

## Echo Chamber

Sixteen collaboratively written stories composed in fall 2020 as part of the Writer-in-Residence programming at The University of New Brunswick



Amy Ash “Cosmic Hearsay I” (2016)

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Echo chamber, *n.* a confined space where sound reverberates.  
—Oxford English Dictionary

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## Introduction from Writer-in-Residence David Huebert

Building community isn't the easiest during a hundred-year plague. Part of the impulse underlying the Echo Chamber project was to bring people together, through writing, during times of enforced disconnection. A development of the Surrealist poets' "Exquisite Corpse" exercise, this project sought to mix and mingle writerly voices to create stories built on juxtaposition and parataxis. See the final section, "Method," for a more detailed explanation.

What I love about assignments of this ilk is the way they grow beyond their origin stories, dissolve their root systems, sprout random and unpredictable in the forest of parataxis. In this experiment, writers feed each other lines, conflicts, characters, arcs. Then those pathways are repurposed, mixed, and remixed until the story becomes a flung boomerang, wobbling crookedly back on itself. Often, the mash and mingle of discrete voices creates a delightful polyvocality, an uncanny coherence, a story both disparate and whole.

These sixteen stories house a trove of delightful surprises. I never could have foreseen their manoeuvres, never could have predicted the kid in the jetpack backpack, the squirrel in a nest of hair, the knight-cum-bricklayer, the precision of the wall, the man-bun and purple kerchief, Jackie's time travel, March 32<sup>nd</sup>, Ann's mom April Fools-ing the cops, the pivot to Costanza's point-of-view, 2053 Upper Canada, the gravedigging, the itching anus.

Another delightful surprise: the variously (un)detectable shifts in voice, in the cracks between lines, sections, paragraphs, speeches, narration. This mix of writers, wide-ranging in experience, united in passion, commitment, and respect for one another's work, were all courageous and open-hearted in pouring their time, energy, and insight into these collective dreamworlds. These stories are fun and fearless. Never scared to be playful, to be dramatic, to be themselves.

Thank you to Shannon Webb-Campbell for her vision, time, and energetic labour on this project. Thank you to Amy Ash for providing her lovely artwork, "Cosmic Hearsay I" (2016) for our title page. Interested parties can find more of Amy's work here: [amyash.ca/](http://amyash.ca/). To all participating writers: I thank you sincerely for your energy, vigour, and collaborative spirit. It was a pleasure to collaborate with you, and a delight to engage with your work.

David Huebert  
2020-2021 Writer in Residence  
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## Story 1: House Fly

We finally found our forever home in the little village of Aroostook. It's a large two-story house, just off the main stretch, down by the riverbank. It isn't much, but it really caught our hopeful eye with its old-timey type charm. We walked on through its creaky, mangled, covered front porch, and found ourselves welcomed by a beautiful wooden staircase in the main entrance, dressed in a vintage oriental-style runner. To the left was the dining room, with its built-in china cabinets and continued sleek dark wood flooring. To right was the kitchen, where the wood flooring got cut off and introduced with vinyl instead. The vinyl matched the rest of the upgraded 90's style that the kitchen had going on. As we continued around into the living room space and back to the staircase, we both began imagining everything this house could be—falling in love with potential. We got ahead of ourselves and signed the contract immediately, inevitably buying this old blue house. Swatting at the fly buzzing in my ear, I followed my fiancé and realtor outside, stepping back out into the crisp fall air.

After our last haul from today's moving trip we finished the tour, bringing us upstairs. We began swatting consistently. Swarms of flies began emerging the closer we got to the room above the dining room. I gripped Taylor by the shoulder to stop him. I wasn't ready to see just how many more were behind that door.

"Let's go to the store and grab some cleaning supplies and some of those sticky fly catchers."

"Alright, I'm gonna do a quick stop at Nate's then, since we're going into town."

"Really Taylor? I thought you were done with that shit! This was supposed to be a new beginning for us and here you are doing the same shit!"

"Christ! Do you ever shut the fuck up?! You have a drink every night. How is what you do any better than what I choose to do, huh?"

"Fuck, whatever then. Grab the keys. Let's just go."

As soon as those words were out of Taylor's mouth, I started running. I blasted out the front door, running on the driveway heading to the street. Legs pumping. I was just moving. I could hear Taylor calling after me—"Hey, where the fuck do you think you are going?" I could hear his words. I could hear the wind. I could still hear the flies buzzing. Nothing deserved an answer. I wanted out. I couldn't take it anymore—the drinking, the promises, the bad choices and bad deals. I wasn't in very good physical shape. I didn't drink as much as Taylor. He was right though. I did drink every night and smoke now and then.

I heard him fire up the truck. He would soon catch up with me. I veered into the brush beside the road and huddled by a bush. The flies were just as bad out here. I didn't care. I hid by the bush, sobbing, wondering where it all began, how did it get this bad. I felt like a volcano boiling over, a rush of heat and lava and all the disappointment, spilling over onto the ground. I could hear Taylor revving the truck, wondering where I was and what he would do when he found me. I started to crawl slowly, planning the night out in the brush. Eventually, he would give up and go to Nate's. They would get bombed. In the morning, I would walk into town and call someone. Who? I wasn't sure. I did not even care. I pulled my red hoodie over my face to block the flies and the sounds of the night.

I'm not sure what time I actually dozed off but the anguish over knowing Taylor was at it again still knotted my stomach when I woke. Ironical that I felt like I needed a drink. Despite the fear of what might be in the darkness and the sounds of critters searching food, I had fallen asleep. Huddled against one of the bigger trees, I dozed off, my mind wandering into a dream. Taylor and I at the lake, one of our first dates. He was trying to impress me, playing guitar as we sat next to a bonfire. He'd brought Kahlua along and we were shooting B52's out of Dixie Cups. I waved off the bottle when he tried to pour a third drink. After that, he abandoned the Dixie cups and for the rest of the night alternated between holding the guitar and the bottle. He finished it and nearly fell into the fire when he got up. "God damned rocks trying to trip me up," he slurred. I should have known then; maybe I did. It's not like I hadn't seen the same behaviour growing up in my family. It was just so easy to pretend it was no big deal when a relationship is new and he takes your breath away. As the sky started to lighten, I wondered where Taylor was and if I'd find him if I went back to the house that was supposed to be our happily ever after.

I got up brushing my clothes free of dirt and decided it was time to move. Whether to move toward the new house or to town was the question. The direction of our hopeful home was closer and I needed a change of clothes at the very least. Eventually tracking back, I crept up the driveway only to find Taylor's truck was still missing. The relief soon flooded with disappointment knowing that probably meant Taylor hadn't been in any condition to make it home. The unique features caught my eye again even as I hurried up the steps. It really was a beautiful house, even with a bad fly problem (they could be managed). The old wooden steps led me to where we had dropped our bags on the bed that had never been slept in. I unzipped the bag, where the contents had been unceremoniously dumped onto the blankets. There was time, since Taylor wouldn't even be awake for a while yet, but the fear of being found was alive and well. Grabbing a few essentials, my wallet and bag, an extra set of clothes, and some hygiene products, I stopped when I noticed a picture frame sitting on the side table. Had that been there before? It was a picture of the two of us on a fishing trip last year. We hadn't caught a thing but the trip had been one of our best, and it showed in our smiles. Pausing for a moment I was caught in a feeling of wonderment and doubt. I was frozen even though moments ago I had been rushing like a bomb was about to fall. The moment was interrupted by a fly landing on the frame and crawling over the photographed faces, searching for food molecules. The spell was broken and my resolve was renewed.

"Hello?" Taylor's voice echoed through the halls as I turned startled at the noise. The frame clattered to the floor, the fly frantically buzzing around from the disturbance.

"Just about to put on some soup!" I called, tucking my bag beneath the bed skirt.

"Damned flies. They'll love it, no? French onion, or chicken noodle?"

"Don't give a crap, frankly. My head's exploding."

"Thanks be to the goddess of flying creatures," I mumbled when I heard the bathroom door slam shut. Barely breathing, I picked up my bag, tiptoed down the stairs, flew past the

bathroom, and opened the screen door to the covered porch. Where best to secure my bag? Ah, yes: behind the broken trellis. I headed quickly for the kitchen. Taylor had yet to emerge from the bathroom.

“Hibernating?” I laughed. No answer.

I’ve heard that fruit flies can be trapped in tall glasses. You put cider vinegar in the bottom of the glass, stretch Saran tightly across the top to seal it, then poke a few holes in the wrap with a fork. Fruit flies *cannot* resist the scent of cider. Even if they wanted to, getting out of the glass is impossible. What a way to die!

House flies are another matter. Hairy legs—adhesive pads and sharp claws on every single one. Habitat? Garbage, exposed food, manure. Think, too, of typhoid fever, cholera, dysentery, hookworm, pinworm. Pinworm’s the worst. Ever had it? Holy shit! TransCanada West, I hear your buzz. I’ve an itch in my anus—an appetite for leaving that I can’t let go.

## Story 2: Driveway Chitter-Chatter

Robert Casey stumbled tiredly out the front door and down his driveway with slow flat steps, yawning into a dirty mug of coffee and scratching himself.

It was almost 7 a.m. Or was it getting on to 8, now? He was trying to remember, until he saw something in the driveway that stopped him cold. A dirty man lying behind his car. More than dirty though, Robert realized; the man looked *filthy*. And behind this horrifically-unwashed individual was a ring of acorns, arranged in a perfect circle.

Immediately furious, Robert shouted out: “Oy! You’d better be dead!”

The *so-impossibly-gross-he-might-as-well-have-been-dead* guy, ever so slowly, rolled over and looked at Robert with shut eyes. “I’m tryna sleep, man.”

“Sleep!?” he cawed. “Get the hell out of my driveway! And take those bloody acorns with you!”

“Acorns?” he mumbled, drooling a little, rolling onto his back now. “What are ya talking about, man?”

“THE! ACORNS! Behind you!! Get it all out of here!”

The bum rolled over once more to see what Robert was talking about and then suddenly jumped up on his feet. “Acorns, man!”

“Yes! Acorns! Bloody acorns! Get them out of here!”

“Wait a second,” he said, thinking back. “Acorns, man, wait.”

“Wait!? Hell can wait! *You* can leave!”

The bum got down his knees to look closer at the acorn circle. Once again, Robert marvelled at the filthiness of the man. An actual stain marked the pavement where he’d been sleeping. “This is a sign, man,” the bum whispered.

“What?!”

“It’s the squirrels, man,” he continued, deeper into the investigation now, getting even lower to the ground, like a golfer analyzing a putt. “It’s the work of squirrels, man. Crafty squirrels, man. They’re goin’ nuts. It’s those 5G towers, man, I warned people. The 5G towers are messin’ with the squirrels, man.”

The homeless man continued with his absurd rambling.

“I’m telling you man it’s these squirrels, they’re the ones trying to warn us man. They’re leaving these circles of acorns everywhere. Like crop circles man. It’s the planet, it’s Mother Nature telling us her plan.”

“Uh, yeah alright,” Casey shrugged.

“I’m telling you it’s those 5G towers man. It’s affecting the squirrels man.”

“I don’t care about whatever the squirrels are saying you can’t sleep here.”



Robert Casey wasn't the type to be bought into these conspiracies. Today it was election fraud; tomorrow it was chemical trails poisoning the water system. He wasn't ready to handle this nonsense quite yet, especially without finishing his morning coffee. The man now covered in even more filth from his examinations appeared to be ignoring him. That or he was as deranged as he was disgusting. He reminded Casey of his father; never quite there in the conversation. He had been a man you couldn't easily relate to if you weren't willing to entertain his quirks. One-sided conversations like these he was already accustomed to. Following the train of his thoughts, the words in his throat came out a little harsher.

"You and those acorns better be gone by the time I get back here."

Nearly spilling his now sludge-like coffee, he stumbled down the driveway with some sense of dignity as the bum never bothered to look up from his 'investigation.' Casey strode away as if some pressing appointment were awaiting him, although he didn't really have anywhere to be that day. He found himself looking back several times during his strides, wondering if the man would still be there when he got back.

Robert gulped down the rest of his acrid coffee and shoved the dirty mug into one of the deep pockets of his housecoat. Reaching into the other pocket, he rummaged around the wadded-up used tissues for his mailbox keys. "Goddamn the cheap bastards at Canada Post for forcing the bloody community mailboxes on us," thought Robert. "God forbid they have to pay people to carry the mail to your door!" It had been over a year since they had installed the group post boxes in his neighbourhood. Robert had not gained any more fondness for the now daily chore of walking down the street in all manner of weather to check his gray little bin with the sticky lock for his mail. Reaching the mailbox, Robert jimmied his key into the lock and held his breath as he pulled open the little gray door and thrust his hand inside. Nothing. Again. For the third day in a row. Defeated, he slammed the metal door shut and turned around to head back towards his house, hoping for the sake of that filthy bum that he had shoved off by now. As he started off down the sidewalk, a kid wearing a bizarre backpack that looked like a jetpack walked purposely out of the closest driveway. They appeared to be about eight or nine years old and as Robert approached closer, he realized the youngster was carrying a shoebox full of . . . acorns.

"Kid!" Robert Casey found himself calling out, but the young boy didn't stop to chat. He just kept moving forward at a constant pace, almost trancelike.

Robert was getting ready to shout at the boy again when he realized that he couldn't find it in him to give a hoot. He was tired and annoyed, and only growing more annoyed as he realized he was clenching his jaw again. So, he just quickened his pace and left the boy behind.

"Oy! Mr. Bum, you bloody well better be out of here," Robert growled as he reached his driveway.

"Shh man," the now somehow-even-filthier-than-before man in his driveway responded. "You'll scare her away."

Robert stepped closer to take a good look at the bum, and as he did, he noticed that the dirt-encrusted man had a fat squirrel nesting in his disgusting hair. With a shriek, Robert produced the coffee mug from his pocket and hurled it at the bum's head.

"You dare hurt one of Mother Nature's lovely creatures?" The kid—the same kid that Robert had hoped to leave behind—asked in a tone that made even Robert Casey's leg hair stand on end.

He couldn't find the words to answer, so they both watched silently as the mug hit the squirrel, then the pavement, where it shattered into a million pieces. Strangely enough, the squirrel barely flinched; it just went on sculpting the bum's hair into a nest. The bum didn't seem to take much notice either.

“I think I’ve started this day too early,” Robert said and turned his back on the scene. He locked the door behind him and looked around his house, ruminating that there was more action out in his driveway than his house had seen for months. He sprayed his hands with sanitizer and removed his mask. There was no one to visit, and nowhere to go. He walked down the hallway to the first bedroom, a guest room, and lingered in the doorway. His son was in university in another province, married, and hadn’t been home in three years. Before his wife had died, and before his son had married, he’d come home at least once a year. But not anymore.

Robert lay down. They had put a cellular tower on the edge of town the year his wife died, and Robert’s life had gone downhill ever since. Maybe the bum was right. Maybe the tower was the problem. No, Robert sighed. It wasn’t so easy as that. People had told him to get out there, make new friends, but Robert was a homebody, content to be reading a book or watching sports on T.V. But then the pandemic hit, and the isolation stretched out unbearably. And being alone became something forced upon him. He thought again of the fiasco unfolding out in his driveway. He’d choose something different today, he thought as he went downstairs to make a pot of coffee. Physical distanced visits in driveways were still allowed.

### Story 3: Two Worlds

The knight stalls at the sound of steel; it strikes a thunderous chord in his chest. The armored man regains a sense of calm as he remembers who he is again. Closing his eyes and withdrawing into his mind, he hears a steady beat, whispers in his heart, from the voice of his mother. A light and airy voice speaks: “Your battles are a choice.” A shield of warmth surrounds him, blocking out the other warriors racing to their smoking battleground. His hair, grown long and twisted from neglect, tumbles off his shoulder, catching the cool breeze. He remembers his father’s voice rattling from a forgotten and mouldy grave: “To bring light, one must endure the burning.” The clang of metal hitting the ground rings in his head like the voices of his ancestors’ scorn. Even so, the knight can feel his mother’s comforting grasp on his calloused hands as he lets go of his sword.

Mama here? God, I’m wasted. Leaving school to lay bricks and stone was, perhaps, madness—as she often argued. *She* came around. My father *never* would have understood. What stories he’d lavish upon a little kid! Tales of those maniacal horsemen of the steppes, the Scythians, garrotting their own people—as if practice were needed to behead their enemies, skin them whole, and drink their blood. He’d stroke my hair and smile, citing Herodotus—tell his “little man” how they’d scrape each scalp clean of flesh, rub them between their hands to soften them, and use those scalps as napkins. The skulls? Well, they sawed them beneath the eyeholes, lined them with cowhide and gold, and used them as drinking cups. When I squirmed, begged him to stop—please, Papa, please—he’d insist the victims weren’t always other soldiers, but sometimes family members stupid enough to whine or start a quarrel.

“Sir Henry . . . awake now! Please Sir, rouse yourself!” A young page gently shook the knight’s shoulder and he awoke with a forceful gasp, his bleary eyes unfocused. Breathing heavily, Sir Henry propped himself up against the saddle to his right and gazed around the dimly lit tent. His page, Ralph, was kneeling beside him wearing a distressed expression on his boyish face. Next to him lay Henry’s blade.

“Please Sir, forgive me. It appears your slumber was not peaceful. I was compelled to remove the weapon from your side. I apologise for . . .”

A clatter and roar interrupted Ralph’s explanation. Sir Henry and Ralph exclaimed with shock and pain.

“Unhand me you foul thieves!!” exclaimed Sir Henry.

“Thieves?” one of the men demanded, almost indignantly.

“Even without my sword, I’ll separate your head from your neck!” Henry warned.

“Woah, buddy, stand down,” another laughed, though clearly not with camaraderie.

Henry's father might have skinned those men alive, then fixed their skulls into drinking cups to drown out the memory afterwards; but Henry once again felt his mother with him, and loosened his fists.

"Where've you been the last three days? McGreggor's about to blow his top!" the first man pried.

Henry shook his head and blinked. Suddenly feeling the draft from his open window, he reached for a blanket to cover himself. He almost called out for Ralph, his young page, but thought better of it.

"I've been busy," Henry grunted, "you can tell McGreggor I'll be in tomorrow, and if he wants to fire me, good luck to him. I lay twice as many bricks in a day as you do in a week." The men left begrudgingly, with no promise to take his word to McGreggor, but Henry couldn't find it in him to care. It had been weeks since his mother passed, and the daydreams—if that's what you could call them—were only getting worse; it was nearly impossible to decide which world was real nowadays. So, the knight would don his shining armor, and sit nursing a bottle just to pass the time.

When he would sink into this level of consciousness he once again experienced the battlefield just as it was—every sense tingling. He could feel the cold biting his hands, the smell of iron that came from colliding metal and fresh blood, taste the kicked-up dirt, hear the wails of falling horses, and most jarring of all, he could still see the faces of the men he had fought alongside, all of them. His mother's presence had been his anchor in reality that kept these traumas at bay, but now that she was gone, he found himself farther and farther adrift.

Henry tossed and turned for hours, slipping between two worlds. Sweat stinging his eyes, every muscle aching, he wielded his sword, fending off the enemy on the murderous battlefield. Intermittent glimmers of light made him squint into the darkness. Even then, he couldn't be sure if it was a tent flap or curtain at the window, lifting in the wind, letting in a sliver of moon. Often his mother's hand cooled his brow. Finally, the sun bored through. He felt the heat of it dry the blood on his face. As he awoke to the morning, the glint from the armor of those fallen at his feet piercing his eyes. And the pounding, like hooves in his ears, made him swing his feet over the side of the bed. Head in hands, he knew it was his son, Ralph, hammering his fist on the door.

"Dad! Dad! Are you awake? You need to get up right now. Mac called and said you've got 30 minutes to get your ass in there or you're done!"

"Yeah, Yeah, keep your shirt on! I'm coming," Henry exclaimed as Ralph threw open the door.

"You look like shit! You're not gonna call another sickie are you? Cause I've got my last mid-term this morning and I can't miss the bus or I'm screwed."

"I know!" Henry yelled into the ceiling. "Just go!" He pulled off his T-shirt and headed to the closet. "I'll call you later."

"Okay, see ya." Ralph turned away, adjusting the weight of his backpack as he left. As Henry threw his work clothes on, he thought about the day's work that lay ahead of him. It would be good to have tools in his hands, the square edges of bricks. To have his feet firmly on this side of something precise and beautiful as a wall.

#### Story 4: Storm

“The patio doors are bending in! Mom, we’ve got to get out of here!”

“Viviane Joy, stop panicking! You’ll be the death of me. We’ll be fine. Remember Freda? Besides, I’ve not finished packing.”

“Packing? What’s left to go?”

“Not one piece of my Royal Albert leaves Surfside until it’s nested securely in Grandma’s camphorwood chest!”

Best she humour her mother, if only to prevent herself from becoming a nervous wreck.

“Not a bad idea: I read online that a cup and saucer, Royal Albert, just went for \$400 at auction. Maybe you’ve a small fortune here.”

Viv picked up a small, newsprint-wrapped bundle from the chest, untangled a hand-painted teacup devised for pointed pinkies, and turned it over. Royal Albert, all right. Numbered, and initialled in gold. She tucked the cup gingerly into a corner of the chest—flatted the paper in which it had been wrapped. Storm or not, *The Globe and Mail*’s front-page banner of November 8, 2007 so startled her that she failed to notice the water creeping across her mother’s wall-to-wall carpet:

THE ECONOMY: CANADIAN DOLLAR SHOOTS PAST \$1.10, CLOSES AT 1.0775

What else had she saved? A Rockport shoebox with a stick-on label, “WHITE SANDALS, 1993.” Two inches or more of Expo 86 memorabilia. Another box—COLLECTIBLES on top, COLLECTABLES on the side—both in her mother’s hand. Long a journalist, she seldom made mistakes. Hmm. Viv vowed to look it up in her *Canadian Oxford*. Wait a minute! Why this *Playboy* magazine?

Although, why not, thought Viv. Her mother had always been a collector of all manner of items, especially pieces that captured what she considered to be the zeitgeist of a particular time, place, or space in her life. A *Playboy* magazine certainly represented a certain essence of *something*. On Viv’s more charitable days, she would describe her mother as an enthusiastic albeit organized packrat but during tense moments such as these, her mother’s habits felt more like emotionally stunted tendencies towards hoarding.

The mounting sound of the rain pummeling the windows of the cottage matched the rising panic tightening in Viv’s chest. They really needed to get out of here and not just because of the very real threat of the dirt lane to Surfside being washed out by the downpours. Alec had made it exceedingly clear that if Viv arrived late to pick up the twins again, he would be contacting their lawyers about renegotiating custody.

“Mom, are you almost finished with those? It’s really getting nasty out there and I think the rain’s getting through those window seams! We’ve got to get going.”

“That’s the last one. Now help me with this chest before we’re soaked through.” Viv took hold of the chest, and helped her mother lug it out to the jeep. The rain shot down like bullets, and drenched them to the bone, so that they were both thoroughly soaked by the time they made it into the car.

“Alec’s been calling you,” Vivian’s mother noticed aloud. Viv tried to keep her eyes on the road, which was becoming a nearly impossible task as her poor windshield-wipers struggled to keep up with the downpour.

“Answer it!” she demanded, and so her mother did, but not without adding:

“Viviane Joy, I believe a please is in order!”

“Listen,” Viv said into the phone, already beginning to plead her case, without so much as a hello, “I know I’m late, but—”

“I don’t have time for this, Vivian. The daycare called; again!”

“I know. Listen, I’ll be there in five. I’m so unbelievably sorry!”

“Don’t bother. I picked them up already.”

“I’m so sorry, Alec! You couldn’t imagine the kind of day I’ve had—”

“Grow the hell up, Vivian!” Alec scoffed, “I’m taking Jess and Vincent this weekend. We can revisit custody Monday.”

“You can’t do that!” Viv began, but Alec ended the call before she could continue. Viv clutched the wheel till her fingers ached.

“I’m—” her mother started.

“Sorry?” Viv interrupted. “It doesn’t matter anyway.” She wanted to scream, but all that came out were tears; more damn water to try to see through.

Viv surveyed the scene at the arena where they’d been directed to, the nearest safety zone. Viv couldn’t believe it. Cots, a cement floor, organized chaos everywhere. She watched one young mother drag a crying toddler back to its cot when clearly they wanted to run in circles as many other small children were doing. It was probably for the best she didn’t get away quick enough to pick up Jess and Vincent. They would be safe across the river and outside the slide zone with Alec. But Jesus. Is she responsible for the goddamn storm? For her mother’s mind-numbingly thorough packing? Alex only has himself to worry about, and he kept the house, forcing Viv back in with her mother. And he wasn’t paying near enough in childcare, so Viv couldn’t afford payments on a car.

“All set?” Her mother appeared at her side. “I’ve got our designated bed numbers here. 756 and 757. Those sound like some lucky numbers.”

Viv rolled her eyes. Trust her mom to try to perk up the situation. Sleeping here, or trying to, was going to be a nightmare.

“Look Viv. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how late it was getting.”

“I don’t think it would have been a good to bring them here anyway. Better to have your precious teacups than my children in this nightmare.” Viv said, regretting her words the moment she heard them out loud.

As tears welled-up in her mother’s eyes, Viv threw her arms around her. “Oh, Mom, I didn’t mean that. I’m just worried that Alec will somehow use this against me. Plus, we don’t know how much damage the storm is doing to the house. What if we can’t live there anymore?”

Her mother dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “Don’t you know that you and the children mean everything to me? As for the house, it’s weathered floods before.” She smiled at Viv and put her arm around her. “We’ll figure it out, Viv, because you and I are survivors. And surely to

goodness Alec will be reasonable once he realizes how bad the storm is in this area. It's bound to be all over the news by now."

"Thanks Mom, I hope you're right," Viv sighed, willing herself to hold onto a shred of hope. "I don't want Jess and Vincent to be upset. I should call Alec again to let him know that we're safe."

Her Mom chimed in, "Good idea, but before you do, there's something I want to tell you. I was going to surprise you with the news after everything was finalized, but I think you need this ray of sunshine right now."

Viv listened intently as her mother revealed that she had pretty much pre-sold all of her Royal Albert, her Expo 86 items, the box of collectibles, et cetera. A nest egg for Viv. Maybe a down payment on a modest house.

Viv's childhood was a treasure too. She would remember the stormy days, like today, when her mother would entertain her with *The Wizard of Oz*, an old VHS that was lovingly guarded and now enjoyed by the kids. Kansas, Dorothy and her puppy and the wicked witch. Alec, meanwhile, would live mortified with the idea of being the bad guy in the movie, because the puppies were always after the witch and he couldn't act like one. So many adventures, so many treasures to unearth and secrets to reveal. The princes charming were not blue, but green. One would have to start living another life. Viv, going back to the present moment, said quietly: "Everything, all this I will leave it so that people stop saying that I live in Kansas," and the storm began to stop.

## Story 5: Cain and Abel

Ronnie aimed her flashlight into the farthest corner of the gloomy shed. The air was stale and stuffy in the cramped metal space. She crouched down to push the dusty boxes aside, hoping to catch sight of some recognizable writing on the sides of the old bins and boxes.

“Looking for this?” said Josephine.

Startled by the unexpected voice of her sister, she jumped up and spun around to face the open doorway of the shed where her sister stood. Swinging back and forth from Josephine’s left hand was a tarnished silver pendant watch. Upon seeing the pendant, Ronnie reached out instinctively to grab it, causing Josephine to snatch it back up into her fist.

“I had a feeling I would find you snooping around for this. Did you really think Mum would have packed it away out here with all this old junk?” said Josephine, her mouth twisting into a cold smirk.

“Nice to see you again too, Phinny. I wasn’t snooping. Just thought I would get a start on cataloguing the clutter before we start clearing things out,” said Ronnie nonchalantly. She clicked off her flashlight and moved towards the doorway to squeeze by her sister who stood planted in the entryway, the chain of the watch still visible, wrapped around her fingers.

“Get out of my way, Phinny. I have a lot to do before the funeral,” Ronnie groaned, trying in vain to squeeze past her sister.

“Quit calling me that. I’m not a kid,” Josephine said with flared nostrils.

“Then move,” Ronnie suggested less than kindly.

“God! I can’t believe I drove nine hours for *this*!” Josephine shouted, still refusing to budge.

“It’s not *my* fault mum died,” Ronnie barked, adding, “but I’m *so* sorry that it inconvenienced you,” just for an extra jab at her sister.

“Why do you have to be like that?”

“Like *what*?” Ronnie demanded.

“I won’t apologize for being successful.” Josephine’s knuckles were white, as she gripped the watch furiously against her chest. “It’s not my fault you never left.”

“I didn’t say it was.” Ronnie’s own hand was gripped tightly around the flashlight, but not because it held any importance.

The pocket watch belonged to their mother. Well, really it belonged to the mother of her mother’s mother, as such things often do. But now it belonged to Ronnie, or it would if Josephine would just hand it over. Ronnie earned the watch. *She* stayed with their mother. *She* did the shopping, and the cooking, and the taxes; *she* stayed while Josephine was off in the city, too busy to even call.

“Mum’s gone,” Josephine hissed. “You don’t get to be the perfect daughter anymore.”



Ronnie's heart dropped, and the corners of her lips fell with it.  
 "Move," Ronnie growled, and this time Josephine obliged.

Ronnie watched her sister drop a handful of dirt onto their mother's grave. It was just as Ronnie suspected: peeking out from under Josephine's black glove was the glint of silver, the silver that rightfully belonged to her. Ronnie would need to confront her sister.

She waited until they were back at the house, friends and family laughing and crying and eating all the food the Ronnie had ordered from the caterers. It was her Aunt Betsy who opened the conversation.

"What's that on your wrist dear?" she said to Josephine, as the three of them sat receiving condolences.

Josephine looked down and quickly covered over the watch. "Oh. Nothing."

"That's not Momma's watch, is it? It's supposed to be passed to the oldest daughter, you know."

"She's had it on since she arrived," Ronnie blurted out. "I haven't even had a chance to look at it. All those years looking after Mom. All those nights without sleep, watching her."

Ronnie started to cry. "And now Josephine sweeps in and thinks she's entitled to everything."

"Well, dear," said Aunt Betsy. "It's not yours Josephine. I felt the sting when it went to your mother, her being the eldest, but that is how heirlooms work."

Josephine pulled the watch off her wrist and flung it, striking her sister, before it hit the floor. All three women hear the tinkle of broken glass. "We're supposed to be grieving Mom and all you two can talk about are possessions!" She stood and walked away.

Four weeks later, in preparation for the new owners to take possession, Ronnie was at her mother's house sweeping the dining room in which she, her sister, and her aunt had had their disagreement. The whole thing felt strangely distant now. Reflecting on it made her cringe the way that watching a scene in a melodramatic soap opera would, the kind that when you're watching it on television you laugh because "real people don't act that way." Suddenly, the broom made contact with a piece of glass—a shard from the broken watch face. The watch had swiftly been scooped up by Aunt Betsy and taken to a watchmaker to be repaired in an effort to diffuse the tension created at the funeral reception. So far no one had gone back to retrieve it. Ronnie found herself now feeling less entitled to the watch than ever. It felt petty to go retrieve it from the shop, but she couldn't leave it there, and her pride insisted that she could not surrender it to Josephine. Surely it would only validate her entitlement and encourage future tantrums. A deep breath. They must be able to come up with another plan. *We're adult women for God's sake*, she thought. Heirlooms were supposed to keep families together, not pull them apart.

"It is a history of seeking, a history that never ends, straight out of the Old Testament, full of conflict, fire and brimstone. Cain and Abel and their offerings to see who pleased God the most." The pastor droned on. Ronnie stopped listening, instead thinking: *there is no divine presence, no words of encouragement, in a plan to commit a crime*. She couldn't just kill her sister, could she? And blame it on the Bible? But that would be too much and lead to a lawsuit for plagiarism and misinterpretation of the Old Testament probably. Plus, the whole life in prison thing. Rivalries are never lacking, even when there's no money and the inheritance is very little. Just a watch. A silver pendant. Ronnie got up and walked out the church mid-sermon. Life would be boring if she and her sister lived harmoniously, without suspicion or the least bit of envy.

Ronnie knew what she had to do. The watchmaker opened at one o'clock on Sunday afternoons. She texted her sister: *Meet me at Mom's grave at 2 p.m. sharp.* When Josephine asked *Why?* Ronnie texted back a *Because I said so.* Even with everything that had gone on between them, Ronnie still held a magnetic power over her younger sister. After picking up the watch, it took everything in Ronnie to keep from putting it on her left wrist. She remembered trying it on as a kid; she hadn't worn it since. *Just to feel its comforting weight,* a voice inside her reasoned. Instead of putting it on, however, Ronnie zipped it up in a plastic bag and drove to the cemetery where their mother was buried, arriving fifteen minutes early. Surprisingly, Josephine was already there, in her new luxury something or other.

Ronnie couldn't resist: "Nice car, Phinny. Does it get you everywhere early? That must be a first."

"Nice to see you too, Ronnie. I think I know what this is about."

"Do you?" Ronnie opened up the trunk of their Mom's old hatchback and retrieved two shovels. "I don't think you do."

Josephine took a step back when she saw her sister with tools. "Whoa. I thought it was to give me the watch. In a nice sisterly gesture with our mom watching over us. Or under us. Or whatever . . . . So, what are the shovels for?"

"Well, I know you love Mom's godforsaken silver pendant so much," here she took the plastic bag out of her pocket and waved it around, "that I thought I'd bury you all together!"

Josephine took another step back. "Okay, yeah. You've gone crazy. I think I'm going to go now."

"You believe me? Seriously? No, Phinny, I'm not going to kill you over some stupid watch. But I realized, this thing," she held the watch up again, "has come between us. So it should stay with Mom. Will you help me bury it with her?"

"Um, no." But after less convincing than Ronnie thought she would have to do, they both set to the task at hand. Ronnie threw a pair of gloves at Josephine, who caught them expertly. It was hard work, backbreaking work, but also somehow satisfying, especially after a few hours, they weren't sure exactly how long, they hit the wood of the coffin.

Josephine leaned on her shovel. "So, what's your plan here? Are we uncovering the whole thing and opening it up to put the watch in with Mom? Because you know, I don't think I can do that."

Ronnie looked around; no one else was in the cemetery. "You take a break. I'll just dig a little bit more. I have water in the car, by the way." Ronnie kept going, possessed by a renewed strength. By the time Josephine returned to the site with a bottle of water for her sister, Ronnie had uncovered most of the top part of the coffin.

"So you really are going to open it up. This is crazy, Ronnie."

"Help me out of here." Ronnie reached up and Josephine took her hand. "No, I think this is good. I just want this crappy heirloom to be as close to Mom as possible. Any final words?" "None from me."

"Well, here you go, Mom. Hope you're happy, wherever you are." Watching her sister's reaction, she tossed in the plastic-bagged watch, knowing that as soon as it hit the bottom, Josephine would dive in after it.

"No, wait. You can't! Let's talk about this!" It was more of a fall than anything, as Josephine now lay sprawled across the coffin, grabbed the bag and ripped it open to spill the silver into her hand.

As inevitable as the Biblical story, Ronnie knew there was one more thing she had to do before she started filling in the hole. She raised her shovel high.

### Story 6: Falling from trees; the day the bee stopped flying

“Fear is only a figment of my imagination,” Beatrice whispered as she gripped the next patch of shredded birch bark. “Fear is just a silly human emotion. Once I reach the top, I’ll be above it.” Beatrice didn’t look down, because if she were to look, she might have seen the earth that she left nearly eight feet below. The branch supporting her left foot crunched in on itself, and in a moment of weak-human-panic, she leapt from it to another that seemed to promise it would hold her weight. “Bea?” a boy Beatrice might have recognized as James Willard if she cared to look down, shouted in disbelief. “Wha-dew you want?” Beatrice demanded. Her words came out slurred and droopy like a bouquet of half-dead flowers. “What are you doing all the way up there?” James asked, as he squinted up at her, and thought, *she’s a bee clambering back up to her hive*. “I’m busy, go-way!” Beatrice said. She lifted a hand from the tree to shoo him off, and nearly sent herself tumbling down. “Whoa!” James cried out. “Just come down, and we’ll go back inside.” James realized something that chilled him to the bone. He realized that he could compare Beatrice to a little bee all he wanted, but she would never be able to fly; one slip would send her crashing to the ground, and what was worse: James realized that Beatrice didn’t seem to know or care.

At that moment James wished his mother wasn’t such good friends with Bea’s mother. He wondered if there was a way to make them not good friends. Friends, in his limited experience, did seem to up and vanish sometimes. Now he wanted Bea to come down from the tree so he could go back to the house and watch the two women. Watch and find a way to get them angry with one another.

He had been taking care of or dealing with Beatrice his whole life, or the part that he could recall. Their mothers would always discuss them from a distance as if they weren’t there—the corner of the room or the bench at the playground. “Oh, isn’t she adventurous,” they would say, “such a lively girl.” James never received compliments like that. Obviously, it didn’t pay off to be the reasonable one. He was sick of it. “Get down here this instant!” He yelled at Beatrice, trying his best to channel their mothers. She might not listen to him, she never did, but maybe if he sounded like a grown-up it would work. He was running out of ideas and out of patience. “Get down here right now or I’ll leave you up there to freeze to death!” He screamed with a frustration that extended well beyond what the situation warranted. He felt simultaneously sorry and empowered. Beatrice stopped and looked down.

Seeing the name, James Willard, under a picture of newly certified accountants in the morning paper, had made feelings of guilt settle like a lump of grease in the pit of Beatrice's stomach. She hadn't thought about him for years. James had always hung around like an annoying brother. All that ended the day she fell out of the tree. Her mother blamed James: she figured he had dared Bea to do it. Beatrice just lay in the grass crying and screaming, a jagged bone poking through the skin on her shin. Even after her leg healed, she never admitted that she'd stolen a few swigs from the liquor cabinet to help her run from the recent memory of Maddy shoving her and calling her a wimp on the basketball court. When her mother made it clear she was to stay away from James, Beatrice pouted, but was secretly glad. She felt like she could finally fly. And she did. She flapped her wings through relationships, courses she began and never finished, job after job. Finally, the business she started a year ago was taking off. Who knew she'd be so good at motivating people? She was exhausted all the time, but she felt like she was moving forward in a straight line. The only thing holding her back was her distaste for the bookwork and a guilty conscience. She wondered, *would an apology be enough?* She took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

It rang exactly once. "Hey James. It's me, Bea." "Bea! Great to hear from you." He genuinely sounded glad to hear from her. "Fall out of any trees lately?" "Very funny." There was the first of many pauses here. James spoke next. "So, I heard about your mom. So sorry about her passing." "Yeah. Sorry about your mom as well. They were such great friends." "Listen." "Yes?" Beatrice took a deep breath. "The reason why I'm calling is, I want to apologize." "Apologize for what?" "That day, when I fell out of the tree." "You don't have anything to apologize for. We were pretty much going our separate ways, anyway." "That's not it. The thing is." "Yes?" "The thing is, I didn't fall out of the tree. I let go on purpose." "What? What for?" "I don't know. I got this crazy idea that you would catch me." "Well, I didn't." "You were so angry." "I am, I was, so angry." "And you didn't catch me." "And I didn't catch you." "I sometimes wonder, if you caught me, would our lives have ended up differently." "Maybe? I dunno. I, uh, I got to go back to work. But, uh, thanks for calling." "Hey, listen," Beatrice tried to continue the conversation, but James was gone.

James yanked the paper from the grip of the typewriter rollers with such disgust that 3/4 of it remained stuck. Back winding the wheel he managed to pull out the rest. Balling up the two pieces of paper he dropped them into the basket with the others. Folding his arms tightly across his chest he let out an exaggerated sigh, "Why can't I write this fucking thing?" He had been chasing this story for what seemed like forever. There had been periods of no typing, no going over the details, when he was in college, while busy establishing his career, and those moments he only thought he had forgotten but were reawakened with his constant retrospection. Admittedly, he was obsessed with changing everything that day. "If I could just get it out of my head, onto paper, tell my story, I know that it will make a difference," he insisted to his therapist over the phone, for the umpteenth time. "Trying to reconcile the past is important but searching for some sort of absolution is for the guilty, James, and this is not your role," she repeated. "Attempting to change the story to be anything but what it is is an illusion that keeps you stuck. Fictionalizing that day on paper will not change the facts, putting the blame on another or others won't either. Acceptance of what was is what will push you past the past," she said. Let the truth land you on your feet, let the truth work its way out onto the pages." James put the phone down,

exasperated. He knew what she was saying: the time had come, only he had the power to change the facts as he had been trying in vain to, or not. Letting his shoulders resolve and tears drop out of the way, he slowly fed a new sheet of paper into the typewriter. Tabbing over to the center of the page he typed, "Falling from trees; the day the bee stopped flying."

## Story 7: Lessons in Parenting

“C’mon baby!” David dips the spoon back into the baby-food jar. “Open up! Here comes the airplane! Vvvvvrrrrrrroooooooooom.” David aims for the partially opened mouth. He knows Madison doesn’t need baby food anymore, but the little jars are convenient, and relatively cheap, and he can toss them after. No muss no fuss. “Here it comes!” Madison clamps her teeth down and the spoon hits her lips, spilling a green glob on the table and the corner of the chair. “Shit!” David mutters. Madison leans back and laughs and laughs. The little bugger is proud, David thinks. He looks over at the sheet he’s supposed to fill out. What did your child eat? Not fucking enough. He wonders if he’s ever going to get Madison for a weekend day so they can go fishing, or drive out to the lake, or to see the grandparents. David wonders if he’ll ever again wake up snuggled with Madison.

Madison stops laughing. David glances around the kitchen. He knows there isn’t much in the house but he only has Madison three hours twice a week. He does have milk though. David pours Madison a glass. Madison reaches greedily and slurps it all before banging the cup on the table.

“Don’t bang your cup Madison,” David says just as Madison does it again. Madison laughs. David glances at the clock. Thirty more minutes. He writes down peas then adds some more milk to the cup. “What do you say?”

Eight months ago, David and Madison’s mom were on good terms. They had their daughter—together—despite the knowledge they both carried that they would not finish raising this child together. The only question was how long they could, and would, keep it going. Until she could talk? Until preschool? Or by some miracle until they could explain the separation to her directly. They made it until she started eating solid food.

David knew this was largely his fault. He’d been through bouts of depression and addiction in the past but had found balance in recent years. The tacit expectations of marriage from everyone around him compounded with the intuition that no marriage would come to fruition—not to mention the pressure of first-time fatherhood—was doing a number on his equilibrium. He fell back into old habits, ones that would have likely been tolerated, understood even, but his biggest mistake was keeping them a secret.

David knelt to hug Madison, then watched her toddle off towards two other children playing with coloured blocks on the floor. Checking his watch, he realized he had to hurry to make his appointment across town with Social Services. As he slid into the chair across from Ellen’s desk,

he felt time was on his side after hitting several green lights along the way. Ellen was all business with a smile, "Hi David. How are you today?"

David returned the smile, "I'm doing okay, thanks."

She studied the form he had handed to her when he arrived. "I see that you took Madison to the park today."

"Yes, I pushed her on the baby swing and helped her climb so she could go down the small slide. She also likes to hide in plain sight and giggles when I look high and low until I find her."

"That's great." Ellen paused, giving David a piercing look. "On another note, it looks like she only had peas and milk for lunch."

David could feel heat rising in his face. He knew this would probably be an issue. Even considered adding a food item or two to the list. But figured it might come back to bite him. A surprise visit from Ellen was all he needed. He decided to head her off, "I know it wasn't very much food. Maybe next time I'll offer her some more choices, but honestly, she wasn't interested in food, she just wanted to play."

Four or five months passed, he no longer remembered how long because he didn't really care. The reports became routine. Preparing food, cleaning the house for visitors, and even farewells that had to be sad were chores. Before going to sleep, he went to check a box where he kept family memories. He found photos of his mother (which were many). His dad's were rare. His dad was a truck driver he rarely saw and was not used to showing him affection. "That's not a man's thing," he said, while serving him the food that he knew how to cook, which wasn't much. His mom was very detailed at all times and that bothered him as much as his dad. He came to the conclusion that he wanted to live his old life and he wanted to continue it in his own family and all the depressions and addictions in the world were a way to fight that.

Shuffling the pictures one behind the next, David stopped and drew one closer for inspection. Was it a baby picture of Madison? Of course it can't be; it was him. The resemblance was uncanny. "What a strong gene pool," he said aloud. "All you ever wanted was love, wasn't it?" he continued, talking to the little one in the picture and to himself and to Madison all in one thought/breath. He was overwhelmed with the revelation, so that his heart started to beat faster, with the feeling that he really wanted Madison to be in his life more than a few hours here and there; that he wanted her more than he wanted drugs. She deserved to have a loving father, he deserved to love her. Louder now, he said, "I can do it for you, for me and for you Madison. I can break the chain, change trajectory, who the hell ever said that I had use the same directions when raising a family as they did?" Armed with his new resolve he dialed Ellen's number at Social Services.

She was fourteen now. His baby Madison, practically grown. She came around the table to give him a hug. He knew she loved these Saturday shopping trips with her mom. It would give him time to unpack the new bookshelf he had bought for her, get it screwed together and into the corner of her bedroom. It would give him time to run to the grocery store and get pizza ingredients. Something special for a night in, watching an old movie. He went to the window to see her get into her mom's car. Raised his hand to give Diane a wave. Held his hand aloft as some communication of mutual understanding passed between them. Watched as the car backed from the driveway, headed down the street. Turned and went to the phone to call his own mom, to ask her to join the pizza party.

### Story 8: 300 Sorauren Avenue

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020. Jeanette and Charlie always remembered the date of the first storm of the year. Its onset never failed to reveal which building issues they would need to contend with for the winter. Cracks that were negligible in the warmer months—aside from the occasional admission of uninvited whiskered guests—became chilling drafts as the seasons changed. Dustings of snow would sneak through gaps in the framework, melting into puddles from what little heat they could retain in their Victorian-era home. They raised five children there, the house's sturdy bones making for a secure and storied place to grow up. But with two bad knees, one bad back, and 4,000 square feet, the confluence of the home's age with their own was accelerating into a current they could scarcely contend with. Real estate prices had increased in recent years and even a small condominium was not a viable option without the sale of their current home. Knowing that their nostalgia had kept them there years longer than was advisable, they were now at risk of selling their home for parts rather than as the antique it truly was. Just as the snow was being cleared off the sidewalks outside, a man with a fresh haircut and nice suit came to the door. In his mid-thirties, he was barely older than their youngest child which, to them, gave his corporate bravado an adolescent air. His property developer pitch was a performance full of buzzwords intended to disguise gentrification as urban growth, but it was the first offer they'd had in years and they knew they had to listen.

Jeanette's sleep had been interrupted by weird dreams ever since she took the business card from Kevin Lewis and marked the calendar for a meeting with him to discuss their options. Last night she woke up feeling like she was holding a teacup under a burst pipe. Charlie was breathing deeply beside her. She tried to focus on happy thoughts. How she had been pregnant for their second child, Lindsay, when they finally scraped enough together for a down payment on a house. For a couple of years before, Charlie took every overtime shift offered at the sawmill and Jeanette looked after a neighbour's four-year-old son while his mother worked a nine to five job for the government. They were barely twenty-five and full of energy. When Charlie had a day off, they would check out the house listings in the Realty section of the local paper and drive past them. Jeanette loved the older, what she called "classic" styles with gable roofs and front verandahs. He hugged her and grinned when she surprised him with a picture she had cut out of the paper, her dream home pinned with a magnet to the front of the fridge. Charlie didn't care as long as she was happy. They called the realtor the next day.

It was a great opportunity and they had to seize it. They had to escape the ghosts of their past, but not in the figurative sense. These ghosts were real, spirits that followed them for as long as they



could remember, and the main reason why they didn't stay at home. The ghosts made fun of them and called them good for nothing and losers. They thought that with a change in their lives they would leave them alone. The terrible thing about it was that only they could see them and feel their effects. The new house was perfect and the ghosts thought the same and now turned out to be envious and stayed with them. Winters became heavy and that's why they remembered them. The house began to deteriorate and so too the ghosts that gave them strange dreams. That was all in the past. Or so Jeanette and Charlie thought. They almost happily cleaned up from the leaky roof, yet another ice damming spring of thaw and freeze and thaw and freeze, right where the upper part of the roof met the lower part. As they placed their buckets and wrapped their towels, watching the water stain the ceiling above their fridge, they fought the ice-cold water with the happy knowledge that this would be their last battle. The meeting with the realtor Kevin Lewis had gone very well. Their house sold almost immediately, sight unseen, inspection not needed. Kevin never said exactly who the buyer was, but Jeanette told Charlie that she thought it must be one of those hotshot developers. Neither of them wanted to imagine their home of forty years being torn down for a new apartment complex. They instead imagined a young couple just like they were, maybe with a kid and another on the way, wanting to take on the major project of a character home. Preservation was the word, Charlie said. The final price wasn't great, but it was definitely enough for Jeanette and Charlie to move into a condo closer to downtown, within walking distance of their favorite restaurant, complete with the nicest elevator either of them had ever been in. The move was uneventful. Their last day in their family home, Jeanette and Charlie walked through each room, one by one, and said good-bye to the ghosts they found still floating about. They couldn't come with them, they reasoned, for the simple fact that there just wasn't enough room.

That year, the snows came very late. They moved into the condo on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. The first snowflakes usually appeared by Hallowe'en, but days passed and no snow. Christmas was boring, depressing even, when the background was green and brown. The small veranda they had laughed at was decorated for Christmas, but without a dusting of white, the greenery had a definite look of shiny plastic. January arrived and the snow did not. Charlie bemoaned the wasted money assigned to snow removal. Jeanette shivered—winter winds without snowbanks to provide a baffle, were bitter and they chilled to the bone. Jeanette and Charlie began to regret the day Kevin Lewis had entered their lives, sold their home and banished their ghosts. When the first snow did appear, on January 30, 2022, it snowed for three days and four nights, they lost power and the only lighted, warm place in the building was the cushy elevator, shared with eight other tenants.

Now, two weeks after that frightful night, a knock was heard at the door. Answering it, Jeanette was greeted by her neighbours from two doors down. They too had sought refuge in the elevator. Now here they stood, husband and wife of forty years. Jeanette, delighted to see them again, welcomed them into her living room with offers of tea and homemade date squares. Charlie came from the den and after greetings all around, the foursome sat and reminisced over that frightful night. As the conversation went from 'grateful to be alive' to a somber tone of disbelief that the building was not as sound an investment as they had been sold, Jeanette became quiet. Charlie stroked her hand in reassurance, knowing his wife was unhappy living in the condo. Looking at each for the go-ahead, their neighbours began to share the reason for their visit. They had not been able to shake Jeanette's tale she told in the elevator, of how they came to live at the condo. Like her, they too shared a woeful tale of a sleek salesman, a lost beloved home and an

underwhelming condo. They had come by to see Jeanette and Charlie to find kindred souls in a world they felt very lost in.

To lift spirits, Charlie suggested they all grab the Queen Streetcar and head over to Sorauren Park. It was Monday and the small farmer's market would be in full swing. Then afterward, they could walk their old neighbourhood and share memories with their new friends. Jeanette welcomed the idea of a fresh, fall walk. And to share her beloved old neighbourhood with new friends seemed like just the ticket for her heavy heart. After retrieving their coats, the foursome headed out into the day, grateful for new friends and new adventures.

The long streetcar ride was filled with easy chatter and the new friends discovered they had much in common. The women loved to bake and feed friends, the men longed for a lazy Sunday afternoon of sitting on a porch, drinking beer. They all missed their children and grandchildren, most of whom had long since moved away. Once or twice, Jeanette caught Charlie looking at her with a worried face that confused her. He gave her a half-smile and looked away. Jeanette set a reminder in her head to talk with her husband about it.

Upon their arrival at the park, the foursome were disappointed to learn the market had begun to shut down and vendors were in the process of packing up. Seems the day had been bountiful and not much was left to sell so the market closed early. Instead of produce shopping, Charlie suggested to start with a trip to the neighbourhood coffee shop. When Jeanette surprised Charlie with her request to see her old home, Charlie stammered for words to discourage the viewing. He had not told his wife that Kevin Lewis revealed to him his plans of knocking their old house and the neighbouring one down to build a sleek, upscale condo. His plans were to tell her over coffee with their new friends in hopes of softening the bad news. Then the foursome could offset the bad news with tales of beloved memories of times lives in this neighbourhood. But Charlie's plan was bust as he watched the two women hurriedly walk up the street to 300 Sorauren Avenue.

When they arrived at the address, the old Victorian house remained, albeit in far worse shape than when they moved. Charlie's face was showing his confusion as he was certain Kevin Lewis had told him in secret. Now, looking at the two dilapidated and unleavened houses, Charlie was befuddled. As the foursome stood on the sidewalk staring at the home, a middle-aged man came up to them. He introduced himself as the new owner of a home around the corner and the head of the newly organized neighbourhood watch. After learning who Charlie and Jeanette were, he told them the tale of the Victorian house and why it still stood. He spoke of scams and unethical business practices by Kevin Lewis, who had now skipped town with the money from the sale of the two houses. The corporation that bought the properties was under investigation for tax fraud. And so stood the homes in dilapidation and government seizure. Charlie and Jeanette looked at each with great despair. Their beloved home was in such bad shape and they could do nothing about it. Added to this, their new condo was not all they had hoped. Things quickly spiralled into a day of despair. The new friends looked at each other then offered a crazy idea. What if the four of them sold their condos and bought this place. They loved the history. And Brenda being a wiccan witch could dispel the evil ghosts in a pinch. The idea sounded wonderful to Charlie and Jeanette. The foursome thanked the neighbour and hurried off to the coffee shop to talk.

After months of working with government offices, the foursome finally had an answer. The cost of the home was almost affordable with the sale of their two condos, and with Brenda's daughter renting out the garage for her pottery business, they had collateral for a loan to cover the remainder and for repair costs. Things seemed hopeful and the foursome began to set their new

life into motion. Soon, Charlie and Jeanette would be watching the first snowstorm of the year back where it began. This time, with new friends.

### Story 9: Is This Hell, Man?

A young woman approached us smiling, “Hi, my name is Erin and I’ll be your server this evening. Please follow me.”

She led us toward a booth, brown ponytail bouncing, pitcher of ice water in one hand, menus in the other. The room around us was filled with noise and motion. I plopped into the vinyl seat exhausted from a day of Christmas shopping and side-stepping the edges of Brenda’s crankiness. I was used to the fact that most people got on Brenda’s nerves, but today it seemed different. Like I was rounding a corner where a sinkhole was forming. Across from me, Brenda winced, rubbing her lower back and studying the multi-page laminated menu.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Erin asked, looking at me.

“Just water, please,” I replied.

“I’ll have the same. But I’m looking at the turkey club. Do you use REAL mayonnaise here?” Brenda blurted close to Erin’s arm as she poised the pitcher over her glass.

Erin jerked to attention, pulling the pitcher to her chest like a child snatched from danger, water splashing the table. “What do you mean, *real* mayonnaise?” Erin asked eyebrows raised.

Brenda spoke loudly, pausing between each word, “Hellman’s is the only REAL mayonnaise!”

My mouth burst open like a split seam. “Honestly, Brenda, why do you have to be so persnickety?”

“I only want the truth.”

The truth. What is the truth? Oh no! Those memories when I was a seminarian, but not that of the green eyes or the occasions when I celebrated Holy Week and, due to some morbid fixation, Good Friday, with the most devotion. Watching that Jack Nicholson movie where you hear: “You can’t handle the truth,” so trite it loses all meaning. Documentaries about wars where the reality of those days is known. And her father, a police officer, questioning suspects to clear up cases. It’s no wonder that Brenda turned into an inquisitor to catch someone telling lies.

“Since when do lies have color? White lies? What about blue or pink ones?” Brenda responded to something Erin said that I had missed. I was amused by her comments and forgot this rare quality about her.

“It’s only a white lie,” Erin was saying. “Miracle Whip tastes the same as mayonnaise anyway.”

Brenda immediately got up from the table. “We’re going.”

“I’m sure you can find something on the menu that doesn’t require mayonnaise, fake or otherwise.” I was tired and hungry. And thirsty. I took a huge drink from my water.

“Any establishment that tries to pass off Miracle Whip as Hellman’s is not a place I want to eat. Good day to you.” Brenda grabbed her bags and started walking towards the exit. I shrugged at Erin, took one more drink, grabbed my own bags and trailed after her.

“So I guess you don’t want to hear about our specials today . . .” I heard Erin trail off as I quickened my pace. Outside the restaurant, I finally caught up with Brenda.

“Let’s try another place?” Halfway between a question and a suggestion.

“You bet we are. Until I find a turkey club made with real mayonnaise spread on each side of the bread. At this point, I even want mayo on the outside. I want to feel it with my fingertips.”

I let this strange comment go. You wouldn’t believe it, but we tried seven other restaurants/diners/greasy spoons on Main Street. None of them had Hellman’s.

“Apparently there’s a Hellman’s shortage?” Halfway between a question and a conclusion.

“Then we keep trying. All night if we have to.” I’d seen this determination in Brenda before. We had fallen into the sinkhole.

“Wait, Brenda. Just wait. Look at me.” I got her to stop, but she wouldn’t look in my direction. Her eyes stared a hundred yards away, towards her goal. “My arms are killing me lugging all these bags around. I can’t walk anymore. I was hungry before we even started shopping. We have to figure this out.”

“Oh yeah, what do you think we should do?”

“What would your father do?” I found myself asking her, though I wasn’t sure why.

I watch her sleeping, a steady even breathing in and breathing out. I can’t believe that she’s been an in-patient for nearly three weeks. It took longer this time; it takes longer each time she comes back from an “episode,” a word her father used when he talked about Brenda’s bi-polarism. Is that even a word? Bi-polar disorder—*A person experiencing a manic episode often has feelings of self-importance, elation, talkativeness, increased sociability, and a desire to embark on goal-oriented activities . . .* Goal oriented activities—the fervent quest for REAL mayo “activity.” And the search continued for several hours. It was a bad one, the worst yet. Brenda exhausted herself and me that day, again, and never did get her Hellman’s. Sad. That is how I feel. Sad. I can’t do anything for her, I can’t do this anymore and I can’t stop feeling shitty and awful about what I was about to do. Let her down, give up. She told me that I would walk away from her, from “it.” “Everyone does,” she said so matter-of-factly on our first date, nearly three years ago, like it was a done deal for her. Like slapping an expiration date on our relationship that was barely out of the gate. “If I could walk away from it, I would. So, how can I expect anyone to put up with it?” “I am a lot, a lot of lot,” she would repeatedly say. I am sorry that you are a lot, I am sorry that I am not enough.

“Look, it’s okay.” I reply to her “Yeah this is a lot but you’re my friend and I think you’re worth it.” I half-smile at her, as she lies on the hospital bed of the psych ward. I have always been afraid of this place, with its cold-white walls, the odd screaming patient, and the freezing floors. Would it be a crime to paint this place a nice hue to bring in some warmth? I look at my friend; she’s exhausted, and I can tell her medication is causing serious drain. I get up to let her sleep only to her protesting to not leave her alone. “You rest, I’ll come by tomorrow. I promise.” She begrudgingly lets me go, mostly because she has little strength even after this three-week stay. On the walk home I reminisce how much fun she was and laugh out loud at the amazing times we had. My heart hurts for her and I feel trapped not being able to do anything.

I pass by McGregor's, a local takeout joint and decide to get myself some supper. Whilst I wait for my order, I take notice that "turkey club" is on the menu. A sharp ping of sadness hits my heart. I get my order and head home, already heavy about tomorrow's promised visit.

It is around one o'clock when I walk into her room and she looks so much better. "Where have you been? I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

"I said I'd be here." I look around her room as if looking for hidden police. "And I got a surprise for you." I pull out a greasy bag from behind my back. "Ta Da! One turkey club sandwich for my friend." The look of joy on her face is everything. "Oh, wait for it." I then pull a small jar of Hellman's out of my pocket. I'm not sure but I think I see a tear in my friend's eye.

Brenda made it a whole year without having an episode. She's been taking up painting lately and using it as a means to express herself. I guess she has stayed up a night or two painting, but it never goes on longer than that. I'm hoping that might be a sign that she's getting the hang of self-care, or maybe her episodes are shifting. She invited me over tonight for a night of painting and munching out. I'm not much of a painter, but I agreed. When I arrive the table and canvases are already set up, she's even using the old Hellman's jar for the water for the paint brushes. It brings me back, and I think of everything we've been through. I can't help but be proud of how far she's come. I quickly finish up my attempt at painting a peacock; I can feel my eyes get heavy. "Brenda, what do you think?" As I turn my canvas towards her, she glances over in a hurry. "Yep, its great! I mean it's not much of a peacock in the obvious sense, you know like the image I printed out for you. But I can definitely feel its essence," she replies in the most nonchalant way, so quick and to the point. She turns back to her painting. "I think I'm going to head home, I'm exhausted." I get up to gather my belongings. I can hear a heavy sigh from Brenda, as if she's getting ready to protest my departure. "You're no fun anymore. All you do is sleep these days." I just stare at her, confused. "Brenda, I worked all day, all week actually. I'm just tired. It's not a big deal." As I'm about to walk out, I'm confronted with the biggest eye roll I've ever seen. "You know what, all this time I thought I was too much for you. I can see the truth now." I turn back towards her to speak up, but I'm faced with the door as it slams shut.

## Story 10: Costanza's Box

I really like watching documentaries on weekends, especially on Sundays. On Saturdays, cartoons are my intellectual hobby because they don't require much effort in the regions my brain doesn't use. I found a documentary that fascinated me. It was about the Second World War in Italy. And it so happens that one of my friends is Italian, Enrico, who had received a visit from his girlfriend, Costanza. The documentary talked about the last days of the war and showed photos and videos of the combatants. I spoke with Enrico on the phone to have him bring Costanza to watch it. I remembered that her maternal grandfather, Guido, was in the war. Enrico told me that at the moment he could not accept the invitation. Days before, he had noticed that Costanza was behaving strangely, since he surprised her near the fireplace of the house where they lived. At that moment, she was taking out of a box papers and what looked like photos with the intention of throwing everything into the fire. Costanza changed her mind and put the box on a table. Enrico told me that, piqued by curiosity, he opened the box and verified that there were photos and also letters with Guido's name. The strange thing about the case is that Costanza mentioned to him that she had no memories of her grandfather.

I asked Enrico to bring the box over if he could, if Costanza was okay with me taking a look. He said that she definitely was not, but he brought the letters and photos over anyway. It was the next Saturday, cartoons day, but we left the television off as Enrico and I poured over the contents of this strange box, drinking cups of loose-leaf tea. The letters of course were all in Italian, but Enrico translated bits and pieces for me. The place of Cassino kept coming up, with details about rain, mud, flooded rivers and washed-out roads. The pictures showed soldiers in various poses of preparation, all with speckled mountains in the background. One picture in particular caught us both off guard. "Isn't that a German tank?" I asked. "I think so," Enrico replied. "So wait, Costanza's grandfather fought with the Nazis?" "What choice did we have?" Enrico seemed a bit defensive. The strange thing about this picture, however, was that the man we had identified as Costanza's grandfather was wearing a German uniform, apparently gesturing at the rest of his tank crew. "So, is Costanza's grandfather Italian or German?" "I have no idea," Enrico answered, as he started putting all the letters and photographs back in the box. "I think I should go now. Costanza will be wondering about me."

I must have been sitting on the couch for a long time because I noticed that the sun was starting its nightly descent. I had been glued there since Enrico left, conjuring up possible scenarios that could explain why her grandfather was wearing a German uniform. I mean, he could have been indeed German, meeting her Italian Grandmother and falling hopelessly in love. Or, worse, he could have aggressively taken her grandmother and the birth of Costanza's mother was the result. Or the pictures were taken prior to October 1943, before the Italians switched sides. I had heard once that people said the Italians fought with the side that had the most food. Awful thing to make someone feel bad about, when in fact who wouldn't do what they could to

feed their families! No judgement here. And what if he was German, would it change something for Costanza, or Costanza and Enrico? According to Enrico it was enough for her to considering ridding her life of the pictures and letters that stood as proof to something she wanted to hide. One thing for sure, if I knew Enrico, and I knew Enrico, he wasn't going to let sleeping dogs lie; he was headed home to pry open that Pandora's box.

Two years and a few changes later, I ran into Enrico uptown in front of the K-mart. I'd lost touch with him after that weekend two years before. I'd made an effort to keep in touch, called him a couple of times, even stopped by his house one Sunday. There was a 'For Sale' sign on the lawn and, when I peered in at the windows, all the furniture was gone. I couldn't believe it; Enrico and Costanza had been good friends, or at least I'd thought so. "Enrico!" I said as he pushed his cart into the K-mart parking lot. He tried the, "Sorry, you've got me confused with someone else" routine but I wasn't buying it. After all, who else wears a man-bun with a purple kerchief tied around it? I chased him down, asked unrelenting questions, finally got him to look me in the eye as he slammed down the hatch of his car. "Remember that box of Costanza's we went through at your place? Well Costanza was more upset than you can imagine. She packed up and left me. Lock, stock and barrel. The only thing she left behind was, you guessed it, the box. As far as I know, she fell off the planet, changed her name, even changed jobs. I couldn't keep up the payments on the house without her help, so I moved to an apartment in Westlake. Sorry." I started at him. Realized in that moment, people's privacy was part of their trust. We should never have gone through Costanza's box.

I grab the receiver, "Costanza, did you get rid of that box yet? We have to go, they found us and they're on their way."

"Mom, I told you I'm taking care of it," I replied as honestly as I could. She didn't have to know that the box was gone on a little vacation across the city with Enrico. That fucker. He won't hear the end of this one.

"Wait, we have to go? Go where? Where are we going?"

"I'm on my way right now, pack up some things and just bring the box if you haven't actually gotten rid of it yet."

Enrico walks in just in time. I grab the box right out of his hands and shove it in my suitcase. How can I tell him the truth now when he already betrayed me? Enrico and James can think what they want now anyway. It's not like they can help me out; they're just two dimwits. They can't even fight off a fly without nearly knocking themselves out.

When I think back on all of this from the vantage point of 2020, I think it is me, Constanza, that is the dimwit. Why I worried about the world finding out my grandfather was possibly a German, possibly a Nazi, is no longer clear to me. With climate change and the like and how we are all greenhouse gassing each other, it seems less important to hide it. Not that the Holocaust was any less tragic. In fact, I found it more so, given what it revealed about human nature and our capacity for cruelty. Still, this family secret wasn't as significant as I thought it was. The world was ending and burning. The news was filled with stories of people, including family in Italy, gasping their last breaths from COVID with their loved ones unable to visit.

Our capacity to be super-spreaders of death seemed even more clear. Under these circumstances, it seemed important to come clean.

I took out the box, determined to search through every paper, every piece, to discover the truth or whatever semblance of it might be available. As I opened the box, I started to cough, to feel my head aching. I can't smell anymore or taste. Am burning up with fever. I wish I skipped



that rally of anti-maskers. Maybe I have some of my grandfather in me. I wish I had worn a mask at that barbeque afterwards.

I should call the emergency number, get that test. No. I want to get through this box of papers first. I tear it open, feeling dizzy, quavering. More unsure than I have ever felt before. On the top of the box, there is a picture of granddad wearing that uniform. That is the last thing I remember before I wake up in ICU.

## Story 11: The Dog Leash

“But I don’t like dogs.” “It’s okay. I’ll only be gone for the weekend.” Stewart was leaving his dog Seamus with me. Yes, named after Seamus Heaney, the only reason I pet him in the first place, scratched him under his chin and told Stewart that my parents had two boxers while I was young. Really young. The only thing I remember is one of them, Prancer I think, stole my plush soccer ball out of my mouth and tore it to shreds. An experience I was still processing, though happy with my progress thus far. I no longer looked at balls and cringed. I actually had this strange desire to take a bite out of one the last time I was jogging in the park and ran by a field with all those small kids and small goals, a mass of bright color swarming around some object. They called that soccer. Where was Prancer when you needed him? “But I’m training for that half-marathon. Just a couple months away.” “So take Seamus with you. He loves to run.” “He’ll mess with my stride, my gait, my time. Can he even run that far?” “So you won’t be able to train as hard for a couple of days. So what? You have plenty of time to get back on track. What’s the difference between stride and gait, by the way? Not the same thing?” “No way. Stride refers to your legs. Gait is the action of your feet on the ground. Heel-toe. Heel-toe.” I said “no way” again as Stewart handed me the leash attached to Seamus’s harness, who, I had to admit, was being pretty good just sitting there at this little back and forth between Stewart and me. Stewart started quoting one of Seamus the poet’s poems, one of the hundred for his mother, and so I offered up no further resistance. He handed me the bag of what he deemed “dog essentials,” a large rolling suitcase, and I was going to make a joke about Seamus having enough stuff to stay for a month, but didn’t, as I was worried that this could have been Stewart’s plan all along. Seamus licked behind Stewart’s right ear to say goodbye, and the dog and I made our way to my apartment.

“Aw geez, the elevator is out again, it looks like we’re going to have to take the stairs Seamus, are you up to it? Rather, am I up to it?” Looking at the size of the pooch and the rolling suitcase, I wasn’t sure. Pushing on the door to the staircase, Seamus squeezed through in curiosity. The heavy door attempted to slam shut only to be interrupted by the suitcase on wheels that didn’t make it through in time and pulled me backwards. Seamus leading us the whole way up, swiftly pulling me as if he knew exactly where he was going. His breaths coming in short gasps as he cleared every few steps, or are they coming from me? I tugged back on the leash to stop him from climbing more stairs. “We have arrived guy, fifth floor.” I pulled on the door and we spilled into the hallway. Seamus pulled left, I tugged right. “So this is what it’s going to be like. I live this way, and so will you for the next little while.” I dug into my pocket and fished out my keys. Why do I have so many? Turning the key while pushing my hip into the door, we arrived. “Ma? Ma? We have a houseguest for a bit.” She was going to fall for him, I just knew it, and then I would be fucked. It was always that way with her, it had always been that way with her. Same behaviour over and over equals the same result or something like that. She stopped

being herself, the herself I felt like a son with, a long time ago, almost thirty years now. What is it that Seamus the human said? “Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.” Seamus’s tail started to wag with meaning as he eyed Ma approaching us.

Later that evening, my heart had ceased to pound and my level of angst had fallen—enough to let me sit in my favorite easy chair to watch my favorite program, “Hope for Wildlife.” Seamus showed a propensity for reality TV and sat on my feet, head lifted and turned towards the TV. Just looking at him made my neck sore. Ma was asleep in her favorite chair on the other side of the room. As the “Beautiful Eyes” song was building to a crescendo and I thought perhaps Seamus would start to howl, the doorbell rang. Seamus, well-trained guard-dog, was on his feet in a heartbeat. Forgetting the very useful leash hanging on the inside of the closet, I answered the bell as I always do, undoing the deadbolt and opening the inner wooden door. Just outside the screen, a small girl in a dark blue uniform stood, holding a stack of four slim boxes in front of her. “Sir, would you like to buy some Girl Guide Cookies? Chocolatey Mint.” Seamus needed no more urging. He gathered his legs beneath him, gained momentum by raking his nails along the hardwood floor and leaped up and through the screen of the screen door. He missed the startled Girl Guide and scrambled past her, down the walkway and into the street. Before we could gather the boxes of cookies from the doorstep, he had crossed the avenue and followed the path down one side of the Dillon house. “Will he come back?” said the child. And again, I thought of a line from a Heaney poem: “...human beings took second place / when he trotted off the path and started barking / At another dog.”

I grabbed the leash and went after Seamus, thankfully still occupied by the other dog. By the time I reached the other side of the street, Seamus was off again. Calling his name, I followed him in a light jog, not wanting to spook him. My assumption of where he was going turned out to be correct, his home. Sitting on the stoop, Seamus looked at me with a puzzled look. “I know you miss him, but he’ll be back. I promise.” I fastened the leash to his collar and attempted to tug him forward but to no avail. I sat beside him and said nothing. Seamus lowered himself and put his head in my lap. Gently stroking him, I realized Seamus was teaching me that not all dogs are like Prancer. After a bit of time, and I suspect more due to hunger, Seamus let me take him back to my home. I think it might be okay to have him around. But just for a few days.

Stewart called at the end of the weekend and said he had been delayed. Work or something. Couldn’t make it back. Oh, and, his family needed him. Something about drywalling the basement. Could I, he asked, keep Seamus for a few more days? He started rattling about how busy he was and how much he missed the dog. He didn’t mention missing me. I cut him off saying Seamus had to go outside.

Another week went by. No word from Stewart. Maybe he wasn’t coming back. I remembered the bad feeling I had when I saw that monster suitcase full of toys and other dog stuff.

I didn’t mind Seamus. Ma took a liking to him. Knew that was gonna happen. He had his charm. I sure did not love him. At least not until I got the diagnosis. Cancer. The dreaded words. I had ignored that pain in my leg preparing for the marathon. I crawled into bed when I arrived home from the doctor’s office, curled up next to Seamus. Cradled his warmth until I fell asleep. The next morning, I decided I might keep him, if Stewart didn’t show, at least until after the surgery. I thought about renaming him. Maybe call him Shay. Beyond that, my mind was blank. I collapsed into bed, refusing to cry. Seamus crawled in bedside me. I could feel his warm body and his steady breathing.

My texts to Stewart go unanswered for two months. Nothing. Not a peep. I don't care. Eventually I stop trying: Not because I want Seamus – although he IS growing on me – but because life gets too riddled with doctors, meds, chemo. Seamus is the only comfort these days. A better friend than Stewart for damn sure. I thought maybe Ma would be there but mostly she smiles nervously and asks what I want to watch on T.V. That's something I guess. It's a normal reaction, at least if you believe Seamus Heaney, "Human beings suffer. They torture one another."

My sneakers sit in the closet, next to the suitcase of dog toys, mostly untouched except for that one ball that he'd bring to the couch and gently drop in my lap. He ruined the hardwood chasing it down the hall again and again. When I was stronger we'd take a walk to the mailbox. Seamus stopped needing a leash and I know why: He's letting ME go.

I can't go out now. Too weak. By day Seamus patrols the house, stopping at my bed to nudge my hand and wag his tail in response. He whines and circles when the chemo side-effects kick in, pummeling me from the inside. At night he doesn't leave my side. He's sort of grown on me. I know it's just matter of time. God, I'm going to miss him.

## Story 12: A Farewell to Fools

“It’s akin to riding a merry-go-round!” Janice said, having to yell over the din of the protesting crowd so that *her* all-important statement could arrive to the ears of Ann, who was parked at Janice’s right elbow. “Look at them all,” she yelled on, “probably learned at the knees of their mothers and fathers, how to hate, how to hide. It’s fear, you know, fear of standing up for what’s right! It disgusts me! How can anyone sell themselves out, not be true to themselves?” Ann considered answering the question with a statement that would have stung but of course she didn’t because it would only have put the gears in motion; and she had learned a long time ago that with Janice, most times it is best to stay within the lines.

Ann closed her eyes, willing the dizziness to pass, wishing she *was* participating in some playground frolic. But this was serious, a ride-that-could-end-in-death, or, at least, mangled body parts. Getting sucked into Janice’s bloodthirsty enthusiasm was no way to maintain tight control. She had to pay attention, open her eyes or die. She remembered the first time she had plugged in, found the place where her feet fit on the RPD, the Rapid Personnel Deployer. You stepped on at the edge of the crowd, as close as the personnel carrier could get, pivoted out over the heads of the people, stepped off in the midst of the chaos. Dispersal was the objective; the result was an anonymous mingling with a confused and belligerent mass. When the light turned green, she would have to lift her foot, be ready to use the butt of her rifle to clear a small advantage among the confusion of bodies. Such was the life of a crowd control technician in 2053 Upper Canada.

Just as the light flipped green, Ann was pulled out of the game. “Ann, love. Do you want me to make you a sandwich?” Ann’s mother was standing in the doorway. “Mom! I’m playing a game with my friends.” Ann scolded her mother with the tone of a teenager despite the fact she was a 30-year-old pothead still living at home. “Of course, I want a sandwich. Just bring it in here.” Ann’s mother smoothed her dress and turned away like she was a dismissed servant. “Now where was I.” Ann said aloud into her headset. “Oh yeah ... such was the life of a crowd control technician in 2053 Upper Canada.”

Ann’s friends all left the group. Not much was going on now that she was flying solo. She flicked the green light off, realizing she still didn’t get her sandwich. She tiptoed her way down the stairs, the glow of the television piercing her eyes through the dark. Paranoia and suspicion arose. Only thing she could focus on was her fear and the heartbeat in her ear. Nearly tripping on to the kitchen floor, she noticed it was her mom sprawled out on the floor, the slice of bread making its way down with her.

“Mom?... Mom!” Ann bent over her mother, fear tingling in the back of her neck and panic rising from her belly. She saw blood, the dishevelled kitchen. Someone’s in here! Ann hadn’t heard a thing except the noise of the crowd in her headphones on the game. She cocked an

ear, hearing the drone of a news anchor on the T.V. and something else, muffled voices – more than one – near the rec room. She grabbed her phone and bolted to the back porch, crouching next to washer, pushing 9-1-1. She could still see her mom. One ring. Her fear gave rise to terror as she recalled the havoc of the rioting crowd: the destruction, the violence. Two rings. How “normal” people could be pushed to act in senseless ways. Her mom, so sweet and willing to help anyone, was now lying on the floor, victim to someone’s hatred. Three rings . . . “911, what is your emergency?” Ann whispered, “My mom’s unconscious in the kitchen and there’s an intruder in the house. Please send someone.” Ann ended the call and dialed one more time. It rang once before she got an answer. “Hello?”

“Janice,” Ann whispered, “I need your help.”

“Help with what?” Janice asked, “Why are you whispering?”

“There’s someone in my house and I think my mom is hurt.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Ann hissed at her.

“Turn around.”

“What?”

“Turn around, look behind you!” Janice said over the phone.

Ann turned around on the porch and saw Janice standing in the living room looking at her, holding a cell phone in her hand. “*Gotcha!*” she exclaimed.

Overwhelmed with confusion, Ann stood up from where she was crouched beside the busted washing machine and looked at Janice. “What the . . . what?”

“April fools!”

“April fools?!”

“April Fools!” Ann’s mother shouted, jumping into view, holding a big bologna sandwich on a plate.

“April Fools,” Ann muttered, looking down, shaking her head. “Shit.”

Everyone stood quietly a moment, Ann coming to terms with the hoax, Janice smiling eerily, and Ann’s mother holding the bologna sandwich.

“You know I called the cops,” Ann finally said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. They’re gonna be here any minute.”

“We should hide!” Janice exclaimed.

“We can April Fools the cops!” Ann’s mother said, still holding the sandwich.

“No,” Ann said. “We’re not doing that.”

“Yes, we are.”

“No, we aren’t. Someone’s gonna get shot.”

“You’re such a DRAMA queen,” Janice said, rolling her eyes.

“Ann,” her mother said, setting down the sandwich plate, stepping forward, and laying a motherly hand on her arm. “I’m your mom, and I love you. But we’re April Fooling the cops. It’s gonna be hilarious.”

“Someone is gonna get shot.”

“No one is going to get shot.”

Very shortly afterwards, Ann’s mom was shot by the cops. She was hidden behind a coat rack and jumped out, shouting April Fools, holding many sandwiches. Janice fled town and lived a dodgy life on the road, running from her past, forever calling it March thirty-second. April Fools was forever ruined for Ann. And she never ate another sandwich, as long as she lived.

### Story 13: Roots

The chainsaw sound made Davey's six-year-old ears hurt.

"Dad," said Davey, "Why cut the tree?"

Stanley looked at the greyed branches. "It hasn't had leaves for years. It'll be good wood for our stove."

"Dad, the tree still works: It holds my tire swing. When I climb it, I see all the way to the graveyard." It was still sturdy. "How long will it take for the new tree to grow?" Davey asked.

"We aren't planting a tree," Stanley answered.

"We don't need to plant anything," explained Davey. "The tree has baby arms here at the ground. See," Davey said, pointing at the roots. "When they grow up can I build a tree house?"

"Davey, those are the roots. It's where the tree started from. Roots grow across the ground, not up."

"Well what good are roots?" Davey asked. "You can't climb them."

Stanley explained, "Their job is to help the tree to grow UP. They feed the tree and keep it from being knocked down by wind."

Davey thought for a minute. "What will they do now if we cut the tree?"

Stanley explained "I suppose they don't have a job anymore."

Davey eyed the roots spread out around him and then looked at his dad. "All these roots for one tree? Should we cut the roots too? They don't do anything."

Stanley stayed silent, unsure of how to explain to a six-year-old how important roots are and how hard it was to get rid of them.

"Roots don't want to leave," Stanley told him finally. "They want to stay put, so we let them."

"Forever?"

"For as long as I've known."

"That's a long time," he said. "You're pretty old."

Stanley laughed. "Am I?"

"Yes," he said smiling. "Mom's pretty old too, isn't she?"

Stanley still had the chainsaw idling toward the tree. Glancing up through its shrunken branches he noticed the clouds, dark and forming, like wet cotton. "I need to get this done now, son," he said.

"Can I watch?"

"It might start raining."

"I can handle it."

"You can *handle* it?"

"Yeah."

"Where'd you hear that before?"

Davey shrugged.

"Alright, Smarty-pants. Take a few steps back."

Davey watched from the garden as Stanley chainsawed away the long dry branches one by one, braced for the soft thud every time they fell away from the trunk. After a while Stanley needed a stepladder for the higher branches. But as he worked the rain began falling, dotting the grey wood of the cut limbs, plunking the tin roof of the garage. Davey arched out his tongue trying to catch the droplets like snowflakes.

Sweating, Stanley said that was enough for today, and together they went into the house. The rain was really falling, now.

Stanley stored the chainsaw in the garage while Davey filled the kettle with water and waited for his dad to set it on the stove. Later, they slurped hot chocolate and warmed up by the woodstove. Davey looked out the window at the dead tree darkening in the pouring rain.

"Dad, when are you gonna cut the big branch?"

"Tomorrow. And you mean the *trunk*."

"The *trunk*?"

"Right."

"The *trunk*," he repeated, quietly, trying to memorize the word. "Maybe mom will help you with the *trunk*."

Stanley ran his thumb around the mug of hot chocolate, letting the warmth of the woodstove encase him. The fire snapped and settled behind the iron doors.

"Dad? Will she?"

"We talked about this, Davey."

"But we could ask her."

Davey was still looking out the window at the dying tree. Tired, Stanley watched him looking out.

"Do you remember what we said about the tree roots?" Stanley asked softly.

"Yeah."

"What did we say?"

"They wanna stay forever."

"That's right," he said. "Well, me and you are like tree roots, pal. We want to stay forever too."

Davey looked confused. "I thought we're moving to a *part-meant*."

"Apartment. And I mean we stay *together* forever. Not *here* forever."

"What about Mom?"

"What about her?"

"Is she a root, too?"

Stanley closed his eyes, tired and sweaty, out of things to say.

"I really don't know, son."

Davey was quiet and his father was quiet too. Outside the rain fell, splashed, and muddied the street in front of their yard where Davey's tire swing lay on the grass, blown over beside the half-cut tree.

The next morning Davey awoke to the sound of a car door slamming. He stumbled out of bed and made his way over to the window. Peering down the driveway he could see his mother's car lights slowly backing out. He looked at the time.



5:05 a.m.

His mother had to leave early for work but sometimes Davey would see her just as she left and watch from his window until her car lights disappeared down the road. It was like his personal goodbye to her every morning.

Making his way down the wooden stairs, jumping two steps at a time, he heard his father at the stove. Usually Davey would smell coffee brewing when he came down. This morning the smell of bacon greeted him with the crack and sizzle of oil cooking on the stove.

"Morning," he piped.

"Mornin'," Stanley rumbled, his drooping eyelids still trying to cover his sleep-deprived eyes. Davey sat at the table as his father brought him his plate of still-sizzling bacon and egg scramble. He looked over at the tree still looming in the yard as he munched on the salty bacon.

"We gonna cut the *trunk* down dad?"

His father nodded slowly as he glanced at the yard, his coffee working its magic as he sipped it thoughtfully.

"Later. Gotta take a little drive into town today."

"Are we gonna see the *part-meant*?"

"*Apartment*. Yeah, it won't be long."

They finished breakfast and headed out in Stanley's pickup. Davey watched the countryside zipping by as he became fixated on the blur of trees along their path.

"When are we coming back?"

Stanley was silent for a moment. His eyes, more awake now with coffee-fueled adrenaline, glanced over at the boy silently looking for stray wildlife.

"We'll be back for lunch, probably."

"Probably?"

"Yeah"

"Will mom be home?"

Davey looked over at his father's face when he didn't answer. The rings under his eyes looked a bit darker than usual. Maybe cutting the tree had been more work than he could handle at his age. Davey returned his gaze to the countryside, watching as the tree line receded to reveal more and more vinyl houses as they got closer to town.

Although he didn't entirely understand why his dad didn't answer, he decided not to ask about Mom again.

"Dad, do all trees get cut down?"

"Not all trees."

"But isn't that how they die?"

"It's how some die, but not all of them. Some trees die on their own in the woods. Others get hit by lightning and fall over."

"But where do they go then, when they die?"

"Well, lots of them don't go anywhere. They stay wherever they fall and rot into the ground to help other things grow."

"Like the roots?"

"Not exactly. Roots are part of how trees and plants grow while they are alive. Dead trees get broken down into smaller pieces that feed other things that live in the woods."

"And the same thing happens to the roots? They break down too?"

"I suppose they do too, eventually. It takes a long time though."

Davey got quiet again while he took in this new information. He tried to imagine being a tree or a root, staying put in one place for a long time, just waiting to fall down or get turned into

smaller pieces. He wasn't so sure he wanted to be like the roots, stuck in one place for such a long time.

"And here," Stanley said, fiddling with the parking brake till it clicked, then announcing, "we are."

After buzzing in and riding the elevator up to the third floor, Davey and Stanley stood outside what Davey thought was probably the tallest door he'd ever seen.

"Will the part-meant have a new tree for my tire swing?" Davey asked after careful consideration.

"No," his father answered, "but there's a park down the street with swings."

"And a slide?"

"Sure, there's probably a slide."

Stan read the numbers on the door: 108. The eight was crooked, making it look like an infinity sign. He knew Davey's mother would have had something clever to say about that. Hell, she would have had a whole story to tell, and Davey would have loved it; she was always better at making up stories.

"What if we brought the tree from our house!?" Dave suggested. "The trunk part at least."

"It's dead, pal," Stan took Davey's hand. "Let's focus on what's already inside, okay?"

"Okay."

Stanley opened the door and took a deep breath. The inside of the apartment was covered in dusty blue and red checked wallpaper; it was certainly something new.

"Dad?" Davey asked, looking around at the colourful walls.

"Yeah buddy?"

"Do partments have roots?"

Stanley chuckled. Of course apartments don't have roots.

"No," he answered quickly, but after thinking a little longer, he added, "not until you plant them."

They were back later than they hoped that Saturday. Stanley—keenly aware of his limits—had contacted Charlie Robinson, who lived not far from them, to help him fell the rotting spruce which, they discovered, had been hollowed out by troops of ants. Well-placed ropes, Stanley's cleverly-executed chain-saw wedge, and Robinson's monster truck (hooked to the ropes) served to vanquish the grey height of the stubborn crown and trunk—sent what was left of the tree crashing to the ground. Just before dark, a branch of Davey's mother's eleven-year old crabapple tree, cracked by an errant limb, had been discreetly repaired with two dark sticks and black Gorilla tape.

Davey, in the end, had approved of the apartment. Outside his new bedroom window, he'd screamed with delight, was a tree with pops of colour that looked like the cranberries his mother boiled for sauce whenever his grandparents joined them for turkey dinner. Once his father pointed out that Davey no longer had to bus to town—that he could, like so many of his classmates, *walk* to school—he'd wrapped his arms tightly around his father's legs and said, "I love you."

Stanley invited Davey into the garage after Charlie Robinson left with the dead branches that could, he said (shaking his head), have easily started a chimney fire. In one corner of the garage was a stack of wood rounds. "Pine," his father told him. "Incorruptible. Remember the story I told you about the day you were born—how Post-Tropical Storm Arthur snatched one of

our hundred-foot white pine's two leads, snapped it off like a matchstick, drove it through the roof in four places, and took out the back deck? Choose one. You and I, son, are about to make a table for your new bedroom."

Davey soon learned what was meant by "sand like hell," about the difference between varnish and urethane, about how vital it was to use 600 between each coat to make the glossy finish bind. He and his father purchased a set of wooden legs with metal brackets from Home Hardware. The dark-brown curls of bark that he decided to leave intact would make him dream of the new girl at school. Davey stroked the table, which he placed next to his bed, every night—counted the golden rings by two's, as he was taught in class. Try as he might, he never did determine the age of that tree.

The first night Davey and his mother, Beatrice, spent at the apartment, leaving Stanley alone in the old house, which he'd retreated to only after puttering away in the garage as long as possible, Stanley tried to pretend nothing had changed. He put the kettle on, made himself a cup of tea. He went to his favourite recliner and flipped the channels, ignoring the spot where Beatrice's chair used to be, tried not to think about all the empty places in the rooms and cupboards that used to be full and vibrant with three living people using them, that now held gaping holes, space, and emptiness.

They had talked it over for months, to death it felt like. At one time Stanley was going to take the apartment, but with his wood working business held out of the garage that had made no sense. And it was Beatrice who felt trapped and isolated in the old house. And Davey being able to walk to school was a bonus for everyone. They'd landed on what made the most sense, but Stanley couldn't help worrying how the change might affect Davey. If the decisions his mother and father were making weren't slowly eroding Davey from the inside, until too late they'd discover the damage couldn't be undone. And he and Beatrice, taking a break from each other, could the break mean the end of everything? Or could their relationship ever be repaired? For now, he decided that all he could do was his best, but manifesting that felt insurmountable as he wondered if he ever had ever really, truly, tried all that hard at all. Which option was worse—maintaining the status quo of being the distant parent and receding into irrelevance, or trying to force some kind of fun-dad facade that might screw his son up even more? When it came to wood-working, he was perfectionist, sure, but that passion and energy was often shed as he crossed the threshold between the garage and the house. The table was the only idea he had, a shot in the dark really.

At Christmas time a few years later—the divorce still aching, but the open-wound sting numbed—Davey, now thirteen, brought a gift to the house on his way to Beatrice's parents' place. "I can't stay long, but I wanted to give you this," he said. Stanley opened the box to find, within it, another box—made from pine. It was clearly handmade, a little lopsided with small bubbles of dried wood glue peeking from its seams. It was on that cold December morning, maple logs crackling in the stove, and the fresh smell of his modest Christmas fir tree, that he realized that without knowing it, the table had been his best. Wood was a language he could communicate in, and now his son could too.

### Story 14: Raven Lunatic

“You better prick up your ears, mate.” Mark was forever cooing this, day in and day out. He’d recently leaned the slang on his trip to Leicester, UK and was fascinated by its roots, loved how it rolled off his tongue. His friends were not so appreciative of the phrase. To them, it felt like every time he wanted their attention or had some so-called exciting news he just had to share, again, he would always include telling them to “prick up your ears.” Unbeknownst to Mark, some friends were beginning to avoid him.

“Mark, give it a rest. We don’t use that here. Canada does not ‘prick our ears’ unless ya wants ta wear earrins.” Bethany sneered at Mark. “You’ been home a month and I’ve heard ya say that damn phrase a million times. Y’ur pissin’ everyone off.”

“It’s prick UP your ears, Bethany, not . . .” Mark began to correct her but was cut off.

“I don’t care. Give it a rest already.” Bethany slipped out of the booth and walked to the back of the restaurant. She did not need the facilities, but she did need a break from Mark and his insensate goings on about pricking ears and Leicester.

The day arrived. It felt like an unholy amount of time since the plans were first made and the tickets were bought. Mark had just finished last-minute packing. While crossing off items on his list, to ease his anxiety about forgetting any crucial items, he heard his phone go off. Mark jumped off his bed and launched himself toward his dresser where his phone laid face up. The text message notification lit up.

*BETHANY: I’m soooo soo sorry Mark! I gotta cancel my flight. My mother’s been in the hospital since last night, and we have no clue what’s going on. They’re keeping her for a few days, at least . . . so she needs me to take care of Brianne. I’m so sorry, but I just can’t leave my little sister alone. Hope you understand. Take lots of photos and keep in touch. Do you think Air Canada will give me a full refund?*

“Fuck yeah, they will,” Mark felt like shouting at the text in relief. He didn’t want to go anyway. Especially after he learned his Buddhist affinity group for quiet queens, guys into drag, was hosting a retreat that weekend on Zoom. He was going to tell Bethany on their vacation about his drag activity. He wasn’t sure how she would take it. She seemed frustrated since his last trip, before the pandemic, where he met up with the guys in person. Bethany seemed envious and was always on him to change his phrases, to forget Leicester. He wondered if she knew, especially since she asked him about wearing earrings. She once found his hidden clothes closet. Flustered, Mark had said it was his stash of Halloween costumes.

Mark picked up the phone to text Air Canada to cancel his ticket. Bethany was on her own. He grabbed up some chocolate from the left-over Halloween candy. Nobody believed that “secret”—that he bought it for the kids. Now, he would not have to tell Bethany, at least not for a while. Would not have to let her know about the blue checked dress, the one he borrowed yet split dancing, during his online performance, trying to stay in the narrow range the camera could see.

Mark closed his eyes and pictured himself on the retreat, in gallery view, eyeing the beautiful men, in their wigs, lipstick and lashes, closing their purple shadowed eyes at the sound of the bell.

The broken ribs were healing. The cut over Mark’s eye, closed with eight ugly stitches, was going to scar. It would forever be a reminder of the dangers of his hobby. He could cover it: his make-up technique was improving. Even Bethany, once she got over the idea that you had to be gay to do this, commented on how good Mark looked in drag. But she wouldn’t sleep with him on performance nights. Mark hoped to be back on stage soon, singing “Sweet Dreams” by Annie Lennox and playing up the audience as Raven Lunatic in that luscious, flowing wig and the most gorgeous black sequined mini dress. It felt so fucking good to own the room, to hear the whistles and cat calls. Afterward, being asked to chat with the reporter felt validating. Not everyone knew about his affiliation for drag but he’d decided he was done hiding. When it came down to it, we all did something funky that people would judge you for. That freeing feeling, flying high after a show, after being interviewed had been short-lived. Three drunk bastards, GI Joe types he guessed, jumped him just as he crossed Wellington and turned up his street. He didn’t remember much: the words cut deeper than the punches and kicks. “Fucking weirdo. Pussy. Pansy.” “Weirdo” hurt the worst. Mark had spent the past two weeks rethinking his “coming out,” wondering if it was worth it.

Bethany had her hair in a ponytail and an acid-wash backpack as she dragged him up past the construction site and the new YMCA. “Where are we going?” he asked for the tenth time. For the tenth time, she just grinned back, took his hand as they passed the Public Gardens, wended up and through the parking lot. At the park across the street there was an outdoor screening of a hockey game, people sitting six feet apart but strangely, still, together. Mark thought of ice rinks. Somewhere, men were playing hockey in July.

He smelled them before he saw them. Brown, dun, spotted. Trotting around the pasture, switching their tails, ambling, nuzzling their noses together. It was evening, a blood-orange haze of sunset crawling Citadel Hill. He found himself smiling without meaning to.

Bethany touched the rubbed scar above Mark’s eyebrow as she led him to the fence where docile horses circled and shat and rubbed their noses on the worn planks. The sign said not to feed them but Bethany opened a backpack full of sad apples and wire-haired carrot ends. She clucked and a dappled mare loped over.

“Prick up yer ears,” she said. “I finally gets it.”

Mark looked at her and shook his head. She cooed and squeaked, the horse’s ears rising to attention. Mark laughed, but she wasn’t done. She squawked like a squirrel. She made chicken sounds, mouse squeaks. She whistled and smooched and whoomphed and they laughed together, watching the horse-ears rise and swivel and dance. Bethany touched Mark’s ears, rubbed the braid of scab and scar above his eyebrow, and told him she knew, had always known. They talked about the quiet queens, about the checked dress, about the hail of words and fists. “Sometimes,” Mark said, “I feel my life has been a sieve. A little sham of truth with secrets

sloshing around it, trying to pass through.” She said nothing, which was all he needed. She leaned in to hug him and the embrace turned into a slow, swaying dance. A dance that had no need for music. The hockey-watchers cheered something on the screen, but the applause was in his ears, in his ears.

### Story 15: Escape to the Night Circus

Jackie was smoking a cigarette in the hall of mirrors and Marc was tugging on her sleeve.

“You can’t smoke here.”

Jackie looked down at her brother, blew smoke into his face.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

She snorted. “Good luck, Narc.” She gestured to the mirrors. She was right. He didn’t know the way. The voices of young men boomed around a corner. Something about vomit in the Gravitron. In the mirror, Jackie adjusted her bra. Something squished under Marc’s sneaker. He looked down into a horror of ketchup, smooshed French fries.

His sister was gone.

With panic settling in, Marc’s ears got hot while he remembered the fight, how he’d tried not to come.

“But Mom, Jackie always takes off on me.”

“You just mind your sister, you hear me. I need you outta my hair.”

At just 11 years old, Marc lived in his room unless his mom had a male caller coming around. Usually, he put up with being shooed out of the house, but he hated the Carny Fair. All those freaks running the rides and screaming at people to try their luck at some stupid game. His older sister broke into the conversation. “Ya, ya little snot. I’m minding you and I say we’s going to the fair. Trevor is working today and I wanna surprise him on his break.”

Whether he wanted to or not, Marc knew he had no say in the progression of his days. Littered with the wants and needs of those around him, he retreated into his own little world. Remembering his stash of stolen library books in the trunk of his mom’s car, he sneaked out of his room, grabbing the car keys off the counter. He quickly grabbed the first book he saw and then returned the keys. Before the front door had a chance to slam behind him, he was already sprinting to the dusty bare-boned playground of the trailer park. Settling into his new world, time became elusive. Losing track of it until the words he had been focusing on went soaring. His sister appeared in front of him with her finger shoved into his face as though he was a dog needing to be trained. Her words muffled and then drowned into static noise. He turned away, facing his bedroom wall.

Hearing Marc crying, his face turned away, broke something in Jackie. She suddenly became aware of herself, finger poking and face shaped into a grimace. Face scowling, the way she always looked, in her hatred of her life and her mother’s men friends and their late-night visits to her room. In the morning, she felt like she had ridden the Gravitron for hours, feeling dizzy and sick, from the men’s grabbing and grinding and smoking. Jackie’s friends teased her, she was always adjusting her bra, trying to remove the feeling of the unwanted touches. The only time

she felt free was at the carny fair, on some fast ride, ridiculing her brother. This time it was different. She realized she had to change, to relate to her brother in a way that wouldn't crush him, reduce him to a ball, a nothing. Seeing the tears, Jackie knew she definitely had to learn something new, like Buddhist meditation or time traveling. She picked up one of Marc's books and saw it was right on point regarding heading into the future. Jackie became obsessed with the subject until she had mastered this tool, aided by her calmer mind. She knew her training was done when she found herself one hundred years in the future, cradling a wizened, frail Marc on his deathbed, as he took his last breaths, staring into her soft, grey eyes. His books were neatly piled beside him. When Jackie looked inside, she saw he had written, "This belongs to Narc." Jackie wept knowing that the hurt had lingered all those in between years.

Jackie was hidden behind one of the tall mirrors, out of Marc's sight, thinking it over. She could hear Marc's sneakers squishing while he wandered around the mirror house, calling her name. Why was she doing this? Why was she hiding from him? The panic in Marc's voice was so fragile and innocent while he looked for her. Jackie took a long drag on her cigarette. The smoke spread in front of the mirrors casting a hundred reflections of herself standing in the grey haze. In the mirror she saw her own tired face; the sore color of baggy eyes. And then in the mirror she saw something new, the way Jackie bit her own lip while she thought. A lot like how her mother did when she was at her wits end. Was that a coincidence? Or was she just becoming like her own mother? Was Jackie on the path to becoming the same person?

Marc had gone off to the other side of the mirror house. Jackie could still hear him calling for her while she smoked, blowing out wavy grey plumes. Then, Jackie killed the cigarette under her shoe heel and went to find Marc.

Marc turned up wandering around at the far corner looking confused by the illusion of pathways all around him. She walked slowly, delicately placing her heels then toes as she silently crept up. Her hand reached out to grab him and shake him silly so he'd probably piss his pants. "Jackie?"

Her hand hovered for a moment before it gently rested on his shoulder. "Hey."

He still twirled around like a wild animal and let out a girly yell. "JESUS JACKIE. Don't do that!"

The sound of Jackie's laughter rang all around as Marc hit her arm in anger.

"Calm down squirt, I wasn't gonna leave ya. Come on, Trevor's probably gonna go on his break soon. I don't want to miss him."

Marc looked up at her with an expression he had meant to be intimidating, but only brought a smile to Jackie's face. Instead of throwing a tirade though, he let out an exasperated sigh and marched out ahead.

"Oh come on I was only teasing ya," she snickered after him.

When did he get to be such a cranky old man? She wandered after him ignoring her own reflections following her.

As they walked out into the cold night air Marc shoved his hands deeper into his windbreaker, angling his elbows out to make himself seem wider. Jackie looked over and could see the cloud of smoke from the workers on their break. She spotted Trevor's ballcap and his wavy shoulder-length hair easily as he giggled among his friends in their nicotine cloud. She started towards them but looked back over to Marc again who had stopped to admire the lights of the Ferris Wheel. He was starting to lose his boyish traits and it wouldn't be long before he was a fully-fledged punk. She adjusted her bra and changed course toward her brother.



“Hey,” Marc looked up at her as Jackie sauntered over. “Wanna go ride the Gravitron again?”

“What about Trevor?” The resentment in his voice was strong.

“He’s not around. Bugger didn’t bother to tell me. So what’ll it be squirt? You ready for one more, or you gonna puke again?” Marc didn’t respond right away and seemed to sense that she wasn’t as smooth with her insults as normal.

“Alright, but you’re the one who’s gonna puke after sucking down all that smoke,” he retorted.

“Not likely,” she smirked and pushed him ahead as they moved towards the Gravitron one more time.

“Here,” She held a cigarette stick out to him. He took the offering like she was passing on a great family heirloom. “There now at least you’ll look a little bit cooler when you’re blowing chunks everywhere.”

“Shut up!” Marc yelled angrily at her, but still delicately placed the stick behind his ear. He kept it on him all night; later stowing it away in one of his stolen library books for safe keeping.

## Story 16: Zooming Out

“Do trees grieve their fallen leaves?”

After Sage yelled out this one, I yelled back, “Shut up!” They stuck their head out, looking all teary eyed. Unperturbed, I yelled, “Stop watching that dopey guru. He is a goof.”

Sage was hooked on this program, *Morning Call to Bliss* with Desi Pannach.

“He loves us,” Sage yelled back. “We are his Global Family,” they said, in reference to themselves and all the other Zoom groupies that showed up every morning for their bliss dose. One time, Sage even went on screen, turned their video on. I could hear them chatting with Desi with all the groupies sending love on the chat, I guessed. I wanted to yell “shut up” that time. I heard Desi talking about love, Sage mumbling about how scared they were in lockdown. I kept quiet.

It wasn’t always this way. It’s amazing how being forced together can actually move you apart. I don’t even think Sage gets what we’ve lost in such a short time. At first, we had that alignment of mind and soul and purpose. There was a time when Desi would have been what I needed and wanted too: bonding over that feeling of love and acceptance and hope.

Namaste.

Bullshit.

I’d have to say our misalignment began with losing Mamie so suddenly. In the lockdown we never got a chance to say goodbye. Afterwards Sage went looking for virtual happiness and I thought it was too phony and unnecessary.

When I told Sage I felt like I’d been left behind, Sage said that was my problem, that happiness was a state of mind you chose to embrace. The chasm grew from there: me living offline in the real time and space and Sage using blogposts and virtual prophets and friend requests to define real life.

I didn’t buy into any of that, though. It wasn’t until a few days afterwards that I heard Sage calling for me. I ignored it. Knew they were watching Desi. It was that time. But Sage was determined and found me sitting in the kitchen and demanded I come upstairs to their computer. But, of course, I wouldn’t; I wasn’t going to waste my time with any of that.

I put my headphones in and cranked the volume on my iPod. I couldn’t hear anything Sage said to me. I just saw their lips move, and their face creasing into anger—until Sage tore away my iPod and ripped the earphones straight out of my ears with a *pop!*

“Hey!” I shouted. “What do you want!?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you! Desi wants us all to bring someone new to the Zoom meeting!”

“So, bring someone,” I said. “And leave me alone!”

"If you come to the meeting this *one time*, I promise to never bother you about it again."

"Oh, like I believe that."

"Honest!" Sage said, and held out their pinky finger. "*Pinky swear, cross my heart, if I lie, I'll smell your farts.*"

"That's . . . not the rhyme," I mumbled.

"It is *too*," Sage said, still holding out their finger. "Just this one time, come to the meeting, and I'll leave you alone."

I sighed. "Fine."

Sage set us up in the living room because they liked the background. They kept adjusting the computer screen until it was perfectly centered between us.

"I think it's still off center," I said knowing full well it was probably aligned to the measurement.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Here's better?"

Sage proceeded to adjust the web cam more as I grinned watching them agonize all over again.

My smile slackened when I realized that the old Sage would have laughed.

The groupies all came online like Christmas lawn ornaments lighting up.

Then Desi appeared raising his hands in a quasi-religious acknowledgement, "Hello there, my Global Family!"

Sage waved enthusiastically, "Hello Desi"

"I see everyone's brought a friend today, this is really exciting, so wonderful to have you all here, welcome, welcome."

I suppressed an eye roll. You told everyone to bring somebody.

Like an AA meeting we all introduced ourselves and after Desi talked about the current lockdown restrictions changing, reminding everyone to stay safe.

As if we could forget. Walking outside without protection was considered a crime now.

I felt Sage's hand intertwine with mine. Confused, I looked up and realized Desi had told everyone to take their partners' hands.

"I want us to think about the people in our lives and remember what is important in these strange times. We have each other and remembering to follow the bliss of our beautiful connections on this earth is the most important thing right now."

Sage beamed at me; this participation in their virtual world really had meant a lot.

I felt guilty. I didn't feel the same. I couldn't meet the intensity in their eyes and instead I closed mine as if I really felt the bliss.

Why, I wondered, was I remembering Jonestown and that stinking Giuliani and his bosom buddy, He Who Shall Not Be Named? Bloody narcissist, that Desi. It seemed as if as long as that crook lived, so did Sage—that if Sage stood apart from Desi Pannach and his groupies, they'd die from loneliness or worse: stab themselves with a needle like Mamie did and end it.

I couldn't stomach this mess much longer. Once Sage had signed off, it wouldn't hurt me to get dressed, grab our masks, and drag them out *with* me to buy a morning paper. Could be it was time for a heart-to-heart, a wee dram of honesty, a touch of courage, and an unreserved apology.

But where will this heart-to-heart lead us, a voice inside my head whispered. Of course, I know damn well where it would take us, or at least where it would take me. Out of here. Metaphorically if not physically. I glanced over at Sage. They were so focused on the screen at

this point that they barely noticed me pulling my hand free from their grasp. Their beloved guru was swaying back and forth now, chanting some sort of affirmation. His followers all appeared in smaller little video boxes underneath the larger main Zoom speaker video. Sage began rocking on the couch in unison with them, following along with all the other brainwashed Pannachites.

God, who ends things in a pandemic? Certainly not anyone in Desi's giant Global Family. But I was definitely not interested in being part of that reality-denying sap-fest. I left the note on our hall table, put on my mask, and tossed my backpack over my shoulder. Thank goodness restrictions had lifted enough for some of the hotels to have opened back up. As I opened up our door to the world outside, the clanging gong signalled the end of Sage's daily session. By the final resounding note, I was free.

## Method

16 writers were sent initial prompts (see “The 16 Initial Prompts”), and asked to respond to prompts in a paragraph between 50 and 250 words within seven days. These 16 initial responses were then sent anonymously to the next participant in the randomized list of 16 (after the fashion of an email chain). Recipients received a new prompt (ex: “Exposition: Where did it all begin?”) and were tasked with responding to this prompt by building on the initial paragraph within seven days. This anonymous digital chain continued to circulate through a total of 6 week-long cycles, with the final prompt (Week 6) asking participants to conclude and title the story. Writers were encouraged to interpret prompts creatively and capaciously. The results rendered here are various dynamic approaches to the provided 6-part structure, all written by 6 discrete writers in anonymous collaboration.

## The 16 Initial Prompts

1. Set up a confrontation between characters in a spooky Halloween setting.
2. A pile of acorns was arranged in a circle, and placed in the middle of the driveway. Use this as a point of tension between the two characters who interpret it differently.
3. You are born with the voice of your mother and father inside of you. If you could only hear one voice for the rest of your life, whose voice would it be? Dramatize the conflict within experiencing these two voices.
4. There's a big storm coming. Your elderly mother is refusing to leave her danger oceanside property.
5. Two people really want the same thing. Their parents have passed away, and they want to inherit X or Y object. Dramatize the conversation.
6. Put your character in a risky situation involving trees and another character.
7. Your main character is trying to get the toddler to eat vegetables, and the toddler is learning to manipulate the main character.
8. Your main character has received an offer for their historic home that is difficult to refuse. A shady developer wants to buy it, but your character needs money.
9. Your main character is with a friend in a restaurant who treats the server poorly. Does your character intervene?
10. In a conversation with someone else, your character finds out an uncomfortable secret about someone they are dating.
11. Your character is given something they need to take care of but don't know how to. Make your character irresponsible.
12. How does a character's interaction with tree rings relate to a relationship in their life?
13. If a tree is made up of a root system, what happens when it rots? Put this in dialogue between characters and add conflict.
14. Your main character thinks too hard about an idiom (ex. "I'm all ears"). The obsession begins to put strain on their relationship.
15. Two characters are trapped in a hall of mirrors. An old animosity resurfaces.
16. Do trees grieve their fallen leaves? Frame in a conflict-rich dialogue between two characters.

## Notes on Contributors

**Shari Andrews'** sixth book of poetry, *First Thin Light*, was published by Oberon Press in 2015. Her work has appeared in anthologies including *150 Canada's History in Poetry*; Acorn Press, 2018. Numerous journals: *Canadian Literature*, *Event*, *Grain*, *The Fiddlehead* and *Room*, among others, have published her poetry. She has received writing grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the New Brunswick Arts Board.

An avid reader, **Tabatha Armstrong** is a staff member at UNB Fredericton who enjoys dabbling in creative writing pursuits from time to time.

**Carla Bourque** spends her days working in the communications field. An introvert by nature, she stretches herself regularly by coaching and acting in local theatre. Her love of writing was fostered from a young age: Her mother needed her to channel her creativity somewhere other than in a million questions posed to whatever grown-up nearby would listen. Carla is married to her cosmic soul-mate whom she met on a blind date. Living in Moncton with her husband and two cats, Carla enjoys hiking, playing softball and all things Disney.

**Sherry Coffey's** CNF essay "Hiking the Fundy Footpath" was published in the Winter 2020 issue of *The Fiddlehead*. She is an award-winning writer with published poetry and non-fiction. In 2008, she was a recipient of Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Emerging Artist's Award. She is from the Yukon Territory but lives with her husband, son, and little dog Lambert in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

**Shawna Cyr-Calder** is a full-time mother and a full-time student at the University of New Brunswick. Currently doing her 3rd year in the Bachelor of Applied Arts program. She has written articles for Pink Blitz, The Brunswickan, and Paper News, had an op-ed published in the Times & Transcript, and sporadically edits and proof-reads for East Coast Groove.

An early retirement, a pandemic and moving from Montreal to rural NB in May of 2020 has provided **Johanne Dugas** with ample time to devote to her passions of writing, photography, and anything that involves bringing creative thoughts into the open. Her "working-to-pay-the-bills" career was in Montreal, where she put her McGill diploma to good use in the Quebec healthcare network. Satisfying her need to be creative, Johanne was a columnist and translated articles from French to English for several suburban weekly newspapers along the way.

**Matthew Gwathmey** lives with his partner and children in Fredericton, New Brunswick. He studied creative writing at the University of Virginia, and is currently working on his PhD at the University of New Brunswick. His first poetry collection, *Our Latest in Folktales*, was published by Brick Books in the spring of 2019.

**Dominic Kent** lives in Saint John, New Brunswick where he writes and lives with his cat named Cat.

**Gwyneth Moir** is a first-year arts student at UNB Fredericton. She is currently studying English and Creative Writing in hopes of becoming a screenwriter. In her spare time, Gwyneth volunteers with the Saint John Newcomers Center and writes poetry.

**Carlos Morales**, born in 1965, is a poet and writer from Juayúa, El Salvador, who has lived in Fredericton, New Brunswick, since 1991, where he has participated in literary activities and worked to promote Latin American culture. He published his first book of poetry, “Antología Chiquita” (Small Anthology), in 2012.

**Jennifer Musgrave** is a freelance writer, aspiring poet and reflexologist based in Saint John, New Brunswick. She earned her Bachelor of Arts at Mount Allison University and continues to pursue insights into creative writing and alternative healing modalities.

**Christiana Myers** is a curator, writer, museum educator, and artist living in Menagoesg/Saint John, New Brunswick. She holds a BFA from Mount Allison University and a MLitt Curatorial Practice from the Glasgow School of Art. She has undertaken curatorial projects in Atlantic Canada, Montreal, Finland, and Scotland. In 2018, she was selected as Canadian Art’s winter editorial resident. Her recent arts writing on disability and access, climate conservation, and ritual have appeared in C Magazine, CreatedHere, and publications by St. Thomas University and Goose Lane Editions.

A substitute teacher, writer/editor, and volunteer guide for the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, **Diane Reid** is a vital part of Fredericton’s vigorous poetry scene. She raised funds for the University of New Brunswick’s Alden Nowlan House, selected and supervised its art and poetry installations, and served on its board. Her home is west of the city on Kelly’s Creek, a tributary of Canada’s historic St. John River. Her debut collection, *Summer Preserves* (Breton Books, 2012), was nominated for both Atlantic Canada’s Gerald Lampert Memorial Award and the national Griffin Prize.

**Josephine L. Savarese** is an Associate Professor in Criminology and Criminal Justice at St. Thomas University with an interest in creative writing.

**Darin Squire** is a current UNB English and Creative Writing major. While he comes to university and writing late in life, Darin has accomplished having several articles printed for a New Brunswick arts magazine. His poetry and short fiction have gained the attention of professors and fellow writers.

**Jane Tims** is a botanist, writer and artist in rural New Brunswick. She has written: five books of poetry including two with Chapel Street Editions; nine books in the *Meniscus* science fiction series under the name Alexandra Tims; and the first two in the *Kaye Eliot Mystery Series*. In 2016 she won the Alfred G. Bailey Prize in the WFNB Writing Competition and in 2020 she won Third Place in the same competition. She illustrates all her books and creates the front cover art. Her website [www.janetims.com](http://www.janetims.com) features her art and poetry.