

After 'While

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After 'While by Cherie Dimaline

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A story by the 2017 Governor General's Literary Award winner for young people's literature — text

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(Illustration by Ben Shannon)

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After 'While, a short story by Cherie Dimaline, is part of ***Chaos & Control***, a special series of new original writing by the **2017 Governor General's Literary Award winners**.

Warning: This story contains strong language.

The first time Lucky lost a tooth, the tooth fairy left her a bowling trophy. It was confusing because when she asked Grandma Stella to read the little plaque to her it said "To Fred, Best Gutter Ball in the State."

The second time she lost a tooth she got nothing at all. She thought maybe it was a one-shot deal and she was left with a mouth full of duds. But a week later a ziplock bag

of pennies showed up lodged under her pillow with a handwritten note on the back of an Export label that said "Sorry, I'm shitty with deadlines." She assumed it was from the delinquent fairy and quickly sent her a thank you prayer, since she wasn't sure what the best way was to reach her.

"Screw 'em all and let Jesus sort it out," her mother would say. So she got in the habit of deferring all her important messages to heaven since Jesus was such a good organizer.

Lucky's mother Arnya was a magician. She could make groceries appear overnight even though the stores were closed. She found ways to evade the landlady where others would be stuck handing over cheques. She could make Lucky feel panic and relief in the same sentence.

Lucky collected magazines, which was easy to do since magazines were transient in nature, the hobos of the written word, hopping on trains, sleeping in alleyway piles, being left on chairs in offices where people came to wait. By the time she was eight she had a wall of sloping, slippery magazines like pulpy pillars stacked beneath her window in her attic room at Grandma's.

"What do you need all these for?" Arnya was sitting on her mattress smoking a cigarette and painting the peeled heel of her black booties with a small bottle of black Halloween nail polish. "How much do you even read in Grade 1?"

Lucky was organizing the travel issues by continent. She coughed. "I'm in Grade 3, Arnya. And you shouldn't smoke in here." She pointed to the circular window over her shoulder with a thumb. "It doesn't open."

"Well, excuse me, brainiac." Arnya ground out the cigarette in an empty plate on the nightstand, after taking one last haul that burned the paper down to the butt.

Lucky felt the silence as reprimand and hurried to fill the space.

"I like the pictures. And I collect the words."

Her mother exhaled through her nostrils. She reminded Lucky of the dragons in Grandma Stella's stories, if a dragon wore purple eyeshadow and swore a lot.

"Collect words? Why don't you collect something normal, like dolls or some shit? Or cards. I used to have a collection of cards from casinos all over the midwest. Until I left Richard. They stayed behind." She stabbed at the exposed white plastic with the nail polish brush until the fibers splayed and bent.

Lucky didn't really remember Richard. He was one of the boyfriends that lived "somewhere else;" one of the ones her mother moved away for. He happened during the "Christmas years," the only times she saw Arnya. His was one of the names scrawled directly on the wrapping paper of her wildly guessed gifts, as if her mother invoking him through the addition of a name made them somehow related, made her somehow relevant.

Lucky had a box under her bed filled with cut out words. Things like:

"can't understand"

"cosmic reckoning"

"Jilted"

"Separate"

And, "underestimated"

She also had words like:

"glamour by night"

"adventure"

"untold riches"

And even, "listen to your gut" (This was cut from a health magazine article about IBS and originally read "Listen to your guts" so Lucky had to be extra careful to extract the "s.")

They were the words she held in her hands, let slip through her fingers in the hours without her mother, when Arnya was off chasing a job, or a gig, or a man, or outrunning a debt. She was a natural born magician in life, and Lucky understood that magic takes time.

"Well," Arnya was shaking a cigarette from the pack, bouncing her thigh on the bed so that her wet boot dried quicker. "I'll be off, then."

Lucky felt a pinch in her stomach and that familiar feeling of guilt. "It's okay, you can smoke in here if you want to."

Arnya was already up and pulling on her denim jacket. She popped the unlit cigarette between her crimson lips and leaned over to place a heavy hand on her daughter's upturned face. "Nah, it's okay kid. I gotta see a man about a horse."

She turned to leave, pausing at the door. "Be good and listen to your crazy old grandma. Who knows how much longer the old coot will be around. See ya later, alligator."

The girl listened to her mother's steps on the stairs, the crack of the exposed heel louder than the other. Then the front door shutting behind her.

Lucky dug through the second pile from the left, the one that held all the old National Geographics. She found a promising issue on animals of the southern U.S., picked up her red-handled scissors and hunted for the words.

"Alligator.... alligator...."
