

on tiles, sometimes as murals, but mostly just tile by tile to stand on its own, that's all the time she had. Mostly, she said she was referee in the shop, repair person-- fixing chipped paint, or pieces that blew up when fired, or just dipping the piece for a woman watching her Rolex and putting her coat back on.

They tell me it's relaxing, coming here and painting, and if this is the most relaxing part of their days, we're in trouble.

Katie wasn't sure why Sophie-Anna chose to work on seascapes when she had the chance, but maybe, she thought, it was the usual, the grass is always greener. She knew that Sophie-Anna thought Katie's life must be so peaceful, slow, tranquil. Sometimes, in the evenings, when they were talking long distance, Katie would count five sirens over the course of their conversation. The car alarms were too numerous to keep track of. Why don't you come and visit? Katie would always ask.

And the answer was always the same, the business was busiest in the summer. Regular clients, and tourists, birthday painting parties, and wine-tasting painting parties which produced some of the ugliest ceramics, Sophie-Anna said, you could ask for. But the partyers had such a great time and were nice to her. PAINTED LADIES didn't advertise the wine-tasting bookings because they didn't have a liquor licence, but word seemed to keep business steady.

Celeste promised to get her out of jail right away if need be. It's not like cash is going to be a problem, she'd say.

For two weeks, Katie and Sophie-Anna would leave the beautiful white interior of the townhouse, for the colours of PAINTED LADIES. Descending the suspended stairs each morning, and heading for the front door, Katie would think, I don't want to leave, why can't I just stay here?

She would let her right hand absently drift from supporting cable to supporting cable-- the stairs were supposed to look like they were floating on air, and the vertical metal cabling didn't actually look like it could possibly be holding up twelve stairs-- and she would think, I can't do it

anymore, I can't stand teaching at the university, I can't stand to be where anyone knows me, I can't stand being who I am.

And then at the bottom of the stairs, facing the front door which was already open with Sophie-Anna there saying, C'mon already, Katie would think, And who is it that I am?

What was she? It was easier to list what she wasn't. Not a mother. Not a mother-to-be. Not a woman who'd chosen to never have children. Not a tenured professor. And certainly, not an artist, so why was she going to a ceramic-painting place?

She knew what was getting her up and out in the mornings. A few things. Katie didn't want to be alone in the house when Celeste got up-- mornings were her worst time, and the energy in the house was quite terrifying then. Even the white-on-white furnishings and drapery seemed tension-filled, not to mention all the glass cubes where walls should have been.

When Celeste was happy, and Sophie-Anna was happy, times which coincided inexplicably Katie thought, the townhouse was a haven. At times when she was miserable back on her island, her sister's home was where she longed to escape to. But she realized she'd been picturing times after about three in the afternoon. Relaxing and delicious dinners. Wine in fancy glasses. Fires in both fireplaces. Evening light through the skylights.

Morning was time to be on a Toronto street, walking to a blatantly trendy coffee place, admiring the people who had courage to park their luxury vehicles, engines still running, flashers flashing, in the street, while they bought their decaf, non-fat lattes. Where she lived, everyone drank double cream, double sugar coffees, and so, on those clear December Arabica mornings with her sister, Katie thought the contrast was startling and significant. She didn't want to think why.