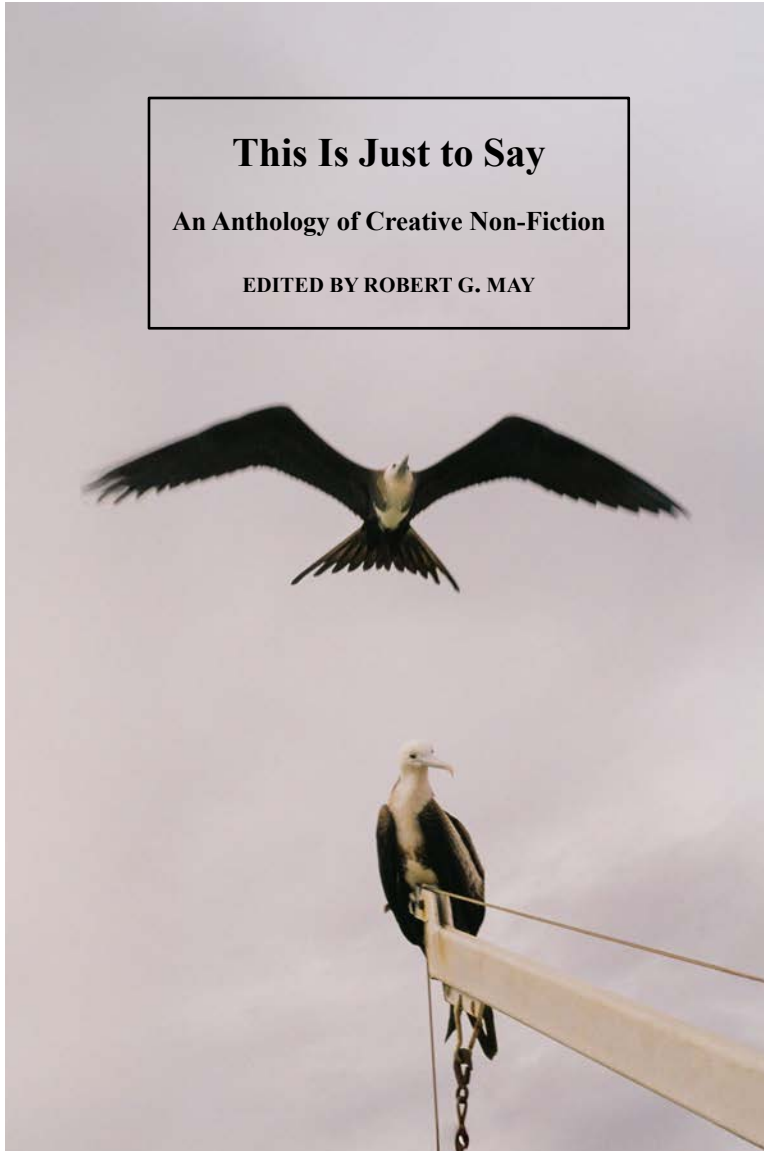


This Is Just to Say

An Anthology of Creative Non-Fiction

EDITED BY ROBERT G. MAY



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Preface

ROBERT G. MAY

THIS IS *Just to Say* is the ninth collection of creative non-fiction and memoir produced by my creative-writing students at Queen's University, Kingston.

In my Creative Non-Fiction and Memoir seminar (CWRI 272), students learn the basics of writing in this popular and fast-growing genre. Who is it for? How is it structured? What are its components? What kind of background work is involved? How should it be revised? The course makes use of Lee Gutkind's well-known guide to writing creative non-fiction, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (2012), as well as Luanne Armstrong and Zoë Landale's excellent anthology of recent Canadian creative non-fiction and memoir, *Slice Me Some Truth* (2011). The seminar of twenty-five undergraduate students meets twice per week over twelve weeks. In the first class of the week, they learn the craft of writing creative non-fiction and memoir by studying Gutkind and discussing examples from Armstrong and Landale. In the second class of the week, they put what they've learned into practice by workshoping their own short pieces of "flash" writing in the genre, critiquing each other's work and learning from each other's efforts. Their work culminates in a final project that they brainstorm, research, compose, and

revise. That final project is then published here, in this collection, with only minimal further editing.

One of the themes that kept recurring over this most recent offering of CWRI 272 is the importance of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. You don't need to live an exciting life like James Bond to write compelling creative non-fiction and memoir. Often, it's possible to find something inspirational in the commonplace activities of day-to-day life. In her short essay "Natty Man" in *Slice Me Some Truth*, for example, Jane Silcott recounts her experience seeing a well-dressed man riding his bicycle past her house. After he rides out of sight, she thinks she hears him exclaim "a single word (Yes!)," which gives rise to her profound meditation on what it means to live in the world and the importance of responding actively to what's around us. There's nothing particularly remarkable about the "natty man" or his physical activity, but there's something about his juxtaposition against his environment that makes the author respond strongly to him and what he represents as a single constituent amid the larger human drama.

I think this realization—that it's possible to find the profound in the commonplace—enables creative non-fiction writers to broaden their scope to write about topics they may have originally rejected out of hand as being too "prosaic" or "mundane." So, in this collection you'll find essays about putting out the garbage, temporarily losing a favourite possession, getting caught in the rain, and doing the dishes. In every case, the author has used that rather commonplace activity as a jumping-off point to explore modern life's joys and anxieties, challenges and victories. In every case, there's a larger, overarching message for the reader to perceive and benefit by.

If you're interested in reading more excellent creative non-fiction and memoir by my students at Queen's University, please download the first eight anthologies in 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),

Heavy Waters (2023), and *The Ways It Was* (2024)—from my departmental Web site:

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

Thanks for reading *This Is Just to Say*. I hope you enjoy this anthology of creative non-fiction by a group of talented and enthusiastic creative-writing students at Queen's!

Queen's University at Kingston
Winter 2025

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the hard-working and dedicated students of the Fall 2024 offering of Writing Creative Non-Fiction and Memoir (CWRI 272) who contributed their original works of creative non-fiction to this year's anthology.

And special thanks to the students who contributed ideas for the cover design and the title for this year's anthology. The title *This Is Just to Say* is based on a suggestion by Madison Kunz and Alexia Troost. The cover photograph illustration was created by Kolya Salter.

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This Is Just to Say

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Strong Is the New Sexy

ISABELLA BOS

“**F**ITNESS IS consuming your life,” “You’re going to look too masculine,” and “Are you sure you can eat that?”, are all sarcastically offensive comments that I hear almost daily. Little do these belittling people know that fitness saved my meaning of life from the gruelling and grasping stigma of what society has become. A woman in the public eye is essentially pushed to conform to the stereotypical idealization that revolves around who the visually and physically lustful image looks like, and the lengths one must go to fit in that mould. How unrealistic and disgusting is that! As a teenage girl growing up, facing the systemic means of what we call our current generation, I experienced what many others can relate to. Spending hours starving ourselves to shrink smaller, changing our everyday life to become unhealthy, circulated around our unrealistic fitness goals just to fit in with others, all for the goal to be known and praised for our non-existent waist and our wonderfully gaping thigh gap that men so unpleasantly worship.

The days would drag along with circulating thoughts that never seemed to die down, reminding me of my self-worth and how important it is that I value and prioritize these concepts over every other part of my life, these wishes and unrealistic goals that I would never be able to attain

unless I were in a physically and mentally unhealthy state. It was like my new hobby, I mean, something you spend so much time with must become a part of your daily routine, right? Going days with my stomach groaning, and suffering for an hour on the Stairmaster with the excuse of “I like to move my body when I’m bored,” all just to be left lost in the shell of a body that could never chase the feeling of satisfaction.

The day that I was alone in my student house, laying on my bed in the basement of a home where I felt desperately isolated and misplaced, scrolling through my phone, a shift occurred where I realized that I had been fighting against what I had wanted for myself this entire time.

Getting my shit together led me to become the version I am today, a strong, healthy, and driven individual. Taking it upon myself to prove that I could overcome my struggles, I competed at a bodybuilding show, winning my class, and began to prepare to battle towards Nationals in the hopes of winning my pro card next summer. I have gone to lengths to become a better and healthier version of myself; I no longer am the shell of a human that I once was. However, as I move forward, society does not. Why do I still receive such an immense amount of backlash? Small comments from grandparents or family members remind me almost every day that under any circumstance, “don’t get any bigger,” or that I have to be weaker than a boy, otherwise, I will be seen as masculine. Comments flood my fitness account that inspire countless people, but to many, I “went too far,” and I “looked better before.” But if you are too weak, you are seen as looking like a little boy and pathetic. Women have to maintain a perfectly balanced lean and petite physique to be physically attractive and acceptable to the public eye. However, without looking anorexic being so gruesomely small, you must take the time to build muscle to fill out the gaping areas that make you “feminine” and “sexy.” But when you are no longer stage lean and are in your off-season, you have “fallen off” because you are no longer unhealthily lean. Every single emotion and perspective of these back-and-forth arguments creates a whirlwind in my mind, that lingers like a fine strand of hair that

is left to simply there just to be an annoyance. I spent hours a day doing cardio, sweating away every ounce of energy I had left in me, just to get right back up and push weights in the gym, drive home, and eat the minuscule amount of food I was allowed to have just to diet down to the unhealthiest and smallest version of myself, I received the most praise I have ever had in my entire fitness journey. “You look like my dream physique,” “How do I get to look like you,” and “You are my inspiration,” were comments I heard on the daily, and even though I knew they had a positive intention, they truly demonstrated the corrupt idealization we have on what is deemed as “desirable.” A body with no energy, cognitive function, hormonal regulation, or productive capabilities is what is sought after. It is motivating to hear these comments, but honestly, it is quite sad.

Being post-show, I have to face the great fear of reversing back to a healthy body, which is an experience many are overwhelmingly afraid of. Knowing I had to put this physique that I worked towards for six gruelling months behind and accept that I needed to put on more muscle and body weight was terrifying. Slowly, as I grew, the praise I received started to diminish and change. I no longer would hear comments on how small my waist was, or how lean I was. I accepted this process for the reality that it was and knew that my value only came from my opinion and judgement of myself.

I now have a happy relationship with myself, highly ambitious goals, and more intention for life, I have my energy back, a smile on my face, a full stomach, and a rested body. I am strong and healthy, and I could not be any happier for the future that is yet to come for my bodybuilding journey. So no, fitness has not negatively consumed my entire life; it has given me a passion and meaning for life and constructed me to become a mature and meaningful person full of life. So no, lifting weights does not make you masculine—I have never felt more feminine and curvy in my life—and living a strong life over a petite and struggling

routine is more than worth it. And yes, I can eat that. I can probably eat more than you.

Adam, Eve, and the Apple (Product) of Doom

KIRA CHRISTIE

SLENDER RAYS of frost-coated sunlight slice down through the snarl of branches overhead, falling like broken glass onto the four boys trudging along the forest's trail. Their school uniforms in disarray, wrinkled ties dangling precariously from popped collars, the boys walk. They talk. John, the smallest and loudest of the lot, caterwauls out lyrics to the newest song from Judas Priest. Gary and Peter do their best to ignore him. When that doesn't work, Gary knocks him on the back of the head and tells him to "Pipe the fuck down, will you? Jesus, I think my ears are bleeding." Brendan, the tallest and quietest of the lot, stares off into the trees around them. The world is quiet, save for the hyena-like cackling of their newly broken voices. Bare branches lean in closer to listen, brushing against the navy cotton of his blazer as they strain their leafless tips towards the boys. It is only them in this moment. In this forest. In this infinitesimally small corner of life they are the sun, and everything around them is drawn to their light.

My father described this scene to me over the phone last week, his voice dripping with nostalgia as he talked about the "group of weirdos

and misfits” who, in his words, virtually raised him. I listened, both knees tucked up under my chin in my dinged-up desk chair, as the phantasm of his voice echoed in the depths of my ear from all of 272 kilometres away in suburbia: Toronto. Isn’t it incredible, the distances bridged by telephone lines? Voices race from here to here to here, a web of words cutting black lines through clear skies like the jagged scribbles of a toddler across pristinely painted walls. It’s miraculous, and yet—a sour chord churns in my stomach. Black lines press down like barbed wire. Confining. Restricting. Choking the life, the light, out of conversations.

The typical morning of a university student looks something like this: wake up, roll over, turn off that goddamn alarm you set last night when you were feeling optimistic about the next day’s productivity levels, and pop open your phone for a quick scroll through the old Instagram that inevitably turns into an hour of mindless swiping. Left, right, up, down, like—shit, didn’t mean to like that—political hot takes, what’s Timothée Chalamet up to? Oh my god, have Olivia and Louis made it official? And then, of course, there’s all the messages you missed from your more nocturnal friends to reply to; that’s another good half hour of screentime right there. Still—this is only the prologue to the day’s device use. Most college students spend somewhere between eight and ten hours a day on their phones (Penglee). What, don’t believe me? The next time your hand creeps its way instinctively down to the pocket of your jeans, pop open your settings app and check where your average daily usage is sitting. Odds are, you’ll find a screentime report that’s about as diminutive as an ancient Roman war elephant.

“The biggest difference between my generation and yours,” my father explained during our call, “is that you’re turning primary experiences into secondary experiences.” My father and his band of teenage misfits, gallivanting through the forest as though nothing else in the world mattered but that moment and each other: that’s about as damn primary as it gets. They felt the world around them, felt truly connected

and present and alive in all the ways that the modern screenager fundamentally can never be.

A good friend and I bought concert tickets on a whim last month, fleeing our to-do lists and planners in favour of spending Friday night screaming our bloody lungs out in the nosebleed seats of Montreal's Centre Bell. Standing in the audience as the lights began to dim, an electric current of anticipation jolted through my body. Chin up, eyes alight, I glanced excitedly across the darkened sea of audience members before us—and froze. Here. There. Everywhere I looked: the backs of heads, decked out in the singer's trademark coquettish bows, illuminated by the light of a thousand iPhone cameras. As the singer burst up from beneath the stage and the crowd around me roared to life, I couldn't have felt more like crying. All these people who'd paid so much money to be there, who'd travelled so far—all of them had chosen to confine their experience of the moment to the mere sliver of it that fit into the frame of their two-by-four screens. No sight. No sound. Just shaky recordings in place of memories, later to be screened for "postability" and uploaded to Facebook or Instagram if they met social acceptance muster.

I guess the question behind it all is, should we have picked the apple? Was it worth it to trade character for convenience, to prioritize immediacy and access to infinite knowledge over having first-hand life experiences? When we line up outside the Apple Store to buy or upgrade our own personal forbidden fruit, are we making a deal with the devil? I don't know. I'm just a guppy, swimming across the Queen's campus pond in a school of other fish who have their headphones in, their scaly faces down. My own music blares in my ears, silencing the world around me as I walk to class. Silencing my discontent. Silencing my thoughts, my passions, everything that makes me who I am beyond a mere glowing name on a screen.

These days, we live in darkness. Our eyes desperately swallow up the weak light of a computer monitor because it's all we've got, because we're so starved of vivacity that even the ignis fatuus of the online world

will suffice. Because we know no better. Our lives have never emitted the same radiance as those of my father and his friends, sauntering oh-so-self-assuredly beneath treetops that lean in closer to hear their every word. In the broader scope of the universe, the light of the modern world is a dim flicker compared to the supernova that is those four teenage boys.

And they don't even know it.

The boys trudge deeper into the winter-bare brush, their footsteps echoing heavily against the frozen ground. John is still prattling on about god-knows-what, tripping over his oversized feet as he hurries to keep pace with Gary and Peter who, having given up on tuning him out, are instead making good use of their longer legs. Brendan watches them from behind, silent. He can't find the words for what he wants to say.

He doesn't need to say anything at all.

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We Set Our Camp at Dusk

CHARLIE COKE

WE SET our camp at dusk.

In spite of earlier delays, we had found ourselves a driver. He had carried us through the winding hills of eastern Ontario and delivered us deeply into the swamps that surrounded Kingston like a forested moat. By then, the rain was upon us, and beat down in great pellets. It would be another half hour before we set out from the cab, and by then our clothes were sodden. Heavy with precipitation, our backs were laden with the equipment of ten men rather than that of the four that remained of our company. At the head of our platoon was Liam, a soldier and hunter of some note from Victoria. His face was that of some lesser Welsh make, with soft eyes and a thin nose that would have made him a treasured novelty in an Athenian army camp. From his cheeks sprouted thick sideburns like tangled wire.

We were to make for a lake some five kilometres from the road, through uncut brush and slick stone. Altan and Edward were without rain clothes, and the night chased us like a scorned lover. Within a hundred yards it cornered us, and despite Liam's protests, it was decided in near unanimity that camp be set upon a rock outcropping tented by a thick canopy.

In the act of raising our tent I sustained an injury to my hand, and without proper access to medical supplies, and more than an hour from any aid, I was forced to will myself through the pain. We stripped to our undergarments and flung ourselves into the shelter.

We spread what sparse equipment we had among us: a sleeping bag to me, a glow stick to Altan, a soft mat to Liam, who was assailed through the night by a rock positioned at the small of his back. We ate our meagre rations of granola and chocolate, and settled in for what would be a very long, very cold night.

At dawn, Altan and Liam separated from the group and made the trek to the lake with a doomed confidence that only young men can truly possess. While they scouted the way it was Edward and I who were assigned to the fire. Edward was strong, and wise with the ways of the woods. Armed with both an early-1800s survival guide and a hatchet fashioned from flint, he set about separating branches from the surrounding trees.

The act of fire-building was laboured. The rain had dampened the detritus of our encampment, and the long summer had seen most of the available firewood harvested by previous caravans. Two hours of effort produced little more than smoke. By then the sun was at its zenith, and Liam and Altan returned from their journey. The wet foliage of the uncleared path had left them waterlogged from the waist down. As we roasted sausages over our sputtering campfire they described to us the exact magnitude of our arrogance (Dunning). The lake was nearly an hour's hike from where we had set camp. If we set off, overburdened as we were, it would be long dark by the time we arrived. Without access to the lake, however, we were deprived of any supply of freshwater save what inadequate stores we had brought with us—namely two flasks, both of which were already depleted.

At Liam's insistence, we turned to our supply of beer, from which darker impulses prevailed. There are few sights in this world so frightening as the madness of men in the clutches of the drink. Within an

hour of our first drinks, Edward and Altan had cut holes in our blankets and wore them like ponchos, imitating some pagan ritual beyond my understanding. They raved of well-endowed women, and foreigners, and danced with axes about the encampment. In her *Introduction to Anthropology*, Jennifer Hasty says that it was the tradition of many indigenous cultures to expel young men to the wilderness for the dangers their youth posed to their communities. I bore witness to living proof of it that night, for in that moment we were young, and stupid, and brave, and alive.

Then came the cold.

Like a festering sickness it crept into our camp. The air turned cool, then crisp, then frigid. Having expected early-autumn weather, we clustered around our fire, shivering in our short sleeves and jeans. The flames turned to embers, the embers to coals, and within an hour we were cloaked in darkness. There was fear, for where there is dark and cold there is death, and all men fear death. Weak and uncoordinated, the first signs of oncoming hypothermia (“Hypothermia”), we trudged back to our tent. Liam was again at the head, his rifle pointed into the oldest and most hateful enemy: the night.

Sleep was a distant friend, and with each hour that passed we would wake gasping and shivering. Confusion wracked our minds, our skin paled. We bled warmth through our soaking clothes, and thirst clawed at our throats like a caged tiger. We arranged ourselves into a trembling heap so that we might pool our warmth.

It was Edward, bravest of all the men I’ve known, who stirred at first light to rekindle our bonfire. We sated our hunger on blackened bacon and hard bread, hoping with flagging morale that the food might abate the effects of our exposure.

My hand still in ruins, our egos tarnished, we collected our things and made the hike back to the roadside. As we waited, the cumulative strains of the past two days wore heavily on us. Within the hour our cab arrived. Our driver, Patrick, was simple, and reeked of alcohol, but we

greeted him like the mercy of god. The four shades of what once were men ambled our way from the treeline to the automobile and packed ourselves shoulder to shoulder in the backseat. Our expedition was a crippling success.

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Come One, Come All!

REESE COLLINS

IT'S BEST to start drinking early in the day for maximum chaos. I might have been the only student in Kingston not drinking for FOCO. I had a paper due at midnight, which kept me anxious and in the right state of mind. It was ten in the morning, and I stepped onto the festive streets with sober hesitation. A banner hung prominently from a student house, joking about a celebrity who had suddenly died the week before. Stopping in front of the waving white sheet, I took a picture to show my friend. I calculated my route to my friend's house by these signs: *Turn left at the banner smeared with blood, blaming Western for the death of Harambe, keep straight, past the sheet praising Queen's girls for their sexual skills.* An older couple strolled through the streets on their morning walk. When they passed me, I kept my head down and eyes averted, as if my Queen's merch were a scarlet letter.

Our group bounded out of the house with the intention of finding a street to loiter on. My roommate Alex and I nipped at the heels of the charging drunks, trying to keep up with their determination, which rivalled the bulls of Pamplona. There, a few blocks away, the street party called like the red cape urging them forward.

Alex leaned most of her weight on me. “I think we should slow down. I’m not feeling well.”

We made it half a block before Alex couldn’t walk on her own, stopping to rest on someone’s front steps. My other roommate, Francesca, tried to snap her back to consciousness as students stopped and stared—not out of concern, but with a hinting suspicion the show was just about to start. The spectators gathered around with drinks in their hands and malice neatly tucked behind their feigned concern. I watched their eyes, glossed over from liquor, take cruel satisfaction as I called 911. I felt like I’d been plunged into the fishbowl of entertainment where the unfed sharks circled, searching with bared teeth for the innocent minnows. How would it be fun if there wasn’t any bloodshed? I’d never felt so hopeless calling for help. The paramedics would come—I knew they would—but in my eyes, humanity couldn’t be rescued. One day, these young adults would go on to build bridges, companies, and families, yet these years on campus would never teach them compassion.

The worse Alex got the more people joined us in front of the house. Every few minutes there was a new group. Every few minutes Alex got worse.

“Is she dead?” a guy stopped to ask.

Another group passed by. Francesca positioned Alex on her side as she threw up again.

“I heard there was a dead girl out front!” one of them said.

Alex was still unconscious, still throwing up, still being gawked at like a car crash on the shoulder of the road when a group of boys crowded around us, pointing, whispering, picking us apart like vultures consuming the dead. The joking turned to cruelty as the drunken boys laughed like hyenas circling their prey. There, I discovered the celebration of school spirit was a convincing mirage. Beneath the academia, there is a lurking barbarism, waiting to be set upon the undeserving masses. I wanted to brandish my water bottle like a sword,

armoured in my cropped merch, and scream, “Are you not entertained?” until I lost my voice.

In the radius of Queen’s campus, there are three hospitals located within a few kilometres. And yet, there were no red and blue lights or blaring siren of arrival. Aren’t ambulances known for their speedy rescues? Even when the ambulance arrived twenty minutes later, they couldn’t get her onto the gurney.

The male paramedic planted Alex’s feet on the ground as she sat on the step. “Get up. Now.”

“She’s unconscious,” I tried to explain. “She can’t stand up at all.”

He tapped her cheek. “Get up. Get up. Alex. Up. Now. We’re not doing this part for you. Stand up.”

When she didn’t respond, he grabbed her chest and pinched her hard.

“Ow! That really hurt,” Alex cried.

“It’s supposed to,” he said. “Get up.”

The paramedics positioned her like a ragdoll, tossing her this way and that until her shins were scraped raw from the friction of the cement stairs. Eventually, they dropped her onto the gurney like a slab of meat.

Growing up, I was told 911 was the saving grace in any crisis. But watching this process, it seemed as if our healthcare system operated like a conveyer belt at a conveyer belt, taping people together like boxes and shipping them off. The outside could be broken and bent as long as there was no damage inside.

I rode in the back of the ambulance with the female paramedic, staring at the slow tick of the clock hung above the doors. For the first time all day, it was silent.

She grabbed Alex’s finger and clipped something on. “This hooks up to the electrocardiogram. We call it an ECG. It just records her vitals so we can monitor things like her heartrate on the screen.”

Although I couldn’t see his face, the male paramedic’s disapproval emanated from the front seat. My cheeks heated with the red hue of shame.

“If she wasn’t unconscious, I would have walked her home,” I said.
“I know it’s not really an emergency.”

“It’s always good to call,” she said.

It didn’t feel good.

Upon arriving, they parked the gurney next to a group of paramedics as we waited for a bed.

“We’ve already gotten a few calls today,” another paramedic said, shaking his head with a smile. “It’s crazy. When I was younger, we’d sleep it off on the bathroom floor next to the toilet. There was no monitoring or ambulances.”

I untucked my shirt and took off my sunglasses, wishing I’d never asked for their help. Alex wouldn’t remember the disapproval of the people who were supposed to help, but I would never forget the shame.

“A bed has opened up for you,” a passing nurse informed us.

The male paramedic flashed the woman a smile and asked her about her upcoming Hallowe’en plans. He was in no rush as he asked her about her costume. Down the hall, one of the many beds cramped into the hallway sat empty.

The thirty-minute walk home from Kingston General Hospital was silent except for the drunk guys blaring rap from their speakers. My paper was due in seven hours. I wrote it in bed, in the dark, free of beer cans, stumbling drunks, and hospital equipment. Before I fell asleep, I scrolled through the few photos I’d taken earlier. I stared at the photo of the banner mocking the dead celebrity. My friend had cried when he died. I deleted the photo and wondered if it would have been funnier if I were drunk, or if cruelty was not something to be cultivated, but uncovered.

Serendipity

SADIE DE ARRUDA

THE WORD *serendipity* has always held a special place in my heart. I'm drawn to its cosmic optimism. *Serendipity* is not the same as *fate*, and as someone who does not believe that we live a fated existence, I cling to that distinction. I believe that we live a life where happy accidents happen, and when they do, we must appreciate what we have been given.

The fact that the word exists is a kind of a happy accident. In 1754, while writing a letter recounting a happy accident from his day, Horace Walpole brought life to the word serendipity. Walpole's invention came from the story "The Three Princes of Serendip," in which three brothers are repeatedly faced with good luck in the oddest of situations ("Serendipity"). Of course, Walpole is a famous writer remembered for his novel *The Castle of Otranto* ("Horace"), so he is not a stranger to history. Even so, isn't it miraculous that a word invented in a letter would go on to become so well known?

Despite its miraculous origins, serendipity's personal importance can be traced back to my parents. They had both grown up in Kingston and even went to the same high school for a year, but it wasn't until their twenties that their paths crossed. They met in the early '90s, so early they

no longer remember if it was '91 or '92. Their story starts normally: they were both attending a wedding, my mother as a bridesmaid and my father as the filmographer. They spend hours dancing and chatting, and by the end of the night, they agree to go on a date.

Their first date was at the Keg. Two kids sitting in the crowded restaurant, laughing and learning about each other. My mother remembers that my father wore "a white shirt and shorts, and he brought a red rose." My father remembers "Everyone coming up to her to say hi, in the restaurant that I worked at!" They talk in between constant interruptions from childhood friends and coworkers. This is dating in a small town. At the end of the night, my father walks my mother home, but she doesn't call him back about a second date. Thankfully, this is not the end of their story.

After that, they go their separate ways. My father moves to Vancouver for work and my mother starts dating some other man.

Three years after their first date my mother and her boyfriend go to Vancouver to visit friends and they end up at my father's house party. If this were a Hollywood romance, they would lock eyes across the room and spend the night reconnecting, but this is not a Hollywood romance. They chat and catch up, but my mother still goes home to Kingston, and my father doesn't chase her.

Over the next four years, they didn't hear from each other. My mom married that boyfriend from the party, and after moving to Toronto, my dad got married, too. Neither marriage lasted long. By 2000 they were both divorced.

One spring afternoon my father called an old friend to tell him the news and his new address. While talking, his friend tells my father that my mother has also gone through a divorce. He gives my father her number and says she would be a great person to talk to. I often wonder if this man knew what he was doing, or if this was just one of those serendipitous moments.

Thankfully my mother returned his call this time. They like to say they spent the next year “courting,” as they would spend their weekends travelling to see each other. One night in November 2001 they went to a theatre in downtown Toronto. After seeing a trailer they decided to see the new John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale film called *Serendipity*. It’s hard to imagine a more perfect film for a couple reuniting after ten years to see together on one of their first dates. I imagine them sitting in the dark theatre, watching an hour and thirty-one minutes of a Hollywood version of their love story (“*Serendipity*”). That said, I’m still partial to my parents’ story.

Despite this being an almost perfect tale of love and reunion, they never talk about that date. That is until years later, when a global pandemic strikes and they’re stuck in their home telling their children every story they’ve ever lived.

In the five years following that movie, my parents started their lives together. They got engaged, bought a house, and welcomed two daughters only nineteen months apart. And after all that, they finally got married. In August 2008, in the backyard of their home, their daughters would walk her down the aisle to Etta James’ “At Last.” At the time I did not know that most children don’t attend their parents’ wedding, let alone walk their mother down the aisle. How serendipitously wonderful is it that I could be the exception to that rule!

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Tunafish

CHIARA DI LORENZO-GRAHAM

A TUNAFISH once told me I would live a happy life. A seemingly angry yellowfin tuna, to be exact. A flashy, glittering beast who, unbeknownst to me, awaited our chilly meeting near the sandy bottom of a clear ocean.

It was the late spring of 2024, and I was in the midst of a tropical getaway with two of my greatest friends. The sun was hot as we drove, radio on, to the beach. I was in the front seat, iPhone in hand, and acted as the designated navigator. Victoria, “Vic,” sat in the back. Anastasia was our captain. She rolled the car into our parking spot and we grabbed our mesh beach bags, filled to the brim only with essentials: sparkling wine and snorkelling gear.

The sand was hellishly hot; it turned our feet a bright red as we ran quickly through it. We braved the blaze until we arrived at our camp site, a spot of Anastasia’s choosing where rock and sand meet the sea. We dip our bodies into the ocean and strap on our gear, one after the other, until we take off as three little mermaids.

I often pray to God while I’m in the ocean. There is no place better to wish and worship. It’s where we were created. I came from it, and so did you. All life once crawled on hands and their knees away from it in

search of oxygen. A church is also a nice place to pray, often filled with intricate sculptures and art, where you can look up and see the face of Jesus. But—

The ocean is the original temple. While I'm in it, I lay in the soft hand of God and pester him with my endless vows and dreams. In the years before this trip, I often agitated him with my constant pondering of “why?”

“Why are all these bad things happening to me?” I would ask him.

“Why must I go through these things?”

Even during the darkest nights there would be no answer, and soon these questions became sinister sea monsters with too-large tentacles. When the silence continued, I prayed instead for a response. I searched and prayed endlessly for a sign that he was listening, that he was real. Though even when I pretended to shift my prayers to that query, I still couldn't let go of the question that had wrapped its tentacle around me—

“Why?”

It vexed me more than anything. It encompassed everything I felt.

Our gang of three mermaids kept our swimming up, even as the current evolved into more than a soft push. We took the westward path, Anastasia our fearless leader, and moved closer towards the reef. Vic had the extremely wise idea to return to the beach and chill, whereas Anastasia and I, slightly drunk on saltwater, continued our mission. Our efforts paid off when a flash of sea-green appeared—a wild turtle that led us closer and closer to the reef, where the sandy bottom lay just a few metres below. It politely swam off as we were greeted by a stingray, who welcomed us into its home. We respectfully followed, desperate to keep up. Entranced by these encounters, it took a while for us to pop our heads up and realize we had drifted much farther from shore, now *behind* the roped-off reef. The bottom was now suddenly many, many metres below. The current became a forceful shove, working against us as we scaled the perimeter of the reef, now desperate for shore. Soon, we reached the east side and began a straight swim towards land. The clear water was a

small mercy, so unlike the murky Canadian lakes I was accustomed to. Our bodies showed their exhaustion—our limbs like metal anchors, desperate to plunge to the bottom. I shoved my face into the water to gauge our depth. What alarmed me wasn't how much farther we had to paddle, but what swam near the bottom. There—a giant tunafish and its companions swam in perfect formation. Exhaustion ignited my fear, and I began kicking around like a madwoman. The largest of the group, alerted by my frantic movements, fixed its ugly eye on me. We were locked in our gaze, both seemingly unsure of what the other was doing. Then, as if coming to a decision, it pursued me at full speed. Its companions, slightly smaller and uglier, followed suit. I got Anastasia's attention, and to her credit, she tried valiantly to pull us both towards shore, as though sheer effort could make us go faster. The speed of our swim burned my lungs as though they were grazed by hot coals.

The fear of my toes being nipped off by sharp teeth had me suddenly entranced in a dreamscape land of my own creation.

Here—the tunafish faces me.

Here—we are alone, and he speaks perfect English.

“Why were you playing in the water?” he asks.

“I was scared.”

He looked puzzled. “Why were you scared? I'm just a fish.”

“Because I thought you would bite me.”

“I can't bite something tougher than me,” he replies. “But I can try to scare it. I can eat smaller fish, but I can't eat the bigger beast.”

We share a hearty laugh, and I am perplexed by my earlier fear of him.

“If you are not debilitated by the things that seem sent to kill you, you will live a happy life,” he says.

And suddenly, I am back in God's palm. Suddenly the burning in my muscles is fading, the sweat dripping away my vows and questions. I emerged from my daze as Anastasia and I reached a standable depth.

And when we finally crawled out of the ocean, on our hands and knees, I watched all those prayers I once pleaded dance around my shoulders and then leave me. I loosened my grip on “Why?” and it too tumbled back into the ocean. Where it used to live in my heart, there were now answers tucked in their places. Answers and responses in the form of two beautiful friends.

One, who walked with me as we leaned our weight on each other’s shoulders, braving the hot sand. And the other, who waited for us up the shore, enjoying the sun.

That Stupid Little Voice

AUTUMN ESSEX-MCINTYRE

I REMEMBER the night before better than the actual day—watching video after video on Premiere “how-tos.” After all, it had been a good couple years since I’d done a proper run through. I was never an expert. I wasn’t as good as Meg. Sure, I knew the basics: how to put in audio, adjust volumes, fade in, fade out. But what if they asked how to make a key frame? Or about file types. God, I already felt like an idiot. How was I supposed to stand in front of this group of kids and give a presentation? I was a fraud. I was lying to these kids. I was lying to Tallon, who I had looked up to so many years, I was—

“Thank you so much for agreeing to come today,” Tallon smiled at me. “You’ve been a big help.”

Really? I had helped? That can’t be right.

I’ve always dealt with imposter syndrome. That fun little voice in the back of your head telling you that you’re undeserving or underqualified for whatever you’re doing. According to *Psychology Today*, around seventy percent of adults face those thoughts, so it’s pretty common—even if part of the problem is your brain telling you that you’re uniquely qualified.

Well, unqualified.

In an effort to feel useful in my gap year—and because my mom had been urging me to for the sake of my résumé—I volunteered in a high-school classroom. I had avoided it for a while, hoping to dodge those thoughts entirely (you can't feel underqualified if you never do anything, right?). But believe it or not, avoidance got me nowhere. So, to ease myself into it, I asked to volunteer in the same films class I had taken in my own high-school years. And not because film is my major. Actually that scared me more than anything, because it put more of an expectation on me to know what I was talking about (which I felt completely incapable of).

No, the main reason was that the teacher, Mr Tallon, was a wonderfully inviting individual. And, in my mind, I had already fooled him into thinking I was knowledgeable. In my time in his class I had high grades. I was even awarded two of the little mock-Oscars he gave out at the end-of-the-year film festival: Best Editing and Best Picture. There's another instance of imposter syndrome rearing its ugly little head. It wasn't "proved my ability," but it was "tricking him" into thinking I had it. Imposter syndrome, the lovely little thing it is, works on confirmation bias. It didn't matter that I had points of evidence towards the opposite; I would hyper-focus on any negative and use it as proof that any of the good was just a fluke.

But the problem here was an interesting paradox. I was drawn to his class because of his kindness and support—but scared for the same reason. As a student, I benchmarked him as the ideal teacher: something to aim for in my own career when I got there. He was a complete and wonderful contrast to his name (which always managed to make me think of an eagle claw), a master of a warm, welcoming environment. The class was always joking and discussing openly with him. He acted in student films any time they asked him (which was often: he was a good actor, too).

I thought he was infallible to a point that he genuinely intimidated me. Disappointing him wasn't just disappointing a kind teacher, it was

revealing a flaw to someone who somehow had none. It was almost impressive, the mental gymnastics I had to do to get to that point.

So, there I stood, nervous beyond belief, in exactly the spot I had wanted to be since middle school, intimidated by kindness (of all things), and ruining that carefully curated, warm environment like a bulgy-eyed, shaking chihuahua. I loved the idea of teaching, and helping my classmates with questions always made me fuzzy, but something about the assumed authority made it feel so different.

Every time I stepped into that room, I felt like I was cheating them. I didn't know nearly as much as they probably thought I did. There were plenty more qualified people in my classes. My friend Meg, for example, was a whiz in the editing room, effects and cuts that made the final works seem nothing if not professional. It was amazing watching her pieces. I had nothing of the same effect, I was sure.

It was why I was so nervous when Tallon had asked me to do a presentation of the "absolute basics" of Premiere. And why, when it was over, I was in utter disbelief when the class thanked me. I had just admitted to not knowing how to make a certain effect. When a student asked, I chuckled and mentioned that when there's something so specific, I'd find a tutorial online. I had openly admitted I wasn't an expert.

In my head, I didn't know everything about everything in the editing space, and that fact alone made me unfit to teach. But the thing was, they didn't expect (or even necessarily want) that. All they wanted was someone with a bit more experience: enough to help them through the minimal use they would need for their project. Imposter syndrome, though, has a nasty grip. That acknowledgement didn't fit the narrative I had in my head, so my brain opted to leave it out. The moment it was over, I was in my own head, berating myself for my lack of omniscience.

But the students still thanked me. They still asked me the next day how to import or why their audio wasn't playing. Nothing was wrong. They didn't look down on me.

They *thanked* me.

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Made by a Fae

EM FROLICK

FROM MY rainbow shorts with a stick for a belt to the purple hat covered in sequins, I was bold from head to toe, inside and out. As a kid, I was described as unique and weird. I know this because in both grade two and grade six we made what a kid in my class called “warm fuzzies,” where your name goes on a sheet of paper that’s passed around for your peers to write one word that describes you, or a couple complimentary sentences for you. Though, I stopped hearing these qualities eventually. This was at IRC, my small school of around 260 people in the heart of the Junction, Toronto. We had a “dress out loud” day, which was the embodiment of me. It was like pjama day or crazy hair day, except you wear creative and bright clothing. I’d stay up at night picking out the perfect outfit, too giddy to sleep. I always decided on fake press-on nails, sequined and rainbow clothing, add temporary tattoos, and bedazzle my face with Dollarama jewels. I remember everyone lining up at recess for me to bedazzle them. I won Most Enthusiastic and Involved for our school’s Earth Day event from DJ Trevor, an interactive entertainment performer, along with my best friend at the time. We went up on stage and won a special sweater from the company. The whole school cheered, and we put one of our arms in each

sleeve and the other around each other's waist, walking off stage. I spent recesses running around and laughing, making parodies of Taylor Swift songs, and playing soccer with my whole grade. I would laugh at everything so hard that I would snort. A couple times my best friend's mom complained to her that I was too much and my snorting was too loud in their house. It hurt, and I realized I wasn't invincible, though no one could say I wasn't a bubbly kid.

But now it's August 1, 2016, I'm eleven, and throwing up in the bathroom. I would become a statistic in the months and years to come: "9.4% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 5.8 million) had diagnosed anxiety in 2016-2019" ("Anxiety"). I felt reduced to a number. I'd woken up one day to be the subject of the fae and changeling folklore. I was swapped out in the night for an anxious and scared version of myself, and my childhood was over. I was stuck looking down on her, this new me who had a panic attack every day for months with any new change. She wouldn't eat from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. all week. She could not leave my house without my mum or be in a car with anyone who wasn't my mum or dad, and she cut off friends who were close but not close enough to the very small bubble of anxiety and despair. I begged my mum to homeschool me, and when she said no, I begged her to let me die. I knew I was no longer a kid.

Freezing cold but sweating, throwing up, going numb, dizzy, crying and screaming, I was detached from my surroundings: derealization. In our 2011 Honda Odyssey I would have panic attack after panic attack. After the nursery school closed, my mum didn't get another paid job because taking care of me for the next six years was more than enough. Scared and shaking, my mum and I would arrive at school.

"Let's go."

"No."

"Em, come on!"

"No!"

Then she would get out of the car and come around to the passenger side. I locked the doors so she couldn't open it to get me. She had the keys and unlocked the doors, but I had my finger ready on the lock button. This went on a couple times until she yelled and I got scared. She'd peel me off my seat and I would beg and cry. After that it was one mental-health professional after another. Felt like a dark celebration each time: three guidance counsellors, two different doctors, one psychiatrist, one hypnotherapist, one psychologist, one social worker, one therapist, and a partridge in a pear tree. My parents were fed up with my behaviour and took me to Yorktown walk-in clinic for a mental-health appointment. When the first psychologist since I was eight came and told my parents that they just had to force me to go places I refused to go to and leave me there, I was devastated. Upset, I refused to talk to her. She treated me like a child, making me point on a diagram where I felt sick and writing my worries in a birdhouse and sealing it shut.

Growing up at eleven was hard. I was young enough that no one treated me like an adult, but I knew I was no longer a kid. My once sparkly clothes were swapped for baggy ones, and my laugh was not heard often. No one thought I was unique. I hid myself.

I remember when my life had a glimmer of hope: fall of 2018. The changeling wasn't thriving as it had been. I met with a pediatrician who was very against medication. He made an exception due to how anxious and sick I made myself. He was a bit of a bully, swearing and always saying a couple inappropriate things. Our first interaction had been a sign he would be a little different than my other mental-health supports. I had been at the dentist the morning we met and there were Dora stickers for the patients, presumably the kids, but I was no chump. I had about four on my face and I had forgotten when I got to his office. Maybe my inner child was still somewhere in there.

“Emilie?”

“Yes, that's me.”

“What are you in for? Well, I can tell it’s not a self-esteem issue,” he said, pointing at my face.

I didn’t really mind him. He gave me one of the most common antidepressants, sertraline (Zoloft) that helped significantly with anxiety. In a couple months I started to feel like myself again. I don’t remember exactly when it came back, but my laugh started having a snorty charm to it again. It was as if on August 1st when I threw up I had expelled my serotonin and I just needed to get some back. I’m still on the highest dose of Zoloft, but I’ve been a lot closer to me for a while now.

Some even call me weird and unique.

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Struck Between Fear and Gratitude

PEYTON HICKS

MY NAÏVE, childlike perspective immediately changed through the life-altering moment I was struck by lightning. The air appears dense and thick, as though it were holding its breath. A single clap of thunder splits the sky. It's so loud, so sudden, that it feels like it comes from inside me. My eyes burn, the flash of light blinding. A shock of raw electricity jolts through me, causing my body to convulse. I feel as though the ground has seized me and drawn me into its depths.

I can't move. I can't think. My limbs are worthless as they begin shaking, twitching, foreign to my body. I feel weightless, as though I'm caught in an everlasting moment. My mind screams to react, to do something, but I am paralyzed, frozen in time, unable to escape the chaos consuming me. The ground then rushes up, hitting me with such force that it knocks the wind out of my lungs.

There I lie, motionless. Around me, everything spins and blurs. Uncontrollably shaking, my body feels like it belongs to someone else and is miles away. Suffocating, cold, heavy, panic sets in. My heart thuds. My mind is like shards of glass, shattered and fractured.

I suddenly feel an odd clarity. It pierces the mist of anguish and confusion. Something I cannot identify heightens my senses, a whisper

that warns me I've crossed some invisible line and can never go back. The world feels different now, even if the storm is still raging all around me. The air feels more authentic and heavier. The sky has changed from simply being the sky to something much more powerful. I understand that I can no longer take life for granted the way I used to. I lost the innocence I once possessed.

With the earth beneath me still unstable, I force myself to my feet. I breathe in short, quick breaths. Though it's not the same, the world around me is gradually starting to take shape again. I don't comprehend it. However, everything suddenly has an impact to it, a gravity I was unaware of.

At first, fear seized me. Not only did the memory of the lightning strike haunt me, but so did the never-ending question: Why me? I had no answers, only confusion. I couldn't find serenity in the chaos of it all. It felt as if my existence had been thrown into the air and let to fall where it will, like a leaf caught in an unforeseen gust. The storm was uncontrollable, with no rhyme or reason, and that truth worried me. I wrestled with the idea that I had been marked by fate, and that my life was no longer mine to direct. For a while, I allowed that fear to govern me, retreating inside myself, attempting to protect any semblance of normalcy.

Visions of that moment, that moment when everything changed, occupied the years that followed. I repeatedly replayed back the moments before the strike in an attempt to find significance in the chaos. How could something so abrupt and strong have such a profound and personal impact on my life? But the more I considered it, the more I understood that I wasn't supposed to comprehend it completely. Something about it was unfathomable, something I couldn't understand. And I discovered significance in that uncertainty.

The lightning had made me realize how fleeting life really is, something I didn't know I needed to experience. I had a new perspective on the world in the space between gratitude and fear. Little, fleeting

events that I had previously disregarded suddenly had immense significance. The sound of laughter, the comfort of an embrace, and time, which had previously been taken for granted, became valuable.

I was altered by more than simply the physical trauma. It was the way it made me confront life's uncertainties. To understand that there are no guarantees, that everything can change at any time, and no one is protected from the unpredictability of the world by any amount of preparation or planning.

Yet instead of giving in to my fear, I discovered how to welcome the unknown. I discovered how to be grateful for what I already had, there in front of me. The lightning didn't take over my life. It gave me a gift: the opportunity to live awareness and gratitude.

Thus, the years went by. Although I can still clearly recall the strike, I am no longer under its influence. Rather, it acts as a reminder, a manual to live life to the fullest, to value the times I used to take for granted, and to appreciate the people I love and care about. For life is brittle and subject to sudden change, but there is beauty to be found in that vulnerability.

The suffering, the storm, the lightning, it all transpired. It is now woven into the very fabric of who I am. Its power, in a sense, comes from the unknown, and will always serve as a reminder to live life with both fear and gratitude.

Foreigners at Fieldstone Drive

MEGAN HOOK

ON THE 401 just past Scarborough, my family sits in a white minivan, sharing a bag of dark chocolate Flipz pretzels labelled in Hebrew. In the trunk, ten luggage tags read “TLV→YYZ.” Up front, my eyes hurt from the overwhelming amount of English signage on the roads.

When we stop at an ONRoute Tim’s somewhere between Cobourg and Belleville, I fumble through my order for a medium French Vanilla, distracted by the flashing text across the digital menu screens.

It’s nearing four o’clock when we reach Kingston. I recognize Highway 15, the barn, the Food Basics, the new Hampton Inn. Instinctively, I know we’ll turn left onto Rose Abbey Drive, left again onto McCallum Street. When we pull into the double-car driveway of 531 Fieldstone Drive, my grandmother’s familiar voice calls out, “Welcome home!” from the front porch.

It is June 30, 2022, a date I only remember because it marked the day I stopped existing in the international sphere and had to confront where that meant I belonged.

There's this phrase coined by Dr Ruth Hill Ulseem of Michigan State that floats around the international circles called a "Third-Culture Kid," abbreviated to "TCK" by people who think that sounds catchier (O'Bryan). It's received universal acceptance from counsellors and universal hatred from students since its conception, with good reason. TCK supposedly describes that feeling of being caught between three identities: that of your "home" country, your "host" country, and the part of you that will forever be a global citizen.

My peer group and I rolled our eyes at the psychological attempt to classify such a convoluted feeling. We didn't need counsellors to tell us we were special. We were hyper aware of our unique, temporary circumstances; the disconnect between our lives abroad and our former lives was starkly obvious. While the word was meant to bring comfort, it only emphasized how little we fit in anywhere.

From ages eleven to seventeen, I spent more time on planes than I think most people do in their lifetimes. When my dad received a military posting to Amman in March 2016, my parents told me and my little sister about it in a calm voice across the Sunday morning breakfast table, maple syrup still pooling on our plates as we realized we were leaving Canada behind. For the next six years, my dad worked as the Deputy Defence Attaché for the Canadian Embassy of Jordan until 2019, and then Israel from 2019 until 2022.

The Government of Canada classifies Jordan as a Level IV and Israel as Level III on the scale from I to V of difficult countries to live in (Appendix). This granted my parents an extensive set of benefits. For one, my sister and I attended ACS and WBAIS, both examples of those boujee international private schools you tend to see on TV. We had access to teachers with Masters and PhDs, state-of-the-art theatres, massive swimming pools, and fitness centres on campus.

We also received a Vacation Travel Allowance, a sum of money I sometimes feel guilty discussing. It gave my parents the freedom to book

those vacations that most people only dream of, and to expose us to the world you usually see in documentaries.

They didn't waste the opportunity.

I set foot in twenty countries across four continents in six years, my identity becoming this oddly beautiful mosaic of the languages I'd heard and places I'd seen. I swam in the crystal waters of the Maldives. I saw the Acropolis in Athens, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the Duomo in Florence. I visited the Cliffs of Dover in England, the Pyramids and Sphinx in Giza, Petra and Wadi Rum deep in the deserts of Jordan.

Without realizing it, I formed an identity centred on my experiences. I learned how to navigate through confusing foreign airports, how to live out of a suitcase during the long weekends in Europe. I loved how travel and global immersion defined me as a person; I often felt more at home while travelling than I did in my own bedroom.

And then, in March 2023, we sat down at yet another Sunday pancake breakfast to discuss our journey back to Kingston.

The first days at Fieldstone Drive were surprisingly easy. My phone connected to the Wi-Fi automatically, I could work my grandmother's ancient TV system, I knew where to get a glass for water. My family bought maple bacon and All-Dressed Ruffles to make up for six years without them.

And yet life didn't fall into place.

At Service Ontario, the man behind the counter sighed heavily at my paperwork and began listing off the documents necessary to receive a Health Card.

Age Of Majority Card—impossible. I turned fourteen in Jordan.

Driver's License—impossible. I turned sixteen in Israel.

Ontario Transcripts—impossible. I had never attended Ontario high school.

My dad argued on my behalf, and I received a Health Card soon after. But it was a stark reminder of how much of my life had nothing to do with Canada.

I still don't know how the pieces of me slot together.

Part of me is forever eleven, sitting below the massive escalators in Queen Alia Airport, waiting for my new life to begin. Part of me is forever seventeen, arriving in Toronto on an Air Canada flight with the taste of a day's worth of travel and Excel chewing gum in my mouth. When asked where I'm from, I blank, with nine addresses and three countries rushing through my head. I returned to Canada two years ago, but I can never return to the simplicity of Canada being home.

Some days I feel Canadian, walking with a Tim's coffee in the crisp fall mornings. Some days, I want to toast *Shana Tova* or *Ramadan Kareem* and am absolutely certain I belong elsewhere. Most of the time, I fall somewhere between, like when Buck Martinez narrates the Jays games at 7.07 p.m. EST, and I immediately know it's 2.07 a.m. in Herzliya.

Neither "TCK" nor "Canadian" capture my continued identity crisis, but I'm learning to be okay with it. I don't belong to the diplomatic sphere anymore. I still belong to the world, though.

That's good enough for me.

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All's Fair in Soap and War

WILLIAM HUTTMAN

UNTIL ABOUT five days ago, I had never once in my twenty-one years of living laid eyes upon a cockroach. This is now my reality, seeing as my departure from the dish pit did not motivate my roommates to pick up the slack. You see, my roommates have a terrible allergy to cleaning up after themselves, with the most egregious effects of this disorder being an ever-extending mountain of dirty, disgusting dishes. These dishes, caked in grease and ruinous in stench, build many kingdoms across my tiny kitchen. They settle in the first half of the sink, then in the second half, before taking the entire counter for themselves. It seems now they have enlisted a militia of cockroaches, paid handsomely in week-old macaroni, in order to repel any who would seek to clean the dirty dishes.

Their ploy has worked against my roommates, clearly, but enough is enough. Long ago I made a promise to myself that never again would I clean dishes that weren't my own, but my ability to use the kitchen facilities in the first place has been threatened by the insects and their porcelain overlords. To arms, then. I shall succeed where others have failed, where I have succeeded again and again—at the foot of the mountain, Dawn in hand. It is not a magical sword named Dawn, but it

very well could be! Dawn dish soap has received many accolades not only for its efficacy in maiming grease, but for rescuing ducks and other wildlife from oil spills and other toxic sludges (Shogren). It receives many an accolade from me as well, and I imagine it would from my roommates too, if not for their “dishorder.”

A shadow appears upon the ledge of the kitchen alcove just above the sink—the cat, small, lithe, observant. The anointing of the sponge in holy Dawn reflects in his feline eyes, absently, patiently. The fool wishes to bathe once the mountain is clear, always does. With his fur, I fear the cat’s fate would be no different from the waterfowl taken by the Deepwater Horizon—and that I’d have one more thing to clean afterwards. My demands that they stop looking to jump in fall upon deaf ears, as the cat patiently waits for his perfect opportunity. I will not have it. The settlement of crust-on-plate is raised high above the sink towards the wretch, a shield that would remain until clean. The sink is too full to accommodate a quenching bath, and so the heavy rain of the faucet must suffice. With the sponge as my blade, I carve a cleaner future out of the plate, the scream of charred crumbs echoing across the kitchen as they fall chunk by chunk.

The newly bone-white plate is set to rest upon a nearby dish rack, and a dirty one replaces it again before the cat considers leaping. Once more, the blade of Dawn cleaves through the dish, then the next, slowly manoeuvring from the peak of the mountain to the subterranean depths. The stench grows stronger as the sink’s status as clogged is revealed via the basin of murky water, which buries the remaining dishes. Catastrophe—a bath for the dishes was no longer viable, though the cat still thinks this the vacation destination of a lifetime, even in spite of the floating cockroach beach bums.

It is harrowing. My resolve drops, a grievous psychic wound. My roommates let it get this bad, either ignorant or inconsiderate of how other people in the house use the space. I’ve become complacent with their neglect, only doing my own dishes or opting to order out, at great

financial expense. I am a stranger in my own home, cursed to betray myself over and over again by cleaning up the messes they leave behind for me. There is no “Thank you,” there is no “Leave them be! I’ll do them later,” there is only the desolation of the sink, and the rot of the home. I can feel their gaze even now, watching through the walls as I clean, shit-eating grin strewn from one corner of their face to the other, knowing their housemaid has taken care of their waste.

Distracted as I am, the cat paws forward at the sink faucet to attempt a foothold, under the belief that we are still playing a game. In my dejected state, my shield is lowered and my blade is sheathed—the cat has his opportunity. His paws do not quite reach the sink, even as it continues to inch forward to the edge of the alcove. Then, the forelegs become bound to the chest as the cat slowly lowers his body into a horizontal position, creaking as if wounded, like a spring. The eyes narrow into singular slits. The ears tuck into air foils. The spring is released. Instinct takes over. Like the master swordsmen of Iaido, the blade of Dawn ejects from my sheath, knocking the cat away from his noxious destination, landing on the floor below in a terrible flail. Guilt demands I look at what I’ve done, and as my eyes trace down the soaked wooden cabinetry, I meet the observant gaze of the cat, peering through a layer of foam. With a single meow, he says that he has had enough of me and leaves for greener pastures, foam beard in tow.

I stare at the cat’s absence, falling out of the fantasy. I was a twenty-one-year-old playing sword and board with a sponge to distract himself from the real state of things. The imaginary pen at the mind’s desk lay to rest beside the manuscript, unable to romanticize further the frustration of the continual failures in my house. When the dishes had names and ruthless mercenary bands of cockroaches, it was easier to laugh off my roommates’ aversion to dishwashing. Here I was, though, standing in front of the pit, the sponge expelling its contents and fitting the form of a tightly bound fist. There was no psychic wound, no grand kingdom, only the truth. I was not captive to them, I was captive to myself. It was

easier to battle the dishes like Hercules than it was to confront my roommates face to face, to tell them how they make me feel. I remember how often I break promises to myself. Guilt demands I not upset the cohabitants of the home, that I take that fury and direct it towards the dishes, themselves a sink for my ire and dissatisfaction. The sponge finds its way onto the counter, and I wash my hands, slowly watching the sponge expand and return to its original shape again, hoping it never reforms.

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Fledgling Student

MADISON KUNZ

THE STAINED-GLASS ballerina was crying in the rain, but I wished she wouldn't. She watched as blood gushed down my fingers from where my index nail picked my skin as I waited in the alcove for Ms Michelle to meet me. So many times, I had stretched up here before her class; now it was her turn to come to me, and she had no idea. Her only clue would be the mourning stained-glass.

"I got out," Annalise explains as she perches herself atop a desk in the empty studio. "COVID-19 happened and that was that."

I nod my head solemnly as I take in the space we had. It is small, cluttered, and suitable only for a soloist. I should have considered the Queen's University club budget, but I hadn't expected to come anyway. First some girl stops you at the sidewalk sale like a lioness stalking a gazelle. Then she finds the weakness of your gait matched with another girl you met across the dorm hall the night before, and she thrusts a QR code at you like jaws snapping shut in one, meticulous motion.

"I continued after COVID," I offer. "I left a year after."

Annalise's eyes glint in knowing, and she hops off her pedestal to unwind her curly hair from its loose updo.

“I saw your video, and I wanted you instantly. A ballet girl is rare, you know.”

I nod again in the way I was trained to. An acknowledgement of hearing, but not contributing. A subordinate’s dance.

Ms Michelle closed the door without a word. I wasn’t perched the way the contemporary dancers favoured, but rigid and graceful all at once. Kind of like the *Black Swan* film: fragile and purposeful in a warped dream. Most people frown when I explain my love for that film, but the dichotomy of White and Black Swan was a lot like my role in the ballet world. Innocent because I was a child. Seductive because I had breasts and smirked like a woman.

Michelle’s lips quirked at my posture, and it was an effort not to roll my shoulders back at the ghost of her praise. This was the final test, and I knew it, but she did not.

I did not know either when I was younger. I did not know that because of my figure I was already typecast to play one kind of woman. I did not know that this abusive power dynamic between mentor and student, the one that had emerged between Michelle and I, would be identified and studied by Western mental health experts. In classical ballet, these abusive traditions thrive and are called “part of the deal” by the ones that refuse to leave (Dwarika 7).

“You make a perfect Esmerelda.”

My emerald tutu framed the doorway, pushing the people aside. It was the only benefit to wearing one. I muttered a “thank you” before racing to the bathroom sink. At this competition, the adjudicator’s voice had echoed over and over in my head. The memory of his hand ghosting over my ass as he smiled for the camera played over in my mind as I had Michelle undo my corset in the bathroom. My gold medal, my pride, transformed into a weight of shame by one small squeeze. “You make a perfect Esmerelda.” Yes, I thought, the perfect virginal outcast, upheld and destroyed by lusty hands. He was my Frollo, I supposed, but then again, so many of them were. So many men had done this same assault,

and Michelle had been there for all of them. Her eyes were all that protected me, and I couldn't rely on them anymore.

"You are not the thing I am leaving," I emphasized.

"I know I'm not." Her posture was terrible as she scanned the costume rack. "But I wouldn't blame you if it were true." Ms Michelle's eyes gleamed like the tears on the window, a most terrifying sight, and I realized it was no longer her place to chastise my choice. The moment I had told her it was over it ended like a curtain falling over a stage with a deep curtsy to lie me to rest. I had no idea that freedom could feel like a jail to a suddenly-free inmate.

"You could teach another girl Esmerelda if you wanted."

"No one will learn Esmerelda for a while."

I smiled despite myself. "That makes sense."

Now, stuffed in another alcove at Queen's, Annalise kicks her legs up on the desk, a protest of hers against the same world I was from. "Oh, yes. When I quit dance, you can imagine not knowing what to do with yourself."

I smile, remembering the autumn leaves that crunched under my feet on my way here. It was the same sound I had heard when I left Michelle's studio. For good. "So, when did you really invest back into dance?"

"Third year for Project Red." Annalise yawns. Her manners still appal me.

"That year? My first year? And you made choreography?"

"That was my first time choreographing for a group. That was my first time dancing properly in years. I went because I saw the show in second year, and I thought it was good, but I knew I could do something better in my own style."

I like the way she phrased that. Her own style.

I always envisioned that ballet was its own chess. We moved forwards and backwards one space at a time like pawns with cinched waists and taped breasts. I saw directors as Kings, teachers as Queens,

and competitors as Bishops, but when I joined Project Red, I became the player. The board flipped, and I found my own style.

“I need to go, Ms Michelle,” I stood ducking into a curtsy, but as I turned to leave, her cold fingers encircled my wrist and twirled me into a hug.

“It’s just Michelle now.”

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The Frozen Loss of Family Estrangement

JECCALLOYD

THE LAST time I saw my grandmother, I was nine. I recall the gleam of the airport floor, the grey and blue light filtering through the windows, her standing by the gate, waving. Her silhouette shrunk smaller with every step as we walked away, her face dissolving into the blur of strangers. I was getting ready to board my last flight from England, leaving behind all I knew, to start my new life in Canada.

For the first few years in Canada my grammy's absence didn't feel permanent. I knew she would call or visit or even send cards. But one day I noticed the silence was stretching. One evening, I questioned my dad and asked why we hadn't seen a grammy in such a long time.

His face tightened. "Grammy did something bad and has to learn that actions have consequences," he said

"Is it forgivable? Will we see her again?" I pressed.

His expression grew distant and he almost looked sad. "Unfortunately, this time it's not. I don't want you to contact her unless I say it's okay."

At this point, I could tell he didn't want to talk about it anymore and that it was for the best if I gave it time, but the question still lingered. As I grew older I eventually learned the full story. After my mother's

passing, my grandmother insisted on giving her a church funeral, a service my mother had explicitly stated she didn't want. The church carried painful memories for her and many that she wanted to leave behind. My grandmother, clinging to her own traditions, went ahead with the service and even spoke poorly of my father during it. That was the breaking point. For my father, honouring my mother's wishes was sacred. Having my grandma disregard them fractured the fragile bond we had left. He cut off contact to protect us.

And yet, despite knowing this, I still miss her.

The funny thing about estrangement is that the cause and the thing that tore us apart fades into the background over time. What remains is the ache of absence, a longing that feels like a dull throb. I don't think about the funeral anymore. Instead, I think about her cottage, the smell of fresh scones wafting from the kitchen, and the way she used to correct me when I added too much sugar to my tea. It all felt permanent then, something I could return to at any time. But estrangement is a "frozen loss," as Kylie Agllias describes it, a grief that never truly ends. She writes that it is a form of "continuous mourning," where you are left suspended in the "what-ifs" and haunted by all the things you will never get the chance to say. This resonates with me deeply. Memories of my grandmother sometimes feel like scenes from someone else's life, as though I'm watching them from a distance, unable to touch them. I can still hear her raspy British accent explaining how to make tea, her laughter during British sitcoms I didn't quite understand, and the custard creams she'd sneak into my packed lunch. Without her, those traditions lost their warmth, drinking tea alone feels hollow, watching a Britcom isn't the same without her chuckle beside me.

Recently, I spoke with someone who had experienced a similar estrangement. They described it as the loss of not just a person, but of an identity. They lost a part of themselves that was tied to family and culture. "It's like losing a piece of who you are," they said. Their words resonated with me. I didn't realize how much of my British identity was

intertwined with my grandmother until she was gone. The Sunday roasts, the late-night cups of tea, the quiet evenings watching British TV, these were more than just routines. They were a connection to my heritage, a bridge between who I was in England and who I am now in Canada. Without her, that bridge feels broken.

Psychologist Edward Casey calls this shift in memory and emotion “emotional recolouring.” Our recollections take on new shades as we change. For me, memories of my grandmother have become brighter and more vivid over time, like pieces of a puzzle I can’t fully assemble. Her absence has made those moments seem larger than life, imbued with both comfort and sorrow. It’s not knowing that’s the hardest. I wonder what she’s like now, whether she thinks of me, and if she regrets what happened. Estrangement feels like wearing a familiar coat that no longer fits. I try to slip it on, hoping to feel the same warmth it once brought, but it always falls short.

Writing about my experience has helped me understand how much her absence has shaped me. The loss has become a part of my identity, a source of both strength and pain. I belong to two places—England and Canada—yet I feel rooted in neither. Sociologist Anthony Giddens describes identity as a “reflexive project,” a lifelong process of constructing who we are. In my case, it’s a project built around a void, a space that may always remain incomplete. Understanding the concept of “frozen loss” has brought me some clarity. It’s helped me see that my struggle to let go is part of the process. There may never be a tidy resolution to this story, no moment of reconciliation or closure. Yet, there is hope that, one day, I will make peace with what I have lost and find a way to reconnect with both my heritage and myself.

For now, I hold onto the memories, letting them guide me as I navigate the complexities of family, culture, and identity. Maybe one day, I’ll step back into England, drink tea, and watch British sitcoms, not as a way to relive the past, but to reclaim it on my own terms.

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The Silent Friend

CHLOE MACE

I COULDN'T find him. Why couldn't I find him? He's not in my bag, not at the studio, and he wasn't on my bed once I got back home. Where is he! Tears start to fall down my face. "Mom, Dad," I shouted for them. "I can't find Treasure! You have to help me find him!" I exclaimed. Tearing my room apart, pillows and bedsheets thrown to the floor in a panicked rush, this dull feeling of ache washing over me, filling my entire body. I had lost him. Neither myself nor my Mom and Dad could find him. While the tears continue to fall, my parents start to help me put my room back together.

That night I tried to find some comfort in my other stuffed animals while my parents helped me get ready for bed, feeling guilty that they weren't giving me as much comfort that I needed in that moment. My Mom and Dad stayed by my side, knowing how devastated I was. I slowly fell asleep to my Dad singing "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" by Andy Williams. It was a song that he would sing to me when I was a baby to help me fall asleep, and I didn't know then but, like Treasure, I would hold them both dear to my heart.

After somehow surviving the next day, my parents brought me to my studio for my next ballet class. Opening my studio doors, I walked around the corner and there he was. Sitting on Mrs Angie's desk, there sat Treasure, my soft, sandy-brown cat, with his darker paws and ears, and a little white section on his face to show the pink-stitched mouth and nose. My treasure. Relief instantly filled not only my whole body but my parents' minds as well at seeing him again. Happy tears started to prickle in the corner of my eyes. I ran over, grabbed him off the desk, and hugged him tight.

"I had a feeling this was yours." I looked up and saw Mrs Angie appear from around the corner. "We found him, so I decided to put him on my desk waiting for someone to claim him as theirs."

While my parents continued that conversation all I could do in that moment was continue to hug Treasure close to my heart. That night when I left the studio, I made sure that Treasure came home with me.

I didn't realize it at the time, but that moment was a perfect reflection of how much Treasure meant to me.

Some people believe that "there's no 'normal' age for a child to move on from their comfort toy," whereas other parents are told that "most children grow out of comfort objects by the age of four" ("Strong"). I was one of those kids who didn't grow out of my comfort object. When sleepovers started becoming a thing in my life, I was one of the only few who would bring Treasure in my bag to calm my nerves. Or when show-and-tell was still a big deal, I brought in Treasure while other classmates brought in more "age-appropriate" items.

Even when my parents separated and I started going between two houses every week, Treasure was there, too. I would pack him in the car with me, tucked into the corner of my bag, as though he were a little security blanket that followed me wherever I went. The split was not easy, especially at first, but with Treasure in tow, I didn't feel as if I were going through it alone. He didn't need to talk, didn't need to ask questions. He was just there.

I've grown older, so the way I saw Treasure changed. I stopped holding him as much, stopped telling him secrets into his little triangle ears or telling him about my day. He's become more of a quiet companion, a silent observer of my life. His fur isn't as soft anymore. Instead, it has this more worn-out look, and the little patch of white on his face has been stained from years of hugs and travelling. His neck is no longer able to hold his head up, and if you look close enough you can see that his eyes have a little chip in them. But even when he began to show signs of wear, I can still see him for what he truly is—my friend, the first friend I ever had.

I don't remember the first time I met Treasure. I think, perhaps, that's because I didn't need to. He had always been there, as a constant presence in my life. When I was born, so was he. My Aunt Claire bought him for me as a baby gift and shipped him down from England. My cousin Phoebe gave him the name Treasure which looking at now was the perfect name for him, as that is exactly what he is to me.

There's something about comfort objects, something profound in how they anchor us to moments in time, to feelings of safety and love. Treasure has been my constant, the one thing I've never had to outgrow, even as I've become more independent, more "grown-up." When I'm upset now when I'm feeling lost or uncertain, I'll pull him out from behind my pillows, tuck him into bed beside me, and for a moment, I can remember what it felt like to be a child, with no bigger worries than making sure Treasure was by my side. I did not know this beforehand, but I learned from research that a "*teenagers* who need their comfort objects daily may have poorer mental health" ("Strong"). It does give a more scientific reason for my attachment to Treasure though I think even if I didn't have any "poor" mental health problems I'd still be attached to him.

He's more delicate now, sure. But to me, he will always be my favourite and with me forever. My first and final friend.

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What We Leave in the Fountain

SOFIA PETRACCA

LEGEND HAS it that if you throw one coin into the Trevi Fountain you will return to Rome, if you throw two you will fall in love with an attractive Italian, and if you throw three you will marry the person you meet there. Three exciting choices, yet somehow I felt nauseated. There I stood, pensive, jingling three euros in the palm of my hand, looking up at the grand white travertine masterpiece, so intricately carved and sculpted by the hands of famous Italian artists, proudly reaching up into the stary sky.

But all I saw in front of me was what felt like the decision of a lifetime.

My family had spent three weeks travelling Europe by plane, train, and ship, trying all types of food, visiting the world's most rich and historic sites, and meeting people from all over. At last, we made it to our final destination: Rome. We had one day left before our flight back to Toronto, so to enjoy the night we left our Airbnb and took a walk through the city to the Trevi Fountain. I was in awe. I could feel the magic rushing from the spouts and crashing into its basin. I could feel it radiating off each of the hundreds of people that crowded the square, excited to experience antiquity and make wishes of their own. I squeezed the coins

in my hand, forcing the cool, copper-coloured steel to match my body temperature while my dad carefully explained each of the wishes. And I took it very seriously.

Had I known at the time that there were tons of traditions that exist regarding the way people make wishes into the fountain, and that this one in particular came from some 1950s rom-com, would I have felt differently? Would I have been able to enjoy my night surrounded by happy families and couples, all indulging in the magic of Rome? Regardless, the memory that prevails was my decision paralysis.

According to Dr Sheena Iyengar, there are three mental tasks to making a decision: understanding what options are available, knowing what you want, and making trade-offs between available options. My three choices were very clear, but the problem was that I didn't know what I wanted. To choose to return to Rome would be the safe and easy option. It would be to offer up otherwise hopeless romance and embrace rationality. If I threw one coin, I could leave my love life in my own hands and let time take its course in my pursuit of true love. I liked the city enough to want to come back someday, but was it really worth the wish?

Falling in love with an attractive Italian seems like the ideal option, especially considering the man I started dating three weeks before I had left for this trip was in fact an attractive Italian. His name was Dante. We had been friends for a year and the tension between us had been building. Finally, he asked me to be his girlfriend. I thought it would be a day to celebrate, but to say that I was underwhelmed would be an understatement. Because this boy who I thought was perfect for me hadn't fought for me the way that I had hoped and hadn't treated me the way I deserved.

But maybe this wish is exactly what we needed to fall madly in love.

I considered my last option: marry the person you meet at the fountain. Surely this scenario wouldn't apply to me—I wasn't interested in meeting a stranger and randomly falling in love with them.

Until I saw him.

Standing on the other side of the square by the gelateria with the few friends he had been travelling with. It was Juan, who I had first met about a week and a half ago when he extended his hand to me and asked if I wanted to be his partner to learn the bachata in those tacky dance classes they offer on cruise ships. And he was here! We had to laugh off the number of times we would step on each other's toes, and when his Spanish accent was just a little too thick that I couldn't understand what he was saying. But eventually we got it down. He would push his hand into my waist, signalling for me to turn. I would spin back around, and my eyes would meet his for what felt like a second just too long, so I would look down at my feet. Our conversations continued over drinks in the lounge, and the next day we would do it all again.

Bellissima, he had called me, a compliment that I graciously accepted but could not reciprocate.

“Smile for the camera!” shouted my dad as my two sisters wrapped their arms around my waist. What a lovely moment to capture. How could a place so beautiful, so magical, and so filled with love, give me the most anxiety? I peered over the edge of the fountain looking at the hundreds, if not thousands, of coins that had been thrown with great expectations. Would I have felt any better if I had realized that these wishes now sat lifelessly, drowned in a foot of water, waiting to be picked out by one of the many workers employed to collect the coins each day? In that moment, I saw only the pixie dust I held in my hands. But I was frustrated that I had no flexibility in my choice. I couldn't make these so called “trade-offs” between options. It was one, or the other, or the other. Rome was the easy option. Dante was the option I was most scared to choose in case it destined us to be together. And Juan—my heart called to him, but I could not betray the man that I had promised myself to.

My dad called a ten-minute warning until we were to leave. It was time. I turned my back to the fountain and threw over my left shoulder just as myth instructed me. Leaping from my hand into the Roman

wonder standing behind me, my fate was sealed. How real it felt, but what a silly ritual it was. Because magic doesn't come from what we leave in the fountain. But there is most certainly magic in the culture and tradition, and in the art and architecture that brings people from around the world to one place to share in the joy of throwing away spare change. Enjoying simply in the prospect of sharing in the human experience, my worries would not have consumed me. And as for my wish, I have left many people wondering what the choice I made was, and while I empathize with curiosity, I can't spoil the magic!

But I will leave you with this.... It came true.

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I Feel It

MOOREA RATSCH

I DON'T remember the first time I felt envy. I know that I've felt envious of people my whole life, which is a scary thought, considering that when I was growing up, I was taught that envy was a nasty negative emotion and that I should never admit that I felt it.

But I feel it.

During the third year of my undergrad, my long-distance best friend Olivia called me again and again until I picked up.

"Moorea! You won't believe it!"

"I won't believe what?"

"He finally asked me!" she squealed.

"To be his girlfriend?"

"Yes!"

"Oh?"

I could feel a cold wash over my skin and my heart starting to squeeze. But at the same time I was genuinely happy for her. My body and mind were fighting against each other with how to feel. After all, her new boyfriend seemed to treat her right, and he made her happy. Which was a lot more than her previous boyfriend of six years did, and after months of hearing about her random talking stages that were healing her

broken heart before proceeding to break it again, I was glad to hear that she finally found someone.

“That’s so exciting! How did he ask you?”

I listened to her retell “the best moment of her life.” But I couldn’t help but feel hollow. She had someone who wanted her. She had gotten a new boyfriend a year after her breakup, and here I was three years after mine, and I was still alone. I mean, I didn’t even have a guy interested in me! I wanted to be happy for her, but I couldn’t. I was envious of her. I was sad about my lack of a dating life and felt so guilty that I could even feel that way about my best friend. The worst part was I couldn’t control it. Here, I was supposed to be metaphorically jumping and screaming with my best friend about her new man, but instead, I was comparing my life to hers and wallowing in my feelings. I struggled to control my envy, and I wanted to fix it.

A couple days after Olivia told me the good news, I asked her what she thought envy was. She believed that envy “is the feeling of resentment towards someone because you want what they have.”

This surprised me, as I don’t think I have ever experienced resentment towards someone when experiencing envy. I certainly feel that I want what they have, but I have never resented them for having the thing that I would like. I didn’t resent Olivia for having a new boyfriend because I was happy for her, and I didn’t want her boyfriend either, as I had never met him. I just wanted to have what she had for myself, but not the actual thing she had. But despite those facts, I noticed that she also felt another emotion when experiencing envy. She felt resentment. It made me think about how envy is not just a singular emotional experience. When she told me about her new boyfriend, I realized I felt sadness, guilt, and envy. I understood that I didn’t just feel envy in that moment, and when I thought back to other moments when I experienced it, I realized that envy is an emotion that never comes alone. It’s a mixed emotion, which makes it objectively harder to deal with and control.

Mainly because I don't think that I was ever taught how to deal with or control it properly.

So to help me understand why I feel envy and to get a better idea on how to control it, I decided to read a couple of life-advice books that bored me to death. But after reading them I found that they only lightly touched on the topic of envy. The authors would admit that they feel it, especially towards the people they were closest to in life, but they never provided any solutions for how to deal with it. So I decided to return to the basics of learning, a children's picture book. I only found one about how to deal with envy, and it was pirate themed. However, there was one piece of advice that really resonated with me, and it was to "look around without it and see if you already have some great things that you forgot to think about. Put down your spyglass so you can see what you do have, and not just things you wish you had." (Toner and Freeland) I found this advice was valuable for looking at my life in the bigger picture, and I could use it to help control or at least better understand my envy. So, I am going to put down my spyglass and stop looking for the things that are wrong in my life or the things that I am lacking. Instead I am going to become appreciative of the things I do have. I am grateful to have a friend like Olivia who comes running to me to share the big moments in her life, that I have a best friend who is willing to put in the effort to make our long-distance friendship work even though it's challenging at times, and I'm happy to be single, as it provides me with the chance to keep discovering who I am as a person without the influence of a relationship. Even though I enjoy being single, Olivia finding a new boyfriend gives me hope for the future that one day I'll be the one to call her to share the good news that I too found someone who loves me.

Just because I don't remember the first time I felt envy or wasn't taught how to understand it growing up doesn't mean that I can't learn to control it now. So even though it's advice from a children's book, I will take it and use it to understand my envy. I accept that I will never be

able to not feel envy—after all, it’s not something I can stop myself from feeling. Instead, I’ll learn to live with it.

I feel it, and that’s okay.

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Best Girl

LINDSAY ROBB

I MET my four-legged soulmate on a Saturday morning in February 2021. She was a small grey pony with a pink nose and a mane so short it was almost military. Standing on the cold concrete barn floor, I watched her pace around her stall and listened to all the young kids whisper about her. They thought her name was Oreo. Their instructor told them to stay on task, but I couldn't really blame them for being distracted because a new horse arriving at the barn was very exciting, especially when it was one as pretty as Orianna. I was quietly excited that I was chosen to be the first student to ride her in a lesson, and as I brushed her, I realized that her lack of trust in people was palpable. I was going to change that. During my weekly riding lessons, I helped her out of her shell while she taught me patience, gradually letting me in, piece by piece.

“Because it's raining today and she's nervous, we're just going to start by getting her relaxed,” my riding instructor said one wet Saturday morning. “This may sound silly, but I'm just going to ask you to breathe. She can tell if you're nervous, and if your breathing is calm, she'll pick up on that and match your emotions,” he said.

And so, I became hyperaware of my breath and the way my bones fit in the saddle. My limbs were almost limp, a signal to her that I was not holding on for dear life. Body language that said the words, “I trust you.” I breathed with the sound of the rain as it ricocheted off the tin roof. I breathed with the feel of Ori’s soft footsteps on the sand. She followed my lead and slowly relaxed her muscles and her mind. This was the first time I truly spoke to her without words and the first time she answered.

Things continued like that for a year, and I had bi-weekly riding lessons that were crucial in strengthening our bond. I made my dad drop me off early and pick me up late so I could spend more time at the barn with Ori. Eventually I realized that I wanted to play a bigger role in her care, so I begged him to look into leasing. I could tell my dad was apprehensive because he’d never seen this side of the horse world before. He was used to absentmindedly signing waivers to confirm he wouldn’t sue the barn if I fell, not a transactional contract for custody of a small grey pony with a pink nose named Ori. After days of research, my dad agreed to get his little girl a horse. We signed.

Ori was mine. Well, kind of. For the duration of my one-year lease, I was responsible for exercising her, caring for her, and half the vet bills. I could finally cut her mane, which had grown into a long, wild thing since I first met her that one February. I now had the freedom and power to give her the life and love she deserved. Even though it was just a signature on a dotted line, that lease marked the true beginning of our bond (Laflamme). It was a bit of a strange arrangement because Ori’s owner was getting her master’s degree out in Vancouver, and yet I was the one driving to the barn going four times a week to take care of Ori. But it worked. And so, the clock started counting down. Three hundred sixty-five. Three hundred sixty-four. Three hundred-sixty three.

During our short time together, I wanted my best girl to know that she was my world. On December 24th, 2022, I came to the barn in a Santa hat carrying a handful of apples and carrots that I cut up and put

on the floor of her stall as a Christmas present. In April 2023, I took Ori to the indoor arena and let her run. The spring fields couldn't decide if they were muddy or frozen, and she needed to stretch her legs. We ran side by side, and she shook her head with happiness. Flushed and full of adrenaline from the spring air, I laughed when her legs narrowly missed me in an excited buck. A few months later in June, she let me hug her face for the first time, even though she had never been a physically affectionate horse. We had just found out that one of the other horses had a tumour and would not recover. Ori knew that I needed her that day, and did everything she could to support me. She always took better care of me than I did of her.

In our last August together we stood in her field, and I scratched her. This was my absolute favourite thing to do with Ori because that's when her personality truly shone through. The grass was hot and dry, and the crickets chirped. I scratched her shoulders until she made a face that told me I found the right spot. When shoulder scratches were no longer good, she used her nose to point to her front leg. I moved to her front leg and was rewarded with a scratch on my head in return. In the wild, horses will scratch each other's backs as a sign of affection. This is called mutual grooming, which shows trust in the herd ("Mutual"). I almost cried the first time Ori scratched me, and not because she left bruises on my back. She didn't say it, but I could have sworn I heard the words "I love you." How far she'd come since that one cold February.

Except, as those months went on, the ticking clock in the back of my mind got louder and louder. Ori wasn't mine, and our time together had an end date. Her owner would soon fly back from Vancouver with her master's degree, and then it would be my turn to go off to school. There's just something so sickening about falling in love with an animal and knowing it's all going to end. Leasing a horse is an incredible way to bond with an animal, but it's so much more than a legal transaction (Laflamme). It's a vivid period of love, hurt, work, and trust.

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The Anti-Garbage Club

MAGGIE ROHRAUER

“IT’S NINE o’clock on a Saturday. The regular crowd shuffles in...” Music plays in my AirPods, semi-distracting me from completing my business assignment due tonight. My eyes struggle to stay open in the bright glare of my laptop screen, until I hear the rustling of what could only be a black garbage bag being pulled out of the kitchen garbage can. Billy Joel’s voice immediately drains to the background of my mind as my eyes close and I contemplate whether my roommates will believe me if I strike a Medusa-just-looked-at-me-and-I’m-frozen-now pose. But hearing the door creak open to Sofia’s room, and the proceeding clatter of our makeshift blue box being overturned to reveal the accumulated contents of our recycling that week, confirms that it is Thursday night, and we are about to begin the process of “properly” sorting, throwing, and disposing that the City of Kingston expects of us each week (“Apartment”). *Shit*, I think, *I wish it was nine o’clock on a Saturday*.

“Is it plastics or paper today?” I begrudgingly ask, as I put my AirPods away and emerge from my room.

“Plastics, I think,” Victoria responds in a tone of exasperation.

While we kneel around the makeshift blue bin to organize our trash into piles, like kids sorting through Hallowe'en candy, I hold back outbursting for the fourth time that month on the stupidity of organizing trash that is all going in the same place. Keelin says, *South Africa doesn't even have compost*. Chloe says, *in Burlington recycling is combined altogether*. But as I hobble over to the balcony with the big black garbage bag, an amateur Santa Claus struggling to carry his sack of goodies across the living room, I can't hold back my frustration: "You know garbage still ends up on the sidewalk regardless of what we do, and zig-zagging down the sidewalk to class multiple times a week is not getting any easier." I turn and watch as Sofia and Vic continue sorting through the garbage in a silent ritual worthy of respecting someone's God.

As I angle my body in preparation to hurl the garbage bag two storeys down, aiming it to land on the lawn in front of the building, a metre away from the road, Vic warns, "Don't hit that patch of ice."

I laugh, telling her, "I think at this point in the year, I've had enough practice not to make a stupid mistake like that."

Splat.

A shard of ice pierces the bag, spewing rotten contents all over the lawn. Frozen and disappointed in my attempt to make our lives easier for ourselves, I look to the sky and wonder if the universe is trying to teach us a lesson we keep failing to learn, or if Thursdays are simply bad luck for the residents of Nelson Street.

The sound of a balcony door sliding open below and Annalise's voice resonating up breaks me from my philosophical cycle: "Did I just see a garbage bag fall from the sky?" I picture myself sitting on the soft swallowing pillows of her couch and begin laughing at the image of a garbage bag falling past her living-room window. My disappointment in the now broken bag is Annalise's amusement, and she watches from her balcony below ours, as I re-bag the garbage I despise. But I know my frustration is short-lived. Annalise and her housemates will need to put their garbage out that night, too—that is, if her housemates awake to the

smell emanating from the mounds of month-to-year old trash stuffed beneath their beds.

I remember the first time I walked into Annalise's apartment, I had to resist the urge to gag and plug my nose. What felt like a thick layer of grime watered my eyes, masked my tastebuds, and breached my nostrils' capacity to handle scent. My feet stuck to the slabs of wood in the entryway, and I feared that Annalise could read behind my fake smile and controlled posture fighting the flight-or-fight response to run. I was abhorred by the sty in which my new friend lived, and perhaps even produced. Isn't it curious how one man's trash becomes *rehidden* as another man's treasure? Environmentalist professor Dr Hird's statement "Out of sight, out of mind" takes on new generational meaning here (qtd. in Wilkins).

After record time of racing around her domestic space, Annalise pushed me back out into the hallway (where I could breathe), whispering, "Charlotte doesn't take out the litter box for two weeks at a time, or clean her dishes, because she says there's no point in cleaning something that will be used again." My eyes widened in outrage and disgust, but internally I smiled at my new discovery: the missing member of our Anti-Garbage Club. The princess, the proactive, and the prepared could not put out the garbage without their promoter, and the nightmare domestic space she presented. Our club was founded on the detention of waste and our collective labour to its disposal, but I still wondered if our bond would grow beyond university into something we wouldn't want to dispose of as easily as cat litter or compost.

I sit on the balcony now, next to the bag of trash awaiting its turn to be collected and wonder at the in-between world in which it rests. Not yet prepared for its next life: venturing to the recycling or the dump. But also outgrown its capacity in our university-student-run home. I sit with the bag, and I think about how one day the responsibility will fall solely on me to carry the garbage to the curb, to laugh at my mishaps, to clean up broken glass or the litter of smelly cats. One day, we won't all be

standing on a balcony watching a bag of garbage explode as it hits the ground. One day, adulthood will sneak up on us and collect us away to a new place where the burden of responsibility will threaten to crush the resilience we worked together to create.

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Death-Proof and Desirable

KOLYA SALTER

ALL MY life, I've been a looker. Not in the “tall drink of water” way, although I wished that was the case. No, I am a *looker*, a watcher, an ogler. In childhood, I couldn't sense motivation or desire, distinguish interest from disgust, or discern passive aggression from genuine kindness. One day, some indiscriminate day I can never pinpoint, I experienced that serene self-actualization reserved for a child who realizes his place in a world outside of his own. I couldn't intuit the emotions of my compatriots, but perhaps, through consistent, careful observation, I could see it.

It was late May. The early evening sun had taken on its typical tanned leather glow; the tall, viridescent oaks that lined the path filtered light into a Kodak Gold portrait of Regal Heights. Striding up to Hugo's door, my mind was entrapped in Saige-land. The chase that was once a flame of infatuation had transitioned into a wildfire of panic and dread—on my father's request to “live for yourself a little,” I left for this impromptu movie night without a formal invitation.

Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* is ostensibly a car thriller. The antagonist (Stuntman Mike) stalks a group of conventionally attractive

women (Jungle Julia, “Butterfly” Arlene, Shanna) from bar to bar, forming an unlikely acquaintance with the group before murdering all three in a brutal car crash. Fast forward eight months and Stuntman Mike is back at it again, with another group of beautiful women (Kim, Zoe Bell, Abernathy), another ‘70 Chevy Nova, and murder on his mind. Only this time, Mike picked the wrong crew to fuck with. After a twenty-minute-long car jousting match, Stuntman Mike is cornered in a sullen wheat field and beaten to death by his objects of lust.

Beyond *Death Proof*’s surface (and Tarantino’s numerous intertextual nods to Old Hollywood films like *Vanishing Point* and *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*) lies a fascinating interrogation of power and desire through looking relationships. As his name suggests, Stuntman Mike is a stuntman—a former body double for Gary Clarke on *The Virginian*—who seems to lose all prospects of stuntman fame when he scarred his face in a “shaving accident.” Mike bounced around from small production to small production, limited to car stunts due to his marred visage. For most of the film, Stuntman Mike holds the power in his gaze. His vision is centred on those who reflect his former self, that drive of up-and-coming talent in the all-consuming world of Hollywood stardom hopefuls. However, these women also represent a foil to his character. They are young, beautiful, out of reach for a lowly stuntman. Mike’s irrelevance, professionally and sexually, becomes the engine of his Thanatoid drive.

A month and a day before I watched this film for the first time, I was lost in a forest. Prancing along on a psychedelic-fuelled hike with my closest companions, I told everyone I was taking a “vow of silence.” It was more than an abstention from speech; it was a vow to feel what I had, for so long, run away from feeling. Later, on the beach back in Grand Bend, I watched the water envelop my feet in the sand. For months, my romantic life had been a series of half measures, barricades I erected to protect what I thought was worth protecting. Those barricades hurt people I cared about. They hurt me by not hurting me

enough. I stared, in silence, at the ocean-like waves Lake Huron tended to produce in the early spring and vowed to myself again: I would not remain silent. I would put my whole heart and complete effort into whoever caught my fancy next.

While Mike epitomizes lustful anger, Julia personifies a paradoxical purity. She's a twenty-something, on the hunt for success in the business—music, modelling, DJing—whatever endeavour proves her worth. In this regard, she's an ingenue; Julia strives for a place in this world without deference to the by-products of her aspirations. Arlene and Shana receive the brunt of this outgrowth: "That wasn't a fight. That was Julia acting like a grumpy bitch and me calling her on it and indulging her at the same time." Shana and Arlene are more than aware of Julia's shortcomings. Still, they're friends, willing to look past her proclivity for confrontation. Both realize that behind the "grumpy bitch" persona that Julia attempts to costume herself in is another lover frustrated by the ambivalence of her apple.

"Hey, Saige." She turned away from the jukebox, a medley of confusion and angst upon her face. "I know this probably isn't the right time for this conversation, and I'm not sure exactly how to tell you how I feel, and—"

"I know"

"—I don't know what you'll get out of this. Or, frankly, me, either. But I need to tell you."

"Okay," she said, back turned, failing again to insert a crinkled-up five-dollar bill into the faulty machine. "What?"

"That wasn't cool. I understand you have feelings, too, and I'm trying to understand and accept that, but you don't do that to a friend. You don't do that to your friend."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"You could have told me."

"I know."

“It’s not that hard, you know. To let someone know that shit isn’t working.”

“I know; I’m not trying to blow you off. This machine is so fucking annoying.”

I gave her some extra cash—cash I got from the bar, an excuse.

“Thanks, honey,” her eyes still transfixed on the screen.

“I’m honey to you now?”

“I’ll see you soon. We’ll talk soon. I promise.”

“No, we won’t. Don’t bullshit me.” For the first time that night, her eyes caught mine. Eyes that were once filled with care and lust were now empty.

On her birthday, she invited me to her new apartment. It’s a two-bedroom spot on the upper floor of a *depanneur* just northeast of the McGill ghetto. The place is impressively furnished: Moroccan rugs, leather armchairs reminiscent of Castiglioni, framed posters of Hendrix and the Grateful Dead. Her bedroom has a balcony attached. I asked if I could sit outside. She said, “Knock yourself out.” I sat alone, smoking, while Saige and her new boyfriend costumed themselves for the forthcoming night out. I thought about biking home from Hugo’s. I took a nasty spill halfway through the expedition; there’s a scar on my right elbow to prove it. Turning that last corner on Howard Park Avenue, I took my hands off the bars. I was trying to let go, trying to prove to myself that I wasn’t the characters I just saw. That night, I put my hands back on the bar. I put my cigarette out in the ashtray next to the dozens of dead soldiers from days past. I took a Bixi back to my friend’s place, letting my hands dangle by my side the entire way.

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Richie Havens' Woodstock Set

THOMAS SECHIARI

IF I could travel back in time, I would return to the “Three Days of Peace and Music,” Woodstock ‘69. The age I live in is that of music streaming, instant communication, and efficient travel. Music can go viral and the masses form so easily nowadays, and people casually travel farther for the music they love. A friend of mine flew all the way to Paris just to see Taylor Swift last May. Music today is shared without coming face to face, whereas in the ‘60s sharing relied on the passed-on words of others. So, do not think for a second that what is necessary for the Coachella music festival to take place is anywhere near as significant as what led to the Woodstock music festival. Modern-day festivals such as Coachella host a multitude of different guests that generally have nothing more in common than their musical taste. Woodstock was similar, but all the attendees were connected in another way. Woodstock was one of the biggest assembles of hippie counterculture. Hosting over 400,000 people, it was a crowd that was completely composed of the younger, disillusioned population; though maybe affected differently, all these people felt that their voices were being ignored by authority. The music that was being performed at Woodstock was mostly protest music, the music of the people, the voice of the people, and at the time one of the

only voices that could not be silenced. There was a different need here. It was not only about the music, but it was also about showing up for the messages you believe in. The people who attended symbolized the backing of counterculture through the messages of music. With a set list of the '60s top artists and a crowd more revolutionary than any of the modern day, it was destined to be a magic moment.

Thousands drove in from far out, and many picked up their share of hitchhikers along the way. The highways leading into small Bethel, New York were gridlocked with traffic all heading to the same place. Masses left their stalled vehicles in stopped traffic and made the final leg of the journey on foot. Once they arrived, they were greeted with a multitude of surprises. Some good, some concerning. The ticket booths were nowhere to be found, meaning a free concert, but scarcity was true about everything else other than the number of people there and the good music to come. There were few bathrooms, food and water were not easy to come by, and about ten times more people than expected to be there. The crowd was filled with these idealistic hippies who wanted to extend the summer of peace and love, idealistic in the way that they tolerated the harsh and uncomfortable conditions of the festival. Due to the lack of organization and the unexpected turnout, facilities were scarce and food the same (Hollingsworth), but the audience maintained a sense of harmonious peace ("Woodstock").

Another surprise was that they were not greeted by the shiny black hair and intoxicating appearance of Joan Baez. Instead, sitting on the stage in a rust-coloured dashiki, sweat beading off his forehead, was Richie Havens. He was forced on stage early as the first performer of the festival. The organizers urged him as the four acts scheduled before him were trapped in the unforeseen traffic, from the unforeseen masses making their way to the small farm in Bethel. A black man performing in front of a sea of white was a still rare phenomenon of the '60s. Nonetheless, if this were to occur anywhere in 1969, the Woodstock stage is where it was going to be.

Richie and his band began to play through his prophetic and soulful songs while the disorganized organizers scrambled to finish building the stage around him (Walter). It was when he finished his original set list that he was told he would have to keep on performing until the next act could be flown over the traffic and into the festival via helicopter. Richie played every song he knew and gave a little piece of his soul in each song. However, only a few hours into the three-day festival, the field was already turning into a mud pit, and the August heat was busy boiling up impatience in the crowd (Hollingsworth). The deciding factor of chaos or unity, in that moment, was Richie himself.

When he ran out of songs, he began improvising. Years later he would tell reporters that in the videos of his performance, you can see him tuning and strumming his guitar and that he was just trying to figure out what else he could possibly play. He claimed he looked out across all the faces in the crowd and the word “freedom” came to mind (Walter). This festival was a form of liberation for everyone who was there.

He started scratching his strings with his eyes tightly crimped shut. His pace was erratic. His body started rocking back and forth to the percussive melody he was creating with his guitar. With the down strums of his guitar at a rhythm you could march to, he began his chant of “Freedom!” The quiver of his voice that tremored like a cry was just as powerful as the word “freedom” itself. The cries for freedom and the sheerness of his overworked guitar left the crowd in a catatonic state. They stared and sat still while absorbing the raw emotion Havens was giving out. His band hopped into the rhythmic wave one at a time. With an equally as erratic bongo rhythm and a bass line to force down every down strum of the guitar, Richie began chanting, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child!” This is where the song came together, the word “freedom” symbolizing a generation’s need to be heard, and the “Motherless child,” the one who lacks the love and care that everyone needs. The messages of the disillusioned counterculture are wrapped up in the simplicity of an improvised song.

By the last minute of his song, every person able to stand was on their feet, clapping their hands, and feeling the rhythm. Richie walked off to the end of this song with a sea of applause left behind. He got into a helicopter to be lifted out of the festival later that day and reflected on the crowd. He recalls thinking, “This is incredible.... We’re really here and they can’t hide us anymore” (qtd. in Walter). They could not hide the masses who were united in the pursuit of freedom.

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An Ancient Expedition

KYRA SEIFRED

MY NANA and I form the most unique duo on this trip. An extravagant, chatty eighty-year-old with dyed red hair, bright fuchsia lipstick, and a perfect manicure, with her nineteen-year-old, androgynous, and septum-pierced granddaughter. I come prepared in second-hand hiking gear passed down from my recently deceased grandfather (not Nana's husband; he died three days after I was born). It is much too large, and Nana has insisted many times that it is not flattering to my figure. Despite this, I feel I fit in with our rugged landscape.

Being well-travelled, Nana has often spoken of bringing me along on one of her adventures. For my entire adolescence, there was an unspoken rule in our household that this would never occur. My mother reminded me often of the time when, under Nana's supervision as a toddler, I had not been fed for a whole day. After years of offering and vague planning, I had confidence that if anything did go wrong with Nana, I would survive perfectly fine. After all, at nineteen-years-old I can feed myself.

Nana has booked this trip to Haida Gwaii through Well's Gray Tours, a travelling company that specializes in group tours that tend to

attract an aged population. Now I'm huddled around a strip of conveyor with eighteen elders outfitted in baseball caps, hiking shoes, and Gore-Tex jackets in the Sandspit airport, feeling quite out of place. When everyone is finally gathered around our tour guide Lisa, I get my first good look at my companions. The ages range from what looks like sixty to eighty-five, they're all WASPy and clean-cut, everyone has come with a significant other, except for two women who have become each other's surrogate husbands. I wonder if my companions think I'm a slob or a lesbian in my oversized outfit. Which one is worse? I'm not too worried about initial impressions, though; I think the novelty of my being a young person will charm them enough. Unfortunately, this novelty will not be sufficient for Nana, who requires reassurance through constant small talk. Much of the travelling process has involved me anxiously side-eyeing her in hopes that I haven't been silent for too long and made her uncomfortable.

After we've loaded onto a silver school bus and started to drive to the motel, the sun lights up the landscape rushing past the windows; a dense, mossy green forest is on our left, and an ocean with rocky shores shines on our right. As I stare out the window, I feel my anxiety dwindling. The majesty of the environment overtaking my thoughts of Nana's current mood.

"Okay, welcome everybody! We've come to Haida Gwaii at a great time: the weather is beautiful, and there's a music festival this weekend, so everyone's excited!"

Lisa makes a sparkling introduction and then hands out our schedules and nametags while talking about the events we'll go to throughout the week.

Nana turns to me. "You know this April, since they signed an agreement, they have full governance rights. Who knows? They might even get a seat in Parliament! Lisa should mention that it's important."

Nana is an educated woman; I just wish she wouldn't be so loud about her education. Haida Gwaii had just signed the Rising Tide

agreement in April, which extended their governance rights, shifting ownership and jurisdiction from the Crown to the Haida Nation (“Haida Nation”).

She raises her voice and turns to the front of the bus. “Lisa! Do you think Haida Gwaii will get a seat in Parliament?”

Two days later we’re on an expedition to Moresby Island. I’m outfitted in a massive trench coat, sunglasses, a toque underneath a wide-brimmed hat with a drawstring tightly secured around my chin, a scarf, and gloves. Although I’ve been strutting and posing on various items to fully show off my look, Nana has been complaining to Lisa for the past twenty minutes.

“You know I went on zodiacs in the Arctic, and we were not wearing as much as this.”

“Trust me, it gets cold out there when the wind picks up.”

Lisa tries to explain to Nana, but she still looks peeved to be in such an unflattering state. My companions struggle to get on their gear. They shift through the piles of lifejackets and trench coats. Some of the men have to put on overalls, which is the most time-consuming activity. Their wives help them find the leg holes and strap them in after some tentative hopping.

Finally, the boats have been placed in the water. We’re on the tip of an island surrounded by two others, creating a cozy inlet that leads out by two small passages. After two minutes on the boat in the open ocean, we are completely engulfed in a thick blanket of fog. I cannot see anything more than two metres ahead.

My Nana is very worried about the navigational capabilities of our captain. She leans over to whisper to me, “Me and Dave, would *never* go out in this fog.”

Nana has a funny way of always being correct. Professionals cannot dissuade her, and neither can her family. Suddenly the lack of visibility is not my greatest issue. I try to look excited, hoping that it’s not obvious that seeing nothing is not exciting. If I’m happy, maybe she will be, too.

As we approach the island, our boat comes to a slow stop. Our captain buzzes on the radio. He must ask for permission before we can enter the Watchmen site, a system that uniquely protects Haida villages, meaning every site is overseen by a Haida person and everyone who wishes to visit must ask permission (“Haida Gwaii”).

“Hello, Watchman. Calling in and asking for landing.”

I hope that the fog will clear up before our ride back; maybe I’ll get to see the mountains, and maybe Nana will start to smile.

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Peace, Happiness, and Company

SONALI SOMAIA

I USED to find it impossible to have a moment of peace, where my mind found its solitude and my soul felt connected to my body. It wasn't until I moved in with Nina, a woman like no other, that I learned what it meant to have a sense of self. Nina and I have been living with one another for three years, and she has witnessed me at my lowest points and celebrated with me during my times of pride. She is the kind of woman who asks questions during a story so you know she is listening, the kind of woman who is kind because she wants to be, and most of all she is an exemplar of true strength.

Nina and I come from similar backgrounds, but her unforgiving life has made her the most forgiving person I have known. She has been pushed, shoved, and kicked while already down, but each time it is the emotional strength and willingness to thrive that causes her to stand up again, and continue to live. I have not always had that same mindset. I remember about two years ago, conversing with her in my old Honda Civic over a bong and her nightly joint. I had been working on treating my recent diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and was confronted by my therapist about my seven-year addiction to self-harm. I brought it up to Nina because, well, that's just what I did. Nina knows

practically everything I think, and trust me, with BPD there's a lot of ground to cover.

"This is just something I have to keep doing," I told her, hoping she wouldn't continue to push, letting me *just have this*. I was recently out of the hospital due to a psychotic break triggered by sexual assault, so to say I was looking for control would be an understatement. I could not afford to take time off work, so I didn't. I did not have the time to address things beyond surface level, so I didn't. So when others, including Nina, asked me why I felt so detached from my body, and why this terrible act of self-hate "helps," I would usually ask them back, "How many more times do you want me to get better just to break again?"

For a moment we sat there in silence, and I truly did not expect her to say anything. I thought I was broken beyond repair. I was waiting for her to say something along the lines of, *You did not deserve that, or, I am so sorry that happened*. Instead, she packed me a bong, handed me a lighter, and said, "You are not broken. You know that, right?" I smoked my bong. What did she mean by that? Of course, I am broken, my psyche was too damaged for doctors to fix, my problems were too large for my parents to solve, and I was broken.

"Sonali, what happened to you was awful, but you know that already. You are not responsible for anything other than making it through your days, and guess what? You have no control over what others will do to you."

"Exactly! So what's the point of me trying?"

"No. People are unpredictable, and hardly ever will have your best interest at heart. But you are never alone. Not only because you have me, but you have you." We both took a moment to marinate in what she had just said. "Who moved out of their mom's house and got control of their life? You. Who took control of their future and got into a good school despite working upwards of forty hours a week in high school? You. You do have control, not over what you were born into, and not over men, but

this is not where you were a year ago. You did that. You are not alone in this.”

You are not alone in this. I remember her saying that because although I had been told this before, it was the first time I believed it. I felt liberated. She was right. I am not alone. I have always found a way to pivot, and I will find a way again. She continued, “I’m saying this because, if all you have for certainty in this life is yourself, you need to care for her. Even in the most physical, manual sense. Feed her, clean her, protect her. She has gotten you through so much.”

“Then will I be happy, do you think?”

“I don’t think anyone is happy.” *Great*, I thought, still stuck in the idea that my only options were happiness and sadness.

“I think what you need to do is have the goal of peace, and then sometimes you’ll be happy, and sometimes you’ll be sad, but at the base of all of it, you’re always okay, and you are never alone.”

Nina changed my life that day. She was able to extract all this terrible sadness that I had been carrying for so long and tell me that it was, in fact, going to be okay. She encouraged me in the most gentle way to gain control over my headspace and take responsibility for the anger and guilt I feel because, at the end of the day, those painful emotions did far more damage to me than anybody else. For the first time in my life, someone was able to make sense of the bullshit ideologies that I was programmed to feel that perpetuated a cycle of self-hate. I was able to take this new diagnosis and make sense of the way I thought. I could finally look back at the sexual assault without depersonalizing entirely. I could think about my worst childhood memories and know that is not what I am made up of. I felt seen, understood, and truly comforted.

It was usually difficult for me to get advice from friends, mentors, and even therapists, as I often had a hard time trusting that they wanted the best for me. Yet I have no question that all Nina wants is for me to be at peace. For the first time, I realized I was no longer alone, and I never

would be again. It is a privilege to coexist with someone like Nina. I am proud of who I have become, and I owe so much of this pride to her.

The N-Word Pass

ALEXIA TROOST

“**H**AS HE given you the n***** pass yet?”

“Excuse me?” I responded, taken aback, both because this white boy just said the n-word without even flinching and because I was telling him a story about my best friend that had nothing to do with this. “No, he hasn’t, and I don’t need it.” I turn my back on this guy, not wanting to continue the conversation.

“He must not like you that much, then,” he says, unbothered, as he moves his attention to something else.

This wasn’t the first instance I had been asked about my “n-word pass,” and every time somebody brought it up in context to my friend, a flash of rage would overtake me. After all, his Blackness is such a small part of his identity. And why were people so excited by the idea of me saying the n-word anyway?

When I told my best friend about it, he laughed, “Well, do you want to say n*****?”

“No.”

“Okay ... then why are you mad?”

“Cause he said it like it was nothing.” I was shaking with rage at the thought of it.

“Lex, it’s just a word.”

I didn’t understand why this wasn’t as big a deal to him as it was to me. Especially if he was the person I thought this word hurt.

There has been so much discourse over the use of the n-word for white people. Whether it examines teachers reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in class, or a group of sorority girls rapping to a Kanye West song (Flynn). It honestly baffles me that this is a conversation we are still having. I have witnessed people ask my best friend for the pass and watched the daring excitement fill people’s faces when he tells them to “just say it if they want to so badly.” Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence but a trend among Black students, particularly in predominantly white schools (Ngui et al.).

The word means something different on a Black person’s tongue than on a white person’s. The Black community has reclaimed the word as their own, and younger generations especially use it as a substitute for “bro” (Cabrera et al.). As a white person, who am I to have an opinion on how Black people choose to use that word? But when white people use it, it carries significant weight, regardless of the circumstances in which it is uttered. White people invented the n-word to strip Black people of their humanity (Kendi et al.). It is a word that countless Black people heard as they died violently. It is impossible to separate that weight from the word.

“But how can it not bother you?” I asked my best friend.

“I don’t know ... there are worse things.”

He and I didn’t talk about race much, especially back then. My best friend was Black, but it wasn’t something I spent much time contemplating. Growing up, his Blackness meant he could introduce me to new music and (attempt) to teach me how to dance to it. His Blackness was never something I feared until early in high school. We were in a school band together and often stayed in the music room practising new songs until dark. He lived far from the school, and so did I in the opposite direction. My mom could never drive him home, but she could drive him

to the bus stop a couple intersections away from the school. That way, he didn't have to walk alone in the dark and cold. One day, after saying goodnight to us, he stepped out of the car and walked to the bus shelter with his hood up. My mom and I were stopped at the light, so I watched as he situated himself inside. I also watched the middle-aged white woman in the shelter size him up cautiously, clutch her purse, and move as far away from him as possible.

That woman did not see my best friend, one of my favourite people on the planet. She did not see the fourteen-year-old who had taught himself to play seven instruments. She did not see the guy who laughed with his whole body and was always trying to bring others in on the joke. She did not see the soft giant who gave the most comforting hugs when someone was cold or sad or "just looked like they needed a hug."

She saw a threat.

I am not condemning this woman or even calling her racist. That evening, she perceived a Black man for two beats, and her unconscious prejudice took action. My perception of him changed a little that day, too. I became scared about how people would perceive him and what that perception could lead to.

I can see where my best friend was coming from in his apathy to the n-word being used by white people. Racism is such a deep-rooted issue and appears in so many forms and dangers. Maybe this is why hearing that white boy use this deeply racist word affected me so much. It had the potential to hurt someone I loved in a way I could never understand. The same way that that woman's prejudice could have been in a different situation. I can only condemn white people who use that word as severely ignorant and careless. However, the issue with that ignorance is that it can quickly snowball into something more harmful. If you are willing to cross that line, what else does that indicate about you?

Last year, at a party, one of his white friends said it. When he called me to tell me about it, I asked if it bothered him.

"I don't know, I just wasn't expecting it," he told me.

“That really sucks, Jojo,” I answered him, not knowing what else to say.

“Yeah, it does.”

So no, I don’t get an “n-word pass” just because my best friend is Black. It does not mean that I am cleansed of the centuries of prejudice and white privilege society has imposed on me. I don’t get to use him as a shield from my responsibility to educate myself and become anti-racist.

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Guitar

LARA WALSH

WE SCURRIED down the narrow stairs of our grandparents' basement, one hand on the railing for stability, and the other reaching past one another to see who would get there first.

"I won!" exclaimed my brother.

"That's not fair, you have longer arms than me!" I replied in defeat.

Here we were again, competing in our usual routine of who could make it down the stairs the quickest—a game that our mom tried and failed to ban many times in our house.

Our grandma had told us that she was reorganizing the basement and looking through old things, so of course we had to see what treasures we could find down there. Upon splitting up to tackle our own individual bins, I heard a gasp come from my brother on the other side of the room.

"What?" I asked as I ran over to see my brother holding what appeared to be a vintage brown guitar case.

He placed it on the floor and began opening it to reveal the most beautiful guitar I had ever laid eyes on. On top of soft red velvet was a teal blue '94 Fender Stratocaster that looked brand new. I could have sworn that it sparkled even in the dim basement lighting.

"Wow!" said my brother, in awe.

“It’s beautiful,” I replied, reaching out to brush my fingertips along the strings.

What we heard was a severely out-of-tune set of notes, but we didn’t mind as we excitedly ran upstairs to show our grandparents our discovery. We learned that it was our dad’s guitar he saved up for in high school, and seeing that it was sitting in the basement, our grandparents insisted that we take it home to try out, which is exactly what we did.

Some of my earliest memories involve music, as it has always been a huge part of my life. I grew up surrounded by it, whether it was classic Beach Boys or Dave Matthews Band hits from my dad, or Ricky Martin from my mom, which she claimed was her “club music” (usually accompanied by some questionable dance moves). My love for music only grew once my older brother Josh taught me how to play the guitar when I was ten years old, which introduced me to a whole new world of it. Music had a new meaning once I learned that I could create it myself, and since then I have fallen in love with it. I still remember the days that followed our discovery of the guitar, which mainly consisted of me watching my brother as he followed YouTube videos on how to properly play chords. I was a little intimidated by the number of frets and strings on the guitar at first, but once my brother started getting the hang of it I decided that my job as a younger sibling was to copy him (as it usually tended to be), and he taught me my first song on guitar, which was “Seven Nation Army” by The White Stripes.

“Start on the seventh fret of the A string, then the tenth, then work your way back up the fret board,” said my brother, as he helped guide my finger along the strings.

It was a bit of a stretch for my small hands at the time, but I immediately fell in love with it and the fact that I was creating music with my own hands.

Since that moment I have been attached to playing the guitar, and it felt like the beginning of so many important moments of my life. I went on to join a band in my school, and after years of feeling anxious every

morning owing to my hatred for school, I began looking forward to it because it meant that I got to play music every day. I went from someone whose hands would tremble while presenting in front of the class, to a person who could perform in front of the entire school week after week. Beyond impacting my confidence, learning an instrument at a young age has also proven to have a positive impact on cognitive skills and academic achievement (Roman-Caballero et al.). Reading tabs while performing different movements on each hand has enhanced my hand-eye coordination, and I have applied my memorization skills from learning hundreds of songs to my academics. All this to say that I truly believe it changed my life and was the start of a new me: a confident, happier, and passionate individual.

Fast-forward seven years later, it was the night of my grade twelve graduation, and the start of an exciting yet *terrifying* chapter of my life. I was seventeen years old and about to move out of the only place I'd ever known, to a town where I knew absolutely no one.

"Alright now, close your eyes," my brother said as we sat in the backyard of my grandparents' house with the rest of our family.

I closed my eyes nervously, half expecting a joke gift in brotherly fashion, but was shocked to open my eyes to a guitar.

Not a teal blue Fender Stratocaster, but an acoustic Seagull with a burnt umber colour and a ring of white around the sound hole. It was accompanied by a strap with floral designs of my favourite green, and sparkles that truly did glisten in the sun. It was the most "me" guitar I had ever seen, and it was all mine.

"I figured you'd need a change from the electric, and this will be easier to bring to university," said my brother.

All I could do in thanks was hug him, as I was truly speechless at this gift.

Despite the uncertainty that lay ahead, I knew that music would guide me through this new stage of life, just as it had in the past few years.

Playing guitar was more than just a hobby to me, but rather a piece of myself that was evolving every time I performed. I learned so much about myself through music, and this guitar felt like a representation of the upcoming stage of my life. Just like the very first one my brother and I discovered in our grandparents' basement seven years before, I couldn't wait to see what this one had in store for me.

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