



Unearthed Treasure

An Anthology of Literary Non-Fiction

EDITED BY ROBERT G. MAY

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Preface

ROBERT G. MAY

U*NEARTHED TREASURE* is the third annual anthology of literary non-fiction by the students of WRIT 290, an online course at Queen's University at Kingston.

In WRIT 290, students have the opportunity to read several works of literary non-fiction by authors such as Neil Peart, Danielle Ofri, Alice Walker, and others. Students learn about the efforts authors put into their works of literary non-fiction and what the genre's central characteristics are. Students discuss with each other the major themes and ideas of the works via discussion boards and other online tools.

Students' final assignment for WRIT 290 is to compose an original work of literary non-fiction on any subject they wish. First, students write a short proposal and sketch out a rough outline. Then, they develop their outline into a working first draft. Finally, they revise their first draft into a polished, publication-ready final version. At every step of the process, students receive advice and feedback from their instructor or teaching assistant. Students' final works are then published here with minimal further editing. The works of literary non-fiction in this collection thus represent the product of several months' work by a group of dedicated and diligent writing students.

One of the most important lessons students learn in WRIT 290 is that literary non-fiction assumes an audience. Literary non-fiction is meant to be read, enjoyed, and appreciated by others. *Unearthed Treasure* is therefore an appropriate title for this book because it

alludes not just to the authors—the creators of the “treasure”—but also to the readers—the ones who have “unearthed” the authors’ creations in the act of reading them. Unearthed treasure is also highly valuable. The authors of these pieces value their experiences and have thus chosen to write about them, and readers will find value in sharing in the messages and lessons derived from those experiences.

As Henry David Thoreau writes in *Walden*, “Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations. Books, the oldest and the best, stand naturally and rightfully on the shelves of every cottage.”

Interested readers may also download the first two WRIT 290 anthologies of literary non-fiction, *Through the Eyes of Ourselves* and *The Scene and the Unseen*, at:

<http://post.queensu.ca/~mayr/anthologies.html>

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And thanks to the WRIT 290 students who contributed ideas for the cover design and title for this year's anthology. The cover art depicts a section of a bookshelf in the Library at Trinity College, Dublin, photographed by Julia Partington. The title *Unearthed Treasure* is based on a suggestion by Tammy E.M. Toeppner.

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Unearthed Treasure

An Anthology of Literary Non-Fiction

A Spoonful of Theatre

MORGAN ANDERSON

SPEAKING AS a self-proclaimed theatre nerd, it can be extremely frustrating spending thirty dollars on a ticket to sit in a silent, darkened theatre for two hours and see nothing more on stage than you could have experienced at the movies for less than half the price. The “liveness” of theatre, as Jordan Tannahill terms it in his book *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, is what sets theatre apart from film and television. In the theatre, actors and audience members occupy the same space, breathing the same air, to collaborate on a creation that would never be complete without both parties involved. In fact, in the case of some of the performances I’ve seen this year, this liveness resulted in actors and audience members even eating the same food. After I give you a taste of the theatre to be seen in Kingston and the surrounding area, I’m sure you won’t be able to resist a larger bite!

At the conclusion of Edge of the Woods Theatre’s acrobatic play *Ralph and Lina*, after experiencing poverty, war, and heartbreak, the title characters carry a box of Tim Horton’s donuts and a case of Molson Canadian beer onto the stage. In the final scene, reminiscent of every small-town Ontario family Christmas dinner, Ralph and Lina pull audience members onto the stage at random to play the parts of distant aunts and uncles. My boyfriend and I chuckled at the sudden shift in atmosphere the second donuts were introduced into the play, and I howled with delight when my boyfriend was one of the five people thrust onto the stage to crack open a bottle of Canadian and celebrate Christmas in Canada. I was even more elated when he sat back down and passed the bottle over so I could enjoy the familiar and refreshing (if a little warm) beer. As soon as the first audience member was brought on stage and the first beer cracked, the fourth wall, which had

been threatening to topple throughout the show, crashed to the floor, and actors and audience members alike enjoyed time together. We had all come from different walks of life and into the theatre that evening, but a common understanding of the tastes and smells of specific foods managed to bring us together in a way that the restricted seats and soggy popcorn of a movie theatre never could.

Not long after my adventure into the edible fiction of *Ralph and Lina*, I found myself in the front row of another food-oriented narrative called *Tang*, written by Queen's student Sean Meldrum and produced by Power Presents: DSS. I managed to seat myself in what should've been termed the "splash zone" because of the sticky citrus spatter of oranges that spewed out of each character's mouth and onto my lap. The audience was also at risk of being hit by rogue cracker crumbs or flying water droplets as the characters slowly realized that everything they put in their mouths suddenly tasted a little bit like orange. The characters' negative reaction to the orange taste in all of the edible matter on stage was quickly understood to represent contemporary fear of change and difference. This message and the food itself easily flowed out of the fiction, through the fourth wall, and onto my lap, making it a very vital experience. Attending the screening of a film can be a vital experience as well, of course, if vitality is defined as something that is absolutely essential. Theatre, though, also fulfils the definition of vitality as something that is lively, a definition that cannot be attributed to film.

After *Tang* made a literal splash in my understanding of theatre conventions, Surface/Underground and Why Not Theatre's production of *Late Company* a month later was less palatable; the bitter taste it left was soaked up only by guacamole dip one of the characters accidentally dropped on the floor. Tannahill would probably describe his hit play as shoving the "recognizable and familiar down our throats" (25), and I definitely felt like I was being force fed. As I sat in the theatre, I watched recognizable and overrated acting techniques employed instead of convincing and engaging characters. If it hadn't been for a talk-back with the actors, I might have been convinced I had sat through an hour-and-a-half-long television show rather than a live theatre performance. The only moment that saved this production from its lifeless portrayal of Tannahill's cleverly compiled script was the thick and tangible guacamole that splatted to the floor midway through the show. This accidental spillage was exciting because it was

unrehearsed, unlike the pre-planned perfection of a film. The rest of the play may have been stale, but the guacamole definitely was not.

In a world where movies are so easily downloaded and watched for free in the comfort of our own homes, what more could live theatre possibly give us? Well, beer, donuts, oranges, and guacamole are a good place to start, anyway. If theatre wants to remain vital for its audiences, it needs to start employing techniques to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, fracturing the fourth wall, without breaking it down entirely. Food is an object that so obviously exists in both the real world and the world of the fiction. Sure, the character in *Tang* is eating a juicy orange, but we can't deny that the orange is digested by the actor in the real world, too. Food affects an actor's reality as much as it affects plot and character development, which reminds me, as an audience member, that what I'm seeing is living in the same space as I am. Tannahill speaks to all theatre when he claims that it is, "an event, a one-time experience that could never be recreated in quite the same way again, and one that could not exist without our collective presence feeding into it" (16). So, next time you're looking for something to do after dinner, why not dig into the juicy, live theatre experiences that Kingston and Queen's theatre artists are serving up?

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An Experience of a Lifetime

MICHAEL BARTLEY SMITH

THE PACIFIC Pearl is one of the oldest cruise ships still in service under P&O Australia, and I was given the opportunity to work on this vessel as a ship security specialist. When I submitted my résumé for the job posting, I never imagined that I would actually get the position. I completed an interview via Skype, completed arduous amounts of paperwork, passed a marine medical exam, and even spent one week training in Nova Scotia. I finally received my confirmation date, and even though I was nervous, I was excited to finally get the opportunity to travel outside of Canada. I pictured the breathtaking scenery while travelling to and from islands, sampling exotic foods and getting a chance to relax while basking in the sun. It seemed like the most ideal work environment, but I must have been delusional if I really thought that this was the way that things would turn out. After all, I was working in the security department.

On a ship, when an emergency happens, there are no police officers armed with guns and batons for you to turn to—just the security department, which also happens to be the smallest department on the ship. In addition to the duties usually designated to those who have sworn to serve and protect, the security department also doubles as a fire department. In the event of a fire, members of the security department join with members of the engineering department and are split up into three teams: boundary cooling, fire team, and search and rescue. By now, you can understand some of the responsibilities that were placed on the security department, and just how liable we were in the event of an emergency. All the specialists also worked night shifts, which didn't give us much of a chance to socialize with some of the employees in different departments, or to take advantage of the cheap

drinks served at the crew bar. I wish I could say that my duties were there in name only, but I was kept busy from day one.

The first night on the ship I was introduced to the portion of the security staff that operated during the night. Everyone was fairly quiet, which made the whole situation even more awkward than it was originally intended. It didn't help that I was still suffering from the jet lag from my first international flight. I was one of only two Canadians in my department, which was apparently a big deal. The majority of my co-workers were from New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, and many of the other islands situated around Australia. They were all already very familiar with each other, so I could tell that this was going to be quite the adjustment for me. After having our first meeting and having a quiet dinner with some of the security staff, I was able to get a tour of some of the major attractions aboard the ship. The bars, open deck, the club, and the splash bar, it all seemed absolutely amazing to someone like me who has never had the chance to take a vacation. The city of Sydney slowly began to disappear in the background as we made our way to our first destination.

I was abruptly awoken from my momentary daydreaming by a commotion that appeared to be happening on the lower deck. My colleague and I rushed down to see what the issue was. A man, who appeared to be in his early forties, was heavily intoxicated and was arguing with some of the bar staff. Apparently, the bar staff seemed to have cut him off for the night and restricted him from purchasing any alcohol for the time being, which caused him to be furious. My colleague attempted to calm him down, but he wasn't even letting him get a word in. He complained about how he was a paying customer, and how he just wanted to enjoy his vacation and have fun. That night I learned there were a few words, which if used in a certain sequence, could alter the course of events for an entire cruise at any time: "I'll jump overboard." Now, in my opinion this passenger was intoxicated and wouldn't have dared to utter those words had he been sober. I believe that the only reason he made such a ridiculous threat was due to intoxication and frustration from getting cut off. Unfortunately, my opinion doesn't matter, and the captain would rather work the security department to the point of exhaustion than take a chance and find out this man was serious. For the entire cruise, that passenger was arrested and placed into confinement where he was monitored twenty-four hours a day. Photos were taken, every conversation was video recorded, and every single movement from him, no matter how small or

insignificant it appeared to be, was logged and written down. Even though I made it through the first night, it set a precedent for what was to come over the next few months.

As time went on, I started complaining less about my duties and focusing on the task at hand. I began to adjust to this style of life, and now that my co-workers had started to open up, it made my transition so much easier. It turns out that there were others in the same position that had not lasted long, so they didn't like getting attached. Since I couldn't go the crew bar, I ended up spending the majority of my time outside of work at the gym and ended up losing over thirty pounds! I also learned that the day security team was in charge of all the operations on the gangway, so they weren't allowed to go out and explore the islands, unlike the night staff. I took that opportunity to socialize with the staff from other departments and ended up making quite a few new friends. In all, I have to admit that I was quick to judge my situation because there were still plenty of things to be thankful for. Even though I don't think I could work on ships again, overall it was a good opportunity for me, and I wouldn't have been able to enjoy it if I didn't take a risk for the experience of a lifetime.

Where Is Your Faith?

PATRICIA BLAIR

IT IS quite funny, the response I get from friends, when I inform them of my decision to quit my job of fifteen years to study English full time. After a long pause or perturbed look on their faces, the question I get next is, “What will you do after completing your studies?” I tell them that I will become a writer or teacher. I just throw in the teacher title because it makes me look like I made a good decision, because how can I explain that becoming a writer is quite difficult and that the possibility of great financial reward looks dim. How many professional writers do I know personally? None, really.

When I walk away from the conversation, I ask myself, “Why do you throw in the teacher bit?” Is it due to a lack of faith? I tell myself that my friends will never understand my dream, so giving them something they can relate to makes it easy for me to explain. My dream is to be a singer, songwriter, author, and speaker, but if I tell them that, they would definitely conclude that I am insane. Where is my faith? Why can I not be confident in giving them the true answer and not doubt it will happen?

Jesus asked his disciples where their faith was when they faced a turbulent life-threatening storm. Although Jesus was present with them, they allowed their fears to blur their vision of Christ’s ability to save them. Faith allows one to believe that what he or she desires will be his or hers as long as that person does what is required. The expectancy of the disciples was to trust that whatever happened was under God’s control.

If I truly believe that what I desire to be is what God wants as well, then I should not waver in my faith. The Bible says that we often do not receive what we desire because our intentions are not in alignment with

God's will. When my motives are not congruent to God's standards, I do not expect to have faith that moves mountains. I can only achieve unshakable faith when I am sure that I have been divinely inspired. This is the first step to possessing faith. Knowing that the purpose of my endeavours, not based on a superficial desire, but on a God-given one. This purpose serves as the "why" to my belief.

Fear is an enemy to faith. Fear says I cannot see how I will get from point A to B, and there is no way I will take this step forward. Faith says, I cannot see how I will get to point B right now, but there is a way, and I will find it with God's help. As a student, faced with many challenges in developing skills necessary to helping me attain my dreams, I need just to keep moving forward. Fear is a natural emotion, but when it disables me, I cannot move towards achieving my goals. Debilitating fear communicates that God's power is limited. When I sincerely believe that God is able to do anything, evidence of my faith occurs when I make use of all the resources I have available.

Faith is a prerequisite to engaging in a favourable relationship with God. Being a Christian is a demonstration of faith in and of itself, since God is unseen. Faith is a fundamental principle for pleasing God. Similarly, there are some fundamental courses and skills I must acquire to complete each level of my program successfully. With diligence, I must try consciously to acquire the essence of each lesson. I would not want to live in a house where the builders just did the bare minimum to get approval on construction standards. If I take shortcuts with my education and skip the basics, this does not constitute successfully completing my degree. As a house built on an unstable foundation, when storms or challenges come my way, I will fall. This realization applies to all areas in my life. How can I be a Christian if fundamental principles such as faith and love are foreign to me? Just as a writer's ability is to communicate effectively, I must bear the fruits that identify me as such. My purpose and labour is in vain if I build merely on my talents rather than my values as a follower of Christ. Planting in superficial soil will bring a harvest, but not one that is rooted in Godly morals or one that will last for eternity.

Faith must constantly be in motion. When I get to where I want to be, I will still need faith to maintain what I have. Life brings continuous levels of success and struggles. When I graduate with honours and become all that I desire to be for Him, I will need faith to go even further as God leads me. My experiences with God will help my faith to develop. I will have greater opportunities to share my journey of

faith with others, therefore fulfilling the teacher aspect of my answer. The practice of trusting God will serve as an example for even those whose faces were perturbed by my initial act of faith.

God is able to transform common things into something spectacular. What makes me think that amid the many graduates and people seeking to attain dreams similar to mine that I will achieve them? It is not the faith I have in myself that motivates me, but my belief that the omniscience of God is able to do all things through me. Where is my faith? It is only evident through demonstration; therefore, it would be too easy to say where it is. I can only show it by what I do.

A Perverse Kind of Love

HEATHER BONNELL

AFTER SIXTEEN years of high-calibre education, I have come to one, incredibly painful conclusion: I don't really care for the world I live in. Just writing those words down is a difficult task—I wish I had something else to say.

The past four years of my life have been dedicated to my undergraduate degree in Global Development Studies, or “DEVS” for short. DEVS is a left-of-centre arts degree program that studies how the intersection of politics, economics, and culture generates change around the world. In this context, “development” mostly refers to interventionist approaches to “improving” what is known as the “Third World.” When I came to Queen's in pursuit of this program, I was passionate about changing the world. The content we study, however, emphasizes the reality and complexity of the world we live in. I spend most of my days thinking about global inequality from the detached but beautiful campus of Queen's University. The irony of such circumstance is not lost on me, as my studies have often tormented me to a state of guilt-ridden paralysis. Yet, I have come back to DEVS each year, optimistic that I will find an understanding that will somehow make sense of the hardship I know exists but have yet to really experience. I have found comfort in creating opinions by analysing development case studies, problems, and theories. I have loved the possibility that I might understand our global reality better than my peers—so much so that I was seduced by the appeal of critical thinking and knowledge I felt was the *truth*.

I found comfort in the fact that I at least knew better than the “voluntourists” of the world who believe that their travel photos and three weeks in Africa make their consumption-based lifestyles and

first-world problems balance out. A certain sense of smugness washes over me when I think how intelligent I must be to have figured this out. Of course, this is knowledge reserved only for the first years brave enough and smart enough to apply to this program and get in. I picked DEVS, and DEVS picked me back. It felt both inevitable and dependable.

By the time I got to my third year of school, I had managed to hold off the tension that had been creeping since I entered the program. But I knew it was coming. The further along I got in this program, the angrier I became at everyone and everything, from voluntourists, to politicians, to the UN. No one was doing anything right to save the people whom I think deserve more. I was finally starting to grasp the complexity of inequality, but the more I learned, the more I found it to be incomprehensible. I was feeling lost when DEVS fatefully turned its critical eye towards me.

I was told to read a chapter from Barbra Heron's book *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender, and the Helping Imperative*. I learned that I was a major part of the persistent problems I perilously sought to address—and not just because I was born to privilege or because I lived and benefited from a consumerist culture. It was my desire to improve the world that implicated me. Heron explained to me that my efforts in development would likely be fruitless because they were rooted in a bourgeois, white subjectivity which produced problematic binaries and undignified images of the “Third World.”

I continued in my studies in the hopes that by being educated, I was better than the women Heron spoke of. I found more disappointment, however, in my final two years of school. The answer I was looking for, that there was a *right* way to improve the world, did not exist. At the end of four years, I have learned that if I wanted to be right, which I seem to desperately desire, I was in the wrong field. If I wanted to be happy, which I never seem to feel, I was studying the wrong subject matter. DEVS has completely changed my perspective on the world. I still cannot come to terms with the privilege I was born with, and I am not sure why any child is ever taught the fallacy of fairness. I will continue to struggle with my failing idealism as I continue to live in an unequal world that is not likely to change.

I remember I had wondered if I would fall in love when I came to university. I even wished I would find a person to connect with and make me happy. It would have been nice to have someone who could distract me from my big thoughts and big frustrations. Instead, I fell in

love with ideas; these did not distract me, but they fuelled my frustrations in a way that was intoxicating. Why I chose to pursue such a feeling is perhaps a cause for worry. However, the appeal to understand why I had won the genetic lottery to wealth, while others consistently suffered, became tantalizing. I tried to reason that if I could *explain* why the world was such a fucked up place, I could make it better. Instead, I learned through both faith and fear that there are many troubles with such good intentions. Global development is so much more complicated than creating progress, righting wrongs, or giving back. In fact, it was nothing like I thought it would be.

I continued in my studies in the hopes that, by being educated, I was better than the women Heron spoke of. From then on, I began to grasp that my privilege was a bigger problem than I had previously thought. As complex as the world was, I never thought that my role in it would be just as complicated. I was, and had always been, a colonial continuity. My comfortable life was built upon histories of inflicting pain. How am I to change that? I had only wanted to help. However, as it turns out, that was just my legacy as a “custodian of morality”—a combination of my socially constructed gender role and my experience as both privileged and restricted in a world where women still are considered less. My sense of compassion was rooted in the oppressive position of privilege that I held—my passion was patronizing. Learning this broke my heart. In an instant a new idea had interfered, drastically altering the relationship I had built with my degree.

I thought that DEVS would allow me to understand what others did not. I thought it made me a better person. I have been continuously devastated by the fact that DEVS proved neither of these things to be true. Becoming educated has been a truly painful affair. I hope that my ability to think critically about the world, and even myself, will serve me well. I don’t really care for the world that I live in. But now, as I prepare to graduate, it’s about time to find my place in it.

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One in Four

MARA BRYDEN

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING, one of four North American women will be sexually assaulted in their life. I can only hope that because I was that one, then three friends, classmates, or other women will be lucky enough not to face the same attacks.

A stranger cannot fully understand the implications an attack can have on the overarching entirety of elements of a survivor's life until they have lived through a similar attack. As children, my friends and I raced around the playground, screaming out "RAPE! Help me!" as we thrashed theatrically; mere jokes of trauma that were so very distant from us. We would surely never experience the rough, relentless grasp of sexual assault and damaging encounters as anything more than jokes on the playground. How naive we are, until we are the ones faced with the stopwatch of sexual assault—moments when a formerly naive and pure persona is replaced with a new, fragile, and unrecognizable one.

It was a frosty December day of 2010, the day that my old self expired and I had an unfamiliar, regenerated identity forced upon me. Despite the countless droning warnings from speakers at University orientation ominously cautioning the faceless sea of bodies not to take drinks from strangers, I adopted the same mentality I had as a child on the playground: it won't happen to me. Unfortunately, I became one of those statistics I had studied among the masses of naive students in my Introduction to Psychology class earlier in the same month.

I had swiftly pounded back a shot of rum tainted with a vial of vile venom, coaxed into my unsuspecting hand. He was a short, lean boy with shifty eyes, reminiscent of a wolf licking his lips behind the trees to pluck a little red-hooded girl from her life's path. Within minutes, my body was revolting, struggling, and trying to rid itself of the

substance, but it was too late. I never did discover exactly what drug my attacker had used to render me utterly defenceless on that chilling evening.

I escaped my body and floated above the scene, vomiting downstairs with maniacal alarms going off, resounding through my head and knowing something wasn't right as my friends stumbled upstairs to leave me alone with the wolf. He stroked my hair as I vomited, a snake waiting for the perfect moment to strike its victim once the venom takes hold. I careened forward, seeking an escape from the dank basement, the wolf's lair. I was thrown onto a bed, splayed and pinned, like a wriggling frog in a science dissection, leaving life behind. It's a blessing and a curse, you know, not being able to remember what happened to you in the most vulnerable moment of your life. Do you wish to have security in knowing all abhorrent aspects of your attack? Do you wish to have blissful, blind bewilderment?

Only six of every one hundred incidents of sexual assault are ever reported to authorities. This does not come as any immense surprise, as I did not report my attack. When assault cases are highly televised and marked with survivors allotted the same dignity as high-selling celebrity tabloids, it's hard not to become afraid and resort to sinking within your new persona. Instinctively, we coil back from our attack like a wounded animal, licking our lacerations and preparing for the next fearful blow.

When I sought medical help in my fragile state mere hours following the attack, I decided I would only charge my assailant if my drug test came back positive. With the internal knowledge of the truth behind my irrevocably damaging attack, I sought the indisputable proof of the drugs he had used to solidify my case in court. I was told that my drug test could not be confirmed without releasing the vials to the police. I let sleeping wolves lie.

While I formerly identified as an eternal pessimist, I must opt to see a beacon of optimism; I have risen as a fire-bellied phoenix, I have risen to develop a new self from the ashes of my charred former being. The new form of myself I acquired on December 19th is growing more familiar over time. This self is stronger and jaded. In many ways, I have also grown softer. I identify with peers and friends who have opened up to me and shared their stories, combining together into a woven, warring tapestry of stalwart solidarity.

This new self has also found empowerment in speaking out against assault. I began working as a security guard at a campus bar, hoping to ensure even one sexual assault could be prevented. The girl stumbling towards the door with a new suitor; rerouted and given a taxi home with her friends. The man who fumbled uncomfortably, making eye contact with me across the bar as he pushed his friend away who had suddenly decided being friends wasn't enough. The individual who was sure no one had seen him stir a pill into a girl's drink while her back was turned. Finally, the thankless countless uncomfortable words to patrons at the bar: "Are you feeling safe? Are you comfortable? Do you need me to do anything for you?."

I must carry on the hope that with adopting the identity of a statistic, the one out of four women, I can prevent just one other from becoming the next statistic.

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The Purse-nality of Handbags

DEVIN CLEARY

Style is a way to say who you are without ever having to speak.
(Rachel Zoe, fashion designer and writer)

I WAS ten years old and sitting on the floor of my mother's gigantic walk-in closet. I stared up at all of her evening dresses, coats, and fancy skirts that lined the hangers. My mother was preparing an outfit for my father's promotional dinner later that week, and she had summoned me to help her decide between a short black number or a floor-length red gown. After much deliberation, we settled on the black dress and picked a pair of heels to accompany the outfit. She then turned and walked over to a different closet—my favourite one. She opened the door and inside were scores of purses: some petite and some large, some had simple styles and others had elaborate designs. Each had their own unique place on the shelf and a purpose within my mother's collection. I would sometimes sneak into my parents' room when they were downstairs just to peek at the selection.

My mother pulled out different bags, laying them on the bed and picking them up again. She'd delicately fiddle with the straps and walk around with each one she had taken out, analysing it. It appeared as though she was having a silent conversation with each contender, talking to it about her needs and hearing what they had to say in response. This was a ritual I was used to seeing whenever my mother was selecting an outfit, and it always fascinated me. I hopped onto the bed and asked her what she was doing. She stopped her ritual and came to sit with me on the bed. "Devin," she said, "a purse is not *just* a purse. It's not just something you use to carry things around in, although that is an added benefit. A dress is a dress and a shoe is a shoe, but a purse

is the extension of a woman.” Being ten, I was unsure what my mother was trying to tell me with that answer, and I wandered away to go play in my bedroom, leaving my mother to find the perfect bag for the occasion.

Twelve years after that conversation, I now understand what my mother was trying to tell me. I own an impressive handbag collection and know each of them intimately. I know their quirks and highlights, their successes and their failures. Each bag has a distinct purpose and meaning, and it was selected to fulfil that purpose within my collection. No designer would attempt to convince a consumer that a purse is merely an object meant to be filled with miscellaneous items; it was designed for a particular type of woman, and to convey a particular message. A Chanel is the epitome of classic and refined feminine style, the Valentino Rockstud clutch mixes functionality with edginess, and the Rebecca Minkoff tasselled rucksack combines a bohemian vibe with a timeless silhouette. A woman may own all of these purses, but she would never use them interchangeably. She will carefully take time to select the one that fits her needs in that moment, engaging in a silent conversation until she is sure that this particular design is right. It allows the world a window into who she is in that exact moment.

This tailored coordination is the manifestation of a woman’s personality, and is only wholly complete with the addition of the right purse. During times of rejoicing and celebration, a bright and bold purse can be worn to project a confident emotion. In times of difficulty, a dark-coloured handbag or rugged silhouette can act as a message of sombreness. It acts as a layer of armour against the world during difficult times, and can provide strength and courage. Irrespective of the scenario, the purse is a woman’s companion as she confronts life’s daily trials and can be viewed as a glimpse into her personality. A purse will always be available in any situation, similar to a best friend.

While some may view handbags as a convenient accessory for miscellaneous items, they play a more integral role to a woman than society may recognize. It is true, a purse serves as a functional piece of a woman’s outfit that can store important items. However, society often misses the intimate connection between a woman, her handbag, and the world. It provides a connection between women in a world constantly trying to pit us against each other—a secret kind of language that only we know. I can always tell when a woman is off to an important business meeting or a date depending on the bag she is carrying. I can discern who is a handbag addict that speaks the language from a

woman who does not, as she is carrying a bag that is perfectly coordinated to her outfit. The rest of the world may not realize it, but there is a silent bond between two women who speak this secret code—a nod of the head as we walk by, admiring the other's leather companion and taking note of the glimpse into her emotions and personality.

As women wake up each morning to face the day, each person has an established routine. It can involve coffee, a morning workout, or reading the local news. For many women, the cornerstone of their morning routine is selecting their attire for the day. I once used to look in confusion at my mother's various purses as she would change from one to another. Now, understanding the deep relationship a woman has with her purse, I too undergo a similar internal dialogue as part of my morning routine. A purse is not haphazardly chosen for given outfits, similarly how our closest friends are not randomly selected; there must be an understood connection and symbiosis between the two. Once a purse is donned, it is the projection of the woman at that moment in time. It portrays fears, emotions, and triumphs for all to see as we display our closest companion for the world. They can see our personalities through our purses; outwardly boisterous in our silent camaraderie and an expression of our life experiences, our day-to-day emotions.

He Captured Me, and I Set Myself Free

RACHEL DAY

I FELL in love with a boy who wanted me to change who I was. I spent torturous months trying to make myself fit into this tiny, perfect box that he designed. It was almost a year later when I realized that I would never fit into this box because I was not made for it. I sacrificed everything to make him happy, but I wound up making myself miserable. It was then I learned that I was the one who held the key to my happiness. I found the strength to leave and rebuild my life. You have that strength somewhere inside you—you just need to find it.

Fall

It was a chilly October afternoon when we met. How strange it seemed that we would meet at the bake sale our club hosted on Homecoming weekend. But there he was: Simon. He was a year older, taller, smarter, and gentlemanly enough to walk me home after the bake sale ended. I didn't yet know how much of myself I would sacrifice to be with him. It took eleven months for me to finally understand that my identity was more important than Simon's demands.

"Bye, Rach'," Simon called, already branding me with a nickname that made me feel like I was his.

Thanks to Facebook, we reconnected days later. When Simon asked to see me again, I didn't hesitate for a second before saying yes. A date turned into a sleepover which turned into two more sleepovers before the week was through.

"Why aren't we dating?" Simon asked me on our third night together. I drunkenly giggled in response. "I'm serious. You're cute

and funny, and I like spending time with you, Rach'. Let's do this for real."

Before I knew what I was saying, I said "Okay," and I kissed him.

As November ended, Simon and I became Facebook official. The beginning of our relationship reminded me why fall was my favourite season.

Winter

On the first of December, he took me to a romantic restaurant for my eighteenth birthday. As the days passed, we grew so fond of each other that our "I love yous" arrived before Christmas. By January, I was fiddling with Simon's phone where I found his active Tinder account. Fiddling turned into snooping and there it was: a text conversation between Simon and a girl, agreeing to meet up with no mention of me. I confronted him, but he somehow talked his way out of it, leaving me apologizing for going through his phone.

February arrived dull and bleak when I found out Simon had not only lied to me one night about staying in to do his essay, but I discovered a new hickey on his neck. Simon tried to convince me that I was hallucinating. I almost left him that night, but I couldn't bring myself to shut the door and leave. Hours later, I was apologizing profusely for hurting him. It was three months into the relationship, and yet every time he did something wrong, I wound up apologizing. My self-esteem was slowly declining, and I never recognized how crucial it was for me to practise self-care until it was too late.

Spring

As the snow melted and spring arrived, Simon went home to British Columbia when school ended. He was supposed to be gone for fourteen days; instead, he was gone thirty-one. He ignored the majority of my messages, and when he did reply after days of silence, he offered no apology or explanation. Our days apart were met with my increasing anxiety and doubt. It was as though the heat exacerbated my anxiety, leaving me to question the future of our relationship. Was he ever coming home, and if he did, would things be different?

Summer

By mid-June, I was still clinging to the idea that things could get better, but it was then Simon told me he wanted me to lose weight. He blurted it out during one of our now daily fights. He had inadvertently moved in with me, which meant he sat on the couch all day while I went to work and took care of the house. Our arguments always ended with him walking away, sometimes for days without a word. I was even reluctant to sleep at night because I knew as soon as I did, Simon would leave and I would sit there, wondering when he'd come back.

"I need you to lose ten or fifteen pounds," he explained. "I'm scared you'll always be this size and I need it to change." Mind you, I wasn't big. I wasn't unhealthy or overweight in any capacity, but he needed those fifteen pounds gone. I started running every day, counting my calories, and eating foods I didn't want to eat, and it was awful. But Simon seemed to be pleased. Until he wasn't.

"You're such a negative, miserable person," he would complain. "You don't have any hobbies, you waste your time watching TV and reading books, and you never stimulate yourself intellectually." This, of course, was always after I worked, and then came home to clean the house. To please him, I started being happier. I complained less, and I gave up my pastimes of reading and relaxing with reruns of favourite television shows.

Everything he told me to do, I did because I thought it would save us. I didn't know I was the only person who could make me happy. I thought if I just changed everything about myself that he disliked, then we could be happy again.

Fall

The end of orientation week activities signified the start of my second year, and our approaching anniversary. I continued to eat healthier, to go to the gym daily, to take diet pills, and to be a more positive version of myself. I complied despite how miserable it made me. Even with all of my changes and efforts, we still argued every day. I began to wonder if I was ever going to be enough.

On a brisk October night, Simon said to me, "Can you leave?" It was nearly one o'clock in the morning and we planned for me to stay over. I was past the point of anger as he came up with excuses about how he sleeps better alone. He had asked me to leave in the middle of the night a hundred times before, but this time was different—or maybe I was finally different.

As I walked across the eerily silent campus, I asked myself how much more I was going to take. What did he have to do before I realized he wasn't the guy for me? How many more nights did I need to walk home at 2.00 a.m. before I realized I deserved someone who would *want* me to stay? The answer was zero.

The next day, I left Simon. It was then I realized that fall was not about the death of a season, but rather the start of making room for something new.

This was my story, but it doesn't have to be yours. You can always change the ending like I did.

Now

It's been seventeen months since I set myself free. I finally know who I am, what I want, and how I deserve to be treated. It took one year of weekly therapy sessions, endless support from family and friends, and soul searching, but I discovered who I am. Being alone has taught me how important I am and allowed me to restore my self-esteem. In the end, I'm all I have. To some that is a scary thought, but I don't think of it that way. In the end, if all I have is me, then I'm pretty damn lucky.

Travelling Trio

CATHERINE DELANEY

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime. (Mark Twain)

AS I stand on the rampart of the Castillo De San Marco in St Augustine, my son is reading through the pamphlet, comparing this Fortress to Fort Henry in Kingston.

"It has cannons, it's by the water, and it seems to be guarding the city," he says with amazement.

"It is also called Fort Marion by the Americans; it is where the first Europeans, the Spanish, came to the North American continent," I reply. We continue our self-guided tour. The beautiful Spanish fortress is built entirely of "coquina" stone, a rare kind of limestone. There is yet another correlation to Kingston. We move on to the St Augustine Lighthouse. From the top, we take panoramic pictures of the eastern shore of Florida. It is such a clear day. The Old City is calling us for some shopping, but after a few stores, we decide to return to the hotel for a well-deserved rest. On our way, back we drive past Ripley's Believe It or Not, the original museum from the television show. We have to stop. The museum contains an exhibition of oddities, pictures of unusual people, and things. If you are easily grossed out, this museum is not for you, but for an eleven-year-old boy, Ripley's is unreal.

The following day, we journey to the beach at Indialantic, a surfer's lesser-known Mecca than Cocoa Beach. Although the sand is

coarse, I find so many seashells from angel wings to scallops of every colour. The beach is busy in view of the upcoming launch of the Space Shuttle Endeavour scheduled to take place March 11, 2008 at 2.00 a.m. My husband and I sit on the sand to watch the surfers and our boy play in the waves.

The alarm goes off at 1.00 a.m. “Where are we and why is the alarm going off?” After a few minutes, we realise it is countdown time, T-minus sixty minutes. We rush to the beach, to see the Space Shuttle take off from Cape Canaveral, some thirty-five kilometres away. The beach is blanketed with people, standing in various attire from pyjama to club dress and everything in between.

“Is it two o’clock yet? Is it? Is it?” Our son is so excited, he can hardly contain himself.

The crowd is anxious, and the launch is postponed from what we can hear from a radio somewhere nearby. The tension is palpable. Suddenly, the countdown starts, everyone is counting back.

“10, 9, 8 ...” until we see in the distance an orange glow that lights up the entire eastern seaboard, only to fizzle out into the low ceiling of clouds. The rockets powering the Space Shuttle to outer space go out as quick as birthday candles after you make a wish. We see mixed emotions on our son’s face, excitement and disappointment. The show only lasted four seconds. Cape Canaveral’s Kennedy Space Center is an awesome place to tour. Since the debunking of the Space Program, many areas are now open to visitors. Our son is fascinated with space discovery, just as I was, growing up.

Our first week vanished. It is time to see some family. My in-laws are snowbirds. They winter in Clearwater. Our yearly pilgrimage to Florida always includes a stop at their place. It gives our son a chance to visit with his grandparents. Time he would not have otherwise. After a good night’s rest, we are on our way to one of the best flea markets in the USA, the Wagon Wheel near St Petersburg in Pinellas Park. You can find anything from fresh fruits and vegetables to furniture. Our son loves this place for all the games, toys, and used books he can find. He comes away from the flea market with a new perspective on recycling.

The next few days are divided between the pool, Clearwater Beach, and a fun restaurant called the Palm Pavilion. This restaurant and inn was built in 1926, right on Clearwater Beach. We can watch the sunset while listening to the local talent. Our appreciation for music always brings us back to this beachfront place. Another must-see beach is Honeymoon Beach, located in Dunedin. To make the best of our day

at this beach, we check the newspaper for the low-tide timings. One hour before low tide is the most opportune time to stroll this wonderful beach. The beach is part of a wildlife preserve state park. Honeymoon Beach is a unique piece of land that stretches like a finger in the Gulf of Mexico. We sit on mounds of seashells and pick away our favourites.

“Mom, dad, what is this? It looks like a rock with a tail.” We look at each other, puzzled by this find. “It’s a horseshoe crab!”, says my husband. Fortunately, there are explanatory boards by the entrance to the beach: these prehistoric-looking sea creatures wash up on the beach on regular basis.

With a week left of vacation time, we leave Florida for a tour of Washington D.C. The stunning capital of the United States is a place to visit whether your interests are architecture, history, or sightseeing. The day went by so fast. As we stand in the pink courtyard of the Smithsonian Castle, the cherry trees are bloom. It looks and smells divine, which we take a moment to enjoy.

After spending three full weeks together, the travelling trio always does a rewind of the journey. We like to look at what we have learned. We express what we enjoyed and things we would never do again. My husband and our son thought the Smithsonian Museums were amazing. For me, the chance to be with my family on a great trip is all the wonder I needed. The importance to have this time and share it with each other is a rare opportunity these days. Families should travel together to create ties, bonds, and memories. I encourage friends and people I know to take their families on trips. It is good for the mind and soul.

The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.
(St Augustine)

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Into the Fall

DARREN DEVISON

AS I pull up to the trailhead, the rocks extend enticingly over the tree tops. Rays of sunshine surround the peak like fingers reaching to snatch the rock. Music plays gently on the stereo, muffled by the distant siren's call. I hastily grab my kit, barely remembering to lock the car. The trailhead's map shows a smooth but stiflingly long trek to my destination, nowhere to go but forward. Under the tree canopy, the sun's rays are hindered, forced to sneak through small breaks between the leaves. The leaves glow as the sun crashes down. The trail is shadowy but visible, just a hurdle delaying the journey. I move forward to what is shouting for me in the distance, as music plays in my mind:

Be it no concern, point of no return
Go forward in reverse
This I will recall
Every time I fall. (Vedder)

On a trail, there is ample time to be lost in thought. A person's mind may take many different tacks. The mind's focus depends on where a person is going, and where that person has been. Nature displays itself; a person has but to look, and choose to notice. Life is everywhere. The ground is covered with green moss. Moss studded with jewels of sunlight; I hasten down the trail, striding along, ambivalent. My adventure and my mind are both in front of me, not with me. I give no priority to my surroundings. What is around me can be appreciated later; the rock must be challenged, now.

Finally I emerge from the canopy, and the sun greets me once again. I dissociate from what is around me; my eyes are only on the

rock. My compatriots are here, preparing for the assault. After a quick deliberation, it is decided that I will lead the crack. I fasten the straps of my helmet as I gaze up the wall; I run through the steps in my head. The rock is cold, grainy, but stable. The pre-installed sport anchors are visible from the bottom. I wish the rope would uncoil faster. I pace impatiently, the soft ground squishing underfoot. The previous day's rain has produced an acute earthy fragrance. Tied to the rope, I face the rock, ready to depart. Music still plays in my head:

My shadow runs with me
Underneath the Big Wide Sun
My shadow comes with me
As we leave it all
We leave it all Far Behind. (Vedder)

As I step off the ground, my weight is on my toes; my fingers scan the rock. My hands become as important as my eyes. Rhythm sets in. Movements become systematic and meditative. Still, gravity pulls me down, and the rocks push me away; there is only one direction to go, up. Even in the sun, the rock remains cold; the rock does not submit to what is around it. The rock needs taming. After tying into the final anchor, I begin my push to the top. Towards the pinnacle of the wall, the rock begins to change. It becomes brittle, choosing destruction over being conquered. As I push upward, my eyes remain top bound. I hear a daunt snap; I'm thrown into an abyss. I'm falling.... I am falling.

The sun, the glowing leaves, the cold rock all spiral and melt together. The Earth's features become a labyrinth. The rock, the sun, the leaves all compress and explode, leaving only darkness. On the ground, the world has shifted. The rock has become the ground, the earth the vertical plane. The surroundings move, nothing is static. Then, as if someone had pushed pause, everything becomes stationary; the world reorients itself. My body is afire, every nerve ablaze. I stare outward at my helpless companions. I gaze inward at myself, helpless. This cannot be happening.

I cling to the hope that this is all a dream. I hope I am still in my warm bed, not on the damp ground. I see the fear and uncertainty in my companions' eyes, their mouths unable to form words. I refuse to accept reality; I lash out. Why did I not check that anchor better? How could I have been so careless? I had done this type of climb hundreds of times, why wasn't I paying attention? My anger is as hot as my

burning nerves. I can't believe I have lost everything just to climb a stupid rock. My mind manifests a dark cloud, blotting out the sun. There is feeling in my body, and I feel the music:

Subtle voices in the wind,
Hear the truth they're telling
A world begins where the road ends
Watch me leave it all behind. (Vedder)

I'll face what is to come. Lying helpless, fragile, lost, I think back. So much time is spent planning and trying to control the world. Anchors break, rocks snap, nothing can be foreseen or controlled. Even at full strength, the sun could never hope to break through a leaf. Yet, as opaque as leaves are, the sun still reaches the forest floor. Did I truly smell the fragrance of the forest, or do I only think of it now because it might be lost to me? So many precious things go unnoticed as we take our adventure through life. We rarely see these precious things until they are on the verge of being snatched away. As I lay on the ground, my dark cloud begins to wane. As the sun banishes the last of the darkness, the scent left behind is intoxicating.

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The Blessing of Brokenness

DEBORAH EFECHAOBOR

IT WAS 3.25 p.m. and the yellow school bus had finally reached my bus stop. As I dashed down the street, I felt like Usain Bolt; I could feel my heart beating, and backpack shaking excessively. As soon as I stormed into the house, I could smell mom's chicken roasting in the oven; I could see a display of fresh vegetables, mashed potatoes, and apple pie laid out on the dining table. Before mom could even get a word in, the phone rang and I pounced on it; I knew that my girls were calling me to join our daily after-school gossip. We talked for hours: *"But she's so fake.... I used to think we were friends, but after that, she better forget my name."* It was like this every single day. I fought for popularity; I was on the sidelines, cheering my friends on when they bullied others, but the moment these friends turned on me, I became like Muhammad Ali in the rink, dodging each check hook and pull counter with new gossip, more backstabbing, and great lies.

Unfortunately, my dad announced that we were moving to Waterloo, Ontario. No matter how much I cried, my parents didn't care. I wasn't the only one in a sad state; Michael Jackson died on the day of our move, and the world was in mourning. It became evident that Michael Jackson was more than the guy who sang "Man in the Mirror." People of all race, age, and religion, mourned the death of a man who united the world with his talent, and broke down the racial barriers in the music industry. That day I learned that the key ingredient to changing lives is a willing vessel.

We had to find a church. One Sunday, we found ourselves at Outreach Church. I looked around expecting to find African families worshipping God; mothers and grandmothers dressed in traditional dresses, skirts, and big hats; husbands dressed in fitted suits with their

bibles in tow; and children dressed in casual wear with their colouring books laid out their laps. Instead, I saw Caucasian men and women wearing jeans and casual shirts; children were a rare sight because most of the adults were well up in age. I felt like I did not belong; I tapped my dad repeatedly, signalling that it was time to leave. He ignored me.

Suddenly, an African woman, probably in her mid-twenties, dressed in a black belted collar midi dress with patent red pumps, graced the altar. Pastor J was elegant, yet so powerful. With her hands lifted in the air and knees on the ground, she bowed before God in total surrender. Her face, much like Moses', radiated the glory of God. She revered the word of God and prayed as one who had a personal relationship with God. That Sunday morning, I saw a woman that I aspired to become; she looked like me, but she was different—she knew God. Inwardly I said to God, "Whatever she's got, I want it."

I never considered myself as part of the *Beyhive*—mesmerized by Beyoncé's superb vocal abilities—or even a *Belieber*—in awe of Justin Bieber's cuteness—yet I found myself strangely captivated by this local preacher. She didn't have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but she still had a purpose. She might never boast of an Oscar that sits in her award room, but my life can testify of her greatness. Some were born singers, others solicitors, yet God's plan for their lives is the same—that is to make a meaningful impact in the lives of others with their gifts.

There is a tendency to abandon that which is broken—be it a broken glass, a broken heel, or even a broken home. Yet, inherent in any broken object is the potential for reconstruction. As God appointed Ezra to rebuild the Second Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, God designated Pastor J to build a temple of praise within my heart. She spoke often of living a life of surrender and devotion to Jesus Christ. Her life—similar to the life of Paul the apostle—is truly a testimony. The bible speaks of a man who once blasphemed God and persecuted the children of God. In spite of this, God used him to reveal the truths of the gospel to bring the Gentiles to Christ. Pastor J's childhood was masked in tragedy, but her life was renewed once she received Christ. God used the very thing that should have destroyed her life to become a life-changing message of God's love. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. We often regret poor choices we've made in life, not realizing that we encountered these roadblocks to guide others to fulfil their destiny. We are all builders, using the tools of suffering and hardship to restore lives.

Isaiah 43.19 became my testimony: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it.” I loved God’s presence and rejoiced at the thought of entering into his courts. I searched the scriptures and dreamt of a personal relationship with God. I knew that I was a city set on a hill that couldn’t be hid; I was a candle, lighted to give light to all in the house. There is no fellowship between light and darkness. I deleted all contacts with my friends in the GTA. I hated gossiping; it made me feel dirty. I wanted my life to bear fruit, for any branch that does not bear fruit is immediately cut down from the vineyard.

Obedience is costly, but its rewards are everlasting; I received new wine. I received the Holy Spirit, and I wasn’t willing to trade this joy for anything—no amount of money, clothes, or friendships could compare with what I had in Him. God became my best friend, my comforter, and my peace.

The purpose of life is to effect change. If not for Pastor J, I would have been another black girl whose struggle for acceptance and love led to teenage pregnancy. A university degree would have been unattainable. Sadness, sorrow, and self-condemnation would have been my companion. It only took one life to change the course of my life. Pastor J’s life directed me to God’s narrow path. As noted in the book of Matthew, “For straight is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and there are few that find it” (7.14). I live my life knowing that someone is in need of my story.

The Cloud

KATE GLASSPOOL

MENTAL HEALTH issues in youth are growing rapidly. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) estimates that “10-20% of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder—the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide.” Not only are mental health issues a serious problem, but people also feel ashamed to talk about them. CAMH states that “just 50% of Canadians would tell friends or co-workers that they have a family member with a mental illness, compared to 72% who would discuss a diagnosis of cancer and 68% who would talk about a family member having diabetes.” The reality is that people feel they need to hide their mental illnesses from family and friends.

Two years ago, I was walking down the street oblivious to the growing epidemic that is mental illness. I had plans to meet my friends for dinner at 6.00 p.m., so I was rushing home from class. I was not thinking about how lucky I was to be healthy and happy. I loved this time of day. The sun was still out, and the air was crisp. I felt the sun gently touch my back as I walked towards my house and away from campus. I passed the usual suspects on my way home and smiled at them.

All of a sudden, out of nowhere a dark ominous cloud came over my body, and I felt like I wanted to run. My hands were shaking. My heart was racing. I felt like I was not in my own body. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. Why was I feeling this way? What was going on?

I quickly ran home, hoping I could run fast enough to escape the dark cloud. When I arrived at my house I bolted up the stairs, locked the door, and jumped into my bed. I put my head under the covers in complete fear over what had just happened.

About an hour later I woke up groggy and disoriented. It was 7.00 p.m. Shoot. I had missed my dinner. I called my friends and told them I was running late. I quickly got changed and pushed what had happened earlier to the back of my mind. Maybe I was coming down with the flu, I told myself.

The next day I woke up, but did not feel like myself. The sun was shining as it always did. The birds were chirping. My roommate was making coffee in the kitchen, blasting Ed Sheeran. Normally all of these things made me happy, but instead I was hyper-focused on how unusual I felt. I had a big day ahead of me, so I chalked it up to the flu again and rushed to get ready.

I rushed to campus for my exam at 2.00 p.m. I arrived at the exam hall and I sat down in the seat. Students filed in like products on an assembly line, and the exams were handed out. Before I could even put the pen to the paper, the dark cloud began to creep over me again. My mind was racing. Heart was pounding. What was happening? Why? Why? Why? I gathered my bag and ran out of the exam hall. I burst through the doors like a tornado ripping through an unsuspecting town. I sat down on the step outside of the exam hall and felt the most intense fear pulsing through my body.

Once again, not knowing what else to do, I rushed home, but this time I called my mom to tell her what had happened. She told me to relax, get a good night sleep, and in the morning everything would be fine. I listened to her and crawled into bed.

The following morning I woke up and still did not feel better. I broke down crying and called my mom. I realized that this was not something I could push to the back of mind. This was not an old friend calling that I could just ignore and call back later.

The next thing I remember is getting in the car to leave Queen's. I was travelling back to Toronto to see a doctor to find out what was going on with me. As I got in the car to leave Queen's, I felt defeated. It was coming over me like a wave. I felt like I was stuck in the undertow, unable to catch my breath. I felt ashamed.

I arrived at Saint Michael's Hospital like I had just been dragged to a horrible party with my family. I looked up at the building and almost felt it glaring back at me. We went up to the sixteenth floor, the psych ward. I walked in and told them my name, then took a seat in the waiting room. I could hear the clock ticking. Tick. Tick. Tick. When it was time for me to go in and see the doctor I could feel the sweat dripping down my back.

I walked in and my first thought was how young the doctor was. She had long, shiny blonde hair and almost reminded me of Barbie. She told me her name was Megan. We started talking and I began telling her exactly what I had been feeling. I was talking so fast, I felt like one of those Energizer Bunnies: bang, bang, bang. After about thirty minutes of questions, she told me I was suffering from panic disorder. She told me that this was very common in young people and it was treatable. She also told me not to be scared or ashamed. Ah, this cloud now had a name. Oddly enough, I felt a wave of relief come over me.

I began treatment and worked hard at battling my newly diagnosed anxiety. I felt like I was stuck in a hole and was trying to climb up. But every time I tried to climb out, I kept slipping on the muddy sides.

And then one morning, after months of trying to climb out, I woke up and felt the cloud moving into the distance. I did not feel like there was a storm hurdling towards me. I felt calm. I looked out the window and for the first time in a long time I felt hope.

A Crossroads in Kingston

NICHOLAS GOLD

TO GET to the Kingston train station, travel to the northern end of the city. Look for the small, one-lane road that turns off of John Counter Boulevard. The road is easy to miss. Only a small sign peeking out of from behind John Reid's Furniture Store tells of the presence of this road. The road travels for hundreds of metres before reaching the station. Small wispy trees partially envelop either side of the road. These trees are easily swayed by the wind. They bend inwards, towards the road, on either side. Drive far enough down this path and eventually the main road disappears from the rearview mirror and a clearing becomes visible up ahead. As the clearing opens up, a new world becomes visible. There are no stores, houses, or busy roads here. Just a large, open field exists. A thin line of trees surrounds the outer edges of the field, and wild, untamed grasses populate what's left. The road travels to the centre of this field, where only a small building, a parking lot, and two train tracks exist.

With the Kingston train station, it seems that more land was available than what was needed. Looking outwards from the station only reveals hundreds of metres of empty, undeveloped land. The station may exist well within the city, yet from within the station it feels like the city does not even exist at all. This is a place that is separate from the rest of the world. This station, like many small train stations, doesn't look like much. The walls are made up of panels of ruffled, grey concrete that have been weathered by the years. This is a neglected building. This train station is a place that has been forgotten by the world, and in response, it decided to build up a world of its own around it.

Isolation is a common characteristic of most train stations I've visited. It does not matter if the station is a grandiose monument to the achievements of architecture, or if its only four modest and sturdy walls. Toronto's Union station, for example, is held up by towering pillars in the fashion of mighty Roman or Greek structures, like the Parthenon. Union station is able to stand out in the chaos of a major downtown centre. It may seem impossible to escape the roar of downtown Toronto, yet when entering Union station, all sounds of the outside world cease to be heard. That hectic world fades away, and echoing footsteps are the only sound that is heard in this separate world. It's an amazing ability of train stations to remove themselves from the world they occupy. Regardless of if they are located in the heart of a major city, or in the middle of an empty field. Train stations distance us from the mundane choices of everyday life and introduce a new set of riskier choices.

Train stations are separate, isolated worlds where a choice is made. There are multiple tracks heading in opposite directions. When you board a train at the Kingston train station, you can leave that separate world from either one direction or the other. The isolated nature of the train station is important, because when people make that important decision of which direction they will travel, they invariably make that decision alone.

The Kingston train station has two rail lines. One line travels southwest towards Toronto, and the other line travels northeast towards Montreal. I always take the train that travels southwest towards my hometown of Toronto. However, there are always times, when the train heading in the opposite direction arrives, that a quiet voice in my head urges me to buy a ticket and board that train. The quiet voice is a reminder that a choice exists to leave my familiar world and enter into the unfamiliar world. The voice of reason, however, is like a devil on my shoulder telling me not to. Travelling in that opposite direction is terrifying, because I have never gone that way before. It is safer to just travel to where I have already been. It is an unfortunate circumstance that the voice of reason seems to shout the loudest. It is a voice that drowns out all other sound. It contends that the quiet voice is unrealistic, that plans have already been made, and it is too late to change them. It can mould reality until the train station seems to have only one line, making it so that there is only one direction that the trains travel in. However, the reality is that train stations radiate tracks in

multiple directions. These tracks present a crossroads, and a crossroads presents choice.

Travelling into the unknown can seem like an insurmountable barrier when that voice of reason is so much louder than the other, much quieter voice. However, I think that voice of reason is hiding something. It masks fear with logic and makes it seem as if there is only one choice. There is plenty of fear when it comes to travel. Venturing into places that are unknown is marching headfirst into chaos. There is no way to predict what will happen. Going towards what is comfortable is safer and easier, but it is not the entire world.

Some famous train stations are majestic pieces of architecture. Many more, however, are modest and mundane places. It is easy to forget the importance of mundane places, and that is a tragedy, because many important decisions are made in boring places. Most train stations have become forgotten as other forms of travel have eclipsed the train. However, train stations, and the clear choice they offer, are a good reminder of the importance of taking risks and travelling to unknown places. Train stations don't just offer the literal means to travel, they also confront us with the question of where we are going and why we are going there.

Sacrifices

KRISTIANNA GOW

“WE LIVE in a home, not a house,” I remember my mother repeating to us growing up. She was the most intelligent woman I had ever met, yet what she was saying was something that I had a hard time distinguishing and often thought she may be crazy for thinking they were two different words. To me, the two words always seemed so interchangeable that I wondered how they could possibly mean two different things. However, the older I got, the more I started spending time with others my age, sometimes even in their environments.

I remember the first time I went to a friend’s house as a teenager, no longer confined by the rules of a child or a pre-teen, but closer to adulthood in my mind. Yet I did not fully understand the difference a couple years could make. The people that surround my friends, the people they considered family, acted nothing like mine. Their home seemed unattached and cold, and the way they treated each other almost distasteful. It was the first time I finally understood what my mother was trying to say about a home, how it was more than just a house.

For me, a home was a safe heaven that my parents, mostly my stay-at-home mother, had created for my siblings and me. It was a place of refuge and security. A place I never had to question if I was loved or appreciated, because the moment that I walked in the front door I could feel it, the overwhelming feeling of being valued in my safe place, rather than being empty, as I often felt when I was at others’ houses.

That day I when I walked back into my own space, I was finally able to distinguish the difference between a house and a home. I also

realized why those words could be distinguished for me, and it was all because of my mom. Our house was not always tidy, especially when my youngest brothers were toddlers, and sometimes things were a bit out of order and hard to find. This was the reality of living in a house with five other individuals and two dogs, but we never felt less than a family because of my mother. She was what held our family together, without her there is no doubt in my mind that we would fall apart.

I never truly appreciated my mother until my teenage years, as it was then when I really began to understand the incredible woman I had in my life and how lucky I was. She never complained about taking my siblings and me to friends' houses, volunteering at our school and for our field trips, driving us to our sporting events, and every to piano lesson or dance class. She attended each game, performance, and recital, always having a smile plastered on her face and words of encouragement on her lips no matter what time of day it was. She was an inspiration, a super mom when it came to anything child-related, but at what price?

My mother moved around a lot when she was a child with her parents and her two younger sisters. She and her family always lived in similar small kinds of areas where your neighbours were, at least, a five-minute bike ride away and everyone lived on a farm of some sort.

She grew up loving and speaking to animals, dreaming of a time when she would be able to have her own hobby farm to come home to after a long day of work. Her British grandmother, who encouraged her to follow her dreams, was her favourite person. As a child, my mother would go on for hours about the woman who had taught her how to act like a proper lady who was able to stand on her own two feet, could accomplish anything she set her mind to, but to remember the importance of family, as they come first.

Her final lesson was what my mother took to heart the most. She had big dreams of becoming a lawyer, and so she spent much of her time studying hard in school and earning the grades she would need to be accepted into university, as well as falling in love and marrying my father. Yet as her she believed everything was finally coming together perfectly, she was faced with a harsh reality that her parents had decided to divorce.

No longer did my mother's dreams seem to matter to her, but rather as her parents worked on learning to go on without each other, she took control of her family, becoming the emotional support that everyone but her seemed to need. She put her life on hold as she took

on working a job as a bookkeeper for the mechanic shop my father worked for. All while she became the parental figure my aunts needed and began supporting them in their aspiration rather than following her own.

The role that my mother took on as a parent never stopped after that day, as sooner rather than later she and my father were expecting their first child, my oldest sister. By the time that I came along, my parents made the decision that my mother would become a stay-at-home mother so that she could devote all of her time to her children, the most selfless act a person could make, as by doing so she firmly decided that we were more important than her dreams.

When my mother and I reflect on everything that has happened in her life leading up to our lives now she often says she doesn't regret any of her choices, as she has everything she could have ever possibly wanted in life. She has a home that most people could only dream of, a farm where she gets to love and talk to her own animals, and children who never have to doubt their importance in her life and that they always come first. None of her sacrifices she made, she believes are as important as her home and the way it makes her family feel.

A Personal Journey

Combating the Criticism of a Liberal Arts Education

HUTTON HO

IT WAS another typical afternoon in Mr Pynn's eleventh-grade math class. Today, we were tackling quadratic equations. As I panned my head around the classroom, I noticed that all of my peers were diligently scribbling as my teacher hastily scrawled his lecture notes on the dusty chalkboard in front of the class. Mr Pynn is a stumpy middle-aged man with a quick temper, and he also had an ego befitting his frame. When he finished writing his last few words on the chalkboard, he turned around to scan the class. His forehead was glistening with sweat and his underarms were visibly damp from perspiration. Mr Pynn eventually decided to establish eye contact with me and proceeded to ask, "Hutton, what causes a parabola to become skinnier or wider?" My expression went blank. I could hear my heartbeat thumping through my chest and the back of my neck began to feel like I was trapped inside the confines of a toaster oven. "Uhh ..." I stammered. "The y-intercept?" I could sense an immediate aura of disappointment emanating from my math teacher's beady eyes. "Hutton, please come see me after class. We need to talk," Mr Pynn rebuked. I could feel my face flushing into a deep red, and I could hear tiny pockets of suppressed snickering erupting across the classroom. I don't think that I had ever felt so publicly embarrassed in my life. Little did I know that this moment would become the turning point that led me to where I am today.

From an early age, I always knew subconsciously that my academic interests in school were in subjects like social studies, the humanities, and the arts. However, I had a stubborn attitude and refused to acknowledge that my grades in math and science were perpetually

mediocre, despite my best attempts. This was further exacerbated by my upbringing at home, where my parents would persistently emphasize the importance of math and science in education. In elementary school, the grades I received in math were always borderline passable. They were so poor that my parents finally decided to invest in a private tutor with the hopes that I'd be able to improve. Admittedly, the tutoring did work, and I gradually transitioned into an A and B math student, but I only put in additional effort to clean up the dents on my report card. I had no passion for the variable solving exercises that I was continually being fed, and I couldn't envision myself employing any of the theoretical concepts that I was learning towards acquiring a particular job. However, I tried to maintain a keen level of engagement because I felt that math and science were necessary for cultivating a stable, long-term career. Meanwhile, in my social studies courses, I was able to produce assignments that were A-level quality with relative ease. It took me multiple failures in chemistry, physics, and math to finally realize that my prospects for a career in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) was in dire jeopardy. I needed to fall back on an alternative plan, and I needed to act quickly.

It was the last day to respond to universities on OUAC, the Web site that facilitated undergraduate admissions in Ontario. I had applied to a number of liberal arts programs across the province, and was accepted to all of them. However, my heart was dead set on attending Queen's. Hunching over my laptop, I entered the pin number that my high school guidance counsellor gave me to log into the OUAC portal. After glancing over my list of admission offers for the final time, I clicked on Queen's to accept their offer. This was it, I'm in. I had officially secured my spot into the Queen's Arts program, and was scheduled to enrol as a first-year undergrad beginning in September 2012. I felt a sense of both relief and excitement. After experiencing this short bout of adrenaline, I decided to rush downstairs to inform my parents about my decision. It felt like my parents and I were engaged in an afternoon-long, gratifying conversation until the one inevitable question decided to interrupt the cheery mood. "What job are you going to get with an arts degree?" my mother asked in a blatantly dubious tone. I hesitated momentarily, but when I finally regained my composure, I began to outline my negative experiences in high school math and science. Needless to say, my parents were not the least bit impressed.

Fast-forward to the year 2016. I am now in my final semester at Queen's, and months away from graduating with an undergraduate degree in sociology. Looking back at the last four years of my education, I do not regret the decision I made to pursue the liberal arts, nor will I apologize for choosing this route over STEM. I have been forced to tackle the criticism concerning my choices, but I will not shy away from challenging these pessimistic attitudes. Over the past four years, I have learned to read widely, think critically, analyse abstract concepts, think creatively, and perhaps most importantly, I have learned to hone my writing across a range of disciplines. I have learned to become a more articulate writer, and I have applied these skills in various forms, from writing casual business memos to rigidly structured argumentative essays. Unlike my high school math and science classes, I had an easier time engaging with lecture material, and my professors placed a great emphasis on critical thinking over rote learning. Instead of being taught the steps to systematically find the solution to an equation, I was encouraged to rationalize and propose individual solutions for the problems that I had encountered. This style of learning fit my studying habits, and I became liberated with the idea that I no longer needed to memorize and regurgitate concepts on tests and exams, only to forget everything that I was forced to memorize the day after. Transitioning from a STEM-based education in high school to a liberal arts education at Queen's, I no longer feel like school attendance is a chore. Instead of dreading the day ahead, I am instilled with a newfound sense of empowerment. Most importantly, however, my decision to pursue a liberal arts education was a personal quest for passion. I eventually stumbled upon what I was truly passionate about by keeping an open mind and making many mistakes. These risks and failures had acted as stepping stones towards my journey into the liberal arts. The critics may be questioning the utility of a liberal arts education, but I would argue that the freeing of the mind from dogma is much more pragmatic than vocational training designed to breed a docile, complacent, and alienated workforce.

A Poisoned Mind

SAMANTHA HURLEY

She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom. (*The Scarlet Letter*)

WHEN I was a child, my mother's friend was owner to a number of gorgeous, colourful birds held in a large cage in her front room. I remember I would spend the majority of our visits staring transfixed at the birds held in the captivity of their cage. How they would flap their majestic wings in their confines, always wondering when they would be released.

Some days stand out in the mind more than others. A birthday, a graduation, a first kiss, a trip with family. These moments burn into our memory through great significance and importance; a memory that triggers the slight upturn of the lips, and a warm feeling through the heart. There are also days that stand out in the mind that we perhaps wish weren't recalled so easily. A fight, a divorce, an injury, the loss of a loved one. These particular memories have the opposite effect; chills up the spine, a tightness in the throat. It seems that the memories that have the greatest emotional reaction attached to them seem to be the easiest to enter the mind at whim. For instance, I remember crying the night I finally got away. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I had pleaded into the phone, as the screaming voice on the other end spat curses and insults. *Or else. You'll regret this. Selfish. Stupid.* I had been afraid to say no, to go against what he wanted, because of what he might do or say. I also remember the day months after when I received awful messages that made me unable to sleep for a week. I remember days dating back to six years ago, when he would seem so tender, loving, and caring, and I still feel ashamed that I was manipulated beyond my control.

However, the day I remember the most was the day I received my final diagnosis.

The letters on the page were slanted, scrawled quickly and innocently across the page as if they carried no heavier meaning. “Bipolar disorder,” my doctor was saying as he wrote, “completely normal for someone like yourself who has experienced major depression and PTSD.” *Normal*. I let the word digest, turning it over and over in my mind, my mouth silently sounding out each individual letter. *Normal*. I felt the farthest from that.

“Anxiety untreated can lead to many different mood disorders ...” my doctor continues, intently scribbling down my medical information, unaware of my drifting mind. My eyes wander to the far side of the room, where they catch on the abstract painting hung on the wall. Suddenly, I black out and all I can see is his disgusted face, hear his threatening tone, feel his anger vibrating off of him.

“You catch that?”

I’m broken from my trance, and look up to see my doctor eyeing me carefully. I dig my fingernails into my now sweating palms. “I’m sorry, could you say that again?”

“I said that especially with your genetic history for mental illness, some are more likely to develop symptoms and require medication.”

He hands over the paper to me, and I hold it in my open palms, boring holes into the words on the page, hoping they would transform and rewrite into a happier omen. I felt unnerved, the questions in my head replaying over and over again. *How did you let this happen? How did you let this get so bad?* The past couple of years had been a blur; I couldn’t believe how one person had had the ability to transform who I was as a person. I had come out broken, but had denied, trivialized, and distorted the emotions I was subconsciously so desperate to bury. I felt like the real me was deep within myself, screaming to get out, but a grieving shell was blocking the sound out.

It’s been almost a year since that day in the doctor’s office, two since the day I first entered his office, and the emotions are still fresh in my mind. I had contemplated why I am able to recall this particular memory the most, why every detail is engrained in my memory. Surely there were days where my emotions were running higher, faster, and louder than this one. However, the reason this day held great significance was it was the day I was told my original thoughts of being condemned to a life of pain were wrong. I had originally believed that I would be held back from anything I tried to achieve based on what I

had gone through. This day was the first that my pain was made tangible, something that could be worked on, and it was the first day I knew it could be inevitably conquered.

This year has been filled with new memories that have stood out more than others. Those unbelievable highs where I attempted anything risky or reckless to feel again, as well as the unbelievable lows of spending weeks where I had been afraid to venture out of the house, were both a thing of the past. Those highs and lows that came with my diagnosis gave me incredible self-awareness, and I was able to understand with absolute clarity who I was at my best, and at my worst. The days in which I find ways to be grateful for my strength rather than be afraid and disempowered, are now the ones most easily recalled. These kinds of days have slowly outnumbered those of fear and hurt, and have been replaced by kindness, by positivity, by feeling finally safe.

Like those birds trapped in the cage, I didn't understand a life outside of those confines. Just as my younger self had done so many years ago, it was only after I found the lock, and slowly opened it that I could see the effects of freedom. The birds taking flight, finally spreading their wings, and beginning their journey onwards.

A Generation's Uncertain End

MICHAEL JANIK

MY MOTHER'S mother is the only grandparent left in my life. Grandmothers are supposed to be quintessential storytellers, compassionate sages, the backbone of family structure, and above all else, the sweetest, most precious human beings on the planet. But my grandmother is a widower and has always lived in a sleepy town in Poland's southern mountains; she is a habitually reclusive individual set resolutely in her ways, but she relies on others to act as a voice of reason. After my grandfather's passing sixteen years ago, she broke off nearly all interaction with the outside world save for her daughter's regular phone calls back home and the occasional visit from her son. The family has been consistently split since then, not out of dysfunction, but as a result of physical distance and personal priorities. With so much spare time and so few things to fill the days with, Grandma's environment exemplifies her self-isolation. Her impoverished little town is essentially a dispersed suburb with one central town square, and a pair of legs is not enough to manage a journey anywhere, especially for an elderly lady. So Grandma spends most of her hours either hiding away in her apartment or in church asking God for his blessings. With no social networks to maintain, save for the chats about local politics and happenings with her churchgoing friends, Grandma is entirely alone.

My grandmother is turning eighty this year, and while many would consider that a tremendous milestone, it is a landmark that spawns new worries about her accelerating deterioration. Grandmothers are supposed to age gracefully, to be radiant visions of enduring youth and energy, and the very symbol of personal contentment and understanding, but Grandma purposefully chooses to disregard her

well-being. Against all rationale, she digs herself deeper into solitude and self-neglect. My mother always keeps her stocked up on essentials through care packages, but Grandma reflexively stows them in the darkest corners of her cupboards upon their arrival. She dismisses help and exudes self-righteousness; however, behind this stubborn and determined facade is a woman who is willing the final stages of the human condition upon herself. Grandma recently requested that we send her a simple black suit for her funeral, and the finality of this preparatory plea suggests an eagerness to move on to the afterlife. Social reintegration and new, positive habits would completely change my grandmother's perspective and help reclaim her wellness, but the process is hindered by how deeply she is set in her ways. Her habits are rooted in vulnerability, and owning up to any discomfort would be a statement of defeat.

I last saw my grandmother nearly six years ago on a family trip to the motherland, and the experience still resonates in my mind. I still remember crawling out of our cramped rental hatchback and bounding up the stairs of my grandmother's apartment block with luggage stuffed under each arm, only to be met with a dim, dingy, neglected dwelling and a frail, uncertain, and withdrawn elderly woman. Grandmothers' matriarchal instincts naturally prioritize the care of loved ones over personal concerns, but Grandma continues to internalize her worries despite being freed from her maternal role. My mother and I were dismayed with Grandma's living situation and were furious to learn that she had let herself go like this; we knew she was secretive about her personal life, but we had no way of anticipating it could have been this bad. My mother and I were determined to turn things around in the little time we had, but how do you change habits that have been entrenched for over fifteen years? Our plan for a simple recovery soon turned into a complete restructuring. From renovations to a new wardrobe to instilling positive perspectives and habits, we had somehow managed to refresh and rejuvenate my grandmother's lifestyle. It was an emotionally and mentally draining two weeks, but seeing Grandma smile as we parted ways at the end of our trip was an incredibly rewarding experience, and that moment still fondly resides in my memory.

But fast forward six years later, and true to her stubbornness, my grandmother relapsed into her old ways. Her hard-headedness is at an all-time high, and she is setting a new standard for what it means to be incorrigible. I have started to distance myself from her self-neglect as a

way of coping with the thought of her carelessly wearing herself down, but the more I reflect on the callousness of my approach, the more disappointed I am in myself. My grandmother is my last physical tie to Poland and our family's history, and despite her stubbornness, I still want to her to realize she has not been taking care of herself and that there is meaning in doing so. Both physical and linguistic barriers have made it incredibly difficult to maintain any relationship with her, and I know I must reach out, but any attempt would invariably wither away after a few conversations barely held together by broken Polish. Grandma needs to realize that a brighter perspective would allow her to finally capitalize on her days and triumph over any ideas of insignificance. I know I would be trying to alter an inevitable outcome by getting involved, and every natural force is telling me it is ridiculous to even attempt it, but the health of a family member is at stake and I must push reasoning aside and try to make a change. Or maybe it would be best if things took their natural path?

It is terrifying to imagine how many grandmothers are presently growing weaker with age, and it is critical that we continue to respect and value the core familial role they play; we can be so quick to disregard their legacies and the impact they continue to make in our everyday lives. Go give your grandmother a phone call, and make sure she's doing okay.

Toddlers, Dogs, and Language Acquisition

LYNN KING

FEAR OF saying something the wrong way can be debilitating. There will be opportunities lost in not saying what you want, or in not understanding what has been said. In my case, misunderstandings usually stemmed from my lack of self-confidence, and my constant questioning that often took over my capacity to speak. Even after I convinced myself, or even after I rationalized that if I made a mistake, things would be fine. I am never quite sure if things will *really* be fine. One thing is certain: if you want to learn to speak a second language as an adult, you will have to exercise practise, patience, persistence, *and* engage other people.

While learning a second language, I often found it extremely difficult to express myself verbally. It was as if I was in grade school where the fear of public speaking, or the reciting of anything, while standing in front of a group, left me in a state of distress. This fear followed me into adulthood. It had followed me to Quebec, into my *Françisation* class, where my hopes of becoming fully fluent in French were fairly quickly replaced by a hope to be able to just get by in my new language. I had feared if I had trouble speaking in front of an audience in my own language, how could I ever be expected to do it in a foreign language?

It is with much regret that during my childhood, I never fully learned French past a level only useful to speaking to toddlers under the age of three. As limited as my vocabulary was, it expanded somewhat when I learned how to swear. When you are young, there is something very intriguing about learning how to spew profanities in a language other than your own. Although using coarse language against the

Catholic Church didn't hold any appeal for me, I was grateful that I could recognize profanity in French should it be directed my way.

As an adult, however, I was quite pleased when my French vocabulary had surpassed that of my sister-in-law's dog. I was quite sure that Jack was not capable of understanding commands in the imperfect voice. I hadn't tested that theory, but to Jack's defence, and to my chagrin, he was perfectly capable of understanding the imperative voice long before I understood what that entailed.

Toddlers and dogs aside, and despite the fact that learning a new language as an adult was not easy, I persevered. It is well known that children learn communication through both verbal and non-verbal cues. It is probably not that well known that second-language acquisition by adults is also highly supplemented by non-verbal gesturing, at least in the beginning. Had anyone peered into our beginning French classes, we would have looked like an ensemble theatre troupe from the Marcel Marceau School of Mime and Gesticulation, The Quebec Chapter. Of course there is no such place, but had there been, we would have made the school proud.

A benchmark day in my evolution to becoming bilingual came when I went to see the film, *The Passion of the Christ*. In my personal war against bilingual illiteracy, I chose to see the film with French subtitles, and much to my surprise, I understood much of it. In my defence, I already knew the storyline and the ending, so I was able to follow it with some sense of ease.

Inexperienced users of a new language trying to broaden their vocabulary can, as I have found out, stumble into malapropism, sometimes leading to embarrassment, or at best, creating a very funny situation. Ironically enough, the word originates from the French phrase *mal à propos*, meaning "inopportunist" or "inappropriately." So it was not a surprise to find out that I was not the only person afflicted with this phenomenon. During French oral exams, Stan, another student, had broken his big toe. So when it was time for his exam, the easy question asked was "What happened?" Obligated to reply in French, he said pointing at his toe, "J'ai cassé mon oreiller." The teacher started to laugh.

Perplexed, he had asked, "What is so funny?"

What was so funny was that the translation of *oreiller* is "pillow." It was hard not to imagine a full-grown man tearing up a pillow by having a pillow fight. After the laughter subsided, the instructor explained to him that what he had broken was his "orteil."

Languages are not static; they are continually evolving entities that require constant adaptation. For example, using Google as a verb made me slightly queasy, but now it has become part of my everyday lexicon, as well as that of my dictionary's. Inexperienced users of a new language trying to broaden their vocabulary can, as I had experienced, depend on a dictionary just a bit too much. My whole life, I have used dictionaries with no problem. I have delighted in learning and understanding a word for the first time. The same holds true for French. Although, there are times that I have searched for a meaning of a word only to find that I needed to search for the meaning of the meaning. My personal record to date is six entries just to find the meaning of one word. Ignorance is not really bliss at all; it is mostly just frustrating.

If you expect to learn a language quickly by solely buying a book or a CD, I think the road ahead will be difficult. There are many tools available that preach quick answers. There's even a Wiki available called *How to Learn French Fast*. It includes ten steps with pictures. I wish I would have known about that before. Just think of all the time and agony I would have saved. My personal favourite is the Audiobook, *Fast and Easy French*, which has all the aspirations of being oxymoronic, or perhaps it is actually about people. Personally, I am waiting for *French in 30,000 Complicated Steps Including Exceptions* to come out because that would be a more accurate title.

Learning new things can be intimidating, unfamiliar, terrifying, self-doubt inducing, and downright uncomfortable. So you must trust me when I say the sooner you accept that the road to fluency may never be fully realized, the sooner your language acquisition will be—dare I say—a lot more fun. To continue in your quest to French fluency you must read more, write more, speak more, yell more, order more, and sing more, but mostly, you must be more patient, and accept that there will be times that you will make more mistakes.

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Helping Out

DAVID LAFLAMME

A COUNTRY'S values can fall into disrepair. It can forget what made it what it is, where it came from, where it is going. It can forget what makes it great. It can fall asleep and slowly moulder like an old wooden house on a forgotten street.

The hum of the country was muted and penetrated only as a murmur and occasional racket to disturb the peaceful neighbourhood. Nervously waiting for the strangers to arrive, the house stood empty, still getting used to its new spruced up look, like an elderly lady fussily preening herself with a new outfit, hoping the neighbours will notice. The country was expecting thousands of newcomers in two months' time. Wanting to do something to help, we had had the idea of fixing up an old derelict house we had bought as an investment and donating it to a refugee family for a year, rent free.

The woodwork around the new windows and doors smelled fresh and tangy as I put away my tools, getting ready to hand over the keys at the end of the job. Two months of frantic work had transformed a derelict house into something homey and welcoming. I smiled to myself as I remembered inviting Ahmed, head of the civic committee charged with housing the refugee families, down to see it when it was still a dilapidated muddle.

That day, two months previous, Ahmed's face was a rare mixture of hope and scepticism. "You can have the place ready by the New Year," he asked? His intelligent and sensitive eyes measured the stained ceiling and the wavelike bumps under the filthy carpet. The little house was a war zone: wallpaper hung in tatters, kitchen cupboard doors disguised their wood grain under greasy grime, and loose windowpanes rattled in the cold autumn wind. Perhaps, he was

thinking, it was too far gone to be worth the saving. Like the dysfunctional country the immigrant families were leaving, the old house was no longer safe to live in. Ahmed smiled confidently as we shook on it.

It had happened in a flash, as things sometimes do. One night Darlene and I were sitting around the table talking, and Darlene had asked, innocently enough, if we were doing anything for the refugees slated to start arriving in a few months' time. I had heard on the CBC that the first priority was housing and I then stopped in at Ahmed's, who I knew was involved. In a few days' time, like kids on a toboggan picking up speed down an icy well-packed run, we were racing to meet the two-month deadline.

Every day brings new reports of atrocities, mayhem, and fresh waves of refugees like breakers whipped up by a coming storm crashing onto the rocky shore and spurring little boats to seek safe anchorage. Canadians over donuts and coffee frightfully contemplate the prospect of bomb carrying militants hiding among sick, starving, and penniless civilians with nowhere to go and nowhere to stay.

"It could be anything," my helper Casey nodded sagely as we stared at the water dripping from the freshly mudded ceiling. Chunks of oozing wet drywall came away in my hands as I tried to find the source of the problem. "It's not *anything*," I retorted shortly. Casey and the job were getting on my nerves. After repairing the leak—a loose water pipe connection—we took a break and, as we sipped our coffee and wolfed down our donuts, Casey went on about all the leaks he had encountered in his life. "It can be anything," he repeated between bites and gulps. I heaved a sigh of relief as I finished my drink, anxious to get back to work and away from his homey philosophizing. What he said next though put the whole thing in perspective for me: "It can be anything," he concluded, "but then—you gotta do what you gotta do."

Fear is nobody's friend. And when it comes to visit no one wants to acknowledge it. They don't want that fear and the sickening feeling it brings. They want it to go away. Instead, sometimes people turn to anger. They are angry at the people they fear who often deserve their friendship.

Darlene was there the day the flooring installers arrived. We had laboriously stripped the floors in preparation for a local company who had offered to donate and install new vinyl downstairs and carpet in the upstairs bedrooms. "This for the Isis people?", the foreman smirked. "This is for people who need a home," Darlene replied steadily. The

awkward moment passed and with the installers' practised workmanship the new flooring transformed that tired space into one of hope, promise, and renewal.

We finished the job with me banging the last nail in the woodwork around the new windows, Casey putting the final touches on the drywall finishing, and Darlene wrapping up the painting. I had built some sturdy shelves in the pantry for the donated food. In spite of the shelving, a surplus of bags and cans flowed onto the floor in an untidy heap. "Thank you," the old house whispered.

I remember, as a child, walking through the national museum and seeing the railway cars that had been especially outfitted for the waves of immigrants going to settle in the West. Leaving famine, flood, and fear in the old country, they packed belongings, boarded ships, waited in quarantine, and worried what the new, cold, stark land would bring. Those people were us. We are them. The newcomers are the future.

A country's values can fall into disrepair. It can forget what made it what it is, where it came from, where it is going. It can forget what makes it great. I hear on the news, almost daily, reports of new waves of refugees fleeing their torn homelands and seeking a better life for themselves and their families. They will need food, homes, and a warm welcome to help repair their damaged lives and start anew.

Untitled

MARGARET MACKINNON

MY FATHER spent my entire life preparing me for his death. “Death is inevitable, kiddo,” he said as I sat on his lap, just four years old. I know it sounds like a strange thing to tell a four-year-old, but he just wanted me to be prepared. “I’m a lot older than your friends’ fathers, and I’ll be gone a lot sooner.” I knew that was true. Other kids always asked if he was my grandfather. I gave him a nod and a hug, and he sent me on my way.

“Ah, that’s my girl!” Dad would say, when I showed him a good grade from a test. “Keep on showing me these, alright? Won’t be around to see your graduation after all.” To my twelve-year-old self, he had no terminal illness other than old age. “Pfft,” I scoffed, “You’re going to be around for a long time, Daddy, I’m sure of it.” My youthful confidence assured. He gave me a smile and a kiss on the head. I put the comment to the back of my mind.

“Your little sisters need a mother!” Dad screamed at us, seeming to think my sister and I were still small children. He was always spouting gibberish these days, and it was getting more and more difficult to calm him down. After-school activities had to be abandoned once we realized he couldn’t be left home alone. He had tried to make tea by placing the plastic electric kettle on the burner. We only needed to learn that lesson once.

It certainly wasn’t easy, hearing the diagnosis. I remember when I was in the tenth grade, about sixteen, Dad had been acting kind of strange and I had my suspicions. I knew my mother was keeping something from me, but I was not prepared for when I heard the words spoken aloud. Then it was all downhill from there. Ninety percent of Alzheimer’s patients can live for ten plus years, if they’re lucky, but

Dad's was that ten percent that spirals rapidly out of control. I'll never forget the day we took him to the doctors and they decided he was too sick and no longer able to drive, so they took his licence. I remember walking out of the hospital, and Mom was crying and Dad was trying to comfort her, so he said, "Well it's not that bad, at least they didn't take my licence." My sisters and I had to hide our manic laughter that surprisingly showed up. This didn't seem real.

"Follow your numbers," my father's blank face said to us. It was a pale, sunken echo of what he used to look like. As if recreated by someone who had only glanced at him in dim lighting. The words meant nothing to us, but we clung to them with desperation. I was seventeen and in a living nightmare. It was July when he went into the Alzheimer's ward, ten short days after my graduation. I was so thankful that he had made it, that we had danced at my prom. It felt like a win, what with years of him waxing poetic that he would not live to see the day. My victory was short-lived, as it is hard to say "I told you so" to someone who doesn't remember you exist. July passed on to August, then September; my birthday. It wasn't like I expected him to greet me at the hospital door with a Winnie the Pooh balloon, like he used to when he could remember birthdays. But a glance, a moment of recognition, anything would have been nice.

Late October, autumn was in full swing. Everything dies in autumn. The leaves, the bugs. You didn't need a crystal ball to see that my father wouldn't make it to December. But still I clung faithfully to the words, "Follow your numbers" as if they held the key to the lockbox that held all of his memories. I repeated them when things got bad as if they would always lead me to serenity. "Follow your numbers," we said to one another, words of comfort among suffering siblings.

Just as the final leaves fell from the trees, he was gone. The blood rushed out of him in such a way, I immediately understood the difference between a body and a corpse. In five short seconds the pale imitation of my father ceased to exist, a greying corpse taking his place. The aftermath of his death came with effects that I had long expected, but many that I did not. For instance, a new-found fear of the elderly was certainly not something I saw coming. It plagues me to this day, even six years in the future. I could no longer watch any film that featured Alzheimer's disease. From the dramatic tale of *The Notebook* to the frivolous yet heartfelt *Friends With Benefits*. Once there was a mention of dementia, I just had to excuse myself. I've heard that this

phenomenon is called “triggering” and I have to agree, as it feels like taking a bullet.

This experience of my father’s illness and subsequent death have changed my life in ways I didn’t even know were possible. This goes to show that no amount of preparation can protect people from grief. I try not to think of him as that feeble shell of a human we saw at the end. I aspire to remember him as the hilarious, compassionate, and kind person that he was, which can be a struggle on the bad days. I rely on my family and friends for warm memories, shared stories, and general support to keep my sanity afloat, but even that sometimes is not enough. It may seem counterproductive to find clarity in the ramblings of an old loon, but when I begin to slip, or get too deep into the darkness of my own mind, I remember “Follow your numbers,” and emit a surprised chuckle. Somehow that helps me find my way back into happiness and calm thoughts. And though I have absolutely no rational conclusion as to why, on occasion I find myself smiling, and think, “Ok, Dad. I’ll follow my numbers.”

Creating Music

KATIE NORRIS

I AM nine years old. Lying before me on the living room carpet is a violin. It's brand new and gleaming. I can't identify the type of wood it is made out of, but it's a warm, red colour, made sharp through a fresh layer of varnish. The colour reminds me of summer and contrasts against the bleak grey of the February slush. The bow is resting securely in the top of the case and a shoulder rest is hidden in a compartment above the violin's neck. The violin is small, like myself, and everything about it seems delicate. I have been told that it is a three-quarter sized violin and I will grow into an adult model.

My first lesson is this afternoon. Right now, everything about this instrument is foreign to me. When I return home, however, I will have been enlightened. I will have learned the secrets of creating music and I will have entered a new period in my life. But for now, before this life-changing lesson, I am not going to rush. I shall relish this last moment of ignorance because I know this is the last time I will look at the violin as a curiosity. The last time I will look at this violin from an observer's perspective. When I come home this afternoon I will be able to call it *mine*.

Eleven years later and I look back on this memory and have to smile at my childish naivety. I really was ignorant—or should that read innocent? I had no concept of the time, pain, and energy that it would take to create music. I hadn't yet learned that playing the violin and creating music were two different concepts. All I knew was that I wanted to create music. I wanted to create the harmony that I felt was missing in my life. I wanted something that was mine to cultivate and grow. Something that would help me take back control of my life that had imploded around me.

My father left me when I was six years old. I was too young to fully comprehend why this was happening, but old enough to remember his face as he left the house, old enough to remember sitting with my mother on the toy chest in my and my sister's room for three hours as she cried. What I remember most was the ringing in my ears and the numbness all around me. The powerless feeling as my life was changed forever in a moment and wanting to understand why—*needing* to know why. I think that is what drew me to music in the first place. The ability to create something special spoke to me and I needed to bring something beautiful into my life. As I saw my father less and less I was able to concentrate my pain into something concrete and real.

What many people don't realize about the violin is how much it hurts at the beginning. How each of the four fingers on your left hand will blister as the steel and nickel strings bite into you. One practice and your fingers will be red and raw. After my first lesson and a week's worth of practising, my fingers were on fire. I wanted to lessen the pain by playing with the pads of my fingers but my teacher relentlessly told me to play on my fingertips. At the time it was frustrating. I could play just as well with the fleshier pad of my finger and felt less pain. What I didn't realize until much later, however, was that to have true power over the violin you need to play on the tips of your fingers. It allows you to slide up and down the strings with accuracy, and most importantly it gives you the space needed to play with vibrato. Moving your finger back and forth to create a rich resonant sound. What I thought was a painful inconvenience was actually the foundation to becoming a proper musician. And eventually my fingers formed thick calluses.

Even now, I can rub my left thumb over my fingertips and feel them. The calluses have grown tough over the years. If I dig my thumbnail into the top of each one, I create little trenches along my fingertips that mimic the ones that come from pressing into the strings. The hardest habit to break is peeling each callus off as it forms. Once removed, your fingers revert back to their infancy. Practices are painful because freshly exposed, tender flesh is once again cut by the strings. Sometimes I still like to peel them off, though. I enjoy playing through the pain. It helps remind me of how far I've come. Not only as a musician but as a person.

When I was six and my father left me I thought I would die. The pain was sharp and tender, and each day without him seemed impossible. As I grew up I wondered why I let him continually hurt me.

He rarely came to visit, and when he did he never seemed interested my sister or me. Each time he ignored me or Julia seemed to cut me afresh. But like my fingers, my heart grew calluses of its own. I could live my life without the past holding me down. I could pick up my violin and translate my feelings into something more than just sound. I grew in spirit and from my darkest time was able to create something beautiful: Music.

How to Make a Baby

JULIA PARTINGTON

IT WAS an unusually rainy day for January, and a lazy Sunday at best. My husband and I had just finished making love. Our bodies lay tangled together, like an art-deco iron gate, in the tousled and knotted sheets of our bed. As we watched the rain tantalize the window, I knew there was an egg. It wasn't like the brown or white ones half crushed at the supermarket. It wasn't like the small teal-coloured ones cracked on the ground from toppling out of a robin's nest. It wasn't even like the soft pastel-coloured ones you find in a purple bag of Cadbury Mini Eggs. But it was small, about 100 micrometres in diameter, and it was waiting.

The first step is puberty. I was eleven years old when I learned about sexual education. I remember it being taught in my classroom by the gym teacher. The lights were out, the curtains closed, and nothing to visualize except an illustration of a fully erect penis pointing at me from the television screen. The rest of the class stealthily chortled. Heaven forbid we see a penis without thinking it's jocular. I forced a giggle, but inside I was intimidated. How something of that magnitude was going to tally inside my body had exceeded my comprehension. The illustrations of the male anatomy then moved on to the female anatomy. As the visuals of female reproductive organs became bleary from overuse of the aged VHS tape that this school production was recorded on, I started to ruminate of when I would get the sign.

The sign that my body was thematically distributing eggs occurred when I was thirteen years old. It wasn't a broken dam at first, more like a leak. But when the dam did break, it was unsatisfactory. I stayed in my bedroom for most of a morning, wearing every pair of underpants I could muster. Once I realized that adding more wet Band-Aids to the

problem wasn't the solution, I cried for assuagement. My rescuer was my father. As a single man, he felt awkward, but obliged. He left at my bedroom door an assortment of adhesive feminine products, all shapes and sizes. I would later give him a teenage nod of thanks and affection, which he would reciprocate with a fatherly nod of "I promise I'll forget this happened."

The second step is defloration. This happened to me when I was eighteen years old. It was two things: fulfilling and unpleasant. The pursuer, my first squeeze, was also on the same mission. I looked on at him endearingly as he fumbled with the thin rubber sheath in his hand. This was about the sixth one by now. "Would something help? Music? Candles? Scrambled porn?" I suggest as I nervously snicker over the thorny situation. "I think, all of those things," he responds, while looking around the room for a lighter. Eventually, by sheath number ten, we sussed it out. We laid there for a while after, the room smelled like blown-out candles, and Billie Holiday still played on the stereo. When minutes turned to hours, we decided to get up, go to the living room, and watch scrambled porn. I think I loved him, but love is a rude awakening.

Love was never as cliché as I thought it would be. I always envisioned it starting in the pouring rain, that first kiss sinking in the deluge. Or starting during dusk, on a pebble beach. But, it was so much less than that. It would take many clichés before I discovered what love really was. Love wasn't easy. It was work. Love wasn't a myriad of romantic situations, nor was it on this profound level of philosophical understanding. Love was a job, and I don't mean that as a chore. I mean that you need to work at it, on both sides. There's going to be disagreements, agitation, scraps, and half a dozen other things. But there's also understanding, reliability, humour, trust, and acceptance. Having that one person who not only accepts your faults but loves you for them. My first kiss with my husband was at a dive bar that was not only covered in graffiti, but also had a floor stickier than a movie theatre. I kissed him first. He was so shocked by my audacity that he gave me "props" when he said good night. We never went on a real date, and the closest we've gotten to a romantic moment is passing out on a beach after overindulging on mud slides. We slept through dusk.

The third step is conception. Being thirty-two years old, I knew that this was the easy part since biology takes care of the rest. All that has to be given attention are two things: timing and sexual intercourse. Timing is to determine when the female body is fruitful. For the most

part, this happens exactly fourteen days after the first day of menstruation. At this point, a luteinizing hormone along with a follicle-stimulating hormone is secreted, which signals the body to release an egg. Sexual intercourse introduces the male sex cells to the female body, which starts off as a group of 40 million to 1.2 billion sperm. Out of that high ranking, only one will make it to the egg, while the rest, sadly, swim around for another couple of days, until they die and disintegrate.

My egg waited. Sure enough, maybe forty-five minutes later, or twelve hours later, or maybe even days later, my husband's sperm, only around 200 of them by this point, reached their destination. I wouldn't have felt it, but I could picture it. The tail breaking off as it burrowed even further to its purpose. My egg making a barrier to prevent any of the forerunners drastically attempting to break through. The head, its nucleus fusing into the egg, then activating the genetic material that will soon make a baby, and, that's it, really. That is the beauty of how my body makes life. Though I supplied the steps, I'm merely the cathartic catalyst.

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Finding My New Sight

NICOLE PATTON

Y*OU DON'T know what you've got until it's gone.*

This simple message jumbled around in my brain as I waited impatiently for the ophthalmologist. In a way, I desperately wanted him to arrive so I could get this laser eye surgery done, but in another way I feared this doctor. Here was a man, a human being, taking my eyesight into his hands. Yes, he had a bunch of degrees and great reviews of his practice, but I couldn't simply trust him to wave his magic scalpel and give me 20/20 vision.

The waiting chairs were too comfortable. They should have been hard and plastic that squeaked every time my leg bounced with nerves. The entire office should be uncomfortable, like the glasses that sat on my nose. I'd grown tired of wearing them. I knew that they were expensive, they could shatter easily, they had to be taken on and off frequently, they pinched my nose and created indentations on the sides of my head, and they were certainly not my greatest attribute. I had just become so tired of looking at myself in the mirror without glasses and seeing a blur where my face should be. The frustration of not even being able to see myself had begun to mount since my doctor had first placed glasses on my nose.

My being here was a miracle in and of itself. I was ready for a change, but this was a risk, a huge risk if I took into account the number of horror stories I'd read online. I knew that it was silly to trust anonymous Internet users, but when one puts something extremely important to them at risk they start to believe crazy things. I was frightened by these tales of constant dry eyes, double vision, and my worst nightmare—blindness. An estimated 39 million people in the world are considered to be legally blind. These are the people who live

in the dark constantly, never gaining the ability to see the warm colours of a sunset or the clouds rolling in during a thunderstorm. These are the people who lack something that we take for granted most days. On my way to the surgery that morning, I spent a lot of time contemplating what blindness might mean to me. I simply laid my head against the car window, listening to John Lennon sing about how all a person needs is love. We drove from our suburban house, along the highway, and into the city in record time, giving me a perfect opportunity to take in the sights before my surgery.

Images like cookie-cutter houses, manicured lawns, and open parks suddenly took on more meaning for me. I had to wonder if I would miss everyday scenes like the faded boards of backyard fences or the muddy pits that the city called playgrounds. After living in the suburbs my whole life, I'd become unaffected by the sights around me. That slide that I used to play on in the park was now melted and burnt after a couple teenagers set fire to it, but I could still see it. My sight may not have been 20/20, but I could still see the broken chain of the swing and the weed infested sidewalks. All these sights I had taken for granted.

Sitting in that office and waiting for my surgery had really brought my life into perspective. That saying that had been rolling around in my head all day finally started to make sense. *You don't know what you've got until it's gone.* I knew that it was a very slim chance, but if I lost my sight during the procedure, these few images of my suburban neighbourhood would be the last scenes I'd ever see. In reality, I had seen so little. I hadn't seen the Egyptian pyramids or the Eiffel Tower or Victoria Falls. But the simple sights of my suburban home that I had taken for granted, now meant something to me. My eyesight meant something to me. Already I had changed, and I hadn't even stepped into the procedure room.

Almost at once my doctor arrived in scrubs. This was it. This was the moment I had been both dreading and dreaming of. Somehow I got to my shaking feet and followed him into the room where I was encouraged to lie down on a table under a hulking machine. There was no going back now.

A suction cup over my eyes caused my vision to grow fuzzier until it faded to black. I panicked. Blindness. I couldn't see! My heart raced and my breathing became heavier as I clasped my hands together in silent terror. My mind worked overtime as I quickly considered what my life would be like as one of the unlucky people whose surgery went wrong. I'd never get to see those wonders of the world, or even those

rotten backyard fence boards and rusted swing sets of my suburban home. I would only have those few scenes to cherish in the never-ending blackness.

But wait.... Pops of colour returned, and slowly but surely so did my vision. I could see! Relief poured through me like a rushing river. It didn't matter that my vision was still slightly blurred as the nurse helped me up to go into another room to finish the procedure. In my view, the worst was over. Two flashes of a bright light later and the procedure was complete. I sat up, still revelling in the feeling of having my sight return ... my 20/20 sight. After years of wearing glasses and seeing smudges instead of crisp images, I could really see ... and it was beautiful.

In reality, this experience had me walking out of the office with both a new pair of eyes and a new outlook on life. I had risked losing something precious to me, only to gain a completely new perspective. My suburban home suddenly became sunnier, and those scenes I had taken for granted took on a completely new meaning. The few moments I had of blindness had given me an exciting new vision of life, one where I no longer took things for granted and instead cherished the images around me ... because really, you never know when you'll lose them for good.

Going Back

TIFFANY PAYNTER

WE WERE eighteen young slaves wading our way through the mangroves, muttering curse words under our breath, convinced that it had always been Mr Spencer's plan to have us suffer in the stench and wilderness of mangroves at low tide. Some of us were too afraid to speak, others were too confused to be afraid, but Zane was unmoved.

"This is where he kills us," he whispered to the group of us huddled together for warmth. "He's gonna bury us out here and harvest our brains."

We did not disagree.

Liquid-filled jars of stillborn chicks, mutant frogs, tailless lizards, and some unknown specimen's brain lined the top shelf of Mr Spencer's locked closet. And whenever he'd open the closet door, whoever was closest to the door would strain to see if any more specimens had been added to the collection. By our numbers, there were seven.

It had been ten minutes since any of us had seen or heard Mr Spencer, and half of us had gathered between the roots of a mangrove tree to figure out if our energies were better spent staying put or finding our way out.

"Chiiildren?" he said.

"Yes, Mr Spencer," we all replied in unison. We looked around to see where the voice had come from, but the rain had set in. Between the grey of the trees, the grey rain, and the grey sky, the voice seemed like it was part of the grey.

“Out is north.” He had read our minds. We said nothing. “Children, how do we know which way is north when we can’t see the stars?”

Stacey spoke back to the grey, “The moss grows on the north side!”

“It’s time to go, chiiildren.” That’s all Mr Spencer said, and that’s all he had to say. We all started northward, guided by the trees and the moss.

*

Although the enslaved were not allowed an education, they were intelligent individuals. They learned that the moss always grows on the north side of the tree. (Dr Bryan Walls, “Freedom Marker: Knowledge”)

We made it out of the mangroves onto an old railway trail snaking Bermuda’s northern coastline.

“Today is the last day we will be focusing on Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. Consider this field trip your final test. I’m going to ask you all questions as we make our way back to school and I expect you all to think before you speak.”

We looked around at one another in confusion, itching at the dried mangrove mud caked and cracking on our skin. Some of us resented Mr Spencer’s impromptu exam, but looking around at everyone’s wide eyes, eyes as wide as I imagined my own were, I knew that most of us were excited to be in a place we had never been and to travel a path we had never travelled.

“What was Harriet Tubman’s ‘nickname’?” He asked.

“Moses!” Someone called out from behind me.

“And why was Harriet Tubman called Moses?”

Proud to know the answer, I shouted out, “Because she was like Moses in the Bible who demanded that the Pharaoh let his people go. She escaped north and then went back south to free other slaves.”

He turned around to face the class and pointed his cane at D’mitri. “And did she free all those slaves by herself?”

“No. She and other abolitionists, white people and black, created the Underground Railroad.”

Mr Spencer smirked the way he did when he was impressed, and he turned, walking a little faster.

“Chiiildren, name a song that was sung to help slaves escape as they travelled along the Underground Railroad.” After a brief silence, Mr Spencer began humming the tune to “Wade in the Water”:

Who’s that host all dressed in white?
Wade in the water
Looks like the leader of the Israelite
God’s a-going to trouble the water

Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water
God’s a-going to trouble the water

Before long, following Mr Spencer’s lead, our class was singing “Wade in the Water” at the top of our lungs. I was half choir girl, singing as best as I could, and half spectator, in awe of Mr Spencer and in awe of us all. I wish the world could have seen us there in that moment, eighteen “slaves” and one Moses, bettering angels.

Before that day, none of us would ever have guessed that Mr Spencer might be one of the “good guys.” He looked like the sketch of a villain who had escaped from a Roald Dahl novel. Everything on him was longer than it was on everyone else, including his nails, which he grew to the length of talons. He even spoke “long,” drawing out “children” until it filled the space of three syllables rather than two. His name was hushed over cafeteria tables, like Voldemort’s, as if the saying itself were a conjuring. Older kids would run down the corridors like unmounted Paul Reveres, “Spencer is coming! Spencer is coming!” Their warnings always resulted in one’s immediate self-assessment.

Shoes? Dusty. Apply spit. Check.
Laces? Laced. Check.
Tie? Loose. Straighten. Check.

And woe betide the student who had more than one part of their uniform in disarray. Mr Spencer was merciful, but he believed in our dignity, and dishevelment was blasphemy.

What I know now is that as one of the most gifted and intelligent Black men of his generation, Mr Spencer could have been great at anything. But he ended up being a great teacher. He taught so that we’d remember history’s lessons. He taught to transform us. He taught to

free us. In trying to trace the moment when the seed of teaching was planted in me, it was back there in the stench of the mangroves and along that railway path, watching Mr Spencer pointing his cane and firing questions. Mr Spencer's decision to teach Black children in a public-school system that most often fails Black children will never go down in history. Harriet Tubman's name will be remembered long after his name is forgotten. However, just as Harriet went back, year after year, to help slaves find and claim their freedom, so too did Mr Spencer, year after year, help a new class of students find and claim their freedom.

Victor and the Working Girls of the Malecón

PETER PEMMELAAR

THE CELEBRATED Cuban writer and painter Pedro Gutierrez had described his native Havana as an improbable city, occupied by improbable people. My friend Victor Manuel Glees is without a doubt one of Gutierrez's improbable citizens. Victor handed me a beer, pausing momentarily to crack open the can. In all the time I had known Victor I had never seen him offer beer, rum, or cigarettes to a guest without first opening the respective can, bottle, or pack. I guess he felt material deprivation was no excuse for poor manners.

The most notable feature of Victor is his immense physicality. He stands at six-feet-five, with jet black skin, and even as he celebrates his fiftieth birthday, his body remains hugely muscled and athletic. His naturally kinked hair is slicked back in a manner reminiscent of 1930s Harlem

Bebop performers. Appearances can be deceiving. Victor is not a doorman, nor an ex-boxer, like his father (a former professor of French literature; he is an academic who teaches French and English in the Cuban university system. Victor is also the unofficial patriarch of fourteen decaying 200-year-old Spanish colonial townhouses, spread along the first block of the Malecón. The Malecón is Havana's world-famous seawall, built by the Americans in 1904 to protect the city from the unpredictable Caribbean waters. Victor's block is similar to many others along the Malecón. Before the Cuban Revolution, they were the preserve of Cuba's educated middle class, a mix of professors, engineers, lawyers, and the occasional businessman. In the same way these buildings have decayed, so have the bonds of these communities.

The unravelling of the communities along the Malecón is not all the blame of Castro's revolutionaries. Many of these professionals, fearing a Stalin-like bloodletting, fled voluntarily, leaving their suites vacant. The communists, in turn, being good ideologues and devoted believers that class is a function of economic circumstance, moved the homeless into these structures. Victor often reminisces about those early days of his childhood, when indigent rural families and intellectuals lived in an uneasy tension along the block. In time, Cuba's free education system polished off the rough edges, and few of the younger people on the block even know of each other's family lineage.

Victor is a classic Cuban man, in the way Cubans would use the term *classic*. The image of the cigar-smoking, rum-drinking and salsa-dancing Caballero, while not totally fiction, is to a large extent a function of the American marketing machine. It was designed to draw tourists to an Havana in the days when Havana was America's Las Vegas. Victor drinks beer, smokes cigarettes, and thinks salsa is principally a means of meeting female tourists. In his role as block patriarch, he is called upon to smooth out the varied social issues that emerge among the fourteen townhouses. These might include domestic disputes, unpaid debts, and of course, the ever-present issue of material infidelity. He is in effect the sober moral conscience of the block. No one is compelled to follow his advice, but his words carry great weight in adjudicating these issues. And, like almost all Cubans, Victor's principal source of income is not his occupation, but a side business. In Victor's case, he offers flat-rate protection, and night-time child-care services for the Malecón's many prostitutes. For the sum of 10cuc (about \$12) Victor will ensure your physical safety while his wife runs what is in effect an all night child-care for your children. Victor is not a pimp; he obliges no one to pay, he simply offers his services to whichever women want to take up his offer.

I am halfway through my beer when Victor launches into his latest observations about life in Havana. "The Government says prostitution is illegal, yet they have turned this entire island into a brothel, and they are its pimp." Victor is referring to the tourist trade, which he feels has robbed Cubans of their dignity. With both his huge arms outstretched he continues, "My English classes are always full. Yes, because students want to learn English, not to read Miller (I am not sure if he means Arthur or Henry), but to bring drinks to oblivious tourists." He pauses to assure me I am exempt from that category. "You know when life was the best in Havana," he passes me another beer, "when the

Soviets were our allies. People forget, the Soviets were elegant, educated, and cultured. They respected our nation, like Tomas.” He is referring to a former Cold War Czechoslovakian fighter pilot who lives next door. Tomas, at the age of seventy-six, pursues his passion for fishing by crossing the street to the Caribbean Sea each morning. We are interrupted by a young, light-skinned black woman, Victor’s first customer of the night. She exchanges a few words with Victor and leaves her daughter with his wife. I am not sure which is more ironic, being interrupted by a prostitute while Victor compares the whole tourism industry to prostitution, or that Victor’s income comes from an industry he compares unfavourably to the tourist trade. The interruption appears to have muted his passion. “Anyways, life could be worse. At least we have beer and warm weather.”

We step outside to the warm humid air and observe the throngs of tourists on the north side of the Malecón. Many of them are snapping photos of the Castile Moro, the Castle that the Spanish built to protect early Havana from the English. Few dare to challenge the unyielding traffic to cross to the south side where Victor’s house is located. Too bad, most of them would find Victor a memorable experience.

I returned to Havana several months later to find that Victor was in prison. He apparently assaulted a French tourist over a dispute with an Angolan prostitute. His sentence was a harsh ten years. Had this dispute been with a Cuban man he might have received at most six months. Victor had indeed become a victim of the tourist industry he despised. I didn’t feel up to seeing Victor in prison during my trip, not out of disregard. I just want to keep the memories of our many conversations unspoiled by the image of him behind bars. For the better part of the week, I found myself increasingly intolerant of the tourists around me, and perhaps more intolerant of myself. A year later I finally did make the trip to Combinado de L’este prison outside Havana. To my surprise, Victor had been released after only fourteen months. There was no contact information available. One of the guards informed me he had moved to Santiago to live with his wife and his wife’s sister. I have never seen him again.

Snapdragons

SARA PERCIVAL

I'M IN town for a visit, meeting a friend in my old neighbourhood. It's a beautiful day so I'm walking rather than taking the streetcar. Rounding a corner, I realize I'm on Brunswick Avenue, and there it is. I read the sign as I walk past: KENSINGTON GARDENS. I can barely recall the time I spent there. Or rather, the lack of time. It feels like a dream, like it almost never happened. It seems there'd be no reason at all for me to enter a building like this. Yet, at one time, there was.

I'm eight years old, sitting cross-legged on the floor, lurched over the coffee table in my grandma's living room. She sits on the sofa, examining the rows of cards spread out between us. "Ah!" she exclaims, slapping down her cards, satisfied. This is a regular occurrence for us, double solitaire, game after game. It's the after-dinner tradition during our weekly visits. "Ah-HA!" I retort, and triumphantly smack down the remainder of my cards, *thlap-thlap-thlap*. I'm the victor, and it feels great, because my grandma doesn't let me win. She doesn't believe in that. Victory, or anything else for that matter, is so much sweeter when it's earned.

My mother sighs through the phone. "We need to find a place for Grandma," she says. "She needs full-time care, someone to be with her. It's time." She sounds tired, resigned. I don't have to ask to know that that someone will not be one of us. Jalna is all the way in Ottawa, my mother works multiple jobs, and I'm twenty-one, working full-time, and in love. I'm useless.

It's Christmas. The day is always spent at Grandma's. Her house is warm, festively decorated, and smells delicious. She does it all herself before we get there, the tree, the gifts, the meal, and she's always ready when we arrive, waiting, dressed to the nines. I give her a hug, and as I

squeeze, I can feel her skeleton, her bones. She is healthy—remarkably so, in fact—but she is naturally slim and now in her eighties. *Frail* is not the word to describe her, however, nor *delicate*. Though I can trace my finger along each bone in her hand, see each vertebra in her spine, words suggesting weakness simply don't describe her.

"I saw a spot on TV about this place, Kensington Gardens," I say, "it just opened."

"That's super," says my mom, "I haven't had luck with any of the other places. They're not right for Grandma. Too bleak."

I give her the number I'd scribbled down. "It actually looks nice," I say, "Clean. And it's just a few blocks from me."

And that's where she ended up. And it was nice. As nice as one of those places can be. I felt a small swell of pride that I'd found it. I felt like a grown up, having contributed something helpful. Sadly, that pride would turn to shame after not too long.

It's summer. I'm in Grandma's garden. She's created an oasis out here. It's not too large, but it's home to a vast array of flowers. She has a brilliant green thumb. She spends hours out here, planting, pruning, nurturing. I inhale deeply and feel like I'm breathing in all the colours, sweet pinks and woodsy greens. I love it when she walks through with me, naming all her flowers: "Rhododendron, Gladiolus, Black-eyed-Susan." All those funny names. She shows me how snapdragons work. Exactly where to pinch to make the dragon heads bite. They're my favourite.

I walk through the sliding doors with a sinking feeling. The woman at reception smiles and I keep walking, I know where her room is. I take a deep breath as I approach her door, but quickly realize the room is empty.

"Are you looking for Pat?" a gentle voice asks from behind me.

"Yes. My grandma," I say, turning around to face the little woman in blue scrubs.

"They've just gone down for lunch. I'll bring you to her." She leads me through a wide hallway, which is currently full of residents. Most are sitting, staring, some in wheelchairs, all very, very old. The majority of them are much more far-gone than Grandma. Vegetative. She doesn't belong in this place.

We're driving in Grandma's 1960s Volkswagen Beetle. I love everything about this car. The colour, the shape, the sound—my goodness the sound. Like roaring thunder beneath us. It's a stick shift, so the whole car jerks and heaves when she changes gears. It's fun.

People always smile at this car, especially when they see the jaunty, silver-haired gal who drives it. It suits her. It's bright orange, like one of her tiger lilies. She drives herself everywhere, and continues to do so well into her eighties. Fiercely independent, she always makes her own way.

That may have been the last time I visited her. I didn't know what to say, sitting there in the cafeteria, surrounded by indignity. It was selfish of me to not visit more, but I found it so painful. I hated seeing her in that place. Away from her home, her garden. Someone who'd lived such a colourful and independent life, ending up there. Leaving was always the hardest part of those visits, or rather, leaving her there. So I stopped going altogether. How's that for logic.

I lean forward, my short little arms pressing the table in front of me. With a determined seriousness, I ask, "Grandma, is it the real Santa Claus we're seeing today?"

She chuckles. "Yes, it is."

I had to be sure. I knew there were impostors. "But really," I continue, lowering my voice conspiratorially, "The real one. The really *real* Santa."

Stifling her smile, she matches my tone and leans in. "It's him. The real one. And you're going to meet him."

I beam. I'm thrilled she levelled with me. And so impressed she was able to track down the actual Santa. We smile at each other. "I love you Grandma."

I've passed the building, it's behind me now, but I feel as if I'm dragging something. I turn back, and trailing along behind me is a little red toboggan, the one she gave me years ago. Sitting in it, staring sombrely at me are the twins, Remorse and Regret. From behind them, Selfishness suddenly pushes to the front and makes a rude remark. Not to be left behind, Heartache runs up and jumps on, causing the others to groan. I'm going to be late so I keep walking, but it's almost too heavy to pull.

Discovered Cultures

SHANTEL PLUMMER

BEING EIGHT years old in a frilly church dress, sitting and patiently waiting for my mother to serve Sunday dinner, made me extremely antsy and annoyed. My mother noticed that I was not very happy keeping the big tutu looking dress on while having dinner. When she sat down she told my sister and me, “Being born in Canada is a blessing.” She always stated that because both of my parents came to Canada for better opportunities and to get away from the areas they lived in. These were sad and empty places, filled with crime and barely any hope due to the lack of opportunities. My grandmother, father, and his siblings moved to Canada, leaving nothing and no one behind due to crime and natural causes taking what was left of this bloodline. My mother saved for a year before having the opportunity to come to Canada, leaving her newborn baby girl, siblings, nieces, nephews, mother, and father behind. The stories that were told made me never want to learn about my culture or even experience it. Places like Canada, the USA, and England were the desired destinations that many Jamaicans dreamed of in their deepest hope to move on towards a more luxurious life. Jamaicans always refer to these places as “farin” and it was the best accomplishment anyone could achieve.

On coming to Canada, my parents dropped many things from Jamaican culture and conformed to Canadian culture. Growing up in Canadian culture can really cause a melting-pot effect. Over time, our culture and place of origin become a distant memory or completely lost, and we cling to the Canadian lifestyle. Officially, Canada is seen as a cultural mosaic, and this may be true for many immigrants now, but my experience is so much different. My parents chose to pick up the Canadian culture, turn away from their Jamaican roots, and make

me a genuine first-generation Canadian. These choices and transitions had very real effects. Canadian culture consists of celebrating Christian holidays. Many of these cause consumers to spend excessive amounts of money to celebrate holidays like Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. My identity and culture was Canadian, so I celebrated Easter by hunting for eggs. I celebrated Christmas by spending money on material objects. We never attended church! And our Canadian choice was to eat fast food such as pizza, wings, McDonalds, and Burger King most Friday or Saturday nights. Hockey was a big thing in my house, we watched most games if possible. My second language is French, and I travelled to places like Ottawa and Montreal, ordering and speaking French like most other people. I tried my first poutine and Beavertail in Ottawa, and it made me think Canadian food is so amazing!

While being a teenager in high school, the mindset of not wanting to know Jamaican culture still existed, and living Canadian culture remained. This specifically started to change when, one day, sitting in my history class, listening to my teacher talk about history and cultures. I began to realize that maybe my understanding of Canadian culture and history was wrong. I only knew what I was exposed to, and that created blinders and stereotypes of Canadian culture. My teacher, who was part native, explained the history of Canada and previous cultural practices, urging the importance of knowing history and keeping it alive. This made me wonder about what I knew about my culture and the history of the country where the majority of my family lived? I felt saddened that I never saw it relevant to know about my origins. When I got home, I explained this to my mother who then dropped a huge bomb on me that I would be travelling to Jamaica alone for the summer! My first thoughts were, "Is she insane?" "Should I call someone to evaluate her state of mind?" She and my father each told me stories that did not make that country sound good.

That night, I went to bed thinking to myself, "How can I get out of this summer nightmare?" By the time dawn sprung I had little to no sleep because the gears in my mind were working overtime to find ways to avoid this trip. I went to history class early that day and spoke to my history teacher about the dreaded news I had heard. The idea she had was that we should look at pictures and see what it is like there. I sat down in the chair beside my teacher's desk and she typed in Jamaica and clicked on images. What I saw was so beautiful, it looked so warm, the sand looked light brown and white, and the water was so

clear. I couldn't help but picture myself walking on smooth sand and swimming in crystal clear water. The advice given was, "do some research before knocking the idea."

After school I rushed home to do some research and came to the conclusion that I wanted to see this beautiful place my parents grew up in before choosing to leave. I asked my mother to call my grandmother and tell her I am coming back home! My mother squinted her eyes and asked me, "What changed your opinion?" My response was, "RESEARCH!"

The school year was ending and summer was approaching. At first I was excited about visiting this paradise my parents had chosen to leave behind. Then, I became nervous because I would be seeing family I never met. I would meet them in a new place with different customs. My mother gave me a list of things we needed to buy for this two-month culture shock I was about to experience.

There were knots in my stomach on the way to the airport. I was about to take my first major trip and it was going to be alone. I waved goodbye to my mother as tears rolled down my cheeks. I have been on an airplane before, but never alone or to Jamaica. Four hours later, after a snack, a boring movie, and a nap, I was standing in the airport of the country I never dreamed I would visit. My uncle and aunt came over as I stood there lost and asked if I was happy to be in Jamaica.

Their accents were much thicker than my parents', but they were so warm and friendly. I jumped into my uncle's truck and opened my window. The drive into the country area was absolutely frightening. My uncle drove so fast up the hills and honked the horn when going around the corners in case someone else was also coming, very fast. I couldn't even enjoy the beauty of the country.

Once I got to my grandmother's house, I was in shock. It was a beautiful house with fruit trees all over. The only one I recognized was a mango tree. My cousin climbed up the huge mango tree and picked a few ripe mangos and threw them down to me. I had to ask what some of the other trees were because I had never seen anything like them before. My grandmother's house has an ackee trees, guinep trees, jackfruit trees, apple trees, and a chicken pen. The garden was filled with broccoli, cucumber, and squash.

While being in Jamaica I quickly started to pick up the language of Patois. My family back in Canada only used a few slang words in sentences. My cousins spoke English, Patois, and Spanish. I was really starting to love the Jamaican culture because it was so easy to pick up

Patois. My family decided to bring me to town but told me no jewellery because the crime rate is high there, especially if thieves know their intended victims are from out of town. While in town, my grandmother would refer to me as Faye's daughter, which was my mother's nickname growing up. Everyone was so excited to see me. I had so much fun that I forgot that I didn't have anything to eat yet. So I asked for some fast food.

My grandmother took me up to some guy with a drum that had steam coming out of it. My face completely dropped when I saw that he was cooking in the drum. In a thick accent he asked me what I wanted to eat. He had jerk pork, jerk chicken, Manish water (a soup), fried dumpling, and festival. I asked my grandmother what festival was, and she explained that it is a sweeter and longer version of a dumpling. I decided that I would try some jerk chicken with festival. Then the man said he would give me a drink for being so cute. When I looked down he handed me a bag filled with liquid. To me it looked like an IV bag they give you when in the hospital, except it was red. I looked at my grandma, confused. She laughed and said, "tek it, it's just bag juice." My own thought was, "what happened to putting juice in a box or can?" Despite my initial hesitation, the food was mouth-watering. The thoughts I once had that Jamaica was no place to visit began to vanish.

It started to become dark and my cousins met me and my grandmother at "top road," which was a hill above where my family resided. They were having a big party and my cousins wanted to take me. My grandmother said it was fine, so we began to walk down the street to the party. The music was fast paced with some Patois lyrics. The only music artists I knew were reggae ones that my parents played: Bares Hammond, Bob Marley, Sanchez, and so on. I had to ask my cousins what kind of music they were playing and they called it *dancehall*. Even though I could hardly keep up with the words in the song, I began to move my waist and then slowly move my feet and legs, copying what all the other girls were doing.

Throughout the remaining month I spent in Jamaica, I began to learn about its history. I learned about the national flag colours and anthem. The national bird is known as the doctor bird or a hummingbird. Climbing trees was a new skill I obtained, resulting in making me resourceful. I fluently spoke Patois and a bit of Spanish. Even my favourite food happened to be the national dish, which is called ackee and salt. Although it resembles the look of scrambled eggs, it is so delicious with fried dumpling and plantain that it became

my favourite food. My Canadian habit of watching television faded away and I attended church every single Sunday—a church that was always packed with people. I had no idea that Jamaica had the most churches per square foot in the whole world.

The experience of going back to my parents' country of birth was amazing and mind-blowing. The experience was fulfilling because I learned about the people, the language, the food, and other unique cultural practices such as attending nine night. This is when someone dies and there is a celebration of their life for nine nights. I enjoyed every second of my experience in Jamaica and I found the importance of knowing my culture and heritage to understand myself more. There were so many things that I learned about myself. I had no idea I could dance so well, could braid hair, speak patois, and climb trees.... These have shaped me into the person I am today. My belief is that every person should experience their culture for the fact that it will enlighten themselves on their culture, history, and self. Being afraid of my culture, at least at first, was an experience I could hardly avoid. Living my culture was an experience that I will never forget.

The Walking Wounded

LYNN JOHNS

It was me, and a gun, and a man on my back. And I sang “holy, holy” as he buttoned down his pants. (Tori Amos, “Little Earthquakes,” 1992)

AMONG US are the walking wounded. The injured are the casualties of an unproclaimed war, a war fought behind closed doors. It is a quiet war, perpetually raging in bedrooms and basements, attics and alleyways, on school grounds, in churches, and arenas. Stifled into silence, the wounded are the subjugated, secret soldiers in a war of conscription and of corruption, in which manipulators and predators prey upon the vulnerable to satisfy a lust for power and control. Although the wounded walk all around us, their injuries are chronic, irreparable, inoperable, and often undetectable to the naked eye. These are the victims of a war being fought in the trenches of our own backyards, a war fought every single day. The faces of its victims are familiar. They are the faces of loved ones: our sisters, our mothers, our children, our neighbours, our friends, and our spouses. These are the survivors of sexual violence.

The foot soldiers in this war battle an enemy often hidden in plain sight. Many victims are shot down mid-flight, their lives sent into a tailspin as they spiral out of control, plummeting downwards to the inevitable crash that shatters them into a million, fragmented pieces. Sadly, they were unable to detect the warning signs, or if they had, they dismissed that slightly suspicious inner voice with a laugh and a shake of the head. *I'm sure he didn't mean to touch me like that. How could I have thought he was being anything but friendly? How silly, I know this person! He would never hurt me.* They were blind to the enemy

because he wore the camouflage fatigues of a coach, a teacher, an uncle, a priest, a boyfriend, a boss, or a trusted family friend. I use “he” because the reality is that the perpetrators of sexual violence are predominantly male.¹ Society still labours under perpetual myths about “stranger danger,” when in reality, the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults are committed by individuals already known to their attacker.

It is difficult to ward off a stealth attack. And the attackers are masterful planners—they play the long game, and they play it well. For victims of chronic abuse, the official term is “grooming.” Abusers target a victim, gain their trust, and often fill a void or a need. They isolate their victims, desensitize them, sexualize the relationship, and, most importantly, maintain absolute control over them. They prey on the vulnerable, circling the herd, sniffing out, rounding up, and finally separating the most defenceless from safety only to hunt them down and feed on their flesh. Espionage is a key tactical strategy employed by perpetrators of sexual violence; they thrive on secrecy, operating beneath banners of “don’t tell,” “this is our little secret,” “this is all your fault,” and “you know you want it,” to the more chilling threats of “I’ll hurt your family” or “I’ll kill you if you tell anyone.” These shadowy suggestions are all highly effective, carefully calculated manoeuvres. Subsequently, victims often become quietly compliant, perpetually sealed vaults. They become the keepers of a pestilent secret that rots away their very core. Survivors of sexual violence often experience a deep and lasting shame. They feel guilty for “allowing” this to happen. In an attempt to protect themselves and their loved ones, survivors may go years or entire lifetimes without revealing their truths. They become voiceless. They cannot speak the unspeakable truth because there are no words to describe their experiences. The bitter irony is that words may be life-saving. Words may be the very oxygen required to keep victims breathing, their lifeline to help and healing. The unfortunate reality is, however, some never speak, and some don’t survive. Some find liberation at their own hand when it becomes too overwhelming.

It is all too common for survivors to shine a blinding spotlight of guilt and shame upon themselves. It is a searing laser I know only too well. Every moment of every day leads back to that one, painfully clear point in time, or for some, the first moment in a succession of traumas. The perpetrator, and the memories are inescapable. We die a little more each day, as our victim narrative morphs into a story of self-blame: the

“could-have, would-have, should-have monologue.” *Why did I go there that day? Why did I walk? Why did he choose me? Why did I stay? Why didn’t I run, scream, kick, bite, yell, scratch out his eyes? If only I had stayed for badminton practice, things would be different. If I hadn’t worn a skirt.... If I had been stronger, louder, older, younger, if only....* It is an endless, self-defeating script that rarely gets the rewrite it deserves, a film documentary that loops over and over and over in all its brilliant, Technicolor glory.

“Neighbours bring food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between,” notes Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But there are no casseroles for rape victims. No carrot cake for childhood sexual assault survivors. No cheerful bedside balloons or ruffled pink carnations grace their nightstands. The simple fact is that most people would not know how to handle a revelation this shocking. There’s no social script to follow, no guidebook, no etiquette manual for dealing with people who reveal these traumas. On our best days we almost can handle physical illnesses, marriage breakdowns, the loss of a job, a pet, the loss of a beloved life. We try valiantly to shoulder the burdens of alcoholism, miscarriages, and gambling addiction. We can sit next to surgery, it’s sterile and sanitary. But we have an unmistakable aversion to the “sexual” element of sexual assault crimes. Many people are uncomfortable discussing normal, healthy, sexual relationships, so sexual violence becomes an even more difficult terrain to traverse. Victims are often perceived as tainted and stained, “damaged goods.” It’s a nasty, dirty business, and people want to keep their hands clean of it. Much of the unwillingness to acknowledge the atrocities of this social epidemic stems from the sexualized nature of these crimes. But the simple truth is that sexual assault is not about sex. Sexual assault is not a crime of passion; it is a crime that is often premeditated. It is not about the perpetrator “losing control.” It is not about desire; most people have healthy sexual desires but do not commit sexual assaults. Sexual assault is about power and control, and sex is the weapon used.

Plato said, “be kind, for everyone you meet is suffering a great battle.” This is a battle like no other. This writing, this story—is a victory. It is a battle won by a survivor of sexual violence because I am here. I’m alive. I remain. Words are my armour and my weapon. For survivors, recovery often comes in the unlikely form of speaking the truth. Each time a survivor finds the strength to tell our story, we reclaim a tiny piece of ourselves. Our words are the threads with which

we will bind our torn fragments, and stitch up our wounds each time they re-open. They say the truth shall set you free. It is time to open all the closed doors. By naming our perpetrators, and shining a light on them, I hope that someday, we will win this war.

NOTE

¹While females are disproportionately the victims of sexual offences, males are disproportionately the accused. According to Statistics Canada 2007 police-reported data, 97% of persons accused of sexual offences were male.

My Grandmother and Her Legacy

SITARA SIM-SPENCE

FAMILY IS one of the most important aspects of my life. There is almost no decision that I have made in my twenty-two years that has not been based around my family. My family is rare in that, unlike many families, we seem to actually get along. For sure, there are always differences in opinion, and for sure, we have our arguments. As a family, though, we are all there for one another, and are always willing to help out the people around us. This mentality has been passed down through my grandmother. She believed that the people you love regardless of blood make a family. Coming from an abusive home, this was an essential way of getting by in life. My grandmother, Lyn, tried to instil in her children a sense of the importance of family that she never had growing up. As her grandchild, I saw first-hand these benefits of her spirit, in that she became a mother to me and my brother when my mom was busy working as a single parent. She would also do the same to all my friends that were from broken homes. She became the communal grandmother.

My grandmother Lyn was the first-born child of her parents who later in life had a son and daughter. Lyn's parents were cruel people who treated their younger children so much better than Lyn. Growing up, Lyn was physically abused by her father and mentally abused by her mother. The only safety she had was her grandmother, my nanny. Lyn would often run away to my nanny's house, where she'd be safe until Lyn's dad would eventually come and take her back. Going to the police was never an option because Lyn's father was well known by the police, and they never believed her. At the young age of sixteen, my grandmother couldn't take the abuse anymore, and my nanny gave her a bus ticket and all the cash she had so she could flee to Toronto. There,

my grandmother moved in with her older friend from high school, and began working for a non-profit organization. In Toronto, my grandmother met her eventual husband, and they worked together as activists for the poor. Together, they began careers working for social-justice programs, where she was offered a job as a drug and alcohol counsellor in the Northwest Territories. My mom, Terry, was six, and my aunt, Sarah, was only one when my parents moved to the North. During their time in the North, they moved around a lot, taking whatever job was offered. In addition to their day jobs, they also ran group homes for children, or welcomed foster children into their own home during their time there.

From what I have been told, the North of Canada is like no other place. The people and communities are close knit and isolated from the outside world. My grandmother talked about how she has never met nicer and more family-oriented people than when she lived there. Despite this, there are many divisive and destructive social issues in the North. There is an extreme issue with drugs and alcohol there. There are many children without families and children having issues with the law.

My mom and aunt as children did not have a normal childhood, growing up in the North, as they were always foster children in their homes. The children they took in could range from having crimes as simple as stealing to murder, but my mom and aunt made it very clear to me that they were never treated differently from the group-home children. My mom Terry, being older than my aunt, said that the children they took in regardless of their past grew up to be like Terry and Sarah's brothers and sisters. Growing up, my mom Terry's favourite "brother," Rocky, came to the home and was known as a tyrant. Terry said that he often ran away and refused to listen to Lyn. As time passed, though, Rocky changed; he was for the first time treated like a kid and not an adult. Rocky turned from being difficult to fighting off the bullies for my mom. Rocky would walk her to school every day and pick her up from the elementary school after he was done class at the high school. He made it clear to the boys who were mean to my mom that she was his sister. Terry and Sarah said that having an alternative family forced them not to judge people by their past, as well as to forgive and acknowledge that everyone deserves a second chance. As children, it was instilled into my mom and aunt to treat the people around you regardless of relation, like your family.

As my mom and aunt became parents, they passed the same lessons onto me, my brother, and my cousin. As a kid, I have always lived with my family but also my grandparents. It may have been for financial reasons, but I would have never changed it. As my parents were always busy people working, I got to spend a lot of time with my grandmother. It became my own personal responsibility from a very young age to take care of her. My mother through the years has taken in many of my brother's and my friends due to their being involved in bad family situations. At first, I felt so much resistance to having other kids in my house. I always found my mom was working too hard for kids that weren't even hers. She was always spreading herself so thin in her time, finances, and emotional support. Eventually, my mom explained to me why she would help these kids out, and I realized that's not the way my grandmother taught me

As I have grown up, I have noticed a difference in what is deemed important to me compared to other young people. I always make choices based on how it would affect my family. I choose Queen's University because it was in my home town, and I was able to stay and help out my family in any way while going to school. As I have grown up, I have noticed that there are a lot of people who are just not close to their family, which I have found bizarre. The bizarre thing to me is seeing siblings that don't take care of kids that don't know anything about their parents. The worst thing I see is seeing youth treat their parents and loved ones as wallets for their own pleasure. I know I am very lucky to be given the family I have, but I think, regardless of the circumstances you have been given, you can always make a family. The people that you care for do not have to be a mom and sibling. They just need to be people who care.

A Bat Attitude

LESLIE SINCLAIR

“WHEN THE bats start flying out, don’t open your mouth,” Joolie said. We bobbed in our kayak, one of several near Congress Avenue Bridge, alongside a couple of sightseeing ferries. The structure loomed above us, lined with excited spectators. “Don’t ask me how I know that.”

This was the one thing I had to do while I was in Austin: witness the nightly flight of 1.5 million bats at the Congress Avenue Bridge. Austin, home to the world’s largest urban bat colony, is the self-described bat capital of the world. The bridge inadvertently became the ultimate bat roost in 1980, when it was renovated to add a series of expansion joints, about an inch wide and seventeen inches deep to its underside. By 1984, legions of Mexican free-tailed bats had set up summer cottages in the cozy crevices. The bridge bats are now beloved, in part because they devour fifteen tons of flying insects on every flight, but at the time, concerns about public health caused an uproar.

I met Joolie for the first time earlier that afternoon. She picked me up at the airport and we had plans to bat-watch that evening. The best view of the exodus, she explained, was from the water, precisely from her tandem kayak. I was nervous about this idea. I’m far from a naturally sporty person but I’d learned in the context of dating, where some of my most successful dates have been based on sports, that the goofiness of physical activity can bond strangers together. I relented—making new friends is, after all, its own kind of courtship—and after inflating Joolie’s kayak we set out onto Lady Bird Lake and muscled through a headwind towards the bridge.

Texas had taken on mythological proportions in my mind when I was a little girl. My mysterious great uncle, Garth, had moved to Austin

in the mid-1970s, not long before I was born. My memories of him are mostly recreations: the pictures that hung in my great grandmother's parlour, the story my parents tell about how he'd let himself into our house, take a nap on the couch, then get up and leave, all without saying a word. My only true recollection of him is the time he came home to visit with his two sinewy Dobermans, Zip and Zap, and the impressive drawl he had acquired. It was the first accent this little rural girl ever heard. Just like that, I was sold on Texas.

When 2005 rolled around, I was staring down my thirtieth birthday. The Internet, specifically the Blogosphere, had become my reprieve from an unhappy marriage. Chance led me to a Blog written by an artistic Austinite named Joolie, a woman of about my age. I was captivated by her irreverent style and clever wordplay, and her Texan adventures fuelled my fascination with the Lone Star State. Blogs were different back then. They weren't glossy food Blogs, or lifestyle Blogs, or travel Blogs yet. Nobody was trying to be a famous writer or go viral. The photography was not slick. All kinds of regular people were just writing down what they did that day, being really honest about their lives, and clicking "Post." By 2013, Joolie and I had graduated from reading each other's Blogs to e-mailing each other with the frequency of traditional friendship, but we had not yet met "IRL." We sensed that it was time to make it official. Although I worried that meeting could ruin the perfectly great e-friendship we had, my heart had already landed in Texas, so I got on a plane.

Every dusk from March to November, hundreds of people jostle for position on the Congress Avenue Bridge to watch more than a million free-tails emerge to forage for food. By April, 750,000 pregnant females have settled into their summer roost. Each female gives birth to one pup, doubling the population. Pups begin to hunt with their mothers in July, and you'll see the most bats between then and mid-August. Sweaty from our exertions, we at last reached our destination. Joolie triumphantly cracked open a couple of cold ones. It was September. Bats or no bats, what kind of maniac would visit Texas in the dead of summer, I wondered?

My marriage abruptly ended on April Fool's Day, 2007. As I prepared to move into a new apartment, alone, I recalled a linocut print that Joolie had made a few months earlier and posted on her Blog. It was a black-and-white portrait of a woman, an Everywoman, she later told me. "Eat a dick," says Linocut Everywoman, with a waggle of her finger. The sentiment summed up everything I felt about my husband

right then. I laughed in spite of the terrible hand I had been dealt. I asked Joolie if I could buy one to brighten my new pad. She put it in the mail, no charge, and even slipped in another print. I was touched by Joolie's compassion; it drew me closer to her and flamed my crush on Texas.

"Let's paddle closer so we can hear them," Joolie suggested. We cruised up beside a gaggle of other kayaks, a guided bat-watching tour. The guide shone an infrared flashlight up into the crevices so we could all marvel at the tiny creatures preparing to fly. To glimpse the mass of excited bats amplified their concert of high-pitched chirps and chatter to my ears.

Then, it happens. A few bats dart out, and quickly morph into a black cloud. Hundreds of thousands pour out and twist into a ribbon that swiftly undulates across the treetops on the shoreline of Lady Bird Lake. The crowd, including Joolie and I, watch, rapt. Despite Joolie's warning, I catch my mouth gaping open in awe, and snap it shut before I find out how guano tastes. As we gaze up from our kayaks, the bats are silhouetted against the dusky sky. Though it is off-peak bat-watching season, we are beguiled by the spectacle for almost forty-five minutes.

Human journeys are complicated. Sometimes, our sonar echoes off a bridge a thousand miles away. Do we choose to subdue our instincts to seek happiness and companionship? Or do we take wing despite risk? Now, like the free-tails who return every year to the Congress Avenue Bridge from their winter home in the Yucatan, Joolie and I migrate annually. The Congress Avenue Bridge is just one colony; the total summer population of free-tails in Central Texas is estimated at more than 100 million. Oh, the connections we miss, if we aren't prepared to fly.

A Small Ode to a Small Creature

MICHAELA STEVEN

IN THE very beginning, she was just a cat to me. She wasn't even my cat, and she technically wasn't my friend Erica's cat, even though she lived in Erica's small student apartment. She was an impulse buy for a group of University students who wanted a pet more than they wanted a companion, and when they all went off on their own adventures after graduating, she was passed off between various owners. Erica was just another stop on her journey, a stop that lasted eight months longer than it was supposed to. I was never fond of cats, but Callie had never grown out of a kitten's small body. It is almost impossible not to love a kitten, even if that love needs some time to grow.

Her name was Callie, but I called her every nickname I could think of, to make Erica laugh. Sometimes Callie would nuzzle up against my leg, and other times she would look at me like I was the peasant in her kingdom: Queen Callie of Princess Street. Sometimes she would make a risky jump from the futon, and other times she would hide her identity under the bed: Callie Berry Catwoman. She was Calzone, Callie-fornia, Alley Cat Callie. When I visited the apartment, Erica would chuckle at these monikers as we tried to coax this little cat out to play. We were two almost-grown women reduced to girls in the presence of a feline.

Callie began to slow down when the leaves began to turn. Like the leaves, the change in her was gradual, but once noticed it became a rapid decline. She was lethargic and her breathing was shallow, both behaviours that are unlike her. One fall day between classes I arrived at Erica's apartment, and together we took Callie to the veterinary clinic—Erica as Mom, myself as honorary Aunt, and both of us as

servants in love to the smallest queen there ever was. Callie was an enigma to veterinarians. As her current owner, Erica couldn't explain much about her medical history, and the only age the veterinarians could guess at was that she was a "very old lady." It was explained to us that this made medical decisions about Callie's care even more difficult, as they couldn't use her age as any kind of indicator.

Callie groaned and meowed while her narrow body was explored by the vet. With hope, Erica remarked that Callie had put on a bit of weight lately just as the vet was prodding Callie's stomach, hoping to receive some good news from that fact. Erica's face fell when the vet confirmed that what we interpreted as weight was water sitting in her abdomen, putting pressure on her lungs. I didn't even need to look at Erica to feel her crying. What I didn't realize was that I was too, crying with the knowledge that there wasn't much we could do about issues that complex. The vet spoke slowly, treading carefully around our options while making it clear that any treatment could put Callie's small frame under additional stress. Her age became yet another unknown in Callie's life of mystery, and without this knowledge we would be guessing at solutions on borrowed time.

Through all of this, I just wanted Callie to be able to speak. It might sound silly, but it would've made the whole ordeal easier, knowing exactly what she wanted. The responsibility to make the right choice for another life was overwhelming, and one I thought I *might* have to make in the later years of my life. Never did I think I would be trying to make a choice like this wearing sneakers and clutching my best friend's hand. When is the time to be merciful and let go, and when is the time to push forward in protest of the uncontrollable, and through the unknown? These questions felt big, embodied by a little cat.

We made our choices for the cat that couldn't speak to us, and the vet left us alone so he could make the preparations we would never see. Without preparation, we were thrust into this final moment with her, and it was our turn to nuzzle into her hair. Looking at Callie, I thought of all of the owners who had given her away so they could go off on their own personal adventures. I couldn't understand how "goodbye" was so easy for them to say. I didn't have any kind of big realization when I was in that room with Erica, because we were just living second to second, being together with Callie. We gave her love, and then she was gone, and when I finally looked down at my watch, the whole visit had only been an hour long. It felt like an eternity, and a flash.

With red swollen eyes and tired bodies, Erica and I zipped up our backpacks and collected our things in the clinic lobby. In a gentle voice, the woman at the front desk asked us how we would like to settle the vet bill. It was a necessary consideration, but after all of the emotions that had been swirling all around us, it was bizarre to have a price named for Callie's care. Erica pulled out a credit card, and would later worry about how to pay off the charge for our clinic visit; yet another reminder of our status as caretakers. The clinic visit made me understand that being an adult is more than taxes and rent and an age number; adulthood is the responsibility of having to decide what is best when there is no way of knowing for sure. Yet, it is the adult who is thrust into this experience and in the true absurdity of it all, has to pay for it. In time, in money, and in their soul.

At the end of it all, she was still just a cat. However, Callie embodied every nickname; she was a hero, a queen, an old cat in a kitten's small body. I have come to understand that all that we wanted so desperately to do was to save this perfect little creature from everything trying to hurt her. But we couldn't. She couldn't tell us what she wanted us to do, and we couldn't help her like we needed to. But we loved her. And I think you can't save anyone, you can only love them. And love oftentimes won't be enough to save them, especially from the forces that swoop in and take Callie's from us. But we loved her still. We don't love because it will save us from death—nothing will keep us from death. That is the adult lesson, disheartening but ultimately true. Callie's lesson is that we love because it's the only thing our little hearts know how to do.

My Stumbling Block

TAMMY E.M. TOEPPNER

Our doubts are traitors, / And make us lose the good we oft might
win / By fearing to attempt. (William Shakespeare, *Measure for
Measure*)

MY FIVE-year-old eyes saw Cinderella as “perfection personified” in her pastel-blue gown. I just had to colour Cinderella’s horse-drawn carriage in shimmering gold and she could ride off to the ball. While colouring I envisioned Cinderella sliding her foot into that iconic glass slipper—a perfect fit. My daydreaming, however, abruptly came to a halt when my crayon slipped from my grip. “OH, NOOOOOO!” I cried out. I had inadvertently drawn over the lines of Cinderella’s pumpkin-shaped carriage. In desperation I rushed to show my mom my drastic mistake. She looked at me with warm comforting eyes “That’s okay, it still looks perfect!” she said. Frustrated and unconvinced by my mother’s reassurance I threw the less-than-perfect princess into the trash.

I distinctly recall feeling that same sense of agitation at age ten. A childhood friend used to enjoy rearranging the costume jewellery I had meticulously placed on my bedroom dresser. I was obsessed with symmetry and resented her deliberate attacks on my defenceless bureau, but I was able to stifle my irritation.

I guess I am what you would call a perfectionist. Unfortunately, perfection is a double-edged sword. Occasionally my drive for perfection leads to impressive achievement. More often than not, it leads to my downfall.

Walking in my Shoes

After graduating high school my desire for perfection started to spiral out of control. I decided to take a year off before attending university to get some practical work experience, save money for tuition, and figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up! I worked full time as a secretary and took a kinesiology course in night school to improve my GPA to ensure my acceptance at a good school. Somewhere, however, between completing kinesiology and New Year's, my life began to unravel. Suddenly my hair had to be perfect; every strand had to be in its place and my makeup had to look flawless. Soon I began noticing every imperfection around me—from a minute coffee stain on my desk to a co-worker's untied shoelace. I was so distracted, trying to keep track of all my worries, that I began keeping lists. Although I knew the lists were futile my brain felt like a broken record caught in its groove, scratching incessantly. It eventually became so distressing that I began isolating myself from my friends and family, which only worsened my symptoms. Now I was anxious, angry, depressed, and I even contemplated suicide. I continued to hide my abnormal behaviour and I was a good actress too; nobody knew about my inner turmoil. I wore a mask that enabled me to smile and carry on as "normal" as possible. It wasn't until one morning, when I was frantically getting ready for work, that my secret was revealed.

"Hurry Up! YOU'RE GOING TO BE LATE AGAIN!" I heard my mom shout as she hammered on the bathroom door. As usual I was running late for work because I had to finish my ever-lengthening morning rituals and routines. I remember my mom prying the bathroom door open and peering in at me. I remember her eyes wide with dismay as she watched me count under my breath "12, 14, 16, 18, NO! START OVER! 2, 4, 6..." I was lathering my underarms with deodorant so excessively that it was dripping down to my waist. I could feel my eyes well up with tears and my body awash in panic. My shell instantly crumbled into a heap of sand beneath my feet. It was at that very moment I knew I desperately needed help.

Finding my Footing

There was no hesitation in my doctor's voice when he remarked "Yep. Your repetitive checking and counting is classic *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*." Finally my enemy had a name: OCD. Although

I had never heard of OCD, at least now I knew what I was dealing with. I was one of the lucky ones. It only took me about four months to get the necessary help from the onset of my symptoms. Many suffer in silence for years before seeking help. Despite just having an enormous weight lifted off of my shoulders at the fragile age of nineteen, I couldn't help but feel ashamed and embarrassed with my diagnosis.

Average age of onset ranges from early adolescence to the mid-20s but peaks earlier in males (at 13-15) than in females (at 20-24). Between 10 percent and 15 percent of university students engaged in checking behaviour substantial enough to score within the range of patients with OCD. (Barlow et al. 166)

Those afflicted with OCD are tormented by *obsessions* and *compulsions*. *Obsessions* are the “intrusive and mostly nonsensical thoughts, images, or urges that the individual tries to resist or eliminate” (Barlow et al. 163). Obsessions are like annoying earworms that you just can't get out of your head, but instead of a tune replaying itself on a loop—it's a nagging fear. A shadow of doubt that warns you of impending doom: “Did you lock the front door? I don't think you did! What if the house gets robbed?” Your brain is locked and compulsions hold the only key. *Compulsions* “are the thoughts or actions used to suppress the obsessions and provide relief” (Barlow et al. 163). Even though your escape is temporary, you find yourself surrendering. The bully has you convinced that you need to unlock and relock your front door ten times before you can “safely” leave your home.

The oppressor can also take on many faces, and manifests itself in a variety of debilitating ways. For instance, the famous Canadian actor and comedian Howie Mandel has a specific type of OCD called “*mysophobia*—fear of germs and contamination” (Ciccarelli et al. 532). When Mandel travels he feels compelled to “order two-dozen towels when he arrives at the hotel, and makes paths with them so he does not have to step on the hotel carpets” (Barlow et al. 165). Unfortunately there currently is no cure for OCD, so I rely on “stepping stones” to keep me on the right path. Help comes in the form of anti-anxiety medication, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and peer support groups. There is nothing more beneficial than your peers. Not only do you realize that you're not alone, but you can also teach each other how to cope. Yes, the medication does help, but fifty percent of the battle is

learning to cope. Attending a peer group is a step in the right direction towards recovery. A person is more likely to trust and open up to a peer who has “walked the walk” and stumbled in similar footsteps. I am grateful for the support I have received over the years from my family and friends.

I try to exercise regularly, eat healthy, and get adequate sleep. I also try to avoid excessive caffeine and alcohol, which can increase anxiety and depression. I try to approach life with a sense of humour and I force myself to laugh in the midst of engaging in unnecessary double-checking behaviours. OCD has taught me what my limits are, what I realistically can and cannot do. To combat OCD I have discovered that I need to keep busy because too much idle time is deadly for me and can greatly increase my negativity and decrease my confidence. I now strive for excellence, *not* perfection, and try to live my life regret free, avoiding phrases that begin with: “Shoulda, woulda, coulda...” I view OCD as the “disorder of doubt,” so my personal mantra is “NO DOUBT” and I only allow myself to focus on my strengths and *not* my weaknesses. As a firm believer in the tenets of positive psychology, I continually try to challenge and change my irrational and self-defeating thoughts into more rational, self-helping ones.

I will probably trip over OCD obstacles for the rest of my life, but I will persevere. I may have OCD—but it does not have me. For every time I fall down, I will get back up. Every time I lose my balance, I will stabilize. Would my life be easier without OCD? NO DOUBT! Yet maybe, just maybe, I carry the burden of OCD for a reason. Perhaps my OCD is really a blessing in disguise. After all, if not for OCD, would I be pursuing a career helping others in psychosocial rehabilitation? I doubt it. Would I realize the urgent need to educate society about mental-health issues to eliminate stigma? I doubt it. Maybe every two steps I take forward will result in one step back, but as long as I raise awareness about obsessive-compulsive disorder, my efforts won’t be in vain.

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Keep Climbing

DIANA WU

HOW DO you define failure? It could be investing all that you have into a company only to find that it does not adequately satisfy a need or demand in the market. It could be putting a product into the market that turns out to unexpectedly jeopardize peoples' safety. It could be failing a test. It could be applying for a position but not getting hired for it. There are so many ways one can define failure. There are so many types of failures in varying degrees. Now, how do you respond to failure? How do you handle setbacks? In my opinion, we can learn something from even the most minute failures. I believe that failures are unavoidable, but it is how you choose to respond to failures that are of most significance.

I love climbing and hiking mountains. The way up is always hard work and the elevation makes the climb harder. I am out of breath far sooner than I would have expected as the elevation quickly knocks the wind out of me. During the tough journey upwards, sometimes all will be well with sunny skies and breathtakingly beautiful views. Other times it will be rainy and cold, with clouds that cover the scenery, leaving you surrounded by shades of grey. Just like the journey to your goal, sometimes the path will be clear and it will be easy. Other times it will be unclear and difficult. Nonetheless, keep sight of the top and keep sight of your goals.

When I was climbing Wayna Picchu, it was honestly quite embarrassing for me. I was trying to climb this mountain that a bunch of tourists climb. I didn't think it would be this hard. Climbing down the mountain were seniors and tourist less physically fit than I. "You're almost there!" they said. They didn't look tired at all! How were they able to so seemingly easily achieve the goal I was aiming at? The climb

was supposed to take about an hour and a half. It felt like I've been climbing for far longer than that. Why was I taking so long? How tired and slow I was getting was really embarrassing me. As a recently retired competitive swimmer, I was supposed to have endurance and stamina. Why was I so tired? I just wanted to collapse in a heap and lie down for a long, long while.

While I love climbing mountains, I don't quite like falling down. I have a fear of getting hurt, and I had a fear of failure. To me, failures are when you are unsuccessful in attaining or achieving your goal. Failure has always seemed intimidating to me. It was a rainy, wet, muddy, and oh so cloudy day. The rocks that made up the stairs became slippery and I fell down a couple times. Oh, how I hate falling. Why can't it just be an easy way up? The thought of stopping crossed my mind a few times. My limbs were hurting, I kept stepping on wobbly rocks, and it was so hard to breathe. After a few falls, I decided to adopt a different mindset, and I reassured myself that my shortness of breath and lack of stamina was probably due to the quick and significant change in elevation. I did arrive in Peru just a day before from the Galapagos Islands. The vast difference in sea level was likely setting me back from an easier climb. I decided to work with my embarrassing lack of stamina and I paid more attention to the rocks. I learned where it would be best to step and how to climb using the least amount of effort. While I did take a couple of breaks, I got back up, tried to overcome my embarrassment, and I kept climbing.

I did not want to fail because it meant disappointing others as well as myself. What would I do if I did not succeed? I did not know. That being said—I cannot phrase it better than Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes in “The Failure-Tolerant Leader”—“there are failures and there are *failures*.” Of course, there are definite failures, but most failures are *failures*. To me, *failures* are setbacks. *Failures* are perceptions and lessons, open to individual interpretations. Did you really fail? Or does this “failure” somehow lead to something better? If your business failed, why did it fail? Where did you go wrong? What can you change about it? How could you do it better? If your failure can lead to further improvement then are they not more of a perceived failure?

Instead dwelling in the regrets of mistakes, learn from your mistakes. Learn from the times when you did not succeed in the way you wanted to. These times can turn out to be valuable lessons. From our perceived failures, we grow as people. This is why I am no longer afraid of failing. I have learned that *failures* are lessons. They might set

me back, but it is okay to fall down and get a couple scratches—as long as you do not remain a heap on the middle of the mountain. When life gets you down, get back up and keep climbing. Do not let failures and setbacks lead to your descent down the mountain and away from your goal. Learn from your experiences, climb smarter, and keep your head up with your eyes on the prize. Only then can you succeed.

At the summit of Wayna Picchu, I was rewarded with the most beautiful of views. Learning the ways of the steps and how to work with the circumstances, I was able to look down and see how far I have come. Ravelling in the incredible view, I was so glad that I was not a collapsed heap somewhere along the way up.

It is how you choose to respond, when things are not going exactly the way you wanted, that is of utmost importance. You have not truly failed until you have given up. You have not failed until you decide to climb down the mountain and give up your goal. Things can almost always get better if you learn from your past experiences and your setbacks. Soon enough you will reach the peak of the mountain and you will achieve the success you have worked so hard for.

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Untitled

DAVID XIE

THERE IS a photograph capturing the moment. I can remember that moment because I felt like a big boy. Finally, I got to have my own suitcase, just like my daddy. When my mom took this picture, I was filled with so much pride that I could not stop smiling. In the picture, my grandparents are standing beside me with huge smiles on their faces, but with tears swelling in their eyes. I remember being slightly confused by their smiles and their tears. These two things did not go together. I felt that something was not exactly right, but I did not know what. My grandfather held me tight and told me that he would always love me, which furthered my confusion. It was as if he was telling me that things were going to be different, but I did know what this difference would be.

My grandmother just held me in her arms and sobbed. Her chest vibrated as she gasped for air. I could feel these vibrations moving throughout my body, and they scared me. This was not what my grandmother was supposed to do. My grandmother was a gentle breeze that whispered stories into my ear and filled me with a sense of wonder. Her quiet voice filled me with love and comfort, not fear and uneasiness. I now knew that something was wrong. What was happening?

By the time we boarded the plane, I was trembling with fear. I had a feeling that things in my life were going to change. But I did not want them to change. I sat strapped into my airplane seat, and hardly realized that the plane was taking off. Instead, I saw myself hopping up on my grandmother's lap. For me, this felt like the safest place in the world to be. Nothing gave more intense satisfaction as when she called me her little bird. I was her little bird, and her lap was my nest. On these

mornings, she would wrap her arms around me and whisper stories into my ear. These stories took me away to worlds of adventure and moral fables. My grandmother's words turned me into the victimized cat in the *Great Zodiac Race*. I could see myself dashing towards the finish line to take my place in the Chinese zodiac before being pushed into the water and foiled by a devious rat. In *The Emperor and the Kite*, I am the tiny Princess Djeow, whom nobody notices. Wrapped in my grandmother's voice, I can feel the exhilaration starting in my stomach and travelling to the rest of my body, as I float upwards in a basket of food tied to my kite. Sitting on my grandmother's lap, I am Princess Djeow bringing food to my imprisoned father, as the rest of my family is helpless to aid him. In a flash, I transform from the tiny girl that no one paid attention to the heroine that uses her ingenuity and her kite to rescue her father. These worlds were opened up to me by my grandmother through her loving whispers as we sipped tea and ate our morning rice.

I sat there in my airplane seat with tears rolling down my cheeks. Before this day, I knew that my mornings with my grandparent would last forever. I could not imagine a time when my grandfather was not there to scoop me up in his loving arms. I knew that my grandmother would always be there to whisper me away to other worlds where I played the leading role.

The smell of a new house still fills me with a sense of disorientation and despair, which has me avoiding new houses even today. I think it was that moment when we walked through the front door that I fully realized my life had changed. There was the large marble-tiled entrance. The sweeping banister-staircase leading upwards to the unknown. The way my parents' voices echoed throughout the empty house. And that smell. The smell of recently completed woodwork, of glue, of paint, of cold stone and chemicals. This was our new house in a new country. This was our new house without my grandparents. I was devastated. I fell to my knees in the entranceway and began sobbing.

My first night in my new bedroom, I had a vivid dream. My grandfather is striding towards me. My eyes brightened as he scooped me up and held me in his arms, so that our eyes met. I looked into his eyes and saw them swelling with tears of joy. He had this beaming smile on his face that I had seen many times before. We laughed together as he tossed me up in the air and caught me in his strong arms.

That dream was a perfect moment—a perfect moment that ended the moment I woke up the next morning.

For the first two weeks or so in my new house, the days were a blur. All I wanted to do was sleep, so that I could dream. Dream of my grandfather's smile. Dream of my grandmother's voice. Every morning I would wake up and for a moment, I was filled with joy. Then, I would realize where I was and that my dream was not real.

However, one morning I woke up, and after I realized that my dream had just been a dream, I could still hear my grandmother's voice. Her voice drew me out of my bedroom and down the stairs to the kitchen. My grandmother was asking where her little bird was. I looked at the kitchen table, and there on my mother's laptop was my grandmother, and she was speaking to me. With tears running down my face, I leaped onto the kitchen table and began hugging the laptop. I could hear my grandmother whispering over and over again, "I love you my little bird. I love you."