



**A Bend in the Sky**

An Anthology of  
Creative Non-Fiction

EDITED BY ROBERT G. MAY

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## Preface

ROBERT G. MAY

*A BEND in the Sky* is the sixth anthology of creative non-fiction produced by the students of Writing Creative Non-Fiction (WRIT 290), an online Arts and Science course at Queen's University. For the first time, this collection also includes creative non-fiction works by the students of Writing Memoir (CWRI 272), a new on-campus writing-workshop course offered through the English Department at Queen's.

In both courses, students have the opportunity to learn about the craft of writing creative non-fiction and memoir by studying Lee Gutkind's *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (2012). Gutkind is founder and editor of *Creative Non-Fiction*, one of the most renowned journals devoted to the genre, as well as a prolific writer and teacher of creative non-fiction. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* is among the best known guides to writing and publishing in this relatively recent but increasingly popular genre.

Students also have the opportunity to study some of the finest recent works of Canadian creative non-fiction collected in *Slice Me Some Truth* (2011), an anthology edited by Luanne Armstrong and Zoë Landale. Both editors teach creative writing—Armstrong at the University of British Columbia and Landale at Kwantlen Polytechnic University—and both have published prolifically in creative non-fiction and other genres. *Slice Me Some Truth* contains creative non-fiction works by Fiona Tinwei Lam, Edith Iglauer, Wayne Grady, Mark Kingwell, among many others.

In his book, Gutkind asserts that writing is not a one-off activity, but a process involving numerous steps, such as brainstorming, research and immersion, drafting, and revising. Both CWRI 272 and WRIT 290, therefore, are organized in such a way to emphasize this multi-step process of writing creative non-fiction and memoir. In both courses, students are asked to complete four major writing assignments over a twelve-week period. In the first writing assignment, students are asked to brainstorm some potential ideas for a work of creative non-fiction, based on a series of questions or writing prompts. In the second writing assignment, students are asked to choose one of their topics and expand upon it by conducting some background work in the form of research (i.e., finding secondary sources on their chosen topic either online or at the library) and immersion (i.e., conducting a personal interview with a person relevant to their chosen topic). In the third and fourth writing assignments, students are asked to compose first a rough draft and then a polished version of their final project, an original work of creative non-fiction. At each step along the way, the teaching assistants and I provide students with detailed written feedback and advice on what they have produced.

Students' final projects are then published here, in this anthology, with minimal further editing. The result is a diverse collection of creative non-fiction works on a wide variety of subjects. There are essays here on loss, pain, and struggle, on love, ambition, and triumph. *A Bend in the Sky* is a truly impressive and compelling anthology of deeply personal, deeply truthful writing by a group of talented and dedicated students.

Interested readers may also download the first five anthologies in the series—*Through the Eyes of Ourselves* (2014), *The Scene and the Unseen* (2015), *Unearthed Treasure* (2016), *Spirited Words* (2017), and *Truth Be Told* (2020)—from my Web site:

**<https://www.queensu.ca/academia/drrgmay/e-books>**

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## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the hard-working and dedicated students of CWRI 272 and WRIT 290 who contributed their original works of creative non-fiction to this anthology.

Thanks as well to the conscientious teaching assistants for WRIT 290, Roger Martin, Lorinda Peterson, and Sylvie St-Jacques, who helped guide students' creative non-fiction works through each stage of the writing process, from brainstorming, to research and immersion, to rough draft, and to final version.

And special thanks to the many CWRI 272 and WRIT 290 students who contributed ideas for the cover design and the title for this year's anthology. The title *A Bend in the Sky* is based on a suggestion by a contributor who wishes to remain anonymous. The cover photograph was taken by CWRI 272 student Katherine Lidtke. "The photograph," she writes, "is of Thousand Steps Beach, which is tucked away in Laguna Beach. The beach is known for the steep flight of stairs that beachgoers must use to access the toasted coloured sand.... I took this picture in early March of 2018, while on a family vacation." The title and photograph complement each other beautifully.

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## The Cards You're Dealt

MADISON ADDESI

I'VE NEVER been one to be in awe over card games, nor have I ever suggested playing one over other board games I owned. Card games are often simple, and they have never struck me as something I'd get much out of. So it's kind of surprising that the Italian card game Scopa became the source of maybe one of the biggest lessons I have ever learned.

My Italian grandfather (my "nonno") was born and raised in Italy, and he did not know much English. His visits to our home therefore consisted of very little talking—as we didn't know much Italian, a struggle I feel many grandchildren go through with their immigrant grandparents. But we spent ages doing a whole lot of what he could do—playing Scopa. It was his favourite thing of all time ... besides his son (my dad), my mom, my sister, my brother, and I. Scopa wasn't just a game to him, it was a way of life. Because of this, I believe that if he was still around today, he would agree with the epiphany that I have had, thanks to him, and the cards. You see, Scopa is a metaphor for the precarious balance between success and failure, life and death. It shows us how endings can change in an instant, and never be predicted.

My grandfather was a traditional Italian—he lived for his customs and traditions. Therefore, whenever my family and I had a chance to play Scopa with him, his eyes would light up, his smile would extend from ear to ear, and he would say "buona"—meaning "good." After all,

“cultural activities are regarded as having a positive and significant impact on self-reported happiness” (Ateca-Amestoy 220), so it made sense why this game brought out the happiest side of him. But what is Scopa? In brief, Scopa is a card game where the first player to reach eleven points wins. The idea—in the most simplistic terms—is that you try and collect cards on the table that add up to the same number as the ones in your hand. For example, if you have ten in your hand you can pick up a six and a four if they are on the playing floor. Special points factor in at the end that can assist in your win, and ultimately, the game ends unexpectedly when a player’s cards run out.

The biggest lesson I learned from playing this game hit me full force the last time my siblings and I were able to play with my grandfather. I remember it vividly: it was a warm April night and my grandfather had come over for dinner.

“Before nonno goes home, kids, why don’t you play a game of Scopa with him,” said my mom.

“We’ll go to his place next week and play,” I responded.

“Yes, next week we’ll come play Scopa with you, nonno,” my sister overly enunciated to him, and we all brushed it off.

“Okay,” he said in his thick Italian accent, and left.

There was never a next week to play with him. He did live for about a year after that, but his life was never the same. It consisted of non-stop hospital visits, loads of medication, and ended with him being bedridden and incapable of doing his favourite things ... Scopa included. This all taught me one key thing: life is never a sure thing, and its duration can be very unexpected. Since life can be so short, it’s imperative for us to be grateful for even the simplest things while we still have them. After his passing, I realized just how deeply being in the face of death made me feel much more grateful for the little things. It made me fear in a sense that my own life would slip by without me having a chance to appreciate all the things I have that are truly important. I believe this game of cards is a mirror into what life is like. In Scopa, you never know what cards you are going to be dealt, and just like life, you never know what it’s going to throw at you. Therefore, the best way to approach both things is to appreciate what you’ve got and work with that—especially right there, especially right in that moment.

In Scopa, “a hand ends when the deck of cards runs out” (Alcamo).  
“Ah ha, that’s my point! And that right there takes me to eleven,”  
my father exclaims. We all sat there in disbelief.

“I swear you were just at five points, that win came out of nowhere,”  
I laugh and say to my dad.

In Scopa, the ending can come entirely unexpectedly, and the duration of the game is never foreseen. I came to realize after my grandfather’s death that his favourite game gave me this parallel view about life. A few months after his passing, when I saw the Scopa deck in the kitchen drawer, I thought about this all and brought it up to my sister.

“I think life is never fair, nor predictable, so enjoying all that we are given is the best way to get through it,” she said.

I sat there and nodded at her realization; I couldn’t have agreed more.

I found this lesson of our time on earth being so unpredictable to be one of the toughest pills to swallow. In fact, I believe it’s one many people have a hard time consuming. We take for granted many special things in life, but often, “when one is confronted ... with a situation where their life is in jeopardy, appreciation for this benefit may result because they have become more aware of what might not be” (Frias 155). Although my life itself was not in jeopardy, witnessing the life of someone I love coming to an end made me appreciate these benefits just as much: “Perhaps when individuals become aware that life is a benefit that is not a given, they gain an appreciation and gratitude for the life that they have” (Frias 154). This day taught me just that. Death can creep up suddenly, no one ever really knows the hand they will be dealt in life. Perhaps the lesson I learned most from my nonno, and his Scopa deck, is that we must not wait for our cards to run out to enjoy the precious things that we have.

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## **From the Bottom of a Bottle to High in the Sky**

LYDIA ANDRE

**I**T IS five-thirty a.m., I am in my quiet hotel room. My hair is pinned back perfectly, my makeup is flawless, my heels are polished. In over an hour I will be back in the sky flying from one part of the country to another. I wheel my suitcase, meet my crew in the lobby, remembering how I got here.

I spent the first half of my second year of college going to class with a water bottle filled with vodka while my head was in the clouds. I was never “good” in math, yet here I was in an accounting class. I really didn’t know why I was there; I think I was trying to prove something. My parents saved to pay for my education—I had to go to college. I would sit in my class completely confused about what was going on. Business school was a safe bet. I could get my diploma in two years, and I would be able to use that diploma as a starting point. The goal was to just get through it. After that, I could go anywhere. The problem was, I didn’t want to be there. No amount of willpower could persuade me enough to engage with the material. I was constantly distracted and becoming more miserable as each semester dragged on.

Every day before class, I would fill up my black water bottle with enough vodka and club soda to get me through class. It was always vodka and club soda, my “water,” as if I was fooling anyone. However, by maintaining a steady buzz, I had the energy to attempt to go to class.

What I didn't realize was that with every drink I lost more and more respect for myself; I wasn't fooling anyone.

The last day I went to class my professor asked to speak to me after the lecture. I used to spend the summers in her yard running and playing hide and seek. My best friend was her niece. She watched me grow up. She came up to me at the end of class. Disappointed she says: "Lydia, what happened with that assignment? You're late again." She didn't appear mad, only sad as if she had lost me.

"I know, I didn't hand it in yet, I will get it to you," I said weakly.

"You're failing this class. I can help you catch up, but you will have to make changes and get serious." Her kindness was apparent, even if I was avoiding eye contact.

In high school, I would always do well. Everything came easily to me. Even in math, which I disliked, I could manage an acceptable grade. College had higher academic expectations. Suddenly the effort that produced good grades in high school yielded pitiful results in college.

Dropping out was not the plan I had in mind. Armed with the guilt of wasting my parents' money on tuition, and the knowledge that I really could have done better, I created an alcohol-induced blanket of self-loathing. Even though I was self-medicating with alcohol I kept going to work. I was highly functional despite my self-destructive actions. I downplayed failing out of college by saying that I had bigger dreams and could not see myself confined to an office. Ironically, I found myself confided in a cubicle of a call-centre job.

Every day, I would robotically recite my script: "*Bell Canada Bonjour, je m'appelle, Lydia. Comment puis-je vous aidez?*" I would assist angry customers by day and be resentful by night. My drinking increased to a point that it was no longer about having fun or as an escape. I found a grey area in which I was able to go to work on time, pay my bills, and look presentable, despite being deeply unhappy. Dr Jessica Gregg, an associate medical professor at the University of Oregon Health and Science explains grey-area drinking: "Someone's not so far into their drinking that their body is dependent ... they're not in the severe end of the spectrum, but they are drinking in a way that makes their life worse, as opposed to better." My parents did their best to persuade me to go



back to school and would often pry to figure out what I was planning to do with my life, knowing I would not thrive working in a call centre.

On a whim I Googled how to become a flight attendant. The idea of drowning my surroundings with alcohol lost its appeal. Two companies were hiring without any prior experience: WestJet, and Air Canada Jazz. I hitched a ride from Cornwall to Ottawa to interview for WestJet. I walked into a room and saw glamorous, professional, beautiful women. Women who were dressed in white blouses and pencil skirts, their hair pinned back. They looked like flight attendants. They had answers to the question “If you were a kitchen utensil, what would you be and why?” All I could think of was “I’m a whisk! Something capable of creating messes.” No, I didn’t get that job, but the rejection lit a fire in me so bright that I was determined to get the next. I refused to return to sitting in a cubicle.

The interview with Air Canada Jazz was six weeks later. During that time, I learned about their fleet, studied aviation, put down the booze, and went to the gym. I saw the opportunity for a life of adventure, and I knew I would have had to put in the work to achieve it; I started to really enjoy the process. My parents drove me the six hours to Toronto. We didn’t speak much in the car, but I could feel their apprehension. I knew this would be my redeeming moment. I walked into my second aviation interview with confidence and determination. This time, I looked the part. I wore my best white blouse, fitted skirt, and my hair pinned back with confidence and a smile. I left that interview with a training-class date feeling proud. Bursting into tears, I ran into my parents’ car, screaming, “I did it!” Two weeks later I moved into a hotel room.

Training consisted of long, irregular hours. We would fight fires, perform emergency CPR, practise land and water evacuations, swing crash axes, and study. We memorized announcements in both official languages. We would be quizzed daily. If you failed a quiz or were late, you were fired. There were drug tests and a firm zero-tolerance no-alcohol policy. In total, the training consisted of six weeks of in-class and on-the-aircraft testing, followed by two weeks of training flights. I still remember my first day in uniform as a qualified flight attendant, looking out the window—my head in the clouds as I smiled my biggest smile. I found my home.

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*Outpatient Addiction Treatment*, 28 May 2021.

## Swiss Army Knife

STEPHANIE ARBUCKLE

“STEPHANIE, YOUR thoughts?”  
I stop breathing for moment, my fingers gently lifting from my keypad.

“Uh, me?”

It was a dumb response. I was the only Stephanie in the strategy meeting that day. I was the only Stephanie, period.

“Yes, you!”

Our CEO flashes me a smile, his fluffy eyebrows raised as he waits attentively. The Directors mirror him and fall hush. My cheeks burn. My knowledge of the English language begins to wane, but something flows off the tip of my dried-up tongue. Something about taking a regular pulse, positive employee feedback, company culture. I throw in some corporate jargon for good measure. I need to sound more like them. I’ve never been called on during roundtable before. I am a voice in a crowded room.

When I finish, I contemplate adding my verbal contribution to the meeting minutes, but the details escape me. In an instant, they’re gone—a blatant reminder of how my nerves still swallow me from time to time, even now.

My title is Executive Assistant. Last week, our CEO—my boss—said my job description would soon include something having to do with management. Managing our people, project management, managing internal operations. Managing to tie my shoes in the morning. Managing

to pack a lunch. Something like that. In my last job, an eight-year stint, it was Overworked Administrative Assistant, and before that one, Bored Customer Service Representative, Pretty Good Waitress, Stable Slave, Unfulfilled Cashier. Other titles came before those ones, of course. High School Dropout. Runaway. Careless Bitch.

Fuck Up.

In 2006, if you were a high school dropout, educational reporting indicated that you were in the 9.5 percentile. That was me. Back then, dropouts statistically had the lowest income, often lived in poverty or close to poverty-stricken regions, and were “the leading burden on Canada’s welfare, health care, and prison systems” (Trypuc and Heller). I was never on welfare, nor was I a hospital regular, or ever put behind bars, much to mine and my parents’ relief. I was, however, a leading burden. My own, that is.

Our meeting wraps up. Chatter breaks out among the team as they zip up their laptop bags and wiggle into their coats, some leaving traces of lunch on the table as they slip out the door, others carefully packing up all evidence of their attendance. Moments earlier I was the voice in the room, but now I’m the EA again, and the EA deals with abandoned napkins, empty food boxes, and forgotten forks and knives. Furtherance looks like this. It makes two of the Directors uncomfortable, so they offer to stay and help. I smile and tell them to carry on. I couldn’t care less about rounding up dirty napkins. I spent the summer between college semesters shovelling thirty-two stalls of horse shit five days a week in thirty-degree heat. That was all before ten a.m., before the second turn-around, the second feeding, sweeping the two enormous barns, scrubbing thirty-two corner feeders, filling sixty-four water buckets and four outdoor troughs, and cleaning the worn-out leather on various bits of bridles and stirrup straps. If I skipped lunch, it was an eight-hour day at nine bucks an hour. Seventy-two bucks. I was skinny. Hungry. Poor.

When you’ve been poor once, you never forget what it feels like, even when you’re not poor anymore. I’ve merged into the middle class—the New Poor, the Rich Poor—ever so slowly in the past couple of years. My bills paid, my apartment spacious, my tummy and the tummy of my animals well fed. I drive a beat-up car that works most of the time. My investments are minuscule, but they exist. I’m supposed to be sick, or on

welfare, or in prison, or all three at various instances, with a tattoo inked into my thirty-three-year-old forehead that reads “Social & Economic Burden.” Somewhere along my path, I ditched that position title, too.

I return to my desk at our firm’s neighbouring office space across the street. It’s ten thousand square feet and counting, bustling with freshly graduated Analysts, up-and-coming Consultants and Directors, and Senior Managers alike. The halls that I once walked with my clueless, cowering head chirp with the friendly voices of familiar colleagues, now. I collect a handful of “heys,” “how are yous,” and “let’s catch up soon” as I shuffle past boardrooms and private offices, a steaming latte in hand. It’s one-thirty in the afternoon. I am halfway through a newsletter draft, with two urgent memos in the queue, a new policy outline tucked underneath the pamphlet I snatched up last week for my tenth-floor reno project. I have a candidate interview scheduled in an hour and a half, a process flow chart due in thirty minutes, and I have to pee. My dancing neurons numb all the parts of my brain that I loathe, lighting up all the parts that I love like Christmas in New York. Against all odds, this is what my job feels like. A globally renowned holiday in a globally renowned city.

“Steph, I need your creative superpowers. Do you have five?”

I don’t, but for our VP, it’s a yes.

I follow him into his office and sit on the leather chair in the corner, my long legs strung out across the carpet, crossed with toes pointed and pushing against his desk. I am awkward most of the time. I talk too fast when I’m brainstorming, stutter when I’m thinking out loud, curse often in small group meetings, and have a limited capacity to filter my mischievous humour. He knows this. They all do.

“I need your graphic design skills.”

He elaborates, rambling on about a visual for our advisory team, something for our new core competencies, our training and development initiatives. He’s drafted up a PowerPoint, but he tells me he hates it. It’s dull, he says, and he wants something flashy and original, something with my style, some kind of original that I can piece together in Canva. When it comes to digital design, I am self-taught, flying by the seat of my pants, ever uncertain, ever improving. With each request, I do only what I can—my best, on that particular day, at that particular time.

“And I know this is tight, but I want to present this in our Advisory meeting tomorrow afternoon. Will you be able to flip it back to me before then?”

“Um—ya, For sure. Of course. No prob. Tomorrow before lunch. Got it.”

I am not sure, nor do I have any idea what it’s supposed to look like, or what he wants it to look like. As usual, I will race through my research, briefly stew in a period of blank frustration, squeeze myself into hyper focus, and design something that is entirely new to me, the hours passing like minutes. I’ll have two hours in the AM. I decide I’ll make it work.

He claps his hands together and shouts enthusiastically.

“You’re the best, Steph! What would we do without you? You’re our fucking swiss army knife!”

I leave his office grinning. Another title to add to the list, and I think this one is my favourite.

Fucking Swiss Army Knife.

Yes.

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## **(Maladaptively) Daydreaming Through Life**

SOPHIA BARRIE

I WOULD say I see life through a particularly unique lens. I observe people; what they do, how they talk, what they find funny. Then they become characters in my head, their stories start to become like a movie, almost like a really good dream. It's somewhat confusing, but then again, you should try being in my *head*.

I've put a considerable amount of thought into what I do all day long, what makes me happy, what passes the time to makes me feel good and productive. But what if this activity, or habit, wasn't something that was necessarily "good" or "productive," at least in other people's eyes? What does everyone else do all day long? After careful examination, I figured it out. It's usually circling around, pacing wherever I can, which, from a distance, probably makes me look a bit like a crazy person. This is my "imagining thing." Pacing and pacing around my living room, around the table, chairs. This kind of activity would honestly be what I would consider my first vivid memory growing up.

So many parts of my life have been lived through a separate, imagined reality that I created in my mind. I have mastered a technique of romanticizing everything and everyone in my life, or who I wish was in my life. It's almost like formulating new personalities because of how I envision them acting out in my head. They could be so different.

Describing it is like a headache after concentrating on something really hard, concentrating for what Alexa Tsoulis-Reay says takes up "about sixty percent of their waking life." For people with maladaptive

daydreaming, that is. The easiest way to define my experience with it is dreaming while being fully awake or having a conversation with someone while a whole other scenario is happening in my mind simultaneously. It can be exhausting, but it makes life a hell of a lot more interesting.

Many of the people who have maladaptive daydreaming (MD) are also diagnosed with ADHD. I've never been diagnosed, but its similarities lie in the distractions from productivity at work and in school; as much as imagining is stimulating, it is also very distressing. Learning math, science, or pretty much any other subject, was an elevated level of difficulty for me—I never really learned much.

“Okay, start your homework,” my grade-five teacher Mr York said. I look on the board to see a bunch of jumbled numbers and letters, none of which I was familiar with. I look at my textbook and an immense amount of confusion hits my ten-year-old face.

“Wait, what did we learn?” I say to my classmate on the right side of me.

“Ha ha, that’s funny,” they told me. Then realizing I was serious, “Oh, look at the board.”

An entire forty-five-minute lesson being completely missed because I was so mentally absent. I was there, but I may as well not have been.

Sometimes it can be used for good, though. I once paced between the door of my room to my parents’ room, five inches apart, for five hours, going over the entirety of my *Willy Wonka* play, twice. I played Charlie and spent the whole break I had in between my dress rehearsal and show imagining it. Practising it. Until I heard the words, “Okay Sophia, it’s time to go.”

Some might find this kind of thing more than a little alarming. Sometimes it even unsettles me. Still, it’s helped teach me how to love and appreciate myself. The idea that I am creative enough to come up with the most ridiculous scenarios or imagine myself in a future or past setting in my head for almost the entirety of my life without getting bored, is my greatest form of personal creative expression, really.

As a young girl, my mom took videos of me just walking around the playroom looking at my hands with my whole body going into an unknowing shake. This was to help my paediatric neurologist understand



what I was doing. "It's a form of a tick," the neurologist said. "She'll grow out of it once she becomes socially aware." Researchers Nirit Soffer and Eli Somer put a group of people with the "disorder" in a test where each of the participants averaged about four hours of daydreaming per day. The participants' ages ranged from eighteen to sixty. So, I'm not sure I'll grow out of it. However, social awareness surely kicked in.

Kids observe everything, and always have something to say. So, you can bet kids noticed when I acted on my urge to constantly go into this state of mind—one when I look either freezing or pre-seizure.

"Are you cold?" my classmate says while we wait in line at the end of recess.

"No, not really," I replied.

"Oh...." She turns around half embarrassed, half puzzled.

I was asked this question so frequently, no matter the actual temperature, that I just started playing around with my answers to get a fun reaction. I never really cared that people noticed, because well, how could you not.

I hardly realized how aware my friends were until we joked about it in high school. There was a video they took of me in grade nine at lunch where I had a piece of cafeteria pizza in one hand and a big chocolate-chip cookie in the other. Throughout the video I concentrate on another video with intense focus. As I'm watching the video, both items are shaking like a leaf while I laugh, not at all being aware that this is what I looked like. After watching that video of myself, I became socially aware.

Maladaptive daydreaming is a condition that makes a person go into a fantasy or daydream-like mindset for extensive periods of time throughout the day. I had a lot going on in high school within my personal life, so much of which MD helped me through. Sometimes I would visualize myself on vacation, or taking fun photos, being with my friends and looking cool. This distraction made a difference.

Jayne Bigelson, a maladaptive daydreamer, co-authored a paper where ninety people anonymously wrote about their experience with MD. One woman from Oregon explains it as "An addiction to fantasy." During darker times of my life especially, this "addiction to fantasy" became my own main escape from reality, trying to make sense of

everything that was going on by trying to imagine a lifestyle I genuinely wanted to wake up to. Honestly, I think that this saved me from becoming even more depressed than I was, just for the basic fact that an alternative, more ideal reality was playing in my head for most of the time.

“Okay, you have the house to yourself, which I’m sure you’re happy to hear,” Mom says.

“Woohoo! Thank God,” I responded. Not because I got to have free range and would get to throw a party for myself, but because I had quiet, uninterrupted time to imagine and fully embrace this “tick” or addiction, whatever it should be called. It’s like a relief when I get the house to myself.

It’s interesting to research this not-so-common disorder, as many articles and discussions are mainly negative, especially the ones written by people who haven’t experienced it. It is tied to multiple mental illnesses and experiences with trauma, Erica Cirino writes in her *Healthline* article. The trauma and mental-illness experience I have had in my life have influenced the amount of time I would spend daydreaming, but I wouldn’t say these forces have caused it. I also wouldn’t say it scares me when I read articles like this, but it does make me ponder.

I was so young when my daydreaming emerged—and what’s even more interesting it is a habit that both my brother and I share.

“I picture myself making the basketball players’ plays, or what they’re going to do next,” he explains. His “imagining thing” looks the same as mine, aggressively shaking, but with his arms crossed like an X over his chest instead of straight down at the sides.

We have both done the same thing our whole lives, envisioning different scenarios, leaping back and forth between alternate realities. Like me, he also says it’s “my favourite thing to do.” I always found comfort in this. Although I never found it alarming that I had these urges and intense daydreams, knowing that he does the same thing, and enjoys it too, makes us understand each other better. “Maladaptive” is the chosen word, which implies something negative. I always knew that this was viewed as a questionable “activity,” since it’s not every day that

someone tells you they prefer the inside of their head to real-life interactions, but you know, I guess I'm still waiting to grow out of it.

I can't imagine one day I woke up and these realities were gone for me. I know I'd be so bored, and it would take a lot of time to adjust. Maybe I would concentrate better though, maybe I wouldn't have to ask someone to repeat what they said three times. But then I'd have to pick a new favourite thing to do. I can't imagine anything being more fun than creating a separate life for yourself that you can click into anytime you want; can you?

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## My Brain Has a Mute Button

CAITLIN BINGHAM

**A**DHD STANDS for *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*, a complex brain disorder that impacts brain development and activity, and causes problems that affect attention, the ability to sit still, and self-control. Although it is one of the most common childhood neuro-developmental conditions globally, my diagnosis only came when I was fifteen.

From the outside looking in, I've always been a space cadet—someone whose head is constantly in the clouds, always forgetting something, and who is covered in bruises from tripping over my own two feet. Although I always knew something was different about me, I could never figure out exactly what that was. When I was six, I spent my entire first year of grade school believing that I had superpowers because of my unexplainable ability to mute the world around me. When this so-called mute button went off, my eyes stayed focused on whatever I was supposed to be looking at, and then my mind begins to wander. The thoughts in my head are louder than the voices of the people around me, leaving me unable to hear or focus on anything else.

I often found my powers to kick in at the worst possible times. Like when I had to memorize lines for a play, or steps for dance class, or the coach's game-plan in hockey. Or my mom's list of chores. I couldn't control when this so-called mute button would go off, but I was convinced that I would soon be able to learn how to control it—just like

the superheroes' coming-of-power stories I read about in comic books. I always felt that all I needed was some time and maybe more practice.

I was able to keep my superpower a secret until I was fifteen and failing grade-ten math. One night at dinner, after completing a particularly difficult test at school that day, my mom nervously turned to me and said, "Ms Mackasey called and asked us if we've thought about getting you tested." A few weeks later, I found myself sitting in a children's psychiatrist's office. The space was exactly how I imagined it to be: light grey walls, an oversized dark grey couch, and what felt like hundreds of brightly coloured inspirational words hung all around the room. Little did I know at the time that I would be sitting on that big grey couch for the next four consecutive afternoons. Each day was like the last, always starting with the doctor calling me into her office and ending with an excruciating number of hours spent playing memory games—especially for a girl who never wins at them.

Two weeks after my final session, the doctor called my back for a meeting to discuss her results. We were called into her room as soon as we arrived at the office, each taking a seat on that large grey couch I knew so well. Before anyone could say anything, the doctor handed me a document as thick as my copy of *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. Written at the top of the first page, in thick bold print, stated, "Concerning attention, Caitlin currently meets criteria for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—predominantly inattentive presentation." Relieved to finally know why I felt different my whole life, all I said at that moment was "Wow."

Immediately after reading those words, my mom started to cry. Although I'm not entirely sure why she responded that way. I think she was hard on herself for not seeing the signs earlier. I couldn't blame her for being so upset because a big part of me wishes someone saw the signs earlier, too. Even now, I can't help but think that maybe if I had known about my ADHD sooner, I could have taken control of my mute button entirely. I could have been an actor who remembers her lines, a dancer who knew the steps, a hockey player who understood the rules, and a daughter who did all her chores. Instead, I was a fifteen-year-old who wasn't particularly good at anything—especially math.

“There are options, you know,” my psychiatrist said, to break the awkward silence over the sounds of my mom crying.

Remembering that my mom is a regular on Facebook, the site full of opinion sharers, I wasn't at all surprised to hear her reply: “I'm interested to learn about the options right now, but please, for the love of God, do not put my girl on stimulants. I've been reading everywhere lately. They're no good.”

“Right now, there are two main treatment options for ADHD: stimulants and therapy,” the doctor replied. “Stimulants work by increasing the amount of dopamine and norepinephrine in one's body and brain. This increase in brain chemicals makes a person feel more alert, focused, energetic, and awake. Some side-effects include sleep problems, decreased appetite, weight loss, increased blood pressure, dizziness, and moodiness, to name a few.” As the list of side effects grew, so did the size of my mom's eyes—I watched how they widened with each word. I could tell that the doctor sensed her discomfort by how quickly she switched up the conversation topic.

“But therapy,” she added, “is a wonderful starting option. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, commonly referred to as CBT, is a form of psychotherapy that challenges negative thinking patterns. It's like brain training for people with ADHD.”

“Side effects?” my mom asked.

“Practically none,” the doctor replied.

These seemingly innocent sentences sent me into a long six months of holistic therapies that focused on colour coordinating my to-do lists, using monotone sound-to-speech features on my laptop, and fidget toys. I thought to myself that maybe these methods would have worked when I was younger, but right now, my mute button was still going off, and I knew that no amount of fluorescent sticky notes would be able to fix that. I began recounting the memory of what she said at my last psychiatrist appointment, I finally brought up the courage to tell my mom that I was ready to try ADHD medication. All that worry was for absolutely nothing because she supported my decision and accompanied me to my doctor's office that afternoon.

“We're gonna start you off on eighteen milligrams of Concerta, alright?” my doctor said to me as she typed the prescription into her shiny

new MacBook. “Try this for a month and then come back to see me,” she said, while practically running out of the room to see her next patient of the day.

The next morning, I nervously ate my breakfast before washing down my very first pill with some orange juice. About an hour later, I was sitting in my first-period English class, a subject that almost always set off my mute button. But today, I read along to *Macbeth* and followed the storyline so closely that I was able to raise my hand in class—something I’ve never been able to do before. The indescribable feeling of the effect of taking my medication for the first time can only be compared to that of putting glasses on someone who can’t see for the first time. There’s no longer a blurry line between reality and the ones I make up in my head. ADHD medication gave me the opportunity to become the student, friend, daughter, and person I always knew I could be and that’s something that no amount of post-it notes, to-do lists, or fidget toys could ever have done.

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## The Prospect of Marriage in Stanley Park

TRACY BISHOP

**P**ROSPECT POINT is lovely in the summer. At least it was on the warm, sunny August day that Morgan and Ky got married.

“What do you think about our new status as in-laws?” I ask Jack on the flight home to Ottawa.

He turns his head to meet my gaze and answers softly, “I think we are in-laws—we are the same people we were yesterday.”

I look out the tiny porthole to the outside and stare at the wispy clouds as we leave the newly married kids, the Pacific Ocean, and Rockies of British Columbia behind us.

From the moment we exit the airport—we know we have entered the welcoming and lush embrace of the aptly described beautiful British Columbia. It’s a perfect day, no rain, just blue sky and sunshine. Everything about this place speaks to its calm and natural setting. The smell of fresh Pacific air is pleasant, and as we leave the airport, I manage to take in a couple of long deep breaths on the leisurely walk to the Canada Line Rail platform. On the ride to our lodgings, I gaze at the majestic mountains in the distance while my mind wanders to thoughts of our daughter’s upcoming wedding. It has only been a few short months since Morgan and Ky first told us their news. I think back to my reaction to their announcement and how I tried to act cool about it—but my congratulations fell flat. I want to offer words of encouragement; instead, I think about how it seems like it was just yesterday that Morgan surprised us with her plans to leave Ontario to attend the University of



British Columbia. I also think about how young they are, and that forty percent of marriages end in divorce. My husband is a man of few words and appears unaffected by the upcoming event, so we don't talk much about it—except for time spent discussing travel plans for the occasion. I wonder to myself if all parents feel ambivalence behind their smiles when their children tell them they are getting married or if I'm simply not ready for this mid-life turn of events. I feel myself being drawn into reasons to be happy for our daughter when I'm jolted back into my surroundings.

“This is our stop,” Jack says as he touches my arm. My gaze turns to the train doors and back to my husband and we briefly exchange glances as we make our way outside, ready to close one chapter and enter a strange new one. It's hard to believe that within a few short hours of leaving the humidity of the nation's capital that we are here in Vancouver wandering past its bountiful front yard gardens, Japanese snowbells, spruce, and cherry trees only minutes away from the markets of Granville Island.

Suddenly we are talking about the logistics of getting to Stanley Park in time for the wedding. During the planning we decide that time constraints rule out our usual beloved ferry ride to Vancouver Island. After a couple of brief visits with the kids and a lovely meal at Earl's Kitchen and Bar near the Vancouver Harbour with our soon-to-be in-laws—it's time to prepare for the ceremony.

Today is the day, and the clear sunlit weather provides the perfect conditions to be married within the rainforest of Stanley Park. Prospect Point is serene, and we are surrounded by centuries-old western red cedars, maple, and fir trees that look out onto the jewel-blue Burrard Inlet—mountains perched across the distant shores. Morgan's long red dress with dainty mother-of-pearl buttons sewn on the front of the waistline is lovely, while her husband looks dashing in his grey suit and red bow tie. She is a student at UBC, and he is a bike mechanic, and together they look young and happy. The guests wear colourful and festive clothing, and wander casually around the grounds talking and laughing with one another. The ceremony is relaxed, and the single golden sunflower that Morgan holds looks charming against the green backdrop of the enormous red cedars and firs. I can see the sadness in

Jack's green eyes, the same green as our daughters, and I know by the way his sculptured jawline is tightening that he is struggling to let go of his little girl. After the vows are exchanged, customary photographs are taken within beams of sunlight shining through clusters of trees. The ancient-looking etchings of the silver Celtic Warrior ring we surprised Morgan with contrasts beautifully with the Indigenous wedding band her husband placed on her finger. Later friends and family gather around to tell personal stories about the couple as we eat a light meal in the shade of the rustic picnic area. We spot some familiar faces and meet new ones as our circle and love expands and we join each other's communities within the sanctuary of sacred trees and mountains. I embrace my husband to lessen the grief I can see behind the mask of his happiness.

Later, as we hug the kids and gather for the reception at a local Craft Beer Market, we accept our new roles as parents. Morgan is now a married adult and Ky is now our son-in-law. As I look across the table, I wonder how his parents feel while we smile and exchange pleasantries. They look so pretty in their blue suit and floral dress as they laugh and talk with their friends seated around them. There is no question that Ky's family and friends are amenable. In this I find comfort, as I know his moms will be kind co-parents. I decide that I like the people we have met at this special gathering; I can see that this is a good community, and that the kids are going to find their way. After customary hugs and goodbyes to Morgan and Ky, we leave the restaurant hand-in-hand, making our way out into the Vancity night. As one chapter closes another begins.

Wandering through the airport we stop to admire Bill Reid's Spirit of the Haida Gwaii jade canoe and the red cedar carvings made by the Nuu-cha-nulth people. I look over at Jack. His shaved head harkens back to his army days; he's handsome and rugged, and today his lightly lined and grey stubbled face is content as we prepare to board our plane. I ask him if he's going to be okay and he tells me he's well, ready to go home while also ready to return here to BC where our daughter and son-in-law await—a place that each of us will return to and once again hug our daughter anew.

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## Discovering My Purpose

VANESSA BOUTIN

**I**T WAS scorching outside, and it had been for the past week. Sweat beaded down my forehead and coated my back as I travelled up and down a twenty-foot ladder with another pack of roofing shingles thrown over my shoulder every time. We had been working on the barn for a little over a month and were finally approaching the final details. After finishing the shingles on the traditional barn-style roof, we would put up green siding that matches the house and garage, then start on the interior design. This was not the first time I assisted my dad in his building projects, but it was the one that started what would later inspire my future. After the completion of the barn, we would later construct a chicken coop, keep poultry and swine, and clear nearly fifty acres of untouched land intended for cattle in the vast backyard of Northern Ontario.

When I was younger, I relished the land I call my home. The many lakes and large forests that surround the city of Timmins and encompass the lifestyle of Northerners are unlike anywhere else. As a kid, I had no care for who I was. Though, I remember always taking great pride in where I lived, a sentiment that became deeply rooted in me with the encouragement of my parents.

Over time, it becomes more apparent that many people born and raised in Northern Ontario feel a deep urge to leave it as soon as possible. Many of my high-school companions who have felt this way have left town, gone to college, and vowed never to return. Other than the small

cities, towns, and rural areas, there is nothing here. In most of our small communities, you cannot go ice skating through a town square, walk the mall with your friends until your feet hurt, or attend a festival.

I like to think that my family and I are some of the lucky ones who, by experiencing the wonders of Northern Ontario on our terms, have learned to love it despite its downfalls. In my youth, we used to leave our home in the small city of Timmins on Friday afternoons, arriving at our habitual campsite after approximately an hour of driving the winding highways out of Timmins. I used to sit in the backseat of my parents' Ford vehicles, relishing the moments when the city sights gradually turned into a scenery of birch, poplar, and evergreen trees alongside the highway. Our weekends consisted of late nights, campfires, fishing, and exploring the great outdoors.

At that time, I was but a kid who did nothing but enjoy life to its fullest. I often ask myself: what changed? For starters, I am no longer a kid. I now face reality in the eye every day knowing that I have discovered myself after many mistakes and overthinking. It took me years to develop a sense of what I want out of my life. Over the years, I have spent many restless hours sitting in silence, contemplating and debating what I was born to do. So, when it was finally time to choose a direction for this life of mine, I asked myself: where do I want to be in ten years? My answer: how cliché of me. The real question I had to ask was, who am I?

Attempting to take charge of my life, I sent applications to six universities during my last year of high school. I applied to locations both far and close to home and received enrolment offers and chances at scholarships that I did not think I could ever pass up. I was so close to going through with this next step in my life that I was one click away from accepting an offer of admission that would have taken me to a place over twelve hours away, by car, from my home. I sat there, staring at my university acceptance letter with the giddiness of a five-year-old staring at toys through a shop window. My life seemed to flash before my eyes and, realizing that I could not leave the only home I had ever known, I used a single click to close the browser tab. I was not ready to face that future yet.

So, I decided to stay, find myself, and continue to embrace the simplicity and serenity of Northern Ontario, where six percent of Ontario's overall population resides in 80% of the province's land. (Chapagain 1).

After much deliberation, I found myself seeking advice on how to approach this step of my life. I confided in my mother, who said: "Things do not always have to end up the way we've planned them, so remember that when you do find your role in this world." My friends also had their own words to suggest, such as "you shouldn't spend so much time reflecting, just wing it," or "you're good at so many different things, just pick one and be done." However, the piece of advice that stuck most was from my dad.

After a long and cold winter, spring had finally shown up, bringing above-freezing temperatures and melting the many feet of snow we had received. My dad and I were cording a truckload of logs when I turned to him and asked: "What do you see me doing with my life?"

At this, he stopped and turned to me. That was when he gave me the greatest piece of advice. He said: "I don't know what you want for yourself. But remember not to go into life blind, or else you'll fail. Know that there will be problems along the way and that they may stop you for a little while. But never give up, because perseverance is everything." Overall, everyone had given me great advice. But, it was my dad's words that impacted me the most.

Then, one day, not too long ago, as my dad and I were setting up for a long night, I finally realized who I was and what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. That night, our first gilt was in labour, and it was nearly time to welcome what would be ten, three- to four-pound newborn piglets into the world. Needless to say, the excitement I felt as we spent twelve hours with the first-time mother pig as she delivered the newest members of our farm was breathtaking. It was during that very night while experiencing the first of many of these occurrences, that I realized that what I want most in my future, is to become a farmer.

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## **Fur a Lifetime**

### **The Journey of Getting a Puppy and How She Broke My Walls Down**

SAMANTHA BUNDGAARD

“AND ... MARLEY wins the puppy school training test!” the dog trainer exclaims to the class of twenty people. My puppy won ... my puppy? Marley is sassy, has boundless energy, and is absolutely bonkers, but oh boy, will she perform well for treats. I had gone to elaborate puppy training for the last six weeks. At age twenty-one, I was the youngest puppy owner in that class by far. Of course, I was self-cautious when I could tell eyes were glaring over at me. From the start, I was proving to myself and to others that I could do this. Marley is now fifty-five pounds of gingery brown-and-white fur, bursting with love and light.

“They look like little pigs!” was the first thing my brother squealed when we laid eyes on the litter of nine, three-day-old puppies. I had thought the same thing.

“Aren’t puppies supposed to be cute?” my mom had whispered to her herself.

“They sure sound like little pigs,” I giggled to my brother.

My aunt and uncle own a dairy farm filled with animals. I had spent my childhood here. I remember riding dirt bikes with my three very boyish cousins and searching for eggs on Easter. I loved it here. There were no TVs, phones or video games, we had to genuinely be in nature, and I cherish that.



About a month before the puppies were born, my uncle sent me a picture of Heidi, his very pregnant golden lab. He knew I had been searching for a puppy, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, puppies were hot commodities. I could be put on a waitlist for two years or pay five thousand dollars for one. So, when my uncle offered me a free puppy, how could I refuse?

My mom didn't want me to get a dog, and she did not keep her opinions to herself. My mom grew up petrified of animals. A scary black dog had bit her as a kid and she could not connect to animals in the ways I have. I could not blame her for not understanding my need for animal companionship. I felt safe and loved without conditions around animals. Studies have shown that bonds between humans and dogs have had a significant beneficial impact on humans' mental and physical health: "Dogs and cats in particular give an abundance of pleasure" (Walsh). They elicit a sense of wonder, curiosity, and excitement, as well as a culture of openness. Pets provide soothing relief from life's storms, especially in these uncertain times of global threats (Walsh).

Awaiting Marley's arrival, I had a conversation with my mom a few weeks before bringing my new puppy home. We were sitting at the dinner table scarfing down fettuccine alfredo when I asked my mom, "Why don't you want me to get a dog?"

She replied, "It is just not a choice I would have made at such a young age or wanted you to have to be tied down at twenty-one".

My mom had spent her twenties travelling the world, The thing is with me, once I get an idea in my head, I find it hard to let it go. I am not saying I am proud of this trait in any way. It feels like I have an invisible box around my body. No matter what anyone else says, their words can't penetrate the walls of the box. Whether stubborn, or just determined, I knew I wanted this puppy. End of story.

I rarely listen to my mom's opinions about my decisions. It was hard to talk to her about getting a dog because she did not budge even after I explained all the reasons that led me to my decision to get Marley. We got in a brutal fight one day. She screamed, "you're so stubborn!" when she doesn't get her way. This usually pisses me off and we spiral. I read a book called *101 Essays that Will Change the Way You Think*. It is a self-help book. I love self-help books. Understanding how, why, or when

we act or speak intrigues me. This book highlighted the fact that what we dislike most about other people is what we dislike most about ourselves (Wiest). When my mom yelled at me, that exact sentence slipped out of my mouth. And if you know anything about stubborn people, they don't like to be called stubborn.

We were getting in fights more and more as the days got closer to bringing the puppy home. Fights are tough, they take a lot of energy out of me. Most of the fights were about the puppy. To be honest, I do have walls built up around me to block out other people's opinions. But I was truly scared as hell to raise a puppy all alone. I had done a bunch of research, but who knows? I could be getting some crazy dog like the one who had bit my mom.

I was visiting the farm every week to see the little pigs grow into fuzzy fur babies. We have no real clue what the breed is for sure. We think they're collie, lab, and rottweiler, but I'm sure there's a mix of everything in those farm puppies. A week after they were born, I had to choose my puppy! I had known which one was going to be mine from the first time I saw them. This tiny little blonde, black, and brown puppy had stood out among the rest of the black ones. I knew she was mine. I then named her Marley.

Six months into bringing Marley home I asked my mom if she thinks my decision was right. She answered, "I love her, she has matured you, opened you up, having her is like having a baby. I would not have done the same thing, though." My mom and I rarely agree on anything, so I didn't care that she said she wouldn't do the same thing because I know she wouldn't have. I agree with her, though. I had to open up, let people offer help, and give me advice for once. Psychologists say that stubbornness is a defensive strategy that children exhibit when their freedom feels threatened. This can happen when people's parents are too controlling or possessive (Kets de Vries). I love my parents, but they had certain expectations for how my life would play out which came off as controlling in many situations.

Marley came home with me and changed my world. She drove me nuts, peed everywhere all the time, ate my shoes to shreds, and gnawed on my fingers like a chew toy. But *ohmygawd* she was cute. It has now been ten months since I picked her up from the farm and she has changed

me for the better. Although I'm still stubborn, Marley was the key to my opening up. Slowly but surely, she has slowly chewed away at the walls of the box I had spent a lifetime building around me.

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## A Mother's Due Diligence

MEG CARUANA

I GAZE up at the pink piggy bank that sits on the book shelf of my childhood bedroom. I am twenty-one years old now and sitting on the edge of my polka-dot bean-bag chair I feel overwhelmed by the memorabilia and miscellaneous knick-knacks that clutter the room. The pink piggy bank has sat in that very same spot for the last six years, and these days, it collects more dust than coins. Prior to life on the shelf, the piggy bank resided in an old leather suitcase. In its company were other home-made gifts my grandfather had made himself, and sent to my parents as presents for my brother, Mack, and I, all during his three-month stint in Australian state prison. This suitcase was originally underneath my parents' king-sized bed until quite recently. In all of my years of living in our family home, I had only ever needed to once lift up the draping comforter to discover it. Unaware of the suitcase, I was even more unaware of its contents. It was the home of a small collection of personalized, hand-made crafts, and some barely legible cards written in my Papa's chicken scratch. For sixteen years, my parents slept atop a musty leather suitcase of secrets and silences that I never even knew existed. That was of course until my Aunty Annie indulged in a few too many glasses of white wine and, through slurred words, revealed the truth behind my grandfather's absence.

Throughout Mack and I's childhood years my mum was reminded of her decision to keep my Papa's conviction hidden from the two of us each time she vacuumed. She now openly expresses that her role as a

mother and a daughter, both protector and protectee, often left her at odds, wincing each time the head of the vacuum hit the base of that suitcase underneath the bed. An unavoidable reminder of hostage secrets, and a subsequent questioning of whether or not my mum was doing the right thing in keeping those secrets from us. If only the fallout from my grandfather's conviction could be sucked up, discarded, and forgotten like the dust bunnies beneath the bed.

“Frederick Richard Heinze, 57, of Dandenong North, was found guilty of six charges, including false accounting, obtaining financial advantage by deception, making a false document, and perjury” (Person). This *Australian Age* article was dated September 24th, 2004. Written when I was just four years old. Twelve years later, in March of 2016 while on a family trip to Australia, I read the article for the first time. At sixteen, it only took me five short minutes to resolve twelve years of uncertainty and deception. I read the article and met the harsh and unwelcoming reality of its contents. Crouched in the dark in a corner of my aunt's home while everyone else slept, I became consumed by the endless information at the touch of my fingertips. I dove off a platform of safety, of everything I thought I knew, into deep and abrasive waters of truth.

The article outlined a truth that was stated so directly that I could hardly argue against its validity. It continued to include a quoted court transcript; a judge's sentencing; a first, last, and middle name; and a home town which I knew belonged to my mother. The words were harsh, blunt, and painful. I sat in that dark corner dumbfounded. I didn't quite know how to process any of this new information. I had always known my grandfather was a character, a strong personality who spoke unapologetically without filter. A man who would spend the entire day in the middle of the ocean fishing, and who would make up some elaborate excuse about the “shitty bait” if he returned home without catching any fish. A man who would lose his temper at a Macdonald's drive-thru if he couldn't get roasted tomatoes on his toasty. I began to realize that the “ah, good ol' Freddy” reactions when these stories were told was perhaps not so benign. The chuckles were always short, but the shaking heads of my parents, aunts, and uncles continued long after the stories were finished.

This newly acquired familial truth left me questioning the validity in all the positive experiences I had shared with my grandfather. As a child, when my Papa would come to visit, each day he would give my brother and I money so that we could walk to the nearest Seven-Eleven and purchase Slurpees. On holiday, as we all sat around the dinner table, he would turn his back for a brief moment and rear his head, this time only to be sporting a dentureless smile. We would laugh and giggle as he told the waitress he was ordering two scoops of ice cream while he simultaneously held up all five fingers on his right hand. As a young child I watched as Papa stopped and rolled down his window to talk to the homeless men begging on the street. He was the first to listen and offer an uplifting comment or joke.

The information that I read in the *Australian Age* distorted the image of my charming, humorous, and generous Papa. In a quick five minutes he became a fraudster, an imposter, and a Robin Hood gone wrong. He stole from the poor and gave to himself (Ansley 1). I learned in an unexpected flash that there was far more behind the twinkly, inquisitive eyes and sarcastic humour of my grandfather. That those shaking heads of family members in reaction to stories of his short temper and propensity to bend the truth were perhaps the sad confirmation of his more sinister character.

Most Web sites that offer guidance on the ways to cope with the criminal conviction of a family member suggest allowing yourself a grieving period. It is a grief of the physical absence of that person while they are locked away. Yet, for my brother and I, the period of physical absence had already passed, and I began to grieve the idea of a man who I thought that I knew. In doing so, I became distant and untrustworthy. I wouldn't pick up on birthdays that he remembered to call and I would dodge his e-mails at Christmastime. I held no resentment towards my parents, who I had always just understood were trying to do the right thing by Mack and I. My relationship to my Papa became encapsulated in a bubble. It was like I had access to all of our memories and I could reflect on our past relationship, but it felt as though neither would ever be tangible again. Two years after the "reckoning" when I was about eighteen, on our next trip back to Australia I had tried to open up to my grandfather and get close again. However, it felt like every organ in my

body would clench up like a fist each time I shared words with him at a family function or gave him a hug goodbye. I understand now that this was my anger and pain. A battle between wanting to allow myself to love and trust again but being unable to do so. A desire to see my Papa with the rose-coloured glasses from before, but just not being able to shake the black tint that they now possessed. This conflict was where the true grief lay.

Once the truth came out and we could talk about it all, my mother began to reflect on her experience and the impact the conviction had on her. My mum recalls that on the first Saturday of my Papa's trial my parents drove my six-year-old brother and four-year-old me to the hockey rink to watch our neighbour play. On the Wednesday that my twenty-seven-year-old aunt testified that Freddy did knowingly overstate the value of his company's assets, my parents took us to Marineland. On the Tuesday of his conviction and sentencing of three months jail time, my mother wept on the phone, ordered take-out pizza, and wedged herself between the grubby legs of my brother and I to watch *Finding Nemo*, the story of a lost fish who attempts to find his way back to his father. An irony lost on us. When we visited Australia, my mother's homeland, and asked why Papa wasn't at Christmas lunch, my parents responded that he was stuck, working ... in the outback of Australia. On Boxing Day of 2004, when my parents secretly visited my grandfather behind bars, Mack and I were jumping, blissfully unaware, on the new trampoline that Santa had gifted our cousins. Looking back now, it's clear as day that not all was as it seemed. What were fond, formative, and loving memories for Mack and I, were dark and painful ones for my parents.

While his time in prison was short, the impact of my Papa's conviction lingered long past his time served. His actions destroyed the marriage between himself and my nana, sibling alliances were formed, and family ties became severed. Legal fees depleted the Heinze family bank accounts and they were soon sucked drier than Australia in the peak of its drought. My mother's childhood home was repossessed and, perhaps most jarring, the man everyone thought they knew became a stranger. These were the realities we all faced as a family. Realities that

were buried and hidden in suitcase underneath my parents' bed, shielded from the eyes and ears of my brother and I.

The piggy bank that sits on my shelf is shaped like a pig. It is made up of dried clay and holds about fifteen Australian dollars. This piggy bank is the only physical evidence from my trip there in 2016. The pig's surface, while shiny, possesses a rigid texture that owes itself to my grandfather's imperfect brush strokes. Obviously he would start, and then stop midway, and begin again nearing the bottom. These are tell-tale footprints of cheap paintbrushes, perhaps, or clay that was not properly dried before being painted. Beggars can't be choosers in prison, I suppose. There is a small crack that sits in between the pig's snout and eyes, presumably damaged on the trip to Canada. Air Mail is no risk-free mode of transportation. The shock of realization now past, I find myself thinking that this pig, in all of its well-meaning imperfection, is akin to my grandfather. It is charming in its appearance. It is comedically self-referencing in its pig form. It is Jolly in its pink hue. It is inviting, even, to onlookers, but only lends a small slit of its body to hold space for the valuables of others. It possesses a slight smile, big enough to provoke my own, but not quite wide enough to conjure a laugh out of me. The pig is a vault. It possesses no rubber stub to open on its belly, and the only way to get to its contents is to smash it with a hammer.

This past December I returned to Australia for Christmas once again. With arms open wide and conversation available to me, I found that my engagement with my Papa was far less strained than it had been years prior. Freddy pulled the same denture joke, ate way too much dessert, and told us how the grocery store was out of ham (the only item he was required to bring). Over ice-cream cake, Papa told me that he had listened the recent vulnerable episode of a podcast I had been on and that he was very proud of me. As I sat at the table across from him I smiled as I realized, "Ah, yes ... same old Freddy." Finally let in on the secret, I too now understood the simultaneous love and frustration you can possess for someone. That reality and the truth doesn't necessarily have to ruin a relationship, but it can add depth and meaning. With that, I have been thinking that I may be ready to begin investing in the piggy bank again.



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## Calamity to Convalescence

SARAH CAZA

**M**IDWAY THROUGH the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, my significant other accepted an internship in the oil and gas fields located near Fort McMurray of northern Alberta, Canada. Once we moved there, as a result of the pandemic and having to stay home all the time, all aspects of my life had suddenly shifted to being delivered almost completely digitally. This made the decision to go to Fort McMurray pretty easy since the classes I was taking also switched to online. I ended up working from home full time as well, and hardly saw the light of day in the basement apartment we resided in. This was the first time I had been out west.

We were there for twelve months—and it was the longest twelve months of my life. We arrived in the middle of August, just a few weeks before my partner started his position as an engineering intern. That day, the downtown area had flooded as a result of excessive ice jams from the Athabasca River and caused major damage to a lot of stores and restaurants. I would be hesitant to call Fort McMurray a city, but its designation on maps suggest otherwise. This northern city is nestled in a bay, surrounded by the boreal forest, and sits at a lower elevation than most other parts of the province. And so, the water that pooled in the streets remained there for a long time before eventually draining away. Regrettably, there were also the black, remnant trees of the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire surrounding the entire landscape. There were no branches, no leaves, no hues of green in many sections of the city,

making it appear unforgiving. For me, this was heartbreaking to see. At this same time, however, this reminded me of how any journey of healing starts.

The first time I arrived at Fort McMurray, or any time I'd go for a walk after that, I kept envisioning the historic boreal that once would have surrounded me. I imagined spruce, white birch, aspen, and poplar trees grouped together overarching the city—at least that's what I wanted to see. Instead, my first impression was that of anguish.

"I want to grow a little garden," I told Vicente, my partner.

"We're living in a crypt." Vicente shook his head. At the time, the near future started to feel foreboding.

One of the evacuees, Therese Greenwood, of the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire, wrote a book about her experience abandoning everything she knew:

The morning's bright sun was gone. Midnight-black clouds hung low over rooftops—not clouds at all but smoke that infused the air with a cloying cedar-y incense. I could no longer hear the helicopters that buzzed overhead for days.... (Greenwood 20)

Although I didn't experience the wildfires myself, or have my home burned to the ground, my world as I knew it seemed to me to be collapsing under the pandemic. Greenwood's helicopters silenced by a fiery disaster were my highways and city buses silenced by the threat of contracting a deadly virus. The aftermath of the wildfires left the entire landscape of Fort Mac gloomier with black, branchless trees leaning towards the ground next to the streets. Going outside was a constant reminder of everything wrong with the world.

As the weeks went by, I saw the seasons flash before my eyes—literally. I had only gone out once per week for groceries and maybe some other errands. But every Sunday, I noticed the days becoming shorter and darker as we drove. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic was worsening; case numbers were skyrocketing across the world and, eventually, Fort McMurray ended up having one of the largest workplace outbreaks in the country since the pandemic began in 2019 (Yourex-West). In other words, more sick people meant having to stay

home more often. At this point, travelling was not a good idea and our families lived on the other side of the country.

The four o'clock AM alarm would blare every morning, making me jump a little. "Gosh, wake up, Vic, you got to get ready. I'll make breakfast."

Vicente would leave thirty minutes later, groggy as hell and I never blamed him. He'd be gone for fourteen hours each day and we didn't get to spend a ton of time together. And as time went on, I had essentially morphed into an antisocial, practically agoraphobic hermit—which ended up not being too surprising.

A study recently was done in Fort Mac to evaluate the mental health impacts of the disasters that have happened in the region since 2016: "The prevalence value for GAD (General Anxiety Disorder) among respondents was 41%" (Agyapong). The study found that the estimated risk for likely GAD was doubled after exposure to floods and the COVID-19 pandemic. I had become so used to being alone with only Vicente for parts of the day, I started to see the disconnect from my former life; I no longer had the urge to be out on the town or to visit anyone because I was getting used to being at home alone.

Once Vicente's internship was nearing its end and we were preparing to leave Alberta, the weather was getting warmer, and we were counting the days until we had to actually pack our things. The river thawed and the snow melted—but the aftermath of the pandemic snowballed us. It would have been naïve of me to think that life in a pandemic would have been anything but restricted.

However, after all my partner and I have experienced, alongside Fort McMurray, I began to recognize the memory of the place as a motif for resilience and healing: despite getting hit by catastrophe one after the other, nature and the communities have their ways of bouncing back. People are still bustling and commuting at all hours of the day, and the birds still chirp at dawn. And because so many were affected by the same misfortunes, it was not difficult to find an empathetic helping hand. The city is visibly scarred and would likely never look or feel like what it used to. But it's important to remember that healing takes time and isn't a flawless process. Things can get worse before they get better. I hope to see the world heal in the same way Fort McMurray would.

As we drove back to Ontario, I turned to Vicente and smiled. “Do you want to go back someday?” I giggled.

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## To Before, For After

EMILY CHRISTIAN

**I**T'S 6.32 a.m. when my dad clomps into the kitchen to make coffee.

He says to me, "You're up early."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I have anxiety?"

He scoffs. "Why?"

"I don't know."

It's 6.33 a.m., and I'm twenty-two years old. I spent all night shaking and shivering in a warm room. My stomach is stuffed full and twisted around and painfully empty. My bottom lip is perpetually torn, dry, and bloody, my nails chewed back to the quick, my neck and shoulders held in rigor mortis. My heart skips beats and beats too fast, every inhale is shaking, and every exhale is rushed. I stare at the wall all night and Before haunts my thoughts.

Before

My fourth-grade teacher dresses like an old lady, but I tell her I like her outfit so she'll like me. The next time I hyperventilated and sobbed and tried to break open my head on my desk, she still rolled her eyes and sent me to the office. The secretary used to call home, so someone could come get me, but Mom told them to stop, so now I just try and stay in the office for as long as I can. The principal looms over me and says, "I

don't understand why you're acting like this, Lily. You'll fall behind in class."

I find monsters in the pattern of the carpet, and remind her, again, my name is not Lily. I miss memorizing multiplication tables, I miss vocabulary words and cursive writing lessons, but I learn that there is something deeply wrong in me, and I have to hide this broken part of myself.

At home, Fergie comes on the radio. My mom says, "See, Emily? Hear what the song says? Big girls don't cry."

During

Seventeen, and my childhood best friend keeps me sitting in her driveway for an hour. It's late, past nine, and I'm tired. She's going on about some guy, or her teacher, or her newest diagnosis, or some other bullshit, when I realize: she doesn't know a single goddamn thing about me. She doesn't know my plans for university, or how my classes are going, or my job. Every text asks for a chauffeur, and she never wished me a happy birthday, and she has never, ever, asked how I'm doing. I end our lifelong friendship by not leaving her on read.

Nineteen, and I move out, and I figure out that if it can't go on a resume it isn't worth doing. I take science, because those are real jobs, and English for an elective, because I got ninety-six percent in grade twelve, so it'll boost my GPA. I need a part-time job to pay rent and to show that I can manage my time well, which'll sound good in interviews. I don't bother making friends, because I'm focused on school, and work, and "has friends" doesn't go on a resume.

Twenty, and the world ends. I try to learn organic chemistry by reading a blurry PDF of a textbook chapter, but I can't tell what's important, so I just write everything down. I sit down to study for half an hour and spend twenty-eight minutes zoning out. I tell myself that I just don't learn as well online.

Twenty-two, and I start going to an actual therapist, and I learned that just because I can justify why everyone treated that little girl the way they did (they just didn't know what to do, it's a generational thing, no one really understood it, there was too much other stuff happening and

this was the least important), she was still having near-constant panic attacks, and it's still bullshit that no one did anything.

October 18th, 2021, I call my dad and complain about a headache. He says I'm hungover from Reading Week. A doctor gives me something for migraines. A week and a half later, a different doctor shines a light into my eyes and tells me to just get some rest. I stop going to class, or handing in assignments, and I fail the semester. I'm stressed out, and my therapist tells me I need a break. A few weeks later he tells me I can't just do nothing.

Twenty-two, and I've had a headache for nearly sixth months straight, through birthdays and Christmas and final exams I couldn't write. I've cut off my sharp edges to keep the peace. I'm weighed down by all the burdens I carry for others that go unappreciated. I've tried to hide the broken parts of myself. It's just gotten me anxiety, a migraine, and insomnia. It's terrifying, and will probably hurt, and I don't know if I'd call myself ready, but I want to keep moving.

After

The future is unknown. The past isn't.

Dear Before:

The problem isn't you, and it never was. I know you don't know, so I want to tell you that you have these episodes because you're going through a lot, at home and at school, even when you don't realize it, and you have been for a while. I'm sorry that no one acknowledges that, and I'm sorry they expect you to tell them. I'm sorry that no one is speaking up for you. I'm really, really sorry that no one treats you with love and care and tenderness because that is what you deserve. I'm sorry you had to hide so much of yourself, and put up with so much, and keep your mouth shut, just to survive. There is nothing wrong with who you are and there never has been.

There's nothing you have to change about yourself, and nothing you have to do, no requirement you have to meet, to be worthy of love. You are allowed to feel however you want and express it however you want, and you don't have to justify it to anybody. You deserve to live freely,



and you will always have me in your corner, and I will always love you  
and support you through anything and everything.

All my heart,  
After

## On Breaking Bread

JEREMY CHU

AUNTIE AND I embrace at the door. *It's so nice to see you again,* she says, placing her hand on my shoulder to guide me up the stairs. I feel young again, compliant against her palm and seemingly smaller between the townhouse's walls. I recall the tide of New Year's greetings as family ebbed and flowed through the halls, their red garments inviting prosperity to all spaces of the townhouse, and my young joy when they gift me small fortunes of Lai See.

Mah Mah stands at the top of the stairs, the corners of her mouth breaking upward, her crow's feet forming warm, downturned crescents. She opens her arms and calls me in her own way: *Jermany!* she cries, attempting my name through Cantonese marinated English. We hug.

*Okay, Okay!* she says.

She points to an empty table, and her jade bangle rattles like a calling bell. I'm led through the hallway and into the living room, revisiting the old games of tag won and lost in the corridor, passing the now-empty fish tanks and the pale portraits of ancestors who lived and died in the old country. Auntie circles the dining room table and pulls chairs from under the table.

*We always meant to reach out,* she says, fidgeting with each chair's placement. *But with kids, and then grandkids, and Yeh Yeh's health—*

Solving the riddle, I reply: *No, I understand. Life Happens.* We each find a seat.

Mah Mah doesn't sit at the table. I watch her small shuffle bring her to a velvet recliner placed across the table, and when she sits, it doesn't make a noise. Her posture is exquisite, she places each hand atop a knee and glows with contentment as she watches us.

That recliner used to be a rocket ship. Pull the right lever and the whole machine springs backward, legs floating, my body facing the constellations. The red breath of thrust covers the living room, and I'm pulled into stretches of starlight. At the kitchen table, my father and Mah Mah converse in Cantonese until it sounds farther and farther away, the language gliding into the night. I float alone.

But now, Mah Mah sits in the recliner, oblivious to its might. She studies me like a portrait, as if I were slowly joining the gallery of ancestors. When Auntie asks me what I've been up to, I want to tell her the truth. I want to tell her that now more than ever, I've been wondering why she stopped contacting me after my father abandoned my family. I want to speak about *mou min*, an old word for losing face, where preserving a clan's pride and preventing talk around town meant disowning a family's blemished members. Life happens, but it happened to me destructively, and they were embarrassed by it. I hold my thoughts.

*I've kept busy*, I respond, shifting in my chair, my smile thin and wanting.

I speak about university, my weekend job stocking groceries, and my upcoming poetry publications. In time, I think to myself, I'll tell them what the poems are about. When I speak, I shift my attention between Auntie and Mah Mah. Auntie and I converse fluently, but when I see Mah Mah's furrowed eyebrows and body leaning into my voice, I know my words are getting lost along the way. She nods anyhow, keeping her same smile. Her happiness brings me warmth and sadness.

*Oh, you must be hungry, let me get something to eat*, Auntie says, rising from her seat.

Mah Mah knows this sentence well. *We have cake!* she exclaims, springing from the recliner. Her loose slipper shuffle brings her to the kitchen before my Auntie, and I hear them converse in Cantonese under the soft clanging of kitchen dishes. I am left to my surroundings, to the terrain of picture frames that blanket the corners of the room. Each frame contains different kinfolk: a history of suits, shirts, graduation dresses,

and cheongsams. When Mah Mah watches me, I wonder if she's remembering my place among the garments.

*Okay, Teatime!* Auntie says excitedly.

Auntie and Mah Mah enter the living room carrying two trays: one with teacups filled with warm Typhoo and a second containing a T&T Swiss roll, cut into thin, shareable slices. Mere moments pass and Mah Mah is already in the velvet recliner, her mouth full of pastry, the tea and Swiss roll distributed evenly. This is her gift. As a child, Sunday evenings meant that fried pork chops and garlic sizzled over stovetops as its oily vapour replaced townhouse oxygen. Sunday evenings meant that classmates would ask what I have for lunch, and I would feel powerful with my plum sauce and white rice.

Now, Mah Mah, Auntie and I all speak the same language. We talk through the guiding of forks against plates, the spreading of cream filling over the cake's subtle coffee aroma. We listen to the silence, the chewing, the small sips of tea. We are fluent in eating. One thing I've learned about Mah Mah's: you will go home feeling filled. The words that I've swallowed feel a bit sweeter during this visit, largely due to an abundance of Swiss roll and the hope in a few more Sunday dinners. We can talk when our mouths are filled with pork chops. Another thing I've learned about Mah Mah's: to come home, you must unpack your baggage, you must eat the cake.

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## The Age of Adulthood

CHARLEE CLARK

THROUGHOUT MY childhood I never had an experience where I was truly challenged in making a large and impactful decision. I grew up living a relatively sheltered life, with a loving family and five older siblings which I was constantly compared to, and I was almost always referred to as “the baby” of the family. I experienced a childhood that included several figures who were protective and empathetic towards me. This sounds like an amazing upbringing, and it was. When it came time to move away to university in another province, I understood that the sheltered life I once had was going to be stripped away from me. I would no longer have my mother accompanying me in all things big or small, and I would no longer have the security provided by my four older siblings. I was going to be entirely alone. This experience would end up being more challenging for me than I could have imagined.

Throughout my entire life being referred to as “the baby” of the family and in some sense being treated and comforted the way a child would be, I found it strange to now be faced with making a decision which would determine the trajectory of my entire life for the next four years. For once, deciding was entirely up to me, my parents could not decide this for me, only support me in whatever I may decide. I found this to be the first situation where I was going to act as an adult, and yet I knew that I did not feel like an adult in any sense. I was eighteen years old, which meant that society had now deemed me to be an adult,

although I had yet to be faced with an adult situation. Looking back, I can remember the idolization I once had for eighteen-year-olds as a young girl. My babysitter was eighteen when I was about eight, and I can still remember the sense of awe I felt just watching her navigate life, the clothes she wore, her blackberry phone which constantly buzzed, and her makeup. I thought, she is so mature and grown up, she has it all together. I can't wait until I am her age. Her blackberry constantly being buzzed by her friends, I was intrigued by the relationships which she had with her friends. I had only experienced love in a parent-to-child relationship thus far (Firestone): this concluded my beliefs, she has everything. She is an adult. It's strange, I always wanted something so bad as a child when I couldn't have it, or when I couldn't be it. It was always the things I wanted so desperately as a child, but as an "adult" I wanted to be the furthest thing from it. The reality of the societal notion which is that a person is considered an adult at the age of eighteen, Setterson lays out this experience simply, and he does not exclude the factors which come along with this societal normalcy. When an eighteen-year-old is suddenly exposed to adult situations, feelings of pressure and anxiety often follow (6). This was my situation exactly. I did not feel happiness, prepared, or as if I had everything together when I put on make-up, chose my own clothes, and was constantly being texted by my friends. I felt overwhelmed, and anxious. Trying to manage friendships, being in multiple constant conversations with friends and family every day. I did not feel like I had everything. I felt like I was drowning in expectations.

The initial move to Ontario and settling into my dorm was a difficult process in itself, but it was the little occurrences and situations throughout daily life that I did not imagine would be so difficult for me. The first instance where I was faced with a minuscule task which felt so large and like nothing I had been faced with throughout my childhood, was booking myself a doctor's appointment. The phone rang through to the doctor's office as I practised what I would say to them in my head.

"Hello, how can we help you today?" the doctor's office remarked.

"Oh, hi there, I would like to ... um ... book an appointment for a flu shot," I explained.

Such a simple phone call yet filled with so much anxiety and anticipation. I had completed a difficult part of this experience, but now

I had to deal with the anxiety of my upcoming doctor's appointment the next morning, and most off-putting part of it, attending it alone. I envisioned myself in the doctor's appointment the night before, alone in the room as the doctor entered. He begins swabbing my arm with the strong smell of alcohol. In my initial vision, my mother was standing alongside me ready to give me a hand to squeeze as I got my flu shot. I quickly reminded myself that is not going to be the reality of my doctor's appointments from here on out, I would be alone. "Maybe I should text one of my friends and ask if they can come accompany me," I thought. Opening a new text, I attempted to draft up the text in my head: "hey, I am going to get a flu shot tomorrow and..." No, I couldn't send this text, my friends do not want to join me in the doctor's office while I get a flu shot, they are busy with school.

The following morning, entering the doctor's office, I was nervous. I timidly walked up to the front desk: "Hello, I am here for my flu shot appointment."

The woman at the front desk does not look up from typing on the computer. "Take a seat over there," she told me.

As the doctor called my name, I took a deep breath. I clenched my hand as he gave me the flu shot, as if I was holding my mother's hand. This was the first instance when I realized that I am now living life as an adult, and that I would need to adjust to the uncomfortable feelings which follow that. Writer Kelly Brown explores this idea of slowly moving into adulthood in her book *How to Become a Grown-Up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps*. Brown discusses how to act like an adult (48-50). Step after tiny step, I believe this is the way I carried out my new adult life for the next year. I pretended my way into being one. Over time, doctor's appointments became much more comfortable to attend alone, but there was no shortage of other contexts where I had to force myself to take on the role of an adult and make decisions which benefited me, no matter how uncomfortable it may have felt.

As a child, I thought that an adult was someone who got married or had children. Turning eighteen years old and living on my own quickly made me realize this vague idea was not true. I knew, and I found out, that I was going to be expected to act as an adult much sooner, regardless

of my marital status or if I had children of my own. My first experience of feeling as though I was transitioning into an adult was years ago, but I still do not feel like I am an adult. I still struggle making decisions and navigating my life's paths and challenges. I have learned to act as an adult when needed, regardless of my inner self telling me it feels wrong. There are so many other aspects of my life when I can let my inner child live, but after several years I find that I have formed an equal separation between the two. At times, it feels as though I am living two separate realities, which can be hard to navigate. I do not always think I am an adult or that the experience of moving away to university and turning eighteen has changed me into one. This experience simply allowed me the challenging experience of being exposed to adult situations and finding a way to navigate them in a way that is practical and meaningful, and allows me to stay true to myself.

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## Afterlight

EMILY CLARK

“ARE YOU ready?”  
The needle is poised just above my arm, loaded with ink that will flow into my skin, never to leave. I shiver, though the room is not cold. The artist waits, headphones covering one ear. I can faintly hear the electric music pulsing from them, carrying on with the beat of my heart. My dad stands next to me, phone raised to take photos.

Being a minor, I needed parental approval before getting a tattoo. The legal liability sheets lay on the counter, having been signed by my father. Parents can, and probably should, be wary of their children marking their bodies in a permanent way. My dad navigates this uncertain avenue of parenthood as he does most aspects of life: calmly.

Fourteen hours ago he was sleeping peacefully as the clock struck five in the morning. Thirteen hours ago, he was being woken by the sound of his phone ringing. When he answered, I sprung the idea of getting my first tattoo on him. I had not planned the untimely call. A week prior, I was e-mailing with a local tattoo parlour, unsure if they even had availability in the coming months. I wasn't even sure my own inquiry for an appointment was legitimate, or if I was just trying on the feel of making one. To my surprise, they went ahead and booked me in for the following Monday.

It was actually happening.

Now all I needed was parental consent.

Right.

It was time to convince my parents to consent to my tattoo. The best strategy that my seventeen-year-old brain could conjure was this: tell them as late as acceptable and tell them separately. Make sure there's enough time available for me to plead my case adequately, but not for too much alarm or precautionary thought. Most importantly though, try to make sure that they would not have time to discuss the matter *together*. My strategy seemed to work. The early morning call to my dad ended in my favour, with him agreeing to talk more about the idea with me throughout the day, all of this leading up to the appointment that I had scheduled in the evening. His main belief as a parent is that I be committed to the design I decide on, having a reason behind selecting it.

"Have you spent enough time thinking about this? Don't get a tattoo for any reason other than that *you*, as an individual, want it," he stressed later, after the phone call.

"Yes," I told him. "I think about this every time I cry over a book." He knew that was a lot.

As a father, he also values understanding his child's personality, in case my passions and interests are fleeting or if they seem to stick over time.

Luckily, I pass these tests.

I have and will likely always love books more than life.

A little under two years ago, I was reading a book that I never thought would impact me the way it has. The protagonist was at a low point, and everything seemed up in the air, no easy end in sight. In a tender moment, one character asked her what the future looked like. She described the future as fire on the horizon. Light that could be the sun rising or setting. She called it "afterlight."

"Afterlight."

The work that I will get tattooed on my arm. Close to my heart, but far enough away that I can easily look at it, getting lost in the emotion every time I read it.

The next time that I was completely entranced by a book, I was mourning the ending if only for the sake of staying in that world. I felt like I didn't even know what would come next in my life after finishing the story. Or better yet, what had my life been before reading it? This feeling was desperate and addictive and familiar. It was "afterlight."

Anytime I finish a book and I get the feeling that the fictional world I just came from means more to me than anything in reality ever has, I think about “afterlight.” The word has taken on a new meaning for me over time that has become deeply personal. “Afterlight” has come to encapsulate every strong, indescribable, transcendent feeling that I ever have about a book. It has become a permanent part of me.

What is a tattoo if not a permanent part of someone? The word “tattoo” comes from the Polynesian word “*ta*” which means “striking something,” and the Tahitian word “*tatau*” which means “to mark something.” I feel as though “afterlight” has already struck me and marked me emotionally. I am confident that it’s time it is done physically as well.

Having my dad on board was a success. Just three hours before the appointment, it was time to convince my mom. The phone call with her went much smoother than anticipated. I expected heavy scepticism, forgetting that she has been listening to my ramblings about “afterlight” and its meaning to me for nearly two years. She put aside any parental worry about meaningless teenage tattoos that may go out of style. I think perhaps that I have the modern rise of literary tattoos to thank for her understanding too. In 2018, Marieke Hardy, the director of the Melbourne Writers’ Festival, put into words the strong feelings that tattoo-ees attach to literary tattoos:

Words and writing have helped so many of us survive really difficult stuff. We also often see ourselves reflected in the pages of a book. Having that symbolism attached to your body is a great way of paying tribute to these awesome tomes that have helped steer us through the complexities of life, [and] make us who we are.

The meaning I associate with “afterlight” was enough to convince my mother to see that my wishes here weren’t just vain and flighty. She knew they would have a permanence for me that would match the tattoo.

With my mom’s added approval, my dad and I headed to the appointment. On entering the building, we are both pleasantly surprised. The atmosphere is professional and spacious. He mentions to me that the setting here resembles what someone might expect from a medical clinic.

There are signs and careful cleanliness, reassurances and cautionary measures. This was not the kind of place he had envisioned from his ideas from pop culture. This was not a dirty, crowded, beaten-up-hundred-year-old-couch-in-the-lobby-type atmosphere.

His being sure of the situation reassures me. The artist's final question hangs in the air.

"Are you ready?"

Me, my dad, my mom. And "afterlight."

"Yeah. I'm good to go."

A buzzing fills the air. The artist snaps the other headphone over his ear and gets to work. When I feel the burn of the needle and ink going into my arm, I am so glad. I'm happy to have found the passion that I did in books. I'm struck by this word that has such depth and meaning. My word. A word for *me*.

Fifteen minutes go by, and the buzzing stops. The artist wipes the excess ink from my arm. It's done.

"Afterlight" is now a part of me even more, and I am so thankful for all the books that have given me this part of myself.

Jack London once said: "Show me a man with a tattoo and I'll show you a man with an interesting past."

While I am not a man, my past might just be interesting.

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## Battling Trauma with Zelda

JOCELYN CONSTANTINOFF

IT'S SATURDAY morning, I have the day off, and I am ready to begin the same activity I always do on my days off. We're going to save a world: Hyrule, to be exact. Ganondorf has tormented the people of Hyrule for seven long years and it's time his tyranny ended. Of course, I am not really in the mystical land of Hyrule. I am playing a video game, *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, and I am controlling the game's hero, Link. This may seem like an innocent, small-potatoes form of relaxation, or escapism. But it is not. I am but one of 729 million people who regularly play PC and console video games (Wijam). I've played a few PC games, but I prefer console video games, and *The Legend of Zelda* series has always been my favourite video game franchise. Especially after December 2011.

In December 2011, gamers were fixated on popular games like *Batman: Arkham City*, *Skyrim-Elder Scrolls*, and *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*, but those games weren't even on my radar. In fact, video gaming was the furthest thing from my mind. I was working as a manger of a small retail store, and I was elbow deep in flannel pyjamas. My store's backroom was a sea of boxes, and I was focused on finding a spot for all these stupid pyjamas.

My assistant manager suddenly stormed in with another armful of pyjamas and threw them on top of the boxes. "I'm done. I cannot fit anymore out there."

I stared dejectedly at the pj's, slightly disheartened that my beautiful backroom, normally so organized, was fated to remain a horrific mess for at least the next two months. There was only one solution to this situation, and I voiced it.

"I need a break."

We were certainly due for one; it was after lunch, and we'd been working since before the store opened. We immediately abandoned the boxes, leaving the store in the capable hands of our sales staff while we ventured out into the mall. We bought coffees from mmmMuffins, and we decided to check out a few stores before heading back to the pyjama fiasco. One store I insisted we stop in was EB Games, a favourite spot of mine.

I don't exactly remember why I like the store so much, but it is probably related to my childhood. I can remember seeking out the electronic sections in stores, just so I could stare at the video games and add to my wish list. So perhaps I was channelling this childhood mindset by insisting we go to EB Games, but nothing prepared me for what I spotted at that store: a limited-edition Zelda-themed 3D DS with the newly re-released *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D*.

My eyes silently traced over the image of Link riding his horse across Hyrule Field. I hadn't play *Zelda OOT* in years, but I still remembered how it felt the first time I completed the Great Deku Tree dungeon and was able to enter Hyrule field. My eyes stopped at the price tag, and I stopped breathing. It was \$199.99. I could almost feel my ex's hard fingers closing around my throat for just thinking of spending that kind of money on myself.

Even though it had been almost two years since I had left my ex, the memory of him pushing me against a wall and choking me had never left. The choking incident happened after I paid overdue bills without his knowledge, and we didn't have enough money to get ... I don't remember, but it was something for himself.

I immediately backed away from the store's display. It didn't matter that all my bills were paid, or that Christmas presents for my six-year-old daughter were bought. There was no way I could buy this handheld gaming console for myself.

This trauma response is quite common in people who've left an abusive relationship. Cynthia M.A. Siadat defines a trauma response as "the reflexive use of over-adaptive coping mechanisms in the real or perceived presence of a trauma event" (qtd. in Nguyen). Most people know about the "fight and flight" responses, but there are two more: "freeze and fawn." In my case, my "freeze and fawn" responses were triggered at the thought of buying something for myself. "Fawning" is easily understood as wanting to please everyone at the expense of yourself, and "freezing" causes a person to dissociate or not act all (Nguyen). For me, this meant I froze when it came to buying something perceived as unnecessary and that I tended to put others before me, regardless of my own needs. This was why I had trouble even considering such a big purchase. The last time I'd spent a large sum of money had resulted in violence and my subconscious wanted to preserve my safety.

"What's caught your eye?"

I nearly jumped; I'd forgotten I wasn't alone. I brushed off the question, but I felt so conflicted leaving EB Games empty handed. I really wanted that 3D DS and, the more I thought about it, the more I couldn't think of a good reason for why I wasn't back there buying it.

I decided I needed another opinion, so I dug my phone out of my purse and clicked to my brother's contact information.

(Me) "Hey, just saw something at EB games I really want."

(Michael) "What'd you see?"

(Me) "Zelda themed 3D DS. It comes with Ocarina of Time."

(Michael) "Awesome! Did you buy it?"

(Me) "No...."

(Michael) "Why not? Ocarina is your favourite. It's Christmas, treat yourself."

I stared at my brother's last message. He was right. *Zelda OOT* was my favourite Zelda game. I had spent countless hours playing it when the game first came out on the N64 in 1998. Why was I so afraid to spend money on something I really wanted? No one was going to get mad at me for buying it. At least, not anymore. I had left the only person who had ever threatened me for spending money. It was like a lightbulb went off; I realized why I was so hesitant right then and there. The memory of

the choking incident was preventing me from buying the handheld console. From therapy, I knew everyday events could trigger trauma responses and I would need to work through the response and retake control.

I made my decision.

I went back to EB Games and, for the first time in a very long time, I bought something “unnecessary” for myself. Replaying *Zelda OOT* and freeing the people of Hyrule from Ganondorf’s tyranny made me feel like I was reconnecting to the person I was before my life was turned upside down by an abusive relationship. To the world, *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* was the game that “charmed gamers the world over and boosted *Zelda’s* popularity” (Gombos 234), but for me, it was the game that allowed me to break through a trauma response that was keeping me stuck in the past.

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## Keep It in the Family

SOPHIA COPPOLINO

“THE MOST Italian thing about me is my name,” I admit begrudgingly to my friends, acquaintances, and Roman civilizations professor, “Sophia Josephia Coppolino.”

It’s a lie. My middle name is Josephine, but in moments where I’m clinging to an identity of generations past, the extra “a” is affirming. I expend a great deal of energy convincing others of my Italian heritage. I’ve adopted a strict diet of bread and cheese—and only cheeses that end in the Italian vibrations -ino or -ella. I do not go to church, but I wear a cross identical to my Nonna’s (whom I called Grandmama). I hold lemons or tomatoes up to my nose at the grocery store, posturing awareness of a ripeness that only a true Italian could identify, as I spread germs across the produce section.

I’m not Italian, either. I am Sicilian. My family is from the island at the bottom of the boot-shaped peninsula, the triangular land mass that Italy is kicking into the Mediterranean. It is an important distinction. Sicily is Italy’s miscreant cousin, the island’s volatile spirit overshadowed only by its mountainous terrain. Since antiquity, Sicily has been conquered by a dozen empires and subject to multiple tyrants, experiencing fleeting stints of independence (“Sicily,” *Wikipedia*). It was not until 1860, when Giuseppe Garibaldi capitalized its revolutionary spirit, that Sicily was thrust into the United Kingdom of Italy (“Sicily,” *Encyclopedia*). However, Sicily’s tumultuous history continued as the official government grappled with its infamous counterpart: the mafia,

or *Costa Nostra*—which directly translates to “Our Thing” (“Sicilian”). No government has been able to subdue Sicily because Sicilians refuse to be mastered.

My grandparents were farmers from Castoreale, a village in the northeastern region of Messina, home to 2,800 inhabitants and eighty churches (“Castoreale”). Sicilian turbulence has kept the island rural, corrupt, and desolate of opportunity. My grandparents fled their “ruggedly spectacular homeland” for Canada without hesitation (Coppolino). They didn’t speak much English—we communicated through lollipops they gave me depicting the Italian flag. They were adamant on becoming Canadian, naming their youngest son, my dad Jim, the least Italian name they knew, to accelerate their assimilation. Craving acceptance, my family turned their backs on Sicily, shedding their olive skin and hiding behind parkas and tuques. All my dad knew growing up was that he was “the lesser southern Italian kind; the poor, uneducated backwater cousins to the fashionable, modern, and sophisticated Northern Italians” (Coppolino). I watch my dad nod and tight-lip smile when people joke about cement shoes and horse heads. He “choose[s] to accept any comments as a romanticized badge of silent honour” (Coppolino). What he does not recognize, but what I have been cognizant of from a young age, is that the island’s spirit lives within him, diminished but not disappeared.

The *Costa Nostra* has survived in Sicily because of a cultural phenomenon called *omertà*. *Omertà* is a silent obedience that my dad calls an “outlaw concept” (Coppolino). Yet, I know asking too many questions about my family would expose me as a fraudulent Sicilian. Most of what I know about my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and extended family comes from unsubstantiated gossip that is pervasive during the holidays. So, I stay silent and listen.

The tension between my Uncle Santino and my Aunt Darlene was explained to me at Christmas in a whisper.

“Santino poisoned her dog,” my cousin Oliver said.

My dad dismissed the claim haphazardly. My Uncle Santino may be selfish and obstinate, but he wouldn’t kill a dog.

One Thanksgiving, my Aunt Katerina told of how my Zia Maria (my grandmother’s sister) became estranged from the family.

“You didn’t know? Mum didn’t think Maria should have taken everything from Zio Tindaro’s home,” she explained. “Mum thought everything should’ve gone to his kids.”

My dad didn’t know either, but he chalked it up to conjecture. He doubted his aunt was capable of burglary. (Although there were rumours about Zio Tindaro, too. “[He] drove a Cadillac, lived in the fancy part of town, wore nice suits, and when [my dad] was thirteen, somebody blew up his car outside his nice house” (Coppolino).)

I claw back anecdotes from my family, hoarding them inside my head and slowly incorporating my extrapolated ideas of Sicilian-ness into my behaviour. I am an outsider. The youngest of my cousins, my only vivid memory of my Grandmama is of her high in the air, precariously picking cherries from the tree in her backyard. She was the Sicilian matriarch. She was the one who criticized our meatballs, contended over pricing at the hardware store, and who we accompanied to church on Sundays. When she passed, the little cultural exposure I had was buried with her. I am a superficial Sicilian, identifiable only by name. The others, they are carriers of a volatile gene, one that unintentionally disposes them to be authentically Sicilian.

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## Dancing with Words

ERICA CORRIGALL

I fell in love [with reading] the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once. —John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*

I'VE NESTLED myself into a sofa chair in the downstairs change room of the dance studio as my daughter attends her weekly ballet class. I listen as she and her classmates leap and soar to the melodic rise and fall of the classical music that surrounds us all. In one hand, my tablet is lit up with the words to the latest Starstruck novel, *Celestial*, which I was given as an advance copy to review before the book's release. In my other hand is a thick fantasy novel from the *Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J. Maas that has me enthralled.

Parents and families are scattered around the room also waiting for their children to finish dancing. Among them sits a middle-aged man next to a younger child who is completely mesmerized with the colouring book that is being held hostage by the pointy tip of her marker. As I glance up from my tablet, my left hand feathering the pages of my Sarah J. Maas book in a nervous fidget, I notice him observing me.

"You like reading?" he asks, nodding at the obvious answer in my hands.

I can't answer fast enough. "No," I say, "I don't like reading, I *love* it." I'm too excited to pause for embellishment and quickly launch into details of my favourite authors and genres, excitedly gushing away about how reading is an escape for me. I can see the dance dad's eyes widen,

but that doesn't slow my excitement. Eventually I get to the same point I always do when talking about my love of reading; the fact that until age twenty-five, only six years ago, I hated reading with what could only be described as a seething fury. I like the shock written on peoples' faces when I interpose this unexpected detail to my obvious and overwhelming passion for all things literature.

My first horrible experience with reading happened in 1999, at the age of ten, when my grade five teacher expected me to read *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville and then write a book report. I tried. I read all the words on the pages without issue, but no story formed in my mind. What was the point of all these words anyway? For my report, I reworded the synopsis hoping that would satisfy the assignment requirements. It did not. Instead, my teacher asked me to do it again. I read the words *again*, found new words for the synopsis, and submitted a new report. After many similar attempts, my teacher had a conversation with my mother. I was asked to make one more attempt.

By this time, even looking at the book made the blood boil beneath my skin. Under the watchful eye of my mother, I worked my way angrily through the words on the pages yet again, thoroughly annoyed that I could likely repeat the novel verbatim at this point, but still had no comprehension of the story it told. Even now, more than two decades later, I still cannot stand to open the book, even though my feelings about reading have changed so drastically. When I submitted my last report, having used a thesaurus for new words to recreate the synopsis yet again, my teacher gave a grudging sigh and awarded me a C-. I hadn't really earned the grade; he was clearly just tired of reading my horrible attempts at a book report.

Like many other children facing challenges either with reading or just in the classroom, "persistent, failed expectations" left me "feeling flawed, disillusioned, and confused" (Orenstein 36). From this moment forward I had concluded that my "wish to perform [could not] be fulfilled by any reasonable effort." I became afraid "to try, and [went] to great lengths to avoid whatever might lead to failure and more shame" (40). My self-esteem faltered, and I soon found different ways to get around readings in school. Though it resulted in poor grades, which did not at

all reflect my level of intelligence, I resorted to watching movie versions of the books we were reading so I could understand the stories. My final grade for grade twelve English was an unsurprising sixty-eight percent.

However, things changed for me one day in the spring of my twenty-fifth year. I was playing an online video game when a fellow player gushed about her love of books. I told her about how much I hated reading and soon found that she would not let up on recommending that I give *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green a try. After many weeks of pushing, I decided to look around online, and found an e-book version that I could download.

I loaded the file into a generic e-reader app and began to read. Before the end of the first sentence, I was hooked. This book didn't feel like the books of my past. It felt like an MSN conversation, or like talking to that online gaming friend. Though it was slow-going, I could not stop reading until I had devoured the entire story. Was this what everyone else experienced when reading? How could I never have felt this before?

Before I knew it, I had devoured John Green's entire collection, and was reading other authors of young adult contemporary novels. I found John Green fan communities online, and read even more books based on their recommendations. *The Fault in Our Stars* quite literally changed my life and taught me to dance with the words on the page and fall in love with the magical escape from reality that the act of reading fiction provides.

"You probably have a learning disability," the dance dad said to me. Back in reality where I was describing the torture of words before John Green, I looked at the dance dad confused by his response. It wasn't the shock I had come to expect from my brazen "reading-hater" confessions. Suddenly here was this person, this dance dad, offering me answers to questions I'd never known to ask.

"I work with kids with learning disabilities all the time," he went on. "What you just said about reading the words but not comprehending the meaning—that is actually quite common for kids with learning disabilities."

"Oh," I said. I wasn't sure what to think. "So, there's an explanation?"

“Yeah,” the dance dad said. “Basically, to have a learning disability doesn’t mean that you’re not intelligent. It just means that you learn differently than others. Obviously, you have somehow figured out how to develop meaning from written words as you have gotten older.”

“Right,” I said. I was shocked. Before I could respond further, the kid beside him had released her captive colouring book and abandoned her pointy tipped marker in favour of asking her father for a snack. His distraction was a relief, saving me from having to find the words to adequately express my shock.

Above us the rhythmic tapping of gravity pulling tiny feet back to the floor stops and is replaced by the chaotic clumping of children’s feet as they line up and make their way downstairs to change and leave dance behind for another week. As I help my daughter change into her street clothes and prepare for the walk home, I’m overcome with feelings of “relief and validation” (Orenstein 45). I understood myself better now than I had just an hour ago. My life-long struggles with reading were not because I was unintelligent or incapable. I simply hadn’t yet learned to dance with the words. Before tucking my tablet away, words of wisdom on the open page stand out to me.

Sometimes, when you don’t have enough spoons, you make do with a fork.—S.E. Anderson, *Celestial*

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## The Seatbelt Rule

PATRICIA-ANN DALPE

ARE YOU familiar with *Family Guy*? *Family Guy* is an animated sitcom that revolves around the adventures of the Griffins, a working-class family. In one episode, “What Really Grinds My Gears,” the character Peter Griffin finds himself hosting his own television show. The premise of the show is for him to perform long-winded rants on live TV about the things that irk him. Well, phubbing really grinds my gears. It irks me to no end when someone is engaged with social media rather than with the person or people who are actually in their immediate company.

At first, I thought that my displeasure with the relationship people were having with their phones while in my presence was unique but, as it happens, my sensitivity to being pushed to the wayside in favour of an anticipated incoming text or an updated status of someone’s social-media platform is a trending phenomenon that leaves many people feeling that their physical presence is trumped by someone else’s online presence. According to *Wikipedia*, this rude behaviour has a name—Phubbing. A word that integrates both “phone” and “snubbing,” and describes the habit of one person being emphatically interactive with their mobile device instead of being emphatically interactive with the person who is physically present.

Did you know that individuals check their smart phones every six minutes? That is roughly 150 times a day, and this phenomenon is not exclusive to those of Generations Y or Z, either. My partner, who is a



Boomer, continuously checks his phone for alerts, and much to my displeasure, sometimes he will even glance at his phone while we are engaged in a conversation with each other!

Body language and facial expressions are important in communication, and if we are looking or glancing at our phones while someone is talking, the subtleties in facial expressions and body language, which often communicate more than words, are lost.

Phubbing will very likely have a negative impact on your life and maybe even on lives around you. Phubbers are seen as less attentive and impolite, while the phubbed can feel disrespected and disregarded. Soon, the phubbed will become phubbers themselves to seek inclusion and to distance themselves from the painful feelings of being socially neglected. I know all this because my quest to stifle the frustration I felt at being regularly phubbed provoked and energized my own phubbing pursuits.

With a lack of interest in the “liking” or “swiping” interactions that many media platforms endorse, I turned to mobile games as a means of stifling the frustration I felt at being phubbed by my partner. Not only did I succeed in my phubbing pursuits, but I became addicted to the online games I downloaded to my mobile device. Fortunately, I deleted these addictive games from my phone. Not before sacrificing meaningful connections with my family and my friends, however, and not before I allowed my phone addiction to have a negative impact on my professional life.

Research has provided evidence that phubbing is a symptom of an addiction to social media, to the cell phone, and to the Internet. According to psychologist Emma Seppala, this addiction not only disconnects us from our relationships with others but also has the power to alienate us from ourselves and from our own needs.

I decided to broach the whole phubbing subject, as well as my newly acquired addiction to my cell phone, with one of my sons and learned several things. First, my son had no idea there was a name for this type of behaviour and (dis)connectedness; second, he admitted that his phone addiction compromised real connections with real people; and third, he had the wisdom to create healthy boundaries regarding his phone usage.

I love my phone. I love that I can Google an alternative to thyme when a recipe calls for it and I have none left—marjoram or oregano are a quick fix in a pinch. I love that I can FaceTime my family, anywhere and anytime. I love that my phone has the capacity to store music, and that I can either pair it with my home system or with my earbuds and listen to my playlists on the go.

However, I did not love that my phone addiction was slowly killing my personal and professional life, nor did I love that it was slowly killing my phone's battery life.

When my kids were younger, and I was responsible for getting them from point A to point B via my car, I implemented the “I will not put this vehicle into drive until I hear the ‘clicking’ sound of each passenger’s secured seat belt” rule. I cannot control the relationship that others have with their phones. I can, however, control the relationship I have with my own phone. I can also control how I wish to move towards more meaningful interactions with others without any media notification distractions. I can implement the “I will not proceed to engage in any conversations until our phones are secured and out of reach” rule because what “really grinds my gears” is when someone is engaged with social media rather than with the person or people who are actually in their immediate company.

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## **Sewing Makes Me Feel Good**

### **Thoughts On Making Underwear in Montreal**

JESSICA DEAN

I AM a seamstress. Sewing is my passion and it is woven into every fibre of my being. I love to make garments, specifically women's underwear. I've always loved sewing and I can make many things with my sewing machine. I bring my sewing machine along with me everywhere I go. Tenderly packing it away into a large insulated grocery tote with scrap fabrics cushioning its delicate parts. I take good care of my sewing machine. I dust it regularly. It's important that I take good care of my machine so that it can take good care of my work. I oil the nuts and bolts that make it tick. I often have the urge to create, and I love to have my tools with me in working order so that I can make things as I please.

Growing up, my mother always encouraged us to do handiwork projects like embroidery and crocheting, so I've always gravitated towards crafting and making, and have found comfort in sewing's therapeutic nature. Being a maker is a big part of who I am. A *maker* is a person who makes or creates something; a creator. I make underwear. That is my favourite pastime.

Right now, I am inspired by fruits, florals, and earth colours. I sit at my desk amongst piles of navy-blue velvet and pretty lace trimmings. I sketch a pair of panties onto a curvy model that I have drawn onto some watercolour paper. They are basic panties with blueberry printed, white organic cotton, and picot lace. I like to colour my images with

watercolour paint. I paint little blueberries with tiny emerald green leaves onto the panties and watch my sewing idea come to life. I enjoy mixing the water and paint with my brush, watching its gentle ebb and flow. I love the way my hands feel while they are creating—purposeful and intentional. I enjoy sewing because I enjoy the act of creating and seeing my ideas come to life. It's magical.

My favourite days go a lot like this. Today is one of those days. I wake up late. I love the morning light in my little bedroom in Outremont. My bed is close to the radiator and I can feel its warmth through my second-hand blanket. I'm completely wrapped in this blanket and I've kicked all the other quilts onto the floor during the night in favour of this one. It has bright pink colour-blocking with large quilted flowers—something about it is so happy and bright. Someone made this blanket and it has a story, a history. Now the blanket has a new life on my bed and it will potentially have further life as a sewing project. The blanket has a few tears in the corner, I suspect a dog had chewed on it. I gently trace the tears with my fingers, I will mend them later but for now, the blanket works just fine. I love to collect fabrics, linens, blankets, and tea towels from thrift stores and make them into garments. My cat Clifford and I sleep on them until I decide what to make with them. I look out the window. Clifford is on the radiator quietly watching the snowflakes fall and we are content. I love the way the bright snowflakes look against the bright red bricks of my little home.

I pace into the kitchen to make a coffee with almond milk and maple syrup and get ready to start my day. I plan to go shopping for more picot lace today. I'll also stop by a couple of other shops just to browse and see if anything inspires me to make something. Last night, I stayed up late working on a project and I made a mistake. I was making a pair of underwear with organic cream fabric and a blueberry print. I accidentally sewed my picot trim onto the wrong side of the fabric. I had to carefully undo all of my work, picking apart the seams with a little pointed tool. The seam ripper has a little red bead on the tip of the pointed end. This prevents the tool from snagging the fabric as you undo your work. I have made so many little mistakes while sewing and the processes of undoing and relearning have taught me so much.

When you make a mistake in sewing, it has to be redone and fixed, otherwise the garment will not function. It's this act of undoing that has translated into my life and shown me that it is okay to make mistakes and there is something so special about these acts of undoing, unlearning, learning, processing, making, and recreating.

The Blue Metro line from Outremont takes me to Jean Talon station where I exit and wander down St Hubert Street looking for treasures. I come here often because it has everything I need for my sewing projects in one spot. Montreal has a rich history in the garment and textiles industry and there are still remnants of this history scattered around the city. All along St Hubert Street there is a treasure-trove of sewing-supply shops, and I love to come here to shop for sewing materials. It's one of the best spots in the city to find materials for sewing projects.

I started making underwear when I moved to Montreal in February of 2021. During the pandemic, a lot of small businesses popped up on Instagram. People were stuck at home, and many took this time to explore their passions. Montreal is a great hub for artists, and I met a lot of makers in Montreal through Instagram. I found an environment in which I can connect, relate to, and thrive. It is through this little online network that I found Phoenix Rising Redone.

Phoenix is a maker in Montreal. She sews box jackets, underwear, and other garments from deadstock, vintage, and sustainable fabrics. I follow her work on Instagram because I find her creative process to be inspiring as a fellow maker. I send a message to Phoenix to ask about her experience with being a female maker in Montreal. She writes to me from her sunny apartment in Montreal. She says that living in Montreal has helped influence her work because it is "a hub for small women-owned businesses" and that this is "definitely inspiring and helps remind me that it is possible to kind of build something out of nothing and find success in it." I relate to this and it is certainly a great feeling. Montreal has offered me so much: community, connection, and a place to explore my art. One of the first sewing patterns that I purchased was from a maker I found through social media named Amy Bornman of All Well Workshop. Bornman sums up this feeling of finding community through creative work quite neatly when she says, "making my clothes feels like a really intense way of stepping into my own identity" (Shearer). She

describes her experiences with sewing and finding community as “wellness for my city, wellness for my friends, wellness for me” (Shearer). I find comfort in her words and the poetry that she weaves into her quilt work. Bornman often weaves quilts that contain words and poems and stories and I find something intangibly inspiring about this.

There are two thrift stores that I frequent on St Hubert. I check them routinely for fabric finds. It is like a treasure hunt. I’ve found so many fabrics in this way. I give them a hot wash at home and store them away for a future project. Lately, I have been making oversized collars with thrift linens and curtains with seventies-style floral patterns and they are just beautiful. I like taking something like an old bedsheet and giving it a second life. It’s simply more sustainable. I prefer to find my materials second-hand or in local shops.

I continue down St Hubert Street, walking past all kinds of sewing, fabrics, and specialty shops. These are small, family-owned shops. They have colourful displays of fabric in the windows and bits of bright neon tulle or metallic sequins hanging from the door handles. I get many ideas as I look through the windows. I’ve been working on some new pieces with a blueberry theme and I’m really enjoying shades of blue at this moment. I pick up some cornflower blue mesh from a place that I can’t remember the name of. It’s in the back of the shop and is a bit dusty, but I buy it anyways. As I roam through the shops I run my hand lazily, but curiously, on every roll of fabric and lace that I walk past. The textures flicker through my fingertips. I love this feeling.

I walk down the street to look for a bit of white picot elastic because it will pair nicely with the mesh that I just purchased. I see the same faces working in these little shops. These shops have been around for a long time. I make my way up the carpeted steps of Ultratext, a sewing accessories shop specializing in trims. There is always the same man and the same woman working here. I don’t know their story. Maybe they are siblings, maybe they are friends, maybe they are husband and wife. I am not sure what their relationship is but I feel that they share a history and that their shop has been around for many years. Something about this shop is predictable and comfortable and I like that feeling, so I continue to come here.

I go home and lay the cornflower blue mesh delicately onto my bedroom floor. I cut out a pair of panties and sew them together with white picot lace. I find comfort in the gentle hum of my sewing machine. I sit at my desk, looking at my work and think wow, this is the perfect garment for spring. I hold the delicate material in my hands. It is silky and soft. I feel good.

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## My Chains Are Gone

REBECCA DE VENEZIA

“I HAVE failed as a parent,” Mom says. Dad, beside her, continues to flip through photos on his camera, admiring the works of his photography hobby. As we sit in my apartment kitchen, crowded around a small round table on cheap foldable chairs, the usual hums and creaks of the old building fill the silence.

She was right. By coming out as ex-Christian, I had broken the promise of Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go: And when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Mom pipes up again, grasping for an explanation as she rattles off everything she did right: church every Sunday, youth group every Tuesday, church camp every summer, Christian school for ten years. Yet, sitting across from her, is a daughter frustrated and broken but struggling not to grin in triumph. *And even then, after all those years of trying to control me—you failed.*

From the minute I entered the world, I was weaned on the Bible. At school, I leafed through eye-catching picture books depicting the swaths of animals on Noah’s ark; at church, I painted shoddy cardboard hearts emblazoned with John 3:16; on car rides in between, I listened to Michael W. Smith and *Adventures in Odyssey*. By four years of age, I promptly learned of heaven and hell and that I, a toddler, must concern myself with where I was headed. Desperate to fulfil the vague request of “accepting Jesus into my heart,” I soon repeated the salvation prayer, trembling on my knees in the dark, as my mother told me what to say, how to appease God, how to be wiped clean.



Now, at twenty, after moving out and immersing myself in what evangelicals refer to ominously as “the world,” I have gained a new perspective on my childhood.

“You indoctrinated me,” I say. “I didn’t have a choice or a chance to believe in anything else. It’s brainwashing!”

“And we indoctrinated you,” Mom replies curtly, “into truth and love.”

*Speaking the truth in love.* Fundamentalists love to flip to Ephesians and hide behind this saying when their views are challenged. I can vividly remember when Calvary Baptist Church made the news in November 2018. The elders of the church rescinded the leadership position of a youth leader when they learned she was in a same-sex relationship. They informed the woman through a letter, indicating they were praying for her “full restoration” (O’Meara).

On the Sunday morning after the event, I sat with my family in the sermon of a different church nearby.

“Calvary Baptist Church, who is faithfully honouring the word of God and lovingly trying to restore a believer who is caught in sin, is now being blasted publicly by the media!” the pastor said, with his typical persuasive cadence (Redemption). “They are being lied about, misunderstood. . . . Do you realize this is a sign of the times? You have to believe this—this is the underlying work of Satan, who is seeking to kill and destroy the church of Jesus Christ!”

That day, the morning sunlight highlighted the lush, well-trimmed lawn and glinted off the towering cross that decayed the brick walls of Calvary Baptist Church. The elders approached the bitter protestors with saccharine smiles and free coffee boiled with the love of God.

The clash between Christianity and “the world” was confusing to me as a sheltered child. I am reminded about one day in seventh grade, when our teacher Mrs Wade announced that we would be taking a field trip to an old folks’ home.

“You’re going to sing the songs we’ve been preparing and tell them about Jesus,” she explains, handing out verse-inscribed bookmarks.

We arrive at the senior’s home, and Mrs Wade, more antsy than usual, conducts us with sharp, flashing eyes and stiff gestures. Poised in militant rows, we perform our set—hymns, of course—for the mildly

amused seniors, then disperse into the audience to corral souls. Unfortunately, it's my first rodeo. I am paired with a man who seems unable to speak; his jaw is slack, his lips quiver, and his large, soulful eyes examine me with a desperate emotion I cannot understand. Hastily, I say, "Jesus loves you!" and place a bookmark in his lap before skirting away, praying that would save him. I conveniently leave out the fine print about hell; with my frilly white blouse, dainty polished shoes, and mesmerizing harmonies, I present myself as a vessel for the message of love.

And yet, as the years passed and I dressed every morning, I began to find that the sleeves of my worn shirts grew tight, and my growing feet ached in my old shoes. But every Sunday, as I peered into pews of polished people beaming in well-fitted dress shirts and dresses and joined in the jubilant worship—I felt something off.

In a recent conversation I had with a youth pastor, I voiced my long-held concerns. I didn't want to believe that homosexuality is wrong, that humanity deserves eternal torment, or that my purpose in life is to give myself up to a man that would point to the "wives, submit yourselves to your husbands" (Col. 3.18) verse in every argument.

"None of how you feel matters if what the Bible says is true," was the youth pastor's unsurprising response. After all, "the heart is deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17.9) and as Christians, we must "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10.5).

Christianity promotes the idea that the pursuit of happiness and self-love is selfish, that their distinct definition of God is the only true source of joy. After years of channelling woeful repentance into self-hatred, I now much prefer Gandhi's definition: "Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony" (Morrissey). I did not truly understand what this meant until I took the leap of faith to leave everything behind. There are still days when the act of wrestling my heart, soul, and mind out of God's iron grip takes struggle and courage. I have learned to meet those days with faith, hope, and the greatest of these—love (1 Cor. 13.13).

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## Cooking with Sprite

JAMIE DIGNARD

I HATE cooking. I have tried to enjoy it. I like cooking shows—they make it look so easy. But when you find yourself crouched down on a kitchen floor, digging for a pot in an overcrowded cupboard, it isn't quite the same. Add to that the sweet sound of little children fighting over the television. Or when you forget what you had planned for a menu that week. Or when you remember that the chicken is in the freezer and it's hard as a rock. Suppertime delays lead to a homework frenzy, followed by fights over who goes first for a nightly bath.

Cooking supper ruins everything.

*I hate cooking* is a mantra passed down from one generation to the next. I have witnessed (and tasted) my mother's disinterest over the years when the chore was occasionally hers. My father assumes the role 99.9 percent of the time. He is a good cook. I asked my mother once if there was ever a time when she enjoyed it? To my surprise, she did have one fond memory: "Teaching you girls, when you were young, how to make a working woman's spaghetti sauce. Homemade spaghetti sauce." Of course, the recipe she taught my sister and I stayed true to her pragmatic approach to cooking: "You buy the bottle of spaghetti sauce, you buy some cut up vegetables, you put it, you know, you stir them up, and you fry them a little bit. You put them in, and you put the spaghetti sauce in a big pot—everybody thinks you made it. That's the only good memory I can think of—working woman's spaghetti sauce." It's been years since Mom has made her "spaghetti sauce." Nowadays when I make spaghetti

sauce for my family, it's maybe telling that I use my *grandmother's* recipe, not hers. While this recipe is more complex, it still involves quite a few cans and a good measure of ketchup!

I am beginning to see why I hold the views I do on cooking.

The current pandemic has altered food behaviours for families. In a survey of ten European countries, Grunert and colleagues discovered that thirty-five percent of respondents found increased enjoyment in time spent cooking and eating family meals. A couple of times per week, I see that possibility of joy in my own kitchen when a little sprite appears. My little helper is nine years old who, contrary to the xylem and phloem of her family tree, actually likes to cook. I do not know where she gets this from. Some nights, maybe once or twice a week, my little helper will join me in the kitchen if I have planned something that excites her. So far that includes: English-muffin pizza night, taco night, and build-your-own burger night. My little kitchen sprite delights in Googling images of what's on the menu. She will then print, cut-out, and tape these images to the kitchen wall. This sets the stage for our "restaurant". Once she has her signage up, she runs down a checklist of to-dos with me, so that she knows what we need to chop, cook, slice, or serve to be ready for our "customers." Next comes a flurry of activity to get ready for the evening diners. We work in harmony, switching tasks frequently, and the mood is positive and focused. I delight in watching her and in sensing the joy she exudes. It's contagious.

Who knew?

I don't have any memories of cooking with a parent. I asked my mother who taught her how to cook. Her response revealed a much more complex relationship to the task than her many comments through the years have led me to believe. My mother grew up in a large family, and her parents worked a great deal. The eldest children had to cook for themselves and their younger siblings. If there was any formal learning about cooking, it came from her eldest sister, Lorna. As my mother put it: "never mom and daughter in the kitchen or any of that crap." Money was always tight, and food was limited in supply. Cooking was an unpleasant chore.

"Supper's ready!"

The diners arrive and calamity ensues if they fail to look at the menu on the wall and place their order. “Ellie, no!” sprite screams at her sister who, head down, has grabbed a plate and starts building her burger. With a little smooth-talking from me, the sous-chef, we get back on track. The diners place their orders, and my little sprite preps the dishes to be served. I watch the microwave clock and see it’s taking three to five minutes to serve each plate—sprite the chef is careful and precise! “Mom, don’t forget the drinks!” she calls over to me. Customer feedback is always positive—she always does a great job. It makes me happy to watch her beam with pride with each dish served.

Once the meal is done, the diners exit the pop-up restaurant. My sprite gives me a peck on the cheek and tells me I’ve done a good job. She follows foot behind the diners, leaving before the dish washing and tidying up begins. Still, my little chef makes cooking supper tolerable for me. Possibly enjoyable. Once I’ve finished putting the leftovers away, loading the dishwasher, and handwashing the pots, I carefully peel the signage off the kitchen wall. I tuck everything away in a kitchen cupboard for reuse. I hope she never loses her whimsy, and that she never hates cooking supper.

Poised between Mom’s spaghetti sauce and my own kitchen sprite, I find myself reflecting on my feelings about cooking. I’m still not fond of it. My little kitchen helper, my little sprite, approaches cooking with imagination and excitement. Will I dampen her spirit over time? Maybe some child-like wonder would do me some good. Maybe my little sprite will break the generational chain of hating cooking.

It’s taco night tonight. The printer shoots out three warm pages of pictures of tacos. I watch her, fascinated with the care she gives each image. She cuts them out and tapes them onto the kitchen wall. She passes her small hand over top of each image to ensure there are no bumps. “Mom, how about you start by grating the cheese?”

It’s time to get to work!

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## Heavy Air

STEPHEN DONNELLY

MOM CAME by the house for a visit. She was appalled. In her absence, the kitchen table had become covered with bills and newspapers: we ate dinner in front of the TV now. She grew more incensed as she went upstairs and scanned the detritus scattered around our rooms. “What the hell *is* this?” she screamed as her arm swept across the top of my dresser, scattering Lego and comics around the room. My brothers and I burst into tears, stumbled downstairs, pulled on our shoes and ran from our sardine-can neighbourhood (average income: \$11,158) through the field we crossed every morning to the school bus stop. We walked aimlessly through the *nice* neighbourhood (average income: \$21,066) past cookie-cutter high-ranch homes with their cedar hedges and big back yards. Presumably, we were running away from home, but with no destination and no money in our pockets. Soon our huge gold Chrysler New Yorker came around the corner and pulled up alongside. We opened the doors and got in without a word. “Hooked On A Feeling” was playing on the AM radio and normally we’d all sing along with the “Ooga-chucka ooga-chucka” part, but today we stared silently out the windows. We knew that our parents’ separation was no longer a “trial.”

Two weeks earlier, mid-November, was that dull time between the hide-and-seek evenings of summer and the excitement of Christmas. The *Top Nine at Nine* was on the AM radio, counting down today’s most-requested songs. The opening riff of “Night Fever” by the Bee Gees started and I quickly hit Record on my red Panasonic cassette deck.



Sitting on the green and gold cat-hair-infused shag carpet, I read a skateboarding magazine and dreamt of palm trees and California. The room looked like a Sears catalogue had vomited: heavy olive drapes cast a gloomy shadow, sucking up sound and second-hand cigarette smoke. The busy wallpaper featured planes, cars, and cameras which spun when I hallucinated, sick in bed with the flu.

My dad appeared in the doorway, a life-sized G.I. Joe at six-foot-two with his short red beard, addressing me and my brother in the next room simultaneously. "Can you guys come here, please?" he said in his deep baritone.

"Strange," I thought to myself. Normally he would just holler down the hall if he needed something. We followed him past the bedroom of our sleeping youngest brother, to the master bedroom (brown and orange shag), where my mom was sitting on the gold bedspread.

"Your dad and I have decided on a trial separation. I have an apartment and I'll be living there and we'll see what happens," my mom explained. Decades later I found out that she had already been living there for weeks, coming back to our house in the morning to get us ready for school, going to work, coming over for dinner, then going back to her apartment after we were in bed. What a life.

Time stood still. What do you say in this situation? "No?" All our neighbourhood friends lived in single-parent households, so the concept wasn't foreign to us. "Do you have any questions?" she asked. We glanced at each other and solemnly shook our heads. "Go brush your teeth and get ready for bed, then." As I lay in bed that night, I wonder if I may have heard her leaving, but assumed at the time that it was just someone taking out the garbage.

The next morning, youngest brother Brent heard the news as he sat on the bottom step (brown and yellow shag). "Your dad and I are separating. Do you want to stay here with your brothers or go with me?" my mom asked. My brother later characterized this situation as "barbaric." He was always a sickly kid, allergic to dairy, citrus ... even his own sweat, so perhaps he needed a mom more. With his coaxed agreement, it was decided: he would finish the school year and then move in with her. And then she was gone, to an apartment on the other side of town. We started visiting on weekends.

Soon it was March Break: a week off from school. Every year we got to miss a second week and drive sixteen hours south to Myrtle Beach. South Carolina wasn't exactly tropical, but it was warmer than the waning Canadian winter at home. Mom was always the organized one, so it was chaos in the house as Dad tried to wrangle us himself for the first time. "Get your stuff ready to go!" he bellowed in frustration, trying to get us out the door.

"I'm as ready as you are!" I squawked back in uncharacteristic defiance in the cramped hallway. His hand shot up and I crumpled instinctively into a ball on the carpet (red and black shag) and burst into tears before I could find out whether he would actually hit me. He never had in the past, only threatened to, while slowly counting up, "one ... two ... three...." We never knew when that ominous count would end, and we never risked finding out. I wasn't going to risk it this time, either.

Finally on the road, we drove the familiar route across the border and down Interstate 81, stopping at a roadside motel in Scranton and falling asleep to the sounds of *Saturday Night Live* glowing on the blurry colour TV. The next day we arrived in the more economical *North Myrtle Beach* at the family motel we stayed at every year. We rolled into the parking lot with the hot ocean and asphalt breeze wafting through the open car windows. In jubilation, youngest brother Brent climbed out the side window, perching on top of the door, pumping his fist and cheering that we had arrived. Dad screamed, "What the *hell* are you doing?" instinctively grabbing him with his free hand and swatting him back down into his seat where he sat, red eyes watering. We pulled into the parking spot outside our two-room economy suite. At least we had arrived.

We settled into our routine of ping pong, swimming, shuffle-board, mini-golf, and cruising around the motel pathways on the free bikes they provided. The ocean was so cold we'd swim in it for a few minutes just to say we had, then run back up the street and jump in the heated motel pool to warm up. I met a cute girl from Ajax, a town I'd only heard of, and we played shuffleboard until her dad came and said they had to pack to leave the next morning.

My brothers and I decided to explore beyond the hotel compound, so we took the loaner bikes and cruised down the main boulevard towards the touristy downtown area and its *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* "museum." A few miles up the road after a couple of video game and snack stops, Craig nervously suggested: "We should probably head back."

"You guys go ahead, I'm going to keep going," I declared. These were times when an eight- and eleven-year-old could bike for miles across town in a foreign country and nobody worried about it, least of all me.

They turned back and I continued down the winding coastal road, neon signs glowing in the afternoon sun and shouting out their appropriate motel names: Sunset, Oceanside, Sandy Dunes. Arriving at the Gay Dolphin gift shop, I walked my bike past saltwater taffy shops and midway ticket booths. I leaned the chrome handlebars against the worn wooden boardwalk rail and scanned the beach. I loved this town, its tourist traps and kitsch, and this annual family escape from the dreariness of the Canadian winter. I stared across the dunes, my heart growing heavy like the sun hanging low on the horizon in the thick, salty air. Spellbound, I listened to the seagull shrieks echoing overhead, ocean waves pounding on the beach. Alone.

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## For the Love of Food

LINDA DUNN

I AM four, maybe five years old. While my two younger sisters are confined by the bars of a wooden playpen, I roam freely in my grandfather's back garden. I reach up to pluck an apricot from a low-hanging branch, and the sweet juice that gushes into my mouth when I bite it surprises me. Delights me. I don't yet realize that this one taste marks the beginning of a love I won't outgrow. Only that I want more.

My parents bought their first home in the mid-fifties in the western fringe of Toronto where developers had levelled apple orchards to plop down little suburban boxes. Here and there, mercifully, a mature oak or maple survived the onslaught, but man, it was bland! I'd roam dusty, desolate streets in the searing sun of August afternoons, kicking stones, searching for something to colour my life. When I'd hear my grandfather's voice on the other side of a phone call to my mom, I'd perk up. *Hi, Jeannie*, he'd say. *How're ya doin? The kids? Good. Well, we've got a couple of extra bushels of peaches. They're ripe, you could put 'em up tomorrow.* I knew then that it wouldn't be long until I'd hop into the station wagon with Mom and Dad. At Grampa's warehouse, brimming bushels lined the cool concrete floor. The fragrance of ripe fruit mingled with a damp, earthy smell, and it filled your nostrils. On the drive home, the sweet scent of peaches wafting up from the rear lulled me till Dad backed the car up the gravel drive, unloaded our haul, and yelled up the stairs: *Girls! Come on down to help!*

Like assembly-line workers, we each had a job to help “put up” the peaches. One washed, swishing the fruit in a big metal tub, another zipped the skins off after Mom blanched and dropped them into cold water. I liked packing the jars, using my small hands to gently slide peach halves down the sides. This was a process we repeated each summer with whatever fruit came our way from Grampa’s warehouse. By the time September ended, I would see those fruits again in glass jars, lining our cold cellar. Purple plums, golden peaches, and yellow-orange apricots—colours of my summer.

In the world outside our doorstep, the culinary landscape was evolving. Ruth Reichl, one of America’s most noted restaurant critics and food writers, and former editor-in-chief of *Gourmet Magazine*, discussed this evolution in “Why Food Matters,” a 2005 lecture that she delivered at Yale University. Reichl listed events that accounted for changes in food production during the fifteen years following the Second World War. Advances in refrigeration helped post-war manufacturers in the fifties successfully pivot from producing munitions to fabricating household appliances. Corporations vied to make brands like Frigidaire household names and to convince consumers that freezers belonged in every home. Manufacturers scrambled to get frozen fruits, vegetables, and TV dinners in stores to fill those freezers. Advertising exploded. By the sixties, ad campaigns targeted women, especially working women, extolling the virtues of convenience foods sure to make their lives happier. It was a confusing time for women who enjoyed preparing family meals, who didn’t buy the claims that cooking was a chore, especially when advertisers were pushing recipes like Spam casserole and ham cooked in Coke (Reichl 8).

As a kid in the sixties, I saw this up close. My friend’s mom would still be working when I went home with her after school. We had free rein to climb up to raid their cookie cupboard and gorge ourselves on store-bought Oreo and Fudgee-o cookies. But the house felt strangely hollow. Dinners at their house, most days, slid out of a box and into the oven. Not so at my house. We’d call out, *Hi, Mom!* as the screen door slammed, knowing she’d be home, likely prepping dinner. Mom was a good cook and an even better baker. A whiff of her baking would draw

my sisters and me from our rooms to the kitchen table, where we waited impatiently for whatever sweet thing coming from the oven was cool enough to eat. While we waited, we exchanged tales from our day, kidded, and teased each other. Those times, in the kitchen with Mom, were the glue that stuck us together. Nonetheless, I wasn't immune to media messages of that time, telling me I was missing out on something good. I envied the Swanson dinners that my friend and her brother ate in front of the TV when their parents had dinners out. *How come we can never have those?* my young self whined, not yet knowing how dreadful they tasted, nor comprehending how unaffordable they were for a one-paycheque, five-kid family.

More decades than I care to count have passed. My cook's eye still searches for the freshest, best food I can find, but a different mindset affects my decisions. It's logical to choose a hormone-free, humanely raised chicken over a pale, hormone-plumped factory farm version, isn't it? Of course. But it's not a choice that everyone can afford. Good, ethically produced food costs more, and that, itself, is a problem. In his 2008 book, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, noted food activist and author Michael Pollan contends that most of the "highly processed foodlike substances" (14) in supermarkets "[are] no longer, strictly speaking, food at all, and how we're consuming it—in the car, in front of the TV, and, increasingly, alone—is not really eating, at least not in the sense that civilization has long understood the term" (7). Generations before us knew about how to eat. This changed when "we allowed the nutrition experts and advertisers to shake our confidence in common sense ... and the wisdom of our mothers and grandmothers" (13). My family's connection to food was a gift to me. The traditional ways of eating I've managed to maintain, despite the pervasiveness of industrialization, are not common.

Each spring, I become impatient for the first Saturday farmer's market. I can't wait for May to scope the rows of umbrella-covered tables, to find what looks best. I like strolling through the stalls, stopping to chat with my regular farmers and vendors, remembering their sun-weathered faces. Their gnarled, dirt-covered hands confirm their connection to the food they grow. I feel happy to buy greens I can tuck

into my own bags, that won't turn into green soup in a matter of days. Grateful to have fewer plastic containers to toss into the blue box.

The many problems related to food are not solved by small acts such as these, but renewed interest in food is showing. A decade after his 2006 book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*,<sup>1</sup> Pollan expresses optimism in a *Washington Post* article. He points to statistics that show a 180 percent increase in the number of farmer's markets since 2006, and a 430 percent increase in farm-to-school programs that will teach kids about where food originates. The number of elementary schools with gardens has doubled (Pollan, "Decade"). So, past knowledge is inching up to meet the present.

My past inches up to the present, too. When my phone buzzes, *Ahoy!* my son's standard opening, greets me. A photo with the caption, "making eggplant parmigiana," shows his smiling, bearded face in the kitchen of his new home across the ocean. *Can you remind me how long it bakes?* he asks, then, *do you add two layers of fried potatoes?* Next morning, it's *Ahoy!* again, and a report on dinner with nine friends crammed into their tiny apartment. *Not as good as Nonna's, but decent*, he assesses. My love of food has come full circle. I'm reassured of the bonds cooking creates among family, friends, and community. My heart is so happy it aches.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Michael Pollan, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, embarks on a journey to personally experience how food is being produced in America. He writes about the three principal food chains that sustain life: the industrial, the organic, and the hunter-gatherer, to inform readers of harsh realities and offer knowledge to enable informed decisions about the food people choose to eat.

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## Satin Words

INGELA FAGERVIK

**Y**OUR ALOUD to sit hear or their. When you say this out loud, it sounds perfectly acceptable. When written, it is sure to make many readers cringe. Some, still, may not sense anything wrong with the phrase. Should they?

The air in the fourth-grade classroom is filled with the sounds of pencils scratching at paper. From the corner of the room comes the clickety-clack of my fingers on the keyboard. Unlike the other students, whose brains can process information in predictable ways, I can barely put a word down on a paper without making some kind of mistake. The psychiatrists called it dyslexia. They told me it was perfectly okay; it's not a reflection of my intelligence, but that it was just something we would have to learn to accept. In school, I would have to use a computer with built-in autocorrect if my teachers were ever to understand my messy piles of letters. I felt ashamed to be so isolated from my peers. If twenty percent of the population suffers from dyslexia, I wonder now which of my classmates back then were suffering in silence ("Dyslexia"). How many of them simply resented me for having the accommodations that they needed as well? Other students accused me of cheating for using the computer for my schoolwork. I sometimes wished I could accuse them of cheating for having brains that could process words.

While we all struggle through writing our short narrative fiction pieces in English class, my teacher approaches me. "I'd like to read what

you've written down so far. Is that okay?" she asks. I scoot my seat a few inches to the left to give her room to pass judgement on my work. She purses her lips and nods as her eyes scan over each line of text. I wait on tenterhooks to hear her verdict. "This has a lot of potential," she tells me, and I feel a surge of nervous pride. "See this line? What if you moved this word over here?" She takes the mouse from my hand, cutting and pasting a string of text from one place to another. "Don't you think this flows?" I read it again. I nod uncertainly, wanting nothing more than to appease her. I feel the eyes of the other students on me like daggers, jealous of the special attention I seem to be getting. I just want this interaction over, but my teacher continues. "Now when I read this paragraph, it feels like I'm running my fingers over a gold satin cloth. It's smooth and flowing, and it makes me want to read more! You're a good writer, Ingela. Do you think I could use your narrative as an example for my other classes?" In that moment, I'm in shock. Tears sting at my eyes, and whether they're of pride or of embarrassment I am not sure. I know my classmates will shun me for this. No one wants to eat lunch with such a teacher's pet. But I can't help the surge of delight at hearing my teacher's praise. I thought dyslexia meant I would never be able to equal my peers, much less be an example for them. I wonder, then, if I would ever be able to achieve that same success without relying on a computer.

After that, I drilled words into my brain. I tested myself on spelling, trying desperately to prove that I can rise above the crutches of autocorrect. While I showed considerable improvement in accuracy, I was never able to reproduce the speed and clarity of my typed words with a pencil—even as an adult, I still have the characteristically illegible scrawl of a dyslexic (Brown). But my quest for linguistic excellence came with an unbecoming side-effect: I had begun to look down on those whose writing contained obvious grammatical flaws. If I was able to figure out these scrambled words, surely my neurotypical classmates should be more than capable. Why couldn't they tell the difference between *then* and *than*? What was holding them back? Did they simply not care? Had no teacher ever shown them the way their writing can feel like gold satin cloth?

In high school, I took a particular interest in reading scripts for plays. I loved the way that dialogue reflects the way people speak, and how it didn't always adhere to the rules of grammar I'd painstakingly sought to memorise. The people who wrote these plays that I read clearly were professionals. Surely they knew when they wrote a sentence fragment, or misconjugated their verbs. I hadn't imagined before that writers could misuse words deliberately, and I was fascinated. Really, when you think about it, how many people always speak in proper English? Who hasn't used a run-on sentence while anxiously describing something they themselves barely grasped? Isn't ending a sentence with a preposition so common nowadays that even staunch grammarians disregard the error? Could it be, then, that artfully misusing grammar could also lend itself to writing that flowed smooth as satin?

Ain't it a fact that you can read this sentence in yer head, imaginin' you're bein' spoken to by some off-kilter farmhand? Or, perhaps, you would prefer to envision this following phrase as something emanating from the lips of a haughty aristocrat. Maybe it's funner to think you're talking to a little kid! After all, words can be like toys to be played with. They can be the Lego brick building-blocks of magnificent castles or multicoloured towers to be toppled. A carefully constructed sentence can be a warm and refreshing cup of tea. Remove the care and attention, though, and a sentence can just as easily be a shattered mess on the floor. The humble sentence is a tool as much as a toy: without its guiding structure, words would be scattered haphazard like seeds in the wind.

But perhaps the difference in writing quality is not as simple as the amount of care one puts into their words. While I can overcompensate for my more mild dyslexia by consulting autocorrect and painstakingly analysing every word I see, those with worse conditions and challenges may be unable to do even that. Even if they were capable, perhaps it is simply more effort than it's worth for them, or they might lack the accommodations that have made my life manageable (Hebert 843-63). Even those whose minds can process words normally may not see the purpose in putting such effort into things as ephemeral as their sentences: such energy might be better spent building things that last longer than the breath on their lips. Was it wrong for me, then, to judge people on the basis of their grammar?

I sit at my cluttered dining-room table. Loose papers obscure the tablecloth and the remnants of breakfast. My laptop is also smudged with some remnants of breakfast. My fingers work at the keyboard, typing quickly but clumsily. My old dog snores at my feet, and my mother mills about the house. Distraction tempts me. The red squiggles of autocorrect highlight a handful of words. I know I'll have to correct them as I comb back over this document, but right now that feels like just another distraction. As I write this, I am no longer ashamed of the computer I rely on. Without it, the letters in my head are like the clutter on my table: chaotic and confusing. But using the arsenal at my disposal—spell check, text-to-speech, keyboards—I write with confidence that my words will be understood.

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## A Travesty

SAMANTHA FARAH

I SMOKED a lot of weed that week. Not that I'd never smoked that much before, but not as consistently. My mind needed to be distracted, my life didn't even feel like mine anymore. What was once mine was snatched away from me both forcefully and without a single morsel of remorse. This can't be my life now. This kind of stuff happens in a movie or to someone else, but not to me. This isn't real, it has to be a cruel joke or something—I don't know how else I would explain the events that transpired over the past two weeks.

I am as equally perplexed as I am fascinated, and I don't believe that fascination always has to fathom over great people. Some of the more fascinating individuals are human beings who have committed despicable and unethical acts, yet you find yourself craving every detail like an addict. Sometimes the most chaotic things are the most fascinating and you can't help but obsess over how these acts of evil come to exist. The best part about watching serial-killer documentaries, or driving past a car crash, is that it isn't your life that has been affected. You can find comfort in the fact that you have control over how much of it you're exposed to and you can choose to stop watching at any point. But what happens when you can't turn off the TV? What happens when you get played by someone with a Ted Bundy-like charm and then you're suddenly left having to pick up the shattered pieces of yourself over people who you didn't even know two weeks ago? Unfortunately, I can provide some insight.

Not too long ago I found myself swindled by a co-worker and his sister in law, or so I thought. I was deceived by two people who were living a double life and I managed to find myself dead centre in the midst of the crossfire. As if that wasn't problematic enough, the aftermath of the whole ordeal grew even more damaging, and even though I am the visible victim in this scenario and want to rid myself of these horrible people and forget about the ways in which they disrupted my life, I still find myself fascinated over the Travis of it all. I want to know how I let myself trust someone who my therapist would classify as a narcissistic sociopath. Someone who lied so effortlessly and would create such elaborate schemes. An individual so manipulative and self-serving that definitive boundaries do not exist to him.

When he introduced me to Sophie I was so excited to have another friend. I had been living in Banff for all of one week, working the night shift, and it had been beyond difficult to meet new people close to my age. When I first met her, I instantly loved her like family, because she was his family. The day she finally told me the truth, words cannot describe the overwhelming feelings of delusion and stupidity that flushed through my system.

Sophie called me in tears begging me to meet with her by the park next to my staff housing building at the Fairmont where we'd usually smoke.

"Is everything okay?" Her face was paler than usual, which only heightened my anxiety.

"No," her voice was shaky and pools of tears began to form again in her puffy red eyes. "I haven't been honest with you and neither has Travis, if he knew I was meeting with you right now—if he knew we were talking about this, I..."

"It's okay," I reached for her hand to reassure her. "What's going on?" From the little time I had spent with Travis, there were three things about him I have known to be true. The first one was that even though he said he didn't want to date me, seeing me talk to any other guy, unless introduced by him, made him manic. The second was that he needed to be in control of all situations, and this meant that Travis would never participate in any activities that would compromise keeping a sober mind. The last thing was that his possessiveness and need for control

kept him paranoid in all aspects of his life. Everyone was innocent until proven guilty, always. So when Sophie expressed that she was scared of telling me a secret that she knew would piss Travis off, my gut immediately told me that he had slept with another girl.

“What is it, Soph?”

“Sam, I am not Travis’s sister in law. We’ve been hooking up since before I got here. When I first met you I was so upset and jealous and I did not want to like you. Travis had told me about you back when I was still living in Ottawa and told me I wasn’t allowed to come here unless I promised to grow close to you. He said that if I listened then I could finally be with him only if I could first get the three of us to be together. I never expected to like you—I never saw it going down this way I—I—I love you, but I still love him and I—I’m so sorry Sam, I’m so sorry, I’m so so sorry.”

Thinking about that day on that bench still leaves me breathless. Travis, I can confidently say that I hate you. Your deceit and the actions you took against me to cover up for your malicious acts are so categorically insane, that I can’t help but be obsessed. I’m obsessed with how foolish you made me look. I’m obsessed with being coerced into a throuple that I didn’t know I was in, the stalking that ensued after I discovered your lies, the constant attempts to gaslight me into being your friend after the fact, and the way you used Sophie as a spy to gather information about me. Ultimately I am the most fascinated by the unspeakable acts you committed during your security shift when I was half a bottle of tequila deep. You convinced me it’d be best not to tell anyone. Consider this my public refusal to stay silent any longer.

## Rejection! by Rocking Father Roddy

STEVEN FENN

**I**N APRIL of 2019, I completed my first year away at university and returned for the summer to my childhood bedroom, returning a man far different to the little girl who grew up within its purple walls. Before opening the door, I prepared myself to meet the gaze of the bead-eyed butterfly curtains, I hated how something intended for privacy made me feel so watched. I was greeted not just by butterflies but a more shocking sight: seventeen palm leaf crosses adorning every empty surface. They were on the walls, tucked behind my mirror, stashed on the dresser, and one even sat on my pillow like a mint at a hotel. The palms were still fresh, a rich green, not yet dried to a crispy beige. I had hoped Palm Sunday would go uncelebrated this year. This redecoration was my mother's final Hail Mary, her last attempt to drag me back into the comfortable complicity of Catholicism. While my family slept, I took the collection of crosses, trashing them down the street in a public dumpster. These symbols held no power over me anymore; I wouldn't let them.

In my early youth, I was strongly devoted to the Catholic Church. There were times where I would get hit by a ball in the schoolyard while praying for forgiveness, likely over a passing wicked thought or getting an answer wrong during the lesson before recess. My devotion led me to be familiar with our priest, Father Rod. My mother's friend often referred to him as "Rocking Father Roddy," joking about his random performances from the pulpit, playing country songs on his guitar to



entice attendance at mass. The time I spent with Father Rod was often for the sacrament of confession. I would join Father Rod in the dusty confessional, divided by a screen, and tell him all I had done wrong. I confessed many sins to him over the years, often on a weekly basis.

“I lied to my mother.”

“I am questioning God’s vision.”

“Father, I used profane language.”

No matter what wrong I had committed (or how severe its penance), I found forgiveness and love in Father Rod, the church, and in God. This changed when, on the day before my seventeenth birthday, I came out as a transgender man. Catholic teachings paint transgender identity as the “rejection of a gift,” where biological sex is a gift from God and a fundamental part of your relationship to Him (Liedl). When I came out, I had declared myself a sinner but, having done nothing permanent, I was worthy of rehabilitation. I remained a lamb of God, albeit the black sheep of the flock. Hopes for my rehabilitation came to an end in January 2018, eight months after I came out. Fresh in the new year, I received my official legal name-change certificate and reached three months on hormone replacement therapy. Enrolled at a Catholic high school, the administration had many documents on my legal and religious status. The head of administration, Mrs Brady, informed me that they could convert all documents to my new name except for one: my baptismal certificate.

“You’ll have to talk to Father Rod,” Mrs Brady said. “Baptismal certificates are controlled by the parish office or the diocese, I’m not sure which.”

I made an appointment to meet with Father Rod at the rectory. The rectory was a small house, it sat tucked behind the church and beside the church hall, a member of the block devoted solely to the various buildings associated with the parish of St Francis de Sales. I used to pick at the grass of his lawn at church picnics, the cool moisture felt incredible between my fingers.

“A baptismal certificate records the moment itself, the bonding of a soul to God. The name cannot be changed.” His grin faltered as he paused to study my features, noting the subtle changes, rethinking the sound of my voice. “Have you chemically castrated yourself?”

“Pardon, Father?”

“What you’re doing is self-harm, destroying your ability to become a mother.” He paused. “No, it’s worse than self-harm, it’s suicide! It’s murder!” Father Rod tended towards the dramatic, it’s what made him the most popular preacher in the area. “You are killing the woman created by God!”

“I’m not dead, Father. I’m just a man.”

Our conversation was pre-empted by the Pope’s condemnation of advancements in medical treatment for transition, disparaging medical transition for meddling with sexual fertility and the intelligent design by God of the differences between men and women (Brammer). Father Rod’s protestations echoed the Pope’s comments, his concerns for my theoretical children already anticipated.

When I returned home that night, I had to inform my family that they were no longer welcome in the church. Over the next few days, my mother’s tears were constant. The legal entity of Steven Fenn had barely existed for two short weeks and already he had wreaked havoc upon this family. As a child, I would turn to prayer in times of uncertainty or shame. Now, God did not want me. Alone in my shame and uncertainty, swimming in a lake of my mother’s tears, I felt an overwhelming need to fill the space within me God left behind.

To fill that space, I turned to books. I borrowed books on ethics and epistemology, self-help manuals on manhood, and novels overflowing with queer narratives. I craved an answer, to find anyone—anything—that could help me fill that hole. On the bean-bag chairs hidden around the corner from the librarian, *Fun Home*’s blue panels comforted me with their cautiously thoughtful optimism. The titular character, George, skipped along the sidewalk while I read her tale on a windy day in the park. The book that reached me was *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan. The book, which featured two boys kissing on the cover, was one which I had avoided some years prior when tasked with reading it for book club. I was ashamed to be holding this book again, but I knew its contents were something I needed to experience. I tore through the book in secret, devouring each word through the dim shine of my flashlight. It was the final words of this book which started to fill in the hole, a directive which I am determined to follow:

“Make more than dust” (123).

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## What Keeps Me Dancing

GRAEME FUHRMAN

March

**B**ACK IN my childhood bedroom, I rearranged the furniture, creating enough space to swing my legs around in all directions. My parents were turning this room into a gym and had removed the bed, so after pushing the free weights against the wall and strategically placing the workout bench, I had just enough room to do a modified ballet class. While supporting myself with a dresser as a ballet barre, I did my first *tendu*. The aim of this basic step is to stretch one leg and point its foot, so it is no longer weight bearing but still in contact with the floor. I enjoy *tendus*; they wake up my joints and make my legs feel like dancer's legs: supple yet strong. On that day, however, the carpeted floor bunched under my ballet shoes, making it difficult to articulate my feet. My legs felt clumsy and weak, and my movements imprecise. Still, I pushed forward, progressively lifting my legs higher and faster as I did more advanced exercises. By strategically angling my body, I even made it through *grands battements* (kicking your leg as high as possible) without hitting any workout equipment. The small space became a more significant hindrance once I started to dance without the support of the ad hoc barre. The carpet made turning almost impossible, and I frequently tumbled into the walls. To do jumping exercises, I used a yoga mat to cushion my landings, yet it still felt like I would crash into the kitchen below. I finished class feeling disheartened. I didn't know how I

could stay in dancing shape under these conditions. I also didn't know if I wanted to. It was hard to find motivation jumping around my childhood bedroom, and with performances impossible for the foreseeable future, it was easy to wonder what purpose my career served.

On March 16th, 2020, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens sent its dancers home for what we thought would be a two-week lockdown. We left the studios with videos of an upcoming production to study and orders to stay in performance shape. Staying in ballet form takes determination under the best circumstances. Ballet technique is unnatural; it requires you to keep your legs rotated outwards, with your feet pointed in opposite directions as you turn, jump, and balance. The training can be gruelling, and years of rehearsals take a toll on your body. To do this work, you must enjoy the physical challenge, but for most professionals, our motivation comes from a desire to share what we do; dancers are creatures of the stage. The real challenge of lockdown was not training in limited space but being away from the theatre.

June

“You have to keep your mask on and only dance in your allotted space.”

“Allotted space?” I asked.

“Only eight dancers are allowed in each studio, and we have taped off a designated area for each to make sure you stay two metres apart,” the company manager replied.

The studio felt familiar yet luxurious; the at-home training had given me a new appreciation for my everyday workspace. Despite the stiffness of my body, and the mask blowing my breath back into my face, the first exercises felt terrific. I was on a dance floor, and the airy space around me allowed me to extend my limbs with a freedom I hadn't felt in months. As the class progressed, the challenges began. After getting used to the carpet, turns were hard to control on the slick floor. By the time we were jumping, I repeatedly stumbled out of my tape square, and I easily became winded from both the damp mask clinging to my face and thirteen weeks of at-home training. Like the ballet world, I needed to learn how to work in this new reality.

The pandemic financially tested many ballet companies. The shuttering of theatres caused ticket revenue to dry up; Alberta Ballet lost over two million dollars from cancelling *The Nutcracker*. Forced to innovate, companies turned from performance houses into online content creators. Hoping to reach audiences, companies streamed videos of past performances or asked dancers to film solos, often from the confines of their homes. The results of this effort were mixed at best. Dance's power does not translate well to film; none of the videos I watched, even the most technically brilliant, excited me like a live show. Even before the pandemic, I occasionally questioned whether ballet was too antiquated and elitist to work in the digital age. Dance historian Jennifer Homans is a proponent of this pessimistic view. She finishes her bestselling history of ballet, *Apollo's Angels*, by arguing that ballet is dying. Attempting to speak for the wider ballet community, she claims, "We linger and hark back, shrouding ourselves in tradition and the past for good reason.... We are in mourning." Training in a taped-off corner of a studio and performing only for a camera, I was forced to reckon with this idea anew. I disengaged from the endless streams of content companies were now posting online. I found it hard to commit to my training fully. I wasn't exactly in mourning, but without real performances, I felt a new apathy towards the artform I had dedicated my life to.

#### August

On a stage in a public square in downtown Montreal, I was masked and dancing in front of a socially distanced audience: a small scattering of standing people sequestered in squares painted on the pavement. The sun beat down on my neck, and I could feel the rickety stage shift when the group moved together. It was my first time in front of an audience since the lockdown, and a feeling of relief came over me. I was relieved that I still felt comfortable on stage, that I still knew how to put on a show. Most of all, I was relieved to see that there were people who would brave an unpredictable global health crisis to watch dance performed live. It was important to me that they took this risk, but I could also feel that to them, it was a risk worth taking. The value of live performance cannot be measured easily. However, take it away, and its true

significance becomes clear. Seeing the audience standing in the summer sun reassured me that people still craved a way to engage with ballet collectively. From that tottering makeshift stage, I could see in that masked audience the purpose my work served. Although considerably altered by sanitary measures, this was how ballet should be, art as a shared human experience.

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## **It's Not Just a Game!**

**KEELY GERVAIS**

**I** STARTED playing hockey when I was four years old, and if not for the pandemic, I would probably still be playing. I've never thought about why I love the sport so much; it's something that I've known my whole life. Something about that first step out onto the ice—where you feel like you're flying—always takes my breath away. Provided you don't fall on your face, which I've done a few times.

I have had a well-rounded experience of playing hockey; I've played every position, despite protests from my dad about the multiple switches between player to goalie; I've experienced the faraway tournaments; I've played competitive rep and house league hockey, although hockey is always competitive to me; I've played with older age groups because sometimes I just needed an extra challenge. I've even played with boys before and could "skate circles around." I don't mean to brag; they're my dad's words, not mine.

My dad has always been one of my biggest supporters. He taught me how to skate when I was three years old, coached most of my teams, and would take me to many of my tournaments. Our thing was hockey. I loved having him on the bench during games to encourage me between periods, and I think he enjoyed it just as much. Whenever I let in a goal, I'd look over at the bench, and he would give me a nod to brush it off and keep going. That was all the encouragement I needed. But if he had to miss a game, and I would look at the bench, something was always missing.



One particular year, my dad had decided to help assistant coach with my coach from the previous year. The other coaches did not like that I would automatically be his on team again. I heard a rather cold voice state, "We've always picked the goalies out of a hat. That way, it's fair for everyone." From my seat outside the room, the yelling made me laugh, especially when I heard Dad's deep, irritated yell: "I'm not having my daughter on a different team than I'm coaching! That makes absolutely no sense!" I knew that the other coaches didn't stand a chance at getting me on their team if my dad had any say in the matter. The rest of the season went by without any problems until one day that I'll never forget.

I had just finished my last exam for first semester of grade ten, and when we got home, my dad announced he was moving to the Cayman Islands. My first reaction was: "Okay! Let's go!" I didn't even know where the Cayman Islands were, but if Dad was moving there, I wanted to go, too. But when I realized it was a different country and I wouldn't be going, there was confusion, anger, and lots of tears. Everything after that was a blur, and I still couldn't comprehend saying goodbye to Dad. Forever. As I was packing, I was scared to ask him: "How long are you going for?" His reply was not very reassuring: "I don't know."

While it felt like my whole world was crashing down, the one thing I still found joy in was hockey. I finished the hockey season in Barrie, but it wasn't the same. Dad, who had been my rock, was no longer there; I felt so alone, like a piece of myself had left with him. Of course, I still had my teammates and coaches who supported me, but it was never the same.

Despite the setbacks and the heartbreak from the move, I channelled my anger and sorrow into making the finals, which we did. When Championship Day came, everyone was on edge. We were only in House League, playing for the first-place trophy, but we treated it like the Stanley Cup Finals. Everything was on the line. My stomach was alive with butterflies, and my legs were bouncing with nerves. To calm my nerves and pass the time, I prayed. I willed myself to find the strength and guidance, and hoped that the rest of the team was doing the same. You could hear a pin drop in the room. Even though we had music

playing, I couldn't hear it. The girls weren't laughing like we usually do—we all knew what was at stake here.

I tried to ignore the fact that Dad wasn't there. Yet, a little hopeful voice in my head was saying, "He still might come." I imagined him walking up behind me, tapping my shoulder, and crushing me in with a bear hug, just like old times. Then, I would feel his scratchy goatee on my forehead and know everything would be okay.

But, deep down, I knew he wasn't coming, so I tried to focus. As I got dressed, I was shaking a little, with excitement to get out on the ice, and fear that we might fail again. The disappointment from last year scorched the disastrous loss in my mind. We were playing many of the same girls from that team, so the pressure was on.

I don't have many pre-game rituals as a goalie, but I knew tonight was different. So, as I got to my crease at the start of the first period, my legs were shaking with anticipation. I lifted my glove to the sky because I knew Dad would be cheering me on from two thousand miles away. "This one's for you, Dad."

Something I've always loved about playing hockey is the high it gives you because nothing compares to that feeling—when all the noise in the world drowns out, and it's just you on the ice. Your heart is beating out of your chest as the game comes down to one final moment where you must decide how much you want it; what is victory worth to you? One last rush decides your fate. There's a desperate struggle in front of the net as the puck disappears under a sea of swarming bodies. Then, once it feels like all hell has broken loose, the buzzer goes, and you know you've done it. You've won. Your bench erupts in screams as your teammates scramble onto the ice, crushing you in a dog pile of sweat, blood, and tears. And at that moment, something that I had shared with my dad became just mine.

Dad may have missed me that day as much as I missed him, but I will always treasure the moment I called him in the change room after we won, and I could sense the massive smile he had on his face even through his voice. I was finally able to truly appreciate the sport for what it is and what it gave me my entire life. That day, hockey truly became part of my soul, not because of my dad, but because *I* did it myself, *I* won, and I wouldn't be the same without it.

## Bomb Shelters of Books

JOYLYN GRAY

**I**N THE summer of 1990, my family and I left the blistering desert heat of Kuwait to bid a final farewell to our family in India. At my father's birthday on July 29th, my grandmother raised a glass of wine and said, "To beginning a new chapter." The family drank to us; we were immigrating to Canada in September. A week later, early on August 2, my uncle rushed in with a newspaper in hand; my father stood up from his breakfast, laid the paper on the table, and read it with a grim face. My father's strong, sweet morning *chai* grew cold as he read the reports.

"Iraq invaded Kuwait at two a.m. The government has fled," my father told my mother. My parents had built a life in Kuwait. My mother carpooled to work with her friends, some in *hijab* and others in dresses and high heels; there were no dress restrictions in Kuwait. My father lunched at the *shawarma* cart outside the gold doors of the Gulf Bank, always remembering to bring some home on Wednesdays. My siblings were born in Kuwait; it was where my parents had monetary assets and where our packed boxes were ready to be shipped to Canada. But now, Kuwait was where their friends were in danger.

Thirty years later, Indians in Kuwait recall awakening to empty streets and bombed oil reservoirs going up in black flames in the desert. A survivor said, "we saw a fleet of fifty or sixty helicopters hovering in the sky like a swarm of bees. We were clueless ... until we saw Iraqi flags." My parents were expatriates in Kuwait, but it was their stepping

stone to their ultimate destination—Canada. My parents believed that Canada offered better education and life opportunities for their children. Despite the loss of material things and financial uncertainty, my parents got on a plane bound for Canada with four young children and immigration paperwork in hand.

“That’s a long journey,” my older cousin said before I left. “You can borrow a book; you’ll have to sign it out of my library. Bring it back when you return.” She handed me her sign-out sheet, already filled by other cousins. She made me write my name, the date, and the book—*Famous Five Run Away Together*—at the bottom of the list.

“I’ll charge overdue fines if you don’t return it on time,” she warned. I didn’t know when I would see her next, but the fear of leaving behind all I loved—my grandmother, cousins, and friends—was dulled by those young British sleuths.

The chill of fall was sweeping through Toronto when we arrived in September. The school year had already begun at St Maria Goretti in east Scarborough.

“This doesn’t look like a school,” I told my mother. The plain brown exterior and paved playgrounds were alien to me compared to the colourful buildings and thick green cricket fields of India. My grade-four class looked hostile as the teacher introduced me.

“You can sit there,” the teacher said, pointing to an empty desk. I made my way down the aisle; thirty eyes followed my every move.

“You smell,” someone retorted as I squeezed past the desks. I froze. Ms Kennedy said nothing. Unlike war, allies in life are made instinctually; this teacher was not an ally. St Maria Goretti was one of the largest Catholic schools in Toronto, but despite being a smorgasbord of ethnicity and income levels, I felt vulnerable and sought out a place to hide.

Luckily, the school had an extensive library with a receptive librarian. Under the sanctuary of its huge glass windows, I felt safe from the battle against those who tormented me for my skin colour, my “ugly” features, and growing body. I got lost in “The Lady of Shalott” as *Anne* performed it on a sinking raft. I spent breaks in the school library helping

sort and shelf books; I loved sticking card pockets on inner covers and stamping the school's name on the pages.

"I found solace in books, in the quiet peace of the library," my friend Henrietta told me once. Ayn Rand's *We the Living* introduced me to Henrietta; I found her reading it at an Indian expat New-Year function in 2005. I stepped out of the packed dancehall and found a bespectacled girl curled up on a couch in the hotel lobby. I said: "I love that book," and we've been friends since. Before smartphones, introverts had books. Henrietta was an infant when her family fled Kuwait, but she recalled growing up in Toronto eight years after me, with similar feelings of alienation. Despite our age gap, our experiences were mirrored; we both found refuge in books and libraries amidst the bombs, the bullies, and the barriers as an immigrant youth in Toronto.

So it began, the library as my bomb shelter and hideout in this frigid place, where no one looked like me, where my parents struggled, and where loneliness was a landmine. The public library in Scarborough unlocked the oppressive doors of my parents' home. Instead of shivering in the snowy winter, entrapped in our one-bedroom apartment, I looked out towards the ravine, imagining it to be the "lake of shining waters." L.M. Montgomery opened the portal to my imagination. The 2018 Toronto Public Library Youth Strategies Plan found that youth "face multiple challenges," including racism, poverty, and cultural isolation. Just as it had for me, the library and its books continue to offer young immigrants a positive and safe space. Among the bookshelves, we could flee from the turmoil at home and at school.

"At Western, there were old little lamps on the desks," Henrietta mentioned as we roamed the Toronto Reference Library, stopping in the Arthur Conan Doyle room. "Its stone walls felt like Hogwarts," she said dreamily of her alma mater, the University of Western Ontario. Henrietta said when her anxiety and introversion found the world too harsh, she hid in that stone-walled library, reading safely under the glow of the little lamps. Books have given me the strength to unwind and decompress during the darkest times in my life, providing me with the confidence to re-enter the world after traumatic events. I found words that allowed me to find pleasure and peace in the world around me.

“You look beautiful! Where’s my book?” my cousin asked me through the tequila shots at my wedding. “You owe me like a million bucks.” Her father, who had returned to Kuwait after the war, stood posing for the photographer across the hall with my father. Although my fines are still accruing, *Famous Five Run Away Together* sits comfortably on a shelf in my own personal library, nestled between my husband’s hardcovers and my baby’s countless board books.

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## *Anything Goes with Emma Chamberlain*

HAILEY HALL

I WAKE up to the daily painful sound coming from my phone. Seven o'clock a.m. It's time to crawl out of bed. How will I feel today? Will I be productive? Will I find myself back in bed watching Netflix? I get out of bed and make my coffee. As I wait for my mug to brew, I notice the radiance from the morning sun lighting up my living room. I move to the couch and burrito myself inside my favourite blanket. After some mindless scrolling, I notice that initial morning determination begins to fade. Laying back down is becoming more desirable, while productivity seems to be moving farther into the distance. I feel restless. My head begins to feel cloudy, blurred with irrational thoughts about my present and future. The end of my undergrad is approaching—I'm nervous. So many deadlines, such little time. Where am I going to work this summer? The weight in my chest arrives, it's heavy. Not again. I check the time on my phone. Seven-fourteen a.m. Can I just listen to one forty-minute episode and then start my day?

I put in my ear buds, lay my head onto the fluffy pillow, wrapping myself tighter into my blanket. I go onto my phone, click Apple Podcasts, play *Anything Goes* by Emma Chamberlain, and place my phone face down beside me. I close my eyes. "Good morning, guys" Emma says. Relief.

My thoughts begin to quiet as I focus only on the sound of Emma's voice. It's a distraction I continue to return to—a form of escape I know will never fail me. The world suddenly doesn't feel so overwhelming and

noisy. I can centre my thoughts—I am finally in control. I continue to focus on Emma’s voice.

I listen to her Podcast whenever I feel anxious because she also struggles with mental illness. Her openness about her experiences with depression and anxiety have taught me to feel okay with mine. We are also the same age, so I relate closely with her struggles of growing up and navigating the world as an emerging adult. Emma’s Podcast has also helped me find the confidence to speak up for myself. I’m so proud of this. I’m not alone, and she always reminds me of that. Her vulnerability and unapologetic personality inspires me every time I listen. It is okay to have bad days. In fact, bad days are normal. Seventeen-year-old me just could never accept this. I always thought there was something wrong with me—why can’t my mind slow down like other people’s? Why does it always have to be racing? Emma’s Podcast is the one thing that never fails to stop this racing, and suddenly, I can think clearly again.

Mindfulness. This is what I’m experiencing. Feeling self-aware about my own cognitive and emotional state (Leboeuf 172). This is my self-care. A way to soothe my mind, while feeling comfortable about the emotional state it is in. Finding ways to distract from the blur of deadlines and uncertainty about what the future holds for me. I continue to focus on Emma’s voice. It is so helpful focusing on a singular voice that is separate from the numerous ones in my head. I can follow the rhythm of her voice. How she moves from one sentence to the next. The story her Podcast episode tells. What I can take away from it. How my emotions and experiences relate to hers. Feeling secure in the environment I’m in. Oh yes, my environment—where am I again?

The couch. Snuggled in my favourite pink blanket. Disconnected from the world—my phone face down. My eyes closed. I remember now. I’ve returned from my escape from reality. Just for a moment. I feel like I’m on a phone call with a friend. She tells me how her day has been, she shares her dreams with me, the thoughts on her mind, and everything in between. A form of conversation—and I’m the listener. I feel relaxed. Emma’s Podcast continues to be the perfect distraction from my mind. Twenty-six minutes into the episode. Seventeen minutes left.

My mind feels lighter—clearer. Self-care really is such an essential part of my life. If I was feeling this way even just a year ago, I would’ve



chosen to go on with my day without taking these forty minutes to stop and take care of my mind. I would've lived my day wishing I could go back into bed. I think back to how many days I wasted by just wanting the hours to pass quickly. Once I felt anxious, I accepted defeat. Today is a bad day, I would think, and I just need to get through it. Not anymore. Instead, I practise mindfulness. I prioritize self-care. I put my mental health first. Emma's Podcast really is my most used form of self-care, and it is for these very reasons. I am aware of my negative thoughts and feelings. I feel above them, and I am okay.

"Have a good day, guys. I'll see you next week," my Podcast episode ends. I take a deep breath. I can start my day again. I check the time: 7.56 a.m. Only thirty-four minutes until class. I get up off the couch and fold my blanket, setting it on the arm rest. I rinse out my mug and place it in the sink. I proceed to walk into the bathroom and turn the shower on. I undress then step inside, close my eyes, and feel the warm water fall on my shoulders. Not only am I ready for the day—I am excited. I will see you next week, Emma.

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## Going Up

JULIA HANSEN

I WOULD be out of control in the sky, left to the whims of the pilot and cabin crew. The thought repeated, I unable to banish it. Sitting alone in Terminal One of Toronto Pearson Airport was not an easy task. People slowly began to fill up the pleather bench-seating and restaurant area at my gate. I was jealous of them and wondered if they too were feeling the same as me. Were they also anxious? It was hard to tell with the mask mandate and current state of international travel.

It was expected in March 2020 that things would be back to normal, but they weren't, and even stricter regulations had been imposed. It was now December 2021, and the Omicron variant was spreading across the world. Even in my university town of Kingston, Ontario, which had remained relatively unscathed throughout the earlier stages of the pandemic, an outbreak of the new variation of the virus was underway.

This would be my first solo flight. I had double and triple checked that I had all the documents that were required of me to enter Austria. Vienna was still in semi-lockdown, but I was going to be staying with my university roommate who was on exchange in the city.

My hands and legs shook as I sat. I had been temporarily comforted by duty-free chocolate and trashy newsstand magazines. They began boarding my flight. The reality was I was scared. I would be out of control in the sky, left to the whims of the pilot and cabin crew. I was not claustrophobic, but the idea of being in a metal tube for eight hours with just in-flight entertainment and my novel to amuse me was worrying. I

was scared most of all of the panic I hoped would not overcome me as the plane geared up for takeoff.

The symptoms of anxiety and I were old friends, a friend with whom I would never be able to part. My hands would tighten up and feel electric, my stomach and bowels would clench, and I would shake so horribly that I looked like I could be suffering from hypothermia. My body did not understand the cues my brain gave, the energy coursing through me.

I do not particularly remember my first panic attack, but I knew that from a young age I would become hysterical when I was uncomfortable with a situation. When I was five, my family travelled to Denmark long before flight anxiety was in my vocabulary. I had loved being on the plane with my parents and bouncing baby brother. The flight attendants for KLM gave children loot bags with activities and served ice cream in economy class.

One study found that “flight anxiety takes away joy from the travel experience and may result in physical and mental exhaustion for the traveller” (Batouei 710). I was experiencing those feelings while sitting at the gate, and I had not even boarded the plane yet. I had put myself through so much mental strain, something that my parents tried to talk me through. That was the problem with anxiety. I was standing at the edge, looking down, imagining all the scary situations that could arise, while not trying to fully throw myself off and catastrophize all the scenarios that had such a low chance of occurring.

My father would tell me, “don’t worry about the things that could happen.”

My mother would say, “just take it one step at a time.”

It was easy to ignore them and fall back on my illness. “It is just how my brain is wired,” I assured myself.

In Denmark what disturbed me the most were the mannequins. The historic Carlsberg brewery in Copenhagen used them in their exhibit. As a five-year-old I found them terrifying. Years later, upon reflection with my mother, she told me that I had been inconsolable and had to be rushed through the museum. I do not remember throwing this fit and just recall a general uneasy feeling.

As I got older, I was no longer scared of mannequins or “fake people” as I called them. My anxieties manifested in other ways, including going out with friends, large crowds, and even driving. I would have to inform my friends and teachers of my neurosis, and luckily everyone was very supportive. Information about mental health became widely available throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

However, what was scarier than all the scenarios and the panic was what would happen if I did not board the flight to Vienna. I was terrified to be someone who would be too scared to experience the world. I loved to travel, and the feelings in my head were just a part of that.

Anxiety for me was about growing up. When I was a kid, I worried about theme parks and horror movies. As a teenager I worried about getting my driver’s licence, going out with friends, and the big city around me. As a young adult I worried about going out to clubs and flying by myself.

In my coming of age, I had to conquer the anxieties that came with it. My worries were markers of how I was growing as a person. The most loving thing that I could do for myself in this moment would be to board the flight.

The people around me were not “fake” as I handed the gate agent my passport. I could laugh at that phobia now, hopefully like I would be able to laugh at this one, one day. I realized that this was happening. As I went to sit in my seat, I scanned my surroundings and studied the flight attendants, hoping that nothing was amiss. I would be out of control in the sky, left to the whims of the pilot and cabin crew, and that would be okay. As we taxied to the runway I gripped the armrests of the seat, and as we took off, I realized that I was finally growing up.

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## Heroes

JULIE HURST

THE WIND howled across the resort as the storm battered the northwest coast of Lancashire. The dark Irish Sea and the troubled sky began to merge into the dirty grey colour that locals recognized as a sign to stay indoors, or at the very least, stay off the seafront. Alistair loved the town, and he was a frequent visitor with his father, Robert. However, the men had not seen the beauty of the sea in the middle of a violent storm. Alistair couldn't wait to experience the extreme weather, so he and Robert grabbed their coats and set out on a lunchtime walk with their dog Henry. The spray from the tallest waves tumbled over the sea wall to partially flood the promenade. It drained away towards Gynn Square, an area of landscaped gardens and a roundabout that nudges traffic towards other parts of town. The two men were not fazed and threw Henry's red ball for him to fetch as they walked along North Shore. Henry charged across the road after his ball, which bounced off the tram track and into the air. He jumped to catch it, but the ferocious wind lifted the little dog like a kite let loose from its string. He was claimed by an incoming twenty-foot wave and disappeared into the violent waters. Without hesitation or thoughts of personal safety, Alistair waded into the sea to save his beloved Jack Russell. Robert looked on in horror as the sea threw Alistair off his feet and pulled him into the current. Thinking quickly, Robert threw a life preserver into the waters for his son and shouted to two bystanders, "Quick, call the police, get help, go, go!" The

life preserver rope was too short, and Alastair was swept away from the sea wall by the strong currents.

Police Constable Angela Bradley and her partner Police Constable Gordon Connolly first arrived on the scene. They courageously waded into the murky waters attempting to rescue Alistair with life belts; the pair were battered by the waves and thrown against the sea wall. P.C. Morrison, a traffic patrolman, also responded to the developing catastrophe. He desperately attempted to rescue his colleagues but fell to the same fate. The spectators and volunteers who helped the rescuers became desperate and screamed at the other rescuers, "Quick, oh my God, get him, grab him quickly!" but P.C. Morrison became enveloped in large waves. He desperately gasped for air as thoughts of his wife and children flashed through his mind like an old slide projector. He succumbed to the waves and disappeared. Soon, emergency services and first responders emerged in droves, their flashing lights and screaming sirens protruding into the nearby hotels and guest houses. The chaos summoned local people and business owners who gathered outside to gawp at the scene. Two more officers were rescued from the sea that afternoon, and the crowd gasped and cried as the severity of the emergency became clearer. People stood helpless as the police officers received emergency medical treatment from an off-duty doctor passing by.

The Fleetwood lifeboat had been busy the night before rescuing a fishing vessel that had got into difficulties in the rough seas. The crew had almost ended their shift as the alarm sounded again. Although they were tired, they knew the emergency involved several people in trouble, including police officers, and the adrenaline of the crew kicked in as they scrambled to save them. The boat was relaunched; however, the new self-righting boat could not handle the strength of the waves. The lifeboat arrived too late and had struggled for three hours to reach the rescue area from Fleetwood, only seven miles away. It was beaten back and battered by the ferocious wind while sea spray bombarded the crew from mountainous waves. The Thornton brothers had joined the lifeboat service two years earlier. They were experienced fishermen and had practically lived on board fishing vessels since they were boys. Before the "Cod Wars" began between the U.K. and Iceland governments in the

1970s, their father and paternal grandfather worked for the Boston Company as part of the North Atlantic fishing fleet. The boys had joined the lifeboat service when the fishing industry began to dwindle, and work had become scarce. Steve Thornton nearly fell overboard as the boat rolled and self-righted itself. Quick-thinking Ken Stanhope, the skipper, grabbed the young man as the two of them were almost thrown over the starboard side. Steve's brother, Matty Thornton shouted, "Help, grab that rope, throw it to them!" Chris Newson, a burly man who worked as a butcher, responded immediately, and Ken managed to grab the rope as it hit the two struggling men. Matty and Ken had volunteered as lifeboatmen for over twenty years, they were familiar with the large swell of the ocean and knew the tides and weather conditions, but this storm was different. The tides intermingled with each other as an aquatic whirling dervish. The men could not reach those in peril. Henry the dog, Alistair, and P.C. Connolly were retrieved from the murky waters several days later, but P.C. Bradley and her colleague P.C. Morrison disappeared.

There is an eight-foot memorial on the promenade of North Shore at Blackpool called "The Four Blue Men." It was unveiled in 2013 to honour the three brave police constables that died almost forty years ago and a tribute to all emergency services, Police Force, Fire Department, Paramedics, and Ambulance Services, Coast Guard, and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

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## A Change of Plans

SERENA MELODY JAMES

LEAVING MY elementary school to have lunch on my own was a customary activity for my sixth-grade self. By that point I have grown used to my presence not being perceived by anything more than the glossy pages of my comic books or the new drawing I was attempting for the week. Through these pages of paper I was able to have my mind idle in a space that wasn't my current reality. May it be my favourite character battling a new enemy or my third attempt at drawing the same line, I found that whatever burden I had was lifted, even for an inconsequential moment. However, the predictability of my life altered on an overcast, fall afternoon.

As I was taking steps towards the noisy school doors I heard a couple of voices from the girls in my class approaching from outside. I grasped the cool metal of the door and made my way outside, having my eyes track the gravel in front of my feet instead of making unnecessary eye contact with others. The door slammed behind me as I made my way towards my spot beneath a tree. This time a voice called out my name.

"Hey, Serena! There is a dance club opening up and its first meeting is today. Want to join?"

I clutched my books to my chest as I stared directly at her. *I could've* just said no, said that I'm not interested, that I was trying to catch up on homework—

"Sure."



I genuinely don't know what came over me at that moment. What is an anxiety-ridden, reserved *me* of all people doing joining a club like that? Yet with all these thoughts running through my head, I continued to follow them down the hall to a classroom that housed a teacher that I haven't seen before. She looked young and relatively tall, with sleek, long black hair. I sat on the carpeted floor, slightly distanced from the other girls in the room. I listened to what the teacher had to say about the club, the time commitment, and who can audition. As she walked around the room, I noticed that her gait was graceful and poised, much like a ballet dancer. Once the meeting finished and it was time to head back to class, I jotted down my name on the sign-up list.

#### Tenth Grade

This Saturday afternoon was similar to that of my fateful sixth-grade day. I am in Toronto to participate in an event connecting all students learning Korean as a language during night school. The pamphlet listed numerous events hosted today, but the one that I chose to join was a dance showcase. Though I have spent years teaching myself as much as I can, I always felt that I could never compare to a person who received formal dance classes. I still decided to push through these theatre doors and make my way down steep steps to my place in the audience. I watch others perform, enjoying just how much talent others can possess. I know that I should be psyching myself up right now, but that little voice that tells me that I am better off not being seen by others makes its way back into the centre of my mind. That is until I hear my name and song being announced to the audience. I take a breath, and swiftly descend the steps to the stage. Waiting for the music to start, I track my eyes above the audience's seats, as to not make eye contact with anyone. I feel my flared, maroon-coloured shirt sway as the song starts. My mind is completely clear. I get to exist in a space again where the task at hand becomes more important than anything else in this present moment. With every passing movement, I pay no attention to what I look like, what others are thinking of me, or what I need to get done that day. The song finishes, and I feel breathless. As I head back to my seat, I fixate on the russet carpet that covers the steps that I land on. Once again I wonder

why I make some of the decisions that I do. Though some of them turn out negative, I am led to believe that I do make split decisions in the aspiration that something positive can happen in my life.

Later on that day, I am hanging out with a couple of friends eating snacks that I bought from a nearby vendor. A lady sees me and makes her way over.

“Hello, I wanted to let you know that you’re a wonderful dancer. Did you ever participate in gymnastics before?”

“Yes, I have, just a little when I was younger.”

“I thought so. I noticed it in the way that you move your body. I do hope that you continue to dance in your future. You can make something great of yourself with it.”

“Thank you so much!”

She walks away, and I finally realize that I have a different way to find my peace in this life, where I can be seen by others.

## A Life Lived Alongside Music

BENTON JONES

I WAS six years old. Blurry figures in the distance sang vaguely familiar songs I've heard on car rides and muffled through walls. The cold evening air nipped at my nose and along my cheeks. My dad and brother disappeared into the sea of heads, although I tried to keep my eye on them, I couldn't keep up. I remember thinking the band was playing one of my parents' favourites, although I couldn't quite tell. One of the ones that got played enough for me to be able to hum along to the chorus.

My parents had a thing for music. Neither of them was particularly musical per se, but there isn't a moment through my childhood that doesn't include a soundtrack. Their tastes fluctuated as time passed. From grunge to techno pop and back through, the musical ambience of my house shifted constantly, and always reflected the mood of the people inside it.

Although at the time you wouldn't know it, your childhood is when you become, well, *you*. The transformation from uterus occupant to miniature citizen largely decides who you will become later in life, and so the kind of music listened to plays a large role in how you perceive yourself. Trying to trace this cause and effect in my own life leads me to a particularly early memory.

Late one night I sat in front of the family computer, figuring out how to download music and sorting the songs by the feeling I associated with them. I had slept through the afternoon to avoid a six-hour stretch after school where my brother attaches himself to the computer, always

blaring Pearl Jam or something similar, although the bright monitor lights routinely turned my eyes to grapes. I looked up lyrics I jotted down during the day trying to find something familiar. I would occasionally sneak around the house, sifting through my parent's CD collection, trying to find something interesting. It became a sort of a hobby, grouping music together, trying to find what they meant. That night I stumbled upon a band named Tool, a group that, at the time, I assumed to be specifically designed to terrify kinds who watch their videos late at night. I promptly lost interest in music.

Halfway through middle school a close friend of mine took their own life. I first heard about it online and assumed it was a prank. It happened a few months he had grown distant, which made everything else about it that much worse. Trying to process what had just happened as a pre-teen wasn't a very smooth process.

After avoiding thinking about it for a few months, I started going through my friend's old accounts online. There's a sort of bittersweet nostalgia that comes with reminiscing like that. As I went through his web of digital memories, I found a band that I had remembered him playing and checked them out.

Thus started my obsession with Twenty-One Pilots, a band whose sympathetic and sorrowful songs helped a young me finally start to work through my friend's suicide. For most of my life I completely hid my interest in the band. It's not much of a secret that pre-teen boys aren't the most accepting group. The more I became attached to them, the more I found myself becoming involved with related topics online.

Sleeping through the day became a habit as I would wait for the computer. I was mostly on forums for people to share what they feel like they can't publicly, without a face or a proper name, strangers online could finally become a truer version of themselves for a moment. I could tell by the grammar most of them were my age or younger. Sometimes I still like to wonder where all those people wound up in life.

The first time I saw the band live it snowed. There was a light haze in the downtown strip, fog seeping down to mingle with the bustling pedestrians. Although it's now known as the concert that terrorized the

TD Place Arena's infrastructure with the power of synchronized jumping, it all felt like a blur to me.

"You look different," a girl in class told me.

It was an offhanded comment, but it stuck well enough to make it into this story. I was wearing all black. I felt normal, but it was true that I hadn't dressed like this before. It had been over a year since my friend died and I was still listening to all his favourite music. I had stopped interacting with my friends, and unbeknownst to me in that moment, I had started dressing how he did before the last time I saw him.

After consuming countless hours of music about suicidal tendencies and social awareness for mental illness, at that moment I really internalized a depressing concept. Most people see mental illness as a bang. A major splotch rather than a fizzle. So, when someone fades into the background, people tend to look away absent-mindedly.

There is an idea that an individual develops a sort of musical identity as they listen to music, changing alongside them as they grow older. As I grew, my music taste continued to shift, with different artists coming and going to satiate the need for variety that my parents set within me.

It's 2022 and with the practical and social consequences of a global pandemic, and the current worldwide dance with nuclear annihilation, I've found myself living alongside the same selection of music I had as a pre-teen. In the same sense that music can help you define who you will become later in life, it can also serve as a reminder of when you've come full circle.

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## Home for the Holidays?

SABINA KAFAROV

I GRIPPED the handle of my carry-on tighter as I tried to keep up with my older sister, DJ. It was our first time travelling unaccompanied. Both our parents were busy and couldn't get the holidays off, so they sent us alone at sixteen and seventeen years old.

Our flight was delayed due to the raging blizzard that blanketed Frankfurt, Germany. The pilot's words seeded the fear of missing our connecting flight in my mind. "There will be a forty-five-minute delay due to weather." As the pilot finished the announcement, DJ and I exchanged a pained expression. That only gave us forty-five minutes to make our connecting flight.

Frankfurt Airport is one of the largest airports in Europe with over a hundred gates across two terminals and it was our first time in the airport. Not a problem if our flight had been on time, or if our connecting flight had not been at a different terminal. I pushed my way through crowds of people and caught up with my sister. She was standing still.

"Dude, what are you doing?" I asked. "We're going to miss our flight!" She turned towards me. "We already did!" she pointed towards the board. The flight to Baku had left fifteen minutes ago. We stared at each other for what seemed like hours. We didn't know what to do. We had never missed a flight before. We didn't have working cellphones as international plans didn't exist yet. My fear of missing our flight had been replaced by something worse, the fear of the unknown.

Not many people are aware this is an actual fear. The fear of the unknown is the fundamental fear that results in anxiety disorders and neuroticism. The clinical name or psychological term is xenophobia. But its meaning has been morphed by the media to come to mean the fear of strangers or foreigners. The airport is not a fun place for xenophobia to creep into one's mind. But it took over mine.

"Stop crying!" I heard DJ say. I looked at her in wonder. Then I realized the wet stains on my shirt and raised my trembling hand to my cheek. I was crying, bawling in fact. Between gasps for air, I managed to mutter "What do we do now?"

My sister turned and scanned the crowd. She grabbed my hand and pulled me towards a stern, tall man. As she was explaining what had happened, I realized he was a security guard. A rather unhelpful one too, as he kept shaking his head. My anxiety increased. I felt like my heart was exploding. My crying intensified tenfold. I must have looked hysterical as my sister shook me to get my attention. The security guard changed his face from stoic to concern. He said something into his walkie talkie and a few minutes later a woman walked over.

"Hi, you missed your flight? I can help. Come with me." She said in a thick accent. She helped get me on my feet and we followed her through the airport, finally arriving at a plainly decorated office. With grey walls and high-walled cubicles, the place had hardly seemed inviting to me, although there was a small tub of Lego in the corner. The sign on the door said "Unaccompanied Minors Office" in small black letters. At the time, I had not known such a place existed, but now I know that there is one in every airport. Flights pose a threat to children, especially when unaccompanied or when they do not carry documentation. My sister was carrying mine, since I had the habit of misplacing my belongings.

At the office, we were able to place a call to our mom, who was relieved to hear our voices.

"How on Earth did you miss your flight?" I could hear my mom speak even though my sister was on the phone. My mother was barely over five feet tall, but her voice echoed through our apartment in Toronto.

“There was a blizzard and we landed too late to make our connecting flight.” My sister responded.

“Oh! I knew this was a bad idea. I knew I shouldn’t have let you fly on your own. I’m so sorry, my babies!” Her voice grew louder and shriller.

“It’s okay Mom, we found people who can help us.”

“Let me speak to them”

My sister gave the phone to the woman. I could see the smile on the lady’s face growing firmer until she looked like a plastic doll with a frozen grin. My mother was not easy to deal with.

After a few minutes she hung up the phone and started typing on her computer. Eventually, the kind woman gave us another ticket to a flight and escorted us to the gate. DJ and I sat for hours waiting for boarding to start but it never did. I stretched my legs out as my sister went to speak to an attendant. I could tell the news was bad as she took her time making her way back and gazed at her shoes while she told me “We missed the flight. Apparently, the gate number changed, and they made an announcement.” Instantly a million scenarios ran through my head. Would we be like Tom Hanks in *The Terminal*? Doomed to spend years of our lives stranded in an airport? I was wrenched out of my trance by my sister who pulled me through the airport once more to the Unaccompanied Minors Office.

The lady was shocked to see us. “As minors, they had to escort you to the new gate,” she informed us. “They didn’t.” My sister was curt. It had been over a day that we were stranded, and we were hungry, and sleep deprived. Unbeknownst to us, passengers that experience flight delays are more emotionally negative and rightly so, as most are not properly compensated or offered solutions that work. If a hotel messes up a reservation, they offer a better room, reward points, or a discount at one of their sister hotels. This isn’t the case with flight delays. Passengers just have to deal with it. Perhaps that is why so many people hate travelling or long flights. So many unknown variables, so many things that can go wrong, and there is often little reimbursement or compassion for those who are affected.

So, what happened in Frankfurt? We slept on a cot near an elevator, since all hotels were booked because of the blizzard. We got tired of



having people shove us from one place to another, so we took matters into our own hands. We had travel insurance, so we knew we could book our own flight. We went through customs and the German officials stamped our passports. We officially entered Germany. We made our way to the ticket booth at Turkish Airlines near the entrance of the airport. Speaking Turkish and English fluently, we explained our situation, and the travel agent was able to book us on a flight to Istanbul and from there to Baku. We did make it home for the holidays, just two-and-a-half days later than we had originally planned.

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## The Language of Loss

ELIZABETH KIM

**G**RIEVING IS learned young. Dolls disappear and are never found. Toys break and can't be repaired. Playground friendships end and never mend.

Learning to grieve for these small things, over time, builds up to allow more permanent griefs to grudgingly settle into our lives. The leaving of a country, for instance, and finding yourself in a sea of strange lands and people. The pain and melancholy of a first heartbreak. And above them all, the greatest, most poignant grief—the death of a loved one.

My mother's best friend, Mia, had a daughter a few years older than myself—Stephanie. She was early into her adolescence when we met, a babbling, shy baby no more sentient than a pet. But she liked me, and eventually loved me as a sister. Whenever we went places, she took on the role of a big sister—out of obligation or want, I'm not sure. But she held my hand, led me around, and pretended to gasp at the utterly mundane things my little brain found interesting. Here family attended all my milestones that came with growing up—music recitals, graduations, and birthdays. When I started taking the classical arts more seriously, they came to my violin concerts and recitals, enduring shrieking minuets and blood-curdling concertos; clapping dutifully and bringing fragrant bouquets of flowers.

When she began studying at university, and eventually met someone and got married, I was fascinated every step of the way. I must have been

sixteen or seventeen around that time—young, impressionable, and malleable. So, I envisioned my future the same way—a linear, smooth road with a degree and a life partner at the end of it. Now, years later, I see the painfully obvious fallacies that were invisible to me before—looking at every milestone as a finish line. Living doesn't end after a difficult exam or graduating college or getting married or getting a job. But for Stephanie, it did.

In her fifth month of pregnancy, she passed away from a miscarriage. Her mother told us that she passed quietly—passed, like a car on the street, or a train in the night. Passed, not died; words trying to hedge a great and profound loss somehow.

A few years later, when I passed my audition for the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra, I hopped on the subway every weekend to go to rehearsal. Each week, I'd see different buskers and vendors, passengers both white-collar and flamboyant, and contently settle in my seat with my instrument as I took in the sights, smells, and noises around me.

Rehearsals were my favourite part of the week, and my days began and ended in high spirits. As a young person from the suburbs, it only made sense that I tried to escape the monotony of a small town and melt into the anonymity of the buzzing metropolis. But the route I took passed by the cemetery Stephanie was buried in. I was reminded of her, and she was the only thing on my mind the rest of the commute.

In the echoing, rustic halls of the university where orchestra rehearsals were held, I was reminded of her. I was at her alma mater, after all, and she once walked these halls, now here only in my memory. I wondered if she traced the same steps as I did whenever I walked through the formidable, ancient campus, snow softly blanketing the cobbled steps. Once, after rehearsal, I explored the massive campus—to my young self, a vast city in its own right—and wandered into the science buildings where she had studied Pharmacology. The halls were grey and bleak, ambition and stress hanging thickly in the air. I couldn't imagine her here—such a vibrant, lively, and creative person, studying for hours under the dull fluorescent lights. I stood there, violin strapped to my back, nervously glancing at the older, prettier, adult-like students, and felt a sudden sadness. I found it unfair that the city and its people

lived on as if nothing had happened, the archaic infrastructure under my feet bearing the weight of the world without a care.

Grief and its constituents—there are whole literatures on these. Symphonies, poems, paintings, ballets, operas, and other art forms. When Stephanie died, music became an outlet for me, a language of loss. In elegies, symphonic poems, and requiems, I channelled my loss—pieces created from and for grief. They were pieces where I could discover new interpretations with every listen, and ones I could play along to; pieces created to mourn a loss—of a dream, of a future, or of a person. She had been an integral part of my musical journey yet did not live long enough to see me reach the peak of my career. When she passed, a part of my music went away with her.

When I left for university, I stopped playing music. It happened naturally, slowly becoming a smaller part of my life as I found new friends and pastimes, focusing on an entirely new major that wasn't music. I was an active part of my business program, joining clubs, stressing about internships, and drinking religiously on weekends with all my peers. And with it, I found myself thinking of Stephanie less and less, my grief now nothing more than a memory and a major event in my distant childhood.

Mourning for Stephanie, a beloved friend, makes me realize that grief is just love with nowhere to go. Years after her death, I outgrew music and outgrew my grief, grounding myself in reality. As much as I'd like to believe that the people we love never really leave our lives, there will always be a grasping that comes from trying to mourn an emptiness she once filled. But in my memory, she is alive, somewhere where I can't see nor reach her—in a place where our paths won't cross anymore.

## Ayya

MISHKA KUCHARIK

I HAD never been near the ocean at night. I could see the white caps of cresting waves in the near dark. It was louder than I imagined, but I didn't have any expectations. Everything about my experience in Sri Lanka was novel and astounding. The others stripped down to their boxers and waded into the water. I removed my hat, boots, and tunic, and the next thing I remember I was under water, being pushed and pulled by a force unlike any other. As soon as I got my feet under me, another wave caught me in the chest, knocking the air from my lungs. The water pulled at my clothes, rushed over and under and around me. This was the same ocean that produced the waves, some over nine meters in height, that would devastate over a dozen countries.

I was one of two hundred Canadian soldiers deployed with the Disaster Assistance Response Team to Sri Lanka after the tsunami of late 2004. Over 220,000 people lost their lives. The Canadian government deployed the DART a few weeks later, a group of doctors, medics, engineers, and us, the grunts. Soldiers from our unit, the 2nd Regiment Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, were deployed as members of the Defence and Security platoon. We landed in the capital city of Colombo and had time to explore before the long drive to Ampara where we were stationed. During a walk through the city, a woman in a pink sari stopped me, a careful hand on my arm. She nodded her head to the side and smiled before continuing on her way. It was a moment of connection, however brief, that has stayed with me. I felt acknowledged.

We made camp in an abandoned sugar factory south of Ampara, a two-storey white building. The property was fenced in and overgrown with lush, green plants and trees. Our unit occupied a room on the second floor, army-green cots covered in mosquito netting pushed close together, our kit tucked underneath and out of the way. Our platoon was tasked with washing bat shit off the walls, manning the security booth at the gate, emptying portable toilets, and burning garbage. It doesn't convey the heroic image of doctors tending to patients or engineers providing clean drinking water, but it had to be done. We were happy for opportunities aside from our regular duties. Our days outside of camp were filled with work: slinging sledge hammers to take down half walls, all that remained of a home, a life, or building small shelters out of one-by-fours and flimsy blue tarp, surrounded by curious children dressed in brilliant white shirts their mothers washed in the river and left on rocks to dry in the hot sun. The sun and heat were constant. The candy bars in our ration packs liquified. During our lunch breaks, we would lick melted chocolate from the wrappers.

One tasking took us east to Pottuvil. We helped engineers and members of the Sri Lankan Navy ferry people, food, and water across the gap in the causeway, the land and bridge washed away during the tsunami. There is a golden statue of the Buddha on the side of the road beside the causeway. The photos I have, taken with my old digital camera, are grainy and don't reflect the almost pristine condition of the statue, a reminder that not everything was washed away. We spent each day easing the black assault boats across the muddy water and up to the shore, offloading the outgoing group and helping new passengers board. The people were quiet and thoughtful, travelling to and from work and running errands. The other soldiers and I took turns getting into the water to guide the boats to shore and help people disembark. This meant spending most of the day in wet clothes. When an elderly woman handed me the baby girl she was travelling with as others assisted her off the boat, I was afraid to hold her close. I was wet and my jacket had that mildewy scent of old life jackets, but the girl never fussed. She didn't cry, just looked at me with large dark eyes. Their family was killed and she and the woman were the only survivors.

At night, we slept in tents on the beach. A crude shower was erected not far from our camp site— a three-sided, waist-height privacy screen built around a shower head attached to a water bladder. Crouching down to shower was awkward but there were no women within the ranks of the Sri Lankan Navy we worked with, and I was the only woman in the Defence and Security platoon. I was happy to accommodate to the facilities; showering on the beach under a full moon to the sound of the waves of the Indian Ocean is not an experience I will ever forget.

On the second day of our tasking, a naval officer waved me over. He was smiling and eager to talk. I wish I remembered more about our conversation. I do remember his request: “Call me *ayya*.” He explained that *ayya* meant brother, and that he would call me *nangi*—sister. I had been in the Canadian Armed Forces for three years. I’m glad I didn’t know in that moment that my deployment to Sri Lanka would be a singular experience. I don’t remember the officer’s name, but I never forgot the words for brother and sister. He showed me a kindness and respect that surprised me. I was an *artilleryman*, a token, a check-in-the-box for diversity for the Canadian Armed Forces, necessary but not entirely welcome. In Sri Lanka I had the opportunity to shed the preconceptions of women in the combat arms and just do my job. I thrived in that environment. During my performance review, the Sergeant and Master Bombardier admitted that I had surprised them. They hadn’t expected me to adapt so well.

We left Canada in the deep cold of January and were welcomed by the tropical heat of Sri Lanka. I acclimated quickly while many others in my troop had a difficult time, challenged by the high temperatures, hot sun, and humidity. When I talk about my experience in Sri Lanka, I often say that I felt that I bloomed like a hothouse flower. Far from the rigid requirements of quotas and promotional images, preconceptions and the destructive military culture that has only recently come to light, I had space to be myself, to show what I could do. It’s been a long time since I left the service and there are many things I’m happy to leave behind, but I often think about Sri Lanka. I’m working on building a life with similar space to bloom and thrive. One of our final taskings was to clear debris from a school in Akkarupaittu. The side of one of the main buildings was marked by the waves, the water line scarring the white

surface two thirds the way up a two-storey building. In the aftermath of devastation, life continued. Children ran through the halls and into the schoolyard, laughing and playing in the bright Sri Lankan sun.

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## Down the Hatch

SASHA LECHTZIER

**T**HE HARSH reality is that nothing was the same after I got discharged from the hospital, and nothing would be the same as I began my journey of recovery and my life with mental illness.

For many children, being introduced to the concept of death unconsciously changes them. The moment when they realize humans do not live forever like many of the mythical and magical characters they have come to adore, is a moment of fundamental transformation. The night I got admitted, eight years ago, I was told I could die and the act of sugar-coating became a stranger to me.

Battling an eating disorder is not a childlike experience. Having to fight a voice in your head that wants to kill you isn't something a child should have to do. I was forced to grow up because that was the only way I was going to survive. I needed to know about numbers, statistics, and medical terms like *bradycardia* (a slower than normal heart rate) and *hypothyroidism* (a condition where the thyroid doesn't create and release enough thyroid hormone)—terms I had never even heard of or ever wanted to hear. I had to advocate for myself, speak up, and understand that the only way I was going to survive this was if I left *Pretty Little Liars* and *Glee* in the past and started understanding the disease that I needed to fight.

*Anorexia nervosa* is an eating disorder where the main interest is to lose as much weight as possible, embodied in the constant refusal to eat and the fear of gaining weight (Munteanu). Anorexia and other eating

disorders have the highest mortality rate of any other mental illness, and adolescents present the highest risk. Anorexia is often referred to as the “white teenage girl’s illness,” which has allowed for the detrimental stigma surrounding these disorders to continue growing. Teens who don’t identify with this demographic are less likely to seek help and don’t have the opportunity to be properly screened for a diagnosis (Damour).

I can’t help but wonder how my treatment would have been different had I not identified as a “white teenage girl” who presented as the most stereotypical image of an eating disorder. The treatment system is disordered in itself, as those who look a certain way have an inherent upper hand on others, no matter how sick they may be.

I remember looking in the mirror and liking what I saw when it really should have scared me. I think that’s when I realized how sick I was—when I realized that even having an intense staring contest with death wasn’t enough to convince me to eat a sandwich.

I remember my head being occupied by a stranger that quickly became my best friend, but a best friend shouldn’t want to harm you. Your best friend shouldn’t tell you that you aren’t pretty enough or good enough or skinny enough. But mine did.

I remember succumbing to that voice instead of my head. I let myself listen, and it only got louder. It wasn’t my friend, but it was too late when I finally learned that.

I feel my throat get tight thinking about the state I was in, and at only thirteen years old. What a horrible way for a child to feel. My friends were going to their first parties, trying their first sips of alcohol, sneaking out at night, and spending weekends at the mall, while I was tethered to a heart monitor listening to sick babies cry from down the hall. How could I not have instantly grown up?

I see the hard-drive icon pop up on my desktop. I click on it and open the folder called “Stuff,” and just like I knew it would be, a document titled “Room 333” is there. During my first week in the hospital I kept a digital journal hoping one day I’d be famous and have to write a book about my experiences. I guess it’s never too early to start preparing for stardom. I open the document and I’m back in Room 333, on the pediatric floor at North York General Hospital in Toronto. I read what my thirteen-year-old self had to say.

*I wake up to the sound of a continuous loud beeping.  
I was constantly getting tangled and caught in my wires and sheets.  
The blonde Susan walks into my room carrying the usual blood-  
work necessities.*

I look down at my inner forearms and if I look close enough I can see tiny marks from all of the blood work I have needed to get over the past decade.

*Today I got to go outside for 15 mins in my wheelchair.  
I cried when I felt that first breeze of fresh air.*

I look around my room here that has two walls of windows, a big upgrade from the tiny hospital window I spent six weeks staring out of.

*I don't even know what real life feels like.*

*My life right now is made up of four little walls.*

*All day staring at the same four little walls.*

*Staring at the same clock, at the same chair, at the same stupid wires  
that connect me to my monitor.*

I wonder to myself now if this is why the pandemic hit me so hard, that maybe I was teleported back to those four little walls.

*She asked me if I was supposed to get medication!*

*Shouldn't she be telling me that I need to have medication?*

Medication. I look beside me and see the bottles of pills that have become permanent residents on my bedside table.

*They keep upping my nutrition like I am some sort of doll or  
something, and I have an unlimited amount of room in my plastic  
stomach.*

I smell someone cooking downstairs and I am taken back to my room here in Kingston, 248 kilometres away from Room 333. Food isn't something you can ever remove from your life, which makes recovering from an eating disorder so difficult. When dealing with other addictions — alcohol, drugs — the most successful recovery comes from when you fully abstain and withdraw from those substances. With an eating disorder, you can't do that. Food is everywhere and it always will be.

The thing with an eating disorder is that it sends alarm bells ringing to everyone around you, but somehow you can't hear them. It took me months to hear the bells, and even more months to not like the sound of them.

I didn't know who I was for a long time. Instead of me consuming food, food consumed me. I lost myself and I didn't know how to find the person I wanted to be. I didn't even know if I wanted to find that person. You can't find something if you don't know what you are looking for or if it doesn't want to be found.

Society feeds us messages every day that promote disordered eating and praises restricting, over-exercising, and weight loss. It makes it really hard to break from the disorder when you're living in a world that promotes it. It is hard to go a day without hearing what you should or shouldn't be doing or comparing your body to others, and at a certain point, everybody around you.

As I sit in my room now, on the top floor of my university home looking at the walls around me that are completely covered with pictures, thank-you cards, and art from the past decade of my life, I wonder if all of this would look the same had I not spent six weeks in the hospital that March.

A lot of my life has felt unrecognizable to me, but it has been those unpredictable roads that have taken me to great places. They always say the battle is worth where it takes you and I think to myself, "I am where I am supposed to be." After all, the only thing more exhausting than having a mental illness is pretending you don't.

## Summer Wounds

ERIN LESTER

I'M STICKY and hot after a full day by the pool. I can barely peel myself off the couch. Between the B.C. summer heatwave and my mom's corny Hallmark reruns playing on the living room television, there's enough agitation in the air to make me restless for a drink. It's the kind of heat she would say "makes you do crazy shit." I take a cold shower to cool off, let my hair air dry, and find the most unrestricting outfit in my closet. Something with minimal coverage is nice, and the high waisted, navy-blue skirt I stole from my sister with my beige crop top fits well, so I won't overheat.

"I'm heading out! Don't wait up!" I yell towards the kitchen ceiling, as if my mom can hear me through the carpet upstairs. I wait to hear footsteps across the ceiling in her bedroom, but I don't. "*Sweet.*" Registering the silence as a win, I'm not concerned with her whereabouts. It's easier this way to slip out from the garage without running up against one of her lectures on how to keep my wits about me if I'm going to dress like *this*, and her not-so-subtle reminders on how "rape is the most under-reported crime," as if I didn't take it seriously the first hundred times (NSVRC). "*Maybe I'll meet someone tonight,*" I giggle, glancing up from my iPhone 4S to spot the taxi waiting outside. I open the door of the back seat and head to the Granville strip.

As I tiptoe down the steep, beer-stained staircase of the Cellar, a Vancouver bar now called the Basement, I reach for the railing with a slight hand, my red painted fingertips just barely touching the metal to

keep me straight. *“Fuck, these platform shoes were a bad choice,”* I internally criticize. I plant both of my heels on the floor, and float my fingers off the railing, maintaining stability. I start to feel the limbs off my torso rise and extend, like the branches of a new tree during its early spring growth. I look up from my shoes ahead of me to spot a man lounging over the back bar. Without hesitation, moving one sticky heel in front of the other across the dark room in front of me, I approach him. “Oh hello! Do you work here?” I asked, relaxing my jaw with a slight smile of teeth and wide eyes. Thoughts of *“Damn. Blue eyes and blonde hair. His lips, omg, his teeth. This man is beautiful”* and *“Fuck, that was a stupid thing to ask, of course he doesn’t work here”* invasively and simultaneously streaming through my mind. “Oh, hello to you, too! And, uh, no, I *don’t* work here—I’m Ben, though” he slips back to me in a cool tone, peering over his low hanging shoulders towards the bar to locate whoever does work here. “Would you like a drink?” his sharp blue eyes now gesturing towards the glass dangling by his fingertips.

“Absolutely—I’m Erin,” I blush, fawning at him.

After several whiskey gingers at the bar, we move to the dance floor where he kisses me. I finally submit to his hands in the gap between my thighs from the bottom of my skirt. The previous summer’s pop hit, “Call Me Maybe” by Carly Rae Jepsen, filters through the room’s speakers and the hopeless romantic in me thinks, *“I love him”* and *“Uh, what’s going on?”* I latch onto the presence of his unfamiliar hands dominating my groin. My mom’s voice in my head adding a disturbing thought like, *“Did you know one in five women will be raped by someone they know in their lives?”* that I immediately dismiss.

“Let’s get out of here,” Ben chuckles, pulling me off the dance floor just before nausea and more anxious thoughts can find me. He redirects me back towards the steep staircase framing the exit and I climb back out of the Cellar onto the sidewalk.

“This is so much better!” I release with a deep exhale, peeling my platform shoes back from my heels.

“Damn, that’s dirty,” Ben laughs. “Do you need me to carry you?”

“No! I’m perfectly fine on my own,” I tease back with a smile, knowing we’re a short walk from the Hotel Vancouver where he’s staying.

All I can smell is iron and I taste the whiskey leftover on my lips, “I’m so sorry! This has never happened before...” I mutter into my hands, heavy with my head to shield my eyes from the pool of my blood beneath me.

“Wow. No worries, it’s cool—that was hot!” Ben’s demeanour prompts my shoulders to slightly fall away from my ears, until I catch a glimpse of my eyes and several bruises on my chest in the mirror ahead and they rise back up.

“Yeah, I had a lot of fun. I guess ... I should probably get out of your hair, though.”

“Well, you should come visit me in Whistler,” Ben says, tossing his phone across the bed covered in blood-stained sheets. “*Bruises and blood are hot, right?*” I fumble to catch his phone, assuming he wants me to punch my number in. “You’ll be fine, yeah?” Ben asks, leaning over the sheets to touch my neck and watch me put my number in his contacts. “*Fuck, my body—my vagina—hurts.*” I shrug inward as I curl over to pick up my clothes and slide back into them.

“Oh yeah, that was totally hot—I’ll be fine,” I shrugged, giving his phone back. “*I wish I had a sweater,*” comes to mind, cringing at the idea of walking through the hotel as a stamp of the night before.

“Good morning!” I yell up from the garage. I can still hear the television on upstairs in the kitchen playing some toxic love story narrative. I rush into the guest bathroom down the hall and lock the door behind me.

“Hello?” my mom quietly hoots out while I scrub my face in cold water down the hall. Refreshed, I peer out of the bathroom door and creep back down the hall to grab a light sweater and shorts to slip into. “Hellooo?” my mom sings, fancily trying to get my attention from upstairs. Finally, I tiptoe up the stairs to meet her. She’s watching the same reruns from the night before, “Oh, hello! It’s the middle of July, in a heatwave, sweetie, what’s with the sweater?”

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## The Universal Silver

JOJO LI

THE REPELLING chemical fragrance of a scented candle drifted into my nostrils. *It is unpleasant*, I scoffed at my own mind with schizophrenic fervour, *but it is like nothing you are about to go through*.

The room was lit only by candles and a dim screen showing a real-time software simulation of the night sky in my town. I sat inside a circle drawn with charcoal powder. Seven metals were evenly placed on the rim of the circle: a gold coin I borrowed from my father, a maple leaf silver coin, a piece of copper, a vial of mercury, an iron fish intended for cooking, a tin jar, and an ingot of lead. In the centre of the circle was an open book, a hardcover copy of the French alchemist Fulcanelli's *The Mysteries of the Cathedrals*. The room layout resembled an amateur modern-art project. It was my recreation of the dialectic of *ora et labora*, a combination of inward prayer and outward work, through my attempt to create a blasphemous mock universe.

What I was doing seems absurd, so I pressed down hard on the piece of Canadian silver, until the warmth of my hand penetrated to the other side. Where should I put my faith? In the symbols and knowledge, or the computer-generated graphics generously provided to us by space agencies? Had I made my beliefs known to the rational world, I would probably be seen as either a hillbilly religion fundamentalist or a member of one of those semi-secret groups that greets each other with coded handshake. Internally, I protested that I am neither, but I became not so sure immediately afterwards. In my imagination, every speck of space



dust in the infinitely empty universe on my computer screen mocks my pathetic human intellect in unison, seizing the opportunity of my weakness in confusion.

The name Fulcanelli is a marriage between the Roman god of fire, Vulcan, and El, the name of the supreme deity of the Canaanites, the father of Moloch and Baal—the “father bull.” Researchers into Fulcanelli’s life are eager to point out the historic connection between contemporary western European alchemical masters and the rampant influence of freemasonic lodges in pre-WWII Paris. From the perspective of uninitiated observers more than a century ago, these students of alchemy must have appeared to be just typical members of *petite bourgeoisie*. However, unbeknownst to the world, when these alchemists left their favourite cafés and clubs to return to their everyday work, they worked intoxicating magic in heated basement or underground, checker-board chambers of the local Masonic temples. The goal has always been the philosopher’s stone, also known as the Tree of Life or the Elixir of Immortality, which is a light-giving substance in every master alchemist’s possession. The philosophical stone is akin to a living lightning, and in the Scottish mason Albert Pike’s words, the light-bearer is none other than Lucifer himself.

Page 104 of *The Mysteries* concerns a cornice in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. The seven circles of planetary metals beneath a relief of the sarcophagus of Christ were arranged by their virtue, Fulcanelli explained, with the highest being Saturn and the lowest being the Moon. A metal with higher virtue could be transmuted into lower ones, but the reverse is much harder. For this reason, what the laypeople call “alchemical transmutation” is actually the manipulation of the order of heavenly bodies with the process of purification by fire—the physical means of purification—and by spirit—the metaphysical application of the spirit of Lucifer in the vector of the Philosopher’s Stone. Fulcanelli also pointed out the levels of metallic perfection correspond to their relative position in heaven. Under the firmament, Saturn is the highest, then Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon is the first above the Earth. I knew that Saturn travels the slowest and the Moon fastest, like the order Fulcanelli detailed. Still, I felt dazzled by the unequivocal proof that the flat Earth was common knowledge among the world of occult a

century ago. How much more was kept away from people then and now, simply because the unsuspecting masses were unwillingly or unable to examine what was kept secret from them?

*The Book of Enoch*, a book in the Dead Sea Scrolls concerning the Genesis Six falling angels' affair with the daughters of men, also confirming this "un-Copenhagen" worldview. The archangel Uriel taught Enoch the ways of the heavenly luminaries. Heavenly bodies are carried by the four winds from the corners of the earth, and travels on fixed paths across the sky in layers. What most Christians today claim to be the clouds is the firmament, which was created in the second day. I treaded backwards on two diverging paths, but the destination seems to be the same.

I rarely discussed spiritual issues with my mom because of her radical new-age beliefs, but I called her this time to hear her take on the Mystery of the Cathedrals that were kept a secret.

"The occult symbols on the Notre Dame are trademark of the designer," she replied.

"What was the trademark for?" I asked.

"The energy-harvesting method to grab Aether and channel them through vibrations of the octave, of course," she said, with the conviction of a nine-year-old.

I decided that was enough for me, so I got off the phone. I was not sure between us who came closer to the truth, but at least she was convinced. Ironically, in the world of the mainstream science a century ago, Aether was the silver bullet to answer astronomical anomalies. I could almost picture Fulcanelli laughing at the boundless vanity of the physicists' pointing finger at infinite heavens, while enjoying the generous gift bought by alchemical exchanges under what he knew to be a glass ceiling.

Uncertain what to believe anymore, I stood up and sat in front of my computer screen. Typing in Jupiter, I found the planet and its moons—mere dots of lights against a backdrop of infiniteness. I zoomed in, until a ball of beautiful computer-generated patterns filled my screen. Everything could be much easier if I concede to the theory that we came from a primordial soup. I could not deny its vulgarity, even though until a moment ago it seemed as real as the silver coin I held in my hand. At

last, I realized the dichotomy must exist, be it heaven or earth, order or randomness, the creator or NASA. We exhaust energy and air to argue about the immutable in heaven, how futile must our existence be if we were rendered so powerless?

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## Silver Days

KATHERINE LIDTKE

LOVE-HATE relationships are like lighting a matchstick from both ends and watching the flame slowly burn into the middle. It's complicated. It's difficult to explain the bend in the centre that concaves under the pressure of the racing flames. The flames reach the middle, they embrace, and then vanish.

People concave to pain too. Sometimes it is difficult to explain why the greatest people and the best places can generate the most pain. Nostalgia. The idea of missing something once it is gone. The most efficient way of explaining this phenomenon is to ask you to think of the rain.

The Ottawa River

It's day ten of twenty-two, and it is raining. All I can think of is the sun that will hopefully greet me on day sixteen on Lake Shishkong, a painite for lakes in Northern Ontario.

I peer my head out of my meadow-green sleeping bag that cocoons my exhausted body. As I emerge, I notice how the bruises on the inside of my upper arms are changing shades like an aging sunset. The purple and blue hues fade into green and yellow, smudging watercolours that lighten as they heal. I can hear the hissing rain on the tent's fly. It looks like I was attacked by *Ceratopogonidae*—small little flies often referred to as *no-see-ums*—which is exactly what happened a few days before. I

have absolutely zero interest in leaving the tent, but I must. I put on what I call my “wet clothes,” which are surprisingly only damp. However, I know that my socks and hiking boots that slept outside the tent will be drenched. As if they were submerged in the lake that I listened to the loons swimming in last night as I dreamt of a bluebird day. I am dreading putting them on after breakfast. Hopefully, I don’t find a slug in my right boot again.

We make it onto the water, eventually. Our three boats travel as a flock that flies south to the next lake. The water laps at the ribs of the cold, extruded aluminium canoe. Dip, dip, and swing. Dip, dip, and swing. My cherry wood paddle chips away at the glassy, mirror-like water. I am one more dip, one more swing away from Lake Shishkong.

#### Lake Shishkong

The sun is shining today, just like I had hoped for on day ten. I get to the end of the portage, and I slowly flip down my boat that hugs my shoulders perfectly. My bruises that typically scream in situations like this remain quiet. They’re careful not to disrupt the silence. Kate is behind me, and she gently sets down her boat next to mine. The boats kiss. Kate and I stand side-by-side and marvel at the natural beauty that exists peacefully in front of us. I wallow in the sun like a gecko under a heating lamp. Kate sits perched like a turtle on a rock while its toes soak in the cool, calm aquamarine.

Lake Shishkong is located only metres from Lake Obabika in the Temagami Region of Sudbury, Ontario (Jacobs). There is one single, secluded campsite on the lake. We find ourselves surrounded by old-growth pine trees when we arrive. The pines tower over us much like Roald Dahl’s *BFG*. I feel like a young kid again. Old-growth forests are protected from one of the biggest threats: us humans. The harsh winters, ice, and snow are no competition for the destruction that logging causes in the Northern regions of Ontario. The towering pine trees are anywhere between eighty to 250 years old. Some are older and wiser. Some are younger and still fragile. The only way to know would be to count their interior rings, which is an extremely daunting duty for us and a dangerous activity for the pines. The old-growth pine trees are a part of

the one percent of old-growth red and white pine trees that stand strong in the world (Jacobs).

While the trees look down, we find ourselves looking up. Rock faces that climb upwards over a hundred feet show us their crooked smiles (“Obabika”). Much more magical than Mount Rushmore. This rock face appeared naturally, supposedly through tectonic activity (“Obabika”). To the Teme-Augama Anishinaabe, this “lake at the place of the huge rock” is a place of considerable significance (“Obabika”). To me, it is also known as the place beyond the pines.

Shishkong makes me feel youthful again. It’s a pleasant change in how I feel, given my twitching, grieving muscles and the new round of bruises that have developed. This time the bruises are pink and purple. Fresh, raw, and new. Vulnerable. I am made vulnerable on Lake Shishkong, given its inspiring natural beauty. But despite my vulnerability, physically and emotionally, there is security in the old-growth pine forest here. The ground is soft, and I feel at peace with my surroundings and myself. The pine trees who are ready to pass on their wisdom have shed their rust-coloured needles, which blanket the earth and whisper their secrets to the wind that carries them.

Lake Shishkong is one of my favourite places that simultaneously generates the most happiness and sadness. It’s the idea of wanting something you can’t have or can no longer access, or grieving the loss of something or someone you once had but no longer do. The greatest people and the best places can generate the most pain because sometimes we don’t recognize the greatness in things until they are gone. And once they’re gone, we find ourselves wounded.

#### Canoe Lake

When I arrive back to Canoe Lake, home, I find myself battered on the brisk evening of day twenty-two. Not because of the weight of the Grumman, the canoe, I carried on my back for the past month. But because a piece of me is missing. The piece isn’t lost. I know exactly where it was. Just like you hide a key to your back door in your garage, I have hidden it. A piece of me is on Lake Shishkong; and, even now, after three years.

Explaining why the greatest people and best places can generate the most pain is a near-impossible task. When you try to describe the nostalgia, just think of the matchstick and how you miss the rain.

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## Untitled

BLAKE LITTLE

WHEN I was fifteen I made a vow to watch Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (or at least one scene from it) every day for a year. It was my grandfather's favourite movie, and in what could be easily viewed as some sort of obscure family ritual, was inherently my favourite film too. Most people, including yourself probably, have no idea how someone could stand to watch the same film over and over again. At times I still think to myself why it was that I was okay with doing it. One of the only explanations I could come up with was that both my father and I loved movies. Every week, sometimes in multiples, my father and I would go to the theatre to watch movies. The family's love for the big screen seemed to be a generational thing. So while I may have been born in 2001, the answer to why I could bear to watch the same film again and again, lies somewhere between 1980 and 1983.

"You can't be serious, Harry. It's literally a shitstorm out. There's no way you're going all the way down there again." Perhaps he was right, but the only thing on this particular Friday evening that was stronger than the record-breaking storm that had gone on, was young Harry's desire to go to the Roxy Theatre every Friday night. The date was Friday, January 22nd, and while seventy-five percent of North America had been covered in snow, no amount of shitty weather was going to deter this twelve-year-old boy from going to his favourite late night double screening of Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains the Same*.



“You’re not coming?” Harry asked him. “Sittler’s got you too raddled?”

“Man, fuck Sittler and fuck Philly too.”

“If it’s fuck anyone it’s the Leafs, ‘cause that’s exactly what we are, Paul. Fucked.”

“Regardless of our hockey problems, there’s no way I’m going tonight, Har’.”

To be fair, he had a point, but in Harry’s eyes he would’ve needed to have been broke, dead, or in jail before he would miss Friday nights at the Roxy. There was something ritualistic about the whole thing. Everybody who went knew exactly what it was, what it was going to be, and what it would be until the theatre would eventually stop playing the film a few years later.

And so as usual, Harry and his friends would take the subway from the west end of the city all the way down to Greenwood station in East York. The ride took roughly an hour, but depending on whether or not you had already taken your acid, the nearly unbearable ride would become a short and enjoyable adventure to take with friends. On this particular day, Harry and his friends had yet to get theirs, and thus needed conversation to tide them over until they got to the station. Although at this point in time acid was relatively accessible, the place to get it would be Greenwood subway. Walking off of the platform there would be numerous dealers waiting for anyone who was looking to buy.

“How many hits are you getting?” Robbie asked.

“I think I’m only doing two today.”

Harry spoke of it as if it was like it was nothing, cause to him it truly wasn’t that bad; these acid trips were weekly occurrences at this point in his life. Once again you’ve probably reached another mental checkpoint. Is this twelve-year-old kid really doing LSD? Sadly, or not so sadly, depending on how you look at it, he really was. Growing up in an impoverished family with eight kids, Harry was truly lost, and even if his parents cared, they themselves had no idea how to control him. With very few other outlets, drugs tended to be Harry’s very first form of escape, His second was the very place he was headed to. Upon entry, Harry and his friends’ only concern was that the employees would find the wineskin they were sneaking in. Funny enough, the copious amounts

of marijuana they had pre-rolled and the acid in their systems were not of anyone's concern. At the Roxy, nobody got in trouble for their use of drugs, and even if you weren't high when you came, by midway through the first screening you were almost certain to experience a second-hand high from the ganja-clouded room. The fact is this place was somewhat of a sanctuary for lost souls, and what better place to escape reality than the colourfully designed theatre. With cartoon characters on the walls, mosaic floor tiles in the shape of hearts, and a group of teenagers all gathered with the same intentions, The Roxy on Fridays was as close to an acid cult as possible, without the negative correlations that are so commonly seen from stories like that of Charles Manson. Newcomers and theatre-regulars alike could come to the Roxy to escape whatever it was they felt they needed to.

So while the Roxy theatre now stands as an Esso gas station with the long nights of classic rock music to be considered nothing but a memory, the legacy of this place lives on. It was here where my father found his love of cinema, his love of rock music, and in the strangest of ways, his sanity. As I sit here, a twenty-one-year-old film major whose dream is to become a rock musician, one can't help but think that there is without a doubt a direct correlation. So when people ask me how it was that I was able to watch *Goodfellas* for 365 days straight, I can't help but link it to the Roxy, too. Cause while I wasn't doing acid and partying on a Friday to escape, I sure as hell was using my favourite film to cope with my own struggles.

Growing up, My father and I would always go to the Cineplex, sometimes often enough we would watch the same film. Yet after all those years I never understood Cineplex's slogan. I may have seen it a thousand times, but never did I quite get it. But here I am, missing my father, wishing that he would drive out to see me just to watch a movie, because whether it's the struggles of a broken twelve-year-old boy, or the struggles of a young man trying to chase his dreams, everybody needs an outlet sometimes. To that I say, "Come to Cineplex. Let's escape."

## **It's Worth the Concussions**

SARAH MAAT

**N**OTHING COULD stop me. I was beaming as I sprinted down the field. My Ultimate Frisbee team had lost every game up to this point and it was our one shot at making the playoffs. Our team was a group of misfits—people I had guilted into joining the league. A guy I met partying in first year, a geology student, the photographer for the school newspaper, two future doctors. Only half of us had ever thrown a Frisbee. But, out of some crazed obligation to me, or because my pleading phone calls had finally worn them down, they showed up week after week, ready to play. We were outmatched like the Habs in the 2021 NHL final. We had accidentally entered a league of mostly male teams even though ours was co-ed, and our athleticism and Frisbee skills didn't really stack up. What we did have, however, was desire. There I was, my legs pounding into the turf, pushing myself to go faster and further down the field. Our best player released the disc. Time froze and the Frisbee began to soar. I jumped and so did my opponent. The disc was right there. He reached up and swatted it down. A Frisbee charged with enough power to travel the entire field ravaged my right cheek.

A few days later I was in the hospital receiving x-rays. A headache had formed as quickly as the black eye, and neither was getting better. I already knew the diagnosis. My behaviour had “conspired with the complex mechanics of head impacts” (Piazza 346). I was now experiencing my fifth concussion.

Frisbee wasn't my first love. My dad is six foot six, and his towering height and obsession with basketball had predisposed me for the court. Growing up, he would bribe my sister and me until we loved basketball as much as he did.

"I'll buy you a can of Coke to share after practice, just don't tell Mom."

Renée and I bonded over tough games and the sugar that purchased our participation. We graduated from sisters to teammates.

Soon, bi-weekly track practices complemented the basketball games. Track birthed soccer games in the summer, and skating in the winter. The injuries I've acquired from all these sports can be lined up like dominos. One wrong move and I might collapse. However, I'm not just collecting concussions. I'm also collecting a community.

My experience with sports is not unique. Since Ancient Greece the Olympics have fostered community-building on a global scale. Although teams strive for gold in separate arenas, independently driven by an insatiable desire to devour their opponents, community-building shrouds the entire event. At Tokyo 2020, two athletes decided to share the high-jump gold medal despite being from different countries (Chappell). The next year, a gold medallist from Finland stayed eighteen minutes after completing his race just to encourage the last-place finisher from Columbia (Reardon). Athletes' competitive spirits often manifest in an immense respect for others that establishes community.

My seasons playing rep basketball were not Olympic level, although they were tough. Other teams would see us coming and call on their benchwarmers to suit up. When I stepped off the court after my very last game, I took a second to look around. We had started as a team of thirteen lanky and uncoordinated high schoolers, and were slowly picked off, as our teammates, discouraged by the never-ending losing streak, gave up. We were left with only six players when playoffs began. It was a brutal end to what had already been an incredibly challenging season.

During practice my dad—our coach—gathered us in the centre of the gym to run rebounding drills. He had pivoted from trying to coach our shot accuracy and ball handling. Now, our focus was rebounding. How was the other team going to score if we never let them grab the ball?

“A good rebounder has two things,” my dad would drill into our brains. “They have to be tall, and they must have the best positioning.” But his advice didn’t stop there. “The best rebounder, however, really only has one,” he would say. “The best rebounders are the ones who want the ball the most. They are the ones with the greatest desire.”

In the years I played rep basketball my community was bound by our shared desire. We wanted to win so badly that we believed we could conquer impossible odds. Our record was horrible—only losses—yet we showed up game after game, coursing with a desire to win, propelled by the community we had built, and fuelled by a common love of sport. We eventually learned what my dad said isn’t true: the ones with the most desire don’t always get the rebounds. But the ones with the most desire have the biggest smiles when they shake hands at the end of the game, they bond with their team over post-practice ice-cream cones, they cheer for you on and off the court, and they have the strongest community, no matter what the scoreboard says.

Too soon after my concussion, I re-joined my Frisbee team and was lacing up my cleats. Somehow, despite never winning a game, we had made it to the playoffs—I decided not to question it. The team trickled in, and we started to get pumped up. Our average skill level had increased noticeably, and for the first time we all managed to wear the same-coloured jerseys. We lined up ready to battle the same team that had concussed me three weeks earlier. Riding the playoff high, we called out which players we would defend. Our usually dazed bench players eagerly anticipated the other team’s pull—a throw that would start the action. Goosebumps covering my body, I looked around. We had the desire. The field’s floodlights cut through the crisp night sky. This was it.

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## Psychology Student Syndrome

SLOANE MACDONALD

WHEN MY introductory psychology lab finally gets to the good stuff, I have to uphold my civic duty as a TA and begin my class with a disclaimer.

“This week we will be talking about psychopathology—something a lot of students are usually interested in.”

*Psychopathology*—I’m supposed to ask them to define—is a fancy word for the study of mental disorders.

“But before we start, I need to remind everyone that this is just a first-year course. We are not actually clinical psychologists.”

I pause and pretend that their eyes aren’t glazed over.

“It would be completely inappropriate to use our limited knowledge of mental disorders to diagnose ourselves or others.”

I get a couple of nods now. Perhaps I have arranged the words right, or perhaps they just don’t care. Perhaps they can tell that secretly, I don’t—this is a do-as-I-say-and-not-as-I-do type of disclaimer. I may be a TA, but I’m also just a psychology student. Obviously, I have self-diagnoses.

I first hear the phrase “medical student syndrome” mentioned in my second year of university—a few months after declaring my psych major, and a few months before my first mental breakdown. Also called “intern’s syndrome,” this is the tendency for medical students to believe they’re experiencing a sickness they’re studying. Some say it’s

hypochondria, but it's really just ironic—a way for us to keep pathologizing our desire to pathologize.

I hear “medical student syndrome” mentioned as my roommate enrolls in clinical psychology. The course doesn't fit in my schedule, but I know the phrase doesn't apply to me, anyway. It is second year, and my life is still good. I do not identify with the “wounded healers,” the large proportion of my peers trying to cure themselves with a psych degree (Hardy 193). I am a well-adjusted healer, the antithesis of the abnormal.

I say so to my sister: “Honestly, whenever I try to picture going to therapy, I just imagine *Veggie Tales*.”

“What?”

“You know, the silly song with Larry, the cucumber. Where he sings about his lips to his psychologist? The asparagus? That's what I imagine therapy is like—lying on the couch and everything.”

Now, standing in front of my first-year students, I know this reference is only partially accurate. I know the asparagus has taken a psychoanalytic approach despite its lack of empirical support. I know he is treating the cucumber's fear of losing his lips with the vestigial practices of Sigmund Freud. And I know that Larry could benefit from cognitive behavioural therapy, just as my self-diagnoses suggest that I would (Boettcher).

After my first mental breakdown in second year, I decide to make room in my schedule. My clinical psychology professor upholds his civic duty: “Diagnosing yourself or others would be completely inappropriate.” He doesn't mention that the clear-cut criteria also make it inappropriately easy. Clad in the worries of a wounded healer and newly armed with the *DSM-5*, I suddenly think I wield the weapons of an experienced clinical psychologist. I quickly acquire three new mental disorders and psychology student syndrome.

There is sometimes confusion in the medical field about the difference between diseases and syndromes. In her talk, “What Exactly are Syndromes?” Dr Kirtly Jones disapproves of the term. *Syndromes*, she explains, are groups of symptoms running together with no defined disease process.



“I like working with diseases,” she adds. “They usually have an understood cause and treatment.” Dr Jones explains that sometimes, people with syndromes aren’t really that ill. She says that there is no single cause of a syndrome, and there is also no single cure. Like the *DSM-5* criteria, syndromes skip over the “why” and “how.” They hand you the “what” and then hand you off to figure it out yourself. A desire to label, the stress of a student—groups of symptoms running together. No root cause or cure, just a case to explore on a couch with an asparagus doctor.

At the end of my fourth year, I call my old roommate to discuss our impending psych degrees. I ask her about the clinical psychology course and if she ever contracted this syndrome.

“Yes,” she replies. “I’ve self-diagnosed.”

“Did studying psych make these diagnoses manageable, or was this a source of stress?”

“More anxiety-inducing,” she answers after a moment. “It’s made me a bit more hesitant of mental-health professionals. Because it’s like people just like me, you know, who just continue on in school.”

“Yeah.”

“And how much do I really know about this stuff?”

When I have my first mental breakdown in second year, I spend a week sleeping on the floor of my room. I don’t know what is wrong with me, except that I keep scratching off the skin on my arms and feeling like I’m dying. The Internet says I’m coping with emotional pain, and the *DSM-5* will use the words “panic attack.” My university’s online mental-health form simply declares that I need immediate help. I fill out all of the questions they ask, and they tell me they’ll send resources soon.

I refresh my inbox for an entire week. But I never receive that e-mail.

When my introductory psychology lab finally gets to the good stuff, I make my disclaimer and direct their attention to piles of little green cards.

“There’s a stack on each table,” I announce to the class. “Everyone is encouraged to take one.”

The cards list Web sites, names, and numbers, plus the mental-health form that left me hanging.

“This is a list of resources at our school, in case you or a friend ever need help,” I say. But the students’ eyes just glaze back over. This is knowledge they have; this is fact.

When the last of the students trickle out, most of the little green cards stay behind. Perhaps they are still unwounded healers—perhaps they just haven’t declared their major yet. I pick up the piles of leftover cards and imagine what I’ll say on our last day of class.

Probably, “Good luck if you’re trying to get into the psych program.”

And maybe, “Good luck if you get in.”

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## The Apex Predator

CONNOR MACKENZIE

THE EARLY morning sun beats down on Krueger National Park, baking away the early morning dew. Wispy clouds scatter the sky but offer no protection from the sun. Shade is a commodity, and every inch of reprieve from the baking sub-Saharan heat is welcome. The hum of the diesel engine ceases, as the dust-caked jeep parks underneath a marula tree, providing a brief moment of relief for those on board. Rays of light pierce through the near barren branches, the vegetation a victim of a hungry elephant herd, barely visible in the distance across the great plains. The herd had just moved through, sauntering at their own pace, their trunks working double duty, both plucking leaves from surrounding trees and blowing dust upon their backs to shield their leathery hides from the relentless South African sun. Similarly, those aboard the battered Jeep apply sunscreen of their own, vigorously rubbing the white paste across every exposed inch of their bodies. Their tan and beige garments are all but soaked through, the stains of sweat growing across their backs as the sun rises higher into the morning sky.

The break ends as quickly as it started. The diesel engine turns over and begins its methodical hum as the truck shifts into gear. Thick black tires find their groove on the narrow dirt road, following the winding path that is baked into the sub-Saharan terrain like old scars on weathered skin. The guests in the back screw lids on their water bottles and jettison them below their seats, getting their cameras ready to shoot the next member of the big five. So far, they have only seen the African bush

elephant. The lion, the leopard, the black rhinoceros, and the African buffalo still evade them. Light glistens on the bevelled glass at the end of their telephoto lenses, as they point them in every direction, searching for their next awe-inspiring subject.

The jeep slows, as a tropical basin comes into view. This oasis of biodiversity, a lifeline for all those that inhabit the reserve, is bustling with parched creatures in search of a much-needed drink. Product of a branch of the great Orange River, the watering hole reflects the African sun perfectly in its dirty green water. Springbok sip timidly at the far end of the pond, their long horns flicking back and forth as they survey their surroundings for the first sign of impending danger. They bend at the knee, crouching down to lap up every bit of sustenance they can muster, but ready to flee at any given moment. Across the water, two rhinos lay haphazardly on the muddy shores in the shade of an outcropping of Cape reeds. They roll slowly, working to cover every inch of their prehistoric hide with cool mud from the marsh. Red-billed oxpeckers hop across their backs, picking at the insects embedded in the mud.

The rapid clicks of the shutters of the single-lens reflex cameras echo the clicks of the two guides' tongues as they sit in the front of the parked jeep. Communicating in Khoisan, the guides click and snap back and forth, their eyes never leaving the pair of rhinos in the nearby marsh. One guide sits behind the wheel, his arm resting on the weathered dash of the dust-coated jeep. The other perches on the jump-seat, hanging off the grille of the jeep, his feet resting on the dented bumper. His single-action rifle dangles from a leather shoulder strap across his back, its muzzle pointing to the sky. The guides go back and forth, tongues clicking at an unfathomable rate, their eyes never leaving the pair of grey creatures lounging in the mud.

This sight is more welcome than their last rhino sighting. A week ago, they came across another pair of rhinos, but in drastically different circumstances. Previously, blood replaced the mud, and the two rhinos lay slain, with their horns ripped from the roots of their snouts. The ivory was destined for the black market, to be shipped to some sociopathic collector in a country a lifetime away. Traumatized guests couldn't muster to raise their cameras. They sat in silence as the guides leapt from the jeep and ran over to check the pulse of the slain creatures, to no avail.

The guides crouched for a moment and offered a swift prayer, honouring the fallen animals, before shouting into their radios, and searching the dusty terrain for tire tracks. The poachers could not have gotten far, though they had gotten far enough to be out of sight across the barren horizon. Voices crackled back through the radio, “Can you see their tracks? What direction are they headed?” For what seemed like an eternity, the tranquil beauty of Krueger Nation Park had been disrupted by the horrors of man. This nightmare haunted the guides, and as they watch these majestic beings mud themselves, the guides couldn’t help but smile to see two rhinos alive, for now....

Suddenly, the guides snap out of their trance, as a commotion from across the pond catches everyone’s attention. Lenses swing violently to see two lionesses pounce from their hiding spots, one clamping down on the neck of an unsuspecting springbok who had become too complacent, while the other chases its next prey. The remaining springboks spring to action, bouncing and sprinting in every which direction, fleeing their impending doom. The successful lioness holds the springbok in her jaws as the last throws of life leave its body. The golden fur surrounding her jowls is already stained red with blood; she finally releases the unlucky springbok and catches her breath.

Death is inevitable on the sub-Saharan plains; how it occurs is the only variable. The circle of life unfolds before the eyes and lenses of the guests, these ones lucky to see it in its natural state. Everyone watches in awe, taking in the truly unbelievable sight. And all before breakfast.

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## Vessels of Hope

LAUREN MARTIN

AS SOON as I saw them, I felt as though some sort of spell had been cast upon me. Of all that I had witnessed on our trip so far, a wooden door flanked by two gnarled trees hardly seemed worth my notice. Yet here I stood entranced before the site.

My family and I had spent the morning driving out of London and spent the afternoon touring the stunning campus of Oxford University. Now, as the daylight was fading, we were driving along the narrow and winding roads of the Cotswolds. We were headed to the village of Stow-on-the-Wold, a scenic hamlet rumoured to contain a magical doorway to another realm. Well, not really. At least, not *literally*. However, according to local lore, the back doorway of the village's local parish, St Edward's Church, was the inspiration for J.R.R. Tolkien's "Doors of Durin," the mystical entrance to a great Dwarven city (Pearce).

While I had never been a die-hard fan of *The Lord of the Rings*, I had always been a lover of ancient churches, and it was this affection that fuelled my mounting anticipation. After parking just outside the village, we took our time strolling up its central street, which was lined with classic Cotswold-style homes and stores, built from tanned stone and topped with mossy slate shingles. Following the directions of a local woman, we took the last corner on the right and entered the church grounds through an iron swinging gate. As I passed through it, I felt all my senses heighten. Every sight, smell, sound, and feeling were rich and magnified. My eyes took in the graveyard with its worn and leaning

stones placed haphazardly around the space. I looked up and saw the sky filled with pastel colours and the felt the fading light of the sun warm my cheeks. The song of the birds singing sweetly in the trees above me became louder, and my nose tingled with the scent of wet earth. The sheer beauty of the place was breathtaking, and I felt in my soul a deep sense of peace.

Venturing around the back of the church we discovered the famed magical doorway. The door itself was rather simple, an arched wooden structure with bolts of iron through it, placed there sometime in the thirteenth century (Pearce). The mediaeval door was flanked by two massive yew trees. The bases of both trees were twisted and covered in ivy, and their roots were wrapped around the wall of the church, looking as though they had penetrated the stone.

Throughout my vacation I had seen several historical places, buildings, and monuments, but none were so strikingly ancient as this place. With a lifespan of over three thousand years, it was possible that these yew trees had existed on the site before the idea of building a church was conceived (Pearce). My spellbound mind became curious and filled with questions. What had these ancient vessels seen or experienced? How many hundreds and thousands of worshipers, mourners, sceptics, and sightseers had borne witness to this beauty? How many dead were buried beneath my feet? What were their stories and what had their lives been? While pondering these things I was confronted with an uncomfortable truth: these trees had existed long before I was born, and they would continue to exist long after I die. Considering their ancientness made me almost embarrassed by my own mortality. It was as if the trees were mocking me, comparing their wise maturity to my foolish youth. Like a thunderclap came this sober reminder: life is brief, and you will one day die. I was surprised to find that my gut response to this revelation was not the anxiety or dread one might expect. Instead, I felt a supernatural level of contentment and acceptance. Being immersed in the beauty of such a place, it was nearly impossible to experience fear. I was wrong about the trees. They were not seeking to mock me, but to offer hope. They had survived hundreds of years in a broken world, living and growing more beautiful each day. Over their lifetime, countless famines, wars, natural disasters, diseases, and general

atrocities had taken place on Earth, and yet here they stood reaching out towards heaven. Their beauty had only grown with time.

I saw these trees not only as representatives of resilience but of renewal. I would learn years later that yew trees have historically symbolized the wonder of resurrection and are thus found in graveyards across the United Kingdom (Pearce). These majestic beacons of hope rise up from deadwood and seem to have access to eternal life.

Lost in my profound thoughts on the dual brevity and beauty of human life, I heard my mother calling my name and informing me of our need to leave shortly. Gently the spell started to fade as I began walking back the way I had come in the direction of her voice. Looking over my shoulder I stole one last glance at the door and its noble guardians, silently offering a prayer of thanksgiving for this beautiful place. As I walked along the well-trodden path through the faded gravestones, this final question arose in my mind: where is my hope to be found? The sun illuminated the answer as it passed over a stone in the shape of a cross, casting the shadow of its form on the earth beside me.

“Thanks for the reminder,” I whispered towards heaven as I passed through the swinging gate.

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## On Acceptance

KELSEY MCHUGH

*A*CCCEPTED, IT read. I could barely believe my eyes. I shut off my phone, opened my e-mails once again, and there it was, the golden ticket for my future—acceptance to one of the most competitive undergraduate programs in Canada. I was ecstatic and knew that if I wanted to be the best, I needed to be surrounded by the best. If only my father could understand.

My fascination with levelling up fuelled my passion for success as a child. I excelled in every class and developed a deep love for learning. I devoured books like I was reading my last words and found solace in academic achievement. An A+ a day kept my anxieties at bay and made my parents and teachers proud. I yearned to feel validated, but I did not recognize how crippling this feeling could be at this point in my youth. In my senior year of high school, it was time to embrace the inevitable—what I would be doing after high school. I visited my guidance counsellor weekly to discuss which programs were the best academic match, and poured over career outcome reports from the universities to determine which graduates had the earliest career success. I knew what I wanted (the best)—but I also knew that I was my father’s daughter, and he’d undoubtedly have an opinion.

He sat me down at our kitchen table one quiet afternoon in late October. The leaves had just started to change colours, blanketing our window view with rich red, gold, and orange hues. I could tell he had prepared his arsenal—his weaponry of reasoning why I would need to

pick a practical program and stay local to Ottawa. His shoulders tensed as he took shallow breaths.

“Your applications are due shortly. You should be making smart decisions for your academic and financial future,” he said sternly.

I looked down sheepishly at the table. “I think I’ll apply to Carleton and the University of Ottawa, but I want to go to Queen’s.” Its program was top-notch, with a seven percent acceptance rate (Candorous), which made me feel a part of an in-crowd.

He shook his head disapprovingly, “You may think it’s the best program out there, but you will regret the decision if you choose to go.” His words felt like a sucker punch. We then avoided the topic, and each other, for the next several months until I inevitably accepted my offer that May.

As I phoned him to tell him the news, I could hear him breathing deeply on the other side of the phone. He then uttered the sentence he’d say to me for the next four years, “I may not fully agree with your decision, but I will always support you.” We hung up shortly after that. I sobbed but was convinced it was the correct choice.

September arrived quickly, and I said a bittersweet goodbye to my parents. My father had orchestrated an efficient move-in process and had slipped me a twenty for dinner—it was his quiet attempt at showing me that he cared. I met a slew of new faces that day, showing me that Kingston could become a second home. The sprawling student community made it feel like an environment where I could balance a thriving social and academic life with people who finally understood me. What I failed to understand is that even my self-perception could be misleading.

For years, academic researchers have been studying the impact of university life on student stress levels. University students are one of the most at-risk groups for significant anxiety and stress due to their propensity to neglect their own need for self-care and compassion (Lyraeos 143). I, unfortunately, fell into this cycle.

As I adjusted to my new environment, I felt myself starting to play a character. I had difficulty adjusting, which made school and socializing difficult experiences for the first time in my life. These insecurities were something I felt that I couldn’t share—even with my dad, who called me

almost every day to see how I was doing. I refused to admit that I couldn't handle it.

"Kelsey," he asked during one of our calls, "I'm concerned you're not taking care of yourself. School is your priority, and I know you're doing things to build up your résumé, but maybe, for now, you should take a step back."

"Dad, you don't understand—doing these things is part of the full experience. I can't just pick one or the other," I said. He just didn't get it.

By the fall of my second year, I had mastered the charade. I had successfully been chosen for a student government position and was hired for a summer job at a prestigious professional services firm before the end of September. I walked around campus with my head held high and constantly surrounded myself with people. Despite outward appearances, I often returned home to my rundown student house feeling a deep sense of loneliness and exhaustion. If this is what success was supposed to feel like, I wanted no part of it.

In March 2020, I returned home temporarily due to the pandemic. On one of those melancholic, early pandemic doomsdays, I sat back at the same kitchen table that I had with my dad two years prior. I poured him a cup of coffee, one cream, and one sugar. He set down his morning newspaper and leaned his forearms on the table.

"How are you feeling about starting the last few years of your degree?" he asked between bites of cereal.

"I mean, I have a lot to do next year. I'm still not sure if I'm doing the right things to get to where I want to be. At the same time, I'm not even sure where I want to be," I admitted. I was surprised to hear myself reveal this since I was afraid of confronting my vulnerabilities.

He looked at me with a sincerity I didn't see often. "I know I'm hard on you, but I think you need to slow down. I've always told you that you're too hard on yourself, and I can see it spiralling. You have some time in the next few months to detach from campus. Use it wisely because you're putting too much pressure on yourself."

His words were a wake-up call. Over the next year, I made a lot of lifestyle changes. I stopped doing things that made me unhappy; I

distanced myself from relationships that negatively impacted me. I started to reflect on what mattered most—feeling secure in myself again.

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## Growing Up in “Troubling” Times

AISLING MCMANUS

THE SCHOOL year was creeping to a close. The excitement for the summer was the buzz that kept us going throughout the day. The final bell rang. I scrambled to pack up my things, I slung my sweater over my shoulder and headed for the door. We always met in front of the school for the walk home, we all had to make the trek together or me mammy would beat the head off us if we left one of us behind. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” she’d say, “You’d never forgive yourself if something happened to them!” As we all scurried to the schoolyard to wait, my brother Kevin would give a nod once we could all start the trek home. Chatting amongst ourselves we’d recant the tales of our days and exchange gossip. Turning the corner at the Antrum road, we prepared to be searched by the Guarda. Now, you might think it is a ridiculous notion to use a child no more than ten years of age as a smuggler, but it’s been done before and it’ll be done again. So the searches continued. Most officers were sound about it, but every once and a while you’d get the odd eager one who always gave my brothers a hard time.

Ethne and I were the closet in age, Irish twins they said. We’d skip along the cobblestone roads, playing hopscotch as we went. Coming up to the Fall Road my brothers would mark orders at us to “Cop On!” You had to have your wits about you in this part of town. Fall Road was in neutral territory which meant nothing should happen there, but of course something always did. A new mural of Bobby Sands is there to greet us. “Good ol’ Bobby starved himself to death to bring attention to the

cause,” my mother would say. My mother always made remarks like that, until my father shot a dirty look her way. We weren’t to talk about the troubles in the house. We if we didn’t know my dad’s part in it all. He was active in the Irish Republican Army. I just didn’t realize how active he was at the time. It didn’t matter what “good ol’ Bobby” did, the mural would be vandalized by sun-up the next day. As I said, neutral territory was never actually neutral.

Thursday was mincemeat and peas night. My plan was to woof it down quick then nip down the road to Mary Macken’s house. She got a new record in and she was all chuffed with herself. After dinner we had to do the rosary, every single night. “The family that prays together stays together,” my dad would say. I rushed through it and tip-toed out of the sitting room. Off to Mary Macken’s house I went. The row homes looked endless as I walked down Orient Gardens Road. All the kids played in the streets as there wasn’t room for dozens of kids to be running around inside. Mary was one of twelve. So, we only got to listen to two songs off the new record before being booted outside to play. I didn’t mind, I knew I would beat her at marbles anyhow. I always did. Mary was never good at playing games. That was the first night, the night that kicked off the start of summer. I couldn’t wait to be rid of those nuns. Even if it was only for a couple of months, a break from being taught by those horrid ladies was a welcomed change.

Before I knew it Mary was grabbing me by the shoulders shaking me silly. “Move! Run!” I remember looking up and seeing a sea of men holding sledge hammers, wrenches, and pipes. They were marching at us down the road. It was a path of destruction that couldn’t and wouldn’t be stopped. Mary had scrambled off to find her family. I jumped over the little fence to head straight home. Would there be anything left? Had they already made it down that street? As I arrived I saw my mammy scrambling, throwing cans of food and sweaters into a bag. The oldest ones took care of the youngest ones. “For Christ sake! Mary take them and get out of here!” my dad screamed at my mom. We were sent out of the house without him. My dad wouldn’t let them take the house, he just couldn’t. This wasn’t the first time a pat of destruction would leave us homeless. We had been through this before, so this time we had a plan. We weren’t as scattered.

Then these riots happened, every family would take refuge at the church. The church was guarded and off limits to the troubles, so it felt safe. You could breathe there. You could think there. There was a bomb shelter in the basement, with several cots all lined up and ready to go. Every family on our street would be there for the “big sleepover” as Ethne called it. And sharing a bed was something I was no stranger to, having nine siblings myself. The summer of 1970 would be the most active time in the thirty years of the troubles that had plagued Northern Ireland. Police searches on your way to school, curfews, and the bombings would be the daily events that we would all learn to get used to. It would not be the last time I would be left homeless taking refuge on a church cot. The weight of these movements rested heavy on my childhood. Just moments before I flicked that marble, I was sure this was going to be the best summer of my life. Little did I know, it would be one of the worst.

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## **When She Gives Up Herself, the Rats Will Eat the Mice**

SARAH MCQUOID

“THE NEXT item you’ll need to find on your list are the infamous rats of Arras,” our tour-guide Conny explained. “During the Thirty Years War in France, the French wrote the message, ‘When the French give up Arras, the mice will eat the rats.’ The people of Arras have embraced the rat into their culture through food and festivals. It’s your task to now find one of the many hidden rodents that have disguised themselves within the crevices of Arras’s culture. Good luck!”

My travel companions, Jake and Carter, followed me towards the cathedral-like gothic city hall. A stark difference from the peach-toned Spanish-style façades that ran parallel. The clock tower stood tall over the building. It appeared to be vulnerable underneath passerbys’ wandering gaze. It was so thin and delicately carved with brittle, bone-like details that a strong wind could collapse it. I can’t help but feel intimidated by this tower. The tower knew all and saw all. It was cold and pious. It judged me silently from its place above the clouds, as if saying, “I know you. I know who you really are. I know what you think.” I felt self-conscious under its gaze.

I was sweating in the early spring heat because I decided one can never be too prepared for the weather. I screamed “tourist,” standing in my maroon crewneck with AMSTERDAM written squarely on my chest. My beaten-up Vans faded into a washed grey instead of the black



they possessed when I bought them. Pale, light-blue jeans stuck to my thighs like a second layer of skin, unlike the elegantly dressed women with their bohemian skirts and delicate cotton blouses. They sped past with such disinterest they could very well be walking down a suburban area in southern Ontario. The tower knew I didn't belong, and the locals knew as well.

We pushed the smoothly carved, church-like doors into the main entrance where we were met with intricate paintings and delicate wooden furnishings. The interior adorned with linoleum floors and electric chandeliers juxtaposed the medieval like exterior. It served as a subtle reminder of the twentieth-century architect Pierre Paquet's modernized, hybrid rebuild following its destruction in the Second World War. The bright lights and computer screens gracing the front desk coupled with an ATM to the side serve as proof modernity lived there.

We were only meant to tick Second World War memorabilia housed inside the City Hall off our list, but I couldn't leave the tower. I walked past the bronze rats hidden in the alcove pointing towards the ticket desk. I shoved the fares I bought into Jake and Carter's hands and tugged them towards the shiny new elevator nestled between the old stone walls.

When we reached the top there was a steep flight of wooden stairs to the door of the building's exterior. I climbed the stairs slowly with a white-knuckled grip on the railing. I was anxious the worn wood would snap underneath my feet.

We stepped outside and I kept my gaze on the floor while squeezed close to the wall. The chest-height walls didn't provide me with enough security to know I wouldn't be swept off by the wind, even though the air was still and suffocating. My lungs heaved trying to collect an ounce of clean air rather than the thick, dry air that caused a scratch in my throat. I felt as if I was attempting to breathe with a weight strapped onto my chest.

My companions leaned over the barriers, pointing out sights on the horizon. I spent time watching the glinting minute hand tick by slowly in an attempt to gather an ounce of courage to ignore the voices in my head begging for the safety of the wall.

I finally stepped towards the edge of the stone barrier, allowing the cool roughness to ground my spinning thoughts. I looked out onto Arras

from a new perspective. I watched the square below me observing people sitting outside restaurants languidly sipping wine in the early afternoon. I watched groups of tennis-shoed tourists like myself posing for photos to post to their Instagrams. They moved together in packs while the locals flitted through them without a second thought to the beautiful scenery around them. I saw the quiet stillness of the streets that ran parallel to the square. Their streets lacked a pulse that can only be provided by the slapping of worn shoes on their pavement. The surrounding houses paled in comparison to the extraordinary hub of the square. They were a plain, decaying, grey stone lacking the cultural richness of the bright houses lining the square. Their own needs were neglected in favour of the town's heart. I saw a rat atop a wind vane. My observations alerted me to the thrum of power I felt radiating from the tower. I too became the all-powerful watcher. I was no longer a mouse afraid of being eaten by rats. I was a rat chasing the tail of my anxiety riddled, mice-like mind.

I noticed a stairwell behind the elevator shaft once we had finished. I tugged Jake and Carter towards me and pointed to it.

"Let's take it down," I said.

"It's closed off. We probably shouldn't," Carter protested.

"I don't care, let's do it," I answered.

"Okay," Jake shrugged. Ever the easygoing, laidback one.

I checked to see if anyone was looking, and then I shuffled behind the elevator shaft like a rat squeezing through a crack in the foundation. Jake and Carter quickly followed. The stone of the stairs were worn down with decades of use. There was barely enough room for our arms to support ourselves as we made the descent and my knees wobbled with every step I took. We descended the dizzying stairwell in silence. The only sounds were our shoes lightly shuffling on the stone and the soft puffs of our breathing. It smelled stale and the air felt heavier in this cramped space, but I felt the most calm I had in a while. My mind wasn't rattling with thoughts of "what if?" Instead, it was silent. No one knew we were here but us. It felt incredibly freeing to do something I had no plan for and I didn't care if it caused a chastising. After ages, we reached a plateau, and I threw my hands on either side of the wall abruptly, causing Jake and Carter to bump into me. Standing in front of the

abandoned, graffitied office space, was a pigeon. The rat of the sky, as New Yorkers say. Maybe not the rat Conny was speaking of, but a pest nonetheless. I stared at the pigeon, and the pigeon stared at me. A laugh exploded from my chest, taking me by surprise. Carter and Jake joined me laughing at the absurdity of it.

When we had finally left the City Hall, our phones started ringing like crazy with incoming calls about missing our allocated meeting time for lunch. Who cares. That was a problem for a mouse and not a rat with the city beneath her claws.

## Coming Full Circle

DIMITRA MERKOURIS

I REMEMBER sitting in the auditorium listening to “The Man” talk about life. Opportunity. Choice. “Somewhere in this world there is a job for you. Study what interests you. Follow your dreams. The rest will take care of itself.” The motivational speaker sang into the microphone, trying to galvanize 168 comatose sixteen-year-olds into some sort of action. If you don’t know who “The Man” is I can always introduce you to my mother. And, if you think I am not capable of action, I can assure you that I most certainly am. As a timid teenager living in the midst of suburbia, however, it was the independent thinking part that gave me the most pause. My mother was happy to do the thinking for me, and at sixteen I was happy letting her. Like many Greek immigrants arriving in Montreal in the sixties, my mother was proud, powerful, and omnipotent. Especially when it came to her family. “It’s a fact,” she would say, “math and science are the way to go!” Did you know there is a statue erected to honour the strength of the Greek family in Montreal? It sits at the corner of Jean-Talon and Park Avenue. The statue consists of a suitcase-clad bronzed trio gazing into a world of possibilities gifted to the city by a group of patriots during the 375th anniversary of the metropolis (Kolasa-Sikiaridi). I took my own teenagers to see the “Statue of the Greek Immigrant” not too long ago. My adult eyes gazed at the sculpture, and I thought about my twenty odd years as a Respiratory Therapist, undoubtedly the biggest mistake of my life. “English class is a lovely pastime,” I remember my mother saying, “but, how exactly will you pay

the bills?” She wasn’t wrong. During my twenty years as a Respiratory Therapist, I paid a lot of bills. In hindsight I can see how ill-suited I was to the role.

When I was ten years old my parents bought me a rabbit. He was a small, brown, fluffy ball of heaven that I would visit in the garage to cuddle each day. His name was Hoppy—for obvious reasons. One fateful afternoon, my sister (who was five years old at the time), accidentally slammed the garage door shut right on top of poor Hoppy. I spent the next two days sobbing in Mrs Forrester’s grade five class at Irving Bregman Memorial Elementary School over the sudden demise of my beloved pet. I missed three days of school that week, as I was fever-laced and bedridden from my life. My misery was a tangible thing measurable by the mercury in my mother’s oral thermometer. To say that I was a sensitive child would be like calling the ocean salty. Years later my pediatrician—the formidable Dr Kovacs—paused and peered at me over her wire-rimmed glasses when I told her my mom’s postsecondary school plans for me.

“Are you sure, sweetheart?” she asked kindly. Softly.” It’s not an easy place to be in the world. You’re very sensitive.”

“I can handle it,” I declared proudly. Resilience had been slammed into me from an early age through time and opportunity.

The first death I witnessed as a Respiratory Therapist happened when I was a third-year student rotating through the Anesthesia department of the Royal Victoria Hospital of the McGill University Health Centre. It was my final week of a three-month clinical rotation and I was happily ensconced in the cardiac room. I had found my niche. Induction. Intubation. Minimum alveolar concentration. These words were a mantra I sang as I prepped drugs and troubleshot machines. Managing the anaesthesia requirements for cardiac surgery required extensive training on my part. My tasks included a complete assessment of the anaesthesia machine with a full electronic self-check. Testing the defibrillator. The proper functioning of all intubating materials, suction, blood warmers, blood pressure cuffs, EKG leads, drug infusion pumps, and all drugs related to anaesthesia. I learned very quickly that being well-prepared soothed my anxious soul. But, no amount of preparation could prepare me for an intraoperative death.

“They just booked a liver transplant,” Tara Glover, my instructor, whispered in my ear as I stood peering over the green surgical drape at the open cavity below. “Interested?” she asked.

“Yes!” I squealed, my own heart thundering in my ears. I skipped out of the cardiac suite and hummed my way through the next hour preparing to save a young woman’s life. I felt special, having been deemed competent enough to handle a liver transplant. After all, “RTs have unique skills and abilities that they use to provide care to patients in complicated and oftentimes critical situations” (CSRT). I learned a lot that day. I learned that autoimmune disorders can ravish livers during pregnancy. I learned babies, recently delivered and two floors above us in the NICU, can easily be orphaned while strangers stand in their mother’s blood as it pools onto the floor. I learned the phone number of the blood bank by rote, marvelling at the stacks of empty bags of blood, plasma, and platelets around me (I had been tasked with documenting each one). I learned how terrible silence in an operating room can be when machines are turned off prematurely. I learned that I would never forget one woman’s thick chestnut hair cascading off the stainless-steel table although her face had already become a blur in my mind’s eye. That day, I learned to stop humming.

It took me twenty years to recognize I was suffering an existential crisis. The clues had been there for years. My dentist fitted me with a mouthguard to protect my enamel from nocturnal grinding. I suffered frequent migraines. Most telling of all was the essential tremor in my hands that had developed shortly after my third maternity leave; trying to place a fourteen-gauge intravenous catheter with visibly shaking hands was a humbling experience. Surges of adrenaline made my heart race. My misery was unsustainable. On the cusp of my thirty-ninth birthday, I quit my job as a Respiratory Therapist. I learned many lessons as a healthcare provider. Mostly, I learned that in the light of day, all of life is a series of poetic enjambments waiting for me to pick up a pen and start writing. About life. Opportunity. And choice.

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## Formative Years

ILHAAM MUHAMMAD

WE WERE robbed on a Friday evening. It happened in January. Family dinners at my grandmother's house were mandatory; everyone was meant to be there. I don't remember the little things from that night; I don't know what I was wearing or what we ate. Most details are blurry, tainted by time, fear, and the inconsequential nature of trivial things. What I do remember was that I, as per usual, was reading a book. I remember that it was an anthology of children's stories and that it belonged to my aunt when she was younger. I was simultaneously reading and following my cousin around the house as she cut the outline of an eye-mask out of a colouring book. I don't remember following her into the kitchen, but I do remember becoming engrossed in the book I was reading, too focused to notice that she had left the kitchen. I don't know what prompted me to look up from my spot at the counter; maybe it was the deepened sound of their voices or the unnatural shape of them in my peripheral vision, but I remember looking up and seeing a man in the kitchen and he had a gun. I dropped the book immediately, and in my memory it falls to the ground dramatically, the pages fluttering as it shuts. My scream was loud, piercing as it reached my mother where she was sitting in the living room. There were four men with me in the kitchen that night, three with balaclavas and one with a cap. He was the one whose gun I remember pointing directly at me. The first thing he did was close the kitchen door, just before my mother came in. She had heard my screams and came running. Sometimes, in the moments when I am



most upset with her, I think about that moment when she saw her nine-year-old in a room full of armed robbers and still chose to come inside. My mother's entrance brought relief. I was still at the age when her *abaya* folds held security, and in that moment that was exactly what she was; security. Reassurance. Protection.

As the nine-year-old in question, I didn't really think about the consequences of that night in the ways that an adult can. I know that I was scared as they told us to lay on the kitchen floor, I know that I was uncomfortable lying amongst the members of my family on the tiles. When they hit my grandmother with their guns and demanded money from her, I did not understand what could happen. When my mother talks about that night she says that they took my grandmother to the side when they hit her. All my mother could think at that moment was that she was grateful that they were out of our eyesight so that we did not have to see her being shot, were that to happen. The thing I remember most clearly was the feeling of one of the men's boots as he purposefully stood on my fingers when he took my grandmother's car keys from her drawer. I can still smell the rubber of his boots, the stench that came off them. My fingers carry the memory of his footprints. I remember my mother reaching over and putting her hands over my small ones, trying to take the hurt from his boots onto herself. I think about becoming a mother a lot because of that. I wonder about when I have children of my own, will I have the same strength that she has?

Maybe thirty minutes after the men had entered the house I remember being itchy and frustrated and I asked my mother, in a loud voice, "How long are they going to be in the house? I'm tired." There was silence, and now that I think about it I wonder if my family were afraid that one of the men would lash out. But the man who had entered the house first, the one with the hat, said to me: "We will leave as soon as we can; if you do exactly as we say." There's no way to justify violence and theft. Not on a level where innocent women and children are harmed. Just as I was born into this family in a privileged area, in a house that had enough to be deemed worth robbing, were those men not as I was? They were victims of a system that gave them no choice but to behave in exactly that manner. The Apartheid legacy of violence, poverty, and corruption. A country whose people suffer for their race and

socioeconomic standing, their anger breaking in waves of unfettered violence. The police never found those men, but sometimes I wonder what he might have been thinking when he chose to pacify a child of the family he was stealing from.

Now, at the dinner table my father is disgusted by the news regularly. He'll say: "Look at this. I can't believe it," and I'll know he's talking about the increase in crime levels in South Africa. I wonder what my country would look like without the horrifying consequences of its history. I think that maybe people are like that too, who would we be without the good and bad of our pasts? We need a mould, events that shape the way we see the world. Without a history, without experiences and stories that form us, we would simply cease to exist.

I used to think about that night, convinced that it didn't affect me. I told myself that I could not have been traumatized by it because I was too young to properly understand what was happening. My mother sent me to see a therapist afterward, and I didn't understand why until a few years ago when I, laughingly, told her that there was no reason for me to see one. My memory of that night and the time afterward is that of a child's; the edges blurred by time. My mother remembers after the robbery when her nine-year-old ran into her house hysterically, telling her that the men from that night were back. Holding her traumatized daughter was her turning point, one that cemented her decision to become an immigrant. I don't remember that. But I do think about the things that I took away from those minutes on the kitchen floor. I know that I don't read books with such complete focus anymore. I avoid being the only female in the room. My pulse spikes at the thought of unlocked doors and easy access points. Memory is such a funny thing., I don't know who I would be without this particular facet of my history.

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## **Shots**

CLAUDIA NORTHEY

**O**UR WAITRESS was returning for the collection of empty glasses on our table, and I took the opportunity to check my phone. It was now well past eight p.m., the time we were originally supposed to get on stage, but Jay had told us to wait for the bar to fill up more. It was late August and the sun had mostly set, but it was bright enough for me to look around the back patio of the Merchant Tap House, as well as the lake, which was still reflecting some gold, in the distance (“Map”). It was strange how I’d spent five years doing my undergrad in Kingston, and yet was still seeing many areas of the city for the first time, since we’d started working with Jay in January.

I remembered vividly the nervous excitement we’d all felt as we drove past the Kingston Penitentiary, on our way to Jay’s studio on Burnett Street for the first time (“Map”). The name “The Glorious Sons” holds a great deal of significance in Kingston nowadays, as the most successful hometown band since the Tragically Hip, and it felt surreal that one of its founding members had taken an interest in us. This guy had opened for the Rolling Stones twice, co-written songs that had charted in America (“A War On Everything”), and was basically living the life I’d been dreaming of since I’d first heard The Beatles as a three-year-old.

I was currently experiencing a similar level of nerves as I had that day. As a band, we were aware that there would be many people of

significance in the crowd tonight, including Jay's label partner, Michelle, and the Sons' drummer, Packer.

"Should we do this?" our bass player Sammy asked me. I started looking pointedly in Jay's direction, until he noticed me. Thumbs up.

"Alright. Yeah, let's go." The four of us got up from our table and went through the bar's side door. In contrast to the last time I'd been inside, the place was almost packed now. At least, as close to packed as bars were allowed to get under current COVID-19 capacity restrictions. You could smell how much beer had been spilled on the ground already and, in that moment, it hit me properly how much I'd missed this sweaty atmosphere. There was now a long table about three feet from the stage that I assumed would be taken up by many of the key people we were hoping to impress tonight. Yikes. As I got up on stage I heard my friend, Emily, yell my name from across the room. This made me laugh and my nerves continued to shift to excitement as I started the familiar pre-show routine of tuning my guitar. Our set would start with a slow instrumental build that would eventually explode into our first song, "Your Way," once Mitch started playing that driving drumbeat, reminiscent of the Black Keys' "Howlin' For You." At this point, I knew these songs better than my own parents' voices.

About forty-five minutes later I was riding the greatest high of my life, which had nothing to do with substance abuse. Well, maybe I was a couple drinks in. But getting onstage always gets my heart beating so hard that it feels as though it's going to expand and break out of my chest. So, by the time a show's over and my body relaxes again, I'm either left feeling totally empty or full, depending on how we played. Our set tonight had felt like the best ever, and I now felt there was nothing left to do except get drunk with my bandmates and celebrate what we'd achieved. Griffin, our singer, seemed to be on a similar wavelength. Even before our set, he'd yelled "Shots?" at me, before escorting me to the bar to do Jägerbombs with him. I was getting the sense that a few more had followed, in his case.

*"Take your first ride and run, baby, run!"* I suddenly heard from the stage, followed by a wall of guitars strumming a C chord.

Boston Levi, the artist we were opening for, had just taken the stage, drawing my attention away from Griffin. He was already signed to Jay's

new label “745 Music,” the label we’d been hoping would sign us for the past year. At this moment, though, it felt like we were closer than ever to achieving that. Jay’s “Fuck yeah, Claud!” after our show the previous night had strangely been one of the most encouraging things ever said to me, and he seemed even more excited tonight. He’d probably missed playing shows even more than we did, with the amount of tour dates The Sons cancelled since the pandemic’s onset.

As of late, there had been mounting tension between Griffin and the rest of our band, as talk increased of vaccine mandates being put in place around Ontario. Sammy and I both came from Toronto, where to date 82.47% of the population is vaccinated and most people had been pro-mandate (“Vaccination”). Mitch and Griffin, on the other hand, lived in Prince Edward County, a rural area where COVID-19 had been less widespread, and where vaccination rates are currently sitting at 78.42% (“Vaccination”). Mitch was double-dosed, like me and Sammy, but Griffin was following suit with the rest of his family in refusing to get vaccinated.

On one level, I understood their hesitation. Due to the state of emergency around the world, the process to approve these vaccines had been much quicker, which initially caused many to doubt their safety. But at this point, with millions having been successfully vaccinated, I was having increasing difficulty understanding why a group of people who had never feared the 0.01% chance that COVID-19 would kill them, were now afraid of the one in a million odds that a vaccine would.

My biggest issue, however, lay with the fact that Griffin’s stubbornness and political views were taking precedence over his commitment to our band. Though this may seem like a tall order, on my part, we’d had countless discussions about there being no chance of us succeeding in the music industry without making this band our biggest priority. For the past few years, Sammy and I had been making the two-hour drive to Griffin’s house almost every weekend for rehearsal, missing countless family gatherings, as well as time with our friends and girlfriends. Mitch had recently re-joined the band, despite past conflicts with Griffin, because he knew how good the music was. So, when the government had announced that as of September 22, we would all need to be vaccinated to play in any indoor venue (“Rules”), I’d assumed it

would only be a matter of time before Griffin caved. It was unimaginable to me that he would be willing to risk, not only his future but all of ours, for *this*, especially when we felt so close to success.

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## Thousandfold Silence

SHAY O'BRIEN

**A**S YOU read this story, I implore you to find a childhood toy, if you can. Hold it tight. Love it the way a child loves its toy; without fear, or embarrassment, or restraint. We've all earned a little comfort. And maybe, just maybe, you'll forget that embarrassment and keep it by your side. It's never too late.

A baby is born into the world. Tiny, underweight, and far too early. She is given a tiny pink blanket and a stuffed lamb—which seems far too large next to this premature baby—to clutch in tiny fingers. For the next three years, this baby and her lamb are inseparable. Lambchop. Cheekily named by her father, she will have no idea of the morbid meaning of her favourite stuffed animal for many years to come.

Later, my mother will tell me the tales of Lambchop. How she was there for this baby girl's first words, her first tooth—which will later end up causing Lambchop's demise—her first steps, and so many of those pivotal moments in an infant's life. How she served as a companion, a protector against the monsters of the night, and primary teething toy. How after years of contributing to the growth of this child, she began to show wear. A toddler is no gentle beast, and this toddler in particular needed her fierce protector far more than most children do. It stayed by her side through whispered arguments, nighttime shouting matches, and the slow dissolution of the one constant in a child's life. Her parents. My parents.

Lambchop was there on that night, when my father quietly left without a trace. She was there in the child's arms as she slept, unaware of her father's disappearance. She was there to ward off the twofold silence that descended upon the house in the wake of a whispered tragedy. And in the shadow of his departure, Lambchop fell apart.

Where one story ends, another begins. And so began the tale of the next Lambchop. She was brought into the child's life by a new father figure. For years to come, my mother will describe Rob as her soulmate, gentler and kinder than my dad ever was. This Lambchop watched her grow, go to school for the first time, make new friends, and she travelled all over with the girl. She quickly became worn as she was taken to airports, on long car rides, clutched tightly as the girl made her way through life, never far from her side.

However, this Lambchop also had to be there for the difficult times and the tragedy. Rob died a hero's death in a country too far away for a five-year-old to understand, and the girl lost another parent.

My sister was born to another mother. Lambchop was there for this, too. She got to see a child come into this world and grow up, as the first did. She saw the girl meet her stepdad and sister. The girl had perhaps grown too old to be so attached to a stuffed animal. She has now seen a decade's worth of pain, happiness, firsts, and lasts.

And she saw another last. The final view of my stepsister and stepfather as they left without a trace. Another disappearance, a tenfold silence that Lambchop wards off. And in the shadow of their departure, Lambchop faded into nothing.

At the end and beginning of an era, my mother decided to quietly replace the old and worn Lambchop with a new one. My story with this one was more complicated than the first two. She saw me through the beginning of high school and the fears and anxieties that come along with that transition. But as the years went by and I grew into my teenhood, I saw my friends and peers who seemed so cool, so mature, none of whom had silly childhood stuffed animals. I grew insecure about my childish clinging to Lambchop and my need for the comfort she brought me. I held out for a while, but the awkwardness of puberty and the desperate need to fit in with my peers saw Lambchop tucked away in the back of my closet, and soon banished to a box in the storage room.



Years passed, and the uncomfortable hole her absence created wasn't filled, but faded to the back of my mind.

Until senior year. Senior year took me by surprise and swept my legs out from underneath me, knocking the wind out of me and leaving me feeling hopeless. I lost my only friends, felt directionless in the face of university, and couldn't find stable footing at home or in my own mind. I felt like a child again, tiny and helpless in the face of the world.

All the while, Lambchop waited. She knew I would need her soon.

COVID-19 hit as I prepared to leave for university. My world was once again thrown into confusion, disarray, disorder. I needed Lambchop again. I needed the comfort of familiarity. I needed help in this next phase of my life. And she was there, waiting for me.

Lambchop is sitting next to me now, as I write this. She has seen me through the beginning of university, moving out into a place of my own, and my slow growth into adulthood and independence. As I reflect back on the experiences I have been through, Lambchop has always been there. It only makes sense for her to be there for me now, too. I know now how silly it was for me to give her up. I've read studies, Blogs, and academic journals that highlight the importance of stuffed animals even into adulthood. As I've experienced myself, they help with major life changes and times of hardship. I was too blinded by wanting to fit in, and in reality, a lot of those other kids at school had and have stuffed animals to keep them company.

As I write this, I run the beads inside her soft body through my fingers. The tip of my nail catches on something. A hole. A bead squeezes out of the small worn tear. I expect to start crying. And I will, I'm sure. But in this moment, in the hundredfold silence which descends as I realize that my time with Lambchop the third is coming to an end, I smile. Perhaps now I am ready to let her go, the way I wasn't years ago. But perhaps not. Perhaps I will find another when I need it most, in a new phase of my life, and love it as hard as I can. And I am no longer ashamed of that. Of needing the safety Lambchop brings.

And in the light of my acceptance, Lambchop begins to fall apart and fade once more.

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## Ashes to Memories

MAEVE O'TOOLE

THE SUBSTITUTE teacher began taking attendance, and I immediately felt a pit in my stomach once he reached the “M” names.

“I’m not sure how to say this name,” he struggled, “Mauve?”

Uproarious laughter from my peers broke out, and I felt my face turn beet red as I sat there wishing my name was Julia. Why couldn’t I have a normal name like everyone else?

“It’s Maeve,” I said feebly.

After school that day, I returned to my grandparents’ home where I heard “Danny Boy” performed by Sinead O’Connor blasting from inside. As I walked through the door, my grandfather’s booming voice greeted me, announcing that “Maeve, Queen of Connacht” had arrived. My grandfather, the great Dan O’Connor, stood there with his large shoulders, signature flat cap, and green sweater. When I told him about the embarrassing events of my day, he proceeded to spin a tale about Maeve, the prominent Irish warrior-queen of Celtic legend who would charge into battle with an iron sword held high protecting the beautiful green lands of Ireland. His stories always made me feel better—How empowering to think I shared a name with someone that fierce. I was eight years old when my grandfather passed away. At his wake, I said goodbye to my grandfather and Maeve, Queen of Connacht; after that day I simply became the girl wishing to be called Julia.

Years later in 2018, when I was twenty-six years old, my family and I travelled to Ireland to spread my grandfather's ashes. It was raining when we arrived at the Dublin Airport. We hailed a cab and made our way from the province of Leinster to Connacht. As we drove through Ireland, I noticed crumbled castle ruins scattered across the lush, green scenery. The ruins left a majestic glimpse of the grand places they once were. Proud buildings with flank towers and expansive gardens, guarded by the bravest warriors in days of old. Turning to the cab driver, I asked why the Irish were committed to preserving these ruins when land space was so hard to come by. After all, Canada is about 142 times bigger than Ireland.

Responding in a melodic Irish accent the cab driver said, "Our history means everything to us. If we got rid of the ruins, we would forget the fight we went through to preserve our heritage. And that would be a tragedy." As I thought about what the cab driver said, I remembered one of my grandfather's stories about the High Kings of Ireland: "The freedom of Ireland has been fought for through the centuries. There were twenty-three O'Connor High Kings of Connacht who bravely battled foes throughout history to protect the land." I remembered the O'Connor family crest, a strong oak tree with far-reaching roots, hanging proudly in the dining room as he told stories around the round table.

My thoughts were interrupted when the cab driver asked, "Have you ever heard about the ruins at Carrickmines Castle?"

I replied, "No."

He elaborated, "There was a huge dispute between authorities and conservationists to stop the ruins from being paved over to make way for the M50 motorway. There was a group called the 'Carrickminders' who valiantly protested for preserving the site and took legal action against the government. They had a lot of support. I was on their side."

The rain let up as we arrived in a small, cloud-covered town called Connemara in Connacht. Passing by stone fences housing sheep and cows, we made our way down a dirt path towards the Atlantic Ocean. I could smell the peat burning from the chimneys nearby and feel the fresh breeze blowing off the ocean. We eventually reached a rocky beach where the waves splashed against the rocks like a steadily beating drum.

My mom had my grandfather's ashes in a black box, and we readied ourselves for letting them go. As my mom released the ashes, they floated along the water moving freely with each wave. My family and I sat there in silence for a while watching the tides shift from low to high. Along this journey, I had been forced to confront feelings and memories I had tried to drown out for years. It felt good to reclaim the past and let it go with joy in my heart. I looked up to see bright orange sunbeams just below the horizon peeking through the clouds.

"God rays," my mom said as we stood united saying our final goodbye. As we watched the sunbeams fade, I imagined my grandfather's spirit joining the halls of his ancestors, finally taking his place amongst the O'Connor High Kings of Connacht.

After spreading the ashes, we found a local pub in town to exchange memories and raise a glass in my grandfather's honour. As we entered the pub, indistinct, cheerful chatter filled the air. We ordered a pint of Guinness and sat down. A band consisting of a tin flute, fiddle, and an Irish drum called a Bodhran was playing classic Irish music in the corner of the pub.

"That was such a moving experience," my sister said.

I replied, "It really was. What do you think he would say if he was here now?" The pause in conversation made us aware of the music playing in the background. As we listened, we heard the lyrics from "Danny Boy": "And I shall rest in peace until you come to me." We looked at each other smiling, raised our glasses, and shouted "Sláinte."

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## Time, Suspended

JOANNA PETROPOULOS

A MOMENT can change the course of a life. A second can catapult change even in the enduring stagnancy that had plagued my life since March 2020. A pandemic would sear my first year of adulthood in memory. The distinct separation between self and the world that had encompassed life before would be illuminated as time dragged on, and I remained confined to four walls, a computer screen, and a loneliness that became my closest ally.

I dreamt of leaving; to go anywhere other than the place that didn't even feel like home anymore. I travelled far in my mind. I imagined trips across seas, and who would be by my side. The answer to who I'd be with remained unchanged. Sean, Christina, Olivia, and Amanda, the four people who defined by teenage years would be there. I set out to take back some normalcy. I wanted to reclaim any piece of my adolescence, so when the only five people I have ever felt comfortable with suggested a quick weeklong getaway, I was there.

Sean and I drove up along with Mumford and Sons, singing those lyrics along with the mid-morning breeze that day in June. We had been apart for nearly a year. Forced alone, after six years of being inseparable.

"This doesn't feel real," I utter under the echo of "I Will Wait."

"Believe it, because it's happening," Sean shouts with his characteristic enthusiasm.

It had been two years of planning this trip. It was nothing extraordinary. Simply five overgrown high-school kids finally spending

a week together. We had booked a quaint cottage in months ago. We spent the subsequent weeks kneeling at the feet of fate, pleading that the threat of the pandemic would calm just long enough for this one moment. I had spent the past year alone in my childhood room. Time stalled. My days rotted away in a daze of schoolwork and attempts to recover from an onslaught of mental illnesses brought to their most dangerous by the impending illness waiting just outside the door. I didn't go out. I didn't see anyone. I had to stay behind as I watched everyone return to their university towns, ready to make the best of the worst of circumstances. I simply did not have the chance. I couldn't be trusted to care for myself on my own, not quite yet.

I wasn't alone in my strife. Since the pandemic began, college- and university-aged students quickly faced the debilitating effects of a future revoked. The case of loneliness was vast, reaching nearly ninety percent of students. Anxiety, my own greatest villain, swelled to eighty percent reporting increased bouts of the feeling. Together we were a group composed of those who fell into these categories, giving life to the numbers my psychology professors cautiously mentioned.

We pulled up to the driveway. I noticed that the moon had peaked through the blue skies. Time was already moving too fast.

"We're here!" Christina squeals. Though she too spent the year alone, the darkness I felt in my chest seemed to be absent from her. Her eyes were lit by a happiness that was palpable; one that would permeate into the entire duration of our stay in that secluded house and would leave me wondering how two people could come out of this with such different outlooks.

"Let's get exploring!" Amanda shouts into the trees, eager to leap into the world we had been so far from.

My friends and I found ourselves on traditional Anishinaabe land found on Manitoulin Island. In Anishinaabe culture, the land is a place of healing and fulfilment. We were careful with our selection of destination. With each of us in need of healing in some form, this choice became quite clear. I escaped into the land, abandoning all conceptions of time on that land and my own notion of myself. I simply lived. There is this idea of ensoulment that I would retrospectively wander across. In this, the land gives way to a map of the soul. In my explorations, that

connection to the untouched land became the vessel from which true identity was formed. I found myself independent from the isolation that stole life from my eyes. Warmth flooded my dull cheeks as the sun gleamed in the early-morning hours as I would write the hours away in the company of birdsong. I'd sink deep into the ground, exploring my mind's fault lines in an attempt to bridge the gaps left by a year alone.

"How have you been feeling?" I whisper to Amanda on our second morning.

Coffee in hand, she breaths in deeply.

"Honestly, I haven't felt like myself. This is maybe the first time in months where I feel myself coming back."

"I understand. It's been hard reimagining a life so different from what we always thought it would be"

We sat in pure silence. Letting the moment sink in deep. Perhaps this was that great moment of realization; our early twenties would not be the great adventure we'd always dreamt of. The long nights chasing youth away as the sweet scent of time passing lingered in the air would have to wait.

The next five days spent within the sanctity of ocean-blue walls would be infinite. We lost all sense of time entangled in whisky hours that crept into the daylight. There was a magnetic draw between us once more; the same one that led us to each other that first year of high school. Our connection to each other felt engrained in fate itself. As if we had and always would know one another.

The moment that solidified the vitality of this trip to my life is encapsulated in my memory seamlessly. It was one of the few times we had gone exploring and stumbled upon a beach. I watched from the shoreline as the four of them disappeared into the glistening waters. I stayed back, choosing instead to indulge in the writings of Joan Didion.

Perhaps it was the cumulation of fate, desperation, and divinity that I stumbled into Didion's "Goodbye to All That" for our first of many encounters to come. By situating personal evolution within the context of a particular location, growth is directly reflected in the places Didion found herself. New York for her, this little Anishinaabe cottage for me.

I was coming to realize that I would not leave this place the same as I had come to it. There was a shift in my mind; an altering of perspective



that I couldn't help but hoped stayed the course of the weeks to come. I had left what I came to trust in a year of little change. I ventured outside the bounds of the anxiety that often bolted me to four walls. I could watch the world turn free from the fear I never believed would leave me.

Lying on that beach was the first moment I can clearly recall the usual emptiness that anxiety carved in my chest being filled. I wasn't fearful of the loneliness any longer. I knew that despite the fallout of the past year, hope was not entirely lost. In the words of Joan Didion herself, "I was very young in New York, and at some point that rhythm was broken, and I am not that young anymore" (238). I was no longer the young, bright-eyed girl who had met my high-school best friends. Nor was I the barren, empty person who struggled through a pandemic. There were separations in time, in identity, in every facet of the person I re-entered the world as. I arrived terrified of leaving behind the comfort of what I had grown to know so well: structured routine, predictability, an unwavering ease to the mundanity of each day. Leaving, I was eager to break free from the sanctity of my once quiet, disconnected existence. The mere days spent in the presence of those I love and the earth in its uninterrupted state would serve to effectively end my childhood, allowing me to break from the habits that confined me to the girl I had been. I suppose I simply needed a return to the most basic aspects of life. It was reunion with the dirt under my feet, the sun brushing against my cheeks, and the light of unbridled laughter. Pulling away from the driveway, time slowly began to move once more. Life was returning home with me.

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## Fishing for Happiness

SARAH PORTER

AS I peel my legs off the metal bench and readjust my body to face the sun, a warm summer breeze goes through my hair.

“Next bus to Cancun leaves in half an hour,” a woman exclaims from behind a small counter. I look around the terminal at all the other olive-skinned backpackers waiting for the same bus. Their tans stood out against the bright yellow walls and their eyes are tired looking. I wonder if they felt the same elation that I had experienced during my stay in Belize.

I’ve been to the bustling streets of Bangkok and the breathtaking Bondi beach, but no place was like the island of Caye Caulker. Every trip I have ever gone on has been planned with no room for spontaneity or surprise. Belize and its never-ending beauty and adventure was the awakening I needed to step outside my comfort zone and really experience what life has to offer.

Thinking back to that chilly February evening in 2016, my sisters Dana and Michelle were in the room next to mine.

“Come here!” Dana shouted; her voice echoed through the hallway. I walked into her dimly lit room, she was in her bed pulling at the ends of her brown hair with one hand and scrolling through her phone with the other. I glanced over at Michelle, who was sitting cross-legged on a white fluffy rug with her phone an arm’s length away from her face. She crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue to the camera and started giggling again. She smelled like a pile of empty beer bottles that was left

over from a college party. Having just broken up with her boyfriend of six years, she had been drinking more than usual.

“I have a flight here ready to book, if you and this booze bag would get your passports for me.” Dana sneered.

“Oh, pipe down over there! I’ll get my passport, just give me a minute,” Michelle blurted out before slowly hobbling to her room and returning with her passport in twice the time it took me.

“Booked. No place to mend a broken heart like Playa Del Carmen, am I right ladies?” she quipped, and two weeks later we were boarding the plane.

Waking up after a few days in Playa Del Carmen with a pounding in my head and a dry mouth, I headed to the deep green garden filled with palm trees and hammocks. Dana and Michelle were already sharing a hammock across from our new friend Chrissy. She was tall, blonde, and toned, with an English accent that sounded like music to your ears.

“Where are you guys travelling next?” Chrissy asked.

“We were thinking Bacalar,” replied my sister Dana.

“Exciting! I am heading there with my friend Tim for two nights, then we are going to Caye Caulker. It’s a cool little island in Belize, you guys should come with us,” Chrissy suggested.

“So cool, we will be there!” Michelle agreed without a second thought.

The next few days flew by and before we knew it, we were relaxing on the deck of the ferry gazing at the alluring turquoise water on our way to Caye Caulker. The ferry pulled up to a white-sand beach lined with colourful shops. As we disembarked, a dusky, slender man with a green bucket hat covering part of his dreads approached us right away.

“Well, if it isn’t the Romeo of the island visiting with four beautiful ladies,” he said to Tim with a bellowing laugh. We all laughed back, unsure what he would say next.

“You want a local experience? Come meet me here in the morning, my friend will take you out spearfishing for only eighty dollars.”

“I’ll be here!” Tim exclaimed and Chrissy agreed. Fishing was not an interest of mine. I would prefer lounging on the beach, but I nodded in agreement to continue with the go with the flow attitude on our trip.

The next morning our group moseyed down to the same waterfront we arrived at less than twenty-four hours earlier. A tall, dark-skinned man with a medium build stood on a small wooden boat, just big enough to fit all of us on it.

“Let’s get moving, people!” Breeze said with a giant grin on his face. A fitting name for the gentle man that ran these tours daily for years. “If you don’t hurry up, we will miss all the good fish,” he continued. Our pace quickened, and soon we were gliding through the crystal-clear water until the reef was underneath us. There was an abundance of colourful fish jolting through the clear water. We could see the yellow, blue, and red fins weaving through the white coral. It was mesmerizing to experience the natural wonders of the island. I finally understood why Belize had been such a popular destination for backpackers since the nineties.

“Spearfishing is hard, but not impossible,” Breeze started. “Just pay attention to my instructions, and you’ll be pros in no time!” He pulled out three metal bows with spears. “The easiest way to load this is to place the bow on your hip and pull it towards yourself to put tension on the arrow and hold it into place.” He demonstrated on his hip. “Then, when you’re ready, pull the trigger and catch your fish!”

He handed the spears off to us, and we dove in. I held my breath and glided through the water stealthily trying to sneak up on any fish. I pulled the spear back, hit the trigger, and missed. This happened many times until the spear swiftly pierced a fish and started to sink. I swam to quickly grab it then shot to the surface.

“I finally caught one!” I exclaimed, piling it into the cooler that already had a dozen fish in it.

The sky slowly became painted pink and orange when Breeze floated us back to the pier. He tossed a match into the charcoal pan of a barbeque and laid the fish and bell peppers on the grill. The air filled with the delicious scent of garlic and seafood, while we toasted our amazing day with green bottles of Lighthouse lager.

“Last call for Cancun,” a voice interrupts my thoughts. I peel my legs off the metal bench one last time and settle into the comfy seat on the coach bus. As I gaze out the window at the lush palm trees and

majestic blue water one last time, I am reminded of how lucky I am to be able to spontaneously explore places like this.

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## Drowning in Depression

SAMIHA RAHMAN

EVERY DAY is a shade of black and white, there are no rainbows. Just hurricanes, storms, and thunders, but the sun never appears. Unlike most people, I am different. I have just one emotion, sadness, which is the most difficult to control. It is a strong sentiment that randomly bursts in my heart at the wrong moment, and from there it courses through my veins and into my nervous system taking a full swing. When it possesses me, I am overpowered by it. I crumble down in an isolated corner and wrap my arms around my knees allowing tears to explode out of me. When I stare at my reflection in the mirror, I find a depressed girl with violent tears streaming down her dead eyes. Most of the time, I don't know why I am sobbing or why my heart feels like an empty void, but I do know that I am suffering from depression.

When my family laughs with sheer happiness, I don't feel the same joy. When my uncle shared his news of marriage last month, I didn't share the same delight. All I feel is empty darkness in my heart. Yet, when someone smiles at me, I stretch my lips out of politeness masking my dead emotions. I smile until my lips hurt. Although I envy the happy people around me, I do not show my tears to them. I hide it. I try to act happy and flow along with the crowd even when my heart doesn't belong there. Even when my throat begs to let out those dying screams of sorrow, I bury everything in and smile the painful, convincing smile.

I do not see the glitz and glamour of this world as everyone else does or a bright future for myself. All I see is time betraying us. It's speeding

past me, leaving me abandoned, alone in the corner. I have no idea who I am or what I want to be when I grow up. I am hopeless. I don't envision a "perfect future" in the same way that everyone does. The person in front of me doesn't know how I feel nor does my family. No one knows. Sometimes, my tears do betray me, and I feel ashamed when they trickle out without my permission. When my family asks what's wrong, I simply don't know how to answer. The answer to the question remains unknown, even to me. I don't know the reason for my tears, and I don't think people around me will ever understand. I feel broken and alienated in this world, estranged from the rest of mankind with a permanent, disastrous emotion.

Before I see a psychiatrist or consume antidepressants, I decide to research. The internet considers depression a serious illness, a mood disorder that is related to one's phenomenological and biological factors. It drowns a person in a sea of negative thoughts and inside a world of dark hopelessness. Some Web sites advise seeing the psychiatrist before the condition worsens while other articles differ. Some claim that depression is due to the repetition of continuous stressful events that slowly sprouts to something deadly and monstrous playing with a person's psychological factors. Others say that young people exposed to social media and antidepressants are the most vulnerable to this mood disorder, and due to COVID, depression in young people seems to be high. For some reason, I believe this source.

One evening, I went to see a trusted, aged pharmacist so he could provide some recommendations. I've known him ever since I can remember, and I can say that he was a very close person to me. We sat together and I opened up about my conditions, and he attentively listened. Through his serious expression, I knew he wanted the best for me. I asked him about the common drugs that are prescribed to depressed patients, and he told me that there are countless varieties of antidepressant, all of which take different routes to fulfil the particular goal of forcing the brain chemicals to control one's mood functions.

He says antidepressant dosages come with great risks if the regular dosage is skipped which will cause a higher disturbance not only to the mind but sometimes to the body as well. "It can cause you to shake, come down with a fever, suicidal thoughts, injuries, affect your sleeping

routine, and sometimes it doesn't even cure you, it simply just worsens your depression," he says.

Deep in thoughts, I feel lost again. He consoles me that these days depression is often due to COVID; people are caged in the house and lured by the Internet, their minds dominated by it. He tells me that people in the past participated in outdoor activities like hiking, chores, farming, etc. They spent their days finding pleasure in greenery and nature which was what kept them away from depression.

Thinking about his wise words, I agree with him taking his words into consideration. For a sudden moment, I suddenly have the courage to take a great leap in my life and fix everything. He tells me that he advises his patients to prevent negative thoughts and not give up in life, rather schedule an entertaining activity that keeps one distant from social media, something that one would find pleasurable and also be proud of one's positive accomplishment.

On my way home, I consider his words to my heart, and my heart feels a lot better. However, I still book myself a doctor's appointment in case. I tell myself, I am not worthless, I need all the help possible, and the first thing I would do when I get home is to enrol myself in a creative activity that I would love. Who knows, maybe I will feel better.

I am suffering from depression, and I repeat to myself once again that it will soon get better. If not today, then perhaps one day.

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## Fighting Hatred

GEORGIA REED

I STARE at the striking image on my screen for the hundredth time. In the image, I can see a diverse group of young protesters close to the camera; they threateningly hold wooden sticks which, just moments ago, had been used to hold their protest signs. Now it appears that the protesters are angry, out of control, and their body language implies those same sticks are about to be used for violence.

In the front and centre of the image, amongst the protesters, kneeling on the ground, is a young black woman; the mob is so close to her that if they used those sticks, she would be severely injured.

I get chills every time I look at the young woman's face; she has an expression of forceful determination, and she appears to be yelling something at the indignant crowd surrounding her. The young black woman is leaning over a middle-aged white man on the concrete; the man is in the fetal position, covering his head with his arms: the woman is shielding him with her body.

I glance down at the clock, as I had been doing for the last ten minutes. I can't believe I'll be talking to *that* woman in a couple minutes. I take a breath, pick up my phone, and dial the number.

"Hello, this is Keshia's Cafe; how may I help you?"

I pause, nervous energy spiking, this feels like my celebrity moment, except this woman is so much more than a mere celebrity.

"Hi, is this Keshia? This is Georgia; I connected with you through Instagram about an interview."

“Oh, yes.”

She tells me to hold on a second, and she gives me the number for her personal phone so she can leave the café reception and go somewhere private. I write down the number on the Word document I have open on my laptop.

“Phone me in two minutes,” Keshia stated.

Four minutes later I have successfully phoned her personal phone number. I’m flustered, because initially I phoned the wrong number, so I had made her wait longer than I had meant to.

“Hello again.” My voice comes out breathless. I stare into the space in front of me without even seeing the walls of the basement I am in. “I just want to say thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me. I’ll get right into it as I don’t want to take up too much of your time.” Breath in. Breath out. “Do you think your early life influenced your decision to protect that man in that moment?”

She then explains to me that yes, she was deeply influenced by the police beating of Rodney King.

When she mentions this, I remember reading about the horror that occurred on March 3, 1991. What I read about the hideous event haunted me; King and some others were in a white Hyundai and were being chased by the police—the driver was intoxicated and had refused to pull over; apparently, when the car finally pulled over, the police cruisers descended on the occupants, and the individuals in the car were ordered to get out and lie on the ground—two complied, and the third, twenty-five-year-old black Rodney King, went on his hands and knees and the police attack (“LAPD”).

From my reading, I learned that beating that followed was horrific—a witness filmed the unwarranted, excessive police violence and sent the video to KTLA television (“LAPD”).

“Seeing that beating, in that moment, a spark had ignited inside me.” Keshia’s voice penetrates through the phone and into my ear, and I wish I could see her face. “You know as a child; you have a tender heart inside of you. Seeing King getting beaten, I became an activist. I decided I was always going to do what’s right, no matter the situation.”

Keshia tells me something that shows just how much of her personal drive comes from her exceptional moral principles: “At thirteen, I organized a school-wide demonstration in protest against the beating.”

In awe, I continue; “I read that you had some repercussion for defending that man in June 1996, and I am wondering if you could tell me a bit about that.”

“Did you see the Oprah interview?”

I tell her yes, I had.

In the video of the interview, Oprah provides an introduction, and her words give me goosebumps: “In 1996, the KKK was holding a meeting near the University of Michigan. Hundreds came out to protest, and that’s when eighteen-year-old student Keshia Thomas made headlines.” Oprah continues, nodding to the viewer: “[Keshia] used her own body as a human shield to protect a man as he was physically attacked by protesters.” Oprah asked Keshia why she had shielded the man in this way, and Keshia compared her instinctive actions to those of a mother leaping to protect her threatened child; with complete shock and astonishment, Oprah stared at the young black woman beside her and replied, “this wasn’t your kid, this was a white man in a confederate T-shirt with an SS tattoo at a KKK rally....”

Keshia’s astounding reply was, “he was still a human being” (“African-American”).

To me Keshia says: “People told me I was a traitor to my race. A lot of family did not understand the whole idea of what I did, and why.” She continues with conviction, “I did what I did as an example for others. It was to make an impact on people, and to make an impact on people, you need to lead by example.” Her voice pierces through the phone. “It wasn’t about the man or getting thanks. It was about doing the right thing.” Her words echo in the silence of the empty room I’m in, and I know they will resonate in my memory for years to come.

After speaking with Keshia, I wondered if I could ever be that brave. I admired her incredible moral courage at such a young age. She challenged an angry mob of her own peers. In front of me on my laptop screen is a quote that describes just how far-reaching Keshia’s influence was:

I was on the white supremacist side of an Ann Arbor rally in 1988, and the hate the protesters reflected and amplified back at us was instrumental in justifying the white supremacist dogma that I ran with for the next seven years. Aggression is fuel to neo-Nazis. Keshia struck the most devastating blow to hate possible and I strive to follow her lead. (McDonald)

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## Summer in the Suburbs

REMY RICH

**I**T WAS the summer of 2016. “Views” by Drake was playing on every radio station, Snapchat filters were the latest social-media craze, and no one would be caught dead without box brows and a matte liquid lipstick.

This was also the first summer I spent in Thornhill instead of at overnight camp. My parents said I could stay home once I was old enough to get a job and drive to it, so the day I got my driver’s licence I sped over to the Domino’s Pizza across the street from my high school. Rick hired me on the spot on the condition that he could underpay me in cash. The funny thing is I almost never took the car to work, I’d always bike because it was nice out.

It was a typical summer in the suburbs—lots of bike rides and bonfires, lots of random parties in people’s backyards. This was the first time my friends, who I had grown up with, and I all had jobs. We felt independent working all day and meeting at my place each night to share a joint and listen to Chance the Rapper on the red couches in my backyard. Jon and Chaim were into Pokémon Go that summer, and sometimes they’d visit me at work while looking for legendaries during the day.

Nighttime was a different story. On my breaks I’d sit outside, enjoying the warm evening air and my blue raspberry slushy from the Mac’s next door. The more nights I worked, the more familiar I got with

the nighttime action. It started off with normal sketchy parking-lot stuff like drug deals, but then I noticed the tow trucks.

At around ten p.m. each night, they would erratically swerve in and park in a semicircle like they were at a tailgate party. They would bring out these fold-up lawn chairs, crack some beers, and listen to the radio all night. Sometimes they'd bring their dogs. There was such an insidious energy to them. Maybe it was the way they were parked as if they owned the lot. Or it could have been the way they'd get a bit too drunk and blasted the radio a bit too loud. Sometimes they would kick their dogs and yank them up in the air by their collars as everyone laughed.

But of course, we were in the suburbs, and nothing interesting ever happened there. The day after any late-night shift, I'd retell the evening's events, which would prompt teasing from Jon and Chaim.

"Rem, they're not sketchy, they're just some guys hanging out"

"Oh yeah, there's *definitely* a tow-truck mafia occupying the Mac's parking lot every night! We should probably do something about that right away!"

Usually they'd laugh it off and convince me it was in my head, but then I'd be driving down Bathurst and a massive tow truck would speed past, frantically weaving through traffic. They would be waiting at every major highway entrance and littered through the parking lots of the neighbourhood schools. They were everywhere. It was weird for sure.

My mind was made up about the truckers one night in August. It was just Rick and I closing, so obviously he wasn't going to help me take out the garbage at three a.m. The trucks had all been long gone at that point, all except one. It had been sitting there for hours. I figured someone left it there. As I walked over to the dumpsters, I noticed a man standing behind the truck. The driver's side door was open, and he was holding a walkie talkie. I put the bags into the dumpster and began to quickly walk back. Suddenly, I hear someone shout clear as day through the walkie talkie,

"GO! GET THE F\*\$% OUT OF THERE! NOW! GO! GO!"

The man jumped into the truck and sped out of the parking lot, tires screeching and everything. I stopped in my tracks and watched him swerve out of the parking lot, not even stopping to check for traffic

before veering onto Bathurst. In the coming weeks, anyone I told about the man with the walkie talkie was sceptical.

For years, I replayed the events of that summer over in my head. I even had a strange tow-truck encounter in the summer of 2019. My friend Gabe and I got in an accident on the 401, and the driver tried to convince us to leave our car in his “private lot.” He drove us all the way there in his truck that he boasted was \$250,000. It was the nicest truck either of us had ever been in, and the sound system was insane. He almost swindled \$1,000 from us, but I remembered the tow-truck mafia and we were able to get away safely with our car.

On May 26th, 2020, I was on my phone sitting on those same red couches where my friends and I used to hang out, and this tweet from CP24 popped up on my timeline:

“BREAKING: York Regional Police have arrested 20 people and laid hundreds of charges, including first-degree murder, in connection with a joint-forces investigation into a long-simmering turf war involving the towing industry.”

I stood up. I definitely felt some weird kind of satisfaction where even though I was right, I didn’t necessarily want to be. Since that tweet, I’ve read countless articles about the tow-truck mafia and their ringleader, Alex Vinogradsky, who is also from Thornhill. There’s been countless other murders, tow trucks set ablaze, staged collisions, drug trafficking—the list goes on. I have even read few articles about how the police were involved and taking bribes.

I don’t live in Thornhill anymore, but my sister and I still like to get ice cream from the Mac’s (which is now a Circle K) when I’m in town. Every time we pull into the plaza, I look for the tow trucks—they’re never there, but that same darkness looms over the parking lot, nevertheless.

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## Driven to Succeed

ERIN ROE-CRAIG

I LOVE driving, and I love my car. E.B. White said, “everything in life is somewhere else, and you get there in a car.” Undoubtedly, having the ability to drive makes day to day living more convenient, but for me it also represents something very important—freedom. Freedom to get away on my own if I so choose. It allows me time to think and reflect without interruption. I can just focus on the road and allow at least part of my mind to wander while listening to my favourite music.

As a young teenager I was just itching to get behind the wheel. I remember one Sunday morning a few weeks before my sixteenth birthday I woke up to the sound of my dad’s voice coming from downstairs. Before I was even aware of what he was saying I could tell he was agitated. I lay still as I tried to hear exactly what he was talking about.

“If she thinks that she’s going out, fooling around, putting miles on the car, and wasting gas she’s got another thing coming!”

My dad’s adversity towards my enthusiasm for driving was not exactly a secret. As my long-anticipated birthday approached, I knew that even broaching this idea with him would feel like I was introducing him to a boyfriend that I already knew he wouldn’t like. I’ve always been a bit of a loner, and even as a child I cherished my alone time. But growing up in a family of four in a small house often made being alone difficult, so I looked forward to the freedom that driving would provide.

I would finally be able to hop in the car and take off for a while, and I could hardly wait.

Weeks prior to that fateful Sunday morning I had announced to my parents at the dinner table one evening, and with as much fervour as I could muster, that I would soon be signing up for a drivers' course and that I would need my dad to accompany me in his car so that I could practise. Somewhat to my surprise they barely reacted. I knew they had *heard* me speak but it was like they had not taken in *what* I had just said, and I knew this didn't mean that they agreed with any of it. No one including me said another word on the subject for weeks, that is until that Sunday morning when my dad made it clear he wasn't on board with my plans.

Although his outburst came as no real surprise, it made my heart sink. The past few weeks had felt like I was watching a flame in a room full of gas fumes—I knew there would eventually be an explosion, I just didn't know when. Apparently, this was the day. I slowly dragged myself out of bed and ventured downstairs in my robe. My dad was pacing back and forth between the living room and the kitchen. I reached the bottom of the stairs and he turned to look at me. His face flushed and his eyes wide.

Despite my standing just six feet away from him he shouted at me, “Erin, you are *not* driving *my* car!” I didn't say anything but continued to meet his angry gaze. “For one thing I'd have to put you on my insurance and then the premium will go up!”

I had a part-time job at the time so I assured him that I would pay for whatever the difference in insurance cost was, and that I would also buy gas when I used the car. I restated that in taking lessons I would need to practise with a licenced driver so what was I to do if he refused to help me? None of this seemed to matter to him and he remained unmoved.

My parents knew I didn't give up easily so I doubt they thought they had stymied my determination, and they were right. They remained silent while I attended drivers' education classes twice a week. They didn't say a word as I arranged practise driving sessions after school and on weekends with my then-boyfriend Jordan, who already had his licence and owned his own van. I continued to follow through with my plans, but it didn't mean that I was at peace with the situation. Inwardly, I was

angry at my dad. I was also hurt and frustrated by what I believed to be my parents attempt to quell my budding independence. I was convinced that they did not believe in me, nor did they trust me. To my barely sixteen-year-old mind I believed that my parents were conspiring against my progression into adulthood. I resigned myself to accept that I could not count on their support in the future, and it made me sad.

For years I struggled to understand my dad's negative position, that is until I discovered a clue. I began to study behavioural psychology and discovered that anxiety lies at the root of anger. Both feelings can be improved or worsened by the individual's thought patterns. A person who is already feeling anxious can quickly become angry given certain triggers (Stanborough). On several occasions when I asked my dad what, exactly, was his problem with me driving it resulted in an argument. He usually cited my lack of experience on the road.

In an exasperated tone he'd wave me away saying, "You have no idea what the highway is like!" I couldn't argue with that, but it was because I had never driven before, so how could I know what it was like? After what is now my nearly forty years of driving experience, I've come to realize his concerns were valid. A common belief among many experts and non-experts is that the combination of youth, enthusiasm, and inexperience on the road can be deadly for teen drivers (Metz). I now believe that fear was at the root of my dad's behaviour towards me. He worried I could become just another statistic.

As a mother of two I've had similar concerns. I now believe that my dad was trying to protect me. Although his method was counterproductive, I have come to feel more forgiving towards him. I still wish we could have discussed it rationally and maybe we could have come to a better understanding of each other. I received my licence on the first try, something I was very proud of, except my dad never congratulated me, and that still makes me sad.

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## Waiting for Somebody

LUKAS ROHNER-TENSEE

**F**OR THE first eight days my body deteriorated, as water began entering my lungs and my digestive system effectively shut down. I still couldn't eat or drink anything. One by one, I was hooked up to multiple IVs, an oxygen tank, and an NG tube. I was constantly drugged on morphine, but it could not stop my pain from gradually turning into panic. Hyperventilating became a daily occurrence for me.

For hours I lay in the hospital alone, waiting. Waiting to see why I collapsed in my dorm room with stabbing pains through my abdomen days before my first ever university exam. Waiting to see if they would let my mother visit. I was hoping for good news, but as the minutes turned into hours, I understood I was waiting for bad news.

From the 9th to 29th of December I was a resident of Kingston General Hospital, as I battled infections and organ failure because of a ruptured appendix. This extended time alone and in constant pain wore on me, and since then I have dealt with recurring mental health struggles. Without a miracle created by my sister and the support systems I now have in place, my recovery from this illness may not have happened.

Ruptures can happen in an appendix, although typically doctors can perform an operation before it deteriorates to that point. My appendix, which had ruptured at least five days before I was admitted to KGH, was according to my initial doctor the "worst case of appendicitis" he had ever seen.

Being warned every day another vital part of my body was failing and having nobody to turn to for comfort for much of the time was just as damaging for me in the long term as the actual destruction that was happening to my body. Up to one-third of people with a serious medical condition have symptoms of depression. Having a physical barrier that sets me apart from my friends and doesn't allow me to eat, drink, work out, or party the same as them only adds to the feeling that I am still on my own, fighting against a weight that rests directly on my shoulders. Thankfully, however, dealing with these issues is not something I need to confront on my own anymore.

The world was a fog of fear, pain, and uncertainty, with no end in sight, but then something changed. Incredibly, my sister realized she was in a COVID "green zone" and showed up at my bedside one evening with the news she would be able to visit every other day, as according to COVID regulations. My pain was steadily increasing, and I had a major surgery booked for the next day which was all I had been able to think about. In fact, at the time of Isabella's entrance I couldn't shake the feeling that I was going to die alone, right there in that room. But then she walked in, and with her came a feeling of hope for the future that I had not felt once while lying in my hospital bed. All the morphine in my system may have been the real reason I looked up and saw an angel walk into my room, but to me it seems I felt some sort of divine presence because with her came the support I needed to keep fighting my way out of the hospital.

The most important aspect of my recovery has been having a supportive social circle that provides mental support such as esteem validation, as well as physical support such as bringing me to my doctor's appointments. Having such support systems in place has been proven to help patients with chronic or severe illnesses improve more rapidly. However, I also know that my stay in KGH changed something about me at a subconscious level that I do not expect to be ever fully reversed.

In the hospital, my sister was the only social circle I had, and my seemingly impending death led me to be controlled by my negative thoughts and emotions. According to my sister, I would lash out verbally at nurses and her for nearly any reason. My fear of never leaving the

hospital, which guided my anger, controlled me more than the drugs I was under.

My sister was, of course, right. In the hospital I was volatile and irrational. I was also losing over thirty pounds in body mass and was terrified of my chances of survival. I was living with the expectation that I would die, which was killing me just as much as the acid that was burning through my intestines. I became so stressed in the hospital that I reached a point where I had to decide whether to give into my fear and the acid in me and lay down and die or use my anger to keep fighting.

I still remember my first night in the hospital. I was waiting for the doctors to return, with too much pain arcing through my torso to even reach for my phone. I remember being just as scared of the possibility of facing this struggle on my own as I was of the actual symptoms I was being confronted with.

However, I am not the only person to struggle with a diagnosed mental illness such as depression. In fact, my own personal hero and former Toronto Raptors player Demar Derozan is somebody who has shown me that you can be both successful at battling depression as well as in your chosen field of work, which in Demar's case is basketball. He has spoken out multiple times about the importance of reaching out when negative thoughts begin to creep in, and having him as an idol helped allow me to do just that as well.

Life can still be a scary way to pass the time. Now whenever I get up or go back into bed, I always take a moment to check if my body is still functioning for me. It isn't the same fight-or-flight instinct that controlled me in the hospital, but these little doubts serve to remind me of how far I have come by leaning on the support of others.

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## A Yellow Bruise

GABRIELLE ROULEAU

THE KITCHEN seems the same, pristine counters and freshly vacuumed floors, as disconcerting as ever. I take a habitual moment to question her parents' whereabouts, not sure they *are* gone, just that the house is hauntingly quiet—except for the occasional scuffle of the girl on the second floor. The bathroom, specifically. I spend much of thirty minutes wondering why she takes so long. Then she joins me, and I adjust myself, flowing along with the topic: *How is your girlfriend? How are you managing school? And your meds? Oh, your mom ... always so funny....*

It's natural for me, to steer everything in her direction. So many years of practice under my fingers that she's oblivious to the scriptedness of it all. She grew up with it, though, between me our sisters, and she probably never notices the awkward social stumbling that comes with our neurological disabilities. Occasionally I feel bad about it; the ease with which I fake the expected emotions as I habitually pick at the thick yellow candle which centres her table.

*How are things with your parents?* She asks in passing. I smile, reply easily enough, and off I go once more: sometimes I prompt more chatting, but often, I suggest a walk. We rise from the table like little cogs in a clock, working in mechanical sync. The cold yellow-brown tiles of the kitchen floor remind me one last time, why I'm so relieved to go.

I hate her house—although I’ve never said so. I know she dislikes my family, for her I do not mind, so I suggest we go out for food instead. I notice that she only buys a drink. No matter how much I wish I could ask, I have enough experience with behaviour analysis therapy to know what socially awkward is. So, despite the bones that dig into me when I hug her goodbye, the small wincing she makes when I tap her upper arms or legs, and the unexplainable dislike I carry towards her girlfriend—I never ask until she’s ready.

My depression weighs on me, a little monster watering my insecurities with a yellow can. The fear that if I do ask, pester, or demand to stay within my comfort zone, I might lose her. I wonder often, if this is the universal experience with depression and if so, how any of us have proper friends. Self-pity creeps in with a yellow-stained bag of guilt. I give it a seat before I remind myself, I have no right, not really. I could be her. Her fiery anger—at the world, herself—moments away from unfiltered self-adoration. Constantly bordering between fear and the nagging urge to *do it. Any of it, all of it.* No, I am glad I’m not her, I’m lucky I am not her. I have it easier ... do I not?

Despite these reservations, a moment of vulnerability arises, and I text her. I need to see her, just for a bit. My fingers twitch spastically as I type the request. I kick doubt out, although it’ll come back later. When we meet at our usual spot, just in front of her house, I began my usual script: *I just wanted to see you, I was feeling kinda down.* I listen to her chat as I study the cracked pavement along the roads, occasionally glancing up at her. She *does* look normal: hair, piercings, and the yellow sunflower tattoo. The longer I watch, the more I remember why I watch. As much as she loves me, as much as she trusts me, I know I could never trust her the same. I’ve seen her anger, bubbling, and uncovered, she mentions it in passing. The switch can flip, barely noticeable until it’s too late. I don’t like that, so I keep my mouth shut for another thirty or so minutes. We exit the grocery store—Giant Tiger with its ghastly yellow posters and bags. Our bags swing gently back and forth as we walk, broken only by the coins jingling within my yellow cat wallet. She giggles and I begin to cry. Only seconds later her thin arms curl around me, sunflower pressing into my shoulder, comforting me: *that’s not*

*okay, you're right to feel hurt.* I knew she wouldn't be upset with me; I just hated the idea of burdening her with more than she already carried.

Therapy is a blessing and—despite my father's doubt—often seems to be the answer to everything. I begin one January morning. I do not like it at first, I knew I wouldn't. I have spent so long trying not to talk about myself, it feels *wrong*. Almost every session I mention her, clutching onto my yellow Winnie-the-Pooh mug. I like to think I noticed the pattern before my therapist.

During these sessions I first verbally compare my mood swings to hers, relieved we conduct my sessions over video call—it's easier not to look him in the eye. I inspect one of the many flowers that adorn the sickly yellow wallpaper around me. *I know personality and mood disorders are different*, I assure him more than once. *I know I shouldn't compare myself to her. She often tells me, much as she struggles, she wouldn't want my life.*

Why do I, then? Compare myself to her. The revelation comes to me as I send her one of my monthly check-up texts. *She's my lifeline, my purpose. If I didn't love her so much, I wouldn't be sure what to do.*

Sometimes I think, although the man does his best, he doesn't always know what to say. Knowing I'm his first autistic patient, I'm lenient. Besides, I like him, even more so when he tells me the truth: *Give it to yourself, your love, it belongs to you, firsts and foremost.*

The following September, I help her move out of town. In one of my manic moods, I almost decide to go with her. I'm glad now I didn't. My life, although certainly more boring and just as lonely, lacks certain anxiety which comes with the constant paranoia that I might fuck up. It lacks certain stress that comes with wanting to be there for her. It lacks the sadness which comes with knowing I'll never be enough—because enough, by my definition, is impossible. But mostly, distanced by space, I recognize I don't need her as much as I think I do. Space, as uncomfortable as it is, unveils a barely hidden truth. I love her far too much. So much, it breaks my heart. I've clung to her arm for so long, I'm not sure I know how to let go. But it's because she's my dearest friend, that I feel I must. An aching curiosity swells in my chest—will I ever feel confident in this decision?

## Keeping Culture in the Face of Colonization

NATALIE SEMKOW

**H**AVE YOU ever heard of a death-defying dance? One by one, five men dressed in traditional white and red garb climb the rungs of a one-hundred-foot pole—the height of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro or two thirds the height of Niagara Falls.

The pole represents the Axis Mundi (Andrade 94), the axis between the two celestial North and South Poles. Once at the top, four of the men, representing the four cardinal points North, South, East, and West (Andrade 53), sit on each side of a square frame that rotates freely around the pole. As they rotate, they meticulously wind rope around the upper shaft of the pole. The fifth man, perched on the pinnacle, simultaneously plays a flute and a petite drum.

Each of the four men takes an end of rope and starts to gingerly tie it around their ankle.

In an orchestrated sweep, all four men plunge headfirst off the ledge while the fifth man continues to play music at the pinnacle. They slowly unravel upside-down, the circumference of their formation growing ever larger as they head towards the earth. They portray the rays of the sun (Andrade 96) shining down from the heavens, the wind and the rain spiralling into a storm (Andrade 93), the human sacrifices coming down to fertilize the land with their blood (Andrade 34, 121). This is La Danza de los Voladores—the dance of the flying men.

Before I had witnessed this dangerous ritual, I had intentionally sat on a ledge close by a street performer, a Volador, resting for his next show. I was vacationing in Playa del Carmen, mingling with locals using my adequate, broken Spanish, which afforded me the opportunity for casual conversation. I asked ignorantly, “Are you Mayan?” misled by the travel site that had labelled the street performances as Mayan.

He responded, “No, yo soy Totonaco,” and proceeded to educate me about the many more indigenous Mesoamerican cultures native to Mexico, “Maya, Totonac, Náhuatl, Zapoteco, Otomi.” He stated that indigenous cultures span beyond the borders of Mexico; the Maya originated from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras. For him, culture meant more than just Mexico and was independent of arbitrary imposed borders.

He stated that when the Spanish colonizers came in the 1500s, everything changed; indigenous cultures were affected, human sacrifices stopped, and religion imposed.

He said, “Look around us, people from Mexico have a dark complexion like me. The colonizers from Spain are white; they are not from Mexico.” I fleetingly considered that perhaps Mexico is a cultural mosaic like Canada, where you can be two cultures simultaneously, in this case Mexican and Totonac, but in reality, there was resentment present in his descriptions. Despite this, the colonial influence was nevertheless present when we started talking about how the pandemic had affected the world and he asked me, “Are you a believer?”

The Spanish Colonization of Mexico had impacted indigenous cultures permanently. Colonization was initiated by the Spanish Crown to extract resources and expand the monarchy. In 1521, after the Spanish conquistador Cortés and his men defeated the Aztecs in Mexico, New Spain was officially created. Soon after the conquests, evangelization, or the conversion to Christianity, began; Spanish churches were built on top of indigenous temples as a show of domination. Mexico won independence from Spanish rule in 1821 (Kilroy-Ewbank), but the effects of colonization are still present today.

Dr Yvonne Lam, a sociolinguistic researcher, was immersed in Totonac culture first-hand; she completed six field visits to Totonac villages over the course of fourteen years (Lam 163). I had the

opportunity to interview Dr Lam to learn more about her experiences. She is Canadian with Chinese roots, lover of the Spanish language who shares her research passion with her husband.

In her research, she recalls the prejudice that indigenous people face from colonizers and their own people alike: teachers would admonish them for speaking in their native tongue, and they were told that they sound like “parakeets” (Lam 167).

She states that, under conditions of “language shift” as defined by Hyltenstam and Stroud as “a ‘power differential’ between a minority group and a more dominant one that results in the marginalization of the former,” that “it is natural that speakers of minority languages seek to learn dominant languages in order to access more social, economic, and political opportunities” (Lam 159). The Spanish language became a means for indigenous people to ensure prosperity.

I asked her, “Do you think a decline in language use can lead to a decline of culture?”

She said, “With a decline in language you lose some richness of culture, history, and traditions,” but that “humans are good at adapting” and “we create mixed and hybrid cultures; then there is no loss, per se.” She states that “Not many people are monolingual. We have to rethink what we mean by culture and identity.” Indeed, although difficult to measure, “Multilingual speakers outnumber monolingual speakers in the world’s population” (“Monoligualism”).

I asked Dr Lam, “Do you believe that tourism keeps cultural practices alive, since it allows for trading culture for a living wage?”

She said, “You hit the nail on the head”; that despite the narrative the indigenous people shared that “being indigenous meant being backward and poor . . . through tourism, traditional indigenous culture is made applicable to the modern world.”

However, Dr Lam warns that “there is also a dark side.” She states that “Hotel owners, likely of non-indigenous ancestry, would come into the villages and offer work to the Mayan kids,” and that a boy she had met “was upset that the hotel he worked in had a Mayan name, was decorated in Mayan symbolism, but staff were told not to speak Mayan.”

Assuaging my unspoken concerns, Dr Lam added that the Volador I had met was probably legitimate, considering “there’s a dancer network

and it is a more informal business, working for cash,” whereas “you don’t know if the proceeds in other cases are going back to the indigenous villages.” Ultimately, La Danza de Los Voladores was a means for the Totonac to communicate with the gods to ensure prosperity (Andrade 94-95) by offering the sacrifice of the Voladores who were shot with arrows on descent (Andrade 33-34). These days, the dance is less lethal but still ensures prosperity of its people by providing a means to share tradition with travellers. The dance is now recognized and respected as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

A Totonac poet, Manuel Espinosa Sainos in his poem *Borders* writes:

It seems all roads lead to forgetfulness,  
to losing our roots, our language,  
our essence, to the horizon, abundance  
being the promise of a lying god.

The landscape wears poverty like a cross,  
hunger a line of footprints in the sand.

Confused, the wind whistles its deep loneliness  
as echoing our history fades,  
we’ve lived in vain, in vain,  
scratching the wall dividing us.

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## Loon Lake

KATHRYN SEWELL

**T**HE HEADLIGHTS of my Mazda hatchback jump across large gravel pieces best suited for ATVs and trucks, as we twist and turn through the night. Three of us bounce down a logging road quite familiar to Carina and me, just four hours north of Toronto on a good day. We feel the excitement bubble in the air, sure to become a rolling boil as we round the last few bends. Mitch turns up the music and cracks open a beer, something we wouldn't dare do on just any road.

"It's tradition!" he exclaims. Carina and I nod in alliance, following his lead. The energy of the night mirrors many journeys to music festivals once taken: the anticipation of arrival along dark and desolate backroads, in a car filled with items of both necessity and novelty.

It had been just over a year since my ventures to Loon Lake began; back then I knew nothing of it other than the promise of Northern Ontario paradise. Revitalizing experiences of self and life-discovery had been a missing piece for many of us since the pandemic hit. In the absence of these experiences often found at music festivals and in community spaces, Loon Lake became a communal watering hole for reflection and replenishment. With life having become what felt like a series of lockdowns, Loon Lake was something new many of us craved.

Much like our pre-COVID days of running all-night arts and music events together in Toronto, Loon Lake started with just five of us. The initial five of us unexpectedly became four last year during peak pandemic lockdown. We continue to show up not just for ourselves, but

in memory of our dear friend Richard, too. These days, Loon Lake now houses up to fifty of us at a time.

Carina navigates the windy dirt-and-gravel road as music beats loudly through the still back-country night, and moonlight cloaks the treetops. Thick walls of spruce, pine, and birch trees line either side of the logging road with dense undergrowth peeking through, a true indication of Ontario summer. The three of us scream along to the music while dancing in our seats, with occasional squeals of joy as the cool woodsy night air whirls through our hair.

The Ojibwa people dominated this region for hundreds of years; they were one of the largest Algonquian-speaking Nations (Saarinen). Much like today's locals, they too were fishers and hunters. Although the present-day locals find our acts of connecting to the land odd, there is a thread that runs through all of us despite our differences. Loon Lake is a centre point in remembering that through simple connection with the land and with others, we remember who we are.

"Do you think they can hear us coming?" Mitch belts over the music. Carina giggles as she swerves to avoid large rocks that dent the underside of my car.

"I don't think so, not yet," she says, changing the song.

"Oooooohhhhhh," the three of us glee in harmony as a new song takes over our bodies.

My mind drifts off into fond memories of Loon Lake in the months and a year prior. I recall my first trip down this logging road: I had come alone—back then I did a lot alone. If there's anything I've learned this year, it's that life is better together. The phrase "community is the answer" has echoed through my mind time and time again.

"This is it! We're here!" Carina screams as she veers to the side, throws the car in park, and jumps out to dance under the moonlight. Mitch and I join, with flailing limbs and bursts of laughter. With a quarter of Canadians reporting anxiety, depression, or PTSD symptoms in the last year (Statistics Canada), we have arrived at the one place that allows us to forget all of that. Not only have we found solace, but we have also found a place where we get to celebrate being alive.

In the middle of Loon Lake, there is an Island. Last summer we spent an entire day there. Recently in conversation, Carina recalled that day:

“My soul was just so *alive* from being so fully expressed and playing. We were yelling, jumping from the cliff, throwing fruit and wine, and just being so primal and expressive.” That day has since become a core memory for the twenty-something of us there. Time had stood still: the sky was blue, the clouds were fluffy, the sun danced its rays across our bare bodies, and the air felt light and smelt sweet. That day felt like a pure celebration of being alive.

Mitch, Carina, and I tread cautiously through the muddy trail with gear stacked high in our arms. As we round the final corner, the path becomes a corridor leading straight to Loon Lake. In the distance, we see a roaring fire and the moon’s light reflecting on the water’s surface. May the deep conversations, dancing, and silliness begin—the simple guarantees of Loon Lake. Carina recently recalled what it feels like to arrive: “It truly feels like home. I feel immediately comforted and calm when I arrive. I feel connected to myself, nature, my friends, and the people I meet there.”

As the forest canopy breaks, I stroll past the spot that just one month earlier I camped at with friends not here this time. A year prior in that same spot, a group of us banded together to batten the hatches and secure the tarp as an alarming weather front came in. Close to fifty of us hunkered down in our tents while thunder crashed directly above. The memories of this one little spot seem forever imprinted in the land.

It’s been a long day, and I remember with excitement the sacredness of morning not far from now. There’s a collective appreciation for stillness: a preciousness to entering the day. One typical morning as I unzipped the tent, Carina whispered softly, “Coffee!” to which I echoed, “Coffee!” I placed my bare foot amongst moss and wildflowers onto the cool slab of Canadian shield: some of the oldest rocks on earth (Barrett). It often comes as a surprise to unzip our tent to clusters of people sitting quietly together savouring their morning coffee; some near the water, others tending to the fire. French presses and cartons of coffee creamer scattered across the landscape.

We unload our arms into the dark tent upon arrival and I wonder aloud to Carina, “What will Loon Lake provide this time?”

“All I know is a piece of my soul lives here,” she says.

We take a deep breath in unison and head towards the water’s edge.

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## A Tale of Two Grandfathers

KARSTEN SHANTZ

**T**ECHNICALLY, GROWING up, I had one father, and two grandfathers. But I only had one Papa. My father worked the night shift in an office on the top floor of Commerce Court, once “the tallest building in in the British Empire.” By the light of monochrome green computer screens, he managed the flow of natural gas through pipelines from coast to coast, keeping families warm while they slept, night after night, including ours. By day, there wasn’t much of him left for me, just a great snoring mass in a darkened bedroom with drawn curtains. Sometimes I would sneak into his room in the morning and try to talk to him.

“Dad, will you be here when I get home from school today?” I would say to the mass. But the mass was not easily woken before my mother discovered what was going on.

“Let your father sleep!” my mom scolded as she dragged me out of the darkness.

His father Mahlon, the mad-Mennonite monster with a Hebrew name meaning “sickness,” was a bible-black tyrant who taught me that grandfathers were not commodities, not similar or interchangeable with one another by any standard that matters.

Mahlon was a failure at everything that mattered, including and especially the Christianity that defined his life as a Mennonite.

In the morning, he would wake up in his shack of a farmhouse without running water, beside his saint of a wife, bound by God to him

in bondage, destined to suffer and be beaten down until she eventually broke. His first act of the day would be to drop his filthy shorts and defecate on the floor. His wife's would be to clean up the fetid mess. After that, no one knew what he did, but they knew he didn't go to work, and he didn't raise his eight children. My Dad, the youngest, was born long after my grandmother's breakdown, mostly by his oldest sister. He worked chores at a neighbour's farm for food, and didn't own a toothbrush until he was a teenager. Some of my uncles inherited some Mahlon's malevolence, but curse was weaker the later they were born (and therefore less attention from him they received) and through neglect, my father was spared from his characteristics entirely, save two: an attraction to my mother, and an above-average belly.

"Joyce, that's a nice dress. I would like to see what's under it," Mahlon would say to my mother, through rotten teeth, over a fat belly he didn't earn, at the Christmas dinner table. He was not interested in me, the son of his eighth son. He eventually ended up in a home, and when we visited him, his favourite conversation topic was the regularity of his bowels. He grew thinner and quieter over time, and eventually died with prostate cancer, not of it, as they say.

"Your grandfather has passed away" my Dad told me one day in a voice that didn't seem sad, but was worried I would be. I wasn't.

My mother's father was an Englishman via New Scotland, who married a Scotswoman from New England. Maybe they both felt like puzzle pieces in the wrong box and saw in each other something familiar because they were similarly afflicted. He had white hair, a red face, and a chest like a tree trunk. He had hard, scarred hands. Years after he died, someone told me he was only 5'4", but I remember him as a giant.

On Saturdays, my mother, baby brother, and I would travel from our tired family farm to his bright suburban home in Oakville, still a small town then, and at the time, the wealthiest in Canada. It was also home to an above-average number of Black people, owing to its history as a minor stop on the underground railroad. He lived in a spotless, mid-century modern suburban home, a "war-time" house, built for soldiers returning from World War II. The woman would chat and talk care of the baby, and Papa and I would work in "the garden," which is what English people call their yards. He had the best grass on the street.

When we arrived, I would charge forth from the car, swinging the car door wide open an instant before it stopped moving. I would explode through his back door, rush up the stairs, and always find him still at his kitchen table, reading his bible through a pocket magnifying glass.

For the Greatest Generation, eyeglasses were a medical appliance, humiliating and unflattering, used in the correction of a disability. Theirs was the age of polio. Famously, even monarchs were not brave enough to admit weakness: Princess Ka'iulani of Hawaii was known to need them but hide them from all but her closest servants.

“Well, look who it is!” was his greeting every week, feigning surprise through a broad smile of crooked teeth and shimmering, wise, old eyes that radiated love. He was a working-class gentleman. Even on Saturday mornings he wore a button-down shirt tucked into wool pants. I don't think he owned jeans. He wasn't a snob, I just don't think he was aware of them. He was from another time. He used abhorrent racial slurs with love:

“The (n-words) are some of the kindest people you'll ever meet,” he taught me. “They have been treated so unfairly.” This would have been considered progressive at that time, in that place.

He made me a miniature wheelbarrow in his wood shop, one I could fill with “earth” and push alongside his. Papa was very organized; on those Saturdays we always made sure his car was spotless for church on Sunday. His shoes were always polished. He taught me about compost and to love disgusting worms. He taught me about God's amazing grace, that people can't earn forgiveness for their sins, forgiveness can only be given away through love. When he talked about forgiveness, he cried sometimes, as though haunted by the sins of a past life.

Papa didn't talk about the war, even to his own children. But whatever happened there, in the bloody mud of fascism's last stand, drove him to drink. When I was older, I would find out about a secret half-aunt, fathered by him earlier in life. Papa found Jesus in his thirties, after his first son was born. The story goes that a school bus broke down on the street in front of his house. The driver was a man named Clair, an ex-soldier, who knocked on his door and asked to borrow a wrench. They worked together on the bus, and the driver told Papa about his job as a driver for the church. He invited Papa and his new family to a church

picnic, and Papa found his path to redemption, and away from alcoholism, soon later.

When were finished in the garden, Papa and I would always go to his washroom in the basement to clean our hands. It smelled like heating oil, original Old Spice, and bar soap. As we washed the earth from our hands quietly, tired and sunburnt from an afternoon's work, I would stare at a modest marble cross he kept on the counter.

"As much as Jesus loves you, Papa loves you more" he would say to me in that moment, every weekend. In those days, when my family lived on a farm, before I was old enough for school, and before my brother could talk, he was my only friend. I think Papa and I were as close as any two people could be. In him, I had a surrogate father. A kind old man to teach me about hard work, and life, and goodness in a sunny garden, in a safe place.

I think maybe in me he saw a second chance to raise a boy from scratch, without the baggage of the sins he dragged his family through before he found his way. For both of us, the other represented the thing we were missing and needed most.

Christmas was a special time of year. My grandmother would give me a store catalogue, and direct me to the toy section with a marker to circle the things I was interested in. Then, on some Saturday late in December, I would stay with my mother and grandmother while he went Christmas shopping. When he would return, he would declare that he had bought us all farm animals for gifts, and told us not to look while he unloaded them. When we were safely in a room away from the door, he would bring in the boxes with great commotion, making loud animal sounds and banging hard against the walls on his way down to the basement. I remember pretending I believed him and laughing so hard it hurt. When Christmas morning arrived, we would open presents at home first, then head to their house for the big celebration where there were always the best toys, and no farm animals, waiting.

They say that when you're old and your partner dies, a part of you dies with them. When our Saturdays came after my grandmother died, I would still burst through his back door in excitement, but I didn't find him reading his bible at the kitchen table anymore. His house was dark, the lights were out, and all my memories from then feel like winter: grey



light barely penetrating the curtains. As I would charge up the back stairs, I would hear him get out of bed and make his way down to me slowly, on his steel hip, until we met and I saw those crooked teeth and kind old eyes. He would take me to run his errands in his huge blue Crown Victoria sedan. I think having me there was the only way he could muster the energy required to go out. I don't remember what he bought, grandpa stuff I guess, but he always found a way to sneak a toy into his shopping bag to surprise me with when we got home.

Eventually he remarried, to someone who he knew from his youth in Nova Scotia, and he resolved to move back there to be with her. He was happy again, but in a different way than I was used to. I was jealous of this new interloper, a geriatric Jessabelle, here to steal my best friend. My mom was tired of living a lonely life on a farm, so we bought his Oakville house, and moved in one bright summer day before he was set to leave.

The next morning, I woke up in my new bedroom in his house to the sounds of social laughter coming from the kitchen. My aunts had come to wish him off and they were having breakfast together. I couldn't believe anyone could laugh on a day like this. I stayed in bed all morning, dreading the event to come, sometimes sobbing, sometimes furious. I thought if I didn't get out of bed, the day would stand still, and I could stretch out the morning forever. I couldn't bear to see him. Eventually though, I heard the ominous thuds of his car doors closing. The preparation was done, a life packed up into one U-Haul trailer his Crown Victoria.

"Come say goodbye to your grandfather!" my mother called up the stairs.

I hauled myself out of bed, stomach churning, throat clenched shut as I fought back tears. When I went outside to the driveway and we met eyes, mine exploded.

"Well look who it is," he said gently. I hugged him as hard as I could and cried. I was too sad to even say goodbye, chocking on my own misery. I think I knew in that moment, that would be the last time I would ever see him. I waved as he backed out of the driveway, and forty-eight hours later, when he arrived at his new home, he had a massive heart attack while unpacking. He didn't even make it to the hospital.

“Your grandfather has passed away,” my Dad told me in a voice that didn’t seem sad, but was worried I would be. I was.

## Slumbering Giants and Bristling Porcupines

MARGARET SHEN (JITONG)

A SHARP *krrrrrrrrrrk* was the sound of money for a short period of my life. This was the fault of a wallet I had bought at a museum gift shop. In charitable terms, it was a plasticky bifold accessory adorned with the museum's logo and a loud Velcro seal. Less charitably, it was a mistake in judgement and tragedy of Velcro that mercifully fell apart within months. I stubbornly used the wallet in my day-to-day life, every monetary transaction during that time being preceded by that piercing *krrrrrrrrrrk* as I pulled open the wallet, an auditory spotlight loudly declaring "*financial transaction in progress*" to anyone within earshot. Fortunately, my other purchase, a pack of naval-themed playing cards, has survived as a more durable and less obnoxious reminder of my trip.

Located in the city of Fall River at the southern tip of the state of Massachusetts, Battleship Cove is a naval museum dedicated to the preservation of its flotilla of twentieth-century warships. Moored on the riverfront are three ships from World War II: the battleship USS Massachusetts, the destroyer USS Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., and the submarine USS Lionfish. A fourth ship, the East German missile boat Hiddensee from the late Cold-War era rounds out their motley fleet. The ships are open to visitors, where they can discover how from the mighty battleship to the pint-sized missile boat, all warships can be aptly described with one word: cramped.

On that cloudy summer day, my attention was immediately drawn to the battleship. Its towering height and incredible length dominated my

sightline, standing above the other ships which themselves already dwarfed the visitors. The battleship was past its prime by the late 1930s, superseded by the aircraft carrier as the primary naval striking power. But you wouldn't know that from looks alone as the Massachusetts stood tall, proud, and imposingly backdropped against the grey sky. At 230 metres long and equipped with sixteen-inch, five-inch, and forty millimetre guns, the ship bristled with firepower as I walked onboard.

Coming off the gangway, I immediately noticed how metal the ship was, literally, almost everything onboard was built out of steel parts. The walls, the guns, the machinery, the doors, the passageways, the ladders, just about the entire ship. In our age of plastic where we live in homes made of drywall, wood, and plastic, this unusual construction was jarring. I had read about the construction of warships, and I understood that ships must be made of steel for strength and safety. But no amount of reading prepared me for the visceral experience of being completely entombed in metal as I began to explore the ship.

Destroyers were equipped to act as protective escorts for convoys and fleets against enemy aircraft, ships, and submarines. Submarines on the other hand were tasked with sinking ships by torpedo and by gunfire. The destroyer Kennedy missed the war it was built for by a few months but compensated with an active Cold-War career across the world. The submarine Lionfish did complete in time for the war but conversely had a very short post-war career. It commissioned in late 1944 and saw its most notable service packed into less than a year of war.

The battleship Massachusetts similarly held a short but active career. It started in the Atlantic in 1942 before switching oceans and working its way across the Pacific, keeping pace with the Allied advance. In a few short years and across thousands of miles, the battleship served as a home to the thousands of sailors who toiled aboard keeping it operational.

Yet as I walked through the belowdecks interior spaces, I could hardly believe that so many people could have ever been crammed onboard. The great length, width, and displacement of the ship was foremost dedicated to housing its numerous guns, countless sensor arrays, powerful engines, and thick slabs of armour. Walking along, I was confident that only after all the equipment was accounted for, did the work of accommodating sailors begin. Like a book squeezed into an

already full bookshelf, the spaces allowed for the human crew felt like an afterthought, forcibly pushed in out of pure necessity. Compared to the generous allocations for the war-making equipment, the crew spaces consisted of narrow- and low-ceilinged passageways, compact ladders, a tightly packed mess hall, and spartan crew cots stacked four high in large dormitories that offered neither privacy nor personal space.

The missile boat is best thought of as the bad-tempered porcupine of the Cold War, a small and fast hull packed so full of firepower that it bristles with threatening intent. A cost-effective deterrent, it convinces enemies to stay far away lest they're willing to risk getting quilled. Hiddensee, the museum's odd duck, began as a Soviet-designed missile boat in the East-German Navy before briefly serving the reunified German state. This was followed by a transfer to its old foe, the U.S. Navy, before joining the Battleship Cove Warship Retirement Home.

In those hemmed-in spaces aboard the battleship, I quickly lost track of the vastness of the ship that I was on. With few other groups exploring the tightly packed together passageways, I could wander undisturbed as I took in an environment clearly built for people, but at the same time barely habitable and almost alien in comparison to all the other human-built environments I had experienced in my life. The corridors of metal unnerved me, the lack of portholes divorced me from the world outside, and the tightness of the passageways made me distinctly aware of the space I occupied.

Eventually, I found my way back out of the bowels of the ship. Once again able to connect with the outside world, I couldn't help but wonder how it must have felt for the sailors serving onboard. Was the vastness of the hostile ocean a taunting reminder of their own cramped conditions aboard? Was it a reminder of their disconnection from the rest of the world? Or perhaps it was constant reminder of the unnatural place they called home as they sailed through an environment that humans were never meant to tame.

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## First Day of Nightmares

MANEET SHERGILL

WALKING THROUGH the halls of Tindall High, I look around at what I had been dreaming of for so long. High school. The blue and white walls mirror my uniform: white leggings and buttoned blue tee that I had laid and assorted a week in advance. Some may say I was obsessed or simply a typical first-year student unknowing of the misery lying ahead, but what they did not know was that this was a fresh start for me. No more quiet, shy, middle-school me. I fix the bottom of my skirt as I nervously walk through the halls, the sound of the chatter of my peers drowning out the sound of my racing heart. I make my way through the crowd and into the bathroom, passing a group of squealing girls linked arm-in-arm. *Where's Melinda*, I think to myself. I stand in front of the bathroom mirror fixing my blue headband and move it into the perfect place right in the middle. I take a deep breath and head towards the door.

Clutching the paper with my class assignment for first period, I walk towards my classroom as I bump into an unknown figure speeding down the hallway.

"Inez!" Melinda exclaims, grabbing me by both arms. I look at my best friend with surprise. Melinda's hair was done up in a tight pony, two curls hanging from both sides of her face. She wore light makeup that was subtle but noticeable and had an array of butterfly clips in her hair.

"Melinda?" I ask, surprised.

Melinda's face changes expression. "Oh, hi," she says, awkwardly shifting her gaze. "I should go, I can't be late for class!" Melinda quickly attempts to rush past, but I grab her arm, stopping her in her tracks.

"Melinda, come with me I have so much to—"

Melinda pulls her arm away from me. She pauses before saying, "I have to go right now." I watch as she walks away as I stand alone in the hall. Realizing everyone had gone to their classes, I rush to my first period, feeling anxious and now very confused.

Leaving my first-period class, I can't help but feel dissatisfied with my first day. I miss my best friend who I barely got to speak with and felt ... pretty much the same. I look around at my peers dressed fashionably in their layered vests and bows with high knee-socks, attempting to glamour their uniforms. *Why hadn't I thought of that?* I make my way through the crowd, hoping to run into Melinda once more and ask her about their strange interaction. Ironically, as I reach the front door of my next class, I see Melinda waiting there standing next to Brett. *Brett?* I look at them both, surprised. Melinda stood next to Brett, linked arm in arm, laughing. Brett was the guy Melinda and I despised all through middle school. He had bullied me for as long as I could remember after my older sister broke up with him. The guy who cheated on her.

I walk up to Melinda. "Hey, M, can we talk?" I ask. Before I could get a reply, I grab Melinda by the arm and pull her to the side. "Hey, what are you doing? When did you become friends with Brett!"

Melinda stares at the ground. "He is not that bad," she whispers, looking back to see if he could hear. "He's really been there for me this summer, you know."

I stare at my friend in disbelief. The idea of Melinda and Brett being friends was one that I never saw coming.

"When you were at camp? Brett was there?" I ask, trying to put the pieces together. "I thought you hated him. He's been nothing but cruel to us, to me, my sister, I—when did this even happen? Why didn't you tell me?"

Melinda finally meets my eye, and through her expression I can tell she has more to say.

"What?" I ask.



“I just think we should take a break,” Melinda replies aggressively. “Clearly you don’t support my decision and I just think I’ve moved on from your child-like behaviour. It’s time you did, too.”

Melinda moves her arm and rushes back to Brett, giving me no time to respond. I stare back at them, unknowing how to feel. As if they could read her thoughts, Brett grabs Melinda by her face and kisses her. My mouth drops as I watch them go inside, realizing what was going on. *Melinda would leave me for him?* I think as the rest of the class rushes past me.

The rest of the class involves me sitting in the back, hiding from everyone, all alone. I’m unable to comprehend a thing the professor speaks of. Melinda and Brett sit at the front, giggling and passing glances throughout the lecture. So far, my much-anticipated first day of high school was a disaster, and all I wanted to do was go back to the day before, when everything was normal. When Melinda was still my friend. When class ends, I rush out the door before the rest of the class, speeding to get into the cafeteria, grab my food, and hide in any empty classroom. The tears well up in my eyes as I make my way through, watching friends laugh and hug, all excited for this new journey. Before entering the line, I hear someone call me from behind.

“Inez!” I turn around to see Matt, my childhood friend, waving at me by the back door. “Come here!” he shouts, ushering me to head over. I walk up to him as he gives me a grim look. “How have you been? We haven’t spoken in so long.”

I look up at him, guilt simmering all over my face. Ever since Melinda and I became friends in middle school, I had stopped spending much time with him. “I’ve been alright,” I avert eye contact. “What have you been up to?”

Matt grabs my arm. “I actually wanted to show you.” Matt walks me towards a classroom. Inside are a bunch of students, sitting by huge canvases, playing music and painting objects.

“Wow,” I say, “the art room in middle school was definitely not like this.”

“I know,” he replies, “I thought you would like it, you haven’t painted since—”

He stops and looks at me. *Since Melinda*, I think. “Well, it definitely looks like a lot of fun,” I reply. Matt grabs a brush and points it at me. I remember the feeling of making art, it was something I always enjoyed and let go of after Melinda deemed it too boring. I grab the brush and smile at him. Maybe, this would be a fresh start for me after all.

## La Vie En Rose

CELIA SILVA

March 7, 2022. Dubai, UAE.

**T**HE FACETIME had just started and was ended abruptly as Marta, my sister, along with the Humber River Hospital ICU nurse rushed to help my frail, eighty-year-old mom. I didn't even get to speak to her, which is a torture to someone who is used to video calling her, sometimes twice, daily. A few minutes later, Marta messaged me: "No more Facetiming, please. She's too tired and out of it."

Mom had been in and out of the hospital for the past week with an unstoppable epistaxis, which is a fancy name for nosebleed. One of the veins in her nose was damaged, and unless she had a procedure called epistaxis embolization to fix it, it could lead to serious complications (Krajina). Though hospital visits were commonplace, given her many health issues, this was the first time I would not be there with her. This was the price of living far from her, after a job relocation brought me to Dubai in 2020. Being the baby in a family of eleven kids, with the closest in age to me being eight years my senior, I always felt like an only child. Father left us, penniless, when I was three, so it was just Mom and I, through thick and thin, and boy, there was a lot of thin.

In 1995, after my twenty-two-year-old brother's death in a car crash, thirteen-year-old me was the one hugging my mom as she cried herself to sleep every night. Thirteen years later, I'd be doing that again, seven months through my first pregnancy, when my forty-eight-year-old sister

died, suddenly, from a stroke. Mom came to stay with me for a few weeks in order to help me get ready for my first baby, but it was I who was helping her through the loss of her first baby. But our story is not all bad. Not at all.

May 15, 2015. Paris, France.

The sleepy daze we were in since leaving the airport was replaced with excitement and tears of joy as we caught a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower, from the cab on the way to the hotel. This dream was sixty-five years in the making, from when nine-year-old Irene saw the Eiffel Tower in a picture her dad proudly showed her. He had gotten it as a gift from his French boss at Belgo Mineira, and explained to her: “See, Nena,” as he used to call her, “this is the Eiffel Tower in Paris, where Mr Okla is from. It’s near where Alberto Santos-Dumont flew the 14 Bis! Look how beautiful!” He said, with pride in his eyes (Crouch). Mom was a big fan of Santos-Dumont, the inventor of airplanes for all intents and purposes, according to Brazilians everywhere.

We were getting in the elevator at the hotel when a very familiar voice thundered behind us: “Finally!” exclaimed the male voice. Mom, Marta, and I turned at once to find my brother Norton with his wife Rosa, and my cousin Cynthia from Holland.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” was all that the three of us managed to say, while they came toward us and we hugged them in a big group hug. We were like happy children on the first day of the county fair, except the county fair was Paris. Mom had insisted on wanting to take the subway: “Come on guys. We can’t come to Paris and not take the subway. I can do it. I’ll just need a little help.” She pleaded. Given her mobility issues and the steps to get onto the train, I drafted a plan: “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do: Marta, you open the doors. Rosa, you take her left arm. Norton, you take the right. Cynthia, you’re responsible for getting the walker in and I’ll help her up from behind.” As the train approached, we got into position and, comically but successfully, got mom on board, creating a boisterous scene on the train, and transforming ordinary passengers into willing volunteers on this mission.

Her walker came in handy, giving her priority into attractions and helping to stretch the three days we had in Paris. Three days that were just as magical as they were short. Our mood was of complete ecstasy and joy! Mom surprised us all with her vigour and strength. We were all worried, given only nine months had passed since her hip surgery, and only seven months from her ministroke.

On our last night, after an early dinner at Café Panis, just across the Seine from the beautiful Notre Dame Cathedral, we took a cab to a boat dock near the Eiffel Tower, for our sunset cruise on the Seine. As we made our way onto the boat, everybody smiled at mom and made way for her and her walker, with some giving up their seats for her.

“You see? Some people say the French are rude. They have obviously never been to Paris. Look at this.” She said, smilingly pointing at all the fuss being made over her by complete strangers. Did people see this beam of light, that I have always seen, emanating from her? It looked like it, as I have never seen anyone with such a skill for softening even the hardest of hearts.

“Mom, do you want to go back to the hotel now? How’s your hip?” Marta enquired when we docked. Mom looked at her like she had been insulted and replied: “No way. It’s our last night in Paris. Can we just sit by the Eiffel Tower? To say goodbye?” She said, looking at me. “I don’t know, mom,” Marta started, to which I interrupted, giving her a dirty look. “Thy wish is our command, princess,” I replied as I escorted her up the stairs to street level.

We got to Champ de Mars, found a cosy spot on the grass, and sat down. Mom sat on her walker’s chair. Marta and Norton were buying champagne from the many street vendors that freely sell alcohol on the streets of Paris. I kept an eye on mom, while the rest of the group distributed champagne-filled plastic flutes and cheered. Her eyes were fixed on the Tower and the beautiful light show that had started. She did not speak much, and she didn’t really need to, as her eyes said it all.

Much like the Eiffel Tower, which went through wars and devastation but remained standing strong and beautiful, my mom also went through her own losses and devastation, but remained a beautiful, strong, role-model of a woman. With her eyes still transfixed on the tower, mom caressed my hand that was resting on her lap, and we just

sat there, drinking champagne and admiring the muse of our trip. To my mom, that was the Eiffel Tower. To me, it was her.

March 15, 2022. Dubai, UAE.

“Hi, princess!” I smiled, trying to hide my tears as I finally saw her without any tubes and bandages on her face. “Are you feeling better?” I enquired.

“Hi, sweetheart! Yes, a lot better now that I can breathe through my nose. My throat is still bothering me but I’ll get there,” she replied with tired eyes.

“Well, take it easy. Rest and take lots of liquid, okay? And mom, remember the story I told you that I was writing about you? That one I had to interview you for?” I asked, to which she nodded, agreeingly. “I’m almost done the draft. Just focus on getting all better so I can read it to you when I’m done, okay?” She nodded, with her tired eyes now showing a sparkle of excitement.

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## A Non-Linear Journey

ISRRA SINAN

AS I stared into the wall looking at the world map, I realized this is not where I'm supposed to be. It was my third year in software engineering at university, and it felt as if I couldn't code my way into this profession. A part of me always knew that I haven't belonged here, ever since getting my acceptance letter back in high school. I was lost throughout the minutes of every day. I had motivated myself every hour of the day, which drained large amounts of energy. But after one thousand and ninety-five days, I got tired of lying to myself. It's as if the algorithm of life is on fire and the smoke is fogging up my vision of life. I looked at my home country, Iraq, and I remembered every detail of the war that I had lived through as a child. I know that my parents did their ultimate best to give me this opportunity, and to ensure we had a safe life. But I was not safe from myself. How could I be as I continued to lie to myself every day? At this moment, as a tear fell down my face, I felt my mouth drying up from the amount of marijuana I had inhaled.

I got up from my desk, and it felt like I walked into another universe as another part of my brain was being stimulated. In this universe, I was learning about the human body. I was drawing the anatomical shapes of each organ and writing down how notes on how they function. The myocardium is the one I admired sketching out the most due to its complexity. It is a cardiac muscle that pumps blood to the entirety of the body as it exchanged oxygenated and deoxygenated blood. It works fast while making no mistakes in its job because one mistake could cost a

life. Ultimately, the sole purpose of this organ, otherwise known as the heart, is to make sure that the body maintains its capability of doing anything. Since it is the hub of the human circulation system, it helps the body to do the impossible. As I continued to write my notes, I smirked.

Anatomy was just the beginning of the journey. It came first as one should understand the functions of the human organs before anything else in the sciences. Later on came pharmacology. This was the topic that I indulged in the most, it made my heart lose its mind by skipping beats. It was like having a moment of clarity for the first time in a long time. I couldn't remember if I had ever had those, after all, I was not sober enough to remember.

Pharmacology is the study of making and taking drugs, to be concise. In this course, you learn about how compounds in medications or herbal supplements and their effects on the functions of the body. I fell in love with the process of the discovery and development of drugs. It was almost magical how I felt like I had found my place. Ironically, I was on drugs to falling in love with the topic of drugs. Isn't this how life works, though? You should do what you love?

At the same time, I was learning about the neurobiology of the brain. This course, however, focused more on understanding how to critically analyse literature that focuses on neurological abnormalities. Throughout this course, you worked with a partner to bounce ideas back and forth about the meaning of words. I was so eager to have my weekly meetings with my partner as it was easy for us to communicate. One can say, we were like lightning and thunder on a rainy day as we thrived at what we were doing.

I looked around my room once more, and it was not the same. I was no longer fighting with the lies. The world map on my wall had been transformed into anatomy sketches in little frames. I was not in the same room anymore, and it was not the same year, and I was not the same person. As of right now, I am in my last year of life sciences learning how to write scholarly articles to become a researcher.

Academically, my bachelor's degree enables me to grow in knowledge and application of the background information I need to become a researcher. I have gained enough amount of information throughout my course work, and have a vision of what research areas are



of interest to me. Due to my exposure to the vulnerable population as well as drug discovery and development, I plan on working towards enhancing and developing community-based clinical research in vulnerable populations, which may include children with mental disabilities and palliative care patients.

It's a non-linear journey as my neurobiology partner said. It's a non-linear journey to find what you aspire to be. In conjunction with the stressors of choosing a career to pursue, coming to the realization of where you feel like you belong plays a major role in selecting your pathway. However, eventually, your heart will aspire and inspire you to make sure that every breath you take is to help you achieve what you want to be; to make sure that the blood circulating your body is helping you attain the impossible.

**Saving the Day**  
**The Remarkable True Story**  
**of Superhero Constable Shawn Fougère**

ALICIA SKINNER

**W**HAT DO you think of when you hear the word “superhero?” Do you picture exciting comic book adventures from your childhood? Would you believe me if I told you that not all heroes wear capes? Constable Shawn Fougère may present as a typical police officer, but there is so much more to him than what meets the eye. Like many superheroes, Fougère is both empathetic and courageous. Unfortunately, he faced trauma yet overcomes its daily impact with the assistance of his sidekick. The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from which Fougère suffers will be a lifelong battle, but is made more tolerable with his service dog Kal by his side, providing him with physical security and emotional support. Through mental-health advocacy for others suffering from PTSD, Fougère’s goal is to destigmatize mental health, and to provide reassurance, a sense of normalcy, and hope to PTSD survivors, suggesting that their darkness will not last forever. With proper mental-health support and guidance, he is a living example that it is possible for PTSD survivors to once again enjoy a quality life.

The National Institute of Mental Health states that “Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event” (“Post-Traumatic”). Unfortunately, Fougère experienced numerous traumatic events throughout his law-enforcement career. Fougère revealed that his

PTSD began when he and a fellow officer were dispatched to assist a young man in a mental-health crisis. They had “got a call about a young man using a knife and he was cutting himself out in the driveway. So when we pulled up, he was. It was superficial cuts, but he was taking a knife and cutting himself, and he was in mental distress. He was having some very personal issues. We managed to talk him [into] dropping the knife and we brought him to the hospital.”

The medical staff at the hospital confirmed that “[the young man] was fine” and thus, the police were not informed of his release from hospital. This resulted in a traumatizing end that ultimately led to Fougère’s PTSD. In his words, “They didn’t tell me, they didn’t tell the police, they didn’t tell his wife, they didn’t tell anybody, [and] three shifts later I got a phone call of a man in distress, and I had to carry him out of the bush after he committed suicide.” Shockingly, it was the same young man Fougère brought to hospital three shifts prior. He reveals, “that was probably, without a doubt, one of the most disturbing parts because I bonded with this young man and I thought that I was a part of the solution. I had a lot of guilt, I felt like I was part of the system that let him down.”

Dealing with the aftermath of emotional trauma is ongoing. Fougère’s loyal companion Kal, a service dog specifically trained for officers with PTSD, helps Fougère cope with flashbacks, nightmares, and other traumatic events he has experienced. Kal was trained at K9 Evolution, a company that offers “effective Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) treatment alternative for individuals affected by PTSD” and “Provide[s] individuals affected with PTSD with support and access to resources to assist in optimizing social and canine welfare” (“Service”). According to the “How PTSD Dogs Help” section of the PADS’s (Pacific Assistance Dogs Society) official Web site, a service dog can help a person with PTSD:

The companionship and natural benefit of a dog’s presence (lowering cortisol [and] increasing serotonin production) helps mitigate panic-attacks, agoraphobia, flashbacks, and “gray outs” (where those with PTSD lose track of where they are or what they were doing). (“PTSD”)

Kal assists Fougère on a daily basis to help prevent such issues. Fougère explained to me:

[I]f I'm out in public, he does everything for me to make me feel safe. But he does it in a totally non-aggressive way. So if I'm talking to somebody, he always puts himself between me and the other person. If I'm standing in a line, he looks behind me so that I don't worry about behind me. If I'm in a crowd and I need to leave, I have a command for him, and the command is simply called "Gotta go." And we leave.

Because of the intense year-long training, a service dog's role extends far beyond that of a domestic companion pet. Kal has proven to be Fougère's strongest support in times of need.

Finally, I'd like to end this story on a positive note, by describing how Fougère's journey continues to inspire other PTSD survivors to keep up their daily fight. If there is one message he hopes people will remember, it is that both mental and physical struggles deserve equal amounts of attention and respect. In other words, a person's mental pain should not be treated any differently than a person's physical injury (i.e., a broken limb). Fougère uses the following analogy to explain this concept clearly: "I always say ... a physical injury is an orange. A mental injury is an apple. They're totally different, but they're both fruit. So let's just look at them and say we have to cope with it. And when I do any talks, or any speeches, it's that. Mental health and physical health are the same."

Fougère will continue to be a guest speaker at upcoming engagements upon the release of his first book, *Strength Not Shame: My Journey Through Mental Health and Addiction*. This is another way Fougère aims to inspire and empower others dealing with mental-health issues. Surprisingly, Fougère's original plan was not to write a book, but eventually, he was convinced otherwise. He revealed to me,

My idea was not to write a book. I had my main psychologist. He wanted me to write because I was bitter and angry and had so much

resentment towards the policing industry and my managers and even all of my friends.... Because of all that anger and resentment, my doctor said “Why don’t you start writing stuff out?” So I just started ... as a venting process. One day, I thought, “Wouldn’t it be cool if I put that all together and actually wrote a book?” And he says, “Well, just write one. You don’t have to publish it, you just write it. So I just started doing that and then after four years of notes, I thought I should write a book. And that’s what happened.

The overall reaction to Fougère’s work? In his words, “People think that it’s kind of cool because I’m totally honest. [In my book,] I talk about crying, I talk about being weak, I talk about being strong. And all of a sudden I’ve got publishers and people thinking I’m kind of cool so, it’s nice.” He believes that if his book changes even one person’s life for the better, then his goal will have been met.

In her poem “The Hill We Climb,” featured in *The Alternative* news outlet, Amanda Gorman wrote, “There is always light, / if only we’re brave enough to see it / If only we’re brave enough to be it” (108-10). It is Constable Shawn Fougère’s wish that his enlightening message of hope will shine on and empower others. He has proven himself to be a hopeful beacon by encouraging other PTSD survivors to get the help they need. Fougère’s journey is proof that the bravest thing a person struggling with PTSD can do is speak up and reach out for support. Only then can healing begin on the path to a new life.

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## Caretaker

FELIX A. SKINNER

**M**Y ROLE in Good Girls's death shaped me into the man I am today. I was a farmhand at the time, and she was a once-beautiful horse who had become sickly, skeletal, and tired. I had done similar and perhaps more brutal things in my life up to that point, but her death and my prior relationship with her meant that this time was different. Growing up in the countryside meant that I'd hunted before, and I remember the first time I ever killed anything. I was eleven years old, and until that point I had wondered at tales of woodsmen hunting for survival; they were "one" with nature and skilful in their pursuit of their quarry. I wanted to be like that, and so one fall day as the sun was slowly fading, I lay in wait in the forest, ready with a bow, for the first time in my life the predator of an as yet unknown prey.

After an unknown time, I heard leaves rustle and looked down into the ravine that I had chosen as my hunting ground, and I saw a squirrel making its way along the forest floor. I drew my bow, raising it to where I felt my aim would be true. The squirrel seemed to freeze, whether it saw me or not I do not know, and I released the arrow. I was unprepared for what happened next. I struck the squirrel, but unlike in some romanticized story it did not simply sink to the ground, felled beautifully by my skill and prowess.

I watched in horror as the squirrel writhed in agony, unable to move from where it had now been pinned, the arrow buried into the ground. I was powerless, or so I felt, and for what seemed like hours I had to watch

while something, an innocent animal, died horrifically as a result of my inexperience and naivety. It was then that I vowed that if I ever killed another thing, I would ensure it did not suffer, that I would never again be responsible for the pain of an animal. Such a story must necessarily sound cruel and upsetting to the uninitiated, by which I mean those who have never intentionally killed another thing—for any reason. As a child I was surrounded by farmers and hunters who killed as a matter of course, and so my experience was not unusual, and formative in the way I am sure it is for all who experience it.

It was with such a past that I eventually, about seven years later, began work as a farmhand responsible for the lives of fifty horses, and encountered Good Girls. Named by the owner of the property, Good Girls was thirty-two years old, exceptionally senior for a horse in an industry of breeding and racing that tended to wear bodies out young.

The first time I encountered her it was late at night. Stefan, the owner's son, was getting in his truck, a weary look on his face. As I opened the gate to the paddock for him, I asked what he was doing, where he was going, and whether he needed help. A horse hadn't returned from the field he told me, he feared it had died during the day, and was going to look for the body. I got in his truck and we drove, the headlights sweeping the rolling hills as we scanned for the missing animal.

Eventually we found her, a thin body lying in the rut on a hill: only, she wasn't dead. She was weak, but using straps we managed to pull her from the rut so that she could be rolled and given momentum to stand, which she did with great difficulty. It was the beginning of the end for her, and simultaneously the beginning of our relationship. For months afterward I cared for her and watched as she faded. The tattoo on her gums—an old practice—testified to her age, and the twisting of her legs as she walked, along with the protruding and jutting bones seemingly ready to tear through her paper-thin skin, made it clear that it was time. Each morning when I arrived, hers was the first stall I checked, always ready to find her dead and always simultaneously relieved to find her alive and disappointed that her pain would continue. I thought back to that squirrel and my promise never to allow suffering in an animal again. Paradoxically it may seem to some that once again I would kill an animal, but I felt no guilt this time. I had caused the suffering of the first, but for

Good Girls I would put an end to it. I argued with the owner for months, pleading that she allow the vet to put her to sleep.

There were many more incidents in that time. On several occasions Good Girls collapsed, each time to rise again with the help of straps, pulleys, and the strength of six or seven workers. Others described seeing such suffering as traumatizing, and all agreed that nothing—save death—could put an end to the pain. On one occasion Good Girls cut her neck on a jagged edge of the stall door. Hanging her head over the door, blood streaming down the slats, she was a pitiful sight when I found her. It became clear to the owner, at last, that there could be no more delay.

A day soon after that I arrived at the barn at an agreed time, and helped to calm Good Girls as the vet inserted the IV. I fed her, held her, and eventually stayed with her as she was injected with the poison. We were standing in the arena on the hard-packed sand, all of us in a semicircle. We had tried to position Good Girls so that when she fell it would be against the wall. That way she would slide to the ground peacefully, and we could make her death graceful, dignified. She fell the other way though, hard against the ground. One moment alive, the next dead and already falling, unfeeling. It was unceremonious, every bit as much as that first death I'd caused, but this time, I believed in it.

I'd advocated for this end, and played an active role in it, though of course I hadn't depressed the plunger myself. I felt no guilt, only sadness and gratitude that she wouldn't suffer any longer. With that moment I'd taken the power that I held as a human being to decide the fate of other lives and used it for good.

I had evolved from my first misuse of that power, and could take comfort in the knowledge that I had done the right thing in a difficult situation. I understood that just as I am the master of my fate I had shouldered the responsibility of being so for other beings, and had acted accordingly and morally. I changed that day, or rather I recognized that I had. Should I ever find myself in the same sort of situation again I can be sure that I will be ready.



## **A Blast from the Past!**

### **Hollywood's Golden Age: Fashion, Technology, and Culture**

REBECCA STEVENSON

**C**ONTRASTING BLACK and white, glitzy but traditional silk—the Golden Age of Hollywood's infamous glamour and pop-culture fashion was certainly something to behold. The decade began by quickly transitioning from “flapper” styles of the twenties to a more elegant and conservative style—influenced by some of Hollywood's stars' most iconic looks such as Bette Davis and Ginger Rogers. Can't you just imagine the feeling of overwhelming elegance when dressed to the nines? When researching 1930s Hollywood fashion I was infatuated by the sleek and glamorous looks which ravished the movie premiers, social circles, lavish parties, and films of the Golden Age. The dresses were effortlessly enchanting, popularly constructed from such silky, reflective material that one could see her own pinned-up bob and rosy, red lips staring back at her. The bewitching gowns mesmerized me as I looked through black and white photos of the Golden Age—admiring such elegance that the Hollywood beauties possessed. I couldn't help but notice as I scrolled through dozens of infamous actresses in their best dresses and casual garbs that I had seen some of these looks before. “Where?” I asked myself—I certainly was not around during the 1930s and the fashion trends are almost invisible today (to my dismay)—but then it hit me, Grandma Jean! My mom has displayed some of my great-grandmother's gorgeous photos from the thirties in my house. I had the opportunity to interview my mom, Michelle, about her grandmother—

my great-grandmother—Jean. Grandma Jean was born in 1916 and she told my mom stories when she was a child about the days of her youth during the thirties. Although grandma Jean passed away years ago, my family has pictures which are quite telling of the pop-culture, technology, and fashion from the 1930s. Grandma Jean was born and raised in Canada, which was not exactly similar to Hollywood during its Golden Age, but during the interview my mom said that Grandma Jean remembered watching Hollywood movies as a kid. “I wonder if she saw Snow White when it first came out. That would have been groundbreaking for the time,” my mom said. Nineteen thirties Golden Age fashion focused on elegance, conservativeness, and glamour, and through some very old pictures I was certainly able to see that to be true. I found one picture particularly telling, as Grandma Jean was most likely fourteen years old, and was dressed like the elegant Hollywood socialite Mona von Bismarck—who was voted one of the Best-Dressed Women in the World by Chanel in 1933. I found this decaying photo to be so immersive because I realized how prevalent fashion was to thirties culture as even children were mirroring Hollywood glamour styles. My mom said, “Oh my! She looks like a little movie star”—showing how Hollywood style influenced the globe as young Jean from London, Ontario looked like she could have been on a Hollywood movie set or attending a socialite lunch with the Hollywood crowd.

Although fashion was a sight to behold during Hollywood’s Golden Age, technological productions were also turning heads. “Hollywood and Radio in the 1930s,” published by the Kennedy Centre, explains the role of technology in not only the film industry during Hollywood’s Golden Age, but also the effects that it had on a depressed society. Technology used to create Hollywood’s iconic films and radio shows created an escape for those suffering during the Great Depression. Hollywood’s extravagant productions allowed people to have something to escape into and enjoy during the gruelling time, which resulted in the glamorous idealization that Hollywood still has today. The most popular films of the decade were produced by top studios: Warner Brothers, RKO, Fox, MGM, and Paramount—which are still thriving today! Since Hollywood’s Golden Age was during the Great Depression—a bit ironic—in order to escape sad realities, many people turned to movies as

a getaway, revealing a positive aspect of the effect that Hollywood had on pop-culture during this decade. As my mom mentioned in our interview, she wondered if Grandma Jean had seen *Snow White* when it first came out, and although she could not remember any specific titles that her grandma told her about, she does remember seeing a ticket stub that cost only twenty-five cents! Can you imagine that? I easily spend at least eleven dollars on a general movie ticket nowadays. By looking at black-and-white pictures from Grandma Jean's childhood I was also able to immerse myself in some of the camera technology that was common during the decade. Did you know that sound movies did not start to dominate the industry until around 1927? Making them a fairly new phenomenon during Hollywood's Golden Age. This new aspect of sound entertainment paved the way for early 1900s radio technology to transition from WWI communication efforts, to mainstream entertainment. Radio shows ravaged the American home, ranging from political to entertaining fictional themes—of course laced with spiffy commercial ads, marking the ramp-up of modern consumerism. The Kennedy Centre describes escapism technology during the decade as “rapid growth of technology, such as portable camera devices, technicolour, multiple sound recording capabilities, and more sophisticated editing techniques g[iving] support to these efforts,” which I was able to see through Grandma Jean's portable camera, and my mom's memory of the twenty-five-cent movie ticket.

Through my research on the 1930s—specifically Hollywood's Golden Age—I was able to immerse myself in the glitz and glamour of Hollywood's silky and elegant styles—and see them influence the globe as my great-grandmother looked like she had just signed a deal with MGM whilst in London, Ontario. Although the flashy clothing and infamous pop-culture of Hollywood continues to this day, I was able to gain a new appreciation for a deeper meaning to Hollywood's 1930s technological advancements as they created a world to escape to during such gruelling times of the Great Depression. Overall, if someone were to offer me a ticket on a time machine, I would certainly love to visit 1930s Hollywood to further immerse myself in the pop culture that I find myself so infatuated with. As the 1930s hipsters would say, “I'm going to put the kibosh on this writing now.”

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## Granny

CYNTHIA STRINGER

**M**Y PHONE rings. The display shows that it's my brother. *Oh no, I think to myself, Nathan usually only calls me with bad news.*

"Granny is in the hospital," he tells me, confirming my fears. "The doctor doesn't think she'll make it through the night."

I have been packing for a vacation for the past two days—a vacation my husband and I have been planning for over a year. Our flight leaves tomorrow. "Do we cancel our trip?" I can't imagine leaving at a time like this.

"No, don't cancel it."

I am crying now. "But I should be here for her."

"Your staying won't change anything."

I am still crying when my phone rings again. This time it's my dad. Nathan must have phoned him after we ended our call.

"You can't cancel your trip," he tells me. "Granny would want you to go."

Both Granny and I once lived on our family's farm in western Saskatchewan. The span between our houses, which were connected by a dirt road, was 220 metres. When I was five years old, I was allowed to walk to Granny's house by myself, my mom watching me from our doorstep the whole time. If I didn't stop to pick raspberries along the way, it took me four minutes to get there. When I climbed onto the step

at Granny's front door, I would glance up to her kitchen window and see her face. Granny was watching me too.

Granny and I liked to play games. Bingo was our favourite. I got to crank the handle on the Bingo ball mixer. It was big and round and made of see-through grey plastic. The little red Bingo balls tumbled around in it, making a loud clattering sound until one came out of a hole in the bottom. As the ball cranker, I got to call the numbers. That was the best part.

Granny's house smelled like roast beef, potatoes, and baked bread mixed with soap—a green bar sat at the sink in the porch—and Grandpa's pipe tobacco. The best meal at Granny's was lunch. As a child of Scottish and English immigrants, Granny was proud of her British heritage. Lunch was Granny's name for afternoon tea. It was at four o'clock every day, and it consisted of a drink and a sweet snack. Granny would make a pot of Red Rose Orange Pekoe tea and bring cookies out of the cupboard. I didn't drink tea, so Granny gave me Sun-Rype apple juice in a plastic cup. Granny drank her tea from a teacup.

Her porcelain tea set had dark pink roses on it. The roses looked just like the ones in Granny's front yard. I picked a rose off that bush once. Granny caught me, and she looked angry. "I do not want you to pick any more of those roses," she told me. Her voice was louder than it had ever been before. I never touched another one of those roses.

As we both got older, I became more capable, but Granny needed more help with things. After her first hip replacement, she could no longer bend over her bathtub to clean it, so she hired me to do it. It was my first job. Every Sunday, armed with a can of Comet, a striped rag, and a plastic ice-cream pail, I cleaned her bathtub to a sparkling shine. Granny gave me a five-dollar bill every time. Giving a kid responsibility makes them feel special (Beresin), and I was no exception. I had my own money and it felt good to know I was helping Granny out.

My parents separated when I was ten years old. In a world turned on its head by divorcing parents, I was comforted to find stability at Granny's house. Granny normally wore the same clothes—velcro shoes, navy blue slacks, and a short-sleeved button-up shirt with flowers on it—she consistently had lunch at four o'clock every day, and her house smelled the same as it always had. Granny's arthritis made her fingers

crooked and her knuckles knobby, so she couldn't knead the dough for bread anymore. But she continued to cook roast-beef and potatoes, a sea-green bar of Zest soap perpetually sat at the porch sink, and even though Grandpa had been gone for three years, the smell of his Macdonald's pipe tobacco pervaded the air. At home, everything around me was changing, but Granny did not change. I could always rely on her. The nightmare that was my broken family would have scarred me far worse if it had not been for my relationship with her (Henderson 1260).

Granny has been living in an extended care facility nearby, yet the last time we saw each other was at my wedding eight months ago. I should have visited her more, but I always came up with flimsy excuses. I thought I would have more opportunities. What a fool I have been.

*Granny is ninety-two years old. Why did I think I would have more time? I berate myself. She is dying. We will never get that time back.*

Like a massive weight pressing down on me, the guilt is overwhelming. That little girl who loved to play bingo and eat juice and cookies, the one who was taught about discipline and responsibility, is about to abandon the woman who helped raise her and whom she could always rely on. For that little girl knows, and I know, that Dad is right. Granny would want me to go on my trip. Still, I will always regret not visiting her in those last few months.

With a heavy heart, I phone a flower shop, and order a bouquet to send to Granny in the hospital. The card reads, "I'm sorry I couldn't be there. I'll love you forever. Cynthia.

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## **Blind in One Eye ... Can't See Out of the Other**

SHEILA THOMPSON

“**W**HAT ARE you? Blind in one eye and can't see out of the other?” my dad bellowed after I had spilled something yet again.

“Yes,” I retorted, indignant at his anger.

This finally made my dad stop dead in his tracks. That was the last time he ever yelled this at me because when he stopped to think about it, technically, I *was* blind in one eye and couldn't see out of the other.

Before my diagnosis, the tension in my house would build every night at bedtime. My parents were always angry and sullen, and I seemed to be the primary source of grief in their lives. I wasn't trying to be difficult. But no one would listen to me. When I closed my eyes, thousands of bright lights would come flying at my face every night. Sometimes they looked like bugs. I was petrified of bugs. Thousands of little lightning bugs flying directly into my eyes. I would spend hours unable to close my eyes because every time I tried, bad things happened. *Am I crazy? Does everyone see this when they close their eyes? Why won't it stop? I'm scared. God, please make it stop. I'll do anything to make it stop.* These thoughts would race through my head like speeding cars in the night, their bright lights blinding anyone who looked in their direction.



Inevitably, my weak bladder would get the best of me, and I would rouse from my room to visit the bathroom. And every night, it was the same. I was the bad child who wouldn't stay in bed.

"Mom, I see stuff when I close my eyes," I said.

"There is nothing there; go back to bed," she said.

"I have to pee," I replied.

"It is always something with you; *go back to bed*," she said.

"I just really need to pee," I said.

"No, you don't; Why don't you ever listen to me?" she replied.

*Why does no one ever listen to me*, I thought.

I lost count of the number of times I was spanked for seeing things and having a weak bladder. I couldn't win. But, looking back, I can understand why no one believed me. Naughty children don't want to go to bed, and people don't see things that aren't there. But at the time, I was alone in the world. No one believed a word I said, and my actions were always misinterpreted. I wished more than anything for someone to believe me ... and believe *in* me.

I was born with a rare genetic defect called Coats' Disease. Have you never heard of it? I'm not surprised. The first eye doctor I was taken to said to my parents, "I'm not touching this with a ten-foot pole," and sent me to Toronto.

Coats' Disease is an abnormal development of the blood vessels in the retina, named after the person who first reported the condition, George Coats, and is in no way named after the article of clothing. I often wished that this disease had a better name due to the obvious confusion that can occur. It's also not so much a disease as a condition. This abnormality causes leaking of proteins and lipids in the retina and must be treated with a laser to stop the leakage and prevent the retina from detaching.

My diagnosis at least brought some vindication for me—I *was* seeing things. Coats' Disease also explained away my supreme klutziness and lack of coordination. But unfortunately, my vindication only extended to my vision and balance, and anything else I said was still not believed. But there was at least one small victory for me in the constant battle forged against my parents.

Surgery was the only option. The day I went under the knife was two weeks after my little brother was born, so my Mom had to stay behind. My grandma accompanied Dad and me to the Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto. You would expect a fearful girl like me to be scared, but I wasn't frightened. Perhaps I did not fully understand what surgery meant. I don't ever remember being worried about going blind or that something bad could happen to me on the operating table.

I may not have understood that I was going blind or what surgery meant, but there was one thing I understood clearly: *the lights in my eyes went away*. They were there less and less every night until I no longer saw them again. The doctors considered my surgery a success, and they were able to save the minimal peripheral vision that remained.

I hated my glasses. I had these big, thick polycarbonate lenses designed to protect my right eye from damage. They looked like they belonged in the 1980s, not something someone who cared about their image should wear in the 1990s.

"Four-eyes," the kids at school yelled.

*Floor eyes? What are floor eyes?* I knew they were insulting me, but I didn't understand the joke. The message was lost in translation. *Why is it okay for the popular girl to have a giant headpiece with her braces, but I can't have glasses? Why does no one like me? I didn't do anything.*

My right eye started to deteriorate. There was nothing "wrong" with my right eye, just normal poor vision that can be corrected with glasses. So now I had a prescription lens in one eye and a plastic lens in the other. I had a tough time with things that required depth perception. Things like sports, pouring a glass of water, or walking on my own two feet. Over the years, I have (almost) perfected the art of "almost falling." And when I do fall, it is a lot more graceful. I am happy to report that falling has only caused one broken arm and a couple of sprained ankles in my thirty-five years.

I am not as disabled as people might think. People with one eye can do almost everything that other people can. I can even drive a car with lots of practice (and professional lessons). However, there are a few things I can't do. I can't be a pilot or join the police force or get over the fear of balls flying at my face. Gym class was a nightmare. I lived in fear of balls taking my right eye out and being left with no vision. I do not

have a backup eye. Childhood was rough. I felt misunderstood, friendless, and alone. Coats' Disease was only one of the many conditions I had to deal with.

Fortunately, I have built myself a great life. A life that includes my amazing parents, who were not trying to be mean; they just didn't understand and did the best they could. The wisdom that comes with age has allowed us to forgive the past and put aside our differences. My biggest problem with my vision as an adult happens when my clumsy self knocks my glasses off the nightstand. I fumble to find a light and plant my face directly on the floor to locate my fallen eyesight. Because, yes, I literally am blind in one eye and can't see out of the other.

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## The Married Martyrs

JACKIE TIANZUO

WHEN MY great-grandmother was married to my great-grandfather, he was the mayor of a city in China. I've always been told that he was well-received by his citizens—he was selfless, democratic, and loved his family and his people. This was in the 1930s, Communism was on the rise in the country. As such, coming from a long line of privilege and education, my great-grandfather and his family were considered the “bourgeoisie.”

Yet, I was told that the citizens of this city never cared for that. They loved my great-grandfather, not solely because of the jobs he created and the mouths he fed without the slightest hesitation, but rather because he simply saw everyone as equals. On the other hand, my great-grandmother—well, not much was known about her at this time. She did what most women in this time could do: raised her two newborn sons and looked after the house.

By the end of 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had just won the civil war and was in the process of seizing control of the country. Officials of the party were sent to every city, town, and county to replace the local government. My great-grandfather was confronted by these party officials. See, China only had one party prior to the CCP, namely, the Kuomintang. As a mayor, the Kuomintang was the only party my great-grandfather could register under.

He never cared much for political parties and dogma; his community was what mattered. Nonetheless, the civil war was about ideologies, not

people, and to the CCP, he and his family represented the enemy. He was given an ultimatum: “either announce faith to the party [CCP] in front of your city, such that you and your family can be spared by living in the countryside or, serve life in prison.”

My great-grandfather was aware of the purges happening all over the country: thousands of political officials not representing the CCP were being murdered, usually along with their families, and their properties were nationalized. Knowing fully well that his family would not be spared regardless of his decision, he had his colleague take my great-grandmother and their children to a remote barn in the countryside.

Now as for himself, he chose to go out his own way. Even family members from my mother’s side (who came from a different city) recount the story of how he delivered a speech in support of individual liberty and the hope for democracy in front of his citizens—and was shot soon after.

Of thirty-four years old and a widow, my great-grandmother and her two toddler-aged children now strived to survive. They slept with cows and tried to remain undercover from the CCP for as long as they could, until they were inevitably caught. The officials let her and the children live, so long as they could use her as a demonstration. Every national Holiday (especially the Communist holidays), she was escorted out of the barn to an erected scaffold in the city square. Here, while kneeling, she would be tied to a pole and be battered, whipped, and humiliated.

In between the rounds of being beaten, the orator would lift her head to have her recite phrases like “I committed treason against the people and I deserve punishment,” and then proceed to press her head back down and let the beatings commence. Acts such as these were common in China for nearly thirty years—so common that even my father recounts witnessing multiple public demonstrations in his early adolescence, even as late as 1976 (the year when Mao died).

After four years of living out of the barn and being tortured while everyone celebrated the holidays, she was desperate to leave. Still grieving for the loss of her husband, she married a second time, with a man named Peng, and was eventually able to relocate her family to his home in a county far away in the mountains. Peng was a kind, hardworking farmer who lived a simpler life. It was hard for her to love

him as much as my great-grandfather, but she was safe now. She had another child with him, and then in a couple of years, Peng passed too from an unknown disease.

She was now alone, with three children in a small house and no neighbours in sight. The hardest part for her in those years, my father would express, was trying to grieve for not only Peng, but also the man that she was not allowed to grieve for.

Nonetheless, she adapted. In the following years, she learned to grow crops, raise chickens and pigs, and even create a water-collection system where water from a stream near the top of the mountain flowed down through bamboo shoots to her well. Eventually, her children, including my grandfather, would become old enough to help in the house. My grandfather would rejoice about Chinese New Year, one of the handful of days in the year where his family could share some meat for dinner. On most days, it was rice, porridge, and fermented root-vegetables, meal after meal.

More years would pass, and my grandfather's brothers would move out of her house to begin new lives in the cities, where they married and started their own families. Eventually, my grandfather moved away too, but to a house nearby in the mountains so that he could be close to her. There, he married and had my father, who grew up in similar conditions. My father tells me some of his fondest memories included taking the solo hike to my great-grandmother's house on a weekend, just to listen to her stories.

"Her stories were full of life." In fact, he said that all of his cousins, even ones that were adults by then, would long to visit her—to sit down and just listen to her tales. One story told of a gaunt woman with ragged clothes and messy hair that knocked on my great-grandmother's door to beg for food. The neighbours would warn that she was a foreign spy and that she should not be trusted. Without a second thought, my great-grandmother fixed her a meal and gave her a bed to sleep on for several days.

With decades now gone by, she was getting older, and all of her children and grandchildren would encourage her to live with them: "You'll have an easier life in the city, we can take care of you." But she

always refused. She preferred to live in that house, even if it meant living alone, disconnected from her family and the rest of the country.

Growing up, I wondered why she chose to live away from it all. It took me a while to understand that perhaps she needed that. Perhaps she knew that she would never be able to accept the China that had been stolen from her. Perhaps the mountains, the nature, they were the few remnants of the country she knew and loved. Whatever it was, I'd like to believe that my great-grandfather was smiling down upon her all those years. Because as he wished for his citizens, *she* practiced what *he* preached: she lived her own peace.

On June 9, 2019, she passed away at 102 years old. Family members that lived nearby said it was as if she knew that day was her last, and she welcomed it—just like my great-grandfather.

## Canadian, Japanese, and Pirate Princess in Africa

FRANCIS TSUDA

CANADA. JAPAN. West African Coast. Pirate. Princess. One would be hard pressed to find these five key words in a single story. Three different continents, two occupations that seemingly have nothing in common, and a span in time of five hundred years. And yet, here I find myself, a Canadian-Japanese, born in Tokyo, raised in Montreal, and living in the Ivory Coast. And five hundred years ago, on an island nation on the other side of the world, there she was, a Japanese pirate who called herself a princess. Here is the tale of how fate pulled the strings so that the story of the pirate princess was brought to a foreign land she had never even heard of.

“Fuaaaaaaaaaah....” A loud yawn resonates through the hallways of the Canadian Embassy in Abidjan, with nobody to hear it on this early Saturday morning, “Damn it, I’m still tired.... Shouldn’t have stayed up ‘til two a.m. playing Total War....”

As I curse my carelessness, I drop my heavy bag onto one of my father’s chairs. This being my first experience working part time, I admittedly brought a heavier load than necessary: two lunches, a bottle of water, my smartphone, my Asus laptop, my Chromebook, two portable chargers, and two books—just in case. With the exhausting weight off my shoulders, I open my phone’s notes to check what to do next.



“Alright, I opened the doors, turned on the lights, and turned off the alarm....” One by one, I check the list of tasks I’d written down during my work briefing. “Alright, I should be okay until the staff arrives. Looks like supervising renovation work won’t be too busy a job after all!”

Stretching, I throw myself onto one of the office’s couches. I don’t want to brag, but I doubt any other eighteen year old ever had this comfortable a workplace. My father being ambassador really makes this easy. With my still tired body resting comfortably on the couch, I have ten minutes to make the most out of until the workers show up. That said, though, what are my options?

“Well, using my phone early in the morning is like inviting a migraine to a tea party,” I think to myself while going through my bag, “so I guess the Pirate Princess is gonna have to do.”

Truth be told, *Daughter of the Murakami Pirate* never really appealed to me before. My mother, an avid lover of history, swore that it was a great book, but to be honest, I’m not entirely sold. What excitement can a pirate princess whom nobody has heard of give me that the epics of Lord Nobunaga, Great samurai warlord who unified all of Japan after a century of warfare, wouldn’t exceed tenfold? After reading the *Shincho-Koki*, the “Chronicles of Lord Nobunaga” written by his direct subordinate, every historical tale has been little more than pale in comparison.

As unenthusiastic as I may be, I have heard of the Murakami pirates and their fearsome reputation. The marauding warriors of the Seto Inland Sea figure in all Japanese textbooks, after all. Active during most of the sixteenth century, the Murakami pirates were a loose confederation of three clans sharing the same surname, each with a fortified island as home base. Despite their popular image, the pirates were far from lowly bandits and brigands. Lowly extortionists and scammers were what they were: they demanded taxes from any ship that travelled in their seas, and would attack if not paid. A far cry from the daunting and ambitious, yet noble and majestic Nobunaga.

Funded by rich commercial income from their trade with the powerful Otomo clan, which in turn traded with the Portuguese, the pirates had both the gold and the swords to force anyone to respect them. That said, as famous as the Murakami may have been, I’ve never heard

of them having any princess, which is surprising given how much Japanese people like stories of strong and, for a lack of better terms, *violent* women. I grimace as I remember the accursed “Fate” series, where characters like King Arthur and my beloved lord Nobunaga are gender-swapped into anime girls. If this is one of these kinds of stories, I won’t think twice before travelling halfway across the world back to Japan just so I can bludgeon the author with the 470-page book for taking advantage of my love for history and instead feeding me his ridiculous fantasies.

I yawn yet again, then open the book. I skip the table of contents so as to not be spoiled the story and go straight to the meat of the tale.

“It is unknown when these lands, known as Osaka (大阪), became known as Osaka (大阪) as they are today” (Wada 9).

“Wait, what?” I scratch my head in confusion. “Osaka? That’s nowhere near Murakami lands. Where are the pirates!”

The lack of pirates momentarily confuses me, but the next instant, I completely forget about those swashbuckling rascallions, as a name I’ve heard before came to my eyes.

“Suzuki Magoichi, the leader of the Saika-To, the Kishu (modern-day Wakayama) based mercenary musketeers, frowned as he looked outside from the wall-like trenches of Osaka Hongan-ji Temple” (9-10).

“Saika Magoichi!” I fail to hold myself from calling his name out loud. As a lover of history, I’ve obviously heard about the mercenary leader—cool, charismatic, and fighting the strong to protect the weak.

“Right! The Saika-To had been hired to defend Hongan-ji Temple. Nobunaga even got shot in the leg.”

Suzuki Magoichi is something of a Robin Hood in Japan: a crack marksman who defended his home of Kishu from warring Daimyos and became known, along with his own Merry Men, the Saika-To, as the greatest mercenaries in all of Japan. Their origins were humble: hunters from the forests of Wakayama who killed game for a living. When the Kishu region became embroiled in a civil war of succession, however, the common folk couldn’t count on the lords and samurai to defend them. Instead, the Saika-To was formed as a militia, a band of vigilantes who protected their people against bandits and invading armies. When rich

warlords came bearing chests full of gold to retain them as mercenaries, “Saika” Magoichi became the deadliest hired gun of the Far East.

Despite my original doubts, Magoichi’s appearance instantly boosts my interest in the book: you can’t go wrong with a man like him. Reinvigorated, I continue reading. Well, I would have, if not for....

*RIIIIIIIIIING*

“Fine, fine! I’m coming!”

Lazily, I got up and opened the secured doors for the construction staff. Way to interrupt my Sengoku Jidai experience. Following a brief exchange of greetings and explanations, I just as quickly retreated into my father’s office to escape the stinging smell of paint and dust.

“Back to you, pirates. What do you have for me?” I let my backside drop onto the couch and grabbed my novel, opening it to the page I’d left off.

With every page I flip, the book captures my attention further: the first part of the book presents the situation in which Japan, and more specifically western Honshu, finds itself during this era. Oda Nobunaga, Great Unifier of Japan (and my personal favourite historical figure of all times), has run out of patience for warrior monks of Osaka Hongan-ji temple, who have been a thorn in his side for years. Hongan-ji was a special temple, in that it practised Ikko Buddhism, which promised salvation for all believers. It was especially beloved by the common people, as it preached that all human beings were equal. It doesn’t appear Nobunaga had a problem with this ideology in general, but Ikko rebellions breaking out in his lands was a whole different deal. Indeed, Ikko-converted peasants, questioning the authority of the samurai, overthrew their feudal lords and tried to win freedom; not something Nobunaga wishes to deal with in his efforts to unite Japan. Now, Hongan-ji is faced with fortified Oda trenches and castles, ready to flatten the temple should it refuse to surrender. Fortunately, Kenryo, the temple’s Grandmaster, has an ace up his sleeve: the Mori clan.

The Mori are a powerful samurai clan that dominate western Honshu. Through shrewd diplomacy and cunning warfare, the Mori daimyo, Mori Motonari, became the most powerful lord in the region. If anyone could go head-to-head with the Oda, it’s the Mori. And conveniently for Kenryo, many people in the Mori domain are followers

of Ikko Buddhism. As such, the Mori held a meeting to hear the monks out.

“On the elevated section of the room sat Mori Terumoto, and below him, with Kobayakawa Takakage and Yoshikawa Motoharu in front, sat in two lines Nomi Munekatsu and the other lords, their eyes fixed on Yoshibe, the envoy from Hongan-ji” (40).

“Fuaaaaah...” As fascinating and palpitating as sixteenth-century politics were, I am a sleepy man and I’ve come looking for pirates, not statesmen. The monotone scenes of old men grumbling about the economy and religion are gradually starting to bore me. “Where are the pirates...”

Ask and you shall receive. A few hours into my read, I am finally greeted with the first pirate: Murakami Yoshimitsu, leader of the Murakami branch of Innoshima island. However....

“Come on! More politics!?” I grimace as the pirate reveals himself to be just another one of the countless politicians of feudal Japan. “Where is the raiding!? Where are the naval battles!?”

*Knock knock.*

Once again interrupted, I turn from my book and look at the office door, where the construction team leader was waving at me. I sigh and get up, yet to see any “true” pirate in this pirate book.

“What? It’s already lunch break?” I doubt my very ears. How did I not realize so much time had passed? “Well, alright, then.... Let me know when you’re back, I’ll open the doors again.”

“Thank you, sir.” The leader nods in satisfaction. “We’ll be back in a bit.”

As I watch the workers leave, I feel and hear my stomach grumble. Focused on the book, I hadn’t noticed just how hungry I was myself. It’s amazing how medieval politics and societal history can hide a man’s appetite.

“Well, good thing I brought lunch.” I declare to myself while walking back to my couch and opening my backpack, summoning from its depths a ham-cheese baguette sandwich I bought at a local bakery. “There are a lot of things I can praise about this country, but its food has got to be at the top of the list.”

With sandwich in hand and pirate in mind, I once again open the book. Once again, I lazily drag my eyes through the wall of text as captain Yoshimitsu told the Mori envoys, Nomi Munekatsu and Kodama Narihide, about the way the pirate confederation worked and what part of the sea was under his domain and where was the Noshima Murakami's domain and how the Kurushima Murakami—

“SHUT UP!”

I can't help but snap at the written words and the endlessly continuing dialogues and explanations. Why! I understand that the Sengoku period was as much an era of politics as warfare, but who wants to read all of this! I don't hate medieval politics; in fact, I like them more than most of the world. But sixty pages and still no sign of piracy! In a pirate book!

“GET ON WITH IT, WILL YOU!”

Once again, ask and you shall receive. I flip the page to a small, unassuming ship zooming past the Murakami and Mori galleys, until several light warships sail out of the surrounding islands. Though I do not know this yet, this is going to be my first experience with Ryu Wada's writing tactic that made his book such a masterpiece.

In the span of six lines, my expression goes from an annoyed and impatient frown to eyes widening in shock and concern. As it turns out, the unassuming ship is not the simple farmer galley it appeared to be, but is instead filled with bandits and brigands holding a group of peasants hostage at sword point. As soon as the pirates began boarding the ship, however, their plan fell apart. The first of the marauders to leap aboard is, to the watching Mori envoys' surprise, a young woman. To mine, the book makes no attempts at dignifying her appearance:

From her tall body extended unusually long arms and legs, and atop a likewise elongated neck was placed a small head. This imbalance of body proportions was enough to keep eyes locked onto her. Most bizarre was her appearance. Below her rough hair flowing in the marine wind was a slender face, her nose was sharp like the beak of an eagle, and was pointed upwards. Her eyes were so big one would think her eyelids were ripped open, her brows were close to her eyes, and alongside her pupils formed an angry frown. Her mouth was

big, her lips were thick, and her malicious grin made her look like an ogre. (69-70)

“What the hell!” I believe most people would react like me: “Who—What—Why would someone design a story heroine like this? An ogre! Who in blazes describes a princess as looking like a grinning ogre!”

The ogre princess wastes no time with pleasantries and instantly goes on the offensive: she cuts off one bandit’s head faster than the eye could see, punches another’s face in with her armoured gauntlets, parries a third one’s sword and slices him open. Despite being faced by a group of armed men, there is seemingly nothing the villains can do to win. In the span of a few seconds, all the bandits are either dead, knocked out, or have lost the will to fight. Kyo scoffs at their weakness before taking the survivors aboard her ship and branding their heads with burning irons, as was apparently customary for Murakami pirates.

Just like that, my boredom has been blown away. Action! Combat! Piracy! This woman singlehandedly destroyed the grinding and molasses-like atmosphere of the past three hours reading about scheming politicians and grumbling generals! That was all it took to turn a tale of political intrigue into an action-packed pirate epic! I honestly can’t believe this is the same book.

“Sir!”

“Fuah?”

I turn to see the construction captain once again standing in front of the glass door. At the same time, my eyes catch the wall clock with its short needle pointed at the number four.

“It’s already been that long?” I ask in confusion. Again, it felt as if I’d skipped a long period of time.

“Yes, sir. We’ve packed our things and we’re ready to leave,” the leader replies. “You’re going to stay and lock the doors, correct?”

“Yeah, I’ll be doing that,” I respond, still in disbelief. “Thank you for your hard work. See you next week.”

The leader nods again and walks back to his team, leaving the embassy through the main door. Though I can’t see them, I hear the elevator open and the team move their equipment into it. I breathe yet another sigh and put the book back in my bag. Great. Not only did the

pirate girl steal the ship, but she also somehow managed to steal four hours of my time. How good of a pirate do you have to be to pull off something like that?

After grabbing my stuff and checking that all the doors were locked, I make my way out of the Embassy. As the last job of the day, I open a secured safe in front of the embassy's door and stash the keys there. With a wide stretch and a final yawn, get aboard the elevator heading downwards. As the metallic gates close, leaving me alone in the descending box of steel, images of the texts I just read flash in my head. The slender but muscular pirate woman, cutting her way through bandits in a way that I could never describe as graceful with all the lies in the world.

“Heh...” I lightly chuckle before walking into the elevator. I guess I'm really going to get my pirate book after all.

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## Shedding the Negative

NIAMH TYRRELL

THE COLD air fills my lungs, making it hard for me to breathe. The snow falls tonight like a heavy rainfall, but all I can think about at this moment is how the wind could pick me up and take me away. As I walk through the front doors of my dance studio, I think to myself as I pass under the entrance's big block letters, "what an appropriate name."

Turning Pointe is the name of my dance studio, a place where I find sanctuary and privacy to reframe my thinking and renew my body and mind. I place my bag down in the usual corner and find studio space for myself. Being there at night reminds me of venomous snakes in the wetlands of Australia and how they find shelter under rocks or dig themselves into the soil and sand. When a snake is about to shed its skin, it hides away more often than usual. At Turning Pointe, I can hide and be at peace. I stretch out my limbs before getting ready to move, like a snake beginning to shed its skin by nudging against a rock.

As I have matured, I understand now what I need to do to make myself feel better. I know the steps of my wellness ritual like the back of my hand. This is my time to rejuvenate, a process of renewal, shedding old skin and starting afresh. I try my best not to think of anything at all while I dance. It is my opportunity to escape and start fresh like a new beginning.

I plug my phone into the studio's speaker, and shuffle through the music until I find a piece that could make my head put my body in its place. I continually press the shuffle button, and as soon as I hear the



opening harp strings to “La La La” by Sam Smith, I feel an instant hit of adrenaline, my head fills with inspiration and my body begins to initiate movement.

Like a rattlesnake using its rattle as a warning sign to tell predators to back off or to stay away, I glide into the centre of the room and spread my body as far out as I can. I drop to the floor and roll around the room in awkward contortions. The music picks up and it is almost as if it is telling me what to do: “Hush, don’t speak. When you spit your venom, keep it shut. I hate it. When you hiss and preach.” I stare at myself in the big mirrors on the wall, I am mesmerized at what my body is able to do. I begin to look at myself in a different way, with more confidence. I inch my body across the room, rolling and arching my back, initiating a movement that will take me out of a concealed headspace. Often snakes shed their skin to avoid parasites that could harm them. Dancing always feels like I am peeling back and getting rid of intrusive thoughts about myself that could hurt me.

As I move, I am reminded of snakes and how they were used in healing rituals. Snakes are symbols of renewal and health because they routinely shed their skins. In ancient Greece, people would sleep in Asclepians, temples of healing, and make an offer to the gods. While sleeping in the temple they would be licked on their eyes and ears by snakes in order to receive second sight and second hearing and therefore, become more attuned with their senses.

People would then report their dreams to the physicians, and they would prescribe them treatment for their illnesses. While I lay on the ground, mimicking the motions of a snake, controlling my muscles to move a certain way, I feel like I am making an offer to the gods to treat me too. I feel less alone when I am dancing at the studio because I have a community of people there that understand the feelings that moving your body gives you. Like a snake during this process, I feel very vulnerable in these moments, as this is when I am reflecting on my most intimate emotions.

When I feel anxious and can’t stop thinking about certain situations, dance is the only thing that helps me reframe my thinking. While dancing, my mind is completely consumed with making art and following through with what my brain is telling my body to do. Dance

gives me a sense of control when I feel entirely powerless. Like a snake, the process of shedding skin doesn't happen quickly, it can take a long time. Similarly, for me, the process of leaving my negative thoughts behind me and reframing my thinking in order to feel rejuvenated is a process that doesn't just happen after a single dance routine.

It is important for snakes and people to shed their skins to be able to grow. It is vital that people take part in activities or take the necessary steps when they feel they need to shed old thoughts and negative feelings and experience a sense of renewal. Routines or rituals that allow people to feel as though they have pressed a reset button are essential. When we find what works for us personally, we can all move forward from that point with a clean slate, and begin the process of renewal.

Beads of sweat drip down my forehead, and my face radiates heat like a furnace, but I have never felt more energized. My muscles tremble from jumping so high, but I have never felt stronger. I push my way across the room, and stare at myself in the mirror, I feel like I am dancing with another version of myself. Like a snake charmer, I am enchanted by who I see in the mirror and try to copy their movements. The song continues, "I'm covering my ears like a kid. When your words mean nothing, I go la la la." I cover my ears like the song tells me to and use the good energy I am creating like magic to block out intrusive thoughts. I find myself singing along, ignoring thoughts that don't benefit me and singing to myself, "la la la."

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## *Nineteen to Twenty*

MACY TYZIO

**F**RIDAY, JUNE 18th, 2021 might be remembered for some as the day that President Biden signed legislation creating a new federal holiday marking the end of slavery, or maybe it's remembered as the week that Netflix released fifty-four new shows and movies.

For me, Friday, June 18th, 2021 is remembered as ... well I don't remember much from this day, but once you hear why, I think you might cut me some slack. Picture this: a nineteen-year-old girl had been at her dad's watching TV after a night out. Her dad walked downstairs, holding the railing while getting progressively paler with every step he took. He looked at her and without any warning blurted, "I have cancer, I'm going to get my hair cut." He wrapped his arms around her so tight and scurried out before facing the reality of tears. Yes, I'm her. The nineteen-year-old girl whose only concern that day was being too hungover to go out that night. Now, you can understand why I might not exactly remember everything that day, but I do remember one thing, which was saying to myself, "June 18th is the day my life completely changed." My hangover was instantly cured from shock. Thanks, dad!

The word "cancer" is hard to swallow, literally. Laryngeal cancer is cancer of the larynx, which is a part of your throat that is also called the "voice box." It helps us speak, breathe, and swallow ("Laryngeal"). My dad had always been a social butterfly, he's charismatic and witty and could sell you just about anything, some may say it's "effortless." The

fear of losing him or who he was swallowed me whole, and this time without any struggle.

July 7th, 2021 was my dad's first round of chemo plus radiation treatment out of many at Jurvinski Hospital in Hamilton, Ontario. It looks over the escarpment, which was quite peaceful in the midst of the storm we're living in. Now, let me tell you, within less than a week, I realized this was going to be no walk in the park, as they say, and reality hit harder than a truck. Every day was a new learning experience as he slowly progressed. Week one was quite overwhelming, learning that radiation is on floor three, and chemo is on floor four. Learning that it takes seventeen minutes from the house to the hospital taking the same route on Locke Street, as the streets are less bumpy, which avoids the possibility of projectile vomit.

I quickly learned that this was something my dad was never going to be able to handle on his own and that I had to step up to the plate and be responsible (we're not in Kansas anymore). We eventually formed a routine, the smell of the morning dose cherry-scented codeine-fentanyl syrup stains my memory to this day.

Along with the nurse's voices in the back of my head saying "thirty millilitres, max, or he could be at risk of an overdose," and "don't forget to clean his feeding tube three times a day." I had never held so much responsibility, I was not only the caring daughter but the actual caretaker. Caretaking is a rollercoaster, as you never know what to expect each day, learning something new daily. One day I remember taking my dad to treatment, as we were walking towards the red brick building I saw the character Cookie Monster run outside the treatment centre. Now, you may be thinking that cookie monster was there to entertain the kids with cancer, but my sixty-seven-year-old father found more joy in taking a photo with this big blue character, saying, "Yeah, I've got cancer, but who gets a photo with Elmo nowadays?" than any other kid, I've ever seen.

That bright, big, stretched-from-corner-to-corner smile was priceless. Although not all days were rewarding like this, at one point later on my dad got shingles. The red, patchy, and irritated skin flared and spread across his bony ribs and back. As he lost his battle to the interest in food, he also lost the mental battle of remaining positive,

letting the impact of illness change his mental stability, which sadly became reality quite fast into treatment.

The journey is mentally draining, watching someone you love suffer can be so discouraging, but also rewarding to be able to help make his life somewhat easier and tolerable by surrounding him with love and positive energy. The cancer association talks about being a caretaker and its impact, saying “You might find that caregiving enriches your life. You might feel a deep sense of satisfaction, confidence, and accomplishment in caring for someone” (“If”).

Month two rolls around and it feels like we talk about cancer 24/7, but I’m learning that it’s healthier to talk about it, than pretend it is not there (which was my dad’s favourite game). Cancer has been around for decades, it was recorded that “Some of the earliest evidence of cancer is found among fossilized bone tumours, human mummies in ancient Egypt, and ancient manuscripts” (“Understanding”), but no matter how long it’s been around it really doesn’t help you prepare for what you see and go through.

My dad became fragile, becoming light as a feather. Endless tubes came out of his body like a science project, while he melted into the couch as the drugs would keep him up physically, but not mentally. His strong powerful voice became hand gestures, and the upkeep of a conversation longer than ten minutes was a little victory. Watching his body slowly age before my eyes. Almost as painful as watching paint dry. Imagine slowly watching your parent go from being eccentric, charismatic, happy, and humorous to a vegetative state within two months while remaining and maintaining strength for their sake.

Cancer is a sickening disease. Your once happy and healthy cells uncontrollably divide and spread into healthy tissue comprising your body and its abilities, throwing challenges it must face, but it can be treated. Life and the transition to adulthood take on a similar form. Your once happy self is faced with challenges, curveballs, death, achievements, etc. that you overcome, which makes you ultimately stronger. Like cancer, adulthood can be scary. It places you in a position in which you have no choice but to face it no matter how fast you can run or how good you are at hiding. The strength of facing and challenging hardcore reality while maintaining strength while changing your

priorities is let alone hard enough for one let alone two, therefore it was the challenge of a lifetime that prepared and introduced me to the world of adulthood.

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## The Biggest Murder Mystery in History?

CHARLES VEALE

**I**F I could go back in time to any point in history, I would go back to the Tower of London in the summer of 1483, in order to solve one of the biggest murder mysteries in history. Before I embed myself, let's look at a bit of the backstory.

In 1483, King Edward IV died, making his twelve-year-old son, Edward V, king. He would be king for less than three months when he was declared to be illegitimate due to his father having violated a previous marriage contract (Lewis, *Richard III* 287). His uncle became King Richard III. Edward and his nine-year-old brother Richard, Duke of York, were taken into the Tower of London for their protection. They were not seen again after the summer of 1483 (Mackenzie). This mystery is known as "The Princes in the Tower." Many people believe that the boys were killed on the orders of their uncle, King Richard III. There is, however, no evidence of this. This is what makes it so impressive.

I would start my journey at the Tower of London in July of 1483, because this was close to the time when the princes were last seen (Lewis, *Survival* 22). Since, in this reality, time travel is possible, I am going to assume that it would also be possible for me to fit into a position where I would have full access to the Tower and would be completely fluent in Middle English, which was spoken at the time. I will also make the assumption that my actions cannot change the outcome of history due to the fact that they have already happen.



Most of the accounts that blamed Richard III were not written at the time and were biased towards King Henry VII, who defeated Richard III in battle in 1485 and took the crown. The most popular account was written by Shakespeare during the reign of Henry VII's granddaughter, Elizabeth I. His account portrayed Richard III as severely deformed. When Richard III's remains were discovered under a parking lot in 2012, it was found that he did suffer from scoliosis, but was not deformed in the way that Shakespeare portrayed him, and it is possible that his condition was not known to the public until after his death, when his naked body was displayed by Henry VII. (Ashdown-Hill).

I would be vigilant at all times but, given the fact that there is no known specific disappearance date, I may have to wait for a few months. It would be necessary for me to fit into palace activities as a member of King Richard's court. During this time, I would keep a close watch on the whereabouts of the Tower. I would keep an eye on the princes. If they were to suddenly disappear, the first thing that I would do would be to look for disturbed ground, especially near the staircase to the White Tower, where they were rumoured to have been buried and where children's bones were recovered during the reign of Charles II who were believed to have been the bones of the princes and were deposited in an urn in Westminster Abbey among the graves of many other kings and queens.

The bones have not been examined using modern science: the Queen will not grant permission for the urn holding the bones to be opened. It is, however, possible that Prince Charles may grant permission during his reign.

Given that the White Tower is located right in the centre of the Tower of London, I do not think that I will witness a burial or find a new grave, as it would raise too many questions for too many people.

As I wait, the summer turns into fall. October is another possible date for the boy's death, as it was marked by the beginning of Buckingham's Rebellion. The Duke of Buckingham had been one of Richard III's strongest supporters, making his rebellion seem odd. One theory is that he had the boys killed believing that this was what Richard would have wanted, and that he rebelled when Richard was appalled by

what he had done. Should the boys disappear around this time, this would be my primary suspicion.

Finding the boys gone, I would place myself as close to the King as possible during the rebellion to determine what the King perceived to be Buckingham's motivation for rebelling. I may have to pretend to be a military advisor to be that close to the King. I am, however, not sure how qualified I am to advise on fifteenth-century warfare, given the fact that my knowledge of the subject is based solely on information that has survived to the present day.

The fact that the boys were murdered has never actually been confirmed as a fact itself. The longer I am required to wait in the tower, the larger their hopes of survival become. Their continued survival could cause problems for their uncle, as they could always be used to form a rebellion around. So, it would have been beneficial for Richard III to let the public believe they were dead while hiding them away somewhere under a false identity. As time wore on, it would become increasingly necessary to keep a close eye on the boys before they were moved to determine where they were going. I can say fairly confidently that they would be broken up, so it would only be possible to follow one of them. Which ideally would be the older boy, the former King Edward V. This is where I may end my journey, for at this point there are too many variables as the boys could be sent to the remote parts of England, or perhaps another country altogether.

Now, if that had not happened by Richard's command and I found myself and the princes still in the Tower by August 1485, when Richard III was killed in the Battle of Bosworth by the forces of Henry Tudor, who would become King Henry VII (Lewis, *Richard III* 384), the boys would certainly be endangered. In order to combine the houses of Lancaster and York, Henry VII married the boy's sister, repealing the act that had declared her and her siblings illegitimate.

Had the boys still been alive, both of them would now have a better claim to the throne. This would be a very tense and potentially dangerous time to stay in the Tower. If the boys were not immediately rushed away to safety by someone lost to history, they surely would have been quietly killed on the orders of King Henry VII. This is at last when I find myself at the end of my journey with one of many possible answers.

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## Praying for Boston, Not the Hockey Team

STEPHANIE VERK

**I**T'S WEDNESDAY afternoon. My body aches as tension attacks. Internal dialogue continually plays in my head, preventing sleep from being a possibility. Then, finally, my cell phone rings, and I jump to answer. The invisible hands have grasped my throat once more as I see the 617 Massachusetts area code on my phone!

"Hi, yes, it's Stephanie." I nervously exclaim.

Dr H.'s deep voice explains the updated situation: "It looks like plan B is most likely to happen." But, he continues, "The main issue is the approval of the ambulance service needed to go from Spaulding Rehabilitation Centre to Francis H. Burr Proton Therapy Centre at Mass General daily."

"Why is this an issue?" I defeatedly ask.

Dr H explains, "The Canadian government has issues funding an American ambulance service when Canada has perfectly good ministry-regulated ambulances."

I had taken my son Aiden into the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) twenty-one days ago for what I had been told for months was "viral fatigue." My active seven-year-old had been sleeping for endless hours throughout the day. He was starting to have difficulty walking and was on round-the-clock Tylenol for headaches and Gravol to try and combat the nausea that was overwhelming to his young body. An MRI showed a tumour the size of a plum in Aiden's developing brain. Surgery was performed immediately to release the pressure, and soon

after, we were told that the tumour was cancer. The cancer had spread like a serpent down his spine, and “bad guys” spotted his brain. On autopilot, I have survived with a smile on my face to show strength and safety to my beautiful boy. It has been a tornado of doctors, research, waiting, and praying. Waiting to know the next steps and praying for treatment in Boston. Treatment will give us hope for Aiden’s future, for our family’s future. Finally, I am on the phone with the doctor from Boston, but hope is not yet guaranteed.

I exhale at the thought that the potential to give my son the best chance at survival and long-term quality of life is coming down to money. I am told the estimated cost for six weeks of transportation is \$24,000. I cannot even begin to comprehend how I would ever come up with this amount. The potential to win the lottery seems very unlikely as I have not left the hospital in twenty-one days to even buy a ticket. The internal dialogue starts up with frantic questions. Do we need to pay upfront? Can we get the treatment and then just declare bankruptcy after? The thoughts swirl in my head as Dr H discusses the advantages of proton therapy, which is not yet available in Canada.

Proton radiation is generally expected to provide equivalent tumour control as Photon radiation offered here in Canada. It is sought out because it has been shown to substantially reduce the long-term effects through its targeted approach. Because Aiden is only seven and still very much developing, a targeted approach could save him from hearing loss, infertility, and the one that hurts the most, loss of independent living.

My heart splinters at this thought. Aiden’s cancer, Medulloblastoma, is one of the most common malignant brain tumours of childhood, but I have been told he has the fourth subtype, which is the worst. Medulloblastoma occurs in the cerebellum, also known as the “small brain,” located at the bottom of the back of the head. The cerebellum is involved in many aspects of human behaviour and function, such as movement, speech and breathing.

Dr H and I end our conversation with him, letting me know he is about to head to a round table debate to argue that the proton radiation and extensive rehabilitation are equally needed for Aiden.

“Can you and Aiden’s Dad try to decide, if it comes down to it, are you able to cover the transportation costs? If you could have an answer by four-thirty when I call back, then we can decide what the plan is.”

The air escapes my lungs as I whisper “Yes” and hang up the phone. Is this even at all feasible? I start to pray for a miracle. I head back into Aiden’s hospital room, curling up beside his tiny warm body on the children’s hospital bed. He nuzzles into my arms lovingly. I want to go back twenty-one days, I want to hear Aiden’s voice again, and I want to get embraced in his hug. I make jokes and try to get Aiden to laugh and smile. This has become a regular pastime of trying to be a comic and get any response I can. I am told automatic functions will come back first with posterior fossa syndrome, which has been true.

The fifteen-hour surgery, a week prior, to remove as much cancer as possible has stolen my sons’ ability to walk or talk. The surgery has left Aiden with what is called Posterior Fossa Syndrome. Posterior Fossa Syndrome only develops in approximately 25% of children after the surgical resection, but I guess Aiden won the horrible disease lottery and has developed the most severe case. Aiden needs to beat this horrible disease and needs the extensive rehabilitation that Spaulding Rehabilitation Centre can offer him.

The phone rings a bit past four-thirty p.m.; I tell Aiden I will be right back and head out of the room into the empty hall. It is Dr H. “Okay, so here it is ... It has all been *approved!*”

“What? Wait a minute. Where is the, but?” I burst into tears.

“No, but,” he says, “it’s all been approved. The way they have worded the contract with the Ministry, it covers Aiden for any care he needs in any affiliated hospital, which Spaulding is!”

I am speechless. I thank him profusely and hang up. I head back into Aiden’s room, and the tears stream down my cheeks. The air in the room is electric as I tell Aiden and his Dad the fantastic news. Tears form in all our eyes, except Aiden’s, because he does not get the significance. I tell Aiden that he will get to ride on a “jet plane,” and a huge smile spreads across his face, and his eyes light up.

Although I am ecstatic, I self-talk myself down. I do not want to get my hopes up until I hear it from the oncology team at CHEO. I don’t think I can handle another ping-pong game. It is just after five-thirty

p.m., and I still have not heard from the team. I start to doubt my sanity as I send the caseworker an email, “Any word on Boston?” I don’t mention the conversation I had with Dr H earlier. I need to hear it for myself from this side. I put my phone away, it has been a long day, and I am depleted. I decided that I should probably eat something and start to head out of Aiden’s room. “Ding,” my phone chimes.

“Yes. Give us ten minutes and meet in the Sens Den.” Aiden is angelically asleep as his Dad and I head to the Sens Den, which is down the hall. Our emotions are running high. Aiden’s Dad and I are trying to be there for each other, but everything we say is getting lost in translation. Finally, the caseworker and interlink nurse, Marilyn, who has been a godsend for my sanity, arrives.

“It’s all been approved!” No beating around the bush. The words echo in my heart. “There is a little bit of paperwork to sign, and we are *all* quite shocked.” The caseworker continues, “We are told Aiden’s case went to the top of the Canadian health -care chain! There are a couple of requirements, such as flying Orange Air as it has a full medical staff, but everything looks good.”

I ask, “When we will leave?”

“Most likely, tomorrow morning, I am working on that piece right now. Aiden has a one p.m. appointment to prepare for the Proton Radiation in Boston on Friday.” I hug and thank Marilyn and the caseworker profusely; tears of relief and hope pour. We head back to Aiden’s room, and I tell his Dad in a panic that I need to see Declan before we go. The thought of not being with my other sons, Declan and Lynkon, is devastating. Lynkon is so tiny; will he even remember me? I try to balance it all but taking care of Aiden and trying to equally be there for our other boys has been an impossible feat. My friend brings Declan down to the hospital that night, and I fall asleep on the small cots with Declan in my arms.

I wake early; the sun is not up yet. I quietly get myself ready in the small bathroom next to Aiden’s bed, who sleeps peacefully. I start to pack as much as possible to make it easier for Aiden’s Dad. He will need to clear out the hospital and Ronald McDonald room when we leave. Our home for the last twenty-one days. I pack Aiden’s and my suitcase from the items we already have here. My phone rings at nine a.m., and I am

told the plane is on the route and should be here around ten-thirty a.m. Declan sits with Aiden on his bed, showing him Pokémon cards as Aiden smiles. I look at the clock at twelve p.m.; my heart pounds profusely as a man for transport shows up and lifts Aiden to the stretcher. I hold Declan in my arms as he hugs me tight. "I want to go with you!" he cries on my shoulder. How can I explain to a five-year-old why he cannot come, why his mom is leaving him and why his brother is sick?

The transport man checks Aiden's vitals one last time, and we all start to follow with sombre steps down the hall. I hold onto every moment we can all spend together, but we need to part ways. They lift the stretcher with Aiden strapped tightly onto the ambulance first. I follow and take a seat beside him. The doors of the ambulance close, and I can hear Declan's piercing cry as I see him out the small window, engulfed in tears and in his dad's arms.

I squeeze Aiden's hand and mask my heart-wrenching pain with a reassuring smile to Aiden. Six weeks, I tell myself, six weeks, and this will all be a horrible dream we will wake up from and be back to normal.



## The Path Less Travelled

AMANDA WEAVER

**T**WO ROADS diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both. When you look at the world from rose-coloured glasses it's a pretty picture, isn't it? It isn't until you take the glasses off and you don't have to go very far in research to uncover the grim history of Canada's past. Through curiosity, travel, and exploration, to innovation and establishment of residential schools, colonialists tried to eradicate what they considered "the Indian issue." Children were stripped from their families and their heritage to learn the way of the white man. Their identity and culture were cut and tailored to fit the ideology of what a true citizen of the state should define themselves as.

Growing up rural, I attended church on Sundays. My parents went as far as high school and it was ingrained in me if I wanted to be successful today I would need to get a degree. Attending Hagersville Secondary High School was interesting, they did what they could to offer extracurricular activities. It was a school close enough to Six Nations that Indigenous students attended along with a lot of rural farm kids like myself.

The reserve wasn't too far from the school. There were some nice houses with Escalades parked out front, others covered in plywood and tarps with what the Indigenous students called "res rockets" parked out front of their house. Res dogs roamed freely. They appeared to me more aware of the traffic passing by than the drivers did of the dogs.

During grade twelve English class with Mr Whitman, the class was getting restless. Everyone could feel the approaching warmer weather and the excitement of future planning.

“Anthony,” Mr Whitman said in a stern voice: it was his character to single individuals out to get the rest of the class to fall in line.

“Is there something you would like to share with the rest of the class that you felt necessary to interrupt my lecture on Shakespeare?”

“No, nothing to add today, sir,” Anthony said with a smirk on his face. He was tall and lanky Italian kid like a basketball player with brown hair and brown eyes.

The bell rang for second period.

“Hey, Amanda, wait up,” a girl’s voice said from behind me as I was leaving class. It was Tabitha, an Indigenous girl from Six Nations. She was a tall, intelligent girl with jet-black hair I was always envious of because it shined in the sun like silk. She did well in school and really did not have to try. She told me once during gym class in confidence she was teased by other Indigenous kids because her mom was white and her skin was fair in comparison to other Indigenous kids.

“I heard you’re thinking of going to Ottawa for university, is that true?”

“Yes,” I said inquisitively.

“Me, too! I’m planning on Carleton, majoring in Law,” she stated proudly. “What about you?”

“University of Ottawa majoring in psychology.”

“Nice. Well, maybe we can get together a bit while we’re both going to school there,” she suggested.

“That would be great. It’s always nice having people you know where you’re going,” I said with a smile. “I have to run to class. We’re learning about the lifecycles of the butterfly from a caterpillar, but we can catch up later if you like?” I said.

“Oh, fun, that would be great! Bye!” She said enthusiastically.

Arriving in Canada’s capital in relation to where I grew up, it is often described as a dull government town full of drab buildings and sanitized historical sites, with little evidence this land was once fields and trading posts discovered by the French. I went to the registrar’s office in Tabaret Hall, a building seen by thousands of students each year, to get my

student card, and a statue caught my eye of Father Joseph-Henri Tabaret as I ascended the concrete stairs into the building. Throughout the first year, I spent the time I should have been focusing on school trying to bring excitement into my environment and my life, before I realized Ottawa and maybe university was not for me. From pulling all-nighters to write an essay or cram for an exam, to dancing and drinking until three a.m. in Hull. School became less and less of a priority for me while I was trying tirelessly to define who I was balancing a social life. Many times I walked around Ottawa at night with friends just to admire the duality of an expressive nightlife searching in every nook and cranny for any sense of life.

Second year I lived in the faded blue townhouses at 12 Robinson Street with Tabitha. She often stated to me and anyone around listening, “My goal is to use my education to assist other Indigenous people on my reserve.”

“I admire your ambitions and drive to do good,” I said. “I want to be a counsellor once I’ve completed the psychology program,” I said with hesitancy and uncertainty in my voice. Throughout school, Tabitha was able to balance her life in ways I could not understand, studying cramming for exams and sailing through university, while I struggled and failed courses.

“I would like the bigger room,” I said as we were moving our things in.

“Well, as long as we can share and you agree to switch up the rooms halfway through the year.”

I continued unpacking, pretending I didn’t hear her. In my mind I prayed she would not bring it up again. Who wanted to live in a smaller bedroom when I could run laps in the bigger room? While we lived together money was tight, we argued about groceries and phone bills. Throughout the year Tabitha never brought up the room again. My grades ended up slipping even lower than first year, and after second year I dropped out.

The College of Bytown originated from three jurisdictions: civil, Catholic, and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate with an endeavour to bridge the gap between Protestants and Catholics as well

as anglophones and francophones. Bishop Joseph-Bruno Gigués was appointed acting superior in Canada where the Oblates had been working since 1841, later succeeded by Father Joseph-Henri Tabaret in 1864. The original building, a quaint white wood building, was built in 1848, with the early years fraught by financial difficulties. In December of 1903 there was a fire that claimed three lives and destroyed most of the college's history records. In 1904 Tabaret Hall was constructed where it stands today. If you are to look at the building, you will see the beautiful marble floors and oak wood banisters. You would not see the struggle and the mundane bureaucracy that comes with bilingualism and religion. The name of the school was changed to University of Ottawa in 1933 as the university grew in size. The changes to the university's direction through this period reflected challenges faced and adversity through government and civil pressures. Today, Ottawa University boasts a distance education and serves over 42,000 students with over 250,000 alumni.

I was walking down Rideau Street recently, and stopped to notice the buildings that once held businesses and establishments were changed to the University of Ottawa near where the LCBO is and the homeless go to meetup. On my way to Parliament I noticed a man sitting outside the Rideau Centre. He was the same man that sat there while I was in university with his pet rats, waiting for the change people could part with.

I smiled and said "Hello." He looked at me, confused. I was dressed as if I had just come from a business meeting at the Ritz-Carleton, and he turned his attention to a passer-by stopping to give him change while the pigeons pecked away along the sidewalk nearby. As I walked to Parliament Hill I noticed hundreds of children's shoes and toys around the Centennial Flame and the smell of tobacco and sage in the air. The sun was setting to the west of Centre Block behind the Peace Tower. A silver lining glistened on the clouds that I will never forget: it was a sign change was coming for all. As I left there a monarch fluttered by my face. Smiling, I thought I wanted to live life, and that is exactly what I did, and that has made all the difference.

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## Stop Wasting My Time

JONATHAN WEDGBURY

“**S**ORRY, BOSS, just running a bit late, we’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“That’s fine, I’ll see you soon.” It wasn’t fine. I had already been sitting at the table for twenty-five minutes; I’m finishing my second beer and an appetizer of crispy calamari had just arrived, an appetizer I emphasize to the waitress would be for a group of six. She leaves the plate on the table, and I am compelled to reassure her that my friends are on the way. She gives me a defeated smile and walks away. My anxiety begins to kick in as I glance at the entrance for the twentieth time since I arrived at the bar, now noticing others looking in my direction with looks of confusion. The table for six begins to feel like a table for twelve as the baroness of the seats beside me are accentuated by these glancing looks of now disapproval.

“They must be coming soon, I definitely told them the reservation was at three.” I open my phone to reread the group chat to confirm this, and sure enough, I did. The text sticks out like a blot on a canvas, a reminder of their lazy punctuality. It’s moments like these where I understand why my football coaches dish out the worst punishments for tardy players. “On time means five minutes early,” yells my head coach. “Anything later is a sign of disrespect.” He wasn’t kidding, and the guys who have been kicked off the team because of this serve as a constant reminder. In sports, the most effective cure for lazy punctuality is fear,

and it almost never fails. But that's just football; I can't take away my friends' scholarships or kick them off a team.

Lazy punctuality is a phenomenon we have all experienced at one point or another. That realization of someone's tardiness followed by a drawn-out period of questioning yourself and the person you are meeting up with. It's a feeling we brush off at the moment of their late arrival, but it is something that we don't forget.

Just as my anger seems to reach its threshold, Duffy and his girlfriend arrive and relieve me of my exile. He apologizes and says they had trouble finding parking. "That's fair," I think to myself. It is downtown Toronto, after all. Their presence temporarily melts my frustration as we begin to indulge in beer and calamari.

"We're not the first people to arrive, are we?" Duffy asks, shocked.

"Yeah, Jaeden and Wells are still fifteen minutes away and I haven't heard from Peter." I instinctively check my phone for any updates. Nothing.

Duffy laughs a little at the mention of Peter. "Not surprised there."

Making plans with Peter reminds me of when I used to take my dog to the dog park. With enough incentive, she would eventually come back when called, whether it was because I had tasty treats, or a squeaky ball, or because she was just too tired of playing with the other dogs. But she never came back when I really needed her to. Incentive was everything, so what incentivized my friends to show up on time? I begin spiralling down a black hole of negative self-talk. Should I have invited some girls? Should I have brought marijuana? Should I have picked a different spot? Am I not a fun person to be around? I check my phone. Jaeden says they're now ten minutes away, but still nothing from Peter.

Duffy and I knew Peter well enough to expect this sort of behaviour, we were long past the point of expecting anything else. I start to become envious; Peter had made lazy punctuality such an integral part of his personal brand that it became universally accepted by everyone who knew him well enough (Williams 2). I become thankful to at least be receiving updates from Jaeden on their ETA. I get a text saying they're about five minutes away. I text Peter for a third time asking where he's at. He doesn't even need to pretend to care anymore.

Wells and Jaeden arrive; only one empty seat at my table now. Jaeden explains how Peter was supposed to pick Wells up from his house in Aurora but ended up attending a party and completely ghosted Wells on all platforms. He then asked Jaeden for a ride, who at that point was driving his mom to work and was planning on arriving right on time. I start regretting my previous feelings of frustration and disrespect; Wells and Jaeden weren't punctually lazy; they were just victims of an unforeseen circumstance. I offer to buy the table a round.

Jaeden's story is humbling, and the effect it has on me appears in the form of a flashback. I'm in the tenth grade and I decided to squeeze in a quick game of tennis before I meet my girlfriend at Runnymede subway station to check out the annual Ukrainian festival. Similar to Peter, I had overscheduled myself, foolishly thinking I could successfully manage my hectic schedule, a trait I have now learned is common among people who are chronically late (Rose 2). My dad texts me, saying he can no longer drive me home and that I have to take the subway. While I was comfortable navigating around Toronto on the train, streetcars were completely foreign to me.

"Don't worry, babe, I'm really close, I promise," I text to my girlfriend.

"Babe, I'm getting scared, I've been sitting here alone for half an hour."

"Five minutes away, I swear," I text, thinking this will make her feel better.

An hour later, I strode into the station like I had just climbed Mount Everest, expecting a hero's welcome. She immediately bursts into tears, and in-between sobs, explains how scared and lonely she feels, waiting an hour for me to arrive in an area of the city she's unfamiliar with.

It's good to remember moments like that in times of frustration, a reminder of the inevitability of human error. It's easier to be frustrated with others than with yourself.

Peter arrived two hours later.



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## My ADHD Superpowers

CANDICE WEST

THERE'S SOMETHING special about Lu. She has superpowers, and she helped me discover mine. Our brains function on the same wavelength. She has an energy about her that mirrors my own: the tribe vibe of belonging. We also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and yet she lives with greater joy. You see, *she* has secrets, and *I* am meant to discover them.

I have a need to “always be doing.” When energy is bursting through my seams, I jump into action. Deciding *what* to do is a struggle because everything has equal priority. This means I wash my face, feed the dogs, start my make-up, brush my hair and teeth, finish getting dressed, realize I'm running late and haven't had coffee yet. I eat, but then leave the house without my coffee or lunch. This is what it looks like to have difficulty focusing. Because of Lu, I have the opportunity to let go of my lifelong “what's wrong with me” mantra and use my skills for success.

Time management struggles, being consistent, controlling emotions, and learning from past mistakes are all part of ADHD, but there are tools like checklists, time limits, and mindfulness to help manage challenges. And there are “superpowers” to be gained!

I became friends with Luisa Balan in 2019. We met as fellow massage therapists, within a yoga studio. Our love of animals had us meeting up, under our neighbourhood's canopy of trees, for walks and talks with our dogs. Lu told me she sketched. She invited me to an event where she would display and sell her art for the first time.

Her art moved my spirit and focused my attention. At the clothing rack, I pulled on the soft cotton of shirt after shirt, for a better view of each design. Her art, printed onto a metallic material, was applied to the clothing. Reflecting the lights, the prints gleamed metallic greens and golds—her art was fluid realism. I walked through the event in a transcendental daze, a magical gift that my mind experienced in a non-physical realm. By the end of the art show I felt truly connected to Lu. We went for Mexican food next door and kept talking. Discovering that we both love to read, she invited me to join her book club.

I met them at Moxies where we sat under soft lighting on leather seats, drank red wine, and voted on the 2020 book list. I leaned into my impulsive nature, and my new friends responded with joyful laughter and reciprocal conversation. Lu not only ran the meetings but has become an organized person. I developed this skill by using my phone's calendar like a personal assistant; it reminds me to "do the thing," or reschedule it for the future. It makes transitions easier.

The book club shut down in 2020, with the first COVID-19 lockdown, and Lu disappeared for several months. My ability to forgive and let go of grudges (the upside of distractibility) meant that I wasn't upset with her disappearance. Eventually, I reached out. She told me she stopped practising massage therapy and moved out of Toronto. Making that big change in her life reminded me that my natural impulsivity is okay. We made plans to meet at the halfway point between our cities, but it fell through.

Then, in the summer of 2021, Lu came to "West-A-While Cottage" at Head Lake in the Kawarthas (between Uphill and Norland). On Lu's first morning, she brought her phone, coffee, and journal down the staircase to the lake, and got cosy on the patio swing. In the warm morning sun, at the edge of the dock, I was practising yoga on my mat.

The water rippled with sun-sparkled diamonds while Lu journalled, and I enjoyed some peace with meditation. I glanced back at her. The breeze gently blew a wavy brown lock of hair off her face, showing all her delicate freckles.

We decided nude sunbathing on a giant party floatie was the liberating thing to do. We hid from people on boats and jet-skis. At night

we watched meteor showers and shooting stars from the dock. She told me the cottage was full of magic for her.

“I feel like I can settle here,” she said. Taking time to slow down did wonders for our nervous systems—it was a good balance of relaxation and excitement. Being unable to tolerate boredom means being inclined to make life exciting, and that sounds like a superpower to me!

I received a last-minute invite for Lu’s birthday to Niagara Falls in August 2021. Superpower impulsivity to the rescue, I said yes, and our adventures continued! We stayed at *The Pink Elephant*, a seventies deco Airbnb.

Lu exclaimed, “It has a *Great Gatsby* feel to it, it’s like another era: quiet, mellow, low-tech. We’ve been teleported to another time. Let’s listen to one of these vinyl records while we play a board game.” Her face lit up.

I love the joy of Lu’s free spirit and sense of adventure. I admire that she journals daily to determine how to reach her goals. Being around her encourages my personal growth.

That autumn I visited Lu at her home in Ancaster. Jasmine, Lu, and I engaged in hours of hydrotherapy and sun worship. When the sun began its descent, Lu placed a box on the table. She lit several candles, once again creating an environment for entering a transcendental state. Our superpower of hyperfocus set in, where our creative brain is most active, and time disappeared as we steadily carved into linoleum until our fine works of art were complete. Words slowly entered my mind, returning me to the physical realm.

Lu said, “Transcendental states take you away from [the] background noise and allow you to access new [“browser”] tabs you haven’t accessed before.” This was certainly true for my first time carving a linoleum stamp. I asked about Lu’s experience.

“I become the carving tool. Creativity is my superpower. When I lean into it, it strengthens my health and sanity.” Hyper focusing allowed Lu to learn this art style relatively quickly. Learning to use hyperfocus allows us to work efficiently. Lu used her ADHD to her advantage and realized that I have been doing it too.

Those with ADHD, the neurodiverse, commonly have an intense energy, which can result in emotional outbursts or anxiety. However, I

use my athletic superpower to calm my nervous system with exercise. Lu believes that regular meditation increases the buffer time before reacting emotionally. She also thinks having a creative outlet helps her more than meditation.

I am energetic, motivated, optimistic, and creative. I use routines, deadlines, and lists to help me feel accomplished. I use mindfulness, meditation, and physical exercises (yoga, dancing, walking, and running) to help me manage the intense emotions and excess energy I experience. Lu and I have ADHD and we are each “living our best life” despite and because of how it makes us different from our neurotypical counterparts.

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## Mimeomia

MADISON YULE

“**L**ESSER ARTISTS borrow, great artists steal” (Shoemate). It was displayed on the wall of my high-school art class. This quote from Pablo Picasso, my teacher explained to us, means that greatness does not equate to ingenuity. That to be great, you can steal, so long as you differentiate yourself from the person you stole from. To a group of fifteen-year-old public-school students—many of whom were listlessly attempting to get the single art credit they needed to graduate—my teacher was justifying why we would spend the next twelve weeks painting Campbell’s soup cans, replicating the infamous watercolour lily pads, and sketching Vitruvian men. None of which were done with any relative similarities to their original artists from which we had stolen, rendering the Picasso quote upon which our curriculum was built, effectively redundant.

Years later, as I had worked through every class in my high-school art department and found myself sitting in a course offered only to the very few—a selective interdisciplinary program that ran for the entire semester—my new art teacher echoed similar sentiments as his colleague had shared with me before. “Nothing you do will ever be new,” he told our class on the first day of grade twelve. “Do your research,” he continued, “anything that you believe to be inventive has been done before.” As I recall the lesson, I believe my teacher’s intent was less to do with discouraging our creative endeavours and was much more to do

with Picasso's quote. To be an artist, maybe even to be a human, is to steal.

I, ever the over-eager, under-disciplined, and misguided student, took these words of wisdom quite seriously. To be an artist is to steal; to research what has come before you; to see what your peers are creating around you; to understand that you will never be original; to recognize that no matter what you paint, what you sketch, or draw, or think up in your brain will never be as good as the first image to show up on your Pinterest feed; to internalize your inferiority; to learn to detest creating art altogether, because it has become easier to give it up than to live in mediocrity.

*If I am not an artist, who am I?*

When I was in that grade-twelve art class we would often have alumni of the program visit the classroom to speak to us. One morning a former student who I had looked up to for a few years came in to work with our class. She was two years older than me and I had followed her on Instagram since I was in grade nine, looking at her art and what she created with such admiration. When she spoke to our class she told me that for a year after she had finished the art program she couldn't so much as pick up a paintbrush. That the act of creation had been damaged. At the time I didn't understand how that could be, but I pretended—in an act of adolescent desperation—to relate to what she meant.

As I've grown up I've come to understand her warning all too well. I've always held onto the tradition of creating only in the eye of the storm; only when I can bear to do nothing but sit before a space of nothingness, and give in to the comfort of my own sadness until something has appeared before me. Art has long been intertwined with the deepest parts of my emotional state. I was taught that in addition to stealing, the other marker of a great artist was my ability to divulge the most difficult parts of life onto the canvas, the page, the stage. In these moments of creation as a reluctant expression of pain, I am reminded of Picasso. I am reminded of the quote on the wall and the words my teacher spoke:

*To be an artist is to steal.*

*Nothing I do will ever be new.*

*Anything I believe to be inventive has been done before.*

And I ask:

*Has someone felt this pain before?*

*Am I stealing this too?*

*Can there ever be one breath, one whisper, one teardrop, one gasp for air, or one single unnamed something on this Earth that can be wholly and entirely mine alone?*

However, I am an artist. I've been conditioned to know what to do with my pain; how to flick a paintbrush just right so that my trauma softens around the edges. How to universalize an experience that I long to feel in my own isolated misery. When I was in high school I felt fortunate to have honed in this skill, as I watched a friend of mine make attempt after attempt to achieve an A+ grade, desperately trying to draw out some type of pain our teacher might deem worthy. In the end, the eating disorder she developed over the course of the semester ended up being enough.

I now find myself unable to equate art with anything beyond pain and I miss what it felt like to be unashamedly happy. I don't, however, truly recall a time when this was my reality. As a member of Gen Z I was raised in a post-9/11 social climate, wherein media and technology were banalized at a rapid pace (Talmon). This digital part of life was used to communicate hatred, fear, and a sense of perpetually impending doom (Talmon). On social media, in the art classroom, in the privacy of my own home, I have memories only of reducing myself to lists in a desperate attempt to categorize myself cleanly into a box of my identity (Turkle).

*What do you like to do?*

*What are your favourite movies?*

*What genre of music do you like?*

*What is your trauma?*

*List the terrible things that have happened to you before the age of seventeen.*

*Who are you?*

*Who am I?*

In my art, like on social media, I strive to answer these questions. To make meaning out of every piece of myself and my history. I don't know exactly who I am, and in turn, I fear no one else does either. I



believe that people know versions of myself, rough sketches and pencil drawings so easily erased and edited. I am an impressionist painting of all the things I long to leave behind. I am made of stolen pain and borrowed trauma. I am exhausted from trying to give meaning to these wounds I've reopened year after year. Of bleeding rage, and loss, and failure onto a blank page as if anything I do will ever be original, will ever be exceptional, will ever be new.

Because to be an artist is to steal.

*And if I am not an artist, who am I?*

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## Bridge the Gap

MICHELLE ZENG

I BRING up the topic over dinner one evening.  
“Ma, Ba. Can I ask you some questions about Chinese and Western cultural differences for my creative writing course?”

My mother looks intrigued. My father, once he understands what I want, is surprisingly nervous. He dithers, tries to put it off until tomorrow.

“I need to write down my answers first,” he insists. “Can’t you give me a day to prepare?”

“You’re overcomplicating things. It’s not like this is a test,” my mother says, exasperated. She turns to me and smiles. “All we need to do is have a casual conversation, right?”

“Right,” I agree. I feel surprisingly calm. “Casual.”

I brought up the topic for the first time over dinner one evening. I was twelve years old and wide-eyed, speaking a jumble of English and Mandarin around a mouthful of bok choy.

“Mama, Baba,” I said, and swallowed. “What do you think of gay people?”

My parents paused over their food and shared a glance, unreadable. Then my father turned to me, smiling gently, and gave me the answer I had hoped I wouldn’t hear.

I conduct our interview on the living-room couch, because I can't help but feel that something about dinner tables makes them avenues for fraught conversation. I want our discussion to go as smoothly as possible.

I set up a recorder and go through my list of questions. My father still looks slightly nervous, my mother expectant. They ease into it as I ask them about their early years in Canada, how they made the transition between east and west. The two of them reminisce. Laugh a little at old memories. Things proceed as expected.

Then I turn the conversation. "Do you think I would've become the same person I am today if I had been raised in China?" I ask.

Both of my parents respond immediately. "Definitely not."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my mother's mouth twist.

*Tongxinglian*. Homosexual. I learned the meaning of the word despite how much my parents tried to avoid the topic, or spoke of it under their breaths like it was a disease to be avoided.

"*Luan qi ba zao de*," my mother would sometimes say if I mentioned, faux-casual, that some celebrity or other had come out as gay. *How messed up*.

Or, when I hinted once that someone I knew was questioning their sexuality, she said, "I hope you aren't putting any ideas into their head."

"What do you mean?" I protested, taken aback. I hadn't expected her to turn the conversation onto me.

She only pursed her lips and stared out the windshield as she pulled the car into the driveway.

"It's just—sometimes I wonder what the schools here are teaching you. Some of these things...."

She sighed, and shook her head as though in disbelief, or wonder.

"You have a strange expression on your face, Ma." I keep my tone deliberately light. "Are you not a fan of my western traits?"

*Did you ever wish I was different?*

It's not like I haven't considered the notion before. In many ways, I am everything that a good Chinese daughter is not. I am the queer one in my family, in every possible sense of the word. I get too angry over my

beliefs, or too sad. It seems like the older I get, the less my parents and I understand each other. Or maybe, in fact, we have never understood each other at all.

How many arguments have we gotten into over the years because of our clashing points of view? How many more are yet to come?

Maybe it would've been easier, if I weren't myself. If I had grown up in a different way.

"That's not it," my mother says. Then she adds, to my surprise, "I think it's good that you are like this. You'd have to be, in order to grow up in the west."

She nods decisively at my stunned face, as though this is a given. As though this simple, complicated fact was never in doubt. "I like you just the way you are."

*Laowai*, my parents had jokingly called me for as long as I could remember. *Foreigner*.

Or, as a Chinese-Canadian classmate of mine had more crudely termed it, *we're like bananas. Yellow on the outside, white on the inside*.

Was my queerness, too, something that made me foreign?

Once, when I was around thirteen years old, I refused to listen to some Chinese song my mother had pulled up on her phone. Although it wasn't the first time I had done such a thing, this particular instance somehow seemed to enrage her.

"I won't ever show you things like this again," she snapped, and left the room despite my startled, tearful protests.

I realized, then, how tenuous my grasp was on the culture I had inherited. How easily it could be taken away.

"We have also slowly changed to adapt to living in the west," my father says, pensive. He leans forward. "But your mother and I are very traditional people. There are some things we definitely can't accept, no matter what."

I brace myself.

"Like cannabis."

“Oh.” I did not expect weed, of all things, to be the first “controversial” topic my dad brings up. I suppress a snort. “Anything else?”

He looks uncomfortable, shifting in his seat. “I don’t know. Like ... say, men loving men, women loving women, that kind of thing.”

Ah, there it is. After so many years, it no longer stings so much to hear.

Unexpectedly, my mother interjects, “But we also need to learn about this stuff.” Her eyes are watching me, intent. Perhaps knowing. “I feel like, no matter whether we are in China or here in Canada, maybe our entire generation of parents needs to learn more about this.”

“Yeah.” My father crosses his arms. “I don’t agree with the newspapers saying this kind of thing is normal. That I cannot accept.” He falls quiet, and then abruptly speaks again. “But if I had a son, and he happened to have that thing—he would still be my son.”

“It’s not necessarily about you, nor is it a western thing,” my mother says, a thoughtful tone to her voice. “This is just the new kind of world we live in.”

“Right,” I manage to say, switching off the recorder. “Thank you for your time.”

It’s not acceptance. Not really. But maybe it’s a start.

## **Jacob, Me, and Our Rings from Our Trip to Collingwood**

DAVID ZIVONTSIS

I AM staring out the car window at the endless brownish green fields of the Ontario rural farmland. I am on a two-hour road trip to Collingwood, Ontario. This is my first trip that wasn't for school or with my family. I'm with Jacob (my best friend) and his parents. I know a three-day trip during a cold Canadian March doesn't seem like much, but to me and Jacob it means a lot. Even with Jacob's parents in the same cottage as us, we are going to get more freedom on this trip than our seventeen-year-old selves had ever felt before, and it feels good.

I look over at Jacob and see him taking his headphones out, so I did the same. He said, "Are we here?"

Karen (Jacob's Mom) turns in her seat to look at us in a jovial fashion and said, "We are here, guys! Welcome to Collingwood! We have so much we can do!"

Adam (Jacob's Dad) tried to rally down the excitement of Karen by calmly having a puzzled look painted on his face and saying, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's try and find the cottage first."

I quietly listen to them, but internally I am starting to get really excited. I haven't said much on the drive yet, just answered a couple of questions back when we were first leaving. Although I have known Jacob's parents a long time, I am still reserved when I am with them. Jacob giggles to himself and smiles at me because he likes to notice the

contrast of me being really shy compared to normally when it is just him with me, and I talk his ear off. I am always very talkative and open with Jacob; I have known him for sixteen years! If our friendship was a person, it could be driving, and I still can't even drive yet.

Jacob and I have been best friends for so long that I could barely imagine a life without him. High school is coming to an end this summer; we only have a few months left. We have gone to different schools before and still stayed good friends, which makes me confident that after high school will be no different. It still sucks we won't see each other at school every day, but it doesn't stop us from planning things to do later. If anything, we plan more now. No matter what, we'll always have our memories together.

As we make our way driving through the downtown, Jacob and I started looking at places we want to check out. Then we turn to each other and start planning what we are going to do each of the days on our trip. It makes me think about when we were younger and our plans were to just meet up and hang out, nothing more to it. It also makes me think about the future, and how it is going to be so much rarer and more planning that it'll take to hang out. Between work and university, we'll both just have to wait for when our schedules have coinciding windows.

Although they have had family trips to Collingwood before, they have never been to this cottage, and it is starting to get dark. We are going down a long, cracked, and bumpy road. In the distance, I can see what looked like a mall sewn into a snowy mountain with a hundred tiny stars. After a second, I realize what I am seeing is one of the huge skiing lodges. We see a sign for the area the cottage is supposed to be, and we turn in and quickly realize that it is just a normal suburb.

"Are you sure this is it?" Adam said with scepticism in his voice.

Karen responded, "Yep this is definitely it... Not very cottage-y, is it, though?"

It is Jacob's uncle's cottage that he had gotten earlier this year, but it seems that it wasn't really a cottage and more just a second house his uncle bought. We make our way through the maze of side streets and find the "cottage," and because it was dark out now, we just want to get our stuff in and get settled so we can do things early in the morning the next day.

Jacob and I got the basement for ourselves and our time is our own, we can do whatever we want. Now just Jacob and me, I start talking a bunch. We are discussing everything from where we'll sleep, to high-school drama, to just video games. This makes me think of all the trips we can have together. We can go on a bunch of trips without any parents, and this night is the first taste of that kind of freedom we will have together.

On our first day, the plan is to check out the downtown, go to a restaurant for dinner, and go bowling. We had a quick breakfast and head out to the downtown of Collingwood in the morning, which for us is about noon. As we walk around, we make more plans for the next couple of days. Plans for years to come filled with our excitement of the freedom we are starting to feel on this trip. We notice a store called "Appealing Environments Rock Shop," and with us both loving rocks, we decide to step in for a sec.

We browse around like we have nowhere to be, because we didn't, really; we can do whatever we want today. We see so many big beautiful crystals of every colour, but what we end up staying focused on was the cheap dollar rings. The rings, like everything else in the store, are plentiful in different colours and materials. We both are drawn to the black obsidian ones because they look like the ring from our favourite game series: *Uncharted*.

Jacob and I have played a lot of games together, but *Uncharted* is one of the stand-outs. We both have played through them alone and together. Years before *Uncharted* and this trip, we played through games like *Spiderman: Friend or Foe*, *Ghostbusters*, and many more. In years after *Uncharted* and this trip to Collingwood, I am sure we'll still be playing through games together when we get the chance, probably games I do not even know about yet. Things will change a lot, but I have no doubt me and Jacob will still find time to do the thing we love to do together.

I thought to myself, even though we have all our good memories together, it's nice to get something we can hold. I can't hold the memories of us playing those games or anything like that. The pictures on our phones we have taken—and will without a doubt take later on this trip—will be nice, but it is not the same. I want to get something I can



hold onto, something we can share, to remember this trip. Maybe I am just getting more sentimental because in a couple months it is the end of high school. Our future as friends is the most uncertain it has ever been and probably ever will be. Getting something like this will be a nice memory, no matter what happens.

Looking at the cheap rings, I inquire, “Hey, Jacob, should we get two of these and have matching rings?”

Jacob replies, smiling, “Yes, we should. What colour do you like?”

After a moment of thinking, I say, “What do you think of the black obsidian ones? They kind of look like the ring from *Uncharted*.”

We both kind of laugh at its small resemblance to the ring from our favourite game series. Jacob happily replies, “Yes! I was thinking the exact same thing!”

We pick two of the rings out and buy them together. We walk out excited about our new matching rings. I take mine out of the small paper wrapping the cashier neatly wrapped it in so that I can try it on. We continue to browse the storefronts, and I am checking out how my new ring looks on me. I start showing off to Jacob how well it is fitting my finger, when ironically it slips off and it hits the sidewalk, shattering into a million pieces. It is sad, but also it is hilarious to both of us; it was only a dollar, anyways. I give a goofy, sad look to Jacob, and we turn around and head back to the store. I quickly run in and get another ring, and I am going to play it way safer with this one.

The ring itself is nothing special: it is cheap, simple, and obviously easily broken. I didn’t get the ring because it was an amazing ring. I bought it for the story of this trip we are on. Honestly, the ring can mean to me more than just this trip, too, and I hope it will be. I want it to be something that reminds Jacob and I of everything we have done together. Often, with things that are important to you, it isn’t the thing itself that has value; it is the stories behind it and what it means to you that gives it value (Gonchar).

Now equipped with our new matching rings, we spend the rest of our days on the trip doing as many things that we planned as we could. We go out to a special restaurant called the Beaver and the Bulldog. It looks like a novelty cabin restaurant straight out of a sitcom episode, and we absolutely love it. Going to restaurants and making food is something

Jacob and I have always loved doing, definitely more as we are getting older, and we can now just go when we want and make whatever we want.

Years pass by, and now we are both twenty-one. I am cleaning my room, trying to get rid of as many things as I can, when I see that cheap, now-broken ring. Not even for a second do I think about throwing it out. I have lots of other rings, and this cheap black obsidian ring that has snapped in half and been make-shifted back to life is still my favourite. Even with it being disfigured, when I hold onto the ring it's like I am holding on to my memories (Russell). It is something psychological that, when you have something physically in your hand, it brings back memories and feels like all the feeling tied to it are oozing out of it, back into my mind (Jarrett).

Looking at photos of Jacob and I is fun, but it just is not the same as us both physically having our rings: mine on my desk and his on a chain he wears as a necklace. It is important to keep little things like that, especially now with everything being digital.

“Often the story behind something is what really gives it value and meaning” (Gonchar). Having stuff like this makes our friendship stronger and feels like proof to each other that we got each other's backs. Even if we don't need the proof, really, it still means a lot. Although the rings themselves can break easily, our friendship is unbreakable, and the memories we have will never be gone.

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