

A person is seen from behind, wearing a yellow jacket and a large tan backpack, walking on a mountain trail. The scene is bathed in a warm, orange light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The person's hand is visible in the foreground, holding a dark object. The background shows rolling hills and mountains under a hazy sky.

In a Heartbeat

MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES

Two people just have a way of finding each other

On a *Heartbeat*

MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES

LORIMER

Lucien has always felt lonely, even though he lives in a big city. Desperate to be somewhere no one knows him, Lucien decides to spend his last semester of school in a small town — somewhere he can get a fresh start. The last thing he expects is to make friends and, even scarier, find someone he's interested in. Alder seems interested in him, too, but when Lucien starts to hear rumours about Alder's past, he wonders if finding love is too good to be true.

MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES is a visual artist and author. He has self-published several works of non-fiction short stories and zine collections. He is also the author of the Lorimer Real Love teen romances *Just Julian*, *Romeo for Real*, *We Three* and *Confessions of a Teenage Drag King*. Markus lives in Toronto, Ontario.



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James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers
www.lorimer.ca

 eBook also available

\$14.95 CAN / \$8.99 US

ISBN-10: 1-4594-1627-9

ISBN-13: 978-1-4594-1627-7



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**JAMES LORIMER & COMPANY LTD., PUBLISHERS
TORONTO**

Copyright © 2021 by Markus Harwood-Jones
Published in Canada in 2021. Published in the United States in 2022.
US hardcover edition ISBN 9781459416291

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James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers acknowledges funding support from the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), an agency of the Government of Ontario. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada and with the support of Ontario Creates.

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ONTARIO
CREATES

Cover design: Tyler Cleroux

Cover image: Shutterstock

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication (Paperback)

Title: In a heartbeat / Markus Harwood-Jones.

Names: Harwood-Jones, Markus, 1991- author.

Series: RealLove.

Description: Series statement: Real love

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210205903 | Canadiana (ebook) 20210205946

| ISBN 9781459416277 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459416284 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8615.A7744 I5 2021 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published by:	Distributed in Canada by:	Distributed in the US by:
James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers 117 Peter Street, Suite 304 Toronto, ON, Canada M5V 0M3 www.lorimer.ca	Formac Lorimer Books 5502 Atlantic Street Halifax, NS, Canada B3H 1G4 www.formac.ca	Lerner Publisher Services 241 1st Ave. N. Minneapolis, MN, USA 55401 www.lernerbooks.com

Printed and bound in Canada.

Manufactured by Friesens Corporation in Altona, Manitoba,
Canada in June 2021.

Job #277241

For Andrew, my heart.

01 Departures

THE CONVEYOR BELT has a squeaky spot. A whine every few turns. I sit at the edge of baggage pickup. A warbled announcement welcomes me to Kelowna International Airport. With furtive glances to the dark maw of the luggage track, I will my suitcase to appear and free me from luggage limbo.

“Luggage limbo . . .” I quietly repeat the phrase. There’s a ring to it. My hands slip into the pocket of my sweater. I pull out a notebook and grab the worn

pencil crammed into its folds. *Luggage limbo*, I scribble down. *Endless turnstile . . .*

“What rhymes with turnstile?” I mutter through my options, “All in a pile . . . Once in a while . . .” A squeal cuts through my concentration. I grit my teeth and glare as the baggage track whirs to life again. A family of sunburned faces huddles around, jostling for their suitcases. In my journal, I flip the page and start a new line: *Canada Goose jackets. Ski-goggle tans.*

At last, a heavy, neon-pink suitcase thuds into view. I gather up my things and weave through the crowd. I grip the bag’s handle and don’t need to check the tag. I know it says *Melanie Quan* — my mother’s name, by marriage.

Mom always says she never figured herself as the type to settle down. Definitely never thought she’d change her name. Then she met Shana and “everything changed.” Whatever that means. Just like that, Melanie McMartin became Melanie Quan. And when I was born, she became Mom and Shana became Ma. Seventeen years later, my name changed too.

Though, I don't think they saw that last one coming.

See, when I was thirteen, we had a guest speaker at school. He was supposed to teach us something about equality or how bullying is wrong . . . All I remember is that he mentioned being a “trans man.” Before that, I'd never realized how much a couple words can change your whole world.

It took a while before I clued in anyone else on my big self-discovery. In the end, I came out by accident. I was just fiddling around with my Facebook profile — I never realized that a gender update would get auto-posted to my feed! All of a sudden, everyone was sending congratulations emojis and asking if I had a surgery fundraiser. Meanwhile, I was barely working myself up to buying a binder!

Thankfully, my mothers' only complaint was that I didn't tell them first. I thought for sure Mom would go on about my “betrayal of womanhood” or something cringey like that, but Ma must've talked her through all that second-wavey stuff *before* the family meeting. For my seventeenth birthday, the two of

them even surprised me with a trip to Service Ontario. They'd done all the paperwork for my name change in advance. All I had to do was sign a form and wait for my new ID in the mail.

Darting through the airport, I press a hand to my pocket and feel the outline of my passport. My heart still flutters thinking of the name inscribed inside: *Lucien M. Quan*. That's me.

A breath of cool air rolls across my face. I pass through the airport doors and sunlight breaks, gold and warm against my skin. The parking lot is slick with melting puddles, memories of snow. I'd heard the winters were mild out west, but this is even better than I'd hoped. I peel off my coat. January here feels like springtime back home.

Toronto's a big city but growing up there makes it feel small. I've lived on the same street, in the same two-bedroom apartment, for as long as I can remember. At my alternative school, my accidental gender reveal was briefly big news to the hundred-person student body. I was never great at making

friends, but suddenly everyone wanted to know me. I was bombarded with questions: How did I know? Was I having “the surgery”? What were my opinions on neopronouns or hormone blockers?

The attention was almost fun, if awkward. Then, the most popular kid in school came out too. They were so much more prepared, with easy answers to everyone’s questions and a penchant for public speaking. Pretty soon, they’d started a Gay-Straight-Alliance and even won an award for championing gender-neutral washrooms. It didn’t seem to matter that I’d asked for the same things when I was in grade nine, but back then everyone just thought I was being a “good ally.”

I knew I couldn’t spend one more semester in a school full of posers. I needed to get out, see the world — figure myself out on my own terms. Once I had my new passport, that urge to run only got stronger.

When I pitched the idea, Ma wasn’t a fan. Apparently, “someone like me” shouldn’t travel on my own. But Mom had my back. She told me she

remembered the feeling — that drive. To go somewhere, *be* someone new. She said she knows what it's like having everyone think they already know all you can be.

With my parents more-or-less on board, there were still just two small problems: time and money. I had to finish high school *somewhere*. Plus, as much as my folks say we're "comfortable," I know we don't have the dollars to drop on an international trip. I figured that would be the end of it. Cool idea, can't afford it. Story of my life.

That's when Mom got a call from her sister, my aunt Jean. Turns out, she's got a daughter heading off to University of Toronto and is in need of a place to stay. Even better, Jean works as principal of a high school and could pull some strings to transfer me in. Next thing I knew, it was all arranged. Cousin Jeanette would stay in my room and I would get to spend a whole semester living in Vernon, British Columbia.

Standing at the airport entrance, I can't help but stare. Beyond the lines of parked cars and idling taxis, gigantic mounds of earth reach for the sky. They're

flecked with brown and green, white peaks lined with glittering fir trees. I've never seen real mountains before.

Mom never talks about growing up in Vernon. All I know is, she left around my age and didn't look back. Meanwhile, the McMartins have never come for a visit or invited us for a holiday. Without a face to a name, I search the parking lot for a stranger who could be family. I wonder if Jean looks like Mom, all big curls and freckled cheeks.

A silver pickup catches my eye. Its engine roars like a beast. A Canada flag is plastered to the corner of its tinted windshield. Sunlight glints off its bumper and I wince, blinking back spots. When I get back my sight, the truck is bearing down towards me. A loud honk cuts through the parking lot. The air in my lungs is frozen. My legs feel like two blocks of cement. All I can think is that I'm fifteen minutes into my fresh start and about to get hate-crimes in the parking lot.