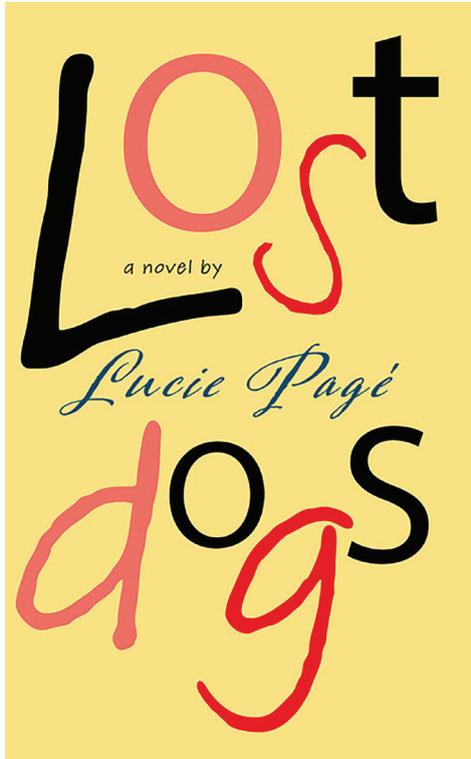


Excerpt from *Lost Dogs*
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Published by Cormorant Books

Publication Date: March 2023

344 pages

\$24.95

CHAPTER 1: POINTS OF VIEW

There were perfect blue skies, but Becca wasn't in the mood for them.

She was walking. Not because she wanted to but because the only things you control when you're fourteen are the music you listen to and how your personalized avatar is put together.

She'd made it to Queen Street faster than she'd imagined, given that she'd been home sneaking gummies, and scrolling through TikToks on her phone just twenty minutes earlier.

Becca hadn't reacted when her mom had read the weather forecast out loud. Sometimes Caroline was weird. But there had been a reason.

"When was the last time you were outside, Becca?" Caroline had asked.

Becca had thought back. "When I took out the garbage?"

"No, I mean out getting fresh air. It's going to get rainy, soon. It'll be grey for months, right?" Her mom had gone on, talking up the sky, the trees, the fall colours. She'd even used words like *fresh* and *crisp*.

"Wait," said Becca, clueing in. "Is this you saying you're not giving me a ride?"

Caroline pressed her lips together in a smile, confirming. "I'm going to the garden centre."

"The garden centre," Becca repeated, struggling to believe she'd heard her mom correctly. Caroline was a serial plant killer. "So why can't you give me a ride before you go stalking flowers?"

"You wanted to do your own thing? Do your thing. I'm going to do mine."

"Are you punishing me?"

Caroline stamped out another smile as she shut off her tablet. “Okay, I’m not stopping you from going, Becca. You’re free to ignore my advice. But if you want this, you’ll get there under your own steam. I’m not getting involved.” She rose to her feet and walked toward the kitchen.

“Can I Uber?” Becca called after her.

And because her mom had wasted so much time trying to convince her she had an urge to walk instead of just telling her she was SOL on the ride, Becca had run upstairs, changed out of her car outfit, put on her outside clothes, and wrecked her messy bun in the process.

Instead of discovering colourful fall scenery, there was autumnal carnage all around. The temperature had dropped overnight, and all the foliage on the gnarly little city trees had fallen en masse. There were curled-up yellow leaves all over the place. As she walked, Becca watched them catching the breeze and skimming over the sidewalks like they were crossing the river Styx only to come to rest on the garbage piles that sat near the curb.

It was grim, but it was the way Becca had started to see everything around her. Like, there could be a bunch of flowers in a yard, but she’d zero in on the one whose head had been lopped off. She’d see a puddle, but rarely the sparrows drinking from it. And whenever there were old people around, she couldn’t stop thinking about how soon they would die.

Clearly, she needed to talk to someone.

Obviously, it couldn’t be her mother.

For one thing, Caroline solved everything with diets. For another, every piece of advice her mother had given her so far had been wrong. Like picking prestige friends. And wearing showy clothes. And how everything would be fine. Everything was not fine. Her life was a disastrophe.

Becca had done a lot of work trying to figure out which therapy clinics were the most discreet. Eventually, she'd found one on Queen Street that felt right. It had a spa-grey website that was super understated. There was barely any writing about sadness anywhere on it. Sadness was implied.

What had impressed her most had been its test for depression. It was totally free. She went through all the questions and got a seven out of ten, which was like a B-minus. Normally, that grade might have upset her, but this wasn't school. This was life, and all she needed was a pass.

The therapists who worked at the clinic had posted pictures of themselves smiling. It was probably how they'd smile at you if you were talking to them IRL. There were blurbs beneath their pictures, but they were all blah-blah-blah brags. All Becca wanted was a doctor who would really listen to her. She'd carefully studied their profiles and eventually settled on this one therapist who had long earlobes. He wasn't smiling as hard as the other doctors were, but something about that was okay.

Her mom had taken one glance at his picture and said, "Keep looking."

It had been offensive on so many levels.

Caroline had been all: "Men with beards look reasonable on the outside, but they're only happy when they dominate."

Which had made Becca roll her eyes because there was no way her mom could actually tell all that from a beard.

Although. It was Caroline's job to know people. Like, really know them. Becca could barely decide what kind of gum she should chew, but Caroline could tell what people wanted even before they knew because she did marketing. She was so into people, sometimes she'd go right up to total strangers like one of those psychics with a message from someone who's passed away and say

things like, “Okay, you don’t know me, but you one hundred percent need an avocado hugger. It. Will. Change. Your. Life.” And people would freak out and be amazed.

And yet, when it came to knowing what Becca wanted or needed, Caroline was usually wrong. No matter how closely Becca followed her mom’s advice or recommendations, it always ended up as a huge personal fail. So, in spite of how much her mom had immediately disliked her chosen therapist, Becca had gone ahead and booked an appointment with him.

Naturally, Caroline had insisted on going with her to her first session to check out the doctor and then ended up using most of Becca’s session, but Becca could tell Doctor Schofield was okay. She was also pleased his ears looked just like those in his picture.

All the way home, Caroline had kept trying to change Becca’s mind about going back to see him. She’d said Becca would get over whatever was bugging her, but Becca had ignored her. Besides, the receptionist had Caroline’s credit card number, so it didn’t matter what her mother thought anymore.

She was around three blocks from the clinic when a giant grungy ice cream cone folded open onto the sidewalk, revealing itself as the door of a store. It was sort of mind-blowing, like a secret world being revealed, only instead of a wizard with an owl appearing, it was a guy cracking open a pack of smokes.

Becca had to look inside. She slowly pulled the door open for a sneaky peek, and a way-too-happy recorded greeting blasted, “Hello! Welcome! Come i-in!” She spotted a lucky cat’s paw waving hello with great enthusiasm from over the Cheetos. Then the guy at the cash register made eye contact. She was one hundred percent busted. She couldn’t *not* go in.

Becca wended her way through the maze of chip racks toward the front counter. Behind the Hickory Sticks, she saw a photocop-

er. On the right, just past the Bacon Ringos, were a couple of coolers. She knew she had to get something so she didn't seem like a complete freak, so she headed toward the bottled water.

The walls were covered floor to ceiling in random little bags filled with cell phone cases, safety pins, ant traps, and shower caps. So. Sketch. She wondered what was in the dusty plastic baggies by the ceiling. Maybe antique gummi worms?

Taking a small water bottle from the fridge, she returned to the counter to pay. As she put away her change, she noticed that taped to the back of the lottery monitor was a poster of a lost dog.

Becca immediately recognized the big white pit bull with the stupid grin and the white eyes. She'd seen the dog a bunch of times around High Park. It was legit blind. She'd seen it walking around with some guy, gently bumping into things, although this one time they were out in a field and the dog started leaping straight up. It must have known where it was. Then the guy had said something, and the dog had taken off galloping. Like, with no fear of hitting anything. Just crazy. They must have had a signal, because the dog stopped and came running right back. You could tell it knew it wasn't going to get hurt. Ever.

Suddenly, Becca felt tears in her eyes. She didn't know what was going on, but the counter clerk had started to stare, which could only mean he could see her tears. He'd started to look alarmed, and then his face unexpectedly burst into an awkward smile. "Okay. Thank you," he said, pointing to the door, inviting her to leave. "Thank you."

She nodded because she got that he wanted her to leave, but she was not in control of what was going on with the crying situation. She *def* didn't want to deal with it in front of the entire world. *Almost done*, she wanted to say.

Turning away, she pretended to study a lottery ticket scratcher

in the shape of a finger and heard the man at the cash, who was clearly unsure of what to do next, make a phone call.

Becca remembered how she'd read someplace it was better to let your cry happen so your eyes wouldn't stay puffy, but this was getting ridiculous.

Stop, she told herself. *Stop*. It had zero effect.

She could hear the guy on the phone's voice getting louder. Tenser. She had to go. She grabbed her drink and made for the snack maze, bumping into a bunch of different types of chips, apologizing each time because she hadn't seen them.

Reaching the door, she flipped up her hoodie to hide her face, wondering whether she was legit headed to crazy-town. As she pulled the door open, a happy voice shouted in mechanical sing-song: "Hello! Welcome! Come i-in!"