Little Library

An Anthology of Creative Non-Fiction

EDITED BY ROBERT G. MAY

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Preface

ROBERT G. MAY

THE FIRST "little libraries" starting springing up around 2009. A man from Wisconsin reputedly built the first one in the shape of a one-room schoolhouse as a tribute to his mother, a teacher who had a passion for reading. The man's neighbours loved it so much they started nailing together more little libraries to put up in their own front yards or to give away to friends. People started taking notice. Journalists wrote stories about how these miniature book repositories were bringing communities together and reigniting an interest in the written word. Social-media users posted photos and map locations of little libraries in their neighbourhoods. The "take a book, leave a book" revolution had begun.

The number of little libraries in America grew to more than four hundred by the end of 2011, and ballooned to more than four thousand by the end of 2012. That year, "Little Free Library" became a registered non-profit organization with a mission "to be a catalyst for building community, inspiring readers, and expanding book access for all through a global network of volunteer-led Little Free Library book-exchange boxes" ("History"). Since then, the organization has received numerous awards and accolades, has been the subject of thousands of articles and

profiles, and has become a global phenomenon. It's estimated there are now more than 150,000 little libraries in 120 countries all over the world. According to one British-Columbia-based magazine, there are more than two thousand officially registered little libraries in Canada, with hundreds more unregistered ones (Mundy). There may even be a little library on your street! You can find out more about the Little Free Library organization on their official Web site:

www.littlefreelibrary.org

When you look inside a little library, there's no telling what you'll find. I recently rummaged through a little library in my neighbourhood in the west end of Kingston, and I saw extremely well-thumbed paperback romance novels juxtaposed against hardback literary biographies, baby books made of stiff cardboard (complete with teething marks in the corners) alongside dog-eared math textbooks (liberated, no doubt, from the high school down the street), thrillers rubbing elbows with self-help guides, cook books jockeying for position among comic books, and more. Some of these venerable tomes had clearly been in there for a long time, their cracked spines faded to near unintelligibility by the sun. Others looked like more recent additions, their covers shiny and their pages bright. You don't need a library card to use a little library: no barcodes, no scanners. Just grab a book and go. There's no organizational principle at work inside a little library: no Library of Congress, no Dewey Decimals. Just a hodge-podge of random volumes waiting for a new reader to take interest, a new owner to take possession—permanently or only temporarily.

I've always thought an anthology is a lot like a little library. There's no telling what you'll find inside an anthology, either. Sure, the cover may identify a broad category or a specific genre: short fiction, contemporary poetry, ghost stories. I even have an anthology of Canadian dog stories on my shelf at home. (Who knew so many short

stories have been written about Canadian dogs?) But it's not until you rummage through an anthology that you find yourself pleasantly surprised by what's been included. Or, yes, unpleasantly disappointed by what's been omitted.

The word *anthology* comes from the Greek *anthos*, for "flower," plus *logia*, for "gathering." An anthology is a gathering of flowers. The word was first used as early as 60 BCE to describe a collection of poetry. I really like the idea of an anthology as a floral bouquet: both are colourful, both appeal to multiple senses (some books just smell great, don't they?), both are an equal pleasure to give and to receive. Just like an anthology, a bouquet of flowers can pleasantly surprise the receiver by its composition: "Peonies, my favourite!"

But I like the "little library" analogy even better, which is why I selected it as a title and cover image for this year's CWRI 273 (Writing Creative Non-Fiction) anthology—the tenth in the series! In CWRI 273, a small but enthusiastic group of students from a wide range of academic disciplines and backgrounds gather together twice a week for twelve weeks to learn the rudiments of writing creative non-fiction, a relatively new literary genre that marries the creativity of novels, short stories, and other narrative modes with the truthfulness of journalism, life writing, and other forms of reportage. These students have the opportunity to brainstorm, research, compose, and edit their own works of creative non-fiction, implementing the techniques they learn about in class and workshopping their own writing with their peers. The final results of all that labour are published here, with minimal further editing. You can see previous volumes in the series on my Web site:

www.queensu.ca/academia/drrgmay/e-books

In this year's "little library" you'll find creative non-fiction about relationships blossoming and relationships withering; dorm culture, thrifting culture, and gaming culture; social acceptance and cultural

displacement; playing chess, engaging in varsity debate, and watching trash TV; how to cope with *misophonia* (a new one for me), how to respond to healthcare violence, and how to engage in "risky play." Just like the little library in my neighbourhood, and just like the one pictured on the cover, this "little library" is sure to pleasantly surprise you with its broad range of ideas and subject matter, its creativity, its honesty, and its unalloyed charm.

As the instructor of CWRI 273, it is my sincere hope that you find a volume in *Little Library* that piques your interest and ignites your own creativity. It's been my pleasure to see each and every one of these little library books take shape over these past several weeks, and now I'm equally happy to turn them over to you.

Happy rummaging!

Queen's University at Kingston
Spring 2026

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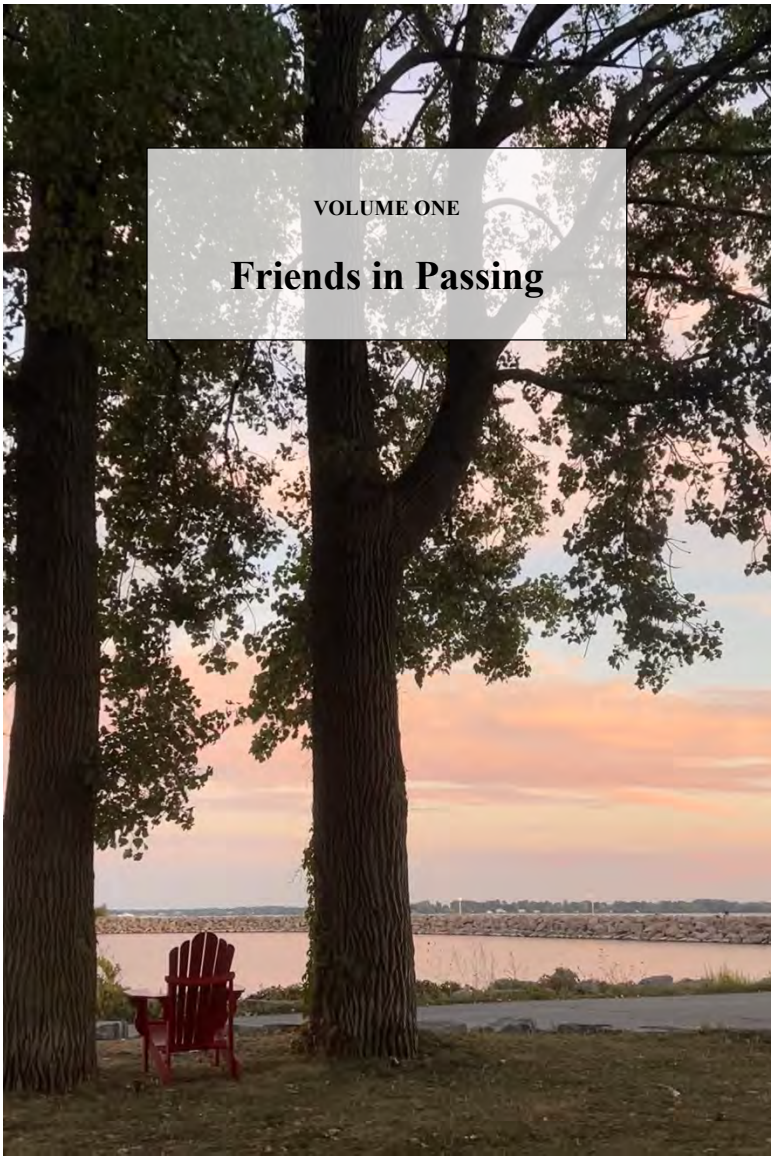
VOLUME ONE
Friends in Passing

Off the Rack

ROXY ADAM

"PEOPLE ARE just looking for a bargain." Fredrik's voice is crackly over the WhatsApp call.

"Oh? Don't you think it's something else? You seem very passionate about it," I pressed, trying to understand how a vintage-store owner could feel this way about his profession.

"Well, it's kind of a principle for me. Paying high prices for clothing just doesn't make sense. It is about bargains. Clothes are meant to be used. Yes, people also look for uniqueness, but there's basically an unlimited supply out there."

I felt immediately bothered by this answer. Clothes are meant to be used and worn; this is true. And there are infinite amounts of clothes. In Canada, over 450,000 tonnes of clothing are wasted annually, around twelve kilograms per person (Weber et al.).

But, as a small child, nothing about clothing felt impersonal or expendable. My best ensemble was striped leggings layered under a frilly dress, with a head full of multi-coloured clips. I obsessively clipped them, warning my mother to back off if she tried to interfere. During Reading Time, I would sit cross-legged on the library carpet, always reading the same book: *Fashion Through the Ages*. I wanted to be like

the women in that book when I grew up: the woman in the ‘60s mod-mini on the cover, the ancient Egyptian queen dripping in gold jewels on page five, and the Victorian lady in a gown on page ten.

“It’s too much effort. You do it for me,” I begged my confused mother. I was eleven years old, an age when most girls want clinical control of their outfit, yet I refused to pick out my clothing for school. The reality was it was not too much effort; it was that nothing demanded anything of me. I noticed something strange happening to the clothing around me: the *beigification*, the disappearance of patterns, of fun. My school had no uniform, so I couldn’t understand the rows of identical Aritzia hoodies and Lululemon leggings. Eventually, I got embarrassingly old to be dressed by my mother.

I remember the many trips to the mall with my middle-school gaggle. We would sift through piles of brightly coloured Forever 21 polyesters. I’d stand in front of the fitting-room mirror, my chubby face fraught with disappointment. Was it the cut I didn’t like? The material? The length? Everyone else liked these things. I’d come home and cut the tags off immediately, telling myself it would be different this time. I’d then wear the same ratty clothes again and again, leaving the new ones untouched. I was a repeat offender.

Things gradually shifted in high school thanks to my best friend Ava and our mutual emo phase. I longed for my clothing to express what I couldn’t say out loud. Still, I couldn’t just walk into a mall and find something non-conformist; how oxymoronic would that be? Meanwhile, thrifting was booming. That year, three million people bought second-hand clothing for the first time (Mau). The pandemic hurt retail brands, sending people to the thrift in droves.

So, during the summer of 2020, when the lockdowns eased in Ontario, Ava and I would bus down to the Victoria Park and Eglinton Value Village. Inside, the heat amplified the musty thrift smell. The metal racks bent under the weight of countless clothes. “No one finds anything good by skimming. What you need to do is search through the clothes

one by one. Look through every size because things are labelled wrong or hidden," Ava instructed. We spent upwards of three hours in the store that first time. My arms burned from searching; my mask made it hard to breathe. And yet, I couldn't help but feel that I was on the precipice of striking gold. But I went home with nothing that day. Nothing I tried on felt like me. I didn't even know what I liked.

Over time, I became more confident. I made lists of my clothing likes and dislikes. I learned how to date clothing by seam number and tag era. I began to identify materials, differentiating cotton versus wool, rayon versus polyester. I began searching every part of a garment for holes and stains, calculating if something was too damaged to buy or too unfixable to fix.

Thrifting can teach you what you like. Out of the massive random assortment at the thrift, when something calls out to you, it says something about you. In their book *Second-Hand Cultures*, Gregson and Crewe introduce the concept of "object biographies," the idea that second-hand goods have ongoing histories across multiple owners and contexts, gaining new meanings and value through reuse. In this way, thrifted items hold an emotional dimension, unlike retail. You're removed from the pressure to buy whatever is trending.

Five years later my room is exploding with clothing and other strangely secured artifacts. How many wonders can one cavern hold? My '90s-does-'70s bomber jacket sits next to an airy organza dress. Beside this rack lies my jewellery: a nickel Haida-style cuff, stacked over another—*whimsy gothic*, bright silver. None of these treasures belong to the same era, but they all belong to me. The metal racks are a mirrored hallway, leading you towards your own style, if you let them.

Yet, "just looking for a bargain" kept rolling around my head. Unsure what I felt, I called my boyfriend Yunus (a fellow thrifter) and explained Frederik's perspective.

"Don't you think that the two perspectives work at two levels? Yours is individual, his is global," Yunus retorted.

"This is true, but what if most people are looking for a bargain? What if I'm just weird and get really attached to objects?"

"But if they're just looking for bargains, aren't they doing a different kind of shopping? More like retail, since it's about something other than clothes?"

Here is my reconciliation: yes, there are essentially infinite pieces of clothing and infinite choices. But it's not the clothing that's special, it's the biography—the story you give the pieces. In that sense, thrifting isn't about infinite clothing at all. It's about chance meetings between people and objects at exactly the right moment, and the person you become once those stories become part of you.

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I Took the One Less Travelled By

and That Has Made All the Difference

CLAIRE BAK

IN THE springtime in rural Ontario if you walk outside and listen you can hear a symphony of sounds. The sway of tree branches, the rustle of leaves, the chirping of birds, and sometimes the laughter of children. Just outside of Lakefield, the Bak family patriarch has a farm. In its heyday, the farm grew squash, pumpkins, and potatoes, hearty vegetables that were plucked and vended at the family market. When the market was sold and the Bak children moved out, produce production halted. Now, year after year, the Bak siblings return with hordes of children, and the farm became a place where the Bak cousins played and explored.

Growing up, I found myself lucky to be cousin number seven in the middle of thirteen kids. I've always thought that I had a good spot. Three of my cousins are the same age as me, my closest cousin in age and friendship being Eamon. If I wasn't with him, you could find me clinging to my older brother. I was a tomboy and my favourite activities were wearing Sam's hand-me-downs, playing games with Sam, and generally being interested in whatever Sam was interested in at any given moment. At Sam's right hand, you could usually find Eamon's brother Paul. Paul and Sam were thrown into a similar cache as Eames and I, born in the

same year and always hanging out together. Their older sister Frances often joined in, and the five of us were rarely seen apart.

My cousins and I loved climbing on the farm equipment in the big barn. Our Dziadziu still kept a wide assortment of farm vehicles that we loved to hop onto and pretend we were racing. This play was always supervised by the adults, who were not too keen on letting their children mess around with heavy machinery by themselves. Despite the fun we had in the barn, my greatest memories of the farm growing up consist of times when my cousins and I would follow the stream out to the forest and into our own parentless world where we could get lost in our games. Classified as what is now called "risky play" (Brussoni), our games were, for the most part, unsupervised. This type of play is proven to be beneficial, as "Cognitively," risky play helps children "overcome their fears, build their critical thinking skills, and become accustomed to coping independently with difficult situations" (Brussoni). The property felt like it went on forever, full of shaded paths with trees to climb, wild turkeys to gawk at, and a pond that trickled into a stream that spanned the entire farm. Out on the property, we looked out for each other.

"We're going out to play in the yard!"

The five of us race out of the big house, the screen door swinging behind us. Making our way down to the pond, Frances looks around conspiratorially.

"Guys! Through here. I found a passage."

We crawl down the bank on our hands and knees, caking our clothes in mud and sludge. At the east end of the pond, the water gets shallower and marshy, turning into a stream that runs along the property. We giggle as we wade eastward through the stream, pushing aside bulrushes and other wetland plants. When I trip over a rock that's beneath the murky water and fall sideways into the stream, Sam laughs as he gives me a hand, helping me through.

"Fran! When will we be there?"

I'm getting tired of wading and am ready to set up camp. As we continue through the stream, we come up to some brambles that are yet to produce fruit and sweeping evergreens that block our path.

"Great. We came all this way for nothing," Paul pouts.

"Just wait one minute, will you? We just need to push these aside and we can keep going."

Frances scolds Paul as she holds the overgrowth aside, revealing a path beside the stream that is shrouded by trees, save for spots of sunlight seeping through. After the last cousin steps through, Fran releases her hold on the scratchy branches and begins to climb the bank, grabbing Eamon's arm to help pull him up.

"We need to walk on the path now. The stream gets too deep here for us to wade through."

The look in her eye warns us not to test her. Normally, this is enough for Frances to keep us in line, but Paul and Sam look ready to test her authority.

"If you don't get out now, I'll tell."

Frances knows the power of her words. Away from parents, pretend play "provides a natural opportunity for kids to build upon their social skills, as they work to pick roles, create a shared world and storyline, and resolve any conflicts that arise" (Keough). Fran was in charge of our little crew. We scramble up the bank, not wanting to risk a verbal dressing-down from the adults about misbehaving while unsupervised. The path looks like it was lost to time. Reading the rusted signs, we learn that the path used to be a snowmobile road. Judging by the overgrown branches and fallen-down fence, nobody has driven here for a while. We find a place to set up camp and begin looking for fort-building materials. Eamon and I decide to climb an evergreen nearby, one with lots of branches to find purchase on. As we climb, Frances yells to us, "Be careful up there!" We understand that there is no one to save us if we get stuck, but risk it anyway. At the top, I look down and grip the branch a little harder.

“Are you stuck?” Eamon calls up to me, already having begun his descent.

“No! I’m just looking around before I come down!”

We both know I’m lying. But Eamon shrugs and goes along with it. Being scared of heights is babyish, and he knows that crying could get us both uninvited from the next excursion. I take a deep breath and shift my hips off my purchase, sliding down until I touch the lower branch with my tiptoe. My clammy hands leave wet spots on the branches as I climb lower and lower, but I soon make it low enough that Sam can catch me as I jump off a branch and return to the ground.

Soon enough, our stomachs start grumbling, signifying it’s almost time for dinner. Frances grabs my hand as we begin to walk back and we look ahead, laughing at the boys slipping as they crawl down into the stream.

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Speak Up!

JULIA DE LIBERO VAN DAMME

I SPENT the last weekend of my first month of university watching Montreal slowly burn to the ground on a bed of cool, dry grass. I was visiting the city over the weekend to compete at my first debate tournament ever, Central Novice, hosted by the McGill Debating Union. Somehow, a fire broke out in the city and crept towards Rue St Laurent, forcing me and my friends to evacuate the night club we were in and head over to an empty soccer field just outside the city. I had never travelled to any other province in Canada before, let alone by myself. On that first trip, I brought a giant suitcase of every outfit, skincare product, and stuffed animal I owned, and filled a second suitcase with five different kinds of cheap vodka to bring home to my other freshly-turned-eighteen floormates in residence. But despite being so clearly unprepared to solo travel anywhere, I was unfazed by this ravenous blaze creeping towards us on the horizon. A door was opening. Under a vast, glowing sky, I could see a path unfolding itself and stretching into the far corners of the world. My life was finally beginning.

Now, at one of the last debate tournaments I would ever compete in, I am standing at the podium in front of my younger sister, a business student at Laurier who I had invited to watch me. These days, I could

easily take everything in my life with me in a backpack or two; I had competed, judged, and coached at competitions in Ottawa, Toronto, Windsor, St Catherines, Calgary, and Halifax. I represented Queen's as a judge at the World University Debate competition in Panama City, Panama, and judged at Yale Inter-Varsity, where Ted Cruz famously debated against Justin Trudeau many years ago (Panetta). I'm not just gazing reverently into the fire anymore; I had thrown myself into the flames, and made it out the other side.

After watching me and my partner's first round of the day, she approached me in the hallway.

"So, did you guys win?"

"What? Yeah, we definitely won that round! Didn't you hear the judge's explanation for the call?"

"I didn't understand what she was saying at all. I actually didn't really understand what your opponents were saying, either. I kind of figured you won. Your speech was the only one I could understand."

I was floored. Had she really not understood what my opponents had said?

Over time, I have come to realize that debate is really only designed to help you convince people who aren't debaters. Debaters share a particular vocabulary and framework for crafting argumentation. To provide a strong argument, one cannot simply assert what they think is true; they need to "mechanize," or provide explanations as to why what they claim is true. Their explanations need to contain "structural reasons," concrete information typically related to human psychology, history, or other information that plainly exists in the world to what debaters call "the average reasonable voter," the perspective all judges must assume when assessing performance in a debate. The meanings of most of these words and explanations debaters use are incomprehensible to the actual "average reasonable voter," which is completely intentional; most people who successfully debate competitively receive formal training on understanding this terminology and learning how to argue

correctly, oftentimes giving coaches hundreds of dollars a year to help them understand what judges want them to say. I guess as I was spending more and more weekends away at tournaments or running classes I didn't realize that I was beginning to speak a completely different language.

Even seasoned debaters have expressed disillusionment and frustration with the activity over the years. Reflecting upon his debate with Cruz in a CBC article, Trudeau himself discusses how Cruz was focused on "winning the debate, rather than on any sort of fair chance to have a good and robust debate," because apparently "that's the way university debating was played at that particular moment" (qtd. in Panetta). Even now, a major focus of the varsity-debate circuit is speaking performance, which creates a hyper-competitive attitude that actively encourages debaters to neglect their health, drain their finances, and jeopardize their GPA in hopes of achieving the recognition that comes with competitive success. Sally Rooney, author of bestselling novels *Normal People*, *Conversations with Friends*, and *Intermezzo*, wrote an essay called "Even if You Beat Me," in which she emphasizes that insularity and aggression she experienced as a top-speaking European debater. She describes travelling the world, telling people in their respective countries how to manage their foreign affairs without any prior research or verifiable information, how her journey in the activity was all-consuming and led her to engage in a kind of escapism that was ruining her life. Over time, I have seen person after person chewed up and spit out by the debate world, alienated and torched by parts of the community that, ironically, only seem to enjoy listening to themselves talk.

But despite all of this, despite the fact that debate remains immensely competitive, despite the élitist culture that excludes those who didn't talk or look the way they liked, despite the fact that my sister had just barely understood what was going on in my debate round, I felt something excitedly bubbling inside me after I had the chance to finally have my sister watch me debate. I found that even if she wasn't following

the speeches she heard, this joy was emanating from me like a warm lamp. Why? I thought back to that first debate tournament in Montreal, to the glow of a burning Montreal on the horizon. What I felt back then was the pure satisfaction of giving myself the opportunity to speak, seeing the way people blossomed when I listened to them, being forced to learn how to think about and decide what was true and important in my life, and the autonomy to act on those choices by travelling the world and learning the stories of so many beautiful people around the world. What debate had truly taught me was that sometimes being friends is more important than being right. I may never be able to make someone fully understand my point of view, but the fact that I was able to ignite my passion about the world and connect with so many different people through this activity was invaluable.

I thanked my sister for coming to see my debate, gave her a big hug, and headed to my next round. I decided to conclude my time competing at my last debate competition early that weekend and prioritize watching as many movies with her as possible while we were both in Waterloo together. The entire city was experiencing one of the worst snowstorms in the last five years, but snuggled together facing her TV I have never felt so warm. I was full of gratitude. Debate had won me everything I could have ever wanted.

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A Collective Reality

KATIE EVERSON

THE WHITE arena flashed as it extended across the screens high on the wall, the potential for a perfect image disrupted by the screens' differing brightnesses. We were chatting close to the bar, two of us on a couch and one in a chair opposite, facing the thick brown paper draped over the table between us.

"E," one of us guessed. Emily scribbled "E" on the page.

"P." Nope, that one was wrong.

"We're not guessing this word." Jen was probably right, but that didn't stop us. We proceeded to randomly guess letters until our stick person was almost fully formed and the unknown word *hemifusome* stared back at us from the page. What in the world was that?

"It's an organelle that was just discovered," Emily the Biology Major explained.

A similar struggle ensued when Jen, who was in Political Studies, picked up the crayon and chose *epistocracy*. Emily and I would never have guessed that.

Then it was my turn. I scribbled nine dashes on the page, a larger space between dash five and six. I knew they probably wouldn't think of it, but I couldn't find a better phrase associated with English Literature.

Damn. I really should have picked something better than *close read*. Still, it was hilarious to watch each other guess at words they probably wouldn't know and discuss them afterwards.

It's important to plan fun activities to encourage "bonding" with housemates. This allows home to become a "positive living environment." Potential activities include touring the city or even having movie nights ("Living"). As current third-year students, we lead busy lives, and our very different classes prevent our schedules' easy alignment, but we always make time to connect with one another. This connection was just as important to us last year as newer housemates.

"No fucking way. He's insane." Jen was in shock. We all were.

"Did he say, 'I forgive myself'? That's ridiculous," Emily, recently returned from work, agreed. We were rotting in our chaotic yet cozy living room, sitting on our repurposed couch meant for an outdoor deck. On the screen was *Temptation Island*, a reality dating show that separates couples and surrounds them with single people to determine if both partners will stay faithful. Recently delivered pizza boxes and various snacks littered the carpet around us, illuminated by someone's old Christmas lights strung across the room. Our activities were observed by Pitbull and Kevin Chamberlain from tasteful pink tapestries on the walls. Periodically, our adorable black cat would stick her head into the room, curious about all the noise, then leave. This was the scene that accompanied our shock and collective investment in the lives of other people as the third of our trifecta returned home from work.

"And to say that he forgives his girlfriend! She didn't do anything," Emily continued. Incredulous, we paused the show. We needed a moment to process this atrocity that was Grant's explanation for cheating on his girlfriend on camera. Our cat came into the room again; I assume she was judging him, too. After collecting ourselves, we allowed Grant to resume his soliloquy.

"I love you, Ashley. I do," he breathed. What? Reasonably, we followed that statement with shouts of "No!" and "He's not serious!"

"Does he really believe what he's saying?" I asked.

"He can't," Jen agreed.

At this time in our second year, we were still learning how to live together. We had spent lots of time together in our first year, but sharing a roof was different. Reality shows such as *Temptation Island* allowed us to come together as housemates because, like many other people, we enjoyed critiquing the shows together (Church et al. 32) and connecting with others (26) by having group discussions as we watched (36). Like us, many other people disagree with the messages of dating shows like *Temptation Island*, such as the "objectification and overall pettiness of the contestants" (32). We would often talk about the behaviour with which we disagreed and ask each other for opinions on what we had seen. We learned even more about each other through this activity and bonded over our similar ideas. This observation echoes Emily's feelings as well, who when interviewed remarked, "Watching [reality TV] with friends makes the experience so much more fun. You can discuss things that are happening in the show and laugh at the outrageous comments and actions that are happening."

Rusbult's investment model, although generally applied to romantic relationships, explains that when a relationship meets a person's needs, they will be more committed to that relationship (qtd. in Rumble). If this theory is applied to our friendship, it makes sense that our friendship as housemates was healthy because we always made sure to connect with each other through activities we enjoyed, such as watching reality dating shows.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this scene was not atypical for us. Our activities together as housemates often began by opening up Netflix or another streaming service and sifting through the options. Sometimes we selected a horror movie or something animated, but often we would return to these dating shows that entranced us so much. Many college and university students know that there is no shortage of possible dating shows to choose, especially if you are lucky enough to have access to

several streaming services. We made use of that availability, pairing dinners and weekend hangouts with shows. Despite the fact that we all consider these shows to be terrible, our late nights watching them together were really, really fun.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this piece, I have used pseudonyms for my housemates and have manufactured dialogue based on what I can remember from the events that ensued.

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What Vic Taught Me

NADIA GARCIA

MY NEWLY empty room is coated with a layer of dust, and I now know for sure that the building's strange and sour odour is permanent; it hasn't lifted since the day I moved in. I've tried to combat it by cracking open the window, but the frame is still somewhat stuck, just like it's been since January. I'm used to it. In Victoria Hall, which we all call "Vic," everything is constantly broken. The idea of moving out has tantalized me for months, and the time has finally come. I am lounging on my cheap blue twin mattress waiting to be retrieved, the contents of my day-to-day life already piled into plastic crates. It's strangely gratifying to see my dorm room so devoid of life; the bare walls reassure me that my departure is indeed approaching.

My phone screen lights up. My mother has texted me, *We're here*, and I think, finally. I spring up off the bed and grip my room keys in my palm as I slam the door shut. It makes the same type of thud that has obnoxiously echoed through the halls these past eight months, partly because the doors are made of a material so dense that noise is inevitable, and partly because no one seems to care to be quiet. Since it's my last day here, I'll slam the door as many times as I want.

I walk through Vic's dingy hallways and exchange short smiles with my peers. Our curtness marks quite the shift from the eager conversations we shared at the beginning of the year. At the time, I loved being in Vic, I loved living among hundreds of others, I loved everything. I chose Vic partly because my mother had refused to pay for one of the more expensive and modern residences, which she considered an unnecessary luxury. Her decision was fine by me, though.

"Vic's apparently a party res," I reported to my friends at lunch in the twelfth grade, on one of the rare days I had actually bothered to show up to school. "You guys know I don't care about getting sleep or being organized or anything like that, so it should be fine. I think I'll have fun."

I did have fun, for a little while, experiencing the sort of excitement that comes with hundreds of eighteen-year-olds living unsupervised for the first time in their lives. But the novelty of moving into Vic eventually subsided, and I realized that I did, in fact, partially care about sleep and cleanliness. The realization came to me slowly.

One night, I poked my head out of my dorm room, curious to see the source of the boisterous voices down the hallway. A group of guys were assembling themselves on all sides of the common-room fridge. They lifted it up, carried it towards the stairwell, and attempted to lug it down the stairs. Interesting. A carton of milk fell out and splashed onto the floor, but the guys paid no mind. I retreated into my room.

A few days later, a stench hit me as I walked out of my dorm room before my morning class.

"Do you smell that?" one of my neighbours shouted down the hallway at me. I nodded.

"It's disgusting. What is it?"

"It's the fucking milk!" he shouted angrily. "Where are the cleaners?"

I walked closer to the common room. My neighbour was right: a bit of milk had remained on the floor, the puddle starting to curdle into thick,

yellowish clumps. I gagged and took a picture for my friends. I wanted proof that Vic was starting to get kind of gross.

The milk stayed there for many days more, its stench permeating the air with an unimaginable intensity. My neighbours and I took some amusement in discussing the whole ordeal, but I was quietly disgusted that the expired dairy stayed on the floor as long as it did.

I didn't yet know that the repulsiveness of this situation would soon be overshadowed by that of others, that some curdled milk was nothing compared to the bathroom sink full of vomit, the common-room sink filled with bloody tissues, the lingering dampness and sagging ceiling tiles from the flood that leaked into my dorm room one night.

In November, I decided that I had had enough.

"I'm writing a request to switch buildings. I can't do this anymore!" I exclaimed to my roommate one day in our dorm.

"I hope you get it. My friend switched buildings earlier in the year, so it's totally possible."

I typed out a strongly worded application filled with dramatic allusions to my worsening mental state and concerns for my health and safety. When my request was eventually rejected, I began dreaming of move-out day in April, when I would victoriously depart from Vic.

Now that the day is here, I am so close to leaving; I just need my mother to come in and help take everything out of my room. I let her in through the basement entrance and she grimaces at the state of the building. Perhaps she is beginning to understand the transformation that has occurred in me the past several months, that her daughter has recently become a bit of an uptight germaphobe owing to everything she has witnessed inside of these walls.

We take trips up and down the stairs with my luggage in our arms. There are some students who are visibly sad about leaving and I think, funny, I had really envisioned myself being like them, but I can hardly wait to get out of here. I marvel at the assortment of experiences that can occur in one place, that one person's story can be vastly different from

that of another's, although they took place in the same location. It's slightly unfortunate that my story was a negative one, that living in Vic unsurfaced some of my inner apprehensions.

My mother and I collect the last of my posters and decorations, the things that I had assumed would make my dorm room a little more tolerable. The room is now totally empty, and it looks depressing. I want to leave it behind, discard it like an unwanted memory. My mother turns to me and says with a sympathetic smile, "Oh, honey, the extra money would've been worth it." I nod knowingly. When we leave, I barely take a second glance before I shut the heavy wooden door for the final time.

Who Is the Problem?

Is It Me, or the Egregious, Boisterous Harpies of Queen's University?

MADDY HUTCHISON

NEARLY EVERY morning in the student ghetto of Queen's University, the first sound I hear isn't birds chirping, my alarm clock, or traffic honking at cars going the wrong way down Johnson Street. It is a shrill, heart-stopping cacophony. Shrieks and squeals ricochet off the brick walls of my house, shaking my room and likely weakening its foundation. This is how I know the sun has risen and the school day has begun—the harpies on their way to campus, or more likely, Starbucks.

Commonly mistaken as earth-shattering screams of terror, these guttural cries are not in pain or fright—they are, somehow, expressions of laughter.

Every morning, I hear this racket from the periphery; however, I can only remain in the limited tranquillity of my house for so long. Every day, I stand before my front door—a barricade between peace and fury, burdened by the choice between a day of peace or one of berserk, Spartan anger.

By the time I dare to set foot on the soil of the Queen's University campus, "I hear this agitating, grating voice" (*Dance*). As if they sensed my internal debate, the banshees are already looming, their conversation punctuated by screeches. I leap ahead, cranking my headphone volume to the top, teeth grinding, eyes glaring, and shoulders tight, walking at a pace worthy of an Olympic gold medal. I ferociously weave through chittering huddles of them stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, aggressive hardcore techno playing. The piercing braying penetrates straight through the beat, degrading my eardrums and disintegrating both my mood and patience.

Simply existing in Kingston, Ontario thrusts one into an inescapable playback of nails running down a chalkboard, kettles boiling, and tornado sirens whining. Like a song once enjoyed and then ruined by an overplayed "Shot on iPhone" advertisement (Apple), this unwavering assault has harrowed me to a point of constant, unadulterated rage. My life has been a perpetual search for a "Skip Ad" button, resulting in adverse health implications caused by a permanently clenched jaw, narrowed eyes, and generally irritable temperament. In my ailing state, I have begun to ponder and research—could it be that the problem may not lie entirely with them?

The first time I considered this question, I was at the Queen's University Athletics and Recreation Centre on a treadmill. As my feet thumped on the belt to the beat of my music, two girls stepped onto the treadmills next to me. Immediately, like two magpies fighting over a shiny rock, they squabbled about switching spots, giggling like mosquito-operated jackhammers.

"Stop! Oh my god!"

"You're so bad!"

Their voices cut straight through my music like Damascus steel, throwing off my pace. I slapped the side of my headphones, maxing out the volume.

"You're literally such a crackhead!"

“Oh my god! We’re literally doing cracktivities!”

I stumbled, kicking the side of my ankle as a “Volume Should Be Turned Down” notification rolled across my phone. My rhythm was completely destroyed, forcing heavy wheezes out of my lungs. Workout, focus, and mood ruined, I found myself teleported to the locker room, changing my shoes to leave. I had reached my limit, choosing escape at the sacrifice of my workout.

This level of irritation stimulated by sound is not entirely unusual. Researchers have identified a condition called *misophonia*, in which certain noises can trigger strong emotional responses like anger, disgust, and anxiety (Wooley et al.). A study published in 2025 in the *Journal of Otology* found that individuals with misophonia report heightened, uncontrollable emotional responses to specific sounds, including beeping, chewing, tapping, and other repetitive auditory stimuli. Their reactions were not mere annoyance; they were clinical, visceral responses.

In that moment on the treadmill, my reaction felt as Wooley et al. described: uncontrollable and visceral.

It is possible that my irritation stems from a real medical condition; however, my research found annoyance towards certain voices as deeply cultural. Linguists and sociologists have documented associations between vocal quality and assumptions around gender, personality, and intelligence. In *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Prejudice*, researchers explain that pitch and vocal patterns function as social markers, shaping how listeners perceive authority and competence (Pearce et al.). Voices are not just sounds—they are social signals.

The possibility that my reactions are shaped by social bias rather than pure auditory sensitivity is admittedly shocking. As someone who has never considered myself prejudiced, I found this idea difficult to accept as the cause.

Despite this, it would be a lie to say patterns have not emerged. The voices that provoke irritation within me tend to be high-pitched,

boisterous, and exaggerated in tone—and often emitted by young women in social environments. This corroborates broader cultural patterns, where certain voices are judged more harshly than others.

Media culture reinforces these patterns. News anchors, podcast hosts, and public speakers seem to possess similar vocal qualities: steady pacing, moderate pitch, and controlled tone narrate influential media, highlighting those that deviate from this pattern. High-pitched voices, vocal fry, and accents are criticized, revealing intersections with sexism, classism, and racism (Winn, Tripp, and Munson).

The question shifts—are my reactions problematic, or shaped by a larger force?

The irritation I experience may not exist in total isolation; it may be a part of a broader cultural pattern. At the same time, it may also be a response to an environment that is, at most times, overwhelmed by egregious and boisterous individuals.

Queen's University is anything but silent. It is a rowdy, bustling, and social place full of excitement and drama. Sidewalks, lecture halls, and campus buildings teem with conversation and laughter, each leaving the mouth of someone absorbed in their own life, clueless to the frustration that toils within me.

Some days, like the day at the gym, my reaction feels disproportionate. Others, it feels entirely justified.

As I stand before my door each morning, the tension builds. The silence behind me is calm and predictable—outside, there is the inevitable irritation. The sound does not change and neither does my reaction. The only controllable factor, truly, is my understanding of it.

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Addicted to the Screen

KIRAN KHAN

IF LIFE had a scoreboard, I would have no clue where I stood, but in video games, I always knew. At six years old, I got my first phone. It was my father's old BlackBerry, half-screen and half-keyboard. When newer models came out, he no longer needed it. Instead of throwing the phone away, he gave it to me. I remember the arrows on the top of the keyboard and the numbers on the bottom. The first game I ever played was simple: it had a few balls and bricks you had to hit. There was a board you could control with the left and right arrows, so it was your job to ensure that the balls would hit the board and reflect onto the bricks. If it dropped, you would lose it forever. If you lost all your balls, you lost the game. Even then, you could always restart the game. It doesn't work the same in real life.

As I got older, I noticed my dad was always sitting in front of the screen. Whenever he was at home, he sat in front of an old, bulky monitor that hummed—a cheap, chipped desk table next to a frail wooden chair from a different set. I knew it was slow because I would constantly hear my dad yelling at the raggedy box as if we could afford a device that could talk back like Siri. I've always wondered what was displayed on the screen that made it so alluring, something so addictive that he didn't

have time to sleep, play with my brother, or even help my mom at home. All he did was sit, motionless, with an arched back, mindlessly consumed by the screen.

I could not have understood it until I tried for it myself.

My parents divorced when I was nine. From then on, our fridge was louder than dining-room conversations. My mom was always at work, taking as many shifts as possible to keep things running. We couldn't afford a babysitter. After school, I would walk my brother home with friends and stay at home. I knew the procedure: "Go inside, lock the door, keep all the lights off, and if anyone knocks, do not respond," my mom would say in a daunting tone etched in my mind. We had to pretend no one was home so mommy wouldn't get in trouble. From three-thirty 'til seven, we were bored out of our minds.

At first, we tried to fill the silence with small things. Homework spread across the kitchen table, *Wild Kratts* playing quietly so the neighbours wouldn't notice, sneaking bites from food that was meant for another day, like we were squirrels rationing for the upcoming winter. But the clock would not move.

Eventually, when we found where my mom hid the laptop, the screen became the easiest place to go to. I still remember sitting on the floor beside my brother while the room slowly darkened around us, the only light coming from the laptop balanced evenly between us. Like a good episode of the *Wild Kratts,* you are captivated by the pixels on screen, and it was a good episode every time. All of a sudden, your surroundings disappear, and you've lost track of time. The glow from the laptop's screen lit up the room in the late afternoon, bright white lights that contrasted with the creamy orange ombre of the sunset through our apartment windows. It was the artificial light created by the screen that lit our dark room, and the sounds of the keyboard clicking that replaced the silence that used to make those afternoons not move.

From then on, whenever the world felt uncertain, I knew I could hop on a game where the steps were clear and constant. Any game's rules

were simple. There were objectives, levels, and clear ways to win or lose that brought me comfort in the unpredictability of our home. Sometimes the ball moved too fast. It bounced wildly, hitting corners I couldn't predict, but I could control the board where it landed. Outside the screen, it was complicated, but when I was consumed, I didn't have to wonder when my mom would come home, if she'd bring back something from work for dinner so that we wouldn't have Kraft Dinner or Indomie, or if my father would ever come back. All those thoughts disappeared.

As I got older, technology advanced. Tiny usernames would appear on the side of the screen, each one being a real person with their own lives. Social platforms like Discord were created so you could talk to people who played video games, and with cheap headphones and a mic from Dollarama, I started to connect with people online. Most were in similar situations to mine. We had a lot of free time with nothing to do, nothing we could afford to do. I used to play sports that my mom signed me up for in the *Kids' Fun Guide*, but once I turned twelve, they weren't free anymore. Others had different reasons, but we all felt alone. Every day after school, I'd get on my computer to play with my online friends. We'd talk about our family situations, relationship issues, financial problems, and just about anything you could think of. Something about them being so far away made it easier to speak honestly. They couldn't interfere in my life—they could only listen. You knew you could trust them because they physically could not snitch. I know what you're thinking: stranger danger. Schools have always told me to be careful when talking to people online, never to reveal anything personal about myself. I'd say it's untrue. Everyone starts as strangers; you are just as likely to be harmed by someone you're close to as by someone you meet online (Jaureguizar 4).

I believe this ideology comes from the disturbing stereotypical image of a "gamer," but it does not represent all of us. You have probably heard it: "overweight, acne, living in their mom's basement, lazy, violent," you name it (Atmuz). Personally, I think it's an individual's

problem. If you ignore your responsibilities to play video games, then you are a loser. Yet, this can be applied to every hobby, not just video games: drinking, betting, binge-watching Netflix, or watching sports. To others, I probably looked like I was mindlessly looking at the screen. But on the other side, people were waiting for me to come home. Their voices filled the empty rooms when I was alone, and inside those worlds, I found my place.

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The Cost of Caring

KATHARINA KNAPP

"IT'S CUTE how your dad paddles your mom around in the double kayak," my friend visiting us at the cottage commented.

"Yeah. Well, she can't really do it by herself anymore, and she loves being on the water." The romance was lost on me, as all I could see was the frustration and sadness in my mother that was not there before.

She wore her usual bright and floral scrub top, with the same curly wisps of hair escaping from her ponytail after a long twelve hours. The look in my mother's eyes was something I had never seen before. Her blue eyes are the opposite colour of mine, but the joy in them is something we usually shared. Her hug felt tight, but she only used one arm. I don't really like hugs, but today when my mom pulled me in, I sensed I shouldn't pull away. The pressure of working on the infectious-disease unit through COVID-19 had been weighing on her. This seemed different.

"The security guards were delayed getting to help me," I manage to overhear my mom telling my father in the other room. Peeking around the corner, I see her red-faced, teary-eyed, and my father tenderly runs his hand up and down her back. Her voice lacks its usual confidence, with long pauses between the details she tells my father. I wasn't there,

but I never stop trying to imagine it: the frustration that turned into thoughtless violence.

This scene is not what I'd come to expect when my mom came home from work in the years since she returned to university to become a nurse. The contrast with her usual tired but cheery disposition was jarring.

As selfless as anyone you would ever meet, my mother had no anger for the violence she experienced. She placed no blame on the patient who strangled her with her stethoscope. The stethoscope that my father bought her as a present when she returned to university.

"Where's mom?"

"She's sleeping, Katie. Be quiet; she is going to try to go back to work tonight," dad said.

But my mom did not go to work that evening. 17 May 2021 was the last day everything felt normal.

"I was always so impressed by the fact that she had gone back to school, and obviously it was a big deal for her, too," my sister said when she and I discussed how crushed our mother was by her career coming to a sudden and violent halt. Our superhuman, unshakable mother now seemed vulnerable. She was always unbreakable.

"You need to look out for your mum, Katie. She's strong, but she's having a hard time," my nana told me with tears glistening in her eyes.

She was right. Everyone else was better at accepting the changes than I was. Supporting nurses who have been through trauma is essential, and failing to do so increases their chances of developing PTSD (Guan et al. 18). My insistence on things staying the way they had always been, and my belief that I could ignore everything and wish my mother's injuries away, is something that I will always regret.

"Why can't we bake now, then go shopping and everyone can decorate the tree together after dinner?"

"I can't do everything, Katie. I need to pick what to use my energy and strength for," my mother reasons with me when I selfishly complain.

The routines that my mother and I shared, and once took for granted, now seemed to take more out of her.

"It's not like it's hard. It'll be fun." A lot of time passed before I began to learn not to add to her stress.

For anyone in the healthcare world, my mother's story rings true, yet you never think that it will be you or your loved one who will go through this. The experience of many Canadian nurses is similar, with the most frequent trauma exposure being physical assault, at ninety-three percent (Stelnicki et al. 34). Just like so many others, my mother was reduced from a person to a series of medical assessments, paperwork, and protocols. Once she wasn't of use to the healthcare system, she was left behind.

Big brunches and social-media posts for Nurse Appreciation Week. No need to ensure the safety of nurses; there just need to be festive cupcakes in the break room, which is kindly outfitted with one table, three reclining chairs, and one couch.

Empathy and concern from my mother's boss were nearly non-existent, yet she was promptly sent her card and Sick-Kids-branded memento for her years of service. All the lip service and none of the human compassion.

"How's the arm?" people ask my mom. Like it was somehow detached from the rest of her. Their eyes glaze over when she decides to be honest, so she lies.

"It's getting better," she says instead.

Now, after her surgery to help the nerve damage, her movements are still careful, energy still limited, and strength in her arm not what it was. Those who know her best don't ask much anymore. We already know the answer.

"Here, mom, take this." I gesture the lightest item towards her left arm.

"Thanks, Katie," she says, eyeing the heavy bags I have piled on my arms and back.

Almost five years later, no real resolution has been reached. Limited respect has been shown to my mother by the supposed best pediatric hospital in the world that she works for. Even still, the woman I have always strived to be even half as good as continues with hope and dedication to get back to helping others in the best way she is able now.

My mom is not unbreakable, but watching her hardships made her real to me. She is no longer the unattainable, mythical being of my childhood imagination. She's more human and she seems even more resilient in the face of an imperfect reality.

It's March of 2026. When she hugs me, she uses both arms, but it's still a little uneven. One arm is stronger than the other, but it's just barely noticeable.

I still don't like hugs, but I never pull away from her anymore.

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Hastings Bridge

NAOMI LEE

WE HAD made it to the bridge. It was rusted and coarse under my bare feet. I studied the gap where eighty years ago it had collapsed. The water below ran wildly.

My watch beeped. Two a.m. My room glowed a bluish violet. The air was thick with sandalwood incense. The screen held four inches from my face made my eyes burn. I watched old videos of me messing around with my friends. I threw my phone across the bed and stared at the fading glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. Everything had dulled. It had been three months since I'd been at school or seen my friends. I let out a long, anguished groan. My brother saw the lights on and opened my door without knocking.

"I saw you posted an Instagram story about Black Lives Matter. I have a problem with it, let's discuss," he jeered. I threw the closest book I could find at him, and he slammed the door shut. Shit! If dad wakes up, it's going to be my fault. I open Spotify on my laptop and play *Wild Heart* by Current Joys. From the beginning of the album. No skips. I cried and scribbled in my journal about being robbed of teenagerhood: no riding my bike with my friends, no awkward sloppy kisses, no getting into

stupid fights, no parties, no delinquency. I'm forgetting how to talk to people. I am afraid of what's next.

It was pure sixteen-year-old angst with nowhere to go except those pages. Things were just starting to make sense, too.

I was with these two girls I didn't really know. Zoe pitched the idea of going. She was a thrill-seeking tomboy. Her older brother sold weed to everyone at our school, and she had this great laugh that revealed big white teeth. I was intimidated by her. Saroya shrugged "sure" at Zoe's idea. Saroya was new to the school. She had this coolness about her no one could put their finger on. She wore mini-skirts and only spoke when she had something to say. She showed me a kindness I had never experienced before or since.

It was early August. The days were sticky and the nights were tender. It was that time of year when everything began to turn gold.

"The current will take you but not too far where you can't swim back," Saroya said.

"How high up is this?" I whimpered, failing to play it cool.

"Two storeys," Zoe said. She could tell that this piece of intel did not comfort me. In fact, I think they could both tell I wanted to turn back immediately.

"Don't worry, you won't die. Lucas dove off here head first yesterday and he's fine," she boasted. She showed me a video of it on her phone. Her brother, the weed dealer, was also really cute.

"Besides," she whined, "you have to jump because I can't," pointing to the big grey boot on her left foot. I looked over the bridge onto the rolling hills of Northumberland. They were glorious. There was something ancient about the way the rich light kissed the trees and river. I took a long, deep breath. If I jump, all of it would stay the same anyway.

Our palms were sweaty as we gripped hands. I looked at Saroya, scared. She looked at me scared, too, but with a grin coming from the corner of her mouth. It wasn't Zoe's pressure that made me jump. Or the appealing idea of having my father's disapproval. It was the warmth of

Saroya's eyes when she realized I had never felt this vulnerable before. She squeezed my hand. The adrenaline reached our toes and we jumped.

We fell for a long time.

I felt the weight of my body. The air dancing around us. I was convinced I had grown wings and would be suspended in time forever. Every ruminating worry I had seemed so unimportant compared to the sensation that coursed through my body. I had been locked up in my room for a year praying for something to change.

And it was me.

I had no choice in the world shutting down or in the childhood I wanted so badly to forget.

But this was my choice.

To do it afraid.

As the current took us, I came up for air and howled euphorically. Zoe and Saroya laughed.

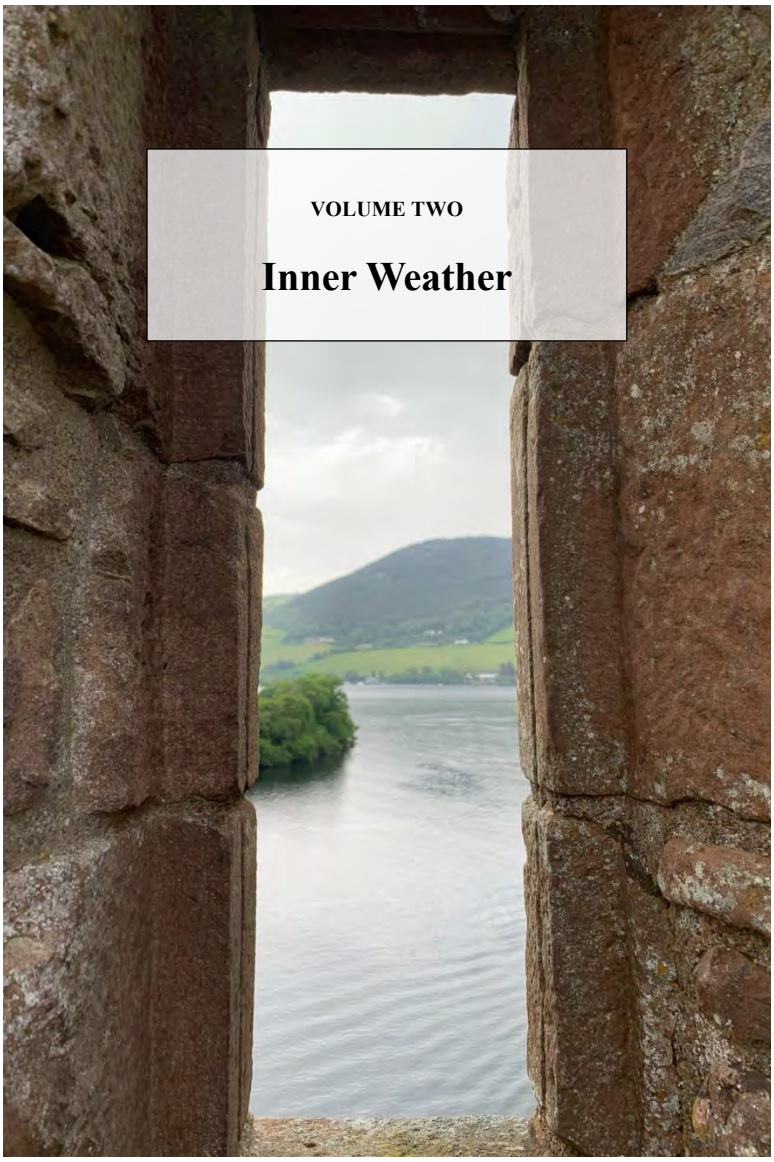
"Again! I want to do it again and again and again." I followed Saroya up the makeshift ladder.

"Not so bad?" she asked, looking down through her legs.

"Not so bad at all," I beamed.

We jumped until the sky was purple, with the remnants of the sun still on our skin. The three of us biked to Zoe's house to watch a movie after.

How easy it had been to change the way I looked at life. How fast it had been to change myself. I felt free, happy for the first time in a while. I had been confined to my room grieving my youth for so long. I was finally being a teenager. I made a vow to myself then, riding back to Zoe's in the twilight, that I would always take the risk. Jump.


VOLUME TWO
Inner Weather

The Christmas Dinner

ALISSA NAYDENOVA

I HAD an English professor who taught *Pride and Prejudice* by arguing that the foundation of Mr Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage was gratitude. I'd hurriedly scribbled it down for the midterm, but it kept ringing in my ears: "Gratitude helps us navigate the fine line between private and public, between happiness and loneliness. We're not islands…."

A month before I'd taken that course, I was sitting at the head of the kitchen table. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. My eyes kept roaming their faces while they were telling stories I'd heard before, though the others hadn't. Julia. Maia. Hannah. And Sophia. The lights were low, the candlesticks halfway melted down the golden holders. A stringent violin was playing in the background, and the snow was slowly melting on the four pairs of snow boots sitting by the door. Everyone was oblivious.

I suffer from premature nostalgia. I miss moments I'm still in—I know they'll only pass me by too quickly. I was nineteen years old, on exchange at Queen's University in eastern Ontario, and I was hosting a Christmas dinner. I'd built a community in the past four months. My nostalgia was a symptom of gratitude.

“Alissa, it was absolutely delicious,” Sophia smiled at me as she slightly pushed her plate away.

“Thanks, but I can’t take all the credit. Julia was my co-chef all day,” I winked at the twenty-year-old sitting next to me.

I’d met Julia in Spanish class at the start of my exchange. I’d sat in the second row behind her, only associating a long blonde braid and tailored black slacks with the voice that said, “*Hola, me llamo Julia y soy alemana*.” Finally, another European, I’d thought. As I later learned in broken Spanish, she was Canadian-American, raised in Germany, and majoring in Geography and Psychology.

We were the same person in different fonts. I was Bulgarian, but I’d lived in France since I was eight, and I’d decided to do my Bachelor’s in Journalism and Literature at the University of Essex in England.

People like Julia and I are what experts call “Third Culture Kids” (Pollock and Van Reken 19). The label’s too neat, but if I had to summarize it, “Where are you from?” never has a simple answer. We leave home to go home.

We were also an efficient duo in the kitchen. I’d never used the stove, the burners, and the microwave at the same time, but I’d also never cooked a Christmas dinner for five people. She’d kneaded the dinner rolls while I stirred the gravy, and mixed the batter for the cauliflower wings.

“Here, let me finish the mashed potatoes so you can set up the table.” Julia walked over from the stove. “How many tablespoons did you already put in there?”

“Maybe two or three. Actually, no idea.”

“Relax. I’ll figure it out.” She took my place over the cream-coloured pot as I started arranging the chairs around the kitchen table. A white paper tablecloth with candy canes, green napkins, and red Christmas crackers on each plate. A bouquet of plastic peach-coloured peonies and cotton flowers in the middle. I placed the brand new

candlesticks I'd gotten at Dollarama the day before in their holders. Time to light the match.

Sitting next to Julia was Maia, her auburn hair basking in the blue, orange, and red Christmas lights.

"No, no, no. I'm telling you. He was cheating on me. Now, he has a new girlfriend, and his father has the audacity to text me, even though we haven't been together for months!"

I'd heard Maia's scream on the other side of the wall separating our bedrooms when the text came in a few weeks ago. The situation had immediately been discussed and dissected.

Over the last two weeks, it'd been only the two of us in the apartment, and we'd gotten closer studying for exams. Maia was a fourth-year Maths major—funny and, true to her Italian roots, unapologetically loud—but finals made her anxious. I'd invited her, hoping some company and warm food would cheer her up. She'd ended up cackling all night, between stories about her very Catholic grandmother and the sexist guys in her statistics class.

Julia's eyebrows were raised in shock while Sophia was laughing at Maia's wild gesticulation. I knew they'd all get along. They were all comfortable in large groups, confident, and outspoken. I looked to my left to Hannah, who was staring at her plate. She'd barely said two words all evening, only to compliment the heirloom tomatoes in the Panzanella. I'd forgotten she gets shy around new people sometimes.

Hannah was a chronically online film geek—in the best possible way—with a dark sense of humour once she got comfortable around you. She was also an exchange student from Essex, but we'd never spoken to each other before we came to Kingston. Right before Hallowe'en, we'd ended up at the independent movie theatre downtown to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. We'd been completely oblivious to how popular the film was here. Our fellow film enthusiasts were dressed as characters from the movie, and they'd come prepared with props—newspapers,

loaves of bread, and game cards were flying across the dark room—surpassing any 4D experience out there. Yeah, no one warned us.

"That slapped my knockers on a car door," Hannah's British accent peeked through. "I loved it!"

She'd once told me she didn't feel at home here because she knew it was temporary, and she almost wished it was only for a semester. I hadn't been able to understand what was so bad about staying the full eight months. I was used to temporary. For people like me, like Julia, we'd grown up between places with loved ones in different countries, constantly sending pictures followed by a "Wishing you were here." We were always just passing through. Hannah wanted a place to stay.

Being a TCK has its perks, too. It had dulled the homesickness, so when I landed in Kingston, nothing was tying me back to the Old Continent. I was older, more experienced, and newly single. I was not afraid to ask questions or share my life story with people I'd just met. I wanted to make friends. I'd done it all before, and here I was at nineteen deciphering the equivalent of 350°F in degrees Celsius, trying not to burn the house down while cooking my cauliflower wings.

I knew I would become an anecdote in their lives once the year was over. Still, I had made 326 Alfred Street mine. We didn't share a childhood, a mother tongue, or a country, yet that night I felt right at home. Seven thousand kilometres away from my family. I could chalk it up to some neat Christmas miracle, but that would be too easy. My professor had been right. Gratitude. I was grateful for having been let into these people's lives. I could be nostalgic because I knew a reality without them.

I'll probably never fully fit in anywhere. This temporality is what I get for now: too French to be just Bulgarian, too Bulgarian to be French, definitely not English or Canadian. I've gotten used to that. Still, sometimes I envy people who have roots. Stability. Like Hannah. It's different for them. They can show you around their childhood home,

their grandparents live in the same country, and they have Christmas dinner together. Every year.

Yet, I wouldn't have it any other way. It's special *because* it's ephemeral. I am the sum of all the fleeting moments I've collected. I'm grateful for all the people I get to miss across the globe, because they're my home. Homes.

Once the food was eaten, the table cleared, and everyone had gotten home safe, I made a cup of chamomile tea. I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. I ate the little chocolate piece hidden behind the printed eleven on my Advent calendar. Too giddy. Too nostalgic. I might not know with whom I'll be having Christmas dinner next, but that's the beauty of it. You never know what your life will look like in a year. Who you'll miss. Who you'll love. Who you'll be.

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What We Lost

EMILY RAMKUMAR

"JUST LEAVE me alone," I told my mom, walking away from her, my eyes red from crying.

"Don't treat me like this, Emily," she replied, anger and hurt written across her face.

Our relationship wasn't always this way. My mom used to be my best friend. Owing to my mom's young age when I was born, we maintained a close bond throughout my childhood years. We would go shopping together, she would paint my nails, do my hair, and watch movies and TV shows with me.

One morning before school in the seventh grade, my mom and I were in the kitchen making our lunches.

"I'm so excited to watch the new episode of *Heartland* later," I told her.

"You better not watch it without me," she said, giving me a half-serious look.

"I won't. Don't worry."

My mom was considered the "cool mom" among my friends. I remember often feeling embarrassed when she would break into song in my hockey team's dressing room, but all the other girls loved it.

“Oh my god, mom, please stop,” I said as she grabbed a hockey stick and used it as a microphone to belt out the lyrics blasting from the speaker in the dressing room.

“Go, Shabana!” my teammates cheered as I buried my face in my jersey, wishing it would swallow me whole.

Part of the reason my mom wanted us to have such a close bond was because she never had a close relationship with her mother growing up and didn’t want me to experience the same feelings.

“I never saw her as a mother because she was never really involved in my life,” my mom told me when I asked about her relationship with my grandmother. “I never had a life. I didn’t know what being a teenager was, and if I asked to go somewhere it was always a problem.”

My mom wanted to give me what she always wanted from her own mother: love and affection. And she did. However, as I got older, our relationship became more complicated, revealing how a mother’s regrets and lack of emotional support can create conflict with her daughter. My mom started to talk more about how she never got to “live her life in her twenties” and missed so many opportunities. Though she never explicitly said it, the reason she never got to live her life to the fullest is because she had me. Having me at the age of twenty meant she had to drop out of college and give up her dream career. I know my mom doesn’t regret having me, but when she talks about all these missed opportunities and not being able to live her life like those around her, it starts to make me resent her.

Many people in my mom’s life, including her family and close friends, were worried about what would happen to her career if she had a child. Studies suggest that having a child in your early twenties is harmful to a woman’s career and one of the dumbest things she could do (Dickson). Listening to her talk about the life she might have had if she hadn’t had me made those ideas feel like part of our reality.

Last year, I posted pictures on Instagram of me and my friends from nights we had gone out to bars and clubs during the semester. My mom saw them and smiled sadly.

"When I was your age, I didn't get the chance to go to university or go out and have fun with my friends."

I didn't know what to say. I just smiled and went back to scrolling on my phone. Part of me felt sad for her, but another part of me felt frustrated. It wasn't my fault. She made the decision to have me. Moments like this made me realize that her past was starting to shape my present experiences.

As I've gotten older, I've realized that mother-daughter conflict is common. Psychotherapist Rosjke Hasseldine explains that mothers sometimes communicate their emotional needs in indirect or manipulative ways, relying on their daughters for emotional "feeding." When this happens, daughters can struggle to see their mothers as a source of support. Reading this made me realize that this dynamic has shaped my relationship with my mother. Instead of feeling supported, I often feel obligated to support her.

I've experienced this with my own mother on several occasions, in which her inability to recognize that she is "emotionally starved" (Hasseldine) has prevented me from being able to talk to her. During the month of December, I was going through a rough breakup. I needed time and space to process things myself; however, she couldn't understand that.

"Just tell me what happened. It's not that hard," she said to me when I told her about the breakup. "I'm your mom, and you need me."

In that moment, her desire to be needed outweighed my need for space. All I wanted her to say was "it's going to be okay," "I love you," or "if you want to talk, I'm here." Instead, she kept pushing me to talk, causing me to shut her out completely. This led to arguments and fights almost every day over the Christmas break. What I needed was support, but what I felt was pressure to carry her emotions.

"I don't understand why you're acting like this. I know you're hurting, but that doesn't mean you're allowed to push me away," she said.

"This isn't about you mom, it's about me," I said between sobs.

I know she was just trying to help, but it felt like she was manipulating me to tell her what she wanted to hear. She was making the situation about herself, focusing on her emotions instead of mine. Now, months later, she realizes that she was in the wrong and should have given me the space I asked for. Nonetheless, conflict remains between us. I often resent her for her past words and actions. Constantly bearing the weight of my mother's emotions has prevented me from talking to her as often and stopped us from having the close relationship we once had.

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Space Cadet

AMY SIMCOE

"I REMEMBER when they landed on the Moon," dad said.

"Weren't you, like, three?" I asked, half-listening. The Florida sun was beaming down on us through the windshield, as if it were starting a fire through a magnifying glass. My arms were growing tired from holding my hair above my neck as I tried to dry the sweat building at my hairline. To no avail, the open passenger-seat window only blew hot air back at me.

"We gathered around the TV, but it was black and white in those days, you know."

"Amazing what you can recall in hindsight," I said. I was staring longingly at the Cocoa Beach spring breakers beside the highway, running and splashing in the waves.

"Don't kid."

As we exited Highway 1, leaving the beachside views behind, we drove to the entrance of the Cape Canaveral peninsula. Once an uninhabited reed bed, the scrubland was developed into a ballistic missile testing centre during the Second World War (Sy-Quia). With the advancement of both American and Soviet weaponry, the two countries discovered their projectiles could go beyond the limits of the Earth's

atmosphere. Thus, sending the first person to the Moon became the new benchmark for success in the freshly termed Cold War.

The Saturn V, the rocket that made the United States reign victorious, was launched on Cape Canaveral's Merritt Island. It's now displayed in the Kennedy Space Center, where you can view a rendering of all 360 feet in its glory (NASA). As if to stick it to the Russians, the spacecraft is displayed above a gift shop, where you could buy any matter of astronaut paraphernalia: keychains, socks, or your own polyester bomber jacket resembling the ones worn on the Apollo missions.

Malcolm, our tour guide, was likely the most knowledgeable person on the Moon landing, second to my dad. The two of them animatedly discussed minutiae regarding the Saturn V's construction, or Neil Armstrong's exact phrasing when he decidedly spoke for all of mankind. My eyes kept shifting to the vintage NASA ads displayed in the hangars, which were meant to liven the empty space between rocket displays. They depicted pin-up models riding spaceships, or visiting futuristic space colonies, like the ones in *The Jetsons.* Some had aspirational phrases plastered in the centre, like "Dare to Go Beyond."

As our group began to leave the hangar, I lingered behind, trying to draw my father's attention.

"That was impressive," I said to him, "for a fake rocket."

"You don't seriously believe that."

"What?" I said, grinning at his palpable annoyance. "They had every good reason to pretend to land on the Moon. People say it was just a movie set."

At fifteen, I was deeply entrenched in online conspiracy-theory discourse. It was hard to avoid when I purposely sought the most provocative content possible. I was a frontiersman, exploring on the fringes of my curated, sheltered childhood. However, it always left me bewildered when I came across someone who genuinely believed in something like the Moon-landing hoax. How could a person deny such

an obvious truth? It's thought that when one subscribes to these theories, it derives from a desire to dismantle an omnipotent, monopolizing force (Bale 41). But to me, it seemed like they were trying to bend reality to their will by contorting, contracting, or inventing it entirely.

Although the theory has been debunked so often that it has become a cliché, it still always finds new heads for tinfoil hats. Over time, it even metastasized into various sister conspiracies involving the United States government. In September 2019, after a Facebook post beckoned conspirators to break into Area 51, over a hundred people showed up to the Roswell military base to conduct a raid (Waxman). Yet, despite their semi-ironic claims over the Internet, the attendees simply danced, laughed, and playfully taunted the security personnel. My friend Tai was watching the livestream in math class, and I couldn't stop glancing down at his phone. Despite my superciliousness, a part of me hoped these unabashed weirdos would find their aliens after all.

After taking a photo next to the rotating NASA sphere, we said goodbye to Malcolm. Dad bought me an ice-cream sandwich, joking that it was in exchange for my silence. As we sat on the benches by the John F. Kennedy memorial fountain, we reflected on the day. The sun was slowly disappearing, revealing a sprinkling of stars.

"There's one fact the guide forgot to mention," he said, pointing to the sky. "Neil Armstrong left his daughter's bracelet up there. She passed away when she was young."

"Wow," I replied, "that's kind of amazing."

For years after, I shared this fact with friends whenever we ventured outside the city limits late at night, where the Moon looked especially bright. It struck me that, long after any of us are gone, a remnant of this little girl will remain, untouched by floods, erosions, or any of Earth's disasters. However, I later learned that, while Armstrong had a daughter die young, the fact that he left her bracelet in outer space was most likely fictional, written into history by Hollywood as a plot point for their Ryan

Gosling *Apollo 11* flick (Davenport). Nevertheless, this theory is often misconstrued as fact. They fooled my dad, and most certainly fooled me.

On 1 April 2026, the Artemis II crew was launched into orbit, in NASA's second attempt to send humanity to the Moon. Perhaps fifty years from now, conspirators will claim the footage was produced by artificial intelligence, instead of a soundstage. I often contemplate that vision of ultra-futuristic space colonies from the pin-up model posters, and whether it will ever be possible. Maybe, if humanity were to colonize the Moon one day, they would turn the entire thing into a theme park. I suppose at that point, all we could do here on Earth is point up to the sky and wonder what they're hiding up there.

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How Do I Ask You This?

LANIE SMITH

OUR TASK for that week's class was to interview someone related to our topic of choice, and I couldn't figure out how. I wanted to write about my friendships with the older men in the brass band I played in during summers between university semesters, but it was a new variation of the trolley problem. Pull the lever and interview my older friends and jeopardize our dynamic, or not pull the lever and not interview them and fail the assignment. I came across this predicament time and time again in my friendships with older musicians: do we acknowledge our differences, or does our friendship thrive on our decision to be equals?

I ended up interviewing my best friend Becca, too scared to potentially tarnish the friendships I had with my older friends. How do you phrase something like that? "You are old, I am not, and I want to talk about that"? I was filled with terror at the prospect of ruining it all, but Becca grounded me back in reality. She told me that the beauty of playing in a community band is that "part of it is knowing the music and part of it is knowing Dave S.", so maybe they wouldn't mind, but the thought lingered. Dave S. was my stand partner for the better part of two

summers, and he and Ridley had recruited me into the British brass-band world.

I was putting my euphonium back in its case when they asked me, a pair of old men approaching me after rehearsal, wondering if I would join their band. “It’s a traditional British brass band,” Dave S. told me, “So euphonium players are king.” That sounded good enough to me. In my decade of playing I'd never felt euphonium was given enough attention, so I agreed. They told me that rehearsals would be Monday nights, a couple towns over in Kincardine, and that next week I could join their carpool.

The next Monday, Dave S. waved me over to his car, where Ridley, Rance, and Dave A. were gathered with him around the trunk. “We’re playing Tetris,” said Ridley. He wasn’t kidding. We had to fit two cornets, two euphoniums, and a bass trombone into the trunk of a hatchback. Easier times have been had getting a camel through the eye of a needle. After we finally got our instruments settled, it was time to settle ourselves.

We’d danced around our different ages before, aware but not acknowledging, but now we were forced to face it as the five of us looked at the five seats in the car. One teenage girl and four men older than her father had to figure out how to arrange themselves without making anyone uncomfortable, physically or otherwise.

We decided that I would be in the middle, given I was the smallest one there. I was hyperaware of the neighbouring seatbelt buckles being almost directly beneath me, so I slouched down to move my rear as far away from the buckles as I could. I imagined this is what it felt like to be on a bomb squad, each movement calculated and precise. “Sorry about that,” said Dave A., from my right, buckling up, hand nowhere near anything. Our friendships would survive if we could last the forty-minute drive to rehearsal, aware of the awkward arrangements, doing all we could to avoid snipping the wrong wire. Were someone to make a comment, daring to acknowledge the possibility of awkwardness, then

hopefully the car would explode and take all of us out, saving us the embarrassment of being different ages and genders.

My interview with Becca didn't directly note the age differences between us and our stand partners. She referred to their age and life experiences as making them "people who know themselves," saying it was a comforting thing to play with such a group. That's actually an historic benefit of community bands. The earliest brass bands in Britain were places for workers to feel united (Herbert 10), which is an apt way to describe the cramped conditions in the back seat of the car. I hesitate to compare our car ride and the labour of the factory work of the 1800s, but both groups did have to deal with discomfort to gain a community, albeit very different discomforts.

We arrived at the church in Kincardine, having survived the bomb threat of a car ride in good spirits. Laughing, we carefully unpacked ourselves and the trunk and made our way to rehearsal. In the basement, I found myself out of my depth once again. Ordinarily, low brass instruments sit in the back row of the ensemble, but here the set up was different. We sat in a three-sided square, euphoniums and baritones sat in front of the trombones, across from cornets, flugelhorns and peckhorns perpendicular, with basses behind them. As the clock neared 6.30, more and more players showed up, all carrying varying instruments but holding two things in common: they were friendly and they were over sixty.

Yet another Dave said to the group as we oiled our valves and sorted music, "Nice to meet you, Lanie, and thank you for lowering our band's average age!" The room wasn't bothered by his acknowledgement of my age, but then again, this new Dave also got a discount at checkout. The rule seemed to be that our ages should only be acknowledged in joking, and never by me.

"We don't care what you play, we're glad you're here," was the sentiment of the room, all of us equal through music. Music, as a universal organizer, gave us all roles to play and made the room

comfortable and fun despite—or perhaps because of—our differences. The car ride's initial awkwardness sat far back in my mind, as it was suddenly worth it for the smiling faces in the room.

Perhaps I should just feel grateful to have them as friends, continuing to enjoy their company without dissecting each minuscule dynamic. I would be happy to keep playing bomb squad, even if it means not being able to interview my subject for a school assignment, and I imagine my musical posse of sexagenarians would feel much the same, simply letting music organize and equalize us all.

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Circles Within Circles

KARSON THIBEAULT

THE FIRST time I heard Mark's name, it was spoken like a warning. In the first meeting of our club, under the fluorescent lighting of that hall, it was the kind of gathering where people were encouraged to introduce themselves with enthusiasm and showcase the passion they had for any ongoing projects. Instead, the conversation I became involved in had taken a quieter, more secretive turn. Leaning over, someone whispered to me very casually: "Whatever you do, don't get involved with Mark." I asked why, but the answer was vague. Something about him being loud and erratic. Someone else insisted he was manipulative and untrustworthy. A third person dissented and maintained that he was simply strange like the rest of us, and harmless. None of them agreed with each other—no single opinion of Mark seemed to be the same—but all of them appeared heavily convinced that they were right.

At that moment, Mark sat across the room, leaning back in his chair and speaking in bold exclamations and animated gestures, speaking like he was a salesman trying to sell an obviously damaged car, perhaps even snake oil. He looked just like everyone else in the room: alternative, self-expressive, resistant to fitting into any clear mould. But he was singularly confident in a way that bordered on theatrical. If I had met him without

the whispered context, I would have assumed we were similar people. But before I had that chance, the warning settled in and clouded my perception. What fascinated me was not that people disliked him—it was that nobody seemed to agree *why* they did.

Over the next few months, I gathered every possible version of Mark's character. I spoke to his long-time friends, people who had spent one chaotic night out with him, and even his then-girlfriend. Some described him as brilliant, capable of slipping into long, philosophical conversations without warning. Others said he was unbearable, the type of person who dominated a conversation until the other person had no choice but to retreat. Some resisted his reputation entirely, insisting he was one of the most loyal friends they had ever had. The contradictions only made me more curious.

The first time we spoke, it was after a meeting had ended and most people had gathered in small groups. Mark approached me and began speaking as if we were already familiar.

"You're quiet," he said. "That's usually a good sign."

I laughed, unsure if it was a compliment, and still processing that he had not asked my name. "Why?"

"Because quiet people are either thinking or judging," he replied. "Both are interesting."

Our conversation continued in that arrhythmic pattern. The topic shifted quickly—from his ideas for a photoshoot, to an underground rapper recommendation, then to a story about being stranded in a foreign city at three in the morning without warning. Talking to Mark felt like trying to keep up with a guide in a labyrinth, and I found myself following his footsteps towards a destination he had somehow memorized but refused to disclose. When we finished speaking, I understood the warnings I had been given. Mark ignored almost every social rule that usually structures a conversation. There were no clear openings, no careful transitions, no effort to make things easier for the other person to follow. And yet, I couldn't dismiss him. I didn't *want* to.

Beneath the disorientation, there was something deliberate in the way he moved through conversation—something that felt less like carelessness and more like a liberating refusal.

It was around this time that I encountered Erving Goffman's concept of a "spoiled identity," the idea that a person can become socially marked, *stained* even, not because of any single defining trait, but because of how others respond to them (3). In this sense, stigma is not fixed within the individual. It forms around them, shaped by interpretation, reinforced through repetition. Mark seemed to exist within that process constantly. His behaviour remained unchanged, but its meaning shifted. The same unpredictability that people like me found magnetic, others experienced as exhausting. The same confidence that could be read as authenticity could just as easily be read as performance, or even manipulation. At first, I understood this in a detached way. It felt like an explanation I could apply to him, a way of organizing the contradictions I had collected. But over time, that distance became harder to maintain, because the more I paid attention, the more I recognized something uncomfortably familiar in the way Mark was spoken about.

There is a particular feeling that accompanies you upon entering a room and not knowing exactly where to stand. Conversations form quickly, closing their ranks inwards as you hesitate just long enough to miss the moment where entry would have felt natural. You remain present, as visible as the rest, but slightly misaligned. Not excluded outright, but not quite integrated. I began to pay closer attention to that feeling when it surfaced, noticing how often it occurred and how subtle it could be. It didn't rely on rejection—it only required uncertainty. Watching Mark move through those same spaces, I realized that what separated him was not simply his behaviour, but his indifference to this uncertainty. Where most people adjusted themselves—softening edges, smoothing over gaps—he did not. He continued forward at his own pace, unconcerned with whether others followed him or not.

For a while, I interpreted this as misguided confidence. Then, as a kind of social blindness. Eventually, something else. It began to seem possible that what I had taken as deviation was, at least in part, resistance. That the discomfort surrounding Mark did not come solely from what he did, but from the fact that he refused to accommodate the expectations set upon him. He refused the notion that he should attempt to remove the stain. That realization was less abstract than I expected it to be: it forced me to consider how much of my own behaviour in those spaces was shaped by the same expectations. How often I adjusted the way I spoke, the timing of my responses, even the occasionally fabricated version of myself I presented—all to remain within the boundaries of what felt acceptable. I saw how easily that code of conduct was erased when someone refused to follow it.

The idea of a "social periphery" had initially seemed like something stable: a kind of outer ring occupied by those who failed to meet the unspoken criteria. But, in this group of social outcasts, the sustained presence of exclusion made that structure feel no longer fixed. It shifted with the context, audience, and interpretations of the behaviours of those involved. What I had been observing in Mark was not just exclusion, but instability—an ongoing negotiation between presence and perception. What unsettled me most was not where people like him stood within that structure, but how easily anyone could be moved there, how easily one could be marked, deemed unworthy of a second chance or re-evaluation. Not abruptly, but gradually through small misalignments. A missed cue. A response that lands slightly wrong. A version of yourself that doesn't quite match what the moment requires.

You don't leave the circle all at once. You drift. And sometimes, without fully realizing it, you begin your own orbit.

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Notes from a Starving Girl

GABRIELLA TREITEL

A GIRL will tell you they're fine—scroll through their camera roll, messages, social-media accounts—but if you really want the truth, there's only one right place to look. Tonight, I watch my reflection in my bedroom window, unable to control the tears from sliding down my cheek and staining my sweater. My Notes app is open, sucking me back into that same dark place where I once poured out the pain I couldn't speak. For some reason, I begin to read. *I don't understand how anxiety can manifest into physical pain. How fear can make you shut down completely to the point of starvation.*

Come December, university acceptances begin rolling in—no, crashing in—completely dominating conversation among twelfth graders. As I walk down the hallway, instinctively cupping my ears, I mourn the senior year I imagined. One where my only worry was who would be my prom date, how he would "prompose," and whether he should wear a grey or black tuxedo to match my red mermaid dress. Instead, I shrink my five-foot-seven-inch self to nothing and refresh OUAC for the hundredth time. *The thoughts in my head are always screaming. And my ears feel like they're bleeding. There are these voices*

that just won't go away. Voices telling me it's not real, that I'm making it all up.

Most days, I skip lunch and busy myself with activities. My relationships are frostbitten: I resent my mother's pity, the school's endless postsecondary presentations, and my friends, who effortlessly collect acceptances and secure their futures. Since December, life has grown impossibly heavy. Some days, I want to fight back. Other times, I pray for the weight to crush me. *When will the act of living not feel like a chore?*

My teacher's fingers drum frantically on my shoulder as I blink awake. She drags me towards the wall and the open window. Wonderful. I passed out again. Fainting has become routine, each staff member knowing their role. But today, the look on my teacher's face is different, and I sense another defeat. How fitting. The office door is shut, but I imagine the conversation: "Grade twelve is a stressful year, full of many unknowns. Your daughter dreams of getting into Concurrent Education at Queen's, and each day she does not hear back, she feels a sense of failure, a recurring trauma that drives unhealthy habits. Eating disorders are more common than you think. They can be a desperate attempt to regain control. Are you aware she has not been eating for the last few weeks?" My mother is not an idiot. She knows something is up. But that is not enough to get me to care. The world is punishing me, and I want to punish myself back. *I hate that no matter where I go or how hard I try to escape, I can't outrun myself.*

I am wedged between my parents, awkwardly fitting into the frame of my computer, where my new therapist, Lauren, is conferencing in. Only a mother would have the guts to ambush her child and orchestrate a two-hour intervention on a random Wednesday evening in March. I fixate on my fingers and gnaw on my nails until they bleed. I only stop when the metallic taste of blood becomes too overpowering. They all irritate me, taking extra-long pauses and sharing secret looks. One sentence comes out clearly from mom: "We spoke to the doctor today

after you passed out at school. If you don't eat, or start to tell us what the hell is going on, you're going to the hospital." *How do I answer a simple "How are you?" when I don't understand what's going on inside my own head?*

I yank out my ponytail and start picking at the split ends in my hair. I briefly contemplate whether it would be easier to go to the hospital than sit through this conversation. I'm already being treated like a patient who poses a danger to themselves; at least the hospital has a strict visiting-hour policy. Instead, my response is short. I know it will sting, but I want to hurt her. "I'll talk to Lauren about it. It's none of your business." That is obviously a lie. This is her fault. She is my mother, and I am hurting in a screwed-up, unfair world because of her. I hate my mom for caring and for loving me when I can't love myself. *I try to listen to Lauren and remember that mom and dad forgive me. They forgave me before it happened. Before I became this person. Because it isn't my fault. This isn't the real me talking. It's my eating disorder.*

"What do you think of this shirt?" I ask, stepping out of the Winners' dressing room.

"I love it. You're stupid if you don't get it," my mom instantly replies. As I change into my clothes, I blink back the tears before they can form large puddles on the dressing-room floor. I try to bring myself back to the present. I'm in my favourite store, with my favourite person, doing my favourite activity. We walk to the cashier, and something inside makes me reach for mom's hand. There is a lot to say, but I choose to stay quiet. She looks older, tired. Maybe even traumatized. I squeeze her hand three times—the childhood code she taught me for "I love you." We wait in line for the light to go off and signal it is our turn to check out. Until then, I am not letting go. I'm scared of the power I have to subconsciously destroy myself and the people I love.

The Reindeer

RUBY TUCKER

A SMALL doorway is hanging alone in the middle of an entire galaxy, facing towards the cosmos and an endless amount of blank space. Nothing besides the doorway is visible to me, except for the first few steps of a staircase disappearing below the frame, into what I can only assume is a whole other world I cannot see. Suddenly, a small dog leaps into view, racing up the last few stairs towards the doorway. It is being chased by a much larger creature, what looks to be a reindeer, but not a normal one. This particular reindeer has x's where its eyes should be.

Where am I in this dream?

The dog does not stop for one minute to consider its circumstances at the edge of the door frame before it jumps head first into the galaxy, leaping away on air or matter or whatever the fuck is up here with us. There is a smile on its face as I watch it go. The reindeer misses the dog by half a second, dramatically skidding to a halt in the doorway. For some reason, it cannot cross the threshold. I cannot tell what the reindeer thinks about this, because x'ed out eyes don't convey much emotion.

The dog disappears into infinity, and I wake up in my bed sobbing. I am five years old. I still think about the reindeer who didn't catch the dog fifteen years later.

I am twenty and sitting at our dining table, elbows resting on fake wood as I stare dully into the screen of my computer, where I'm not quite paying attention to what I should be studying: an endless number of sociological terms pertaining to the study of criminology and deviance. The dining room bleeds into the living room in front of me, where Rebeka lies draped across our cognac leather couch, absentmindedly perusing the abundance of movies Netflix has to offer. She wants to be a lawyer. My mother would be pleased.

She stops clicking the remote, hovering over something I cannot see in the glare of the afternoon light spilling through the front windows. I soon know all too well the laughter and bickering I hear from the March sisters alive on the screen. I look up as a patch of cloud canvasses the sky. Amy March holds a piece of burning paper in front of a roaring fire. I blink back at my own screen, trying to think about what *anomie* means. I am once again distracted by the shouts of Jo March as she realizes Amy has destroyed her entire book of handwritten stories.

I'm not fully paying attention, but still that familiar lump in my throat rises to the surface like it does each time I am reminded of this scene. I have an old book full of dozens of handwritten stories, though none of them are finished. I guess I couldn't cry over them, then, if I didn't care enough to write the endings.

"I can't watch this," I tell Rebeka, covering my eyes.

"I know," she says, tilting her head to the side. "It's awful."

Anomie: feeling hopeless. A loss of purpose.

I am purposeless in the car with my dad; he is driving me home from school. The trunk is stuffed so full of my belongings there is a wall of clothing and bins between us and the back seat. He's telling me about *Frank*, his own story, which he has been working on since I was at least twelve years old. He's extremely intelligent when he talks about the

things he loves to do. If he manages to write the ending before the industry collapses, maybe he will become rich and famous, and he won't tell me not to become a writer myself. The sun through the window and the plastic bins are pushing against me from every angle as I shrink further and further into myself, far away from campus and a feeling of responsibility I can't quite place.

Princeton University's Wayne Bivens-Tatum wrote an article stressing "the global significance of neglecting personality and individual freedoms in vocational education" (qtd. in O'Marra). Sophia tells me one summer afternoon that I should never change. I wanted to say it to her first, but she beat me to it. She still has that freedom, even during the holiday season when I visit and see the open *Spirit of Math* booklets on the kitchen island: fractional equations, long division, divide, multiply, subtract, bring down.

I ask Sophia if she's finished the story she was telling me about over the summer. She shakes her head no; she hasn't worked on it in a while. I promptly pull out her Christmas gift, which is a new notebook and a deck of story-writing cards, watching pleased as she immediately sits down to work. Her mom forgets to pay me that night, but I don't mind; I missed her inquisitive demeanour much more than a fifty-dollar bill.

I am in my neighbour's Jeep as she drives to the studio, playing her assistant for the day because I'm broke. She's talking to me about some degree from too many years ago that she never used, waving her hands around animatedly while I look straight ahead, nodding absentmindedly. At some point, I tune back into the end of the conversation.

"At least it wasn't totally useless, though," she says. "It wasn't English or something."

I don't ask how she learned about artistic expression. She's a photographer now.

I'm afraid I will always be the reindeer who can't fly.

Jasper and I used to make its shadows on the walls with our hands at night, putting our thumb and index fingers together and lifting the

other three fingers up to form antlers above the top bunk-bed or across our map of the world where they could go anywhere they wanted. I always thought the eyes we made looked beady and mean, like Dasher and Dancer if they were characters in a horror film. Maybe that's why my subconscious mind turned them into x's.

Maybe I wouldn't have been so scared if the reindeer had caught the dog and dragged it back down the staircase away from outer space, where there is no future for animals of any kind. I think about how the reindeer was so close, *so close*, to making it on time.

It is too late now. The dog always escapes. All I can do is watch from a distance, unable to move, praying to God or whoever might be listening that in some universe, the reindeer runs just a little bit faster.

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Alien in My Land

YAALINE VIGNESWARAN

MY MOTHER left our home country, Sri Lanka, when she got married at twenty-three. My father left years before that, at fourteen years old, as a refugee fleeing from the violence of the civil war, which lasted from 1983 to 2009. Both my parents grew up in Sri Lanka, a small, mainly rural island located just off the coast of India, near the Bay of Bengal, before they moved to Toronto. To them, the urban lifestyle of Toronto is a concept that was extremely hard to wrap their heads around. They did not feel like they belonged in such a city after growing up on and around farmland and villages. This is something I could never relate to. I was born in Toronto, and busy city life is what I am used to. I never really felt alienated from my culture until my family decided to take a memorable trip to Sri Lanka in 2018.

My uncle and his daughter picked us up from the airport when we arrived. He was a rather large man with full facial hair that made him look intimidating. His daughter had a brighter presence, with colourful clips and accessories shoved into her short, wavy hair. Immediately, they started hugging my parents, and they all conversed in Tamil. Growing up in an English-speaking country, I wasn't the greatest at Tamil. I could understand it fluently, but I could only speak in broken Tamil with awful

pronunciation. When asked how I was by my uncle, I could only awkwardly stumble over my syllables and muster up a mediocre response. My uncle smiled at me, but the confusion and concern I could see through his squinted eyes and raised brows ruined the façade of support. His daughter, and my cousin, didn't even attempt to give me a smile of pity. I felt the stare through my eyelids as I stared at the patterns on the floor, already noticing how out of place I was.

The view on the ride back put me in a trance, as we drove through cities and villages that all looked so new. My uncle and mother talked the entire ride, catching up on all the missed years, while my cousin and I were silent. I couldn't help but notice the differences between us. I wore jeans and a t-shirt, which likely had bright pink sparkly lettering, and my Converse. My cousin wore a plain dress with sandals. She squinted her eyes, clearly analyzing the text on my t-shirt, but she remained silent.

Such a long trip called for a break, and the car pulled over by a street merchant. An older man ran the cart filled with small red fruits.

"One bag, sir," my uncle called out, holding a few coins.

The man had a deep, scruffled voice. "Buy two bags, brother."

My uncle shook his head, accepted just the one bag, and passed the bag around the car. I held the leathery fruit, grazing the spines around it with my fingers. A small pocket knife was passed around the car, and I anxiously watched my cousin expertly cut around her rind to reveal a white, translucent ball of fruit, which she popped into her mouth with ease. The windows were already rolled down, and she turned slightly to the right and spat out the large black seed in the middle. The knife came around to me, and it felt unnatural in my hands. I held it against my fruit and could feel my cousin's judgmental stare as I nervously stared at the rind, unsure of how to open it. My mom eventually saved me from this humiliation ritual by offering to open the fruit for me, but when I was handed the small fruit, I tried my best to ignore the unappetizing exterior and slimy interior. I began to nibble around the seed rather than pop the entire thing into my mouth.

“What the hell is she doing?”, my cousin said out loud.

My face was bright with embarrassment, and I was unable to defend myself in Tamil, so I just hurriedly finished eating and never reached for another fruit for the rest of the ride. That was the only time I ever tried a Rambutan, and I never forgot the sweet, jelly-like taste of the fruit I so badly wanted to try more of.

The next stop was the Sella Katharagama temple, an historic site dedicated to the Hindu god Murugan. It is located in the Monaragala District of Sri Lanka, and is believed to be one of the holiest sites in the country. At this point, I was already embarrassed and felt so out of place. When we got out of the car, everyone around me was wearing traditional dresses and walked with purpose, while I awkwardly trailed my mother in my jeans. As soon as we stepped foot outside, my parents immediately blended in, and it was like they never left the country at all. I was the only alien in the group. I noticed my cousin walking significantly ahead of me as if it were an embarrassment to be around me. This specific temple was mainly outdoors, and it was huge. It is known for cows to wander freely, but as someone who is scared of even dogs, this concept was terrifying. I had a death grip on my mother’s arm, and this only sparked more judgement and harsh looks from my cousin, who owned several pets.

I thought Sri Lanka would be a place where I felt belonging, but I felt more foreign in my native land than I ever did in Toronto. I spent the rest of the trip counting down the days until I could go home, where I could speak my broken Tamil without judgement, wear the clothes I want, and eat the way I like. To this day, I struggle during birthdays when my mom video-calls my foreign relatives. I never lost that feeling of being alienated from my culture for having grown up in Toronto. The judgmental glare from my cousin is something I will never forget, and the looks of pity when I spoke Tamil will always stay with me. That was when I first understood how vast the disconnect was between me and my native land.

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Candidate Moves

JAMES WESLEY

THE MISSISSAUGA Chess Club meets in a room that wouldn't attract notice from anyone not already looking for it. There is no glamour to the place, no cultivated atmosphere, nothing meant to flatter the visitor into feeling they have arrived somewhere important. A folding table stands near the entrance, where pairings are posted; beyond it, the boards are laid out in rows, each with a clock planted squarely beside it. The players, who drift in by ones and twos, do what chess players always do before a tournament begins. They test the buttons on the clocks, pull out their chairs, then sit, but most importantly, they centre all their pieces. A small superstition of the community, as if a bishop half-tilted on its square might invite bad luck, or worse, carelessness, doubtless a curse from the tournament organizers. There are no spectators. I sign my name, find my board, and sit down before thirty-two pieces and an infinite number of ways to go wrong.

When the first round begins, the room contracts. The conversation ends so abruptly, so completely, that the clocks seem to take over in its place. Their clicking is not loud, but it is persistent. In a classical game, you may sit there, thinking, hands folded, and persuade yourself that your mind is moving with purpose. Blitz strips that away. With just three

minutes and no extra time, every pause has a price. The board no longer seems like a field of possibilities so much as a field of possible mistakes.

My opponent, a young man in a navy quarter-zip who handles the pieces with a kind of economical neatness, plays quickly with little thought, as though the first moves of the game aren't moves at all but merely an inevitable arrangement of matter. I answer in kind. For several turns, the position retains its initial civility. Then matters become complicated. I make what, afterwards, I would have called an active move, by which I mean one that satisfies my appetite for initiative. My opponent replies at once. There is a particular humiliation in being met so quickly in such moments. It suggests the position has already been figured out by your opponent while you are trying not to drown. A few moves later, I lose material in the dullest and most chastening way possible, that is, not through some exquisite combination, but through an error immediately seen by myself and my opponent.

The better I get, the worse I feel. Not worse in the theatrical sense, not with despair, but worse in the sense that the board has grown increasingly unwilling to conceal from me the meaning of my own decisions. Early on, chess is merciful. You can lose and still remain blissfully unaware as to why. The board is too large, too cluttered, too full of relations you are not yet equipped to recognize. Later, once enough patterns have entered the mind, mercy evaporates. More possibilities don't appear. The opposite happens: the false ones begin to fall away. The position no longer feels infinite. Instead, it narrows into a small handful of continuations that wait to see whether you are fit to distinguish one from another. That narrowing is also what the cognitive psychologists William Chase and Herbert Simon observed when they studied how stronger chess players think, not by surveying everything, but by identifying the right possibilities for further consideration (56). A loss, then, ceases to be mysterious and becomes a self-authored reality of one's own insufficiency.

Most forms of improvement flatter the receiver. They permit a person to feel enlarged by their own developing competence. Chess withholds that sensation, or grants it only briefly, then seizes, leaving the player starving. Incompetence has almost its own camouflage; as the psychologists Justin Kruger and David Dunning argue in their study of self-assessment, it is spared the burden of understanding itself (1121). Perhaps it's more precise to say that the game doesn't get more difficult. It's not as though squares or pieces are added. Rather, the difficulty finally becomes observable.

Between rounds, the room becomes livelier. Men stand over finished boards and replay their defeats with an index finger, tracing the route by which the position had turned against them. One player laughs while describing a blunder. Nobody in this hall needs persuading that a bad move could linger in the body. Everybody has felt, at one time or another, that peculiar aftertaste of preventable error. It occurs to me, watching them, that this environment feels like one I understand and connect with. The feeling of connection has less to do with friendship than with mutual submission. One sits across from another person and enters a sealed room of one's own, yes, but the others in the room have consented to the same confinement. The players share this sort of vicarious company amid isolation.

My bag waits by the door now, half-packed for tomorrow's tournament; the clock is in the front pocket, and the score sheet I will not need is tucked between a pen and a bottle of water. By tomorrow evening, I will have done it all again. It is strange, the things that keep hold of you. Chess doesn't comfort me. It has never really offered the comfort of feeling finished that I desire in the rest of my life. I don't think, now, that I am chasing mastery in any serious way. That dream belongs to the beginner along with ignorance. If anything, it has gone on enlarging itself, as my fellow club player Jack Fergusson put it. Maybe that's why I keep returning. Maybe I find a morbid sense of comfort from

knowing I am small and have limits in a world that desperately endeavours to tell me how great I am, how I am enough.

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Splinter

SOLEIL WRIGHT

I'M HAVING a hard time figuring out whether this table is red oak or mahogany. I keep gripping my hands around its waxed edges, thinking my fingers will eventually catch a splinter that tells me the answer. My knuckles dressed in thrifted rings are turning white, but it's so damn sanded that it's refusing to raise and embed itself in my skin. I can't believe I'm praying this wood pierces me, but I'll try anything to avoid peeling my gaze from its sheen and forcing myself to look at her.

"So is the party not happening?" I speak slowly, watching as both their shoulders tense against the pitch of my voice. They're sitting beside each other across the table, leaving me alone on the other side. I'm trying to brush off the sinking feeling that this seating arrangement is intentional, a setup that fits the punchline. We've spent the last three years eating lunch at this table, but my bearings are suddenly so foreign. There's a nauseating scent of cheap coffee beans as the barista turns on the grinder behind us, and I can feel my pulse beginning to pump through my eyelids.

I know the answer to my own question; I'm just stubborn. I won't deny I fit into the type; I dig my heels into mud and swear I can't feel the rain pooling around my feet. It's how I've acted during my entire

friendship with Rosslyn, but she's always let me be that way, and we just work. She shouldn't be surprised. I'm asking a question that should unravel from my mouth casually, like anything else that's being said in this Second Cup, but I feel the words crawl back down my throat. Syllables cascading like molasses, coating my tongue and clogging my airway. My anxiety, an affliction I've been swinging hopeless punches at my whole life, is churning deep in my veins. A guttural wave of it urges a stutter in my eyes as they reach Rosslyn's. In the heat of a panic attack one night, I tried reading about what was happening to me, an attempt to conceptualize my pain. I found out that your pupils dilate when you panic, and I spent a decent hour convinced mine would explode. She must be staring into the void of mine. Why do hers seem so steady?

"Yeah, it's still happening, but there's been a slight change in plans. The hosts have heard the things you've said about them, and they're not really interested in rekindling the friendship." Julia's words don't process, they're too robotic to register as human to me.

An interrogation bulb shines down on me in the form of a Home Depot light fixture, illuminating the sight of my sternum rising and falling at a rapid pace. The other customers sitting with their $3.95 sesame bagels and lattes drowning in syrup have dissipated into thin air, along with their quiet murmur, abandoning me in this grating silence. Julia remains stoic as she grinds a three-year friendship under her heel. She's always excelled at mimicking rustic machinery, struggling to master the art of harbouring empathy. Her lips don't even twitch as she spits that sentence out. If they did, I didn't notice. I'm too focused on Rosslyn.

Throughout the thirteen years that I've been her best friend, I have never failed to read her. It's a skill I've called my superpower since we were young. I know every twitch, tick, and shudder she pulls. But her face reads something that might just be my kryptonite. I'm not sure if this power started when we met in junior kindergarten, when Ms Nelson placed us together at a table just like this one. Maybe it progressed each

time we ate lunch together that year. It could have manifested gently, taking shape while we took out the straws in our juice boxes and pretended we were teenagers drinking pop. We giggled behind lunchboxes, sharing the same intimate and naive belief that adolescence would stay just like this.

"Why are we such losers?"

I felt mean for tying us together in that self-deprecating statement, but as the two of us squished in her twin bed together, excluded from yet another end-of-the-year party, the thought escaped from my mind.

"We're not losers, everyone else is just too stupid to see that we're actually cool. I think we're ahead of our time."

Rosslyn's insistent optimism gnawed just as hard as my envy to be a "somebody." I was incapable of prying myself from the hole of self-pity in moments like these, but my pessimistic attitude always paired well with her hopefulness. She was always able to thread a rope strong enough to pull me out.

"God, I hope high school is better than this."

It was a kind of wishful thinking that can only staple itself into youthful minds. It's a skill that adults forget over time, and teenagers turn themselves inside out trying to figure out. The idea that fresh hallways would suddenly spread kindness into the hearts that once took pleasure in breaking ours was an innocent delusion. But we were twelve and already running out of air trying to catch up with life, so we clung to it. A theatrical portrayal of our futures was performed that night. Our shadows splayed across her chipped bedroom wall, a projector for all the ways we'd ricochet off the other's mind. The same naivety crept its way into the air between us, pulling at straws coated in the hurt of not being chosen, pretending it was temporary. The feeling of being "someone, but not quite" followed us through the years, but we never excluded each other from ourselves. There was a pure and unspoken promise that we'd never live a version of this life without the other in it. The version I am living in right now should not exist.

Nobody has said anything in the last five minutes, and my fingerprints are beginning to fuse to this table. I'm begging my voice to mutter anything in my defence, my hands to budge and grasp the hope of resolution before it untethers itself from us, but I can't. My exile was etched into their tongues before we even sat down. It was over the second I couldn't predict Rosslyn's next breath.

My grip begins to loosen, and I no longer care what this piece of furniture is made of. It could be pine, maple, or cedar. Fuck, it could be steel. It wouldn't change the fact that my heart's breaking as I hold it. I finally let it go and stand up with my backpack in hand. I'm out the door before either of them has the chance to convince me to stay, although I'm smart enough to know they weren't planning on it.