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The Familiar

The moon hangs like an unnamed fruit, ready for plucking. In the weird, silver light of Palm Sunday morning, I skirt the edge of the woods. In these early days of the pandemic, they've closed the forests in the Dundas Valley, fifty miles west of Toronto. The bare trunks of April loom like an illogical fence. I sneak through the forest gates and descend into the ravine of my childhood.

This wild belly is a bit of a loophole—it borders the forbidden trail systems. What if everybody decided to hike down here? The question throws a shadow across my walk, because there's no good answer. After weeks of obedient walks in my neighbourhood, I don't know why I've let my car drive me across town. When I was young, my mom introduced us to the idea that “just me, just this once” was faulty moral reasoning, and the family maxim (like Immanuel Kant) has been a killjoy ever since.

I've been turning circles like a wounded animal, chasing dead ends. I'm up early, I can go to the gym before work. Wait. No. Instead, I turn toward the familiar and short-circuit. It's like the reflexes of bereavement—the impulse to call my mother and tell her she should start watching Grantchester on PBS, then remembering she's dead.

The sky is now a stir of pink and purple and burnt orange—orange like the fire I set by trying to stick some croissant into my toaster this morning, a treat against tiny losses. The Farmer's Market is too high-contact, so I've dispensed with tulips, rosemary goat cheese, artisanal bread, and chats with Chris at the organic veggie stand. I've cancelled my trip to New Zealand—a forty-year dream.

Everything pales against blistering death rates and financial hardships.

At work, abruptly, our outpatient mental health clinic was disassembled—rooms where I've provided therapy for teens with depression or anxiety or gender dysphoria were repurposed with hospital beds. Days at home doing therapy on my smartphone, I've tried to make up for the lost intimacy—the lost visual data—by jamming the phone hard into my ear. Between my hospital inbox and the news, it feels like the world is spinning faster than usual.

I slip toward the rough bark and white shavings of a stand of birch trees, pencil straight and sharp. I find myself wondering about the dead: my parents, my grandparents, the poet Mary Oliver. What would they be doing?

Branches are snapping ahead in the brush. I see a powder-blue coat and the tawny muscle of an off-leash dog, and call softly. The woman is startled.

“I’ve been down here every day for three years, and I’ve never seen anyone else.” She bends to clip the dog.

“I grew up here.”

We’re observing physical distance. It helps that I’m scared of dogs.

“Don’t tell anyone.” She wants her secret protected.

“Of course,” I promise.

I thought it was my secret.

They switch back, leaving me alone. Dormant grasses bleached by winter, pine needles faded to straw, rusty leaves in chalky clumps are punctuated by otherworldly color. I’m sorry I don’t have my camera.

Parrot-bright skunk cabbage twirls up from the mud floor. Its tips are plum. Sprays of emerald grass with periwinkle flowers aren’t bullies down here. Raspberry canes blush toward life. There are swaths of magenta bracts with weepy candy-cane necks, and thick bramble and rose stems puncture my jacket and catch my ankles. Fitting, that on Palm Sunday, the walk is thorny and uncertain as I bushwhack toward a sandy stream.

The path makes me remember: cross-country races; the unruly Nelson boys; a mythology of quicksand and the belief that there were seven hills and valleys to reach the other side—a destination beyond the possibility of arrival; the hike with a can of beans, matches, and no can opener; hours spent deciding how to cross a creek. Time didn’t budge until the streetlights came on, and we flew home like moths.

• • •

I rest on a creek bank beside the tangled ash carcass of a collapsed tree. I'm trying to digest the pandemic, the fragments. Maybe what I'll remember is white. Powdery hospital workers—puffy mollusks in space suits with alien masks. The discarded gloves. Caskets stacked in a potter's field. The skeleton ribs and dome ceilings of field hospitals. Snow swirling around the prime minister during his morning address. Snow falling and disappearing onto the tarmac like the dying. The empty shelves where soap, bleach, flour, and eggs used to rest. Toilet-paper memes. The scrubbing of my calendar as the vacation is deleted.

I stop narrating—stop trying to organize my experience—and come back to my surroundings. Decay pierced by spring. The sharp loam. The sparkle in my calf as I wind up a steep hill. The young sensation in my jaw with the weight of a heavy footfall. My scabbed knuckles rub inside my frayed gloves. I eavesdrop on the symphony of birds—shrieks and trills and wobbly throats as they flirt and sing and sail toward the next season. Their indifference to me is comforting. The woody coo of mourning doves and the two-note song of black-capped chickadees dip me into the sabbath of the backyard where I was a daughter.

I emerge from the woods and find my way along a childhood street—it's wide without sidewalks and church-quiet. Every house rings with story. I used to babysit in that house fouled by the smell of menthol cigarettes. A mafioso in his silk bathrobe used to wait on his veranda for the Globe and Mail. The boy with three nipples lived there. Someone put up a chain-link fence, there, at the bottom of Howard's Hill, where we used to toboggan into traffic. I remember the dad who wore pants belted up under his arms, old Mrs. Murray who spied on us all through curtains parted by her crooked finger, saving money for Archie comics and grape Sweet-Tarts, wishing my coaster bike was a yellow ten-speed like Sabine's.

I'm tearful on the small lilt of a hill toward the family home. Maybe it's the orphan in me, looking for surrogates to guide me. I'm adrift in a boat without paddles, weary and under-equipped. I want my parents to show up, each with an oar in hand, to row for awhile.

I turn to the news for hope, which is stupid. I scrawl health sites for the latest rules for living. I live-stream church services, in pajamas, as a marker for Sunday. I Google "How to write during a pandemic," knowing there won't be answers. I hunch like a question mark in front of my computer. I want a container for my confusion, my pitching mood, the mutating grief, but the page is formless. I'm unsure how to bear witness. It's all detail without

perspective—like postcards that arrive home long after you’ve returned.

• • •

Amid the galloping blooms and generous light of spring, grief wells up every April and waxes and wanes through June. My body remembers hospital vigils and death. Twenty-five years have piled up without my dad. Five years without my mom. I miss them so much, but I avoid the family home and neighbourhood like an exposed nerve—too tender.

Yet, here I am.

I slow my walk. Stop and stare for a bit.

The virus demands a deep imagining of death. Mortality distilled from vapor into something sharp and crystalline. The crack of thin ice. A tumble into the dark. The tiny skin between here and what’s next. Eggs splitting open.

Struck by the fragility of breath, my lungs trail outside me like balloons on a string—all my loves tethered by string, numberless pastel balloons. I wonder who I am as the props of routine fall away. I wonder who I’ve been. Was I too casual with it all? Did I love fiercely enough?

I face the house, and time collapses. Now is consoled by then. The driveway, the birch tree, windows that held Block Parent signs, the front door as portal: Love is embedded in every turn of my head. And calm descends like a warm hand on my forehead with the assurance that everything will be okay.

In this season of isolation, I’m chasing the familiar. Familiar—of family. I know why I’ve come here.

Turning Day

Her old head talks as young fingers grip bone
china, ancestor to the paper cup.
Smiles over tea, small bites of a scone,

a few choice pieces of whispered gossip
as a breeze plays through a garden hyssop
plant, blocks far from the busy street cafe
ignored for calm sips of home-brewed Earl Grey.

There is a small pond, red fish drift inside
like live jewels in a clear noonish hue
of sun sparkling off a lazy tide
caused by dropping carapaces of blue
beetles that fall slowly from the tall yew
tree overhead, spinning with wayward fronds.
And a yawning mouth greedily responds.

Shaking sunflowers still tower above
like forests, sentinels to grinning light
that have risen higher than tall tops of
trees, in her mind. Eyes see a sight of slight
stems bend in gusts like the tail of a kite;
those yellow petals burning bright like day
and illuming pine shadows as they sway.

There are days when she sits open and nude
on her back porch, lets her garden shield her
from fir trees and bluebirds, from being viewed.

Autumn's reddish winds have begun to stir
up fallen petals, that dance, brightly blur
across her eyes and her thighs, hidden by
a hedgerow whose leaves have begun to fly

Fly away.

THE WIND TOO OFTEN

The wind too often blows your voice away
It's thrown from my path, it is cast aside
And I cannot follow the words you say

Molecular movement can make sounds stray
The force of the gusts is pitched where I ride
The wind too often blows your voice away

Some earthy opponents have joined the fray
Their manic strength and your message collide
And I cannot follow the words you say

Honour and truth stood in champion array
Their purpose was swept by a lusting tide
The wind too often blows your voice away

Slothfulness, envy and anger hold sway,
With gluttony, covetousness and pride
And I cannot follow the words you say

Obstacles scatter what you would convey
The trail of the trial is markedly wide
The wind too often blows your voice away
And I cannot follow the words you say

G. W. Down

In These Times

and in these times,
I focus on the birds, the chirps, the helicopter thrum of
wings the gossip high in the bare branches
trees waiting for pips to become a blush of early
green at dawn they branch like the lobes of lungs
and crocus tips sharp-tongued make faces through the leaden leaves

and in these times,
each day is brighter, the tint in the sky is turning a more
assured blue and the moon still sasses me early in the morning
“what a beauty I am!” and then fades into breakfast

and in these times I remind myself I like simple
things quiet minutes writing things down a guitar
in my lap
a walk in the woods
these still exist
there are no bombs from the sky.
no phobia. no hostility.
my unearned blessings.
I don't walk down a street uncertain in my gender, ability, race

and in these times it's easy to hold my breath
as I watch the news and the minutes tick by without a
breath and my head might feel lighter or heavier and my
heart might feel fluttery
and I'll wonder why until I remember I haven't been breathing

I inhale the panic and exhale my wisdom back at the small
screen or do I inhale wisdom and exhale my panic? the
furrowed brows
the measured speech
the limits I've never seen imposed in the blessing of a pretty long life.

and in these times
I remember staying with my mom in Karachi
subject to rolling brownouts to manage electricity in the
heat and random targeted killings at western fast food
spots. Snoopy's ice cream and Burger King or was it
Pizza Hut? and life persisted.

Pervaiz listening to cricket test matches, my mom to Willy Nelson, shopping in open air markets, going to the beach in thick night heat to wonder about the nesting turtles

and in these times I'm thinking of so many — already a nervous sort perhaps stirred toward terror of not enough and “how will I” and “what if” and “what will happen when” the un-lived future minute that grows more terrifying with mounting rates of illness transmission and death

and in these times with even church steeples quiet perhaps the bellringers have gone home too of empty pews the ones who need God's bath or a pastor, a priest, a rabbi, an imam to steady us — those who find peace in the widest lens

in these times i remember
I am small and its okay
I can do my best to deliver some cash to a housebound brother, cheerlead the other as he flies home,
to pay a worker not to come to my house,
to waive rent, to call up the possibly infirm,
to not buy the variety store toilet paper because i still have at least one roll, to cancel my dream holiday,
to bend where i need to bend in the direction of us all and to be content, like David Byrne sang,
“I got some groceries, some peanut butter, to last a couple of days”

The Forest is a Dancer

Felicia twirls, directing the rain that has gathered on her into the loam of the forest, the water spinning off in centrifugal glory. The rain comes down, relentlessly. It used to always be like this, but now the deluge is a cause for celebration, and so she celebrates the best way she knows how- with dance. Her bodysuit is made of soft red cedar, her legwarmers of moss, her shawl is of ferns, and her scrunchie of vines, but even these thirsty things cannot consume all the rain, though they try. What cannot be contained by her costume is directed by her movements, down and into the forest floor. Tomorrow everything will be lushier than it was before, the leaves a darker green, the fungi will peek through the ground in great blooms, and if they are very lucky, after that it will rain again.

She dances fearlessly despite the slick and muddy ground. She slips, from time to time, when she should be gliding through a pas de bourrée. Occasionally, as she turns her pirouette finds too much pressure as it drills down into the peat. But all these failures and imperfections roll off her like rain. Her art demands practice, after all.

Sometimes that practice means falling. It means that her ankle breaks, or her knee, twisted beyond the limits of her turn-out shatters, or the cartilage in her foot bursts, like so many seeds waiting to take root. But if this happens, she leaves it behind- to be like a nurse log to the next generation of the forest.

If there can be a next generation anymore.

~~~

Some nights there is no audience, and it is nothing to her. That is their hubris, thinking she performs for them. No, the strain of flexibility, the ache of hard-won strength, they are for her body and hers alone.

The problem is not the lack of audience. The problem is her lack of stage. Her problem is how the rain lessens each year, despite how she tries to call it with her dance, and how the edges of the forest recede, and are cut down. Her extensions

feel constrained, she cannot use her space, cannot jump as high or spin as far. Dance is about freedom, and growth, and yet the world around her is shrinking, and demanding she become smaller too.

The problem is the logging, but it is also the fires. Once, they would smolder every other year, and it was like using candles for stage lighting. A nuisance to be avoided, sure, but nothing more. Now they come less frequently, but when they do, they rage. She could stand taking a season off: striking the set and letting the fire take down the scrim with its hot licks of flame. She could wait for the sapling Douglas firs to rise like a new coat of paint from the ashes, for them to come back in the Spring ready for the sunlight, and the spotlight. But that is not what the fires are like now. Now, they burn so hot, her bodysuit catches fire and chars her in turn. They are doused, eventually, but where there should be new growths in the aftermath, there are instead “new developments” that crop up like weeds, and so she is left to hand-sew new costumes by herself, and make do with the space that is left.

No, these new ills are nothing like the old. They are not a change, not like adding or subtracting a proscenium or some risers. The fires, the logging, they are like taking a sledgehammer to the orchestra pit and dropping the chandelier

into a million pieces because the bulldozer is coming tomorrow anyways. Coming tomorrow and the day after, and yesterday too.

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The stage manager is her first recourse. She hasn't had a choreographer in ages and she's too small potatoes to go to the director. She finds him at the bank of the river, the edge of the stage, keeping watch. He's new, but not the first of his kind to play this role. The blue herons have seen things come and go; they aren't so tied to the theatre, the rehearsal hall. He's not paying any attention to her, and its hours before call-time anyways, so he's standing on his spindly legs, plucking at his feathers, preening, getting ready to get some lunch into his sharp orange beak.

But she interrupts him nonetheless, asks, abruptly, "How can I save the stage?"

He's already bored with her, and she can tell. Performers are such divas, right?

"Sleep with the building manager," he snaps, before stabbing at a fish. He was lucky, it's a good one, and he swallows it down smoothly, despite the last of its' wriggles. "Might work, has before, dunno about here." He stabs another

fish, tosses that one away, and thinks for a second. "Or a donor. Sleeping with a donor might be even better."

Her mouth gapes, and the ferns around her shoulders shake with anger. That is not what it should take. That is not on her.

~~~~

She goes further upriver and asks the fish instead. They are old pink salmon, come to lay their eggs before they die. They are different kinds of artists than her, or will be when it is time for the bears to paint the trees with their nitrogen. Still, they might help.

They do not speak with her metaphors, having no good vision of what a dance should be, or how a forest might by its image evoke wonder. They are all about the nose, and so they tell her of the scent of gifts and grants, the boons that let them come here in the name of restoration. They tell her to go in the direction that smells of salt and smoke, to go to the place that has the tang of metal and sewage, but even if she could use such directions, she cannot wander and return home after as they do, and even if she could, she does not know if she could beg for what she needs.

Dancing is space, and she loves it to enough to sacrifice. That's what the cracked off limbs are, the seeds, that which

becomes an incubator for new life in the forest, that which builds her stage out. She has given the forest her aching muscles, the cramps in the middle of the night, the knees that will not even be strong enough to bear her dreams when she is a grandmother, but she cannot beg with any more of her. She cannot leave to ask for help from those who could give it, and they will not come for her the way they come for the salmon, for she is not half so delicious.

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When there is nothing else, there is her practice. She runs her pirouettes. Double. Triple. Falls out. Over rotates. Winds up. The last is the most egregious error of all, because it comes at the beginning. Finally, she rolls over her ankle and ends up in the peat.

She weeps.

There is a reason weeping brings help- and it is not for the reasons you might think. It is not because it means she is helpless. No, it is because weeping is watering, and that is the nourishment that helps all things grow.

The fungi, uncountable, come to her call: the *Pholiotina filaris*, the *Galerinia marginata*, the *Amanita bisporigera*, and so many more she cannot name because there are too many to have

names for them all yet. They pop up, long white stems and a cap like a parasol, warm yellow gills, and smooth shining brown caps. More and more come to her, as they came after the rain: fold and flats, and sponges in a rainbow of earth-tones.

She has never thought of them much. They are there. That is enough. They are the undercurrent of everything, breaking down what was, including her remnants, and building anew. When the sounds of trees thundering to the ground day after day quieted her ears, they were there for her, giving her the melody of the forest, guiding the rhythm of her steps.

Now they speak more clearly. "What do we do?" they ask, sucking up her tears as they go, coming to her, crawling along her roots, bringing the energy of all the rest of the forest with them. "We would rather your rain dance than your rain. Tell us, whirling one. You have given us so much. It is our turn."

At first, Felicia does not understand. Then she remembers: the cracks, the knee, the seeds. All the breakages that would have felled her if she did not have the gift of endless growth. These things made her excellent, for excellence is the will to break. Not all her skill could have come from faster spotting and endless practice alone. She has been broken so many times, and they have eaten it all, all her failures. They have

proliferated and thrived in her cracks, glutted themselves on the causalities of her will.

"I need a place," she says. "Just place enough to dance."

~~~

And so they send their spores out, floating in the wind, a confetti in pinks, whites, browns, and blacks, all the base colors of life in a subtle patterned wind of change. They germinate and expand in new kinds of bodies, making them as a thousand nurse logs. There is a great sound in the distance for a while: coughs, strangled noises, gasps. But it is only for a while, and the silence that follows is greater.

The years spread out and with the spores, and her new, spongy stage expands, making space for all that will follow. See as she fouettés in the thunderstorm. See her hands in a port de bras stir the spores. See the bears beat the salmon against the trees like a round of applause, and the heron call the cue for the lightning that she guides with her tour jeté. Breathe in the earthy musk, and see the forest grow, once more.

## You Cannot Return to the Burning Glade

Trail Diary, Day 377

Birds: Barred owl, still and silent at the top of the old oak. Chickadee on her buckthorn branch at the edge of the clearing. Waiting for me and my pocket of seeds.

Animals: None to be seen in the trailcam frame, but hoofprints in the mud by the creek. Deer. A big buck by the depth of the imprint.

Notes: I couldn't walk the trail today, not after the call from the hospital, and later with the funeral director. I stood at the door for a long time, breathing in what scents the wind sent me—sticky pine resin, leaf mould, and somewhere not far off, the black tar of roadwork. I couldn't move past the front porch. Couldn't bear even a quick jaunt, the trail so close to home. Feeling too much like I might miss an important phone call—might miss news of you. But those days are over. So I watched the trailcam, curled up with my laptop on your side of the bed. With my head on your pillow. It still smells like you.

#

Trail Diary, Day 379

Birds: A crow, worrying something on the chickadee's tree. Some small bit of a scavenged kill, lodged between branches. Kept the camera trained on it for a long time, remembering those videos we used to watch of crows using tools, how delighted we were by each quizzical cock of the avian head. Like they would figure out this whole messed up world given enough food pellets. Remember how we tried to lure them to the yard with peanuts, hoping they would leave something in return? Today the chickadee is nowhere to be seen.

Animals: A grey squirrel crossed the frame, but stayed on the far side of the creek. Skirting the bank as if avoiding something. Maybe a snake's hole. New deer tracks in the mud.

Notes: Still in bed. Still with the trailcam. I will make myself get up tomorrow. Eat something. Cross the front porch and stand in the sunshine, no matter how it burns. Remember when we would stay in bed all day? We'd lie so close, nearly every part of us touching—toes, knees, bellies, noses. We breathed each other like our lungs were connected. Ate only because we thought we had to. Because somewhere beneath feeling we knew that love could not sustain us forever. It was one of those times you looked me in the face—inches away, I could taste your breath. You said, "I'll come back for you, Dee. I'll give you a sign. Believe me." And I did. I do.

#

Trail Diary, Day 383

Birds: Chickadee was there on her branch, and came to my hand. The weight of her on my finger was almost too much. Her little claws too piercing. Feathers too delicate, brushing my open palm. Watched her eat seeds, tears streaming. Crow-calls a mile off.

Animals: None. No fresh prints on the bank. But there was a deer leg—lower-half, burnished fur to the ankle, gleaming bone and red muscle intact—wedged into the Y of the tree. Probably eagle-dropped. Should have included this in the bird list above.

Notes: My lungs burn with exertion, fresh air. Feels like it did during the fires last year, when we could barely breathe outside at all. Maybe it isn't the air now; maybe I will never be able to breathe again. Maybe this is how you felt?

#

Trail Diary, Day 385

Birds: The shadow of a host of sparrows crossed my bedroom window.

Animals: Trailcam is open on the desktop, sound on. Red squirrel scolding, marking some disturbance. I can't look.

Notes: In bed again. Since being out on the trail yesterday, every shift of light, every breath of pine or juniper carried on the wind, every sound seems to trigger some remembrance. Something I swore I'd forgotten comes to me through the chatter of a squirrel's teeth. The shape of the light through a clutch of maple keys. We tried to tap a few of those trees out past the glade in our second season, but in the drought the previous summer the trees drew the sap deep, keeping it for themselves. We didn't know the state of things. Thought we'd just done it wrong. We laughed about it in bed later. Laughed so hard we cried, a bit drunk on that sour elderberry wine the neighbour brought. And on possibility.

I kissed the tears from the corners of your eyes and I meant it.

But is this what you meant for me when you threw the rope up over the branch of the biggest maple? When you threw yourself back down to earth? Or did you intend, instead, a warning? Let not your step grace this patch of grass. Lest you remember ... But you didn't die, love. Not right away. Not for weeks.

#



Trail Diary, Day 386

Birds: Turkey vulture overhead the whole way from the house to the chickadee's glade. Not yet, not yet. No chickadee, but bluejays were screaming from the pine grove up the hill.

Animals: Three days ago I recorded that some bird had dropped a deer leg in the tree but now I'm second-guessing. It's a whole leg, nearly to the flank. How could I have missed that? A whole deer leg in a tree is not something easily missed. But I missed it. I must have. I must have missed it like I missed the ways the land was changing—the months of drought, insects I'd never seen before. I must have missed it like I missed the signs of your illness—your breakdown—because I didn't want to see? A deer leg needs a damned big eagle to carry it away. Or a cougar? I don't see mention of cougar prints or scat in the diary. I would remember that.

Notes: The diary reminds me it's almost time to do the back-burn again. How I will do that without you, I don't know. That first year, when we didn't do it—we didn't know—how could we have known?—the fire came so close we had to turn the hose on the porch rails. Stay up all night to keep the wood wet. You fell asleep in your chair, hose running. Woke up screaming at me to get into the pond. To save myself. Wide awake but still dreaming, you couldn't fathom—couldn't see—that the pond was bone dry. Was that the first season I noticed a change in you? When we lived in the city it was easier to put these things aside. But when we found that doe caught in the fence, her head seared to the skull by some quick-burn wind, you weren't ever the same after that. After we walked the woods with your gun looking for all the half-burned souls. After that you mapped the fires. Tracked temperatures. Expanded your recording to the entire country. The continent. The world. The numbers were too much, too heavy. It was hard to breathe.

#

Trail Diary, Day 388

Birds: No chickadee on the trailcam today.

Animals: No.

Notes: Maybe it's the angle of the thing. Maybe I'm just going fucking crazy. But the deer leg's past flank now. Can I see shoulders? Black singe marks on the fur. It's moving. Back legs kicking. Trying to get free.

#

Trail Diary, Day 389

Birds: The chickadee is nearby. Calling and calling, but I haven't seen her.

Animals: Something is screaming in the forest. I can hear it with all the doors and windows closed. With our bedroom door closed.

Notes: I know what I'll see on the trail. I've seen it before. The tangle of stiff limbs. The singed fur. The skeletal mouth in a rictus of agony. The grid of teeth barring all mercy. Antlers like a lightning burn. Just like you said you would, you've come back to me, love. But you haven't left your pain behind. You've brought it back to life. You've given it new strength. And you leverage that strength between me and the world I live in now without you. The world I love. Even without you.

You cannot return to the burning glade. The burning world.

Tomorrow I'll walk the trail. Tomorrow I'll go out with your gun in my pocket. I'll bring extra bullets. But in the other pocket, I'll have the chickadee's seeds.

END.

## Dog Walkers and Murderers

Only dog walkers and murderers are out at a time like this.

And which one are you?

Ah, she said.

My aunt. She arrived at our house last Sunday evening, a clatter of wheeled luggage, impossibly heavy. The *click clack* of heavy silver jewelry. An onslaught of a very loud perfume, earthy and sharp, with pungent notes of cinnamon and sandalwood that evoked another era and filled our small apartment.

That woman is noise personified, my mother said as she fitted a faded sheet over the mattress of the bed in the spare room while I stuffed sad looking pillows into cases too large for their withered bodies. But, she continued, You always need your ducks coming home to roost, don't you? Mixing her metaphors, as always. I just nodded. Hold it in, you don't always have to comment.

Then:

It's ducks in a row. Chickens come home to roost, Mom, I said quietly.

She flapped another pillowcase at me, You know what I meant, at least.

I smiled. I did. I always did.

It had been just the two of us for so long, we had that kind of relationship. Finishing one another's sentences. An unspoken level of communication. It worked for us in our gentle way, getting our points across to each other as quietly as possible.

My aunt, by contrast, was from another world. Or, at least from another much louder family.

Included in the din of her arrival was her dog. An ageing, occasionally incontinent beagle named, aptly, Scruff. He was small, even by beagle standards, his large eyes greyed over with cataracts, and he smelled awful. It was wet dog smell, of course—it hadn't stopped raining in weeks—but there was another underlying scent of something moldy. An odour of decay, and the timeless dog feet smell of corn chips.

I had been recruited to accompany my aunt and Scruff on their morning walks.

Why me, I moaned at my mother, She's your sister, why don't you go?

Just keep her company, please. Her voice was gentle, but her eyes were firm. Get to know her, she said, busying herself with the lasagna she was building for dinner. She could use a friend. You both could. Besides, she continued, I thought you liked the dark.

I like late nights, not early mornings, I said.

Then stay up and it won't be so hard.

I shot her a look and found myself smiling at her. I sighed. Fine, but I won't be good company.

You're always good company, my girl.

That night I set an alarm for 4:30 am, the most ungodly hour I had ever seen and, bundled into sweaters and scarves and clutching insulated mugs of tea, we set off.

The darkness at that time of day was absolute, save for the solitary streetlight in the small park at the corner of our street. A sign denoted it a 'Parkette' and my aunt laughed. Is that even a word, she chuckled, taking in the single slide, the rideable cartoon characters moulded in hard plastic, their paint peeling, making them grotesque under the streetlight. Scruff sniffed and peed, peed and sniffed his way around the base

of the light, the stairs of the slide. Light pooled in a golden puddle on the path. Wet leaves squelched under our feet.

I yawned. What am I even doing here? But then, what am I ever doing, really? At 17 I hadn't done much of anything. I was waiting. I had convinced myself that my life would—should—begin any time now. I spent a lot of time pondering this. I was poised. On the cusp. Waiting. To bloom. For life to begin. All those cliches, I embodied them. It was like they were designed with me in mind.

My classmates talked about heading off to university, about getting out of this dull city and moving to bigger and better places and I dutifully joined in their enthusiasm, all the while feeling my stomach churn at the thought of ever leaving. Like them I longed for something different, but—and I couldn't put my finger on it—there was something in my mind that told me 'Don't bother, there's no point.' I had a duty to stay, to remain here, but if I was asked, I wouldn't have been able to say why.

Teachers had started asking what my plans were for after graduation and all I could do was smile and shrug. I would adjust my earbuds, turn up the music in an attempt to tune them out.

You need a plan, Marnie, they would say. You've got good grades and you need to think about the future.

Yeah, my classmates would sneer, You can't just be a professional fake goth for the rest of your life. Laughter in the corridor at my expense.

My face reddened and I looked down at my long black dress and combat boots; the black mesh fingerless gloves I'd got for Christmas last year. My pale face was reflected in the glass of the trophy case beside the cafeteria and as they laughed, I took in my wild hair, eyes rimmed with thick black liner, my entire face distorted in the harsh

light, light that bounced off the silver cups, the gold and purple ribbons, the medallions of brass and pewter. A cacophony of colour and light and me, the darkness within it. I didn't mind being the weird one. It suited me. Mostly, people left me alone. Days like this were rare.

I tried to smile and move through the crowd, to get away. The Church's Under The Milky Way playing in my ears.

A kid I didn't know grabbed at my earbuds, knocking them free, leaving them dangling from my pocket.

Hey, I said, fumbling to retrieve them, the tinny music outside my head for a change and there for all to hear.

He beat me to them and stuck one in his own ear, listening for himself.

Whoa this is some weird 80s vampire shit, you guys! What a fucking psycho. He dropped the earbud and this time I snatched it up before anyone else could.

Maybe Marnie's a time traveller, someone deadpanned.

No, a ghost, I think she's a ghost.

Ooooooooo, they hooted at me, Spoooooky! More laughter as I stumbled toward my locker, wiping the earbuds on the hem of my dress, willing myself not to cry.

Maybe I am a ghost, I thought now as I stumbled along beside my aunt who kept a slow pace to accommodate Scruff, the jingling of his tags and his snuffling and sniffing the only sounds for a time.

Ahhhhh, my aunt took a deep breath, it's a beautiful morning, isn't it, Marjory?

I rolled my eyes. It's Marnie, remember? Everyone calls me Marnie. It's what I prefer. Also, it's dark and cold. The words dripped off my tongue like acid, but if she noticed my tone, she gave it a pass.

Yes, she said, nodding her head. They do call you that. But I like Marjory. It suits you. Much like the cold and the dark and these early mornings suit me. And you, if I'm not mistaken. She glanced at me, sizing me up, I could tell, but I kept my head down, kept walking, dragging my boots in the way I knew my mother hated. It didn't faze my aunt, the *scuff scuff* sound of my heels on the sidewalk. After a few metres I stopped. It irritated me too, I hated when kids at school did it. Like life was so hard it was impossible to pick up your feet. Please.

I thought of my mother's words. Try, she had said. Get to know her.

I sighed. She still hadn't answered my question.

So, which are you?

No answer. She was infuriating.

Dog walkers and murderers, you said. But what about runners, joggers, those people who walk with ski poles when there's no snow? What about delivery people and bakers? I listed the early risers triumphantly. My aunt looked around over her shoulder then behind her, a smile on her face as she shrugged her shoulders.

I rolled my eyes again, Ok fine, not here, exactly but they...they exist. I spat the words out with a force that surprised me. Not everyone is a murderer, I said, lowering my voice now, the word sticking in my throat. Murderer. Why that?

No, but still, she said, kicking at the wood chips under the slide. Helluva place to hide a body.

I fiddled with my scarf trying not to let her see my shocked expression, but she was gazing away from me still moving the wood chips with her foot.

I cleared my throat. Hardly. This layer? I said, toeing the wood chips, is eight inches, tops. You need like six feet for that, for a body. If she was doing all this to get a rise out of me, I wanted her to know it wouldn't work.

She looked directly at me. I said hide, Marjory. Not bury.

Hide.

Flashes now of stairs, of going below ground.

Down, down, down, my voice, small and singsong, my mother *sshh-shhing* me in the dark. A game? I'd asked, Hide and seek? And she nodded and held me tight, too tight, her eyes wide in the half light. Hiding. Waiting.

I was sweating now. Where had that come from? I kicked at the woodchips. They released their woodsy fragrance; not clean, like in a sawmill or a shop class, but with a scent of decay and rot that made me uneasy in the wet morning. I pulled my sweater tighter around me deciding to play along, ignoring the use of my given name.

And, auntie, how many bodies have you buried....sorry, hidden? I kept my voice light, playful. Not my voice at all. The voice of a different girl, a regular girl. Normal.

My aunt considered this. A few, she said finally.

I laughed. She didn't.

Just the one, actually.

I shivered and turned away. Something in her tone set my mind on high alert.

We carried on in silence with Scruff poking along in the bushes, the sky still not yet ready to relinquish the night. My playful tone had left me, I was back to me. The too-serious girl, the one who couldn't take a joke. It's just a joke, Marnie, god. Why are you always so serious?

Why, indeed.



I stopped, waited for her and Scruff to catch up.

Was that a metaphor, auntie? Not actual bodies, but the idea of bodies. Like when people talk about skeletons in the closet, they don't mean *real* skeletons. Or maybe you mean memories. Memories that have been hidden. Or buried? There is a word for that, isn't there?

I had read of such things, of people who kept secrets even from themselves. It was hard to understand how the brain could do that. I remembered everything. Or thought I did. Sometimes my mind played tricks. A flash like the one just now about the stairs would come to me in the moments before sleep. Would a repressed memory do that, I wondered? Repressed, that was the word. What could I possibly have to repress? But wasn't that the whole point? It was maddening. Why couldn't things just *be*. I was lost in my own thoughts when I felt my aunt stop up ahead of me.

We had reached a metal staircase spiraling up into the gloom. I had never seen it before, and it startled me. Small lights were set into the railings and there were reflective strips on the risers. So it's new, then. But where does it go? I peered up and under the branches of the large willow tree that stood to one side of it. My aunt put a foot on the lowest step and for a moment I thought she meant for us to climb it. My palms became sweaty inside my thin dollar store gloves.

How much do you remember about your father? she asked quietly, her voice a phantom in the still morning, the edges soft and gauzy like fog.

I ran my hand along the handrail, the cold metal biting into my palm through my glove. I'd been holding my breath and began letting it out slowly, controlling it.

A little, I said. Not much, really.

Hide. The word came, again, unbidden.

Fragments, I said and tried to lift my shoulders in a shrug, but the muscles wouldn't move. Tightened against the cold and the damp, my whole back stiffened inside my sweater.

She nodded. You were so young, she said, a small, tight smile on her lips, not quite reaching her eyes.

I guess, I said. Mom doesn't say much.

Much?

Anything.

Ah. Another nod. What about the house?

The house.

Where you were born, where you lived, you...three. A hesitation.

My shoulders tightened further, and I closed my eyes.

Another flash. A swingset, a child in a sandbox. The same darkened staircase. A door slamming. Raised voices. A red face, hovering. The smell of something dangerous, something sickening. Then, darkness.

No. I swallowed hard, and shook my head, we've always lived here, I gestured back the way we'd come, In the apartment. I was defiant but my stomach felt loose now, the tea roiling in waves.

Wait, I said, closing my eyes, a memory shifting in me. There were other places.

My aunt nodded, You and your mom, you moved around a lot. It was necessary. Especially at first.

Her voice sounded far away, and a numbness spread to my limbs. I looked at my hands, gripping the tea mug and the railing, my fingers straining. I tried to loosen them and found I couldn't.

Tell me. My voice but not my voice. A child's voice, thin and plaintive.

Memory is a strange beast, my dear girl. Bubbling up in patches, a feeling, deep and solid, until it no longer is anything even close to that.

Tell me. My hand released the railing and I moved toward my aunt. I fumbled and took her by the arm. Please.

It was a long time ago, Marnie. And he deserved it. All of it. We...her voice trailed off then suddenly became stronger. We had to make him stop.

The mug I had been gripping so tightly dropped with a metallic clunk hitting the bottom step before bouncing onto the path. It missed Scruff by an inch or two and he yelped in surprise. He broke the spell. I dropped to my knees, and my aunt was immediately down on the ground with me, the dog snuffling in between us.

That's what you told me. Back then. 'We have to make him stop, Marnie, we have to make him stop.'

And we did, my girl.

My voice shook. That's when we started moving.

She nodded, her hands on my face.

Why didn't she tell me?

Your mother was so broken, so frightened. That's why it had to be us. You and me, Marnie.

She pushed my hair out of my eyes and smoothed it down. And you needed to remember by yourself. I came to help. It was time.

He went away is all she would ever say. My voice was sullen, defeated. I shook my head; how could this be?

It was for the best. She didn't know, still doesn't know. Not everything.

But it was my life! How...I was a child!

My aunt's eyes were wet and shining in the half-darkness but her voice was shockingly strong. I needed you to know now.

Why now?

Because it's over now.

She helped me to my feet, pushed aside some brush by the staircase, and led me deeper in behind it. The light was starting to seep in, and her face was clearer now that dawn was breaking. We moved quickly into the forest under the stairs.

This, she said, gesturing at the staircase, goes up to the road, do you see? The levels of the city, they're not always quite so even.

I looked around, Yes, I see that now.

This was all overgrown for years, decades. The city, once they added the road, another way to get up the escarpment, they had to build the stairs.

Are we going to the road?

Not quite.

She led me further in. It was difficult to move, the brush was thick. Scruff whined at our feet, eager, no doubt, to get back to his pillow.

It was easier to get in here before, she said, her voice straining with the effort she was making. I was trying to keep up, a dread creeping into the pit of my stomach.

I listened to her describe the forest from before, the way she and my mother would forge their own trails, long before the city realized there was money to be made from health-conscious tourists, the ones not content to drink in the numerous taverns and bars. The great outdoors beckoned them, and the city officials ensured they had everything they needed.

Here.

She knelt by a large rock, moss-covered and with something etched into the surface. She ran her hand over the surface of the rock and lowered her voice. Here. Soon this will be connected to the other road, she said, pointing east, in the direction of the rising sun, And this will be moved. She took my hands. It had to happen, Marnie. The dead don't always stay buried.

Hidden, I said flatly.

She nodded. Yes. Just hidden.

Will we have to go away again?

I think so.

We should go back. Tell her.

She took my hand, leading me out of the brush.

Scruff strained on his leash as we moved back toward daylight.

## Clear Cut Love

Bill Lundgren will be sorely missed.

Long back a lifetime ago, Bill was the first person to welcome Kees when he started at the mill. The two of them would practice their English together while working on the lumber sorting line. Imagine the two of them, a Dutchman and a Swede, each fresh off the boat, trying to sort out their own lives and dreams in this strange new country. Less and less they defaulted to their grammar school German as they settled in, courted Margaret and me, and got themselves 'established' as we used to say. We will miss his friendship and all that mischief the two of them concocted over the years, from practical jokes out in the bush to the eco-terrorism adventure a few years ago, when Joe Marshall's streamside logging was destroying their favorite steelhead hole. But I'm sure that for Kees the most memorable will be their last caper together, a kind of final hurrah.

Bill had a bad stroke about a month and a half before he passed. Kees and I went to see him in the hospital the morning after he was admitted. It was a shocking sight. He was already out of intensive care, and down in one of the regular rooms. Slumped in the bed, his hair a mess, the right side of his face was drooping down. From the right corner of his mouth, he was drooling; and tears were rolling down his cheek from his right eye. It was helpful that the nurses at the station in the hallway had warned us what to expect, that he was unable to speak; though he still had some ability to write yet, just not with his right hand – and he was right-handed.

It was a difficult moment. The truth of aging hits deep when you see your friends laid low by the kinds of illnesses and attacks you had always thought happened only to old people. It is a hard thing to get old. Still, it is better than the alternative.

Though he couldn't speak, Bill struggled mightily to say something. Kees sat at his side and told him it was OK. "You don't have to talk, Bill," he said. "You just rest up." But Bill kept trying, until I put a pen in his left hand, and he scratched out on the edge of some hospital form in front of him just one word: 'Thanks.' And he started to weep, his eyes closed, his chest silently lifting and falling. Kees put his hand on Bill's hand and sat by him in silence.

And that was the first visit. On the drive home, I noticed that Kees was even less talkative than usual. It wasn't until we parked next to the house and Kees shut off the truck, that he turned to me and said, "If that ever happens to me, you have my permission to pull the plug."

I was horrified. "Well, that's a fine thing to say," I responded. "Sounds like you're not very optimistic about recovery. Bill could get back a lot of his old strength and skill as he goes to therapy. And besides," I pointed out, "he wasn't actually plugged in to anything. There's no plug to pull. He's just sitting in a bed." Kees opened his mouth to respond, but I held up my hand. "Don't say it," I cut in. "I'm pretty sure I don't want to hear it." I exited the truck and went to the house. Kees sat alone in the driver's seat for a long time.

Kees and Karl Schneider took turns, every other day, sitting for part of the morning with Bill. It wasn't long before he was transferred from the hospital over to the Tsayu Valley Regional Senior Care Facility in Dempsey. I think that's the official name. We'd always called it 'the fossil beds,' but these days that name is not as funny as it used to be.

Once Bill was settled into his room, it became a lot more difficult for Kees to visit. The therapy didn't seem to be doing any good, and the thought of Bill being confined to that bed in that room for the rest of his days was pretty hard for Kees to bear. He'd never been one for carrying a conversation on his own, but Bill wasn't able to say much, only grunting in agreement. So sometimes Kees'd read the paper out loud, or just sit in silence. I noticed his visits were getting shorter, and was going to say something to him about it, when Pastor Morton beat me to it.

It wasn't really that he singled Kees out or anything like that. It was what he said in his message. He'd been preaching his way through the Sermon on the Mount, and on that particular Sunday, he hit upon this part, from Matthew 7:

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

"Do unto others" – the Golden Rule. That's what got Kees' attention. Pastor Morton talked of the loneliness of life apart from others, and the loving example God showed in giving his Son. But all Kees needed was the reminder of the call to treat others as we would wish to be treated. And he thought immediately of Bill, lying in his lonely bed, in exile from life all around him. How would Kees want to be treated? What would he have hoped for from Bill, if the roles were reversed?

Kees didn't take long to figure it out. The next day he went to see Bill, right after breakfast. It was a beautiful early summer day. Kees rolled out the wheelchair, and helped Bill to climb aboard. Not being up on such details, Kees didn't bother to check out at the nurse's station. And Bill didn't object. So off they went. They spent a couple of hours walking and rolling through the park, and up and down past the shops on King Street. By the time they got back, though, there was a piper to pay.

Seems Bill was scheduled for physiotherapy that morning. When the therapist went to Bill's room, and saw the bed was empty, the staff made a call to his daughter Nellie, on her cell phone. They assumed he was out with her, since she was his only family in town. Only she wasn't in town. She was over in Edmonton, visiting with her daughter. Now Nellie's always been a worry-wart, and took over that role in her father's life when Margaret passed away already 15 years ago. So, when she heard that her father had disappeared, she blew a gasket. She accused the nursing staff of being either incompetent or uncaring, and threatened a lawsuit. That set off a building wide 'code green' – a runner on the loose. I thought that somewhat ironic, since if Bill could actually run he wouldn't be at the senior care center in the first place.

So while Bill was returned safe and sound, there were repercussions. In addition to the need for signing out and back in, each of the residents was outfitted with a computerized monitor to wear, like a wristwatch. My friend, Arlene, who works at the center, described it to me. The wrist monitors would keep track of each of the residents' body temperature and heart rate, and if they ventured without authorization off their wing, an alarm would sound. Thus, in one fell swoop they satisfied Nellie's complaints and put an end to Kees' travels with Bill. He was soon back to reading the paper out loud.

Nellie did not allow him on the 'approved for outings' list, and Kees seemed to have lost his ambition for giving Bill a taste for life. One night I asked him, "Whatever happened to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you?'"

"Well, that's just it," Kees replied. "How would I want it done unto me? If I were in Bill's shoes, I know I wouldn't want him going to all kinds of fuss and trouble, just for my sake. I'd be glad of his visits but wouldn't want to become a burden."

I eyed him skeptically, and was about to open my mouth, when he held up his hand. "Save it, 'cause I'm pretty sure I don't want to hear it. Maybe you



just don't understand men's how friendships work." With that, he went out to the barn to check on the cattle.

And so it stayed until we read from the gospel of John in the dinner time devotions booklet. It was more words from Jesus, this time as he sat at the Last Supper with his disciples, in chapter 15: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Kees went quiet after the devotions, and as I was clearing the dishes I took the opportunity to point out that sometimes, 'doing unto others' is not enough. Loving a friend as Jesus loves means making some sacrifices. Kees looked up at me, and I expected a comeback, but he didn't say anything. He took up the leftover potatoes and applesauce, and carried them to the kitchen, an act I found both touching and unnerving. He never helps with clearing dishes. So I thought perhaps the call to loving sacrifice had gotten through. I thought Kees would swallow his pride and apologize to Nellie, and ask her to put him on the outings list for Bill. But I was wrong. Boy, was I wrong.

The next night, Karl Schneider was over. He and Kees were sitting at the table, talking in low voices, working together on some scheme. Since I knew my input would not be welcome, I decided to leave them to their plans and go watch "Wheel of Fortune" with the dog. I figured, the less I knew, the better.

Two days later, Kees sat with Bill as usual in the morning. He left at his regular time, and then Karl came in after the nurse cleared away Bill's lunch tray. He came in with a duffle bag, which might have looked a bit curious. Once he got to Bill's room, he opened the bag and took out a large, powerful magnet. He slipped out to the hallway and attached it to a certain spot on the top of the metal frame on the emergency exit nearby. It was a trick his son Charlie had given him. Charlie worked in construction, and had been a part of the last renovations at the senior care center. They learned that you could bypass the alarm system with a magnet placed in just the right spot, so that the sensors couldn't tell if the door was opened. It's how they had a short cut to their trucks to retrieve needed tools and thermoses. With the alarm out of commission, Karl opened the door and let Kees back in.

Kees said that when they returned to the room, Bill looked both apprehensive and excited. After the boys got him transferred to his wheelchair, Kees went out to the hallway and got old Sid McAuliffe, who'd been wheeled out of his own room for his afternoon nap in the hallway. They pushed the two chairs side by side, so that Bill's right arm was by Sid's left arm. Karl undid the Velcro band on Bill's little monitor, and they quickly transferred it over to Sid's arm. The heart monitor didn't miss a beat. Kees

returned Sid to the hallway, as Karl outfitted Bill with sunglasses, a hat and a blanket out of his duffle bag. Why they felt the need for a disguise I will never know. After checking the hallway one more time, they were soon out the back door, into Karl's suburban and off into freedom.

Of course, they made a beeline straight to the Tim Horton's. By all accounts, it was a fine reunion. Bill soon emerged from under his disguise, and was back in his rightful place. Kees said Bill's lopsided smile said it all. They spent the better part of the afternoon drinking coffee and wiping drool, laughing and gossiping together like the grumpy old codgers they have become. Bill was, I'm sure, in his glory.

Only it was not a long-lived glory. For there arose trouble at the senior care center. That afternoon, a couple hours after the boys had left, an alarm went off at the central nurse's station. There were two code reds at the very same moment – two irregular heartbeats. According to the computer monitoring center, one of them was Sid McAuliffe. The other was Bill Lundgren. The panic over the alarm increased when Bill could not be found, and it increased even further when they found Bill's monitor on Sid's arm. Soon Nellie was called. And then the police were called. And that's when my friend Arlene called me. She didn't know what was up, exactly, but knowing Kees and the history of Bill's last disappearance, let's just say she had a hunch.

Right away I called Kees and told him the jig was up. Time to get Bill back to his room. So they said their goodbyes and wheeled Bill over to Karl's suburban. Only they didn't head back. Once they left the parking lot and turned to Main Street, Karl went right on past the senior care center and turned onto the highway and drove out of town. They went northeast, up Broken Circle Road. They continued on, up the switchbacks, past the cross-country skiing club, up to the lower ridgeline of Mount Fraser. Karl drove on to an old logging road on the South slope, and they bounced their way to a clearcut. It was one that had been logged a couple of years ago, but not for the first time. It had been cut once before, a long time ago, by a rag-tag crew of immigrants, young and strong, in the prime of their lives. It was one of the first stands Bill and Kees had worked together in the bush. Karl drove to the far side of the landing, toward the edge of the ridge, and parked. Together he and Kees got Bill into his wheelchair, and half carried, half lugged him through the rough meadow of old stumps and fresh, thin saplings, planted the previous summer by another crew, mostly university students, young and strong. They set the wheelchair down at a spot where they could overlook the entire valley below them. Kees stayed with Bill as Karl went back to his vehicle and returned with two lawn chairs and a cooler. Kees and Karl each set up their chairs, one to the left and one to the right of

Bill. Once they were seated, Karl reached over to the cooler, and pulled out three ice cold bottles of Labatt's Blue. He twisted off the cap of Bill's bottle, put it in his good hand, and then dropped a straw into it, so Bill could drink his own beer with dignity. Karl also put a straw in his own bottle and handed one to Kees as well.

There on the mountain, Kees and Karl clinked their bottles with Bill's, in a silent toast to a lifetime of friendship, and an expression of love as only those three could appreciate. Together they sipped their beers as they watched the sunset shade of Mount Fraser work its way east, back across the valley below them, the oranges and purples growing and glowing in the distance. The shadow passed over the clearcut, where the boys themselves had once logged, over the town and across the valley, where all of us have toiled and laughed and cried and lived. Bill drooled and wept, and Kees used his handkerchief to keep him dry.

In time, of course, they had to return. It was really the cooling air that brought them back, more than any commands of the clock. Kees could see that Bill was starting to shiver, and it was time to go. He and Karl gathered their belongings, and they gathered their friend, and returned him to town.

Imagine their surprise when they saw the senior center surrounded with all three of Dempsey's police cars, every one of their red and blue lights flashing. They tried sneaking in the back emergency door, but in Bill's room they soon met with two police officers and a very relieved Nellie, who was soon replaced with a very irate Nellie. In near hysterical shouts she talked about stalking and kidnapping charges. She was just getting rolling, Arlene said, when she was stopped by Bill. He was waving his one good arm, and making an angry growl. He signaled for a pen and paper, and wrote in his trembling hand: "No trouble." Nellie, the tears streaming down her face, knelt by his side and said that in fact it had been big trouble, looking for him, trying to figure out what had happened, and that a lot of people had been searching for him. He shook his head, and took up the pen again, adding two words, so that his message read, "No trouble for them." She could see that her father was both angry and determined, and decided that he'd had enough excitement for the day. She slumped into a chair, exhausted.

At that point the constable gave both Karl and Kees a stern warning, that their shenanigans had caused quite a stir. But Kees said though the officer spoke with an angry tongue, he detected a sympathetic twinkle in the man's eye. Later, Arlene heard him say that if he were ever in the same circumstances as Bill, he hoped that his friends would care enough to kidnap him for an afternoon.

It was only four days later that Bill had a second stroke, and that was the one that took him. I heard from Arlene that Nellie spoke of reviving the charges against the boys, now to include murder, but the nursing supervisor talked her out of it. No trouble for them – it was, after all, her father's last request.

So in the end, Kees and Karl got lucky. The doctor said that the clot that took Bill could have been set to go already on the afternoon of the breakout, as they were bouncing him across the clearcut. It would have been a much different situation if Bill had had his last stroke when the boys were all on the mountainside together. It really was a stupid idea. It was crazy. It was risky. It was dangerous. And it was perhaps the most loving thing Kees and Karl could have done for Bill, in what turned out to be his last days.

Love is always like that. Risky. Dangerous. And messy too. Think of all the crazy things we do when we are in love. In a romantic relationship. We smile and applaud when a young man hires an airplane to pull a marriage proposal across the sky. But I think we ought to applaud when he changes her bedpan 60 years later.

Love always requires us to put ourselves out there, where we can get in trouble or get hurt. Why? Because love is by nature risky and dangerous. And love is at the heart of Jesus, who gave himself completely for us.

I think about that now, as I consider my own life. If love is really known in the things we do, more than the feelings we have or even the things we say, am I a loving person? As loving as Jesus was? How many times have I left a casserole and a loaf of bread on the front porch of a member of the church when they were sick, when what they likely wanted was someone to talk to? But of course, to stop and listen is to give of yourself, not just your time or your frozen hamburger dish. And you might be drawn in, into their life, their worries, and their needs. Risky and dangerous indeed.

Thankfully, God takes all our love offerings, meager as they are, and blesses them with his grace. Perhaps, as in the case of Bill Lundgren, he even multiplies them. Now that Bill is gone I'm glad – no I'm proud of Kees – for doing all he did. I hope one day I will have the courage to commit acts of love using guerilla tactics. Love is risky, but it's always a risk worth taking. Just ask Jesus.

# She Laughed and Calmed the Silence

My grandmother was one who embodied ferocious living. Her attitude was one of *getting it done*. If you don't bother doing it right away, her motto declared, it will never get done so may as well get to it. She was always moving, her elbows bent, scrubbing, cooking, reaching, never resting. I was told that she used to ballroom dance, that she was very good and won awards at the annual competitions held by the legion halls. I never saw her dance.

My grandmother didn't use many words. They weren't her primary language, so we, her family, learned to communicate with her using our expressions and actions. Arguments with my grandmother were loudly quiet. Some days when my family visited her little whitewashed house, I would watch my parents and my grandmother have full disputes constructed of only silence and ignored glances. I therefore grew up carefully passive and was well-versed in the ability to speak loudly without making a sound.

When my grandmother died, I learned that funerals aren't supposed to be gloomy. It was my first and I didn't know the etiquette, but when I watched my family, I saw that I could mourn and I could cry, but I could not be miserable. My grandmother's children told nice, nostalgic stories. They stood one at a time at the front of the chapel next to the huge black casket, which looked much too big a container for my grandmother's little body.

At the funeral, my cousin told a story about the string of pearls she received from my grandmother when she graduated. My cousin said it wrapped her in family heritage and reminded her of where she came from. "So profound," My Aunt said later, referring to the eulogies.

My grandmother never wore her jewellery. She was so practical, and she was always giving things away out of the jewellery box where she kept her unused bracelets and earrings. She was frugal with time, but indifference made her freehanded with luxuries.

My father told another story at my grandmother's funeral. He did not often talk about his childhood. At the funeral he talked about food. He told the audience that my grandmother boiled vegetables for every meal and that she would serve the sodden broccoli or cabbage with watery mashed

potatoes and fibrous chunks of pork. “I think of her every time I eat overcooked vegetables,” my father joked. He wanted to make the audience laugh, and they did. I suppose my father meant to say that my grandmother nourished and nurtured her family well. I thought that my father’s story rather reinforced the life lesson exemplified by all my grandmother did: success in life is obtained by doing things, and by doing things with frugality and efficiency one saves time to do more.

~

Later in life, long after the funeral, I discovered an extravagance that was a stark contrast to my grandmother’s frugality. It was a rainy day that I first met her, and because it was autumn the fuzzy drizzle made the air chilly. A woman stood outside a café and looked at the display sign out front, an advertisement for sugary coffee. I was walking by, but there was a stoplight, so I had to wait next to the pastel advertisement as I tried not to make eye contact with her. She tapped me on the shoulder, forced me to turn around.

“Pardon me.” I first noticed her smile; she smiled big. She had blue eyes, a long nose. “Do you have any spare change? I want to buy a drink, something to warm up, but I don’t have quite enough.” She showed me a handful of quarters and nickels.

I would never have thought of it, of asking a stranger for money, or of asking them for anything but to attend to their own business. I was impressed and distracted by her smile. I told myself that that was why I bought her the drink, and also why I sat with her at the table while she sipped and laughed and told me stories. She thanked me, just once, and I knew right away that she meant it. Her laugh was a big sound that filled the room; she laughed a lot, and talked a lot, too. “I tend to fill empty space with words,” she commented. “I figure if I’m going to say something, I may as well say I bit more while I have my mouth open and save some energy.” She spoke a language of abundance. “Did you know,” she told me, “English-speakers use only about one percent of the English language in our everyday vocabulary?”

After we parted ways, I thought about the bigness of her laugh. I regretted not exchanging numbers. I walked by the coffee shop as often as I could and planned my routes to detour through the

intersection. I made a habit of buying whatever drink was advertised out front, and I would sit at the table facing the street as a sort of tribute, though I didn't quite understand what I was waiting for.

When I did see her a second time, it wasn't at the coffee shop. One morning, there was a knock at my apartment. It was seven-thirty in the morning, and when I opened the door, I was half-awake. She was standing on the porch in a pearly white coat, a stack of pamphlets in her hand. She laughed when she saw it was me, only wearing plaid flannel drawstring pants and a sleep-smudged face instead of the casual formal I wore whenever I stepped outside the house.

"I do love spontaneous meetings," she told me, and wrote her name on a pamphlet and gave it to me. The paper advertised a charity event hosted by the hospital down the road, which also, according to the pamphlet, operated a hospice for palliative care and had five counsellors who ran support groups on mental wellbeing ("take control of *your* health," said the tagline). The hospital fundraiser was a carnival and would have an inflatable castle, games with prizes, and food trucks serving funnel cakes and cotton candy. I wondered if she might be one of the counsellors but thought it improper to ask.

~

We agreed to meet and walk to the hospital together. The carnival was in the parking lot, all the cars having been directed to park in the plaza across the road. As we strolled along the sidewalk, she told me about the hospice patients and the people who attended the counsellors' sessions. She told me about the flowers people brought all the time, how the bouquets would sit on tables or counters for a week and then be tossed into the overflowing dumpster behind the building. "It gets so quiet in palliative care," she told me. "The patients hardly ever hear the sound of talking or of laughter." I asked her if she was a nurse or a counsellor. "Oh no," she said. "I visit the patients because I want to, not because I work for the hospital. I'm free that way. I would never work for a hospital. I'm a visitor," she said, and she told me a story about making a woman laugh when she accidentally elbowed a vase on the bedside table and spilled water and carnations all over the bed. I told her that I didn't know that people could volunteer to visit hospitals. "Yes, that is the problem, isn't it," she said. "Did you know most of the time in those hallways all you hear is buzzers going off. It's like they're living in a machine."

She loved to watch people. On the corner a block from the hospital, we stopped for coffee and sat facing the window so she could point at the passers-by. A man paced past, his hands fists swinging back and forth. She pointed at his shaved head. "That man has little children at home, and he's just left to get to work. Look, there's oatmeal and milk on his sleeves, must be from hugging them goodbye. He wants less office hours so that he can spend more time with them in the mornings."

I asked how did she know. "He's late," she laughed. The man was indeed walking quickly. "Most parents wish for more time. It's not so hard to guess at."

We walked the last block to the hospital, stood in line for tickets, browsed the vendors and played the carnival games and she pointed semi-discreetly to people and laughed joyously, admired hats and shoes, invented stories about the wearers. I bought her a bag of caramels, turned to pay the cashier, and when I turned back, she was on her knees giving the bag to a child with dark hair, the distracted caregiver nearby with a stroller and two toddlers. As the family thanked her and the child distributed the treats to his younger siblings, she rejoined me and clasped my fingers. "They needed it more than I did," she told me. "Did you see? Dropped their fries all over the ground." I looked back and saw the mess of trampled starch and ketchup in the grass. The two toddlers had their fingers to their sticky faces, and they were giggling. I wanted to see, tried to understand how she noticed what I hadn't seen before it was pointed out to me. I held her hand and we walked on, and she swung her arms and leaned forward on her toes.

~

The first time she invited me to visit palliative care, I only went because it meant I would see her. When I walked into the lobby, I smelled Lysol and hashbrowns and illness. The desk attendant had puffy, blond-dyed hair and a lot of makeup, and she didn't look real. The building didn't look real. It was clean and soft and classical music played, Schubert, maybe, but the walls were yellow-brown, and the faded carpet was stained. She met me at the desk, greeted the attendant and made her smile. We walked down the hallway and passed from room to room. We said hello to the residents who were awake; most weren't. We smiled with them, and my cheekbones quickly began to ache. I stood near the doorway of the resident rooms, but she leaned over each person where they lay on their beds, she held their hands and touched



their shoulders, their hair with her fingertips. She introduced me to them and told them that she knew it was meant to be when she knocked on the apartment door and I opened it in my pajamas, and she recognized me from the coffee shop. The second chance meeting isn't coincidence, it's fate, she told them. She looked in their eyes.

Many of the residents didn't respond, and I told her I didn't think they were listening. "Doesn't matter," she told me. "I don't have anything to prove. I only mean to give them back a little humanness. It's too easy to forget, in here, between these walls. I think the staff sometimes forget, too, they have so much to do, they always are rushing to take care of everybody. It's endless."

I thought about language, about my grandmother's silences and the jewellery she gave away and the hundreds of meals she must have cooked, their uniformity, one serving of sodden vegetables soaking into another. With the patients, this woman didn't so much communicate with words, either. She laughed continually, not against the quietness in the hospice hallways but despite it; she laughed with her eyes and her hands, she reached out to touch the patients, she looked into their eyes, she listened.

I looked at the pictures of fruit bowls that hung in the hallways and imagined what my grandmother would have done if she had lived here before she died. I hadn't heard her laugh much; she had a short guffaw that was more a noise of scorn than delight. "That salesperson came by again, trying to buy the house – ha!" I thought about my family's muteness, so much louder and more potent than talking, laughing. In here, in the hospice, the halls were screaming, but for just a moment, her voice seemed to ease the silence.

What would my grandmother have thought of this woman, who laughed freely, who walked as if she was dancing and gave incessantly and unnecessarily? I wonder if she would have made my grandmother laugh. I would have liked that, to hear her laugh.

# TURTLE ISLAND

I don't know where they told them  
to go  
I don't know where they told them  
to go

pretty people  
two weeks sober  
from now, or so —  
what's next for our own?

dealers turn their bicycles, and  
crane their necks,  
gawking from  
distant obvious perches,                      like vultures  
in the park,  
note-taking the embroidery  
of the arm badge, and  
the shiny shield on the officer's breast—  
the gun toter with water  
in hand as a peace offering,  
like the offering of a reservation,  
a consolation prize  
for indigenous ones—  
but offering no land, and  
offering no respect to  
Our food insecure  
Our homeless,  
Our unwell, so  
often fed, but not often nurtured—  
ones not in the know  
of where to sleep,  
of where to cool their fevers  
and clean their skin

the officer drives away,  
the middle person,  
the unfortunate middle person  
with empathy and an unjust duty  
of removing dignity.  
and I watch helpless, sitting among  
them drinking, unafraid but  
not knowing where to go myself,  
but I see them. the universe in the glint in their eye.  
    But they have no  
    subscription to my heart.

I don't know where they'll go,  
but I have a home tonight in a  
bottle,  
as they search for a pusher that will  
grace them with forgetting, I think of tomorrow—  
and how we will remember again.  
I will remember them as soldiers  
and kin.

# Orchids on March 1, 2021

This year my mother's fifteen orchids bloomed  
simultaneously—remarkable

although it means there will be several months  
later on without any orchid blooms.

There are two options, as we can see: buy  
more orchids or prepare for the absence

of colour, which in this year of thinking  
ahead to absent futures feels germane,

as if pathetic fallacy is best placed  
on a kitchen windowsill in full view

of the garden it cannot touch nor  
germinate: the climate is all wrong

and anyways the blooms must be balanced  
against themselves, against the fact of collapse.

---

# To Playboi Carti (@ Meh)

## I

We who passed over the deep  
And into that ambrosial arbor,

Found you in profile, proffering  
Your hands to implacable night,

Singing your Orphic song to she  
Who stood without.

We saw from our perfect vantage  
The nuptial bower, thy byword.

We pine for days  
When words lost substance,

When we were children  
Vociferous and vicious.

Remember, child, thy emblazed shrub,  
Thy purpureal potion.

Remember the voided rooms  
You made for us,

Thy contrived mana, so empty,  
And the promises of plenty.

## II

On the floor you are not silent.  
We accept your censure.

Verily, we are sweet. Our voices  
Cannot breach the murmuring gate

Before which we sit, wide-eyed.  
We wear sandals; we do not die.

To Canaan we fly,  
Away from the shadow of your anger,

For we heard thee by the hearing of ears  
And our eyes have seen thee.

### **III**

Let us tear down thy statue and return  
To Sion,

Let us find the mountain  
Of our inheritance,

Let us shout for joy  
As we did at the founding of the earth.

# THIS DAY IS FOR YOU

This day is for you.

The sky lifts his autumn head  
and sighs his wintery sigh  
gently to his love the tree.

Her perfumed arms  
caress his breath  
and seedlings sprout  
and squiggle  
into rainbow shapes.

This day is for you  
and for your perfumed voice  
which breaths its harmony  
of sun and tree  
and seed and life  
into me.

## Recollections of a Video Game Collection

I assume that I like a fair amount who had the privilege of growth in postindustrial areas of the world after the late 1980s, grew up on platformer genre video games. Even without my seldom used *Nintendo 2DS* I had the convenience and access to curate a customizable collection of virtual entertainment which my inner toddler was deterred from not the least due to cost but I am glad for how I spent only about as much time as I did with them because of that delimitation. Is being enthralled/absorbed by watching others play video games as a toddler during the tail-end of the last century so different from the *Twitch* stream followings which would occur decades later?; I am so thankful for *YouTube* reviewer culture in compensating for all the more questionably spent recreational time I could have undergone before my 20's even more so. As with gushing over how enjoyable old sitcoms might have been to watch when they were unambiguously contemporary, I feel that for the most part acting on that desire for playing new video games as they came out ,would really only have made for a different direction to the loneliness I experienced. However what time was spent I can extract meaning from which can entail more effort than that made by a fair amount who consistently have been involved in playing but don't quite reflect too much on it.

When thinking about what a video game is, I immediately think of platformer games which to my understanding don't have nor ever really quite garnered the decorum or gravitas as adventure or role-playing games ('*RPG*')-- I have neither the fondness to spend time nor the energy to sustain interest in playing through RPG or adventure games but respect the genre ,finding it majorly fascinating for what it has meant for adapting genre fiction. Platformers by nature are characterized as having their



action based on jumping and moving forward to navigate through environments which are fantastical.

Platformers are still a lofty development away from the original arcade style formats *of yore* but I am aware of how there were platformers during the 8 bit era .To this day, the first thing I am likely to think of a video game when it comes to what a video game is, is something which never really went beyond the 16-bit era of console gaming and the limitations of game design during those days which for most platformers meant ‘*side-scrolling*’. Those limitations were certainly not without artistic merit. The richly detailed environments and sprites of say *Ecco the dolphin*, *Sonic the hedgehog* and *Donkey Kong Country* were technological assets which would make the emergence of fighting games more feasible starting with ‘*Street fighter II*’ and the new kind of competitiveness which would come as a result. Even if contemporary games make me fearful for their potential for addictiveness and overwhelming immersiveness, I still treasure these memories in media consumption which I am able to map out over the course of time.

—

~'94(?)

*Once upon a time*, my youngest maternal aunt let me play games on her computer. There is a self-debate in my mind btw whether the first game I ever played was a platformer of some kind with a purple air-horn nosed like alien who gathered food items for points or such or a PC porting of *Mortal Kombat III*. *Claw*, the pirate cat came maybe sometime after.

Certain cousins (who I still have reservations for), had a Super Nintendo with several games including now famous Mario titles (*Super Mario All-stars* and *Super Mario World* among them). We fussed about taking turns, and once with *Super Mario Bros.* I think that once on the *Super Mario All-stars* game) my aunt was baffled by me saying how I would skip on my turns because of how amazing it was to watch –in hindsight it was my earliest admiration of the mere animation needed for video games. With *Super Mario world* came my fondness and fixation for Yoshi in the dinosaur fixated toddler stage of my life.

What I appreciated about how I was exposed to *Pokemon* was how, I saw and heard things about the games but my main exposure to it came from the anime. I think that for my 8th birthday or Christmas an aunt and/or uncle-in-law graciously gifted me a purple *Gameboy color*. Sometime afterwards, I went to a *Walmart* with my mother where I picked out '*Super Mario Bros. Deluxe*' in a rather feigned way. I thought, was unsure, was expecting, was hoping that it'd be Gameboy color porting *Super Mario World*. It wasn't but I was pleasantly surprised by (i) how my mother remembered playing the version it mainly consisted of when she was younger with a relative and (ii) all the extra features it provided as a porting of one of the original archetypes of platformers.

At one point my mother received a random gift of a *Galaga Galaxia* cartridge and the original Gameboy while waiting in line and conversating with someone at *Giant Tiger's*-- so I trusted her judgement. At another point, at a MacDonald's with a '*PlayPlace*', were free to play consoles installed which allowed for demo play much like ones I occasionally saw at *Walmart*, one of which provided a rare opportunity for bonding with

my sister via playing *Mario tennis*. Considering the game's release date (2000) this might well have happened while I lived in Leamington once more in my life.

While living in Leamington I remember a friend/co-worker of my relatives giving us a *Gameboy color* version of Spider-man and a *Gameboy* take on baseball, which in hindsight was quite fun for it's slow pace and coordination even while I didn't understand baseball nor am I too sure I would understand any better if I had it again. I believe that it was for my 9th birthday that I was given *Pokemon Silver* as a gift and spent major chunks of the day on it well into almost being 12. Thus I think it could be said that *Super Mario bros. Deluxe*, *Pokemon Silver* and the first *Gameboy color* Spider-man game were my main GBC games.

I think it was upon returning to Hamilton, that I grew a fondness for video game magazines which I sought for at the library. The now defunct *Nintendo power* was preferable to the more hard-edged aesthetic of *Game Pro*, but I made do if it was the only one around.

My exposure to not only the Super Nintendo but Nintendo 64 titles like *007: Golden eye*, the original *Mario Party* and *Pokemon Snap* would increase again during the year I lived with cousins. A begrudging relationship developed when I hassled a cousin to play the *Legend of Zelda: Oracle of seasons* on a file which was ceded to for me, as well as the one for *Paper Mario*. I think this marked my fascination with fantasy based games and RPGs aside from *Pokémon* and understanding what RPGs were and meant, after having heard about titles like the *Final fantasy* games for years. It was at some point that a *Gameboy advance* was gifted to my younger brother for Christmas or

a birthday, though I fondly embraced it as well. It was my obsession to expect the thrill of playing *Super Mario World* which I think compelled me to convince my brother or mom to purchase '*Super Mario Advance*'. I didn't enjoy it as much as I thought I would and realize how was actually a porting of '*Super Mario bros. 2*' ,a historically quirky title in its departure from then *Mario* game norms what with the presence of a health bar and the element of throwing items or characters around. As I became older and did research knowing how it was something of a makeover on a unrelated title called *Dream factory: heart-pounding panic* helps; I have the hindsight to appreciate it. When I knew *Super Mario world* was officially available on the *Gameboy advance* as *Super Mario Advance 2* through comically hokey commercials made by *KCL productions*, I was greatly sated.

I think that my mom not liking how reluctant my cousin's were to share video games was a reason she was open to letting me pick out a game from a pawn shop for my birthday. It was *The Legend of Zelda:Link's awakening DX* which I found fun enough though not in the same ways like *Oracle of seasons*. *Paper Mario* fixation was something else my cousins were begrudged or annoyed to share with me and I can see why now, considering how it took me time to get a grip on with it's RPG game mechanics but became keenly obsessive with it when I did. I think that either early on after moving out from being with cousins or during our final months with them, the glitch of not being able to play past 1000 hours made all my *Pokemon Silver* information go awry.

~03+

A benchmark of this era in video games after the dawn of this century, how *Sega* lost its relevance in *\*console\** production, the well-established industry modus operandi in contrast to PC or *handheld* console gaming . This was in addition to the overall increase of the catering to the '*rated T to M*' demographic via consistently lurid content attempting to differentiate itself from the seemingly juvenile content and aesthetics of the past. In my opinion it was only around the turn of the last decade that the industry collectively tried to undo the impact of this shortsightedly sophomoric approach, not the least because of toxic social environments which were not always accepting of certain demographics like the female demographic.

When it came to the presence of video during the personal developmental level with me of the 2000's, I don't think too much changed with me when it came to video games entering increasingly into the mid 2000's. When my family moved to an apartment compartmentalized house and had the first seemingly permanent desktop computer, I remember looking through the discount CD section of a *Radio shack* and *Giant Tiger's* . At *Radio Shack* we bought a sort of '*~100 games in one*' CD which mainly consisted of a large number of board games and a few arcade style games. From *Giant tiger's* we had hit or miss experiences. I remember, buying an unappealing '*The hobbit*' PC game which was more based on the novel, years before Peter Jackson's movies and my brother picked a game adaptation of the horror movie '*The thing*' which my mother did not appreciate. In contrast, there was a bundle of edutainment games from which I learned about physics and simple machines, about animals through songs and had an improved understanding for searching and puzzle based games with a *Carmen Sandiego* one. Once within a cereal box was an CD filled

with dozens of games from the company *Atari* dating back to before the 16 bit era supplemented by a varying bounty of content such as production history notes, comics and stylized images and formatting for computer icons. A few of those games like *Missile command* and *Battlezone*, I had already known from the time with my cousin's PC.

~+08

Come my final months of high school or during the gap year before *Mohawk College*, due to my younger brother's *Kijiji* related negotiations that we had an original *Playstation* and *Xbox* which provided experiences. My awe at the world of 'moded' handhelds with dozens of games embedded into hardware coincided with possessing several games for the original *Playstation*. It was around this time that my brother was leaning towards multiplayer shooters and the eventual online social component which came with them, which became so prevalent during the 2010's.

My understanding of video games only truly persisted because of reviewer culture as with the *Channel Awesome* hosts, several years before the *#savethechannel* scandal of March 2018. It was because of the late 2000's remakes of *Generation I* *Pokemon* games and the *Generation IV* entries that an interest was rekindled in me which was a helpful factor for connecting on a much more healthy and friendly level with a cousin who used to be afraid of me and unjustifiably resented.

At some point early on, during a fruitless duration in a *software support* program at community college, to learn programming we did introduction activities with game sprites and my anime fix had taken me to looking into the '*Street fighter*' franchise. From

there I found out how in at least one of the games it seems the character of *Chun-Li* uses a fighting style based not only *Chinese Kenpo* but *Tai-chi-chuan* and from that emerged one element which directed my interest in fitness.

(age) ~+19

There is still a potential for much time to spend obsessing on video games given the nature of online culture with reviewers, forums and strategy or playthrough related sites which were nowhere as nearly accessible to all when the previous century was ending . I would like to believe that I grew up seeing a relevant phase when video games developed to become taken seriously as art not unlike the reception and development of cinema nearly a century before or the paradigm shift which came with photography before that. The fact that I can now understand, curate my own game collection, make my own '*personal arcade*' in a sense if I so choose yet am not keen on embracing it even if it is quite feasible to do so on a personal device than a conventional computer per se is an astounding technological privilege. I never have been too fond of device application ('app') style games but recognized the validity of their presence especially since any device capable of playing one has the processing power necessary, on par if not exceeding consoles from at least as far back as the turn of the century.

—

On the whole, I have had enough enjoyment with video games that disengaging from them is not too problematic for me as a perpetually time-deficient adult. Factors which still fascinate me include the significance of sound design and music, an

immaterial element which existed long before computer generated manipulations of space were feasible but which needed time to gestate from rudimentary computer sounds to becoming worthwhile enough for high production orchestral covers. I even realize how even if story execution has mainly paralleled *B-movies* for most of its history , video games are able to contribute innovative narrative structures and mechanisms because of what interactive '*controls*' can mean for outcomes and how immersive they are. This was present with the time-travelling in games like *Chrono cross* and *Chrono Trigger* during the 1990's and its continues into the contemporary whether it be *Undertale* subverting expectations as to how eliminating life is a game mechanic or with how open-ended to collective construction online games like *Minecraft* can be. It is increasingly evident how this has been an industry which has challenged what it means to be stimulated, not only because of its impact on forms of recreation often taken for granted as juvenile and comparable to toys but because of how it can intertwine with confluence from social media, as music celebrities like Travis Scott made use of during the earlier phases of the global recognition of COVID19, opting to perform a '*concert*' on a platform like *Fortnite*'s online component.

The importance of what some might dismiss as an offshoot of animation albeit more computer based and controlled, still has a fascinating future with space for improvement to provide noteworthy discourse which can find itself having significance which is truly ahistorical even without me needing to comment too much on it.



# Things That Weren't Meant To Be

There's a pit in my stomach everytime the seasons change reminding me of all the memories that could've been:

Salt in my hair and hot sand on my toes  
Your kisses on my cheek as we read sad prose

Our laughter filling the city at sunset as we take every fleeting moment and make it our own

Getting lost in the botanicals with you, my love  
Telling the flowers the stories of everything we've ever known

But these are just ghostly memories of our hollowed out hearts  
Things that were never meant to be  
Such as you and me

# Broken

I see a girl  
across the room. She sits  
with her back hunched over,  
her knees pulled to her chest, pulling her  
baggy clothes to her body like she is protecting herself from a bone-deep chill that calls itself  
loneliness.

I study her closer,  
noting the red swollen skin around  
her eyes. She looks like she has been crying for days.  
Maybe she has been.

I meet her eyes; sunken, empty and soulless,  
yet familiar. Yes, I know  
these eyes that were once so bright and cheerful.  
Now, only muted colours of green iris with brown jutting out  
the pupil, where shadows dance the haunting steps of a waltz called  
death, holding empty promises, empty joy and empty smiles.

These eyes that were once the warm sun turned  
into a scorching hell. A butterfly  
into a shriveled corpse. A person  
into a monster. Monster  
eyes staring back at me. These are monster  
eyes in this human.

Does that mean this girl in front of me is a monster?

After all, the eyes are the windows

to the soul, and if my eyes are staring back at me,

then these monster eyes I now look into,

they are mine.

## In The Body That Used to be Yours

It's funny how you say  
That I'm beautiful  
But wouldn't want my body

If you were in mine  
You'd say the same things  
You say to yourself  
In the bathroom  
Mirror  
Every night before you fall  
Asleep

You would cry looking at it  
Yet when you see me  
There are no tears  
Only compliments  
If only  
You'd compliment  
Yourself more

Beauty is such  
A complex concept  
What is the difference between  
Me and you?  
I'm beautiful yet  
Not your beautiful

Beautiful in the sense that  
I am who I am  
Do you mean it then?  
Let's switch bodies for  
A day  
But not minds

I want you to walk around  
And call the body that you  
Think is so beautiful  
Beautiful words  
Oh, but you  
Wouldn't

You would still be crying  
In the shower  
Tears blending in with  
The water  
Rolling down your hips  
What a mess

But you'd come  
Compliment me  
In the body that  
Used to be yours

# The Opposites

Pop-Pop always said that our reflections in the mirror were the opposite of who we truly were. They showed us the flaws, the insecurities, all the things we resented ourselves for, hiding all the things we should value. I wanted to believe it, but Pop-Pop was also insane.

I stared at myself in the mirror, watching my fingers subconsciously weave my thick black hair into a braid. It was messy and sloppy, with strands of hair spilling out of each stitch, collecting around my eyes and ears, but I didn't really care. I twisted the end into a ponytail and called it a decent hairstyle, twirling the end in my finger.

"Keolani!" A ragged voice called from the stairs. "Keolani! Help!"

I dropped my braid and ran out of the bathroom. Just down the hall, in the middle of the stairs was Pop-Pop.

"Pop-Pop!" I cried. "What are you doing?! You aren't supposed to climb the stairs on your own!" I stared down at the floor below, searching for his helper. "Where is Benito?"

Benito, Pop-Pop's caretaker, was an automaton Pop-Pop had created nearly 20 years ago, back when his mind was sound. The four-foot-tall robot consisted of old car parts, bronze, and about 60 AAA batteries. His only purpose was to care for the old man, and to make sure Pop-Pop stayed out of trouble. Clearly, Benito wasn't doing his job.

Pop-Pop shook his head. "I don't want some cursed robot walking me up the stairs! I want my Keolani." He smiled, reaching out his hand. "Now come on. Help your dear Kupuna Kāne up this darned staircase."

I smiled, huffing as I helped Pop-Pop up the stairs. He'd always referred to himself as Kupuna Kāne, even though it had never really stuck. The stubborn old man insisted on staying loyal to his Hawaiian heritage.

The 85-year-old man was maybe five feet tall, and had probably once been taller, had his back not been hunched over like a candy-cane. His once black hair and beard had turned ash grey, streaked with strands of white. Despite his tan weathered face filled with hundreds of wrinkles, Pop-Pop's brown eyes still sparkled with intelligence. Intelligence that now was encased in mindless chattering and crazy accusations.

"Come now, Keolani!" Pop-Pop cried. "You are a Keli'i! Show some strength, prove to me that those noodle arms can come in handy!"

"Gee." I grunted. "Thanks, Pop-Pop." I hefted him onto the top step. "Benito is supposed to keep you downstairs, where has he gone?"

"Bah! It's boring downstairs." Pop-Pop huffed. "Besides, I wanted to see my granddaughter." He smiled, hobbling over to a Plumeria tree growing next to the hallway window. He plucked a pink and white blossom, and brought it back to me, tucking it into my braid. "There. A lovely accessory for my precious little Hibiscus, no?"

"Pop-Pop." I said, tracing my fingertip around the petals of the Plumeria at the base of my braid. "You aren't allowed to come upstairs. It's too dangerous for you. It's better for you to stay downstairs, in your workshop, fiddling away with your...dealies."

Pop-Pop looked offended. "They are not *dealies*! They are inventions! Discoveries!"

I arched a brow, picking up a small item on the stairs that Pop-Pop had dropped from his pocket. It appeared to be a bronze lollipop, but when I pushed on the bottom, the top flared out, opening to reveal a small green gem inside. “What is this supposed to do then, hmmm?”

“Nothing!” Pop-Pop yanked it from my palm. He held it gingerly, smiling down at it. “It’s just...pretty.”

“What’s it called?”

“Not everything needs a name, Keolani.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ok, Pop-Pop. Now come on, let’s get you downstairs.” I reached for his elbow, but he whacked me with the base of his cane. The rubber covering bounced off my forearm painlessly, but I still frowned in distaste.

“No!” Pop-Pop shrieked. “I have business to attend to up here! No teenager shall stop me.” He glanced me over. “No weak, skinny teenager at that. Now come! Follow me!”

I followed him back to the bathroom. He dropped his cane on the floor and stared up at the mirror. “Ah!” He cried. “There it is!”

I stared at him, then at the mirror. “There is what?”

“The Opposite!”

I frowned. Pop-Pop rambled on quite a bit, and I had learned to turn a blind ear, but this was unusual, even for him. I stepped forward, taking Pop-Pop’s hand. “What is ‘the Opposite’?”

He pointed at his reflection. “There! Oh and look! There is another!” He pointed at my reflection. His eyes twinkled, smile lines appearing around his eyelids.

I smiled awkwardly. “Pop-Pop, those are us.”

“Oh no they are not!” Pop-Pop grinned. He tapped the mirror with his cane. “They are traps!”

“Traps?”

“Traps!” Pop-Pop repeated. He scratched his beard. “Keolani, be a dear and go fetch my prism. It’s inside my laboratory.”

I sighed, but decided not to argue. I was beginning to feel annoyed, but it was better for me to go downstairs and fetch his prism than it was for him to stumble down the steps.

I passed a mirror hanging on the wall as I walked down the stairs. I didn’t usually give it much thought; the mirror had been a family heirloom for decades. The gilded frame must’ve now been close to 100 years old. Though now, as I walked by, I thought I saw something in the reflection. A little flicker of movement, bent by light. When I turned back to look, nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. I shrugged, continuing on.

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On the far side of the house was a large iron door hidden behind the pantry. It was typically locked from the inside, but since Pop-Pop wasn’t currently inside, I was able to push it open without much trouble.

My footsteps echoed on the suspiciously squeaky-clean tile floor. I knew Pop-Pop loved to set traps everywhere, and ever since I got zapped by doorhandle trying to sneak in at night, I was wary with anything in the house. I was careful to avoid the dusty tiles, a typical telltale sign of traps.

Pop-Pop's laboratory was about the size of a school gymnasium. A large silver dome made up its roof, which opened so that he could study the stars at night. Cobwebs draped across the dome, which made sense, since Pop-Pop had long since forgotten the study of Astronomy. Wooden work tables and shelves lined the room, filled to the brim with spare parts and inventions. Some were covered in a thick layer of dust, as if the inventions on their surface had never been used beyond the day of their creation.

The whole room seemed dulled, from the silver dome to the inventions across the worktables. A few artifacts appeared to be clean and free of dust, but they bore no reflection in their unblemished metal, like Pop-Pop was afraid to shine them. The whole room mirrored my Pop-Pop's mindset, something that had once sparkled like a hundred suns, filled with potential, now tarnished and dim, a mere shell of what it once was.

I felt bad for Pop-Pop as I walked across the tile floor. This room had been the source of his dreams in his youth, but now he simply spent his time in here, watching the clock tick by. He hadn't come up with a reasonable invention in 15 years. Not since he'd been forced to take me on after my makuahine died.

One part of the room, next to the large iron door was filled from floor to ceiling with levers. Some of them were rusty and tarnished, while others appeared to shine, like Pop-Pop used them every day. I'd never bothered to learn what each one of them did.

I reached for an object sitting on a workbench. It was about the size of a fork and as thick as a quarter, the quartz that made up the prism was pale pink.

"Keolani!" Someone called from across the house. "Hurry!"

I grabbed the prism quickly and ran out of the room, shutting the heavy iron door behind me. It slammed on its hinges, echoing throughout the main floor.

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I tripped on the carpeted stairs as I sprinted up to the bathroom. My legs rubbed against rough fabric, and a burning sensation tingled in my kneecaps.

Pop-Pop was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, tapping his cane on the linoleum impatiently and rubbing his grey beard. "There you are! Whatever could've taken you so long?"

I handed him the quartz. "What are you doing, Pop-Pop?"

"The mirrors lie." Pop-Pop set the prism down on the counter. "They only show lies."

I laughed. "Pop-Pop, you need to think for a moment. Mirrors can't lie. Mirrors aren't alive. They never have been."

He arched a brow. "I will prove it to you, Keolani. You will see."

"Pop-Pop—"

"No! I insist!"



I sighed and stepped out of the bathroom. I muttered under my breath while running a hand through my hair. “Whatever happened to Benito? Where is he when I need him?”

Pop-Pop must’ve heard me, because he said, “I disabled him.”

“What?!”

“He was getting in the way. Besides, he can’t see them. He’s a robot!”

“See who?” I asked, begging for some sort of clarity.

“The Opposites.” Pop-Pop murmured. “Our evil reflections, they lead us to do terrible things. They’re capable of encasing our hearts in fear, insecurity, and carnage.” He pulled out a small silver disc, pressing a button in the centre. The disc expanded outwards and four legs popped out of the sides. Pop-Pop set the disc on the counter, placing the quartz on top. The prism began to glow.

This was beginning to get ridiculous. Pop-Pop was just having another one of his fits, it should pass. It always did. However, it appeared that this fit showed no sign of stopping.

Pop-Pop grabbed my shoulder. “Look, my little Hibiscus! Look closely, and you’ll see.”

I stared into the mirror. My reflection stared back at me, clearly unimpressed. However, the old man’s face lit up with joy and intrigue.

“Nothing is happening.” I said flatly, after a minute or so.

Pop-Pop’s shoulders slumped. “What—What happened? I saw the Opposite downstairs...it—it moved. It was alive!”

I smiled sadly, blowing a strand of black hair out of my eyes. “Pop-Pop...our reflections aren’t alive. You must’ve been mistaken.”

“But it was real!”

“It couldn’t have been.”

He sighed turning away. “Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps...I’m just the crazy old man you always say I am.”

“No, no, Pop-Pop. Don’t say that. You aren’t crazy.” I grasped his shoulders. “You’re...unique.” I turned him to face the mirror. “See, Pop-Pop? You are—”

My voice faltered. Pop-Pop was standing in front of the mirror somberly, his gaze downcast, and shoulders slumped, but his reflection...

His reflection was smiling right at me.

# The Present

It's just one of those days  
You'd rather be put in a haze  
Instead of crawling through this maze  
We call life

And I know I sound selfish  
I sound awful  
Life is a gift and this is the present  
And you should never deny a present as great as this one

But how can I love my present  
When the ribbon is suffocating me  
Pulling tighter each time I gasp for air

The name tag is all wrong  
Sometimes I wonder  
If this present was meant for someone else  
Not me  
Maybe I don't deserve this gift at all



# Jonah and the Big Backpack

“Last Tuesday I tried to kill myself again. Not to say I do it often. I’ve been on an upward trend recently, with my depression. Depressed people agree that days can be loosely categorized with ‘this was a bad day,’ and ‘this day was okay.’ After a month or so of okay days, I got in my car after work and didn’t even think about it; I followed the speed limit for a while, went a little faster on the highway, and then pulled righter than I knew I had to and rammed into a streetlight.

God has a running joke with me. I heard a pastor say that He makes every morning exactly new, never repeating the dew that drips off leaves, nor a single beam from the sun that rises—a testament of His being pleased in creation. But I think He laughs at me the same way He laughed at Jonah. He was spat out, discarded on dry land, and I walked out of my busted car without a single scratch on my body.

When I was nine, I packed a bag and ran away from home. It was on the Monday I had a math test at school. I did all the homework and finished the practice questions, but when I woke up before my alarm rang, it felt like someone’s hand had reached into my chest and crushed my heart like it was an aluminum can. My mom looked at me strange that morning, maybe thinking that my backpack looked fuller than usual. I rushed through breakfast to hide my nervousness and mumbled quietly, ‘Goodbye, mom,’ before I went out the door. I walked my usual route at first, feeling like all strength had left my body, then something switched in me, and I turned the other way and just started running. At nine, my legs, little as they were, could run faster than my torso could catch up with sometimes, and I ran and ran, and I remember feeling so free, keeping my mouth open to eat the adrenaline in the air. I left my neighbourhood and ten minutes later I had no idea where I was. This satisfied me. I stopped running and contented myself with walking, thinking

that the world looked so different now. Then I saw my father's Nissan signal right and stop next to me.

That car ride home was only three minutes long. When my mom saw my dad and me, standing at the front door, she was confused, of course, so my dad provided context: 'Forgot my work bag. Saw him walking down Turner Street.' I never liked it when my mom yelled. She was furious, switching between telling me how angry she was, to how grieved she was. Then she caught on and demanded to know if I was even planning on going to school that morning. I've had this stupid sheepish look since I was a kid, and I'm sure I was giving it then. When she grabbed my backpack, I begged, as if I had any say left, 'No mom, please, mom. Don't touch my backpack. Please, please, don't touch my backpack.' She knelt on one knee, unzipped my bag, and pulled out my clothes by fistfuls—some pants, some t-shirts, some hoodies—then impatiently turned it upside down and shook out its contents. I have never been more embarrassed than I was, seeing my toothbrush and toothpaste, two plastic bottles of water, a pen, and my Velcro wallet fall onto my living room carpet. The last thing that came out, with a thud, was my Bible. My mom scoffed. 'Christian boys,' she said, 'don't run away from home.'"

I look at Joanna for the first time since I started reading my note. I nod and allow the paper to fold in its crease. "That's it," I say. She's wearing the empathetic look that therapists probably go to workshops for. "Thank you trusting me with that story," she says, carefully. We sit opposite one another in a small room with a coffee table between us, stocked with a tissue box, crayons, colour pencils, and a few pieces of paper. She has her legs crossed, to support the notebook on her knee. I can't tell if her glasses make her eyes look smaller or larger, but she hardly blinks. I don't know why, but I am so angry right now. I feel stupid for telling her that story—I feel like she wasn't even listening.

“Can you tell me what you’re thinking about right now?” She asks, with a steady confidence that sounds cocky to me. I look away from her and stare at the coffee table. Resentment rises in me; I have to say something.

“Nah, stop that,” I say, and I shake my head. She looks at me, questioning, so I continue. “I don’t know who you think you’re helping right now, but I don’t want to hear all this therapist jargon. I’ve been here before. Met with therapists like you. This kind, gentle, encouraging shit doesn’t work for me.”

I look her in the eyes to take ownership of what I have done. I can’t tell what she’s thinking. She doesn’t even look phased. “Close your eyes,” she says. What? I think, then say it out loud. “Close your eyes,” she says once more. So I do. “Tell me that story again, about you when you were nine, walk me through it,” I hear her tell me. My heart is pounding now, and I don’t know why. I lick my lips.

“When I was nine, I packed my bag and ran away from home. It was the day of my math exam, and I woke up early and felt something tight in my chest. I clenched my teeth and curled into my body on my bed, but nothing would get rid of it. So, I got up and I just shoved stuff into my bag. First some clothes, then some pens on my desk, then I went into the bathroom and threw my toothbrush and toothpaste in there. I put all the cash I had in my wallet. Then I thought I’d be thirsty, so I put two bottles of water in my bag,” I say, speaking as I saw myself do it. I loosen my eyelids, but before I open them again, I hear her tell me to keep them closed. “Okay, well, you want the whole story?” I ask, looking at the blackness of my sockets. “Yes,” she replies. I sigh and reluctantly continue. “I go downstairs and eat my breakfast, hoping my mom wouldn’t notice how fidgety I was, because she tends to notice things like this. She looked at me weird, so I rushed out

of the house, and said goodbye to her before I left. I guess I thought I'd never see her again." I stop. The words won't come out.

"Go on," Joanna encourages.

"I..." I start, then swallow, and lick my lips again. "I went out, walked toward my bus stop, then turned, and started running the other way. I just started running, I didn't even care where I was going, I just didn't want to see my house or my neighbourhood, I just wanted to run into nothingness." I chuckle, "Found out I only made it to Turner Street. When I ran out of energy, I saw my dad's car come toward me and I knew I was in a lot of trouble." I smile, "It's a funny story now, but it felt like the end of the world, really." I say that to lighten the mood, but it feels inappropriate, somehow. I continue, "So, I get home and my dad and I are standing at the front door, and my mom—"

Joanna interrupts me. "No," she says, "you're forgetting something."

I laugh with the air out of my nose. "I'm not." I open my eyes to see her at the same place, legs crossed, pen on notebook, notebook on knee.

"Close your eyes," she tells me.

"I'm not forgetting anything," I assert.

"Close your eyes," she says again.

"I'm not forgetting anything!" I say again, angrier, more defensive than I intended.

"Close your eyes," she says, with a sternness in her tone I've never heard before. I close them. "Now," she says, "tell me, what happened in your father's car?" There's a ball in my stomach I don't remember swallowing. I wince my eyes shut.

"Nothing," I say, "we didn't say a word." I know I didn't convince her. I said it with no conviction.

“Okay,” she says, “then tell me what happened when you got home.”

She must not have noticed. “I go home, and my mom starts yelling at me and takes all the stuff out of my bag and my Bible, from church on Sunday, falls out, and she tells me that Christian boys don’t run away from home,” I recite quickly, because I’m not even seeing what’s happening anymore. The feeling in my chest is getting harder to ignore. I feel like I’m in my bed again on that Monday morning. My palms are clammy. I feel like the air is bracketing around me. I can’t breathe. I feel like I’m going to throw up. I feel like I’m going to die.

“Hey,” Joanna says, “long, deep breaths. Now.” I inhale shortly, my breath shaking as it comes up my chest into my nose, and I let it go all at once. “Again,” she instructs me. I do it again, my stomach quivering as the air comes up and out, but slower this time. “Once more,” I hear. I take one more deep breath and hold it at the top of myself for a while, and let it go, slow as I can through my mouth.

I raise my hands to my face and sob now. I sob out my mouth and breathe in through my nose, my chest shivering. I can’t stop. I sob and shake and sob and shake, and that is how I breathe for the next five minutes. “Oh, god,” I groan, and I think of nothing, but say it again and again, “oh god, oh, god, oh, god.” My body adjusts itself, my shoes on the couch, my hands in my face, and my hands against my knees, to hold me up. A while passes, before I come down. I stop sobbing, I stop shaking, and I take my hands off my face and wrap them around my legs.

“You’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay,” Joanna repeats, and the assurance blankets over me and calms me like warm soup. I look at her and feel a weight pull my eyes down. I give in and close them.

“Tell me, as slow as you need to, what happened in your father’s car,” she says, her voice like melted butter to my ears.



“I’m in my father’s Nissan,” I say, picturing it. “The radio is playing the oldies, I can’t tell you what song, but I’d recognize it if it were playing. It’s soft, though. The car smells like his cologne, the one mom bought for him. It smells like what a man would wear, it’s deep, woody, masculine. My feet don’t even reach the ground. My seatbelt feels tighter than usual. He’s pissed. I can feel it. He’s in his button up, long-sleeve blue collared shirt, with a black tie that has a pattern I always thought looked like germs. We don’t speak at first—that was true. But then he breaks the silence. He tells me that...” I stop to wipe my tears against the ball of my palm. “He told me that I should go to Hell.” I can’t help crying, crying so much. “He told me that if I wanted to leave my life behind, there are better ways, like drowning in a swimming pool. He told me I should go to Hell.” I cry even more. My words come out with a whimper, “Who says that to a kid?”

I open my eyes again, because I need to see Joanna’s face, and hear Joanna’s voice. She has tears in her eyes, like me, and we sit there in silence, and I will for her to say something. We sit there still, letting our tears make their way down our cheeks. “Thank you,” she says, after a minute of us just crying, “for trusting me with that story.”

## The World Kinda Ended and now I Gotta Deal With It

*The world ended 9 years ago, I was 8 when it happened. It didn't totally end but 45% of the population was wiped out from disease, so it basically did. Then shortly after, people who we call Oddities started popping up. Oddities are people who involuntarily acquired supernatural abilities after they experience trauma. After the world kinda ended my father and I became scavengers through Northern Europe. A couple months ago my dad died in an explosion. In that accident I got banged up pretty badly. But I was lucky enough that some peacemakers in the area were alerted to the explosion and I made it out ok. I ended up liking it there with the people who saved my life and they apparently liked me back because they recruited me to their team.*

*Now some important people, there's me, I'm Olive, I'm 17 and I don't really know what I'm doing but I get by. There's Isamu. He's 18 and has his shit together. Alecs is cool, he's tall and likes to wear man buns. And Heidi, tall, blonde, strong, and gorgeous.*

*So in short, the world ended now I have to deal with it.*

-

Dinner time, my favourite. I helped myself to some pickled herring, bread, and some potatoes. I sit next to Isamu and across from Alecs. Alecs sits eating his food while Isamu reads a book.

"Hey." I say, making my presence known.

"Olive, seriously, you don't need to say 'hey' everytime you see one of us."

Isamu shakes his head.

"You didn't have to say that, Isamu, just eat your carrots." Alecs says with a bit of attitude. Isamu looks back down to his book, neglecting the carrots on his plate.

"Anyways, have either of you seen Heidi? I didn't see her when I was getting food so I thought she would be here with you guys.

"She's probably training, she'll be here once she notices the time." Alecs says.

Just then, the alarm went off. Great! another attack.

"SERIOUSLY? I didn't get to eat yet!!" I whine.

"You'll just have to eat later." Isamu says, putting down his book.

"Come on, let's go get our shit." Alecs says. I get up grudgingly, my food is gonna be cold by the time we get back. Alecs leads us to the weapon room, Isamu and I run behind him.

"Everyone ready to head out?" Isamu calls out. Just then I got a message from Heidi on my wrist band.

'I'm already on my way to the village.'

I guess we'll meet her there then.

Isamu leads us all out where we each grab a one-wheel and we head off to the village.

The village is already in chaos, small fires were being put out, multiple homes destroyed, and more on the way.

An actual attack, they didn't make a mess of things and leave like normal. They were actively attacking.

The squad got right away to fighting back, arrows, throwing knives, some of the more bulky ones were doing hand to hand combat.

Where do I go now? I've never been in this situation.

"OLIVE!!" Isamu calls. He's lifting rubble away from someone trapped under it.

"Oh shit." I say running over to help Isamu lift the rubble away.

"C'mon there's a lot to be done here." Isamu says helping the once trapped man up.

"Has there ever been an active attack before?" I ask.

"Only a few times before, but never this heavy." Isamu says, starting to jog around to find more people that need help. We turn a corner and find someone, wearing a dark hooded cloak and a bow. No arrows. Shit. SHIT, SHIT, SHIT, SHIT, SHIT.

"NOPE." I try to turn around, Isamu stops me from behind me.

"You can't run, they saw you, stay calm I'll go from over." Isamu whispers quickly. His stealth in action is insane. The archer takes their aim with an empty bow, and a dark and sharp looking arrow forms. What type of shit have I gotten trapped into?

The archer holds the drawn bow still, the arrow getting bigger and more lethal looking. Isamu, you better do something fast.

Just as the archer is about to release the arrow towards me, Isamu shoots with an ordinary arrow from above and behind. They're done. Fallen over, dead. I think.

"Thanks.." I say.

"I hate doing that." Isamu shakes his head.

"Isamu!" Alecs comes running.

"Alecs!" Isamu says in relief. The two embrace for a second then let go of each other.

"Alecs, have you seen Heidi?" I ask quickly.

"I just saw her, I'll help you find her if you want." Alecs offers.

"That'd be great." I say, Alecs leads us to where Heidi might be, Isamu wouldn't leave Alecs' side.

"There's a bit of a break in the battle, we have the numbers here." Alecs says. "Don't worry about Heidi, she can hold her own best out of a lot of us." Not too much running around later I see Heidi helping people in the chaos.

"HEIDI!!" I called.

"OLIVE!" she noticed me.

"I'm so glad you're safe!" I say.

"I'm glad you're safe too." she smiles.

"Oh let me help you with that." I say looking at the rubble she's going through to find possible survivors. Isamu and Alecs join in on another pile of rubble nearby.

"Wa-woh!!" we hear Isamu yell.

"What the-?"

"Let's go." Heidi says. We run around trying to find where Isamu and Alecs are. After running around a few only slightly damaged houses, we find Isamu and Alecs both being held at arrow point by another archer.

"Don't make us do something we don't have to do." Alecs says with no weapons drawn. Heidi draws her sword. I don't know what to do. There's still an arrow that can be easily released at any moment pointed at Isamu, Alecs is trying to be a peacemaker, and Heidi is threatening them with death.

"We can work this out with words, do you want to stop the break in the battle right now?" Alecs says with his hands up. The arrow is still pointed at Isamu.

\*VVVIP\*

"NOO!"

Alecs is on the ground, bleeding.

"NO!" Isamu's eyes bug out. Some of the nearby barrels filled with water shake. Water expels out of them with great control, as if someone took control and is using them as an extension of their arm.

Isamu.

His eyes have darkened, he looks scarier than usual. The archer is encased in water and picked up. He smacks the archer around until the body is limp. The water drops and the lifeless body falls to the side.

Then Isamu rushes over to Alecs' limp state with panic that I've never seen from him before.

"NOOOOOOOO!!!" Isamu cries down over Alecs.

"Olive, get a medic." Heidi says. I don't even know what happened to him. It all happened so fast.

I have to go, I have to help. Medic. Stay calm, get a medic, get one fast. Run as fast as you can. Get someone's help.

So many people aren't far from here. There's gotta be a team of medics. There has to be.

"Olive, what's wrong, what happened." one of the medics asks.

"Alecs. There was an archer, and." I say a bit out of breath.

"Take us." the medic says picking up the stretcher while signaling to another nearby medic. I run around to find where I left them. Isamu is by Alecs, Alecs is passed out if not worse.

"He's still breathing." Heidi says.

"NOOOO DON'T TAKE HIM AWAY FROM ME!!!!" Isamu cries when the medics try to get Alecs onto the stretcher.

"C'mon Isamu, they have to take him so he'll be ok." I try to coax.

"No no no no no. They can't take him without me." Isamu mumbles.

"Come on Samu, let's let Alecs go and get help." Heidi says, almost picking Isamu up and dragging him away.

"N-NOOOOOO!! NOOOOOO!!!" Isamu screams. It hurts to see him in such a low place. He's trying to get away. I've never seen him like this before, and I doubt I'll see it again.

"No no no, we're gonna let him go." Heidi hushes.

"Noooo." Isamu cries.

"Olive, do you wanna take him to the base?" Heidi mouths. I nod.

"Isamu, let's go, I'll take you back to the base." I say, reaching for his shoulder. Isamu is completely silent. He's completely heart broken. He gets up in silence with his head hung.

In the most agonizing silence I've ever suffered, we start our walk back to the base. "So that's what it takes to awaken a power." Isamu croaks. I don't even know what to say.

"I-" I can't even form words.

"SAY SOMETHING DAMMIT!!" Isamu yells. "The silence hurts too much." "I don't know what to say."

"TALK ABOUT SOMETHING, DISTRACT ME CAUSE' AS SOON AS I GET BACK I WON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO FOCUS ON BUT HIM!!" Isamu cries out.

"Isamu, look up."

"It's-" he snuffles

"It's snowing." I say.

"I thought it was done snowing this year." Isamu says, almost amazed. "I guess mother nature decided otherwise." I say more quietly. "Something's wrong." Isamu snaps his attention away from the snow. "What?"

"It's a distraction. It's unlikely to snow so late in the year. And neither of our breaths are freezing. This is staged."

"Ice Oddity??"

"Or weather. How far are we from the base?" Isamu asks.

"Maybe a few minutes run?"

"You run back to the village, find Heidi and tell her what's happening, she'll prepare everyone there for another possible attack. I'll go back to the base and get any of the other fighters." Isamu says about ready to run back.

"Got it."

Isamu and I run off in opposite directions.

Not too far of a run right? It didn't take too long for us to walk this far, if I run I'll be there in a minute or so.

"Heidi! HEIDI!!" I call. Where the hell did she go? It's been like 15 minutes.

"HEIDI!!!!!!" I scream.

"Olive?"

"DON'T SNEAK UP ON ME!! YOU SCARED THE CRAP OUTTA ME!" I yell after Heidi snuck up on me.

"I'm sorry, what is it?" Heidi says with her hand reaching for mine.

"Not now Heidi, there was snow, someone is using a power to make a diversion, we need to ready everyone for a second wave of an attack." I say.

"I already noticed the snow in the forest, everyone is preparing and getting anyone who isn't already, out of the village." Heidi says.

"Oh, ok.." I say out of breath from running.

"I found something I think you should see."

"What is it?" I ask.

"Just follow me." Heidi says, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me into the opposite side of the forest.

"Heidi what's gotten into you?? Stop you're hurting me."

"It's not far, hurry up." Heidi says. If I don't hurry up I'm going to get my shoulder pulled out of its socket.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see we're almost thereee!" Heidi says. Heidi is never like this, she normally would have slowed down. What's gotten into her?

"There, we're here." Heidi says.

"You've dragged me to a.... cave?" I ask, rubbing my shoulder.

"Step inside." Heidi says with a grin. What are you doing? I step in, I don't want her to keep pulling me around.

"Do you feel it? It's exhilarating isn't it." Heidi almost circles me like a vulture looking at roadkill.

"I mean I guess, it feels powerful here." I describe, it's almost like I'm absorbing strength a little by each moment.

"That's funny, it's normally only oddities that can feel it." Heidi inhales.

"Heidi, are you an oddity?" I ask with a raised eyebrow.

"You're a smart girl, I'd hoped you'd pick up on it eventually. I didn't think it would take you so long though." Heidi says, her voice changing from the sweet but stern tone to devious and drawn out.

"What's your power then?" I ask while making sure to sound more calm and not let my rising levels of fear enter my voice.

"You'll find out soon enough my dear," Heidi smiles. "I wonder what yours is if you feel that buzz from here."

"What do you mean what power I have, I had a negative test for powers."

"Only someone who has a positive test can feel it. Maybe somehow you haven't awoken your power yet.. Strange, I woulda thought it would be awakened after what happened with your dad." she says in a more neutral pouty voice. She sounds out of her mind.

"You're a liar, I'M NOT AN ODDITY!!"

"Well you'll never learn what it is I guess." she says, what does she mean? "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" I scream.

"I wish I didn't have to, but even without a power you're becoming a threat to me." "I'M NOT A THREAT TO ANYONE HEIDI!!!" I feel tears starting to run down my face. "Oh but you are. I'm really sorry to have to do this to you, but you've given me no other choice." she says with her back turned to me.

"Heidi, please."

"Don't cry, it won't hurt, it'll only be a moment. Now remember, I love you, and always will. I have to do this." Heidi wipes away the tears streaming down my face.

"Heidi." I'm defeated, I'm going to die.

"Before I kill you, I do need to do something." she leans towards me and plants a gentle kiss on my lips. I want to like this, but I know what she's about to do. Still I can't help but close my eyes and kiss her back.

"When you're gone Olive, remember to smile down on me just once. Farewell My Love." Heidi says with tears rolling down her own face, then mumbles a few words I cannot hear. But nothing happens.

"Did you do something?" I ask.

"No.... NO!! THIS ISN'T POSSIBLE!!! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD!!!!" Heidi screams. Is that her power?

"NO THIS ISN'T POSSIBLE YOU'RE IMMUNE!!! YOU HAVE IMMUNITY!!!" she shrieks.

Suddenly Heidi falls. Arrows in her back, there's no way someone could survive how deep it is.

"Heidi..." I say weakly.

Isamu appears from the entrance, he must've called to shoot her down, he's the second in command from her and she's on the top, he must have.

"She's gone." I say.

"Let's take her body back to the base, she can get a proper burial at the very least." Isamu says, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"She was going to kill me." I say, horror almost echoes from my voice.

"I saw, I wasn't going to do it, but I saw you in danger, and she would be a threat to everyone else."

"I can't believe she wanted to kill me." I mumble.

"Let's get you back to the base." Isamu says, guiding me out.

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Multiple weeks later

Heidi's gone, Isamu took over as head general. Alecs is still in and out of consciousness.

Everything is so strange.

It's still hard to even think, I have powers that saved my life. Had they not been awoken I would have been dead before Isamu was even there to stop it. All I can think about is the fact that I should be dead right now.

Heidi got a nice burial, it's all a blur. I can't remember much after she was gone.

It's crazy, I didn't even know her long, but I feel so broken without her. "OLIVE!!"

Isamu yells. "GET YOUR HEAD OUT OF THE CLOUDS THERE'S BEEN A BREACH!!"

Well fuck, this is just great.

# Windows

I look deep into your eyes,  
They're slightly too big for your face.  
I never noticed before,  
Or did I just not care?

The eyes are the windows to the soul.  
And your windows are as transparent as the tears I shed over you.  
Your soul is too infinite for the finite bounds of your body,  
That it's escaping through your eyes.

My feelings for you escape through my mouth.  
Through my words.  
Though I could never utter these words to you.

So, I remain peering through the windows and wish,  
Wish that one day you could see me,  
Rather than see right through me.



# New Normal

They don't tell you about the bit where it becomes normal.

Wake up in the morning. Shower with the special soap that makes your skin dry and itchy, because your scent can travel far with the right wind. After your shower, check for any open wounds or sores. If there are any, you gotta go to the office and get those completely bandaged – they can smell blood, too (whole new protocol for periods). Put on long sleeves that can tuck into gloves, and long pants that tuck into boots (yes, it's hot in summer. You just have to deal with it). Eat breakfast, or go pick up rations if you're out of food. Walk past the chain-link fence that used to be so horrifying, but now just makes everyone feel numb.

I think I saw my aunt behind the fence yesterday, though it was hard to tell with all the bloating. It was only for a few seconds, anyway. One of the military guys shot her in the head and she got swallowed up by the hoard. Not one of the military people I know. I think his name's Jake? Something with a J. I didn't tell mom about Auntie Sheila. She already knows.

They don't tell you about the smell, either. It's disgusting, hundreds of rotting corpses walking around. Most people wear scarves wrapped around their mouths and noses when they go outside. I saw a hack about putting lavender oil on the scarves, and that really helps. I'm getting sick of lavender, though. If you stay far back from the edge of town, where the fence is, that helps too. You're supposed to stay at least 5 feet back at all times, because sometimes they reach through. That's partly why the guards are there. No one's allowed out – supplies get airdropped in. They curved the fence outward so it's harder for things to climb in, and soldiers pick off the stragglers that do start climbing.

Sometimes you hear stories of idiots with guns who get out and think they can singlehandedly shoot them all. Ah well. What can you do? Except watch the horde outside the fence slowly thin, and say "Maybe next summer". That's the prediction. Next summer.

The terror wore off after a while, the shock. The "exciting" bits - the running for our lives, the scrounging for food, the watching loved ones die because there's *nothing we can do* – that's all over. The horror of change already happened, the adjustment period is over. Now it's just this.

At least the internet still works. The misinformation isn't great, and all the hate speech. Of course people got more racist. Why wouldn't they? But it's nice, other than that. Talking to people feels good. I got a new therapist after my old one got eaten, and she's great. She says it's been hard for everyone, these past three years. It's totally understandable.

Everyone says that. That it's been hard, but there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Things will go back to normal soon. I wish I remembered what normal felt like, because I'm starting to think it's this.

Showering three times a day so we don't attract more, not going near the fence, wearing long sleeves. Shooting the ones who get infected. Anything's normal if you give it enough time.

I walk away from the fence.

Author's note: The following is original fiction inspired by Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party."

*"...Laura remembered the accident again. She wanted to tell him. If Laurie agreed with the others, then it was bound to be all right."*

— Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden Party" (1921)

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## Laurie's Party

The lane was horrid, of course. Holding his pilfered flowers by the dripping stems, Laurie marched them down to the dreary little cottage that housed Marion, her father the carter, her mother and four children besides. The cottage was hardly a home, labouring under the weight of its own shoddy roof and puffing sad shreds of athsmatic smoke out the chimney. Mud squelched under Laurie's shoes when he snuck around the back, threatening to spatter on his party trousers.

"Canna lilies for the miss," said Laurie, upon meeting Marion in what was ostensibly a garden. He presented the bouquet with a flourish. "I've swiped them from the florist."

Marion sniffed and made as if to brush wrinkles from her dress, though the stubborn wrinkles were not dissuaded.

"What'll I do with lilies? Stick them in the dirt? You cut off the root bits anyway."

Laurie recoiled, clutching his darling lilies to his chest. Stick them in the dirt! The dirt! Flowers such as these belonged in a grand vase on a grand table—in a florist's shop window!

"Well / haven't cut them off," said Laurie, faintly shocked. "That's what the florist is for. In any case, they're for you." And Laurie handed over the bouquet awkwardly, afraid for what Marion might do with them. Luckily for the lillies, she only stuck her pointy nose in the blooms and gave the whole thing a hearty sniff.

"Smells nice," Marion pronounced. "Come back, if you want." And she led Laurie further into the garden, past a sickly patch of cabbages and a pit of mud. Laurie hopped up to his usual seat on a portion of crumbling ledge that surrounded the garden so that his shoes wouldn't dirty, and Marion faced him, staring fixedly.

"Aren't you having a party anyway?"

"Mother is."

"I see." Marion nodded sagely. "You want me to come. That's why you brought can-lillies."

Laurie nearly tumbled off the ledge. He caught himself and laughed. Could you imagine! Marion at his mother's garden-party! In her wrinkled dress!

"No! No, dear."

"Won't it be boring without me?"

Laurie thought for a moment. "Awfully, terribly boring. But you haven't dressed for a party, I'm afraid. A party isn't any fun at all if you haven't worn your party clothes."

"You could lend me your party clothes."

For the second time, he nearly lost his balance—this time picturing Marion in a three-piece suit. What a shocking girl, thought Laurie. Didn't she understand? Clearly not. Marion thought that houses were meant to look like barns and that flowers were meant to grow in the dirt. Laurie shook his head and hopped off the ledge.

"No invitation, I'm frightfully sorry." He held up his empty hands, skirting around Marion, and then slipped his watch out of his vest pocket. "I say! I must be off. Later, Marion."

"Stay a while!"

"Can't darling! Sorry!"

And Laurie dashed out of the garden—what was a garden without a pond, anyway?—only ten minutes after he had arrived, in such a hurry that mud splashed all over his shoes. The only consolation was that the lane was perhaps a tad less sightly walking out than walking in, but that was only because you knew you were leaving. He still shivered, passing each sagging, smoking cottage. What a way to live! And Marion! What a lovely creature—but so unrefined.

There was that quiet thrum in the air that vibrated of imminent festivities when Laurie arrived back at the house, maids and workmen chattering as they set about arranging tables and chairs, plates and platters laden with porcelain and pastries. The marquee had already gone up, and the band was contentedly plucking away in the corner. Lunch was on, surely, and Laurie crept inside to change his shoes and coat.

He shouted a hello at little Laura as he went in and made a big show of admiring her hat. His sister was a girl who understood perfectly how to have a party. Mother had done well with Laura. It was a shame that Marion's mother hadn't done the same.

Little Laura squealed and ran right up to the bottom of the stairs wringing her hands like she did when she had something very important to say. She didn't say anything, though, and bounded off, smiling ridiculously under the floppy brim of her party hat. Laurie dressed, and when he left the house, the garden-party guests had begun to trickle in through the gate.

"Hallo, sir!" he hailed a portly gentleman who frequented Father's office, and chatted and mingled, always a small sandwich in hand—and if not, one of those horribly delightful ices—until dusk. It was then that there seemed to be some small commotion occurring between Laura, Mother and Father, and Laurie, who was feeling thoroughly pacified by all those little sandwiches, felt he should not interfere. He wandered over to cook, who was hovering around the marquee, surveying her remaining desserts.

"What-ever has gotten into that girl?" said Laurie.

Cook shook her head, clucking like a hen. "Horrible accident, my dear. That unfortunate family on the lane, just below here? That carter boy—dead. A horse accident, I hear. Horrible."

“Well,” said Laurie, feeling suddenly as though he could not move his limbs. He had the urge to brush invisible dust motes from his pants, to rebutton his coat. He felt very not-quite-right. As though his vest suddenly did not fit. He checked his watch. “Well.”

“Horrible,” sighed Cook and shook her head as she hefted a platter of cream puffs off to the house.

How inconvenient, thought Laurie. How inconvenient. Now he felt terrible that he had not brought Marion along to the garden-party. She could have worn Laura’s things and borrowed a hat from Mother. How awful was it to know that a party was underway just next door but that you had not been invited? How inconvenient, that Marion’s horrible father had mis-steered his horse—and perhaps there had been drink involved, who really knew—on the very day that Laurie had declined to bring Marion to a garden-party!

“Laurie!” shouted Jose, traipsing up to the marquee. “Laura’s going to those terrible cottages! You ought to go with her, Laurie!”

“Can’t—” Go down to the lane? And see Marion? Wasn’t Marion probably hysterical—wouldn’t she probably be sobbing and moaning and cursing Laurie for not inviting her to the garden-party? He didn’t want tears on his coat—wool couldn’t handle saltwater. “Can’t, darling. Sorry, can’t.”

## FREEDOM'S JUST ANOTHER WORD

"Stop! George! Stop!" A woman runs down the hallway, panic in her voice. I step out of my cousin Jane's room at the Autumn View Health Care Facility to watch the scenario unfold. The woman, a personal aid worker, gasps as she continues to pursue a man, an older man, slight build, his lips clenched together in determined concentration. Shoulders hunched, he pushes slippered feet along the carpet as fast as he can propel the wheelchair he occupies.

Close behind, he's followed by a woman, also in a wheelchair. A brown fedora tilted to one side of her head lends her a certain saucy look. Sparkly green New Balance runners are firmly planted on the foot rest of the wheelchair. Wizen, scarecrow arms turn the large, rubber wheels with all the might she can muster.

Both wheelchairs are headed with their resolute occupants directly to the emergency exit of the appropriately named facility, the last residence for those ravaged by age or infirmity. George, the leader of the intended escape picks up speed as he sees his goal within reach. The care-giver left behind in the wheelchair's dust, leans against the wall, her pleas barely a whisper.

A mere few meters from the escape door, George comes to an abrupt halt. His slippers dig into the carpet. He is confronted by my daughter who's also come out to witness the bid for freedom. "George," she says, "You don't want to bust out of here today. It's freezing out there. You don't have a jacket. Turn around. Wait for a warmer day." George sits quietly, appearing to consider the advice he's received. Fedora Lady stops the wheels on her chair and sets the brake. She frowns at the unwelcome intrusion into a plan so close to fulfillment. "I'm going to bomb this place," she shouts at the top of her lungs. "I'm breaking out. No one should have to live like this."

My cousin Jane, a recent resident of Autumn View is in her room nearby. Unaware of the thwarted escape plan, she listens to Fedora Lady's tirade. Taking pride in her often expressed support for the underdogs of the world, Jane shouts out encouragement, "Right on, sister. I'm with you." My daughter and I burst into laughter. "Well, that's Jane for you," I say. The flustered caregiver catches up with the wannabee escapees, shoots a glaring glance in our direction and points her wayward wards back to their rooms.

Jane and her older sister Alice, both well into their late 80s were admitted to the facility in July of 2017. Alice was close to death due to long-festering sores on her legs which turned septic. Jane, in a wheelchair, could no longer remain in their apartment on her own. Settled in a room close to her dying sister, Jane spent hours stroking Alice's hand, at her side to her last breath. Our family provided as much comfort as we could, knowing there was little else that we could do.

For many weeks after her sister's death, Jane, overwhelmed, remained in a state of confusion. She had never handled financial matters, those having been taken care of, by her now deceased sister. She had no knowledge of anything important pertaining to her new situation. As her closest remaining relatives, my daughters, Laura and Lynda, with diligent detective work, helped locate Alice's valid will and all the financial information needed to secure Jane's future. My daughters' efforts uncovered enough money to allow Jane the privilege of happily living in the largest unit in the facility.

Back in Jane's room, Laura and I, still chuckling about the thwarted escape plan resume the visit. I allow the conversation to continue around me. I watch my cousin enjoying a cup of dark Tim Horton's coffee. She takes a sip and smiles. Raising the cup to us she says, "Thanks.

This is real coffee. Not like the church coffee they serve here.” Her smile invokes precious memories of many summer visits to my American cousins.

Our mothers were sisters. My mother, Antonina emigrated from Poland to Canada. Her sister Aniela emigrated to the United States. There never was any explanation as to how this unfolded but I’ve always been grateful for my American relatives. Summer vacation in my childhood began with the excitement of boarding a train, the TH&B from the downtown station in Hamilton. I knew that at the end of what always seemed like the never-ending trip I would be welcomed with open arms and hearts by my cousins. For the best week of my summer vacation I was a little princess and I relished every moment.

It was Jane, who, when I was young, took me to Sattler’s Department store on Broadway in Buffalo. “Pick out any doll you like.” As I got older, it was Jane who said, “Come on kid, I’ll buy you a lipstick. But it has to be a light shade.” It was Jane who was bridesmaid at my wedding and godmother to my daughter Lynda. Jane has always been a large part of my life, the big sister I never had. It is Jane, sitting in her wheelchair, a resident at Autumn View, the last stop on the road of life. I’m not sure how to handle it.

Today is our annual Christmas visit. We bring Jane’s favourites, the coffee she loves, a box of timbits and chocolate covered plums imported from Poland. The Christmas cactus on the window sill, brought on a previous visit, struggles to live. Maybe, it’s just that it has a sense of where it is. Parts of it are dried up. Other parts have given up and fallen off. Any hopes of seeing blooms are dashed. Jane points out a large poinsettia, a gift from the family of a newly departed resident across the hall. “I prayed for that lady to die,” says my cousin. “She was suffering terribly.” The room stands empty.



I join in on the conversation flowing around me. Many happy memories of past years and Christmases are shared. We're all aware of how quickly things change in our lives. Before we leave, Jane and I join voices in our rendition of a favourite Polish Christmas carol. Part of a long-standing tradition, we express a hope that we'll share this experience for many more years "Come back soon," Jane calls out as we leave. She knows we will.

All the wheelchairs in Autumn View are lined up in the hallways. Each one, a sentinel, guards the entry to a resident's room. There is no indication of any plans for escape. George sits quietly, feet ready to propel him to the dining room. Fedora Lady smiles and adjusts her hat when Laura stops to tell her how lovely she looks. At this moment, there's only the anticipation of enjoying the next meal.

Jane has chosen not to go. She doesn't like her dining partners. Having heard the ladies label her 'Princess Leia', I sense a dislike on both sides. "If you don't like those women, ask to be moved." I advise her. "Nah, it wouldn't matter. I don't like any of those women." She remains alone in her room at the end of the escape corridor.

As we leave, I hear a murmur, passing from wheelchair to wheelchair. It's reminiscent of a children's game I remember. Whisper a word in the ear of the kid next to you. Laugh uproariously at the word the last kid says aloud. It's never the word that started out. I read the menu hanging on the cork board outside the dining room. Today's dinner is Beef on Weck, Crunchy Onion Rings and Lemon Pie for dessert. I wonder if that's what the last person in line will hear, or if it will even matter.

The hallways to the exit of the facility seem very long as I follow my family, hoping for the shortest route to freedom. I try to ignore the cries of residents unable to join those fortunate enough to be heading to the dining room. A woman yells out, "Get me out of this bed. They

come in and they leave. They never help me.” She repeats it over and over...a mantra. I wonder if she ever tires or gives up. Perhaps, only when sleep takes over. Others simply choose to utter the word ‘help’ over and over.

We add our signatures to the ‘out’ list at the front desk. Are the overseers of Autumn View afraid someone will actually choose to remain? I push the door open and pause. I welcome the cold air on my face, the crunchy snow under my feet, the ability to walk out and keep going. It may just be, George and Fedora Lady are wise in their own unique understanding of Janis Joplin’s observation that ‘freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.’

#### NOTES

Jane died on December 5, 2020, a victim of Covid-19, in Autumn View Health Care Facility. Many unanswered questions about her death haunt me.

She was cremated and her remains await our ability to claim them and put her to rest alongside her parents at the cemetery in Buffalo N.Y. Border closures prevent our family from doing this last piece of kindness for a beloved cousin and friend.



## Bake-ah, Bake-ah – Remembering the Open Window Bakery

*Bake-ah, Bake-ah, Bake-ah, Bake-ah, honk, honk, get your baked goods here.*

As soon as we hear the driver yelling my cousins and I feel our tastebuds swelling in our mouths. The slam of our cottage screen door behind us tickles our excitement as we slip on our flip flops and race down the cracked sidewalk to the country road. I am eight years old and the first born girl of four cousins. The Open Window Bakery van parks outside a small group of six or seven cottages in the early morning. Everyone wants to be the first to breathe in the aroma of the baked treasures the moment the baker opens the double doors of his van.

Every summer our family stays with my *Bubbe* and *Zaida* and my Aunty Sharon and Uncle Allan along with their three children. Our lakefront cottage is located in Belle Ewert across the lake from Jackson's Point, an hour and a half north of Toronto.

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In contrast to the delicate cakes, pastries and breads, the baker is a tall man with broad shoulders and a large frame. He has dark hair, a goatee, high cheekbones and kind blue eyes. His cheeks are rosy, his smile engaging. As I run towards the van and on this particular Friday morning, I hear voices behind me. I look back and see my aunt is just a few feet away from me consoling my mother, who is crying softly, clutching a Kleenex in her left hand.

“He’s not worth it,” my aunt says.

Who is he? I think to myself. Does my mother mean my *Zaida* or my Uncle? No, no, that doesn’t make sense. Why would my mother be crying over our grandpa or my uncle? Does my mother mean my father? It must be my father, I reason. I love my daddy why would Aunt Sharon say he isn’t worth something?

Last night, I woke up in the middle of the night hearing the two of them arguing. My parent’s bedroom at the cottage is right next to the children’s bedroom. The cottage walls are thin not anywhere near the thickness or as sound proof as the walls back home. My aunt and uncle have one of the back bedrooms overlooking the lake. The children are not allowed to go into *Bubbe* and *Zaida’s* bedroom but my cousin Amy and I like to sneak inside when nobody is looking. One time we pretended to be looking for buried treasure.

“Shhhh Rueben you’ll wake up the children.” At that point my mother and father lower their voices and I turn over and try to go to sleep even though I feel unsettled and disturbed. Last week, I also heard them arguing. They thought everyone was outside swimming, but I’d gone inside to get a drink of water.

The baker looks around at all our neighbours and chooses my aunt to ask the first question.

“What can I get you?” The baker’s voice jolts me back to reality.

Warm sweet smelling blueberry and cherry buns lie cosy together side by side. Large Danishes covered with thick icing sugar with dollops of cheese and strawberry, raspberry or blueberry jam in the centre look like ballerinas tutus. The aroma of Buffalo buns with chunks of crystallized sugar and swirls of cinnamon enter our nostrils with each incoming breath. Cupcakes frosted with colours of the rainbow lie topped with sparkles, or with strawberries dipped in milk and dark chocolate. Some cupcakes even have a plastic ruby or diamond ring on top of the icing. These are the ones the girls like the best.

The second shelf of the van offers a cornucopia of breads; comprised of braided challah, rye, pumpernickel, whole wheat and of course bagels. The combined aroma creates a symphony of heavenly scents that cover me like a warm quilt on a cold winter night. *Bubbe* buys a braided Challah and a rye bread and hands them over to me. They feel as soft and warm as a baby. I know I need to be careful not to squeeze them too hard or they will flatten out. Mother buys our weekly order of pastries.

"Can I have a gingerbread girl," I pipe in quickly, trying to place my order first.

"You just had one last week," my mother interjects with authority.

"I was just asking," I answer, knowing very well I am taking advantage of my *Bubbe's* kind and gentle nature.

Not this week, my *Bubbe* answers looking directly at my mother, maybe next time.

*Bubbe* pays for the baked goods and the family makes their way back to the cottage, each of us lost in our own thoughts. We are all anticipating breakfast. I place the bread gently down on the kitchen counter and look around.

Our cottage kitchen is warm and inviting. Something is always cooking or baking in the oven. The stove and sink are on one side of the room by the window with white cupboards across the width of the room. The table stands at the back. Across the room sits the children's table because the adult table is not big enough for everyone to sit around it at the same time.

"Can you and Amy please set the table?" My mother asks. I look at my mother and she gives me the look that lets me know that just for today we can sit at the adult's table as long as we are quiet and don't get any crumbs on the floor. We gladly accept knowing if we do a good job our mothers will let us choose the from the pastries first.

Amy hands me the orange juice glasses. I tell her I want the glass with the cherries around the bottom. We set the rest of the table together and wait for my mom and Auntie Sharon to give us the okay that everything we need is on the table.

After the table is set, I run to sit at my favourite chair. It's the one opposite the hidden drawer in the table covered by the plastic tablecloth with roosters crowing along the edges. It's my favourite drawer because nobody remembers it's there. Sometimes I write little notes to myself and hide them in the drawer.

"Don't forget to put the pitcher of water on the table," my Auntie Sharon calls out. I run to the refrigerator and take out the pitcher of water. At the cottage we boil the water to purify it. I feel relieved the water is boiled because yesterday as hard as I tried I could not make it out of the lake in time and ended up peeing in the lake. Thank Goodness Auntie Sharon and my mom never found out.

Amy and I sit quietly at the table, trying very hard not to get into trouble. We know if we start fighting or grabbing for pastries, we'll get sent to our room.

My mother and Aunt Sharon have gone out for a walk. They come back inside just as *Bubbe* is cutting the Buffalo buns in thirds and smothering them with fresh butter. I see that my mother has stopped crying and looks close to herself again. My father comes in from outside with a fish he has caught and hands it to my mother. My mother looks up and smiles at him.

At this point I am too hungry to wonder what is going on with the adults. I fantasize about which pastry I will choose for breakfast. My favourite is the blueberry bun. When I take too big of a bite, a marriage of sweetness and tart explodes in my my mouth. This is the moment that defines my childhood memories at the cottage. Blueberry filling gushes to sides of my mouth and runs down my chin. My mother disapproves and gives me an icy stare. But I don't care.



## Walking, Dogs and the neighbourhood

The first snow fall of the year is magical. It brings back childhood memories of making snow angels, building snowmen and riding a piece of cardboard down a steep hill.

On Tuesday mornings I volunteer at an outreach program at the Anglican Cathedral on James Street North; about a twenty-five minute walk from my home.

There is snow on the ground. It's time for warm clothes. My winter coat according to the label is good to minus 20C.

The coat has an inside vest with a zipper which adds extra protection against the wind. I wrap a scarf once around the hood and again around my neck. I pull it up when I am outside to keep my neck and head warm. Heavy mittens complete my outdoor attire.

I am visually impaired. Oakley is my third guide dog. We have been together since the summer. He is a yellow Labrador Retriever.

A guide dog will not relieve themselves when in harness. He does not get dressed until we are at the sidewalk. It allows him to do whatever may be necessary. He does not stop, he's ready to go. He puts his head through the loop of the harness. I pull the strap under his belly and buckle it in place.

This was our first outing in the white stuff. He was confused. He didn't know how to guide me. I kept prompting him, , "Forward."

He was just three in October. The first winter he would have been with his Mommy. The second year he was at the kennels in Breslau. It is the training facility of the Lions

Foundation of Canada Dog Guides. This was the first time he had to work with snow on the ground.

It took us much longer than 25 minutes to get to the Cathedral. It was a slow walk there and a longer walk home.

The condominium where I live has a large fenced in back yard. I called a friend and asked if he would go outside with Oakley and me. He was at our door in ten minutes. I used my white cane so Oakley could be only on leash. Since he was not in harness, he wasn't working.

"What's up?" Chris asked.

"Oakley doesn't know what snow is. Hopefully if he plays in it, he will be okay."

I didn't take his leash off until Chris checked that no one else was in the yard.

Chris threw a ball. Oakley took a few cautious steps, feeling the snow under his paws. He had to use his nose to hunt for the ball. He snorted the snow out of his nostrils. He plunged his head back in the snow drift. He forgot about the ball. It was too much fun tossing snow in the air. It was cold. He reluctantly came when he was called.

At home, I dried his back paws first. He sat and offered me his right front paw and then the left one before I took off his leash. He ran to the living room, twirled around and around in one direction and spun about in the opposite way.

Later we walked to the shopping mall three blocks away. There was no hesitation in his steps. He was confident. He had conquered the snow.

**Three years later**

Oakley learned how to guide me in winter weather. He pushes me aside if there is a large drift. I climb over a snow bank first. I get my footing before he leaps over it to be beside me. He slows down when the walking is uneven. He searches for the best way for us to get through or around a heavy snow fall.

Oakley does not like to get wet even though he is a Lab. Don't tell him that Labs were bred for hunting and retrieving downed birds in ponds and rivers.

There is a disagreement if it is raining. He doesn't want to go out. If he is in harness, he has no choice. He is working. He walks me beside the puddle and he leaps over it.

We have to be careful during lightening storms. It is not safe to be outside, His harness and collar are metal. If he is on leash only, I carry a white cane which is metal. A perfect lightning rod.

Oakley goes everywhere with me: the dentist, the doctor's office, grocery shopping, visiting at the hospital, going to the bank and everywhere else I have to go. Service dogs are trained to be respectful and do not cause any disturbance when working.

I attended a conference dinner. Oakley was lying quietly under the table that had a long cloth covering it. As people arrived, they chose the empty chairs at the table. We introduced ourselves and enjoyed a pleasant dinner together. Before the speeches began, I accepted my friend's offer of assistance to go to the ladies room. My dinner companions were shocked to see Oakley come out from under the table. They didn't even know he was there.

Play time is important for a service dog. They need time to just have fun. He has two personalities; in harness he is all business and out of harness he is all dog.

When the snow fell, it was a new world for Oakley to explore. His nose was busy sniffing the familiar ground. The smells were fresh and unknown.

On our casual walks, he slowed down to a crawl to explore the area between the sidewalk and backyard fence. The neighbours' bushes and tree trunks appealed to him, especially the telephone poles.

The different textures of snow have their own challenges. It was fun plowing through the light fluffy stuff. He could walk on hard snow easily. If it had a crust, his paws sank through it as he took each step. Dogs get embarrassed when they slip. They act as if that was their plan all along.

Once the snow is gone, , it is another new world for him to discover. Dogs have the wonderful quality of being excited each time they go out. It doesn't matter how many times they sniff that tree. Each outing is an adventure.

Years ago we didn't clean up after our dogs. Now, it is our responsibility. Dollar stores, supermarkets and pet shops sell pooh bags. There is a bag in every pocket of my clothing.

When you have a dog, you know their toiletry habits as well as you know your own – yikes, did I say that. Well, it is true and often it is a topic for discussion.

The first walk of the morning is a necessity just as it is for you when you shut the bathroom door. Oakley should do everything necessary on the first outing. If he does not, it throws the whole day's schedule off.

A neighbour takes Oakley out for a good run. It is important for a service dog to get exercise. When they return, I get a full report on what he did.

I use my white cane when we go out for a fun walk so he does not have to work. We head to one of the parks in the neighbourhood. He gets to sniff and explore the ground. I give his leash a tug to get him moving or we would still be there.

Garbage day in the Strathcona community is Monday. The first walk on that morning is a doggie's heaven. Smells galore! Blue bins do not have lids so he has his head in each one as we walk past. Imagine the joy he experiences with all those different smells to sniff: newspapers, cardboard boxes, envelopes, scrap paper and maybe even a pizza box. Doggie paradise.

After the trash is picked up, the sidewalks are an obstacle course. We have to avoid garbage pails, blue boxes and compost bins lying on the sidewalks.

There are benefits to having a dog, whether it is a service dog, a comfort dog or a lovable pooch. Dogs come in all sizes and all colours. Some have long hair. Some have short hair and some have no hair at all. One thing they have in common, a big heart.

They depend on us. You must get up in the morning to take care of them. You take them outside for exercise, regardless of the weather conditions. I don't know why people bother to ask me what the weather is like. They don't like my answer. "You are a dog walker. You don't count. You still go out no matter what the weather is like."

Another bonus, you get to know your neighbourhood and neighbours. The beautiful gardens; decorations at Christmas; the fall colours and the beauty as spring

approaches. I have met wonderful people. Some I'm pleased to call good friends.

You love your dog and your dog loves you. When you come home, you are met with a wagging tail, a bundle of energy and lots of kisses. They stay at your side if you don't feel well. There is always someone to listen to you without offering unwanted advice. They give you their complete and unconditional love. What more could you ask for in a faithful friend?

## Walk a Mile

Mom was lying in a hospitable bed when a young doctor bounded into the room saying, “Good news, Mrs. Hennessy, you’re having twins”. The shock caused her to lose the contents of her stomach, dampening the young doctor’s gown and his enthusiasm. She was forty years old, had five kids and money was an issue. She was not excited.

Upon arriving home, mom was greeted by a large sign on the house, saying:

“Welcome home Jessie and the twins”

I adored our five older siblings. They were so wise and worldly. I’d stand clinging to my bedroom door jamb watching them get ready for work. They were young teenagers but to me they were super heroes.

They were all sent to work before high school. Dad found brother, Dan, a job in a woodworking shop. On his first day, Dan was alone in the shop with another fellow. Larry demonstrated how to saw the lumber. He flicked on the electric blade and there was a shrill, drum-piercing, whirring

sound. He guided the wood towards the menacing blade which cuts it like butter. Voila! Success!

Then it is was Dan's turn. he was terrified but desperate to impress Larry, a former army private. He slid the board towards the blade. The saw hit a knot in the wood. The board bounced upwards, flinging his hand into the blade. He heard four distinct pinging sounds, one for each of his fingers...the sound of steel cutting bone.

Our kitchen was busy on workday mornings. The bathroom pipes would freeze up in the winter so going to the bathroom meant a dash across the property in three feet of snow. It was a bracing experience.

Dad shaved at the kitchen counter, looking into a small mirror. I was mesmerized watching him as he lathered his face and then methodically scraped off the white soap in strips like streets on a map. He'd clean his razor in a basin of water then comb his hair straight back. He was handsome.



The five kids would be dressed and sitting at a long table while mom churned out bacon, eggs, toast and oatmeal. She understood the importance of a good breakfast for the day's work ahead. Then she'd make all their lunches. Much of her fighting with dad was about money for food. Clothes were optional.

She'd do her yelling in the mornings while he was sober. My older siblings minded their own business. Dad seemed to block her out. The blur of a hangover might have helped. The panorama riveted me. My twin slept on in bed, missing the action.

My eldest brother, Donald, was born a rebel. While mom was preoccupied with her brood, Donald was free range. While in elementary school, he found bottles down by the tracks which had fallen off the rail cars. He added some of the product into every student's ink bottle, except his own. When the kids uncapped their ink bottles, they exploded, spraying all of them. Donald was expelled from school. I wonder what

kind of mind thinks of these things. When he was allowed to return to school, mom escorted him to the front door and watched him walk to his classroom. As she headed home, she saw Donald walking down the street. He had climbed out the window.

Once Donald had been to Juvenile Court one too many times, Judge Nicholson sent him to Reform School. It was located in the middle of nowhere surrounded by forests. Donald escaped in the dead of winter. He recounted how he lumbered through deep snow for hours and expected to die from exposure. Like a mirage in the desert, he saw a rail employee hand pumping a wagon, checking the rails. He picked Donald up and dropped him off at the nearest town. There was no reforming Donald.

I took care of his burial a few years ago. In the hospital, I asked him if he had any regrets and he said he didn't. This, after a lifetime of a scorched earth policy. It must be nice.

Most of us regret things like unkind words or failure to help another. He didn't regret being a bully or causing trouble.

When I was twenty-one and newly married, my husband and I had just arrived at Central Station on our way to work. My husband had read something in the newspaper on the train that he needed to tell me. The heading read:

“The trend continues. Another suicide.”

My brother, Gerald, was another one who had a problem with authority. When he was banging on his estranged wife's door because he wanted to see his little girl, she called the police. He had never physically abused his wife but he was drunk.

Gerald gave the police a hard time. They finished him off in his jail cell. The newspaper article purported that there had been a series of 'suicides' in that jail. Gerald was the latest. A year later, a young cop, who was returning to England, told my father that Gerald was killed by the police. They couldn't control him.

Dan, Joan and Bill came next. Joan was taken out of grade school to help care of the twins. She was devoted to us and proved to be invaluable to mom. As we grew, she took us to see Sleeping Beauty. This opened a world of magic for us. We hadn't even seen a television. That would come later when brother, Bill, got a job and bought a stereo and a television on credit. I recall Sheila and I jitterbugging to an Elvis Presley song with Bill and friends forming a circle around the room to watch us. I noticed the teenagers smiling but wasn't sure if it was enjoyment or hilarity at our dancing.

Dan was a sweet, loveable guy. He seemed to always be in a good mood. The girls were crazy about him because he was gorgeous. He would father seven children. Luckily his wife, Judy was up for the challenge. Dan could support his family with money he earned as an accomplished printer. After retirement, he took up painting, to our amazement. Imagine an artist in our uncultured family! I have a 'Dan wall' where ten of his paintings hang.

Mom raised and cared for us with devotion. She was built like a broomstick but handled her responsibilities like a strapping lass. I don't know how. Her older sister, Jean, came from Scotland to visit mom. Joan remembers Aunt Jean standing in our kitchen door, wearing a woollen suit and fur stole, saying "How could you, Jessie?", as she surveyed eight kids mulling around the barren kitchen. She was disappointed in Mom's trajectory in life since she left Scotland. I guess mom came from a more genteel background.

Heating the house was a challenge for mom. The boys would take a toboggan down to the railway tracks to pick up coal that had fallen off the train cars. Mom had another scheme when that failed. Her neighbour downstairs had an arrangement with the coal man. He dumped free coal through the chute in exchange for favours which will not be mentioned here. Mom would invite her up for tea while my brothers entered her basement and stole coal for us. Some

would say she was teaching them to steal but it was about survival during the bitter Montreal winters.

Most fathers were away fighting in World War II, so Mom was on her own.

Once all eight of us were grown, we settled in Montreal, Hamilton, Campbell River and New South Wales, Australia. I make a point of visiting them as often as I can.

In August, I went to Montreal on the fourth anniversary of my twin's death. As children, she was my foil against the world. Nicknamed Yappy, she never stopped talking and specialized in getting attention. That permitted me to be invisible which is what I wanted.

She shares the grave of a distant relative, Patrick Doody. He was jailed for plotting the murder of D'Arcy McGee, one of our Fathers of Confederation. The fifteen foot obelisk looks magisterial.

Newspapers of the day estimated a parade of ten to twenty thousand mourners marching from downtown Montreal past

the grave on Mount Royal. Doody was considered by many to be a martyr to the Finian cause. D'Arcy McGee was thought to be a traitor to the Irish when he became a Canadian politician, loyal to the British Government.

It always wrenches my heart to leave the plot of ground where Sheila lies. Twins share a womb and walk through life as half of a whole. Like anyone who has lost a loved one, I leave a piece of my heart behind. She's ever on my mind.

Recently, my friend, Astrid, and I headed to Campbell River to visit Tom, the youngest. We flew to Victoria and took a five hour bus ride up the Island.

Upon the taxi's arrival, our driver did not exit his vehicle but popped the trunk from inside. Astrid jiggled the lock to open it. We hauled our heavy bags into the trunk. Our driver must have felt that storing our bags was not in his job description.

Standing at the yawning trunk, our view of the driver was the back of his head. It was a large head with a squat hat. His

rod-straight, shoulder-length hair fanned out stiffly like a grey broom. I suspect dirt gave it that fanned look.

We opened the back doors of the taxi. What used to be beige upholstery was now filthy grey. Reluctantly, I sat in a well worn crater and engaged this unhelpful man in conversation.

I asked our taxi driver if he grew up in Campbell River. Yes, he had. I asked about siblings and he told us they were “meanies”. It was a strange word for a middle-aged man to use - a puerile word.

His older brother used to ram our driver’s head through the wall. Posters were hung to cover the holes. He was threatened with death should he ever tell their parents about the head butting.

He said, with glee, that his brother was in deep trouble the day the father decided to paint their bedroom. I’m not sure if the father was annoyed with the damage to the walls or the brutality of the older brother. I suspect the former since the



parents seemed to have been missing in action. Boys will be boys, type of thing. Our driver goes on to tell about an equally abusive, older sister.

Arriving at Painters Lodge, the driver jumped out to get our bags with the fervour of a born-again Christian. He stood by his vehicle, beaming. His erstwhile beige track pants were as filthy as his car. He reminded me of Pigpen in the Snoopy comics. We saw his face for the first time. It was squarish as though compressed in childhood. Funny that. It was undefined and squishy.

Was he now smiling because we showed interest in him as a human being or because it was time for a tip? Maybe, both.

His unkempt appearance may be the physical manifestation of his inner being - someone who has been marginalized and of no account.

We were both struck by this man's story. In the car, we witnessed the transformation from a sullen, unengaged person

to someone who shared a poignant childhood memory.

Humanity lurks beneath the most unresponsive exteriors.

I stood on the front stoop of the Lodge at five a.m. Stars peppered the sky. There was a blob of grey clouds to my right. The moon was wending its way through the firmament. There was a stillness and a low ambient sound. I surveyed the landscape to identify the murmur, like a symphony warming up. It was the drying leaves of the magnolia tree as they shivered ever so slightly. I wondered if I'd see a bear. They climb the trees in front to strip them of pears.

At the bottom of the street, the Campbell River flows into the Pacific Ocean. When my brother left Montreal as a young man, he drove as far West as he could and settled in Campbell River, halfway up Vancouver Island. It's the last town on the electric grid, going West.

My brother and I are both in our seventies now. I rotate across Australia, Montreal and B.C. to visit my siblings. This is brother Tom's turn.

Tom resembles a trembling aspen. He's tall, skinny and edgy with hermit tendencies. His wife, Sal, is younger and a cyclone. She's in and out of the house, teaching fitness to various groups. She's a talker. I could go into just about any store and say "I'm visiting Sal" and they'd know who she was. Not so, Tom.

I was born into chaos but landed in the arms of a loving family. My life has always been circumscribed by special people who share my history. I wouldn't trade places with those more privileged and pampered. I remember where I came from and it was not a dull place by any standard.



