

A Toronto-based writer from the West Coast, **Kimberley Alcock's** fiction has also appeared in issues 31:2 and 31:4 of *Room*. Last year, she completed her MFA in Creative Writing with the University of Guelph. "Sisters" is from the forthcoming collection of linked stories, *Okanagan Girls*.

Sisters

Trina's trying to get rid of the cop when Julia comes loping down the apartment hallway. *Brat*, Trina thinks, *fucking spoiled brat*. Aloud she says, "What are you doing here?"

"Reading Break," Julia replies. She pulls her hair over her shoulder, and then finger combs her bangs. She's wearing a rumpled lumberjack shirt and bellbottom jeans with platform boots that make her tower the cop. Trina thinks Julia's Mom must have been a descendant of Amazon women like Wonder Woman.

"She a minor?" the cop asks. He's eying Julia. He glances back at Trina and she knows what he's thinking: he'd like to take off the lumberjack shirt and grope a tit or two. Trina feels like kicking his perverted ass.

"She's my sister."

"I'll need to see some ID."

"Are you kidding me?" Trina pulls her purple satin robe tighter around her waist, securing the knot. She glances back at Julia, sitting on her duffle bag, her long legs stretched out in front of her, the soles of her boots turned up like oversized cartoon eyes. They're new. Barely scuffed. Last week, Trina had taken

a black felt pen to the heels of her own boots and filled in the scrapes that showed white plastic beneath the vinyl.

“You can call my parents,” Julia says. “I’ll give you their number.”

The cop looks at Julia’s scrubbed face, fresh as toothpaste in the morning, and then shifts his gaze back to Trina’s petite frame, her hooded eyes, and pixie hair. People are always trying to pin her down, figure out where she fits in within the canon of Canadian multiculturalism. They assume she’s Asian but then they can’t figure out the eyes. Trina has a list she recites: French, Cree, Scottish, Iranian. True Canadian, she always says. A little bit of everything you cannot predict.

“She’s my stepsister. It’s spring break.”

The cop closes his notebook. “So I guess you won’t be seeing your boyfriend this week with your sister here?”

Trina shrugs. “Guess not.”

“Fine.” He nods at Julia and strides off down the hall.

Trina watches him go, her breath releasing and softening her chest. She wonders which one of her neighbours called the cops, and if, when they see Julia, they’ll think she’s a new girl for Carl. Trina pushes open the door to her suite. “Come on.”

Julia springs to attention, throwing her bag over her. She takes a quick look around the one room apartment, at the large futon center stage with the pale pink sheets in disarray. Her glance travels to the kitchen cupboards that

disappear into a nook across from the bed. The walls are bright white, like summer sunlight glaring on water. It smells like vanilla candles and bleach. Julia drops her bag. “Where will I sleep?”

Trina shrugs. She walks over to a single bookshelf secured into the wall, opens a carved wooden elephant, and takes out a joint. “Futon. It’s big enough for two. She lights up the joint and inhales, deeply, once, twice, and then stubs it against the elephant’s ass. She puts the joint back into the box.

“Why do you do that?” Julia asks.

“Just enough to take the edge off.”

“No, I mean, why do you do it at all?”

“Hey, it’s not like I’m hurting anyone, Jules. It’s not like I’m going into the cafeteria and beating up some poor, defenseless girl.”

Julia straightens her back. “I never did that. I don’t do that.”

Trina looks at the futon. When Julia is around, Trina gets tired of tilting her chin. Her neck cramps from the strain of looking up. She says, “I need to wash the sheets.”

They walk west, scrambling over damp rocks, slick with rainwater and trails of seaweed. Trina unzips her raincoat and pulls it down around her waist, knotting the arms like a weightless embrace. She sits on a rock and breathes in the seaborne air, tasting the dampness in her mouth. She hasn’t been outside for

days. She only leaves the apartment a few times a week to get groceries and do banking. Carl says the less the neighbours see her coming and going, the better. Trina shivers. She feels as if the rain has touched her on the inside, like it's streaming under her skin. She watches Julia pick up sand-washed stones and put them in her jacket pockets. "You get too many of those and your pockets will rip," Trina warns.

Julia throws one of the stones back in the water. It plunks the surface with a soft sigh.

"Do they know you're here?" Trina asks.

"I left a note."

"Great. You know they might call the cops and haul your ass back home."

"So?" Julia hoists herself up on the rock and stretches her legs. "If they do, they do. If they don't, well then, we've got a whole week together. What's the deal with that cop, anyway?"

"I told you. It's the neighbours. They get pissed off when I play music too loud."

"At ten o'clock in the morning?"

Trina shrugs. "Cops have nothing better to do, I guess."

Julia stretches backwards on the rock. "Can we go for sushi?"

"Beach. Sushi. What else you got in mind, Jules? I got a life, you know."

"So I'll come with you."

"Where?"

“To the salon. I can shampoo hair. Do something. Watch you cut hair.”

Trina stands up. Water is lapping up the shoreline. “Tide’s coming in. Don’t tell Mom and Wayne.”

“What?”

“I don’t work there anymore.”

Noon on Mondays you can get eighteen pieces of California roll for \$4.99 at Sushi Bang on Broadway. The girls there always remember that Trina likes extra ginger. She eats it before, during, and after the sushi, relishing its sharp bite. Trina likes things that sting. Last week, this musician had slapped her ass in bed. “Do it harder,” she’d said. The sting cleared her mind. When he slapped her, all she could feel was the physical pain, the flash of heat on her skin. Trina bites down on the ginger and watches Julia stuff two pieces in her mouth at once.

“God, I love the coast,” Julia says.

Trina picks up another piece of the roll and chews it slowly, letting the nori tender and melt. “How do you think they get the seaweed? Do you think they just pick it wild?”

“We studied it in food science. They harvest it in California. Why don’t you want me to tell them?”

“They’ll think I want money. That’s what they always think when I’m unemployed.”

“But you’re studying. You’re a student.”

“Hairdressing school isn’t exactly med school, Jules.”

Julia leans back on the bench. “You could go to med school. You could do anything, T, they’d help you with it.”

Trina snorts. “They’d help you with it, not me.”

Julia shifts her glance to the windowpane and the two of them watch passer-bys. A middle-aged woman with a razor edged, salon streaked bob pushes a stroller. The streaks look good. It’s probably the work of someone at Suki’s. The woman likely has a husband who comes home Friday nights with pizza or Chinese. Maybe he’s the guy who came to see Trina last Friday morning, just after his sales meeting. He’d wanted to celebrate and said his wife couldn’t drink champagne. Breastfeeding.

“You never know unless you ask,” Julia says.

“I’ve asked.”

Trina is dreaming she’s in the ocean with Julia. Julia’s arms and legs have stretched out like Gumbi and her limbs are as long as Burrard Inlet. Trina has water in her lungs and she coughs and sputters and Julia’s long arm lifts Trina out of the water and plunks her on the beach as easily as a building crane setting aside a chunk of concrete or rock. Trina pushes her feet into the cool, damp sand

and watches Julia from the shore. She thinks Julia is a benevolent monster: the Loch Ness. Oggopoggo.

“Who’s there?” Julia says to Trina, and Trina is lulled out of the dream. Someone is banging on her apartment door.

Trina breathes in. Tightens and holds. Releases. *Bang. Bang. Bang.*

“Hey Baby, it’s me, open up.” Carl.

“We’re not home,” she whispers to Julia. She puts a finger across her lips, signals ‘shhhh’, and pulls the sheet over them. It’s a pale pink tent. It’s a conch shell, and she is at the bottom of the ocean, breathing. Invisible air bubbles travel and skim the surface. The knocks stop and his footsteps fade. Trina presses her palms into closed eyelids. It feels like her heart has left her chest and is beating in her throat. She rests on her back and Julia’s hair brushes against her shoulder. Trina thinks if Julia were a Sea King, she could grab hold of Julia’s hair like you grab hold of a horse’s mane and just ride Julia through the sea. They could go past the inlet, far out to a place where the ocean stretches as wide as the sky and whales swim. “Don’t tell them,” Trina says. “Say I’m still at the salon.”

“Trina...”

“Say it. You say it now. Practice it.”

“You’re at the salon.”

“That’s good. You keep saying it.”

“She’s at the salon.”

“I’m at the salon.”

On Tuesdays, Trina bakes bread. She likes the feel of the heel of her hand pushing into the round disc of dough, turning it clockwise, pushing it again, turning, and then pushing again. Ten minutes of this is akin to meditation; her anxieties dissipate with the turning of the dough. Trina puts the round ball of dough into a bowl on top of the stove, where it's warm in the mornings, and then places a tea towel over it. She looks over at Julia sleeping, her long legs stretched out beyond the comforter. Last year, Julia placed first in the heart run marathon. Everyone had cheered her on and the newspaper had taken her photo. For days afterwards, when they walked down Bernard Avenue, children pointed and whispered. *That's the girl who won the marathon.* Julia stirs and opens her eyes and Trina walks over and crouches beside Julia and holds her gaze. In this moment, Trina thinks perhaps she could will herself into Julia's body. She too could be an athlete, a runner. Trina exhales back into her own body, five foot two. "Get up, lazybones," she says. "We're taking a road trip."

"Where?" Julia asks.

"The island. Pack your bags." She wants to be gone by noon, before Carl arrives again and starts banging on her door.

They sit on the ferry deck and tear chunks of baguette they stuff in their mouths.

"You could open a bakery," Julia says.

“You need capital.”

“Write a cookbook.”

“Jesus, Julia.” Trina stands up and goes to the rail. The water is smooth and dark, like rocks on the shoreline after the tide turns liquid as mercury. If she jumped off, would anyone sound an alarm?

Julia comes up beside her. “I’m just trying to help you figure things out,” she says. “You need to find work.”

“I have work.”

“You do?” Julia grabs the rail and stretches backwards like she’s at the barre. Trina had been the one who had wanted to take ballet but Wayne had declared Julia a natural. Saturday afternoons, Julia went to dance class. Trina had hung out at the mall, bumming cigarettes from men who often stuck around to light them. Sometimes, they took her inside and bought her things. A peach velour jacket. That was the first time.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Julia says.

“It’s nothing.”

“What?”

Trina keeps looking in the water. When her Mom had first married Wayne, they had taken a family trip to Victoria and a pod of whales had swum alongside the ferry. Julia had held Trina’s hand as they stood close to the rail, watching the whales. “How do they swim?” she had asked Trina.

“I don’t know,” Trina had replied. “It’s a kind of magic, Jules. Everything in nature has a way of doing something. They figure things out.”

“How?” Julia had asked.

“Ways. Secret ways.”

Trina keeps watching the water. “It’s nothing I can tell you about.”

“Why not?”

Trina wipes mist off her face. The water smells like oysters, thick and salty. It has ripened in the seabed.

At the dorm room in the hostel in Victoria, there’s a girl wearing only a pink g-string, and a lime green fur. The fur is open and her tiny breasts, pale crests, like the tips of ocean waves, are just visible. “Don’t I know you?” the girl asks Trina when she and Julia put their bags on two empty beds.

“Don’t think so,” Trina says. She has seen the girl at the Cecil, hanging out with Johnny who takes on girls from the East Side. “I’m here with my sister.”

Julia is rummaging through the pack, looking for a clean shirt to change into for dinner. “Hey,” she says to the girl.

“Hey,” the girl keeps looking at Trina and then looks back at Julia. “Sisters, right?”

Trina nods.

“Don’t sisters tell each other everything?”

Trina keeps looking at the girl. Julia pulls a shirt out and stretches her arms over her head and pulls off her t-shirt. “We’re stepsisters,” she says and slides on the clean shirt.

“I get it,” the girl says. “Like in Cinderella.”

“Something like that,” Trina says. She sits on the bed and watches the girl zip up the fur, pull on a pair of boots and head out the door.

Julia shakes her head. “Boy, oh boy.” She rolls her eyes. “What *was* that?”

Trina’s chest scalds. “You think you’re better than her?” She feels like slapping Julia. She wants to pull Julia’s boots off and put them on her own feet. In those boots, she’d be taller. She could go outside, and people would whisper ... things. Different things.

Julia tears up. “You never think about me.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“My best friend dies and you never ...”

“She wasn’t your best friend, Jules. She was a girl you were once friends with and then you left her behind to hang out with some other girls.” Trina shrugs. “Happens all the time.” She thinks of the blowjob she had given the guy in exchange for the peach jacket. He had tasted of coconuts. She had thought, *I can do this. I’ll go to a tropical island.* But afterwards, she had stuck her finger down her throat in the bathroom at the mall, and then rinsed out her mouth with soap and water. Trina looks back at Julia, sobbing, and something solid shifts

inside her chest, as if the bones in her body have morphed into seashells. She thinks of crabs, of oysters, with their soft, tiny insides, and she swallows, feeling nothing soft inside herself, only the white, luminous shells. She says, “Christ. Stop sobbing. She killed herself, Trina. Not like you did it for her.”

Julia wipes her face with the back of her hand. “I didn’t mean to do any of it.”

“Any of what?”

“I didn’t intend to be mean to her, to ditch her, to hang out with those other girls. It wasn’t like I had some master plot. Everything just sort of happened at warp speed. Like my life was happening but I didn’t plan it out that way.”

Julia starts crying again. She can’t remember ever seeing Julia cry this way, like real people do instead of all soft and pretty the way they do in the movies, and she thinks maybe Julia isn’t pretending to be Julia anymore.

When the two of them had met, when her Mom had first brought her to meet Julia and Wayne, Julia had been as tall as Trina, but half her age. Julia had taken Trina’s hand and said, “we’re gonna be sisters, right?”

Trina had dropped her hand. She hadn’t wanted a sister. It had only ever been just her and her mom.

Trina sits down on the bed beside Julia, and sticks out her legs. She thinks that life isn’t really a plan, but an invisible road map. You curve round a bend, take a fork left or right and end up somewhere you could never foresee. “Look at my boots,” she says. The fake vinyl has peeled off the toes.

Julia looks at her own legs, a foot longer than Trina's in shiny, sleek, calfskin. She looks a long time at her own boots, and then goes back to looking at Trina's, cracked along the shins, as if the fabric is skin that was left too long in the summer sun, and nothing can be done.