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Essential Prose Series 198



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Catch and Release



Liana Cusmano



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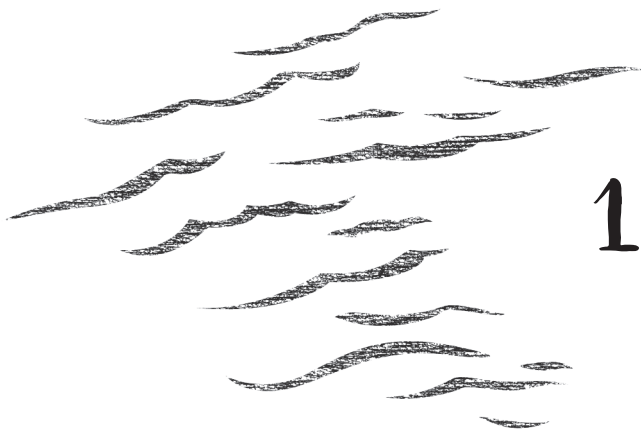
To my family

“Don’t you know, [...] that even the time
it takes me to blink seems an eternity to me,
because during that time I do not see you?”

—XENOPHON’S CYROPAEDIA

Part I





I THINK THIS whole thing really began years and years ago, probably when I was very little, but if I had to pick one moment to start telling from, it would have to be when I was in front of that bar in Cannes last year.

I had decided that maybe I wanted to write films, so I applied to an international filmmaking program that sent college students to the Cannes Film Festival. I didn't think I would get in because the program was so competitive, but six months later I was in the French Riviera, getting my festival pass and touring the beachside apartment complex and staring at the Mediterranean ocean outside my bedroom window. About a hundred of us from all over the world were divided into small crews and assigned roles; part of the program involved making a short that would be screened at the festival after two weeks, to give us the impression that we were launching our careers.

I didn't meet Adèle until a couple of days into the program. We were considering actors for our short, and

my director Sara nudged me and whispered, “What about her?”

A bunch of people were participating in the program as actors, and one by one, they were filing in front of the directors and screenwriters and DPs to introduce themselves, hoping to be cast in something that wouldn’t involve slut-shaming or child abuse or incest. We were looking for an actress who could play someone confident but scared, who would be good in a short psychological thriller about fear and misperception. It sounds interesting and sophisticated, but it was a five-minute film about a girl waiting at a train station and freaking out because she feels threatened by the guy sitting next to her. The climax is when she stumbles onto the tracks and almost gets hit by a train, but the guy rescues her at the last second. The ending is open to interpretation, because it was one of my first screenplays and it seemed cool to do that.

Adèle introduced herself to us, up there in front of the crowd of people, and she was small and sweet and quiet, but for some reason I looked at her and I decided that she was also fierce and smart and independent. I liked her long lashes and her green eyes and her fine nose and her delicate hands, the way she moved and spoke and the way she asked the people watching her, “Do you have any questions? Is there anything else I can say or do to help you make a decision?”

I mouthed to Sara, “I like her.” And I did.

Adèle read lines for us later in the day and she was perfect. We cast her co-star and went location scouting, tromping through cobblestoned alleyways and crowded markets and dirty train stations, and over the next week,

we shot the film and finished the editing and added the credits. I liked Adèle more and more as we spent more time together. Then I started to like her a lot, when we began having meals together in between shoots, and when I saw how talented and focused she was on set, where she would say, “I can do that again, I think I can do it better,” even when Sara said that the take was fine, that the emotion in it was good. Then I thought that maybe I had a soft spot for Adèle after we saw all those films together and discussed them afterwards in hipster-y little coffee shops or in her room at the apartment complex, when she’d say things like: “That film felt so calm; it gave me a really good, calm feeling.” I thought that maybe I just had a big soft spot for her.

And then there was the night at the bar.

It was the last night of the festival and the program directors had screened all our shorts in a tiny little theatre, and we’d dressed up as if we were going to a film premiere that really mattered. I had a fabulous time. But later on at the bar down the street, I got really drunk, and by the time I had stumbled outside, Sara and I had deteriorated to the point where you start asking yourself and everyone around you questions that you think are philosophical, but that are actually tired and silly and only going to hurt you, especially when you’re eighteen and drunk and wearing high heels.

“If you love someone, should you tell them?” I asked Sara.

We were in a small crowd that had gathered outside the bar, some people going to their rooms, others heading out to hit the clubs. Adèle was thirty feet away, in a long midnight blue gown, waiting for a cab that would take

her and her roommates back to the apartment. A few hours before, she and I had split a drunken karaoke rendition of an old French pop song, which I had learned in sixth grade French immersion, and she had picked up from her grandparents. Out there on the sidewalk, she had her head turned to the side, looking down the street, and the light of a nearby lamppost was reflected in her diamond necklace and her diamond earrings.

“Definitely,” Sara said, as she teetered in her black wedges. I grabbed for her shoulder to steady her but missed. She managed to stay upright.

“But what if you can’t?” I cried dramatically.

“You just do,” Sara slurred as she stumbled again. I didn’t even reach out to help her this time; she leaned awkwardly against the doorjamb and didn’t notice the total distress that was beginning to engulf me.

The realization that I was in love with Adèle made me want to find an empty street and scream—and scream and scream and scream until there was nothing left, until I was empty inside.

Instead, I went to a club with my new friends and drank some more. Adèle had gone back to her room and was probably asleep, but I spent the night dancing with my Portuguese cinematographer, making out with a student screenwriter-actor from Belgium, and tolerating the advances of the Bulgarian film editor rooming with Sara and me. We got back to our room at four a.m. I thought everything would be okay.

Later that day, when the festival was over and everyone was packing up to go home, Adèle asked me if I would walk her to her train stop.

“It’s the small one where we shot the short,” she said.

“It’s not that far, but my train’s at ten p.m. I really don’t want to go there alone late at night, you know? Would it be okay if you walked me there?”

I spent the whole afternoon and evening nursing my hangover and compulsively packing and repacking my suitcase. I stumbled out of my room at nine p.m. and met Adèle in the front lobby. I walked her to the stop and carried her suitcase down the stairs to the platform. The night air was cool, and she was wearing the thickest sweater she had brought with her. It was blue.

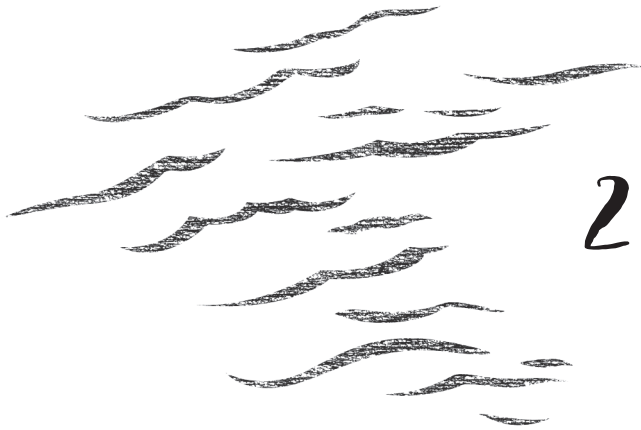
We didn’t talk about anything too important. It wasn’t like the night we’d spent in her room or like the afternoon we’d spent at the beach the week before, both of us in our bathing suits and her telling me that she could sing and act and dance and draw, and go fencing and read music and play pool, and that she had a French name and a French passport and a French home, that she was born in Paris and studying Drama in Montreal. That night at the train stop, we just sat side by side on a bench and talked about the festival and our favourite films, and I tried to look at her and listen to her in a way that would help me take her all in.

At ten o’clock I helped her get her suitcase on the train, gave her a big hug, and then waved until the train was out of sight. Panicked and precarious, I ran all the way back to the apartment in the dark.

It would have been different if I had known that I would never see her again. I could have gone back home and picked up where I left off, studying Arts and Science at university and playing soccer and reading books and tutoring at the community centre, spending time with my friends and family. Adèle would have been a beautiful

girl I had met in France at the Cannes Film Festival, someone I had fallen in love with and who would never be anything more than a really good memory. Even just keeping in touch with her would've been too hard.

But I was going to see her again. I had known that almost from the beginning. I think that's why I was so upset when I realized how I felt about her. That's also why it hurt so much to see her anxious in front of the crêpe place and why it made me so happy to hear her laugh at my jokes on the beach: because I would see her again when we both got back to Montreal, at the same university and in the same classroom. And I wasn't sure that I would be able to handle something like that a second time.



I DON'T THINK I've ever been the kind of person who could only focus on one thing at a time. Even as a little kid, I was always trying to do eight things at once. When my parents asked me what game I was playing with my toys and stuffed animals, I would answer that I was cooking supper for my dog and his friend the astronaut, but also entertaining a conversation with a fireman who had just got off the job, and guiding a dolphin and a Barbie up a mountain in an old Jeep so they could rescue a dog from a volcano. (That would be the same dog I was cooking supper for—his friend the astronaut was very worried about him.) There was never just one linear narrative. My stories and games were a kaleidoscope of thoughts and inventions that all extended simultaneously into different directions, and often met in the middle of one huge, imaginative mess.

As I got a little older, this way of operating changed into having a lot of different interests. I played soccer. I played the piano. I took acting classes. I took swimming

lessons. I worked hard at school. I went to birthday parties and playdates and science fairs. Over the years, some activities were exchanged for others, but I always enjoyed myself and never felt like cutting down. My parents helped me keep it all organized and on schedule the way 21st century middle-class suburban parents do; cooking my meals, washing my clothes, and driving me from place to place, like a multipotentialite child-specific taxi service.

For some reason, I was never overwhelmed. I always had time to sleep and eat and relax. And I was perfectly happy to just watch TV or kick a ball back and forth with my younger brother and sister in the backyard or mess around with baking soda and vinegar in the kitchen. The only thing that comes to mind as being a little unusual is that I read—a lot.

I remember being in the first grade and realizing that, contrary to what I had believed, I could not hide a book in my lap, read it all throughout class without paying attention to the teacher, and still do as well as my parents wanted me to on my math and French tests. I realized that I had to stop reading on my way up and down the stairs after I bumped into the vice-principal and was almost showered in boiling hot Earl Grey—that was when they decided to move me to the second grade. Sometimes, as punishment for talking back or swearing or otherwise trying out different ways of growing up, my mother or father confiscated whatever book I was reading at the time. I read novels and memoirs and cookbooks and parenting magazines. I read children's encyclopaedias cover to cover. I exhausted the children's fiction section at my local library. I was pretty intense about reading, because I wanted to know everything. And I believed that

once I hit high school, I would learn lots of very cool and interesting things, and generally have a great time.

During that first year of high school, when everything changed, I had my first crush. His name was Tristan and he had kind eyes and a nice smile. The two of us first bonded over *To Kill A Mockingbird*. We argued about sports. We did class projects together. We talked on the phone on weekends. I really, really liked him.

I never asked him out or told him about my feelings. But I did reach out to take his hand once during one of our long conversations. We were sitting on a staircase after school one afternoon and talking about coincidence. He didn't believe in it, but I did. I didn't believe that everything happened for a reason or that free will was an illusion, and I explained to Tristan that determinism was often a convenient cop-out for people who thought they were above the law. He responded that free will and coincidence were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

We were pretentious little schoolchildren. Precocious, but pretentious. We did talk about lighter things too. The week before, we had raved about the perfect turnovers in the latest Manchester United match, and the week before that, one lunchtime, we'd made what we thought were accurate and hilarious impressions of our federal politicians.

But that afternoon on the stairs, when he looked at me and smiled and joked, "You're so stubborn!" as we talked about something that we thought we understood, that made us feel intelligent and important, I felt close to him in a way I had never felt with anyone before. So I reached out and took his hand.

Instantly, his expression told me that I had made a

mistake. It wasn't an angry look or a frightened look. It was almost blank, as if I had slapped him in the face and he hadn't understood what I'd done. But it was also a blankness that said that he wasn't prepared for this, and that he didn't like it. He gently slid his fingers out of mine.

We wrapped up the conversation quickly but without rushing. I could tell he was trying to be kind, to smooth over any awkwardness. I appreciated it. But I also told myself that we couldn't go back to the way things were because I had scared him. For about a month after that afternoon on the staircase, our conversations were fewer and shorter. I felt bad that neither of us brought up what had happened or how we felt, but at the time, I didn't think there was anything to say; I felt a certain way, and he didn't. We couldn't just pretend that that wasn't real, so obviously, the relationship would adjust itself accordingly. I was hurt, but at eleven, I thought that was the best and only thing we could do.

If it had been up to me, I might never again have said anything to Tristan that would've been deeper than a cursory rundown of *Life of Pi* or an angry comment about Stephen Harper. But he and I had a long talk one Wednesday night after debate practice, and he told me that he was gay and that he missed me, and if it wasn't too hard for me, could we still be friends?

I don't know what would have happened to me these past several years if I hadn't had him to calm me down when I was feeling crazy or to listen to me talk for hours upon hours about all the noise in my head. And I think it's interesting that that one month where we were more distant was exactly when I had what I'd consider my adolescent flashpoint.

Tristan and I first met in an English class taught by Angela Damon. She was tall and dark and beautiful, with long black curls and slim fingers usually smudged with chalk. She had a soft voice, and she taught literature and writing in a way that made me understand how wonderful and valuable they were. She taught me to write the date in the upper right-hand corner of a fresh page because the date is important. She wrote detailed comments on my essays and short stories because taking constructive criticism is how students grow. She took a liking to me right away. She told me I was conscientious and meticulous. She asked me how I was handling the transition from elementary school. She suggested different books I might like to read and movies I might like to see. She gave me a lot of attention.

After a while, we became close. When I could, I would drop in to see her during recess or lunch periods, sometimes even after school. Whenever I wasn't in class or debating or playing soccer, I went to talk to her. We talked about all kinds of things; I told her about my family and my favourite rock music, or about where I had travelled to over the weekend for my latest soccer game. She asked me how I was enjoying all the different things going on in my life, and sometimes she told me about hers. She loved painting and yoga and spending time with her cousins and trying to play the guitar. "I'm really bad at it, don't tell anyone," she said one afternoon, laughing, and winked at me. I told her about how I had knocked over a podium during an impassioned six-minute rebuttal speech at Queen's University or how I had got into a fight with another forward on a soccer field in Kirkland. I told her stories. She always laughed in all the right places.

It's only after thinking about all this that I realize I was definitely a person before I met Angela Damon. I used to think I wasn't, that I only really became an individual with an identity and a consciousness after I met her and got to know her. Of course, that's not true. I had something to say long before she became my most important listener. She wasn't the only person who witnessed my busy, well-rounded progression out of childhood. But it just goes to show how much I was affected by the whole experience—that establishing a particular relationship with my seventh grade English teacher would make me think I wasn't even a person before the age of twelve.

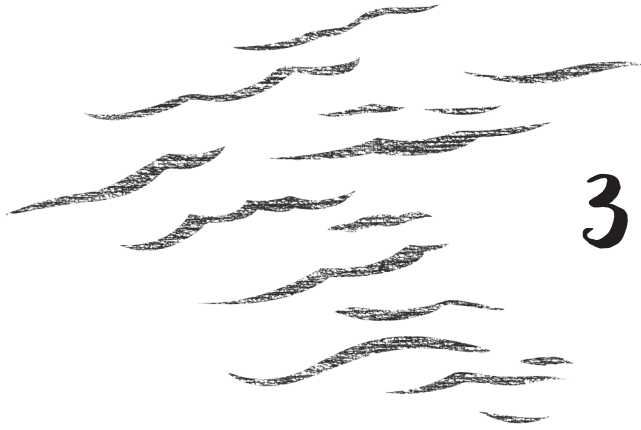
In class, I could tell if she was tired or upset by the way she moved around the room, how she gestured with her hands or how she sat at her desk when we did group work. I never asked her whether she was okay or how she was feeling because I didn't think it would be appropriate. But she always checked on me. If I looked tired after a long night of studying or frustrated because I couldn't understand epidemiology or nihilism or whatever I was reading about at the time, she asked me what was wrong, and in the next couple of days we would talk about it. She always knew the perfect thing to say to help me feel better.

This continued throughout the seventh, eighth and ninth grades. And into the tenth and eleventh as well.

I was always busy. I took enriched classes and studied very hard. I put a lot of time and effort into the debate team and the school soccer squad. I played music and volunteered at libraries, and walked in charity fashion shows. On the weekends, I made time for family and all the Italian-Canadian clichés that would eventually begin

to feel stifling—helping my grandparents tend the garden or prepare tomato sauce or make wine, going to church for two hours every Sunday morning and then to a cousin's house for lunch every Sunday afternoon, answering my aunts' and uncles' endless questions about when was I going to quit soccer and when was I going to have a boyfriend and when was I going to stop doing all the things I was doing and decide to stick to just one and when was I going to have my whole life figured out. I think they pressured me about that because every six months or so, I crashed. I would get bronchitis or laryngitis and spend a week at home because, eventually, the pace I had set for myself would become too much, and my body would shut down, like a racehorse or a sled dog that is overtaxed and abruptly collapses. And even when I could feel that exhaustion beginning to act on me, like a gravitational force, I kept going for as long as I could because I got a rush from doing so many different things, and I got that rush because I loved them. I loved how alive they made me feel, and I loved the people I met when I did them. Soccer teammates, debate teammates, people who played in concerts with me or who volunteered with me, people I met at science fairs in Vancouver or debate tournaments in Calgary. And the whole while, throughout everything, I kept up with my reading. I read on the bus, on the subway, on the toilet. I read my novels and short stories and biographies. Whenever I could, whenever I wasn't doing something else. Because I wanted to do everything, be everywhere, and all at once.

One of the most important constants for me during this period was that feeling. The other was Angela Damon.



THERE WAS A crêpe place right across the street from our apartment complex in Cannes, and if we wanted a quick breakfast or if we were hungry after a long night time shoot, we usually sat on the tall stools in front of *Crème de la crêpe* and ate large, thin, rolled up pancakes stuffed with strawberries and ice cream. During the afternoon, they served savoury meal crêpes, filled with lettuce and tuna or with cheese and tomatoes, and even small salads delicately dressed with vinegar and pine nuts. It was our favourite joint in the city.

Adèle and I had spent the whole day watching Eastern European films at the festival, and the better part of the night talking to crewmates and making new friends in a small, smoky bar just off la Croisette, the main artery of the city. The long days had started to wear us down, but we decided on a one a.m. crêpe before turning in for the night. We made our way back to the apartment and bought two vanilla ice cream crêpes just before the place closed. After the owner left, the two of us were alone

on the small, makeshift terrace, lit up by a single yellow lamplight.

“This is so good,” I said with my mouth full. Adèle giggled as I wiped ice cream off my nose and leaned over to brush some off my cheek.

“They don’t make anything like this in Montreal, do they?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, putting her crêpe down to wipe her hands. “This is so French. But there’s a really good dessert place I know downtown that serves amazing brownies. We could go together sometime this summer, after class or something, if you want.”

“That would be really nice.” My enthusiasm was genuine, so it was easy to hide the ripple of anxiety that almost killed my appetite.

“I’m a bit nervous about going back,” Adèle said quietly.

“Why?”

“I’m worried about all the memories, you know? I met Liam in Montreal, and that’s where we started dating. Now I have to go back for summer school, and I’ll be alone because all my friends are away, and I won’t have anybody to keep me company.” She pushed her crêpe around on her plate. “I don’t want to be all by myself with nothing to think about but him and everything that happened with us.”

I had learned the story in bits and pieces over the past week: Liam and Adèle had been dating for a year. I knew that I was getting a very biased side of the story, but I think it’s difficult to misinterpret the actions of someone who lies and cheats and manipulates; I thought Liam was a horrible jackass. Adèle had finally broken it off with

him. It hadn't been easy for her because she was still in love with him. But after the breakup, he had been very spiteful and aggressive and cruel, and that had made her sure that she'd made the right decision. It had happened only a few months before, so the pain was still fresh.

"It's just—," she said, sighing. "I don't want to have to do this. I've already been through a lot of intense shit with him."

I had finished my crêpe. Hers still lay half-eaten on the table. I balled up my napkin and put it on my empty paper plate.

"I'm comfortable hearing it if you're comfortable telling it."

Adèle was silent for a few moments. Then she said, "Liam used to ... he ..." She took a breath. "It was an abusive relationship. In a lot of ways."

We talked for hours. At one point, when it started to get chilly, we went up to her room and settled on the couch. All her roommates were either fast asleep or still out partying, so we closed the door to the tiny living room area and talked in low tones about our deepest fears. I told her I was bisexual, about how who I was had pained me and tortured me, about the lies I had told myself and the excuses I had tried to make myself believe. We talked about our parents and how they didn't understand us, about how much we loved them. She told me that she wanted to be an actress, that she had a pet rabbit named Bugs, that her dream was to find a man who would love her and travel the world with her. I promised her that she would.

She fell asleep with her head on my shoulder. I brushed a lock of her hair from her forehead and closed my eyes,

falling asleep to the feeling of her body pressed against mine. After the sun came up and I began to hear her roommates stirring, I whispered in her ear that I was heading back to my room, that I would see her in a few hours. She squeezed my hand to show me that she understood.

I had to tear myself away from her. When I got back to my room, I sat on my bed, with hand-written screenwriting notes and pocket-sized science fiction novels strewn all around me, and I felt a deep, paralyzing emptiness. I wanted to run back to the sixth floor and hold Adèle until she woke up, cook her breakfast, make her laugh, stroke her hair one more time. I felt sorry that I had left, but I had begun to feel something horribly familiar starting up again inside me, and I was afraid of what might have happened if I had stayed.

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