

Excerpted from BETTER LIVING THROUGH PLASTIC EXPLOSIVES by Zsuzsi Gartner. Copyright © Zsuzsi Gartner, 2011. Excerpted by permission of Hamish Hamilton Canada/ Penguin Group (Canada). All Rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.

STORIES

BETTER
LIVING
THROUGH
PLASTIC
EXPLOSIVES

ZSUZSI GARTNER



HAMISH HAMILTON CANADA

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Canada Inc.)

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published 2011

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (RRD)

Copyright © Zsuzsi Gartner, 2011

Author representation: Westwood Creative Artists
94 Harbord Street, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1G6

Please see page vi for an extension of this copyright page.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

Publisher's note: This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Gartner, Zsuzsi
Better living through plastic explosives / Zsuzsi Gartner.

Short stories.
ISBN 978-0-670-06518-9

I. Title.

PS8563.A6747B48 2011 C813'.54 C2011-900102-0

Visit the Penguin Group (Canada) website at www.penguin.ca

Special and corporate bulk purchase rates available; please see
www.penguin.ca/corporatesales or call 1-800-810-3104, ext. 2477 or 2474

for John and Dexter

PLANET B

Earlier versions of some of these stories appeared in the following publications: "Summer of the Flesh Eater" in *The Walrus*; "Floating Like a Goat" in *Grain*; "Investment Results May Vary" in *Vancouver Review*; "The Adopted Chinese Daughters' Rebellion" as "The I-Ching of Kris Kringle" in *The Georgia Straight*; "What are we doing here?" in *Toronto Life*; and "Better Living Through Plastic Explosives" in *The New Quarterly*.

Excerpt from Lawrence Ferlinghetti, from A CONEY ISLAND OF THE MIND, copyright © 1958 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Barrett L. Dorko, P.T., quotation reprinted by permission of Barrett L. Dorko, P.T., a clinician, writer, and teacher living in Ohio: barrettdorko.com.

Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)

Words and Music by David Stewart and Annie Lennox. Copyright © 1983 by Universal Music Publishing MGB Ltd. All Rights in the United States and Canada Administered by Universal Music – MGB Songs. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. *Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Corporation.*

Take Me To The River

Words and Music by Al Green and Mabon Hodges. Copyright © 1974 IRVING MUSIC, INC. and AL GREEN MUSIC, INC. Copyright Renewed. All Rights Controlled and Administered by IRVING MUSIC, INC. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission. *Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Corporation.*

Excerpt from THE AGONY OF FLIES: NOTES & NOTATIONS Bilingual Edition by Elias Canetti, translated by H.F. Broch de Rothermann. Translation copyright © 1994 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

CONTENTS

Summer of the Flesh Eater	1
Once, We Were Swedes	25
Floating Like a Goat	53
Investment Results May Vary	63
The Adopted Chinese Daughters' Rebellion	87
What Are We Doing Here?	99
Someone Is Killing the Great Motivational Speakers of Amerika	111
Mister Kakami	131
We Come in Peace	166
Better Living Through Plastic Explosives	191
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	215

SUMMER OF THE FLESH EATER

Field Notes on the Tendency of Varieties
to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type

—AFTER ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE

Understand that pity is not what we're looking for. We are men, we remind each other as often as we can, and we must bear that burden. Forgetting was what got us into trouble in the first place. It's a weak word, *trouble*. But that's what came to mind when someone finally bought the Wong-Campeau place at the south end of the cul-de-sac. Stefan Brandeis took one look at the silver Camaro Z28 in the driveway and said, "Vroom, vroom. Here comes trouble." He was kidding, of course. Who could have believed that a barbarian was at the gates?

Their agent had priced the property before the market started to clench, but with their Ritalin-infused twins at Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, an International Baccalaureate school we knew doubled as a rehab centre, the Wong-Campeaus couldn't afford

to come down. That kind of corked-up familial stress inevitably manifests as fault lines. In other words, 2781 Chatham Close was, as Trevor Masahara succinctly put it, looking like crap. Marcus van der Houte had offered to fluff their place at a generous discount, but the W-Cs declined. (*Fluff* is not a term Marcus himself would use. His business card reads *Art Direction for Real Estate*.)

“I should’ve done it gratis,” Marcus later said, more than once, more times than might have been necessary, while draining the last of another shaker of his signature fig-infused vodka martinis. “A couple of orange PVC Rashid pieces out front”—one of us, possibly Karlheinz Jacobsen, observed that the designer’s cordless Dirt Devil was an “isomorphic miracle”—“and the door in Shade-Grown Espresso with a Spa-Blue casing to make the brown really pop ...” All we could do was reassure him that he could hardly be held responsible for all that had happened. Or *caveat emptor*, as Patel Seth, our Latin scholar, put it.

“Damn his carnivorous soul to hell!” Kim Fischer had yelled from atop his carport towards the end, brandishing his fists like an Old Testament patriarch or modern-day mullah. It’s perhaps not fair to speak of Kim, who with his unisex name and dubious tenor no doubt had more to contend with than the rest of us. His resilience was something to marvel at, though. We like to think he’s running a raw-food retreat somewhere in the West Kootenays, or way out east, the Gatineaus maybe, remarried to a woman who appreciates his way with a paring knife, who understands that taking a pumice stone to the rough skin of your heels does not necessarily make you any less of a man.

But this isn’t about Kim. You could say this is about evolution. You could say we’ve developed a deep personal appreciation for Darwin, the man and the theorist—his dyspeptic stomach,

his human frailties, his ability to cling to contradictory desires. We've weighed anchor aboard the *Beagle*, if only in our dreams, charted our own Galapagos of the soul and found it wanting.

He moved in on the Canada Day long weekend. As the children circled the cul-de-sac on their Razors and Big Wheels, like planes stacked in a holding pattern, he arrived with a U-Haul hitched to the Camaro and started unloading. No moving company, just him. He wore what's commonly referred to as a muscle shirt but what some would call a wife beater. Stefan Brandeis noted that he hadn't seen a grown man in cut-offs that tight since Expo '86. (We later had a spirited debate about whether his was in fact a conventional mullet or ersatz hockey hair.) The first thing wheeled out of the U-Haul was a hulking, jerry-built barbecue. He seemed friendly enough. He flashed what Trevor Masahara called "a big, shit-eating grin" at those of us who'd gone over to welcome him with a pitcher of iced Matcha tea spiked with Kentucky Gentleman.

"Shake hands with the Q," he said, patting the hood of the barbecue as if it were a loyal hound, the half moons of his prominent cuticles edged in grease. Karlheinz Jacobsen's wife later commented that he smelled a bit ripe, and the other women made a show of fanning the air in front of their faces. Kim Fischer's wife even enthusiastically snuffled Kim's exfoliated pits like a truffle pig. At the time it seemed they were being a trifle judgmental, but one thing we'd always appreciated about our wives was that they spoke their minds.

It bears mentioning that he did something else that first day as we gathered around his "Q" trying to make small talk. Without missing a beat, he reached down to rearrange himself inside his cut-offs. This is something we've never talked about, not even Stefan B. Some things are better left unannotated.

Afterwards, he sat down on his new front steps and drank beer straight from the can, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, exaggeratedly rotating his shoulders as if attempting to recalibrate himself. It had all been amusing at first, some kind of sideshow. Like having a Molson ad shot on your very own street. This was before the dog arrived, and the Dodge one-ton.

That day is easy to recall with a great deal of clarity for another reason. We'd always been spared the smell from the rendering plant across the Burrard Inlet. But on July 1, there occurred a shift in the wind that continued unabated throughout the summer. The congealed odour of pyrolyzed animal parts would enter the cul-de-sac and then just hang there, as if snagged on a hydro line. It came and went, some days thankfully better than others. *Can you smell it?* we'd ask hopefully at the gelato shop two blocks away on Mountain Highway. *Didn't you smell it on Albermarle Drive as well?* we quizzed our letter carrier, who took to pelting through her rounds on the cul-de-sac as if Cerberus were at her heels. It was difficult to believe we were the only ones in our North Vancouver enclave saddled with the almost gelatinous stink. There were days when even the leaves of the silver birches that edged the ravine behind our properties appeared to curl back from it. The cedars and the Sitka spruce, more stoic trees, stood their ground.

We have accepted our confluence of bad luck not as a "sign" of something, but rather for what it apparently was: bizarre coincidence. People have driven themselves insane for millennia trying to figure out "what it all means." Most often things just *are*.

"I know it's only a smell," Trevor Masahara said one particularly rank Tuesday evening, interrupting our book club's parsing of Clarissa's guilty rejection of the hydrangea in *The*

Hours, “but sometimes it seems like, you know, an actual *thing*.”

His name? It’s easy to forget he actually had a name, a driver’s licence, most probably a SIN. For a while we called him The Truck Guy and later The Meat Guy. Karlheinz Jacobsen, who has a scientific bent, was the one who nicknamed him Lucy. You know, the so-called missing link? We thought this was terribly funny. “Lucy,” Stefan Brandeis would yell mock *sotto voce*, “you got some ‘splainin’ to do!” while the rest of us laughed. We literally yowled. It seems even then we had more in common with other animals than we could have imagined.

A couple of days after he’d moved in, as if it had been teleported there overnight, the Dodge Ram, circa early ’80s, sat on blocks in the middle of his front lawn. Off-white (*tapioca*, Marcus van der Houte insisted), one broken headlight, and on the slightly dented back bumper a peeling orange neon sticker that read I’M GOING NUCKIN’ FUTS! And one of those chrome Jesus fish. (We never did witness any signs of even covert religiosity, a disappointment to Karlheinz Jacobsen, who alone among us held to a notion of the divine.) The kids went giddy—instant ADHD—as if they’d never seen a truck before.

Marcus was the one who elected to go over to talk to him about it. Bear in mind that we didn’t then, nor subsequently, ever use the term “property values.” We are not the kind of men who fixate on our lawns. In fact, those of us with southern exposures have switched to drought-resistant native grasses. And if there is grass that needs cutting, a communal Lee Valley push mower is used.

He was underneath the truck banging around, bare knees poking out, feet in decaying Adidas. Marcus tapped out the

end-credit sequence to *Moulin Rouge* on the hood to get his attention.