



The Ways It Was

An Anthology of Creative Non-Fiction

EDITED BY ROBERT G. MAY

The Ways It Was

An Anthology of Creative Non-Fiction

EDITED BY ROBERT G. MAY



Copyright © 2024, the authors.

All rights reserved.

The use, distribution, or dissemination of any part of this publication, reproduced, transmitted in any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise stored in a retrieval system, without the prior consent of the author(s) and editor, is an infringement of copyright law, and it may also constitute a breach of academic integrity under Queen's University Senate's Academic Integrity Policy Statement.

Preface

ROBERT G. MAY

T*he Ways It Was* is the eighth anthology of creative non-fiction produced by the students of my Writing Creative Non-Fiction course at Queen's University, Kingston.

In this course, which is offered both on campus (CWRI 272) and online (WRIT 290), students learn the craft of writing creative non-fiction, one of the fastest growing genres in the world today. The course makes use of Lee Gutkind's excellent *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (2012), one of the most popular creative non-fiction writing manuals currently in print. Gutkind is the founder and co-editor of *Creative Nonfiction*, a well-known American journal that has been publishing in the genre for decades. In a highly engaging and user-friendly way, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* takes students through each step of the writing process, from planning, to drafting, and to revising, providing them with practical tools to develop their craft. Students also have the opportunity to read numerous examples of creative non-fiction in *Slice Me Some Truth* (2011), an anthology of Canadian creative non-fiction edited by Luanne Armstrong and Zoë Landale. Both editors teach creative writing at the university level, and both have published widely in creative non-fiction and other genres. *Slice Me Some Truth* gathers together a variety

of recent creative non-fiction writing from numerous subgenres, such as memoir, the personal essay, cultural journalism, among others, to provide students with examples of the kind of writing currently being published in Canada in the creative non-fiction genre.

Writing is a process, so my Writing Creative Non-Fiction course is structured to reflect this process. First, students learn how to plan a creative non-fiction work by brainstorming various creative non-fiction topics and ideas they may be interested in writing about. Second, students learn how to engage in research, immersion, and other information-gathering activities to help flesh out their ideas, and lend them context and authority. Third, students compose a rough copy of their creative non-fiction work, practising the techniques they learned from Gutkind and integrating elements from their information-gathering activities. Finally, students revise their rough copy into a final, polished version, editing their work in response to higher-order concerns (structure and organization) and lower-order concerns (grammar and style). At each step in the writing process, the teaching assistants and I provide students with written feedback on their progress. Students also have the opportunity to share their work with their peers in weekly workshop classes, conducted either online or in person. Students' final work of creative non-fiction is then published in this anthology with minimal further editing.

I chose the title *The Ways It Was* (based on a suggestion by WRIT 290 student Marcie Costello) because it reminds us of the difference between objective and subjective truth. Gutkind stresses the importance of remaining truthful in creative non-fiction (even going so far as to title his book *You Can't Make This Stuff Up!*), but he also points out that truth is a highly personal matter. The way something was to one person may not be the way it was to another. Every truth is subjective, and can be reconstructed and recreated in many different ways. It has been exciting to see how these writers of creative non-fiction have combined

adherence to the truth with their expansive imaginations to create compelling final projects.

If you're interested in reading more excellent creative non-fiction by my students at Queen's University, you may download the first seven volumes of the series—*Through the Eyes of Ourselves* (2014), *The Scene and the Unseen* (2015), *Unearthed Treasure* (2016), *Spirited Words* (2017), *Truth Be Told* (2020), *A Bend in the Sky* (2022), and *Heavy Waters* (2023)—from my departmental Web site:

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

Thanks for reading *The Ways It Was*. I hope you enjoy this anthology of creative non-fiction by a group of talented writers at Queen's University!

Queen's University at Kingston
Spring 2024

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the dedicated students of both the online (WRIT 290) and on-campus (CWRI 272) versions of Writing Creative Non-Fiction who contributed their original works of creative non-fiction to this year's anthology.

And special thanks to the many Writing Creative Non-Fiction students who contributed ideas for the cover design and the title for this collection. The title *The Ways It Was* is based on a suggestion by WRIT 290 student Marcie Costello. The cover photograph was also created by Marcie. She writes, "This macro image of a rich fuchsia pink punch-like peony was captured in October of 2021. It was the beginning of the fall season, and I was holding on to the last days of the warmer summer months by filling a vase chock full of peonies. I took the time to enjoy the intricate details of this beautiful flower by focusing on the imperfect lines of nature's design, each bloom different from the next." Many thanks to Marcie for these excellent title and cover contributions.

Additional thanks to the teaching assistants for WRIT 290, who helped guide students' final projects from conception to final execution with their painstaking guidance at every stage of the writing process: Meghan Burry, Roger Martin, and Lorinda Peterson.

Table of Contents

Ha, Imagine Having a Dad	KYRA ADAMS	1
A Journey to Adulthood	TURKAN ALAKBARLI	5
Hoops and Resilience	ZHANNA ALMAZOVA.	10
Am I Still My Father’s Daughter?	OLIVIA ANDERSON	14
My Furry Feline Friend	ALYSSA ASHBAUGH	17
From Bullying to Barbells	KRISTIAN BELL	21
Anything but Boring	KAMILE BETTENCOURT	25
Growing Apart	JORDAN BOGHOSIAN	29
My Little Women	KATERINA BOVOS	34
Passion into Purpose	SUKHMANI BRAR	38
Beneath the Blue	ALISA BRESSLER	42
The Calling	JESSICA CADIEUX	46
Murder in the Family	JEZINA CARREIRO	50
Breaking Free	JIAXIN CHEN	55
The Sun of God	MEGAN COLEMAN	59
The Climb	FIONA COSTELLO	64
Je Vois la Vie en Rose	MARCIE COSTELLO	68
The Unseen Threads of History	JOSHUA CRISTOFOLI	73
The Beauty of Adulthood	ABI DAVIAU	77
The Sleepless Revolution	ALEX DAWSON	81
Hey, Driver	KIERAN DOHERTY	85

An Entangled Estrangement	KRISTINA DOVOLOS	. . .	88
Abuse Is a Cycle	MARK DRUMMOND	. . . . .	92
Risk and Bliss	ELIZABETH FINKELSON	. . . . .	96
And Yet, It Passes	DELANEY FOSTER	. . . . .	100
The Slow-Walker Epidemic	AINSLEY GERALD	. . . . .	104
Boarding School	CHARLOTTE GILMOUR	. . . . .	108
Eulogy	TRACY GODKIN-JACKSON	. . . . .	111
The Hour of The Pearl	EILISH GOODERHAM	. . . . .	115
Chasing Fireworks	KIANA GOUVEIA	. . . . .	119
The Seven of Us	MAXIE GRANT	. . . . .	123
The Sidewalk Handbook for Clumpers	ALLISON GREEN	. . . . .	127
Uncomfortable Grief	ERIN GRIFFIN	. . . . .	131
Chew On This	COURTNEY HAGGITH	. . . . .	135
Between Slangs and Sincerity	DZENAN HASIC	. . . . .	139
My Hands in Hers	LEAH HERMER	. . . . .	143
The Pupils of God and Meisner	ADAM HIGGS	. . . . .	147
My First Teacher	FAITH HOLLAND	. . . . .	151
Finding Myself Far Away	CHANTELLE HOLMGREN	. . . . .	155
One Forgetful Morning	BEN JEFFRIES	. . . . .	159
My Friend Who Moved Away	MIRANDA JENSEN	. . . . .	163
Beach Days with Granny	CAYLEEN KEARNEY	. . . . .	168
Clusterbusting	JAMES KENNEDY	. . . . .	173
A Journey of Resilience and Growth	JAYDEN KERR	. . . . .	179
Echoes of a Fading Wish	SARAH KOTICK	. . . . .	183
A World of Serpents and Compassion	ESTHER LIN	. . . . .	187
Girl's Best Friend	TAYDEN LINDLEY	. . . . .	192
Six Strings	ANGELINA LIU	. . . . .	196
Between Light and Shadow	TIANYU LIU	. . . . .	200
Hell Is a Teenage Girl	MAZIE MACCOSHAM	. . . . .	204
Reconnected	SARA MACDONELL	. . . . .	208
Lingering Echoes	JOSHUA MACLEOD	. . . . .	213
Learning to Jump	CASS MCCARTHY	. . . . .	217

Left Behind	EMILY MEWETT	221
The Shadow Monster	KATELYN MILLER	225
It's My Turn Now	ALEDA MILNE	229
Wemberly Worried	SOPHIA MOLINARO	234
Silence	ITAY MOSCOVITCH	240
Operation Safe Haven	NICOLE NELLIS	243
Adults Only	CECILIA NG	246
Sanctuary	SARAH O'KEEFE	250
My Mother You'll Be	ELLA OSCAR	254
Navigating Love and Life	VALENTINA PAGLIARO-TOMASICCHIO	258
Butlin's Debacle	CHRISTINE PEPPER	262
Resilience	SOFIA PERTILI	267
My Grandmother's Journey Across Borders	CLAIRE PHILLIPS	271
Beyond the Tropics	HOLLY PRICE	275
Andalusia	BOGARTE QUINN	281
Adventures in Italy	CHRISTIANE RADU	287
A Part of the Action	LOGAN RAMSAY	291
Ink and Insights	SAM ROSS	295
Diagnosis	RAE RUSSELL-HOSEIN	299
No Plan	KIRA RUTLEDGE	303
And the Truth Shall Set You Free	ANSEL SAMSOONDAR	306
Dyscalculia Is for the Dogs	STEFANY-MARIE SAVOIE	309
Exploring the Pixelated Odyssey	HUNTER SCHAUS	313
From Picture Books to Life Advice	HAYLEIGH SCOTT	316
How to Put a Cabin to Sleep	NATHAN SHANTZ	320
Motion Pictures	EVA SHEAHAN	324
Consuming My Jealousy	ELLA SPONAGLE	328
A Home Is Where the Memories Lie	SOPHIE STONE	332
My Story with Anxiety	SABRINA TANENBAUM	336
Meow	MADISON TAYLOR	340
Cattle Call	ELLA THOMAS	344
Sarah	KAYLA THOMAS	348

Nice	RYLIE TISHLER	352
A Brief Conversation Aboard the Islander III	JOHN TSAFARIDIS	356
Liz, Neta, and I	NATASHA VASILIEV	360
Service in Leadership	VELONAH WEKE	364
Bright Gold Star	RUBY WESSENGER	370
The First Girl	ALYSE WILCOX	374
Life Beyond Screens	SIERRA WILKES	378
Take Me Home to My One Direction Concert	LAUREN WILSON	382

The Ways It Was

An Anthology of Creative Non-Fiction

Ha, Imagine Having a Dad

KYRA ADAMS

I WAS about fifteen when my father died. I remember being woken up by my mother telling me she had to go to the hospital. The weeks afterwards were a whirlwind of hospital and family visits, talks with counsellors, and people asking me how I was doing. School became the one space I could be in where there was any semblance of relief. My life had barely started, and I never thought that I would be spending most of my life without my dad. The realization that he would not be at events like graduations, weddings, funerals, and birthdays hit me every now and then, but I did not let it control my life.

“You are allowed to be sad, you know,” said Jaycee. She and I were sitting at the table in the cafeteria during our lunch break. She was working on some math problems while I ate beside her. As my best friend since grade nine, she knew me almost as well as I knew myself.

“I know, but I don’t really feel like anything right now,” I said back. “Besides, why be sad when I can watch you struggle with these algebra problems.” At school, I never felt the urge to be emotional. I may not have shown my grief publicly, but I did feel more lost than some would think. I eventually turned to humour with my friends and sisters, in a somewhat healthy way to let out those feelings. While others may not

understand, the people who supported me throughout those years let me figure out my own personal way to experience my grief and knew what laughing along meant to me.

One moment that I will never forget occurred about three months after the accident. My mom had found a new boyfriend, Sean, who seemed to have become her support. Sean was not my favourite, and I believed he was not the person my mother seemed to think he was. Maybe he had mine and my sisters' best interests at heart, but he just did not sit right with me. I remember connecting with my sisters over this. The four of us did not want to be around him, and so we spent more time with each other. Our lack of emotional reaction could have been owing to the extreme loss of my father, considering how important he was to myself and my sisters ("Understanding").

"I don't want him moving in," I said to my mom, with tears filling my eyes as I spoke to her in the kitchen. I could never seem to get through a conversation with her without crying. "He's not my dad, and it doesn't make sense why he has to move in."

My mom scoffed and turned from the counter to look at me, clearly annoyed that we were having this conversation again. "Honestly, Kyra, I don't care what you want. I like having Sean around, and quite frankly, he's been making it easier for me to get up every day." She turned back to cutting up vegetables. Clearly, she was done talking. Maybe my mom was also in shock. She and I were similar in the way we handled anger. We pushed it away until it became too much.

When my mom and Sean started fighting, I could not take it anymore. Full-blown arguments started echoing through the rooms of the house, so I would take my sisters down the street to a friend's house. I even went down to confront the two of them, hoping it would stop. My mother just looked at me.

"Go back upstairs, Kyra. This has nothing to do with you." I could see the anger in her eyes, but I stood my ground, knowing my sisters were upstairs, wide awake.

“I can’t. You guys need to stop fighting. You’re scaring the girls.” I was half hiding in the doorway of the kitchen. Tears threatened to spill yet again. The constant unrest had been causing me a lot of anxiety over the weeks.

“Then get out. It isn’t any of your business,” she stated. I found myself unable to do anything but wipe my tears and leave. I kept trying each time, knowing that my sisters were starting to catch on, despite how young they were. This experience stayed with me, and it caused a rift in my relationship with my mother. It was only when I got to university that this relationship began to improve.

A few days after one of the fights, my sister came up to me. She had a video of someone doing something silly with their father on TikTok. She looked at me, already kind of giggling.

“Imagine having a dad,” she said. I burst out laughing.

“What’s going on?” asked one of my other sisters, coming in from the other room. We showed her the video.

“Imagine having a dad. I wonder what that’s like.” We were almost crying from how hard we were laughing at this point. To some who have not experienced this form of loss, it would seem insensitive, but for us, it was a way to let out our grief. Our friends had joined in, and it was comforting to know I was not alone. Social support is considered to be correlated with resilience (Anthony, et al.), so having my friends join in and support me in my humour may have reduced the amount of grief I felt, or at least the way I processed it.

Grief will always affect everyone differently. Most people will be lucky enough to not face the loss of a parent until later in life. My family was unlucky in that case, but over the years I’ve met others like us. Our experiences and reactions are unique. I miss my dad. It hurt to think about graduating university, and the people I have met, knowing that he will never know any of it. I have learned how to manage it and channel pain away from anger. No matter how hard this experience was, it taught me to appreciate who I have around me and gave me the chance to reflect

and make the most of my time with my family and friends. No one is ever alone in grief.

WORKS CITED

- Adsetts, Natalie. Personal Interview, 15 Feb. 2024.
- Antony, Tanya Ann. "Portraits of Life After Loss: Understanding Parental Loss Within a Social Context." *Sage Journals*, 8 Feb. 2024.
- "Understanding and Coping with Loss and Grief." *CMHA Ontario*, 8 Feb. 2024.

A Journey to Adulthood

The Transformative Power of My First Pregnancy

TURKAN ALAKBARLI

THE START of my maternity was synonymous with a journey unknown and on its own to me, like an adolescent embarking on a long-distance trip or being cast to another side of the ocean. The life-changing experience became the process of the birth of a new creature that gave up the old idea that the body is just a container of physical matter that implies that it has no real being, putting all my bounds beyond the ways even I could not think of. For the moment, I am still carrying the ring, which does not render me officially single. Still, the happiness I feel after passing through a new and very profound sentimental storm equals the latest stage of maturity of my young life at age twenty. In the comfort of this warmth, I went through a metamorphosis so radical that I could not imagine it still taking place in my life now. It was like the feel of a mother who had just given birth to me, enfolding me in an atmosphere of the most drastic changes. One way or another, my soul, having been inwardly meandering for clarity, got its reflection back in the mirror of self-conversion for the first time. At this moment, as I recollected the events and pieces of my life, I found solace and felt complete. The pictures within the puzzle of my life connected, and I no

longer felt broken. Thus, far from being a depreciation of the detached state of self, parenting has given me a brand new and invaluable outlook on the world and the immeasurable meaning of commitment. Learning that was the change that made me approach things differently since mine was now with another, and the burden weighed me up with the sense of responsibility and accountability I had. It was the lone quality that got me through all the waves of emotional turmoil, confusion, and anxiety by giving me the resilience not to roll over the crests and the maturity that helped me tolerate and go through the whole struggle, ultimately reaching the other shore of motherhood.

The metamorphosis was palpable. One day, as I found myself in this different state of thinking through the ambitions and desires that were no longer a part of my daily routine, I felt like I was washed off into a conscious and contemplative state. In the embrace of newfound warmth, I experienced a radical metamorphosis. It was akin to the tender embrace of a new mother, enveloping me in a cocoon of profound change. In that moment, my psyche, long yearning for clarity, finally beheld its reflection in the mirror of transformation. The once fragmented pieces of my being came together, completing the puzzle of my existence. I thoughtfully planned and felt the excitement of welcoming another soul to me and my husband, who would call me the mother of his child. A unique shift in my perspective during this particular phase of life was a clear example of how I became ready for motherhood, which arose through different hardships and experiences. I have been the student throughout the trimesters of pregnancy as I made my way through the maze of prenatal appointments, classes, and preparatory works for the baby's arrival. Through it all, I have had the skills of balance and prioritization. The powerful phrases of De Sousa, et al. rang in my ears, spotlighting how parenthood has its challenges, from organizing to time management. The new traits I obtained were the stepping stone to success in my motherhood's work. As the second I conceived, my body became a tool that accommodated life; I was exploring a world

unthought of before then and the power that had invested in me. Pregnancy extends the divulgence of the hidden power that had never been known in me, which gives a profound sense of strength and gratitude. It was not just getting fit that I was looking for, but the transformation of self from a material being to a soul.

Increasingly, the pressure cooker of a pregnancy was not just a physical but also a spiritual trial. For instance, this changed my perspective on my daily routine, making me put my body and mind first, not just myself. It also brought my attention to how I, as a mother, was treating my child, since he was in my heart and I was nourishing him. I was in a period of self-assessment and adaptation, and soon paved the way to a thorough, striving-to-compassionate path. As I disclosed myself to the world from the waves after being in the tumultuous waters of pregnancy and childbirth, the whole world gazed at me as a newborn through a new lens. The challenges encountered on the trip gave me a renewed sense of self, equipping me with the skills of resilience, self-love, and perseverance that ensued. My family and friends constituted the fortress in which I could hide from the regrets and griefs of the autumn, protecting me from the preeminent truth of humanity, which is that human beings would always need each other. Becoming a mother was not a girlhood ritual but a profound lesson in character, time, and possession. The knowledge I now have about parenthood has undoubtedly helped boost my self-esteem and enabled me to face the plethora of roles to be undertaken as a parent.

During this mothering journey, I understand that bearing my first child has been more than a physical experience. Instead, it has been a fundamental stage in developing my identity. That voyage reshaped and guided my moral sense and made me better. Moreover, it was a priceless teaching that allowed me to master parenting skills. Now, at the doorstep of this exciting new moment, deeply born, is a gratefulness for my life-altering but heart-helpful first pregnancy experience that awakened my soul and prepared me for the experiences still coming. Weaving a

tapestry of vibrant sceneries, sensory details, and intimate dialogues with my river of tears and laughter, I intend to depict the deep wave of emotions, such as joy, happiness, and irreparable love, that have naturally emerged through my motherhood transformation. Using a symmetric framework that coincides with the wondrous moments of this overwhelming situation, I have tried to transfer the message with as much clarity, coherence, and reverberance as possible to you, the reader. Such a brave story of struggling, finding himself, and the invaluable power of motherhood is an example of how bringing someone who didn't exist earlier into life can change the world. My pregnancy embarked me on an extraordinary voyage, catalysing physical growth and serving as the genesis of profound psychological development. It became the fulcrum upon which my psyche pivoted, illuminating new vistas of understanding and unveiling the essence of life itself. An incredible journey started with me becoming a mom at twenty. It was about not only concerning myself with being a parent but also understanding that my own body was capable enough to give life to a new life.

WORKS CITED

- Barkin, Jennifer L., et al. "Barriers to Optimal Social Support in the Postpartum Period." *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, and Neonatal Nursing*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2014, pp. 445-54.
- De Sousa, Machado, Anna Chur-Hansen Tiffany, and Clemence Due. "First-Time Mothers' Perceptions of Social Support: Recommendations for Best Practice." *Health Psychology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2020.
- McLeish, Jenny, et al. "A Qualitative Study of First-Time Mothers' Experiences of Postnatal Social Support from Health Professionals in England." *Women and Birth*, vol. 34, no. 5, 2021, pp. 451-60.

Negron, Rennie, et al. "Social Support During the Postpartum Period: Mothers' Views on Needs, Expectations, and Mobilization of Support." *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, vol. 17, 2013, pp. 616-23.

Hoops and Resilience

My Rhythmic Gymnastics Journey

ZHANNA ALMAZOVA

I WAS six years old when I wandered into a world where beauty and discipline were synonymous, where the sound of toe shoes tapping the floor and the echo of ribbons and clubs falling in the gym would become the soundtrack of my early years. It was the world of rhythmic gymnastics, a sport that offered me something greater than titles and medals: a reason to live, a passion, a piece of my identity. My exposure to this sport was somewhat serendipitous. I had the elegance of a deer on ice, but my heart beat like a drum. The gymnasium, with its high ceilings and bars, ropes, and hoops dispersed like gems, was a playground for my imagination. The coaches, with their keen eyes and taut smiles, guarded the entrance to this enchanting kingdom.

Training began as a game; stretching was a competition, with each split or backbend presenting a new obstacle to overcome. I walked a tightrope every day, balancing artistic expression with the sport's strict discipline. I was transforming my body into an artistic tool when my trainers schooled me in precise moves and postures with objectivity. However, it was the subjective, personal touches and flourishes I incorporated into my routines that actually brought my performances to

life. The narratives I created through my routines evolved and the number of my achievements expanded at a fast pace as I grew older, and by the age of nine I had won two gold medals, three silvers and three bronzes. Each performance was a storytelling act, a dance between the factual precision of skill and the emotional freedom of expression. It was not just about perfect execution for me; it was about telling a story, expressing an emotion, and revealing a part of myself. I learnt to paint pictures in the air with my favourite piece of equipment, the ribbon, to tell stories with an annoying ball, and to express my feelings with artistic clubs.

My journey was not limited to the four corners of the gym. It spread onto the pages of my diary, where I poured forth my private thoughts, whispered dreams, and muted battles. This personal story ran parallel to the public identity I wore like a second skin, adorned with sequins and smiles, while performing in front of judges and audiences. A couple of years ago, I wondered what was the driving force to me. What made me never skip the training, and go beyond my limits? How can a child have such dedication and passion? And after reading the diary, I understood that it was the gymnastics icons that kept me motivated. My most favourite is Yana Kudryavtseva, a person I still look up to and admire in every way possible. My adoration strengthened my attachment to the sport and established a great reverence for the “giants” on whose shoulders I stood. Their achievements and hardships served as a compass to steer my journey, providing both inspiration and caution.

One day, when the gymnasium was filled with expectant silence, punctuated only by the collective inhale of an audience perched on the edge of their seats, the season was at its climax. The air was electric with anticipation of the main competition of the year: National Championship. I was twelve, the favourite to win; my hours of practice distilled into a single moment that could propel me to the pinnacle of success. The announcer’s voice broke the silence, stating my name, and I felt my heart beat to the rhythm of the music that began to play. My feet

knew where they belonged, as did my hands, which danced intricately with the hoop that served as my performance partner. I started with a confident cascade of motions, each one a testament to the days and nights I spent honing my technique. The hoop arced and swirled, creating a vivid streak of colour against the gym backdrop.

As the music grew louder, I plunged into the pattern I had performed a thousand times before. My body was in perfect sync with the rhythm, creating a symphony of motion that felt exhilarating yet natural. I was the music, the movement, and for a brief moment, I was everything I had aspired to be. Then came the kick, the grand jeté, which was the main moment of my routine. My leg cut through the air, a crisp, precise action. But this time, as my foot flew, the hoop slipped from my hand, rolling away like a startled bird in flight. Time slowed, my breath caught in my chest, and in the space of a heartbeat, I watched my chances at gold leave my grasp along with the hoop. Despite the stumble, I finished strong, my final position sending a bold message through the hush that followed. When the ovation came, it was warm and encouraging, but there was an undercurrent of what could have been.

When the results were revealed, my name was called for silver. I climbed onto the podium, smiling, and accepted the medal, which was both an honour and a reminder. I had gotten so close to the gold that I could almost feel the weight around my neck. The silver medal from that competition was more than just a prize for my accomplishment; it reflected the price of my commitment to rhythmic gymnastics. As the lights in the gym fell, and the sounds of acclaim faded, I was left with a lingering silence that prompted thought. It was in this solitude that the gravity of my journey became clear to me.

The decision elicited a range of feelings, including relief, sadness, and an undeniable sense of freedom. There was sadness for the loss of what could have been, but also a profound sense of serenity that I was now the single choreographer of my destiny. The competitive attitude that rhythmic gymnastics instilled in me persisted, but it found other

channels. The discipline, resilience, and inventiveness that I had developed on the mat established the foundation for the future stages of my life. In the vast spin of life, the experiences I received in rhythmic gymnastics—the falls, recoveries, successes, and near misses—became the steps that led to my progress. I do not regret ending my career six months after the competition to focus on my studies—rather, I am glad I managed to become a part of the national team at one point and have a hobby that used to bring me so much of enjoyment and happiness.

Am I Still My Father's Daughter?

OLIVIA ANDERSON

I OFTEN joked about my “daddy issues,” the term typically associated with women who act provocatively as a result of poor parental relationships. This term promotes the idea of weak, mentally unstable women, garnering little to no sympathy from society. “Daddy issues” are deeply traumatizing, leading to unstable adult relationships and addiction issues, among other things, yet this is glazed over and turned into another joke to minimize women’s struggles. Dealing with these issues is a demonstration of resilience and strength that should not be diminished by a mindless label, something I was guilty of as I disguised my hurt with humour, hoping for the acceptance I did not receive from my dad.

My dad was my best friend: snow forts in the yard every winter, never missed a ball game, watching not-so-age-appropriate movies together, and letting my sister and I play any songs we wanted in the car. Things are so simple when you’re small. I was his little buddy; he was my idol, but I could only be little and naïve for so long. At age six, following my parents’ divorce, I seemed to be my dad’s only friend, his confidant. For years I listened to his woes, his anger, his pain, and eventually I could not take it anymore. I was twelve when our relationship began to crumble, when I became the mature mind he started

building six years prior. I was growing up, which he liked in the sense that I was more independent, out of his hair, but not in the sense that I had opinions, perspectives, and interests differing from his. It became too difficult to keep me under his thumb. His words were laced with a new cruelty; he became incredibly overbearing, and I quickly began to resent my dad. I still loved my dad, of course. He had done so much for me, and I was constantly reminded of such. All the harsh words were simply a form of payment, a fair exchange. He needed to build me up so he could tear me down. It took years to understand that this was not at all the case for most children. In fact, there was not a whole lot of similarities between the environment at my dad's and a normal home.

One of the defining moments in our relationship happened when I was fifteen. My dad was frustrated that I spent more time in my room than with my family. He got the idea that the reason for my hiding was because I was building a bomb or starting a drug lab under my bed, when in reality I was deep in fantasy novels in hope of escaping him just for a little while. This suspicion led to him tearing apart my room. That day he picked me up from school with a smile, leading me to believe that maybe we would have a stress-free night as we chatted about what he was going to make for dinner and what movie we should watch later. I went downstairs to my room to drop my bag off and change, only to be met with my room in disarray. Everything in my drawers, my closet, my desk, was thrown all over my room, a lot of which was damaged in his fit of rage. I went upstairs to confront him, yet he was the same chipper version of himself I spoke to in the car. I feared the fight that would occur if I said anything, so I decided it would be an issue for another day. A few weeks later, as I slowly pieced my room back together between school, work, and staying at my mom's, I got an e-mail from my therapist informing me that my dad had contacted her with pictures of my room from when he tore it apart, saying that she needs to tell me to clean my room. She told him she is solely my person, not a parenting tool for him to use. I immediately confronted him with the issue, filled with anger of

my own, but he was ready for a fight. He picked me apart like never before, as if I was his greatest enemy rather than his child: lazy, cruel, selfish, overweight, cold-hearted, disappointing, disgusting. I felt shredded inside and out as I ran to my room, calling my mom and packing my bag. My dad followed and I begged for him to leave me, my voice raw and head pounding from crying. He pulled me into a hug and told me it was okay as I hit his back and struggled to free myself, his grip tightening.

“You’re scaring me,” I screamed, causing him to step back immediately.

“Don’t ever say that,” he said, eyes cold. He never handled the truth well. He eventually left my room without another word, and I fled to the safety of my mom’s. I told myself I would never go back, but my guilt got the best of me for the time being.

Three months later, my dad told me to leave, and not bother coming back. That house was not my home, but I already knew that. Six months later, my sister left on her own terms, unable to handle my dad on her own. I would cry to my mom, asking her how I could be so easily discarded by my own father, how I would be any different to others in my life. I ignored my pain for several years until everything caught up to me; I watched myself become my father. I hurt people I loved with my anger, my insecurities, my undealt-with trauma, until I did what he could never do for me, our family: become better. I asked for help, turned my negative mind positive, and finally pried myself from the remaining grasp he had on me. At twenty years old I have never felt freer, happier, and fuller than I do now. I have grown into someone beautiful despite the rotten roots.

WORK CITED

Telloian, Courtney. “What Are Daddy Issues and How Do They Impact Relationships?” *Psych Central*, 9 Aug. 2022.

My Furry Feline Friend

ALYSSA ASHBAUGH

I WAS eighteen years old when I found my shadow for the first time. The beauty of life is that we often find love and loyalty in the most surprising of beings when least expected. The most valuable things in life are often those without a price tag, those that come unexpectedly, but once they do, you cannot imagine a life without them. During my senior year of high school, my close friend announced that she was moving back to Argentina and was devastated that she could not bring her beloved cat with her. Being the crazy cat lady I am, I offered to take her in. A few months prior, my mom's stunning silver Siamese cat, Sparkle, had passed away suddenly due to a blood clot. This left my mom devastated; she would be up at night unable to sleep, as the bed felt lonely without Sparkle snuggled up beside her. I figured she would welcome this new furry friend in with open arms, as this new kitty is also a Siamese. Siamese cats, with their striking eyes and elegant demeanour, are well known for their loyalty and affection towards their chosen humans. They have loud and eccentric personalities, and are incredibly fond of their people, but if you are not part of their chosen few, they come off as quite a cold and intimidating breed. For days, our home vibrated with tension as my parents exchanged sharp words, their disagreement

over the arrival of the new cat echoed throughout the house. My dad, stubborn as he is, was pleading that we do not need another animal in our home. He had finally caved, leaving me and my mom ecstatic.

In tears, as her heart ached to give up a long-term best friend, my friend dropped off her beautiful Chocolate Point Siamese cat at my house. I encouraged her to come visit as often as she was able to, as it would be mutually beneficial for her and the cat. After bringing Coco Chanel, previously known as Ivy, upstairs to explore her new home, I immediately felt an undeniable cat-human connection. Her points, including her ears, tail, and paws, are a rich chocolate colour that matches her facial mask with a light cinnamon-coloured body. Siamese cats are known to be talkative, intelligent, and crave constant affection from their owners. It did not take long for Coco to speak to me with her unique, raspy meow.

She was a bit skittish at first as she crept around my room, slowly taking in her surroundings and all the unfamiliar scents, slowly, as her guard was up. Coco was limited to one room for the first week to avoid complications, as we already had an all-white male cat with an attitude problem named Zero. She wasted no time warming up to me; within minutes, she was rubbing against my legs and climbing up onto me. Coco Chanel was adopted as a companion for my mother, but fate had a different narrative in store. My mother's excitement radiated as she came into my room beaming. It was clear that she was beyond pleased with her choice to welcome Coco into our home. Still a bit unsure, she was hesitant to approach her, and impatiently, my mother scooped her into her arms. Immediately, she squirmed to get away, growling and panicking as she was clearly very uncomfortable. Her little brown paws swatted at my mother's face; as most Siamese do, she has a feisty side. Coco's aversion towards my mother was unexpected and left her rattled. Her face immediately dropped, the sadness and disappointment evident in her shaky voice as she said, "She needs to move out tomorrow." My

heart sank. I looked down at Coco, who was already curled up at my feet, and felt a tear roll down my cheek.

The next day, Coco Chanel was extra clingy, and I knew she could sense that there was something off. My parents came into my room as I was crying into Coco's velvety fur and apologizing to her for what was to come. They sat on my bed, and Coco approached my mother with a warm, apologetic look on her face. They hadn't realized how close we had gotten and couldn't go through with the difficult decision of separating us. My mother, completely understanding of the situation, admitted that she believes Coco Chanel chose me because she could sense my adoration of cats, stating that she truly thinks I would be lost without them. She isn't wrong; I can't imagine my life without these furry feline friends. I am forever thankful they allowed her to stay and allowed our friendship to blossom. My family often refers to Coco Chanel as my shadow; if I am in a room, Coco is trailing along behind me. It's a bittersweet feeling, because at times I feel obligated to stay home, as I know Coco will be waiting at the front door until I return. She's quite intelligent; she has caught on to the fact that a suitcase means that I will be away for a lot longer than she is okay with and will climb into it staring at me. She might not be able to speak, but her glare says everything I need to know about how she feels when I am leaving. It's difficult to be away from home, as we've developed a pretty steady night-time routine. She lays on my towel as I shower, occasionally letting out one of her deep, raspy meows to check in on me, then curls up in bed together as if she were a stuffed animal.

Our days are all over the place, but with her dog-like behaviour, she goes just about anywhere with me. She is not your typical cat; she loves riding a shotgun, swimming, and going for walks. On warm days, our adventures consist of soaking up the sun while floating in the pool together and cooling off with a quick dip in the refreshing water. Throughout our memorable adventures, we have developed an unbreakable bond that exemplifies the essence of what it means to find

your soulmate in a pet. Coco Chanel has gotten to know me in a way no one else has; she can read me like a book, sensing and understanding my emotions and moods while offering unconditional support. On the more difficult days, clouded by sadness, her gleaming blue eyes pierce through the gloom, reminding me that if she is here, I am not alone.

From Bullying to Barbells

KRISTIAN BELL

“**D**O YOU really need two slices of pizza and chocolate milk for lunch? Are you not already big enough, Tubs?” John said, as everyone at the lunch table began to burst out laughing.

The echoes of their laughter remained in my head well after the lunch bell had rung. As the pounds piled on, the more ruthless their jokes became. Their words had an increasing impact on my weakening self-esteem as they capitalized on my vulnerabilities, using my overweight appearance as the core for their evil jokes. I found myself drowning in the deep depths of depression. As these jokes continued to pierce my flabby body and my mental health, I decided I needed to transform my pain into power, and reshape not just my body but my entire life.

“One out of every four children aged twelve to eighteen will be physically or verbally bullied and one in seven children will suffer from symptoms of depression” (“Student”). I could never imagine that I would become the one who would face the daily torture of being bullied. There was no one I could turn to; every direction I went felt like a dead end.

“Hey, Kris, what bra size are you, Fatty?” John said to me in the gym locker room. This joke became entrenched in my brain as I tossed and turned all night, thinking to myself how much of a failure I was. I

had finally reached my breaking point; it was time to take control over my narrative and create a new path of self-improvement.

“If it was easy, everyone would be doing it. There will be days that will challenge you beyond your will, there will be days you want to give up, but embrace the struggle, and you’ll be able to create a version of yourself you never thought you would be able to achieve,” my cousin Nick said as I stared at him with inspiration in my eyes. Ever since I was young, I always looked up to Nick, and to my advantage he was a personal trainer who had dealt with the struggles of body- and mental-health issues. He was an easy outlet to turn to for advice when starting my journey. After many failed attempts at trying to turn around my life, this time felt like I was finally picking up traction. December 8th, 2018, is when I would put pen to paper and sign up for my first ever gym membership.

As I took my first steps into the gym, I could smell the thick scent of sweat and chalk in the air. The sounds of iron weights smashing against the ground penetrated my ears. As I walked further, my eyes were drawn to the walls that were enriched with graffiti and motivational quotes. As I continued to explore the gym, I could feel anxiety and nervousness running through my body. Just as I opened the changing-room door, I was greeted by a sight of men who were three times the size of me. As I glanced around at these modern-day Greek gods, I could not help but to passion it as fuel for motivation to someday achieve their physique. The first workout I began was bench press. “Benching involves lying on a bench and pressing weight upwards, using either a barbell or a pair of dumbbells. During a bench press, you lower the weight down to chest level and then press upwards while extending your arms” (Mathe). The once crushing weight of the barbell over my chest turned into a lighter, more fluid, and controlled movement. With each successful rep, I felt a source of pride and accomplishment. The words, “I can do it” finally began to resonate deeply within me.

Throughout my fitness journey is also where I would find my best friend.

“I did not know you work out here,” Erik said, surprised to see me.

“Yeah, man, I have been going here for about a month now,” I said.

“Oh, no way. Same. If you want, we should get a lift in together,” he said.

“Let’s do it,” I replied.

My friend Erik from middle school, who I had lost touch with, went to the same gym as me. Soon enough we became allies together in the gym, providing not only spots but also creating a support system between each other that extended far beyond the gym. The friendship that we created in our common striving for self-improvement became an antidote to the isolation that I had felt my whole life.

As the fat melted away and the muscle began to show, it felt like the shackles of my past struggles were finally unlocked. The gym gave me a place to obtain the physique I have always wanted, but it also became a building block for reconstructing my confidence and mental health. “Physical exercise can play an important role in mental well-being and can even relieve symptoms of mental-health conditions like depression and anxiety” (Star 2). The transformations expanded outside of the gym walls. My depression underwent a profound transformation, and as the weights ascended, so did my happiness. Throughout each gym session, the dark shadow of depression inside my mind began to disappear. “Among those who exercise, the number of poor mental-health days dropped by more than forty percent” (“Link”). In the chapter of my life where depression ran through my mind, the gym emerged as a redeeming quality for the emotional future of my life.

For the past five years of my life, there has not been a day in which I do not enjoy going to the gym. The once intimidating territory of graffiti, chalk, and sweat turned into a life of enjoyment and purpose. The mirror, which was once my fault finder, reflected the physical and mental transformation I went through. The gym has empowered

countless others to push their limits and rewrite their own story. I will forever reflect on the opportunity that the gym has given me to build a happier and healthier version of myself.

“Hey, Kris, you look amazing. Would you mind teaching me how you did it?” John said nervously.

“Of course I can,” I replied, with a big smile on my face.

WORKS CITED

“The Link between Exercise and Mental Health.” *UCLA Health*, 17 Oct. 2018.

Mathe, Jane. “Bench Press: Muscles Worked, Benefits, How to, Variations, and More.” *Healthline*, 24 May 2023.

Star, Katharina. “The Mental-Health Benefits of Physical Exercise.” Edited by Steven Gans, *Very Well Mind*, 3 Jan. 2023.

“Student Reports of Bullying: Results from the 2017 School of Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey.” *US Department of Education*, 2019.

Anything but Boring

KAMILE BETTENCOURT

IF I asked you to close your eyes and imagine a library, what would you see? Go ahead, try it. I'll wait. Was it something big and grand, full of old books? Or something sleek and modern, like a government or university library? Or was it colourful and fun, like the school libraries you visited as a child?

Now what if I asked you to close your eyes and imagine a librarian? Let me guess, you pictured an old lady with glasses who goes around trying to keep everyone quiet enough to hear a pin drop—someone boring, right?

Boring. I hate that word. I'll never forget the conversation I had with a teenage boy I knew several years ago. We didn't know each other very well at the time, so he asked about my job as a Library Technician. It was one of the first times I had heard someone use "boring" in reference to my job:

"You work at a library? You're only nineteen!" he said.

I tilted my head, confused. "Yeah, so? What does that have to do with anything?"

"It's just ... such an old lady job. Is it temporary? What do you actually want to do for work?"

“No. This is what I want to do for work. I’m getting my Library Technician Diploma pretty soon!”

He looked at me like I had three heads. “You had to go to college to work at a library?”

I nodded and tried not to laugh at his expression. “Yeah, or I could have gone to university to get a Master of Library Science, which I might do in a few years from now, too.”

“Why would you ever want to do all that schooling for such a boring job?”

That’s when it hit me that he had likely not stepped foot in a library in years. It’s a problem I’ve seen often in people. Once they stop using something or going somewhere, they tend to remember it the way they used to see it and not take into consideration the changes it would have gone through to reach where it is now. While libraries have never been boring, they have changed a lot over the years, and anyone who has lived through the switch from card to digital catalogues can vouch for that!

I asked him if he knew what a Library Technician was; he didn’t and figured it was the same as a librarian, which he admitted he also knew very little about. The terms can sometimes be used interchangeably, but, in most libraries, they are typically two different jobs. The boy not knowing that didn’t surprise me, really, but I found it odd that he’d be so quick to judge a job he knew nothing about. I asked him to do that same little exercise I asked you to do: to imagine a librarian. His answer was the one I mentioned above.

“So, what does that make me? Is that how you see me too? Old and boring?” I asked.

His eyebrows rose as the realization hit. “Well, no, I don’t group you in with them!”

With *them*. It made me laugh as I thought about my co-workers. Sure, there were a couple of older women who wore glasses, but not enough to cause a stereotype! And what about the woman who helped build libraries in third-world countries? What about the man with tattoos

who played in a rock band after work, and taught kids how to play guitar in the library? Or the woman who helped edit some of the best books of the 2010s? Do they count as boring too, simply because we all work the same job? The people are actually one of my favourite things about the job! The interaction with patrons and co-workers, and the ability to impact people in ways no one would have thought of is always so interesting. It's incredible, watching a child gain confidence as they learn to read, or seeing a grief-stricken mother find solace through the books you recommended. There's a sense of pride you get when a student returns, beaming over an essay mark they received because you helped them find the right Web sites and databases for their research.

I tried to see it through his eyes but had a hard time seeing my job as boring. Sure, some of the tasks may not be the most exciting things in the world, like scanning thirty-thousand barcodes, or arranging things in alphabetical order, but they're still oddly satisfying. The job will always vary depending on the type of library, but to boil it all down: we protect books and information, we allow for accessibility and the freedom to read, we add books to the library and make sure they can be easily found. I even get paid to shop for books! Any bookworm in the world will tell you how much of a dream that is. The job has also allowed me to plan meetings with famous authors and to see where and how the Canadian government stores their documents. How many people can say that? There are even teams of librarians and Library Technicians that work for NASA or Disney! How is that boring?

After trying to explain the job to the boy, he merely nodded and said, "Well, to each their own, I guess. I'm glad you enjoy it. You must be pretty smart." I wasn't sure if he meant it, or if he was just trying to end the conversation.

To this day, I wonder what he'd think of me now, six years later, after having worked in dozens of libraries, with a Library and Information Technician Diploma and an English Degree hanging on the wall. I may not be a rocket scientist, or even the smartest Technician in

my library, but the job makes me happy, and I've helped so many people. That sounds like success to me!

I can proudly say, "Yes, I work in a library." And I promise you, libraries—and the staff who work in them—are anything but boring. If you still don't believe me, go see for yourself. I'll wait here with stories of my own to tell you when you get back.

WORKS CITED

- "Animation Research Library." *Walt Disney Animation Studios*, Accessed 15 Mar. 2024.
- "HQ Library Home." *NASA*, 13 Nov. 2023.

Growing Apart

JORDAN BOGHOSIAN

THE SUN had begun dipping down from its afternoon peak in the sky, levelling a golden light across the Greenbelt's dense bush and out through the splits of the tree line where Elizabeth and I were patrolling beneath. We had just come outside for fresh air, having been labouring indoors for most of the day.

With a pinkly tanned arm, Liz held back a low, hanging branch of oval leaves and shook it. Five russet-yellow globes broke free and thumped down against the rush. I bowed over and began collecting the apples that had fallen. A good deal of them had been knocked from their branches by a strong breeze and had rolled under the shade of the tree for the worms to find. Carefully turning over the good ones, while avoiding the rotting apples attracting hornets, I had managed to gather an odd twenty untarnished apples that Liz could use for baking.

“Doesn't this look like it's a cranberry?”

Hearing the query Liz had directed my way, I looked up from my tote-bag of apples. She had migrated to a tree several strides down the hillside. Her fingers held a deep red berry up to her nose, and I saw the orbs of iridescence shining off her eyelashes as she inspected it in the sunlight.

“Please don’t,” I attempted, reading her intentions.

“It’s fine,” she reassures, taking a bite out of the berry right before my eyes. “Hmm ... it just tastes like an apple.”

“You *have* apples right here.” I raised the tote-bag up in exasperation. “Now I have to keep Poison Control on speed dial for the rest of the night.”

She smiled and handed me the half-bitten berry, which I begrudgingly took a bite out of.

Still caked in the dust and sweat that our bodies had accrued over us while reinforcing the joists in Elizabeth’s future master bedroom, we started walking back the way we came, across the eighteen hilly acres of corn fields that ran directly back off the property line.

“Once it cools down, maybe we’ll take the dogs for a walk.” Liz spoke to me over the sound of our exertions, climbing up and down the hills.

Before we had full view of the house ahead of us, the thunderous barking of Elizabeth’s mastiffs interrupted the dissonance of insects and lull of oncoming traffic. Elizabeth’s spine stiffened as we carried on in the direction of the startled dogs. I felt the tangible crackling of a territorial storm, then saw it brewing up from underneath the pleasantness of her crystal blue eyes.

Right as we walked into visibility of the porch, a young man, most likely a cousin or nephew of Logan’s employer (the previous owner of the farm), came wheeling through the property on a four-wheeler. I spotted a six- or seven-year-old boy in his lap, gripping onto the handlebars.

“They just cut through our laneway anytime they like.” Liz’s freckled face reddens, barely clamping the lid on her temper as she crossed the steps leading to the walk-in porch, where the dogs bounded about. “I can’t say a word until we officially own the house, but just wait until we do.... I’ll be putting up an iron fence and letting the dogs run loose.”

“It can’t be safe going that fast with a child.” I added, petting the largest and friendliest of the pony-sized dogs as I squeezed myself through the gate of the porch.

“Another guy that Logan works with will drive his youngest around on a dirt bike sometimes, and he’s only three.” Liz grumbled, sharing a look with me. “Children shouldn’t be having their own children.”

Even with my limited understanding of the demographics of the rural areas, I understood. It wasn’t uncommon to see local couples who had married in their early twenties with multiple kids of primary-school age.

When visiting Elizabeth, I had once been able to cherry pick my driving route to best avoid the sour attractions of properties who loudly endorsed the Catholic Church. The extent of highway development that had gone on in the years since I had moved had eliminated many of those old routes. The choices currently were either joining the chaos on the 407, or taking the alternatively quiet backroads. I typically gravitated towards the latter, even though it meant the occasional peripheral glimpse of dumpster-sized signs with deeply disturbing imagery and messages plastered across.

I saw Elizabeth growing even more sensitive towards the propaganda as of late.

In what I had gathered from ingesting the context clues, the main reason Liz had shouldered so much of the work of repairing the house onto herself, had to do with her preparing for children. Renovations were the final steps she was taking now that the pandemic was no longer keeping the future so murky, and their financial and physical stability had returned to its former consistency.

We had always reassured ourselves together that more and more women were beginning to prioritize getting their careers on track before introducing kids into the mix. Up until recently, I had believed myself to be fully secure with that choice.

“I might make us cobbler for breakfast with those apples,” Liz mentions while we’re staring at the stars later that night. We had started a small bonfire outside and coupled around it, indulging between water and margarita mixes. Miles into the woods of Ontario’s Greenbelt, the ten p.m. train whistle drags through the sleeping countryside.

A warm fuzz had climbed up my cheeks, allowing words to come forward quicker and with less humility. My hands hovered distractedly over my drink, before taking another quick sip and chasing it with water. “You’re going to be a homeowner,” I remarked stupidly, as though she might not have come to that revelation on her own.

“I know. It’s too crazy.” She agreed.

We fell silent, vocalizing only every so often as the outline of a bat would flap through the smoke funnelling above our heads.

How in the hell had she gotten so far ahead of me? Her milestones, even if she had completed them all at a comfortable pace, still seemed to have amounted into more than mine. When we had talked about our futures, we always imagined our own children growing up to become friends. We had not been thinking of the socioeconomics, or the geography that would come between us.

“Hey.”

I looked over to see Liz regarding me reproachfully, seeming to sense even slightly buzzed that I was behaving out of character. “Are you good?”

“Good and drunk,” I grinned. “And maybe just realizing that I’m a late bloomer.”

“No, you’re—” Behind her glasses, her eyes paused to reconsider. “What’s wrong with taking your time to build an ideal life?” she demanded seriously, with flames glistening in her lenses.

“And you don’t think that I’m pissing my life away?” I ask.

“We’re so much alike.” Her drink sloshed as she sat up fast. “I had a similar crisis back when you moved out west. I worried we would grow apart. But now we’re here building my house, and I have designed a

spare bedroom with you in mind. With a window for you to see into the walnut grove you love so much. You can bring whoever you're seeing down for Christmas, or spend weeks here in the summer. Bring the children, whenever you get around to them. Be that ten years from now or fifty years."

The flavour of burning branches and dry leaves veers into my face, redirected by an arriving night-time breeze. In the moment, I could not tell if it was the combination alone that brought tears into my eyes.

"You'll be the best mom." I broke over the night sounds when my voice regained strength. "Promise me that you won't keep testing out wild berries when I'm gone."

"That's no fun," she pouted, warming my heart and quelling my fears. "But because I love you, I promise."

WORKS CITED

- Bui, Quoc Trung, Robert Gebeloff, Claire Cain Miller, and Sabrina Tavernise. "Why American Women Everywhere Are Delaying Motherhood." *New York Times*, 16 June. 2021.
- "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)" *World Health Organization*, 19 Jan. 2022.
- "Take Action Against Aborted Fetus Images in Public!" 2017. *Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada*, 30 Mar. 2024.

My Little Women

KATERINA BOVOS

“I’LL BE back later, guys,” I called out over my shoulder to my friends as I let my obnoxiously heavy dorm room door slam shut behind me.

I loved my new life at university. I really did. How could I not, given how eagerly I was anticipating finally coming here? I knew everything there possibly was to know about going to Queen’s University. I knew about the Harry Potter reading room on the fourth floor of Douglas Library, which I already knew would be my favourite spot. Did you know that the Bader International Study Centre was used as a filming location for some scenes of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*? Well, I did. I knew the ins and outs of my meal plan and how to sign up for yoga classes at the ARC. I had watched YouTube video after YouTube video for months of campus tours and “What to Expect When You Come to Queen’s!” compilations. In other words, I had mapped out exactly how I was going to design the university life and university version of myself that I had been dreaming of. I idolized my university experience as a desperately craved escape from feeling like an ill-fitted puzzle piece in my high school.

“Your friends are really cool, aren’t they?” a boy, whose name I had been told but could not remember for the life of me, said while sitting cross-legged beside me in the field. I looked around at my friends, all sitting cross-legged in a circle, singing along to a song I had never heard of before but to which they somehow all knew the lyrics. There it was, that all-too-familiar pit in my gut, an iron fist wrapping its cold knuckles around my lungs.

“They are,” I replied, forcing a fake chuckle.

“This stuff isn’t your vibe?”

There it was again: *pang*. Did he know that the “stuff” that “wasn’t my vibe,” per his words, was fitting in, was being part of a group without feeling like the little fourth grader who yearned to be chosen?

Turning the corner from Stuart Street, past Leggett Hall, as the beautiful sight of Lake Ontario at sunset came into view, I immediately exhaled. This space felt perfectly my own already, separate from the minuscule double dorm room where I couldn’t even stretch my arms out without touching both beds. It felt separate from the pressures of having my first experiences with being around drinking, smoking, and random hook-ups. It felt separate from the familiar feelings of unbelonging that I thought I would, by default, leave behind by graduating high school. I could feel it so viscerally and yet so quietly—such a glaringly loud whisper—that I was straying from myself and my needs. And so, I wandered down to the Gord Edgar Downie Pier, one of the only places I could find on campus where I had a decent shot at not running into someone I distantly knew.

As I observed the people around me, situating myself with my back against one of the two large steel intersecting pillars, I felt the beautiful irony of the pier being named after one of the members of the Tragically Hip. The park was filled with people immersed in conversation, reading, writing, and creating art simply by being in a beautiful place and doing beautiful things. Although faint, there was a whisper of calmness inside my chest at this simple realization. Once I was situated and comfortable,

having taken in my surroundings and already feeling more at peace, I cracked open *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, careful not to create creases in the spine. The copy was not mine, after all; it was a recommendation from my roommate who shared my love for reading but not my perpetual sense of loneliness.

“You have to read this book, Kat,” she pleaded with me as I lay in my bed reading *Little Women* for the tenth time.

I wasn’t convinced. “I need my *Little Women*,” I would respond every time.

I finished the entire four hundred pages of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* that night, making the cool steel of the pillar I was leaning on warm from how long I was resting there. When I finally closed the book after reading the last sentence, tears silently streamed from my face onto the words, “I’ve been given so much in this life ... but I’ve had to fight tooth and nail for it. If I can one day leave this world a little bit safer and a little bit easier ... well, that just might make it all worth it.” I realized the sun had completely set and I hadn’t even noticed. I knew I had just read a book that would become another mental refuge. I wiped the tears from my cheeks and stuffed my cold hands into the sleeves of my sweater as if I had forgotten that I was in a public place and not in my childhood bedroom at thirteen years old with my reading light and headgear on. A few feet away from me, the lyrics, “Said she knows she lived through it / To get to this moment” gave me goosebumps as they played from a group of girls’ speakers.

After this first experience with reading at the pier, the twin pillars that looked so cold and unforgiving to the untrained eye seemed like best friends exchanging secrets with me. They reminded me of myself and the characters in my books that I loved so dearly—me at the bottom of one, the bottoms sitting so far apart that getting from one end to the other is physically impossible, and my comfort characters at the bottom of the other. But spiritually, where my mind met my books, we shared the secrets of how to cure loneliness, survive major life transitions, and find

happiness in darkness. Reading not only brought me my greatest love,
but it also made me fall back in love with my life at university.

Passion into Purpose

SUKHMANI BRAR

THE SMELL of heated butter and vanilla always filled the air in my childhood kitchen, which was comfortable and pleasant. My love for baking began in those early years, and it would go on to influence my life in unexpected ways.

The sound of the mixer whirring and the clinking of mixing bowls created a calming rhythm in my childhood haven, which was the kitchen. I set out on a gourmet path with my mother as my guide, with every recipe presenting a fresh challenge. Together, we measured sugar, broke eggs, and sifted flour to create delectable marvels out of ordinary items. My aspirations were fuelled by my father's encouraging compliments as he eagerly sampled each dish, ever the enthusiastic taste-tester. We bonded over measuring cups and mixing bowls, making memories that were just as rich and fulfilling as the treats we made.

I found purpose and comfort by runny cake batter and flour-dusted fingertips. Baking evolved into a vehicle for my creativity, a way for me to form, shape, and express myself. It was in that small kitchen that I first learned about baking's transformational power—its capacity to elevate ordinary ingredients to incredible heights.

My culinary talents improved as I grew older. I read cookbooks with the eagerness of a famished reader, soaking up methods and flavours like a sponge. My confidence grew with every dish I made that turned out good, inspiring me to continue pushing the limits of my culinary skills. My family's love and support gave me the motivation to pursue my passion and grow it into a business of my own.

There were obstacles along the way, as I transitioned from baking as a hobby to baking as the foundation of my own small business. It wasn't until the COVID-19 epidemic hovered over us that I realized how much my enthusiasm could really accomplish. Baking became my haven in the middle of the mayhem and uncertainty; it provided me with stability and solace in a world gone crazy. I made the crucial choice to turn my passion for baking into a business endeavour at this time of reflection; it was a ray of light in the shadows.

There were several difficulties along the way from hobby baker to small company owner. There were times of self-doubt that threatened to destroy my aspirations, sleepless evenings spent perfecting techniques, and obstacles to overcome in terms of money. Nevertheless, I persisted because of my unyielding resolve and my loved ones' unfailing faith in me.

Amidst the challenges, one particular occasion sticks out as a sign of success: the day I made my very first stacked cake. I watched with shaky hands and a hopeful heart as the layers rose in the oven, each tier serving as a reminder of my commitment and tenacity. I had a wave of pride as I carefully iced the cake; this emotion would come to characterize my path as a baker and business owner.

I opened my own bakery after gaining confidence and stepping into the realm of small-company ownership. It was like seeing a caterpillar hatch from its cocoon into a brightly coloured butterfly. It was a time of transformation and progress, of letting go of the past and welcoming the future.

I came into a plethora of people who encouraged me and fed my aspirations along the road. Their unflinching conviction in me got me through even the worst of days, from devoted customers who waited up for a sample of my specialty delights, to friends and family who provided words of support.

In the warm warmth of my bakery today, I am overwhelmed with appreciation for the road that has taken me here. In addition to bringing me happiness and contentment, my love of baking has imparted priceless knowledge about resiliency, tenacity, and the transformational potential of pursuing one's aspirations.

My novel ultimately explores the transformational power of passion and the limitless potential that everyone of us possesses, rather than merely being about wheat, butter, and sugar. And even though I'm still navigating the highs and lows of being an entrepreneur, I have hope for the future because I believe the best is still to come.

I'm reminded of my journey to this place as the aroma of freshly made bread permeates the bakery and laughing reverberates throughout. Above all, it is a trip driven by passion, tenacity, and the steadfast support of those who believe in me. It is a journey full of victories and disappointments, laughter and tears.

I can't help but feel proud and accomplished when I'm surrounded by the delectable results of my labour in the cosy warmth of the bakery. This bakery is a work of love, a monument to the strength of pursuing one's aspirations and the limitless potential that everyone of us possesses. It is more than simply a company.

Looking out at the busy bakery full of people savouring my products, I am overwhelmed with thankfulness for the path that lead me here. Although it hasn't always been simple, each difficulty I've faced has only strengthened my will to achieve and increased my strength and resilience.

My narrative ultimately explores the transformational power of enthusiasm, tenacity, and unshakeable trust in oneself rather than simply

baking. And because I know that the best is still to come, I am eager to see where this trip will lead me next.

I roll up my sleeves and get back to work with a grin on my face and a bounce in my step, ready to make more delicious memories and encourage people to follow their ambitions, one batch of cookies at a time.

Beneath the Blue

ALISA BRESSLER

A CIRCLE of blue monkey bars hung above my head like a crown I'd never wear. I was eleven years old, bogged down by the wood chips lodged between the cracks of my school shoes. This circle of monkey bars was the craze of my cohort: if you could hoist your feet up to meet your hands and pull your body weight through the gap, your social standing would climb, too. Up there, you would hold up your hands to decipher who had developed the largest calluses, with a competitiveness that screamed for inclusion. Meanwhile, I assumed my position beneath the blue, as I did every recess, watching my classmates share giggles, snacks, and secrets.

At twenty-one, I was slogging through the final months of my undergraduate business degree. Attempting to define my post-graduation plan, I had spent the summers between semesters pursuing opportunities that seemed like logical next steps for someone with my academic background—who had spent the year engrossed in Excel sheets, marketing campaigns, and intricate balance sheets. I worked internships in accounting and human resources, and I even took the LSAT. But with each mile I jogged along the path outlined by my field of study, I became more and more certain that I had no interest in crossing the finish line.

My passion lay far from business. I wanted to create and entrench myself in the arts. I was an elegant writer and a passionate storyteller. My goal became a master's degree in journalism.

When my classmates sat atop the monkey bars, I never attempted to join them, because the worst outcome felt like a certainty to me: I'd dangle on the bars and fail to lift my feet, I'd fall onto the wood chips, breaking one or multiple bones, and my classmates would point, laugh, and whisper about how I was incapable of performing a simple physical activity. I'd be injured, but worst of all, embarrassed. I was afraid to be seen trying. I didn't search for limits to test, as kids so often do, and I wasn't fearless, as kids so often are. I clung to what felt safe and to activities I knew I excelled in. I auditioned for school musicals because my choir teacher praised my singing voice. I wrote short stories before bed because I was selected for Accelerated English, so I knew that I was a good writer. I'd never willingly place myself in the unknown. But I would have to, to achieve the dreams that I developed ten years later. In December of my senior year of university, with a pale face and unsteady hands, it was time to climb the monkey bars.

I spent weeks perched in the dusty back corner of the library, reading, writing, and revising my journalism-school applications to perfection. I felt the blue bars slipping from my hands with each sentence I wrote. Without calluses lining my palms, how would I prove my worth? Who would believe that I had what it takes to study at a prestigious university, let alone become a journalist? Even in an eerily empty library, I felt an abundance of eyes peering over my shoulder. I may as well have been dangling for dear life beneath my grade four classmates, awaiting my tragic fall.

My anxiety is deeply familiar to me, like a pesky classmate whom you unfortunately get paired with for every group project. At best, it's a tameable beast, only revealing shadows and whispers in truly uncertain scenarios; at worst, it grows a neck, arms, and legs, embodying a size that feels insurmountable. For weeks, my hands shook so vigorously they

were often immobile. Panic attacks became my morning routine, and composing a full sentence was a strenuous task. I wanted, more than ever, to toss the worries and “what ifs” onto the floor, like a heavy backpack at the end of a long school day.

Although, by and large, my generation grew up with more privileged, comfortable, and connected lives than our parents and grandparents, diagnoses of anxiety and depression are unprecedented among us. Over the past ten years, the proportion of Canadian youth with generalized anxiety disorder has doubled, and today, depression and anxiety are considered some of the fastest-growing diagnoses in Canada. With this comes more access to necessary treatments, such as therapy and medications, which I have been fortunate enough to have utilized for years. When winter break arrived, my applications were submitted, yet my anxiety did not subside. The tools and treatments that had helped me all my life could not ease the tension between my ears. I needed something stronger.

As I hibernated in my childhood bedroom, I thought of all the ways in which I’ve been contained by my anxiety. I thought of the girl who was afraid to take up too much space (both physically, and with her famously loud voice); who couldn’t sit still reading a book because she was eager to create, not consume, but feared no one would listen to her stories; who considered rejection the worst consequence of all. Permeating my thoughts and reflections was my biggest fear—failure—and to heal, I’d have to shake its hand and say goodbye. To heal, I’d have to develop perseverance, which could not be prescribed by a doctor, distributed in a bottle, or bestowed by a counsellor.

One day, I’d like to visit the blue monkey bars. I’d like to see what would happen if I tried to climb them, in front of everyone whose negative opinions I so deeply feared. If I did, would I surprise myself, and gloriously reach the top? Or would I hold on and dangle my body, only to fall on my way up? If I fell, would anyone give it a second thought? Would anyone notice, or care?

I'd like to fall onto the wood chips, pick myself up, and try again.

WORKS CITED

- Stephenson, Ellen. "Insights on Canadian Society Mental Disorders and Access to Mental-Health Care." *Statistics Canada*, 22 Sept. 2023.
- Weiss, Bari. "Why The Kids Aren't Alright." *Honesty*. Free Press, 27 Feb. 2024.

The Calling

JESSICA CADIEUX

WAS THERE ever a time in your life when you wished you could go back and change it? I am sure we have all been there, but what if you cannot change it even if you went back? You were just powerless. Unable to alter the scales, the weight just hanging in the balance. “Life or limb,” they say, but what if it is *only* life? This question haunts me daily, a constant reminder knocking at my door. The evils that plague my mind as I sleep and whisper seeds of doubt into my medical practice. The resolve to understand and let go, a distant idea floating on some island I cannot reach. Strength and perseverance are the only option but can I pick up my shield and go into battle? We shall see.

It all started when I walked onto the ward this morning. I felt an irresistible pull towards his room, as if a magnetic force was guiding me there. As I quietly opened the door, I tiptoed in and saw him sitting in his recliner. This is unusual because he is typically a late sleeper, always staying in bed, and never up at six in the morning. He was never talkative, but today he seemed even quieter, barely able to keep his eyes open and completely unresponsive to my attempts at conversation. Something was not right. I was struck by this uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Some people call it gut instinct. I didn’t know then, but it

was a nurse's intuition. I could not put my finger on it, but I knew I needed the nurse's help. I frantically searched the halls and banged on the nurse's door for help, to no avail. Finally, I found the nurse in the dining room pouring coffee, which is prohibited as it belongs to the residents. With urgency, I pressed the nurse to assess my resident and immediately contact the family to come in. I do not know why it was so important to me to have the family there, but something told me they had to be. I implored the nurse to allow the man some respite, proposing that we save a meal for him instead of disrupting his rest for breakfast. Getting him settled comfortably in bed was my top priority. However, my pleas fell on deaf ears. According to the Nursing Act and Regulated Health Professions Act, the nurse is accountable to make accurate decisions based on knowledge, skill, and judgement. This nurse is unfamiliar with the resident and this floor, unlike myself. They disregarded my understanding of the resident's health status and failed to provide the appropriate care. I was nothing but a lowly Personal Support Worker (PSW) who knew nothing.

I'll never forget that moment in the dining room when my resident went completely unresponsive. I tried in vain to wake him up: everything from painful sternal rubs, to yelling, and pinching his goose-fleshed arms. Nothing worked. Infuriated, I ran out of the dining room, yelling for the nurse. If they had just listened to me, he would be comfortable in bed with his dignity intact, not going through this like a recent episode of *Chicago Med*, making him a spectacle in the dining room and worrying the other residents! This is inhumane. I tried my best to protect my resident's privacy, moving him to a discreet area. I refused to leave and kept advocating for him. The nurse just brushed me aside without a second thought. Everyone has rights. I do not care if I am a thorn in their side. I will fight for my people! Reluctantly, I left the room at my co-workers' suggestion to take a break. I made one last attempt to check on my resident in the room, but I could see nothing. Knowing I cannot assist him truly breaks my heart as his life hangs in the balance. With a heavy

heart, I lowered my head and silently nodded to my co-worker, fighting back tears. I trudged towards the exit, heading for the stairwell where I can be alone to think before going to the lounge. I stayed on my break a little longer than I should have, trying to gather my strength before heading back. A co-worker informed me that my resident had passed away, allowing me a brief moment to process before returning to work. As she embraced me, tears silently streamed down my face. My resident should not have suffered such an undignified death, and without his family. He should have been palliated according to nursing legislation, and the policies and procedures of the home, enabling therapeutic relationships with family, friends, and staff. The residents were denied the opportunity to say goodbye to their friends, just like he was. If the nurse had listened instead of acting superior, it could have been possible. The residents know when they come to our home that this is their final destination. Their journey should be a joyful and peaceful transition, celebrating their life. Losing my resident like this truly shatters my heart. He could not even advocate for himself. I felt powerless to help, restricted by the limitation of my scope of practice. The nurse's actions that day violated their oath to do no harm.

That was the day I decided I would become a nurse. I would listen to people's concerns, collaborating with them without disregarding them. I would follow up and investigate everything to ensure nothing was missed. Working effectively together as a team, we prioritize dignity, comfort, and safety. Nursing goes beyond medications and wound care. Nursing is a holistic measure that encompasses the whole person spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. You cannot help someone heal if you do not treat everything. Working with the interdisciplinary team ensures total care. I am proactive in resolving issues and seeking information when I need help. I continue to listen to my patients, advocate, and fight for them, because if I do not, often there is no one to help them. Enabling patients with education to help them make an informed decision that best suits them is the only way to

empower them. Making their life a little lighter, more comfortable, and hopefully easier for them.

After eleven years of being a nurse, I am still learning and paying it forward, striving to make a difference. I continue to march into battle with my shield held high and my invisible coat of armour protecting me. Fearlessly, I stand my ground against the menacing dragons, keeping them at bay, and shielding my people from any harm. I may have lost some battles, but my victories are greater. Armed with resilience, I will preserve and never stop fighting. In the words of a dear colleague, who also was a former PSW before stepping up to the plate and becoming a nurse, working alongside me for the last ten years. A companion in arms, as we battle the home front together. “The worst feeling in the world is being powerless to help someone in need and when no one will hear you, all you can do is sit and suffer silently with them” (Smith). Never again! I will fix the healthcare system one resident at a time. This is my mission. This is my calling!

WORKS CITED

- “Florence Nightingale: Biography, Facts, and Nursing.” *A&E Television Networks*, 24 Apr. 2023.
- Ilgaz, Ayşegül, and Sebahat Gözüm. “Advancing Well-Being and Health of Elderly with Integrative Nursing Principles.” *Florence Nightingale Journal of Nursing*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1 Jun. 2019, pp. 201-10.
- “Personal Support Worker Standard: Ontario.” *College Program Standard: Personal Support Worker*, 15 Jan. 2024.
- “Scope of Practice.” *CNO*, 1 July 2023.
- Smith, Andrea. Interview with Jessica Cadieux. 16 Feb. 2024.

Murder in the Family

JEZINA CARREIRO

IN JUNE of 2007, three weeks shy of my high-school graduation, my Aunt was murdered. My Aunt Robin was the youngest of five on my mom's side. She resembled a real-life doll. Not the kind you play with, but one of those dolls that sit on a shelf in your bedroom taking stock of your childhood, forever staying in the same crisp condition she arrived in. She could have passed as one of Dr Suess' melodic Whos of Whoville, a comical notion because even as a child her voice had the raspiness of a seasoned smoker.

Despite her parents' tumultuous divorce during her formative years, Aunt Robin was a bright, well-adjusted child, a tenacious high achiever and, according to her three older brothers, a notorious tattletale. My grandfather was the former warden of Kingston Penitentiary, a strict authoritarian with high expectations who undoubtedly looked on her behaviour favourably. "She wasn't a brat; she just genuinely knew right from wrong." With three older brothers, Aunt Robin was my mom's only sister, and my mom was fiercely protective of her. She often put this role ahead of her own well-being, and it consumed her. While being Robin's sister took more from my mom than it ever gave in return, it instilled innate resilience and compassion and empathy that knows no bounds. As

my mom grew up it was clear that she had the exact temperament to excel in a vocation built around qualities that were inherent to her, one that advocated and cared for the vulnerable. So, perhaps not surprising, she became a nurse.

It is perplexing to consider how my aunt found herself in such a precarious position as someone with a life that was by all accounts “normal.” However, a defining moment caused my Aunt Robin to grow up fast and perpetuated an unfortunate set of circumstances, ultimately leading to her tragic death. The summer Aunt Robin turned sixteen she was sexually abused by a close family friend. A consequential shift in her disposition happened overnight, from mood instability and defiance for rules and authority, to promiscuity in how she dressed and carried herself, and her abuse was the catalyst.

From that moment on my aunt was different. Shame, guilt, and unrelenting trauma consumed fundamental areas of Aunt Robin’s life while tainting every one of her core relationships. When happiness became unattainable, she found refuge far from the family who loved her, using maladaptive behaviours to numb a pervasive pain I will never know. Sadly, these “coping strategies” are common for individuals with adverse childhood experiences, such as sexual abuse (Bryant, et al.).

The night the hospital called with news of Aunt Robin’s overdose, I felt the secure foundation of my family crack as I watched my life turn into an episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. We lived so close to the hospital; I remember wondering if I heard the sirens that took her there. My mom always went to great lengths sheltering us from the secret that stole Aunt Robin’s innocence, but she no longer could. A swift criminal investigation determined her death an open-and-shut case of addiction. However, despite police insisting it was a cautionary tale attesting to the risks of my aunt’s lifestyle, her death was clouded with suspicion. Giving in to her intuition and scepticism expressed by medical

professionals, mom buried the grief of losing her sister and took on the role of detective ready to vindicate my Aunt Robin's death.

Through her unrelenting persistence, my mom was responsible for obtaining nearly all the circumstantial evidence in my aunt's case. While direct evidence is regarded as the "gold standard," many forms have been widely discredited via empirical research, which instead posits that circumstantial evidence is undervalued and more reliable (Heller). Upon further investigation, evidence my mom gathered proved that Aunt Robin was held captive by her murderer for a week leading up to her death. He administered enough drugs to render her unconscious so he could continuously sexually assault her. When my aunt finally became unresponsive, he denied her critical lifesaving interventions. Direct evidence corroborated the circumstantial evidence, but it was the abundance of circumstantial evidence that granted us a criminal trial, in turn, establishing my Aunt Robin's cause of death as a homicide.

Based on what I can only assume was a Johnny-Cochrane-vs-Marcia-Clarke-fuelled delusion, my mom became upset finding out the Crown prosecutor assigned to our case was a woman. "Well, she better have some balls!" my mom announced as Jennifer Ferguson, the prosecutor, swung the door open and without missing a beat replied, "She does, and she wants to charge this a**hole with murder." The legal definition of murder is painstakingly ambiguous. From the most egregious cases of first-degree murder, to second-degree, manslaughter, and criminal negligence causing death, there are significant nuances to homicide charges, and the nature of my aunt's murder aligned with many of them. In hindsight, we needed a woman navigating this case. Jennifer spoke authentically of systemic problems, highlighting that child sexual abuse victims (like my aunt) are significantly more likely to experience revictimization and other negative lifestyle factors, such as substance abuse and mental illness. She emphasized that Aunt Robin's overwhelming vulnerability placed her in the path of a predator (Papalia, et al.). Now, mom swears something ethereal brought Jennifer Ferguson

into her life, and expresses profound gratitude for her tenacity and compassion: “Jennifer never met my sister, but she became Robin’s voice like she knew her and demanded the justice Robin deserved.”

Aunt Robin’s trial concluded in December 2007, less than six months after her death. To avoid having her children testify, the Crown offered a plea deal to the lesser charge of homicide by criminal negligence. Rather than a criminal trial, our days in court were spent giving emotional victim-impact statements. The judge formally apologized for the lack of support from law enforcement, and commended my mom on her advocacy and perseverance, stating how profoundly moved he was by her unconditional love for her sister. Aunt Robin spent most of her life victimized and vulnerable because of the burden she carried from that summer she turned sixteen, but because of my mom, her death would not be in vain. Guided by her intuition and faith, my mom built a criminal case out of thin air, fundamentally shifting the narrative of her sister’s death. If you ask her, though, she will tell you she couldn’t have done it alone, and God sent her the help she needed in people like Jennifer Ferguson and Detective Brian Pete, adding, “Those who help others are helped, Jezina.”

WORKS CITED

- Bryant, Daniel J., et al. “Association of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and Substance Use Disorders (SUDS) in a Multi-Site Safety Net Healthcare Setting.” *Addictive Behaviours Reports*, vol. 12, Dec. 2020.
- “Canadian Criminal Code.” *Revised Statutes of Canada*, 2022.
- Heller, Kevin Jon. “The Cognitive Psychology of Circumstantial Evidence.” *Michigan Law Review*, 2006, pp. 241-305.
- Papalia, Nina, et al. “Child Sexual Abuse and Risk of Revictimization: Impact of Child Demographics, Sexual Abuse Characteristics, and

Psychiatric Disorders.” *Child Maltreatment*, vol. 26, no. 1, 23 June 2020, pp. 74-86.

Breaking Free

JIA XIN CHEN

THE BACKDROP of my upbringing was painted with the rigid strokes of traditional education in China. Each day, as I approached the school gates, they stood tall and imposing, casting a shadow over me. The corridors echoed with the shuffling of feet as students in identical uniforms hurried to their classes. The weight of expectations settled on my shoulders like a heavy cloak, a constant reminder of the standards I was expected to meet.

Inside the classroom, the air was thick with the scent of chalk, mingling with the stifling pressure that filled the room. With their stern expressions, the teachers paced the aisles, their voices a monotonous drone as they drilled us on the importance of rote learning and memorization. Success, they implied, was measured solely by exam scores, instilling in us the belief that excelling in exams was synonymous with excelling in life.

Outside the classroom, my parents mirrored these sentiments, their words constantly echoing in my ears. They urged me to study harder, to outshine my peers, and to secure a coveted spot in a prestigious university. Their expectations were not just spoken but ingrained in every aspect of my life, driving me to strive for perfection.

One summer day, I returned home clutching an exam paper with a score of 80 out of 100, a significant improvement. I had hoped this accomplishment would make my mother proud, but instead of the anticipated praise, her response was one of disappointment. “Why only 80?” she questioned. Her words struck a chord within me, stirring up emotions. In a society that placed such high value on academic achievement, anything less than perfection felt like failure; it was a burden I carried with me every day.

As high school progressed, the pressure intensified, weighing on me like a crushing burden. The once-friendly competition among classmates now felt like a fierce battleground, where everyone seemed to outshine me effortlessly. Their successes only magnified my insecurities, leaving me questioning my abilities and worth.

I spent endless hours at my desk, my forehead pressed against the pages of my math textbook, trying to make sense of its complex formulas. The pressure to excel wasn't just about achieving good grades; it was about shouldering the expectations of my entire family. In Chinese culture, academic achievement is deeply intertwined with economic success and social status, a concept ingrained in us from a young age.

The idea of collectivism and filial piety, emphasizing the interdependence among family members and the responsibility of children to their parents, added to the psychological burden I carried. Each time my exam results fell short, I felt the weight of familial expectations and the scrutiny of the community. The pressure to perform well in school was not just a personal endeavour; it was a societal expectation that parents were expected to uphold.

Despite the toll on my mental well-being, I pushed myself to the brink, studying late into the night, my mind consumed by equations and theories. The relentless cycle of studying, testing, and striving for perfection became my norm, overshadowed only by the crippling anxiety that threatened to consume me.

In spite of my tireless endeavours, I often found myself falling short. No matter how hard I worked, someone always outshone me, leaving me feeling inadequate and disheartened. Each setback felt like a blow to my self-confidence, reinforcing the fear of failure that constantly haunted me. The pressure to excel, instilled in me since childhood by my parents and teachers, was relentless. Their words echoed in my mind like a mantra, reminding me of my high expectations: “If you don’t have good grades, how will you get into a good university? Which company will hire you if you don’t graduate from a prestigious university? How will you make money in the future?” These questions fuelled my desire to break free from the confines of traditional education and pursue a path that would allow me to follow my own dreams.

I cleared my throat, trying to steady my nerves as I faced my parents. “Mom, Dad, I need to talk to you,” I began, my voice betraying none of the butterflies swirling in my stomach. “I don’t want to simply follow the conventional path and accept the rigid educational system here. I want to apply to study abroad.”

My father’s brows furrowed, and he exchanged a concerned glance with my mother. “We have worked hard to provide you with the best education here,” he said, his disappointment evident in his tone. “Why do you want to leave everything behind and study in a foreign country?”

My mother nodded in agreement, her eyes reflecting a mix of worry and disbelief. “We want what’s best for you. Studying abroad is a big decision, and we’re not sure if it’s the right one.”

Even in the face of their limited support, I remained resolute in my decision. Over the next few days, I tried to explain my thoughts and reasons in detail, expressing my desire and determination to study abroad. I hoped my parents would understand my perspective and realize this was not a rash decision but a carefully considered choice. However, my parents remained unconvinced. They were concerned about the financial costs and the uncertainties of studying abroad. “We’re worried

about you,” my father said, his voice tinged with concern. “We just want you to be safe and happy.”

I couldn't ignore the call to explore beyond the boundaries of what was familiar. I stood firm in my decision, knowing that studying abroad was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I couldn't pass up. After much discussion and deliberation, my parents finally agreed to my request. They still had reservations but understood that I was passionate about this. They supported my decision to study abroad, hoping that I would gain more knowledge and experience in a foreign country, laying a solid foundation for my future development.

My journey to study abroad unfolded like a tapestry woven with threads of challenge, discovery, and personal growth. Each day presented a new chapter, filled with vibrant characters and unexpected plot twists that shaped my understanding of the world and myself.

Leaving the familiar confines of my home country behind, I stepped into a world where every street corner held the promise of an adventure, and every encounter was an opportunity for growth. The challenges were manifold, from navigating a new language to adapting to a different way of life. Yet, with each obstacle overcome, I grew stronger and more confident in my ability to thrive in unfamiliar surroundings.

Studying abroad was not merely about acquiring knowledge; it was about immersing myself in a foreign and fascinating culture. It was about learning to see the world through different eyes, to appreciate the beauty of diversity, and to embrace the richness of human experience. My academic pursuits became a journey of self-discovery, teaching me resilience in the face of adversity, open-mindedness in the presence of difference, and boldness in pursuing my dreams.

As I stand on the threshold of a new chapter in my life, I carry the lessons and memories of my experience. I am grateful for the transformative experiences that have shaped me into who I am today, and I am eager and excited for the adventures that lie ahead.

The Sun of God

MEGAN COLEMAN

I LOST my faith in God slowly, and then all at once. It was as if I was standing by a campfire, unaware that as the flames weakened, the night was growing darker around me. Suddenly, only smoke covered my surroundings, where the light moments before had just been dancing. It's taken years to try to put my spiritual experience into words, but after reading the wisdom of Rachel Held Evans, a fellow Christian who questioned her religious upbringing, I finally found the right way to describe how the flickers of my religious beliefs were extinguished.

Pentecostalism is an unusual branch of Christianity. There are many sections of Christianity, broken down into denominations, and each denomination holds specific beliefs and explanations of its holy book, the Bible. At its core, there are three main pillars to Pentecostalist faith, with the first two being seemingly at odds with one another. Firstly, Pentecostalism thrives on taking the Bible at face value, using its scriptures like the cold metal on a pair of handcuffs in a courtroom. There is no room for interpretation or debate, only the judgement that has been sentenced on the accused. The second pillar, however, is fluid and mysterious. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Pentecostals skip and dance as if they're kicking up the sands of the Wild West. Part deity, part messenger,

the Holy Spirit is a drunken, heavenly chaos-bringer that selectively showers Pentecostals with spiritual gifts, such as the ability to speak in tongues. The bubbling twists of this language are “for [when] we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8.26).

The first two pillars of Pentecostalism are as familiar to me as learning to walk. In fact, if my parents had a choice of whether to teach me how to take my first steps or about Jesus Christ, I would be moving through life in a wheelchair. After all, Jesus is “the Son of God ... the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5.20) who “will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1.21). The choice wouldn’t matter anyway. If I couldn’t walk, God would simply heal me, which incidentally is the third pillar of Pentecostalism: “the notion that if people prayed ‘enough’ they would be ‘healed’” (Belcher and Hall 67).

“Move down, Meg,” said my mother, motioning me to slide down the pew. I stared at her for a second, hoping she might repeat herself. I hadn’t heard her, as I was lost in thought.

The chapel walls were humming as the tinkering of the piano’s keys bounced softly off the mahogany arches. The sun seeped through crimson windows, warmly bleeding onto my legs. In hot spells like this, the sanctuary’s musty air was always faintly sweet. After almost two decades of sitting in the same wooden pews, saturated with the church’s perfume, I would be moving away soon. Maybe. I hadn’t yet received my university acceptance letters, but I’d heard from a couple kids at school that there were early ones in the mail. I quickly gave myself a silent reprimand.

What about Dad? I thought to myself angrily. *Selfish.* I slapped the label on my thoughts. How could I feel excitement if my father was at home dying? How selfish could I be to think of moving away while his body slowly rotted, the cancer siphoning life out of him, day by excruciating day. It was a strange contrast I could never get used to—standing in church, watching the dust dance in the sunlight, while my

father decayed at home, too sick to walk. The oesophageal cancer had ripped through his throat. I couldn't remember the last time he had been able to speak to me.

"God is good all the time. God is good," the congregation crooned around me, their voices rising like smoke towards the ceiling. I could feel my chest tightening as the song swelled, each cheery note edging me closer to suffocation.

I looked over my shoulder at my mother, listening to her sing the words projected onto the larger-than-life screens in front of us. I tried to decipher how she was feeling, but her face was unreadable. Her lips moved obediently, and if she noticed me looking over to her, she ignored it.

My mother, Janice, is a rock. Strong-willed, patient, and methodical. She acts wisely and meticulously in everything she does, never allowing emotions to make a mess or distract her. An oracle of practicality. Her flag flies high with the words that say, "Get on with it." During my father's illness, she had been having trouble sleeping, waking up in the middle of the night gasping for air after choking in her dreams. For Jan, that was the closest she had ever come to having an emotional breakdown.

I had asked her how God could allow Dad to die like this. How could God love us when he was ripping away someone from our family? She had told me earnestly that she "came to realize that it may not make sense to us, but God has a plan and heaven is amazing and going there is not a punishment, it's a reward." I wasn't so accepting. Life seemed like a wide-open book left on a table in front of me. If someone could slowly die at fifty years old, what exactly was the point of living? With each question I asked, my mother's answers would throw a cold bucket of water over the faintly glowing embers of my religious certainty. It hissed and sputtered as it struggled to stay alight.

Just as the sanctuary's warmth threatened me with drowsiness, the organ jolted me awake. My mother nudged me with her leg to get up. We

never stayed long after service these days. We couldn't afford to be away from Dad for too long.

Just as the back doors were within arm's reach, we heard my mother's name.

"Jan! Wait a second! How's Rick doing?" A tall man in a sharply pressed suit walked briskly up to us. My mother gave a curt smile, but her words were tinged with friendliness.

"He's—" she paused. I looked up at her. I could tell she was thinking of the right way to word her response. "He's not doing well, Andrew. I don't know what to say. He doesn't have much time left."

"God is good, though, Jan. If you prayed with more faith, he would be healed." Andrew gave her arm a squeeze, smiling brightly. "You need to keep praying, okay?" He turned back to the throng of people gushing from the sanctuary.

I stared ahead, my mouth gaping. I turned to my mother, astonished at what I had just heard. I felt my cheeks grow hot, as if someone was holding the azure flames of a propane torch to my oxygen tank. Instead of sharing in my anger, she pressed her lips together and avoided my gaze, pushing the doors open to the parking lot. The sun's light instantly blinded us, and I shielded my eyes.

My steps were rigid, pounding the asphalt as we walked silently to the car together. Since I was a child, "I had imagined God as a warm, faceless light, a sort of benevolent and eternal sunshine. That morning in chapel, a shadow passed over him like an eclipse" (Evans 99). I took my hands from my eyes and looked directly at the sky.

WORKS CITED

Belcher, J.R., and S.M. Hall. "Healing and Psychotherapy: The Pentecostal Tradition." *Pastoral Psychology*, vol. 50, 2001, pp. 63-75.

The ESV Bible. Crossway, 2001.

Evans, Rachel Held. *Faith Unravelled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions*. Zondervan, 2014.

The Climb

FIONA COSTELLO

I REMEMBER the time in my life at which I'd decided I would pursue the known-to-be gruelling journey and challenging career of medicine, just as I remember the day I saw my world crumble down around me as I knew that I had to let it go.

If you've ever been in pursuit of something that held a large place in your head and heart, be it a career like me, or a relationship or something entirely different, you may find yourself understanding the heartbreak, guilt, relief, loss, simply the whirlwind of emotions that can ensue when things don't go as planned.

The beginning of this pursuit was akin to the beginning of a climb, yet it wasn't like climbing on a clear, blue-skied sunny day, where your feet carry you swiftly along the ascending gravel path, into the tree range with the sun peeking through. Rather, on this day, it was as if the clouds had rolled in, creating a sky grey as ash overhead.

As I spent most of my undergraduate degree struggling to balance the heavy workload of a life-sciences program with the extracurriculars I was involved in, I'd let my focus slip on other personal things that I cared about, like spending quality time with friends. I'd become consumed in crafting the perfect medical application, with a strong GPA

and equally stellar résumé. I remember feeling as if those grey clouds from when I'd began my pursuit had never lifted. Perhaps there were brief moments of clarity, brief openings overhead when the sun's rays would push through, but none strong enough to brighten my dampened spirits for the steep and rocky terrain ahead.

I was studying day in and day out, climbing from sunup to sundown, yet I didn't feel like I was making any tangible progress towards my end goal of medicine, towards my end goal of the summit. I couldn't find a sense of relief or pride in the journey I'd accomplished so far. It was continuously disheartening.

I can remember a mentor telling me that I must remember to enjoy the journey, reminding me that this would help push me through those tough days of climbing when the rain decides to pour down, the rocks begin to slide beneath your feet, all the while your legs feel too heavy to take another step. Another mentor told me that I must learn to embrace the uncertainty of the path ahead, to take breaks, and to consider another career I'd like to pursue, another mountain to climb.

In pursuing any career, there will always triumphs and failures. Just as with climbing a mountain, there will always be peaks and valleys. So, what is supposed to get us through the tough times? What is supposed to drive us? How are we to weather the storm when conditions become too harsh, when we don't think we're strong enough to tackle the rock scramble, or we feel as though we've simply run out of energy? And sometimes, despite our best efforts, we must ask ourselves, when is it time to descend the mountain I've planned to conquer for so long?

I'd like to tell you I had a clear answer to these questions, both for your sake and mine. However, like many questions in life, I wonder if there is no clear answer. I see answers differing from person to person, and that ultimately the answers lie within each of us. At the end of the day, it'll be your own two feet doing the walking; it's your own life and your own choices.

In the final days leading up to my descent, a large storm rolled over the mountain. Not only was the sky overhead grey, but the thunder and lightning was dangerous. I knew I had to turn around; I didn't feel safe there anymore. I faced the fact that it was time to let go of my pursuit of medicine, and I learned that the climb down was as similarly challenging as the way up. I slid down some muddy paths and stumbled over some wobbly boulders.

I'm down the mountain now, and some days I still have hope that I will return, that I'll come back rejuvenated, that I'll come back to this career with better strategies to tackle the hardships I faced. Maybe that is what I will do, or maybe once I decide on a new pursuit, another mountain, I'll be stronger from my previous journey and learn to find the good in the path ahead, without the desire to ever look back.

I don't know yet, but whatever I do decide, I'll go into it with a renewed understanding of what's important in choosing a career, what's important inside and outside of this career, and that pursuits like climbing can be messy. Sometimes you might find yourself off the beaten path, and maybe that's okay. Sometimes, you might just need to take a step back and listen to someone's advice that speaks to you. For me, this comes from various mentors as well as my dad. My dad told me to focus on the path ahead; he said he didn't always know what was around the corner of his career path, but he chose to focus on a good two-year plan (Costello).

Whatever pursuit you might be on, whatever mountain you're choosing to climb, I hope you can learn to appreciate the views along the way. I hope that you find other great climbers to spend your journey with. I hope you can find strategies to push through when the weather doesn't go your way. I hope you can see your strengths, identify your desires, and then find personal meaning and adventure in whichever career you choose (Stanfill and Martin). I hope you never forget to find the fun in your pursuit. And if one day, you look back and realize that you've taken

the wrong path, I hope you can find the strength within to accept, and forgive, and then to begin again on whatever route you choose.

WORKS CITED

- Costello, Murray. Personal Interview. 13 Feb. 2024.
- Stanfill, Ansley Grimes, and Michelle Y. Martin. "Choose Your Own Adventure: A Perspective on Career Development." *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science* vol. 7, 26 Jun. 2023.

Je Vois la Vie en Rose

MARCIE COSTELLO

IT WAS 1994. I was fifteen, and part of the grunge, plaid-everything, and combat-boots era. I was a combination of smart, rude, and ambitious; I held little respect for anyone, and I was no stranger to the unstructured. This year my first son was born, and in 1997 I had my second. I called the next decade of my life “Watch Me” while taking on high school as valedictorian, and majoring in design and art history in college. In 2007, I fell madly in love with a man, who later became my heartache and horror, but that’s another story. Our daughter was born in 2010. I spent years living in curious juxtaposition, caught between my visceral reaction to vintage jazz, an appreciation for fine wine, and the love for art, all while surviving life sleeping next to a full-blown addict. My artsy lifestyle provided a reprieve in moments blurred by emotion and trauma. By 2018, I had operated my photography studio for a decade. I was good at it, rewarded for it, and reaped its success. Long nights of editing were accompanied by the harmony of a jazz trombone, and some fine cheese to snack on while the household slept. It was quiet.

As I approached my fortieth birthday, I realized that I spent most of my life surviving for others and proving I was not “lesser than,” you know, like what teen mothers are assumed to be in society? I was fully

immersed in self-discovery, deep in silent urges for reprieve from the last twenty-five years. Feeling the heaviness of my past, with a tired body and mind, I knew it was time for my story to unfold. Who was I?

I saved every penny for my two-star trip to Europe. My travel agent Kristi understood me and said, “All of France is something to discover, but there are areas of France that are more unique than others.” I needed to feel the cobble roads beneath my feet, see architecture come alive from the pages of my textbooks, eat rich butter, and see egg yolks in vibrant orange. Leaving my kids, business, and camera behind struck me like the first thunderclap on a silent night as I gathered my travel maps and tattered yellow loafers.

March 27, 2019. My luggage, brimming with packs of Tums and fancy sundresses, was three pounds shy of the limit. I felt nauseous. I forgot to brush up on my French, but this seemed less important when the stewardess offered a drink.

“Red. Something French, please,” I replied. “Just breathe, for God sakes, and enjoy this,” I thought to myself, staring out of my window, lost in pensive thoughts, romanticizing the expectations of life’s deep considerations while flying over the Atlantic Ocean. “I’ll learn who I am and see all the things I missed. It will be great!” I reminded myself. “Why did I have to go away to figure this out?” Had I become a softer woman than I once was? Thanks, wine. I spent the rest of my flight digging for what I was in search of: my old self.

“We are a world of travellers, a special club, globe-trotting trolls that scour the earth searching for themselves in every undiscovered corner; this isn’t new, this is history!” These are my inner chants. I spent my adult years trying to understand why we as a human community always chased more. I once read, “an extra sense of freedom and adventure, the greater possibility to live out fantasies, and the subsequent rise in self-confidence which usually accompanies the satisfaction of the emotional needs” (Capizzi), and wondered if this was so complicatedly me.

Sisteron, in French Provence, is smack in the middle between Marseille and Grenoble, with roughly eight thousand people nestled amidst the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. This town welcomes you with warm sun and water so blue it resembles a nineteenth-century oil painting. Their locals were so friendly they felt like family. Travel Blogger Chrissie McClatchie discusses Sisteron, while known to Henri IV in the sixteenth century as “the most powerful fortress in his kingdom,” is still standing strong in all its mediaeval glory.

A volcano-like mountainous mass dominates the landscape with its finger-like vertical slopes leading to a vibrant town at its feet. One long bridge enters the fortress. When once inside, it’s like entering a home of Frank Lloyd Wright, ceilings lifting to the heavens just after the entryway. I found Primrose Café, pale blue signs, and cappuccino so velvety it rolled off my tongue like the French roll their “R”s. Meandering around an old bookshop (the kind you want to smell), I found a French copy of the first Harry Potter book ever released: one euro. At the back, a brass phonograph surrounded by records, and there it was, Edith Piaf, in pristine condition: one euro. You know, *La Vie En Rose*? Two euros. Two favourite things exactly as I imagined. I spent the next several days relishing in bakeries and cafés near the turquoise blue Durance River surrounding the town and exploring beautifully preserved historical architecture.

Further north, I made lifelong friends with the town of Beaune. Just over twenty thousand people, nestled in the Region of Burgundy, it’s known for the world’s largest annual wine charity auction; half of my heart now resides here. My hotel room was small. Glaring sunlight from the windows pierced through the most suitable burgundy curtains, highlighting the dust as it floats amidst the French air. Yes, French air. Beaune, once an eighteenth-century attraction to Thomas Jefferson, a former US Ambassador, placed the Region of Burgundy on the map, now known for its beef and extraordinary cuisine, blackcurrants, mustard, music, wine, and architecture, to name a few. I saw butter-yellow

buildings, ponds, mountains, rivers, and vineyards scattered for miles like a smattering on a charcuterie board.

Market day. Cancel my flight, I'm moving in. Sheets of cloth strung above the streetscapes, some drying on balcony flats, others for sale. Produce—I mean real, not like home—was displayed in organized chaos; it worked. Fruits and vegetables were large and more vibrant than back home. Handwritten signs poked through baskets selling fresh truffles from the forest, and cheeses from farms. Children played in the streets, and weathered but happy men and women walked in slow stride; no one was in a hurry.

I found the best crêpe maker in all the land. The two-euro crêpe: Nutella, apricot, and lemon. Crêpes became dinner for the next several days. Budget shmudget.

The people of Beaune were kind, simple, and old, but content. This way of life stayed with me, and I still feel it like a warm whisky burn arriving in the middle of my chest. Was that happiness? Did I find *the thing*? Travelling alone, like Muhamet Mehmetoglu, author of “Solitary Travellers,” says, “the individualistic tourist is someone for whom internal personal values. (e.g., sense of accomplishment) are the most important principles in life,” and it took the form of someone I needed to meet, to know. As I boarded my flight home, eager to hug my children, I experienced my “a-ha” moment in the same way you remember where your lost keys are: in your pocket the entire time. My convincing inner voice pushed me forward in search of external connection within a world I had only ever dreamed of seeing. I realized that I had *already* become everything I was trying to find while in France; I was already *her*. I was never really gone; I was just somewhere else for a while.

In Harvey Levenstein's book called *Seductive Journey*, he states, “it is better to travel fast and far and get intelligent glimpses of all the great historical centres than to travel slow and spend all the time in one or two countries” (61), making sense of my wanderlust spirit, and my butter-and-buses jaunt to say the least.

At forty-five, in my daughter's dainty hand script, you'll see a tattoo up my left shoulder towards my neck. It reads "Je vois la vie en rose," meaning *I see life in pink*, which I embody every single day.

WORKS CITED

- Capizzi, Laura. *Psychological Features of Travelling*. Master's Thesis, 1982.
- Lecat, Benoît, and Claude Chapuis. "Food and Wine Pairing in Burgundy: The Case of Grands Crus." *Beverages*, vol. 3, no. 4, Feb. 2017, p. 10.
- Levenstein, Harvey. *Seductive Journey*. U of Chicago P, 2000.
- McClatchie, Chrissie. "The Tiny French Town That Changed the Course of History." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Dec. 2023.
- Mehmetoglu, Muhamet, et al. "Solitary Travellers in the Norwegian Lofoten Islands: Why Do People Travel on Their Own?" *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, vol. 1, no. 1, May 2001, pp. 19-37.

The Unseen Threads of History

JOSHUA CRISTOFOLI

ON THE mist-veiled morning of July 16th, 1960, LA lay in anticipation, shrouded in fog that seemed to mute the usual city buzz. Paul Butler, the DNC Chairman and dedicated Stevenson supporter, navigated through the foggy streets, unaware he was on the cusp of a pivotal moment. This day was set to be a historical turning point, where the actions of a few were poised to leave an indelible mark on the future. Oblivious to the irony that his unwavering dedication might soon signal the end of his political journey, Butler's approach to the arena epitomized the unpredictability of politics and highlighted how individual choices can significantly shape the threads of history (Black, et al.).

Miles and decades away, I was caught in the sunlight's embrace, pondering over the dense weave of history within the pages of *A Thousand Days*. Each word pulled me deeper into the political life of JFK, showcasing the pivotal moments that shaped our world. It struck me how these events, tethered by threads invisible to their architects, could alter the world. On the nascent stage of televised broadcasts, a medium yet to reveal its full impact on political discourse. It dawned on me the intricate dance of political manoeuvring and media evolution that

set the stage for a future where politics mirrored a game of one-upmanship. The thought propelled me through the narrative, envisioning myself amid the electrifying atmosphere of the convention hall, a silent witness to history in the making.

The arena buzzed with urgency as rumours of Stevenson and LBJ vying for the nomination against JFK swirled. The convention hall crackled with the tension of a historic showdown. Yet, as the votes were tallied, it was JFK's vision of a New Frontier that captured the hearts of the delegates and the nation. Reflecting on JFK's strategic choice of LBJ as his Vice President, I marvelled at the foresight that sought to bridge the nation's divides. This decision, a blend of political acumen and personal dynamics, underscored the essence of leadership—crafting a vision to navigate the turbulent waters to come.

An aide, navigating the quiet halls in the aftermath, was tasked with delivering a letter of congratulations from LBJ to JFK. Upon delivering the letter, JFK crafted his response to be sent to LBJ. "Lady Bird awoke her husband, who nodded assent. As she put down the phone, she burst out, 'Honey, I know he's going to offer the Vice-Presidency, and I hope you won't take it'" (Schlesinger 49). Yet, a letter from JFK followed, with an unusual request for a meeting, marking a departure from political courtesies. Despite the counsel of his closest advisors and the wishes of his wife, LBJ was drawn to a larger destiny, a stepping stone to a role that he believed was his, even if it meant stepping into the shadow as Vice-President.

LBJ accepting JFK's nomination was more than a stepping stone; it was a fulcrum point that balanced the scales of American history. The choice led directly to significant advances in civil rights through legislation that might have stalled without LBJ's Southern ties and legislative prowess. Yet, this same leadership intensified America's involvement in Vietnam, steering the nation into turbulent waters that still ripple through American consciousness today. Similarly, LBJ's push in the Space Race, building on JFK's legacy, not only marked a triumph

in American innovation but also underscored the complex legacy of ambition. Thus, the Kennedy-Johnson ticket wasn't just a political alliance; it was a catalyst for change, spurring progress and controversy alike. One can't help but wonder: without LBJ's influence in those critical days following JFK's assassination, how differently might the thread of American history have been woven?

As the book's last page echoed in my consciousness, it settled softly on my lap. I reclined, gazing at the ceiling bathed in sunlight, a stark contrast to LA's ceaseless energy. My thoughts drifted to a serene Ithaca, New York scene, where time seemed to pause.

In a living room steeped in silence, a man found solace in his favourite chair, surrounded by papers and immersed in thought, his attire casual yet composed. Beside him, a young girl with blonde locks was captivated by the unfolding stories on a black-and-white TV, her grasp not fully encompassing their weight. The man paused his meticulous grading to observe the screen, murmuring, "Johnson as Veep. Interesting." The girl, perceiving the weight of his words, nodded, her understanding still nascent.

This scene, as it unfolded, brought a wave of melancholy. It was a simple, yet profound, exchange between father and daughter, overshadowed by the looming challenges and sorrows the future held. Within a decade, the echoes of decisions made at the DNC would permeate even Ithaca's tranquillity. The girl, my future grandmother, would see the devastating toll of the Vietnam War as it claimed one of her dearest friends to the draft, a sorrow that, sixty-nine years on, remains indelibly etched in her memory (Carrigan).

The stark reality of how political decisions could weave their way into the fabric of individual lives struck me with newfound clarity. It was a heart-breaking reminder of how history and human narrative are intertwined and how political movements impact individual fates. The book's dualism shows how politics path and its effects on ordinary lives are interwoven. JFK and LBJ's alliance against a nation on the edge of

transformation combines with my grandmother's story, showing how the threads of political decisions affect personal lives. This event stresses how significant events influence people's lives. This reflection made the book more relevant by connecting the past to its effect on the present. In the stillness of my room, with sunshine throwing long shadows, my understanding of the weight of history and our involvement in its ongoing drama grew.

WORKS CITED

- Black, Allida, et al. "Eleanor Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and the Election of 1960: A Project of The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers." The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, 2006.
- Carrigan, Joanne. "1960 Democratic National Convention," 15 Feb. 2024.
- "Johnson, Lyndon B.: Vice Presidential Candidate." Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. *John F. Kennedy Library*, 1960.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

The Beauty of Adulthood

ABI DAVIAU

I'M NOT supposed to be writing about this right now. I'm supposed to be writing about my parents' divorce, a part of my life that I thought transformed me from child into adult. While this experience in many ways indeed took away my childhood, it did not turn me into an adult. This is because adulthood involves just as much gain as it does loss. It would also be disingenuous to claim that any one moment made me into what an adult is supposed to be. My true descent out of childhood can be explained through a series of moments shared with people whom I, in very adult fashion, have chosen to spend my life. These moments have provided me lessons, each of which has shown me the beauty in being an autonomous, accountable, and capable individual.

Lesson One: *Sometimes, if you're lucky, you can do whatever you want.*

Often, as adults, we become obsessed with the many things we are obligated to do. School, work, our families; each of these aspects of life demands our attention, reminding us of the overwhelming number of responsibilities we must fulfil every day. But, on January 17th, it was Leah's birthday, and I had a car with a stereo. I knew, for both her birthday and our one-year anniversary of friendship, my gift to Leah had

to fundamentally involve music. Confident that she would connect with a carefully curated collection of tunes, I decided to give her a mixtape. I spent the previous months finding songs that, both independently and together, tangibly represented the soundtrack of our friendship and danced to the tune of Leah.

When I gave Leah the tape, she was overcome, making me uncomfortable with her genuine, profuse, explicit gratefulness. Prone to eventizing like myself, I knew she'd wait until the "perfect moment" to give it a listen. Driven by an afternoon free of class, and an urgent, self-indulgent need to hear her thoughts, I suggested, on our routine drive to Tim Hortons, that we listen to the tape right then and there. With Leah's eager agreement, we aimlessly drove around Kingston as each song blared through my car speakers. Naturally, I wanted to explain my creative direction behind each of the songs I so thoughtfully included. But I hardly had to explain what I did and why I did it. She intuitively knew that Damien Jurado's "Lou-Jean" reminded me of the way she writes, and that Twain's "Dear Mexico" was my thank you letter to Holland, the place that introduced Leah and me to each other.

As the tape closed with Simon and Garfunkel's "Old Friends," I couldn't help but realize I spent my day listening to beautiful music, chatting to one of my best friends, with both of us feeling profoundly understood by one another. Without the certain freedoms adulthood has gifted me, like my car, or the ability to dictate my schedule, or the choice of people I dedicate my love and energy to, I could never have experienced this truly idyllic afternoon. And so, this moment marked the first, but certainly not the last, time that I realized that sometimes being an adult means that I can do whatever I want.

Lesson Two: *With the right people, you can make your own family.*

As children, we take on a narrow and definite understanding of what family is. We are told that our family consists of our parents, our siblings, and the other people in our lives who we are biologically related to. I similarly subscribed to the belief that family was born of circumstance,

and not of choice, until I recently travelled home to Toronto to spend time with my mom and siblings during Reading Week. It was October, and I was sad. In fact, I woke up already crying. I had a dream about the girl whom I had a crush on, and who, both in the dream and in reality, did not reciprocate the feeling. The tears were made of equal parts heartbreak and shame, brewed by a family culture that implicitly taught me to view my sexuality as a deviation needing to be concealed.

Knowing I did not want to share the reasons for my sadness, yet also being unable to stop the tears, I frantically called my roommate, Ru, whose family home was only a few blocks from my own. She could hear the shakiness in my voice and urged me to immediately come over. When Ru opened the door, I immediately fell into her arms. As I cried, she did too. After I unburdened my heart, sharing the weight of my dread and dislocation, she explained that she's been falling behind in school, an issue associated with a time in her life she would never wish to return to. Through our mutual vulnerability, she reminded me I'm unconditionally valued no matter who I love, and I reminded her that her worth and intelligence are autonomous from academics.

As we sat there, our eyes puffy with the relief of shedding tears, I recognized why family cannot be determined by genetics alone. It was Ru, and not my biological family, with whom I could share my misery. It was Ru where I found a sanctuary built on understanding, acceptance, and support. When in the company of souls you find a connection with, the concept of family transcends traditional boundaries, allowing us to find belonging, validation, and love in spaces we create for ourselves. Ru and I unwittingly chose each other as family, demonstrating that with the right people, you indeed can make your own family.

Lesson Three: *You are going to be okay.*

Adulthood, for many, is marked by relentless pressures and unyielding expectations, where the quest for fulfilment is shadowed by disillusionment. It's a path that cycles individuals through stress and exhaustion every day. In the worst of these times, there are moments

when the pain of existence can seem insurmountable. I encountered this moment on a dark winter day not long ago. I won't explain what led me to the resolve that I should no longer exist, but my desire to be rid of all life was strong enough for me to isolate myself in the silence of my room while writing farewell letters to loved ones.

However, life has a way of interrupting our lowest ebbs—and with a knock on the door, my roommate and best friend, Abby, reached out. Abby, who had navigated the immense grief of losing her father just a year before, deserved my honesty, even in my darkest hour.

In the gloom of my room, illuminated only by the faint glow of a streetlamp filtering through the window, I shared my emotional turmoil with her. Abby, in her innate wisdom, offered comfort with the perfect blend of empathy and hope. I knew her words were true, but couldn't help. That is until one point in the long conversation, when she slightly stuttered her words, a mannerism that is characteristic of Abby and might have gone unnoticed in any other context. In that moment, her muddle sent us both into an unexpected and uncontrollable laughter. We continued to laugh like this for another twenty minutes, egged on by the shared understanding that this was not the appropriate time to be laughing.

As we finally settled down, I felt lighter, less determined, and was left with the knowledge that I wanted to experience more moments like that. It was a reminder that amidst the inherent challenges of adulthood, there are moments of unadulterated joy and connection that make the journey worth continuing. This experience, shared in the warmth of friendship and laughter, left me with a newfound conviction: I was going to be okay. Not because the problems I experienced had vanished, but because I realized the strength I possess and the support I can find in those I love. Part of being an adult is navigating the waters of despair and finding a reason to laugh anyway.

The Sleepless Revolution

ALEX DAWSON

IN A revolution we find the past was never fixed but rather in order to build something better there needs to be a new history on which to build it. Maryanne was going from scene to scene in her life, working the dried cement of her past into mouldable clay again. We'd been talking all night and I was feeling like peeling wallpaper but still she was getting to me with all the talk about everyone being hurt and needing love and forgiveness and here was living proof that someone can really change right down to their past and actualize all that good-will inside which made me inspired and miss what we had when we were together.

I sat in bed as Maryanne called all her old boyfriends and best friends and long-lost cousins and I thought, so maybe it's unusual. Love and forgiveness. Of course it's a good thing *in principle*. But it was unsettling to see Maryanne change so quickly. As nonchalantly as I could I asked how her new medication was going. She rushed to my cheeks and hushed me like a baby and said, "Oh thank you, thank you, thank you for worrying about me I know I'm going through some changes because I've finally resolved all my logical contradictions and I know that can be scary but it's totally normal for people coming out of their

depression to have elevated energy levels which you can call hypomania which happens to everyone and lasts a few days and is not serious.” So I showed her a list of symptoms I’d be perusing and she said she couldn’t be manic because to be manic is to be irrational and she is rational. I countered that an irrational person would never know if they were irrational because to be irrational is to not know you are irrational. She said to pull up the definition and so we both stood reading the definition of irrationality saying that she is and is not like plucking petals from a daisy.

As the next few days passed it seemed Maryanne no longer needed food or water or sleep and being too busy with love and forgiveness could not be bothered with these conditions of physical existence itself.

In his work *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary explores the blurring line between work and sleep. As some attempt to find its cure, sleep is the last natural barrier between us and a model economy where advertising, consumption, and work are a continual, unceasing amnesia: “24/7 is a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability” (9). The microcosm of Maryanne’s apartment encapsulated Crary’s worry of a society driven by perpetual activity and the diminishing value of rest. Working remotely during the pandemic meant a blurred line between *on* and *off*. The lights were always on, and increasingly the Maryanne I knew was not home.

We were waiting for eight a.m. which was when we agreed she could call people again because she was rational but just excited and I was rational too we agreed but deep within a sleepless cocoon of purple and grey-like colours were bleeding off the spectrum into the air and anchoring us both down to reality lest one leapfrogged into pure *Geist* which to supplement I fed Maryanne from a bag of almonds and rubbed her thigh softly gripping as it became a battle between the material world

and *Geist* and laughter became metallic and echoed through hallways with Maryanne lifting off the bone like some gestating euphoria as I tried to weigh her down with one almond at a time from my hand and as if some hole had been sewn for the first time the dissatisfaction of not being where I thought I should be went away replaced with having no doubt at all that I am right here beside Maryanne where I need to be.

Before her mom arrived I wanted to get Maryanne cleaned up because love and forgiveness and figuring it all out doesn't leave a lot of time for hygiene basics so we both stood naked in the small bathroom with the fans harmonics expanding and contracting like bagpipes and swiped my hands through the water while Maryanne was sending one-word mass e-mails and then we got in and I started to soap up her back as she giggled into the hollow corner and then I did her hair and asked, "Am I doing it right?" There was so much and the shampoo got lost in the brown clog which seemed impossibly attached to her head but she didn't mind I don't think just vibrating and singing her foot and giggling and barely saying one or two-word declaratives and then she turned around and I made soapy circles on her stomach and shoulders as she stared at me and said, "Almond?" and I laughed because we had an established level of basic language like we didn't already share one but also felt sad but also excited but also barely alive.

When her mom walked in Maryanne suddenly looked distressed. She stood up naked and hugged her and said, "Mom, I'm fine, I'm fine, don't worry," which was probably the most sober collective moment of the last thirty-six hours and didn't last long but at least the cavalry swell of maternal love had arrived and Maryanne was in better hands now. I went clocked out for a while, ceasing to exist in the shower and the couch and hanging off the fire escape and standing over a cutting board, unable to return from behind the dead layers that you need to sit for hours while someone you love erodes like a sand sculpture before your eyes.

WORK CITED

Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Verso, 2014.

Hey, Driver

KIERAN DOHERTY

HAVE YOU ever been so nervous for an adventure that you can't compose yourself? It might come from starting an entirely new chapter in your life, even when you're not ready to leave the old one behind. But you're not entirely sure if the moving on means that you're moving on to bigger and better things. But the fear of the unknown is what drives you to incredible things, because it could turn out for your life to be even better than you could imagine. I was eighteen years old, and while I didn't know it at the time, it was the beginning of a chapter in my life that I wish I could go back to and re-live every moment the exact same way. Imagine you're getting in a van, with your dad in your motorhome beside you, and you're about to embark on a twenty-two-hour road trip all the way down to Georgia. Yes, the drive will be difficult on you, especially since you're essentially tethered to another vehicle that is much slower moving and less nimble than yours. But the fact that this road trip is far from the end of your journey is the scary part, and you don't even know half of it yet. This is where I fell in love with driving by myself.

For reference, most people drive just over ten thousand miles in a year. By contrast, I drove ten times that in 2022. Eight thousand miles of

that was done in two weeks, when I took a road trip to California and back from Kingston, making one massive circle of the United States, and I have loved every minute of it.

I grew up racing motocross all over the United States, which started off just in Canada, but then became a global endeavour. Getting to travel the world for my entire childhood racing motocross is truly its own story, but this one stands out as I might've learned more about myself on this isolated road trip than I did in any of the years prior. Leaving Canada that Sunday morning to drive the first leg of this trip really filled me with emotions. I was moving to a place I'd never been before, and not a place I'd heard many positive things about. Arkansas is definitely not the place I thought I'd be living in when I was younger. But I was blessed with an opportunity that many told me I'd be foolish to pass up. I knew Georgia was going to be a pleasant experience, but Arkansas was a place I was very unsure of, even when I got there. It's funny how things work out, but my view on moving there really started to change as I found myself on this long drive. If I had flown there, I genuinely still believe I would have hated it. But I really did have more than enough time to think about it and weigh out all of the pros and cons of doing what I was about to do, and I'm glad I had that time.

It took a while for me to emotionally get to the point where I was okay with it, but it ended up making the second leg of the journey that much more enjoyable. I was like a kid on Christmas Eve, waiting for it to be morning, and I had no idea what kind of presents I was going to unwrap. The drive in itself, I don't remember much about, other than that I loved zoning out on the open road, listening to some of my favourite songs and rather the feeling of driving was more important than the memory itself.

I had the chance to ask my father about why he loved travelling with me so much, and during this period of me interviewing him, many years after our road trip, his excitement was still as large as mine was towards this topic. We loved travelling together, especially for motocross. This

was something that was really the core foundation of my childhood, and more specifically, my relationship with him. It made me incredibly happy to see him be just as excited as he was back when this was all happening in the moment. I spoke to him for a brief period of time before letting him get back to his work, but the one question that really stuck out to me was when I asked him if he ever had a bad moment travelling with me, and I truly loved his response.

“Not one,” he claimed. “Even when we were arguing over your racing or where you wanted to eat, none of it really mattered. I just liked being with you every weekend. It meant the world to me.” This was exactly what I needed to hear at the time. It made me really understand that those moments we spent together were really precious, because they don’t come around very often anymore, if at all. There are very few places in the world that really have my heart the way Arkansas does. Most people have never been to this state, nor do they intend on it. But if you’re planning on going somewhere you’ve never been before, I can’t recommend it enough. However, wherever someone is located, the people you are with matters the most. Everywhere I’ve been, having my dad by my side has always been the best part of any journey.

If one song or body of work could encapsulate how I feel about driving, and the state of Arkansas specifically, it would be “Hey, Driver” by Zach Bryan. In the record, he talks about wanting to travel back home, to a place he’s familiar with and loves to call his own. For me, Arkansas wasn’t home when I was driving there, but it felt like it the moment I arrived, I just didn’t know it yet.

WORKS CITED

- Bryan, Zach. “Hey, Driver.” 2023.
US Department of Transportation. *Average Annual Miles per Driver by Age Group*.

An Entangled Estrangement

KRISTINA DOVOLOS

“PEOPLE NEVER really leave you when every ghost comes to retrieve you.”

I read this line aloud at a poetry open mic, a confessional piece regarding the estrangement of my best friend. A loss I blame on stubborn egos, uncomfortable growth, and an inability to communicate. We lose people as we change through development. We become estranged when we lack the courage to communicate.

Becoming estranged from people, those labelled family or friends, is nothing new to me, as I did not grow up with family, besides my parents and younger brother. My father's side has either passed or lives in a rural village in Greece. My mother cut all contact with her side when I was seven, and from what I recall, it was for the better. I learned young that blood means nothing when used to excuse abuse, for keeping unhealthy relationships intact. Therefore, I deeply value those around me whom I feel a sort of soul connection with, and I have never felt closer to anyone than my best friend in high school.

“It's as if I've known you before,” I recall her telling me months into our friendship. “It felt less like I was meeting you and more like reuniting, you know?”

“Maybe we knew each other in a past life,” I twinkled.

Our friendship was like this: young and naïve at sixteen. We met upon my arrival at my second high school in the middle of COVID-19 and became fast friends. Upon countless kinship promises and pathetic naïveté, I truly believed I would know her for the rest of my life.

“There has to be something holy to that,” I explained one night to a friend during my first year at Queen’s University. “Trusting somebody the way we trusted each other.”

He and I were sprawled on the bed of his freshman dorm discussing people we’d known, loved, and lost. It’s funny how much you think you know at sixteen. At nineteen, I am only aware of how much I don’t know. How little any of us know about friendship, loss, grief. Mostly ourselves.

“I really cared about her,” I explained.

“I know. Why don’t you reach out?” he proposed.

“She’s blocked me on everything. I don’t think I’d want to speak to her again,” I stated. He and I both knew this wasn’t entirely true.

It is ironic how beautiful things look in hindsight, as this was not a healthy friendship during its final months. We became passive-aggressive and avoidant. She resented me for moving away to university, I despised the person she was becoming. The last time we spoke was in sociology class during senior year. She had been recently rejected from her dream school, and I was working relentlessly to achieve a Principal’s Scholarship alongside my acceptance into Queen’s University.

“Do we have an issue?” she proposed, as class began.

“Pardon?”

“Do we have an issue? It isn’t that hard.”

I was taken aback by her coldness. “Not one I know of,” I replied.

“I don’t understand you. You’re distant and won’t come to lunch with us anymore. For someone everyone claims to be so intelligent, you are insufferable sometimes.”

She accused me of running when things became difficult.

“I’m just unhappy,” I tried to explain. “There are things we need to discuss that you only bring up at inconvenient times. I’m not embarrassing myself in a classroom,” I expressed.

“You don’t give a damn about anything but getting out of here and leaving me with it,” she spat. “Fine.”

She was not entirely wrong. I was running towards a new life and away from the unrecognizable person she had become. Insecure about aspects of her social life, I watched as she attempted to change everything about herself to achieve the high-school-musical fantasy she never experienced. While abandoning her true self to fit in, she abandoned the friend I knew and loved.

Instead of communicating, we walked past each other in silence at our graduation. Her mother embraced me in the parking lot, exclaiming congratulations, and I have never since spoken to her daughter. What happens to love when abandoned in thin air? When the fog of the stubborn ego dissipates, my loyalty to her ghost remains embarrassingly unwavering.

I brought it up once in a therapy session. “Do you think that you became so attached to her because you lacked much family during childhood?”

“Maybe,” I considered. “I have always been fiercely loyal within friendships. We were equally attached.”

“Do you think this was healthy?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. I still don’t.

I ponder whether communicating during our friendship drifting could have saved anything, and I wish I had found this strength. Silent in the face of something worth fighting for, I left her—and in turn myself—with nothing. I am affected by this estrangement, as I have never again felt so seen by someone. I still wake up with things to tell her sometimes; I read things only she would find funny. There are moments when I feel more connected to a ghost than to individuals whom I live with.

I do not yearn to reconcile, as I cannot ask that of her. We both hurt each other. Instead, I wish I could talk to her someday and explain that I will always wish her well, despite it all. Some things are just not meant to last forever.

“People never really leave you when every ghost comes to retrieve you.”

I reflect upon this line while incorporating it into a piece of creative non-fiction for a university writing course. I recognize that when honest growth and reflections are honoured, the ghosts of those loved and lost become lessons moving forward. I like to think this counts for something.

Perhaps someday we will meet again and discuss everything over tears and hot coffee. Perhaps we were only meant to cross paths while young and learning. Maybe that is all it was. Maybe that is okay.

Abuse Is a Cycle

MARK DRUMMOND

This essay discusses a ritual hazing event, including physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, from the author's life.

1. It's Almost Over

I STAND facing east, wearing my prison-chic dark-green coveralls. The placid Richelieu river is in front of me, and a flat expanse of Quebec farmland beyond. It is a nearly cloudless day. Beneath my combat boots is the parade square of le Collège militaire royal du Saint-Jean (CMR). Around me are my fellow coverall-clad recruit officer cadets of 7 "Montcalm" Squadron. To our right are the recruits of Squadrons 1 through 6, like us, formed up in tidy rows.

It is noon on Friday, September 21st, 1990, and our recruit camp has nearly come to a close. Tomorrow we will run the obstacle course. On Sunday, we will celebrate the completion of twelve weeks of training and join the Wing as fully fledged preparatory-year officer cadets. But first there is today. Today is Initiation Day, and we have an uncertain twelve hours ahead of us.

The clatter of objects hitting the pavement behind us is followed a few Mississippi later by the pop and hiss of smoke grenades firing and fogging the air. The order goes out: “About—Turn!” and we turn in unison through 180 degrees to face a wall of white smoke. Moments later, a roar goes up from beyond the cloud. The first-year officer cadets are storming through the smoke toward us.

The first years, whose job it is to run the initiation, are dressed in combat fatigues, their faces painted in camouflage. Each of them carries a spray bottle full of water. Descending on us, they begin spraying us in the face, yelling “Ne me regarde pas!” *Squirt, squirt*. “Look down at the ground.” *Squirt, squirt, squirt*. “Ne me regarde jamais!” *Squirt*. They push our heads down and shove us into a tight cluster. The spraying water and manhandling will continue for much of the rest of the day.

We spend the next five or so hours outdoors, subjected to trials and abuses, both physical and verbal. It is a near tradition for a first-year cadet to single out one recruit for special malice. The initiation is an opportunity for that first-year cadet to lay into their chosen target. Misfits especially are not tolerated.

Some of this time is spent on the ramparts, earthen embankments around the outskirts of the campus, where the walls of Fort St-Jean used to be. There are no walls left at CMR, but the ramparts are maintained for their historical significance.

I remember running up the ramparts, then rolling back down, Dread Pirate Roberts-style, repeating this, quite literally, until nauseam.

2. A False Hope

After five or so hours of physically exhausting and psychologically degrading initiation rites, we are marched off to the mess hall for dinner. The atmosphere in the mess is subdued. Not long after sitting down, the Cadet Wing Training Officer (CWTO) makes a pointedly commanding entrance and demands our attention. “The initiation is cancelled,” he

said. The first years had “overstepped themselves with their abuses” and Wing leadership felt it necessary to put a stop to it.

We are herded out behind the mess hall. There’s a space there with a three-sided rampart forming an open-sided square. This was an opportunity for us to unwind while Wing leadership dealt with those over-stepping first years. Was anyone surprised when the first years came storming over the ramparts to descend on us again, squirt bottles in hand, telling us the initiation wasn’t over after all? In fact, “It’s never over.” Those words would become a mantra we carried as a badge of honour. I still repeat it today in times of stress.

3. The Party Moves Indoors

The first years march us off, faces to the ground, *squirt, squirt, squirt*, to our respective squadron dormitories. There’s something especially distressing about being out of the slightly more public eye of the outdoors. The Stanford Prison Experiment comes to mind.

Number 7 Squadron’s dormitory, Montcalm block, is the only dormitory located in one of the campus’ old red brick buildings built in the 1800s. The other squadrons are housed in relatively modern, standard-pattern Canadian military barracks buildings. Montcalm block is a comparatively cramped two-storey building with a crawlspace underneath and narrow hallways. There is not much room to move, but the first years had plenty of inventive, and frankly bizarre, abuses lined up for us.

The chair position, with your back against the wall and your legs in a half squat, was an everyday form of physical punishment during recruit camp. Decades later, I would learn this is an effective treatment for patellofemoral syndrome. The first years’ contribution to this exercise is to have us wear our garbage cans on our heads, to blow thick cigar smoke up under the garbage cans, and to hit the garbage cans with, was it drumsticks?

Later, we are herded into our rooms. The first years start tearing our rooms apart, ordering us to clean it up. As soon as you had cleaned up a part of the mess, a first year would undo your work and yell at you to do it again. Drawers, bookshelves, and closets are emptied, clothing is tossed, beds are torn apart. But the truly bizarre part of this “exercise” is being told to stick our fingers in our asses, and to then put those fingers in our mouths. I like to think that every one of us pantomimed this. I don’t like to think about the mind that thought this up.

4. It’s Never Over

Four hours later, closing in on midnight, the initiation is finally coming to an end. The first years march us off to the school auditorium for the official close. Words are said, I suppose some sort of congratulatory speech. We then file out of the auditorium to find the first years waiting for us. They are formed into a gauntlet, in the sense of a double file of people facing each other between which you must walk, all the while being subjected to verbal and physical abuses one last time.

Next year we will be first years.

Risk and Bliss

ELIZABETH FINKELSON

AT ELEVEN years old, I buckled into a snowboard for the first time. That was around the same time I stopped doing too well in math. As I sit and type this at eighteen, I still fidget with my neck that I can crack on command like a knuckle, loosened by whips and tumbles in the snow. My left wrist aches and clicks as I type from a similarly acquired fracture on the icy slopes. These bumps and bruises I hold up like trophies well won and worn. It's the steep price us snowboarders pay for pure bliss, a risk all adrenaline junkies must be willing to take for the sport.

At eleven years old I was lucky enough to have my first lesson at Mont Tremblant in Quebec on my last day of family vacation. Heartbeat thumping in my helmet and barely catching my breath, I inched down the virtually flat bunny-hill in a hand-me-down bright magenta onesie straight out of the eighties. I still had a pixie cut then, and funny, crooked teeth. I spent the day on my bum, bruised and blue, never having felt more delighted in my life.

At lunch break with the other kiddies in my snow camp group, I rushed to peel off my pink layers and go rejoin my friends in the cafeteria. When I caught up to them, they didn't recognize me. It took

them a moment to realize that this odd, short-haired, gap-toothed girl in all black base layers was also the giggly girl goggled up and balaclava'd in a pink onesie they'd met that morning. Without my gear, I looked like a little boy. I still laugh at that today. Hey, my father always said he wanted a son. "Well, what'd ya think?" he asked me after my first lesson. I looked at him, beaming, and said I was never ever going back. No more pizza and pole-sticks for me. Now I would become the first snowboarder in a family of skiers.

For the next six years I would spend every winter weekend on the slopes. Mount St Louis Moonstone, a little hill an hour away from Toronto, became my second home. Saturday six a.m. alarms only excusable, then, for the anticipation of the great grey rolling camp coach bus. I grew up on that bus, watching the same familiar snow-covered pine trees and ramshackle farm barns flit by. My ear buds in, squinting through sleepy eyes at the sunrise glowing gold outside the salty, dirty windows. Pure paradise on the open 400 highway. That bus saw me through braces, bullies, and lots of bruises; most of the time, though, it was heaven. Though a couple of falls left me with whiplash, headaches and a sore tailbone, I made it through those years ultimately unscathed. Other campers had it much worse.

In a study on snowboarding injuries from the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program (CHIRPP) little kids aged ten to sixteen were most injury prone particularly for male patients (qtd. in "Injuries"). The most common injuries were fractures at almost 50 percent; traumatic brain injuries at 12 percent; and sprains, dislocations, and strains at 11 percent ("Injuries"). This study, tracking hospital cases from 2016 until 2024, revealed that over two thirds of injured patients wore safety equipment and yet were still hospitalized. If kiddos in helmets still get hurt, one can only imagine the danger of kiddos without them.

One such boy in my camp group, energetic and a year younger than me, was involved in a gnarly crash. Taking a ski to the face in an unlucky

accident, he was left with a slice to the cheek, like a tectonic crack splitting from below his eye vertically down to his jawline. It looked cool, I have to say, but one centimetre closer and he would have gone blind. In only a few seconds of human error he earned a mark on his face for life. He's a coach now at that same camp, and one can only imagine the stories he tells his staring students about his scar.

At seventeen I rode that same grey coach bus again, but this time as an instructor. No longer crawling down green runs, now I was soaring down black diamonds and blues. My hair grew long, I got my braces off and boobs and said goodbye to the little boyish kid I used to be. As a newly licenced and rookie coach, I was handed the runt group of the camp: eleven boys, each armed with fibreglass, metal-edged snowboards and a pervasive need to escape me.

While one ran away, disappearing into the chairlift lines at rush hour, the youngest would cry and wail about his wet pants. Two others would wrestle and smack each other while another threw his snowboard at a car. Tapping their helmets and doing headcounts obsessively, my worst nightmare came true one day: I was short one boy. A frantic search ensued. Drenched in a cold sweat, the sight of any toddler in a familiar orange jacket sent my heart into my stomach. He was the youngest of the group and the thought of him lost and all alone on the mountain made me nauseous. Thankfully, after an hour of searching, we found him safe and sound, sheepishly smiling to himself while trying to steal from the chalet cafeteria.

At eighteen I boarded another grey coach bus again, this time taking myself on a weekend snowy pilgrimage to Killington, Vermont. This would be my first time in the state, my first trip with the Queen's Ski club, and, most tantalizingly, my first adventure without adult supervision as a newly legal adult. I cannot begin to describe the troublesome antics of newly unsupervised, newly adult students running rampant, wild, and free across the border. There were so many ways us youth could have died on that trip. Yet here I sit, typing you this and

beaming. Driving over to a foreign land with people I'd just met, I couldn't help but still feel at home. I was sitting in a dusty bus in my snow pants in the window seat. Just as I'd ridden over in my camper days as a kid and later as a coach, now here I sat looking at the great brown rolling scape of Vermont with its golden, butter-yellow sunsets and barren trees flitting by. Time will pass and everything will change. All I ask is that as long as I live, I will never stop shredding that pow. Riding on the mountain no matter how hard I fall. Everything will kill you in this life, so please, choose something fun.

WORK CITED

“Injuries from Winter Sports and Activities: Public Health Infobase.”
Public Health Agency of Canada, 6 Mar. 2024.

And Yet, It Passes

DELANEY FOSTER

“**Y**OU NEED to believe me, Delaney. These people, they’re evil—and they’re tracking me everywhere I go,” Mom exclaims, glancing over at me while I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

I start to break down.

“And dad is probably going to lose custody of your brother, unfortunately,” she continues.

What should have been a nice movie outing had, once again, turned into this. We drive down the highway, the windshield wipers screeching almost loud enough to wash out my muffled sobs. She is silent the rest of the ride.

Back in June, I’d made my way home for the first time in six months. I am twenty, but upon arriving, I am fourteen. Always reluctant to leave behind my queen bed and return to a twin, I am surprised to find that dad has actually moved out this year. I accept my reward for withstanding his marriage with Mom and inherit his king bed. Fourteen-year-old me is relieved.

“I’m so happy you’re here—I’ve been waiting to tell you everything that’s been going on! It’s all so crazy. These two,” Mom sighs, “They don’t believe me.”

Reaching the top of the stairs, I look over to dad and Thalia sitting at the table, observing their blank expressions. (Dad still comes over almost daily to see my siblings. I must applaud the co-parenting.) I had so much I wanted to tell Mom, but she spoke with an urgency that told me I would have to wait. Minutes into her story, I notice dad with his head in his hands.

“Mom—I was with you, but now this sounds really weird. I don’t think it’s possible for them to be tracking your phone—I mean, to be honest, why would they even care to? You don’t work there anymore.”

Mom was on sick leave after having lost her own mum, but for the past while she had been all-consumed in this work drama, as if to give her mind a less daunting task to handle. In her words, she’d been targeted and harassed by a co-worker and was forced to leave—and now, she was being stalked.

“It’s so much more complicated. You don’t even understand. You’ll be sorry you don’t believe me one day.”

Weeks went by, and the stories continued. First, it was her phone being tracked. Next, it was evidence that my step-mom had poisoned our dog. Then, she was speaking to a man online who knew of our address and had installed video cameras outside our house to “keep us safe.” I responded to each of her confessions with anger and confusion before trying my absolute best to unravel the stories she was telling herself. But no amount of reason would sway her thoughts or persuade her to seek help. I’ve already been through enough, I thought. I don’t deserve to come home to a new set of traumas after having worked so hard to heal what lingered from my childhood. Why can’t Mom help herself? If not for her, then for me? My outrage began to gnaw away at any shreds of

hope that I carried—hope for the strength of our relationship now, or worse, for one in the future. One July afternoon, it bubbled over.

“Mom ... I hate you!”

Tears stream down my lightly freckled cheeks as Mom comes running over.

“W-what? Why? Are you okay? Come here. No, no, no.”

“I’m really scared—you need to stop talking to the man online, Mom. I can’t do this.”

I quickly become fragile as my anger turns to despair. We stand together and embrace for a long moment, and for once, I let her hold my pain. Her, the source.

Upon returning from the movie, I go straight to my room as Mom greets our dog with a forced sense of enthusiasm. Dad had warned me of this. In late November, he had sent me a text expressing his concerns on my return for the holidays.

“Mom’s mental health hasn’t seemed to improve, so it’s up to you if you’d like to come home for the break.”

He meant well, but every mention of my mother’s state set me back to the same hopeless fourteen-year-old girl, the one who longed for an escape from her dread. But soon later, I had learned she’d been given a diagnosis of Delusional Disorder. She was not deliberately conspiring against everyone in her life; she was actually struggling with delusions, “fixed false beliefs based on an inaccurate interpretation of an external reality despite evidence to the contrary” (Joseph and Siddiqui). I felt a twinge of guilt as I realized my anger all this time had been misguided. All these things my mother was saying were not really her, but her illness, a brain desperately trying to survive a world where it does not feel safe. A wave of relief temporarily washed over my grief, and I desperately tried to latch on to this feeling—this glimpse of hope, of understanding. But when the water retracted, as it always does, my sorrow remained.

It is February now, and I have just gotten off the phone with Mom. Another offhand text about one of her delusions had prompted me to call her, and her response has once again brought me to the verge of a meltdown. This time, as I hang up the call, I sit with the lingering remnants of sadness, until soon, it passes. Sitting up on my bed, I observe the Phoebe Bridgers poster on the wall, and my dusty lamp in the corner of my desk. Mom is still sick, and yet, it passes. It is then that I realize, the stories are not real—neither my mother’s, nor the ones I had created in my head to try and justify the depths of my own grief. What if I continued to sit with my sorrow as it arrived, and allowed it not to consume me, but to simply coexist, to be felt, as an experience that needs no defining? After all, the weight of the baggage that I had been so diligently holding was never really mine, but a long lineage of hers, and her mother’s, and her mother’s. And while I may never be able to create a future for my Mom that is free of her agony, mine awaits.

I really do believe it now. I am no longer fourteen.

WORK CITED

Joseph, Shawn M., and Waqar Siddiqui. “Delusional Disorder.” *US National Library of Medicine*, 27 Mar. 2023.

The Slow-Walker Epidemic

Should We Be Scared?

AINSLEY GERALD

FOR THE first time in a long time, the temperature outside has hit double digits again. I ditch my bulky winter coat and opt for the light spring jacket I got for my birthday. I even break out the sunglasses. Making sure my earbuds are fully charged, I walk out the door and make my way to my first class of the day. I get what they mean when they say the seasons can affect your overall mood; right now the sun is shining, my phone is playing Natasha Bedingfield's "Unwritten" on repeat, and I'm finally starting to remember what it's like to be happy again. That is, until I encounter the one thing that annoys me the most.

Slow walkers. The bane of my existence.

Due to the obnoxiously narrow sidewalk that I find myself prisoner to, I cannot get around the group of people walking at a snail-like pace directly in front of me. I am trapped, and I wish with all my heart that I could say that this is the first time that this has ever happened to me, but unfortunately, this is a daily occurrence. And you know what? I've had enough. I think it is about time someone gets to the root of this issue.

My temporary captivity on this sidewalk provides me with an abundance of time to think. Why, exactly, do some people walk so

slowly? Where is the sense of *urgency*? Actually, I know exactly where the sense of urgency is—it's in me, because I was raised by parents who made sure I understood the value of hard work and respect, something that the people in front of me clearly lacked.

And just like that, it hits me.

Hard work. Respect. Why do they lack it? They're probably what the Internet calls "nepo babies." *Dictionary.com* defines a nepo (short for nepotism) baby as someone who benefits from "favouritism ... due to a family relation." The term is widely used to describe children of famous celebrities or politicians who get opportunities they may otherwise not get simply because the people they are related to have connections and influence. When applied to slow walkers, it makes sense. If everything in life comes easy to you because your parents have never made you work a day in your life and you can go to sleep at night knowing you have a promising future no matter what, is there ever a sense of urgency about anything, ever? Is there ever any ... fear?

And that's when it clicked. Just like that, on that obnoxiously narrow sidewalk, stranded behind locks of heat-damaged hair and brains that have never encountered an antidepressant: these people (most likely nepo babies) are completely void of *The Fear*. They never knew what it was like to rest their entire mental well-being on academic validation and praise from authoritative figures. Of course, they can take as much time as they want to walk to class—to them, there are no consequences for showing up late. They'll walk across that stage and get their diploma, the same as the rest of us fast- (or what I like to call average-) paced walkers and will get a high-paying job with their parents' connections. This reminds me of another specific group that I have reason to believe is also entirely void of *The Fear*: only children. Man, only children grind my gears. Just like nepo babies, it is fair to assume that they've never been told "no" in their entire lives and, therefore, have no sense of urgency as well. Not to mention the fact that they never knew what it was like to accidentally hit your sibling a little too hard and be filled with a sense of

absolute dread and fear just from the word “Mom!” For me, that was my first encounter with *The Fear*. Truly, I think it shaped me as a person (and a pedestrian).

I, however, have places to be. I am there to impress. I like to show up early and assert dominance over my peers by sitting in a different seat every time to throw them off just a little bit. Oh, I also need to do well in my classes to graduate, get my degree, and hopefully land a job that pays well enough to support myself and my future endeavours. So, in all honesty, I don’t appreciate the pace to which I am subjected. I am willing to propose that *The Fear* be instilled in these slow walkers so the rest of us can (quite literally) get on with our lives. If the prospect of disappointment or failure isn’t applicable enough to count towards their version of *The Fear*, then I know something that just might. In an article issued by *Time Magazine*, a study that was published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* found that “fast and average-speed walkers had a roughly twenty percent lower overall mortality risk” (Ducharme). If this isn’t enough of a reason to pick up the pace, I truly don’t know what is. Academic failure may not scare them, but heart failure sure as hell will.

I’m halfway to class at this point when I should be nearly there by now. I still can’t get around the group in front of me and there are only seven minutes to go until my lecture starts. I’m surprised my sense of urgency has not radiated onto the slow pokes I’m trapped behind yet, because I swear that if you listen close enough, you can hear the beads of sweat on my forehead silently screaming. This reminds me of a YouTube video I watched a little while ago uploaded by the *New York Post* titled “Here’s How Much New Yorkers Hate Slow Walkers.” In it, they strapped a hidden camera to one of their crew members and had him purposely walk agonizingly slow around the streets of New York to capture people’s reactions. It did not go well. People resorted to inappropriate language, yelling, and crude facial expressions—all of which I am currently debating showcasing right now.

This just goes to show that I am not the only one being plagued by the slow-walker epidemic. This is clearly felt on a global scale, and I'm here to let my fellow victims know that they are not alone. To conquer this once and for all, we must work together to instil *The Fear*.

By the grace of God, I finally approach a crosswalk. I say a few choice words and a silent goodbye to my captivators in my head, and book it across the street once they turn the corner.

I have never been so happy to see the overgrown vines and sunken-in doors of Dunning Hall in all my years at Queen's.

11:28 a.m. Two minutes until my class begins.

WORKS CITED

Ducharme, Jamie. "Why You Should Pick Up the Pace When You Walk." *Time Magazine*. 1 June 2018.

"Here's How Much New Yorkers Hate Slow Walkers." *New York Post*, 17 Oct. 2016.

"Nepo Baby." *Dictionary.com*, 22 Dec. 2022.

Boarding School

A Life-Changing Experience

CHARLOTTE GILMOUR

AT THE ripe age of fourteen, I was a liability. My parents must have seen it, though I didn't fully grasp the extent of it at the time. I couldn't bring myself to care about school, sports were an alien concept to me, my bedroom felt like my only refuge, and my eating habits were cause for concern, even to myself. It wasn't a deliberate descent into apathy; it just happened, like the slow unravelling of a thread.

Conversations with my parents often circled around the idea of a "lust for life" or a "spark" that propelled people forward each day. But for me, those concepts remained elusive. I was adrift.

My days consisted of daydreaming in classes waiting for them to be over, consistently received "barely passing" grades or just failed altogether. I had no interest in inviting friends to my house and wanted to be left alone. Things started to look pretty grim. Perhaps my parents sensed the danger in my trajectory or maybe they just felt an underlying worry about my future. Whatever the reason, they decided to take action.

Their solution came in the form of a trip to Vancouver Island, where my dad's old boarding school stood as a testament to his formative years. My dad always claimed it "changed his life." At first, I got in the car

expecting to hold a grudge and keep my arms crossed and walls up throughout the whole trip. Yet, I played along, partly intrigued by the nostalgia dancing in my dad's eyes. As we stepped onto the sprawling campus, I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe. The campus looked like Hogwarts. The vast campus was filled with gigantic buildings all dripping with old architecture. The entryway of the campus sported a pond with a grassy field surrounding it, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was like stepping into one of those classic boarding-school movies, where tradition and grandeur intertwined. The scale of it all was mesmerizing, dwarfing any high school I'd ever seen. It mocked the high school I was attending.

When my parents revealed that this visit wasn't just a casual stroll down memory lane but an opportunity for us to explore the possibility of attending, my interest piqued. Walking alongside a senior student, her confidence exuding from every pore, I caught a glimpse of what life could be like here. She was the captain of the rugby team, head of her house, and seemed to relish every moment of her experience. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I was so jealous of her life as she explained all she had taken on as a grade twelve student. I thought about the things in my day, sleeping, eating, and watching TV. I was embarrassed that there were kids who were getting so much done as I watched my life pass me by. Touring the boarding house, I walked through the hallway and saw girls my age all sitting on couches together huddled over someone's phone laughing at a video. I had never seen such effortless friendship. Through my two years in high school I had nothing but whispering gossip, exclusion, and frustration. I genuinely believed that was what high school had to be like for everyone, until I saw the girls in the boarding house. Each girl was so equally different and yet all so enamoured with one another. I wanted nothing more than to be a part of the fun. In those brief moments, I felt something stir within me—a flicker of excitement, a glimmer of possibility.

Leaving the campus that day, the idea of boarding school lingered in the air, hovering between us like an unspoken invitation. And when my parents broached the subject weeks later, there was no need for persuasion. I was already sold.

Fast forward to my second year of university, and I can't help but reflect on how much has changed. The strict schedule imposed upon me was like a wake-up call, demanding discipline and structure in a life that had previously lacked both. Tutorials before class, a full day of academic pursuits, sports, or fine arts in the afternoon, followed by dinner, mandatory homework hours, and finally, blessed sleep. At my old school I would have ended my day at three p.m. and sat down on the couch with a bag of chips and watched TV until it was time to sleep. At boarding school I took advantage of all that the school offered and wound up in the school musicals, practising relentlessly because it was truly important to me. I never would have found a hobby that was life changing had I not gone to my new school. Hearing the sound of a crowd cheering after a performance is a feeling that is second to none.

Those three years weren't easy—they challenged me in ways I never thought possible. But they also moulded me into who I am today. I try my very best to hold the same values that the school had been teaching me for three years. I believe there is no reason to cut corners in life, it is imperative that you are kind and respectful to professors and students alike, and getting school work done while balancing exercise and fun is not only good for academics but for mind, body and soul. The habits I formed there have become ingrained in my daily life, reminders of the person I've become. And the friendships forged in the vessel of boarding school are bonds that will last a lifetime. I still today live with girls in my university home that I went to boarding school with. Looking back, I realize that what began as a seemingly mundane trip to a boarding school campus transformed into a pivotal moment in my life. It was a journey of self-discovery, of shedding old skin to reveal the person I was meant to be. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

Eulogy

TRACY GODKIN-JACKSON

THE OAK lectern shielded me from the rest of the room. I was grateful for the physical buffer and grasped the raised sides for the moment it took to find the courage I needed to get through the next ten minutes. The visitation and funeral had mostly passed without incident—so far. This last piece was my right and responsibility to finish, and I was determined to do it well.

The room was filled near to capacity, and I was fairly certain I wasn't the only one surprised by it. The funeral-home staff had placed the dozen or so blankets crocheted by my mom on the back of alternating pews. It was a nice touch. The loud and mismatched granny squares were out of place with the muted décor. Her collection of goldenrod, avocado, lavender, and dusty-rose blankets that she made during the last fifteen years of her life should have looked garish and out of place alongside the stained glass and piles of old hymnals. Instead, it lent to the feeling that she was present and approved of how I'd set the stage.

Dad's fishing rod and tackle box were waiting upstairs in the reception room. Funerals were expensive and it was not lost to me that my parents had found one last way to save money. When Mom died in

late autumn, Dad insisted on waiting for the spring lilacs to bloom before we had a service for her. Knowing how bad his health was, I wondered then, and now, whether he knew that he wouldn't live to see it. It didn't really matter, either way. They died almost four months apart; a friend called it broken-heart syndrome. I was left to pick up the pieces and set the tone moving forward, starting with their double funeral.

I didn't have the luxury of waiting for the lilacs to bloom. My mother's death started a freefall of drama around the festering wounds of family secrets. My father's death was like a flame to tinder. The matriarch had fallen, her most loyal subject had followed. Was it a love story, or a soap opera?

My parents excelled at secret keeping and held their truths close. I was married and had a family of my own before my mom started peeling back the layers and sharing it with me in small and incomplete doses, as though the whole truth in one serving would be too much for me, her youngest, to handle. As I took in the collection of mourners, some of whom had even come to pay their respects, I wondered how much happier my parents would have been if they'd just been open. I, at least, was happier knowing that I was almost finished playing the role of reluctant confidant.

The back of the chapel was filled with my friends who had made the two-hour drive to show support. I felt their encouragement. *Friends are the family we choose for ourselves*, I reminded myself. I wasn't alone here today.

The middle of the room was taken up by family friends, neighbours, and strangers. One of them, I'd learned not ten minutes before, was my mother's brother. I'd known my grandfather was a bigamist but didn't know my mother had siblings she'd been in contact with. He'd been greeted in the eulogy given by my oldest uncle, and I now searched the crowd trying to pick out my "new" uncle. It was one last Easter Egg in my hunt for family secrets and felt very on brand.

My own family sat in the transition row between friends and the rest of the family. There were no secrets in our house; I was determined to leave them a better legacy. They were my reminder that this too would pass. I chose my daughter as my focal point. From mother to daughter, to daughter again. I wanted her to feel the connection, to understand we get to choose our roles in history.

My oldest half-sister was present. We were introduced when I was thirty. I liked her well enough, but knowing I was raised by the same mother who had been too young, broke, and out of options to keep her and her siblings was hard to navigate. I never got over the awkwardness of it.

And then, there was Bob. Bob who had messaged me multiple times, demanding to know when “our father’s” funeral was going to be. Bob, whose real name I didn’t remember, but I did know he’d legally changed it to my father’s name, moved to my parents’ small town, and demanded acknowledgment and money, both of which were denied and would continue to be denied, according to my father’s last wishes.

My dad’s four brothers took space directly in front of me on the right. Each of them had told me, at some point since he died, that they were closest to him. I loved that for my dad. But my mother wasn’t just a keeper of her own secrets; she kept the brothers’ secrets as well. A month before she died, she unburdened what I hoped was the last of her secrets. She told me which uncle slapped his wife, which one enjoyed being cruel, who stole from the others, who cheated, who drank, and who schemed. It explained the lifetime of emotional reticence that I witnessed between her and most men. Not once did I ever see her bow or break, and not once did she give me the option to, either. Idly, I wondered if one of my uncles was wearing the suit that had gone missing from my dad’s closet in the weeks after his death. I would have happily given it if asked.

The open hostility I’d been expecting was in the very front on the left side of the aisle. My deceased sister’s adult children and her husband glared at me from the front. *Fair*, I thought. I shouldered the bulk of the

blame for helping my dad shut down the illegal grow-op my nephew had been running from my parents' farm. My father had also been afraid that the same nephew was going to move in with him uninvited and take over the house when Mom died. After helping Dad with that too, there was no goodwill left between my sister's family and me. I'd offered none of them the chance to speak today and expected that I'd not see them again after the reception.

I fingered the edges of the typed eulogy I'd carefully prepared. It wasn't my role to right my parents' wrongs, and I wasn't there to soothe any wounds. I just had to keep things steady for a little while longer. I searched the crowd for my daughter's face. She smiled.

"I want to thank all of you for being here today and for being part of my parents' story...."

The Hour of The Pearl

EILISH GOODERHAM

I HAVE been trapped in isolation for three years, a prisoner of the pandemic's relentless grip. Layer by layer, the years I spent alone had stripped away my identity until I barely recognized myself. When the lockdowns lifted and the world cautiously reopened its doors, the idea of a normal life had already become a distant memory. I spent the pandemic years reading as much as possible. My days were spent delving into the intense minds of Dostoyevsky, Camus, Woolf, and most of all, John Steinbeck. It was Steinbeck, whose deep love for the rugged beauty of California sparked the desire to partake in life again: "Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream" (1). He wove his adoration into his work, the beauty of Monterey spilled onto each page of *Cannery Row*. His writing invited exploration of the world, promising a renewed wonder in the simple acts of living and being human. The burden of my solitude became crushing, and I was forced to confront the fact that I have not been living, only existing. I have spent three years completely isolated, but now I have finally booked a flight to Monterey, California.

Looking back on this decision to venture into the world, I feel foolish. My face is hot and red, and my sinuses feel full of cement.

Rummaging through my overflowing bags strewn across the passenger's seat, I try to find a tissue. Smudges cover my hands, failed attempts to wipe the black lines of mascara from my cheeks. The tears don't stop. My sunglasses can be a shield, but they don't hide the tear-drop stains that run down the front of my t-shirt. *How could I do this to myself?*

Vulnerability grips me in an icy fist; people are everywhere. My first moments in California are spent with hot tears running down my cheeks as I clumsily try to re-learn to drive after my three-year hiatus. With trembling hands, I turn the key, anxiety clawing up my throat as I ready myself for the journey ahead. *Thank you.* Growing up in the city and learning to drive stick in Toronto's busy core, I never thought a Trader Joe's parking lot would be my downfall. I remind myself that no lesson worth learning comes without the sting of discomfort. I have been stuffed with mottos and mantras, emergency stashes of wisdom—take twice daily, as needed. A victim of my hubris, I navigate through the parking lot, lost in a sea of shopping carts. *Am I speeding? How many miles are equivalent to a kilometre?* My GPS chimes as it recalculates my route, a chorus of expletives following each wrong turn.

Two weeks before leaving for California, I fired my therapist. I was not getting anything from our sessions, no progress had been made, and I couldn't take it anymore. *Maybe that was a mistake.* Our phone sessions had become unbearable; week after week, the thought of speaking with a total stranger filled me with dread. In many ways therapy made me feel more alone than I already was. This person who I barely knew was analysing me, scooping out my brains, rummaging for the reason I was so depressed. When there was nothing found, he shoved my unspooled mind back into my skull and sent me on my way. Reflecting brings pangs to my stomach. Leaning towards the open window, sea air kisses my cheeks as I drive down the coastal roads. I take this moment to breathe. I hardly remember the last time I gave myself permission to bask in the present, allowing it to wash over me without fighting back.

Cannery Row is exactly as Steinbeck promised: a poem, a nostalgia, a stink, a dream. Once known as the “Sardine Capital of the World,” the skeletal remnants of canneries line the tail-end of the row. The row had fed the world during World War II, but when the sardine population was destroyed, so was the industry. The decrepit worker barracks now serve as luxury bird condominiums. Looking out onto the bay, otters float on their backs to enjoy the catch of the day, cormorants gather along the ruins, and distant seals can be heard but not seen. The relics of the once-booming industry are juxtaposed with the outdated tourist shops that line the row. One building stands out from the rest. A timeworn wooden exterior stands modestly against the restaurants and tourist traps with a small sign that reads, “Pacific Biological Laboratories.” This modest building was once the workplace of Ed Ricketts, world-renowned marine biologist, and best friend of John Steinbeck. Ed is not only immortalized by his extensive research in Monterey Bay, but also as the inspiration for “Doc,” the beloved main character in *Cannery Row*. The row is captivating and mystical, as if the line between what has passed and the present is non-existent, allowing reality to intertwine with imagination. The sun dips below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of purple and gold and I reflect on Steinbeck’s famous words: “It is the hour of the pearl—the interval between day and night when time stops and examines itself” (37).

Mornings are spent exploring, and I make my way to the Old Fisherman’s Warf, a quaint pier that glistens against the early morning light. The Princess Monterey starts her engines and I board the vessel as the sole passenger. The boat makes its way out to the middle of the bay, an escort of sea lions, moon jellies, and pelicans in its wake. A woman’s voice bellows over the speakers, sharing facts about the bay and its humpback residents. In the distance, whale flukes flirt with the sky. Suddenly, a full-grown humpback whale breaches, creating a massive splash that covers me in ocean spray. Again and again, a symphony of breaches that leaves me transfixed.

Californian days are dipped in gold, and the nights are bathed in moonlight. The magic of Monterey Bay carries me over the hills and shores, into the sanctuaries of Redwood giants. Looking out over the rugged Big Sur cliffs has more impact than any therapist could ever have. *Nothing matters. Life is good.* I ball up my worries and toss them over the Bixby bridge. The Pacific pulls them away and throws them against the base of the cliffs, shattering them into a million pieces. One of the most beautiful parts of Monterey is Pacific Grove, a small cottage town that backs onto the tip of Monterey Bay. Surrounded by Monterey pines and Cypress trees, Pacific Grove is saturated in their magnificent aroma. Looking up into the trees, tiny orange flakes fill the sky like confetti. Thousands of Canadian Monarch butterflies that migrate from harsh Canadian winters to the warm embrace of Monterey pines every year. Clusters of orange and black adorn the trees around me, edges of wings catching the morning sunlight. Laughter explodes from my chest as it dawns on me that the migration of these Monarchs mirrors my own journey. Following the wings of Monarchs and the footsteps of John Steinbeck, I found myself again.

WORKS CITED

“Our Story: Cannery Row.” City of Monterey.
Steinbeck, John. *Cannery Row*. Viking, 1945.

Chasing Fireworks

KIANA GOUVEIA

BEHIND THE scenes at Shanghai Disneyland, it is a tradition and good-luck charm for performers to wish each other “加油.” Pronounced “jiā yóu,” this phrase is difficult to translate to English: literally, it means “add oil,” and at sporting events, it can be used to say, “go, team, go!” (Kwami). My co-workers in entertainment appropriately interpreted it to mean “fighting,” and though it always functioned as a phrase of encouragement, it was consistently delivered with a hint of sarcasm. It acted as a unique acknowledgement that reached across language barriers as if to say, “I see you, don’t give up.”

Performers are always fighting. On an average Tuesday, dancers around the world are waking up at four in the morning and painting on a full face of makeup, yanking their hair into a bun, and stretching in a tiny corner of a crowded hallway. They are hauling bags filled with ten different pairs of dance shoes while travelling to studios where they wait for hours to be seen, only to be sent home based on their looks or height. Singers are warming up their voices as quietly as they can, so their neighbours don’t complain to the landlord. They are scrounging up the confidence to put their soul on display once again, only to be cut off after twelve bars of music with the dreaded statement, “We have seen enough,

thank you.” Television actors are discovering through social media that their dream project, for which they reached the final round of callbacks, is moving on to production without them. Devastating rejection is unavoidable—sometimes you just don’t have the looks, the talent, or the luck. Any time you take a risk, it can result in either serendipitous success, or as Broadway actress Kristin Chenoweth puts it, “a deep foreboding sense that no matter how hard I tried, it was just going to fall to crap anyway” (Chenoweth and Rodgers). Still, you are expected to persist and find the balance between resilience and emotional softness, confidence and authenticity, and fearlessness and tempered expectations. Maintaining that fighting spirit is exhausting.

When you are a performer, your life revolves around your work (and trying to get it), and your work is always deeply personal. In every step of the process, who you are matters.

The ability to share who you are with an audience is a true gift. However, this gift comes with an unfortunate condition, as if it were granted by a forest witch with questionable intentions: who you are is also judged, often unfairly, on the regular. The cruellest trick of all is that you chose this way of life, and at any point, you could let it all go—but you crave the next good moment too much.

It is hard to put the moment where everything “clicks” into words—it’s connection, exhilaration, joy, and addiction. It’s living through a character but knowing you are grounded in every past version of yourself, as well as the future you work towards. It’s creating a moment in time that nobody else could duplicate in just the same way. *It’s adjusting the red curls of your wig to frame your face just right as the trap door above you opens with a blast of cold air. Your chilly fingers grab the reins of the (giant puppet) horse you ride as the lift platform begins to rise, and your eyes burn as they adjust to the orange light of the sun rising over the park. Although it is hour eight of an overnight rehearsal, you feel no fatigue as the horse begins to gallop across the stage. There is no telling where Merida’s smile ends and yours begins.*

Your hair and cape are blowing in the wind, and everything feels right, even without an audience to witness it. Nothing else can compare to this feeling—it's a scientific fact.

A study published in *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* determined that actors' brains react differently to the sound of their own name while performing in character, suggesting that they are "able to suppress their everyday self" onstage. This study also uncovered matching brain activity across actors working together in a scene, especially in the areas associated with social interaction and action planning (Singh). Performers truly sacrifice pieces of themselves to become connected to their teammates and characters in a way that transcends everyday life experience.

It's strange to imagine the strongest, strangest emotions of my life as colourful patterns on a researcher's computer screen. I would love to see the fireworks my brain could have set off while I proudly gestured across the stage to present my stage sister and real-life best friend to a crowd of screaming toddlers in sparkling blue dresses, desperate to watch a blizzard form in front of their very eyes. I wonder if these electrical signals might burn more softly in the quieter moments, like when a teenager whispered to her favourite mermaid, "you saved my life, thank you," or when that same mermaid took an extra second to admire the castle lit up with thousands of fairy lights before her prince swept her into their next breathless waltz down Main Street.

These feelings cannot be manufactured, though we try: many performers develop an internalized need to perform constantly in everyday life, so as to not let others down and to maintain a sense of resilience (Smirnov). We simply cannot give up our fight. We will do anything to chase the next moment of pure joy, knowing that our hearts will inevitably be broken again and again. What an impossible predicament. 加油.

WORKS CITED

- Chenoweth, Kristin, and Joni Rodgers. *A Little Bit Wicked: Life, Love, and Faith in Stages*. Touchstone, 2010.
- Kwami, Anthony. "What Does "jiāyóu" 加油 Mean in English?" *China Internship Placements*, 27 May 2022.
- Singh, Ananya. "Brain Activity of Actors Shows They Really Do Lose Themselves While Performing." *The Swaddle*, 10 Nov. 2022.
- Smirnov, Yunah. "Mental Health and Broadway." *Medium*, 25 Sept. 2020.

The Seven of Us

MAXIE GRANT

THE TERM “best friend” has never sat right with me. If there is a hierarchy, or a ranking system, I want to know the criteria. How does one measure what makes somebody your favourite or most valued companion? It wasn't until I was without them that I realized the reason I have never understood the term; I have been lucky enough to have friends that break the scale.

Ella and I are sitting over coffee during winter break, waiting for the old crew to arrive and laughing at old pictures. With the seven of us all going to different schools, getting everyone together is no small task. It takes weeks of orchestration, and regularly falls through.

“Do you remember this night?” I ask Ella, gesturing to a picture of her, Riley, Owen, Isabelle, Georgia, and me in the pitch black, laughing in a lake. Eamon is behind the camera.

“Definitely. Do you?” Vividly.

The windows were down, the music blaring, and all seven of us were packed into a five-seater. It was August 30th, summer's end. Isabelle was adamant about getting in “one last swim.” While everyone's senior year was exactly one week away, mine was about three. I was set to go under

the knife the next morning to repair a herniated disc at L5, knocking me out of commission for the first two weeks of school. I was uneasy thinking about the surgery, but I wasn't necessarily scared (unless terrified counts). As an athlete, I had always known injury would find me. High-school athletes sustain nearly two million injuries annually (Darrow, et al.). It was simply my turn to face it.

A lot of people handle injury well. I did not. While injured, I turned in on myself. I stopped reaching out to friends and started caring a little less about mostly everything. The only faces I saw consistently were the six other faces in that car, oftentimes against my will. During that time, there were no shortages of forced coffee runs and surprise visits. At a certain point, and I can't remember when, I gave up on saying I was too tired, and started getting in the car when asked. Most of the time, I would return home after an hour or two, forgetting about the ache in my back. I'm not sure if I realized how rare it was to have company that makes you indifferent to pain.

We pulled into the poorly lit, empty parking lot. Nobody (else) in their right mind was at the lake at ten p.m. on a Tuesday. We stumbled out of the car, one by one, and auto-piloted to the water. Isabelle and Ella were rambling on about some girl in their dance class (who apparently could not grasp the concept of pointing her toes), Georgia was swatting the bugs off her arms (why were they obsessed with her, and her only?), and the boys were singing (shouting) the lyrics of "Sweet Caroline." Everyone was walking at an adjusted pace, subconsciously conditioned to the hobble that had been my reality for the last year or so (my brother compared my new gait to that of a witch). I trailed a little behind, by myself, but not left out.

When we finally reached the water, things moved quickly. Before I knew what was happening, Owen was in nothing but his underwear.

"I am not swimming alone!" he announced.

The lake erupted into objections to Owen's choice of attire. *Why in the world didn't he bring a bathing suit to the lake?*

“Just because you guys aren’t confident, doesn’t mean I can’t be.”
Touché.

We all laughed and stripped down to our (rational and appropriate) bathing suits. We swam like little kids, tugging each other’s legs under the water and splashing each other in the face. The water was brisk, and the air wasn’t much warmer, but that didn’t seem to bother anyone. Swimming may not have been ideal for my feeble spine, but I was happy.

Later, we gathered around a fire to sing. Eamon brought his guitar, and Owen and I contributed what we could to the beat via body percussion. Though he has more rhythm than me, he had much to learn about the art of body percussion. After about three songs, Ella took a deep breath, putting a pause to the music.

“Max, tomorrow will be fine. Maybe you will finally be able to walk like a normal person after!” She joked.

“I know.” And somehow at that moment, I did.

“I love you guys.” She beamed. We all laughed and smiled. Ella had a special talent for stating the obvious.

As I reach for my coffee, I return to the here and now.

“Yeah, I remember. I had surgery the next morning.”

She nods, indicating she knew this too. While I may not have known it then, that night was about more than getting in a good swim. It was about them taking on a bit of the load I was carrying.

As she continues scrolling through photos, the rest of the available crew trickles in. Isabelle and Riley arrive one after the other, Riley’s face beet red from exercise.

“I just came from the rock-climbing gym.” he explains. *Hm. Rock climbing is new.*

I take mental inventory of his new hobby as he sits down. We chat about what Eamon may be up to right now, 1,249 kilometres away with his cool new friends in Montreal. Owen is only a few blocks away, but

he has a very busy morning (he promises). Georgia is off studying, which we could not object to in good conscience.

My favourite author describes love as the “irrational desire to put evolutionary competitiveness aside in order to ease someone else’s journey through life” (Zevin 355). I can’t help but think about the way such a sentiment prevails across time and space. Despite the familiarity of good coffee and conversation, these days things are different in our group. Riley has new hobbies I have no way of knowing about, and Eamon has tighter ties in Montreal than here with us (or at least that is what he mistakenly believes). Everyone has entirely new lives, but one thing remains true. Despite the poor attendance at this, the last coffee before we return to school, we will always be wired to do what needs to be done for each other. Just like they did for me, four years ago at a cold lake with inconsistently suitable attire. The seven of us will always work to dull one another’s pain, no matter how sharp.

WORKS CITED

- Darrow, Cory J., et al. “Epidemiology of Severe Injuries Among United States High School Athletes.” *The American Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 37, no. 9, 16 June 2009, pp. 1798-805.
- Zevin, Gabrielle. *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*. Random House, 2022.

The Sidewalk Handbook for Clumpers

ALLISON GREEN

THE CLUMPER came out of nowhere: a crazy woman with a squeaky voice and a mission. Her squeals mimicked the noise the front end of your car makes when the ball bearings go: steel on steel, chilling my bones to their core. Some metres ahead on the sidewalk, a cigarette haphazardly lit and in one claw, phone in the other, a blind monster lay ahead. Cigarette smoke wafted uninvited to my innocent nose hairs where they shrivelled up in fear. Her wobbles and hobbles barricaded any chance of me passing her on the sidewalk, as I am forced to listen in on her latest exploits on Plenty of Fish. Hey, lady! This is my sidewalk, too!

The human race is awe-inspiring when it comes to reacting to external stimuli. Blinding fluorescent lights, high-frequency noises, or others' orderless driving makes some want to pull out their hair, but others remain unbothered, and zen, even. Perhaps it is a result of millions of years of evolution, and different survival tactics, including the removal of loud lip smacking so as not to make oneself noticeable by predators. Maybe some are bothered by talking during movies because it connects to their prehistoric need to fully understand and control their environment without interruption (Fishel). Who's truly to say whether

pet peeves come with or without morals attached (Grant)? They may have allowed us to survive better or simply detect the kinds of people we wish to stay away from.

I am unfortunately not above the masses and am not a descendant of an evolutionary masterpiece, nor an exemplary survivor of all humanity's trials and tribulations. I have never acted upon my thoughts, but when I am walking in public, and people mystically forget sidewalk etiquette, I often consider violence. I never have, but to say that kicking the calves of defective walkers in front of me has never crossed my mind would be a lie. The hoisting of my leg, followed by a poignant punt could do some good. The fact that millions of years of evolution have only led to this astonishes me. We have engineered people onto the moon and they still aren't aware of their surroundings? I'm not talking about people with disabilities or those who are having a horrible day and their feet drag a little bit; I am talking about the chronically bad walkers who have no regard for others around them.

I don't understand why no one ever talks about sidewalk etiquette, but this has gone on long enough. Too many mornings have been spent gallumphing behind someone whose motions are too snail-like, their leg strides drawn out longer than you ever thought possible, resembling an avant-garde dance routine. Of these experiences, I have devised a walking handbook. You should walk as if you are driving a car: check your blind spots, keep your head on a swivel, and definitely do not look down at your phone the entire time. Even that little blue notification from your mother can wait until you have made it through the crosswalk. If you are walking on the sidewalk and you feel a looming presence, or hear a passive-aggressive cough, simply move and let them pass. Don't be that person who doesn't let others merge into your lane. It's a *side-walk*, not a *side-I'm-gonna-let-the-person-behind-me-lose-their-mind*. We all have places to be, so be a good neighbour and take two seconds to do a rear-view mirror or a shoulder check to ensure no one behind you is fuming.

Now, this being said, there's the slow walker, who can be forgiven, but those who cannot be forgiven are what I call the clumpers. These people clump together like malignant tumorous cells, growing uncontrollably and preventing all traffic in proximity from passing. They ruin lives; families and societies crumble in their presence. Obviously, these clumpers go against the essential rear-view mirror check rule and are somehow worse than a regular slow walker. A common trait shared between clumpers is carrying very loud and personal conversations as they walk. Being in proximity to a clumper means you're the subject of their ear-piercing squawks, turtle-esque strides, and in-and-out spells of tunnel blindness. No place is too sacred for a clumper: not church, not the park, and certainly not the sidewalk you find yourself on.

The anecdote for these frustrating feelings regarding horrible walkers is simply to stop being a judgemental prick. It may prove helpful to take a breath, and reflect upon the need to judge others. Psychological experts say that we can't always correctly gauge a stranger's character solely on their walking habits (O'Mara), which I find a little dull. We like to think that we know people by just looking at them for small moments in their lives, and while not true, it is still very entertaining.

"That guy is walking like he's angry with his mom because she pulled out the crock pot this morning for a regrettable dinner," or "that lady is walking with gusto, I bet she's late for work!" are common utterances of my own people watching.

Maybe that person slowly sauntering happens to be a Satan reincarnate, and the person walking as courteously as a saint is, well, a saint. But as these are only judgmental observations, I guess it is challenging to be able to tell a lot about anyone, without truly knowing them first (Jarret). I try to keep in mind that all kinds of walkers exist. After all, I'm sure some people are judgmental of my own walking habits, even if I am a sidewalk-etiquette expert.

Now, I shouldn't vividly imagine that I am so wildly important that I must be catered to, or that people must walk a certain way or bow down

to me in my presence. I think that what bothers me most in these situations is the lack of respect between us and our neighbours. We shouldn't be so wrapped up in our own lives that we can't look up and see other people's needs. While it is an entertaining pastime, it is important to keep in mind that judging others based on their walking habits can be wrong and hurtful. It makes much more sense to judge someone based on their character than how their feet cross over one another in a sequence of slow or speedy strides. I think that if people took more time to be considerate of small things, there would be a lot less cranky people on the sidewalk, myself included. My therapist has approved this message.

WORKS CITED

- Fishel, Heather. "Pet Peeves Have Benefits? Five Annoying Things That Are Actually Good to Hate." *Wonder How To*, 27 Sep. 2015.
- Grant, Ashley. "How to Cope with Pet Peeves." *Hammond Psychology and Associates*, 11 May 2021.
- Jarret, Christian. "What Your Walk Says About You ... Is Wrong." *The Psychologist*, British Psychological Society, 6 Aug. 2012.
- O'Mara, Shane. "Biopsychosocial Function of Human Walking and Adherence to Behaviourally Demanding Belief Systems: A Narrative Review." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 4 Aug. 2021.

Uncomfortable Grief

ERIN GRIFFIN

I WAS fourteen when my brother died. He received HIV-tainted blood as a toddler, a victim of the AIDS epidemic. He had been sick for a long time. He was only eleven when the disease took his life. As the older sibling, I watched my parents retreat into their own grief, consumed by the unimaginable loss of losing a child. It is the most difficult parenting situation anyone could experience. They were only able to exist; they lived day-to-day doing just enough to keep going.

Grief is a unique human experience that everyone faces at some point in their life. It is an uncomfortable topic and experience. As a culture we are not encouraged to share our grief, or to discuss the death that causes us to grieve. As humans we fear death, and because we do not want to feel that fear we often choose to avoid any mention of grief or dying. When I was a teenager, I experienced the trauma of my sibling's illness and death; there was no discussion and no support. I felt very alone.

He had been sick for a long time. I had already withdrawn into myself before he died. I distanced myself from the daily medical care he was receiving, the nurses that came into our home, and the frequent doctor's appointments. I was old enough to get myself back and forth to

school and to extracurricular activities. I immersed myself in music and reading, joining groups that kept me busy and out of the house. I built walls to block out what was going on, giving myself space.

I had close friends but rarely shared any of what I was experiencing at home. My circle of friends and teachers were shocked when the call came during a school day. "Mrs Spearing needs to see you."

My heart sank. I had known this call was coming. "I'm so sorry, you need to go home right away. Your brother has died."

A mix of confusion and concern on my teacher's face. She hadn't known how ill he was. She didn't know what to do. How would anyone know?

When I returned to school a few days later, there were lots of side glances, the looks of apology. A girl who was part of my group walked right up to a few of us at our lockers and said, "Hey, guys, where are we" Her voice trailed off as her eyes met mine and she quietly turned and walked in to class. It hurt how everyone was so unsure of what to say. I kept saying, "He had been sick for a long time. It's okay." I repeated it until everyone felt comfortable, until they stopped feeling like they had to say something. I avoided making anyone uncomfortable, while I went numb. They couldn't give me what I needed, which was some normalcy, a little understanding. When I needed them to drag me out of my own thoughts, they gave me space.

People can relate to some deaths better than others. If someone dies in a car accident or has cancer, that seems to be relatable and understandable to most people. It was the nineties, and HIV-AIDS was headlining in the news. Everyone had their opinions; I would overhear comments from people that made it clear that they would react negatively if they knew.

"Did you hear J. came out of the closet? He's gonna die of AIDS soon."

"Ew, don't eat that. M sleeps around. You'll get AIDS."

Groups of kids speak before thinking, and AIDS was thrown around without respect for how life changing and life ending it is. Like with death, people are afraid of what they don't know, and HIV-AIDS was big, scary, and most definitely unknown. The "gay disease" didn't translate to a child being infected. After seeing my brother, who at the time was very underweight and obviously physically unwell, I heard a friend say, "He looks like one of those people on TV with AIDS, but that would mean your dad was gay." I froze, shook my head, and laughed uncomfortably. After that, I put distance between us, no longer able to relax around her. How could I even begin to explain what was wrong with what she had said? There were so many layers of bias and false conclusions she had made to get to that comment. How would she react if she knew how far from the truth she was?

I remember going to see *Philadelphia*, starring Tom Hanks, with a group of friends. I hadn't known much about the movie we were going to see. The movies I had seen with Tom Hanks were funny or romantic. A few minutes in and I was in a complete mental breakdown. I didn't know what to do, frozen to my seat, drowning in emotions and panicked that one of my friends would notice that something was very, very wrong. I clamped it all down. At the end, when the credits rolled and the lights came on, I froze my face and quietly followed them out of the theatre, as they chatted about how sad it was and where we should go to eat. I said nothing. My fear of them finding out that I was living a similar sad story caused me to fold into myself. I didn't want pity. I didn't want them to shut me out because they were afraid. I didn't want to risk my social distraction.

I was haunted by the stories of families that were alienated because of the diagnoses. People were being rejected by their social circle and refused service because they were HIV positive. I had heard stories, the topic drawing my attention whenever it came up. My parents and my brother's medical staff educated me on what HIV really was. Transmission of the virus through nonsexual contact is preventable with

basic caution. An infected bodily fluid must enter the body by a wound or injection. It was basic knowledge but enough for me to understand that sharing dishes, furniture, or being near my brother were safe. I understood how it was transmitted and I knew that, as a family, we were safe to be close to my brother. It was frustrating for me to hear misinformation and not feel comfortable sharing or correcting what I heard. To do so would risk being asked, “How do you know so much?” I overthought every interaction and was usually the quiet person in the group because that kept me from having to talk about my family and the disease.

My quiet independence was a coping mechanism. My parents were swallowed by the trauma of losing a child. I focused on music and disappeared into books to mentally distract myself. I grew up fast in a way my peers did not. As an adult, I continue to be fiercely independent to a fault. It is difficult for me to ask for or accept help. As a parent, I allow my children to be independent, but I show up for them. I am at all their events, supportive and attentive, without hovering over them. I do not fault my parents for my adolescent years; we were all going through a traumatic event. However, I acknowledge that I am who I am because of those circumstances.

WORKS CITED

Arkell, C. “HIV Transmission.” *CATIE: Canada’s Source for HIV and Hepatitis-C Information*. Philadelphia. Dir. Jonathan Demme, TriStar Pictures, 1993.

Chew On This

COURTNEY HAGGITH

WHAT AM I even waking up for? The screech of the alarm answers that question: work. At seven-thirty in the morning. I groan, unsatisfied with the response blaring in my ear, and smack the button on the alarm so it knows that I am awake, but not happy about it. I reach for a clean uniform sweater in my closet, irritated that I'll again be sporting the same blue logo I've worn five times a week since the beginning of the summer. I stagger to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face before running downstairs and grabbing a protein bar from the pantry. I don't enjoy the halfway breakfast, but I never leave myself enough time to cook in the morning. I snatch my car keys and rush outside. I slam the door on my way back inside when I find out it's raining and I need a jacket.

The farm is cold, muddy, and miserable when I pull up. Or maybe I'm the miserable one. Either way, I start preparing for the elementary school that is visiting to experience a day in the life of a farmer. When a yellow school bus delivers the classes, I greet them, and the students climb down the stairs with such big smiles on their faces that I almost didn't notice the goosebumps on their arms. Why are so many of them missing jackets? Don't they know it's raining? I confirm the name of the

school with one of the teachers, recognizing it by its impoverished reputation, before walking the group across a field to their designated set of picnic tables under a pavilion. This is where the children will keep their backpacks and eat their packed lunches. The space is spotless, and just about as clean as any farm could be. I know from experience, though, that the tidiness won't last long. Before I know it, granola bar wrappers and spilled lunches will litter the ground, and it will be my job to clean the mess. Of all my tasks at the farm, I dread clean-up duty the most, but it must be done. So, after a long, wet, mindless day, the excursion is over, and I begin my walk to the pavilion to begin cleaning. How lucky am I?

"How lucky are we?" the teacher smiled as I reached their spot. "I haven't gone on a field trip with a class in years." The students giggled at this information, revealing just how fortunate they felt to be standing in the mud with me, no matter how much rain drizzled on their special day. They left in a frenzy of laughter and thank-yous, and I turned to begin my janitorial duties. To my most welcomed surprise, there was virtually no mess. Assuming the teachers had the children throw away their trash before they left, I went to change the garbage can that I've only ever known to be overflowing. It wasn't even full. Confused, but certainly not complaining, I left work and made my way home, where, upon arrival, my mother asked about my day.

"It was like they didn't even eat lunch there," I spilled, unable to contain my excitement.

"Some of them probably didn't," she stated. "I see it all the time when I go to schools in that area to screen teeth." She delivered this news as if it was a fact: analytically and assuredly. I received it as if it was a package labelled "Fragile": apprehensively and inquisitively. Mom is a dental hygienist at our local health unit, part of which entails going to schools around the city and checking the oral health of the students. She explained that, at work, they label schools in lower socioeconomic areas "high-risk," since they generally produce more urgent screening results, such as cavities and gum disease, than those in economically stable

neighbourhoods. She shared anecdotes of children relying on the schools for necessities like food and water.

“Some kids get their laundry washed at school?” I repeated in disbelief. I thought back to the kids that showed up to a rainy day on the farm without jackets. I felt ignorant for thinking it was their choice rather than their atrocious fate.

“That’s why the teeth screenings are so important,” Mom concluded with the same solemn tone she used to introduce me to the disparities in my community. “When you can’t always put food on the table or send your children to school with clean clothes, your top priority isn’t usually booking visits to the dentist for a cavity.” The Canadian Dental Hygienists Association frowns upon this mindset, urging the country to understand the importance of a national standard of dental care. They are creating federal programs to address the gaps in oral health related to socioeconomic status (“Canadian”). They are failing the children by neglecting proactivity in their work, and instead waiting until an issue arises to treat it.

One day, I will use a career in dentistry to change the course of dental treatment experienced by impoverished children in my community. I will work alongside other dentists to incorporate the preventative measures against cavities and gum disease that disadvantaged children are unjustifiably lacking.

Today, however, I will pull my sweater with the blue logo over my head, breathe in its fresh detergent scent, and bask in its warmth. I will grab a protein bar I don’t enjoy from the pantry, and I will thank God for it. I will drive to work, rain or shine, eager and determined to make this an incredible day for the children. This is why I wake up. How lucky am I?

WORK CITED

“Canadian Dental Hygienists Association Releases Report on Gaps in Oral Health Care.” *YouTube*, 4 Apr. 2023.

Between Slangs and Sincerity

A Journey of Self and Societal Reflections

DZENAN HASIC

THE COOL air of Mississauga, filled with the beautiful aromas and echoes of diverse culture and the vibrant life of each unique street, was where my journey began in 2010 when I moved from British Columbia. As a child, the world seemed gigantic yet familiar for me; it was a place where I viewed everyone so similarly, yet we all mingled differently in our cultural ways. As I got older, the use of slang means a lot more to me than before; it is not just a means of communication, but a badge we all wear as a sense of identity. We wear it with pride, yet it often can be misunderstood. Once high school began, my family moved to Oakville, where it presented me with a distinct contrast—it was a much more posh and reserved community, where the vibrancy of Mississauga’s streets seemed almost like a distant memory for me in a short period. It was here, in Oakville, that my reflection on identity, culture, and the true meaning of “coolness” began to take shape.

In the complex ideologies of self-awareness and mental health, I found a treasure chest filled with aspects ranging from guilt, self-efficacy, and the fabric of memory that stitches together my past. This old past, and the slang that we threw around like loose coins, gradually

revealed itself, not just as casual speech but as echoes of deeper societal currents, pulling us along unseen paths. These constant reflections I held were deepened through conversations with my cousin Omar, a psychologist situated in the heart of Bosnia. With his insights into the human psyche, he painted the importance of kindness, assertiveness, and boundaries in broad, bold strokes that transformed my worldview. Through his eyes, I saw how we, the people in my community, were like leaves in the wind, swayed by the gusts of social norms that surrounded us. The cost, I realized, was the authenticity of our personal journeys. In our rush to mould ourselves into reflections of others, we were losing this essence of ourselves. This eye-opening conversation was not an end to these questions I held, but a new beginning, a first step on a road less travelled by, where each step away from imitations and towards authenticity was a victory not just for myself but for the community I was apart. My memories helped guide me into a future where I could be my true self, even in the midst of a changing society.

As I wandered through the vibrant mosaic of Mississauga's streets, the echoes of "Wallahi" and "Wagwan" floated through the air, mingling with the city's pulse. These words, acting as vibrant threads in the city's cultural tapestry, resonated with me, as they were embedded into my memory. But as life's currents swept me to Oakville, those words morphed into something more personal rather than casual. In Oakville, these new words transcended in different ways. They were no longer just symbols of cultural identity or badges of cultural acknowledgment we wore to differentiate where we were from. Instead, they became mirrors reflecting my evolving sense of self. I noticed how these words were often twisted from cultural symbols into costumes that those who were eager to portray a façade of toughness or belonging would wear. This replication and low level of adoption, provided me with a broader social image of superficiality. It revealed a landscape where cultural expressions that once meant something to me, were now stripped of their depth and became just accessories. This was an awakening for me. It

showed me the feats of borrowed identities and how they can reveal the authenticity of ourselves in different ways.

In the scholarly texts and personal narratives I read, I've journeyed deep into the reality of guilt and shame, guided by the compass of my own research and reflections. Scaffidi presented me with an article that explained the effects of guilt, and how these emotions can affect the way we act in our daily lives in manners we sometimes do not take into account. This exploration, with a blend of academic guidance and experiences, has provided me with a new window of assessing my past journeys. As I also reflected on the work from Alessia on "The Relationship Between Guilt and Shame," I slowly realized that my personal growth was being affected because I was mentally lingering too much on my past self, instead of jumping forwards and moving onto my next stages of reality. Each of these insights, once super distant, now were infused with proper critical wisdom and dialogue. I found myself creating a new map of perspectives to account into my future plan of self-growth.

In the realms of my memories, a particular aura of connection stood out to me throughout my self-reflection: a conversation held with my childhood friend on the familiarity of Mississauga. The word "Wallahi" was not a word to us, but like an old gem that went missing, and that we relocated to save our lives in an almost surreal feeling of old memories we shared in that moment alongside our non-stop hysterical giggles and smirks. This moment, rich in the relation we shared, later found its contrast to the both of us, as we moved away into different cities. As we mentioned to our new friends, those same words felt like a pebble in a shoe, noticeable but unsettling. We knew something was off, as our smiles faded away, we reflected on these new experiences and how they felt like a knock-off version of a museum painting that you found at a garage sale. As we dove deeper into this almost never-ending pool of memories, we realized how we grew so much, and how even though it

seemed off, we were maturing as we realized that we at one point were also a part of a phase of trying to be someone we were not, just to fit in.

In the reflections I hold, I have woven a tapestry where each thread represents my journey towards self-growth. I have taken this journey to try and find the best version of myself without being influenced by others in ways that affected me. In today's world, we often feel like we are on a stage where we need to constantly perform for unseen approval, using our words and expressions as customers to disguise the true version of ourselves. From the days of my childhood, to now my life in university, I've come to understand the weight of my words. They can bring me down, yet empower me too, this realization has inspired me in different ways. Imagine "Wallahi" or "Wagwan" as more than an echo the next time you hear it in conversation. It can be a way of critically assessing the power of language, and our expressions, and how they can put us on a path of replication without knowing how it's affecting our self-growth.

WORKS CITED

- Abbate, Costanza Scaffidi. "Interpersonal Effects of Guilt." *Encyclopedia.pub*, 8 Apr. 2022.
- Passanisi, Alessia, et al. "The Relationship between Guilt, Shame, and Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Middle-School Students." *Procedia*, 20 July 2015.

My Hands in Hers

LEAH HERMER

THE MIDWINTER storm rattled the windows. The TV, tuned to the Food Network, hummed low, and my legs squirmed under the covers as I tried to warm up. On the other side of the bed, my grandma grasped a metal hook in one hand and pulled out a ball of blue yarn with the other. She began to twist and pull the yarn, and to my surprise, a small cloth formed. Silently, I watched, mesmerized by the movement of her hands. I stared, unnoticed for a while, her eyes fixed on the TV, occasionally looking down to check her work.

Eventually, I uttered, “How did you do that?”

She looked over at me, noticing my eyes fixed on the scarf she was making.

“I’m crocheting,” she responded, as if that would clear my confusion. I assume she feared any further elaboration would be risky, as teaching a five-year-old who couldn’t even tie her shoes how to crochet was not on my grandma’s to-do list that night.

Every time my foot crossed the threshold of my grandmother’s front door, I knew exactly where to find her. I kicked off my shoes and raced down the hallway to her room, stopping abruptly at her doorway. Her hardwood floors felt cold on my feet, and I could hear her faintly

counting her stitches. She sat upright in her bed, surrounded by various unfinished projects. After silently observing from the doorway for a few minutes, I took a running start and dived into her bed.

“Leah Jane!” she snapped, a little annoyed, as I smiled up at her.

I quickly hopped under the covers and pressed my cold feet against her legs.

“Hey, quit!” she said, smacking the outline of my leg under the covers as I giggled and burrowed my body further under the covers.

Once I was convinced her annoyance had faded, I squirmed closer to her side of the bed, tangling myself in the project she was working on, hoping to catch her attention.

“Can I try?” I uttered.

“Soon,” she told me.

Crochet was not a hobby for her at first. It was a life skill, a chore that she was expected to complete so that she and her siblings could be warm and clothed. By the time she knew what crochet was, there was already a hook in her hand. Her one-shop town and five siblings did not allow for the silent observation that pulled me into crochet. As her skills continued to develop, so did her community. Her once vacant street now featured convenience and clothing stores, and the need for her skills dwindled. Her parental role began to shift as her siblings, now clothed in cheap brands, needed her money, not her skills. While many girls moved on, my grandma didn’t give up, and as the necessity of crochet faded, her love for crochet began to grow. While she continued to crochet for her family occasionally, she started to crochet for herself. Her focus eventually shifted to crocheting for causes to fuel this hobby. I could always find comfort snuggled beside her in bed as she crocheted hats for the local hospital’s cancer ward or winter necessities for charities. She watched the TV, and I watched her.

In my thirteenth winter, my feet squirmed under the covers, but this time, with excitement. She set her project down, taking a deep breath as she sifted through her drawer to find some yarn. She handed me the

crochet hook she had just removed from her project, and I studied it carefully. I had taken some of her hooks before, but this time, it felt foreign in my hand. She slowed her movements, showing me, step by step, as I harnessed all my focus to follow along. The hook fumbled in my hand, and it felt like the yarn was getting tangled before it even left the ball. My excitement slowly faded as I realized the difficulty of the task that I was so eager to learn. A task that seemed automatic for my grandma had me questioning whether I was truly in control of my own hands. My fascination for crochet quickly turned into frustration, and while we hoped this would bond us, it gave us both grey hairs.

Over the course of a few years, she occasionally nagged me to learn to crochet for real, and I eventually caved. She taught me the same way as before, but this time, my frustration was replaced with shock. I looked down, mesmerized at the small cloth that had formed between my hands; I finally possessed the magic she held.

A few months later, my mom sat me down to explain that my grandmother could no longer take care of herself. She was moving into a nursing home, and her house was put on the market. Her new room had no TV, and her single bed couldn't fit both of us. Our little tradition was now a fading memory. While my grandma still crochets, her movements are slow, but not in the same way that she slowed her movements to teach me; this was a different slow that only age could account for.

My crocheting never stopped, but it was never the same. As I sat in my bed crocheting, I found myself lost in the thoughts of those nights, and although the origins of crochet are unclear, I knew then more than ever where it all started for me. I confided in my friends, explaining the nights I was mourning, which were soon replicated by crochet nights together. My friends and I now regularly sit squished together on the couch, unravelling our tangled projects, and giggling at the show humming in the background. I'd never felt anything as close to the joy I felt cuddled in with my grandma as I did on that couch. While she never sat on that couch, I couldn't look down at my hands without seeing hers.

WORK CITED

Brekke, Laurie. "A Brief History of Crochet." *Mother Knitter*.

The Pupils of God and Meisner

ADAM HIGGS

I FOLLOWED my mother reluctantly into the nineties-brown brick building for my premiere visit to the optometrist. I was nervous, anxious, shy, and internally thrilled at the prospect of needing glasses. I had always wanted glasses, maybe because my older brother had them or maybe because it was a visibly fashionable way to signify strong sight and smarts. I did all that it took to garner the need for a sweet set of frames: I sat too close to the television, read books with the lights off, wore the spectacles of my friends, avoided carrots. I wanted glasses, though I did not want to be examined, judged for all my faults and failures—my church already did this—but there I sat in the waiting room, next to a pile of board books and newspapers, playing a child’s game of moving wooden beads, first yellow, then blue, then red, from one end of a wire to the other in rollercoaster form, until finally the eye doctor was ready for me. I followed her into a windowless room with detailed posters of eye sockets and retina patterns, and I was directed to a machine that flashed bright lights and captured images of my small sight-bulbs. This sort of intimate examination made me anxious.

“One, or two. One, or two,” the optometrist repeated in her *accent acadien* that made my proud anglophone mother and I giggle. “One, or

two. One, or two.” After her ones-and-twos it was decided: I had successfully misread the bottom lines of the letter chart. I was now a wearer of eyeglasses. The ecstasy ran high as I selected a simple pair of metal frames and left the eye doctor a changed man.

Sometimes I close my eyes, stand in the dark for a minute, and then quickly flick them open again, just to feel the dilation of my pupils. Sometimes I stare in the mirror and try to catch the inhale and exhale of the black circles that adjust “in response to changes in light” (“Pupil”). I think about how similar humans and pupils are. We adjust to and learn from every moment, every intimidating change and challenge like the “black hole” (“Pupil”) of the eye. Coming from a Christian childhood and growing into an adult non-believer was for me a particularly dilating experience. I did not see it coming.

A few years after intentionally ruining my 20/20 vision only to regain it again with a stylish second pair of eyes, during my last year of high school and sweet Christian youth, I starred in my first theatre production and won the theatre award of excellence. This was huge. I had done drama in elementary school, went to drama festivals, wrote small plays with my small friends to perform on our small stage in the small basement gym of our small school for all the small-town moms. I had been a Christian drama leader, not by choice, but every Christian man is born a leader, and being a missionary was not working out for me (although I see now that being a missionary requires the same level of acting skills). I never thought I would be recognized for my talents and passions like this, in front of my peers, an audience of bullies and best friends. All eyes on me, it was my first taste of being seen in a secular place. I found a secular peace. I applied to Christian theatre college the following week.

I landed at Rocky Mountain College in Calgary the day before my birthday where I would learn how to “[act] for God” (“Playhouse”) using the Meisner technique, a method of acting developed by acclaimed acting coach Sanford Meisner in the mid-1930s. Sydney Pollock writes in her introduction to Sanford Meisner’s book *On Acting* that Meisner’s goal was “to impart on students an organized approach to the creation of real and truthful behaviour within the imaginary circumstances of the theatre” (qtd. in 5). I was nervous, anxious, shy, and internally thrilled at the prospect of becoming an actor, but at this point I was blind to the truthfulness that Meisner would initiate in me. I was led through the stale, fluorescent-lit dorm and introduced to my roommates: Dirty Ryan, Rock-Band Bobby, and Joel. Together we met the girls who were in our program, whose rooms were on the second floor, away from the boys’ zone to shield us from sex before marriage and a myriad of other arbitrary and wicked temptations—I could not have predicted that a couple of months later Joel would be the one to lead me, or follow me, into these temptations, not with the girls but between us. Joel and I became *very* close. I did not see it coming.

Suddenly I could see my youth slipping from my fingertips, calloused and wrinkled from doing my own dishes, washing my own laundry, doing my own groceries. Sometimes I showered, sometimes I shaved. But most of my time was spent learning lines the Meisner way and learning the ropes of sex and booze and living in the closet. David Mamet says of Meisner that he was “one of the first authentic people” (qtd. in 5). It is ironic to think of the Meisner technique now. I was far from authentic. I was one hell of a confused, dilating pupil, chasing light, chasing truth.

Which life was I supposed to live? One, or two. One, or two?

I remember being pulled into the stairwells at two a.m. to have long, extinguishing chats about Jesus and about faith, about my faith. I was

nervous, anxious, shy, but internally thrilled thinking that this might be my chance to out myself as a non-believer and go home. But I couldn't do it. I thought everything in life was easy, aside from girl-crush rejection and swallowing acne medication, but acting was tough. Meisner himself could not prepare me for this feeling of dark fraudulence. Even Joel "perceived [me] as being free and expressing [my]self" (Colbourne), but I did not feel free. Reading in the dark or watching TV too closely would not lead to the results I desired this time. I thought I had it all sorted: a good Christian boy will grow to be a solid Christian leader with no questions, just happiness. But what happens when your blind faith disappears? Joel, my Eden's serpent. His parents sent him to Rocky Mountain to avoid the secular "freedom to act out on natural sexual urges," but what happened when all Joel wanted was to "have a good time and have a level of freedom [he] had never experienced before" (Colbourne)? Adam, his serpent's Eve. Two pupils trying to navigate the darkness with fast-changing light.

I have been wearing glasses now for twenty years. I have seen a lot. I have survived many changes in light. I am dilated more now than I could ever see possible as a pupil of Christian theatre school. I close my eyes to keep this light inside. If there is one thing to learn from awkward college life and scandal with an old roommate, it is this: no more acting. The curtains are closed, the theatre is dark.

Meisner is dead.

WORKS CITED

- Colbourne, Joel. Personal Interview, 12 Feb. 2024.
Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell. *On Acting*. Vintage, 1987.
"Playhouse North." *100huntley*, 24 Feb.2009.
"Pupil of the Eye." *Cleveland Clinic*, 4 Oct. 2022.

My First Teacher

FAITH HOLLAND

ACCORDING TO Statistics Canada, the average retirement age is 65. My nana retired at 59, and in her retirement speech she said, “I will not die like my mother and sister did at 66.” Seven years later her headstone reads: “Germaine Coo, 1957-2023.”

Mom was seventeen when she had me, and after she finished school, she joined the army. The irony that both of her parents were Catholic school teachers does not go unnoticed by me or anyone that I tell this to. Anyway, Mom’s job entailed lots of night shifts, so it was just Nana, Papa, and me most nights. Papa would pick me up from daycare, and on the drive to Nana’s school, we’d play a game where I had to guess which member of the Beatles was singing. Some songs I knew automatically, especially when they encompassed Paul’s pop style or Ringo’s nonsense lyrics. Papa told me how John Lennon died and that was the first time I remember learning about death. Coffee tray in one hand, mine in the other, we’d sign in at the office and walk down the poorly lit, dirt-tracked (or slush-covered in the winter) hall. I remember helping set up her classrooms, placing books in alphabetical order, and moving desks around. She basically had to move to a new classroom every year, but she never complained. I did.

One of the most defining features of my nana was her handwriting. She would write out sentences for me to copy and I would try to replicate the Comic Sans precision in her letters; however, my attempt at recreating her penmanship resulted in smudged scribbles on a page. I blamed it on being a leftie. Sometimes I would ask to sit at her perfectly arranged desk covered in pictures of me just so I could use her swivel chair. She told me I could be a teacher like her if I wanted to, but when I was seven, all I cared about was spinning in that chair until I was seconds away from hurling my lunch all over her students' papers. Also, I wanted to be a "ballerina princess."

I used to think teaching was all about grading and lesson planning, but my nana has taught me it is so much more. Yes, I want to have colour-coordinated binders and perfectly arranged bulletin boards, but I also want to be the teacher who does more than teach students how to critically analyse a text. When going through my nana's things after she passed, we found Ziplock bags full of thank-you cards from students and parents dating back to 2001. Among the cards, she had a stockpile of unused gift cards to random coffee shops and restaurants. Once a week Nana and I would go to our favourite downtown café. She would get a latte with a sprinkle of cinnamon on top and I would get an iced tea. Most teachers I know are coffee drinkers, because how else are you supposed to maintain a classroom full of students as a job? I guess I'll be one of the few who opts to do it caffeine-free—wish me luck.

On New Year's Eve, I was struggling with what I was going to do. I hadn't made any plans, which was strange for me because I like to micromanage every aspect of my life to the minute. When I woke up on December 30th to my mother screaming, I realized that finding something to do was going to be the least of my worries.

I've been having nightmares of walking into that hospital room. Seeing her intubated. Waiting for my siblings to walk into the room. They are so young, seven and nine. I try to comfort them, but my bawling

doesn't help. Every night until I had to go back to university my little sister slept in my bed. I am afraid my siblings will forget her.

The day after the funeral, I left my family to go back to school. I am still trying to mentally process these past months. I call Papa almost every day and we talk about the weather. Yesterday, he told me he was concerned about the changing climate because when he was young, winter was consistently -20°C and snowy from November to March. He said he hates that there are days when it is above 10°C in the middle of February. Why do I care how cold it is right now? I shouldn't say that; I know this is a distraction for both of us. Plus, we used to always talk about the repercussions of global warming.

A couple of weeks ago, he told me, "I mostly miss the real me, the complete me. Nana made me feel like a complete, happy person. I have lost that." I don't ask Papa how he's doing anymore; I find that question overwhelmingly ignorant and I hate when people ask me.

I've developed a dry rim around my mouth over the past two months. It looks like my little sister tried applying lipstick on me. I don't know what it is, possibly an allergic reaction, but it's more likely a skin condition. When I look up the symptoms of psoriasis and eczema, the two main components of both are "blotches of red on your skin" and "an intense itch" (Robinson). I've got the redness covered but I'm not itchy, just chapped, peeling, and swelling. Mom said it might be from emotional stress. Apparently, "There can be a number of hormonal or chemical changes that occur in response to stress" that "can trigger blood vessels to expand and leak, causing red and swollen patches of skin" (Kandola). I don't want to go to the doctor about it so I'll continue to smear Aquaphor around the border of my mouth, let my skin shed away, and move on ... because this is something I can move on from. I'll try to move on until my entire body is covered in rashes, but I fear that as I go on, "teacher" will become a word that I associate with myself and less with my nana, the woman who taught me the world.

WORKS CITED

- Coo, Doug. Personal Interview, 13 Feb. 2024.
- Kandola, Aaron. "How Does Stress Affect the Skin?" *Medical News Today*, 26 Jan. 2024.
- "Retirement Age by Class of Worker, Annual." *Statistics Canada*, 5 Jan. 2024.
- Robinson, Kara Mayer. "Psoriasis vs. Eczema: How to Tell the Difference." *WebMD*, 2 June 2023.

Finding Myself Far Away

CHANTELLE HOLMGREN

COUNTLESS DAYS, I worked hard and ticked off all the boxes. I foolishly believed these accomplishments would gain his approval. On the days I drove the 1964 International cab-less tractor raking hay for hours in the blazing sun, my four children occupied themselves under an umbrella along the fence line, blowing bubbles and playing with small plastic farm animals. With each pass I made, I would count each of their little heads: *one, two, three, four*. When the fieldwork was done, I would gather our hungry, sun-exposed children and head home to make supper that he would approve of, which he often missed. He made a habit of working late, drinking, and hobnobbing with the higher-ups. He called it a smart business model that promoted his growing welding shop.

Once the kids were in bed, I welcomed the silence. In the hours I spent alone, I conspired of alternate realities, realities that included a career, financial independence, and solo travel. I scrolled Instagram feeds that featured the most beautiful places in the world. Thoughts would circle about the likelihood I would ever step foot in countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, or Peru. The idea of spending my life within this five-mile radius was incredibly suffocating and derailing.

Truth be known, I was not cut out for the farm life. I wish I were; it would make life so much easier. As enriching as motherhood is, there is an undying sense of wonder if this is all there is. Why did I feel so invisible in a home with so many voices demanding my energy and attention? Another truth, I have not advocated for myself. Decisions were made for me. I am reminded of this each time I reconcile the bank statements or file paperwork, and nothing reflects my name—land titles, vehicles, tractors, livestock, and machinery. They are all in my husband's and his father's name. As it is always hard to see where the sum of my choices will lead, I have systematically agreed to be nameless, all in the name of tradition.

One late night, I found the courage to tell him I wanted to travel. I reheated his supper while he complained about his trade's incompetence. I recollected my day and checked all the boxes that would appease him.

"I finished raking the hay on the north quarter and checked on the cow with mastitis. I think she might need another shot."

"Hmhm," he said between bites.

"I need to tell you something." I spilled it all while he sat there in silence. I told him I needed more. I bolstered my pitch by describing how I contribute to our growing business and farm. Two weeks is all I would need. His brow furrows, his lips tense, and he finally cuts me off.

"Ours?" he shouts. "You think you have some share in this because you spend a few hours in the field?" Suddenly, his face was so close that I could smell alcohol. "None of this is yours. I built all of this!" He storms to the door, "You are not going anywhere!" and slams it behind him. I hear his diesel engine start and watch the lights disappear into the darkness. And I am alone again.

Chunks of time are lost, locked in the bathroom, wrestling with cognitive dissonance, and trying to find momentum in an impossible situation. Two weeks before my departure, before daybreak, the travel app processed my credit card as I processed the fear of everything that could go wrong.

In two weeks, I sat outside a small Centro Histórico cafe and sipped a delicious *café con leche*. I absorb my surroundings, watching the tourists and locals wandering throughout the Plaza de Armas, Cusco's central core. Children in navy-blue school uniforms and white knee socks run across the plaza chasing a soccer ball. The square includes temples, historic statues, churches, restaurants, and shops. Dense green trees and shrubs contrasted with the dense rock formations of ancient architecture are striking.

I am waiting for my new friend Sylvie from Montreal. We met two days ago when our attempts to navigate Lima's public transportation failed miserably. We combined our efforts and then ate supper in honour of our success. We sat for hours talking and sharing our life stories, including my marriage and Sylvie's recent breakup, which led her to sell everything and travel to South America for six months.

"Chantal!" I hear Sylvie's thick French accent before I see her approach from behind. I turn and notice her wrapped forearm.

"Sylvie! Where have you been?" I exclaim. She unwraps the top layer to expose a transparent bandage. "You got a tattoo?" I exclaim, "I let you out of my sight for two hours, and you get a tattoo in a foreign country?" Sylvie is a free spirit. I wish we had more time together, but she is leaving the next day for Lake Titicaca, and I am heading north to Ollantaytambo.

"It's a *Chakana*!" she explained, tilting her forearm so I could see the ancient symbol.

"*Chakana*," I whispered back. "It is lovely, Sylvie."

I arrived in Ollantaytambo late the next afternoon, a town sheltered by several mountains deep in the Sacred Valley. I instantly loved the narrow cobblestone streets, and markets meshed with religious temples and magnificent defence structures. I toured the Terraces of Pumattalis, massive stone platforms strategically balanced with the lush green grass that grows upon them.

After my tour, I settled in a small restaurant and ordered a red wine with carrot and quinoa soup. I take this moment to breathe in the cool evening air and again soak in the stunning environment. My mind wanders, and I think of Sylvie and her *Chakana*, the ancient cross of the Quechan and Inca people that holds symbolic meaning. My guides held out this symbol in their palms, embossed on pendants, or ran their fingertips over artifacts carved into the walls of Incan sites. *Chakana* means “bridge” and “compass.”

I woke the following morning and wandered to the foyer of my hostel. I am determined to enjoy this fleeting romance with freedom that will end in eight short days. I also need a compass—a guide on this journey of rediscovery. I stop briefly and buy a large slice of papaya from an elderly Peruvian woman selling cut fruit from a rusty wheelbarrow. I laugh lightly to myself—as a free spirit. Taking a bite of the sweet orange fruit, I go in search of my *Chakana*.

One Forgetful Morning

BEN JEFFRIES

TORONTO TRANSIT Commission vehicle number 74 was my prison bus for the four inspired years I attended Northern Secondary School. It was relatively consistent with its schedule, making my morning routine easy: roll out of bed, brush my teeth beneath a cold shower, get dressed, and walk out the door precisely twelve minutes before the bus arrived at the nearest stop. This is what happens between the scenes of the play known as “My Public Life,” akin to Tom Stoppard’s meta-adaptation of Hamlet, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. I can recall one morning in particular when I had to double back to my house three times (triple back?) to grab different items I had forgotten, the most important of which being my dinky earbuds. I could manage without my life-saving EpiPen and homework assignment due that morning, but the lack of music on the way was and still is where I draw the line. The fear of an awkward pre-caffeinated encounter with a classmate was far too intense, and thus, I used my headphones as a cloak of invisibility. My forgetful morning continued by failing to recall the name of the boy sitting next to me on the packed bus. Not that I wanted to talk to him; he sat behind me in geography class and would occasionally make pleasant conversation with me at my desk, but this

fifteen-minute ride was the last sense of solitude I'd have before a gruelling school day. "I'll see him in homeroom; we'll talk then," I thought to myself. So we did, and the sweat from forgetting Kielan's name was wiped from my brow with the morning roll call.

It was considered a high luxury to be the pupil responsible for delivering the attendance folder to the principal's office, and after two months in Mrs McKelvey's class, you could predict almost the exact timing in which she closed the folder and asked for a volunteer. Like a soccer goalie diving to his left before the ball has been struck, Kielan's hand shot up at the sound of the binder snapping shut.

"But he did it last time!" said one student, up in arms literally and figuratively.

I fired back with, "I haven't done it once!"—a blatant lie. In a world where your only peace and quiet is a short bus ride twice a day, the three-minute walk through vacant hallways might as well have been a free period. Clearly resigned from the debate and her group of students in general,

McKelvey declares, "Both of you go, then. Ben and Kielan." Groans and moans from the jealous teens echoed off the hardwood floors, and Kielan and I shared an instinctive look of mischief. An epic side-quest Stoppard himself would be proud of. This was not an opportunity to be taken for granted and ensured one thing: Pik-Kwik.

Northern Secondary School is one of the oldest and largest high schools in my hometown of Toronto. It proudly houses over two thousand students annually and boasts an astounding four floors of classrooms. It has the tendency to feel jail-esque, a sentiment I'm sure most high-school graduates share with their respective institutions. Naturally, when the chance arrives to escape the brick walls, even for just a moment, students jump at it. The obvious choice for a safe house was Pik-Kwik, a family-owned and -operated convenience store just across the street from the cell block. It was actually called "Family Convenience," but after a decade of being formerly known as "Pik-

Kwik,” it had become canonized in NSS lore. Going there independently was a high risk. Teachers don’t often buy a seven-minute washroom trip, but having two people? The plan almost wrote itself.

Kielan and I exited the class and immediately began scheming. “Okay, I’ll drop off the attendance; you go to Pik-Kwik,” said a determined Kielan, “and get me some Milk Duds.” I nodded back as he assured me that he’d tell McKelvey I took a washroom detour. My mission was simple: go in and out of the safe house as quickly as possible while acquiring goods for both us escapees.

I ducked out of the building’s side entrance, but not before being interrogated by a wandering teacher. “I have a spare,” was a frustratingly undeniable response to their questioning. I quickly jaywalked across a gridlocked Mt. Pleasant Avenue, whipped open the haven’s door, greeted the lovely couple behind the counter, and latched onto Kielan’s Milk Duds and my Arizona Green Tea. I paid in loonies and sprinted back across the same traffic-laden avenue, and into the same door I exited from. Kielan was waiting for me with the same mischievous grin on his face that inspired our mission. The Rosencrantz to my Guildenstern. We placed the comically large can and box in my hoodie pocket and crept back into the classroom. I’m sure we weren’t fooling anyone, but at that moment, I felt invigorated by our quick thinking and teamwork that allowed us a sweet treat during the morning lecture. I’m sure Kielan felt the same.

That same day, I boarded the 74 with my head down and music blasting. Finally, some peace and no quiet. I spotted Kielan sitting by himself, also wearing earbuds and trying not to draw any attention. Unlike the morning trip, our eyes caught one another’s, and we simultaneously removed our headphones. He offered me a Milk Dud, and I laughed subconsciously at the fact that Milk Duds had brought us together. I don’t even really like them, but I took one anyway. We chatted vigorously and animatedly about another glorious day at school, and what tomorrow’s adventures may bring before I reached my stop.

In one of his final living moments, Guildenstern says this: “We cross our bridges as we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and the presumption that once our eyes watered.” I write this today sitting on my living room couch, with Kielan cooking breakfast in the kitchen behind me. He is my roommate and best friend in the world. I’m so glad we escaped together.

My Friend Who Moved Away

MIRANDA JENSEN

FINALLY JUNE, I was almost done with my first year of high school. The first of the worst four years of my life. On June 14th, I sat with my friends in our usual booth in the library before our first class of the day. My friend Baxter walked up to us with a bag of his favourite candy, as he told us, buttered-popcorn jelly beans. His mom, whom I'd known since preschool, bought them for him. I remember thinking that was very sweet of her to do.

“Try one!” he said to the group with a sweet smile.

We all reluctantly grabbed one, as if the candy would bite us when we reached into the bag.

“Ew! How do you like these?” I said in complete disgust.

He laughed and popped another into his mouth. As he reached into the bag of jelly beans, his sleeve rolled up slightly to reveal the beginning of self-inflicted scars that had resulted in him being admitted to the hospital for a few days. I had to fight to conceal my shock. The bell rang, startling me back to reality. We all got up and hurried off to class.

What happened between that morning bell and sitting in my last-period English class the next day, June 15th, is a complete blur. Not that it was bad, just incredibly boring. I was never a fan of high school. While

chatting with my friends before class, my ninth-grade English teacher walked in. I hated her. She was on a consistent power trip that I thought was unbearably embarrassing. Right before she began to speak, I felt my phone buzz. It was my mother asking if I had seen Baxter that day. This was weird because I couldn't remember the last time the two of us talked about Baxter. I couldn't recall if I had seen him that morning before class, but something in my stomach wanted the answer to be yes. Can you guess what the answer was? Hint: Not the one I wanted it to be.

Another text from my mother: "There were ambulances and police in front of his house yesterday." The two of us knew what this meant. Just a year before, the same scene of police and ambulances was in front of another one of my classmate's house. Her mother had shot herself in the front yard.

My teacher at the time looked dishevelled, which solidified my fears. She carefully (as she knew her young audience) said the words no kid ever wants to hear.

"A student in my other English class passed away yesterday."

I felt time stop at that moment. I could feel my stomach drop and my face lose all colour. Baxter was the third person I knew to have killed themselves by that point in my life, but I think his death affected me the most. He was my age. Freshly fifteen. We had just eaten jelly beans together.

I didn't cry, I hated pity and the embarrassment I felt after showing any negative emotion. However, my friend cried for me after I told her I was friends with the boy who died. I felt guilty as I choked back tears and shrugged with a small smile to not seem fazed. Looking back, I wonder if my friends thought I was cold-hearted for this reaction.

The only moment my ninth-grade English teacher looked kind to me was when she told me I should go to the counsellor's office. I had a strange urge to hug her and weep into her shoulder, but walked out of the classroom. I had never really been to the counsellor before, and wish I never had to. Therapy has helped me process this situation long after, but

my school's idea of therapy was a joke. I stood in the counsellor's office with tears filling my eyes but a stoic expression.

"Do you want to talk about it?" they asked.

"No, thank you."

"If you want to talk about it, we're here."

I nod as the bell rings.

"I have to catch my bus," I spit out.

I didn't want help. At least not what they had to offer. Being pulled from class to have a thirty-second conversation about my dead friend was not what I thought high school would be like.

I was going over to my best friend Megan's house that night, so I ran to her bus and sat down. The tears in my eyes dried and I had a horrible lump in my throat from the lack of crying. Megan and I talked very little about the situation at hand..

"Did you hear?" I asked her

"Yeah, the guidance counsellor called me down."

"Me, too. Are we still going to Sound Of Music?"

"I'm down!"

It was the free night of the yearly music festival in our town.

When we got to Megan's house her mom asked us if we had heard about Baxter. We talked to her about it for a bit. I remember that the conversation felt more like outsider gossip than it being my friend who died.

"Lisa told me Maya came home and locked herself in her room. She won't talk to anyone."

Lisa is Maya's mom, and Maya was good friends with Baxter. We immediately called her and invited her to the festival to distract her. She seemed so happy to come with us, and we were happy to have her. Maya is now my roommate in university.

After the festival, I went home and sobbed harder than I ever had. Finally alone.

Maya tried to set up a memorial, but the school said they “didn’t want to give anyone ideas.” They lost all of our respect immediately.

My friends never talk about it now, but we all remember. We all know where we were. Megan was just outside her business classroom when a friend told her. When suicide is brought up, Maya and I avoid making eye contact.

Baxter’s parents asked all of his friends if they wanted to give something to bury with Baxter, which got me thinking of the many things I could give. Childhood photos, birthday cards. Then it hit me. I got my mom to drive me to Bulk Barn where I bought a bag of buttered-popcorn jellybeans. To this day those gross jelly beans remind me of Baxter, in the best way possible.

Baxter’s death opened up my eyes to suicide and my own mortality. It affected my friends and me greatly, which is something I think is important for people to realize. I thought it was something that I would see in the news every once in a while, never something that would happen to someone I knew. Suicide isn’t something that just ends the life of the person suffering; it hurts people you love. It puts the idea of suicide in their head. It’s put the idea in my head for six years now. But I know the effects, I know it would kill everyone I love along with myself.

My mom’s friend, Jan, who’s been a doctor for decades, told me that suicide is an impulsive action. It’s a last resort. But, even though I never believed it when I was suffering through suicidal ideation, life gets better. Reflecting on the loss of Baxter, I see how it negatively impacted me, but also how it helped me to realize that I need to prioritize my mental health.

Baxter wrote a note that said, “Please tell my friends I moved away.” He was kind like that.

WORKS CITED

- Bartik, Warren, et al. "The Psychological Impact of Losing a Friend to Suicide." *Australasian Psychiatry*, vol. 21, no. 6, 29 July 2013, pp. 545-49.
- Laing, Megan. Personal interview, 12 Feb. 2024.
- Ruano, Jessica. "Surviving Suicide Loss." *Mental Health Commission of Canada*, 17 Oct. 2023.
- "Suicide (for Teens)." Edited by Christina M. Cammarata, *KidsHealth*.

Beach Days with Granny

CAYLEEN KEARNEY

I GREW up in London, Ontario, where the closest beach, Port Stanley, is forty minutes away. Still, it felt like a lifetime in the backseat of my Grandmother's car on a hot summer day. We'd roll all the windows down on the way up, feeling the warm breeze on our hot, sticky skin. I knew if my Grandmother had extra money that day as we would stop into Sparta, a small village of less than two hundred people. In Sparta there is a two-storey knick-knack store called Sparta Country Candles where we'd indulge on free samples of their homemade fudge, one as we walked into the store, and one as we walked out. I'd dream of my Grandma buying a big slab of fudge and sharing it with me, but she never did, which is why it probably always tasted so good. I loved the feeling of that place, like a home from the past with an assortment of tiny rooms filled with treasures from floor to ceiling. Floors that creaked and stairs so narrow I wondered how anything of size was ever delivered up them. At the top of the stairway was a bathroom open to the public decorated with vintage pieces, including a clawfoot bathtub that my Grandmother admired on every visit. I often questioned if many people used the washroom there, aside from myself, as any noise made inside of it echoed through the entire upstairs of the building that was built in 1838. I made sure to use

the bathroom on every visit as I would pretend, for just a moment, that I lived in that house. After we walked through, my Grandmother would make tiny pleasantries with the cashier while taking another sampling of fudge as we headed out the door.

We'd carry on in my Grandmother's little blue car to the local convenience store up the road, where she would buy a stack of pull lottery tickets from the big see-through bin on the counter. The air always felt heavy and smelled stale in that store, but the clerk was always happy to see my Grandmother's face, letting her know if their bin had been picked through recently by other pull lottery ticket enthusiasts or not. My Grandmother was convinced that small towns, like Sparta, offered more of a chance of winning, as fewer people were purchasing; she was likely right, as it was not very often that the clerk would report the bin as "picked through." Sometimes, she'd let me pick the tickets; she was convinced I was good luck after some of the ones I picked won her some money a few times. I cannot recall what we hoped the row of pictures would be. Still, I always liked the cherries, so much so that I got a set of them tattooed below my ankle bone in a rash decision in my early twenties. A decision I deeply regretted, as the needle from the tattoo gun touched what I later learned is the most sensitive part of the human ankle due to the thinness of the skin.

My Grandmother would complain about the cost of gas being forty cents to the litre. When we would arrive, she'd unpack the carefully packed picnic she made for us. Sandwiches on thick whole-wheat bread wrapped in parchment paper with so much care that it felt like I was receiving a present when she would hand one to me.

"Careful, now, I can save that," she'd tell me when I was finally old enough to have the responsibility of unwrapping my own sandwich. She was ahead of her time when it came to recycling. Nothing was ever in Tupperware unless it had a previous occupant of margarine that had resided in it.

She even saved her milk bags after use, something my mother criticized her about, as she saw it as a symbol of being cheap instead of resourceful, until I started doing it in my adult years, convincing her of their durability. “They are nice thick bags; I never worry about what I am packing spilling. Plus, it’s good for the planet.” I told her.

Sometimes, my Grandmother would shave her legs at the beach. A private affair for most, but my Grandmother would always look to ensure no one was close enough to see her. I never minded; I liked watching how she carefully lathered her legs up with her Pears soap and then ran the razor over the lather, leaving lanes of smoothness behind every stroke. I’d sit on my towel with my feet digging into the hot sand, wishing I could shave my legs under the hot sun. She was particularly fond of this task at Port Burwell, a beach filled with rocks, making it an unpopular place for most; however, it was the perfect destination for personal semi-private hygiene. My father laughs with embarrassment at the mention of my Grandmother doing this, but I thought it was neat. I think almost everything about my Grandmother is neat. She has a rustic classiness about her that I’ve yet to find in anyone else.

I rarely remember my Grandmother ever going in the water, except to cool off on the hottest days, and never in her later years, especially if we were at Port Burwell, as she detested the feeling of the rocks on her feet. Nevertheless, despite the drive, Port Burwell was the beach she became the fondest of because the crowds at Port Stanley became too suffocating to enjoy, and the parking now came with a fee. She would sit under her big beach umbrella while I ventured out into the freezing cold water. My ankles would ache until they either became numb or accustomed to the rigid temperatures. I could never tell the difference; I would just eagerly wait for the moment to pass. I’d swim for hours while she yelled at me from the shore if I swam out too far. She’d sip the one glass of red wine she’d allow herself in the plastic reusable stemmed wine glass that she’d then meticulously wipe down and pack away for next time.

We often stayed at the beach until sunset; I loved feeling the hot air lift as the cool air drifted in with the setting of the sun, making the cold water feel warmer. We'd get Mackie's fries at Port Stanley, and I'd drown mine in their sweet sauce of secret ingredients. At Port Burwell, we would go to the little food vendor across the street and get an ice cream, and on the rare occasion when we would take the hour-long drive to Bayfield, we would stop at my Grandmother's friend's house. This woman made beautiful stained-glass pieces from glass that was purchased or found along the shores of Lake Erie. My Grandmother and I would spend countless hours collecting sea glass for her. "Make sure the pieces are not too small and that the edges are rounded, or they are no good, and you'll have to throw them back into the water for someone else to find," my Grandmother would tell me.

I loved our beach adventures, and as I grew, I learned to do them on my own. Until my thirties, I thought parchment paper was a novelty until I saw it in a dollar store and bought three rolls with more excitement than if I had won the lottery. Now, I pass parchment-wrapped sandwiches to my children, who accept them like little presents, while we sit on various beaches along Lake Erie, Huron, and Ontario. I complain about the price of gas at a dollar forty-five a litre, and I skip the convenience stores. I learned from my Grandmother that you'll spend more on pull-tab lottery tickets than you'll ever win. I do not shave my legs on the beach, as I tried it once and got the most horrendous razor burn. I use a big umbrella, and I still do not let an abundance of rocks get in the way of enjoying the water.

My children laugh and play in the sand. I wonder if our beach adventures together will have the lasting impact on them that my adventures with my Grandmother had on me. The beach has become my sanctuary throughout my life, whether happy or sad. I've driven for hours and miles alone, with friends, and now with my children, visiting various beaches across Ontario, successfully creating these warm moments I once shared with my Grandmother. I rarely attend the beaches we once

did. Port Stanley is now a tourist destination where people fight for parking and walk for miles to find a spot to put themselves and their families for the day. Bayfield beaches have all but washed away as the land is devoured by the lake, or at least the ones I remember. Port Burwell is still unkept and covered in rocks; the dip into the water has become steeper, leaving it too big and uncertain for my children to safely enjoy.

My Grandmother will be eighty-six this year, and she told me last fall that she still drives out to Port Burwell every summer, at least once a year, to sip on her one glass of red wine, enjoying the view, while basking in the memories of her life—something she says she prefers to enjoy on her own now. She was happy to hear that I collect sea glass with my children, and reminded me to tell them to throw back any pieces with rough edges, as they aren't ready to be picked yet, which as an adult I realize isn't terrible life advice, either.

WORK CITED

“Sparta Country Candles.” *Southwest Ontario Tourism Corporation*.

Clusterbusting

JAMES KENNEDY

1980: Lombard, Illinois

“I’VE GOT good news,” the doctor said. “You don’t have a brain tumour.” Bob stared at him as his disbelief turned to disappointment. What else could it be? If it was a tumour, there would be an explanation, there could be surgery, and then it would finally be over. What will he tell Mary and the kids? Ever since that first day, they’ve been holding their breath, terrified he might drop dead at any moment. He’d never forget it: the furniture in the room, the way Mary’s hand shook when she hesitated over 9-1-1, or the look of panic on his son’s face. As a father, he was supposed to protect him from fear, not be the cause of it. After that first bout of suddenly severe and inexplicable head pain, the strange affliction returned at the same time every day. “I don’t know what to say, Bob,” the doctor admitted. “Maybe we should try something else.”

2006: Toronto, Ontario

James left the restaurant early and was already asleep when something in his dreams started nagging at him—a sinew-pulling, taught-rope-snapping sensation that crawled out of his nightmare like a feral beast, dragging him awake. His eyes flicked open in the red glow of the alarm clock. “Not again,” he groaned. It was three in the morning, and the monster was back, clawing from deep within the side of his face, behind his eye, around his ear, and down his neck. A crippling crescendo that increased in urgency, multiplying in strength, and dividing into a terrible host of bitter creatures, running up and down the web of nerves in his face and head.

James yanked open the fridge door, rattling the contents as he searched for anything cold and numbing. He grabbed an old bag of peas from the freezer that crackled and hissed as the icy pebbles moulded to the contours of his head. His top lip rolled over his front teeth when he opened his mouth wide, crying out wordlessly while pacing around the kitchen. This would be the end of his short life, he thought. In a few days, someone would find him stuck to a bag of expired vegetables, face down and dead as a doornail on the cracked yellow linoleum.

2006: Boston, Massachusetts

“He was banging his head against the wall,” Bob said, smashing his fist on the boardroom table for emphasis. Bob was a tradesman and had never been to university, but here he was giving a presentation at Harvard Medical School. Still, the solemn administrators remained unphased.

“But why us,” one of them asked. “Why not neurology?”

Bob was hoping for this question. “The reason we are coming to the psychiatry department,” he replied, “is because this patient was accused of faking it. The doctors said his condition was impossible, so they detained him. They held him against his will and let him suffer for weeks,

convincing him that his problem was psychological. He was alone and afraid, without any treatment, and the *professionals* who are supposed to *help* believed it was nothing but imaginary.” The nodding of bowed grey heads and the hen-scratching of pens told Bob that maybe, just maybe, he was getting somewhere.

Bob now knew his condition to be called cluster headache, but anyone lucky enough to get a diagnosis will agree that the name doesn’t fit the ordeal. Minimizing a rare form of trigeminal neuralgia, which has been dubbed the worst pain known to man, as a mere headache is more than insulting. As movie star and little-known sufferer Daniel Radcliffe says, it makes a bad migraine look tame.

Textbook cluster headache occurs on one side of the head, lasting up to three horrific hours. During an attack, the victim is completely crippled, unable to think clearly, communicate, or do anything but cower, cry, and convulse in agony. The “headaches” come back again and again over a “cluster” of time, often at the same time, for months or even longer.

“We realize psilocybin is unconventional,” Bob continued in his presentation to the Harvard executives, “but we have pages of patient testimonies confirming that it works. I’ve tried over seventy different medications myself: histamine, triptans, Verapamil, Imitrex—you name it—but magic mushrooms are the only effective remedy, and we need you to investigate and hopefully prove this treatment with an honest and diligent research study.”

So, they did—and the results were irrefutable: nearly all participating patients reported that psilocybin ended their attacks, and over half said their cluster period was terminated completely.

2006: Toronto, Ontario

When James didn’t die, he went to the emergency dentist at Yonge and St Clair. His friends were supposed to meet him there, but it was

raining. “Just rip it out,” he said. “I don’t care. I can’t take this anymore.” The receptionist started on the importance of teeth, but James was already on his phone. “I don’t have the money. I’ve missed too many shifts.” He hadn’t been back since the last brunch when he tried to work and spilled hot coffee on a child. The memory made his stomach lurch. “Okay, thank you, Granny.” James said, ending the call.

Once she sent the money for the extraction, he was up on the dentist chair, pulling against the wrenching forceps as the tooth crunched and broke free. After he paid, he walked home on his own, bloody-mouthed, and rain-soaked to the core.

When the monster returned that night, James immediately grieved the loss of his tooth. Feeling solitary, stupid, and scared as usual, he picked up his headache journal—one recommended by some befuddled doctor—wiped his tears, recorded the time, and wrote: *It’s not about the hurting. It’s about the hopelessness. I just wish someone would help me.*

2024: The Internet

James and Bob’s paths finally crossed during a video call. It took ten years for James to be diagnosed with episodic cluster headache, meaning he has longer remission periods than those afflicted with the chronic form. Bob had spent the last twenty years leading Clusterbusters, one of the world’s largest patient advocacy groups, teaching doctors and other professionals how to recognize, diagnose, and help people like James. Bob and Mary were now the proud grandparents of nine. This was the first time James met another “clusterhead.”

“Having someone understand you without having to explain yourself is life-changing,” Bob said, and James knew it was true. For a moment, he saw Bob as an older version of himself. Bob’s validation was so compelling that it left James goose-bumped and misty-eyed.

Bob didn’t want to discuss the reason they’re called suicide headaches. “We’ve all lost friends over the years,” he said. “I’ve had

many late-night phone calls, like the worried wife whose husband is in the backyard with a gun to his head. I get more of those calls than I care to remember.”

Instead, they talked about how Daniel Radcliffe probably worries that the cluster headaches will ruin his acting career, just like they sabotaged James’ old restaurant job. They both agreed that Daniel Radcliffe could make a great champion if he would only get involved.

By the end of the call, James learned that Bob and many others had teeth pulled just like him, and that Bob uses high-flow oxygen to stop his attacks and psilocybin to break the cycle.

2024: Hamilton, Ontario

On the verge of a new cluster, during the quiet hours between attacks, James finally decided to seek out the magic of the mushrooms. He was always reluctant when it came to psychedelics, likely from the trauma of his mom finding him under a blanket, opiate-eyed and paranoid. Still, James held the dried fungus between his thumb and forefinger. He winced at the smell—it was a bit too much like the stench of wet, sweaty feet. Then, popping it in his mouth, he lay down on the bed in the glimmer of candlelight. Closing his eyes, James’ mind quickly began to wander. He started thinking about Bob’s legacy, Daniel Radcliffe’s silence, and his own years of privately persevering while being lost, broken, and alone. James imagined the man with the gun to his head, and the other man locked in the psych ward, and felt a strong kinship for these strangers. He wondered if there is something more to being a “clusterhead” than just surviving. Perhaps the condition is like a conduit that links all of us together on a psychic or inter-dimensional level, he speculated. James recalled the Theory of Everything, and how this reality could be a projection of a higher dimension. He saw colours and shapes, and remembered that patterns in nature repeat themselves because of the laws of physics: trees, veins, roots, nerves—the magic

mushroom's mycelium. He pictured electricity sending signals along these pathways, impulses along circuits that link people and things across time and place. Soon, he drifted off into unknown dreams, comforted by a joyful sense of oneness with the universe. Miraculously, James slept undisturbed that night. In the morning, he awoke with the triumph of winning his first battle against the beast.

James hasn't had a cluster headache since.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Ella. "Daniel Radcliffe Takes Blood Pressure Medication. He's 25." *The Independent*, 19 Aug. 2014.
- "The Cluster Headache Advocacy Group." *Clusterbusters*, 8 Feb. 2024.
- Kennedy, James, and Bob Wold. "Cluster Headache Interview and Discussion with Bob Wold, Executive Director and Founder of Clusterbusters Inc." 14 Feb. 2024.
- Sewell, R. Andrew, et al. "Response of Cluster Headache to Psilocybin and LSD." *Neurology*, vol. 66, no. 12, 27 June 2006, pp. 1920-22.

A Journey of Resilience and Growth

Reflections on Five Years at Queen's University

JAYDEN KERR

I WAS surrounded by a sea of teammates as the final whistle sounded, signalling the conclusion of another intense game. The air was heavy with the sense of both success and tiredness. That brief instant, with adrenaline pumping through my body and crowd cheers resounding in the background, made me realize that this was not just the end of a game but the beginning of a journey that would bring hardships, challenges, and ultimately victories.

My adventure at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, began with the adrenaline rush of varsity sports mingled with the sobering realities of serious academic work. It was a difficult task to balance the demanding schedule of football practices, games, and team spirit with the demanding academic requirements of university study. Nevertheless, in the middle of all this chaos, I was thrown into the thick of things and made a promise to write a story of tenacity and resolve that would ultimately determine the course of my time at university.

My academic career at Queen's University began with a mixture of nervous excitement and cautious fear, a feeling shared by many first-year students. I started my new chapter with high hopes and a strong

determination to succeed academically, exuding eagerness. But moving from high school's regimented atmosphere to the demanding needs of a university proved to be a much bigger hardship than I had anticipated. Over the first semester, I was immersed in a frenzy of academic activities, including lectures, homework, and extracurricular activities. The rigorous intellectual demands of university-level schoolwork soon became evident, undermining my previously developed time management abilities. As a result, I started to study late at night regularly as I struggled with topics like calculus, read literary texts critically, and dedicated myself to learning intricate molecular pathways. Beyond the classroom, I ran into a plethora of personal roadblocks that made navigating university life even more difficult. First-time apartment living abroad evoked a strong feeling of homesickness, highlighting the challenges of adjusting to life away from home. Apart from my scholastic obligations, the fine equilibrium between preserving a social life, engaging in extracurricular pursuits, and taking on part-time work added to the burden of my duties, causing me to always feel overburdened and overextended.

Despite the demanding coursework in university, my involvement in varsity sports helped to mould my overall experience. In my freshman year, I joined the football team, which gave me a much-needed outlet for stress reduction and a strong feeling of community within a competitive setting. I gained an appreciation for commitment and sacrifice through my early-morning practices, strenuous workouts, and long travels for away games. These qualities carried over into my academic endeavours. The life skills I learned from varsity athletics extended beyond the football field and into other facets of my time at university. My ability to overcome academic obstacles was bolstered by the endurance and resilience that came from my demanding workout regimes. Moreover, the cooperative essence of team sports taught me priceless lessons in communication and teamwork, which improved my capacity to succeed in group assignments and cooperative pursuits. To sum up, participating

in varsity athletics gave me a sense of community and stress release, but it also taught me valuable lessons about discipline, collaboration, and resilience that improved my time at university. I developed a greater awareness of the connection between academic and physical endeavours via the struggles and victories of athletic competition, which greatly aided in my overall growth as a student-athlete.

Unexpected events occurred during my third year at Queen's University, which greatly influenced my academic career. My well-planned course was upset when I had to temporarily stop studying due to a family issue. I experienced a period of deep anxiety and self-doubt as a result of this unexpected turn of events, as I struggled with the accompanying emotional turmoil and existential questions. During the difficult times, I found solace and strength in the resilience I had acquired by participating in varsity athletics and intellectual pursuits. I decided to take the issues head-on by using the principles I learned from the football field: resilience in the face of uncertainty and perseverance in the face of adversity. I set out on a journey of self-discovery and growth using determination as my compass. I navigated the choppy waters with unyielding resolution and came out of the experience stronger and more resilient than before.

When I came back to Queen's for my senior year, I was determined to make up for lost time and push myself harder than ever before. I applied all my energy to my extracurricular activities and academic studies, and I faced the obstacles that lay ahead with grit and tenacity. I conquered challenges with persistence and determination, and I also came out of adversity with a stronger feeling of resilience. Upon approaching the end of my time at university, I am struck with a deep sense of appreciation and reflection. When I look back over the last five years, I see that my time at Queen's has been like a beautiful tapestry, full of both successes and setbacks. These encounters have shaped me into the person I am today by acting as crucibles for my development. Through overcoming the difficulties of both personal and academic

rigour, I have learned the transformational potential of adversity. Adversity has taught me to find my inner strength, to keep going when things become tough, and to overcome obstacles with resiliency and tenacity. As I get ready to start the next phase of my trip, this discovery has given me a renewed sense of confidence.

As I approach graduation, I consider the enormous value of my time at Queen's University. It has been a life-changing journey of growth and resiliency, filled with obstacles surmounted and disappointments avoided. During my time at Queen's, I had challenges that tried my perseverance and failures that could have easily destroyed me. But because of the knowledge and experiences I had acquired, I was able to overcome each obstacle and come out stronger and more resilient. I feel a great deal of gratitude for the individuals who have supported me along the road and the events that have shaped who I am as I get ready to start the next chapter of my life. Equipped with the resilience and tenacity teachings I acquired at Queen's, I am confident and upbeat as I face the future. Even though the future may hold unknowns, I can't wait to use the abilities and fortitude I've developed during my time at Queen's to take on the chances and challenges that lie ahead. I'm excited for the experiences that lie ahead of me outside of campus and proud of how far I've gone as I say goodbye to this chapter of my life. Ultimately, my academic experience at Queen's has been one of self-discovery, progress, and perseverance; it has equipped me for whatever lies ahead.

Echoes of a Fading Wish

A Journey into the Mists

SARAH KOTICK

THE AIRPLANE was filled with a mix of exhaustion and silence as I settled into my seat beside my mother. The faint scent of airplane food lingered in the air. I turned to her; the weight of our recent journey was pressing heavily on my mind.

“Mom,” I began tentatively, “this trip ... it’s been a lot to take in.”

My mother nodded. “It has,” she agreed, her voice soft. “But it’s what your grandmother wanted.”

I couldn’t help but feel a surge of emotion at the mention of my grandmother. Born in a quaint Scottish town of rural Dundee, my grandmother left the uncertainty of post-war Scotland. She fled the UK with a one-way ticket to Toronto, Ontario. She passed away in 2020 at the age of eighty-two, but not before making one final wish: to return to her roots and have her ashes spread off the coast of Dundee. In the months leading up to her passing, my grandma entrusted my mother with a solemn wish: to celebrate her life on a journey across the landscapes of her memory. With tears and tender nods, my mother accepted this last request, embracing it as a guiding light through her grief.

Once settled at the hotel, we proceeded with determined steps to the water's edge.

"It's time," my mother said, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nodded. "Okay," I managed to say, my throat tight with emotion.

The cold, relentless waves pounded against the weathered rocks, echoing her life through the salty air. The urn cradled in my hands was a delicate creation crafted from water-soluble paper. It shimmered in the sunlight. I could feel the texture of the paper beneath my fingertips, smooth yet fragile. As we reached the edge of the dock, anticipation was building within me. With each passing moment, the salt-laden air grew heavier, carrying the weight of all our family's sorrow and heartbreak. Then, with trembling hands, I gently placed the urn on the sea's surface. At first, there was just a subtle change—a softening of the paper. But as the seconds ticked by, the paper began to dissolve, its once solid form melting away like vapour in the sun. In its place, a gentle cascade of fragments drifted into the water, carried away by the currents like whispers on the wind. At that moment, it felt as if my grandmother's spirit was set free.

"She's finally home," my mother said, her gaze fixed on the horizon where the sea met the sky.

"Yes," I said. "It's comforting to know she's found her way back home."

The ache of her absence still lingered as there was still a hollow space in my chest. But it was tempered by the knowledge that she had returned to the place she had once loved so dearly.

I then glanced back at my mother. Her shoulders were hunched, and her hands trembled slightly as tears streamed down her cheeks, catching the light amidst the stark contrast of her jet-black hair. The weight of the moment seemed to hang heavily upon her; not even my father's embrace could comfort her. Then, as my gaze shifted to my sister, I noticed the same mixture of grief reflected in her eyes. After a moment of silence,

my sister stepped forward; the delicate tremor in her voice mirrored the depth of her emotions as she began to read a poem by Mary Lee Hall:

“It does not count,” my sister started, her voice steady yet filled with emotion. “I have only slipped away into the next room.”

“Nothing has happened,” she recited, the sound enveloping us like a comforting embrace amidst the sorrow. “Everything remains exactly as it was. . . . I am but waiting for you, for an interval,” each syllable infused with a warmth that seemed to dispel the overwhelming grief.

“Somewhere very near, just round the corner,” she concluded, her words echoing with quiet reassurance.

At that moment, I knew that although my journey with my grandmother had reached its end, a new chapter was about to unfold—one that would be filled with memories and love transcending even death itself.

Composing herself, my mother stepped forward. “When I think of my mom,” she began, her voice soft yet steady, “I’m reminded of the countless moments we spent together. She was my confidante, my rock, and my dearest friend. And though her physical presence may be gone,” my mother continued, her voice quivering with emotion, “her absence will be deeply felt. She will be missed more than words can express, but her spirit will live on in our hearts, a constant reminder of the love and joy she brought into our lives.”

“She was all those things and more,” I responded, “and I like to think her presence will always be with us, guiding us in whatever lies ahead.”

Turning to my mother, I saw a faint glimmer of hope in her eyes, a gentle reminder that there is still light to be found even in dark times.

My grandmother was more than a familial figure; to me, she was a source of strength, wisdom, and unwavering support. Her impact on my life was immeasurable, and the void left by her passing is a constant ache. With the backdrop of COVID slowing beginning to recede, my trip to my grandmother’s Scotland became a crucible of healing. The trip connected me to her in ways I hadn’t imagined. Laying her to rest where

she first drew breath, traversing the cobblestone streets she once walked, and understanding the roots that nurtured her strength was a sentimental sequence of events that brought a sense of closure.

WORK CITED

Scott, Henry. "Death Is Nothing at All." *Death Is Nothing at All: An Illustrated Ode to Grief, Loss, Pain, Resilience, and Healing*. Souvenir, 1987.

A World of Serpents and Compassion

ESTHER LIN

“YOU DON’T trust anyone. You were like that since you were a young child,” Aunt Anna complains.

“Really? I don’t remember,” I say, slightly surprised.

“Well, I do,” she says sourly.

I muse over her words and wander through my lost memories. One vision lures me in. I was a child in a room full of serpents. Behind the glass, my gaze followed the black serpent as it curled around. It was strange, cold, and secretly deadly.

“Let’s go,” dad beckons. I gave the serpent one last glance before moving along.

As my school years flowed by, my fascination with serpents intensified. But the serpents that mesmerized me were not caged in glass. They resided in the hearts of people.

During one college evening, I stumbled upon the “Big Five” personality traits in awe. Suddenly, a hush falls over my room. The smooth hissing of a serpent whispers through the air. It is growing louder and louder. Naively, I follow the hiss into the dimension of agreeableness.

In disagreeableness, I find resonance. Disagreeable people are “less inclined to trust or help others, more inclined to be cold or antagonistic, have less harmonious interpersonal relations” (Nettle 165).

Out of suspicion, my eyes sharpen harshly to notice disagreeableness in others. I never want to be surprised. Eventually, all I see are serpents.

Mom quickly comes to mind. Our home endured years of her scorching anger and scathing words. As if written in the stars, her fire burned our relationship to ashes. We did not speak again.

Neuroticism is “emotional instability, irritability, anxiety, self-doubt, depression, and other negative feelings” (Cuncic). Being very disagreeable and neurotic is not pretty. Fortunately, I inherit a good amount of emotional stability from dad’s wealth of it. However, I did not inherit his blind acceptance of people.

When summer’s here, dad reminds me to come home before the sun sets.

“It’s not safe for you to be out after dark,” he expresses.

A flash of irritation singses through me.

“Okay,” I dismiss, and leave the house.

Later that day, Maura and I are downtown, and it is almost midnight. We walk in an empty rail car. Then, a decently attractive man walks in at ease and sits in front of us. He oozes confidence.

The second I steal a glance at him, his serpentine eyes lock mine in. *I am in danger* instantly washes over my entire body. He says something to me, but I cannot hear. The second the doors open, Maura and I whisk away.

My butterfingers shakily stab away at my phone, calling dad to pick me up. I sneak a glimpse back to see if the guy is following us. Instead, he is slowly walking away. But his head is turning, and his eyes are fixed on us.

Dad has to get up for work in four hours. The guilt of waking him weighs heavily on me. After many panic-inducing minutes, dad's car reaches the sidewalk.

"Thank you," I cry out to Maura for waiting with me. Then, I get in the car.

"Sorry," I apologise, letting go of my usual pride.

"It's okay," he forgives. Somehow, I feel worse.

Agreeable people are "cooperative, polite, kind, and friendly ... trusting, affectionate, altruistic, and .. empathetic" ("Agreeableness").

For eighteen years of my life, I lived in a world where agreeableness did not exist. After I learned of it, I dismissed it as a rare minority. But slowly over time, another reality unveiled itself. Genuine agreeableness was everywhere, and dad was the most agreeable of all.

"He's a good person. Nice to everyone. He's honest, not the type to hurt anyone, not aggressive," Aunt Anna reflects.

Dread dawned on me, and I immediately confronted him.

"You need to stop being this way. Stop helping people," I asserted.

"Why?" he wondered.

"Because people just take you for granted—and who is doing that for you?" I accused.

But no matter what I said, he remained the same.

Sometime during the drive, he shares a story.

"When I lived in New York, I got robbed at night," he says.

My spirit crumbles in sorrow, and glistening tears blur my sight. *The world is cruel for harming someone so undeserving.*

For a moment, I hesitate, struggling to swallow my remaining pride and fear of judgement.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," my voice lightly trembles.

"It was a long time ago. I was around your age," he mentions casually.

Now, I understand how difficult it is to change one's temperament. I never respected agreeableness. But I did not fathom the sheer amount of courage it takes to be vulnerable—and *truly compassionate*.

A few summers later, I am trudging uphill from the lake. The sky is a dark azure blue, and I am painfully out of breath. I bitterly give up and sit on the crumbly ground.

Gloriously, beams of sunlight emerge from Aunt Anna's car. With immense relief, I get in the backseat. Then, she drives to mom and grandma.

As the car drives away, the older women start talking about their children.

"I would have no idea how to raise a daughter," Aunt Sage remarks.

I lean my head against the window. The soft orange glow of streetlights gracefully pass as we drive into the city.

"How can we even choose these kinds of things?" mom sighs.

"Of course," she responds, oblivious to the tension between mom and me. From then on, all I hear is a blur of noise.

"I didn't know how to be a good mom," mom quietly confesses.

At that moment, I knew it was a message for me. In my silence, I forgive her. For the rest of the ride, I gaze at the city lights that sparkle in the night.

The next morning, we are walking through crowds of tourists. Everyone is in various splashes of colours. The rippling water is a luscious blue that glimmers with starlight. The place is rich with emerald-green bushes and trees. For a brief moment, I wonder if there are serpents. *Of course there are*. Somewhere out here, they are peacefully residing in their natural homes. The realm of summer is exuberant with sunlight, and I breathe it all in.

WORKS CITED

"Agreeableness." *Psychology Today*, 15 Mar. 2024.

Cuncic, Arlin. "Understanding the Impact of Neuroticism from the Big Five Traits." Verywell Mind, 13 Mar. 2023.
Nettle, Daniel. *Personality*. Oxford UP, 2007.

Girl's Best Friend

TAYDEN LINDLEY

I TEAR open the curtains and let the golden morning light into my bedroom.

The new apartment is nice. Better than my dorm room from first year, and the place I lived alone in last year. I have a cosy (or, in other words, small) room that is perfect for studying, crying, and sleeping, the only things I do as a university student. I've been homesick recently, but that's not anything new. It's not really my home I miss, but the feeling of comfort, familiarity, and security my hometown coats me in when I'm there. The time going back an hour and the winter season covering everything in darkness have not helped.

I frantically throw everything off my bed and straighten my duvet as I make my bed for the first time in ages, hoping to start my busy day off productively. Kingston's been growing on me over the last three years since I moved here for school. The balance this place strikes between busy and calm is why it was first on my list for university choices. The four dachshunds that live across the street and wear cute knit sweaters on their walks are also a pleasant bonus. My sister Jersie joined the homesick club when she began her first year in postsecondary last September, about two hours from home, and four hours from me. Since

the pandemic started four years ago, studies have found that students have been affected by challenges in adjusting to university life way more than they have in the past. Well, at least now she understands my constant complaining about eight-thirty morning classes and my lack of sweet-treat funds.

I pick my pillows up off the floor and begin to arrange them on my bed when I pause to stare at Molson in my hands. Molson, my childhood stuffed animal dog named after my parents' old dog that I've had since the dawn of my time (a.k.a. twenty years ago), which is miraculously still in pristine condition. I sit on my floor for a while staring at him. My real pet dogs are another thing that adds to my homesickness. Oakley is my sun-kissed goldendoodle (a mix between poodle and retriever) that my family got when I was about ten years old.

The sun comes through my window and illuminates the pictures I have scattered across my walls. From the floor, I can see movie posters, family, friends, and of course, photos of Oakley I keep above my desk. He's my "soul dog," as people call it, and has been with me for all the major events of my life so far. The photos help but it's hard to be away from him, even more so now that he is starting to get old. His knees crackle a bit when walking up stairs and I've been starting to see grey in his eyes. Golden doodles have a life expectancy of ten to fifteen years, and Oakley is about to turn twelve. It makes my heart break a little each time each time I see how old age affects him.

In my first lecture that morning, I reminisce about times at my Aunt and Uncle's cottage. Elliott Lake is a nice middle-of-nowhere town that my family and Oakley have spent countless summers at, though back then I was much younger and did not have the responsibilities of a "mature" adult on my shoulders. Doodles are known for loving the water and for being adventurous, so Oakley loved it there. He was always either covered in mud, or soaking wet from swimming and chasing after sticks thrown into the lake. One summer Jersie slipped on some rocks near the cottage and cut her leg badly. Oakley stayed by her side for as long as he

could. When she went to the hospital, she had her stuffed animal Aussie to keep by her side as a stand-in for Oakley. We may have a lot of differing opinions, but my sister and I both agree that our stuffed dogs are prized possessions. Molson and Aussie are the one thing we can't live without.

Throughout the rest of the day, some other old memories arise in my mind. That time I sobbed on Oakley's shoulder, when we would dress him up in stupid Halloween costumes each year, taking him to the conservation area back home, and more. I think about my childhood, and how Oakley sort of keeps me connected to it even when I feel like I could not be further from it. I have always had bad anxiety, and dogs can be a source of relief as the loyalty, playfulness, and companionship they offer often combine to make us feel good—and even results in a lowering of stress hormones in our bodies. Since I can't have my nightly cuddles with Oakley here, I try to pet the dachshunds when they pass me on the sidewalk as much as I can. While we were on our weekly catch-up Facetime call a couple weeks ago, Jersie told me that when she has children someday, she wants them to have stuffed animals named after our dogs that can be a comfort to them, as well. She made me realise throughout our conversation that even though there are currently about 222 kilometres between here and home, between me and Oakley, that my old stuffie Molson, likely bought at a hospital gift shop, makes the distance disappear. When the time comes for Oakley to go, at the very least I know Molson won't be going anywhere. Oakley's memory will live on in him, and in the stories of memories I will continue to tell other people.

That night, I cover myself in cosy blankets and listen to my favourite music. My roommates are loudly laughing about something as they brush their teeth outside my door. I smile, happy to know that I live in a place of happiness and love. After it quiets down, the nostalgia comes creeping back in. I think again of more and more memories that I hold dear to my heart. Tears come and I embrace them, because I know they come from

good things, and the love I have. My phone buzzes and I open it to see pictures of my dogs my mom has sent me. In one photo, Oakley is sitting in a corner surrounded by plastic wrap. He apparently ate an entire loaf of bread earlier today without either of my parents noticing. I smile and laugh with wet cheeks, then compose myself as I remember that I have to be up at an unhappy hour to get ready for my eight-thirty class in the morning. I shut my curtains, hold Molson tight to my chest, and sleep soundly enveloped in the darkness.

WORKS CITED

- Lass-Hennemann, J., S.K. Schäfer, M.R. Sopp, et al. "The Relationship Between Attachment to Pets and Mental Health: The Shared Link via Attachment to Humans." *BMC Psychiatry* vol. 22, no. 586, 2022.
- Shouldice, Victoria L., et al. "Expression of Behavioural Traits in Goldendoodles and Labradoodles." *Animals*, vol. 9, no. 12, 9 Dec. 2019.
- Thompson, Miles, et al. "Navigating Entry into Higher Education: The Transition to Independent Learning and Living." *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 45, no. 10, 2021, pp. 1398-410, 2021.

Six Strings

ANGELINA LIU

THE SUN is filtering through a small window in the corner of the room, spilling over old furniture inherited from previous tenants. My hands are bent over a dark green guitar, fingers twisting to struggle through a song. My brother is laughing beside me, plucking my fingers off the fretboard and taking the guitar for himself. He starts playing, the sound carrying into every room in the house, forceful and beautiful. It turns into a tangible thing I can pick up and hold. I can feel it. He hands the guitar back to me, pressing each of my fingers back into the fretboard with force.

“It won’t sound good unless you press as hard as you can.” The strings cut into my fingers. He tells me to try again. I keep trying and trying, chasing the feeling, but the sound stays in the room where I am, ringing in my ears.

Before I could speak, I knew the sound of a guitar. Before I was even born, my brother would play a specific song to my mother to calm her nerves while she was pregnant. It was a song he brought from China when they moved to Canada. “Zhu,” it was called. He played it to her every night she could not sleep. I stopped kicking when I heard it, the sound travelling even to my ears.

When I had nightmares, I ventured down to the basement where my brother lived. He was normally awake, working on school and playing video games. He played “Zhu” on the guitar until I fell asleep, then he carried me up the stairs and put me back to bed. It’s almost like I knew what the song meant to me, even though I had only heard it in vitro. Memory is tied to music. Even patients with Alzheimer’s have been able to recall memories from their past when a certain song is played, one holding great meaning to them (Rossato-Bennett). I could remember what calmed me before I was even born. I could remember what it meant to my mother, and me.

There was a turbulent nineteen years of difference between us. We would fight the way parents and teenagers do. The distance between us stretched further when my step-siblings came into the picture. I was close to my sister, making music videos and doing our makeup. He was getting married, moving away and living on his own with his wife. I was born when he was already an adult. I was born when he was the same age I am now.

I heard my brother playing guitar in his new home. I could hear the strings being plucked, the music through the air, but I couldn’t see him. Our family was crowded in the living room. They were arguing among themselves, and no one was paying attention to the melody drifting into the room. I followed the music. I asked him why he was alone.

“Guitar is like peace,” he said. “It makes everything else disappear.”

I thought I understood what he meant. There were a lot of things that brought peace to me. I liked writing, drawing, and baking.

“Nothing,” he emphasized, “compares to the peace of music.”

Fender, the well-known guitar company, describes guitar playing as mindful of the physical and mental state. It describes the feeling of accomplishment that comes with playing guitar as a solution for anxiety and stress (Duffy). I didn’t quite get that concept until I started playing myself. I didn’t understand that it would ever be that simple.

Three months after my high-school prom, I picked up my brother's guitar, the one he left at home when he moved away. It was dark green, smaller than the average guitar. I pressed my fingers into the frets, picked at the strings. My nails were long from prom, catching on the notes. The strings twanged loudly, making off-key sounds. I tore the nails off my fingers, leaving them stripped and jagged. My fingers returned to the frets, nail tips scattered on the couch beside me.

I realized I was leaving for school the same way my brother did, and I had not spent enough time with him. I realized that I had spent my entire summer with my friends, chasing the feeling of a high-school dream that had slipped out of my clutches. Time was moving too fast. I picked up my guitar. I started to learn songs, songs I liked and songs I knew very well.

Guitar made things simple. Six strings. A guitar pick. Frets, notes, and sound. Music. Things I ruminated over slipped away and tucked themselves somewhere far in the back of my brain. It was only the simple tablature, ringing of the strings. I was transported away to a place where my anxiety and stress did not exist. It was focus and accomplishment. I could finally understand that it was peace. By the time I got that, I had to leave.

While I was at school, I could play guitar in my room, and feel that maybe, three hours away, my brother could hear me, and listen to me play. The sound didn't stay in my room anymore. My brother taught me to transport the sound further than the confines of my room. I felt that maybe the sound could reach his ears, even three hours away.

My sister-in-law has just given birth to two beautiful baby boys. I can see myself, in the future, by their bedsides, playing a guitar. They are sleeping, peacefully, in two twin beds in their shared bedroom. The sound wafts through the room, out into the hallway and down the stairs. The moon shines brightly over a small window in the corner of the room. The melody is peaceful and calming, almost like I had heard it before, or

like they had. I can play “Zhu” for my nephews the same way my brother did for me. I can show them a glimpse of their father.

WORKS CITED

Duffy, Mike. “Five Reasons Playing Guitar Is Good for the Mind and Body.” Fender Guitars, 6 Feb. 2023.

Rossato-Bennett, Michael. “Alive inside: A Story of Music and Memory.” YouTube, 22 Jan. 2014.

Between Light and Shadow

A Journey Through Chinatown's Unseen

TIANYU LIU

THE TAPESTRY of Toronto's Chinatown, with its kaleidoscopic sights and sounds, has always held a particular allure for me. Its vibrant streets, adorned with red and gold Chinese signs, the air infused with sizzling dumplings and sweet pork buns, are the cultural sanctuary for many Chinese immigrants and international students. Sadly, beneath this colourful multicultural façade lies a parallel hidden narrative covered by the shadows of the smelly McCaul Street alleyways and the dimly lit Grange Park.

On a winter evening, I strolled through the streets flanked by tall buildings and my attention was caught by a young person nestled in a corner of a dim alley. Dressed in worn-out clothes, they seemed to huddle to their makeshift shelter with each gust of wind. This touching sight, contrasting sharply with the city's exterior, provided a poignant glimpse into the challenges of youth homelessness—an issue I aimed to explore through experts' insights and the first-hand experiences of those facing the realities of living on the streets. In my pursuit to understand this problem, I turned to journalists and social scientists who have shed light on the various obstacles confronted by homeless youth in Toronto.

Amanda Noble highlights the increased vulnerabilities these young individuals faced during the pandemic, emphasizing poverty as a hurdle while stressing the need for tailored support and assistance. Journalist Muriel Draaisma paints a picture of how the city has responded to help homeless individuals during winter's harsh conditions, weaving together advocacy efforts and personal stories to underscore just how challenging life can be for those without a safe haven. Journalist Nicole Ireland has brought attention to a concerning trend: individuals seeking refuge in hospital emergency rooms, highlighting the healthcare system's role as a last-resort sanctuary. Her analysis of the downturn in Toronto's suburbs provides a view linking economic changes, housing-market instability, and the increasing problems of homelessness and social inequality. The stories and statistics come together to emphasize the need for policies that prioritize the aspect at the core of this crisis, advocating for a caring approach that tackles the complex environmental and health issues intertwined with homelessness.

I chat with my close friend, Enying He, about this issue. She's not just my best friend for almost a decade. She is also studying in the Child and Youth Care (CYC) program at Toronto Metropolitan University. She has chosen homeless youth as the theme of her Honours thesis. Under the supervision of a Ph.D. student, she has been doing fieldwork for quite some time. Known for her kindness and skill in assisting people, she invites me to a bubble tea joint in the heart of Chinatown, the community with the highest rate of homeless youth in Toronto.

Under the soft glow of a streetlamp at Grange Park, I sit across from Enying. Her gentle eyes seem to lighten the weight of the world. As she speaks, her voice a soothing balm against the evening's chill, she weaves the tale of "Jean"—a name we call for a young soul navigating the complexities of existence far from the warmth of a traditional home.

Jean's journey starts by crossing the ocean before landing in his new home in Canada. There he seeks solace from a life marked by loss and family conflicts. The tale carries a touch of sadness as he grapples with

the pain of losing his mother to illness and the strained relationship with his stepmother. At sixteen years old, Jean finds himself lost in a cityscape, his footsteps echoing a silent plea for understanding and belonging. It sounds like a cliché a stepmother, doesn't it? Such clichés are occurrences in Toronto.

As Enying immersed herself in Jean's story, it went beyond numbers to explore the essence of resilience and self-discovery, driven by unwavering determination to overcome obstacles. After Enying shared her experience, I did truly empathize with the individuals hidden behind the cold statistics of homeless youth. Jean's journey unfolds in an environment marked by neglect, where the absence of love and societal support casts shadows over his life. Thrown into a world of survival, Jean navigates through the maze streets of the city, where moments of beauty and kindness can quickly fade into feelings of isolation and aloofness. Amidst challenging lessons and difficult nights, the streets transform into both a battlefield and a classroom for Jean. It is here that he learns to walk on the line between belonging to a supportive community and facing the vast emptiness of indifference.

However, Jean's tale isn't entirely about struggle and despair, although there is struggle and despair aplenty. His tale is also enriched by touches of unexpected compassion, new human bonds, and forms of resilience that arise when facing obstacles. In the bleak blizzard, warmth touches Jean as he enters Chinatown Community Centre, hidden behind a bubble tea joint. The hot air vibrates with strength, starkly contrasting with the apathy reigning outside on the streets. Exhausted from his days journeying, Jean is greeted by a volunteer who, with an inviting smile, offers him a steaming cup and a seat at their table. As he settles in the shelter, the conversations swirling around him create a tapestry of shared experiences and laughter—a welcome break from the loneliness of the streets. Here amidst the clatter of dishes and the shuffling of feet Jean discovers a bond with his travellers. They share nods and tales, each story adding to the patchwork of their family. At this moment, Jean

understands that he has stumbled upon something than survival—a feeling of belonging within a community united not by chance, but by a shared sense of optimism and resilience.

By telling Jean’s story, I urge you to join me in showing empathy and offering support. His story reminds us that our humanity is defined by how we care for and lift up those on society’s fringes. Let his story not be an end. Instead, let it be a beginning, sparking a shared commitment to stand with the vulnerable and build a community where every living soul is appreciated and, most importantly, loved and cared for.

WORKS CITED

- Draaisma, Muriel. “Advocates Unveil Their Own Winter Homelessness Plan, Saying Toronto’s Response ‘Atrociously Inadequate.’” *CBC News*, 17 Nov. 2023.
- Ireland, Nicole. “Growing Number of Homeless People Turning to ERs for Shelter and Warmth in Ontario, Study Says.” *The Canadian Press*, 28 Nov. 2023.
- Noble, Amanda, et al. “‘I Feel like I’m in a Revolving Door, and COVID Has Made It Spin a Lot Faster’: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Toronto, Canada.” *PloS One*, vol. 17, no. 8, 2022.

Hell Is a Teenage Girl

MAZIE MACCOSHAM

IF HELL is a teenage girl's anger, it is a fiery tempest of emotions, where every glare and slammed door creates a storm that tests the boundaries of resilience and patience. Reflecting on my journey through adolescence, I am drawn to the exploration of the intricate tapestry of emotions that defined this tumultuous period of my life. Soon before I entered my teenage years, I lay in bed with my parents one night before heading to sleep, as I often did at that age, and my father suddenly expressed to me melancholically: "It's too bad that you're going to hate me soon." I scoffed at him, unbelieving. I couldn't comprehend how our close bond could ever fray, yet he had raised two daughters prior to me, and though I did not know it at the time, he knew what he was talking about. Within a couple of years, I became engulfed in irrational irritability and unbridled anger, unable to control the torrent of emotions that raged within. As the teenage hormonal tempests swept over me, I realized just how right my dad was that night.

With time, I began to recognize the triggers that ignited these emotional storms. Academic pressures, conflicts with friends and family, and my relentless pursuit of perfection fuelled the flames of my anger. Yet, amidst the chaos, there were also many moments of unexpected and

liberating clarity. Through introspection and mindfulness, I learned to navigate the labyrinth of my emotions, taking proactive steps to address the underlying turmoil before it skyrocketed out of control. Before this, however, I often times did spiral into a tornado of poor actions. My older sister, Julia, and I have squabbled with each other since the day I was brought home from the hospital. She would pinch me, a newborn baby, and when I cried, she would do it again. This continued through our adolescent years, and sometimes still to this day. Julia knows exactly how to push my buttons, and she relished in doing it. On one particular rainy, miserable morning before school, where I would have been around thirteen, and she sixteen, Julia's continuous teasing and passive-aggressiveness had pushed me over the edge. I stood up from the kitchen counter, picked up my half-full bowl of Mini-Wheats, and hurled it at her head. At the moment, it was the only way I felt I could express my anger, and with her curly blonde hair now soaked with wheaty milk, I felt only mild relief. Eventually, though it took several years, I learned how to put that anger into something a little less tumultuous. Drawing from my own experiences, I found similar practices in resources such as Raychelle Cassada Lohmann's *The Anger Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anger and Frustration*, which I myself used in the past to try to grapple with my feelings. Lohmann's guidance on coping mechanisms and psychological triggers resonated deeply with my own struggles, offering a lifeline amidst the tumult. These days, when I feel that rise of anger coming up from the pit of my stomach and into my throat, I tend to isolate myself, recognizing that being alone prevents my irrationality from hurting anyone other than myself.

Moreover, while I found solace in strategies outlined by authors like Raychelle Cassada Lohmann, the foundation laid by my parents' nurturing approach to parenting, as evidenced by A. Fernando Perez-Gramaje, et al.'s study, also significantly influenced my response to anger and self-esteem. The unwavering support and guidance of my parents provided a stable anchor in the stormy seas of adolescence,

fostering resilience and emotional well-being. Subsequent to the cereal bowl incident, and all the other sibling squabbles that occurred, my mother would say to me, “You’re going to have thick skin when you’re older, thanks to your sister.” This provided some comfort at the time, and now at this age, I know my mom was right. Additionally, the fluctuating tides of hormones, explored in Nur Indah Noviyanti, et al.’s study on estrogen hormone and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) occurrences in teenage girls, offered insights into the physiological underpinnings of my emotional fluctuations. Variations in estrogen levels throughout the menstrual cycle may exacerbate anger and irritability symptoms during the premenstrual phase, adding another layer of complexity to my teenage experience. While most every other teenage girl was experiencing the same as I, to some degree, it certainly felt as though I was facing it all alone. The screaming fits of rage I conducted into my pillow in my room made me feel as though I should be locked up or put on some sort of medication. My cracked phone screen from throwing it across the room, my broken hairbrush from smashing it against the wall, the clumps of hair that I would literally pull out my head like a cartoon—those were my ways of releasing that anger. Today, stepping outside into nature, I walk under a halo of pine trees, with droplets of rain splashing down through the canopy of the treetops. I pop in my earphones, I tune out, and tune in to the melody that comes through the speakers. “Breathe” by Pink Floyd comes on. The soothing lyrics wash over me, and immediately I feel tranquil. I breathe along with the song, “Breathe, breathe in the air. Don’t be afraid to care.” Through trial and error, I have found my new favourite ways of disputing anger: going for walks in nature, listening to music or a Podcast, exercising, meditation, and sometimes talking to a friend or family member about it. These strategies have helped me become a calm and collected person, for the most part. Of course, everybody has those kinds of days, and with these methods I am able to mellow out.

As I continue to manage my anger, these refined strategies act as a guiding compass, steering me away from the dangerous edge of uncontrolled fury. Nature becomes a therapeutic canvas where the turbulence dissipates, and a sense of calm prevails. Looking back on the tumultuous days of adolescence, I recognize the growth that accompanies acknowledging and handling this complex emotion. It's not about eliminating anger altogether, but rather channelling its energy in a manner that cultivates positive change and personal development.

WORKS CITED

- Lohmann, Raychelle Cassada. *The Anger Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anger and Frustration*. 2019.
- Noviyanti, Nur Indah, et al. "The Effect of Estrogen Hormone on Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) Occurrences in Teenage Girls at Pesantren Darul Arqam Makassar." *Gaceta Sanitaria*, vol. 35, 2021.
- Perez-Gramaje, A. Fernando, et al. "Parenting Styles and Aggressive Adolescents: Relationships with Self-Esteem and Personal Maladjustment." *The European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*, vol. 12, no. 1, Dec. 2019, pp. 1-10.

Reconnected

SARA MACDONELL

SITTING ON the couch, I think of what I should say. I draft a text and read it to my roommate, leaving me with watery eyes, as I am about to do something that I never thought I would.

(Phone rings)

“Hi, Melissa! Is Sarah there?” I chirped, my excitement bubbling over.

“Hang on a sec’, I’ll get her,” Melissa replied. “Sarah, the phone’s for you!”

Sarah’s voice came through the line, “Hey! What’s up?”

“Wanna come over?” I asked, my little-kid enthusiasm taking the lead.

In the distance, I can hear Sarah shout throughout her house, “Mom! Can I go to Sara’s?”

Her mom’s muffled answer followed, “Sure, but your room better be tidy!”

Those nostalgic conversations marked the essence of my childhood—moments spent on the landline, connecting with my best friend, or should I say, my ex-best friend.

Sara Skitch and I were inseparable. We were with each other as often as possible. We were known for being best friends; some would even call us sisters. Sarah lived right across the street—I mean directly across. She was twenty-six Hanson Crescent, and I was twenty-seven. We were both named Sara(h) and had sisters named Kate and Dads named Brian. It was almost like it was meant to be.

I now open Instagram and am greeted with glimpses revealing her life, a life that feels so distant. Her photos show frozen smiles, capturing new adventures, and a world that seems foreign to me. Each update is like a reminder of what once was. Alone in my room, I find myself aimlessly scrolling through our shared history. I remember the laughter-filled sleepovers, the whispered secrets, and the understanding we had beyond words. As I stare at her posts with her new friends, I can't help but feel a twinge of pain. Some would call this “the fear of missing out” (“FOMO”), an experience that more than half of social-media users have (Gilbert). I envy the people I see her with—I wish it was me. Her smile in those photos is so genuine, so full of joy. Her newly blonde hair caught my eye, causing me to do a double take, yet the same sprinkling of freckles still adorned the bridge of her nose.

In 2016, I was given the news that Sarah was moving away, and this news hit me hard. Her new house was only a five-minute drive away, but that felt like miles to my thirteen-year-old self. After the move, we saw each other on occasion, but things were never quite the same. The conversations started to feel forced as if we were trying to fit puzzle pieces together that no longer matched.

In 2018, Sarah Skitch's dad, Brian, was diagnosed with cancer. Terminal brain cancer, to be exact; Glioblastoma, the same diagnosis as

Gordon Downie. Glioblastoma is a highly aggressive malignancy and one of the most dangerous types of central nervous-system tumours. Despite breakthroughs in treatment methods, it remains generally incurable (Hanif, et al.).

Saturday, May 18th, 2019, was the day we lost Brian Skitch.

Saturday, May 18th, 2019, also happened to be the day I lost my best friend.

How does one lose contact with their best friend, you may ask. And well, I ask myself that question every day.

A best friend is supposed to be there for you when you are grieving.

I wasn't there.

Instead, I was afraid. I was afraid I would say or do the wrong thing.

So, I gave her space.

I gave her too much space.

It was a slow fade. The type of relationship where you send texts on each other's birthdays saying you miss each other and that you should hang out soon but never do.

No fight. No drama. Sarah Skitch and I just never saw each other again.

It was my job to make the effort and set up a plan, but I never did, and I will never forgive myself for that.

Time passed, days to weeks, weeks to months. Our once strong bond is now thin and distant. As life shifted, Sarah slipped into the background of my memories, a friend lost with time.

Our friendship was a chapter cut short by hesitations and life's twists.

In quiet moments, a nagging question lingers in my brain: What if? What if I picked up the phone, and refused to let time erode our connection?

Thinking of all the possible things I could say, I find myself grappling with doubts about whether anything I say could truly mend

what has been lost. The possibility of re-establishing contact after a period of silence feels daunting and uncertain. Despite harbouring the intention to reach out to Sarah over the past five years, I have consistently faltered, succumbing to fear and anxiety.

It's truly remarkable how an action as seemingly straightforward as sending a text can evoke such profuse emotions.

I press "Send," and within minutes, Sarah replies. Tears start pouring down my face, my skin flushed and blotchy with the intensity of my feelings. The flood of emotions is overwhelming: a mixture of relief, joy, and apprehension, all merging into a profound moment of vulnerability. In the text, she reassures me, telling me not to feel guilty, not realizing the depth of my remorse. She said I "made her day."

Sarah hasn't changed much—still the same person I remember, just a bit older. She exudes happiness, a fact she emphasizes in her texts. Our conversation continues for a few days, filled with reminiscences and updates on our lives. Every time her name pops up on my screen, I find a little smirk growing on my face.

They say reconnecting with a friend can evoke joyous reminiscences, foster a sense of nostalgia, and lead to greater fulfilment (Gupta). It certainly did for me. However, it didn't fix the guilt. I don't think my guilt will ever go away. Rather, reaching out to her was more like applying a tourniquet to a bleeding wound—a step towards healing, but it requires time to fully mend.

Sitting on the couch reflecting on our renewed connection, I can't help but feel grateful for taking the chance and sending the text.

WORKS CITED

- Gilbert, Nestor. "Forty-Five Interesting FOMO Statistics" *Financesonline.com*, 11 May 2021.
- Gupta, Sanjana. "How to Reconnect with an Old Friend—and Not Be Awkward." *Verywell Mind*, 25 Oct. 2023.

Hanif, Farina, et al. "Glioblastoma Multiforme: A Review of Its Epidemiology and Pathogenesis through Clinical Presentation and Treatment." *Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3-9.

Lingering Echoes

A Journey Through Italy's Heart and Soul

JOSHUA MACLEOD

WITH EACH beat, my heart raced as the plane descended in Italy, a land of beauty and wonder. As I stepped foot outside the plane, the purity and freshness of the air filled my lungs, overwhelming me with a sense of anticipation. Beyond the charm of tasteful meals and ancient landmarks, this journey held a deeper purpose: it was a chance to reunite with my brother Naz, a star basketball player for Italy's national team Olympiacos, whom I hadn't seen in a year. Little did I know, beyond the boundaries of the basketball court lay a world filled with stories and tradition, each piece of artwork and cobblestone street revealing a chapter of Italy's rich history.

I couldn't help but feel excited as I moved through the airport, looking among the busy people for a sign with my name on it. The act of holding a sign with my name was unfamiliar to me in Canada; it added an element of intrigue to my arrival in Italy. Finally spotting the sign, I followed my guide outside and was immediately struck by the breathtaking beauty of Italy's natural landscapes. Surrounded by towering trees and open fields, I found myself in awe of the majestic scenery, though a hint of doubt lingered in my mind about what I saw.

Entering the car that would take me to my brother's house, I couldn't shake the thought, "I hope there's more to Italy than this." With a mixture of excitement and uncertainty, I continued on the road, hoping that reality would exceed my expectations. Upon arriving at my brother's doorstep, I was greeted by his warm embrace, our reunion marking the end of a long separation. Little did I know, this trip would exceed my expectations greatly.

After settling in and catching up with my brother, I expressed my eagerness to visit the Milan Cathedral as my first stop. To my delight, he agreed with me, remarking, "It's like you read my mind," as we made our way to the cathedral. I felt the weight of years of history bearing down on me. Guided by my brother, who had become an integral part of the city, I embraced the essence of Italian culture. As we navigated the winding streets, I could sense years of history beneath my feet, the echoes of love, loss, and victory whispering across the cobblestones. As we arrived to the cathedral, it stood as a magnificent observatory of history, with each intricate carving telling a story that resonated deeply with my religious beliefs. Its majestic presence loomed over us, covered with exquisite sculptures and intricate carvings, reaching back to a time when craftsmanship was adored. Every detail offered a glimpse into the past, revealing the people and events that had shaped this remarkable structure. As I stood in awe, a wave of wonder and reverence washed over me. The Milan Cathedral was more than just a building; it was a living testament to the creativity and passion of the Italian people, a symbol of faith and confidence that transcended mere architecture. I understood that the cathedral symbolized Italy's rich cultural past, as well as the enduring spirit of human creativity and perseverance. It was a powerful reminder of the strength of teamwork, and I was grateful for the opportunity to witness it firsthand.

After our visit to the church, my brother mentioned another significant location: Lake Como. Lake Como, known for its clean water and peaceful atmosphere, was a significant part of Italy's history. The

next day, we decided to visit this well-known place, which proved to be well worth the trip. As we navigated Italy's streets, locals greeted us warmly and engaged in sincere conversations along the way. Many people were curious about where we were from and what life was like over in Canada, drawn by our distinctive appearance. A pleasant couple even recommended Ristorante Antica Darsena for us to eat on our trip to Lake Como. Thankful for their recommendation, we made our way to the restaurant, which had a distinct feel unlike anything I've seen in Canada. The surroundings, music, and hospitality all displayed a sense of peace and kindness. When I asked the waiter for a recommendation for my first Italian meal, she suggested something basic like pizza. Taking her recommendation, my brother and I ordered pizzas, which exceeded my expectations. It instantly became clear why people say, "You haven't had pizza until you've been to Italy." After a brief food break, we proceeded on to the lake, where we were immersed in its peaceful embrace. I experienced a deep sense of awe and serenity as we were surrounded by the calming beauty of nature. The sound of soft leaves rustling, and the soothing smell of pine created a peaceful symphony that echoed throughout the waters. With the sun's golden rays bathing us as we sat on the shore, I had the impression that I was at one with the universe. Lake Como appeared to be calling us to pay attention and take in the knowledge buried in its depths at that very moment. My brother and I found ourselves doing just that as we sat there, reflecting on the past and growing to have a profound admiration for one another and the beauty of God's creation.

As time passed and the sun began to set, sending a warm glow over the calm waters of Lake Como, my brother and I decided it was time to return to his house. Reflecting on the day's events, I couldn't help but feel a deep feeling of joy and fulfillment. Spending that beautiful evening by the lake with my brother had been a remarkable experience, one that I would treasure forever. As we made our way back through Italy's winding streets, the memories we had formed together made me grateful

and happy. Though my time in Italy was drawing to an end, the connection that we had formed and the memories we experienced would stay with me always. As we returned to my brother's house, surrounded by the familiar sights and sounds of home, I realized that our journey had only strengthened our connection and enriched our lives in ways we could never have imagined.

Learning to Jump

CASS MCCARTHY

IT'S 2010, and I'm in the backyard of my first friend ever's childhood home. The grass is overgrown and has long red stalks growing near the fence that keep her trampoline from collapsing. Despite the sweat pouring from our foreheads, I can't think of anything better. I'm not sure how long we've been sitting on her trampoline, but the fabric is sticking to the back of my legs. We're watching the river flow by while she tells me about the argument that she had with her sister that morning. I'm drawn to the flame of Ivy's honesty. I take a deep inhale each time a breeze hits our faces. Ivy tucks her brown hair behind her ears and looks my way with a smile.

"Let's jump."

The trampoline feels hot on the soles of my feet, and my legs are vibrating with sudden exertion mixed with anxiety. I've never hung out with anyone outside of school, nor have been on a trampoline. I observe Ivy's movements and mirror them. I wiggle my toes in an attempt to ground my feet in the bed of the trampoline and slowly bend my knees, causing them to shake more. Ivy takes her first jump which reaches halfway up the mesh. When her feet bounce back, her clammy hand grabs mine.

“Jump with me!”

We bend our knees in sync, and I give it my best shot. As we jump, it feels like we’re flying. Ivy’s white t-shirt gravitates above her belly button, and her smile fills her cheeks the higher we go. With the next jump, Ivy belts out a laugh. This time, both of our hands are above our heads. Ivy’s fingers connect with the static building in her hair, and the sun’s gaze makes the blue in her eyes glimmer. She looks free as a butterfly. I start to wonder what it would feel like to be careless, to feel the moment without worrying if I’m embarrassing myself. Ivy stops jumping, so I do too. She sits down on the edge of the trampoline and reaches through the hole in the mesh.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Rhubarb. Try some!”

Ivy takes the first bite and tells me how she loves the sour taste. I’m cross-legged, watching the wrinkles form around the corners of her mouth with each bite. She looks toward the Wolastoq River, meaning “beautiful river,” and wraps her arms around her knees, rhubarb still in hand. I take the next bite, closing my eyes as I do. After a couple of chews, I pucker my lips together, trying to conceal my dislike for the fibrous texture.

“This is fun.”

I swallow. Ivy responds with a smile. I smile, too. Maybe this is what friendship feels like. Maybe this is what I’ve been missing.

Ivy finishes her rhubarb, and I pass her my piece with one bite mark. I look up at the clouds and rub my arms to try and erase the goosebumps that have emerged on them from how windy it’s gotten. I ask Ivy if she thinks it’s going to rain, and she tells me how much she loves a good storm. I continue rubbing my arms as we sit in silence, listening to the whistling of the breeze.

It happens so fast. The wind sways me until I can’t keep up with my feet as I try to get down from the trampoline. Ivy is laughing as I scramble for an exit but is quick to grab my arm when my body lurches

towards the hole in the safety netting. We both jump down, landing in wet grass that feels like a stringy swamp between my toes. The seconds it takes me to feel confident in maintaining my balance, the rain pours down heavier, and I can't see Ivy anywhere. I try to yell her name, but my voice cracks as I choke on air. My eyes scan the backyard, and my heart picks up pace as I realize I'm alone. I sprint, ready to blindly plan my escape home, when I fall knee-deep into the mud. I grind my teeth together as I push off my knee to support myself back to my feet and run until I can see a muted light in the distance. I run towards it, my feet dragging behind me, when a car horn startles me to my knees. I look back at the lights and wipe my hair from my eyes. I run until I can make out the graffitied street sign leading me home. Once I'm inside, still barefooted, I try to catch my breath on the kitchen floor.

After that day, I didn't see Ivy as often. Someone at school told me she moved, and her red bike isn't outside her house anymore. Sometimes, when I'm walking by, I'll pause and contemplate going around the corner to see if she's still in the same spot on the trampoline, admiring the river. But I never do. I'm worried that the rhubarb is no longer growing next to the fence, or the storm washed away the chalk on her back porch. Sometimes I avoid it because I'm worried that I'll be the only one sitting there, missing her like I do now. They say that friendships are supposed to shape who you are. That they reduce your levels of anxiety, or that something about them alters who you'll become. I heard she graduated high school and started college just a couple of years after I did. I also heard she dyed her hair pink, but I've always thought of her as someone who would pick purple. Over the years, the space between us grows with age. I send the occasional message to ask her how she is, and she does the same.

Twelve years after Ivy taught me how to jump, she died in the City of St John, New Brunswick. The Wolastoq River, which enters near the city and covers over 55,000 kilometres, is where her mother told me her

ashes would be spread, mid-hug, at her funeral. I don't live in the town we grew up in anymore, but when I visit, I still walk by her house. I'll stare at the grey front door, once white, and think about walking around the corner. I'll wonder if she's still jumping on the trampoline, snacking on the stringy sticks that grew next to the fence. Although she's gone and her laugh still echoes, the peaceful waves from the Wolastoq River no longer mirror Ivy's beauty and love for life alone. Instead, the waves accompany a mix of clashing tides that change with the seasons and remind me that despite the loss of her friendship, like nature, I must change with the seasons, too. So, I'll continue to pretend that we're in the yard before the clouds grow heavy and the rain starts. Ivy is still holding my hand, her palms clammy from the summer heat, reminding me that it is okay to trust myself and jump.

WORKS CITED

- Marsh, James H. "Saint John River." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Oct. 2023.
- Rose, Becca. "How Our Childhood Friends Shape Our Lives." *The Date Mix by Zoosk*, Nov. 2021.

Left Behind

EMILY MEWETT

“**P**ETER PASSED away.” I can still hear Cody’s voice crack as he told me the news.

“What?” I asked, hoping my phone cut out and I misheard him.

“He died, Em.”

Those words sucked all the air from my lungs like a vacuum; it’s been two years, six months, and two days and I can still hear them now as clearly as I did then. I try not to think about it often, but I’ll never forget that conversation with Peter’s brother. The sky was so dark I could barely see; the air was so cold I was shivering; those three words were so loud, I wondered if I’d hear anything else again. My partner, the love of my life, was gone.

I didn’t sleep that night. I looked at pictures, watched videos, listened to voice memos. I did what I could to trick myself into thinking it wasn’t true. The next twenty-four hours are foggy. Close family members and friends whom I’d summoned the courage to reach out to checked in on me. My therapist squeezed me in for a short Zoom session. The rest is blank.

People don't know how to talk about suicide. People barely know how to talk about death. Death is the one sure thing in life, and we're so reluctant to talk about it and the grief that goes hand in hand with it. We all experience loss at some point in life, but fewer people, thankfully, directly experience loss by suicide. "Grief over a loved one's suicide is its own type of grief" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 1983). My grief was filled with guilt, anger, abandonment, and loneliness. Guilt because our last conversation was a fight, and now I felt somehow responsible for Peter's death. Anger towards the people who caused him pain and trauma. Abandonment because Peter chose to leave me rather than stay and fight. Loneliness because I lost my person, and I didn't know how to talk about it.

"I feel like I should be angry at Peter," I said to my therapist about three weeks after Peter died. I blew my nose, wiped tears from my cheeks, and leaned back into my pillow. "I *want* to be angry at him. But then I feel guilty and stop myself because I miss him." I stared at the framed picture of Peter and me laughing on my bedside table. *How am I supposed to be mad at the person I so desperately want back?*

"Emily, your feelings are valid," Kirk's voice streamed through my laptop speakers. "You have every right to be angry with him. He's put you through a lot."

"But look at what he went through! He was in so much pain."

"And now so are you." I'd had so many sessions with Kirk, I could tell when he was about to say something profound. I reached for another tissue. "Peter didn't know how to heal from his trauma. Rather than dealing with his emotions, he projected his pain and suffering onto you. If you feel angry, be angry. Don't go down the same path he did." That cut deep. After we wrapped up our session, I shoved my laptop off to the side, got under the covers of my bed, and cried.

A few weeks later, I went for a walk and listened to a Podcast I had recently heard about: *What's Your Grief*. I set off down the country road as the Podcast began.

“Hi, this is Litsa.”

“Hey, this is Eleanor. Welcome to the *What's Your Grief* Podcast where we discuss the very complicated experience of life after loss, one topic at a time. Today we're talking about conflicting emotions.”

I took a deep breath.

“Sometimes an emotion feels as though it's compromising the memory of our loved one, which can feel very uncomfortable.”

“But your love for the person who died will be there forever.”

“When you're grieving, you have to open yourself up to experiencing everything. Otherwise, you'll be avoiding important emotions, and you'll never make peace with the loss. These emotions need to exist at the same time.”

“Early on in grief, it can be hard to imagine getting to a place of being comfortable feeling different emotions, but with time, it becomes easier.”

The sun was shining on my face, keeping me warm in the cool, November air. I didn't necessarily understand how to experience all of my emotions, but I knew I needed to try. I removed my headphones, looked behind me to make sure no one else was nearby, and then, “ahh!” I let out a cry of frustration. I took a deep breath and suddenly an even louder, more powerful scream was escaping my mouth. “How could you do this to me?” I yelled. Seemingly involuntarily, I continued to yell, expressing every little detail I was mad about. I looked up to the sun, tears streamed down my cheeks, and I smiled. I felt lighter than I had in months. I felt relieved.

Everyone's grief is different. Mine was like being on a roller coaster with a blindfold on. I couldn't predict the twists and turns, the highs and lows. It's been two and a half years since Peter died, and while I generally

have made my peace with and accepted what happened, every now and then my grief will sneak up on me and catch me off guard. And when it does, I just let it happen.

“Grief, I’ve learned, is really just love. It’s all the love you want to give but cannot.... Grief is just love with no place to go” (Anderson). Since that tragic day, I’ve grown a lot, for the better—I’d trade it all in to bring him back to life if I could. But by allowing myself to fully grieve, I turned something horrific into something positive. I took all that unspent love that I had for Peter and poured it into me.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Jamie. *Goodreads.com*.
- Haley, Eleanor, and Litsa Williams. “The Conflicting Emotions of Grief.” *What’s Your Grief*, episode 50, Mar 2017.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and David Kessler. *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*. Scribner, 2014.

The Shadow Monster

KATELYN MILLER

FLUORESCENT LIGHTS flicker overhead, sending an eerie glare across the emergency room's sterile white walls. The monitor's beeps echo through the quiet, a menacing reminder of the realness of this situation. My heart beats frantically as I sit on the chilly, harsh hospital bed, echoing the disorganized flurry of ideas racing through my head.

To me, anxiety is more than an illness; it is a dangerous force, a looming shadow that haunts every thought and action I take. It is there, relentlessly nibbling at the boundaries of my awareness from the minute I open my eyes in the morning until I give in to sleep. Anxiety is a subtle and sneaky force that permeates every aspect of my life, frequently going unnoticed by those in my immediate vicinity. It controls every little detail of my day, from the easiest chores to the trickiest choices, influencing me subtly yet significantly. My anxiousness appears as a shadowy figure in the back of my mind, hiding in the darkest places. It mutters doubts and concerns nonstop, warping my world and impairing my judgment. It plays with my emotions, pulling at my psyche with a merciless and vicious hand, much like a cunning puppeteer. However, I refuse to submit to the oppressive power of my anxiety, even in the face of its overwhelming presence. Every day is an ongoing battle against the

oppressive hold that fear and uncertainty have over you. I struggle to summon the courage to confront my inner demons and the shadow monster that wants to devour me whole with each breath.

Anxiety, my relentless shadow monster, is here with me. It always lurks in the hallways of my mind, constantly altering my ideas and behaviours. Its unseen threads entwine themselves around every part of my life, twisting my choices and weighing me down for almost every second of every day. I deal with a lot of different conditions in my maze-like existence, such as borderline personality disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, celiac disease, and depression. However, anxiety stands out as the most potent enemy that always fights for dominance. Anxiety is something I have learned I have to live with, but sometimes, like that, one night in the hospital, anxiety takes over my life.

I had assumed it would be an ordinary night—until, all of a sudden, the anxiety shadows grew closer, their heavy weight crushing me. I was engulfed in the cold embrace of panic, helpless to stop its unrelenting assault. Every breath seemed like a struggle; every heartbeat desperately cried for help. My mind was a raging hurricane of despair, drowning in fear.

The decision to seek help is not easy, but it is vital. My parents drive me to the hospital, their faces marked with worry, their hands shaking, and their hearts sad. They probably never imagined they would have to drive their sixteen-year-old daughter to the hospital for this; I always hid behind a fake smile for them. The trip is a bizarre parade through the nighttime darkness, a swirl of sirens blaring and lights flashing. I can barely even remember the drive there. It was all a blur; it felt like I was not controlling my body or emotions.

Years later, I talked with my mom about the effects my anxiety has had on her and my family; it helped me to calm the voices in my head with her responses. My mom discussed how she, too, has struggled with anxiety and how even when life seems to be at its worst, there is always light to the darkness and that she will always be there to help me find the

light. It is a difficult road full of setbacks and difficulties, an ongoing ascent against the unrelenting force of my thoughts. However, flashes of light—brief impressions of resiliency and hope—shine through the gloom. I have learned that I am stronger than my illnesses and that I am more than what my anxiety wants me to be.

When we get to the hospital, the medical staff's murmuring and the antiseptic smell of cleanliness envelop me as I am led into the emergency room. Many people were waiting, people who had been there before my parents and me. People with severe injuries and illnesses, but I was brought in right away. I learned that night that sometimes they do not make you wait when mental health is involved. Alternatively, maybe that is just for kids: in any event, they immediately brought me to a different part of the hospital. Even in the grip of anxiety, something about the hospital's suddenness and sense of emergency scared me more than anything. What made my issue more dire and demanding than cuts and sicknesses?

I get a strong feeling of loneliness. My challenges burden my parents, and you can see that they worry. I become aware of the toll the illness has taken on my family as I sit in that hospital room, surrounded by concerned faces and anxious stares. My conscience is troubled by the distress I have caused them, serving as a silent reminder of how my troubles affect the people I care about. However, there was hope, and my parents stood by my side, offering unwavering support and empathy, but the strain was evident in their eyes.

I ended up spending hours in the hospital while they questioned me and held me in a room with nearly nothing on the walls. It is hard not just to be left alone with my thoughts in there. I look around, and there is nothing but white walls and a hospital bed. There is not even a proper door handle or anything possibly sharp because they are concerned about what people might do. I thought that was silly. "I would never harm myself." However, there I was, sitting in the hospital room because I had wanted to end my life. After what felt like days in that room, I returned

to the comfort of my own house. My home had never felt more quiet but also warm and welcoming before. I was so happy to be home; my parents were just as glad to have me back home. My house was filled with a warm, comforting glow, contrasting the harsh hospital lights. I ended up sleeping in my mom's bed that night, and since then, it is been an uphill battle.

Ultimately, I am not exclusively a victim of my anxiety; I am also a fighter, a survivor, and an example of a human spirit that refuses to give up. Even though I know I am not fighting this battle alone, I will approach the uncertain road ahead with bravery and tenacity. I shall keep fighting the inner beast as long as I have breath to overcome the obstacles and regain control of my life. Moreover, even though the journey is difficult, I know I will become stronger, bolder, and more resilient than ever because I have my family and friends and the confidence that I am more than my anxiety.

We are a part of a broader human tapestry, held together by strands of resilience and perseverance. We take comfort in the fact that some are aware of our internal conflicts, even during our darkest moments. Backed by the strength of our familial relationship and the resiliency of the human spirit, we have the fortitude to confront the challenges that lie ahead together.

It's My Turn Now

ALEDA MILNE

IT'S JANUARY 2020. Unbeknownst to me, the name "2019 Novel Coronavirus" has just been assigned to a virulent respiratory infection causing an unpredictable and apparently uncontrollable disease outbreak in Wuhan, China. There are fatalities. The West really can't tell what's happening. Talk of COVID-19 hasn't started circulating in my Ottawa neighbourhood yet. Insulated by being half a world away, I'm actually kind of ecstatic. I've already checked off one of my New Year's resolutions: I've read two books this month! I'm writing in my journal for today and I realize my window is cracked open. There's a bright blue tint from the sky and a winter breeze surfing the sun rays into my room. I honestly prefer fresh air, even if it's brisk. Maybe I'll go for a jog this afternoon. I'm soaking up the last joys and relaxations of the holidays. I have four days jam-packed with friends, lunches, movies, afternoon walks with the dog and family dinners. I love the holidays.

It's 11 March 2020. The World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a pandemic (Sencer). Cruise ships have been ordered to stop sailing, and travel bans and border closures increase exponentially across the globe.

“Shut the door!” my mom yells from across the living room. I was in such a hurry to get home, I burst through the door in excitement to announce that I had another two weeks off school, and left it wide open behind me. The weather is warm and it’s still sunny out; I’d leave every door open if I could. My dad tells me it’s insensitive to be celebrating a threatening pandemic like this one. I have to slow my panting from running home to explain that it’s not a disease I’m celebrating, it’s the opportunity to make and check-off a whole new “time-off” to-do list. Two of my friends are coming over later, so I hurriedly grab my journal and start writing “COVID Bucket List” in red bubble letters at the top of a new page.

- Cook dinner for the family on Friday
- 1-hour walk every day
- Start home workouts

“You do realize that every emotion you feel is plastered across your face, right? Have your fun, but keep an eye on the news. I don’t think this will be as simple as a two-week holiday,” my dad laughs uneasily.

It’s September 2020. The reported COVID-19 death toll reaches more than one million worldwide in under ten months (Sencer). The first strict quarantine measures are starting to lift. Preliminary research projects suggest that children who were quarantined are more likely to develop acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and thirty percent meet clinical criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (Kontoangelos). I’m sitting at my desk trying to distinguish who’s talking louder, my online professor or my headache. My attention is yanked away from the black “camera-off,” muted Zoom screen as footsteps rush around the main floor above me. As my eyes reluctantly focus back on the screen, my gaze passes the window in my room: closed. I get up to shove a towel under my door to mask the sound travelling. While I’m up, I decide to lock the window. It’s cold and I’m “in school.”

It's December 2020. The number of recorded COVID-19 cases worldwide surpasses 100 million (Sencer). The pandemic has triggered a twenty-five percent increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide (Kontoangelos). It's sometime in the afternoon and I'm lying in bed when my phone vibrates. I haven't reached out to anybody in weeks, so I muster up energy to turn my neck towards the glaring screen in confusion. My calendar displays that it's Christmas eve. I delete the pop-up, and my phone notifications settle comfortably back into zero, and my room to darkness. I can hear mask-muffled chatter upstairs as dinner's being cautiously prepared. This holiday doesn't count; my mom has COVID, so nobody's able to join our depleted celebration. I feel robbed.

It's August 2021. A CDC study confirms that both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines reduce the risk of COVID infection by 95.4%, and even ninety percent among commonly exposed frontline workers (Sencer). A rising 17.5% of studied participants with COVID-related mental-health declinations have participated in counselling or psychotherapy to date (Ye, et al.). Green dresses and yellow skirts stand out in a pile of warm laundry waiting to be folded. I start my daily routine of breakfast upstairs with whoever's home, brushing my teeth, washing my face, and bringing my laptop over to my desk. The screen lights up and there's a face I recognize.

"What are you grateful for this week?" This is a question Susan has asked me at the start of all our online cognitive behavioural therapy sessions. Her blush-pink lips release into a smile as I name off a list. I get visibly more excited talking about finally going to Kingston for university. I take a few deep breaths once Susan hangs up the call to reflect on our discussions. I give my mom a hug upstairs. She can tell I'm grateful for her help in finding a CBT therapist. We worried talk therapy focusing on identifying negative thought patterns and finding strategies to modify these behaviours would add to my plate more so than an alternative of medication would. CBT is more alleviating than I

expected, and it shows. I realize how sunny it is outside. I run down and open the window in my room.

It's January 2022. More than ten billion COVID vaccine doses have been administered worldwide, and 56% of the world is vaccinated with at least one dose (Sencer). Cognitive behavioural therapy was deemed the most effective online psychosocial intervention for alleviating anxiety and depression symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ye, et al.). It's nice to be back home in Ottawa again. I'm sitting at the middle of a brightly decorated and deliciously filled table with all my family for a New Year's Eve dinner. We're sharing resolutions, and I pull out a folded piece of paper from my pocket with bold red letters at the top spelling, "Aleda's Bucket List." I read off the arts program I want to graduate from, the career as a therapist I want to land, and the eight countries I want to travel to before 2025. My mom's eyes are watering. I know she's not sad. She's relieved, and happy! She wears her emotions on her sleeve, too. I take after her.

"I'm so glad I could help," she whispers.

"It's my turn to help now," I respond with a smile. I'm eager to be the recognizable face helping CBT patients open their windows to let light into their darkened rooms. It's February 2023. COVID has been reduced from a pandemic to a seasonal and benign endemic, similar to the common cold. My new student apartment is warmed by large windows welcoming the sun's rays, even on rainy days. I only see Susan around once a month now, but I use our strategies nearly every day. I pull out my journal to write my daily affirmations, schedule my daily activities, and take a few mindful, deep breaths before standing up to get started. I'm closer every day to crossing off one of my long-term goals: graduation! I'm excited.

WORKS CITED

- Bettino, Kate. "What's CBT and Is It Right for Me?" Edited by Ashleigh Golden, *Psych Central*, 2 June 2021.
- Kontoangelos, Konstantinos, Marina Economou, and Charalambos Papageorgiou. "Mental Health Effects Of COVID-19 Pandemia: A Review of Clinical and Psychological Traits." *Psychiatry investigation*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2020, pp. 491.
- Sencer, David. "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline." *Centres for Disease Control and Prevention*, 15 Mar. 2023.
- Ye, Zhiyu, Wentian Li, and Ruizi Zhu. "Online Psychosocial Interventions for Improving Mental Health in People During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Affective Disorders*, no, 316, 2022, pp. 120-31.

Wemberly Worried

SOPHIA MOLINARO

THE HOUSE is violently dark, nothing but the insecure glow of the moon washing blue over the trees outside my window, and small tapping that trickled down the glass.

“*Did you hear that?*” A voice whispers to me, almost as if from behind my head.

“It’s rain,” I mumbled, as I buried myself within the blankets.

“*But what if it isn’t? What if the tapping is more like banging, or clawing outside the window?*”

I sat up in my bed; the banging continued. What if it is something worse? I know it is rain, but what if it is not *just* rain?

The rationale behind anxiety occupies a person’s mind like a constant, nagging voice. For me, it is the voice just behind my head. The voice is persistent; incredibly theoretical as it tugs on my fears and uses them like puppet strings.

When thunderstorms used to start up at night, I relived this moment a hundred times over. I scurried down the hall to my parents’ room, waiting patiently by their bedside until mother’s intuition woke her. She let me curl up between her and my dad, before returning back to sleep.

This happened so often that after a while she set up a hallway light, so I wouldn't be as scared to walk over.

However, the irritating voice of anxiety does not occur in a vacuum. Growing up, my worries have been a lifelong obstacle, and the biggest struggles with it stem from its physical invisibility. Therefore, for our purposes, let's imagine anxiety in a physical form: awkwardly large, dark purple in hue, and fuzzy all over. This inconvenient monster starts out as a baby, within the youth of my mother.

Within my mother's childhood, she too had difficulty with the dangerous "What if?" scenarios that kept her awake at night. I have learned, however, that her parents never let her find security within their bed during thunderstorms. When she tells me, "You remind me of myself," she helps me understand just how much her anxiety is akin to mine. We share the same purple monster.

At the young age of twenty-four, my mother's water broke while walking into the hospital's emergency room. With nothing prepared, my parents were unceremoniously launched into the mad process of having a baby at thirty-two weeks. My mother could barely process her own panic before they performed a C-section to take out a very tiny baby. The anxiety monster was so big it blocked her view of the baby, and due to inexplicable complications, the nurses made sure she stayed in bed to avoid having a heart attack. The experience made her angry; she couldn't move, and she had no power to help or even hold her newborn baby. It was up to a team of doctors and a machine full of tubes.

Enter the NICU. There have never been so many anxiety monsters all in one place, crowding the space and making it hard to breathe. Infants fluctuated in and out at an alarming rate, all in poor shape and all hooked up to machines. As soon as you walk in, a metal sink is waiting for you to sterilize your hands and put on a yellow gown. The NICU is lined with incubators: warm, plastic cribs. Each one is fully enclosed to keep germs away from a premature baby, whose immune system has not had enough

time to develop. The view through the plastic crib becomes the only source of contact between baby and parent until they are strong enough.

Combined with an artificial environment, watching their new baby stuck in a plastic box over the holidays sent my parents into a miserable state. Family members offered sympathy, but nobody was any help to my mother, who felt powerless in protecting her newborn. Things took a positive turn when I developed with minimal complications. Due to my healthy status, I became the NICU mascot, as nurses loved to carry me around while they worked. I received that skin-to-skin contact most premie babies lack because of the need for them to remain hooked up to machines. Finally, after a gruelling three weeks in NICU, the final determination of success was a car-seat test. The test declared that if a baby can sit within a car seat and essentially not stop breathing, parents can take the baby home. Once I passed the test, my mother's anxiety monster—growing so large in NICU—split in two; I took half of its worries, and so did she.

In Canada as recently as the 2000s, novice parents struggled to find specialized necessities outside the hospital. My mother was on a constant hunt for baby clothes, as everything was so large she often had to resort to doll clothes to dress her infant. Surprisingly enough, Toys 'R' Us had American Girl doll clothes that worked for a while. On the other hand, diapers for premature babies had not been widely developed, and more than that, they were not easily available. Pampers had the earliest line developed around 2002, but not every store carried specialized items. My mother had to modify most diapers, folding them in half and wrapping them around my tummy.

All these supplies and tools for premies are now far more common, especially with the widespread use of the Internet as a source to problem-solve. Back then, new parents resorted to books on parenting, which was how my mother discovered the importance of worry dolls as I got older. These small figures are a kind of self-help tool used to quiet anxiety in

toddlers and small kids. You do this by telling the dolls your worries before bed.

Worry dolls grew up with me; I grew fond of the soft yarn and beaded eyes that I held tight within my tiny fists, before drifting off to sleep.

“She likes them?” My mother nudged my dad for an answer.

“She’s giving them little kisses, so yes,” my father replied without looking up from his magazine. He can’t see the purple monster, but always senses its presence.

“What if she swallows them, or they scratch her face at night?”

“Honey, she’s not an infant anymore. Relax,” he replied gently.

My mother constantly read about stress management tools for kids, finding complex studies around the psychology of the brain to later discover that “When we speak, we use the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex” (English). This area of the brain, involved in emotional processing, works to keep the purple monster at bay when activated. More than that, my mother did all this research to help me feel safe to talk about my anxiety monster, rather than hide from it. Now that I was starting kindergarten, she hoped to instill the confidence I needed to sleep on my own.

The most memorable aspect of growing up with anxiety with my mother was the books we read together. These sessions helped give me confidence in my literacy skills at school, somehow helping to keep both our anxiety monsters quiet. We would sit for hours in a big rocking chair, and my mother even ordered books especially about mental health. The 2000s still had stigma around mental health, but my mother made sure talking about stress was a norm within our house, to avoid the purple monster from growing bigger. The most cherished book when I was younger was about a mouse named Wemberly, who worried about everything.

“Wemberly worried about everything; big things, little things, and things in-between” (Henkes 2).

My mother would read these same lines over and over. The ability to resonate with the character helped me realize how everyone has to manage an anxiety monster. I imagine Wemberly’s purple monster hiding just behind the pages, as her worries are invisible too. However, this book resonated with my mother as well, and as a new parent it spoke to her own experience.

“When you worry, I worry” (4), said Wemberly’s parents.

This line was such a small part of the book, but it carries the potential to sum up everything I could possibly tell you about the relationship between a new mother and a sick baby. Born within an anxious environment, my mother’s worries reflect my own, and as both a blessing and a burden we learned to persevere.

At eighteen years old, driving on my own to live in a dorm at Queen’s University, I thought about the effort my mother put into ensuring I did not feel powerless and anxious all my life. Her influence and similar experience has given me the ability to become an independent adult. That fuzzy anxiety monster still came along in the backseat, but this time I am proud it’s no longer driving. When rain began to fall, the rhythmic sound of raindrops were just raindrops. That purple monster did not look up once, as the steady constant of the wipers simply swept the droplets away.

WORKS CITED

- English, Andrew. “Do Worry Dolls Actually Work?” *Practical Psychology*, 13 Nov. 2023.
- Henkes, Kevin. *Wemberly Worried*. 2000.

- Ionio, Chiara, et al. "Mothers and Fathers in NICU: The Impact of Preterm Birth on Parental Distress." *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, vol. 12, no. 4, 18 Nov. 2016, pp. 604-21.
- Klass, Perri. "Reading Aloud to Young Children Has Benefits for Behaviour and Attention." *New York Times*, 16 Apr. 2018.
- Lam, Fiona Tinwei. "Play." *Slice Me Some Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Creative Non-Fiction*, edited by Luanne Armstrong and Zoë Landale, Wolsak and Wynn, 2011, pp. 125-34.

Silence

ITAY MOSCOVITCH

I HAVE developed an astounding frustration towards everything. It's mainly towards sounds and other people. It started getting bad around the seventh or eighth grade. School became a cesspool of irritation, frustration, and rambunctious pre-teens. Every day I would try and pay attention, but then all my attention was diverted to that one sound that stood out. A tapping of a foot, a snuffle of a nose, that one kid who whispers like a hurricane, and, of course, there was the teacher. All of these noises were being fed into my brain all at once, and my brain couldn't handle it all. From age twelve to seventeen, I couldn't regulate my senses at all. It was like an ADHD hell, but with boisterous teenagers. Walking down the halls was a nightmare. People were shouting and mumbling, dragging their feet, and slamming locker doors, and all at once my brain felt and heard it all.

In high school, I would see all these people. Annoying and rude teenagers full of hormones and sex drive. Some of them were pretty cool, and some were absolute morons. I couldn't stand the morons. Then again, who can? It became harder to focus in class and harder to pay attention to what was going on around me. I was trying to focus more and more, but simply couldn't. I didn't know why this was happening to

me. Why was I different? Why was no one else irritated by the same things that were affecting me? I tried to ignore all noise at first to see if it was all in my head, but I couldn't sit still. I felt physically uncomfortable. It was something more, and something I desperately wanted to mend.

So I started to do some research, and apparently, this happens to a lot of people.

Part of it was undiagnosed ADHD, which my mom didn't think I had. So, as I researched further, I found some pretty interesting things. I had something related to sensory and information overload. Something that a lot of kids have when in the public-education system. So maybe the public-school system negatively impacts kids. Could that be true?

Of course the public-school system has a negative impact on students! Who am I kidding? It's loud, smelly, and chaotic. What can the public-school system have to offer that could positively impact their lives? Gym class? Probably the only thing. It turns out that schools are negatively impacting kids everywhere because of all that goes on. The loud kids, the boisterous lunch break, the teachers giving you shit when you can't pay attention, and bullies who make your life even worse. All of it piles up, and that doesn't even take into account the emotional scarring that comes from pubescent youth.

Everything that happens daily in high school is profoundly paranormal. It's like another world where nothing makes sense and everyone is rude and insensitive. It seemed that people were purposefully trying to irritate me, but they weren't. Schools should have done a better job of providing a relaxing and non-stressful environment for students, especially in elementary school, as that's where kids are exposed to the most stimuli and chaos. Accommodations for ADHD are simply not doing the job, as some students have trouble not only focusing, but regulating where the external stimuli go. I notice that most teachers would rather send a student out of class, as if they're being punished, but for some of these affected students, it's a reward. Maybe they are acting

out, but it's probably because they don't like being in such a boisterous environment. Who can blame them?

Music and movies always helped me relax and desensitize. When I got home and didn't want to see or speak to anyone, I would walk my dog and get it all out. School was so much bullshit that, when I wasn't having a good day, I usually stayed in my room. My parents thought I was just being unsociable or rude, but I just couldn't sit in the living room. The TV would be on, my dad and mom would be talking so loudly, and the cat would start scratching the couch just behind me, and all of that would just pile and pile, and I bolted straight to my room. I would always feel guilty about it, since I always wanted to spend time with my parents, but I physically couldn't.

That's how it was for me. Public spaces have given me such bad anxiety that I didn't like doing the things I used to enjoy. I used to once like school, and even now I can barely sit in a lecture hall or a seminar for an hour. I enjoy going to baseball games, but there are so many people that I usually just rush to get a drink and hotdog and I bee-line it to my seat so I can avoid as much interruption and irritation that I get from large crowds. I used to like airplanes, but because of the confined seating, and prolonged periods of sitting and listening to all the sniffing and coughing, I hate them now. When I go to movie theatres, I wait three weeks to watch a new movie so that the theatre is emptier. Do you realize how ridiculous this all is? I sound absolutely out of my mind.

Lately, it hasn't been so bad. Maybe because I hardly go to public spaces. I mean, sure, I still go out and have fun, but it's a rare occurrence. I find that I am not as irritated as much anymore. But it still happens now and then. Maybe it's because being alone so often made me miss the noise a little, made me miss the annoying things people do, because maybe the noise was just me trying to block it out when I should have been taking it all in.

Operation Safe Haven

NICOLE NELLIS

ACROSS THE field there's a man, about five foot seven. He wears a thick moustache, a well-worn Leafs jacket, and wide-rim glasses that take up half his face. A little blonde-haired girl, Gatorade water bottle in one hand and soccer ball in the other, runs up to hug him, and they make their way out of the park together.

A common observer may be able to deduce that, maybe sixty years prior, that man was a small child himself. What they would fail to gather from this short glimpse is that instead of walking home from a soccer game, he was walking Hungarian refugees through a forest to a new home.

Let me give you some context. On November 4, 1956, Soviet troops permeated what was then the Hungarian People's Republic. This came after a two-week-long countrywide rebellion against the government, specifically against the policies resulting from their subordination to the Soviet Union. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, also known simply as the Hungarian Uprising, left nearly a quarter of a million Hungarians as refugees ("Hungarian"). Most fled west to Austria ("Operation"), my Nagypapa included. Despite the fact that he has not lived in Hungary

since he was thirteen years old, remnants of that heritage live on, one of them being in his chosen title of “Nagypapa” rather than “Grandpa.”

Before the revolution, he grew up in a small village called Kőszeg on the western edge of the country. When he became an altar boy, he was one of the youngest, making all his friends at least a year or two older than himself. They were his mentors in mischief; he listened closely to every little thing they said, rumours they would pick up, clever pranks they would pull. Living so close to the border, he and his friends were allowed to play in areas that were forbidden to most others. Here, they befriended many of the border guards, mainly through little games of soccer. When word of turmoil began to spread, the knowledge he had been quietly acquiring suddenly made him an invaluable tool to the hundreds trying to leave the country. His friendships became alliances, jokes became advice, and all of a sudden his actions carried a weight that kids his age don't typically experience.

You might not get “thirteen-year-old war hero” from the small-town Canadian mechanical engineer that he became, but to me it makes a lot of sense. A quick Google search named me “being adaptable and accepting change,” “overcoming challenging situations,” and “looking beyond the normal way of doing things to visualize alternative solutions” as characteristics of the job (“Ten”). In these ways, his early experiences were his apprenticeship for the job, though you would never have guessed it.

An obvious fact about my Nagypapa, at least to those who have met him, is that he likes to “do it himself.” My mother grew up just one block away from my childhood home, as is pointed out to me each time we take a walk in the neighbourhood. When I look at the house now, it's easy for me to see my Nagypapa in his many contributions: the sun porch, the garage, the vegetable garden on the side of the house. Maybe there's nothing extraordinary about that house. It is, after all, just a house. It can't open its mouth and tell the people walking by, “I am a tangible relic of a new life being built,” or “I was the first family home of a man

who might otherwise be on the other side of the world right now.” To my family, though, that’s exactly what it is.

Maybe a quarter of a million other Nagypapas watch their posterity run across a soccer field, or wave goodbye to them when the school bell rings. Maybe they’re in Canada, maybe Austria, or maybe they’re still in Hungary. Though perhaps identifiable by the way they say their “Rs” or their flat caps or thick moustaches, some no longer identifiable at all, all were once little boys who were forced to grow in ways they never imagined they would have to.

WORKS CITED

“Hungarian Revolution of 1956.” *Wikipedia*.

“Operation Safe Haven: The Hungarian Refugee Crisis of 1956.” *USCIS*, 14 Dec. 2022.

“Ten Essential Mechanical Engineer Skills.” *Indeed*, 12 Apr. 2024.

Adults Only

CECILIA NG

THE DAY my brother came home from the hospital he was seven and a half pounds, which is exactly the average weight for a newborn baby. What was not exactly normal about his arrival was that my mom had been in labour for thirty-three hours, well above the average twelve to nineteen hours it takes to deliver a baby. Experiencing her second C-section (I was also a Caesarean-born infant), my mom gave birth to my little brother. After the delivery, she spent a week at B.C. Women's Hospital in recovery. When she came home from the hospital, she wasn't quite the same as I remembered. She no longer saw me as her baby. She had a new one.

I learned that newborn babies seem to mostly sleep, eat, cry, and poo. "Your first week with a newborn can be blissful, anxiety-ridden, and sleepless. Many parents feel like emotional wrecks during this time and struggle to settle into a routine. Because of the sleep-deprived emotional landmine, it can be challenging to have a balanced perspective when common newborn health concerns pop up" (Feld). By the time he was two months old, I had practically read every single parenting book available at the Kerrisdale branch of the Vancouver Public Library. In

preparation for this sibling, my parents thought it imperative that I read up on all the needs of a newborn. *My Polly Pockets* and *My Little Ponies* had been replaced with *Little People* and Hasbro infant-sized toy trains and trucks. As an only child for seven years, I was not used to having to share my space and parents with another human. “It could also be challenging for parents of a newborn to have a balanced perspective when common newborn health concerns pop up” ... or when the other child has concerns. Any problems of mine felt like they had become a nuisance.

The flock of interns’ excited chatter quickly turns into hushed tones as we walk into the conference room. At a mere six years of age, I know that a good manager toes the line between being loved and feared. Today we choose to be loved. Mom carries the container of hot Tim Horton’s coffee as I balance across my arms a large box of donuts that I can hardly see over.

“Who wants coffee!” cheers Mom in a sing-song voice, in hopes of encouraging the tired group of young associates to continue making cold calls until the clock hit five. They look at her with a noted mix of gratitude and admiration. Bianca, who has just recently graduated from UBC, tells me that her favourite thing about working for my mom is her young energy. I pray that I am looked up to in the same way when I am a leader one day.

Next, we stopped by the Vice President David’s office. He gives me a firm professional handshake and a friendly smile, telling me I should aspire to be just like my mom when I grow up. I already have that plan. I wait patiently outside the room as they discuss important business matters, and Mom glances over at me every few seconds to make sure I haven’t run off to print more pictures of the new toys I wanted her to buy me. Using the printer makes me feel like a real grown-up. When client documents are printed, I am sent to the copy room to pick them up. Once the documents are finished, I am tasked with using the shredder. I stride

past the other adults in the building, carrying my pile of papers to be copied or shredded, and walk into every room beaming with pride as if I am working there with them. When there were no more documents left, Mom let me shred her magazines, so that I would not be bored and restless on a long day at the office. David says he is going to hire me next.

Everything changed when my brother was born. We stopped going to the office together. She started having less time for me in general. In the days leading up to her going into labour, my mom was already at the hospital. I wanted to be with her, but I was not allowed to be—only adults could be in the delivery room.

The day mom goes into labour my dad sat me down at our recently baby-proofed kitchen counter. Every sharp edge in our house had been rounded over the last few months. I don't know how many fathers exist who can communicate seamlessly with their daughters, but you wouldn't likely find my dad in that club. Instead, he addresses his seven-year-old daughter as a business associate who would be oriented on a new company account. Levelling with me, I am briefed on this new responsibility that would be a great opportunity for me to prove that I was mature. (Who said I was trying to prove myself to anyone?) I look around at the kitchen that I had been put in charge of proofing, over at the protective baby fencing at the stairwell I had once fallen from, and up at the cabinet corners that I had not been tall enough to reach. From my perspective, I was still a child. Yet, it seemed like I had little choice but to accept this "promotion"—the junior associate had arrived.

I have spent the last eighteen years of my brother's life trying to show the adults around me that I am responsible and mature. Sometimes I feel an uneasy resentment growing inside me from feeling that I must engage in this kind of people-pleasing behaviour. But this feeling is also occasionally alleviated by the joys of being an older sister. I have gained

a sense of what it would feel like to have a child of my own. I learned about selflessness and sacrifice, and sharing the best things you have with the people you care about. When my brother broke his leg playing basketball, he took over my bedroom on the main floor. Beyond sharing, I have learned about the tenacity of love and the way it motivates patience and forgiveness. I don't recall when I signed up to be an award-winning caregiver, but most people are just thrown onto the life path they find themselves on. What I miss most is that I don't remember the last time I got to spend the same quality time with my mom. I know too that I no longer beam with pride when I am introduced as the daughter who doubles as a live-in nanny, chef, and tutor. "How lucky you are to have an adult daughter to take care of your son," the other moms at the high school drop-off gush.

In one attempt to connect with my estranged mother in the present day, she sheds some light on her decision-making process from when I was younger. Many of her responses to my criticism have to do with her not knowing any better at the time. To me, it feels like she does not want to take responsibility for the shifted growing-up experience I had. In a serious tone she tells me, "you will understand one day when you are a parent and have your own kids." I tell her that I feel like I already have been a parent the entire time.

WORK CITED

Feld, Gina Bevinetto. "What the First Week with a Newborn Is Really Like." *Parents*, 24 June 2023.

Sanctuary

SARAH O'KEEFE

THE FIRST few train rides in Italy brought some anxiety. Endless ramblings from frantic grandparents warning of swarming pickpockets and scam artists polluted the station with a threatening air in my mind. Each passing stranger might be the one to outsmart me, and swipe the remaining few euros from my allotted vacation money. I'd firmly crumple the bills in a sweaty fist behind my back and scan the sea of drifters, sufficiently guarding my treasure. By the end of the week, a childish confidence replaced nervous prejudice. Fourteen or some-odd buses in and out of Rome had affirmed my newfound navigational skills, and now I sat secure and eager next to my parents and little sister on our last outing. *Sperlonga*. A funny new word. I add it to my list of favourites: *prego, bambino, piccolo, gatto, scusi. Sperlonga*.

I'm fresh out of seventh grade, soaking in all the summer I can before returning to middle school, the place where I can only seem to do wrong. Classmates brand me weird and boyish, and I have an irrational nervousness around adults. I try to forget it all and focus on this approaching coastal city, this *Sperlonga*. It was a destination of my father's choosing, carefully coordinated, like all of our family excursions, to not allow for any reasonable discomfort. If the skies are

gorgeous and the weather is warm, the undeniable beauty of the day automatically trumps the complaints of my whining sister and neurotic mother. Despite my apprehension, excitement bubbles in my chest. Still, I hold on tight to a calculated face of bitter thirteen-year-old defiance so it doesn't go to Dad's head. Out the window, sunlight flickers through the gaps in wayward branches. Rustic white homes pile on top of one another, huddling tight over the lush green below. The sky's palette shifts as we near the stacked metropolis. A million yellows rebounding off crumbling travertine, stone, and marble in Rome fade into the greens and blues of the Mediterranean seascape.

Finally, the train doors open and the city greets us. The beach is a short taxi ride from our stop. Dad hops in the front seat and makes playful conversation with the driver, gesturing to us to join in. I'm a timid kid; I hate when he does this. My mother, sister, and I cram in the back.

"Ciao, amico!" He starts with an awful Italian accent. "We've been staying in *Roma* for the past few days and we're just checking out some new areas before we head home. Have you spent time down by the water here before?"

"Si," he replies. "It's beautiful down there. A more local area. Lots of Italians come here with their families."

Dad nods aggressively. "Oh, nice, nice, yeah, I've heard that. It was actually a buddy of mine who recommended coming down here. Said it's a great place to bring the kids. All the little shops, too. I've only heard great things. Any favourite spots you recommend to take a look at?"

I roll my eyes as the pair continue blabbering and I try to disappear into the hot leather seats.

Why can't we just be silent for once? Why does he always have to start something?

Old-town Sperlonga has a different smell than the tourist hub of Rome. The air carries drops of citrus and saltwater. A breeze glides through the jubilant shouts of a wedding party below us. The 2017 heatwave brings some of the most sweltering days southern Europe has

seen in years, but here, in the openness of the day, I don't mind. Sperlonga is not home. Home is harsh winters and angry parents. Home is where things change faster than I can keep up. Here the world stands still, perfectly poised in coastal dunes, limestone cliffs, and a stiff Jenga tower of homes. As I let out a breath and refill my lungs with hot summer wind, I begin to feel myself dissolving into the locale.

Down at the beach, the sea consumes the tranquil and cloudless horizon. Flawless cerulean waters seem impossibly clear compared to the murky green depths of the so-called Great Lakes. Lake Ontario is the only body of water I've been intimately acquainted with in all my brief existence. Here in Italy, my eyes are locked on the blue, shaking with anticipation for that vital "go ahead" from my parents. They give the word and I race my sister to a crystal abyss. Inside, I glide and hover mere inches from sea breams and sardines. The waves tug slightly to the right, where the whitecaps that follow meet a jagged patch of rocky outcrops. It beckons me creepily. We swim around the bend to find the remains of a cut-out cavern in the bordering escarpment.

The hollow wasn't always barren. The first century AD knew it as the lively, animated, banquet room of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, adorned with mythical sculptures and perfectly engineered to reflect the gold of the setting sun. Despite conquering the great armies of Raetia, Pannonia, and Illyria in his early career, the emperor's adult jealousy and poor political instincts later sank Rome into a dark age of chaos. This was his place of refuge. Alternating between the Sperlongan Solstice cave and the island of Capri, he retreated into ultramarine paradise, exchanging the tediousness of ruling with a hedonistic passion for drink and dance. Sperlonga has long since maintained his legacy as a resort town, where Romans and Neapolitans cast aside their daily burdens and bask in a cove outside of time.

Like Tiberius, I long to leave my empire behind. To abandon the chaos of growing up and stay frozen in serenity. Somewhere submerged I feel more accepted by the Sperlongan sea than my childhood bedroom.

Here, I belong to the water and so do the fish. The sand churns in circles around my feet. "I'm here," it says.

The hypnotic movement of the beach has softened me. When it comes time to leave I go willingly into the city, and trace the cobbled walls with my fingertips as we pass shop after shop. The air is cooler at night, and the locals are chatting heartily under the stars. How beautiful their definition of normal. I find myself asking what a life here means to them. Robust pasta dishes, good wine, the waves rolling in and out. Calm evenings, community. Heaping balls of mozzarella. The waves rolling in and out. A perfect time all the time. The waves, all the time.

I'll come back here someday. We call the taxi back to the station. I'm squished in the middle this time. Before Dad can start up his banter again, I feel compelled to engage the driver,

"Buonasera. Busy night?"

WORKS CITED

- Pohl, Frederik. "Tiberius." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
"Types of Fish in the Mediterranean Sea." *Motyvel.com*, 28 Feb. 2023.
Van Allen, Susan. "See the Summer Solstice from a Roman Emperor's Party Cave." *National Geographic*, 6 Sept. 2023.

My Mother You'll Be

ELLA OSCAR

I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
as long as I'm living, my baby you'll be.

—Robert Munsch, *Love You Forever*

THE ONCE sweet nursery rhyme now rings bittersweet in my ears. It was my mother's favourite term of endearment, "my baby," a gentle expression and promise of enduring maternal love. But now, it's a haunting reminder of a person I once knew.

I had a mother once. An incredible woman who put her own life on hold to ensure I could live mine to the fullest. She was the kind of woman to embrace my every dream without judgement, who never missed a parent-council meeting or field trip, and who seemed to effortlessly embody the role of the "picture-perfect wife." But behind the façade of our seemingly perfect family, there were flaws.

My mother was a victim of her own undeserved circumstances. Raised in an abusive environment, she grappled with profound mental-health issues. Her own mother, battling alcoholism, ultimately succumbed to her own poisonous bottle. I don't even know who to blame here. But that's what makes parental alcoholism so challenging. I have

no one to blame for my feelings. Alcoholism is a disease. Once it preys on someone, only twenty-one percent will ever make it out (Moos 2). For a while, I believed my mother would be part of that uneasy percentage. I suppose I saw the glass as half full, but clearly the glass had cracked. We exhausted every option: rehab, A.A. meetings, sponsors, therapy, medication. We even introduced her to new hobbies. (Just so you know, knitting doesn't automatically fix alcoholism.)

September 2012

Mom's weapon of choice was vodka. In desperate times, anything we hadn't already thrown out would do, even the Guinness collecting dust in the back of the fridge. In order to disguise her drink, she would pour it in her "green glass," a term that became as familiar to us as the daily routine itself. Every day after school, Adam, my mom, and I would walk over to our neighbours', us with our juice boxes and mom with her green glass. We were too young to understand why everyone joked that the green glass became an extension of her, but we wanted something to laugh at, so we joined in.

During one of her worst relapses, I thought I had lost her. She lay on the floor, unconscious and immobile, a mere shadow of the vibrant person I knew. I may not have lost her that day, but I lost *her*. As I watched in anguish, the paramedics got to work swiftly. She soon began to gain consciousness. My mother, now completely erratic and unwilling to go to the hospital, had the paramedics stumped. They wanted to help, but they couldn't. That's when the lead paramedic stepped in. He had mentioned that it was his last day on duty, and he didn't want to leave my mother like this. He described how he watched his own mother drown in this illness, and began to weep. Here we were, my mother and this stranger, sitting around her bed, pleading for her to help herself. He knew how I felt and didn't want me to lose her. When I think back on it,

it's possible he didn't want her to lose me. But he too realized that she couldn't be saved. Not by anyone else, anyways.

On another occasion when the paramedics came (Adam and I are frequent callers), they immediately turned their attention away from our mother and onto us, tears streaming down our faces.

"Are you guys okay?" they asked.

"Yes, thank you." We nodded in agreement while Adam turned to me.

"I hate that they always ask us if *we're* okay. They should be asking mom that," he whispered.

I understand what he's saying, but I know it's their job to ask, and after all, this is an ongoing mental injury for us. Although, the feeling of guilt Adam is implying is something I know all too well. Every time I leave her house, I wonder if that's the last time I'll be visiting. I think of how many days I should've spent with her and how many hours I should've called her while I'm away at school.

September 2020

I knew exactly when my parents' marriage ended, and they didn't even have to tell me.

I awake to a rhythmic sound from my mother's room. Glancing at the lime-green digital clock on my handmade nightstand, a relic from my parents' hopeful anticipation of my arrival seventeen years prior, I see it's only 6.49 a.m. The noise persists, relentlessly. I tiptoe down the hallway, passing once-happy family photographs now hanging askew, like forgotten memories. As I open her door, an eerie feeling washes over me, and a hanging smell of vodka from her distinctive green glass. She's seizing. I've never witnessed this before; I'm paralyzed with fear. The next moments blur into a haze of panic. Did you know the brain can block out traumatic memories? I didn't. All I recall is my father bursting into the room, finding me, frozen. He embraces me, and in that moment

I feel like a child again, seeking comfort from a night terror. I look up at him, and his expression, directed towards my mother, is foreign to me. It's one of defeat. He is no longer fighting for the marriage; he is fighting for his children.

I wish I would've smashed that green glass years ago, shattering its hold over us and breaking the cycle of despair. But back then, I was too young, too naïve to understand the power of a single act of defiance. Now, as I stand in the shadow of my parents' broken marriage, I can't help but wish for the courage to have done so. Perhaps then, we could have begun to heal.

Through this thorn in my childhood, I've learned a heavy truth: it's not your fault. Coping means detaching, mourning for the living who are slipping away. I've also learned that children of alcoholics are more at risk for the development of substance abuse themselves. While I am aware of these risks, I refuse to be a statistic. Although, I must accept the possibility of lasting scars. The mother I once knew I no longer have, and while I catch glimpses of her, she no longer exists.

I'll always love her. But she is no longer my alcoholic mother. She is an alcoholic. She is no longer living, just merely existing. But somehow, despite myself, I sometimes catch myself whispering back to her, "*as long as you're living, my mother you'll be.*"

WORKS CITED

- Moos, Rudolf H., and Bernice S. Moos. "Rates and Predictors of Relapse after Natural and Treated Remission from Alcohol Use Disorders." *Addiction*, vol. 101, no. 2, 2006, 212-22.
- Munsch, Robert N., and Sheila McGraw. *Love You Forever*. Firefly, 1986.

Navigating Love and Life

VALENTINA PAGLIARO-TOMASICCHIO

The Girlfriend

“IT’S SO unlikely I have it,” he said. “Everything will work out,” he said. Those words seemed so reassuring even though I had a feeling he didn’t believe them himself. The first couple months of a relationship are often called the “puppy-love” phase, but our naive infatuation quickly turned into a serious relationship after he called me and said he needed immediate surgery for cancer at roughly our three-month anniversary. His voice was calm when he told me he loved me, and that everything would go back to normal after he fully recovered. All I could focus on was walking home in my school uniform and trying to soothe my own trembling voice over the phone with him. I never knew what it meant to be grateful for life until that day. Realizing it could be cut short after only living for sixteen years was a harsh reality to face.

Statistics show that testicular cancer is prevalent among one percent of the global population. The National Cancer Incidence Reporting System and the Canadian Cancer Registry state that approximately four out of 100,000 men are diagnosed per year in Canada (Brenner).

The Boyfriend

After my surgery Mom gave me the phone to talk to her. I told her she wasn't allowed to break up with me now if she was thinking about it: "you can't break up with the cancer patient now," I laughed. She didn't like when I made jokes because she thought I was downplaying the seriousness of cancer. In reality I was making jokes because I didn't know how to process how fast everything happened. On October 2, 2020, I was greeted by my mom after the operation. No one else was allowed in the room because of COVID protocols. Somehow I felt relieved that she didn't have to see me in pain. Over the next few weeks I received flowers and candy baskets from people I barely knew. My name wasn't even spelt right on a couple of the cards. When I got home I was in so much pain that I couldn't make it all the way up the stairs to my room. I stayed in my guest bedroom for the next three weeks until I no longer needed help walking to the washroom.

The National Library of Medicine states that restricting visitations during the pandemic has serious negative effects on the mental health of its patients and their loved ones. Lack of support from loved ones during COVID-19 caused increased feelings of distress and isolation, especially during times of recovery (Moss).

The Girlfriend

Since the pandemic, school was online via Zoom. My mom dropped me off at his house at eight in the morning so that I could be by his side all day. His dad told me before I walked up the stairs that he wasn't allowed to consume any type of food or drink. I did not attend my virtual classes, as they seemed minuscule compared to the amount of pain that he was trying to hide on his face. I sat on a wooden stool beside him all day, as I was too afraid to hurt him if I made any sudden movements on the bed. "Are you hungry?" asked his dad. I smiled and shook my head

no because it made me feel sick to flaunt something as basic as food, knowing that he was hiding his starvation for the past eight hours. I felt sick until I went to bed that night, not because I hadn't eaten, rather because I took the act of eating for granted my whole life up until this point.

Two outcomes happen based on cancer's effects on a couple's relationship; cancer causes relationships to end, or individuals grow together from cancer. In some cases cancer provokes new maturity levels in individuals, thus making their relationship stronger (Moules).

The Boyfriend

A week after I came home I was still on bed rest, even though the nurse at the hospital told me I should be able to walk with minimal pain two days post-surgery. What a cruel joke the nurse made, I thought. Various other problems came soon after surgery: they dropped me during a CT scan, which caused a hematoma; internal bleeding; and an infection. After my girlfriend's multiple failed attempts to distract me from the pain, my parents called overnight care. The woman on the phone tried to invalidate the pain I was feeling. I could barely move. The hematoma grew so big that it stiffened all of my stomach muscles. My organs were pushed to one side of my stomach, and when I moved it would press against them. I felt consistent pain in my lungs from the simple act of breathing oxygen. All I could do was sleep, which is why it helped so much when she came over. Even if she calmed me down for one second of the day, it helped. She was one of the only people who proved she would be by my side through anything until we broke up. The only downside of constantly being around her is that we're growing dependent on each other for everything. When we had good moments, they were the happiest I've ever felt. But the bad moments had a negative effect on everything in my life. I couldn't focus on anything when we

fought, and we fought a lot. We lost ourselves in the process of putting each other before our own needs.

The effects of COVID-19 permitted non-feasible nurse-to-patient ratios as a method to prevent the spread of the virus. This caused higher-risk health problems among patients post-surgery as a result of less care from specialists (Moss).

WORKS CITED

- Brenner, Darren R., et al. "The Rising Incidence of Testicular Cancer Among Young Men in Canada: Data from 1971-2015." *ScienceDirect*, 9 Feb. 2024.
- Moss, Stephana J., et al. "Impact of Restricted Visitation Policies in Hospitals on Patients, Family Members, and Healthcare Providers During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Scoping Review Protocol." *National Library of Medicine*, 9 Feb. 2024.
- Moules, Nancy J., et al. "'Family Is Who They Say They Are': Examining the Effects of Cancer on the Romantic Partners of Adolescents and Young Adults." *Sage Journals*, 9 Feb. 2024.

Butlin's Debacle

CHRISTINE PEPPER

I DON'T know what possessed my dad to book a family vacation at Butlin's holiday camp in Skegness, England, but that's what happened, one summer, when I was about ten. I say "ten" because I was still in primary school, and I have photographs where the garb I'm wearing is decidedly 1970s. I don't know if we have anything like Butlin's here in Canada, but imagine a camp where family entertainment is foisted upon you for the duration of your stay. Like a try-hard Disneyland. To think that my dad agreed to this trip is a mystery. He was more of the Spanish holiday type: two pairs of shorts, two t-shirts, and a two-hour flight and you're on the beach, slathered in sun-tan oil, all smiles and *por favors*. He liked the guaranteed sunshine, the soft, sandy beaches, the vivid blue skies, and impossibly clear, warm, Mediterranean sea. In short, all the things Skegness was not.

In my experience, Canadian summers are often dry and hot, but England is not known for its stellar summers, at least it wasn't when I was a child. In fact, I only remember one gloriously hot summer: the infamous summer of 1976. Temperatures exceeded thirty degrees Celsius over three scorching, rainless months. It was unheard of, positively continental. Record temperatures were reached in June and

July (Moss); a drought bill and water ban were enforced, and fires raged throughout the New Forest. The slogan of the summer was a cheeky “Save Water, Bathe With a Friend,” and apparently many embraced the cause (Wainwright). There’s even a Wiki page devoted to the “1976 British Isles Heatwave,” which details the dire effects of the heat that year and the resulting “mortality displacement.” But it was so unusual, so out of the norm, that surely summers would return to the rain-laden affairs we all knew. And so they did. The daily weather reports in June, July, and August 1977 are a depressing list of precipitation. According to the London Weather Centre, Drizzle, Showers, Light Rain, and a Thunderstorm were the Four Horsemen darkening the skies that summer. So why my father agreed to a family holiday in 1977 with my grandparents and my aunt to the seaside resort of Skegness, a four-hour, nineteen-minute car journey away, I will never know. It has sandy beaches; I’ll give it that, but I want to underscore the famously unreliable British summers that coloured my childhood, and the one sunburn I ever suffered in England, during yes, you’ll recall, the infamous summer of 1976.

Butlin’s was the dreamchild of Billy Butlin. In 1936, he realized his vision to make the British seaside holiday affordable and entertaining for all. He bought a plot of land in Skegness, a seaside town on the east coast of England, and set to work creating a holiday camp crammed with “fun, excitement, and adventure by the bucketload” (“About”). Today, a veritable army of Redcoats, trained at the Redcoat Academy, report for duty at one of the three camp locations to deliver up fun on demand. It’s like a never-ending episode of *America’s Got Talent*: one part entertaining, one part cringe-worthy.

A four-hour and nineteen-minute car ride might not seem like much to many Canadians. Edmonton is a mere three hours away from my now hometown of Calgary, and people take that trip like they’re popping out for Starbucks. Not so in England. A trip from Dover (my former hometown) to London takes roughly one hour and fifteen minutes by car,

and that kind of excursion is planned weeks, *weeks*, in advance. Driving long distances on motorways is not a pleasant, leisurely pursuit in England; it's often dreaded. I feel it's safe to say that it's a topic of spirited conversation in pubs up and down the country, that and the weather, of course. And let's face it, it's a very serviceable topic. Strangers will engage with you: "you're travelling *where* on the weekend? The M2 to London? No!" Shopkeepers will commiserate with you: "construction between Dover and Folkestone again. That's the Channel Tunnel for you." It's a no-fail ice-breaker. Keep it in mind if you should ever visit.

On one visit home to the UK, I popped into the local newsagent's. Drooling over remembered chocolate bars and sweets from my youth, I zeroed in on a favourite: white chocolate jazzies. Not for the sophisticated palette, perhaps, but these impossibly creamy delights are first-rate. They're covered in sprinkles, the array of which only artificial colours can produce, and they go down a treat! I rummaged through my purse for coins and counted them carefully before producing a handful for the shop clerk. He looked down at them and then at me, down again, and back at me.

"Where *have* you been?" he said with a quizzical look.

"What?" I replied, caught off-guard.

"I can't take that! Half of that's not even legal tender anymore!"

I looked down at my coins, trying to locate the offenders.

"Well, you must live under a rock, because a lot of *that* has been out of circulation for years!"

Apparently, the half-pennies and pound coins were obsolete. I would have to rethink my British coin jar back in Canada.

I remember clinging to my Aunt Gay for much of the holiday. We roamed the campsite, taking in attractions, and landed at the fairground. We stopped for junk food and Gay picked up a bag of popcorn. We considered the rides and settled on the Disco Twist. An aerial view of this ride would resemble something akin to a giant electric hand mixer

with a maniacal operator at the controls. As the speed intensifies, so too the centrifugal force, and passengers are jolted to the outer edges of their bench seats like cake batter flung wildly against the sides of a mixing bowl. To my ten-year-old eyes, it was irresistible, and my aunt obliged. Quickly, we were hustled onto the ride: Gay on the inside, me in the middle, and a young girl on the outside. Things started well and we giggled in anticipation through mouthfuls of popcorn.

“Would you like some?” my aunt offered to the girl beside me.

The girl smiled a “no, thank you” kind of smile and the ride picked up pace. Then the speed increased. With each rotation, my aunt slid into me, and I, in turn, into the girl beside me. She was slowly being squashed as the ride quickened, and with each new jolt, a shower of popcorn flew in an arc like celebratory confetti clear over me and all over the little girl.

“Sorry!” my aunt would yell repeatedly with each increasingly frequent jolt, all the while struggling to wrest herself off of me, shimmy back into her seat and close up the popcorn bag. She was successful at none of it and I was of no help whatsoever. I was laughing so hard I could barely catch a breath. It still makes me laugh to think of it. It’s one of my fondest family memories.

My aunt told me that early into the trip, my grandparents had a spat, an “inevitable parental row,” she put it, and my granddad spent the rest of the holiday apart from us. She shared a photo of him taken at the holiday camp. He looks happy, relaxed, with no sign of trouble brewing. But I didn’t remember him even being there. No amount of Redcoat jollification brought him back to us. The kind of happiness they serve up doesn’t fix real family problems. He passed away a year later. In the photo I noticed he was wearing a sweater, though. It was the summer of 1977, after all.

WORKS CITED

“About Us.” *Butlin’s*, 3 Apr. 2024.

“August 1977 Weather History at London Weather Centre, United Kingdom.” *WeatherSpark*.

Moss, Stephen. “Weatherwatch: The Relentless Summer of 1976.” *The Guardian*, 24 Aug. 2018.

“1976 British Isles Heatwave.” *Wikipedia*.

Wainwright, Martin. “The Great Drought of 1976.” *The Guardian*, 17 May 2006.

Resilience

Weathering Life's Storm

SOFIA PERTILI

SOME INDIVIDUALS may understand life's challenges to be simply unfair and detrimental, like the effects of a storm. I for one find beauty in the challenges we face within this lifetime, as it adds meaning and purpose to our beings. I find beauty in storms. As humans, we only have the capacity to understand and value the good because we have experienced unfortunate events, thus making the good that comes in life that much sweeter. Challenges in life are inevitable. Ultimately, how we face these adversities creates the power to alter the outcome for better or worse. Thus, the notion of resilience is essential in determining an individual's outlook on life's challenges. It truly is a guiding light through the darkest of days. A word that carries weight, a word that holds stories of triumph and perseverance, ultimately making it easy to call *resilience* my favourite word.

At the age of fifteen, soccer was the most important and influential aspect of my life. Truly it was everything to me. Soccer was not just a game; it was my heartbeat, the rhythm of my life. While playing the game I saw myself as more than just a player; I was dreamer, chasing my childhood dream of playing professionally. This dream suddenly came

to a rapid halt, becoming the greatest roadblock to all my goals. It was a real-life nightmare, one that I could not escape. During an intense final game at our team's hometown field in Richmond Hill against our biggest rivals from North Toronto, animosity crackled in the air, and the tension was so thick you could practically taste it. I was darting down the sideline like a shooting star on a game-winning breakaway full of energy and determination. Suddenly, my memory blurs, and all I can recall is the frantic rush to the hospital, the sterile scent of disinfectant filling my nose, and the echoing words confirming my worst fear: a torn ACL. In that moment the weight of reality crashed down on me, shattering my hopes and dreams like a fragile glass.

I believed my career was over and I would never be able to play soccer again. I endured a major injury, holding me back from being able to play for the next few years. The weight of the world was on my shoulders. I was stripped of the one thing in life that brought me the most happiness. Consequently, I soon fell into a deep depression. I stopped going to school, I did not reach out to my friends, all I could do was lay in bed and fall deeper into my depressive state. I found myself entangled in a cocoon of thoughts, and the confines of my room amplify me with withdrawal from the outside world. As I lay there all alone, I felt as though I were at the centre of a tempest, engulfed in the chaos of the storm, convinced that its turbulent winds would never cease. Before this very moment in time, the term *resilience* had no deeper meaning than its basic textbook definition: "the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness." However, this word has become far more than a definition once I found myself in the strangling grasp of adversity. To some, the word *resilience* may be a frightful thought that resonates with hardship, detriment, and adversity. That is precisely how I perceived it during this time of chaos and despair.

On one random night a few months later, I decided to watch a movie, as I've done every other night. Thinking nothing more of this than just another movie, I put on *Soul Surfer*. Little did I know by the end of this

movie my whole perspective on life would be altered. This movie was a key, unlocking the door to a new realm of understanding, forever changing the landscape of my thoughts. I was introduced to the idea of resilience, a concept that took root in my heart and became a light amid my darkness. *Soul Surfer* uncovered the true tale of Bethany Hamilton, a young surfer who endured a tragic shark attack, resulting in the loss of one of her arms. By embarking on a healing journey to regain her inner strength, Bethany's mental and physical strength grew, embodying the resilience of the human spirit. Her courage transcended through me, giving me the confidence and strength to harness the brutality of the storm, knowing that no matter how fierce the winds blow, I must have the resilience to stand tall and not hide from the challenges. I was able to connect with Bethany and her story on an unparalleled level. There is solace in the understanding another has undergone a similar tragedy as you, and witnessing them flourish amidst the darkness brought me a profound sense of inspiration. Bethany has altered the word *resilience* for me. Through her will to persevere and break the barriers that she believed defined her, I became able to understand the word *resilience* as the idea of hope, strength, and prosperity. It became a reminder of how powerful humans can become when they overcome obstacles. Bethany's story of her undeniable resilience worked as a force allowing me to rise up and above hardship, stronger and wiser than before.

Resilience is more than just a word. It was my guiding light, my anchor in the storm, and my unwavering belief that no matter how dark the night, dawn would always break. Resilience allowed me to find my strength, emerge from my depression, and believe I was able to find my happiness again. With this strength I told myself I would do everything it took, mentally and physically, to continue playing the sport I loved. And I did just that! A short few years later, I was back playing soccer, and to this day each time I play I cherish the hardship I endured, as it made me the strong and resilient person I am today.

WORKS CITED

- Hamilton, B., S. Berk, and R. Bundschuh. *Soul Surfer*. Gallery, 2011
- Sutton, Jeremy. "What Is Resilience and Why Is It Important to Bounce Back?" *PositivePsychology.com*, 17 Oct. 2023.
- Vienneau, N. "Listening with Heart in Nurse Coaching." *Integrative Nurse Coach Academy*, 13 Mar. 2023.
- Wu, G., A. Feder, H. Cohen, J.J. Kim, S. Calderon, D.S. Charney, and A.A. Mathé. *Understanding Resilience*. Frontiers, 30 Jan. 2013.

My Grandmother's Journey Across Borders

A Tale of Immigration and Resilience

CLAIRE PHILLIPS

THE SECOND World War left an indelible mark on Yugoslavia, reshaping its social, political, and economic landscape. Initially caught in a precarious position of attempted neutrality, Yugoslavia was swiftly invaded by Axis forces in 1941. This invasion fractured the nation's economic infrastructure, plunging its residents into poverty and deprivation. As the conflict unfolded, the country's infrastructure crumbled under the weight of bombings, displacements, and resource shortages. Urban centres were laid in ruins, with homes reduced to rubble. Food scarcity became rampant, leading to widespread malnutrition and starvation among civilians.

The war's toll was particularly severe on rural communities, where agricultural production dwindled due to labour shortages and disruptions in supply chains. Families faced desperate choices as they struggled to secure even the most basic necessities. Forced labour, confiscation of property, and arbitrary violence were commonly routine, exacerbating the already precarious living conditions. Amidst the turmoil, the drumbeat of war echoed with increasing intensity, driving thousands to flee their homeland in search of safety. Immigrants embarked on

treacherous journeys, leaving behind the familiar embrace of their homeland. My grandmother, as a young child in the 1930s, became one of the thirty thousand Yugoslavian WWII immigrants to arrive in Canada.

Arriving in Canada as a young immigrant from the war-torn country of Yugoslavia, my grandmother faced an overwhelming sense of social isolation. The unfamiliarity of Canada's cultural customs and the struggle to communicate effectively left my grandmother feeling isolated in the foreign environment of Toronto, Ontario. However, with resilience born of necessity, she gradually adapted to her new surroundings. In the bustling streets of downtown Toronto, she found a community that embraced diversity, offering a sense of belonging amidst the vastness of the city. Through perseverance and determination, she immersed herself in English-language classes to improve her fluency and overcome the language barriers in which she was confronted.

As she gained confidence in her linguistic abilities, my grandmother's journey took a transformative turn. Inspired by a desire to contribute to her newfound home, she pursued a career in nursing. Her empathy, kindness, and optimistic attitude endeared her to patients. With boundless compassion, she forged friendships with each patient she encountered, not hesitating to spoil each one with gifts and homemade desserts. For each birthday, anniversary, or work celebration, my grandmother consistently jumped at the opportunity to welcome friends and family into her home. My mother, the youngest daughter of my grandmother, often recounts these gatherings, marvelling about the ways in which my grandmother effortlessly brought people together.

"She was always hosting parties at our house for friends, family, or even co-workers," my mother recounts. "I remember she would always invite a lot of people, too—she wouldn't want to exclude anybody. She was truly just always finding ways to make other people happy." Each party was a testament to her generous spirit, as she spared no effort in ensuring every guest felt welcomed and appreciated. From the

abundance of homemade casserole to the countless gifts of family board games she'd distribute, my grandmother's parties and social gatherings reflects her warmth, kindness, and desire to uplift those around her.

Amidst life's trials, my grandmother faced an arduous battle against cancer with remarkable resilience. Confronting the diagnosis with courage, she endured four rounds of chemotherapy, each session a gruelling test of endurance. Relentless exhaustion and extreme weight loss took a toll on her body, all amidst the gradual loss of her long, dark hair. However, despite cancer's physical and emotional toll, she was determined to overcome the illness that sought to defeat her. With an indomitable spirit, she confronted the side-effects of chemotherapy—the nausea, fatigue, and hair loss—with perseverance, drawing strength from the steadfast support of her family and loved ones. She found solace in the social, academic, and personal victories of her children, refusing to allow cancer to strip her of life's beauty. Even on her weakest days, she remained a pillar of support for her children, taking them out for meals and offering comfort and guidance when it was needed most. Her journey became a testament to the power of resilience and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. Despite cancer's relentless return its fourth and final time, my grandmother's unwavering optimism never faltered. Even as her strength waned in her final days, she faced each day with grace and hope, leaving a profound impact on all who knew her. Despite her absence, her legacy of courage continues to inspire all who had the chance to be touched by her strength and soul.

Following my high-school graduation in 2022, my sister and I embarked on a journey to my grandmother's homeland of Montenegro. Retracing her footsteps and immersing ourselves in the rich heritage of my grandmother, we spent two weeks exploring the rugged landscape and history of what was once her home. As we journeyed through the terrain and mountain landscape of Montenegro, both my sister and I found ourselves immersed in a world both familiar and foreign. From the scenery of the Adriatic coast to the rugged mountains of the Dinaric Alps,

the country offered a diverse landscape that captivated our desire to learn. While certainly educational, I found the most poignant moments of our journey were spent retracing our grandmother's footsteps. As my sister and I visited the villages in which she had grown up, the cobblestone streets guided us to cherished memories tucked away in gardens and old stone walls. The quaint, rustic houses stood sentinel, their weathered façades silently bearing witness to her past. With each step we took, echoes of my grandmother's childhood enforced a tangible link to her past, bridging the gap between generations and allowing me to understand her heritage. In these quiet moments, I felt a deep connection to our grandmother's past, as well as a prominent appreciation for the tribulations of her childhood. I felt her presence more prominently than ever, ultimately serving as a comforting reminder that her spirit lives on in the land she once called home.

WORKS CITED

- Donlagić, Ahmet, Žarko Atanacković, and Dušan Plenča. *Yugoslavia in the Second World War*. Međunarodna štampa, 1967.
- Ericson, Ed. Rev. of *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* by Stevan K. Pavlowitch. *Historian*, 2010, 700-01.
- Pakula, Andrew. *War and Peace: Yugoslavia, the World's Failure*. *Peace*, vol. 11, 1995.

Beyond the Tropics

A Journey of Humanitarian Discovery in Costa Rica

HOLLY PRICE

MY JOURNEY into Costa Rica diverged from the beaten tourist paths. Rather than embarking on an ordinary travel escapade, my purpose was deeply rooted in humanitarian endeavours. This distinctive approach granted me a profound insight into the essence of Costa Rica, far beyond the clichés of traditional tourism. Accompanied by close friends, including my steadfast companion Claire, we delved into the lives of local families. Our days commenced before the break of dawn, greeted by the rising sun as we ventured into the sugar cane fields. This daily labour was more than mere toil; it served as an initiation into the rhythm and resilience of Costa Rican life. Yet, our immersion extended beyond physical exertion. We traversed the verdant landscapes, embraced local customs, and engaged in the vibrant tapestry of the country's culture, enriching our understanding in ways that surpassed imagination.

Each morning in Costa Rica unfolds like a masterpiece, blending the splendour of nature with the warmth of human connections. As we ventured into the sugar cane fields, the crisp mountain air greeted us, wrapping us in its refreshing embrace. The landscape stretched out

before us, a canvas adorned with dew-kissed blades of grass, sparkling like diamonds in the early light. Working side by side with locals, the rhythmic sounds of machetes slicing through the stalks filled the air, creating a symphony of labour. Amidst the rustling of leaves and the swaying of cane, laughter bubbled up from deep within, mingling with spirited conversations in Spanish. It wasn't just physical exertion; it was a shared experience, a bond forged through sweat and toil.

"Hey, pass me that machete, amigo," Juan called out, his voice ringing clear over the fields.

"Sure thing, Juan," I replied, handing him the tool with a grin.

The camaraderie among us was palpable, weaving through the fields like a thread, binding us together in unity. Despite the language barrier, our shared purpose transcended cultural differences, creating a sense of belonging that words alone cannot capture.

As the sun climbs higher in the sky, casting its warm embrace upon the land, we seek solace in the embrace of the rainforest. Guided by our gracious hosts, whose radiant smiles and welcoming gestures beckon us forward, we venture into the labyrinthine trails, enveloped in a symphony of birdcalls and rustling leaves. The canopy above filters sunlight into intricate patterns, casting an ethereal glow upon our path. Among the melodic chorus, we discern the vibrant hues of toucans darting between branches, the iridescent plumage of parrots, and the serene flight of doves, each adding their own melody to the rainforest's symphony. Along the way, we pluck ripe mangoes and crack open coconuts to quench our thirst, savouring the sweet nectar as a reward for our labour amidst the lush wilderness.

The stunning scenery of Costa Rica reflects the nation's dedication to sustainable tourism, evident through initiatives like the Certificate of Tourism Sustainability (CST) program and the Ecologic Blue Flag Program. The CST program rigorously evaluates various aspects of businesses, from management practices to environmental impact. This emphasis on responsible tourism underscores the importance of

preserving the environment for present and future generations. Similarly, the Ecologic Blue Flag Program promotes public health and environmental conservation through specific criteria and evaluations. These initiatives not only demonstrate Costa Rica's commitment to harmonizing tourism development with environmental preservation, but also serve as a commendable model for responsible tourism, both within Central America and beyond its borders ("CST").

Further substantiating the commendable efforts of Costa Rica in sustainable tourism are the affirmative outcomes derived from for-profit environmental voluntourism programs, shedding light on the transformative potential of such initiatives. These programs prioritize meaningful experiential components and meticulous program design to instigate and sustain long-term pro-environmental behaviours among participants. For instance, during my time in Costa Rica, I witnessed first-hand the success of programs like the GLA program, which employed a sequential and programmatic approach to introduce students to environmental issues and engage them in hands-on service-learning activities. Importantly, the necessity of post-program communications and follow-up initiatives was stressed, emphasizing their role in perpetuating pro-environmental behavioural changes beyond the voluntourism experience (Schneller and Coburn). This experience highlighted the significant role that students, like myself, can play in promoting sustainable practices through experiential learning opportunities.

Reports from fellow travellers further enrich the narrative tapestry of Costa Rican culture and tourism. Lizzy Smith, a Peace Corps volunteer, shared vivid anecdotes from her experiences, highlighting the challenges of navigating the education system and the importance of fostering meaningful connections with students through community-service projects. Smith recounted instances of cultural exchange within classrooms, where students eagerly shared their traditions and customs, fostering mutual understanding among peers. She emphasized the

transformative power of these connections, noting how they transcended academic boundaries and enriched the educational experience for both students and volunteers alike. Smith's reflections provided a poignant glimpse into the vibrant tapestry of Costa Rican life, underscoring the profound impact of community engagement and cross-cultural understanding (Jim).

As I delve into various online narratives, I find myself immersed in the intricate tapestry of daily life in Perez Zeledon. One narrative in particular resonates deeply with my experiences, offering a vivid glimpse into the lesser-known aspects of Costa Rican culture. Sara's words paint a picture so vivid that I can almost feel the warmth of the sun on my skin as I wander through the bustling local market. The vibrant colours of the fruits and vegetables contrast with the earthy tones of handcrafted goods, creating a kaleidoscope of sights and sounds that overwhelm my senses. Engaging in CrossFit workouts with locals isn't just about physical exercise; it's an opportunity to connect with the community on a deeper level, to feel the pulse of Perez Zeledon coursing through my veins with each lift and squat. But it's Sara's description of visiting the biological centre in Quebradas that truly strikes a chord within me. As I read her words, I find myself transported back to that moment when I stand amidst the lush greenery, surrounded by the sights and sounds of the rainforest. The air is thick with the scent of damp earth and the cacophony of birdcalls, creating a symphony of nature that seems to echo through the ages. In that moment, I feel a profound sense of connection to the land and its people, as if I am a part of something greater than myself. It's a feeling that stays with me long after I return home, a reminder of the transformative power of immersion and cultural exchange. Sara's narrative not only enriches my understanding of Costa Rica but also reaffirms the profound impact of my own experiences. It's a reminder that true travel isn't just about ticking off items on a bucket list; it's about forging connections, embracing new perspectives, and discovering the beauty of the world in all its diversity.

Claire's testimony further illuminates the transformative nature of immersive experiences abroad. As she vividly recounts the Easter festivities, I'm transported back to that vibrant scene: the streets adorned with colourful banners, the air filled with the melodies of traditional music, and the palpable excitement of the locals (Logue and Price). The aroma of freshly prepared dishes wafted through the air, enticing even the most hesitant palates. For me, once a picky eater, these festivities became a gateway to a culinary adventure I never anticipated. The fish soup, a cornerstone of Costa Rican cuisine, stood out among the myriad of dishes served during the celebrations. Initially hesitant at the thought of fish in a soup, I hesitantly took my first spoonful and was immediately surprised by its rich flavours and comforting warmth. The delicate balance of savoury broth, tender fish, and aromatic herbs created a symphony of tastes that danced on my tongue. But the culinary delights didn't stop there. From savoury empanadas bursting with flavourful fillings to aromatic arroz con pollo, each dish became a celebration of culture and tradition. The empanadas, with their crispy golden crusts and succulent fillings of seasoned meats and vegetables, offered a tantalizing blend of textures and tastes. Meanwhile, the arroz con pollo, a classic Costa Rican dish of tender chicken and fragrant rice, exuded warmth and comfort with every bite (Logue and Price). Through the communal act of sharing meals with locals, I not only expanded my culinary horizons but also gained a deeper appreciation for international cuisine. Each dish told a story of tradition, history, and the vibrant tapestry of Costa Rican culture. As I savoured each mouthful, I felt a sense of connection to the people and the land, cultivating an open mind and a heart full of gratitude for the experiences that enriched my journey.

My journey into Costa Rica was not merely a tourist excursion but a profound exploration rooted in humanitarian endeavours. From the early mornings toiling in the sugar-cane fields to the tranquil embrace of the rainforest, each experience illuminated the resilience of Costa Rican life and the richness of its culture. The nation's commitment to

sustainable tourism, exemplified by initiatives like the CST and Ecologic Blue Flag Program, underscored the importance of preserving its natural beauty. Conversations with locals, such as Juan's camaraderie and Lizzy Smith's reflections, deepened my understanding of community engagement and cultural exchange. As I reflect on Sara's vivid descriptions and Claire's colourful anecdotes, I am reminded of the transformative power of genuine connections. In bidding farewell to Costa Rica, I carry forward invaluable lessons: the significance of responsible tourism, the power of community engagement, and the beauty of embracing adversity. Costa Rica will forever hold a special place in my heart, a beacon of hope and inspiration, guiding my future travels with its enduring spirit of resilience and exploration.

WORKS CITED

- "CST Tourism Sustainability." Instituto Costarricense de Turismo, 14 Feb. 2024.
- Jim. "Advice from a Youth Development Volunteer in Costa Rica." *Wanderingtheworld.com*, 2 Feb. 2024.
- Logue, Claire, and Holly Price. "Summary of Interview Transcript." *Costa Rica Journey Through Claire's Lens*, 2024.
- Sara. "A Month in Perez Zeledon." *Kulturstudier*, 4 Oct. 2019.
- Schneller, Andrew J., and Sarah Coburn. "For-Profit Environmental Voluntourism in Costa Rica: Teen Volunteer, Host Community, and Environmental Outcomes." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 26, no. 5, 23 Jan. 2018, pp. 832-51.

Andalusia

A Guide for the Traveller

BOGARTE QUINN

WHEN I stand in one place, I can still feel the ground moving. Dancers with thunderous steps and clapping hands. Flamboyant gestures, passionate in both their love and hatred. A handsome bullfighter who steps gracefully between the pools of blood that gather between his feet. I still feel their movement, their presence beneath me in the place where I stand today.

Some say that ghosts are the ethereal manifestations of past emotions absorbed by physical objects. The radiation of feelings expressed and deposited in the ground to be played repeatedly for whomever should pass over that place, like a semi-transparent image burnt into an old computer screen that paused on the same graphic for too long. These ghosts are an expression of a singular moment in time, but also something embedded in a physical place—something real and tangible. There is a connection between time and space, between past and present, between something lost and something real. And while the ghosts who haunt me travel this connection so freely, I can only walk forward, unable to retrace the journey behind me—a path lost, but not

forgotten.

Welcome to Andalusia!

Even if this is your first visit to Andalusia, Spain's southernmost region, you will recognize it instantly, as if you have been here before. This is quintessential Spain—the source of nearly everything that one imagines to be emblematic of Spanish culture and tradition: flamenco music; bullfighting; tapas; soaring, grand cathedrals; and quiet, verdant Arabian gardens. Andalusia is a paradise for anyone who is fascinated by history, architecture, the arts, and food. It is a place where the past lives in the shadows of the present—*each dependent on the contrast and conflict with the other to be seen separately, and distinctly.*

Today, Andalusia is a magical and tranquil paradise for many travellers. Five hundred years ago, however, this was a battlefield in a war fought between two cultures with conflicting world views, each alien to the other. For a brief moment in a vast history, this place sat at a crossroads between two very different paths: one Christian, the other Muslim; one European, the other African. And though, ultimately, the Spanish defeated the Moors, much from this period remains and continues to influence Andalusian culture and the arts, making this a unique place *reflective of a unique moment in time.*

As you wander Cordova's churches, you will discover Moorish arches supporting bell towers emblazoned with a crucifix. While you walk through Seville's fragrant, walled gardens you will find quiet, reflective pools connected by a complex system of bubbling canals; waterworks built by an ancient people who knew first-hand the dryness of the desert. With your first bite of golden paella, you will taste exotic saffron, a spice originally from Morocco. Andalusia is a mysterious and alluring part of the world with much to offer today's modern traveller, so let's go!

How to Get There

Andalusia is well serviced by flights from Europe's major airports. Destinations on the Costa del Sol near Málaga are popular with travellers connecting through London, and you will find many inexpensive flights departing from Stansted Airport. While these direct flights are convenient and fast, when one has time, one should always travel by land or sea. What is a travel without a journey?

When I hold my breath, I can smell it. Orange blossoms, cooking oil sweetened by churros, and the exhaust of two-stroke engines powering scooters that pass by every few seconds. Thirty years ago, I boarded a train at London's Waterloo Station bound for Dover. It was a cold night, darkened too early by a reticent winter sun. After thirty-six hours, five trains, one ferry, several coffees, too little sleep, and too many pastries made chewy by plastic wrap, I arrived in Seville and breathed in the city—the sense of sensory transportation even greater than the physical distance travelled.

Movement has become a lost aspect of travel. We desire to leave one place and arrive instantly at another. And yet the act of movement, measured in both miles and hours, or perhaps even years, is essential to understanding that you have been transported, that you are not in the same place, but somewhere far away from where you started.

What to Do and See

Andalusia offers numerous historical sites and museums filled with fine art and precious treasures to be discovered; from the Alhambra of Grenada, a sprawling fortification and palace, and the former seat of Moorish power, to Cordova's Mosque-Cathedral, Our Lady of the Assumption, a church unlike any other you have seen before. Once the site of a Visigoth church, the Moors built a mosque here in 785 CE. When

the Spanish forced the retreat of the Moors, they sought to re-establish Christianity, and rebuilt a church on top of the mosque—an expression of dominance. Though an act of destruction, the Spanish kept the Moor's pillars and arches in place, perhaps moved by their beauty as many modern visitors continue to be today. From ancient grand buildings to simple, rustic villages, there are many places to visit and keep a traveller occupied.

When I close my eyes, I can see it. A white-washed village perched high atop a mountain beyond the chaos and noise of the city below, sitting like an island in a sea of silent, twinkling streetlights. My friend and I left the others at the hostel and wander up into the dark Old Town, its streets deserted except for packs of roaming dogs who paid no interest to us. These streets were a twisting maze without map, and so we allowed ourselves to become lost. We followed our senses; sight, hearing, touch, and smell guiding us. We heard music in the distance and followed it to a small bar where a few guests had a guitar and entertained themselves with song. We stayed with them and chose to stay lost. We drank fino sherry and ate salty, fried anchovies late into the night. Our curiosity and desire for adventure, choosing which path to take at each intersection; the way home was no longer a consideration—we had gone too far—our path to return, untraceable, and for now, forgotten.

Where to Stay

In Andalusia, you will find a wide variety of accommodation suitable for any budget. Whether a five-star luxury hotel, a small, family-run pension, or a hostel filled with boisterous youth, every type of traveller will find accommodation that fits their price range and style of travel.

When I wrap my arms around myself, I can feel it. A rough-hewn but warm and colourful Moroccan blanket, still smelling of the desert from which it came. It wrapped itself around me and my companions for the night, two British travellers who were decades ahead of me. A mailman and a fisherman, they were retirees who sought travel and adventure after a lifetime of predictable work. Outside the Santa Justa train station in Seville, we sat and talked, drank cheap, duty-free brandy, and tried to stay warm. It was too late for a hotel and too early for the station's doors to be open. They had just returned from Morocco and were on their way to Mediterranean destinations. I was at the end of this leg of my journey and returning home, to school, and the life I had temporarily left behind. For a moment, the three of us, from different origins and moving in separate directions, sat together and talked of where we had been and where we were going, as if these things were certainties. We waited for the doors to open, to say our goodbyes and become a memory, a ghost to the other—our journeys resumed, and paths chosen.... Do they remember me? Do they feel my movement under their feet wherever they now stand?

One Visit Won't be Enough!

It was only through violent action that the Moors were forced to leave this place, and many times they unsuccessfully tried to return. Fortunately for the modern traveller, Andalusia is now a welcoming place to visitors, and no matter how many times you visit here, there will always be another path to take, new things to see and do, and places to stay. *Perhaps your old path is untraceable, but it is never truly forgotten. A connection remains between the past and present like the Morrish pillars that now hold up Christian bell towers—whether in conflict or peace, dependent on each other.*

... So often in moments of bloodshed, tears wept, laughs had, in conflict and collision, places and times where paths crossed ... there is melancholy. One path was taken, but others necessarily rejected. A future that never happened, but still exists as a distant place in your mind to which you thoughts may travel, but your body cannot. There something so compelling about a version of life lost in the past. A path remains to this place, but now decades later, the connection is ghostly and ethereal—remembered but untraceable. When unable to grasp an object, my mind is permitted to redraw its outlines and reshape its form; desires and wishes painting a dreamy picture of a reality that I can no long hold close enough to see clearly. As the past and present drift further apart, when my now wrinkled hands can no longer hold close what I believe I long for, my aging eyes with blurred vision see only perfection in the growing distance behind me....

The true paradises are the paradises we have lost.
—Marcel Proust

WORK CITED

Drayson, Elizabeth. *Paradise Lost: The Story of Granada*. Head of Zeus, 2021.

Adventures in Italy

Daring to Take on the Road

CHRISTIANE RADU

“UHH, THIS doesn’t look right,” I stated, nervously glancing at the leaves that were brushing against both sides of our car. Large, crooked branches resembling gnarly fingers extended from misshapen olive-tree trunks and reached, archlike, over the road.

“Nah, we’re good,” my husband answered, laughing. “Meredith says we’re nine minutes away.”

I looked at the GPS screen that we had nicknamed Meredith, and the time remaining to our destination was indeed nine minutes. What worried me, though, was the large grey area of nothingness on the screen between us and the Airbnb.

“I don’t know, I think the road is getting smaller,” I answered, peering through the windshield. I was now starting to panic. I was never adventurous by nature. The increasingly dimming light as dusk approached was becoming a major concern. I started to take note of the landmarks around us in case we needed to backtrack.

“Well, uh, let’s go a bit further,” he replied, sounding less confident than before. We had exited the main road a few hundred metres back and the road had narrowed into a track, then a path. There was an old stone

fence on both sides—probably piled there by farmers centuries ago—that separated us from the olive trees. The rented Fiat I initially thought was too small when we picked it up, now seemed Goliathan.

“We should go back,” I insisted, suddenly realizing that we were not on the road to our accommodations for the night, but in the middle of what appeared to be an Italian olive grove—a rather large and dense one—at night! Meredith had failed us!

“Yeah, I guess this path is leading us deeper into the trees,” he answered with a sigh.

Luckily, the landmarks that I had noted going in brought us back to the main road and, finally, to our Airbnb.

We had flown to Rome to begin our holiday in Italy. Two weeks would be spent touring the southern part of the boot by car. The first week we visited Rome, including the Vatican, Colosseum, Pantheon, Trevi Fountain, and the Spanish Steps. I was reluctant to leave this beautiful city, but the next two weeks promised to be just as exciting.

“It’s really small,” I said, surveying the two-door Fiat, only a tad larger than a Mini, that we were picking up from the car hire company, Sicily By Car.

“It will be very economical. Fuel is not cheap here,” My penny-wise husband replied.

I scowled at him and squeezed into the car. Next stop, Naples.

We opted to take the coastal route, which was about three hours longer than the Autostrada A1, a superhighway that the clerk at the car-rental had warned us could be very congested and had tolls. The coastal route offered more scenic views and the opportunity to stop by picturesque towns along the way. This route did not disappoint. The views were spectacular.

We arrived in Naples just as Neapolitans were arriving home from work. Although our hired Fiat would have been dwarfed by the vehicles we are accustomed to back home, to the uninitiated driver negotiating the narrow streets in Naples’ historic centre—many of which are one-

way—the Fiat was gigantic. We had set the address of our Airbnb into Meredith and followed the route from the comforting main street into the tight back alleyways, a terrifying venture for the faint-hearted.

I nervously gripped my seat as my husband successfully edged our Fiat around corners and parked cars, all the while avoiding motorcyclists appearing from nowhere and pedestrians carrying small shopping bags with baguettes protruding out the top.

“Are you sure it’s here?” I questioned grumpily, tired from the long drive.

“Yup, we’re almost there,” he replied.

As if on cue, Meredith declared, “You have arrived at your destination.” Confused, we could see no building near us that resembled the pictures we had seen of our Airbnb. Confirming the address of our lodging with our host by text message and soliciting locals for directions, we had indeed arrived at Vico Castrucci, 5, Napoli.

The entrance to the Airbnb was a forest-green garage door that we had passed three times while circulating the narrow alleyways in search of our destination.

“This couldn’t be it,” I thought in dismay, scared of what lay beyond that door. The host was there to greet us. She opened the door, revealing a hidden new world. We moved into a spacious courtyard, complete with a lovely garden that had beams of light illuminating the three palm trees that welcomed us into the centre court. It was like a scene from a story where one entered another world through a magic passageway. The Airbnb was a monastery that had been converted into tourist accommodations and proved to have all the amenities: modern comfortable rooms and bathrooms and, most importantly, Wi-Fi.

Leaving Naples early the following day, we drove along the Amalfi Coast to the seaside village of Giovinazzo via Salerno, where ultimately we would experience our “lost-in-the-olive-grove” adventure.

“What do you suppose is wrong?” I asked my husband. We had been sitting in a seemingly endless line-up of cars for almost forty minutes

and could not see beyond the point where the cliff jutted out onto the road, so we did not know what was causing this delay. It was hot, and I would have given anything for an ice Granita di Limone from a roadside vendor.

“I think I’ll go and see what’s happening,” my husband said as he opened the door and stepped out.

I had no sooner responded with my usual “Be careful” when the cars ahead started to move. Finally, we were on our way! As we drove around the menacing cliff, two gargantuan tour buses travelling in opposite directions were competing for the very limited space on the road. The skilled drivers successfully passed each other and then it was our turn.

“Oh, my god, he’s going to squish us!” I shrieked, as the bus approached. With seemingly less than an inch between the two vehicles, the driver expertly manoeuvred his bus by us.

And so, our journey along the Amalfi Coast continued, driving along the winding road, with frequent sudden stops to allow oncoming cars to squeeze past us. As my best friend commented on driving along that same route years earlier, “If we weren’t so scared, we might have enjoyed the view!” To calm our nerves, we stopped for a pizza lunch in Praiano, a fishing village perched cliffside that offered a stunning view of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

In the end, despite hair-raising moments, touring Italy by car and manoeuvring our tiny Fiat through streets and roads barely wider than it, we ended our journey with a great feeling of accomplishment. Incredibly, we returned the hired vehicle (and ourselves) with, as the rental report stated, “No New Damage”!

A Part of the Action

LOGAN RAMSAY

“CUT! RESET! Can we get Jer some water?” The hoarse voice of the director calls out over a crackly megaphone and the jail cell becomes a buzz with activity. Except it isn’t a real jail cell, and “Jer” isn’t a prisoner; he is Jeremy Renner, award-winning American actor. Jeremy stands in front of real steel bars with flaky, teal-coloured paint peeling off them, wearing a real grey tailored suit in the real prison of Kingston Penitentiary. However, none of it is real, because we are on a film set. Sometimes, I become so enveloped in the carefully created world that I can omit the smell of fresh sawdust falling from newly constructed set pieces and tune out the hum of three different camera monitors, forgetting that we are shooting a new episode of the HBO television show *The Mayor of Kingstown*. But then I look up and see that the patchy blue walls aren’t holding up a ceiling, the doors all lead to nowhere, and those sunbeams aren’t caused by daylight streaming in, but instead a massive floodlight set up to cast perfect shadows across the cement room. It’s not “real,” but it’s my reality, and I love it.

“PA, I said can we get Jer some water?” the director barks again, fixing his brown tweed newsboy cap that is exactly the kind of newsboy cap you expect a director to be wearing. “PA” stands for production

assistant, which basically means you do everything and anything that needs to be done on a film set. “PA” also means me.

“Copy!” I replied sweetly, not wanting to be the one to slow down the next take; I spring into action amidst the makeup artists retouching and sound guys adjusting tiny little microphones hidden like Easter eggs throughout the set. Behind one of the many false walls production constructed, there is a plastic folding table laden with Smart Water bottles, granola bars, individually packed Goldfish, and grapefruit-flavoured Bubly. I snagged a Smart Water and returned to the cinderblock cell that was growing considerably warmer as the July sun beat down over the towering penitentiary walls, through silver barbed wire and onto the roof that enclosed us in our brick-and-mortar palace. Jeremy didn’t look up or nod or say thank you as I handed him the bottle, but this wasn’t new, and I didn’t take it personally. When you’re a production assistant you’re used to it because talent gets to do whatever talent wants to do.

I hope that one day I get to be talent. When I’m talent, I plan to say please and thank you and smile as production assistants hand me my Smart Water, because I know what it’s like to be them. With this thought in mind, I smile to myself as I return to my designated standing spot next to Camera B, ready to take in the—

“Action!” The word bounces off the cement walls and the superficial cell block falls silent. Every time I hear that word, I know that this is where I’m supposed to be. Sure, maybe I’d prefer to be in front of Camera B instead of beside it, but we all start somewhere; we all have a dream. In my dream I’ve always felt like I was meant for something more. Something more than the usual office gig from nine to five. Not that there’s anything wrong with the nine-to-five thing, it’s just not for me. The thrill of a film set and the allure of the stage are much more my speed. Since the age of ten, I have been cultivating my love for acting and performance, finding my way onto community theatre stages, and

stepping into frames on a variety of short films, all leading to my latest PA job on *The Mayor of Kingstown*.

I call it a job, but I can't say that it really feels like work. I get to do what I love: I get to be around people creating art. Right at this moment I'm helping to create art by watching Jeremy Renner's dog, Hershey the husky, and I really hit it off the first day of filming, making me the resident set-pet sitter. I look forward to taking him on his afternoon walk around set, especially since we have been shooting indoor scenes for days now, breathing the same dusty air that fills the 178-year-old corridors. I pick up Hershey from Jeremy's slate-grey tin trailer, which almost blends in with the rest of the cloudy shades that make up the prison walls. The air feels fresh against my skin and sweet to the taste as I inhale the slight breeze that manages to outsmart the intimidating height of the walls and sneak into the courtyard. Hershey and I do the usual route: down the cobblestone walkway and out the main gate with the red mechanical arm that lifts as we pass by, spend a few minutes rolling around in the freshly mowed grass, before heading back through the gate towards craft services. Marty from the catering company is setting up for the lunch break, unloading brown, biodegradable boxes that provide homes to some delicious concoction courtesy of Chez Piggy.

"Logan! Good to see you. They let you out of your cell on good behaviour?" Marty's crooked grin and tendency to laugh at his own jokes can't help but bring a smile to my face.

"No, Marty, I'm currently putting my escape plan into action," I say in a hushed tone. "He's my distraction." I nod towards Hershey.

"I wish you luck. So, how's the action in there these days?" Marty asks and nods his head towards the building we call Cell Block Two, and our current shooting location.

"Oh, you know, same old, same old. Lights, camera, action-until-someone-forgets-their-line," I say, and raise my hand to block the sun from my eyes. Marty peers over his aviator sunglasses, eyes shifting from me to Cell Block Two.

“Sheesh. Yeah, I’d love to go in there sometime. You’re lucky. You’re on the inside. You get to be where the magic happens. A part of the action! Think I’ll see you on my screen some day?”

“Yeah, some day. Maybe.”

I take Hershey back to Jeremy’s trailer before returning to Cell Block Two and resuming my favourite position beside Camera B. Interesting how Marty thought I was lucky. I love my job, but fetching iced Americanos with two splashes of organic almond beverage, holding light diffusers until my arms go numb, and walking dogs might not feel like *work*, but it hardly feels like *magic*. I guess magic doesn’t really come from the lights, sound, or editing, it comes from each person who shows up: to set, to the office, to life. I’ve always longed to be a part of something more, but I’m learning that small roles, ordinary circumstances, and little moments are just as important. The “something more” that I’m searching for isn’t something to be found on stage or on set; it’s something we find inside ourselves. And by knowing this, I will always be a part of the—

“Action!”

WORK CITED

“Kingston Penitentiary.” *Visit Kingston*.

Ink and Insights

A Journey of Healing

SAM ROSS

“**O**KAY, SAM, have the most amazing day. Just remember to breathe.”

Breathe. For the first ten years of my life, that word was like a mantra, repeated every morning by my mother before I headed off to school. In their eyes, “breathe” served as the remedy to all the dark and scary thoughts that plagued my young mind.

Since my earliest recollections, fear has been an unwavering presence in my life, shaping my experiences in profound and often perplexing ways. What made me so fearful of accompanying my mother to the grocery store or going to school each morning was something I could never quite grasp. My mother’s voice echoed the same advice in my head during these overwhelming moments, but, though well-intentioned, it never proved successful in easing my distress.

One October day marked a turning point for me. Following my mother’s daily affirmation, I nervously shuffled into my classroom and was surprised to see it covered wall to wall in pumpkins, spider webs, and monsters. Despite the spooky decorations, it wasn’t the ten-eyed monster that frightened me the most. I felt far more intimidated by the

eyes of my classmates. In my overthinking mind, I imagined them all staring at me, observing my every move, and waiting for me to make a mistake so they could judge me.

I quickly found my seat and reached into my backpack for a book to ease my nerves. Immersing myself in the world of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy allowed me to forget about the troubles swirling around me. Instead of dwelling on what might go wrong next, I found solace in their adventures.

When my teacher cleared his throat, signalling the beginning of the class, I quickly said goodbye to the Little Women and slouched back in my chair, hoping to make myself invisible to my teacher,

“Sam Ross. Could you help me out with this question today?”

I glanced up, looking at the multiple-step addition question that was written on the board. I froze in panic, trying to remember the advice my parents told me, but for some reason my whole mind went blank. All I could think about was everyone laughing at me when I got the answer wrong or my teacher scolding me for being incorrect. It became too much too fast. I quickly stood up.

“I don’t feel well. Can I go to the office?”

Everyone in my class looked up at me and my teacher looked confused. My biggest fear. Sensing my distress, he excused me, and I ran to the office to call my mother to pick me up. This was a bad day.

Experiencing episodes of social paranoia like this is one of the most common ways anxiety manifests in children (Wang); yet, at this moment, I had never felt so alone.

It took some time before my family devised a proper plan of action. Desperate for relief, I sought refuge in unhealthy coping mechanisms, isolating myself for hours or days on end in my room—a sanctuary where I could breathe freely. I often immersed myself in reading or writing, finding solace in these activities. However, during especially difficult times, I sought comfort in sleep as a temporary escape from my inner turmoil.

As I transitioned into adolescence and approached adulthood, I realized that avoidance was not a sustainable solution. With trembling hands and a nervous heart, I summoned the courage to admit that I needed help. I embarked on a journey of self-discovery, determined to confront my fears, and learn more about myself.

I began speaking to a specialist who focused on anxiety in kids and teens. I opened up to her about my emotions, including feelings of being overwhelmed and lonely. We also delved into my fears, especially those concerning situations where I feel like I am on display to be embarrassed or made fun of by those around me.

Together, we explored different strategies to cope with my anxiety beyond our sessions, all of which fell under the category of *mindfulness*, which she described to me later in the conversation as being very aware of your surroundings. Doing stuff by yourself that makes you feel good but also allows you to reconnect with yourself.

One morning, I left the house early as the sun rose for a nature walk that was recommended to calm my anxious thoughts. Unfortunately, despite my efforts to walk quickly, I couldn't escape my thoughts. I attempted to meditate as a way to clear my mind, but found that I could never quiet the noise in my head no matter how many deep breaths I took in and out.

After these trials and errors, I eventually found a strategy that worked: combining facing my anxiety with one of my greatest passions—journaling.

The process of journaling is ultimately what proved to be transformative in helping me cope with my feelings of anxiety. Journaling is a method recommended by many mental-health professionals and can be highly effective in addressing the distressing thoughts that invade our minds. (Newman 2). With a pen in hand, I could pour out my deepest fears and insecurities onto the blank pages, using the ink as a channel for all my complex emotions.

One common practice in journaling is gratitude-focused writing, which can be especially beneficial for individuals with anxiety. This approach helps shift the perspective of those prone to negative thinking, encouraging them to view events more positively (Fekete and Deichert). About a month into my journaling journey, I sat down to practise this gratitude-focused writing and did an exercise where I was to list five things I liked about myself. As I sat for a while, rocking back and forth on the wheels of my squeaky desk chair, I realized I was struggling to form any sort of answer. It was at this moment that I made a significant connection: I recognized that my feelings of anxiety stemmed from deep-seated insecurities of feeling inferior and not liking myself. This revelation, uncovered through journaling, prompted me to start building self-love and acceptance. Creating a version of myself that truly loved and appreciated who I was ultimately played a crucial role in alleviating my anxiety.

Reflecting on my challenging journey to this point fills me with gratitude for the lessons and strength I've gained. Though fear may still creep into my thoughts at times, it no longer controls me. I now use journaling as a technique to stay grounded, focusing on the positive aspects of events rather than dwelling on the negative. After a long struggle, I can finally breathe.

WORKS CITED

- Fekete, Erin M., and Nathan T. Deichert. "A Brief Gratitude Writing Intervention Decreased Stress and Negative Affect During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Happiness Studies*, vol. 23, no. 6, 24 Feb. 2022, pp. 2427-48.
- Newman, Kira M. "How Journaling Can Help You in Hard Times." 2020.
- Wang, Z., S. Whiteside, L. Sim, et al. "Anxiety in Children." *Comparative Effectiveness Reviews*, no. 192, Aug. 2017.

Diagnosis

RAE RUSSELL-HOSEIN

“WHEN I said our relationship was about work, I meant that. Our space felt truthful enough to sustain that and it is ... the truthfulness isn't what's at stake here.” My phone buzzed on my chest as I lay flat on my back on the floor of my bedroom, trying to breathe through my pounding heart while my thoughts spiralled wildly. These conversations always freaked me out. This current period of instability was flipping all my relationships upside down, and I was desperately afraid of being abandoned. Especially by Lou. Another message buzzed through.

“Somewhere along the line, the wounds you thought were healed were still very raw, and had we both been aware of that we would've navigated that differently.”

I was halfway reading them as they came in, but I didn't want to open the chat. The shame washed over me like acid rain. I was feeling like there would be no end to it. I was feeling hopeless in a way that was familiar but worse. I was feeling like a failure and a terrible friend, daughter, and person. I was feeling alone, but at the same time like alone would be better than this pain of being known and being seen as an absolute mess of a person. Another message.

“While I understand the merit of what your psychiatrist is saying, I believe that true friendship isn’t that fragile.”

Just an hour before, I had sent an incredibly long message to Lou attempting to punish and blame him for my feelings. I was feeling neglected, hurt, rejected, and confused. I believed in my delusion that he was hurting me by being careless, or that he didn’t care about me enough. Or that he owed me more, or that I was somehow being lied to. Despite my knowing how busy he was, how stressed he was, how insanely exhausted he was, and how much he obviously cared for me, my feelings were too big for me to see through, and in a poisonous, self-righteous rage, I’d sent the messages.

In response to my aggressive, abrasive, and frankly abusive attack, Lou was reasoning with me in a way with which I wasn’t familiar. As he reminded me of some of the facts of our matter, defended himself rightfully against my accusations, and gently but firmly called out my abuse, I realized how wrong I was and how much I could have hurt him and our friendship. The messages that were piling up on my lock screen were in response to my apologizing for it all. I’d boiled down; my anger turned to shame and anxiety. He would surely leave me now. Who would stick around for this insane behaviour? Somewhere in my apology, I’d mentioned that my psychiatrist had recommended I step back from relationships that were triggering the trauma we were working through at the time. Maybe secretly hoping he’d step away instead, and I’d have another chance to blame someone else for my loneliness. Another message.

“I didn’t bring those things up to tell you to ‘go deal with it,’ neither am I saying that I will have heaps of time or emotional capacity to sit with you throughout it all.”

Crying shame.

“I am saying that I am present to work our way towards the middle. I am committing to effort towards a safe balance as a goal. Even if it doesn’t exist now.”

I picked up my phone and opened the chat. I read through everything properly and began to type.

“I am willing to do the work with you. I’m really sorry, I’m not good at showing up in a productive way when I’m in pain. I’m very afraid to cause harm to anyone, including myself. This is all so painful and so shameful.”

“There is no shame here, and while there is pain, there is also empathy. As someone who swings off kilter and also cannot trust their own brain, I think I understand in ways others may not. I don’t hold anything because when I am in my throes I ask for grace and mercy and hope that who I am in those times doesn’t reflect as my whole self.”

My heart rate was slowing. My muscles uncoiling. Lou was still here. I wasn’t being abandoned. This was the first time I’d experienced this sort of immediate repair in the wake of a rupture that I’d caused by acting out. This was the first time another person was able to reason with me while my rage and shame were still searing and bubbling, instead of escalating because of my reckless words pressing on their open wounds.

I was grappling with my reality. I’d been given a diagnosis that I wasn’t willing to accept. I’d spent a lifetime trying to figure out what the fuck was wrong with me. I’d gone through therapists, recovery programs, psych meds, and handful of incorrect diagnoses asking the same questions. Why was I this sensitive? Why did every one of my relationships end in toxic chaos? Why was it all so painful? What’s the fucking point? It should have been a relief to have a label for it all, no? One that actually fit. Maybe if it didn’t mean that I’d been wrongfully blaming my past partners and ex-friends for being horrible, when in fact it was I who was the horrible one.

I sat in my self-loathing shame for hours. Wondering if now was the right time to tell Lou that I’d been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. The cut-yourself-and-go-through-people’s-phone disorder. The-high-rates-of-suicide-and-low-rates-of-recovery disorder. Obviously, my own perspective was tainted by the stigma. I didn’t know

at this point that there was new research and new hope. There was hope, however, in the fact that despite my attempts at sabotaging the one truly sage relationship I had at the time, Lou was not going to leave me to face this alone.

No Plan

KIRA RUTLEDGE

I'VE ALWAYS found comfort in plans. Ever since I was a child, I would rely on day plans for solace. If I knew what was coming next, I could prepare for it. Nothing could catch me off guard if I had a plan. Over the years, my day plans evolved into life plans. Go to school. Get a job. Get married. Have kids. Be happy. That was the plan.

My main plan has always been to find my soulmate. As a child, this manifested in crushes on every cute boy in my class. As a teenager, I would obsess over the lyrics of love songs, telling myself I would understand the lyrics when I was in love myself. It always comforted me to know that I had time: the average Canadian gets married at thirty-one years old (Bush). That gave me over a decade of mistakes before I would meet my soulmate. This statistic became less comforting when I got sick.

A few months after my nineteenth birthday I went to the hospital. I would not leave for a month to follow. I was diagnosed with Wilson's Disease, a rare genetic disorder that prevents the body from filtering out copper, causing it to build up in the liver, brain, and eyes. Without treatment, Wilson's Disease is fatal. By the time I went to the hospital, I was already in complete liver failure. The doctors told me that I would

be dead within two weeks without a liver transplant. The average wait time for a liver transplant is 149 days (Mandal). This was not the plan.

To my surprise, I wasn't afraid of dying. I would miss the world and all it had to offer, but I wasn't afraid. It sounds morbid to say, but I had made my peace with death. I did, however, feel sadness. Immense sadness. Soul-wrenching sadness that I might leave this world without ever having met my soulmate. I began to grieve the life that I might have lived, and the family that I might have had. That was until I met Jeff.

Everyone in the transplant ward had a roommate. The rooms each had two hospital beds in them that were divided by a curtain. That day, my old roommate, a middle-aged man named Mr Syed, had been discharged. Mr Syed's wife had just left the room with the last of his belongings, and there I was, left alone in my hospital room, with no plan. I imagined if I were an astronaut, my plan would be my spacecraft. And so, there I was, an astronaut floating in space, tethered by nothing.

"Did you hear about your new roommate?" my nurse asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"No," I replied. She clapped her hands together in excitement at this.

"A nineteen-year-old boy is moving in tonight. He just had a lung transplant."

This was it. This was the new plan. I would meet my soulmate in the hospital. We would tell the story of how we met at our wedding. A quirky tale of two sick kids who found each other amidst their sickness. Our kids would ask about our scars, and we would tell them. I wasn't floating in space anymore. I had found my spacecraft. I had found my plan.

My new roommate was brought into my room in the middle of the night. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was there. All that stood between me and my soulmate was a hospital curtain. I woke up that morning, and the dividing curtain was open, letting the sunlight fully envelop our room. There he was. Jeff. He was sitting up in his bed eating his breakfast as he waved at me with a smile. I politely waved back at him, trying hard to mask any disappointment that might be on my face. Jeff was a fifty-

five-year-old man. Jeff was not my soulmate. Jeff was not the plan. My spacecraft was gone, and I was alone again, floating.

My nurse later explained to me that there had been a mix-up. The nineteen-year-old roommate I had been expecting had been moved to another wing of the hospital, and I was left with Jeff. I spent most of my time in the hospital as Jeff's roommate. There was a familiarity to him I couldn't quite explain. One of my uncles is named Jeff, and I think that was enough for me to imprint some sort of familial role on my new roommate. There was a comforting presence in this. Jeff and I would spend days talking about his two dogs and his favourite spots in the city. He would ask me about school and what my friends were like. Jeff told me about his transplant and what I should expect from the surgery.

The day of my liver transplant, I was in our room waiting to be brought to the operating room. It was just me and Jeff, as it had been for so long. As I fiddled with my thumbs anxiously, he turned to me and gave me one last piece of advice.

"You're gonna be okay. You're young and you're strong. I did it, and I'm an old man."

In that moment, I knew he was right.

Getting sick was not the plan. Meeting Jeff was definitely not the plan. But Jeff taught me that I can't plan my life. Sometimes, it's okay to just be floating in space, untethered. To not have a plan.

WORKS CITED

Bush, Olivia. "Marriage Statistics in Canada." *Made In CA*, 15 Mar. 2024.

Mandal, Ananya. "Waiting For a Liver Transplant." *News Medical*, 15 March 2024.

And the Truth Shall Set You Free

ANSEL SAMSOONDAR

I HEAR the screeching scourge before I feel it. Orbs of iron woven into the leather braids raise deep blue welts and blackened runnels onto my back, bits of bone interspersed with the iron tear glaring red stripes into my flesh. There are nine such lashes in this single cruel stroke, thrice inscribing agony, torment and woe. I cannot endure one such stroke, but I face a multitude. It is possible for me to forego this cup of bitterness, but I can linger no longer in the valley of decision; I must choose or deny Him.

To believe requires faith, which cannot be measured or weighed on any scale that we possess. But I am a true believer; I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is not only the Son of Man, but also the Son of God. My purpose, dear reader, is not to convert or to convince anyone of anything. Instead, my purpose is to quell a disquieting fear that is growing within me: the fear of someday being weighed in the balance and found wanting. This can be done truthfully without requiring the evidence of a hope unseen. Verily, we can read the written Word, see them on the same page with our own eyes. Seeing is believing, or so they say. Each of us must turn our sight inward to examine ourselves, to find the truth within, in whatever form it may take. And so, I subjectively cast myself in

another's place, hoping to objectively sift my own heart through a story found in the twenty-sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Whether or not this story truly unfolds in antiquity as written can be set aside for the moment, while together we seek the truth buried deep. Perhaps, by holding myself beholden to the truth laid bare, I may discover something about myself. And if the truth of what I learn about my nature, perhaps human nature itself, holds fast because of certain words on a given page, then truthfulness will flourish like the vast canopy of a mustard tree, that springs from so small a seed.

Jesus says to Peter, "Truly I tell you this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." If I place myself in Peter's sandals, then only two choices remain: either I deny Christ as Peter did, or I hold fast to the Son of Man as the Son of God. It is at this moment that I will trade places with Peter, to truly test myself and the convictions of my faith, at the risk discovering within myself a hideous and terrible truth. There are two caveats to this trial of thought. Firstly, I do not consider myself worthy to equate myself with the Apostle Peter, so I trade places with him as a simple follower of Christ, of which there are many. Secondly, we will accept that I make a different decision than the one the Peter makes. If I confess to being His follower, then I must partake in the suffering that is appointed to Him; I must bear the same punishment at the hands of the Romans that Jesus will.

I am arrested and taken to the Praetorium to be flogged before I am to be crucified. Flavius Josephus, a Roman Jew who lives during the Great Jewish Revolt, in the years after Christ is crucified, describes Jews being whipped to the bone. Such is the fate that awaits me. I am stripped naked without even a loincloth to cover me; my shame is laid bare and I am exposed in flesh and in spirit. Before long, both will be broken. One of the two Roman lictors binds my wrists together, then ties me to the flogging post. The stones on which I stand are slippery with red, brown, and black blood from previous administrations of Roman justice. A lictor kicks the back of my leg, forcing me to my knees. My accusers heap

curses and vitriol upon me, and the eyes of the lictors are filled with a fierce hatred. I am shivering uncontrollably, not from cold, but from all-consuming fear. I hear the swing of the scourge slicing through the air and feel the cruel cords slicing into my skin. Every muscle in my body strains taut and my arms pull against the cords that bind my wrists, biting deeply into the flesh. The other lictor takes his first swing on the other side of my back, tearing the flesh across the shoulder blade. My body jerks sideways, away from the blow, only to be struck by the other lictor from the other side. He cruelly aims the whip across the backs of my thighs. The strokes land across my back, buttocks, thighs, and calves. Each lash causes an exponentially greater pain as the flogging continues, tearing asunder flesh, muscle, and tendon alike. Blood pours from my wounds until I am standing in a pool of it. I look as if painted red, with glimpses of white, which are the bones of my spine and the back of my ribcage. All of this happens before I am to be crucified, a fate deliberately designed to inflict the utmost pain and suffering. If I make it this far and remain true to Him, can I endure to the end?

I need not suffer any of this, if only I deny Him. The fear of suffering a single cruel stroke is enough to dishearten me and reveal the coward within. The terrible truth that I must face is that I would find myself skulking in the shadows vehemently denying that I ever knew Him. The end of the matter is that we who believe are not appointed to suffer wrath, for the punishment He bears is for our peace. And so it comes to pass that I am left unscarred as He is led away to drink of the cup that His Father has set before Him.

WORKS CITED

- The Bible*. New King James Version, Thomas Nelson, 1982.
Edwards, William D., et al. "On the Physical Death of Jesus." *Journal of American Medical Association*, 21 Mar. 1986.
Maier, Paul L., ed. *Josephus: The Essential Writings*. Kregel, 1988.

Dyscalculia Is for the Dogs

STEFANY-MARIE SAVOIE

FOR SOMEONE who travelled so much, I never knew where I was going. If they gave out awards for getting lost, I would top the podium ... if I could find my way up there. My first week of high school had me constantly losing my locker and classrooms long after everyone else had them memorized. I would pull the tattered timetable out of my equally shaggy fake leather trench coat weeks into the semester. Of course, this was never reason for admonishment from teachers. Disruptive boys bore most of the brunt of punishment and attention from teaching staff. As a girl, who we now know is neurodivergent, I suffered unaware, feeling muddy and dumb, unable to get organized and think clearly.

Post adolescence, my move to Toronto was a nightmare of changing buses, streetcars, and trains with their blaring sound as though guffawing at me for the inevitable furrowing of my brow, vainly straining to see the CN Tower, my only point of reference. After failing countless jobs due to my lack of punctuality, despite leaving my house embarrassingly early, I pleaded the silence from squealing streetcar tracks. The logical sequence would then jump me to the humming, white noise rush of an

airplane cabin. World travelling, I argued, would solve this problem by forcing me to face my monsters.

I was first humbled in Melbourne, after riding the city trolley on a zero-degree day in July in search of ACDC Arcade, an alley dedicated to the seminal rock band's early beginnings in Oz. I found myself battling intense winds at St Kilda pier in the wrong direction while fuzzy, New Zealand penguins toddled among the rocks. This lack of spatiality, however, didn't always end in cute curiosities.

In Shanghai one drunken night, I parked my custard-coloured Vespa scooter, dubbed "Princess Pudding"—a gift from my equally expat boyfriend—behind a winding street adorned with Chinese lanterns and squatting men who oscillated between smoking and spitting. The next day, I doubled a ride on my boyfriend's decidedly dull navy scooter adorned with a Union Jack through the same back streets of Yong Fu Lu to retrieve my misplaced scooter, swooping through the intricate passages in a figure eight, as the familiar heat of embarrassment brewed. I never did find that street again, and lost my Princess forever, causing resentment from Mr Union Jack, who banned me from riding solo in the future because of my scatterbrain.

By the time I reached Istanbul, I was exhausted from the exchanges, not just at foreign currency stands, but at airports, boyfriends, and jobs. Istanbul, unfortunately, is top-tier difficult-to-navigate cities and sensory overload. From my apartment in Rasimpasa on the Asian side of Istanbul, I would go for a jog and spend an hour trying to untangle myself from the streets only metres from my door, full of constant cacophonous chaos: a screaming man selling tomatoes from a cart, women in hijabs yelling friendly conversation across open windows in adjacent apartments, and the non-stop barking of Anatolian shepherds at the zippering sounds of scooters down precariously narrow alleyways. These huge 120-pound dogs (called Kangals in Turkish), a national breed who are bred for field herding and flock protecting, are often dumped in the city when they have served their purpose in rural areas. In Istanbul, they live a kind of

retirement, breeding copiously and wandering under patio tables while being shooed from mosques.

Usually passive to humans during the day, nightfall would cause a Jekyll-and-Hyde, where Kangals' guarding instinct would play night watchman, which included attacks. Many nights returning from clubbing in Taksim with friends became complicated when a growling Kangal would render a passageway unusable. One evening I went running to Nautilus shopping centre, long closed for the day, to avoid the predatory eyes of taxi drivers. Instead, I found a pack of Anatolian shepherds and mixed mutts guarding the entrance to Ayrilik Cismesi station who immediately sprang from sleep at my arrival. It was a dead end, and from shadows crept other medium- to large-sized dogs until there were about a dozen. Some wagged tails curiously while the angry pack leader and his cronies circled my calves up to my hips concentrically, brilliant teeth on display. I remember this moment that "shark" in Turkish is "balik kopek," literally "dog fish." My sweat went cold, and that embarrassed heat flooded into a melange of worried odours that caused the dogs to bow in lunges with snappy snouts. My yoga clothes, which I thought endangered me more to men than dogs, were being tugged indelicately by one half of the pack wanting to play, and the others wanting to maim. This tug of war went on for long enough before a taxi driver turned the wrong way himself, drowned the pack and me in what felt like heavenly glow from his floodlights. He leaned on the horn rhythmically to his stereo Arabesque music. The dogs who didn't leap at the doors barking, retreated into the darkness. He rolled down the window, with one hand on his temple incredulously laughing, turned my way, and said only two words I understood: "girl" and "stupid." Later, after a period of refusing to leave the house due to dogs and embarrassment, I was driven to a psychiatrist who thankfully diagnosed me with ADHD, which I always assumed was a lack of focus and hyperactivity. However, in women these symptoms can manifest more "inattentively" and can include impulsive behaviour. One in five ADHD-ers can suffer from "dyscalculia," a

condition which causes math problems, including spatial and directional deficits. Women especially are prone to depression due to feeling “stupid” and disorganized, which seem to be more accepted in men (Holthe and Langvik).

I’m still working on my therapy, using the CN tower as my compass again, and I am walking dogs full time as employment. After the incident, I volunteered with an organization in Polonezkoy village in Istanbul, rescuing abandoned forest dogs (many of which were Kangals). This transitioned to becoming certified for dog walking and boarding at the Humane Society upon my return to Canada. There is no cure or treatment for dyscalculia, just the acceptance that I always may be ass-backwards. I certainly don’t hear the dogs complaining when we get lost.

WORK CITED

Holthe, Mira Elise, and Eva Langvik. “The Strives, Struggles, and Successes of Women Diagnosed with ADHD as Adults.” *SAGE Open*, vol. 7, no. 1, Jan. 2017.

Exploring the Pixelated Odyssey

HUNTER SCHAUS

IN THE soft and warm glow of our apartment's television screen, a wondrous world of pixels and possibilities unfolded before me. For years, video games had always seemed like a foreign concept to me, something that only my friends played while I looked on in confusion. But when I met my husband, everything changed. He saw the potential that lay within these digital landscapes, as gateways to uncharted territories where imagination could roam free and I could be anyone I wanted to be. At first, I was hesitant to dive into the world of gaming; it all seemed so overwhelming. There were so many daunting controllers, all with so many complex controls and intricate storylines to navigate. Yet my husband was patient and kind, taking me under his wing and showing me the ropes. Before I knew it, I was hooked.

My journey into the world of gaming was a slowly nurtured passion that brought my husband and I closer together. As we conquered intricate, well-thought-out levels, defeated a wide variety of enemies, and experienced the unexpected emotional highs and lows of the stories we explored, we discovered that gaming was much more than just a hobby; it was a conduit for connection. Our cosy apartment became a hub of activity and adventure, where we embarked on virtual escapades

hand in hand, navigating intricate, complex puzzles, and exploring intense and harrowing narratives as a team. One of our earliest gaming adventures together involved an incredibly story-rich survival horror game that had us crying and on the edge of our seats with fear at every twist and turn. We spent hours brainstorming ways around certain obstacles, with each new challenge presenting us with the best opportunity to work together and grow as a team. Amidst the frustration of missed jumps and failed attempts, there was laughter and camaraderie, as we revelled in the joy of collaboration and shared achievement.

With each foe vanquished, our bond grew stronger, as is the nature of video games—an art form created to bring people together in ways unimaginable. It wasn't just the thrill of solving puzzles or beating bosses that brought us closer together, it was the stories waiting to be uncovered. Together, we embarked on epic quests and daring adventures, immersing ourselves in narratives teeming with intrigue and emotion. From sweeping fantasy epics to intimate character-driven dramas, we found ourselves drawn into worlds where anything was possible, each experience deepening our connection to one another.

Unlike some people who use video games as an escape from the realities of day-to-day life, we use video games to explore new possibilities that we could never have imagined. One particularly memorable gaming experience was when we embarked on a journey through a narrative-driven adventure game. As we guided our characters through the twists and turns of the story, we found ourselves engrossed in the lives of the game's inhabitants, climbing mountains with them, exploring new locales with them, even going through their boring day-to-day lives with them. Every decision we made felt like a shared responsibility, each choice shaping the course of the narrative and strengthening our bond in the process.

Perhaps what resonated with us most deeply were the quiet moments of reflection and introspection that gaming afforded us. Amidst the chaos and stress of our daily lives, gaming provided us with a sanctuary—a

space where we could pause, breathe, and simply be together, doing something we enjoyed. Whether exploring serene landscapes or basking in the glow of a digital sunset, these moments of respite served as anchors in our relationship, grounding us in the present and reminding us of what truly mattered.

As we delved deeper into the gaming community, we discovered a vibrant tapestry of voices and perspectives, each contributing to the ever-expanding dialogue surrounding this dynamic medium. From online forums to gaming conventions, we found ourselves immersed in discussions ranging from game mechanics to narrative theory, forging connections with fellow enthusiasts who shared our passion for pixels and polygons. Despite the excitement of exploring new worlds and forging new connections, it was the quiet moments of togetherness that I cherished most.

Whether huddled together on the couch, controllers in hand, or sharing stories of our gaming adventures over a late night in Discord with our friends, gaming became not just a hobby but a cornerstone of our relationship—a testament to the power of shared experiences and the boundless potential of human connection. Looking back on my journey into the world of video games, I am filled with gratitude for the experiences it has afforded us and the memories we have created together. What began as a simple pastime has blossomed into a shared passion: a journey of discovery, growth, and love. And as we continue to embark on virtual adventures hand in hand, I do so with a heart full of wonder and anticipation, eager to see where the pixels will take us next. Because in the end, it's not just about the games we play, but the moments we share and the memories we create that make gaming such a powerful and transformative experience.

From Picture Books to Life Advice

The Impact of Reading Throughout My Life

HAYLEIGH SCOTT

IF YOU ever think to yourself, “I should read more,” or want to get back into a habit of reading, I am here to tell you why you should. My love for reading started in the early 2000s. Thinking of my childhood during these years is nostalgic: playing outside until my parents beckoned that dinner was ready, the sound of the *Arthur* theme song playing on the TV, and the fruity smell of Lip Smackers lip gloss. Not to be too nostalgic (as I often am lately), but it’s easy to think back to my childhood and yearn for simpler times. As my twenty-second birthday approaches next week, I am overwhelmed by the responsibilities and decisions of adult life. Graduating from university, searching for full-time jobs, and applying for master’s programs can be quite stressful. The list seems to keep building, and so does the stress.

One thing that has remained consistent throughout my life and kept me grounded is my love for reading. Since those earlier years, reading books has been an important part of my life. I understand that reading isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. I’m often met with comments like, “I could never sit down and read a book for fun,” or “Good for you,” making reading seem like a chore. For me, reading is relaxing and lets me take

my mind off the real world. From the beautiful landscapes and quaint coffee shops in romance novels to the dark secret rooms in thriller novels where the protagonist is minutes away from discovering who killed their husband, I'm transported into the scenes of each book I read. Surprisingly, reading does benefit the brain. Experts have said that reading can improve our coping skills, mental health, and feelings of loneliness. So next time someone makes fun of me for my "old-lady" tendencies like reading books before bed, I guess I can hit them with the facts.

Let's go back to the early 2000s. My love for reading books was beginning to flourish, thanks to my dad. Every night, my dad and I would hunker down in my childhood bedroom, the lime-green walls and pink polka dots encapsulating us (I remember thinking my room was so cool), and he would read to me. Every night, my eyes would light up with excitement as I jumped up and down in my room. My dad sat patiently as I rummaged through my bookshelf for what I considered to be the perfect book for that night. I remember being eager to hear my dad narrate the stories. Even at a young age, I gave my dad my full attention as he read, often imagining what it would be like to live like the characters illustrated on the pages, to have their toys or their clothes, placing myself into their position. Robert Munsch, a Canadian bestselling children's-book author, was popular then, and his stories fuelled my childhood. In 1994, Munsch's book *I Love You Forever* topped the *New York Times* list of bestselling children's books, and since then, his books have touched the lives of children and parents alike (Munsch). The pictures from his books are vivid in my mind even now. Some stand out to me, like *The Paper Bag Princess*; I remember the princess's soot-covered paper bag dress and the dragon's polka-dot handkerchief.

If you asked me to recall the plot of these stories now, I could probably do so in bits and pieces. I can recall the vibrant striped colours

of Tina's smelly socks in *Smelly Socks*, and I can almost hear the "Murmel, Murmel, Murmel" emerging from the little red sandbox.

"Anybody down there!" my dad would say loudly, reading off the page where Robin investigates the hole in her sandbox.

"Murmel, Murmel, Murmel!" I would shout back, knowing the book by heart.

I credit Robert Munsch's books with fuelling my love for reading, but also for sparking my imagination and creativity as a child. It's hard to immerse yourself in a story without being able to imagine yourself placed within the book itself. Being placed in a book can make the characters feel like close friends, and their emotions can be felt deeply. I can feel the character's excitement and curiosity whenever I read, just like how one might feel if one were to come across a baby in a sandbox. As I navigate through a period of life that is full of uncertainty, I'm glad that I can get lost in a book and turn the world off for a few minutes a day, all thanks to Robert Munsch and his silly little children's books that I grew up with.

Now that I'm in my twenties, the types of books I read are very different. I've come across a new "genre" of book on the Internet, and it is what TikTok and Instagram like to call "Books You Have to Read in Your Twenties." These often involve self-help books or stories with characters in their twenties that we can relate to. *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig is a book I read this past summer. Although not necessarily a "self-help" book, it carries a strong message: the choices we make in life are necessary to get us to where we are today, even if they seem wrong at the time or we regret not choosing a different path. Like Robert Munsch's books that entertained me and helped me learn as a young girl, *The Midnight Library* left me thinking, and it helped me realize that all the choices I'm making will lead me to where I am meant to be. From picture books to life advice, reading has been a constant throughout my life. Although I don't read books with vibrant pictures and lighthearted stories anymore, the reading I've done in my lifetime has left a lasting

impression on me and helps me when I least expect it. If you're considering taking up reading as a hobby, this is your sign: it could be one of the best decisions you ever make.

WORKS CITED

- DiGiulio, Sarah. "Why 'Getting Lost' in a Good Book is the Break Your Brain Needs Right Now." *NBCNews.com*, 22 July 2018.
- Munsch, Robert. "The Official Web Site of Robert Munsch."

How to Put a Cabin to Sleep

NATHAN SHANTZ

I FRANTICALLY scanned the bulletin board looking for the in cabin list. I was in for Balsam that night. I admit I took longer than I needed at the bulletin board, but that extra moment was a necessary breather from the constant bombardment of responsibilities. The bell rang, officially starting campfire. There was no time to grab my guitar from Staff Cabin Two, but I didn't mind because it was a good excuse not to be pressured into leading more songs.

"Where's your guitar?" my brother greeted me as I walked towards the campfire pit. He'd been annoyed that I hadn't been playing guitar all summer.

"Oh, y'know, I didn't have time to grab it after staff meeting." Tim could sense the half-truth.

"You can borrow mine," he said, calling my bluff.

"I don't know, my wrist kinda hurts."

The first song started before he could rebut my clumsy excuse. I sat down on the last row of dirt-caked benches that wrapped around the firepit. Time seemed to slow down; what was only a forty-five minute session felt like a four-hour ordeal.

It's always a brief moment of peace before the impending chaos. In unison, the entire camp stood up and made their way to their cabins. Campers started running, counsellors chased after their campers, all while the last rays of daylight have already vacated the sky. This was a nightly occurrence.

"John!" I attempt to make contact with a Balsam counsellor. "I'm in for you guys tonight, right?"

"That sounds right."

"Is there anything I should know about the group as far as medical or inclusion needs?"

"Just a few homesick campers, and they can be a little rowdy before bed."

"Cool. I'm just gonna run back to staff two to grab my pillow and toothbrush."

I barged into Staff Two, trying to remember the simple list of things I needed for the next three hours. *Toothbrush, pillow, flashlight, guitar*; I thought to myself. *Wait, no, the guitar's too awkward to carry.* I heard voices coming from inside the forest as I walked towards the cabin.

"Balsam! That you?"

"Yeah!" shouted an ambiguous voice.

When I got to the group, John pulled me aside. "There's just nine of them. See that one over there?" he said, covertly glancing at the kid standing away from the rest. "He's been pretty homesick the past few nights. The usual strategies seem to work okay, but he's still kinda down, especially around bedtime."

The counsellors said their goodbyes while I claimed an empty bunk to sleep in until I was relieved of my duties.

"Slug Wars!" a camper yelled, as the rest of the cabin jumped down onto the floor and crawled into their sleeping bags. Slug Wars is a game where campers wrestle on the floor with each other while in their sleeping bags. There was one camper who didn't join in. Instead, he came over to my bunk and sat down beside me.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Jamie,” he said, sheepishly. Jamie was the camper John warned me about. “Can I show you a song on the guitar?”

“Of course,” I exclaimed. His guitar was a quarter-sized classical, with a wide neck and nylon strings. I had doubts as to whether Jamie could reach his fingers all the way to the low-E string. But he sat down beside me again and intently plucked his way through the opening riff of “Come As You Are.”

“Do you play?” Jamie asked in a genuine voice.

“A little.”

He handed me the guitar. I strummed an open-G chord and held it up to my ear, hearing the toll that the humidity had taken on the turning. I tried tuning by ear, then managed my way through the opening phrases of “Sir Duke.”

“Can you show me how you do that?”

“I can try. Do you know the song?” I asked, trying to come up with a valid excuse not to go through the ordeal of teaching.

“No,” he said, hopefully realizing the difficulty in trying to learn a song without first hearing it. But he persisted: “I don’t think I need to have heard it to learn how to play it.”

“Okay, we can try,” I said, handing back his instrument. “Put your first finger on the seventh fret, E string, then move to the sixth fret of your A string, up three frets. . . .” Soon he was able to play the first phrase. I looked down at my watch to see it was already ten minutes past their bedtime.

“Okay, Balsam,” I said in my most authoritative counsellor voice. “It’s now time for you to be in your bunks. I will be turning off the lights in two minutes.”

“Can you play us a song before we go to bed?” I heard one of them ask.

“Only if you’re in bed in the next thirty seconds.” They all scurried into their bunks. I shut out the lights and grabbed Jamie’s guitar. Once

they were quiet, I began to play an arpeggiated cover of “Graceland.” The cabin was silent as the last chord rang out. I kept my fingers pressed to the strings until the last vibrations were absorbed into the walls. I delicately picked up the instrument and walked over to Jamie’s bunk, placing it atop his pile of clothes at the end of his bunk.

“Thank you,” I whispered into his bunk, trying not to break the delicate silence.

Jamie must’ve fallen asleep because I didn’t hear a response. I felt a certain relief knowing that Jamie was asleep. I wouldn’t have to pretend that I was once a homesick camper, too, or have him write a letter home that would never be sent.

As I was walking back to staff two later that night I heard music coming from the dining hall. A late-night jam session, I assumed. I didn’t have my guitar to join in, but I had a restored appreciation for music-making.

Motion Pictures

EVA SHEAHAN

“WHAT SHOULD we name him?” my Dad inquires, referring to our “fancy” new self-cleaning vacuum.

“Wes! A tribute to Wes Anderson,” I reply with the first idea that pops into my mind, laughing. Wes Anderson is my father and I’s favourite director, due to his humour and creativity. During COVID-19 quarantine, we used to drive to our family cottage together and binge-watch various movies together, including Anderson’s *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Isle of the Dogs*, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

My Dad’s mother, my Nana, has the most unique house décor that I have ever seen. As a child, I would sit and visualize her house, trying to absorb it all: the shelves in her room that are covered in teddy bears, the Disney-themed bed sheets in her guest room, and the Tinkerbell lamp on the bedside table. Every surface of her cosy, bright townhouse is covered in what my Mom calls “googly-eyed knick-knacks,” but my favourite part of all are the shelves that line her home, filled—completely stuffed—with DVDs and VHS tapes. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, *Narnia*, *The Lion King*. My brother and I used to each claim a velvet green armchair and kick the recliner up to watch *The Goonies*, *The Princess Bride*, or *Stand by Me*, and inhale chocolate kisses. *The*

Princess Bride is my Dad's self-acclaimed favourite movie, because he grew up watching it with his family, as well.

My little brother and I used to run around the house, sword-fighting and quoting our favourite scene: "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!" Throughout the entire movie, Inigo Montoya burns with the anger and injustice of the death of his father. My father laughs loud and confidently when he watches movies, never accompanied by a nervous glance around the room to see if others are joining in. His laughter and quick-witted humour has always been able to grasp a room full of people. I often get excited to tell him about the most recent movie I watched, a fact we will discuss instead of my schooling, my friendships, or my well-being. He was the person who introduced me to movies, and the reason I value them so much. Movies become the mutual friend that holds our hypothetical friend-group together.

One night, my Dad and I were watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, one of his favourite scary movies. I heard light snoring, and I peered over the edge of the couch. There were cans placed on the table behind him, and the golden dogs were curled up against him. He had fallen asleep, and his hair looked greyer than I could remember. Studies show that people who love horror movies tend to seek stimulation and high-intensity sensations (Vinney). My father has always been consumed by work. I was born while my parents were finishing up their degrees at Queen's University. Most of my time when I was growing up was spent with my Mom, attending her lectures and driving back and forth to campus with her, listening to soft folk music. My father worked extremely long hours, spending every hour of daylight at the law firm. He would catch the first bus in the morning and return on the last bus at night, reading his book as various people got on and off, the clouds shifted outside, and his children got older and older.

I picture my father trapped behind a computer screen. The sound of his keyboard clicks seems so loud, and I imagine him bent over his desk,

drowning in lined paper covered in his own small, slanted letters. I remember the sun beaming on my face at my father's family reunion, the sweet, orange taste of the drink my nana gave me, and my father telling my uncle he still felt like a kid, pretending to be an adult. I visualize him from my nana's photos, as a bold teenager, flipping off the camera with a purple mohawk, and I squint to try to find remnants in the man in front of me. In the car over winter break, I told my Mom that I'm worried I'll never create anything that matters out of the ways that I feel, I'll never make an impact, I'll fade away. She laughed and swatted her hand, "you sound just like your father."

I went to the movie theatre alone for the first time this week.

"It is very empowering to go to the movies alone," my Mom had said to me earlier that day. I told her I didn't see it as empowering. It was just something I was going to do, like any other. I put sugar in my coffee and sit to write in my journal. I walk to campus, listening to music to guide me along. I watch movies. Sometimes, I do not feel like a daughter. At school, I leave behind four younger siblings. My little brother is not so little anymore. We still watch movies together (*Mamma Mia*, *Soul*, *Oppenheimer*), but it is after draining days and long nights that we finish, collapsing into the couch cushions, filled with bad habits.

Leaving home was a stilted and melancholic time. I watched *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* with my parents, and held back tears watching two of the main characters graduate, hugging everyone goodbye. My father didn't say much to me at my graduation, prom, or as I was leaving home. However, he handed me a fresh copy of his favourite book as a young adult, *The Eyes of the Dragon* by Stephen King. Upon further research, I discovered that King wrote *The Eyes of the Dragon* for his oldest child and daughter, because she didn't enjoy his typical stories like his other children, and when he asked her what she did like, she replied "dragons" (Dominus). Perhaps fathers and daughters everywhere are searching for help to connect. My not-so-little brother is packing his bags and reviewing his university offers now, even though it

feels like it should be me, packing and leaving home. I'm always leaving. In my head, I've still never left.

I curl up in bed, watching the moonlight pour across my yellow desk and bed sheets, and my blue dresser and walls. I remind myself my life is full of colour. I think of my Dad, glancing at the well-thumbed Stephen King book on my shelf, and I open my DVD player to watch a movie.

WORKS CITED

- Dominus, Susan. "Stephen King's Family Business." *New York Times*, 4 Aug. 2014.
- Vinney, Cynthia. "Why Do We Enjoy Horror Movies?" *Verywell Mind*, 16 Nov. 2023.

Consuming My Jealousy

ELLA SPONAGLE

AT THE table, I observe Kate's posture as her shoulders hunch, causing her elongated torso to bend slightly over the ledge. Her abs remain prominent even in her relaxed state, making me suddenly become conscious of the sheer lack of my own. I peer down upon the three stomach rolls that form below me, knowing that she barely has enough excess skin to form half of one. I quickly readjust myself by straightening up and sucking my stomach tightly into itself so that my ribs may be mistaken for abs. I wonder what it would feel like to not be so aware of my body, to be able to sit down without worrying how unflattering my stomach looks.

"Layla started to watch what she ate when she was in high school," I recall my mother saying when I was a preteen. "She liked bread and cheese a bit too much." I know my mother never meant any harm in saying this comment, and in fact I'm sure if I ever brought it up now she would have no memory of it. Yet, I can't seem to shake it from my own.

There are approximately 120 calories, nineteen grams of carbs, and three grams of fat (Purdie) in a slice of whole grain bread (my parents insist on buying the "healthiest" kind). I cannot remember the last time I had a slice. My arms will never look like Kate's if I eat bread. Deep

down, I know that even cutting bread out of my diet isn't enough to stop my arms from doubling when I press them against my side. I find this incredibly unfair, considering I watch her eat pasta most nights, and almost never step foot in the gym, a place I now find to be like a second home to me. Her inability to ever relate to these issues makes me feel entirely isolated.

"If you constantly compare yourself to others, you may find it difficult to ever be pleased with you." I put down the note my mother gave in response to my own when I was eleven. After birthing two children, my mother is still much slimmer than me. I start to think of the possibility that my years of jealousy and comparison stemmed from hoping to one day look like her, but always having missed the mark.

I never anticipated just how difficult it would be living in a house with seven other girls. Going out has begun to feel like a chore to me: all of us in one room trading pieces of clothing with one another. Kate asks to borrow a shirt from my closet. She decides on a red, strappy, open-back tank top I'd recently bought. On her, the shirt shows off her sculpted stomach, and the outline of her clavicle and scapula. I can't help but feel slightly envious, as my midsection is compressed to the point that the same shirt seems to wear me more than I wear it. I opt to stay in and deprive myself of the fun my housemates are sure to have because they don't have to be conscious of the way their body contorts when they dance in the same way that I do.

My family went on vacation to Nova Scotia one of the first years I began going through puberty. I was suddenly so aware of my appearance in relation to everyone else's. Before this, my body was like a vessel. It allowed me to go places and fuel itself with all the nutrients it needed, not feeling the least bit guilty about doing so.

"I wish my legs were thinner," I said, looking out into the vast array of blues that blended together across the water so that I could avoid eye contact with my father.

“Most guys are attracted to girls with a little bit of muscle,” my father replied. “No one likes a girl that eats their index finger for dessert.” That comment never sunk in until now.

I sit for a moment after dinner and wonder how I will get rid of the calories I’ve just consumed. There are only three options that seem reasonable to me: either expel the contents back up, run them off, or restrict myself from a day of eating tomorrow. I am aware that no option is entirely feasible, yet not taking action seems even less so. Seventy-five percent of teenagers who struggle from an eating disorder are female (Renzoni). Although the statistics suggest an overwhelming number of girls who feel exactly the same as I do, I cannot help but feel alone in my struggles.

The last time my mother came to visit me at school, she took Kate and me to the nearest drug store. I was searching for wax strips to rip off the thick, dark, Italian hair that grew in several directions on my arms.

“You don’t have any silly little insecurities like Ella does, do you, Kate?” My mother asked.

Kate chuckled slightly before replying, “No.”

I felt taken aback by the abrupt nature of my mother’s question. I realized in that moment why it was so easy for her to always suggest that the appearance of my body didn’t matter. She was the beauty standard. No stretch marks or stomach fat, and at least an inch-wide thigh gap that certainly wasn’t passed down to me. She could give advice like that because she never had to worry about her weight, or the things I was ashamed of with my body, and neither did Kate.

I take a deep breath, holding the oxygen in my lungs until no more air will fit. I reflect upon the fact that I have restricted myself from the joys of life that everyone around me seems to be experiencing. I force myself to believe, if only for a moment, that no one else notices the nit-picky, self-critical aspects of myself that I do. I go through a mantra of positive statements I can think of about myself, counting the seconds that I have been holding my breath. One ... two ... three. I exhale. Today may

not be the day that I stop thinking this way, but I hope it will be the day that I start to try.

WORKS CITED

- Purdie, Jennifer. "Twelve-Grain Bread Nutrition Facts and Health Benefits." *Verywell Fit*, 2 June 2023.
- Renzone, Camille. "Eating Disorders Facts and Statistics." *The Recovery Village Drug and Alcohol Rehab*, 12 July 2023.

A Home Is Where the Memories Lie

SOPHIE STONE

Stage 1: The Early Stage

IT WAS my favourite time of the week: the time when my sister Emma and I got to spend the weekend with our grandparents. Nanny would always be by the door awaiting our arrival, and Poppy would never be too far behind to embrace us in hugs. As I walked through the door I was greeted by Nanny's "welcome bear" hanging on the front wall, facing the door. The bear was always dressed in different outfits, and I couldn't wait to see what outfit it had on every time I came to visit. Walking further into the house, I was greeted by the blue living room, bright from the sun, shining through the windows. Nanny always had decorations up on the windows, celebrating some holiday. Every Saturday morning, I woke up to the smell of pancakes in the kitchen and Nanny smiling at me. After breakfast, my sister always convinced me to ask Nanny if we could go to Dollarama, which we normally would during our visits. As the younger sibling, I gave in to her persistence. Nanny always sent us to our Poppy, who gave us each a toonie. This was back when Dollarama only sold things for two dollars or less. Off to Dollarama, we went where Emma and I would each pick out a toy, which we became obsessed with

for the remainder of the weekend, but ultimately lost interest in it once we got home.

This remained our tradition until the symptoms started showing. My sister and I were young when Nanny was diagnosed with Alzheimer's (the gradual decline of one's physical and cognitive functions). We may have missed many signs, but the first time we noticed was one night when she decided to make Kraft dinner for Emma and me, something she had made many times before. However, this bowl of Kraft dinner was very different from what she would normally serve us. This pasta was full of water, and had yet to be mixed, as if this was her first time making it for us. Stage 1 of Alzheimer's consists of forgetfulness and confusion, such as misplacing items or minor memory lapses. Normally this could be passed off as just old age, but in this case, I knew that Nanny was on a new journey, one that would prove to be her last.

Stage 2: The Middle Stage

The second stage of Alzheimer's is more noticeable than the first. This stage consists of the brain's decline in the areas of language, reasoning, sensory processing, and thought. This stage shows increased severity of Stage-1 symptoms and presents new symptoms, such as mood and behavioural changes, social withdrawal, and confusion. Nanny's changing personality was obvious at this stage. I still looked forward to my visits with her and Poppy. However, I was no longer greeted at the door by Nanny practically jumping with excitement to see my sister and me. I no longer looked forward to seeing what outfit the "welcome bear" would be wearing; I knew that she no longer changed them. Instead, I walked into the blue living room, dim with curtains being drawn. A hockey game was on in the background to fill the silence. I sat with my grandma and watched the TV while my dad and grandpa talked. She only spoke when spoken to, and it was you who had to lead the conversation for her to follow. She slowly stopped recognizing us or forgetting our

names. But nothing in this world made me happier than when she occasionally called me by my name. Hearing the word “Sophie” come out of her mouth would always give my younger self hope that my grandmother was still here with me.

Stage 3: The Final Stage

The hope that I felt whenever she said my name was soon gone. After a summer trip where she and my Poppy visited family in Newfoundland, she was never the same. This is where she entered the third and final stage of the disease. The third stage of Alzheimer’s is the most intense stage. This is when nerve cells in the brain become extensively damaged. This causes a severe decline in vocabulary, emotions, and the connection of the brain to body parts. Nanny came back from her trip in a wheelchair, pushed by my grandfather. She no longer recognized her family; she could no longer walk or control her body. She required assistance from Personal Support Workers. No matter what, I still looked forward to visiting my grandmother. Although she did not know who I was, she always embraced me in a hug as I kissed her cheek. She didn’t know my name, but she still knew she loved me.

This was until one night when I spent the evening with my grandparents and my uncle. We sat in the blue living room with only a small lamp lighting the room. I could tell my grandmother was feeling uneasy, so I leaned in to see if I could help her. This is when she swatted me away, accidentally contacting my face. Everyone immediately started apologizing. “I’m sorry, Soph, are you alright,” asked my uncle. “She didn’t mean to Sophie, I’m sorry,” exclaimed my grandfather. Even Nanny apologized, but the blank expression on her face led me to believe she didn’t know what she was apologizing for. I was not angry; it didn’t cause me physical pain. I knew it was an accident, but I kept thinking about the woman who I loved more than anything in the world, and who

I knew loved me had been reduced to a state where she had struck my face.

Goodbye, Nanny

Soon after this, Nanny was moved to a senior living home, as none of us could take care of her anymore. The times I visited her were dark and gloomy. The walls were no longer a bright blue, but a depressing yellow. My father recalls this and remarks, "I'm glad she wasn't in that place for long." The house went up for sale soon after her death. I was devastated, as this house made my childhood. However, my sister reminded me, "This house isn't a home anymore without Nanny Soph," she explained to me. I understood afterward that we would always hold our memories of her and this house near to our hearts, but I agreed that selling the house was the best decision for all of us. Now the "welcome bear" hangs in my home, the clothes always being changed, and the memory of Nanny forever clinging to it.

WORK CITED

Bolt, Beth. "The Stages of Alzheimer's Disease." *The Educated Patient*, Mar. 2016, pp. 66-68.

My Story with Anxiety

SABRINA TANENBAUM

MY PARENTS thought my hesitancy to go to school on the first day of nursery school was normal. Like all other kids, I was kicking and screaming, completely unsure of the new environment my parents were leaving me in. The following day, I was violently throwing up, so I stayed home from school. My parents knew that by sending me to pre-nursery school, I would pick up all kinds of illnesses, but they did not think it would infect me that quickly. However, after this illness became a pattern, my parents got me checked out by my pediatrician, where I was diagnosed with a Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I got lucky: most kids show symptoms, but do not get a diagnosis until later in life. However, that did not change that physical reaction following me throughout every uncomfortable moment in my childhood life. When my family went out for dinner, social functions, sent me to day camp, and overnight camp, I removed myself from the situation in hysterics, and found the appropriate place to throw up. This became so intense that, prior to each function, I scouted the scene to prepare myself to exit when my anxiety began to attack.

In elementary school, I left class to walk down to the health centre each day, complaining of a sore throat. Since I was too young to

understand the depth of anxiety fully, I did not know the difference between a sore throat and the lump in your neck caused by stress. In response, I developed a constant habit of coughing to try to get whatever I thought was in my throat, out.

From the point I was diagnosed with anxiety until I was an early teen, I regularly participated in therapy. The only way I could explain my experience in therapy was, from the moment I sat down in the chair in front of my therapist, I did not stop talking until they announced that the hour was up. I found that talking out my feelings was the best method for ensuring my well-being. As I grew up, I found a support system to confide in. Their love for me was a cushioned wall, closely wrapped around me. I knew if I ever fell, I would not hurt as bad as I once did. Thus, I didn't have to continue with therapy as regularly as I previously did.

From that point, through my teenage years, my unprovoked anxiety was very stable. However, as soon as people started asking me about my post-high-school graduation plans, I started spiralling back into past feelings of severe anxiety. From February of my senior year until the beginning of university, I transformed into an unrecognizable version of myself, or at least one I had not seen in many years. Not a day went by that I would not throw a tantrum about the upcoming change. Each school day, I would call my parents from the washroom, shaking and crying, barely able to formulate words. I needed them to know that I was ill, and they had to send permission to my school to dismiss me early. All the hard work I put into myself, and all the coping mechanisms that were helpful before, all went out the window. I felt alone in a crowded room. Thus, it was vital for me to go back into therapy.

Nobody except my closest family and friends knew about this battle as I went through it. I learned to put up a good front. Anyone who knows me knows that I always have a smile on my face, anything can provoke my unsustained laughter and my super bubbly personality. One day, I walked into class and like every morning, I excitedly said, "Good

Morning, Ms B,” to which she looked at me and said, “How are you permanently in a good mood?” That comment instantly triggered a vulnerable breakdown as I explained to my English teacher, the person who taught me about the concept perception versus reality, the depth of its meaning. Can you believe that irony?

In those eight months, I lost a significant amount of weight (that did not need to be lost); I had numerous sleepless nights, and being in a “good mood” could not be further from the truth. Meanwhile, not only my peers, but my educators thought that I was the poster child of happiness. Something was not adding up.

From the moment I heard my teacher suggest my unwavering joy, I realized how important it is to speak out on my honest experience with anxiety. I needed to show the people looking up at my life that those who seem happiest are often the ones who struggle the most. Anxiety is not a physical illness, it’s mental. This means people cannot spot a struggle unless it is brought to their attention.

Now, I still find different forms of anxiety creeping up on me. I have a severe fear of change, and I have social anxiety, along with forty percent of teens. I reject situations that are out of my control, and in the realm of mental health, I suffer from episodes of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after a close loved one’s near-fatal accident. However, I believe that in life there are two ways to reflect upon hardships, one can either feel sorry for themselves, and the second is to find ways and grow from the situation. I look at my struggles and notice that nobody gets through life unscathed, and to know this, one must look upon others’ experiences to understand that they are not alone. I truly believe that my experience with mental health formed me to become a well-rounded and compassionate individual.

In the creation of this piece, I took it upon myself to further understand and explore the research behind anxiety. Beforehand, I knew that my feelings were valid; however, they were even more so once I read up more on the subject. This only increased my desire to spread

awareness on the matter and promote people to feel comfortable sharing their experiences. On my own, I realized how powerful my support system was in regard to getting me through my difficult times. I truly believe that that is one of the best medicines for someone who struggles.

WORKS CITED

Penninx, Brenda, et al. "Anxiety Disorders." *The Lancet*, vol. 397, no. 10277, 2021, pp. 914-27.
Understanding Social Anxiety. Human Relations, 2020.

Meow

MADISON TAYLOR

“WAIT, THAT’S kinda scary,” Salif half-laughed as we rounded the cobblestone corner. The sweet combination of the wine we’d had at dinner and our sun-drenched day had us in a silly mood. Our failed quest to find the non-existent bar in our tiny town had us giggling. After four days in Mallorca, Salif and I had darkened to deep shades of bronze and ochre, soaking up every inch of light. Lovers of the sun, we had been eagerly kissed. My freckles were on the offensive, peppering my nose, lips, and cheeks, the stragglers trapped in the lines that appeared when I smiled. Miro and Leila, however, were a mixture of pink and white, strawberries and cream that sought the shade, otherwise destined to sizzle and melt.

“No, they’re so cute!” Miro dropped my hand and rushed towards the few cats that stared back at us from the otherwise desolate alleyway. As he crouched to scratch the stray cat beneath its skinny chin, I began to notice that “a few” was quickly turning into a lot. One by one, they crept forward from the shadows. Their numbers reaching thirty, they peered at us through iridescent eyes glowing amber and green in the Spanish moonlight.

“What the fuck.” Leila, eloquent as always. Kiwis are known for our foul mouths, and that night was no exception. Cats of every description: tawny orange to pale silver, mangy alongside fat, stopped and stared. In this tiny town, with a grand total of fifty-four permanent residents, these cats looked upon us foolish tourists with appraisal. Something eerie, almost supernatural, swirled thickly in the night breeze. Though I’m no believer, something felt pre-ordained. Just a skip away from our Balearic location, in ancient Greece and Rome, cats were associated with the goddess of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery (Mark). The four of us were under their spell.

And then, they let us pass. The moment was over as quickly as it had begun. Uneasiness and relief settled upon me like the sticky afternoon haze we usually evaded with a siesta. What had just happened?

Yoko Ono warbled from the car speaker as we climbed the cliff in our rental Volkswagen. I could picture the connivingly friendly gentleman at Goldcar crossing his fingers, desperately hoping we would make a scratch. We were on our way to the town of Deia, forty minutes away from our home base, and the sheer cliff screamed that we certainly weren’t in Wellington anymore.

Deia appeared around the twisted corner of the road, sun-baked and glistening, its dust-coloured houses hopscotching up the mountainside layered and terraced, like a delicate house of cards. Leila smiled in satisfaction from behind the wheel: Deia had been her suggestion. Her parents had taken her to the town as a toddler, with a digital photo circa 2005 to prove it. Apparently, her dad had explained confidentially, it had been quite the hot spot for the brightest artists of the eighties and nineties.

Leila and Salif lolled on a bench, limbs akimbo as they savoured their ice creams, people-watching. The duo gazed across the road as a trickle of young, attractive people climbed the crumbling stairs into what appeared to be a bar. One cunningly flirtatious conversation later, Leila had managed to secure us all entry into the sold-out event happening later that night. Though unknown to us at the time, Sa Fonda is a world-

famous bar, a long-time favourite of creatives across the globe. It's favoured by Sting, and other A-List patrons seeking some anonymous tranquillity.

Spontaneous in its conception, this night out was one we weren't prepared for. We tried in vain to clean ourselves up a little, checking ourselves out in the wing mirror of the car. Our reflections sported wet hair and gritty toes, with no makeup or deodorant to speak of, laughing as someone's greasy SPF lip-balm did the rounds. That would have to do.

Somewhere between the thumping bass and free tequila, our worries melted away. Shedding the scaly twenty-first-century skin of being constantly perceived, both on and offline, we had emerged blinking into a world of cinematic spontaneity reserved for an eighties coming-of-age film. Plucking the faced-sized Ficus leaves from the canopy above the pulsating dance floor, we fanned ourselves as sweat trickled down our faces and backs. Breathless, slick, and grinning, we danced as if it was our last. Languages overlapped in a cacophony of joy and utter abandonment of the self. It was life, and it was real. It's hard to describe what it's like to be twenty-one in today's world. Examined, surveyed, and dissected, I feel hooked to the IV drip of image, but that night I made a daring, barefoot escape; we were white-teeth teens, molars blinking. All but one of our phones were long dead. We had been given licence to live.

It was as though we had the golden ticket, special permission to enter this sacred place of exultation that wasn't meant for outsider's eyes. I had been led blindfolded into the heart of the island. This was what it being young was supposed to feel like.

Mischievously free, Leila and I teased a sun-bleached Australian who had tried, and failed, to purchase a pack of Camel Lights from an ancient-looking vending machine. His accent swollen with driftwood and salt, it reminded us of home. I "accidentally" introduced Salif to a sharply dressed, Aesop-scented French man who turned out to be the

head fashion designer of a brand I won't name. We rolled our eyes at the two stiff Americans who were glued to the corner wall, unable to shake the shadow of their self-consciousness, bottles of Estrella clutched tightly in their manicured fists. They were a reminder of what we could've been. Thank God we left those people behind.

That night was a gift. Tightly wrapped, and preciously coveted, that twenty-four hours in all its strangeness, mysticism, and utter spontaneity contained the joyous freedom of youth I didn't know I was seeking. As I said, I'm no believer, but I think those cats, with their steadfast and unshakeable presence on the island, allowed us in. Perhaps they saw something in us that we couldn't, an openness to seeing the beauty in the mundane, the love between the cracks, and the ability to just let go. The keepers of secrets, prowlers of the night, the all-knowing Sphinx, they gave us permission to look into the eye of the island and come out the other side changed. In the end, we were the cats that got the cream.

WORKS CITED

- "Es Port des Canonge in Banyalbufar." Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 24 Jan. 2024.
- Mark, Joshua J. "Cats in the Ancient World." *World History Encyclopedia*, 17 Nov. 2012.
- Tara, Joseph. "Episode 2: Didac, Sa Fonda." *Deia Unpacked*.

Cattle Call

ELLA THOMAS

MY TOES slid to the front of my heels every step I took. They weren't the wrong size or anything; my feet were just sweaty from hours of stiff leather straps squashing my toes to a pulp. A couple of dozen models sat on either side of the hallway, their astringent glares latching onto my stride as I cantered towards the glass box office. My agent, Carmen, and another figure sat stiffly in laminated chairs, the kind that sounded every bum twitch or crossing of a leg. Tugging at the door handle, it reluctantly stretched open and then released its weight back onto me, my heels scraping against the tile to keep it open long enough to click-clack my way through. I fumbled with my clunky portfolio and with excited hands, placed my comp card on the coffee table in front of the Italian scout.

“Ella ... let's see here...” He flipped the piece of thick paper over and it made a warping sound. Carmen smiled an empty smile. My naked teenage face stared at me from the back of the card, clutched tightly by his tobacco-steeped fingertips. His sour cologne bled onto the smell of cigarettes, swelling the room with his presence.

“How old are you?”

“I’ll be seventeen in January.” My legs stuck to the chair with sweat. It was September.

“Okay,” he took a long drag of air. “You can undress—we’re going to take some measurements and digitals.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, peeling away my clothing and putting my heels back on. The other models watched from outside as he lassoed a measuring tape around my bra, waist, and hips (the professional term for butt). His fingers were like cold, thick spider legs crawling all over my skin. My glossy eyes searched the room for a place to land, dodging his expression as he exhaled every number. I was relieved to hear they were the same as I had measured earlier that morning, as I did every morning. Next, he pawed at my waist and manoeuvred me around the enclosure, capturing countless shots of my premature proportions. He was like a child tapping on a fishbowl, obnoxiously dissecting the shape of my body; but unlike a goldfish, I had a higher IQ and I was half-naked. Finally, he sat back down, swapped his camera for my model card, and read it for a long minute, despite its lack of words. My shins tingled with a burning anticipation as he scratched notes onto my card, framing the mosaic of photos Carmen had deemed were my best.

“Legs—too muscular,” he said, grunting, “And measurements—too big.” He looked up and down my fleshy silhouette standing in the corner. My palms, damp with sweat, hung by my sides and hovered over my bare thighs.

“What kind of workouts have you been doing?” Carmen quizzed me.

“I play volleyball and run, mostly,” I said, smiling. I thought about how the girls on my team called me “Bambi” because I looked “fragile.”

“Oh ... well, that’s why!” Carmen exclaimed. “European markets prefer less muscle definition.” She offered this anecdote with a resolving timbre. “So, maybe just try walking for now.”

“No biking, either,” he supplemented her prescription. “And stay this height ... otherwise too tall for e-commerce.” I forced my throbbing

cheeks to smile and felt the corners of my mouth reach for my burning ears. As I nodded and swallowed the tears that formed in the back of my throat, he scribbled over my portfolio. It stung as if his pen etched every word into my flesh. "I'll check back in the spring. And you'll be older, so it would be easier to move without parents." He gave me a chalky handshake and I shuffled out of the office, opening the glass door for the next girl on her way in.

Somewhere, there are thousands of residual photographs from interviews, shoots, and runway shows of my teenage self that I will never own or see. From an objective position, one may find the nature of many of these images inappropriate because I was a girl dressed up (or dressed down) as a woman; however, the industry blurs the line between art and exploitation (Crowley) because models lack a reference point of appropriate behaviour in this lawless game. Sexualization is justified by selling products, resulting in the commodification of bodies that aren't even fully developed. My experience lulled any physical insecurity I had into apathy, and I became aware of my desensitized nakedness one day while shopping for lingerie with my Mom.

I gathered the curtain to the side and gazed at my mom's reflection looking at my torso. "Yeah?" I walked under the store's ceiling light and turned to face my mom and the saleswoman. They smiled and nodded like Siamese cats.

"Okay, cool," I said, shutting the curtain behind me.

"She's not shy; she models," my mom chuckled.

"Ah, good for her!" said the saleswoman.

I outgrew the industry as I grew into a woman, and my dream of modelling deflated to a distant fragment of adolescence. My early retirement at nineteen wasn't unusual, as the average model works between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five, and lasts five years in their career (Crowley). I observed how this industry is fed young girls, chews on them for a few years until they've lost the flavour of youth, and then spits out sour women, crushed by their dehumanizing experiences. So, I

severed my ties to the multitudes of Ella held hostage through these images I'll never hold. Then I licked my wounds and felt grateful that they were only surface level. Finally resting a flower of indifference on my fourteen-year-old self's grave, I grieved the poor girl I almost was if I had stayed in the world of modelling.

WORK CITED

Crowley, Jocelyn Elise. "Sexual Harassment in Display Work: The Case of the Modelling Industry." *Gender and Society*, vol. 35, no. 5, 2021, pp. 719-45.

Sarah

KAYLA THOMAS

AT THE young age of five years old, Sarah knew there was something off with her mother, but her tiny brain couldn't quite process what was at play. Growing up, Sarah's mother would frequently yell at her when they were walking down the street, warning her not to step on cracks in the cement or get close to the storm drains because she would get her soul snatched. Her mother would make false promises of wealth coming their way from her relationship with the famous singer Bryan Adams, which Sarah would then repeat to her friends at school and get made fun of for it. But maybe worst of all, Sarah's mother would forget to prepare meals for her, so she would go days without food. As the years passed, Sarah knew it was only a matter of time before she would break free from the chaos of living with her mother and start working towards a life filled with peace.

At eighteen years old, Sarah decided it was time to take control of her life and made her first life-changing decision, which marked the beginning of her adult life; she was going to move out of her mom's house and into her own apartment. She knew that this choice would come with challenges; she knew she was going to need to work as hard as she could to take care of herself. One of the downsides of having a parent

struggling with severe mental illness was the lack of stability. That lack of stability made Sarah crave it all the more. She worked two jobs to pay her bills and would miss doing things with her friends since she had so much responsibility on her plate. Moving on her own wasn't the only big decision she made. She also decided to go to college to get a better education. Sarah enrolled in the Early Childhood Education program at Algonquin College in her home town here in Ottawa. While there, she began learning about psychology, specifically the different mental-health illnesses. That is when it clicked that her mom is struggling with undiagnosed schizophrenia. Her mother's symptoms checked all the boxes: she had delusions, hallucinations, disorganization, and severe mood swings. One minute Sarah's mom would be a happy-go-lucky woman, and the next she would be yelling obscene things at the wall. For many, this situation may feel confusing or isolating, but luckily there is the handy-dandy Internet that makes it easy to find information and connect with others who are in the same boat. Sarah would often fall back on one specific article by FHE Health. She found comfort in the writing, specifically the phrase, "Children who grow up with a parent with schizophrenia have a lack of understanding about the condition. They may ask questions like, 'What is schizophrenia like? Why is my mom or my dad acting this way? Is it my fault?' This experience can have long-term impacts on healthy childhood development." Sarah would ask herself these questions all the time growing up. As a parent herself, she also found it comforting to read, "A parent with untreated schizophrenia may have difficulty providing for their child's basic needs, like food, transportation to school, and educational enrichment. Often, people with schizophrenia perceive the people around them as threats and lash out or, in extreme cases, try to harm their loved ones or themselves." Knowing Sarah for many years, I know that she would go days without food, would have to walk to school in the freezing cold, and would be missing more basic needs due to her mother's mental-

health struggles. This was when she began to understand that her mother's behaviour wasn't her fault.

Entering into her twenties, another curveball was thrown Sarah's way. She fell pregnant with her first child. The panic set in as she feared that she was following in the same footsteps as her mother, becoming a mom herself at such a young age. How was she going to afford a baby? How was she going to finish school? How was she going to even provide basic life necessities for her baby? All she could think was, "apples don't fall far from trees," but then it dawned on her: she was now in the process of planting her own apple orchard. It was this moment that empowered her to keep pushing, not only for herself but also for her unborn baby.

Now that Sarah is well into her thirties, she is a career woman, a mother of two, and a friend. She tells me that she looks back at everything she has been through and is proud that she was the one to break a cycle and is in a position to give her kids a true and untainted childhood. We look out at her kids playing in the backyard and realized that she has done an incredible job at ensuring that she doesn't pass along the cycle of abuse and neglect that she endured. According to an article in *Psychology Today*:

Shame is a significant factor in the continuation of the cycle of abuse. It is not only one of the emotions that cause the cycle to continue but it often prevents people from getting help. It is time to stop blaming and shaming those who do to others what was done to them. It does no good to make monsters out of those who continue the cycle of violence by abusing their children or their partner. This only serves to harden them even more and make them less inclined to reach out for help. It has become overwhelmingly clear that people don't just "get over" child abuse. They continue to suffer and even more importantly, they pass on the abuse to other people.

I asked Sarah if she ever felt the shame factor. She said to me that for many years she felt shame about her childhood, since it was so different than what anyone had experienced. She said that she was reluctant to talk about it in case she was met with judgement, but after being in therapy for years, she realized that talking about it releases it from her heart. We are all dealt a different hand of cards in life, but it is how we play those cards that determine how far we get in this game of life.

WORKS CITED

Engle, Beverly. "Breaking the Cycle of Abuse." *Psychology Today*, 7 June 7 2020.

Robb-Dover, Kristina. "Growing Up with a Parent with Schizophrenia." *FHE Health*, 26 May 2021.

Nice

RYLIE TISHLER

FOR AS long as I can remember, I have been described as “nice.” As an only child with divorced parents, the odds were not in my favour for the development of my character. Kids in my situation often grow up to be spoiled and bratty. However, in a heart-to-heart conversation, my mom revealed the moment she realized I had defied those odds as early as kindergarten.

“Some kid asked you for your lollipop and you didn’t blink before handing it to him,” she recalled proudly with a smile on her face.

Nice has never been a consolation prize in the absence of flashier traits, but a true reflection of my deepest self.

As mentioned, I am an only child of parents who divorced when I was five years old. While I’m thankful for my age, given my inability to comprehend the extent of the circumstances at the time, I was hardly immune to the effects of their separation.

I was thrown into the middle of every argument and was privy to every harsh statement one parent made about the other. Responding to this in the only way I knew how, I took on the role of a peacekeeper, doing everything in my power to resolve conflicts and maintain harmony, often at my own expense. Jenilyn Bartolo, a licenced professional,

explains that children may sacrifice their own emotional needs to provide what their parents need. I did exactly this, being implicitly taught from a young age that the protection of other people's feelings was far more important than the protection of my own.

This understanding set the tone for the nature of my relationships, both romantic and platonic, for the next fourteen years of my life. Devoting my energy to preserving others' happiness at the expense of mine felt ingrained in my being.

My parents kept me at the same school from grades one through twelve, hoping that stability elsewhere would make up for the lack thereof at home. In these years, I established my core friend group and began dating a boy, Christian, who I loved deeply. I thought my cup was filled.

Then, in grade twelve, Greer came. Greer was different from those I had called my best friends for twelve years, and meeting her made me realize that I had more room in my cup than I thought. Bonding through our struggles with depression and anxiety, and the loneliness within them, it wasn't long until she became my best friend. I felt consumed, excited, and grateful in ways that I never have before. Most profoundly, I felt known. The way Greer knew me did not take work, or an explanation, it just happened. Greer and Christian were my safe place.

When the end of grade twelve came, Greer and I picked universities that were eight hours away from each other. With Christian was staying home, I no longer had my safe place.

I managed to settle into my new life at Queen's and began building new friendships with my roommates. As time went on, I became immersed in my new life, but increasingly detached from the life I left at home with my boyfriend.

In second year, I realized that I fell out of love with him, which felt like a daunting and almost malicious discovery. Breaking up with him meant hurting him, doing something that contradicted every value I internalized since my parents' divorce. Finally acknowledging the toll it

was taking on us both, I broke up with him. Pivotaly, I found comfort knowing that I had Greer by my side.

Following the breakup, Christian didn't have many people to speak to, so he gravitated towards Greer. I didn't think much of it, though; I was confident that Greer could sympathize with him while remaining loyal to me. As more time passed, I felt Greer and I become increasingly disconnected, but I brushed it off for a long time, reminding myself that we are at different universities with different lives.

About two months after the breakup, I received a text message from my ex-boyfriend, Christian. This text message made me realize that Greer had acted as a double agent since the day I broke up with him. For two months, Greer was Christian's mouthpiece, pulling information out of me and telling Christian everything I was doing romantically and generally without my knowledge.

My body physically rejected this information. My stomach dropped, my heart began racing, and tears began streaming down my face. I didn't know whether to scream, throw up, or disappear. I desperately wished a black hole would appear and swallow me. Pure darkness seemed better than what I was feeling.

As a people pleaser, I would normally try to empathize with Greer, attempting to understand her story while suppressing my feelings to keep the peace. I had done it in the past, and I expected to do it again.

When I received her sad excuse of an apology, it was like a switch flipped. In a moment of clarity, I decided to never speak to her again, going against every defence mechanism I knew. Sweeping my feelings under the rug felt out of the question, and I no longer felt responsible for anyone's emotions, safety, or comfort other than my own.

While completely unexpected, the flip of switch that occurred in my brain was the best thing that ever happened to me. It gave me the courage to cut someone out of my life with the intention of prioritizing my own well-being, which was unimaginable to me before.

This moment in my life is paramount. It reflects the time I was able to reclaim my deepest self: the toddler who gave her friend the lollipop, not because she worried about upsetting them or trying to keep the peace, but because she wanted to. The toddler who was nice not out of fear, but of innate genuineness.

While I don't want to give her too much credit, Greer changed me for the better, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't grateful for her, betrayal and all. She gave me the opportunity and responsibility to nurse my inner child back to health, and for that, I am forever thankful.

WORK CITED

Bartolo, Jenilyn. "Dysfunctional Family Roles: Identifying and Addressing Them." *Embark Behavioural Health*, 19 Jan. 2024.

A Brief Conversation Aboard the Islander III

JOHN TSAFARIDIS

I NEVER liked the city much. It's ironic: I was born and raised in Toronto, but I've never cared for it. Even Kingston, the big city of small towns, is too much city for me, and that's why I took a job on Wolfe Island. Wolfe Island, for those who don't know, is the largest of the Thousand Islands and sits to the south of Kingston, between it and Cape Vincent. It was two years ago that I worked on the island for a woman: Jean (that's not her real name). She had horses and a farm and would pay me for my time, and that was all I'd ever wanted. Every second week I'd head down to the ferry docks, ride the ferry across the St Lawrence River, and from there Jean would drive me to her farm; it took five minutes of walking, ten minutes on the bus, twenty to thirty minutes on the boat, and then five minutes in the car to get to there—Odysseus himself couldn't have denied that the route was a convoluted one. But I liked it. Well, I didn't like the walking or the bus, but I liked the boat ride.

It was late March 2022 when I took the boat to see Jean for the last time; I didn't know it would be the last time, but I did know that it would be the last time I'd see her that spring, as I was due back in Toronto for

the summer. The commute over to the island was nothing to write home about: as was usual, I sat inside the boat, sharing the cabin with one other guy who couldn't have been older than twenty-five. The boat docked on the east side of the island at Dawson's Point and Jean wasn't there yet, so I stood waiting for her. The guy from the boat stood waiting, too. I thought it was funny, like he was mimicking me. Bored of waiting, he lit a cigarette. That's when Jean arrived.

I thought I'd be done waiting but, after I'd gotten settled in the car, Jean told me we were waiting on someone else: the guy from the ferry—he's the one this story's about. The arrival of spring meant that Jean needed to begin work on her fruit and vegetable gardens so she could harvest in time for the summer and fall farmer's markets, and he'd come to help with the planting. We waited for him to finish his cigarette and watched him crush it out on the ground when he was done. Before he climbed into the back seat, Jean turned to me.

"I never like when people leave their cigarettes on the ground," she said. I supposed that it wasn't the best thing to do and nodded in agreement. If I'm being honest, I don't remember much about the day after that; Jean introduced us, but I've never been good with names and I was helping Jean to refurbish an old carriage house on the property, so I didn't see much more of him after that. What I can remember was Jean driving me and him back to Dawson's Point at the end of the day. For whatever reason, we were fifteen minutes early for the ferry, so we had time to talk. While we talked, he lit another cigarette. This time, when he was done, he tucked the cigarette away.

"I'll throw it out later; I hate to litter," he said. It was as if he had heard what Jean said earlier, but I knew he couldn't have. The boat arrived and we sat together this time and carried on talking. I have had a lot of conversations with strangers—some good and some bad—but I have never remembered one as well as I have this one.

He began to talk about something Trudeau had said during the pandemic, something that had rubbed him the wrong way; Trudeau had

chastised the anti-maskers for their behaviour, called them selfish, and told them that he didn't care what happened to them, but that he wouldn't have them risking the health of others (or something to the tune of that). I'd remembered liking it—fight fire with fire, right? I was worried about where he was headed with this.

"I get what he's saying," he clarified, "but he shouldn't be talking to them like that. He's sinking to their level and nothing good can come from it." It was interesting. What I'd seen as fighting fire with fire, he'd seen as trying to make a right out of two wrongs. He might've been naïve for thinking that there's a world where we can all be kind to each other all the time, but what's the harm in dreaming? Now, it's easy enough to talk the talk, but it's another thing to walk the walk and, if there's truth to his stories, he walks the walk.

"There was a time, back in college," he began, "when I was walking with some friends and we came across these women rallying against abortions. It was obnoxious, but I thought I'd talk with them." He believed in choice himself, but he reasoned that, by talking with them, he might learn what it is about abortions that's so offensive for some; he figured knowing that would be the difference between believing and knowing he was right. In the end, the woman wasn't interested in listening as much as she was talking, which wasn't what he'd wanted, but he'd heard her out and he could feel good about that.

He shared more stories like that as the ride went on, but each had the same message. The stories weren't ever about the issues being debated, but about how he handled himself, knowing that he acted with integrity, that's what mattered to him, and it matters to me, too.

After twenty minutes or so the boat docked and we went our separate ways. I never did see him again. I wouldn't even recognize him if I did, but I still think about what he said. It's a nice way of thinking.

WORK CITED

Wolfe Island. Destination Ontario.

Liz, Neta, and I

NATASHA VASILIEV

WHEN THE plane dropped its landing gear, Liz leaned over and said, “They’re all going to be up and getting their bags before the plane even touches the ground.”

“No way,” I responded. “The flight attendants aren’t going to let that happen.” As the plane dropped the last few feet, every single person around me shot up and started to gather their things. The flight attendants attempted to get everyone to sit, but no one listened.

“What did I tell you,” Liz said, smirking. “I know my people.”

Knowing that we weren’t going to get off the plane until the doors opened and the gate attached, I remained seated. It was my first—and last—time having a flight of the sort. Everyone yelled for the entire five hours, I had been asked to move seats three times to accommodate families who wanted to sit together, and a stumbling grandma had used my head as support when she fell.

Once we finally left and got through security, we found our friend Neta waiting to drive us to her apartment, our home for the week. It was four a.m., and though my eyes were heavy with sleep, I couldn’t help but to marvel at the sand drifting off the desert hills like a great god had brushed over the tops with his hand. Neta’s car had a broken

speedometer, worn seats, and windows you had to manually roll down. The warm air blew into my face on our drive—I could never keep the windows down at night in Toronto; even in the summer the wind was too cold.

The next day, Neta dropped Liz and I off at the subway so we could get to the beach in time for sunset. Walking through the station, I glanced at Liz when we approached security. It looked like we needed to go through YYZ just to get on a train, sending our bags through a scanner, going through a metal detector, then getting searched ourselves. “High security,” Liz said, and shrugged. I wondered what happened here that made them need it.

As we approached the beach, the sunset cast the sky in the most beautiful array of pinks, purples, and yellows that I had ever seen. The waves felt like they’d been churned through a fire before they crashed against my legs. Israel has some of the warmest oceans in the world, I remembered. I smiled at Liz and watched the utter joy on her face as she took in her country. I thought this must be some sort of paradise.

A few days later, the three of us set out to the Dead Sea. “I can’t believe it’s a three-hour drive,” I said, fanning myself from the warm air coming from the broken AC. “Someone distract me.”

“You see this highway we’re driving on now?” Neta said. “It converts to a landing strip for aircrafts when we’re at war.”

“That’s pretty cool,” I mused, imagining planes taking off in the dead of night on the very road our car rumbled down.

“And that mountain there”—Neta pointed to a peak close by—“it’s actually a fake mountain full of trash.”

“I can smell it from here,” Liz piped up, pressing her cold water bottle onto her forehead.

“It hides the trash from the public. They do all the burning there.”

We marvelled at the hills for a short time until glittering waters shone in the distance. “The Dead Sea is losing water. It dries more and more every year. Soon it will be nothing more than a little lake.” Neta’s

tone was mournful for the water she so clearly loved. “It’s also salty enough that no life can exist in it, beyond some bacteria.”

“Thank God,” Liz said. “Otherwise, you couldn’t pay me to get in.”

As we drove closer, there were road signs along the way, indicating how close we were getting to sea level, eventually dipping to minus 430 meters when we pulled into the lot. It was forty-three degrees with not a cloud in sight, the dry air burning my lungs and forcing me to use their showers—no different than those at a beach resort—and chug water like a starved animal. Each dip in the water was spent rubbing mud on our bodies, our faces, trying to scrub some health and minerals into our skin, aching and raw. Again and again we went back and forth, until the sun started to hide beyond the edge of the Earth.

The drive back was not nearly as entertaining. A detour the map proposed to get us there faster took us through dangerous territory. At first, I didn’t understand what was going on. Why do we need to roll up our windows, sink down into our seats, and drive at twice the speed? We weren’t across the border. Why was it not safe? “Some villages are not Israeli occupied,” Neta said. “They’ll throw rocks at us if they see who we are, if they see our heads aren’t covered and wonder why our licence plate isn’t yellow like theirs.” Already, people had come out on the street and started to stare as we drove past. Neta just drove on, even as Liz started to pray.

The next day, Liz and I took the train to Jerusalem for some local sights. The Shuk, I discovered, was a market spanning ten city blocks, but I could hear and smell it before we approached. There were vendors selling clothes, vegetables, candies, meats, and every other good I could think of, each of them yelling out that they had the best prices, bargaining with their potential customers. “Don’t speak a word of English,” Liz said. “If they hear you’re foreign, we’ll never get a good deal.” I became Liz’s mute friend as we shopped, the vendors surely thinking I lost my tongue in a tragic accident, given my nodding or shaking my head as a means of communication. I tried so many spices that my mouth burned for hours.

Afterward, Liz and I walked a gruelling few kilometres to the Kotel, the Western Wall, with the sun baking down on me. I fidgeted with my headscarf as we walked and nearly tripped over my floor-length dress, aching to take them both off to get some reprieve from the forty-degree heat. We finally approached the Kotel, and Liz handed me a piece of paper and a pencil on a nearby stand. She told me to write down the names of those I love, fold the paper as small as I can, and we would go to the wall together to pray.

“Never turn your back on it,” she said. “When you leave, walk backwards until you cross the divider.” She and I walked to the wall, surrounded by other women crying and praying, a hand or their forehead touching the wall as they bowed down. Every nook and cranny had a paper stuffed into it, like they had tried to push them through to the other side. Liz cried as she prayed, and I held her until she felt whole again. The two of us walked backwards in silence, and enjoyed a quiet but peaceful ride home on the train.

Service in Leadership

Mr Reid Leads by Example

VELONAH WEKE

I FIRST met Mr Reid in an interview at the Farm Boy grocery in Kingston, Ontario. I was seated at the eating lounge waiting to be called into the interview room when a disgruntled customer, who had stalled at one of the counters demanding to talk to the manager, entered the waiting lounge and sat at the table across from me.

“Good morning.” Mr Reid appeared from his office in the backroom and announced a greeting to both of us. He then approached the customer, introduced himself, and initiated a conversation. I listened to the customer-resolution process, taking mental notes and points for my impending job interview. After he had solved the customer’s issue and walked her to get product assistance in the deli section, he returned to the lounge.

“Hello, Velonah; you must have heard me introduce myself to the customer earlier. I believe you have an interview with me today. Are you ready?” He turned to me.

“Absolutely,” I said with a confident smile.

“This way,” he said, gesturing as he led the way to his office. “It’s good you had to witness the customer resolution; it was just a regular moment in customer service,” he joked as we walked towards his office.

Mr Reid and I sat for the interview and exchanged pleasantries. “Tell me about yourself,” he started. That statement was an unusual start to an interview compared to the interviews I had ever attended. I managed to explain myself without sounding vague. Mr Reid focused mainly on a strong work ethic and excellent interpersonal skills. “I have always believed that a manager is only as good as the team around him,” he said as we concluded our meeting. “Welcome to the team; you are hired,” he said, rising from his chair and extending his hand for a firm handshake.

“Thank you, sir. I am delighted,” I replied with a sigh of relief. Mr Reid led me out of his office and walked me out on his way back to the floor. I was hired as a cashier in the service department.

There is usually anxiety about whether the manager is tolerable or impressionable if you are a new employee. On my orientation day, we were walking through the bakery to the backroom dispatch area when I asked Leigh, one of the service department supervisors tasked to orientate me, “What kind of a manager is Mr. Reid?” I prodded.

“Don’t worry about him; he is cool, provided you do your job as required,” she responded.

After two weeks had passed, I was working a mid-morning shift and sat alone in the lunchroom during break time. I was eating a hot meal I had purchased from the hot bar section in the store when a black lady entered the room. She was the only black female employee I had seen working there since I got hired, and there was one black male employee in the hot food bar and salad section.

“Hi, I am Natalie. Are you a new hire? I think I have seen you a couple of times,” she said, initiating a conversation.

“My trainee badge gives that away,” I replied, pointing at my new employee badge with the word “Trainee” scribed in bold letters underneath my name. “I am Velonah, Velonah Lubker. Nice to meet you,

Natalie,” I added. I talked to Natalie to get a feel for the work environment and the general attitude towards employees of diverse ethnicities, especially from the manager. Relating from her observations and experiences, Natalie emphasized Mr Reid’s liberal and unique conflict-resolution approach and commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive, and safe working environment.

After a couple of months, I left to pursue a different career path as an administrative clerk in health care; however, I still visit Farm Boy as a regular customer. Whenever I pop into the store, I find Mr Reid with his sleeves rolled up, busy stocking shelves, arranging fruits or vegetables, wheeling a mini baking rack, and arranging the freshly baked pastries and confectionaries. He is cognizant of the constant flow of customers, occasionally exchanging greetings and acknowledging the customer’s presence, answering customers’ questions, or helping customers find certain products. Occasionally, he would casually chat or exchange rapport with his staff members.

Dressed neatly in dress pants, a dress shirt, and a necktie that exudes professionalism, he occasionally throws on the black apron uniform when working on the floor. Sometimes, I find him tidying around the checkout counters, working the till, or wheeling shopping carts inside the grocery store. One day, I saw him in the parking lot, wheeling a long train of shopping carts from the outdoor shed back into the store’s main entrance.

“Good afternoon, sir; today you are working out here?” I hailed him.

“Hi, Velonah. Someone has to do it, and I am available,” he responded, stopping for vehicles to pass as he navigated through the milling traffic of shoppers getting in and out of the store. Ferrying those trains of shopping carts was the job duty I was least fond of for the short time I worked there.

Unlike some managers who would prefer to sit in their offices, barking orders and screeching at employees, Mr Reid is a hands-on manager. I caught up with him recently for a quick rendezvous. I was

curious and intrigued to know what his leadership style meant to him, and I wanted a little background story on his career as a manager.

“How long have you been working at Farm Boy?” I asked.

“It will be seventeen years by April 2024,” he replied confidently.

“Tell me a little bit more,” I prodded.

“Before getting employed at Farm Boy, I started at Tim Hortons as a teenager, then went to Zellers, where I was installing security systems, then moved to Mr Gas and worked there briefly. After gaining more experience working for different companies, I realized that hard work pays off. I then got employed at the Farm Boy store in Tenth Line in Ottawa, where I became the bakery manager after six months; I was only twenty-one years old,” he said with a beaming smile.

“That explains why I always see you helping a lot around the bakery section,” I replied with amusement.

“Yes—part of it,” he affirmed.

“Five years later, I became a produce manager. I worked as a manager for two years, then moved to London, Ontario, as a bakery specialist and store manager for three years. I later moved here into Kingston, where I have been the store manager for about four years,” he added.

“That’s impressive! What makes a good manager, according to you?”

“Resilience, hard work, and perseverance,”

“What does being a good manager mean to you?”

“Not asking someone to do something I wouldn’t do. I am not afraid to roll up my sleeves and get dirty; before I ask an employee to do something, it must be something I can do,” he asserted.

I yearned to hear more about Mr Reid’s challenges, conflict-resolution strategies, attitude towards diversity and inclusion, and the everyday sociocultural nuances at every workplace.

“There are great challenges that come with leadership, and being a retail store manager is one of them. Sometimes, the challenge is

transforming a broken retail system into something beautiful and satisfying. When I first moved here to Kingston as a store's manager about four years ago, I found unruly employees who rolled their eyes when I instructed them to do something or delegated tasks to them. On the other hand, some patrons were rowdy and caused unnecessary fiascos at the store, including bullying the employees. I had to step in and put a stop," he recounted pensively. "My first task here was to streamline everything so everyone was on the same page. Since taking over the leadership of the Farm Boy store in Kingston four years ago, the store's rating has shot up from a struggling three stars to almost five stars!" he added with an air of pride sweeping across his face. "Check it out!" he prodded.

I reached for my phone, quickly typed Farm Boy store Kingston Ontario, and checked the ratings. True to his word, the store currently has a 4.5-star rating.

"That's a remarkable improvement," I affirmed.

"When it comes to employees, a good working ethic is when they prioritize their time, focus more on their tasks, avoid unnecessary distractions, and are knowledgeable about products. Since the store is people-focused, providing excellent customer service is the top priority and upholding the company's values," he concluded.

Regarding his views towards diversity and inclusion, he reiterated that he grew accustomed to diversity from a young age. "My childhood background is what I would call financially underprivileged. Growing up with limited and inadequate access to basic resources and being around people of different ethnicities helped me become open-minded in handling people of various socioeconomic, cultural groups, and nationalities. Stereotyping and discrimination have never been part of my belief. I realized growing up that everyone is fighting for the same opportunities, so it's worth fighting for the right things," he asserted.

Mr Reid manages a grocery store with 125 employees and a team of like-minded people working together to serve a robust clientele in Kingston and surrounding areas.

“There is strength in teamwork, and it’s always my mantra that a manager is as good as the team around him. That is why I strive to hire the best employees, people willing to go above and beyond; I also must take care of my staff for them to take care of me because I cannot do everything by myself,” he asserts.

As part of the employee-motivation strategy, there is a weekly “Cheer for Peers” incentive at Farm Boy to motivate employees, where each employee nominates their fellow team members who are doing exemplary work. Each nominee receives fifty dollars. The nomination is conducted without bias and revolves around the idea that at least each employee gets something in a year.

“Initiatives such as Cheer for Peer help foster cohesive relationships and trust between employees, where they all feel included and recognized as part of a larger team,” Mr Reid explained.

As we concluded our brief conversation, Mr Reid shared that his greatest motivation and the benefit of being a hands-on manager working alongside his employees is getting his steps in. He can clock 20 to 25,000 steps daily, encouraging him to keep moving while being productive. Mr Reid has remained consistent in his work ethic and leadership. He leads by example, defining the aspect of service in leadership.

Bright Gold Star

RUBY WESSENGER

AT FOUR years old I knew I had a passion for teaching. It all started when I received a stand-up chalkboard. I took the dining-room chairs and lined them up in rows. I placed a doll on each chair. The chalkboard read, “MIS RUBY, FIST DAY K-I-N-D-A-G-A-D-N.” The first lesson of the day was art, colouring Disney Princess pages for all. I sat on the side of the chair helping them colour. Most of my dolls were good at colouring outside the lines.

On my first day of kindergarten, I was excited to wear my pink Dora dress and blue flower tights. I walked holding my mother’s hand to the door of the classroom. My teacher greeted me with a bright red-teeth smile and a warm hug. As my mother waved goodbye, I was eager to place my new pink sparkly backpack inside my cubby. My pupils dilated as I observed the classroom: the bright colours, the alphabet, the numbers, the round tables and hard plastic chairs, the teacher’s apple on her desk, the learning carpet, the toys, the toys, the toys! What’s that, is that a time-out corner? I sat criss-cross applesauce on the carpet while waiting for the other kids to be seated. I heard children’s cries, “No, Mommy, no! I don’t wanna go to school today.” How could they not

want to go to school and learn? When you have knowledge you have the power to achieve many great things (“Ten”).

I was quiet, patient, and followed the rules of the classroom. Creating memories of dancing and singing at recess. Art class was always colourful and messy, I loved it. At the end of my first day, my teacher pulled out a bright gold star, looked into my eyes, and stuck it on my dress. My first bright gold star! I could feel my body trembling, jumping up and down full of excitement. “Great work today! You have the voice of an angel.”

The bell rang, and my mom met me at the kindergarten gate. She asked, “How was your day Sweetie?”

I whispered, “It was the best day, Mommy. My teacher gave me a bright gold star for singing the alphabet. One day I will give out bright gold stars.”

By the end of kindergarten, I could read *Goodnight Moon*, write the alphabet, and count to 101. At my kindergarten graduation, it was my turn to dance up the stairs onto the stage. The gymnasium air was warm but it was sending me shivers. I put my princess smile on to match my paper crown as I skipped to my teacher. She announced, “Congratulations, Ruby! When she grows up, her dream is to be a teacher!” Teachers are the support system and inspiration for a child to move forward and follow their dreams (Nair). I smiled as I squeezed my diploma tightly in my hand and danced my way out of there. I knew that day I loved school and I would follow my dream to be a teacher.

High school was the highlight of my life. It was those years I got to shine like my bright gold star.

“Do you want to teach and choreograph a hip-hop dance for my class?”

“Congratulations, you have been elected as Student Council President!”

“We need you, will you be a part of the Graduation and Prom Committee?”

“Yes!”

“Thank you!”

“Yes, I would love to!”

I always said yes to an opportunity. I enjoyed each moment of taking on a role of responsibility, being a leader, planning, organizing, communicating, and providing spirit all over. Over the years, I thought frequently about why I wanted to become a teacher. Teachers constantly connect with their students, inspire them, guide them, and shape their minds (“Should”). My teachers were kind-hearted, supportive, and caring. They made every class exciting, providing opportunities, always inspiring, and every day they made me feel like I belonged. These relationships with my teachers have made me become the creative, responsible, confident, caring, and independent person I am today.

One time I spoke with a former elementary-school teacher and principal. Her advice was to “be open to possibilities. When you find your passion, be open to how that passion might unfold; you will find what you’re interested in, but let it develop naturally.” When it came down to applying to university and what I wanted to do with my life, I knew that teaching was my destiny. I was overly excited to apply for the Concurrent Education program at Queen’s University. As I have grown passionate to love school, I wanted a career in education, envisioning myself as a teacher. As a teacher, I would become a role model inspiring students, watching them grow and succeed, knowing that I could make a positive influence on their lives. Passion for changing the world should be the most important reason to become a teacher (“Should”). As a teacher, if I could just inspire or have an impact on one student, that would make the teaching experience worth it.

Commencement day was here. I stood wearing my navy-blue gown that hung past my knees, a bright orange polyester sash covering my white mini dress, the cap falling half off my head decorated with “Dancin’ My Way Outta Here.” As my name was called, I put my princess smile on and my graduation cap as I danced onto the stage to

receive my diploma. I shook the Principal's hand as the Administrator announced, "Congratulations! Ruby will be attending Queen's University for Concurrent Education." I smiled, squeezed my diploma tightly in my hand, and danced my way outta there. I felt the same jumping joy as I did in kindergarten.

If my four-year-old self could see me right now, she would ask, "Where is your bright gold star?" My bright gold star has been with me all along through this marvellous journey, shining brighter each day as I reach my goals. The brightest my gold star will ever be is when the chalkboard reads, "Miss Ruby, The First Day of School." When I see those smiling faces sitting at their desks, and one of those smiles asks, "What are we learning today, Miss Ruby?"

WORKS CITED

- Nair, Madhu. "Why Are Teachers Important in Our Society? They Have Influence." *University of the People*, 7 Feb. 2024.
- "Should I Be a Teacher? Twenty-Four Great Reasons to Consider 2024." *Teachers of Tomorrow*, 19 Nov. 2023.
- "Ten Reasons to Learn Something New Every Day." *The Goodlife Centre*, 7 Apr. 2024.

The First Girl

ALYSE WILCOX

I MET her at a pool hall in a bad part of town. She wrote her name across the chalkboard proudly: “Jastla.” We played a few games, but I wasn’t keeping track of the score. My mind was busy thinking of what to say next, tiptoeing every question and response to our conversation. Normally, I didn’t overthink it like this. Not with a friend. Then, she turned to me.

“How do you think it’s pronounced?” She smiled mischievously as if it were a trick question.

“Jastla?” I ventured. She kept her smirk. “Is the ‘J’ silent or something?” I asked. Her silence made me squirm.

“It’s pronounced Victoria,” she proclaimed. I looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“Just kidding. My middle name is Victoria. Jastla Victoria,” she laughed. She sounded melodic, like wind chimes. We got along so well that it felt like a lie.

Jastla drove her old Jetta from Edmonton to Ontario a few months prior, after breaking up with her girlfriend to live with a cute blonde she met on Twitter. I knew they were both gay, but Jastla insisted they were

just roommates. When the cute blonde flew off the handle and attempted to kick her out, Jastla said it was because they missed garbage day.

This was back in 2021 when Twitter was still called Twitter. Ontario was a year and a half into COVID-19 lockdowns aimed at “flattening the curve.” Rumours swirled about vaccines invading bodies and manipulating DNA. Conspiracies insisted this was a ruse to change the way we lived forever. This was also before I knew, for certain, that I was gay, hiding behind Christian purity and the “community” I needed and craved.

Because of lockdowns, there wasn’t much to do in the city. One day Jastla and I took a six-hour round-trip journey to the Bruce Peninsula. It happened to be the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. She shared stories about her heritage and family as I drove. Despite the best efforts by residential schools, her grandmother still spoke Cree. Her mother hunted the land and spoke the language. Jastla had tried to learn but didn’t know it. I told her we should burn down Parliament. She rolled her eyes.

“They would just spend a bunch of money to build it back up.”

At one point, I got so lost in our conversation that I almost missed the exit, but I can always tell when we’re getting close.

Fields bare from harvest gave way to white cedar trees, graciously spared from clear-cutting. The peninsula was too far from the city, making farming and logging out here less profitable. We paddled in shallow, cold water as the sun went down. As we drove home, the cedars and pink-and-grey jutting rocks smoothed into farmland. The Earth again looked bare, but at least we could see the stars. We couldn’t see them from my fire escape back in the city. The sky stayed monotone grey no matter how late it got.

Although the fire escape was small, we sat unnecessarily close. I remember her hair grazing my arm as she looked down at her phone.

“They’re there,” she said, taking a drag of a cigarette. Though she hated where she grew up, she missed the stars. I thought about feeling like something was there, but you cannot see it beyond dim grey.

One day, Jastla found a single strand of grey hair and went into a tailspin. She sent me a flurry of texts, panicked about this sign of wisdom and maturity she surely hadn’t earned. She hated the idea of getting old.

I did, too, before I met her. I was cornered by the docile womanhood that plagued my mothers: a family life, with a husband and children. I craved these simple assurances yet hated them all the same. I felt moulded by foreign hands and outside influences. The clay was slowly drying. Every year, I settled further into a person I didn’t recognize.

To me, she seemed free from that life. I imagined her in twenty years, her long dark hair highlighted with grey, her familiar eyes creasing more as she smiled. I imagined the life she’d live, the person she’d be. I wanted to be there for every iteration of her.

I replied with an understatement: “I think you’ll be cool,” I assured her. “You’ll be the same, only wiser.”

I told her I loved her first. It was out of the blue and partly because we had been drinking in my attic, as usual.

“I love you.” She looked up slowly, a sly smile forming on her face.

“What was that?” she said, acting as if she didn’t hear.

“You heard me,” I teased.

“No, what did you say?” she asked again, now slowly moving across the carpet, closing the distance between us.

“You need to back up,” I laugh.

“No, no, it’s okay.” She jokingly brushed me aside. “Say it again.” She was now kneeling in front of me with her hands on my knees, facing me. I conceded.

“I love you.”

“Say it again,” she said.

“I love you.”

“Say it again.”

And I did.

She often told me how much she missed the Northern Lights. She recalled when she and her friends ran, convinced the lights were chasing them. She described how the lights seemed to descend close to the ground as if they were in reach. Even after her friends stopped, she continued running.

That Christmas, I gave her a painting of the Northern Lights to remember home. She left it behind when she moved out east to be with a new girl, but I'm glad she had it, if only for that moment.

Life Beyond Screens

SIERRA WILKES

“REMEMBER when,” I began, looking at my grandchildren stare blankly into the television, “I would play outside until my mother allowed me back in. There was no such thing as watching TV all day.”

Karen, the children’s mother, shook her head. “It just is not like that anymore, Mom.”

“You could try and get them to go outside,” Bud, my husband, suggests, “but they will not touch that snow.”

My oldest grandchild, Sierra, piped up from the couch, “Going outside is not fun, Grandma.”

“I just feel like,” I whispered low, “that kids are not ... kids anymore. Those devices have overtaken their little minds. There is no escaping them. They are even at the schools!”

Karen laughed in response. “Oh, Mother, it is not that serious. Kids these days are just into technology. Also, have you looked outside? It is a snowstorm. They cannot play out there!”

I glanced out the window, where snow raced down. I still could not help but miss hearing my grandchildren’s laughter as they played. Now, all I could hear from them was the noise emanating from their electronic devices.

Later in the evening, my family and I sat at the dinner table. I laughed as I glanced at my grandson Jack, whose tongue poked out as he spooned a heaping pile of mashed potatoes onto his plate.

Bud nudged Jack playfully, “Want some dinner with your mashed potatoes?”

I glanced around the dinner table at my family as we ate and chatted. I knew we would all be absorbed in our devices again, but for now, I enjoyed the interactions.

Dinner finished, and I began clearing the table. Both grandchildren laid on the couch, Jack playing the Xbox and Sierra clicking away on her iPad. Even Karen was engrossed in a screen, sitting at the home computer playing Diner Dash. Bud sat in his La-Z-Boy chair, watching Jack’s game.

As I was about to pick up my iPad, the cabin plunged into darkness with the lights, computer, and television flicking off. The suddenness startled me, and I gasped. The only light source came from the moonlight, casting shadows into the dark cabin.

Sierra broke the silence with a groan. “Ugh! I did not save my Minecraft game!”

I strode towards the fuse box in the kitchen. All the circuits were on, but there was still no power. I hung my head in regret. Even though, as of 2013, I had experienced many outages living in Nakusp, I still had never purchased a generator. Trees surrounded this small town, and it was not rare for one to fall and knock out the power. As the wind howled, I knew that this storm was the culprit of the outage. The power went out similarly last November when a snowstorm occurred.

I returned to the living room, announcing, “Well, the power is out.”

My family’s resounding groans echoed my frustration, but with the screens unable to turn on, I realized this outage was an opportunity to show my grandchildren that there is more to life than iPads and television.

Promptly, I lit candles around the house and assembled the family in the living room. We played charades, a lengthy game of Monopoly, and ended the night with each grandchild picking a book to read by candlelight. I went to bed happy that night, feeling like the kids had experienced a day undisturbed by devices.

The next day, reality kicked in. The toilet and tap had no water since they relied on a pumphouse run by hydro. I needed to fix this bathroom, since no one would use the outhouse.

I came up with the idea of melting snow on the fire stove and pouring it into the toilet, making it work again.

I knew that this power outage would last longer than usual. Nakusp, a small town in British Columbia with a name meaning “closed in,” struggled to get immediate services. Due to Nakusp’s seclusion, I had faced challenges in even obtaining medical help in the past. These facts made me sure that the outage would not end soon.

I walked into the living room, where each family member resided. The grandchildren had a pouty look on their faces.

“Grandma, I am bored,” complained Sierra. Jack nodded in agreement.

I stood there, thinking of how to entertain them. Behind the couch, a large window displayed the backyard with mounds of snow on the ground. I smiled as an idea popped into my mind.

“How about you guys get suited up and play outside?” The kids looked from me to their mother, all three seeming apprehensive.

“Mother, it is below zero out there. It is too cold—”

I cut Karen off, “Nonsense! Kids, get suited up. I will give you each a hot chocolate to bring. Make a snowman, throw snowballs, have fun!”

Both children looked at each other in consideration, but I saw a spark in their eyes.

Karen stood up. “Mother, I do not think this is a good—” Karen was cut off again as the kids rushed from their seats to get dressed for outside.

We watched out the window as the children played. Their laughter resonated as they pelted snowballs at each other. The cold had reddened their cheeks, contrasting against the snowy backdrop like cherries on a sundae. We watched them silently, forgetting the children who numbly watched television and instead took in the two happily playing kids.

“I have not seen them play like this in ages,” Karen comments. I hummed in response.

“Well, Karen,” Bud started, “most kids do not play outside anymore. Have you seen how empty parks are?”

“Maybe I need to minimize their screen time,” Karen voiced after moments of silence, “and ... well, kids need to play. Especially as I saw on the news that this generation is prone to diabetes and obesity from their constant time indoors.”

I smiled in response, happy that Karen finally understood my concerns.

The lights turned on behind us, but I did not notice as I watched my grandchildren play with glee in the snow. A sparkle in their eyes replaced the blank stare that had been there days before.

WORKS CITED

- Favrholdt, Ken, and John Stewart. “Nakusp.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 30 Mar. 2008.
- Hirata, Felipe G. “Probability of Tree-Related Power Outages.” *The University of British Columbia*, 2011.
- Young, Leslie. “Canadian Kids (Are Not) Playing Outside Enough.” *Global News*, 13 Oct. 2019.

Take Me Home to My One Direction Concert

LAUREN WILSON

WHEN ASKED what his favourite time in the past is, Liam Payne of One Direction responded, “Dinosaurs, mate. Straight up.” While I would have agreed at the time, I can no longer say that the time when dinosaurs existed is my favourite time in the past. Liam didn’t know this, but in this infamous 2013 interview, he was living in my favourite time in the past: the time when One Direction still existed. Oftentimes I find myself rewatching One Direction’s concert film *This Is Us* just to feel something. And every night I cry myself to sleep because I am forced to brush my teeth with a silent toothbrush instead of one that sings “One Thing” to me. So, to answer Niall’s famous question, “Where we goin’ today, Mark?”, today, we’re going to a One Direction concert.

I’ve always said that if I could go back to any day in history, it would be the day I was at a One Direction concert in Toronto. Now with so many possibilities, with the entire history of the world at my fingertips, why would I choose to go to a One Direction concert? And even further, why would I choose the one I went to, and not any other one? Well, in

this hypothetical world where it is possible to go back to any day in history, I figured that it would also be possible for me to be transformed into who I was that day in history. And that is a large part of my choice.

I was six years old when One Direction first formed. I was graduating from kindergarten, moving up to a classroom with separate desks rather than shared tables. My memories from this time are quite blurry, but I do remember my innocence. I remember the posters I had all over my walls, the backpack that I would carry with me to school every day, the music videos I would make at sleepovers, and the dance routines I would perform at recess. If I recall correctly, the year I got my One Direction tickets for Christmas was also the last year I got any gifts from Santa.

A lot of people joke that the world started falling apart when One Direction announced their split, but I think that there is a lot of truth to this. The dramatic rise and fall of One Direction was reflective of the time when they existed. It is something that I don't think could ever be replicated. The end of One Direction marked the end of the boyband era, but it also marked the end of my innocence, as I was then a young teenager, soon to graduate from elementary school.

The band actually only did three world tours, and Zayn left midway through the last one. I was one of the lucky ones that got to see One Direction (with Zayn) in concert. I went to their *Where We Are* tour in Toronto with my mom and few of my friends. Before going to the concert, I went with these friends to see One Direction's concert film, *This Is Us*, in theatres, which documented their previous tour. There was a scene where they brought in a neuroscientist, Dr Stefan Koelsch, to explain why girls were so crazy for One Direction. He explained that we were not crazy, we were just excited. Everyone in the theatre laughed, me included, but I also thought the man had a point. What was so wrong with being excited? There was nothing wrong with being excited, but everything wrong with being excited girls—otherwise known as fangirls. Because what could possibly be so exciting about five boys singing

generic, manufactured songs? These girls must just be fans of the band for their looks.

To help others understand, I've always said that it was one of those "you had to be there" situations. It is not something that can be described. I hear those generic, manufactured songs, and I am transported back to my childhood bedroom with walls covered in One Direction posters. I hear, "So, I said to her, Angelina, I want to, I really, really want to" (Tomlinson), and I am transported back to the sleepovers that really didn't involve much sleeping. Because it's not about what it was, it's about what it represented. A wise friend once told me, "When I think back on my fondest memories, One Direction is playing as the soundtrack to them" (van Herpt), and I couldn't agree more.

I think back on that day of the One Direction concert. I remember I had my mom change my hairstyle at least three times when I couldn't decide what I wanted. But it had to be perfect. Because what if they could see me from the stage? I'm not going to get invited backstage if I don't look as perfect as I can. And if one thing hasn't changed since then, it's this mindset: always prepare for anything.

I still remember waiting outside the stadium, and hearing a big group of girls scream after one girl shouted, "I think I just saw Liam's hand." And you know what? Maybe that was a little crazy, but it was also innocent. If this were to have happened elsewhere, these girls would have been dismissed as hysterical fangirls. But at a One Direction concert, everyone understood. And so, while the end of One Direction marked the end of the boyband era, I think that what hurt more was that it marked the end of the fangirl era, at least for me.

I would give anything to attend a One Direction reunion concert. However, this hypothetical world where I have the ability back to any day in history is more plausible than a world where One Direction gets back together. So, that's what I'll do. I will go back to a day where I thought I was prepared for anything, with One Direction music playing

as the soundtrack. Because many things in life come and go, but One Direction is forever.

WORKS CITED

- “One Direction: This is Us.” Dir. by Morgan Spurlock, 2013.
- Payne, Liam. “Iconic Interview with One Direction.” YouTube, 23 Dec. 2013.
- Tomlinson, Louis. “One Direction: Best Song Ever.” YouTube, 22 July 2013.
- van Herpt, Claire. Personal interview, 16 Feb. 2024.