

**Carolyn Montgomery**

## The Hummingbird

**M**e and nineteen other sad girls with ugly plastic ID bracelets on our wrists shuffle up and down the corridors of this Eating Disorders Unit. We're all too something—too fat, too skinny, too needy, too sad, too hopeless. The fat girls hate us skinny girls and we skinny girls hate them right back.

I'm not even the skinniest girl here. Emélie stayed out of ICU because she let them put in that skinny yellow tube that dangles from her nose all day and then feeds her all night. She smells like a baby with old spit-up on its sleeper.

My grandma, Nan, a seamstress, would hate the polyester twill of the pink scrubs that grip the thighs of the fat girls and sag from the shoulders of the skinny ones. It took two weeks of following all the rules, like taking the pills and eating the food on my tray, but I'm wearing my own clothes now. And maybe Mom was right to insist I come here.

I did some stupid stuff this summer but the best stupid thing I did was to get a tattoo. Nan signed for me 'cos I'm only fourteen. It didn't hurt that much and no one else knows, not Mom, not Dad, and not my seventeen-year-old sister Brianna.

The black outline of a hummingbird rests on my right shoulder. It's my charm. I imagine its whirring wings and hovering body sipping nectar from a honeysuckle. It's the only certain thing about me right now. If a hummingbird comes your way, you gotta believe something special is gonna happen.

I got my tattoo in May, the week Mom threw Dad out. He'd been screwing that graduate student Lucie—the one with the thick frizzy hair who hung around him all winter. And each time I was at the lake this summer, I'd find her long, wiry hairs in the shower, on the bathroom floor and behind the toilet. Now Dad's in Victoria teaching at the university and Brianna says he might stay there forever.

I told the nurses I smoke so I can chomp Nicorette like some of the other girls. It's bitter but gives me a buzz and I have something to do besides folding origami cranes and journalling. The journalling is killing me. I've scribbled a lot and today I wrote loving and hopeful because that's what I want to be. I mean we're making all this stuff up anyway.

And the whole time I'm writing, I'm thinking about what I did in June. And every time the therapist asks, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?" I lower my eyes and shake my head. But here's what happened.



It was the first week of June. I like to walk to school past the grand houses in Westmount, past the velvety lawns and the tidy flower beds. I love the scents of the early roses and the lilacs.

Dad had already left for Victoria and Brianna had ditched me for her Grade Eleven friends. All they ever talked about was junior college. I was thinking about the great garden I'd have when I grew up.

Fweet fwooo! A wolf-whistle startled me. I jerked around and saw a gardening guy in a green T-shirt with a leafy logo, La Scène Verte, and cut-offs. He stood behind the rose bed smiling a lopsided smile from under his matching green ball cap. I stopped and stared. I'm not into boy bands but he looked like one of the guys in One Direction.

He raised his arm and waved. I flickered my fingers in his direction. I don't know why I waved back—to be polite, I guess. My heart whirred and my face burned. I felt him staring at me—staring at my legs. I tugged

my school uniform skirt down. I wanted to run but it would've looked too lame. He didn't need to know I was scared.

For the next two weeks, I walked the long way to school, past the apartments. I didn't want to run into that guy again. I didn't want to think about him. But that wasn't true. I thought about him a lot and why he'd whistled like that. Did he think I was cute? I wondered if Dad had ever whistled like that at a girl. And I also wondered whether Lucie, that grad student, had gone out West with him.

On the day of my English final, I was late and took my old route. Parked in front of the same house was a truck decorated with La Scène Verte's wavy, green logo. I walked faster, pulling Dad's tattered Expos hat down over my brow.

"Hey you," a deep voice called out.

I kept my head down. "Got an exam. Gotta go." My voice sounded squeaky and puny.

He walked toward me. I backed away to the edge of the sidewalk. He stayed on the grass. "Meet me after? Coffee?"

He smiled his crooked smile. My heart was racing like the last time. Here was this guy, all muscly and big-jawed talking to me. "I have to go," I said. I sprinted the five blocks to school. At the iron railings, I bent over, gasping in giant breaths, and waited for the pounding of my heart and the aching in my ribs to pass.

I knew Lord of the Flies inside-out so even though my mind was swarming—a guy interested in me, a skinny Grade Nine kid—the exam went okay.

Afterwards, I was chatting with my friends by the railings when I saw him. Easy for him to figure out my school from my uniform. He waved that same wave and smiled that same smile.

"Do ya know that guy?" my friend Lovélie asked as she pointed across the yard.

"Not exactly."

"Why's he waving at you then?"

Lovélie was such a pain.

"He's cute. You know. Like Liam from One Direction."

“Don’t even know him,” I said, escaping towards the school gate. He tracked me from the other side of the railing. I didn’t know whether to stop or keep walking. He stopped me at the gate.

“Hi. Wanna go for coffee?”

That husky voice. My stomach lurching. “I don’t drink coffee,” I chirped and I knew I was blushing again.

But that was how we got started. He bought me a Coke from the dépanneur, and we shared it on the bench in the park near the school. He held my damp hand. His fingernails were dirty and his palms rough. He put his arm around my shoulder, meaty against my boniness, salty and sweaty.

I met him every afternoon for the rest of the week. His name was Roy. I told him my name, but he only called me Babe. I never learned his last name or where he lived or anything important about him.

He touched my cheeks and traced my lips with his fingertips. I touched his pouty lips with my fingers. He held my face in his hands. It felt nice. He ran his fingers through my hair and said he loved it. I imagined us hugging and kissing on the basement couch like Brianna and Marc did. Maybe even French kissing.

After my final exam, he picked me up in his friend’s rusted-out Honda Civic. It was a steamy June day. There was gonna be an evening thundershower for sure.

“Come on. Get in.”

I climbed in and untangled the seatbelt. The car stank of tobacco and that skunky odour of those toking losers from the park. “Where we going exactly?”

“My buddy’s cottage. Lac-Brome. Got your suit?”

“Sure I do. We’re going swimming, aren’t we?” I fished out my bikini top from the plastic carrier bag. He made his crinkly smile. I put my bare feet up on the dashboard. Brianna had painted my toenails Barney purple and they looked pretty cool. I glanced at my watch, quarter-to-twelve. If I was back by six, no one would know I’d been gone.

The screeching of the heavy metal CD made it hard to hear what he was saying. He said such dumb things, it was easier to like him when he didn’t speak. He kept one hand on the steering wheel and reached over and touched my left thigh with his calloused fingers. “Nice thigh, Babe.”

I wanted to ask him to take those rough fingers off my skin, but I didn't.

We turned off the autoroute and drove past farms and white clapboard churches with shining metal roofs. Roy stopped at the Boni-Soir in Bromont. I stayed in the car, smoothing the place on my thigh where

his hand had been. He came out carrying a brick of cheese, some pepperoni sticks and two big bottles of beer. I wasn't hungry and I didn't drink beer.

"Where we going again?"

"Lac-Brome. Soon. Change that CD, eh?"

I peeled my back off the plastic upholstery and slipped in a different disc—more metal. I'm into acoustic bands with clever, sad lyrics, the ones that Brianna likes—Arcade Fire, Great Lake Swimmers, Cowboy Junkies.

We rattled along a washboard gravel road, and he pulled into a dirt driveway. A white trailer perched on cinder blocks overlooked the lake. Somebody was into gardening. Geraniums and marigolds filled the two small beds in front of the steps. The lake was still and glossy, resting before the weekend invasion of jet-skis and wakeboarders.

"Let's go." He pulled off his T-shirt and his cut-offs. No shorts, just his muscled white ass charging down the dock. He cannonballed into the water and an expanding circle of waves rippled away from the splash.

"Come on Babe. Jump in."

I pulled off my top, wriggled out of my jean-shorts and dropped them in a heap on the grass. But I kept my underpants on. I wasn't that crazy. I ran down the dock clutching my towel to my chest.

Later in the trailer, he stood naked in the kitchen, gnawing on a pepperoni stick, his feet pale against the cracked brown linoleum floor. I'd made a mini dress with my towel. He pressed me against the metal edge of the kitchen counter with his hips. I wondered where his friend was and whether he might come back.

He slugged back some beer. "Want some, Babe?"

"No thanks." I pushed the strings of wet hair off my face and looked past him at the yellowed plastic wall clock. It was 12:30. The red second hand jerked clumsily past the black second markings.

He leant over me, "I want you." His lips were greasy, and his breath stank of beer. He grabbed my hair and pushed me harder against the

counter. He put his arm around my waist, steered me into the living room and pressed me onto the couch. The fabric was scratchy and sticky. He flopped onto me like a panting dog. He was heavier than I'd imagined. He forced his tongue into my mouth. I felt sick.

"I want you," he said as he tugged at the towel ends tied above my chest.

I wasn't sure what to do but thought it could be like a science experiment. I swallowed the acid taste in my mouth.

"Touch me, Babe." He took my hand and folded my fingers around his stiff penis. Circumcised. I knew that much. It felt dry and rubbery in my hand. He pulled my hand up and down.

"Harder."

It felt silly, like I was polishing a candlestick, but he was gasping and groaning like it was really something. I didn't want to disappoint him or upset him. I tried to stay curious.

"Babe, I need to fuck you."

He forced my thighs apart with his knees. It hurt more than I'd expected. He whimpered and finished with a shudder. But what I hadn't considered was that after he had that brief nap, he'd want to do it all again. And the whole thing took a lot longer and I was a lot sorer.

Afterwards, I squirmed out from underneath his limp body, grabbed my towel and raced down the dock. I splashed into the lake. The cool water rushed against my battered parts and rinsed away the stickiness from between my legs.



I got home and Nan had made a chicken salad for dinner. Mom was away in Costa Rica with her birding people. I couldn't eat. For the rest of the summer, I melted away under the baggy T-shirts I wore. Mom went back to Costa Rica in August. Dad stayed out in Victoria and Brianna hung out with her chlorine-soaked lifeguarding friends. And nobody noticed I'd stopped eating.

I concentrated on getting down to one hundred pounds. I liked the tidiness of the stick-like one and the two empty zeroes. And if one hundred felt great, I wondered if ninety would feel even better. I felt so powerful. I

loved it. And then my gums started to bleed even when I wasn't brushing my teeth.

It was the first day of school after the Labour Day weekend. I was reaching into the kitchen cupboard for a juice glass when my uniform skirt slid off my hips. I grabbed the waistband to haul it back up and the glass fell, shattering on the tile floor. Mom looked up from the newspaper.

"Why are you wearing Brianna's skirt?" she said slowly and quietly.

I'd have been less scared if she'd yelled. "It's mine, Mom." I didn't lie because Brianna was sitting right there at the kitchen table.

"You're not eating." She got up and traced her hands across my shoulders, down my ribs to my waist and onto my hips in the tenderest way I'd ever felt. Her voice was soft. "Stéphanie, my poor little sparrow, how are we going to find time for this in this family."

And I felt bad for her. I stared at the floor. "Are we still a family, Mom?" That was mean. Brianna got the broom and swept up all those scratchy shards of glass.



And that's how I ended up here. And these three months later, I can see it was a reckless thing to do. I mean, I had sex with a guy because he whistled at me and looked like a guy from a boy band.

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?" they keep asking.

But it's private. It's my mistake. Only me and my hummingbird know. And he never used my name. I was only Babe. No-name Babe. A toy. Roy was a boy, and I was his toy.



It's the end of November now. I'm less empty. I eat smoothies, yogurt, and even cereal. Yesterday, my weight was 109 pounds. I still like that zero in there. My muscles are stronger. The boney ridge on my shoulder blade where my hummingbird lives is softer. I want to take care of that hummingbird. I want to go back to school. I want to have a real boyfriend.

Two weeks ago, the doctors said it was safe for me to go home but I didn't want to go home. It's not home without Dad so I went to Nan's. She doesn't barge about losing things, interrupting, and complaining about how late or tired she is all the time. She turns flat bolts of fabric into jackets and dresses like a good sorceress with a magic wand.

My anti-depressants help me concentrate. Maybe I'll take a correspondence course but there'll be no avoiding summer school. They weigh me at the clinic every Monday and Thursday. When I reach one hundred and twenty pounds, I won't have to go anymore.

Last Sunday, Mom came for lunch. She told us about the hummingbirds that migrate from Costa Rica in the spring, their hearts beating over a thousand times a minute. She was looking right at me when she said the young ones make the journey alone with no help from their parents.

Brianna suggested we have a family weekend at the cottage, maybe go snowshoeing. Nan is refusing to come with us. She says she has a fancy dress to finish, velvet and taffeta.

I imagine the cabin, the roof blanketed in pillowy snow and the creaking under my snowshoes as we pack out the path to the porch steps. What I can't imagine is being there in winter without Dad.



It's the third week of December. It's my first time back at the cabin since the Labour Day weekend. The car crunches to a stop at the edge of the plowed gravel road. The shape of the driveway leading to the cabin is layered with untrampled snow. Brianna and I zip up our down jackets. I've already got three layers on underneath. The snow squeaks under my boots.

The silhouettes of the naked maple trees darken in the twilight. A full moon is rising over the rounded peaks of those tired Laurentian mountains. Each time we come Dad explains the whole glaciation thing that ground those mountains down. I miss him naming the Precambrian igneous and the metamorphic gneiss.

"Shush. It's an owl."

I turn in the direction that Mom is pointing and hear the "who, who, who," repeating through the woods.

"It sounds so lonely and sad," I say. "Shush up. Listen," she says.

I watch skinny dark shadows of the bare trees the moonlight is drawing on the pale snow. My fingers are tingling and my feet are freezing.

"Sounds like a great grey owl. So rare." Mom puts on her snowshoes, turns off her headlight and tramps away in the direction of the hooting.

"Bye Mom," I whisper in her direction.



Brianna and I bungee-cord the two snap-top containers of supplies to the toboggan and strap on our snowshoes. We take turns stamping out the trail or dragging the toboggan across the powdery snow. I'm stronger than I was a month ago but I'm still breathless with each step. It's Brianna who does all the work.



I light the fire in the woodstove with the first match. All summer, the split maple pieces that Dad and I stacked by the fireplace have been drying. The kindling crackles and hisses into a red blaze. One day I'll be strong enough to swing an axe again. "Weird to be here without Dad," I say.

"We'll be okay. He made sure we know how to do everything we need to," says Brianna.

I huddle up against her warm, solid body on the couch and re-arrange the blankets over us. Our breath evaporates into the room. I scratch my forehead under my toque and pat it back into place. The smell of Nan's vegetarian chili warming on the stove mixes with the scent of the burning wood. I wonder if I'll ever eat meat again. Mom is still outside tracking the poor owl.

"Who? Who?" it calls. Or maybe it is "Whew! Whew!" because Mom hasn't found it yet. "How are things at home, Brianna?"

"Trying to keep Mom happy. She's pretty mad."

"Except she can't figure out she's mad. She thinks she's just busy."

"Yeah. But I'd like it if you came home. It's too sad walking by your empty bedroom every morning. It's easier when there's two of us."

I think that maybe I should stop being so mad too. I'm tired of being angry and sad. "Disgusting to think of Dad and Lucie doing it, right here on the couch," Brianna says.

"Any moment, we're gonna find another one of her hairs. Think she's with him in Victoria?" "Maybe. He's a lot older than her."

"Will Mom forgive him?" I ask. "Nope."

We rearrange ourselves among the cushions and blankets.

"I've got a secret," Brianna says as she smooths my toque and takes my face in her warm hands. "Go."

"Marc and I finally did it."

“And...” I try to look pleased, but I need to look away. I feel sick. “It was okay. It’ll get better.”

“Were you safe?” I know to ask that question now. “It took three condoms, but we figured it out.”

Brianna is giggling and I think about what I did. A stupid, stupid, stupid thing. “I have a secret too,” I say and pull the neck of my sweater off my shoulder.

Brianna’s eyes widen and she tilts her head as she sees my hummingbird. “When? How?”

“In May. Nan took me. The week Dad left.”

She traces her finger along the curving outline on my skin. “It’s beautiful. You’ll have it forever.”