

“Zoe Whittall might just possibly be the cockiest, brashest, funniest, toughest, most life-affirming, elegant, scruffy no-holds-barred writer to emerge from Montreal since Mordecai Richler.”

— T.F. Rigelhof, *The Globe and Mail*

BOTTLE ROCKET HEARTS

A NOVEL BY

{ ZOE WHITTALL }

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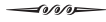
for all the tough girls I have loved

Especially

*Ruth Mary Whittall, 1910–2004,
who was definitely one tough lady.*

“I would like to fall in love again but my only hope is that love doesn’t happen to me so often after this. I don’t want to get so used to falling in love that I get curious to experience something more extreme — whatever that might be.”

— DOUGLAS COUPLAND, FROM *LIFE AFTER GOD*



COLD, COLD HEARTS

MONTREAL GENERAL HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM
DECEMBER 1996

A fluid that tastes like floor cleaner is dripping down the back of my throat. I'm jittery. Seven is more jittery, and he's making the other people in the waiting room uncomfortable. We are waiting for Della, who's locked up somewhere inside the hospital. We are not family. We're waiting on faith that eventually we'll be allowed to see her. This is somewhat ironic because we've been avoiding her for a number of weeks; her pessimism and anxiety had been like a cheese-grater across our hopeful faces. We are bothering the nurse at the front desk, but we don't mean to. We hold hands, kids scared of what we don't know.

I have a notebook open in my lap. Seven is trying to read over my shoulder. *In this liminal space, we are marking the hospital chairs with dirt-filled, creased spiral marks from the pads of our fingers.* That's the only sentence I have written so far, my pen pressed hard into the thin lined paper, each letter perfectly formed. There is so much dirt married to both of my hands it's hard to imagine wanting it washed off. It's coffee grinds and compost, dirt from the café floor where I fell palms down an hour ago. The silent vows exchanged between the dirt and sterile whiteness are more committed than anything I've known recently.

"Go get us coffee from the vending machine." Direct orders are best, considering Seven's probable state of mind, a June bug bouncing against a light bulb, the bulb being the world outside his body. He stands up as if I wound up a giant key in his back. He walks with a purposeful sashay to the end of the hall. I pick at the dried-up muffin mix stuck to my apron.

Rachel wrote everything she ever thought down on paper. Not just the poetry she lived for, but the mechanical details of her emotional day-to-day. When she was sad she'd write: *I am sad today*, and it somehow transformed her. "*I'm always exercising the tools*," she'd say, when I'd find her hunched over her notebooks at the kitchen table at 4:00 a.m.

When Rachel's parents went through her room after she died, they found journals from as far back as 1978. Since her death, I've been journaling like mad. I haven't kept a diary since grade seven, and that was really just a list of dates I wanted to have with Jordan from New Kids on the Block. People who journal always seem a little more grounded.

I could use some perspective.

When Rachel experienced a creative block she wrote simple lists on paper torn from a notepad fixed to a fridge magnet. Illustrated cats paraded joyfully around its border, one curled asleep atop the text *shopping list* written in a fancy font at the top. It was likely a gift from her mother, who was prone to mailing Rachel packages that included clippings from the *Sherbrooke Record* announcing the upcoming nuptials of former classmates, flowery homemade items from the county fair, tea cozies, mugs with puppies on them and Jesus-centric items she'd immediately throw away, until Seven began collecting Jesus items. We now have a Jesus wall in the living room with floor-to-ceiling saviour kitsch, with peel-off holographic stickers of his likeness and fluorescent postcard crucifixion scenes.

The notepad looked out of place against our kitchen, painted the colour of a stomach lining, the black and white checkered floor, the framed tattered poster of a pink triangle that reads *Silence = Death*. Every once in a while Seven takes the poster down and says it's out of date, that Act-Up is over and Queer Nation is dead. Then he puts it up again when he gets nostalgic.

I would find Rachel's lists on the table under take-out menus and phone bills. *Some notes on me right now* is how most of them would start. "It grounds me," she'd explain before shyly ripping the paper from my hands, blushing.

I turn to a new page in my journal. *Some notes on me right now: I don't remember what my natural hair colour is. I'm about to turn twenty-one. I just lost my job about an hour ago. I'm losing Della too, but nothing is certain, really.*

And no one ever really has each other. That's the problem right? When you feel entitled to another person. That's more dangerous than jumping out of a plane.

I always used to feel like a pink layer cake or a shoelace trailing that won't ever stay tied. I'm too aloof. Eve does not live up to her potential, says every cardboard report card from high school. I am an only child. I am hard to get to know. Everyone says that. People assume I'm more complicated than I am. My mascara always runs, not in rivers but highways paved down my citted face. I hate it when people put their bus transfers in their mouth because they're carrying too much stuff, or file their nails on the Metro. I like it when you order a small coffee to go, and the cup is so small you feel like a Charmkin. Remember those fingernail sized dolls popular in the eighties? I hate it when activists get indignant about not having a television, as if the revolution depends on our inability to remember or care about who shot JR. I have never been off this continent and I've always lived in Quebec. Still, Quebec feels like my estranged cousin. I learned everything I know about sex from Degrassi Junior High which I watched in badly dubbed French on a black and white tv that only got one channel. My parents didn't believe in cable.

Maybe my boss will hire me back if I explain. Except explaining would be harder than getting another job. How do you explain throwing a telephone in the face of a hungry hippie girl, who only wanted soup?

Seven returns with two white cups of coffee. It tastes like hot liquefied crackers and old cereal milk. He drinks his like it's Gatorade after a long race, like his throat doesn't care

about hot or cold or pain, only liquid. He leans his small white blond head against my shoulder and closes his eyes. He cups his hands together; I notice his tattoo has healed completely. Across his wrist is written in typewriter font: *Rachel, 1971-1996*. It matches my own.

When I graduated from grade six I won an award for best overall academic achievement. I stood on the creaky stage of St. Mary's elementary school in my peach leather Au-Coton belt cinched around my non-ironic acid-washed jean mini-dress. It came as a shudder-snap revelation: I was a fake. I'd somehow achieved success without really ever trying. I'd come to the conclusion that conventional success and intelligence really didn't mean all that much. Because there I was, winning the highest honour, and all I'd thought about for months was whether Billy St-Cyr would dance with me to "Never Tear Us Apart" by INXS at the Goodbye Elementary noon-hour dance and lip-synch show.

I've been in love once.

I close the notebook and walk up to the nurses' station, ask again about Della. The nurse wears half-circle pink earrings, has clumps of aqua eyeshadow in the crease of her eyes, and is evasive in her most communicative moments. She looks at me like I should be a patient. Her eyes may as well reflect tiny TV screens with closed-captioning, a rolling font that reads, *You're one step away from your inevitable straightjacket destiny*. Or maybe this is paranoia from the drugs last night. Maybe I should sit back down, sit straight, feign patience, lock my ankles together gracefully the way my grandmother unsuccessfully tried to teach me to do as a child. At eight

years of age I swore I'd die a painful death before anyone forced me into a dress. And look at me now, diamond stud in my nose, red painted toes, a careful peroxide regime, closet full of things that barely cover the "great ass God gave me," according to my aunt Bev, who frequently comments on my physical attributes with a mix of praise and annoyance.

I doodle a page full of stars and hearts around *I've been in love once*. Seven stirs. I turn the page and write *I'm still in love?*

When I think about how to explain love, I think of a cat I had growing up. Her name was Whitey. I named her. I know, I wasn't a particularly imaginative child. She was full-grown when I was five and died on my eighteenth birthday. She used to catch mice in the backyard and eat them, but she would extract the heart with the precision of a dedicated surgeon. She'd leave the hollow muscular organ on my pillow licked clean, or on the flat toe of my black rubber rain boots by the porch door. She would meow in a particularly high pitch, urgently, to alert my attention to the gift. Now that's devotion. How anyone could live up to this in a human body is anyone's guess.

I draw bugs and spiders, googly-eyes and long legs, the word *No. Definitely no*. I worry about the nurses seeing this and it adding to the list of reasons Seven and I belong here captive, but I keep sketching and rambling.

I don't like to think I can be broken, but that's what love is, right? A willingness to be a bead of blood, a sheaf of paper so thin you could tear it with a breath. But I can feel my heart

reconstructing itself, resilient game of cat's cradle with each artery. I am winning. I'm trying to remember why I fell in love with Della, and if this is what love becomes. This exasperated feeling of resignation, a blind adoration like a dirty windshield I can't clear so I decide to taste instead. Tongue to glass, I can barely see out. I keep going. One frame in front of the other, blink by blink by swallow.

Della feels things profoundly, in a way she can't always articulate, but I can see it. This might explain her current incarceration. What might enter me as a soft sweet whisper could corrupt her week, could trap her under glass. Everything that bores, numbs and annoys me, she absorbs. Things terrify her at random. Sometimes she's fearless. To say she's unpredictable is the understatement of all time. She laughs out loud, so passionately sometimes that it knocks me to the ground. When you touch her, there is a palpable rawness. When she's asleep, I like to try to peer under her skin and see if someone accidentally put a city there, some sort of ancient civilization trapped where most of us have pores and hair follicles and derma papilla. Sometimes she is the girl who walks into the bar and everyone stares — men and women. They just look and look and get self-conscious and keep looking despite themselves. Other times she's the girl no one wants to look at, the crazy person on the bus who mutters to herself and stares at you in that way that she might ask you for the time or ask you if you've really loved your mother or could you touch her just to make sure she is really there. She's always been just this side of crazy, crazy enough to be an interesting artist, not disturbing enough for anyone to bother telling her to get help.

You know how people get, there could be a parade of indicators, a can-can line of girls screaming out *Your friend is obviously crazy!* but no one says a thing. *It's personal*, after all. You don't want to be the one to point it out and represent a bone-dry conventional world, one of doctors and chemicals and reality. It's so not punk rock. In fact, psychiatry is just another systemic oppression historically used to cure queers for being queer. Why embrace it? But I suppose Della had no choice. I'm ashamed to admit I'm somewhat relieved. I think I'm realizing, pushing a perfect hole for my thumb in the wrist of my shirt, everything is much more complicated than I'm willing to admit. Love. Crazy. All things in between.

I still like to watch her. After all these years, she can still amaze me as much as enrage me. Like when Rachel died, and she kept us all together. Somehow, she just knew what to do when no one else did. I know this afternoon is going to bring about an ending. This waiting room signifies more than I'm wanting to admit. I used to think that if I wasn't married to her or completely over her by the time I turned twenty-one, I was going to run away to the desert and join some sort of vaguely religious organization where all I had to do was make hammocks or spice racks all day, where things would be simple and clearly defined.

I draw a hammock, a crude illustration with Seven and I resting in it. I can't draw people. I don't pay enough attention to the details in their faces to properly represent them on paper. I know the other girl is in the cold hospital room with her, holding her hand. My jealousy is replaced by a calm resignation. *I'm no longer keeping score.*