/// the scratch writing challenge

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WHERE TO WRITE

COVER PHOTO
girl writing on a beach
by kristopher ede//invermere
There’s nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.

— Walter Wellesley “Red” Smith

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The SCRATCH Writing Challenge asked youth to create a work of fiction that takes place in the Columbia Basin for a chance to win cash and get published. The characters needed to reveal the complexities of human nature and needed to be believable within the universe of the story being told. The stories submitted revealed the voice, imagery writing, and style of a generation! Ten finalists were chosen by the Selection Committee; read more about these stories and the challenge from the Committee below.

All of the stories in the SCRATCH Writing Challenge demonstrate a strong connection between landscape and the human condition – the rivers, mountains, forests and lakes are places where characters discover something important about themselves. The highways that stitch this region together provide the setting for the journey narratives of the two winning stories. I recognize all the landmarks.

“Take a good look at those cherry blossoms” Amos Tanguay’s narrator tells his son; “they smell like the fruit that hasn’t be born yet. Try and be gentle, if you can,” he says. This tender voice in the winning story The Geese Know Where to Go inhabits the subtle spaces between self and wanting, staying and leaving, the constant current of the river that wants to take us away from here and bring us back to what we have come to know and love.

A very different, less subtle voice inhabits Julia Caceres Booth’s story Trans-Canada. “I burned rubber west on the freeway. It’s not that I’m nuts, malicious or evil,” Caceres Booth’s main character confesses, “I just couldn’t stand them anymore.” As she distances herself from her children and husband, and drives deeper into the mountains, she relocates the core of herself, and chooses, like Tanguay’s narrator in The Geese Know Where to Go to return to what she knows is true and good.

Claire deBoer’s astoundingly perceptive story, The Pebbles, is about two young people orbiting around each other like satellites as they wrestle with the gravitational pull of their communities. deBoer has a lovely way of landing on a pearl of language that sums up the tension, and final release, of a curious and credible relationship; “Jordan found himself enjoying the first companionable silence he had had in a long while.”

Finally, Kim Wiest’s The Trickster is a story built around revealing the contents of a box. The reader wants to know what’s in the box but we also know it must never be opened. Echoes of Jack London’s Call of the Wild lured me deeper into a crafty First Nations narrative about the nature of fear.

The SCRATCH Writing Challenge offers writers of the Columbia Basin an opportunity to create our own reality through story. It is a way of defining ourselves through the stories we tell and helps us determine where we want to go and how we want to be with each other. All these stories are about us.

The entries in the SCRATCH Writing Challenge surprised me in many ways – the diversity of topics, the range of approaches to fiction, and the vastly different interpretations of Basin culture. The young writers particularly exceeded my expectations. The Wishing Bridge, for example, is a provocative allegory of human greed and selfishness written by Aanika Ruutopold, a 16-year-old from Rossland. This cautionary tale examines the darker edges of human nature and criticizes people’s need to exploit the magical for personal profit. In her condemnation of development and Capitalism, Ruutopold joins a chorus of voices much more “well aged” than her own. I love that the SCRATCH Writing Challenge not only allows us a peek into the work of this young writer, but also gives her an early vote of confidence. The work that Columbia Basin Trust does in creating space for these young writers is invaluable. I, for one, will keep an eye out for Ms. Aanika Ruutopold and am...
grateful for the opportunity to watch her develop as a writer.

Another writer who I will be watching is Melinda Pederson, the 20-year-old from Nelson who wrote Catch, a realist story with a funky timeline. The best fiction takes risks and breaks rules. Pederson pushes against conventions and expectations in several realms, including chronology. Here, the past always bleeds into—and informs—the present. As Pederson shows “what has happened” continually intruding upon “what is happening,” she works with big themes, including the biggest—death. This story will make some readers uncomfortable, but keep this in mind—maybe Pederson wants to make you uncomfortable. The most memorable literature challenges readers and it’s heartening to see this knowledge reflected in the work of the Basin’s young writers.

Despite the impressive quality of submissions, our committee had no problem choosing the winning entries: The sophisticated and beautifully executed The Geese Know Where to Go and Trans-Canada. Oddly, both of these pieces show a parent leaving his or her family. In portraying these pivotal moments, the writers examine the play between convention (what we should do) and desire (what we want to do)—a liminal realm so immensely productive for artistic exploration and, coincidentally, for defining ourselves as a culture.

Dear Young Writers: it’s been fun. As you face the blank page, take the advice of our winning author Amos Tanguay: “Breathe out all of that sadness into the air and make it into something that blooms like a cherry blossom, fed by everything you know.”

Angie Abdou, Ph.D, currently teaches at the College of the Rockies in Cranbrook and makes her home in Fernie. Her work has been published in several Canadian literary journals, including ‘Other Voices,’ ‘The Windsor Review,’ and ‘Grain.’ She has also published two books. ‘Anything Boys Can Do’ (a collection of short stories) and ‘The Bone Cage’ (a novel). ‘The Bone Cage’ was chosen by The Kootenay Library Federation for the 2009 ‘One Book One Kootenay’ celebrations. Angie’s most recent novel, The Canterbury Trail, is a black comedy about mountain culture and will be published by Brindle & Glass Press in Spring 2011.

Reading the entries in the SCRATCH Writing Challenge was a pleasure. The stories provide a glimpse into a variety of perspectives and experiences of life in the Basin. There is something here for everyone. In The Contest by Ismael Bernier, the character Martin follows a woman he has just met on a whirlwind exploration of the Kootenays. The story is a wistful and hopeful look at the choices people make in their lives and will appeal to anyone who has struggled with life’s choices and still dreams about what might have been if they had taken another path.

Julia Mason’s It All Started with a Dual Flush Toilet is a poignant look at one girl’s struggle to return to everyday life after her father’s death. Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one will recognize the struggle to carry on when your world has fallen apart. As the clever title suggests, an unlikely object jump starts her family’s recovery.

The winner, The Geese Know Where to Go by Amos Tanguay and the runner-up, Trans Canada by Julia Caceres Booth each depict parents struggling with the idea of leaving their families. In Trans Canada, a woman makes and rethinks a hasty decision to leave her family while on the road. The small annoyances that grow to an unbearable level will ring true to anyone who has spent time on the road with their relatives. The Geese Know Where to Go starts as a well-crafted, mournful goodbye from a father to his child and community, and ends on a hopeful note. Tanguay uses bold imagery throughout.

It was my privilege to participate on the selection committee. The creativity and courage of the writers is inspiring and encouraging. It gives me great optimism about the future of writing and reading in the Columbia Basin and I won’t be surprised to see some of these finalists’ names on the library shelves in the near future.

Heather Maisel is the Library Director at the Castlegar & District Public Library. She has a B.A. in sociology and anthropology, and a Masters in Library and Information Studies from UBC. She has lived in the Kootenays for three years with her husband, dog and cat. Heather reads widely, and especially enjoys non-fiction, chick lit and travel writing.
It was a pleasure to read these wide-ranging, original stories that portray the diversity and talent of Basin culture younger writers. While reading these stories, I was transported within the varying geography, people and ecology of the Columbia-Kootenay region and given glimpses into the lives and challenges of people who live there.

What surprised me, but shouldn’t have in retrospect, was how much nature showed up in these stories and how often people in crisis found solace, escape, comfort, answers, or just an emotional challenge within a relationship with nature. For example, in the winning story, *The Geese Know Where to Go*, Amos Tanguay’s character is influenced by the landscape which he describes in wonderful lyrical phrasing. In the story, *As the Lake Exhaled into Morning*, by Chase Kabatoff, the main character is influenced by memories of fishing with his dad. In the story with the lovely and amusing title, *the girl with the plastic pirate hat and the boy who loved her so…* by Kristopher Ede, two people walk along a railway bridge and a close encounter with a train leads to a turning point in their relationship.

Many of the stories also featured people at important turning points in their lives, dealing with change, with moving, with relationships, with decisions about how to live and what is important. Interestingly, both of the winning stories are road stories, which perhaps reflect the amount of travel people who live in the Basin do. In *The Geese Know Where to Go*, the main character decides what is most important to him and makes a decision that will influence both him and his young child. And in the lovely story that won second place, *Trans-Canada*, by Julia Caceres Booth, a young mother also decides to change her role within her family. Such stories reflect the crucial insight and awareness these writers bring to the transitions and challenges their generation faces. Congratulations to all these writers and I look forward to hearing much more from them in the future.

*Luanne Armstrong, MFA, Ph.D. is a writer, editor and teacher. She is deeply interested in writing about place and nature. Her book, ‘Blue Valleys, An Ecological Memoir,’ is a book about growing up in the Kootenays and was published in 2007 by Maa Press. She has also published novels and young adult books and poetry. She presently lives on her organic heritage farm on the east shore of Kootenay Lake. She teaches creative non-fiction and Teaching Creative Writing in the UBC Optional Residency Creative Writing MFA program.*
Down at Lakeside Park the geese were honking in the early morning, the way they do when they all come flying out of the fog that clings to the dark lake. They’re going somewhere, and they always seem to know where to go. I guess they could just close their eyes and they would find their way home. Me, I would probably just run into a lamp post on Vernon Street or something. There was nobody but me at the park, just the trees like faint bones, waverering in the mist.

Your mother and I used to come here, before you were born. I remember my father sitting near the windowsill one day. It runs along the edge of the park and then ends near the Prestige Hotel. The conductor wears his old red cap with the shiny numbers on the front, and then that car just dings and hollers all the way down its little length of track. I know you would get a huge kick out of waving at all the people who walk by. Maybe we’ll get a chance. This morning I heard the train and I thought of old blues songs that sounded just like our life. I remembered my father sitting near the windowsill in Cape Breton, his guitar notes creeping out into the street in the evening, while the rain fell in a long, grey fog. His stubborn dreams were always revealing themselves in mournful melodies that he sang too quietly for anyone else to hear. Then there’s you, bouncing on my knee to the rhythm of an old Muddy Waters song. I wonder what a “Hootchie Cootchie Man” is anyway. Grandpa rolls a cigarette and tells us the same stories he told the day before. I thought of our songs, the ones that we haven’t sung yet; as the train rounded distant corners, cleared Harrop, and Proctor, with its whistle unwinding through the mountains. The rust and steel grinding, coming from everywhere in the quiet dawn. I wish I had a harmonica. I’ll tell you all about it someday, when you’ve got your own blues.

If I close my eyes I can’t picture where I’m going. There’s just that old dark and then the places that I’m leaving. I remember holding you for the first time. The morning came gently, as the rain softened each thing and its purpose. I’ve never seen eyes like yours; big empty cups, deep and dark as a well, just letting the world fill them up. You came out with those eyes open, looking at each of our faces as we crowded around the bedroom. It wasn’t like the movies, where the baby is hoisted up, squalling like a balloon squeezing out its air. You were calm. I realized I hadn’t breathed in weeks, I mean good deep breaths that actually fill you up. I finally took a deep breath as I watched you breathe air into your tiny lungs. I knew then that what I really wanted was a son. The way the light grew in the grey dawn. You should have seen it. The clouds turning orange and the rain steaming off of the leaves, the city of Nelson waking up to begin the day’s work. I sat with you for a couple of hours, while your mother slept, your eyes closed in sleep, your dark hair matted on top of your head. I didn’t have any doubts at that moment in time. The rocking chair just moved slowly, as the world rearranged itself in tiny pieces.

That was eight months ago. The leaves all fell off of the trees and the lake grew too cold for swimming. The seeds scattered in the wind and left their dried husks to rattle by the roadsides. The streets always get so empty with the lonely, bare trees, decorated with Christmas bulbs and the streetlights punctuating the four-o-clock darkness. The clouds hang low on Elephant Mountain as the sky is hidden for days on end. I never did like those big, dark-green mountains looming closer every day. I always wanted to rush off to the cold, clear prairies and walk for miles and miles and never come to a hill, or a mountain. I finally decided to do it, today I mean get out. I had all sorts of reasons. So I went all the way down to the Greyhound station when I left the park and I bought a ticket heading west. I’ll try and explain it to you, I really will. I’m on my way now.

I can’t picture where I’m going. Not anymore. There are just shadows that the moon casts on the snow, chasing the Greyhound bus, traveling up into the metallic gleam of the stars. I can’t sleep; my ears keep popping as we approach the Paulson summit. So I decided I would write to you, even though you can’t read. I want to tell you some things, in case I never make it back at all.

There is a whole lot of night out here. I wonder if you’re sleeping. I’m sitting beside a woman who works as a waitress at an Italian restaurant in Castlegar. She’s a pretty sort of a girl, with dark hair and a smile that makes me feel understood, even liked. Your mother has always been so beautiful, even when we fought constantly. When she’s not with me I miss her so much...
though. I just wanted her to be happy, in the end. When the winter came to town we had known each other for about as long as she had been pregnant. She wanted to run with all of her ends untied, just hanging loose. But now she had a little life growing in her and the clouds sat like lead atop the valley. There were mournful nights unfolding out of the early dusk. All the tired, sad things came out in the open. I wanted the grass to be green again, and for all the birds to come back. I wanted to know what I would do when you were born. When I think of that I hear old blues suspended in fuzzy air. I see Arthur Cruddup shaking his fist at a train as it disappears around the last corner, leaving its smoke. “Well that mean old, dirty Frisco / and that low down Santa Fe / Gone and took my babe away / and blewed back out on me.” I guess he must have turned around and walked away from that station, feeling so lonely it might split his weary seams. I think I feel a little like that right now.

I hope the cherry blossoms come out when I get down to the coast. I used to pick them for your mother on my way back home from the nights shift, mopping floors at the rec. center. We wanted a garden where you could run around and be naked. There would be vegetables to eat and little paths that our feet would wear into the soil over the years. There would be a home there, to come back to in the evening, a place where we would grow old together. This morning at the bus station I saw people hug each other, trying to hold all of their loved ones, not wanting them to let go. I had stood over you and your mother this morning, after I tiptoed in through the unlocked door. I didn’t wake you, I just watched, hearing the sandy hiss of traffic off in the distance, on the overpass heading out to Salmo and Creston or Castlegar. I wanted to take you both in my arms, just like the people at the bus station and then collect your smell into the folds of my clothes. I don’t ever want to do you wrong, and that’s why I’m leaving. I knew it was time to leave when I smashed all the flowerpots on the porch and then realized where I had seen that before. I remember my father losing his temper, breaking things and hitting my mother. He would be sad and drunk, with his entire mind soaked in unhappy stories; his fingers callused after he tried to let his guitars give those stories shape. My mother would come in, drunk, after her night of serving tables at a local pub. The fights would blow in like the storms, the ones that batter the Atlantic coast, everything bending, and then finally breaking in the wind. I would stand in the grass beside the porch as they stumbled out into the dark. I remember screaming at the top of my lungs to remind them I was there. I don’t want that for you. I just wanted to give you a garden where the beans could climb, healthy and new. I wanted you to see us sing those happy songs. Take a good look at those cherry blossoms, they smell like the fruit that hasn’t been born yet. Try and be gentle, if you can.

I wish you could see these little moon shadows, just like little rabbits running away from the bus. I would like to ask the driver to stop the bus and let me off. There is an old farmhouse that I have always noticed, way out in the hills outside of Grand Forks. The windows are all broken and the doors hang crookedly on their frames. I would like to buy enough bologna and bread for a few days and just stay there. You’d love it. These hills look like smooth thighs in the moonlight, with miles of barbed wire fences leading off into the distance. I could ask the waitress to come with me; she’s all broken up too. She has a little boy too, and he’s seven years old. Maybe we could find something out in the hills; maybe we could help each other. She’s asleep right now, her mouth hanging open at one corner, and she has unwittingly put her head on my shoulder. That’s all right with me. I hope she doesn’t drool. I wish I had said a proper goodbye to you this morning. I just wanted to watch your chest rise and fall, and listen to your slow, even breathing. That was enough I guess.

The landscape always seems to understand the way that I’m feeling. I just want something that passes by right now. I don’t want to be a part of anything, or anybody. I like these towns, their streets empty, but for a few people passing by my face in little vignettes. The windows are sometimes lit, and I see little living rooms, or kitchens that hold the private lives of people I’ll never meet. People look up at the windows of the bus, curious for a moment, and then they go back to just being on their streets, in their yards. Then I pass out the other side into the place where the streetlights end. These empty fields look like my insides, bare and waiting. I can see my face, reflected in the window, mixing with the fields whipping by. I look young, but I can see my father in me, somewhere. The waitress said the smell of the exhaust makes her sick to her stomach. She fell asleep again and rested her head on my shoulder as she slept. It was nice to have a strange, pretty girl and her small breath nestled against my shoulder. I had to wake her up though, so that I could go back to that smelly little bus bathroom. We got to talking and she finally asked me why I was leaving Nelson. She said she loved that little city and its mountains protecting it. I felt I
should tell her the truth, so I told her about this morning.

I told her how I walked out into the cold air after I left your house this morning. I told her how everything holds a memory in Nelson, nestled in each bush, under each stairwell, on Baker Street in all its seasons. I tried to tell her just what you and your mother looked like, with the blankets twisted around her knees and you up against her chest, your lips puckered. I tried to remember the room, the smell of milk, dirty laundry and lavender. How I felt like a thief in the museum at night, stealing something I had no right to. The further I got from that room, the more my memory of you just diffused, like thin smoke in cold air. When I got coffee at Wait's News, after I left the house, I looked around at the lonely faces of retired, overworked, maladjusted people. I realized I looked just like all of them. I told that waitress how I took my piece of toast outside and sat down on a Baker Street bench to feed the pigeons.

The way they walk cheers me up. The way they fly, well that just makes me feel good. I hope you and me get a chance to feed the pigeons one day. I love those stupid, simple birds, all their pettiness worn on their feathers. I've noticed, however, that the humans streaming in and out of the stores, jostling each other, we don't look all that different from those pigeons chasing down scraps of my toast. Take a look sometime.

That waitress listened to me speak. She had that way of listening that made me want to say a lot. Finally she looked at me with her brow furrowed; her dark brown eyes were heavy with sleep, and seemingly concerned with my well-being.

"Do you really want to go? I mean... is this what you want," she asked, looking intently at my eyes.

I looked away, out the window. We were starting to hit the lower mainland traffic, collecting like a slow river into the final hurrying rush into Vancouver.

"I don't want to. It's just...well... I have to go. I'm too screwed up and I can't give that to my son." I looked away again as I said this, and I almost felt like I was going to cry. I really didn't mean it. As soon as I said this out loud it sounded so false. I wanted to stuff those words back into my throat.

The waitress was silent for a moment. I kept looking out the window, listening to the deep roar of the bus engine underneath us. I wished I hadn't told her the truth, but just said I was visiting my aunt, or getting a passport; anything but my own story, and my actions that I have no good reason for. As I thought this through I felt a huge strain in the engine of the bus, and a grinding that shook my seat. We ground to a sudden halt on the side of the highway, as the overhead lights stabbed into the darkness. The driver told us to hang tight until they could find reinforcements.

"What the hell. I guess we have to get off," the waitress said. "So close to my stop too. I'm just going to walk the rest of the way. It's only about ten or twelve blocks. The bus station is really close too. It'd take you an hour or so to walk there. You may as well walk. Who knows where you'd end up though."

"Now that we're not moving, I don't even know why I was heading west anyway. I hate this place." I knew those words were true. I really did hate it.

I kept looking out the window. People were getting off of the bus on this corner as a gentle coastal rain enveloped the streetlights. When I looked back at the waitress, she was halfway down the aisle. I uttered half a goodbye and then let it hang in silence. The engine was dormant, no more humming or rattling, just a sudden stillness and that feeling that I didn't know exactly where I could go in this strange night.

I got off the bus finally and asked the driver for my bag. He told me we would be leaving soon, as soon as they got a replacement bus. But I felt all that damp air cleaning out my pores, and going through my lungs. The restlessness I felt compelled me to keep moving. I knew I had to decide which direction to move in. I asked the bus driver when the eastbound bus came through the station.

"Buddy," he said, "I don't know why you'd take the westbound all the way back here and then turn around to go east. But it does pass through here at six forty-five. The station is maybe twenty blocks in that direction." He pointed with a thumb towards the road fading off into the red and green of traffic lights.

I thanked him and then I shouldered my bags. I have to tell you, all the momentum was gone. I felt like a marble that had rolled down a sloped floor, only to come resting, still in the middle. I only wanted a blanket, and the sound of someone breathing, not too far away. I even wanted the mountains over Kootenay Lake to be around me like soft fortifications. The rain smelled of wet dust. It didn't smell like anywhere I had ever called home. Ever since the city had begun to collect us, into its outskirts, I knew I couldn't go any further. Sometimes you have to go pretty far to really see your home and the people you share it with. You have to feel like a tiny piece of driftwood, caught in a quickening current, just hurrying towards a darkness in the
distance. So I walked towards the station, happy to breathe the wetness into me, knowing that I would be heading towards you as the morning arrived.

The Husky truck stops and Tim Horton’s shops, the strip malls, they all passed by, bright and empty. I could have poured all of my loneliness into that place and left it. I didn’t want to go any further into the Fraser Valley. I wanted to fall off the edge of the map, or just be a lone bird, like those Canada Geese, with all of my mysterious travels demarcated in the darkness of my mind. I could see your face, smiling and unaffected, looking up at me from the last vestiges of sleep. I remembered the road maps, tangled off into space like red and blue veins. Then the rivers, the Larderau flowing into the head of the lake, from the long, quiet flats, out into the world, collecting places, smells, garbage. Then, Kootenay Lake narrowing into a confused rush. Then, the confluence, where the Kootenay meets the Columbia, and collects all of that force into a current that swims out into the land, in one rushing, the dark whirlpools beneath the bridges of Castlegar. I could see them all leading back to their single points of origin. The map finally unfolded in my mind. You were there, when each other thing fell away. You were there, hoping I would do the right thing.

I’m heading east, son, towards Nelson and Kootenay Lake. I’m heading past the Okanagan valley, into the evergreens and the silence. I watched that big, grunting bus pull out onto the streaming night time highway while the train sounded again. Maybe the same one I had heard not so long ago in Nelson. I waited all night, shivering outside the bus depot, until that early morning eastbound pulled in and I paid my fare. I never want to forget your face and have it be replaced by these empty places or my own loneliness. The thin metallic blues sounded in my mind, the old harmonica huffing and shuffling, the reedy voice harmonizing with foghorns and train whistles. I could see me and you shuffling bare feet across the kitchen floor and out the open door, into the tentative light of spring. When I get a harmonica, I’ll tell you all about it. I promise. The towns are rolling by in the early morning. The bus is half-empty. I finally know just where I’m going, like those geese. It’s all somewhere in me, my own folded and unfolded, torn and repaired map that leads back to you. Just wait until you see the cherry blossoms, and taste your first summer fruit. I bet the buds will burst into leaves, and pretty soon, It will be your first spring, and I have known you since you took your first breath. There are bells nestled in the peaceful air of Sunday, there are umbrellas that keep the raindrops off of your head, there are funny, strange pigeons on Baker Street. There’s so much to show you, so much to explain. When you get your own blues I’ll give you a harmonica. Then you can breathe out all of that sadness into the air and make it into something that blooms like a cherry blossom, fed by everything you know. The bus is crossing the bridge, out of Castlegar, towards Nelson. I see the Kootenay River, where it joins up with the Columbia. Then all that water just flows down into the broad, wide world. I won’t get a chance to send you what I’ve written. I’ll tell you all about it someday. When you get your blues.

Amos Tanguay is 25-years-old and lives in Nelson. Amos is currently reading ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ by J.D. Salinger – a book he’s read more than once. His favourite magazine is ‘The Sun,’ which focuses mostly on personal stories and memoirs. If Amos’ life could be a book it would be ‘The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists’ by Robert Tressell as he related to the struggles of the characters, and their idealism which was at odds with their circumstances. “I also liked its sharp, intelligent satire of the injustice in the world and those who perpetuate it by taking too much for themselves,” says Tanguay. He also said that his answer would be different if you asked him tomorrow. If ‘The Geese Know Where To Go’ were to be made into a movie, Amos would like Toby Maguire to play the lead.
I left my husband and two kids at a gas station on the Trans-Canada highway. They walked into the ESSO to use the washroom and get some snacks for the road and I burned rubber west on the freeway. It’s not that I’m nuts, malicious or evil. I just couldn’t stand them anymore. Timothy, banging his head on the window, not willing to talk or pick “eye spies.” Sam plugging that obscene Backstreet Boys tape, from like fifteen years ago, into the tape deck over and over, one side after the other. And Wilton, what kind of name is that anyway? Talking, rambling, about sleds and pickups and decks and custom built ramps and race gas? There’s no way we could afford a Turbo, you barely work already you jackass.

That morning, my mother’s new boyfriend Craig, had woke us up to Dwight Yokam’s Guitars, Cadillac’s and Hillbilly Music blaring from his regular post in front of the TV. By the time we had gotten the kids up and forced some food down, Mother and Craig had packed all our bags out onto the tarmac beside the truck. I looked at the clock above the table, it was 7 a.m. Framed on the wall below the clock was the last picture taken of my father, dressed in pajamas and housecoat sitting on the couch in the living room. Sam and Timothy sat on either side of him, their tiny bodies looked the norm beside Dad’s, who was disappearing into his clothes as he ate less and less. We came by ourselves to Red Deer that time Wilton had something at work come up, Dad hadn’t woke up the next morning, I panicked, made Mother tell the kids he was gone. That was two years ago. Sam was 7 and Timothy was 10; Dad was 69.

I got up from the table and put the milk back in the fridge. I could see Craig waiting in front of the garage. Mother came back inside. “Well, drive safe, kids” she said. “And don’t worry about that,” she motioned to the table. She picked up my laptop case and carried it towards the open door. We picked up our jackets and followed her out.

“Thanks Mom,” I leaned in and wrapped my arms around her as far as I could without rubbing my face on her sweaty chest, “for everything.”

“It’s been really nice, Angie.” Wilton almost always, spoke slowly.

She winked at Sam and Timothy, “and you two, gonna’ come and see me in the fall? When Mom needs a break?”

Sam looked at me, her blue eyes narrowing slightly. “Anytime, Gram.” She half smiled at my mother.

Craig lunged, demanding a hug from all of us, I patted him on the back while avoiding his unshaven scruff.

Timothy stood silently and watched the awkward display. Mother walked up beside him, put her arm around his small shoulders and squeezed him into her enormous armpit.

Timothy recoiled and pulled away. Jogging to the truck he yelled, “Sorry about the window.” He stopped, gave a quick wave and opened the truck door. He pulled the release lever swinging the seat forward and leaped into the backseat in almost the same motion.

“Yeah, we’ll send you some money for that, Mom,” I promised.

As Wilton backed the truck up into the garage entrance to turn around, Mom stood at the window waving. Her short hair and massive body were silhouetted against those vile florescent lights Dad had liked.

Seven-thirty and we were actually on the road, leaving Red Deer; this was a first for my family. The sun brought life to the flat lands, gold across the expansive prairie sky. The early morning clouds looked like a wet brush was pulled through thick white lines of paint on a pink canvas that stretched out as far as the eye could see over the decaying, frozen fields. The kids, Will and I were all silent. It felt like we were leaving a mass grave site, or a natural disaster, like we had been caught in a tornado for the weekend, the long Easter weekend.

Ten minutes later Will said, “I wonder if the shop has got my oil in yet, I think next year I’ll have to get three pails instead of two.” He paused. “Maybe next year I’ll need race gas instead for my new sled....” This time the pause was more like a hanging question mark.

“I didn’t say anything.

“I should call when we have good cell service again....”

Timothy sat behind Wilton and kicked at his seat.

“Hey, don’t do that Timothy, I’m serious.” Wilton said to the rearview mirror.

Timothy smirked. He kneed the seat and Wilton ignored him. Sam pulled open the tape box, grabbed one out and handed it over the seat to me, “Put this in, Mom.”

“Okay, but not for the whole ride this time, I mean it.” I pushed the tape into the deck.

We stopped at a gas station in Calgary, on 16th Ave. Canada Olympic Park was still covered in man-made snow and the lifts were running. Twenty minutes later, we were back on Highway 1, the Trans-Canada, heading west.

Just outside of Canmore I ejected the Backstreet Boys tape,
and said, “I can’t believe them.”

“It could be worse, like the Pussycat Dolls or something.” Will said.

“No, Mother and Craig.”

“It’s weird that you call your mom, Mother.” Will said.

“I have to go to the bathroom, can we stop?” Sam asked.

“Again, really?” Timothy sighed.

Wilton saw a rest stop and flicked on the right hand signal slowing the truck down—the brakes had been warped for months—the truck shook to a stop. How many times had he promised to fix them?

I got out of the truck and pulled the seat release letting Sam out. Timothy got out as well and hurried to the restroom. I walked around the front of the little Toyota Tacoma, got into the driver’s seat and looked around the parking lot. The Rockies were freakishly tall in the background, rock and snow laid on a foundation of forest, the kneecaps of the giants, dark green, wild and thick. The three sisters, that familial band, were holding up the sky.

Finally Will, then Sam, then Timothy filed out of the restrooms and back towards the truck. I got out and let Timothy into the back seat. Sam got in and pulled out the tape box from where I had just hidden it, underneath the passenger seat.

“Will you put this in, Dad?” she asked, holding the tape, pushing it into my view.

Will grabbed it and stuck it in. The Backstreet Boys’ pubescent melodies rattled around the Toyota’s cab.

Half an hour later we pulled into Lake Louise for lunch. We found a Humpty’s beside the gas station and parked the truck. One caesar salad, one steak sandwich, and two chicken fingers and fries later, we piled back into the truck. I got into the driver’s seat and Timothy said, “You drive so slow, Mom, maybe Dad should drive.” They all looked at me as I released the park brake and put the truck into first. “Back on the road, an hour later, but back on the road.”

“Put my tape back in, Dad.”

Wilton pushed it back into the tape deck.

“Thanks Dad,” Sam said. “Timothy, don’t do that. Mom he’s hitting me.”

“Cut it out Timothy, you know better than that.” Wilton interjected.

“Oh I thought you’d forgotten about me. Does this hurt?” He punched Sam in the arm.

“Hey!” Sam hit Timothy on the head.

“That’s enough you guys!” I yelled.

The kids were quiet immediately.

“That ramp that Angus bought is pretty sweet, did you see it?” Wilton asked.

“What?” I asked.

“That high-rise ramp for his truck, it’s awesome...”

“Please, can we talk about this later?” I cut him off, “I have a headache.”

The tall mountains of Banff National park outlined the blue sky, snow still tipped the peaks and hid beneath rocks and trees lower down. Old avalanche paths were bare and grass was growing in and between the debris piles. The highway seemed increasingly congested as we drove. I passed trucks and vans moving slowly around corners and up the long hills. I don’t drive that slowly, but at least I don’t drive like a bat out of hell like Wilton does. The Backstreet Boys were making a third round through broken hearts and sweaty nights.

An hour later I hit eject on the tape player. The cab was quiet for a second. “Eye spies anyone?” I asked, as I geared into fourth for a corner.

“Mom, seriously?” Timothy groaned from behind my seat. He turned his head back to the tiny window, and pressed his face against the cool glass again.

“I guess I could play.” Sam said.

“I’m always in.” Will added, “but just a sec, I want one picture first. These mountains are epic. I’ll bet the boys would like to climb the hell out of them.” He reached around to the back seat as I went around another corner and Timothy’s head went “CRACK” against the window.

“Timothy, please move your head so it doesn’t hit the window.”

I looked at him in my rearview mirror.

He looked back at me and didn’t say anything. A partial smile crossed his lips and then he put his head back against the window and kneed my seat.

“Hey, Timothy.” I said.

“Here, Dad,” Sam passed Wilton the camera.

“Thanks, look at that...I love these mountains. Look at that chute, damn.” Wilton was excited, it was almost sweet. But then, the reality of all the time and money sucked up by his hobby made me feel sick. Like something was pulling me down, into the pit of my own stomach.

I sighed. “I spy with my little eye...” I began, “something that
is dark grey.”

“That's not fair.” Sam said, “everything is grey. It's spring.” She leaned over the seat and shoved the tape back in.

“Put on your seatbelt, Sam.” I hit the button and snatched the tape out.

“Mom, put my tape back in, Mom, do it. Pleeaase.” Sam's voice got higher and she started to writhe and shake the back seat.

Timothy kneed my seat again, “Just do it, I can't stand her crying, you always give in to her anyways.” He kneed my seat again for effect.

“Stop it.” I pulled the tape out of the door compartment and pushed it back into the tape deck.

Timothy kneed my seat harder this time, then intentionally threw his head against the window. “Crack, crack, crack.”

I gritted my teeth together and didn’t say anything. I wanted to leap out of my skin and over the seat. I wanted to punish him, but I didn't know how.

Sam started to whimper instead of writhe and Wilton turned around to her and said, “Come on now, Sam, it's okay.” He turned up the volume on the Backstreet Boys. My hands tightened around the steering wheel until I could feel the metal frame against my bones, the thinning foam of the wheel forced out of my way.

We were just outside of Golden when Wilton suggested we stop at a gas station and get some snacks, refill our water bottles and use the washroom. I pulled the truck into a parking spot beside the ESSO and almost punched the tape out of the deck. I got out of the truck and let Timothy out and then got back into the driver's seat. I didn’t go in. I looked west towards home, the highway was empty. I grabbed the tape from the player and threw it into the back seat, it bounced off the window and landed in Sam's spot. I released the emergency brake, put the truck into first gear, and slammed on the gas.

I had to leave them there, clear the air in the car, clear my head. I felt so much better. Child-less, husband-less, nothing but silence. The deep-green-patched mountains, the dwindling snow.

I didn't miss them. I'm pretty sure they didn't miss me; incessantly playing I Spy, pulling Sam's tape, well, my old tape, from the deck and vetoing Wilton's dreams. He's a good dad, he'd know what to do.

I reached over the gear shift and into my bag. I found my lighter and cigarettes and on the next straight stretch, I pulled one out and lit it. There was a hint of warmth in the spring air as it ran around the cab. The windows were open as Will and the kids had left them. Mine was rolled all the way down and ash blew from the cigarette in my left hand leaving grey snowflakes caught in the fibers of the empty seats. It felt like hours that I drove alone chain smoking, consumed by my new freedom.

The peaks were ominous as I moved into Glacier National Park. Rising and falling into lakes and valleys, I sat in the quiet truck and watched them move as I drove. They were peaceful, they made me feel calm for the first time all day. Birds flew in arrows appearing in the distance, moving towards home, getting close and then disappearing off the horizon, sometimes above the few clouds in the sky. Out of nowhere came rain, a light cascade of water on the windshield, I put on my wipers and lit another cigarette without bothering to put the windows up. The rain wouldn't last long.

All of a sudden I remembered that picture of Dad, the last thing we have of him, Sam and Timothy sitting beside him, unaware of the danger of his shrinking, of the inevitability of his disappearance. I remembered Mother after Dad had left sitting for days in front of the TV. Even when I had gone to visit, she had barely spoken. There was a gaping hole in her life, so big she almost fell into it. I was worried she would. Somehow, meeting Craig changed that. Now I had vanished too. My family, my husband, my son and daughter, were waiting, hoping I'd come back. I pictured the kids coming out of the washroom noticing the truck was gone. Sam wondering where I went, probably to grab something for the ride, she'd think. Timothy would probably know I had left them. I felt guilty, uncontrollably, horribly guilty.

The rain had stopped. I geared the truck down to fourth and dropped the clutch, the vehicle jerked. I threw the lit cigarette out the window. I looked at the little clock in the dash, it had been at least an hour since they got out of the truck and followed their dad into the convenience store, I had left them waiting there for an hour! I shifted the truck into third, without checking my mirror, the minivan behind me honked. Shoot. Finally there was a rest stop, I put my blinkers on and pulled into it.

The towering mountains of Roger's Pass looked down on me. Their deep green wisdom scolded me, warned I was losing my grip, told me how good I’ve had it...go home, go back for them. I felt ashamed, hoping no one would see me. I turned the little truck around and headed back towards Golden, east on the Trans-Canada. I buried the cigarette and the lighter deep in my
bag, a gift from Wilton, and drove in silence.

Timothy and Sam sat on the bench beside the payphone, they were holding little Styrofoam cups, probably hot chocolate, Wilton's all purpose cure. Wilton was on the phone, his hand in his hair, his elbow holding up his propped upper half on the little table the phone book rests in. He looked terrified, the kids looked fine. “Sorry, guys” was all I could say.

Timothy and Sam didn't answer. They didn't talk to me until Revelstoke, when Sam asked to stop and Timothy complained, “We are never going to get home, I just want to get home.”

Will was quiet after I had picked them up at the ESSO, a worried look on his face. He didn’t ask to drive, he didn’t ask to stop, or where the camera was, he didn’t say much except, “Okay,” when I had apologized.

Finally, after stopping at a Mohawk in Revelstoke, as the sun began to fall behind the last of the massive peaks, we pulled off the Trans-Canada onto Highway 23. The road got narrower, the corners sharper and the shoulder vanished and reappeared as we got closer to home. The Backstreet Boys were singing “You are my fire...” for the hundredth time. The forest sped by the windows, huge pine and cedar lined the highway. I drove until we got to the Shelter Bay ferry landing. “Can you drive? I’m tired.” I asked Will.

He opened the door and got out, but did not say anything.

I unbuckled my seat belt and pulled on the handle opening my door. I slowly got out of the truck and walked to meet Wilton in front of the lights. I stopped and looked at him.

He looked back at me, a sick worried look still in his eyes. His coarse mechanic’s hand grabbed my left wrist, and held it, not softly, but it didn't hurt. We were close enough to Arrow Lake to feel the sun's soft reflection as it set. The hills surrounding the water were vibrant spring green and golden tipped by the light. We stood for minutes; his eyes didn't let go of mine with his hand still wrapped around my small wrist. I didn't move. I didn't want to. We stood in front of the truck. Timothy and Sam watching from the back seat. Wilton’s heavy hand weighing down my arm and me apologizing without words for him. Eventually his hand let go and he pulled me towards him, his arms wrapped around my back and I let myself relax against him. He looked down at me and said, “Thank you, for coming back.”

Julia Caceres Booth is 22-years-old and lives in Winlaw. She has read Paulo Coelho’s ‘The Alchemist’ more than once and is currently reading ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’ by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Julia’s favourite magazines include ‘Adbusters,’ ‘Sled Heads,’ ‘Snowboard Canada’ (especially the women's annual) and ‘SCRATCH’ (of course). If her life could be a book she thinks ideally it would be a mix of Bill Watterson’s ‘Calvin and Hobbes’ and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s ‘Mists of Avalon.’ She knows it’s hard to imagine, but she thinks it would be a good mix, “who doesn't want to be a powerful woman and get to hang out with their best friend everyday?” If ‘Trans-Canada’ were to be made into a movie, Julie would like Zooey Deschanel from ‘500 Days of Summer’ to play the lead.
Train tracks were what had led them where they were, and it was the only thing that told them where to go next, wherever that might be. The sun was high in the sky, coating them and the entire area they were in with a warm light as they continued to put one foot in front of the other without fault. Though they had been walking for what seemed like hours, neither of them knew for certain for neither of them had decided a watch was important. When they were together, they felt like time was measured in something other than the tiny clicks of a watch.

What that something was though, was different to both of them.

For a long time, they walked in silence. She was walking along the railing of the track, imagining it to be a tightrope high above a pit of ravenous, eccentric-girl-eating panda bears and she was the one who had to walk the line from one mountain to the other without losing her balance lest she be eaten. He was holding one of her hands to help her balance as he walked in what she considered Panda Territory. He just considered it the train tracks. Although they hadn’t said a word to each other since they started walking the tight-roped tracks, their silences were filled with the sounds of moving water and birds chirping and wind rustling through leaves and their feet scraping against the metal and rocks. It was quiet, all things considered, but hardly uncomfortable.

With one hand being held by him, her other hand was firmly placed on the plastic pirate hat that sat uneasily upon her head. The last thing she wanted was to lose her hat to the unforgiving pandas resting and waiting not too far away in her imagination. It was hardly necessary for her to hold it, as the plastic pirate hat sat quite well on top of her unruly dark hair—the curls doing nothing more than helping the hat stay in its proper place. But still, she didn’t dare get too cautious about something like that, for once you lose something cherished it is almost impossible to get it back once more.

She felt similarly about the boy whose hand, her hand, was gently resting in.

The boy, however, was not thinking about the hat or the tightrope or the pandas that were supposedly devouring him at that very moment. No, he was thinking about far more normal things, if normal even existed when he was with her. He was thinking about how long they had been walking on these tracks and how much longer they would continue to walk, and how long it would take before she realized why he agreed to come along in the first place.

“What do you know where these tracks go?” the boy asked, the silence between them ending just as simply as it had begun. His pace matched hers so that they were always walking in unison, even though they were walking fairly different paths with fairly different stakes. When she paused, he paused, turning to look up through curious eyes at the girl with the plastic pirate hat.

“Cranbrook, I think,” she said, letting go of his hand to reposition the hat on her head. She smiled lightly once she was done, her hand joining his once more. They didn’t move.

“Is that where you want to go?” He broke eye contact with her briefly to look down the path in front of them. It was empty with no telling where it would bring them, aside from even more train tracks. All he knew was that there were train tracks here, and there were train tracks in Cranbrook, and at some point, they must connect. Was this the way to get there?

“No.”

His eyes met hers once more. “Well—where do you want to go?”

“I don’t really care much where I go,” she said, gripping his hand tightly as she jumped off of the railing with a small hop. “So long as I go somewhere.”

“So long as I go somewhere.”

“Well, you’re sure to do that,” the boy said looking up ahead of them again, “if you only walk long enough.”

The girl smiled at this and, with her hand still firmly within the boy’s, they began walking again. Once more the air around them was filled only with the sounds of shoes scraping against rubble and birds chirping and water moving and leaves rustling and that would have been okay except it wasn’t. Not for the boy whose fingers were intertwined with the girl with the plastic pirate hat. Though they were intertwined through their fingers, it was at that moment that the boy questioned whether that was the only thing they were intertwined through and if that meant something at all.

“How often do you change your mind in a given situation?” the girl asked the boy, feeling his hand go somewhat loose in her hand.

“I don’t,” he said simply, not looking at her but at his Converse shoes as they kicked away rocks with each and every step. He saw a small snake slither through the rocks by the train railing but said nothing, not wanting to startle the girl. “I make up my mind before I do something,” he added in explanation, lifting his
head up. He brought a hand to his forehead as he peered forward, thinking he saw something move in the distance. “You?”
“Several times,” she answered, mimicking his simplicity. “How many times have you changed your mind since we started walking?”
“Six. Maybe seven.”
“But you want to keep walking?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Because I want to,” she said.

The boy shook his head incredulously, kicking another rock. The snake slithered away from them, going in the opposite direction that they were. For a moment, he thought of chasing the snake back home, but he had already made his mind up when he started walking, something she failed to have done it seemed. Despite knowing this, his grip on her hand grew tighter and he walked slightly closer to her, the bare skin on their arms rubbing against each other softly.

“Everyone needs at least one inconsistent person in their life,” she said, “someone impulsive, always changing, and unafraid.”

The boy feigned a weak smile. “What’s wrong with fear?” he asked. Their feet were moving in unison, knocking against the rocks at the same time as their hands swung carelessly between them. A gust of wind came and blew through their hair, nearly knocking the pirate hat off of the girl’s head, but her free hand was quick to stabilize it. “It’s natural,” he said, “like wind.”

“Fear isn’t like wind,” she said, seriously.

“I think it is.”

“Fear is the only thing that keeps people from doing what they really want. It’s the monster that keeps everything and everyone in line, doing exactly as it demands. No one needs fear,” she said, pausing for a moment, “I shot my fear in the face a long time ago.”

The boy resigned. Running a hand through his charcoal hair, he scratched the back of his neck uneasily. In the distance, he thought he saw something moving again, but his mind was too focused on other things for him to truly invest in that like he was invested in the girl he was walking with. He turned and looked at her, his eyes searching for something that was never there to begin with.

“How do I know you’re not going to change your mind one day and feel differently?” he asked her, eyes focused.

“You don’t,” she answered truthfully. Her voice was quiet when she said it, a small reassuring smile having been etched onto her face as she kicked a rock far ahead of them. “No one can give you that,” she said, her voice still hushed, like speaking too loudly might crack the fragile boy her hand was still holding onto.

The boy looked away. “You never asked me why I came with you,” he said.

“I know,” she replied simply.

The silence was back and the sun was still rather high above them, though its rays were burning holes in their backs at this point. Time had passed, and for the boy, the only way of measuring it was with how many doubts the girl was filling him with. For the girl, it was how many times she had changed her mind since they started walking. For both of them, the count was now up to eight.

“Do you remember how we used to share an ice-cream cone together over coffee?” the boy asked, his voice cloaked in a mix of desperation and nostalgia, with perhaps the smallest hint of helpfulness.

“Yeah,” she replied.

The boy looked up at her to find a smile on her face, and soon a smile was on his own. “We would always get the same thing,” he said quietly. As he reminisced the smile on his face only grew. “Your favourite,” he said, grinning, “Mint Chocolate Chip.”

“Mint Chocolate Chip isn’t my favourite.”

“You told me it was.”

The girl shrugged her shoulders. Whatever smile was previously on the boy’s face had been wiped clean. The count was now up to nine. A sigh escaped the boy’s lips; the sun and the walk and the rocks against his shoes and the conversation were taking their collective toll on him. Beads of sweat were beginning to form along his forehead and he stepped slower than before, knocking the two of them out of unison.

“Are you getting tired?” the girl asked as she looked on at him, worried. She stopped in her tracks and waited as the boy caught his breath. Though they had been going through a lot, their hands always remained in one another’s even as they stood there on the train tracks, tired. The two of them sat down against the rocks beside one another.

The boy traced the outlines of animals on the back of the girl’s hand, both of them smiling as he did so. The breeze had picked up again, but it felt more of a comfort than anything else, not even threatening to blow the pirate hat off her head this time.
around. It was silent again between them as the boy continued to draw giraffes and otters and raccoons along her skin.

The girl twisted her head to get a better look of the animals that were being drawn on the back of her hand. Her face was close to the boy's as a result, and she glanced through the corner of her eye at him, watching how at peace he seemed to be. “What do you think is most important in the way people see and act with each other?” the girl asked him, trying to pose it as a spur-of-the-moment question when really it was anything but.

“People are just people,” he replied simply, his focus still on whatever animal he was drawing, not even realizing he had started drawing Pokémon. “I think I just drew Snorlax instead of a grizzly bear...”

The girl let out a small laugh. “If all the bears in the Basin were Snorlaxes I think it'd be a whole lot calmer here,” she said, smirking.

The boy laughed. “Yeah probably.”

As the smile slowly faded from his face, the girl's expression deepened. Without saying a word, she leaned in, kissing the boy lightly on the cheek before pulling away like nothing happened—her eyes back to the back of her hand where the boy had stopped mid-drawing and mid-animal.

“Why did you...?” he asked, his finger resting idly against her skin.

“Because you needed it.”

The boy smiled, but when he noticed how the girl's expression was still serious, he vanished from his face. He looked at her and he could feel the doubt set back in, just after she had finally vanquished it. Covering their enclosed hands with his free one, it was then that his own expression deepened. For a moment they just sat there, staring into each other's eyes. Not a word passed between them. Though the birds were still chirping, and the water was still moving and the leaves were still rustling, all they heard was complete and utter silence. The only thing in the entire world in that very moment, sitting there in the middle of the train tracks, was each other.

“I'm not the one that you should love,” she said finally, breaking away from him. Her hand slipped out of his, and she held it close to her heart as she averted her eyes away. Her fingertips resting on her chest, she could feel her heart echoing inside of her. She gulped, trying to subdue the sick feeling that was beginning to formulate in her stomach.

“Wh-what do you mean?” he asked in disbelief. His hands stayed frozen in place, exactly as they had been, like an imaginary ghost had taken her spot, holding him like she had. In truth, the only thing he was holding in his hand was his heart, which he had presented her with too many times to count.

His head was shaking and he didn't even realize it. “I came here for you,” he said.

“I didn't ask you to,” she replied, getting up to her feet. She turned her back to him, looking out over the lake in front of them. One hand still placed against her chest, the other hung loosely by her side. The wind was picking up again, but she didn't bother to hold her plastic pirate hat in place.

“Who should I love then?” the boy asked, angered.

She looked over her shoulder at him, a weak apologetic smile against the pale skin of her face, and when he saw it, he knew that this was real. In a single word, she managed to collect all the doubts that were resting inside him into one unified thought—a thought that he had been neglecting ever since they began.

“You yourself.”

The boy got to his feet. He stood there, unable to think of way to respond to that. Deep down, he knew he couldn't just outright deny it. Deep down, he knew she was right. All he could do was ask for something more than that—something more than a single word to determine why this had to end right then and there. And then, she gave it to him.

“You can't be with someone until you can learn to be with just yourself,” she said carefully, scrutinizing her words. “Since we've been together, you've become dependent on me—too dependent. I'm not always going to be here. One day, I am going to wake up and realize I don't feel the same way about you as you do about me. That's just a fact of life.” She paused, as she tried to formulate her thoughts into something coherent, something that he would understand all the while feeling the effects of a thrashing heart. “You need to love yourself, because when I'm gone, you're going to have to be the one who picks up the pieces. And...you're not going to be able to do that if you don't love yourself for exactly who you are. You don't need me to validate your existence.”

The words were sinking into his mind and his heart and he knew that, despite how much he wanted to argue with her in an attempt to cling to whatever it was they had left, he agreed with her. It was then: however, that, having accepted their situation, that he actually became aware of it. They were so invested in themselves that they had tuned out the rest of the world, and
when he finally clued in, looking down the train tracks, his eyes widened.

The thing he had constantly thought was moving in the distance had been something real and not just his mind playing tricks on him. There, at the end of the train tracks, was a train coming straight for them having turned a sudden corner. Paralyzed by the harsh realization of the situation, they stared down at the train wide-eyed as it closed the distance between them. Soon the air was filled with the sounds of urgent whistles being blown as the train came closer and closer to colliding with them. The boy grabbed the girl’s wrist, pulling her over to his side of the tracks and down into the bank beside it.

The two of them stumbled and fell to the ground, lying on top of each other just as train screamed in front of them, becoming a blur only broken by the gaps between carts. They lay there catching their breath as they watched the sun poke through the breaks in the train, lighting up their faces. Their hearts were erratic as the realization of just how close they came dawned on them.

The boy scanned the girl to check if she was okay, and it was then that he noticed that something had vanished. It wasn’t their situation that had vanished though, or the problems and truth that had arose between them. No, it was something much different.

“You hat....”

The girl merely blinked for a moment before she registered what it was that he was talking about. She patted her head lightly with her hands, realizing that the plastic pirate hat that she had cherished so much was nowhere to be seen. Her eyes gazed over the area, but she already knew what had become of it even before the answer presented itself.

She had lost it, just like she had lost him. And, once lost, it was nearly impossible to recapture.

The train left them, and the boy helped the girl back up the bank. Together they looked around the tracks until they found it. In the center of the tracks a distance away from them was a pile of broken, black plastic. As they walked over to it, they didn’t hold each other’s hands and they didn’t speak and they didn’t listen to the waves or the birds or the leaves. They simply held their tongues.

Leaning down, the girl picked up the broken pieces. The plastic was twisted and contorted and practically unrecognizable. Their faces were blank as they looked at death in the face—the death of so much more than a plastic pirate hat. Scraps of plastic met the ground as the girl let them fall from her clutches.

“Your eyes met the boy’s.

“I think I’m going to head back,” he said, motioning to the way the train had gone.

“You’re changing your mind?”

“Yeah,” he said, giving her a weak smile. “Everyone needs an inconsistent person in their life, remember? Even you.”

The girl laughed, her eyes not moving off of the boy. “Right,” she said. “I’m glad you’re that person to me,” she added after a brief pause in her speech.

The boy nodded as he slowly started stepping backwards.

“You know that I—.”

“—I know,” she interrupted him.

They smiled, turning toward their respective destinations. Between their backs, lying forgotten against the rocks were the fragments of the plastic pirate hat and their situation. Slowly they began to walk away, the fleeting feeling of wanting to look back gradually disintegrating. Train tracks were what had led them to where they were, and it was the only thing that told each of them where to go next—

Wherever that might be.

Kristopher Ede is 18-years-old and lives in Invermere. Kris doesn’t think he has ever actually read a book more than once, but he thinks he would start with something by Chuck Palahniuk like ’Invisible Monsters’ or ’Rant,’ mostly because they are similar in style and theme to the novel he is currently working on. He is currently reading ’Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close’ by Jonathan Safran Foer. The magazines he typically buys are in his words, ”somewhat out there, and unique, from things I could easily get online.” These include ’Wired,’ ’Adbusters’ and ’Juxtapoz.’ If ’the girl with the plastic pirate hat and the boy who loved her so’ were to be made into a movie, Kris would want the roles to be played by unknown actors as he thought that getting big names would really subtract from the story being about two real teenagers trying to deal with their problems realistically, while showcasing a human connection.
Part One: The Dive

Martin is clueless that he is entering the contest.

One day he is at home in Victoria, attending a Yoga conference his friend is hosting. The next thing he knows, he is travelling for the first time to the Kootenays in a beat-up red pickup truck with a girl named Sally.

He is twenty-four years old, born and raised in the Victoria area. He briefly attended university, majoring in political philosophy due to his interest in property laws and the moral dilemmas contained within, but found that while he has an aptitude for academic studies, he has no real taste for it. Besides, he really can’t see himself spending the rest of his life making a career out of property law from a philosophical perspective.

So he became a full-time barista.

That was over three years ago.

Truth is he has not felt fulfilled for quite a while, and is really hoping to move onto something bigger, even if he can’t figure out what that is right now. So he began to slack off last fall and was laid off during the slower winter months.

It’s early spring. He’s been claiming EI for four months now. He has lots of time left on his claim. He isn’t worried. So when this girl accosts him in the Yoga conference and asks him if he is willing to live an adventure, he says yes, without a doubt. Apparently she knows of him through a mutual friend. She has heard of his deep forest excursions, as well as his kind heart and gentlemanly nature. She needs his help. She needs a partner in adventure.

“Pack a bag and come with me to Nelson. We have to leave early in the morning.”

Amazingly, he is intrigued enough to jump right on board.

Twenty-two hours later, they are in Nelson, up on a mountain, doing a Native American Sweat Lodge. The people around are calm and quiet. They exchange quick hugs and words of greetings, but otherwise keep to themselves. They are a very colourful bunch, varied in ages and ethnic backgrounds. Despite it being a Native American ceremony, there are only three First Nations people present. The rest are mostly of European descent, with a few South Americans, an Asian, and two very pretty young girls from India.

One older woman, even more colourful in attire than the rest, signals him to come forward. He turns to Sally, wondering what he should do. She urges him on.

“Come, you must relax. Breathe it through to the mother.” The woman speaks with a thick European accent, from where exactly Martin isn’t certain. She gestures with her arms to demonstrate the downwards movement of the indefinable force that will carry the stress from his body down into the earth.

“You must breathe it through,” she emphasises.

At once, he feels a calm settle over him. The colours all become brighter. The air smells crisp, an early spring mountain breeze. The view of the west arm of Kootenay Lake and the mountains across from Nelson clearly defined, their snowy peaks reflecting the noon sunshine like a mirror.

The sweat lodge is a dome structure about twenty feet in diameter, built of flexible young trees, covered in leather. Before the ceremony begins, one of the First Nations men explains that there will be four rounds, with a short pause between them, each one related to a different intent. The European woman Martin has spoken with is waiting at the flap, passing sage around each person before letting them in. Sally tells Martin it is called smudging, and it’s done to purify his spirit body.

Inside, the floor is dirt, and there is a pit dug in the middle. Once everyone is in, a man brings large river rocks that have been heated in a huge fire and slides them into the pit. Each rock is welcomed, and referred to as grandfather. Once there are a few in the pit, water is poured over the rocks, and the first round of the sweat begins.

He manages the first three rounds without too much discomfort, but the confined space, the intense heat, combined human odours and the lack of oxygen, conspire to make him lose his nerve in the fourth and final round.

He should get out, but he doesn’t want to fail this for some reason. It feels like an initiation. He looks over to Sally next to him, and is struck by her calmness. Her short blond hair is stuck to her face, and sweat is freely rolling down her face and arms, but that doesn’t seem to faze her one bit.

She opens her eyes, looking right at him with a deep penetrating gaze, holding him locked with her bright baby blues. She smiles at him with genuine affection. It’s an odd moment for Martin. A large degree of closeness with someone who is essentially a stranger.

He remembers the recommendation to breathe it through to the Mother and feels a little better. He pushes himself, and manages to endure the whole ceremony. Getting out into the
fresh air is a treat. Never has breathing felt so good. Everyone shares food and exchanges a few short words about their experiences and their appreciation to have been chosen for this day.

The group slowly disperses. Martin and Sally are left alone with the First Nations man who had headed the rounds, and the older woman that had addressed Martin earlier. She had not participated in the actual sweats, remaining outside and seemingly healing those who had come to her with the laying of hands on their heads.

“So, Sally, you are ready for your expedition?” The old woman addresses the young woman solemnly.

“I have the maps and some supplies. We’re going shopping later and heading out in the morning.”

The old woman nods thoughtfully.

“Yeah, I hear you are ready.”

Without another word, they return to her pickup and head into town.

“This is our big day on the town. Make sure you get everything you’ll need for a few days out in the bush. Whatever you didn’t pack that is,” Sally tells him.

“What’s going on, Sally? Where are we going tomorrow?”

“It’s a quest, an adventure, a contest.”

“A contest? What kind of contest? What’s the prize?”

“If I told you now, it wouldn’t be a surprise. I’ll show you the maps and stuff later.”

It’s late afternoon. The main street in Nelson is alive with activity. There are buskers everywhere, filling the air with all kinds of music from soft rock, to jazz, and even a girl playing the violin like an angel. The sun is shining bright as they finish their preparations and check into a hostel.

“Where do you want to have your last meal in civilization?”

“You make it sound like we’re never coming back.”

“Maybe we won’t. Besides, a part of me feels like someone different walks back out of these trips.”

“And you avoided my question.”

“I don’t know where to eat. I don’t really know the places out here.”

“You wanna try this new Indian cuisine place?”

“Sure, I feel adventurous.”

It’s good food, and friendly service. Martin likes it out here in the Kootenays more and more. He is slightly nervous about this so-called contest, as he understands nothing at all of its nature, but every time he tries to bring it up, Sally cuts him off. Back in their room, she pulls out a few maps with red marker paths.

“So we have seven places to visit. The order doesn’t really matter. We’re going to visit the first one here in Nelson in the morning. Then we drive out to the opening of the lake, to visit the Great Falls of Queen’s Bay, back to Balfour, where we’ll leave the car for a few days, jump the ferry with our gear, and hike around the East Shore for a while.”

“To think that yesterday I woke up with no real prospects for the week, and now I’m in a cheap room with a strange girl about to embark on a contest I don’t know the slightest bit about.”

“And you’ve had a cleansing native sweat,” Sally adds.

“Speaking of, one communal shower down the hall. You want to go first?”

“Be my guest. You kind of are.”

**Part Two: Perspectives**

*Martin wakes up two days later to one of the most gorgeous views of his life.*

The sun is shining on the mountains across the opening of the lake. He is standing on the rocks by the shore, a few feet away from where they had made their camp the night before. They are on Pilot Point, down from the lighthouse. From here, the opening of the lake reveals itself in all its glory. From one point of the small bay they are camped by, he can see down to the south part of the lake, and from the other point, he can see up the north part.

Directly before him is the little ferry they had crossed the day before, the longest free ferry ride in North America. Beyond it is Balfour, the first rays of sunlight just shining down on the small community.

And then, looming above everything are the great mountains themselves, in a sense foothills to the glacier Sally told him hid in the middle of it all.

He is trying to determine where they had been the day before, when they had hiked up from Queen’s Bay and came to a lookout over the whole lake, a majestic entrance to the crevice that hid a huge waterfall a few hundred meters in.

That had been in the early afternoon, after a long hike up a river to a small crystal cave right on the outskirts of town, along a little river known as Crystal Creek, right down the mountain from where they had participated in the sweat the day before.
In each of those places, and then here from the top of the lighthouse, Sally had taken pictures on her digital camera, saying they needed them for the contest. She had indulged, going a little camera crazy on the picture-shy Martin.

“They’ll all be dated. I’ll give you a copy,” she’d said in response to his initial hesitation at posing for her. “Someday, you’ll look at all the places you visited in three days and realize these are the good times. The free times.”

Sally comes out of her tent just a few moments after him, looking surprisingly good to Martin despite the camping. He hopes he is wearing it equally well.

“You look like you could use a good cleaning. Let’s go swimming.”

So much for that idea, he thinks. But then, she was inviting him to go swimming with her to clean up, so it wasn’t all bad.

She slips out of her clothes and into the water in one fluid movement. For a moment, he thinks she is naked, but then realizes she is wearing a pale itsy bitsy yellow bikini nearly the colour of her skin. He wonders if he is blushing as he strips down to his boxers and joins her. The water is cold enough to chase all such thoughts from his mind.

“Damn... this has to be one of the coldest lakes ever...”

“Stop complaining and clean up.” She hands him the soap, swims out a dozen meters, and then dives under. For a moment, nothing happens. Then it hits him. She isn’t resurfacing!

“Sally! Sally!!”

He frantically begins swimming out towards where she had gone under. When he gets there, he dives and opens his eyes. He can’t see anything. He tries to make it to the bottom, but realizes it’s a lot deeper than he had expected. He resurfaces, nearly blind for a moment as he shakes his head and clears his eyes.

“Sally!”

“Hey! It’s ok!” She is sitting up on a rock, trying not to laugh. “I came to shore underwater. I surfaced just in time to see you go under after me.”

“That... You scared me.”

“I’m sorry. But it was very cute of you to go after me like that.”

As he swims to shore, he realizes he has lost her bar of soap in all the excitement.

“It’s ok,” is all she says in response. She invites him to come up on the rock next to her and bathe in the first of the sun’s rays to hit this sacred land.

“One day, I want to have a nice big farm. I want sheep and chicken and horses, fruit trees and huge gardens. I want my children to grow up on the land. I want my neighbours to be my closest friends and family. I want to run a bakery and make bread and other baked goods for everyone around. I love cooking,” Sally says.

“Sounds like a really nice dream.”

“You think so?” She looks over at him with an expectant look on her face. “Seems to me that the way of the world is to move away from that kind of small community life. Don’t you have some kind of financial aspirations? A career and a car you want? A particular house with a picket fence in downtown Victoria?”

“Yeah, sure, a part of me does. It’s what I’ve been raised to want. But another part of me feels like your dream sounds better and better. I don’t feel I fit into the whole money rush going on out there anymore.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. This area is where I grew up. We moved away when I was thirteen. I used to camp on this very spot as a kid. I used to sit here and dream of leaving for the big city, to go to school and become a hotshot lawyer or something, with a rich husband, two kids attending private school, six cars, two houses and a chalet, a butler and a maid. Now I sit here and dream I had what my parents had, what I always wanted to get away from. Weird, isn’t it?”

“Not really. Kids always dream of fame and fortune and great adventure. It’s what keeps them strong and individual. But let’s face it, life here is pretty good. You had to see what the world offered and what the struggle felt like before realizing how fortunate you had been.”

She beams at him, her warmth washing over Martin. She leans over, kisses him on the cheek, and runs back to her tent to get dressed.

Martin watches her go, suddenly realizing he might actually like this girl more than he had been prepared for. Her demonstration of childlike joy, honesty and simplicity of a moment before has affected him more deeply than he can comprehend.

Martin, the political philosophy major, turned farmer. Really didn’t sound so bad. His father would laugh. He gets up and goes to his own tent to get dressed and pack up for the next leg of their journey.

They spend the morning walking south along the shore of the lake. Soon after leaving, they come into Pilot Bay. Sally insists they remain until they each find a small piece of fairly clear
quartz from what she calls crystal beach. She takes pictures, for the contest. This is the fourth spot they have to visit.

Just as Martin finds his piece and they are ready to move out, Sally gasps and frantically points up. He barely catches sight of the biggest bird he had ever seen in his life.

“What the hell was that?”

“What the heaven was that,” she corrects. “It was a Golden Eagle. Extremely rare to get to see one. They nest somewhere around here. As a kid, my dad would take me out here early in the morning. We’ve only seen them four times out of possibly hundreds of visits over the years. And we get one your first time here. It’s a gift from the Great Spirit of this land, a greeting.”

An hour or so later, as they are approaching what Sally says is a Tipi Camp, they come across an old red canoe propped up on the beach.

“Now, normally, I would never recommend crossing the main lake on a canoe to anyone,” Sally says. “But I know this lake very well. And I’ve canoed my whole life. Besides, we’re on an adventure, and the day is as calm as they get out here.”

Martin merely shrugs. He is a pretty good canoeist as well, and he’s never heard of all the stories of people perishing on this lake.

“You take stern,” she says to him as they carry the red canoe to the water.

“Are we stealing this canoe?”

“No. I’ll make sure it gets back here.”

They cross the lake and keep canoeing south along the shoreline for what seemed like hours to Martin. They make it to a sandy beach with a little cottage on it and stop for lunch.

“You know, it just hit me. We’re travelling south!”

Sally looks at him as if he were slightly slow. “So?”

“Well, we’re moving up current! This lake or large river or whatever flows north!”

She smiles warmly. She is impressed he realizes how rare and special this is.

“Yeah, the north arm of the lake flows south, and the south arm flows north. One of few large bodies of water in the world to run north. They both come together and flow into the west arm. My dad used to say there was some kind of magnetic effect because of this. Made magic stronger or something.”

“What about the natives of this area? What were they like?”

“Apparently they called this the valley of the lost souls. There was a tribe that lived to the south of the lake and came up here for sacred rituals and hunting. They didn’t believe in settling on their hunting grounds. One year, they came up and found that another tribe had settled the area. Seems there was a massacre, and the settled tribe were all slaughtered. Pictographs at the four corners of the opening speak of the battle and warn others not to settle here.”

“Creepy…”

“Yeah, no doubt.

“And speaking of creepy, we’re right up on a ghost town. Blake. Used to be a small mining settlement, a stop on the railroad in and out of here. I think this little cottage up on the beach is one of the original buildings, although don’t quote me on that.”

“Somebody is taking care of the upkeep. And there are solar panels on the roof.”

“Let’s go check out the ruins.” She seems to be avoiding the subject of the cottage.

She leads him away from the shack, up to the train tracks. They find a few old foundations and debris everywhere. Sally takes her pictures more sombrely than the other times, and is almost in a rush to get back to the canoe.

The canoe ride back to Proctor is long and hard. Even if they are flowing with the current, they have a strong northern wind pushing up against them. They make camp for the night on the beach of Proctor Park right before entering the west arm, just across from Balfour and Sally’s truck. They are both tired. They set up their tents in silence, have a small meal, and fall asleep in front of the fire.

*****

Martin is running through the woods. Someone or something is after him. He stumbles and falls to the ground just as the trees end. He finds himself on a beach. Definitely Kootenay Lake. There is a sailboat anchored a few dozen meters out. He gets into the water and onto the boat. He pulls the anchor and starts his race across... to where?

The whole atmosphere shifts. Clouds come rolling in. The water turns choppy.

And then he sees it. The little bay, a hideaway from the storm, the oasis he had always been looking for.

Knowing he has no chance of controlling the boat he abandons it, diving into the water to swim to shore.

But he’s stuck underwater. Struggling for breath, he fights with all his might to get to the surface, where the sun seems to
be shining once more...

He awakens with a jerk to dying embers on a cold night. The stars are crisp and bright. Sally is sleeping next to him, cuddled up, obviously restless and cold. He goes to her tent, open up her sleeping bag, goes back to her, picks her up and puts her to bed before retreating to his own tent for the remainder of the night.

Part Three: The Prize

The sun is shining brightly through his tent, pulling him out of a deep sleep. He stumbles out to find that Sally already has the fire going and is brewing some coffee.

“Hungry?”

He is. He eats voraciously. “So what’s next?” he asks through a mouthful of crackers with red pepper jelly.

“We have two more places to visit. Fletcher Falls, and the finale, the Ainsworth Hot Springs. We’ll canoe over to Balfour, and do the rest by truck”

They arrive at Fletcher Falls, up near Kaslo, just around noon. They pack a light lunch and hike down to the falls and the beach. Like so many other little natural wonders in this part of the world, Fletcher Falls is a truly magical place. The falls themselves would be enough, but to be only a stone’s throw away from a breathtaking beach view makes it all the more special.

“This used to be my mother’s favourite place to come and spend the afternoon. My dad even convinced her to camp out here a few nights. You’d have had to know her to have understood how truly remarkable that is.”

Her face is full of bittersweet happiness, seemingly revisiting good times with someone who isn’t around to share more good times with. Martin decides to remain quiet. She would talk if she felt like sharing. But he does give her a hug, which she eagerly takes in. A few bites later, neither being very hungry, they are ready to head back up to the pickup. She snaps a few pictures and leads the way.

The hot springs are by far the best part of the trip for Martin. He’s never been in a natural hot spring before, and is just awestruck by the view and the cave. They have spent about half an hour in the hot pool when Sally tells him she has to go do a few things, and she will be back to get him in about twenty minutes. He watches her exit the pool and head into the woman’s dressing room.

“It’s the lithium buzz.”

“How did you find me? Did we win the contest?”

Now the woman truly does look surprised.

“I don’t understand. I am here to get some banana bread for some guests I have coming. I don’t eat it myself, but it is good I hear.”

“Not that I know. She told me she wanted to revisit childhood places to reconnect with the land. Did you go with her?”

“I... did.” He decides to remain quiet about being ditched.

“Was it nice?”

“Huh? What’s that?” Martin turns to the speaker, a middle-aged man wearing gold-rimmed glasses.

“The calmness that comes over you in here. It’s the lithium buzz. There’s tons of it in the water.”

Martin nods, only semi-interested, and goes back into the caves for another round. A good half-hour later, he begins to wonder what Sally is up to. He decides to go and see if she is anywhere around the pools. He dunks his head, and suddenly, panic grips him. As he is resurfacing, he remembers his dream of the night before. What did it mean? Feeling a little down, he gets out of the pool and looks around. He doesn’t see Sally, so he goes to shower off and get dressed.

He’s walking down the ramp to the parking lot when suddenly he stops in his tracks. Those are his bags down by the gate! He hurries over to confirm it and goes to look where they had parked. She is gone. She’s ditched him! What about the contest? What about the prize?

He feels a moment of anger directed towards her, but quickly changes his perspective. She’s given him a great adventure, one of the best few days of the past few years of his life for sure. He shouldn’t hold anything against her. He shoulders his pack and heads down to the road to hitch back home.

His first ride drops him off in Balfour. He stops at a small bakery on the ferry landing to enjoy a nice mocha in the late afternoon sun. He’d walked by where they had left the canoe, and as he had expected, it was gone. He is surprised when the old woman from the sweat ceremony gets out of a van that had just pulled in and approaches the bakery.

“It’s you!” he says, much more enthusiastically than he had intended.

“Not that I know. She told me she wanted to revisit childhood places to reconnect with the land. Did you go with her?”

“I... did.” He decides to remain quiet about being ditched.

“What about the prize?”

“It’s you!” she says, matching his tone and demeanour quite well, adding a little smile and good humour with her bright blue eyes.

“You go with her?!” He takes a moment to think. “The expedition you were referring to the other day to Sally, not a contest?”

“I don’t understand. I am here to get some banana bread for some guests I have coming. I don’t eat it myself, but it is good I hear.”

“Not that I know. She told me she wanted to revisit childhood places to reconnect with the land. Did you go with her?”

“I... did.” He decides to remain quiet about being ditched.

“Was it nice?”
“Yeah, it was awesome.”

“Then you win the contest.” She smiles warmly, gives him a heartfelt hug, and goes into the bakery to get her banana bread.

Epilogue

A few months later, Martin is sitting in front of the same little bakery in Balfour. He’d gone back home, packed his stuff, putting most of it in storage in his mom’s basement, and headed back out to Nelson. He had found himself attracted to the opening of the lake, and had just recently found both a place in Balfour, and a job waiting at a local pub. Overall, things are good.

He had received a package shortly after returning to Victoria. It had been a photo album of their trip together. True to her word, she had given him a copy of all the pictures. There were even a few of her leaving him at the hot springs. In one of them, she was waving, and looked truly sorry.

Written on the backside of the cover was a short note. Its contents are what made him decide he wanted to move out here.

Farmer Martin. That sounded really good to him. Now if he could only afford some land.

Here’s what was written:

**Martin,**

I am truly sorry I left you like that. I’m really bad at goodbyes. I didn’t want to ruin the magic we had shared so far. This way, all of our memories together are good ones. You were a great friend when I needed one.

Maybe we will meet again someday, and go on another adventure. I just finished law school. I have a little girl, and a fiancée who is also a lawyer, moving towards politics.

I couldn’t bear to get married without one more innocent little adventure in my homeland.

I hope you understand and can forgive me for not being more straightforward with you about my life situation. I thought it would be simpler, purer, this way.

The best part for me was at Pilot Point, dreaming of a different life, one like my parents had.

Maybe next lifetime.

**Sally**

P.S. What about you, Martin? You gonna be a farmboy out in the Kootenays?
Think of your deepest wishes and your most far-fetched dreams. Now imagine that they could all come true with a simple wish. Suddenly the doors are flung open and nothing is out of reach. But are all of your wishes good? Or do you surrender to your darker edges and wish for others to suffer pain or use such power for selfish causes? Because, as everyone knows, every gift comes with consequences...

The Columbia Basin was once a quiet place: humble and kind. It was an area where small amounts of people from around the world would come to enjoy themselves among the historic towns, frosted mountains and ribbons of rivers. Between those mountain peaks and lush forests, crossing over a river, was the plain Doukohbor Bridge, a simple bridge with an amazing fate.

The Doukohbor walking bridge over the Columbia River was enriched with so much history. When it was first built, the people would cross it regularly; their footsteps marking the short time they had on this earth. As generations passed, new, stronger bridges were built to accommodate heavier things like cars and trucks. The small wooden bridge lost its purpose and began to sit and idle and wait for its time, because its time would come. Oh, yes, it would come.

In 2009, the city decided to fix up this bridge so it would be safe for people to use again. The refurbished Doukohbor Bridge was soon opened, only its quaint history bringing in a respectable number of people. It wasn’t until June 27, 2010 that everything changed.

The day was quieter than any other that week. The heat fell like a hot blanket smothering the area. Everyone was either inside with air conditioning or somewhere with cool water in which to wade. No one wanted to be by the bridge, especially five year old Theodore Matthews.

That stifling Sunday, Theo had planned to go over to his friend Mike’s house to see his new puppies. Their dog, Sadie, had just given birth to a litter of four. Their eyes were yet to open and their silky ears needed time to hear. Theo wanted one.

He was sure that if his mother and father were to see the helpless little things, he would finally get the puppy he always wanted. No one could deny the small little tails and great effort the pups put into lifting their heads. No one.

Except now, his grandmother (who he thought smelled of cabbage) had literally stumbled into his house and demanded they take her somewhere exciting. And his mother had thought of the Doukohbor Bridge on the hottest day of the year. Exciting... Yeah, right.

So Theo sat in the back of the car, in his car seat, grumbling to himself. He didn’t want to go. He wanted to see the puppies, not sit with stinky Grandma and go to some stupid bridge.

“Come along, Theodore,” Grandma rasped sweetly, unclipping the seatbelt with her bony, disfigured hands.

He did, but only because he began to realize that if he could get through this quickly, he might be able to convince his mother to take him to Mike’s house after all. He could get through this quickly, he was sure of it. It was only a bridge!

But the time didn’t go by as fast as the small five-year-old would have liked. They read signs, they took pictures and they talked about things like Grandma’s health.

His mother was in the middle of a conversation when he’d had enough. He went up to her and began to tug on her khaki shorts. She went on with what she was saying, ignoring the insistent tugging. Finally she looked down to his curly blond head and asked with annoyance, “What?”

He thought of not asking her because now she seemed angry, but he couldn’t get the image of the soft black ears and helpless tail-wagging out of his head. “Can we go?”

“No, not yet,” And his mother turned back to his Grandma to continue her conversation about the odd weather that year.

Theo kept tugging. His mother absentmindedly swatted at his grip until Theo finally let go and sat down on the warm wooden planks of the bridge. The bright hot sun reflected on the river water and into his light blue eyes, and he squinted as he felt his skin slowly burn. He finally sighed heavily, and whispered to himself:

“I just wish I could have a puppy.”

For the beginning of such an important series of events, the words seem incredibly simple.

Theo had his eyes closed to the burning sun, listening intently to the rushing water and the passing cars. His skin seemed to get hotter each second, and there was an odd panting sound beside him. Startled, Theo opened his eyes to see a pair of deep chocolate ones looking up into his face.

The dog’s hot breath escaped from his open mouth, its long pink tongue lolling. It was a golden retriever puppy, his ears floppy and soft, just as Theo had always dreamed of. The puppy blinked up at the small boy and laid his tiny head on Theo’s leg, golden eyebrows raised.
“Um... Hello,” Theo said, confused. He brought his small childish hand onto that velvety head. It felt right there, he thought. Like it should have always been there, and should always stay there. He began to pet the dog’s fur, and it began to wag its tail in pleasure. Theo was breathless for a few seconds, and then he couldn't hold it to himself any longer.

“Mom! Mom!” He yelled, startling the dog momentarily.

“Omigosh, Theo, what’s the matter?” His mother had finally turned her attention to him from his sudden outburst.

“Look!” And she did. She looked down at where little Theo was pointing, afraid of what she would see. But when she finally realized that her son wasn't in danger, the young puppy bounded toward her, its small paws now pressed to her khaki shorts.

What followed was unimportant. There was begging and pleading on Theo’s part, and confused wonder on his mother’s. She told herself that it must have walked on while she wasn’t paying attention, and that someone who lived near-by must own it. With this determined, Theo’s mother would not allow Theo to keep the puppy, but she promised him she would come to see the other puppies at Mike’s place.

The family walked off together and when Theo turned one last time to say good-bye to the puppy, it had disappeared mysteriously. He had sworn it was right behind him, and the moment he had stepped off of the wooden planks, the soft whimper of the dog became mute.

They left and later bought a puppy from Theo’s friend, to Theo’s immense happiness. But they left behind something priceless behind. Someone had seen what had happened on that bridge, and was suddenly burdened with unanswered questions.

Meet Aaron. He was going into his senior year of high school, and had been somehow roped into working every day on the highway, picking up trash. It was a mind-numbing job, and the worst part was, he wasn’t even getting paid for it. Volunteering. Why had he done it? Oh, because he was an over-achiever, and wanted to get into The University of Waterloo. He had thought that volunteering would provide him with an extra leg up. But, as he worked under the blazing sun, he began to regret his decision, and wonder why he had to be the way he was.

Stupid, he told himself, stupid to not look at the temperature this morning, and fake an illness. He was stupid to not take up the volunteering job at the kitchen in a summer camp nearby. But, he didn’t, and so he was stuck on the blazing highway, the sun burning his back.

He had seen the scenario that unfolded on the bridge. He quickly checked his water bottle to see if he hadn’t drank as much as he had thought. Nope. Practically all the water was gone. He wasn’t dehydrated. So how had he seen what had just taken place? Aaron watched as Theo and his mother and grandmother got in their beat-up red Jetta.

There had been only three people on that bridge, and then suddenly, a puppy was in the boy’s lap as if it had always been there. The thing was, that it hadn't been there. Aaron had seen that. Only three people were on the bridge. And then as they began to leave, Aaron saw it just... disappear.

He made his way down to the bridge, telling his group he just needed a quick break. He made his way down the rocky path and onto the deserted bridge. There was nothing to be seen that would be thought as peculiar, nothing that would show what had happened moments before.

The sun beat down with blazing intensity, and Aaron wiped his brow with the bottom of his grey t-shirt feeling tired and foolish. If only it would begin to rain, a little.

“I wish it would rain.” The fact that over-achiever Aaron had used the word wish out of all the things he could have, and that he had wished for something physical, changed his future. If things had been different, who knows when fate would have caught up with us? It might have been another year or two. Possibly never.

The clear blue sky suddenly began to cloud over with dark rolling clouds, and Aaron finally looked up when a large raindrop splattered across his heated forehead. He looked up in surprise and the pieces of the puzzle fell together with a seemingly audibly click! His mind went back over the last few moments, and realized quite quickly what had happened.

He laughed to himself with joy, and turned his face to the cleansing downpour. He needed to tell someone. He was about to make his way off of the bridge, but realized he could experiment with it first.

He pauses and said out loud: “I wish I had a cell-phone to call my friend.”

The bridge wasted no time as a phone suddenly appeared in Aaron’s hand. The screen glowed softly with the time 2:23 p.m. Aaron gave a whoop of joy, jumping up and down, unable to believe his eyes. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he kept telling himself that it contradicted every fact he had ever been taught, but all reasonable thought flew quickly from his mind.
Aaron called his friend, Cory Samuels, who quickly followed his directions and came to his aid. He was amazed at what he found, and told his father about it. Cory’s father was an important businessman who was skeptical at first. He was the kind of person that always wore a suit and had a Blackberry attached to one hand, and a black leather suitcase in the other. When Mr. Samuels realized how important the bridge was, he explained simply to the mayor and the owner of the bridge that he was very interested in the bridge, careful not to mention his reasons. He offered a great amount of money, which could not be refused. He agreed to terms quickly, and rapidly organized a building crew to build a large building on either side of the Columbia River with a large cafeteria, ticket office and information center. People began to think Mr. Samuels was mad. The bridge was boring, and its history as well, they thought. There would be no mass of people swarming in from around the world to come see this bridge. They had no idea how utterly wrong they were.

Together, Aaron, Cory and Mr. Samuels experimented. What was the bridge capable of? They knew that objects could appear, and weather could be changed. They knew that a wish would only be granted when spoken aloud. And finally, they figured out that once the wisher left the bridge, all of their wishes simply disappeared as if nothing had ever happened.

When Theo had left the bridge, the puppy simply vanished into thin air as if it had never been there to begin with. When Aaron later walked off of the bridge to greet his friend, the rain that had fallen freely moments before, disappeared, along with the thick clouds. The only thing to assure Aaron that it had ever happened at all was his wet clothing and ground.

They also experimented with the theory of wishing for things outside of their view. They realized that the wisher could wish something for another person or object. An example could be that Aaron might wish for Cory’s natural sandy blond hair to turn a very bright pink, and the bridge would obey.

Finally, after many weeks of hard labor, the three would finally see where their magnificent find would take them. They held a sort of open house, inviting reporters and broadcasters from across the country to come to Castlegar. The townspeople were ushered to the banks of the river as they watched the magic unfold. Many thought it a waste of time until they witnessed in awe what their beloved bridge could do.

“Behold, my people, your Wishing Bridge. Dreams come true here. Pain and struggle are lost here. The gods have blessed us with such a prize, and the world will come to praise it. Our dreams and wishes are our future, and our future is the Wishing Bridge and the world will come from far and wide to greet the future.”

And they did. From across the world, they came. Slowly at first, being unsure of the truth. British Columbia was the first to test out the rumors, then Canada and the United States. Within a seemingly short year, the Wishing Bridge covered the front-page of every newspaper in the world. Flights and hotels were booked years in advance. The Kootenay Region, once known for fabulous skiing, kind people, and great summer biking began to change. Castlegar began to merge with Trail. Hotels seemed to raise themselves along the Columbia River’s edge and restaurants and shopping malls dotted every open space. More work became available, and with it, more people looking for jobs. Homes were built to accommodate the masses of people moving to the newly named Castletrail. Many people didn’t come for the Wishing Bridge, but for the economic boom.

But the Wishing Bridge was always there. Tickets sold, at first, for around two hundred dollars each, and kept rising as the demand increased. The Wishing Bridge was then named the Eighth World Wonder. People were so smitten with the walking bridge they didn’t think to ask anything and paid no attention to the horrible things that began to happen.

Meg Tailor was fifty-six when she came to visit the Wishing Bridge. She lived by herself in a quaint town in Pennsylvania after her husband and most recently, her only son, passed away. Her husband passed away from cancer some ten years ago, leaving her with their only child, Max. As he made his way through high school, Meg was there to love and support him. As the rest of his classmates began to apply to colleges and leave home, Max held back, taking a year off to decide his future. It was a horrible surprise to Meg when he decided his future was meant for the army.

Off he went to military school. He had enlisted for four years, and was very quickly sent off to Afghanistan to fight. It was the last time Meg would see him. He died during a suicide car bombing.

After her son’s death, Meg became distant and cold. For years, she worked diligently at her job, without complaint but also without true passion. All her income, which she once spent on her son, was never used for her own happiness. Bills and taxes were paid. She bought basic necessities, but she gave herself nothing. She never dated again; she never even left her town. It
wasn’t until Meg heard of the Wishing Bridge that she let herself feel again.

She paid for a ticket to Castletrail and for a simple room at a hotel and reserved a single ticket for the Wishing Bridge.

When the day finally came, Meg waited in the cafeteria for her turn, and then calmly pulled on her winter jacket. The cold winter winds blasted against her as she opened the double glass doors, and made her way down the path just as Aaron, Cory, Mr. Samuels, and Theo had done three years before. She knew the rules. Wish for something, and it will come true. Walk off the bridge and your wish will vanish.

She began her first step onto the empty bridge, night air finding its way beneath her ragged coat and clinging to her bones. She had fifteen minutes. It was what she had paid for, and it was all that she thought she needed. But as she stood there, moments passing, she wondered if it was enough.

Finally, Meg breathed out, a small cloud escaping her warm insides and into the dark night. “I…” She paused, unable to go on. “I wish… that I could speak, listen and hold my son, Max Tailor.”

Her eyes were closed. She almost expected nothing to happen. They said it was true. A co-worker had gone and come back, amazed with the bridge, dramatically telling his story. Maybe he had lied. Maybe everyone was lying.

A hand grasped Meg’s shoulder, and her eyes flew open to see the familiar smiling face of her lost son.

“Max,” she breathed. Everything was the way she remembered. His hair was buzzed very short, and he still stood a head above her. He had the same determined look and faded scar from his left temple to his ear.

“Hi, Ma,” he said gently. He even spoke the same as she remembered. Like every word held the world’s joy.

Meg didn’t remember her time there after that. It was all a whirl of crying and hugging. Max comforted his mother, and laughed as she began to stutter out words of how she missed him. They talked and talked about their memories from the past. They laughed together and clung to each other as if their life depended on it.

It seemed like only a moment when the guards came to warn Meg that her time was up. She looked up at her son, who just smiled and said, “Look like it’s time for you to go. Don’t worry, Ma, we’ll see each other one day again.”

She nodded, and watched him as she slowly walked off of the bridge. He raised a large hand and gave a slight wave as he vanished.

The next day, she cancelled her flight home and reserved every ticket to the Wishing Bridge on Wednesday at six o’clock. Only the fifteen-minute slots were open. Every time she visited Max, she left with a smile on her face and a gaping hole in her heart. “I’ll see you again Max,” She would promise every time as she was ushered away.

For two months she visited the bridge at six o’clock on Wednesdays until one day during the new year, when she went through the revolving doors into the ticket office and said her normal hellos to the workers, one of them stopped her. They told her the horrible news: there were no slots on Wednesday at six o’clock. Nor were there any slots anywhere. The recent holidays had brought people brimming with wishes, and many of them had stayed. More people were coming. There was not another free slot anywhere at any time until July of 2014.

Meg wandered back to her hotel, heartbroken. She would not be able to wait for more than a year to see Max again. It was too long. A week was painful. What would she do? She couldn’t go home in case a spot opened up, but she couldn’t stay. Castletrail was the city life she had worked to get away from.

The decision she finally made a week later was a story that was written in small print within the newspapers. She simply wrote “I wish I could be with my son forever” on a plain piece of hotel paper next to her cold body. Everyone knew that a suicide directly caused by the Wishing Bridge was not what people wanted to hear. They wanted to think of the Wishing Bridge as a gift from the gods, not a device that slowly began to cause chaos and kill people.

And that’s exactly what it began to do. Meg was the first case in 2014. Her death was well hidden, but more and more odd cases began to pile up and people began to notice. When people were given the opportunity to wish for anything, they forgot the rules. They became obsessed like Meg. They came back again and again, forgetting to worry about the other things in life. Work? Why work when you can simply wish for money? Who cares if all of it goes away once you walk off? It was real and that’s all they remembered as they stepped off the worn bridge.

People began to go crazy. Some would step off of the bridge and just collapse in writhing pain. There was nothing to explain what caused these reactions. When someone asked the victims what their wishes were, they would be unwilling to say.

There was no hiding the deaths and mental illnesses directly
related to the Wishing Bridge. The numbers of people kept streaming in, but another mass of people began to raise the awareness of the dark side of their precious bridge and many followed. The majority of people still believed the Wishing Bridge was a gift from the gods. A group of people, who called themselves The Generation, truly believed that it was no gift, but a curse.

It started off with four teenagers, Amanda, Calypso, Brandon and Zach, who called themselves The Generation. They were originally from Rossland, a small ski town that was right on the edge of Castletrail. It, surprisingly, stayed quite small compared to its surrounding towns, staying well out of the flashing lights and masses of people. These four teenagers saw first hand the changes that ensued once the Wishing Bridge was found. They watched as people ran over themselves to get a ticket to the Wishing Bridge. They were also the first to realize the horrible damage the Wishing Bridge was causing. Every one of them had a dream they worked hard for. One wanted to be on the national alpine ski team, while another wanted to be a respected author. Each worked hard to get to where they were, and suddenly the bridge came along, and anything you wished for would be granted. So long to hard work; so long to real dreams. The Wishing Bridge, they realized, was stealing away people's motivations.

They lay quiet for a while, gathering other friends who believed in what they did. They knew no way of becoming known, so they simply watched... until the deaths began. Meg’s death might have been hidden as well as it could have, but The Generation found out about it. This was their chance to prove to the rest of the world how wrong the bridge was. By this time, many people, mostly teenagers, were following The Generation. It wasn’t long until the word got out to many locals and small groups around the world about The Generation.

They were seen only on the sidelines. Like Meg Tailor, The Generation was mentioned within the newspapers in small print. People heard of them, but they did not bother to be concerned either way. The Wishing Bridge still held the attention of its audience, but slowly The Generation caught their gazes. Then, before people knew it, it seemed to be The Generation against the Wishing Bridge, and The Generation was winning.

People opened their eyes to the evil truth of the bridge. Those who had experienced the great power of the Wishing Bridge were reluctant to let go of something that granted their deepest wishes, but as more and more turned away, so did they. Of course, there were people who greatly benefited from the bridge, like Mr. Samuels, who stubbornly clung to their beliefs.

As The Generation began to conquer, they were surprised to find that nothing was changing. Yes, people began to boycott the Wishing Bridge, and other large groups began to follow suit, but it wasn’t enough. The bridge was still there, and people were still putting up with its poison. People still died, and people still found a way of bringing the power of the bridge to their sickened life. Things weren’t changing.

When Amanda, Calypso, Brandon and Zach realized this, they made a plan. There would be no way for them to ruin the bridge enough without being caught first. But it needed to be gone, that was determined. So, why not use its greatest power against it?

The plan was put into motion one spring day, 2021. The leaders of The Generation all bought a group ticket for their greatest enemy: The Wishing Bridge. They hoped it would be their first and last time.

“You ready?” Amanda asked, her blond hair falling over her feminine features. Her face could have once been considered innocent, but at that moment, her chin was stubborn and her eyes were filled with a fiery passion.

The other three nodded. “Just remember,” Brandon added, “we must remember our wish, and not be tempted to wish for anything else.” They all nodded once again, and strode confidently onto the empty bridge.

The Columbia Basin was once a quiet place: humble and kind. It was one of the areas where small amounts of people around the world would come to enjoy themselves among the historic towns, frosted mountains and ribbons of rivers. Between those mountain peaks and lush forests, crossing over a river, was the plain Doukhobor Bridge, a simple bridge with an amazing fate.

Today, the fate of the bridge would come to a satisfying end. As the bridge’s conquerors stood hand in hand on its worn wooden planks, the constant Columbia River flowing smoothly beneath them, they had the respect to bow their heads to praise the Wishing Bridge on a noble fight.

The four leaders looked to one another, smiling. Zach, on the end, gave a squeeze to Amanda’s, and she to Brandon, and finally to Calypso. This was it. And together they chimed:

“I wish the Wishing Bridge would fall apart into the Columbia River.”

And the bridge did just that.
Aanika Ruutopold is 16-years-old and lives in Rossland. Aanika has worn out her favourite series as a child called 'Avalon: The Web of Magic' by Rachel Roberts and is currently trying to finish Tamora Pierce's 'Tortall' books along with the first book of a series called 'Water Mirror: Dark Reflections Trilogy' by Kai Meyer and 'The Vampire Diaries: The Return: Shadow Souls' by J.L. Smith. If Aanika's life could be a book it would include a quirky, weird heroine who enjoys watching bad movies, reading silly books, laughing with friends, pretending she's a ninja, acting, exploring, writing, drawing, and skiing. She wonders if that story exists yet. In 'The Wishing Bridge' she felt the bridge is the main character and all other character's stories revolve around it, so she would cast the real Doukhobor Walking Bridge in Castlegar as the Wishing Bridge.
“Hey Jess, are you coming over tonight?”
“Sorry, I’ve got a ton of homework. You know Mr. Wellington.”
Jessica rolled her eyes dramatically, plastering a smile on her face. “You’d think the final was tomorrow!”
Mikayla shrugged, slinging her backpack over her shoulder and tossing her dark hair to the side. “Yeah, I had him last year. See you tomorrow!”
She turned, leaving Jessica at her locker, sorting through her textbooks and humming to herself. Most of the other kids had already filtered by, and their loud chatter faded down the hallway as they headed for home. Today, Jessica was in no rush. She lived across town - which meant it took a grand total of ten minutes walking at her speed, twenty at the average teen’s - to get home, and her mother wouldn’t be in for another hour or so.

Just as she was zipping up her knapsack, she heard voices raised sky high down the hall. Her humming dropped off, and she straightened, closing the locker quietly and hooking in the lock. As always, she left it slightly undone to save time in the morning; a habit she had picked up when the school explicitly told them not to do so.

Though the closest door to the outside was just ten lockers down, Jessica decided to go the long way, towards the voices, drawn down the halls by an insatiable curiosity. When she rounded the corner, she had the misfortune of finding a teacher arguing with grand gesticulations with the principal, Mrs. Cranston.

Sighing, Jessica pulled a one-eighty and headed back out her normal door, silently cursing the unexciting life in this forsaken place.

At fifteen, in tenth grade and only moderately attractive, Jessica was not exactly where she wanted to be. The days of easy friendships had succumbed to the pressures of cliques, gangs and flirtation and high school seemed an overall miserable waste of time.

It wasn’t as though Golden were an awful place where bad things happened, but rather that nothing ever happened. A small town stuck three hours from the nearest shopping mall, eight hours from the nearest beach and a country away from the nearest sunny beach, it seemed as though all the people of the world came to Golden, only to leave again at the first opportunity.

Graduation couldn’t come soon enough.
“Anywhere but here,” she muttered, hooking her fingers onto her shoulder straps. She walked slowly, her step containing none of its usual purpose, and stared mostly at the next crack in the sidewalk, of which she had plenty to choose. Around her rose the majestic mountains, wearing warm hats of snow in preparation for the coming winter: the Rockies to the east, and the Selkirks stretching westward, but she didn’t notice them. They had been there for her entire life, and would be long after she was gone.

Past the lights - the only set in the town, except for the pedestrian crossing - and she was almost home: it was just past the houses that squatted to either side of the road, past the little park where the neighbour’s dog always pooped and the children played in the summer.

Home was a three-bedroom, two bathroom wood-sided affair, almost as old as the town, and it could probably have won an award for the largest mushroom garden - not the magical kind - in town. As she arrived, she paused, looking it up and down, seeing the muddy front yard and the weather-beaten side panels.

“Ugh,” she said, as she did every time, and then clomped up the path and into the house. Dumping her bag, she glanced at the cat - a tabby that had already wound itself around her legs - and growled, glaring at it till it left the room.

“You’ll get fed when mom gets home, Kit,” Jessica mumbled, half of her feeling guilty for taking her bad day out on the gentle cat. “I’m going for a run.”

Another glance around to see if anything was amiss, which nothing was, of course, then she left, scribbling a note for her mom on their message board.

Jessica hated running. She loathed the way each step jolted her knee, and how you could never get anywhere at any reasonable speed. However, that day she had steam that needed some serious blowing off, and she imagined herself as a locomotive puffing down the tracks, as she had when she was no more than four. With this in mind, she found herself headed for the rail yard, but that was okay, since the only pleasant running trails were there too.

She reached the paths and hooked a right, letting her rhythm drop into an easier pace. Lining the track was a thin line of trees, mostly lodge pole pine and spruce, thin enough to see the rail line to one side and the houses to the other. But it smelled nice, the trees sighed in the cool weather, the needles that coated the path made the ground soft.

As always, she was never too sure why today had been a bad day. They were all the same, in the end, but it seemed to be
cumulative: sometimes frustration peaked, and she just needed to be anywhere but where she was. Then she knew it would all go away, and she would be free!

She laughed quietly to herself. One thing she was not was stupid. Nowhere could be perfect, but still... it would be better than this dump.

By now she had followed the path to its end, but instead of turning to return home as usual, she dropped down to a walk and meandered towards the airport. Or rather, she corrected herself, the short little runway and tiny hangar. Past the airport, there was a short walkway she found she could enjoy, since it was always quiet, and smelled of clean air.

In Golden, two rivers meet: the wild Kicking Horse River and the mighty Columbia. And here there was a nice path where Jessica could go for some quiet time, and pretend she was anywhere but here.

The air was very still as she raised her pace back to a jog, and the colours were bright in the autumn sun. A couple of clouds skittered across the sky, as though rushing to the places she wished she could go. Past the airport, she entered the miniature park and slowed back down to a walk.

Squirrels chattered in the trees, and occasionally she could hear the call of an eagle as it pestered the heron sanctuary just to the south of town.

Ugh, Jessica thought, even here the stupid things bother me. She paused by the rocky beach, then sat down heavily on the earthen ledge above it. There were pebbles of every shape, and a couple of shades of grey, green and dull purple. Shadows at this time of year were dark, making each rounded stone very distinct against its background. There was one that caught her eye. It was perfectly circular, smooth and black.

Smiling, just a little, Jessica leaned over and picked it up, weighing it in her hand. It was both heavy for its size and light for its colour. For a while she let it just sit there, watching it glisten; it was still wet from river water. When it dried, she found it had lost little of its sheen. Closing her hand around it, she felt the warmth it had borrowed from the sun. Then, tucking it into her pocket, she got up, and jogged home.

It was his fourth year here and he still couldn’t get a single person to make eye contact with him. Is there something basically wrong with me, he wondered? Do I buy the wrong deodorant?

Jordan Connelly thought it more likely that it was the glasses. Somehow, his parents had managed to choose the most offensive pair, and, since he had been too young to care at the time, and his eyesight hadn’t changed, he was stuck with them. “They make you look like Harry Potter,” his parents had exclaimed. Unbeknownst to them, they also made him look like a total geek.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t entirely the glasses, but they certainly contributed to the fact no girl would give him a second glance. No big deal, right? Except the big spring dance was on its way, and he would be the only one who wouldn’t have a date.

Growling under his breath, Jordan closed the locker door, ignoring the squeak of hinges, and hooked the lock into the loop. His combination was in his fingers rather than his mind, which caused problems on the first day back, but by now was ingrained in his memory. As he swung around, science books clutched to his chest, he knocked into a passing student. Of the opposite gender.

Muttering a hasty apology, he headed off, hearing twitters as the offended female discussed whatever it was with her cluster of cronies. He would never call the groups friends.

Sliding into his seat at the back of the class, Jordan settled in for a lecture on plate tectonics, most of the information in which could be gathered at a glance from the textbook. The teacher, Mr. Franks, however, had other plans.

“As we are well ahead of schedule and are currently studying geology, I would like to take you all on a field trip!”

He said this with such enthusiasm, they might have been headed for Disneyland. Grinning widely at the class - which had erupted into relieved chaos at the delay of their boredom - Mr. Franks continued. “Grab your coats, kids. We’re headed for the Columbia.”

Taylor, the one Jordan branded as a teacher’s pet, was the first out of the room, while the mascara-wearing and smoke-scented girls followed close behind. Then went the hicks, their ball caps once again in place upon their heads, and last were the Girls, as Jordan called them, self-declared as the best clique to be in. Jordan, and a few stragglers, followed the teacher out.

“Oh boy,” one of the others muttered, sarcasm dripping off her tone. “Rocks.”

Jordan turned, curious as to the speaker. It was not a voice he heard often, nor one he was accustomed to hear with that tone.

Jessica Fennel tapped a pen against her notebook, sighing
and staring off into space. She was usually tagging along with the Girls, Jordan recalled, but had always seemed a little set apart. Now she was just behind him as they filed out of the school and onto the river path that crossed town.

Slowing down as discreetly as possible, Jordan slowly drew level with her. She did not flinch when he joined her, or look away, or sneer, which was the usual reaction. Glancing at him once, she nodded in silent acknowledgment, and then continued looking off into nowhere.

Content for once to hold his tongue, Jordan walked beside her the entire trip, which lasted all of ten minutes. Carefully, he looked at her, not as would other guys, but as a matter of interest. Her brown hair was drawn into a tight ponytail, long enough to swing with her step. She had thin lips, a small, rounded nose and freckles that formed the constellation Orion on her left cheek, which was the side he could see.

He couldn’t say why he was so curious about her: she had always been labelled “untouchable” in his mind and he was fairly sure she didn’t even know he existed. They had three classes together - socials, science and math - and they were at precisely opposite ends of the room. She was always in front, listening to the teachers, and asking questions, while he simply couldn’t wait to be out of there.

All in all, she did not seem like the kind of person to grumble about a geological field trip.

They passed the bridge, and stepped down to the banks by the confluence. Mr. Franks began prattling, and, mirroring Jessica’s movement, Jordan pulled out his notebook and pen. As the teacher spoke, she turned towards the man, and Jordan focused his attention on the ground.

He could feel his face burn, and he knew his little black curls could never cover it. No one ever paid enough attention to him to notice when he was embarrassed, and so he wasn’t too concerned. What if, he thought, she thinks I’m a creep now? Did she see me watching her? Am I paranoid?

After a few seconds, he decided the worst possible outcome would be that she would ignore him, which wouldn’t be a change from the norm. He could live with that.

Comforted by this thought, he listened briefly to Mr. Franks, took some notes so the teacher could check that he was paying attention, then turned his attention to his surroundings.

Though he had moved to Golden four years ago, and had seen the airport and visited the ski hill, he had never taken the time to explore the confluence. Just past the rail tracks, it was the site where the Kicking Horse - the rafting river - and the Columbia - the lazy snake - become one. To him, they were just a Y-intersection near the airport.

There were a bunch of rocks at the confluence, little rocks and big rocks, and a whole lot of pebbles. Just beyond was the river, or rivers, one clear blue, the other a murky green, braided together. Except for the blabbing of Mr. Franks and the majority of the kids, it was almost peaceful.

Dropping his eyes to his feet, he wiggled his toes in his shoes, his mind drifting and his eyes not really seeing. There was one little stone that caught his attention: a cloudy white pebble the size of a few marbles, perfectly smooth, but lumpy in shape.

Squatting to retrieve it, Jordan’s pencil rolled off his notebook with that infuriating slowness things get when they know they can’t be caught. It teetered briefly at the edge, teasing him, and then dropped precipitously to the ground, wobbling a couple of times before lying still.

He simply watched it for a few seconds, wondering what he had done to deserve this fate. Had he angered some gods he did not know existed, or collected bad karma in another life? Or was he simply unlucky, and it was random that he had the stupidest glasses in the world?

Sighing, he turned a little, and scooped up the pebble, then, as he reached for the pencil, he realized it was no longer there. Looking up, he saw a hand held it, and, connected to the hand by an arm, a person. Jessica Fennel.

Once again, Jordan felt his complexion imitate the colour of the beet soup his mother had once tried to force-feed him. He glanced back to the ground as he got up, not looking her in the face as he rose.

“Here,” she whispered, glancing over her shoulder to the teacher. Somehow he had managed to keep talking even when the entire class was off in their own, happier, worlds.

“Thanks,” was his mumbled reply and he still didn’t look up. There was a pause as he slipped it into the sleeve of his notebook.

“What rock did you pick up?” Jessica asked. Surprised, Jordan looked at her. She had been watching him? Maybe, he thought, she didn’t pay as much attention to the teacher as he had supposed. Then he reddened again. Rock collecting was a child’s habit.

“Just this milky one...” he muttered, the words almost
incoherent even to him, opening his hand to display the stone. When he glanced back up from it, he saw she was smiling. She had a dimple on her left cheek, and the grin was higher on that side. Hesitantly, not sure if she were smiling at him or with him, he closed his fist around it, and Jessica turned back to the teacher.

Almost relieved, and somewhat disappointed, Jordan figured that would be the end of their brief truce. He was mistaken, however, because shortly after Jessica reached into her pocket and retrieved a little black stone, very shiny and smooth. Holding it out for him to see, she said, “I picked it up yesterday on a run.”

For the rest of the period they didn’t say anything else, but on the walk back to school, they paired up once again at the back, and Jordan found himself enjoying the first companionable silence he had had in a long while.

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The rest of the week passed uneventfully and, to a great extent, unnoticed. The week-end dawned sunny and clear, but the cold had started to set in. Colour painted the leaves in gold, orange and crimson, losing the green of summer, but not yet at the grays and whites of winter.

Jessica Fennel, bored again and too tired to socialize, walked along her path by the river. Even over the past few days, many leaves had lost their grip, and her steps crunched on the newly fallen. Now with a scarf and light jacket, she could almost see her breath mist in front of her, but it wasn’t there yet.

Oh joy, she thought. Another winter.

Sometimes even she got tired of her pessimism, but today was just another miserable Saturday before the setting in of snow. Not exactly exciting.

“Anywhere but here,” she muttered again, staring at the dead leaves under her feet. The little beach was beside her now, and she slumped back onto the ledge, looking at the tiny empty space by her pebble had sat. Someday, they would all be little grains of sand, she thought, separated from their mother rock till the end of time. It had surprised her when Jordan showed interest in the stones. The river rocks had always be something she enjoyed looking at, but she had thought it was something that only interested her.

“What was that?” someone asked. Jessica sighed. Now she was hallucinating. She must really be bored. Another voice echoed her. Whirling, she found herself looking at someone’s legs. Oh, Um…” She paused, looking up at her new companion. It was Jordan, and she grinned, considering asking him if he were stalking her. Instead, she just went with, “Wallowing in self pity, of course.”

He smiled a little, a wavering smile as though unsure as to whether or not the statement was a joke. “Of course. May I?” He gestured to the space beside her. Nodding, Jessica looked back out to the river.

“Do you come here often?”

Jessica shrugged. “When I feel like it.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod.

“You?”

“Actually, only since the field trip. I didn’t really know this existed.”

“How long have you been here?”

“In Golden? Four years, or something.”

“Hm.” Nodding to herself, Jessica let her mind wander. There was a pause, though neither awkward nor comfortable.

“Do you, um…” Jordan hesitated. “Well, don’t you usually hang out with friends on week-ends?”

Jessica turned to him slowly, looking at him very steadily. In a tone much colder than she had ever used with him before, she replied, “Why do you want to know?”

His face returned to its red hue, and he mumbled, “Never see you around town, and you hang with them in school…”

He was interrupted. “Look, I don’t discuss my personal life with strangers.”

Flinching at that, Jordan watched silently as she got up to leave. Then, as she brushed off leaves, he said, “Sorry. Won’t happen again.”

The incarnation of dejection, he turned to the river and let his head drop.

Jessica paused. A guy, a teen-age male, had just apologized. This was unheard of. Uncharted territory. After a little deliberation and some mental jousting, Jessica reclaimed her place on the ledge.

“Good,” was all she said, and received a radiant smile in return.

Jordan’s mind was reeling. There was so much he wanted to say, and no inkling as to what should be said. Would he scare her away? The chance of meeting her here seemed so far-fetched; anything he did might upset his good fortune. So, holding his tongue, he let the silence of the river calm him, and pulled out his pebble.
His peripheral vision told him Jessica had glanced at him as he did this, and was still watching him as he rubbed the stone in his palm. It was rougher than some of the river stones - it must be younger - but he wouldn’t trade it for any of them. Warmed by his palm, it returned the heat freely, and, if he were still four years old, he would consider it a pet.

More mature than that now, he refrained from naming the inanimate object, thinking of it instead as a simple rock, but a special one.

Jessica was fiddling with something now, and he angled himself slightly towards her. It was her pebble. Black, smooth and round, it was the antithesis of his. Man, he thought, what a funny word. Antithesis. He had just learned it in Social Studies when the teacher was discussing the differences between Axis and Allied policies. And then, accidentally, he found himself laughing. Somehow, this thought was incredibly amusing.

Jessica looked at him as though wondering about his sanity, and, for all response, he held his pebble out, and, the laughter fading, said, “It’s funny, ok?” Before he could feel silly, redden and eat his words, Jessica lifted her stone and looked from one to the other a few times.

Then she laughed. “Just a little different, eh?”

Claire deBoer is 16-years-old and lives in Golden. She usually reads books only once, but has two favourites that she always goes back to: ‘Jason’s Quest’ by Margaret Laurence and ‘Airborn’ by Kenneth Oppel. Claire is currently reading several books, including ‘The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’ by Douglas Adams. Her favourite magazine would have to be ‘Canadian Geographic.’ Claire couldn’t choose a single book for her life, but it would be an adventure/travel story with a little bit of magic. If ‘Pebbles’ were to be made into a movie, she would like for Lindze Letherman to play Jessica as she thinks Lindze could pull off the pessimist really well.
The sun began to peek over the patches of cedar and pines that lined the mountains in the distance as we headed north down Highway Six towards Slocan City. There was something mystical about this morning; maybe it had to do with the silence of dawn or the solemnity of the open road. Just my father and I sat in the cabin of our truck, my feet propped up against his tackle box. I think it may have once belonged to my grandfather.

“Dad, why are we up so early?”

“The fish get up this early for breakfast and it’s the best time to go catch them.”

“Do you think we’ll catch anything?”

“Of course we will, with you along we’ll have beginners luck and probably catch the biggest fish out there.”

The smile on his face reassured every doubt I had about my first time fishing. As I stared out the window, I greeted a mother deer and her two fawns as they grazed the dew soaked field. It wasn’t uncommon to see deer on these travels with my father. The deer just seemed to be everywhere and sometimes I wondered to myself if it were possible that more deer than people existed out here; I probably wasn’t far from the truth.

As we entered Slocan, our truck slowed to a creep as we headed down towards the lake. We drove down by the dock. The monstrosity of the mill caught my eye and I immediately ceased fidgeting with my seat belt. A faint flicker of lights came from within but the mill still slept at this hour of morning. I was fortunate enough that my father owned his own mill and we were able to go fishing during a week day.

“We’ll be the only ones on the water,” he said to me as he pulled the canoe from the back of the truck.

The sun glistened off the water as it brushed against the rocky shore, as if the depths below were lined with silver and gold from settlers long ago. Father carried the canoe down to the water and placed it in; the stillness of the water was lost. I walked back up to the truck in my red gum boots and pulled at the tackle box. After a few minutes of me testing the weight of the tackle box, my father came and picked it up with just one hand and took it down to the canoe. I walked down to the canoe feeling a bit more real than my Saturday morning cartoons had once misled me to believe.

Father held the canoe as I splashed through the water and lifted one leg into the canoe, the rest of my body went tumbling after. Thankfully I landed on the life jackets or else I would’ve been a teary eyed sook. I moved to the head of the boat as we pushed off and father jumped into the boat and began paddling out. Fog lifted off the water as the lake exhaled into morning.

“How far are we going out?”

“We’re going to head to Enterprise Creek to start.”

“Is that far?”

“Well if I’m the only one paddling it may take awhile.”

With that I grabbed onto an oar and awaited further direction as excitement pulsed through me. We bobbed gently into the morning.

I had helped father paddle for fifteen minutes before I lost interest. As a child I was lucky if I could focus on anything for that long before a family of ducks would drift past or the sounds of rivers pouring their hearts into the lake would have me gazing off into the distance without a thought, or so it would seem.

“What if we don’t bring a fish home tonight?”

“We’ll bring a fish home, don’t worry.”

I wasn’t worried. The stories I had heard caused me to believe my father was the best fishermen in all of the Slocan Valley. The time he battled the sturgeon on Slocan Lake during a thunderstorm and how the waves crashed as the beast lurked below waiting to capsize the boat at any moment and the struggle to break through the waves back to land had always been my favorite story.

Father put down his oar and dropped down our miniature anchor to hold the canoe in place. Opening the tackle box he withdrew a small sour cream container that we had filled with grasshoppers. The sun now was directly over head and while my dad prepared the rods, I helped myself to a paper bagged lunch. A Vegemite sandwich and an Apple juice box, the delicacies of the day. The cocking of a silver bullet splashed against the peeling open of a potato chip bag, the sun perfectly over head.

The grasshopper, hook, and lead weight; a seamless cast out of the canoe. The waiting part of fishing is something I still cannot even bear.

“Does it always take this long?”

My father looked at me and I already knew his answer. I looked off into the distance at where our line might have settled. Silver began to mist as my father took another drink while we waited. I sat and I thought for a moment, what do fishermen think about when fishing? After several minutes I came to two separate conclusions. Fishermen either dissolve into the wilderness and run wild with the animals and the fish tugging...
on the line bring them back or they just needed time away from everyone and they come out here to be alone like when mother goes on vacations by herself. Ripples pulsed at where I had been gazing and then suddenly the line jerked. The line jerked! I felt the fishing pole tremble, but maybe that was just the excitement finding its way to my hands.

“Slowly reel her in.”

I grabbed onto the reel with my right hand, struggling to keep the rod within my left. Quickly I spun the reel towards myself. The tugging of the fish jerked me forward and I braced myself against the canoe with my boots.

“Let her out a bit so she’ll ease off.”

Letting the line slip from the rod put my nerves on edge and what ifs burst into my mind. What if he really wasn’t the greatest fishermen in the entire valley? What if we didn’t catch a fish today? What if I wasn’t good at fishing like I thought I should be? I pulled the rod back as hard as I could and began reeling vigorously. I felt my stomach rise. My father grabbed the net and swooped in and scooped the fish into the boat. Watching it flap as its life seeped from within, I felt its struggle. The gills gleamed in the sun with pebbles of water sliding this way and that; a rainbow, we had caught a rainbow. I rushed to the edge of the canoe; the Vegemite sandwich and Apple juice were exhaled over the side.

My father looked at me and smiled as he laid the net back into the water and let the fish swim freely.

“Too small for now, we’ll save her for another year.”

I looked at him and I didn’t understand but I nodded. “Too small” stuck in my mind that day, my first day fishing I realized that I’m still too small.

10 years later.

We lapped around the water park and the cold bit at my fingers, I knew what was going to happen and waiting for the worst is, well, the worst. The little things always give it away; standing apart like we did was just the tip of the iceberg. It had been three days since I had really talked to her. Odd texts left me feeling awkward and alone, maybe the loneliest I’ve ever felt. I guess that kind of thing happens to people like me, I’m only interesting for a little while and then the obvious lack of interest becomes quite apparent. The cold finally became too much and we found ourselves sitting on the floor of the Kootenay Savings just to keep warm.

“Clark, what’s going to happen tomorrow?”

“Well it depends what time I get up and when I go to sleep.”

“That’s not what I meant. You know what I mean.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well you know what I want?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“What then?”

“You want us to be friends.”

“I don’t want things to change; I want them to stay the same.”

I look at my reflection across from where we sit, I’m cold, and her weight against me I can barely tolerate.

“I can understand that you don’t feel the same way I do. But you have to understand that I can’t just turn off how I feel, I’m not a faucet.”

“Are you saying that I’m a faucet?”

Her eye liner runs, I stroke a few droplets away and a smirk a mile short of a smile falls loose.

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s always nothing with you.”

“That’s the problem.”

“What’s that suppose to mean, Clark?”

“Never mind.”

“Well what are you thinking?”

“It’s not important.”

“It’s important to me.”

“I couldn’t care less.”

“Just tell me.”

I run my thumb along her hands, skin so gentle. I continue along her finger tip.

“She begins to mimic the motion. I stop. I can’t bear the idea of us anymore.

“You’re beautiful, no matter what anyone else says, and if anyone has any issue they can come take it up with me.”

“I thought you’d say something like that.”

“Don’t be stupid, stupid.”

“Jerk”

“I’m sure we established that I’m an ass.”

“You’re anything but an ass.”

Her hands find her face again and she hides.

I stare at the ATM, saddened by the thought that this may be
the last time that I ever hold her.

“So?”

“So what, Louise?”

“What is going to happen tomorrow?”

“I don’t know, I’ll have to see how I feel.”

“Well we can talk about it and make a decision.”

I laugh; I can’t help it, what kind of idea is that. Let’s decide how I feel so that she gets what she wants.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“What do you think of me right now?”

“I love you, I can’t help it.”

She stares at me, my heart bleeds on my sleeve, I don’t even twitch.

“You really are good at hiding what you feel, you know?”

“I know.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll manage, always have.”

“Well you should talk about how you feel.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not fine, I know when you go home you’re going to be a wreck.”

“Not really, I’ve known for days.”

“Oh, well it’s been hard for me as well, the waiting.”

“You can’t help how you feel.”

She put her head against my shoulder, I close my eyes. I put my arm around her and pull her in close.

This could be the last time I ever hold her.

“Well I’d still like to finish watching the movie with you one of these days.”

“We’ll see.”

“Can we talk more tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.”

The bank door swung open and the night air consumed the warmth.

“Do you have a smoke?” the stranger paused and looked us over.

Only in Castlegar.

“No, I don’t have a lighter either.”

He eyed me over a moment and turned to Louise.

“Sorry.”

The stranger stared as if trying to cut through lies, but he found nothing.

The bank door swung open and the night air is left starving.

“I care a lot about you, more than most people; I don’t care about most people.”

“Take a moment to look over that phrase and get back to me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Whatever you say.”

“I’m trying to be serious and you just turn everything into a joke.”

“What can I say, I’m a funny guy.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why the laughter?”

“You just use the humor to hide what you really feel; it doesn’t have to be like that.”

I stare at her and inside I cringe.

“I read your poem the other day, it was nice, simple.”

“Just threw it together.”

“Well if you ever have a son he’ll be lucky to have a father like you.”

“Yeah.”

“But I don’t think that’s what it’s about.”

“I think that it’s more along the lines of things you wanted to hear from your father.”

A tear swells in my eye, I close my eyes, I can just feel my hands in hers.

This is the last time I’m ever this close with her.

I open my eyes and look at her, her smile faint.

“Yeah.”

“Everything will be okay.”

“Will it?”

“For you.”

She pulls her head as she rolls her eyes but the way she slings it cuts through me like a rusted fishing hook into my open flesh.

“Stop smiling, Clark.”

“Why?”

“Because I know you’re just holding it all in, and I can’t smile, I just feel horrible inside.”

What am I supposed to do with all these left over feelings for you?

“I don’t, I just, I thought I’d have feelings grow for you, but they’ve just stayed the same, and I don’t know what to do.”

She keeps talking, but I don’t listen.

*****

Six months later. Give or take.
Now reality has finally caught up with me as I sit here in the Castlegar airport. I’m waiting for the three-twenty flight to Vancouver. My father dropped me off but he had errands to run so with a firm hand shake, he departed and told me to give him a call sometime if I felt like it. I have been growing all my life, just not to anyone’s expectations, not even mine. The truth is, I don’t care anymore. Nothing stays the same and I’ve had to deal with these changes all my life but I haven’t been dealing with them the right way. I’ve been trapped and locked up and these nerves of steel were truthfully quite malleable.

I look outside and watch the rain come down splashing against the runway. My watch reads 2:00 and I still find this waiting around such bullshit. Funny how something that started so young can creep so easily through your life. Life just keeps changing and folding over itself in ways that I find humorous at best. Mother’s vacations and father’s fishing trips shifted into something bigger, divorce. I guess they grew out of their own expectations of each other and had to move on. The thing I find funny about this, even though that they’re both gone now, both living a new life, I can still learn from their choices; in the rest of the family’s eyes “mistakes”. From their choices to move on and keep living I’ve learnt that I need to follow in their footsteps. I need to escape from where I was raised and continue to grow now without anyone to catch me when I fall. I think breaking a few bones is in order, other than the wrist that suffered three days after that fishing trip where I laid in rain for two hours before anyone had noticed my suffering, much like now.

I fidget in my pocket and I find three dollars in change. I push myself up off the hard blue plastic that my backside has become accustomed to over the years of travel and I walk towards the vending machine next to the little café where a year prior I had told my cousin I would visit her sooner than later. I pop in my two twenty five and I purchase the last coke I’ll drink in this airport. As I drink the coke I can feel it clinging to my teeth leaving a feeling of un-cleanliness behind; mud on tiles. I walk back over to my plastic throne and continue to wait. I close my eyes as familiar faces flood into my mind. The sound of the flight breaking over the speakers snaps me back. I get up and walk towards the little glass box all passengers are forced to pass through in order to board the plane. I walk past an old foe, the plastic sturgeon that has been there now for as long as I can remember. I noticed it when I walked in and that’s what I think triggered this all, these thoughts of passed youth. I walk through the metal detector and I’m clean. Outside I inhale the remnants of a lake, exhaling old memories in exchange for the hopes of new ones.

Sitting on the plane I listen to the attendant as she recreates safety instructions at the front of the cabin. She doesn’t look familiar. I look around the cabin to see if I recognize anyone, but I stop myself, I’m alone for now.

“Would like you like anything to drink?” the flight attendant asks as she makes her rounds.

“Scotch, on the rocks”

Gently I close my eyes and the faces return to my mind. The only features I can pick out of these faces are smiles, the only thing I want to remember.

I smile.

The last smile I’ll ever have in British Columbia. The last smile in a place I used to call home.

Chace Kabatoff is 19-years-old and lives in Winlaw. He has read ‘A Clockwork Orange’ by Anthony Burgess more than once and is currently having another look at ‘Watchmen,’ by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. When asked if his life could be a book, what book it would be, Chace replied that he hasn’t written it yet. If ‘As the Lake Exhaled Into Morning’ were to be made into a movie he’d have Johnny Depp play the lead.
Sitting in the kitchen, Brady pours the last of the coffee into his thermos. He hears the low growl of Tamzen’s approaching Bronco and the deep bark of his bloodhound before his phone begins to jingle. Searching the many pockets of his jacket, he prays that he’ll be able to find it before it wakes his mom up, if that damn dog hasn’t already.

“Hello. Tamzen?”
“Yeah, I’m here. Hurry up.”
“You’re early. I’m coming.”
“I’m not early, you’re late.”
“I’m coming.”

Brady grabs the thermos, his tackle and fishing rod before quietly slipping outside. His breath freezes in front of him and he nearly slips on the front step. He pulls open the heavy door to the truck and climbs in. He sees her there, her auburn hair aglow from the sun behind her. “Oh my God Tamzen, am I ever hung over.”

Brady’s at a house party. He’s already drunk a twelve-pack and knows that he is going to be hung-over when Tamzen gets him to go ice fishing the next morning. He hasn’t seen her since the funeral last year and has been anxiously anticipating the fishing trip all week.

Over the speakers in the background, a new song by Simple Plan is playing. There’s a strong drink in his hand, vodka coke. The girl who made him this new drink is talking, something about how awesome the party is. She tosses her hair off to one side. He knows where this is going. She is quite attractive, blonde and thin, and he knows she’s easy. He smiles and makes a joke; she laughs and hits him on the arm, right where his tattoo is. Later, she will take him to her house, pull off his shirt and finger the tattoo.

“Yeah, there is.” Of course there is special meaning behind the tattoo, but he doesn’t want to go there. Not now, not with her. “I got to pee.”

He stumbles down the dark hallway and into the bathroom. He waves his hand on the wall trying to find a light switch. When the light finally goes on he leans against the sink and stares into his reflection. Turning to the side he looks at the bird. A little over a year ago this bird had been circling overhead as Tamzen, Kyle and he had gone ice fishing. Its graceful body had dipped as it played in the sunshine.

“Catch,” yells Kyle, throwing the fish Tamzen had just caught into the sky. He laughs and stumbles. Squinting his eyes into the sun, he tries to see the bird catch the fish mid-flight.

“Brady, come back to bed,” yells the blonde from the other room.

“Yeah, give me a sec. I’m not feeling that great.”

Brady turns the tap on and splashes some water on his face. The cool water swirls down the sink. He pushes Kyle out of his mind and stumbles back to the blonde’s bedroom.

Brady’s head is splitting in two as Tamzen runs her fingers through her long auburn hair, throws the truck in first and begins to creep down the icy hill towards the highway. It’s a clear day. The sun, which is just peeking over the horizon, reflects off the snow like a million tiny crystals. The whole world seems to sparkle.

“It’s been forever since we did this, eh?”
“It has been too long.”

The easy blonde is under him. He runs his hand over her breasts and she tilts her head backwards, moaning under him. She gets louder and the eyes roll back in her head. One of her hands is on his shoulder and it tightens to an almost painful level. He is so aware of where they connect and the pleasure from it. His eyes close. When they open Tamzen’s auburn hair is moving with him on the pillow and her green eyes are looking up at him. He tenderly touches her face and almost whispers her name. He closes his eyes again; this time when they open she’s blonde again.

The Bronco’s window is open, letting in the warmth. Lying on the back seat are three towels. Tamzen is still wearing her bathing suit top, the bright green acts as a highlighter against
her milk skin. Tamzen takes her finger and brushes her auburn hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. Brady wants to run his hands through that hair; he wants to run his hands down to her breasts and to kiss her. Kyle opens the door and jumps back into the truck, a large box of Tim Bits in hand.

“Sorry babe, they were out of the chocolate ones you love.”
Tamzen huffs. “Damn it.”
Kyle takes his hand and tucks the piece of hair that had fallen onto her face behind Tamzen’s ear. They look each other in the eyes and kiss. Brady looks out the window, focusing on the auburn leaves of a nearby maple tree.

*****

“So what’d you do last night, Brady?”
“Hockey Party.”
“That sounds like fun.”
“It was, you should have come.”
“I’ve heard enough stories about hockey parties that I don’t really want to go to one.”
“Really? What have you heard?”
“You know the stories. Crazy threesomes and such.”

*****

While staring into the maple tree and shoving Tim Bits in his mouth, Brady had come up with the idea. Claiming that it was because he hadn’t been laid in a while he’d brought it up with Kyle. Kyle had laughed, and said that they’d have to get her really drunk. She had had most of a two-six before Kyle had suggested that the three of them should screw. She gave him one of those looks that only she can give. One of those are you serious looks and said, “I don’t think so.”
“C’mon Tamz, I haven’t been laid in over a month.”
“Then stop being a man-whore and get yourself a girlfriend.”
“You have to try everything once.”
“No, you don’t have to do everything once. And I know you. You’ll get drunk and tell someone about the threesome and then all of Nelson will think that I’m a whore.”
“That won’t happen, c’mon.”
“No,” she walks out of the room.
Brady looks at where she had just stood. The room still smells like the strawberry shampoo she uses.
“I knew she’d be reluctant. Want another drink?” Kyle tops up Brady’s glass before he has the chance to answer.

*****

They are in the same Bronco. The road is sheet ice as Tamzen navigates her way down the secluded Blewett road from Kyle’s house. Kyle has a piece of her hair in his hand and is twirling it in circles while Brady, sitting in the back seat, stares out the window.
“I am so hung-over,” Brady mumbles.
They had all been drinking the night before, playing that drinking game where you draw cards and for each card there was a different task you had to do, Jack was take a shot out of someone’s belly-button, King was chug back your drink. Brady had relished every time he had gotten his lips around Tamzen’s belly button, her smooth pale skin involuntarily tingling under his lips. Tamzen had quit drinking early; using the drive down shitty icy roads the next morning as an excuse, but Brady and Kyle had drank hard all night.
“I’m still plastered!” Kyle slurs the words together. He puts his hand on Tamzen’s leg. “C’mon baby, I want a kiss?”
She waves him away, “I’m driving!”
Kyle opens up the thermos of coffee and takes a swig.
“God, you smell like rum, Kyle.”
Kyle turns around and shows Brady that crooked-tooth smile that means he’s doing something Tamzen would kill him for.
“Yeah, Brady. I smell like rum.” His face breaks into an even bigger grin. Brady smiles when he realizes they didn’t drink rum last night, just vodka and beer. When Kyle takes another swig of coffee, Brady knows exactly where the smell is coming from.

*****

Brady and Tamzen’s drive to the lake is quiet; there is only the snowplow and a lone car making its hung-over way to a meaningless job. Tamzen’s CD player is broken and the only thing that can be heard above the awkwardness of the two is the heater going full blast.
“How’s your family doing,” mumbles Brady, trying to make conversation.
“They’re good. How ‘bout yours?”
“They’re fine. Do you remember that night we almost had a threesome.”
“What? Who almost had a threesome?”
“Me and you.”
“What the hell? When did me and you almost have a threesome?”
“Oh. Guess you don’t remember it then.”

*****

Kyle yells in joy when they reach the lake. He doesn’t even
wait for Tamzen to stop the truck, he jumps out, slides on the ice and nearly gets dragged under the truck.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tamzen yells nearly hysterical.

“Don’t freak out baby. You’re too tense, have some fun.” Kyle skids to the back of the truck, pulls open the tailgate and grabs his fishing rod.

Brady climbs out of the truck. Facing away from the other two he undoes his fly and takes a leak; his yellow water melts a crater into the ice. He can just catch what the other two are saying to one another.

“I’m not tense, you’re reckless.”

“Don’t worry babe, nothing’s gunna happen to me.”

There’s a loud crack as the ice shifts on the lake.

“You don’t need to worry about me so much. I’m a big boy now. I can take care of myself.”

“Nonetheless, I still worry about you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Brady does up his fly and turns around to see Kyle and Tamzen kissing. When he coughs they stop; both are smiling with that goofy grin that people in love have on their faces when around one another.

Walking around the other two, Brady grabs his fishing rod from the back. “C’mon, Kyle, stop being a pansy, let’s go.”

The two guys run onto the lake, sliding on the ice. Brady loses his footing and goes flailing backwards.

“You’re such a clutz, Brady,” yells Tamzen from the shore-line.

“Yeah, God,” Kyle opens up his thermos and takes a swig. He slides over to Brady, who is rubbing his tailbone and swearing at the damp patches all over his jeans. Kyle passes the thermos to Brady, who takes a swig; there is the definite taste of rum mixed with the coffee. Brady smiles and takes another bigger swig, trying not to let the coffee burn his throat while it slides down. Above them in the sky a golden eagle stretches its majestic wings.

When they reach the lake, Tamzen and Brady solemnly take their fishing rods out of the truck and walk out onto the lake. While walking, Brady takes his thermos out and takes a swig of coffee. The sugary burn of rum hits his lips even though there’s none in it. Tamzen leads the way. She walks to the other side of Cottonwood Lake from where she went ice fishing last time. She walks away from where Brady and she had last shared a laugh with Kyle.
already-too short skirt rises even higher. For a second Brady catches the glimpse of bright-pink underwear. He lets his eyes wander there for a second before looking away.

*****

Tamzen’s rod is the first to get a bite. She reels it in. There’s a tiny Rainbow, half the size of a banana, hooked on the end.

“Aw, it’s just a baby,” she tenderly unhooks the fish and places it back in the water. She throws another maggot on the hook and drops the line back in the lake.

*****

“Here they are.” She turns back around, Tim Bit’s in hand, smile on her face. “Want one?”

“Thanks.” He reaches in and pulls out a chocolate Tim Bit, it’s one of her favourites. Her ivory skin almost glows in the dusk while she holds the box open for him. He reaches out, not even bothering to resist the urge to touch her hand. Her skin shivers under him. He moves his hand up to her face, she doesn’t resist. He doesn’t fight the urge to kiss her, he can’t. He can picture the warmth of her mouth, he has been cold for so long. He has been cold for days. All he wants is to be warm again. He has been cold since the day he, Kyle and Tamzen had gone fishing. He had been sipping at the coffee and rum and watching the golden eagle play in the sunlight when he had heard the crack of the ice shifting and the sudden scream of his friend. Kyle was in the ice, his upper body clinging to the surface, his lower body submerged in the water. Brady was there in an instant, lying extended on the ice throwing his jacket towards the icy hole. The cold against his torso seeped into his body, only combated with the semi-warm shaking from within his body.

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The tip of Brady’s rod suddenly plummets towards the ice. “This looks like a big one.”

“It does.”

Brady reels up the fish, pulling his rod to the right every ten seconds or so. Tamzen pulls off her gloves and grabs the net.

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He pulls her closer. His mouth dances with hers but the cold continues to seep in, seep in from his toes, through his abdomen and into his throat. Suddenly he’s drowning. Frigid water swirls around him and he is gasping for air. Gasping for air. The swirling water threatens to drag him under. He is slowly getting dragged under the thin layer of ice.

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When the fish emerges from the water it flicks back and forth, writhing, trying to escape into the swirling water below.

“This will be good for breakfast.” Brady holds the fish securely and hits its head against the ice.

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She pulls away. She must feel the cold too. Without saying a word she walks back to the church. He follows a few steps behind her. The heat when he enters the church is fake and stifling. Not wanting to be around her he walks into the bathroom. He leans against the sink and splashes some cool water on his face, it swirls down the drain. Dark water is swirling all around him. Everything is dark. Everything but bright-pink underwear bent over a Bronco seat. He makes his way to a stall, clinging to that thought. The friction of him touching himself brings a bit of real heat into his body. When he gets off he’s thinking of her.

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He puts the fish down, wipes the blood off his hands on the snow and smiling looks up at Tamzen. She is staring down at the hole Brady had just pulled the fish from.

“Tamz? You alright?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s just. Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Tamz, I, it’s just, come here.” Brady places an arm around Tamzen and pulls her into a half hug. Kissing the side of her head he smells the familiar scent of strawberry shampoo.

Melinda Pedersen is 20-years-old and lives in Nelson. Melinda often reads books multiple times, including the Harry Potter series, mostly because she was the perfect age to enjoy them when they were published. Melinda is currently reading ‘Son of a Witch,’ by Gregory Maguire. Melinda says her life doesn’t really resemble any books, but if she could choose her life to become like a book it would be the ‘Wheel of Time’ series by Robert Jordan. The series seemed interesting without being too dangerous for the characters. Plus it was fantasy, so magic was involved; this would just be so handy.” If ‘Catch’ were to be made into a movie, Melinda would cast Chad Michael Murray as the lead.
Dear Diary,

I had another dream last night. Dad died, but we had the chance to live that day over again – the day that his plane crashed. I guess it was God's way of proving to us that he was meant to leave us. We did all we could to keep him from leaving the house – let alone getting on the plane. He was completely oblivious to all of our attempts to save him. We did everything we could – the whole morning and afternoon was as different and as altered from the real thing as we could make it. But still, by one way or another, in the end, Dad still died; both in dream, and in reality. In my dream I stayed with him all day, savouring every moment with him. It was as if I knew somehow already how the dream was going to end, before it had even begun.

-Carrie H

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I remember an in-class essay I had to write in an English class once. The theme was “Rites of Passage,” their importance in our lives, and our opinion of whether or not we need to acknowledge them at all. Of course, that was before everything had happened, and to say that I was naïve back then would be an understatement. Something that didn’t even cross my mind while I scribbled my insignificant thoughts on paper, was what exactly happened after these huge “life transitions,” as they’re so lightly referred to in the textbooks. But like I said, that’s understandable that I didn’t think of this because I’d never thought of · let alone gone through · the loss of a parent.

I guess when you get down right to the point, the nitty-gritty of it all, my story would start when I was born; but this isn’t my life story. It all really begins with a duel-flush toilet, but in order for this to make sense, I’ll start in between the two; a prologue.

Death is something that is extremely real for everyone, but for some reason, when people experience it, it’s never expected. I and my family are no exception to this. Dad had been traveling back and forth from home and Ontario for work. He’d just become the co-owner of one of the biggest car companies in North America, which meant a lot of traveling for him, and not a lot of seeing him for us. Last early February there was yet another meeting. Mom had been checking the weather reports and Air Canada® flight listings non-stop the night and morning before Dad took off. The weather had had a mind of its own the past several days and none of us were really expecting the plane to be able to leave that Friday. Despite Mom’s worrying, the plane did take off.

“See you girls soon,” I remember him saying to Mom and me. Maybe this was true, but not soon enough. “Bye, dears.”

“Have a good flight, honey,” Mom said in return. After a swift kiss on the cheek for Mom, Dad was gone; and that was that.

Three hours later after getting back home we got a call: a plane crash. Mom was asked to go downtown and identify “the body,” as if my father wasn’t anything more than a lifeless carcass. Before I go on any more, you should know that Hollywood’s got it all wrong. When something like this happens to someone in a movie, everything is shown in slow motion, with just the right kind of music in the background. They’re extremely mistaken. How do they know that what would be playing on the radio couldn’t be a total contradiction to what you feel when you’ve just found out that you’ve lost your best friend? It doesn’t in the least sense go by slowly. It’s quick; fast. There’s absolutely no time to process anything that’s going on around you. Five hours suddenly feels like 30 minutes.

While Mom was lying down, resting in the room where families could be alone after a loss – was that us? – I called my two sisters, Kaitlyn and Amy (who was on another one of her music tours which had stopped to travel around Alberta for a few weeks), and my brother, Paul, and our church pastor. None of who could believe that this was really happening. Everyone but Amy arrived at the hospital within half an hour and we were finally able to go back home around one o’clock in the morning after talking to investigators of the crash and the coroner. It’s funny how much things can change so quickly, so drastically and still the small things stay the same. Dad’s slippers and coffee mug were right where he’d left them. It took me a few minutes to realize that I’d been staring at his half-full – although at this point it felt more like half-empty – cup sitting on the kitchen table ever since I’d stepped through the door. No one moved it, or even touched it. Just in case he walked through the front door and wanted a hot drink after his long flight.

*****

Amy drove through the night from Calgary, Alberta and got back home in Cranbrook the next day. Over the next week the house was storming with visitors wanting to pay their respects. Friends, family and co-workers sent us their “thoughts and prayers” filled with the utmost of good intentions. I talked to Nichole on the phone that evening. We’d known each other and been good friends since grade four when my family had moved from Trail to Cranbrook where it was more convenient for Dad
to work. Because we’d been so close for so long, neither of us talked much. It was just nice to know that someone was on the other end, in case I had something to say to no one in particular.

Stephen, who’d become one of my closest friends in the last few years was at the house whenever he could be of any assistance; he was always helpful.

“I don’t know how you do it, Carrie,” he said one day when Mom had sent us down stairs to bring up some food from the freezer.

“Half the time, neither do I,” I replied.

“You’re the strongest person I know.” Stephen wasn’t the kind of person who said things just to make the other feel better. I could tell when I looked in his eyes that were staring right through mine, that when he said something like that, he meant it.

“Then how come I can never beat you at arm wrestling?” I asked with the slightest twinkle in my eye.

With the corner of his mouth slightly raised he said, “If you need me, I’m here.”

*****

Surprisingly, life continued, which felt much less natural than it should. I made up my mind not to meet the gazes that I knew would be waiting for me at school. Again, to my surprise, I did a pretty good job of dodging people. Just a few more months until graduation, I kept telling myself. Just a few more months until all of this will be over. Which was true. I wasn’t sure if I was going straight to university after the summer or if I was postponing it for a year, but either way I wouldn’t have to face the eyes of people I hardly knew, who knew the biggest, most important thing of my life. University meant a whole new set of eyes that knew nothing about me. Staying at home for a year meant fewer eyes all together.

In my mind, something as big as losing someone had to have some kind of follow up. People couldn’t possibly have normal lives, go to identify the body of a family member, and go right back to their average lifestyles. There had to be a sort of minor-drastic change after this – a transition, for lack of a better word. I found very soon that I was wrong about that. Returning to a structured way of living was the most abnormal thing in the world; it felt the same when Dad was with us, but only missing one thing: Dad.

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“So, I’m thinking of getting a new toilet.”

Out of the blue? Yup. “What for, Mom? We have two already.”

“Well, I know. But one of them is starting to rust near the bottom,” she reasoned.

I said, “That’s something that a few sprays of Lysol™ won’t fix?”

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“It doesn’t always flush properly either. I just think it would be easier to get a new one all together.”

And so, my non-verbalized wish came true: Moms own version of change had begun, just as I’d wanted. On the day that the new appliance was installed to replace our “unacceptable” one, I came home from school to have Mom come running to greet me at the door, beaming, and beckon to me to see her latest addition to the household. And what do you know, it’s even dual flush. This started the long line of changes that went on in my house over the next half a year.

A few weeks later, following the toilet, came a new car. Soon after rearranging the furniture in her bedroom and the living room and the den, she decided to just buy new furnishings all together. New everything: new couches, new table, new chairs. More often than not she was asking someone something like, “Now, what do you think? Is this the right place for that coffee table?” She sometimes even tortured Stephen with these questions, and even he knew less about what colours went with what colours than I did, which is saying something.

“So, Steve,” Mom said one day when Stephen had come over to study for finals. “I’ve decided to take a family poll. You’re not really family, but you’ll do.” Mom’s sense of humour was deteriorating.

“Mom!” I said, embarrassed. Poor Steve.

“Anyway,” she went on, ignoring me. “If we were to ever paint this house, what kind of colour scheme do you think would look the best?”

It took Stephen a while to answer, “Uh, well, I don’t know. I’m not too good at that stuff.”

“We have tests to study for,” I said before Mom had time to respond.

Steve asked when we were finally able to open up our textbooks in peace, “Does it really bug you, what she’s doing?”

“I don’t know... I guess it’s just her way of dealing. I can’t be upset with her for that. But she only asks what we want to change about the house, never even thinking that any of the family might want to just keep it the same.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” he asked, like he knew
something that he wasn’t supposed to.

“What do you mean? I just want things to be the way they were, the way they used to be; that’s all.”

“Well, it seems to me that after going through something so huge, you wouldn’t want everything to be exactly the same. I just think that wouldn’t feel right. It would feel as if losing your Dad made no difference in your life at all, and you were able to go one the same as before. Then again, you and I have completely different parental situations, and I have no idea what it’s actually like.”

He said this, not really expecting an answer, and looked down to his notebook and started to scribble down history notes on a blank sheet of paper. I sat there, just looking at him. Stephen was the only one who had the guts to talk about my dad around me anymore. Even if I was the one to bring up the subject, most people were afraid that it would be too awkward for them. Steve wasn’t like that. Not knowing anything really about losing a family member to death, here he was giving me advice, telling me exactly what I needed to hear. I’d never really mentioned anything of this subject to anyone before, including him, and yet it was times like these when I kept asking myself the same question, but could never come up with an answer of how on earth he could see right through me and read my mind.

*****

There was some manual labour involved with all of Mom’s alterations on the house. Things that Dad would have done if he’d been here; keeping in mind that most of the changes going on wouldn’t have even existed if he’d been here. Jobs like mounting a shelf on the wall near the front door. Mom had “hired” one of Kaitlyn’s friends from high school who was a carpenter to put the shelf up. However, the only time he could come was one Saturday when Mom was out shopping, so I was the only one home since it was just Mom and I living there now. I’d just been fooling around on the piano when the doorbell rang. I went to open the door.

When I answered the door, he said, as if he wasn’t really sure if he’d come to the right place, “Hey, Carrie … I’m here to do some work for your mom.”

“Hi, David. Come on in.”

“Thanks. It’s a nice day out.”

“Yeah,” I said looking out the window to the finally, clear, blue sky. “I know! Isn’t it?”

“…Are you taking lessons?”

Lessons? For what?

Shoot. He said it was nice playing. Not a nice day. Crap.

“Lessons… I just thought you said… uh… right. Lessons. Yes. For a few years now - since I was ten, I think.”

“Cool. I used to take piano lessons. Until I quit.”

After both standing there for a few (needless to say, awkward) moments, he excused himself to start on the shelf-mounting. Be my guest, I thought. From then on, every time I glanced at that shelf on the wall I had a heat flash from sheer embarrassment.

*****

Graduation – tests, ceremony, diploma, the whole shebang – came and went in a blur. Nichole and I went shopping for prom dresses only one week before grad because all of our finals had us so busy. Her and Stephen were the ones that actually had to convince me to go, since I had no desire to. Steve asked – which turned more into a discussion – me to go to prom with him, and I reluctantly accepted his offer.

It was the day. Students had to be at the school by 4:00. I was able to shower, do my hair and make-up, and get dressed in 38 minutes flat – the longest it’s taken me to get ready since grade nine: a personal record. Steve came to the house – which was feeling less and less like a home everyday – to pick me up and we were able to leave with minimal pictures taken. We made small talk on the way to the school for the ceremonies. He knew that I wasn’t too keen on going, and to tell you the truth he seemed extremely nervous. When we finally got there, about 400 other students in our grade (wearing either long, flowing gowns or tuxedos), happy as can be, surrounded us.

It took a while but the teachers and a photographer were eventually able to gather the whole graduation class together for the group pictures. Getting everyone in the same general area was one thing, but then people had to be in just the right place. The picture had to be perfect. Flawless; nothing could be askew. The strange thing was though, that in all the photos that I’d seen lining the halls of Cranbrook Secondary never had every single person looking at the camera. Never. So why hope for something that wasn’t going to happen? Why try to change something that you had no control over?

I looked around me and realized that I’d been placed right in the centre of my class mates. Their smiling faces, and cameras and bright dresses slowly started to spin out of focus. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone who looked vaguely familiar. I tried my best to zero in on this man, about 50 metres away from
the group. Linking arms with him was a woman, grinning and laughing; it was Mom. At last both of them looked straight at me, and I’d realized the reason I hadn’t recognized this man as my father is because I’d become accustomed to not seeing him.

“Hey,” I heard someone beside me say. “Are you okay?”

I looked over and saw a guy from my history class. I’d only glanced at him for a split second but when I looked back to find my parents, they were gone. Is that what a hallucination was? There one minute, and gone the next? Suddenly everything came back into focus. The guy from history – Brian, was it? – was still trying to find out if I was all right since I apparently didn’t look too well. He was saying something to me, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying. Teachers were still pushing the group closer and closer together to fit into the camera view. Squishing more and more people into me, making me feel like a claustrophobic sardine.

Before I knew it, I was pushing my way through the crowd, trying to find a way out; it was like being in the maze in Alice in Wonderland. I found myself running to the doors of the school, and desperately trying to get myself to the girls’ room. I rushed to the first stall I saw and started coughing; my heart felt as if it was being pulled out from my chest through my throat.

“Carrie? Oh, gosh, are you okay?”

I turned around helplessly and saw Nichole with a worried look masking her face. I blindly reached for some toilet paper to wipe my mouth, not being completely sure what was happening. I looked in her eyes, and collapsed into her arms, tears flooding out of my eyes and running down my face.

“I saw him,” I said to her as she soothingly rubbed my back. “I saw my dad.”

*****

After composing myself, Nichole and I made our way back outside to where the pictures were being taken. By then, parents were starting to arrive. We were just in time for the last few pictures, and then people started to head into the building for the ceremony. I stuck close to Nichole as much as I could, and avoided everyone else. Sitting in my seat on the stage, hearing all those names being called to receive diplomas, I kept glancing at Mom. Her, Amy, Kaitlyn and Paul sat in a line among the audience full of other family members, with each family thinking of their own special person sitting on the stage. To them, all the other faces blurred together, looking exactly the same. To them, I was just another face in a mass of students.

They finally called my name. “Carrie Hampton...”
Mom cried.

Half an hour after the ceremony was over, there was an announcement for the Grad-Parent Dance. I tried my hardest not to stare at all the daughters dancing with their fathers. This is what I had once wanted the most when I graduated. Now here I was with no chance of this ever coming true. Stephen and his parents had eventually found our family. Paul and Steve, Amy, Kaitlyn and I, and Steve’s parents and Mom were all in our own little groups while students and their parents danced. Stephen and his mom danced. I looked at Paul, and our eyes met. He stood up, came over to me, and held out his hand. He didn’t say anything – he didn’t have to. It was as if he knew what I was thinking and feeling. My brother and I hugged each other and danced – which was more just like rocking back and forth – for the rest of the time. He wasn’t Dad, but he did look an awful lot like him.

*****

Later that night, after the families had left, students went to The Comfort Suites Hotel to the ballroom where the prom was held. Stephen and I stayed only for about an hour; I think he could tell that I was still shaken from whatever had happened to me during the photo-shoot. We didn’t go home right away, though. We drove to the Lakeside Park beach and got out to walk for a while. We talked about nothing in particular – how prom went, final plans for after high school. Somehow, the latter of these turned into a conversation about, as Stephen put it, “us.”

“Steve... I...”

“I know now’s not the best time,” he injected, “but have you ever considered it before?”

“You’re right. This isn’t a very good time,” I said, more coldly than I probably had to be. “I think you should take me home now.”

“Carrie...”

“Please, Stephen. I told you about all of my mom’s changes, and that’s how she deals with losing my dad. You were right about things being too normal without change, but one thing I know I wanted to stay the same was our friendship. A relationship... it’s not what I need right now.”

“Can’t you see yourself changing your mind anytime soon?”

I let out a breath and looked out at the water. Of all the days, he chose today. Was it really so bad to be where we are right now? “I really think we should go home, now.”
We said nothing on the way back. When we got to my house, the lights were already off, and Mom was no doubt asleep, content that I was having the time of my life.

“Thanks for tonight,” I said after he’d stopped the car at the end of the driveway. “I’ll see you soon?”

“Yeah,” he said in return, staring straight ahead of his car, without making eye contact. “Soon.”

I stepped out of the car, and heard Stephen drive away behind me as soon as I shut the passenger door. When I got into my room, I almost called him, and told him that I changed my mind. If there was one thing that I’d learned in the past few months, it was that sometimes, the hardest thing and the right thing are the same. This was why I’d decided to go away to school after all. I’d been accepted to a few schools, but in the end, after talking about it a lot with Mom, we decided on the University of Victoria. It was a ways from Cranbrook, but manageable for coming home on holidays. I hadn’t told Stephen yet. I’d been planning on doing that tonight, but after what happened, I held it back.

“So, how was it?”

I looked up to see Mom standing in her pyjama’s at the door of my bedroom, and I realized that I was still holding the phone in my hand when she’d come.

“Good,” I said. A very unsatisfying answer for her, but she knew me well enough to know that something was up. No doubt we’d talk about it tomorrow if Mom had anything to do with it. “I think I’m just going to go to sleep; I’m super tired.”

“Alright...” she said slowly, not knowing what to make of my nonexcitement. “I was thinking of making pancakes tomorrow morning – we’ll talk then.” As she said this, she made her way over to me and kissed my forehead.

“Good night, Mom. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

As she quietly closed the door, I thought about how easily we used the word “love” with each other. Is that what Stephen wanted for him and I? I looked at the picture that I kept on my desk, and lost track of time while staring at it. I really wish you were here, I thought. And really, that’s all I wished for, more than anything. Everything would be so much simpler if he was still here with us.

I don’t know how long it was before I finally got up and changed out of my dress. I hung it up in my closet without thinking, put on my pyjamas, and crawled into bed. With the lights off, I lay on my back, and looked straight up at the ceiling.

It was times like these when I wished I had a skylight. From my window I heard the sounds of the city: cars passing, the comings and goings of people on the streets and sidewalks, the occasional siren, far, far, away, with nothing but a wall between them and me... God knows how long I was lying there for until the lull of the noise outside, and the image I’d created in my mind of the stars above my head finally sent me into the oblivion of sleep. I wonder if he’s up there missing me too, was the last thing I remember thinking.

*****

I woke up at 3:17, grabbed my journal, and started writing.

Dear Diary,

I dreamed about Dad again. He died, but he came back. No one had gone back in time; Dad had simply come back, though I don’t know how. I came home from school one day to find him and Mom sitting at the kitchen table, both of them with their faces beaming. I couldn’t comprehend what was going on, just like when I thought this was happening during the grad photos. This is real, Carrie, Mom said to me, trying to convince me of what I thought was inconceivable. Dad’s really back. Dad said nothing the whole time. I kept looking back and forth from Mom, to Dad, to Mom, and back at Dad again. I couldn’t handle this. Starting slowly and suddenly picking up speed, the tears came. I was so scared of this being fake; I was terrified of being hurt, once more. But neither Mom nor Dad realized this, and kept smiling at each other, and at me, while I kept crying, crying, crying.

*****

The leaves had already started to change colour. The summer had come as quickly as it had gone, and this was my last evening before I left for university in Victoria – what better way than to spend it with my father?

I’d driven out to the cemetery and had strict instructions to be back by 7:30 in time for dinner with the family. We’d all grown so much closer since Dad had died, and we’d especially been spending much more time together this summer before Kaitlyn returned back to UBC for her third year of school, and I headed off for the first time. Nervous? Very much.

Since graduation, a lot had happened. Amy and her band had come out with a new album, with two songs she had written for and about Dad. When the family had listened to it together after the CD had been released, every one of us had tears running down our cheeks.
Mom had finished renovating the house. New carpet had been put in, and the paint was redone. I wasn’t fully used to it, by any means, but in Mom’s defence, our home looked amazing.

As for Stephen, things had stayed pretty much the same since prom night. We’d barely talked for the past couple months. I’d thought about it a lot, and had decided that that was probably the best thing.

I’d been sitting by Dad’s grave since about 6:25, saying nothing, and thinking everything. I didn’t miss him any less, and his death hadn’t become any more real than the day his plane went down. But thank God for family who knew what it was like. In fact, thank God for God himself. Now though, I had just over 10 minutes to get home for supper. Autumn was very much on its way, and the sun was already starting to set behind the beautiful Rocky mountains that surrounded me. I looked at Dad’s headstone one last time – at least until spring, because when I would come home at Christmas time, it would be covered with snow, like everything else.

As I slowly got up to leave I kept thinking of Dad’s funeral and what us four kids had written – memories of our father. One thing that Kaitlyn had said, though, stayed with me, and I kept repeating it in my mind as I left the cemetery and made my way back home to my family:

“I found a postcard Dad sent to me from Montreal on a business trip once, and the closing sentences he wrote could be something he’s saying now. I’d changed the name of his location... He wrote:

‘Lots of people of all colours here in Heaven. Lots of people, period!

See you soon...

Much love,

Dad.’”
There’s a strange noise coming from the front yard. Raised voices pull me from my sleep. My dream-soaked eyes open and I swing my ten-year-old legs over the side of the bed. Groggily, I walk to the window and take in the scene. Two men argue in the pale dawn light. One holds a small box and a cane, Grandfather. The other is a tall, slim stranger. He points angrily at Grandfather and the box, shouting.

I race down the stairs and out the side door. The men don’t notice as I conceal myself behind the shed. From my hiding place, I witness the confrontation. The unfamiliar man has all the haughtiness of youth. He stands tall as he shouts at Grandfather, commands him to open the box. Grandfather regards the young man with the stern, wise gaze of age and holds his ground. As a First Nations elder, he exudes a confidence that, as a young boy, I find awe inspiring. Turning to the house, he tells the man to leave. Anger flares in the man’s eyes as he pulls a knife from his waistband and walks toward Grandfather.

“Grandfather!” The scream wrenches itself from my throat and I leap from my hiding place.

“Jack?” He turns in time to see the knife go into his chest. Gasping, he falls to his knees; a dark stain spreads across his white shirt. “Jack,” he breathes and slumps to the ground.

“Grandfather!” I run to his side.

“Old fool.” A dark shadow blots out the sun and it takes every ounce of my strength to look up from Grandfather’s pale unseeing eyes. The stranger standing above me leans down to wipe the blood from his knife onto Grandfather’s jacket and pries the box from his lifeless hands.

My fear turns to rage as I watch him walk away. Grandfather’s cane lies in a patch of brown, dying grass. Before I know it, the cold staff of the cane is in my hands and I am running, a terrible screaming coming from my throat. I swing the cane above my head, fierce tears streaming from my eyes. I am determined to hurt this man.

I prepare for the hit, but at the last possible moment the man turns. He plucks the cane from my grasp and uses it to pull my legs from under me, all in one smooth movement. Standing over me, he winks and disappears into the predawn light. I blink, and rubbing my eyes. I sit up and look around, but there is nothing but Grandfather’s cane, lying in the grass.

Seven years later.

“What’s wrong with those birds?”

“What birds?”

I point to the flock of dark birds swirling in the sky. They create an ominous cloud of black, circling something unseen.

Kate uses her Chemistry 12 textbook to shield her eyes from the sun. “They’re going crazy!” she says. “I wonder what’s wrong with them.”

“Listen!” I say, pausing.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Aren’t birds supposed to chirp or caw or something?”

“Let’s go see what’s up,” Kate suggests and we set off at a jog through the dense trees toward the swarm of birds. We come out on a sandy beach inside a small cove. The cold, dark waters of Kootenay Lake reflect the stormy attitude of the cloudy sky. White caps crest the waves and crash upon the lakeshore. A cold wind blows, whipping around us.

“Where did they go?” Kate asks. The sudden sound of her voice startles me. I look to the sky, not a bird in sight.

“Oh my God,” Kate says, lengthening each syllable. A colossal maple stands leafless, at the center of the beach, apart from the rest. Its thick trunk is gnarled and ancient. Its bare and lifeless branches hold a cloud of dark feathers. A thousand midnight black crows stare at us. Their gaze is unnerving. At the center of the tree sits a lone white crow.

“Jack,” Kate whispers, breaking the silence. She grabs my arm. “Let’s go.” We take one slow step back and the birds let out an unnatural shriek. Every bird cries as one. The noise is deafening. Covering my ears to block out the sound, I fall to my knees in the sand. Kate lets out a cry, scarcely heard above the birds, and falls next to me. We huddle together and close our eyes.

There is a summit to the sound and then, there is silence. The air becomes calm, the wind comes to rest. Slowly, we relax and look back to the tree. The crows are gone.

Kate and I are speechless; we look to each other in fear and confusion. I scan the sky for any sign of the birds, but no black shape disturbs the clouds.

“Jack,” Kate breathes. She points, to a small box at the base of the tree. Cautiously, we approach. I kneel down in front of the box; it is made from a dark wood with light, intricate spirals across the lid.

“Was this here before?” Kate asks.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember seeing it.” Kate reaches forward and touches the side. With a quick glance at me, her
fingers move slowly to the lid.

“What’s in the box?” Our heads snap up in unison. Kate’s fingers spring back at the unexpected sound of a man’s voice.

“So what’s in it?” He is leaning casually against a young maple on the edge of the clearing; his dark hair hangs loosely over his face. He watches us indifferently as I help Kate to her feet.

“Who are you?” Kate asks.

“Patrick O’Connel.” He flashes a smile that lights up his young, handsome face. Kate smiles shyly back. “And who might I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“What are you doing here?” I ask impatiently, throwing Kate a brief look.

“Tut tut,” Patrick reprimands. “Manners, good sir. I have given you my name, now it’s your turn to do the same.”

“I’m Kate,” Kate pipes, “and this is Jack.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Jack and Kate,” Patrick says as he bows and removes his black fedora. Replacing it, he pushes off from the tree and walks smoothly toward us. “So what’s in the box?” he repeats.

“We haven’t opened it.”

“Well that is a shame. Care to open it now?”

“Sure.” Kate smiles.

“Wait, Kate, I don’t think we should.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” I search for a reason, “it’s not ours.”

“So? We’ll put it back. The owner will never know we were even here.”

“Exactly. Well said, Kate.” Patrick smiles approvingly. “Just open it and let’s see what’s inside.”

“Why are you so eager to know?” I ask Patrick suspiciously.

“Let’s call it curiosity,” he replies. In his dark eyes, I see more than curiosity. They betray a dark longing, a desire.

Although I feel a profound distrust for this tall, dark stranger, Kate seems to experience none of my unease. Her face lights up as Patrick takes her hand and guides her back to the box. “Go on,” he says alluringly, “open it.”

“Wait,” I say as I notice the brown armband on Patrick’s wrist. It’s made of leather and has a white design of a crow imprinted on it. “I’ve seen that before.” I grab his arm and take a closer look at the crow. Its image tickles my memory as I try to recollect where I’d seen it before. Patrick pulls his arm away from me and hides it behind his back.

“Open the box, Kate,” he says; his dark eyes glare into mine. The warmth in his voice has turned cold.

“Wait, don’t.” Trying to stall I search my memories, seeking the white crow.

“Honestly, Jack.” She rolls her eyes. The box is in her hands; its light swirls spin around my mind. Suddenly, I have it, the white crow stares me in the face. I see dead grass, a cane, a white crow on a background of brown leather, Patrick. His dark eyes stare, smiling into mine from where my ten-year-old self lies on the dew drenched ground. Grandfather’s bleeding body lies behind me.

“You!” I shout, shoving Patrick in the chest. “Kate, get away from him.”

“Jack, what are you do—” She’s cut off by the loud snap of a branch from within the trees. Standing in silence, we peer into the dense forest. From its depths there is the haunting howl of a wolf. Kate steps closer to me as we see a form through the trees, coming toward us. And then another, to its right. Soon there are a half a dozen shapes walking through the shadows of the woods.

“Damn it,” Patrick curses. Turning to us, he swiftly bows as he removes his fedora, “until next time.” With a step back, he winks, and vanishes.

Kate’s eyes go wide with shock and fear, her hands still clenched around the wooden box. But she has no time to process what she saw as the forms escape the confines of the forest. A pack of wolves stands before us.

Speechless, my focus is completely captivated by a large grey wolf that stands slightly ahead of the rest, the leader of the pack. I am startled by the intelligence I see in his golden eyes as he stares back into mine.

Breaking the silvery thread that keeps my attention locked on his eyes, he lifts his dark muzzle into the air and lets out a long, hair-raising howl. One by one, the pack joins him in his call. It is the call of the hunt. From the surrounding mountains, eager replies resound. When silence is restored, the pack slips back into the forest without a second glance.

It isn’t until they have disappeared that I feel the sharp pain of Kate’s fingernails as they dig into my arm.

“Ow. Kate, jeeze.” Then I see the look in her eyes. “Kate,” I say quietly, soothingly.

“He disappeared.” Her eyes don’t move from the place where Patrick once stood. “He was right there. And now he’s gone. And then the wolves, they... and now they’re...” There is panic in her eyes and an edge in her voice.
“I know.”
“You know? Why aren’t you freaking out about this?”
“Because it’s not the first time I’ve seen it,” I say. “I was ten. My grandfather had the box.” I sit on the sand. Kate holds the box in her arms. “Patrick wanted him to open it, just like he wanted you to open it.”
“What did your grandfather do?”
“He didn’t give in, so Patrick killed him.” I look away from Kate and the box.
“I’m sorry, Jack,” Kate says, putting a hand on my shoulder. “It was a long time ago.” There is a pause. “My grandfather, he always used to say that there was more to this world than what we saw. I didn’t really believe him, until that day and come to think of it, I should have. I remember he used to talk to animals, we’d go on hikes and I’d watch as he spoke with birds, squirrels, and even a deer once.”
“Did they ever talk back?”
“You know, to him, they did. Not in words, or sounds, but you could just feel that they understood him and he understood them. He had a gift, I think that’s why my people chose him to be an elder. But like I said, that was a long time ago.” We sit in silence for a few minutes, looking out onto the stormy lake.
“What do you think Patrick wants with the box?” Kate asks.
“I don’t know.”
“If he wants it so badly, I wonder why he doesn’t just open the box himself.”
“I think I know how to find out.”

The heavy wooden door of the dark study opens reluctantly. Its hinges creak in protest. Kate and I slowly enter the room; a dim, old bulb turns on overhead as I flip the switch. The walls are lined with heavy brown books, all dusty from lack of attention. An empty desk overtakes the majority of the small room. Kate sits down behind it in a chair that looks too modern for its aged surroundings.
“So what is this room?” She spins in slow circles, the chair squeaking slightly.
“It used to be my dad’s office before he left. But it’s been a place to store all these old books since I can remember. One of which my grandfather wrote himself.”
“And that’s what you’re looking for?”
“Yes. As an elder, my grandfather knew a lot about this area.” I read through the authors’ names on the worn out spines.

“So your grandfather was First Nations?”
“Yeah, Ktunaxa indian.” My fingers trace along the shelf. “Shirley Odemney, Joseph Oliver, William Orgenski,” I read aloud. “Aha! Jackson Orwell!” Pulling the large tome from the shelf, I flash Kate a triumphant smile. She rewards me with a generous clap.

The book exhales a cloud of dust as I drop it onto the desk. Kate watches as I open to the index and scan quickly down the list. ‘Crow – mythology pp. 445’ I flip through the pages until I get to the one I’m looking for. Finding the article, we begin to read:

“The Crow – part of the corvid family, along with ravens, magpies and blue jays. They are intelligent, omnivorous and found worldwide. Crows are mischievous, often suspicious and shy. Crows live in flocks called murders or musters; they nest in treetops and have sentinels that warn of danger. Crows can kill sick animals and eat carcasses they find. White crows are rare.

Crow – Symbolism – Along with the coyote and the raven, the crow is considered a trickster. They are frequently linked to omens of conflict and death. Crows are thought to have the gifts of eloquence, prophecy, boldness, skill, cunning, trickery and thievery.

Many cultures, including Russian, European and Amerindian tribes, believe them to be shape-shifters. According to the Alaskan Taniana tribe, a crow can shape-shift into a man. In this shape, he can trick people into getting what he desires. When he is in the shape of a crow, he does the same to animals. They call him The Trickster. See Trickster.”

I flip back to the index and find the page:

“The Trickster – an important figure in Native American mythology. The Trickster has the ability to shape-shift and is very sly and clever. He is strongly linked to animals such as the raven, the coyote and the crow. Of all other animals, the Trickster is an enemy. He is often viewed with hostility and fear. The Trickster is most commonly manifested in the shape of a crow or raven.

One tribal story tells of how the Trickster brought darkness to the world. He stole the box in which a tribal chief kept the darkness. The box was guarded and hidden in the chief’s lodging. The Trickster transformed himself into the form of a human child, stole it, and returned to his original shape. He opened the box and released the dark.

In another story, the Trickster brought death to the human
world. Long ago, the Trickster travelled to the world of the dead to retrieve the spirit of his dead wife. He put her in a box and returned to the living world. When he returned, he opened the box and released the spirit and death itself.

The tribes of native America believed that when the Trickster came a third time, he would open the box of the end. To prevent this, fifteen North American tribes gathered around one circle. The medicine man of each tribe called to the natural world to ask her to protect the box. As the ceremony progressed, animals began to come out from the surrounding forest. Birds, deer, wolves, cougars, and bears joined the circle. They agreed to help man so long as the choice was given to them of when the box was to be opened. Every animal was part of the accord, except the crow who allied himself with the Trickster. Man agreed and together, they wove an enchantment strong enough to prevent the Trickster from ever opening the box himself.”

“The box of the end,” Kate says, as she reads over my shoulder. Evening darkness has begun to descend outside and the elderly bulb casts ghostly shadows over her face.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“Seems pretty accurate,” she replies.

“I think so too, the similarities are uncanny.”

“That means…”

“We can never let him get this box open,” I say solemnly. As the ceremony progressed, animals began to come out from the surrounding forest. Birds, deer, wolves, cougars, and bears joined the circle. They agreed to help man so long as the choice was given to them of when the box was to be opened. Every animal was part of the accord, except the crow who allied himself with the Trickster. Man agreed and together, they wove an enchantment strong enough to prevent the Trickster from ever opening the box himself.”

“Jack,” Kate whispers beside me. She points to the window sill; someone has drawn a crow in the dust. “He’s here.” We look up and down the hallway for any sign of Patrick. We’d known that a meeting with him was inevitable ever since we’d read my grandfather’s book, it was just a matter of time.

Absentmindedly, I put my hand in my jacket pocket. There is a small piece of paper inside that wasn’t there before. I pull it out, Look for me at 12:45.

-Patrick

Kate and I exchange looks. Here we go, I think. Kate grabs my hand as we hurry to catch up with the rest of the group. We follow our guide down a narrow, metal staircase. There is a loud metallic clatter as thirty pairs of feet negotiate its steps. When we reach the bottom, I look at my watch, 12:45 pm. Kate nudges me and I see a tall, slender figure propped against a wall down the hallway to our right. Quietly, we split from the group and follow the figure through a metal door. It leads to a room scarcely larger than a closet. Pipes and valves line the walls. A large furnace clanks next to us.

“Did you bring the box?” Patrick demands.

“Of course not,” Kate responds.

“Where is it?”

“Safe,” I say.

“I need that box.”

“You can’t have it.” Kate stands her ground as Patrick glares at her.

“Let me put it this way,” he begins, “if you don’t give me the box, some very unfortunate events may occur in the near future. For instance, a friend of yours might go missing, or your grandmother may have an unexpected stroke. Perhaps your dog runs away or your mother gets in a terrible car accident.”

His eyes are dark, he means every threat. Seeing the fear in our eyes, he adds, “Bring the box to Kokanee Creek Provincial Park, tonight. One o’clock, Osprey Lane. Got it?” Kate and I nod.

“Good.” He smiles. With an all-too-familiar wink, he vanishes.

“What are we going to do, Jack?” Kate’s eyes stare straight ahead.

“I don’t know, but we have to think of something.”
“If we don’t give him the box, our friends and family get hurt.”
“If we do, the world ends.” I feel Kate’s fingers wrap around mine.

*****

The glare of headlights reveals the Kokanee Creek Provincial Park sign. The car decelerates as we pull onto the shoulder. I turn onto the narrow paved road and stop in front of a locked gate. The engine dies. There is no sound but our breathing. The box sits on Kate’s lap. Dark shadows slide across its lid, playing in the moonlight.

“Are you ready?” Kate whispers, her breath a cloud of mist. I reach over and clasp her hand, our icy fingers entwine. These past couple of days have brought us closer together than we’ve ever been. We’ve somehow cross the border between friendship and something more without any conscious choice of our own. I squeeze and let go. The passenger side door opens as she steps out into the night; I open my door, secure my knapsack onto my back, and follow.

The shine of my flashlight illuminates the way as we climb over the gate and walk down the vacant road. We turn when we come to Osprey Lane. Dead leaves crunch beneath our feet. The small sound is deafening in the silence of the empty park. A cold breeze blows through the empty branches, carrying dark clouds that cover the moon and stars. There is no light but the beam of my flashlight.

A crow caws from a tall cedar. There is movement at the end of the lane. The faint flap of wings and a lone figure stands, waiting in the distance.

“You’re late.” Patrick’s voice floats through the cool October air. Hesitantly, Kate and I walk to the end of the lane.

Patrick’s black hair shades his eyes and his tall slender form threatens to become a shadow itself. Kate and I stop with fifteen feet separating us from Patrick. Kate holds the box close; we wait for Patrick to make a move.

I place my shaking hand on Kate’s shoulder; she looks to me. “Ready?” her eyes ask. I give her a faint nod. Patrick takes a slow step forward, his eyes never leaving the box. Kate gives me a quick glance before throwing the box high into the air. Instinctively, Patrick dives forward; his outstretched arms catch it just before it strikes the earth. With a deep feeling of relief, he pulls himself to his feet and looks down at the box. He gasps in alarm and his eyes dart upwards, but we are gone. Without a second’s hesitation, we had run into the forest.

We dodge trees, our feet pounding against the cold earth. An angry cry fills the air behind us as Patrick discovers our trick. We don’t look back. The plan is simple; as Patrick is distracted with the fake box, we dash into the woods. Seventeen years of camping here, of biking along its many trails, allow Kate and I to navigate the forest with ease. Just beyond the boundary of the park is a place Kate and I know where we can stash the box until it is safe to move it. Once the box is out of view, we will split up and lead anyone following us away from the box. Then we will meet up and try to think of some way to get rid of Patrick. There is just one problem.

The light of the flashlight darts between the trees, my knapsack bounces against my back as my stride jostles the box within. We come out in an empty campsite and dash across the road into the next group of trees. I look up, a full moon peeks out from its cloudy prison; shedding silver light over the shadowy forest. An unnatural, dark shape is forming above us.

Kate trips over a tree root; I pull her to her feet.

“Jack! Look!” She points to the ground. I shine the beam of my flashlight on the spot; in the dirt is the fresh track of a large dog. Or a wolf. Kate and I exchange glances.

“That can’t be a coincidence,” I say and we force ourselves to continue. Through the gaps between trees we can see what is fast approaching. In a few more steps we are forced to stop. Standing at the edge of the trees, a children’s playground and a large expanse of treeless field are before us. There is nothing under which we can take shelter.

I look to the sky where the black cloud continues to grow. Feeling the hard, flat surface of the box against my back, I imagine the light swirls across its lid. This is it. Kate’s fingers entwine around mine. We take a deep breath, and run. In a matter of seconds we are pelted by beaks and claws. Our arms attempt to shelter our faces as we run blindly across the field. The crows shriek at us as they attack from the air. Kate screams as they tear at her arms and body. I trip on a rock and fall to the ground. There is a searing pain in my shoulder as talons and beaks pull at my shirt. I pull off my pack and shelter the box beneath me.

My hands search the ground for something, anything, to use against these demons from the sky. My fingers close around a rock when, abruptly, the attacks cease. I look up from my position on the ground; Kate is a few feet in front of me and beyond her the crows form a black tornado at the center of the
field. A figure appears in its core. The crows disperse to reveal Patrick.

Painfully, I pull myself to my feet. A trail of blood streams down my cheek. Kate slowly regains her footing; she holds her left arm tenderly. Grimacing, she limps to my side. Our clothes are torn and stick to our skin in patches of blood. We face Patrick.

His eyes betray an evil blacker than the midnight feathers of a thousand crows. In all his darkness, he looms towards us.

“I have had enough,” he hisses through clenched teeth. My grip tightens on my knapsack as he approaches. Without a word, he pulls back his fist and hits me in the gut. All the oxygen flees from my body and I lose my grip on the box as pain explodes in my stomach. I fall to the ground and wrap my arms around my torso.

“Jack!” Kate screams. She runs to my side. Patrick bends down and scoops up my knapsack. He tears through the durable fabric and extracts the box from within. His eyes are full of fire as his long fingers grab a fistful of Kate's hair. Forcefully, he pulls her to her feet and drags her away from me. She screams and rakes her bloody nails across his bare arms. Laughing bitterly, he throws her to the ground and thrusts the box into her hands.

“You will open it.” The words snake through his clenched teeth, his grip tightens on her hair. Tears stream down Kate's dirt stained cheeks. Patrick shakes her as she hesitates. “Open it!” he repeats. Kate looks at me; her eyes are full of desperation. I try to stand. Patrick snarls at Kate and pulls a knife out from his belt. Kate cowers over the box.

The sudden sound of a low growl startles us all, followed by a ghostly howl coming from within the trees. Patrick whips around to see a large grey wolf in the stance of a hunter that has found its prey. A pack of wolves lopes toward us from across the field. Patrick's eyes grow wide and he releases Kate's hair. She scampers away from him and latches onto me. We watch the animals fearfully.

Patrick stands his ground. Straightening his shoulders he pulls on an air of confidence. More animals come out from the forest, deer with great antlers, blonde cougars pacing back and forth, birds of prey sweep through the air, a colossal grizzly and a black bear enter the scene. They surround Patrick, circling predatorily.

“I dare you to try,” he says. Taking his challenge, a small brown wolf leaps at Patrick's throat. But Patrick smoothly dodges its teeth; his knife finds its way into the wolf's side. As he turns to face the rest, the bear roars and swings his mighty paw. Surprise spreads across Patrick's features, mimicking the three lines of red that form across his chest. His hand goes to his chest; he looks at his blood, and falls to his knees. The wolves howl. As one, they spring.

Kate and I look away from the snarls of wolves, the cries of birds and the dying screams of Patrick.

And just like that, the natural world intervened, once again reserving their right to choose the time of the end. When they had completed their task, the animals dispersed, disappearing back into the forest without a sound. The Trickster was gone.

Leaving me, Kate, and the box.

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Kim Wiest is 17-years-old and lives in Nelson. Kim has read ‘The Book Thief’ by Markus Zusak more than once because of the writing style, and because she thinks it is an excellent book. She is currently reading ‘Graceling’ by Kristin Cashore. If ‘The Trickster’ were to be made into a movie, Kim could imagine Kate being played by Saoirse Ronan and Patrick by Matthew Goode, but choosing for Jack was difficult as she wasn’t sure what he should look like, so after spending hours searching the internet, she decided on Anton Yelchin. If Kim’s life were a book it would be ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’ and ‘Through the Looking Glass’ by Lewis Carroll.
WRITING EXERCISES
**FREEWRITE**

Read the first sentence then just start writing and don’t stop! When you reach a command switch your writing style and keep writing.

I've made so many beautiful mistakes I don’t know where to begin.

~write in super short sentences with no more than five words~

~write without using punctuation~

~write with your opposite hand~

~write normally and finish up your thoughts~

Now go back through to see if you find any ideas that you can develop into something bigger.
CHARACTER BUILDING

Having a fully developed character is one of the most important things about creating an engaging narrative. The little details about a character add depth to a piece and can help a writer out of writer’s block. Using the topics below, do some character building.

**FULL NAME?** Was this name given at birth? Why was name chosen? Any nicknames?

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERIZES?** Any tattoos, scars or piercings? What is the story behind them? Who in their family do they look like? What part of their body does the character hate? What is their favourite part of their body?

**AGE?** How old is your character? Do they act this age? How has personal life experiences affected their personality?

**PLACE OF BIRTH?** Do they still live there? If not, when was the last time they visited? With whom did they make that visit? How does your character feel about their hometown?

**OCCUPATION?** Do they like their job? Did they go to school for it? Where? Does the job pay enough? If your character could have any job, what would it be?
**BEDROOM?** Think about your character’s bedroom. What furniture is in the room? Is the room tidy or messy? What is beside your character’s bed? What is in the closet? Are there windows? What can be seen through them? What does your character want to change about the room? If there’s a TV, what channel is it on? If there’s a computer, what sites are bookmarked? What was the last site your character visited?

**VACATION DETAILS?** If your character was going on a vacation, what objects would they bring? Where would they go? Who would they go with? How did they hear about this spot? What would they do once there? Would they enjoy themselves?

**FAVOURITE FOOD?** What is your character’s favourite food? Does your character cook this meal themselves? What does your character’s kitchen look like? Does your character have a favourite place to eat out? What is it like?

**FAMILY MEMBERS?** How does your character feel about each of these family members?
LIFE HAPPENS

Roll a dice twice. The first number corresponds with a situation below and the second number with an emotion below. Based on the character you created, write about them going through the situation and have him or her respond in the emotion rolled. After you are done, think about the following questions: Is it out of character for your character to respond in this way, why or why not? Sometimes the most interesting narratives come from having a character respond in a way that is atypical from how most people behave, do you feel this was the case? Did responding in this emotion work?

SITUATION: Your character...
1. Has lost a job
2. Is having a baby
3. Has learned their pet died
4. Is going on a date
5. Has found out they were adopted
6. Has won the lottery

EMOTION: Your character feels...
1. Nostalgia
2. Anxiety
3. Joy
4. Apathy
5. Anger
6. Horror
PUT ON THE SPOT

Pick a number from 1-10: ___ Pick a number from 11-20: ___.

Go to next page to see what character you chose to write about in what situation. Use the opening line to get started. Try to develop the character fully and avoid stereotypes. What gets in the character’s way while in the situation? How does he or she overcome these obstacles?

CHARACTER: ____________________________  SITUATION: ____________________________

**First person narrative**

I can’t believe what I’ve got myself into...

**Third person narrative**

It was not a familiar situation to be in...
Characters
1. Knight
2. Cowardly Lion
3. Witch
4. Dancer
5. Rock Star
6. Leprechaun
7. Cheerleader
8. Hunter
9. Skateboarder
10. Undercover Agent

Situations
11. Skydiving
12. Parallel parking
13. Robbing a bank
14. Getting jacket stuck in elevator door
15. Watching a scary movie
16. Getting locked in a museum
17. Failing a test
18. Stealing a car
19. Hunting for treasure
20. Trying to tell someone that he/she loves him/her
21ST CENTURY FAIRYTALE

Pick a scene. Spend some time developing the character; give them some interesting personality traits. Pay attention to how your character feels about the situation, what they hope to achieve in the scene and what gets in their way of achieving this. Add components of life today—Facebook, Twitter, digital cameras, Fox News, global warming, skateboarding shoes. Make the scene relevant to today’s society. Write the scene twice: once from the perspective of a character in group (1) and once from the perspective of a character in group (2).

1. From, “THE THREE LITTLE PIGS,” write the scene where the three little pigs are in the brick house and the wolf is trying to get in. Write it from the perspective of (1) any of the pigs or the wolf and (2) Mother Pig, or a merchant that sold the pigs goods to make their houses.

2. From, “LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD,” write the scene where Little Red Riding Hood is talking to the wolf as he is laying in bed in Grandma’s clothes. Write it from the perspective of (1) the wolf, Little Red Riding Hood or Grandma and (2) the Hunter or Little Red’s Mother.

3. From, “GOLDIE LOCKS AND THE THREE BEARS,” write the scene where Goldie Locks is caught sleeping by the three bears and runs away. Write it from the perspective of (1) Goldie Locks or any of the three bears and (2) a boy who loves Goldie Locks or Goldie Locks’ father.
A PICTURE IS WORTH 1000 WORDS

Try not to spend too much time beforehand thinking about what to write, just put pen to paper and see what comes out. Be creative!
1. When developing a story, you would most likely pick situations that:
   a. You have experienced yourself.
   b. You know will keep the reader’s interest.
   c. Are full of social upheaval.

2. How often do you write in first-person point of view? (using “I” rather than “he, she, you” when you write)
   a. Almost always.
   b. Depends. If most narratives I’m reading use the first person point of view, I will too.
   c. Not usually.

3. Which of the following statements best describes you?
   a. Writing provides a release for me. I’m able to express what I’m going through and it makes me feel better.
   b. Through my writing I hope to entertain the reader. I write with the reader in mind and how they will experience my work.
   c. I hope to change the world through writing. By writing I can expose many of the hardships that people experience, and through this exposure can encourage people to change.

4. Which of the following characters would you prefer to write about?
   a. A young person who lives in the Basin and has experienced many of the same experiences as you.
   b. The popular girl/boy that everyone likes.
   c. A drug addict.

5. How often do you let others read your writing?
   a. Almost never. It is far too personal.
   b. Almost always. As long as what I’ve written is good and I know they’ll like it.
   c. Usually. I like to share my ideas with the world.
THE OUTCOME: What Type of Writer are You?

MOSTLY A'S.
You write mostly for yourself. Writing for you is a safe-haven to deal with everyday situations. Your characters are often similar to you and experience situations close to what you have experienced. To some extent, most writers do this and using experiences from your own life can build believable characters and stories. However, be cautious. Your characters may all end up being very similar and the plots of your narratives may look like the same story being retold in slightly different ways.

Writing Tip: Next time you write, develop a character that is different from you in every way except for one or two things. Use personality traits from those around you (your mom, neighbor, girlfriend, etc.) to create this character. Now put this character in a situation you've been through. How does this character react differently to the situation? How does the character feel about the situation? Do you like taking this approach, or does writing from someone so dissimilar feel too alien? If so, find a blend somewhere between the two approaches.

MOSTLY B'S
You write for the reader. When picking everything in your narrative, from character to plot, you pick what you think the reader will like. One of the greatest joys for you with writing is the ability to bring joy and entertainment to someone else. Being aware of what the reading populace likes and providing this for the reader can take you far. However, be careful with writing like this. If you create characters and situations too far from what you have experienced you may create narratives that are unbelievable. You also may experience a larger degree of writer's block because you are unsure of exactly how people would behave in a situation.

Writing Tip: Try to bring something of your own into everything you write. If you are writing about vampires, set the story in your hometown, have your characters watch the same TV shows you do or have your vampires only eat organic. It's amazing how often the little details of our own lives can add to a story, making the narrative seem fuller and helping you out of a tough writer's block.

MOSTLY C'S
You tend to see the world from a social activist perspective and your writing reflects this. You like to write about what you see as unfair in the world as an attempt to change it. This is a noble effort, but, be cautious. Your work may take on a very negative tone if you only focus on what is bad within the world and it may be difficult to keep the reader's interest for an extended period of time.

Writing Tip: When you write, try to make every character and situation have at least one characteristic that is appealing. If your character is a drug addict, make their love for another person their saving quality. If your character has been exposed to hardships from growing up in a family with a low socio-economic status, have the character appreciate the few times the system actually worked for them. Remember, nothing in life is bad all the time. If a narrative is bad all the time it will be unrealistic.
1. A tree is most interesting when:
   a. Kids are playing on it.
   b. It’s autumn and the leaves are a brilliant shade of red.
   c. You are reading about photosynthesis.

2. What is the biggest problem with contemporary society?
   a. The rich keep getting richer and the poor poorer.
   b. Global warming.
   c. Declining interest in literature.

3. What would you most prefer to write?
   a. A play.
   b. A nature poem.
   c. A sequel to your favourite book.

4. The last time you went on a nature walk you:
   a. Took the time to mentally reflect about your relationship with others.
   b. Were so astounded by the natural beauty around you that you couldn’t think of anything else.
   c. Spent the time imagining what just happened in the book you were reading, and fantasizing about what might happen next.

5. Your favourite part of literature is:
   a. The characters. You love to see how the different characters behave and how they react in certain situations.
   b. The imagery. Your favourite part of any book is the beautiful passages that make the surroundings come to life.
   c. Literature’s ability to inspire you to write.
**THE OUTCOME:** What is Your Muse?

**MOSTLY A’S.**
Your muse is society and people. You love to read and to write about people and often get your ideas for narratives from the people around you.

**Tip to get inspired:** Next time you’re looking for something new to write about take your journal and go down to a busy bar or coffee shop. People watch. Pay attention to the way people are behaving, what they’re wearing and, using your discretion, what they’re saying. Take notes of anything interesting. If your imagination starts to run away with you while you’re taking notes, let it. You never know what story you can come up with when you start to imagine how the lady with the Large-Rice Milk-Vanilla-Chai-Latte came to own the necklace she is wearing.

**MOSTLY B’S**
Your muse is nature. You love to be outside and thrive to share the beauty found in the outdoors with those around you.

**Tip to get inspired:** Next time you go on a nature walk bring your journal and a pen with you. Stop at a spot you find breathtaking, ugly, weird or a mixture of the above. Start to write about this spot. You can write about what it looks like, the effect it has on you, how it came to look like that or about how others have felt when looking at it. Try not to edit your work too much at first, rather let the inspiration you feel from this spot guide your pen.

**MOSTLY C’S**
Your muse is literature. Reading the work of others inspires you to put pen to paper.

**Tip to get inspired:** Whenever you are reading something, which is fairly often, have pen and paper at hand to jot down any ideas that you may have. Write down anything you find interesting about a situation, character, writing style or anything else you like. As an exercise, take one of these things and write with it. Your own individuality as a writer will make whatever you borrowed from the other writer your own. Let your experiences become the experiences of a character you were reading about. Think about how this would change the character. Name him or her something else and see what happens.
**SELKIRK COLLEGE**
www.selkirk.ca

*Associate of Arts degree in English (Writing Studies)*

Designed for students who wish to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, but also want to incorporate a strong focus on writing into their curriculum. The program provides two years of university transferable courses that fulfill most or all of the requirements to enter the third year of a Major or Honours program in English. In addition, it emphasizes writing in genres such as literary criticism, communications, freelance writing, or imaginative writing in fiction, poetry, non-fiction and drama. Students will develop a portfolio of their work and learn to prepare manuscripts for publication.

*Studies in Writing Program*

With a strong emphasis on portfolio development and professional practices, and in combination with university transferable liberal arts coursework, graduates from the Studies in Writing program will be better positioned to compete for placement in university writing programs or to continue with their own writing practice. This program is designed for students of writing who have an authentic curiosity for a wide range of subject areas. Students who complete two years of courses with a minimum grade point average of 2.00 (“C” average) will be awarded a Liberal Arts Diploma in Writing Studies.

**COLLEGE OF THE ROCKIES**
www.cotr.bc.ca

*Fine Arts Certificate*

This two-semester program has a combination of classes and allows students to take at least two creative writing courses. This Certificate can give students a solid foundation in the Fine Arts field and then allow them to transfer into a Bachelor of Fine Arts program at most Canadian universities or colleges.

*Associate of Arts degree and Arts and Science Diploma*

Within these programs, students have options to take a wide selection of English and Communication courses along with three or four creative writing classes. In the first-year courses, students examine essential skills of the writing process, from the creation of a first draft to editing, revising, critiquing, and producing a final polished product. Writers also work to develop and enhance a sense of language, rhythm, form and genre. The “special projects” courses allow students to undertake a substantial project in an area of writing (fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction or drama) under the supervision of an instructor.
**UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA OKANAGAN**

web.ubc.ca/okanagan/creative/options

**Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Creative Writing.**

This arts degree has a dual emphasis on creative writing and literature. This double nature ensures that its graduates possess both the artistic skills they require as creative writers and a well-developed background in contemporary literature. Students are also required to take some credits in other Creative Studies areas such as Visual Arts, Media, Music or Performance.

**Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies Master of Fine Arts: Creative Writing (IGS MFA)**

This program is designed to encourage an exchange of ideas and influences from non-studio and other academic disciplines reflecting the complex nature of contemporary art and literary practice. It is designed to address and accommodate the specific needs and interests of each candidate as they pursue their MFA degree at UBC Okanagan. Creative Writing focuses on a writer’s development in his or her preferred literary genre with opportunities for expanded creation and research offered by an interdisciplinary setting.

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**OKANAGAN COLLEGE**

www.okanagan.bc.ca

**Diploma in Writing and Publishing (English)**

This two-year diploma is designed to provide students with a solid grounding in four areas: creative and literary writing, publishing, communications and business. Students will receive applied training in print and web-based publishing, accounting, marketing, and management, as well as creative, cultural and professional communications. Graduates of publishing programs may pursue careers in book, magazine, newspaper or Internet publishing. Depending on the program, they are usually familiar with the structure of the industry, principles of editing, and the technical aspects of traditional and computer-based publishing, and so are well-suited to step off in any of these directions.
Submit to Scratch Magazine

Join www.scratchonline.ca to upload your photos, artwork or writing. If your submissions are selected for publication, you get $$.
Castlegar
Freedom Quest
Industrial Surf/Source for Sports
Kootenay Gallery
Bagels & Brew
Common Grounds Coffee Shop
On-line Learning Centre
Castlegar & District Community Services Centre
Castlegar & District Youth Centre
Stanley Humphries Secondary School
Selkirk College
Columbia Basin Trust Office
Castlegar & District Public Library

Cranbrook
Lotus Books Inc.
Hot Shots Cappuccino & Fresh Food Bar
Cranbrook Boys & Girls Club
Kootenay Roasting Co
Pages Book Emporium
Canadian Mental Health Assn. for the Kootenays
Ktunaxa Nation Council Child & Family Services
EK Addictions Services
Summit Community Services Society
Mount Baker Secondary School
Cranbrook Public Library
Columbia Basin Trust Office

Crawford Bay
Crawford Bay Secondary School

Crescent Valley
Karin’s Book Basket

Creston
Grand Central Perks & Blends
Black Bear Books
Creston & District Public Library
Kingfisher Quality Used Books
Buffalo Coffee House
Prince Charles Secondary School

Edgewater
The Edge

Elkford
Elkford Secondary School

Fernie
Blue Toque Diner
Sparwood Recreation Department
Fernie Secondary School
Fernie Heritage Library

Golden
Darkside Snow Skate BMX
Bacchus Books
Jita’s Cafe
Bean Bag Coffee Roasters and Internet Cafe

Golden (continued)
Golden Family Centre
Columbia Basin Trust Office
Golden Secondary School

Gray Creek
Gray Creek Store

Invermere
Dave’s Book Bar
Columbia Valley Employment Services
Kicking Horse Coffee Cafe
Quality Bakery
Summit Youth Centre
David Thompson Secondary School

Kaslo
Langham Cultural Centre
Kaslo & Area Youth Council
Rudolph’s Bakery & Pastry
JV Humphries Secondary School

Kimberley
Bean Tree
SPARK Youth Centre
Selkirk Secondary School

Kootenay Bay
Ashram Books
Fairy Treats

Meadow Creek
Lardeau Valley Community Centre

Nakusp
What’s Brewing on Broadway
Arrow & Slocan Lakes Community Services
Nakusp Secondary School
Columbia Basin Trust Office

Nelson
Centre for Innovative & Entrepreneurial Leadership
Ripping Giraffe
Sidewinders
Oso Negro
Jigsaws Coffee Co.
Grounded Organic Coffee House
Dominion Cafe
Otter Books
Nelson & District Youth Centre
Nelson Waldorf School
International School of the Kootenays
Earth Matters
ANKORS
LV Rogers Secondary School
Packrat Annie’s
Nelson CARES
Freedom Quest
Nelson Municipal Library
Youth Employment Resource Centre

New Denver
Lucerne Elementary Secondary School

Radium Hot Springs
Radium Public Library

Revelstoke
Community Connections Society
Revelstoke Secondary School

Rossland
Ross Vegas Board Sports
Sunshine Cafe
Rossland Secondary School
Rush Coffee Lounge
Café Books
Rossland Public Library
Alpine Grind

Salmo
Salmo Valley Community & Youth Centre
Salmo Public Library
Salmo Secondary School
Sacred Grounds
Dragonfly Cafe

Slocan//South Slocan
Harold Street Cafe
Mount Sentinel School
WE Graham Community School

Sparwood
Sparwood Secondary School
Sparwood Recreation & Leisure Centre

Trail
Rebelato’s Morning Perk
Clive’s Coffee Bar
Trail FAIR Society
Greater Trail Community Skills Centre
Career Development Services
Sanctuary
Columbia YCDC
Trail Coffee & Tea
Trail & District Public Library
JL Crowe Secondary

Valemount
Valemount Secondary School

Winlaw
Sleep Is For Sissies
Jennie’s Book Garden
Cedar Creek Café

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