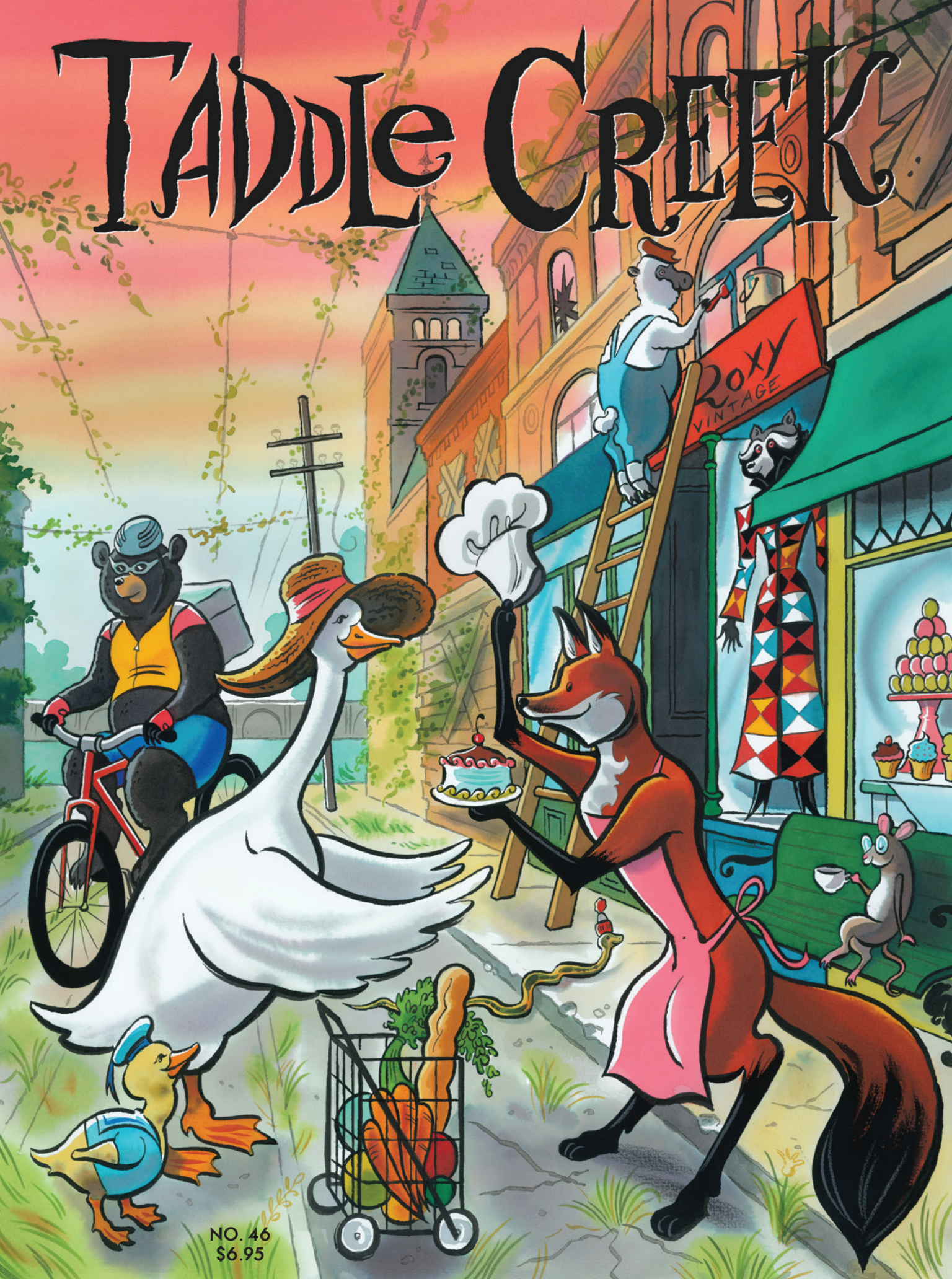
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TADDLE CREEK

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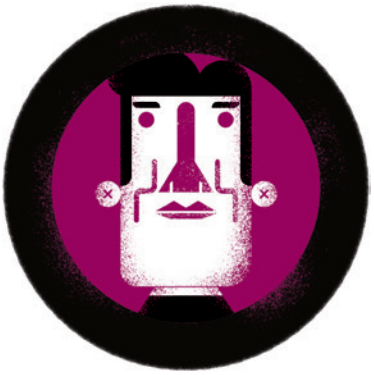
THE CONTRIBUTORS



MICHAEL LAPOINTE ("The Creep," p. 6) is a columnist with *The Paris Review.* His first novel, *The Creep,* will be published in 2021. • **MICHAEL BLOUIN** ("the deeper the joy," p. 9) has two books forthcoming—the poetry collection *Southbound* and the novel *I Am Billy the Kid.* • **ANDREW LAFLECHE** ("From Your House," p. 11) is the editor of *Gravitas.* His most recent books are *One Hundred Little Victories, Eyes Wide,* and *Ride.* • **PATRICK ALLABY** ("Halifax," p. 12) lives in Sackville, New Brunswick. His first book, *Martin Peters,* was published in 2019. • **BRIAN FRANCIS** (The Kitch, p. 18) will publish a memoir in 2021. His most recent novel, *Break In Case of Emergency,* was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Awards. • **VICTORIA HETHERINGTON** ("Be Good," p. 26) is the author of the novel *Mooncalves.* Her second novel, *Heartworms,* is forthcoming, in 2022. • **STAN ROGAL** ("Broken Telephone," p. 28) lives and writes in Toronto. His work has appeared in magazines and anthologies in Canada, the United States, and Europe. • **JASPER JUBENVILL** ("Grizzly Girl Gang," p. 30) makes comics full time, in his bedroom at his mom's house. He is the first *Taddle Creek* contributor who was not yet born when the magazine was founded. • **JULIE CAMERON GRAY** (The Stitch, p. 34) is the author of two poetry collections, *Tangle* and *Lady Crawford,* the latter of which was short-listed for the Pat Lowther Memorial Award. • **BEE QUAMMIE** (The Gallery, p. 36) is a writer and the co-host of show *Kultur'D,* on Global News Radio. Her writing has appeared in *Men's Health, Maclean's, Chatelaine,* and the *Globe and Mail.* • **SAM SHELSTAD** ("Ex-Smoker," p. 40) is the author of the short story collection *Cop House.* He lives in Toronto. • **ALEX BOYD** ("Dictators at Night," p. 42) is the author of two poetry collections, *Making Bones Walk* and *The Least Important Man,* and the novel *Army of the Brave and Accidental.* • **SUE CARTER** (The Spotlight, p. 45) is the editor of *Quill and Quire* and a regular contributor to the *Toronto Star.* • **ELANA WOLFF** ("I really liked your reading last night," p. 46) is a writer of poetry and creative non-fiction. Her latest poetry collection, *Swoon,* won the 2020 Canadian Jewish Literary Award for poetry. • **RICHMOND LAM** (photograph) is a portrait and lifestyle photographer born in Hong Kong and currently living in Montreal. • **GEORGE PFROMM** (illustrations) is an illustrator, animator, and art teacher living in Somerville Massachusetts. • **MAURICE VELLEKOOP** (The Cover) is an award-winning illustrator and cartoonist whose work has appeared in magazines, advertising, and books for more than thirty years. He recently animated the StoryCorps short film *My Aunties.* Currently, he is working on the graphic memoir *I'm So Glad We Had This Time Together.*

From top: Michael LaPointe, Jasper Jubenvill, Bee Quammie, Elana Wolff.

MATTHEW DALEY. CONTENTS AND EPHEMERA HEADERS BY HARTLEY LIN.

THE EPHEMERA

The House Business

This August, *Taddle Creek* launched its latest issue, in the backyard of Toronto's Jet Fuel Coffee Shop, its fifteenth event there in twenty summers. Steam Whistle was available and readings happened, but thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, no audience was admitted. If you missed it—and judging by the analytics *Taddle Creek* saw, you did—the final product can still be viewed, from a safe distance, on the magazine's Facebook page and YouTube channel.

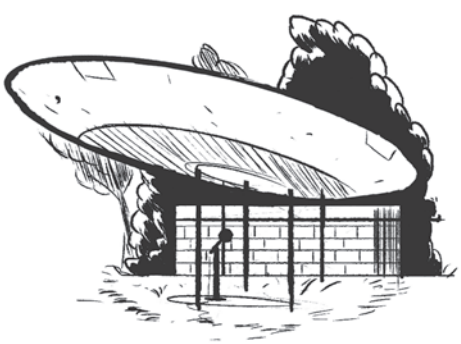
•

Congratulations to Lisa Foad, whose short story "Hunting," from *Taddle Creek* No. 44, was short-listed for the Journey Prize this summer. After years of countless National Magazine Award honourable mentions, *Taddle Creek* recently opted for a quality-over-quantity approach to its award-getting: Lisa's short-listing is a first for the magazine, following six Journey Prize long-list placements since 2006.

Acoustic Performance

When Caitlin Stephen realized the COVID-induced closure of Toronto's bars had left local musicians with nowhere to play for the foreseeable future, she devised a workaround. Every week this summer, weather permitting, Stephen hosted Open Mic Thursdays at the Oculus, a low-key outdoor music event, held beneath a flying-saucer-shaped canopy on the Humber River Recreational Trail, a quick bike ride north of Lake Ontario.

A handful of people were already gathered by six-thirty on the warm August evening *Taddle Creek* attended. Some wore masks, and those who didn't arrive together kept a respectful distance from each other. (Both hand sanitizer and bug spray were on offer.)



Stephen, dressed in a black sleeveless top and dark green shorts, worked the crowd, clipboard in hand, slotting those she knew into the night's schedule and attempting to convince strangers who had wandered by to sign up.

"Are you here to perform?" she asked one cyclist who'd stopped and seated himself on the grass.

"I play guitar," he said. "I thought I'd just check it out and maybe come play next week."

"We're here late if you want to go home and get it tonight."

Promptly at seven, Stephen moved to centre stage, welcomed the crowd, which had grown to about twenty, and started the evening with an original composition of her own, singing and accompanying herself on a battery-powered keyboard, the only "house" instrument made available to performers. She was followed, over the next four hours, by artists whose talents spanned the spectrum. One young man in pajama bottoms played an acoustic version of Blink-182's "All the Small Things," two middle-aged white-haired men with guitars performed the Skydiggers' "I Will Give You Everything," and a man and woman stumbled through "Blister in the Sun," by Violent Femmes, despite the assistance of a lyric sheet.

As sometimes happens at open mics, the evening wasn't without its unexpected surprises, like the Soul Maître D's, a local duo who performed their signature song, "Freak Show," followed by a freeform organ jam. "We need more of that level of quality coming out," Stephen said. "We've had a spirit drum circle, a troupe with two violins, an accordion, and a horn. We've had tons of guitarists, we've had drummers. It's pretty folky right now. There's a little bit of R. & B., which I'm loving."

Stephen, thirty-eight, spends her days as a licensing manager for Mattel and usually attends up to three open mic nights a week. She discovered the Oculus for the first time while biking the Humber trail with a friend earlier this summer. "We went under it and heard the acoustics and we were blown

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GEORGE PFROMM

away," she said. "My friend kept saying we should do a show there or a concert or record some music. At first I dismissed it, but then I started hearing about a lot of the local venues that we would usually play at closing down for good."

By 10 P.M. the only light remaining came from the strings of outdoor patio bulbs circling the stage, but about a half dozen musicians remained, closing the evening with a lengthy group jam that included the Thompson Twins' "Hold Me Now" before things broke up around eleven and Stephen packed up her small cart and returned to her nearby car. "This has made my summer. I want to keep it going into the fall until it gets too cold. I just don't want it to turn into Trinity-Bellwoods," she said, in reference to the downtown park that gained notoriety for its lack of social distancing at the beginning of the season. "If it gets completely full, I think we'd get shut down."

Muscled Beach

One Sunday, as summer entered its final month, a group of eight women and four men, dressed in varying degrees of beach wear, gathered at the top of a pedestrian pathway near Bloor and Dufferin streets for a tour of Bloordale Beach, Toronto's newest summer getaway. Walking south, the group soon came upon a fenced-in lot of rocky white infill, edged with sand along much of the perimeter. "Bloordale is unlike most other beaches," said Shari Kasman, one of the beach's co-founders, who was leading the tour. "For one, it is landlocked."

Kasman, who is an artist and writer, and an anonymous friend began thinking of ways to turn the lot—which, until 2019, was the site of Brocton High School, since demolished—into a space for public use earlier this year. "When it was a high school, there was a parking lot, so you could cut though from Bloor Street to behind the Dufferin Mall," Kasman said. "Once it was fenced in you couldn't do that anymore. So my friend started breaking into the fences to gain access, and then someone from the Toronto District School Board would come by and close it again."

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and most of the places people once gathered closed, Kasman started spending time in the empty space. "I'd walk around in circles or talk on the phone. Then I started thinking, What if we set up a living room in the middle, and my friend said, 'I think that would encourage dumping.' So I said, 'What about a bunch of inflatable pools?' And he said, 'Yeah, but you might have trouble getting water.' Then one day I was walking by and there was a guy suntanning over there, and I was like, 'Oh wow, this could be a beach.'"

Kasman and her friend began making signs directing people to the beach, which they hung on the fence and at one nearby high-traffic location on Bloor. Bloordale Beach officially opened on May 25th. The following day, representatives of the T.D.S.B. removed the signs and re-secured the site. This back and forth happened twice, but by August, the school board seemed content to let the beach be. Kasman and her co-founder procured six deck chairs from a nearby Value Village, which they placed in the centre of the space to encourage casual gatherings. "I saw a really adorable date," Kasman said. "There were these two women and one had surprised the other. They were there around sunset. They had a beach towel and a blow-up unicorn floaty thing, drinks, an umbrella. It's the best beach setup I've seen. The beachiest."

On the day of the tour, the beach was empty, save for the tour group and some passers through. Kasman recounted the beach's brief history and walked the group though its many sights: a sea turtle nesting area (three toy turtles nestled inside a tree protector), the barkour range (a parkour-like exercise area for dogs, made up largely of repurposed ice-cream containers), the lagoon (a divot of dried clay that briefly fills with water when it rains), the botanical garden (a patch of common weeds), the bar (a Steam Whistle bottle opener hanging from the fence—a gift to the beach from a fan), and the adjoining Bloordale Meadow (the back field of Bloor Collegiate Institute, located next door).

"Does that sort of thing happen often?" asked one member of the tour, pointing to a man relieving himself against a storage shed, just outside the beach fence.

"Well, there isn't an actual toilet at the beach," Kasman replied, "so these things happen."

"So, is the fence for conservation?" asked another.

"Yes. We thought of taking more of it down, but we thought that might upset the T.D.S.B. Plus, we need places to put signs. The beach has more than sixty signs."

"Are there any efforts to deal with invasive species, or are they all invasive species?"

"I sprinkled wildflower seeds around the perimeter at the beginning of the season, so it could be some plants are from that package, but it's not for certain. Nothing is for certain."

The tour came to an end after forty minutes with a round of applause for the guide, and the group dispersed.

"I have ideas for the future of the beach," Kasman said. "Someone suggested a clothing-optional corner, a dive shop, surf board rentals. It would be great if there was water."

Long-term relationship

Artists from Bruce Springsteen to Taylor Swift have surprised listeners with unexpected new albums during the COVID-19 pandemic. But perhaps few were as unexpected—for both the band and its followers—as the self-titled debut from Proper Concern, the genre-defying group formed in Montreal, in 2003, by Warren Auld and Nathaniel G. Moore.

The pandemic unexpectedly gifted the band the time to not just record but also release their first proper album, which they did in July, via BandCamp. "We have, like, a backwoods-cult lead-acoustic campfire thing going on, and then a high-tech parody of the Pet Shop Boys," said Moore, a writer and publicist (known to readers of this magazine as its one-time most-rejected author), when asked to describe the band's sound. "A little like Talking Heads."

Auld, a building manager and self-described "artistic dabbler" who is still based in Montreal, and Moore, a writer and artist now living in Fredericton, connected on FaceTime in September to discuss their band's unusual career path. Not long after being introduced, through a mutual friend, Moore suggested they record some "random nonsense" in Auld's loft. "I got really nervous and couldn't do anything in front of Warren," Moore said. "And then Warren went to the bathroom, and by the time he came back I had gone on this rant and recorded an eleven-minute song called 'Mrs. Bachelor,' based on my Grade 1 teacher."

"I had recorded some music on a four-track cassette recorder," said Auld. "When I left the room it kept recording. My tracks ran out and the machine started playing the other side of cassette, which had some Latin music on it, backwards, and Nathaniel's vocals recorded over that. It was the best thing we did."

"It still is," said Moore.

Auld and Moore recorded enough additional tracks, including "Gatchaman Love Song" and "Eight Mile," to fill a Mini CD. Moore pushed the album to some local college radio stations, where it received admirable air play, but the group never bothered to release the album publicly. "We had no follow-through," said Moore. "We'd share it with our friends. I would mail a CD to someone. People would e-mail me and say, 'I was at a party and they played a Proper Concern song.' That happens at least four times a decade."

Despite a seventeen-year collaboration and a handful of infrequent recording sessions, the band has never played for a live audience or, until now, released any of its material. "Recently I said to Warren, 'Hey, I have this podcast I want to do I need a theme for, here's some vocals,'" said Moore. "I sent him a little jingle, and he sent me something back. A month and a half later we had four and a half songs, and we were on our way to our first album."

Auld and Moore hope they can keep their recent momentum going, with a future physical release and, post-pandemic, some live performances. "I think our relationship has been a twenty-year performance," said Moore. "Every time we hang out, which is so rare, it's like a band meeting. It's like a first date that's never ended."

Nathaniel G. Moore and Warren Auld.

Remembering R. M. Vaughan

R. M. Vaughan, the author, artist, playwright, and critic who died in October, at the age of fifty-five, contributed to this magazine for two decades. Many of those contributions were poems—"Tree," his first for *Taddle Creek,* with its specifically placed tabs, is famous around the office for testing the limits of the digital team's coding capabilities in the early days of the Web—but he also provided art commentary, charming letters to the editor, and a photographic collaboration with an unwitting Sears Portrait Studio employee that is among *Taddle Creek's* favourite things ever.

Richard hailed from Saint John, New Brunswick, where he attended the local university, eventually earning a master's degree in English from the University of New Brunswick. His first published poem appeared in *Cormorant* magazine, in 1989, the same year he moved to Montreal. He relocated to Toronto in 1991, encouraged by the playwright Sky Gilbert, who saw promise in the scripts Richard had been submitting to Buddies in Bad Times theatre. His own plays followed, as did a dizzying array of books, including the poetry collections *Invisible to Predators* and the deeply autobiographical *Troubled,* the novel *A Quilted Heart,* and the short memoir *Bright Eyed.* He also became a noted art critic for publications including the *Globe and Mail.* His artistic output was varied and vast, and his advocacy in helping queer culture reach the mainstream is largely unsung. He had little tolerance for the boring status quo, *Taddle Creek's* favourite of his qualities—that and his penchant for dandy scarfs. Earlier this year, he had returned to U.N.B. as a writer-in-residence and, by all accounts, had ingratiated himself to the students, as he did with nearly everyone.

Richard was never anything but a loyal and good friend to *Taddle Creek,* and he is already missed by many.

—Taddle Creek

THE FICTION

THE CREEP

An excerpt.

BY MICHAEL LAPOINTE

1.

The girl from *Vice* stands at my office door. I left her no choice, she says. She's tried calling, e-mailing: "Can we talk?"

I can tell she's a novice by her posture of defiance. She's worked herself up for this meeting.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I didn't mean to leave you hanging. It's been chaotic." From behind my desk, I motion for her to come in. "Just close the door."

The girl drops into the chair, cold cheeks flushed, snow melting in her hair. She's maybe twenty-five. Without asking, she takes her iPhone out and starts recording.

"Sorry," she says, catching herself. "It's O.K. if I record?"

I nod and she roots through her tote bag for her notepad. By the time she produces it, scraggly white headphones pulled along, she's out of breath and has to reset her focus. Then she takes out the heavy book and sets it on my desk: *The Complete Bystander, 1999–2003*. They've printed all thirty-three issues of the magazine to scale.

"Can I begin with a confession?" she says. "*The Bystander* was huge for me in high school, your work in particular."

I loft a smile over the desk.

"In fact, you're one of the reasons I wanted to get into media."

"How have you found it?"

"Obviously we're living in a different time."

She glances quickly at her phone and then at me, at the bandage on my wrist.

"Like Gordon Stone writes in the introduction, *The Bystander* was maybe the last magazine of its kind, the last to start up, I mean, and go all in with print. What was the minimum rate, like, two-fifty a word? It feels like a million years ago."

"How much are you getting for this?" I ask.

"One-fifty."

"A word?"

"God no. A hundred-fifty bucks. It's online only. I hope that's O.K."

"Of course." After a pause, I ask, "Do you regret becoming a journalist?"

"Every first of the month." She laughs. "You get into it thinking you'll have a life like your idols, but the economics have shifted. I guess that's why so many people have gotten out."

From my office at Diamond Communications, you can see the Hudson River's cobalt crawl between buildings. If you'd asked me when I was at *The Bystander,* what I'd be in fifteen years, I would've said editor-in-chief or even publisher, not some associate consultant. But it wasn't money that drove me from the business.

"It's funny, because we're needed more than ever, don't you think?" she says. "We have to sift the facts from the fiction."

I nod in the direction of the book on the desk. "That's what Mort Brewer always said."

"It's the truth, don't you think?"

I wish I could talk about my years at *The Bystander,* my last in journalism, with such pride and self-importance, like some grand old dame of media. But I can only think of all the people I failed, all the dead.

The girl opens *The Complete Bystander* and begins asking about my pieces—profiles of John Malkovich and Madonna, reviews of *Eyes Wide Shut* and *All About My Mother,* a two-part essay on Napster.

"*The Bystander* seems like a golden age," she says.

"It didn't feel that way at the time."

"Then take me back."

I look at her phone. There would be room in there for everything, for the story I never wrote, the one I can never tell.

If I were being real with her, I'd begin with the bandage on my wrist. How, on a night when I seemed nothing more than hair and fingernails and one cold skull, I'd sprawled on the couch with glass after glass, the untold dead pushing out. The glass dropped from my hand, it broke on the floor. I saw the shards on hardwood and chose one.

Then came the blood and, with it, a thought. It couldn't happen like this. Slathering muddy red over the screen of my phone, I managed to call 911.

And I would tell her about surfacing in the ambulance as they began the transfusion, how when I grasped what was happening, I yanked the I.V. from my arm. The medic lunged for the drip as it swung, dribbling blood.

They had to hold me down, there wasn't much time. But by then I'd seen the colour of the blood. It was red, it was fine.

2.

"The attacks were, for me, a personal catastrophe," said Daniel Eastham. "*Rogue Winter* hit shelves that same morning. Do you think anyone bought novels on September 11th?"

I glanced out the window at the snow falling over Brooklyn. You wouldn't normally be able to see the towers from Eastham's brownstone, but now there always seemed to be an absence in the sky. I'd arranged this interview months ago but, given the attacks, it had been put off to December. My first assignment back on *The Bystander's* culture file, it was supposed to have been a coup. At thirty-seven, Eastham was the youngest, most adroitly aloof member

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW DALEY

of an exciting generation of New York novelists, and *Rogue Winter,* a nine-hundred-page postmodern comedy set several years in the future, was positioned to be his grand affirmation. But then, in just a single morning, it became clear that 2003 wouldn't be like his version at all, the America he'd purported to capture had changed, and none of the jokes were funny anymore.

Eastham reached for his glass of red wine and said, "No one's reading fiction right now, let alone author profiles."

In the days immediately after the attacks, it had been all hands on deck at the magazine to cover the only story that mattered. With bridges and tunnels closed, we needed everyone in Manhattan on the streets reporting, including me, a culture writer. At first I panicked at the thought of asking people to describe what they'd seen, who was missing. I hadn't done much hard reporting since my early days in Seattle. But once I entered the stream of events, I felt this other energy. The world around me crackled, true stories were everywhere. There was always someone rousing from their daze with a fresh account, using the presence of a journalist to reconstruct the catastrophe, pin it down with words. The pit still steaming downtown, I was a witness to history unadulterated.

I never got started with alcohol when I still had reading and writing to do, but Eastham poured more wine for himself and said, "Maybe a book like *Rogue Winter* has to be sacrificed for the towers to be redeemed."

I squinted at his overreach, but this is what people were capable of in their ill-fitting new sincerity. I understood the need to get serious. Ever since reporting on the attacks, I felt it every day at *The Bystander.* I wanted to get out of the culture file, into the rush.

"Please," Eastham added, with a frightened glance at the recorder, "don't print that."

I went to the *Bystander* office, in Chelsea, to transcribe the tape and type up my notes. The freight elevator opened, and though it was late, I saw my colleagues still working to put the issue to bed before the winter holidays.

I greeted Ross Briggs, back from covering Enron in Houston, and Ben Hassan, making a rare cameo from his usual perch, in Washington. I checked the window of Mort Brewer's office, and as always, our editor was there, phone clenched between ear and shoulder, scribbling on a yellow legal pad.

In 1998, I first heard a rumour that Mort was leaving *Harper's* to form a monthly magazine. He started giving interviews about the conglomerated state of media, singling out Rupert Murdoch's greasy empire but not sparing Hearst and Condé Nast's fine feelings. The media ecosystem was increasingly homogenous, he said. It was time for a new, totally independent magazine.

He may have been on the back end of his career, but people listened to Mort. He'd trained half the journalists in New York at Columbia and given countless others their breaks, first at *The Nation* and later at *Harper's.* His reputation was spotless. It was said he'd thrown Bob Bartley, from the *Wall Street Journal,* down a set of stairs at a party in the eighties.

Mort's name brought journalistic integrity, literary sophistication, and money. Donors wanted to be involved with a magazine that would compete with his former employers. It would be a new-economy insurgency. A dot-com entrepreneur provided start-up cash—his site was some kind of cut-rate jewellery retailer, I think—and when his fortune vaporized, a real-estate magnate's nephew stepped in. Now I know how precarious the magazine's money was, but at the time, it seemed as if anything Mort wanted in New York was just a seductive phone call away.

I remember receiving one of those calls myself. At the time, I was freelancing as a culture writer in the city. I was surprised that Mort called at all and even more so when the venerable editor lauded my work not only in *The New Republic* and the *Village Voice,* but also some old pieces for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* where I'd cut my teeth after college.

"The piece you wrote about the igloo," he said over the phone, "that was a breakthrough for you, wasn't it?"

For a few months, the *P-I* had run a weekend series of personal memoir pieces. I'd seized the chance to run a little deeper than my usual work, frivolous city-life stuff—Nordstrom execs who played high-stakes Texas hold 'em, Midwestern tourists who came for *Sleepless in Seattle*–themed weddings—which the editors commissioned in a futile attempt to seem as cool as the *Stranger* and *Seattle Weekly,* the city's alternative papers.

The memoir I wrote about the igloo inspired the best reception of anything I'd contributed to the *P-I.* Before that, my work profited from my easy generational access to a nineties attitude that my older bosses found mystifying, as if sarcasm were a confusing new technology that only young people could operate. But Mort was right. With the igloo, I dug deeper. Along with a few of my snappier city-life clippings, it's the piece I sent out when first trying to secure freelance work in New York.

"Thank you, Mr. Brewer."

"Not to disparage your cultural writing," he'd added. "That's why I'm calling today. I intend to have the best culture file in the country, Whitney. I want you to think about writing for *The Bystander.*"

It was the first time I heard the name of the new magazine, and it instantly resonated. I attached myself to the word, like a logo.

If I were going to join Mort's staff, however, I had to elevate my work. Over my first two years at the magazine, I'd never stopped seeking to impress him. So, as I sat at my desk that day in December and transcribed the Daniel Eastham interview, the author's voice droning in my ears, I kept glancing over at Ross Briggs. His Enron piece was his second twelve-thousand-word article of 2001. That's what I wanted to do: something that mattered, not a profile of a soon-to-be-mid-list novelist, as if I were just an extension of the publisher's publicity arm. I wanted something

THE DEEPER THE JOY

a face that looked like a glazed donut that had slept on the floor
last night
thirty-five years old
remarkable that he was able to hold on
even that long
Andy Kaufman died of lung cancer, in 1984, or AIDS, or maybe he's
not dead at all—it depends what you choose to read online
years ago, when I was young, I read of his Carnegie Hall performance
during which he took the entire audience down the street for milk
and cookies, and I was young, like I said, but I knew genius when I
heard about it
then I became a writer.
Andy's brother Michael once claimed that the death was in fact a
hoax and that he had followed instructions in an essay Andy wrote
to meet at a specific restaurant on Christmas Eve, 1999. Michael
did so, he said, whereupon a man he did not know walked up to
him and handed him a typed letter from Andy, who wrote:
"everything is great in my life and I just wanted to get away from
being Andy Kaufman."
you can see the red leatherette banquettes in the glass-walled restaurant
in the late evening
the plate glass windows and the Christmas lights
the tall man in the dark felt overcoat
moving silently through the snow, gently falling. Maybe Andy was
across the street, watching.

Andy was renowned for his Elvis impersonation.
Elvis impersonators are about as remarkable as horses at a racetrack,
but Andy's was really good, everyone will tell you so
but the fact is that Elvis was the first, and the best, Elvis impersonator
and Andy, well, he's dead
or maybe he'll pop up any day now:
"Hi everyone. What'd I miss?"

—Michael Blouin

to exceed what Mort expected of me, a story that would make him say, as he'd said about the igloo piece, "That's when you reached a new level."

3.

"In the igloo, I went mute."

That's how the story began in the *Post-Intelligencer.*

Mom never liked to talk about the accident, but over the years, I extracted enough from her to plug the gaps in my memory. By the time I wrote about it for the *P-I,* it was as if I remembered it myself.

When I was five, Mom and Dad took me to visit Dad's grandparents, in a Pittsburgh suburb, over Christmas. Of the many cousins also visiting, I was the youngest, only barely tolerated in their group, which included some kids from the neighbourhood. None of them could've been older than ten or eleven, but to me, at age five, they seemed like the keepers of the secrets of adulthood. I allowed them to do what they liked with me: paint me like a clown, put me in goal to face slapshots, send me downhill on a trash-can lid, it didn't matter.

A few days before Christmas, my dad finally coaxed Mom away from the family to go to a bar in the city. He was always trying to get her to loosen up and quit organizing other people's time. While my grandparents dozed by the TV, I followed my cousins to the front yard of one of the neighbourhood kids. It was late afternoon. The dead stalks in the garden speared the crusted snow. The kid wanted to show off his igloo. At least that's the word he used for a tunnel he'd burrowed in the bank of snow that had been plowed off the street. He envisioned the igloo as a kind of clubhouse, but none of my cousins wanted to crawl into its cold black mouth. Whether I volunteered or was coerced, no one later confessed, and I don't remember. There wasn't any difference.

I see myself on hands and knees, wriggling into the hole, the attention of my cousins pushing me forward like a wind. In my purple snowsuit, it was a tight squeeze, but then the tunnel gave onto a shapeless cavern. The light of day faintly soaked the frozen walls, turning everything blue.

"I lay on my stomach," I wrote, "and pressed my cheek to the floor. It was soothing. I thought of the older kids, too afraid to follow. I had a glimmering sense of my courage."

And that's when the roof fell in. A heavy rush, all the air clapped out of me, and then only dark and weight.

Later, Dad's family rallied around the cousins, protecting their version of events. The igloo simply collapsed, they said. One of my aunts went so far as to suggest I'd compromised the structure from within. But Mom said somebody must've gone up on the roof.

"Whitney!"

Very dimly, I remember someone shouting my name, how the sound struck my ears, warped by ice. I made no answer, dirty snow filled my mouth. I can taste the car exhaust, the rocks in my teeth.

"Whitney!"

My tongue went numb. I sucked the snow and swallowed, smothered, and that's how it started. At the outer edge of perception, age five, I knew I would die, that death was the name of this coldness and this darkness, and how good it was simply to lie there, let it happen—seep into the snow.

There came the circling sound of sirens. Adults had converged and were digging me out. Soon they surfaced my body and I was hoisted from the snow. It fell from my mouth.

Only when Mom and Dad got home tipsy and asked me what happened did anybody realize I hadn't uttered a word since the accident. When they couldn't coax me to speak, they took me to the E.R., but there was no concussion, no problems with my chest or throat—just a blank where all my words had been.

You can see the change in photographs. Before the igloo, I seem energetic, natural. Unlike Mom, who always glanced away from the camera, as if the whites of her eyes were her most alluring feature, my tiny teeth shone, the blood-red orbs of my eyes open wide. But after, I suddenly look more like her, elusive, vague, as if the shutter always snapped at the moment I moved, blurring my face.

I stayed mute almost a year. I've asked myself why a million times and still have no explanation. Or rather, I have too many—a crowd of expert opinions. Mom's solution was to entrust me to science. She took me to speech therapists, art therapists, play therapists, and surely this was when I acquired the basic skills of my career, as I lay waiting behind the mask of my face, observing each attempt to explain me. It was guilt for having caused so much fear. No, it was a desire to punish my parents for neglect. No again, it was an anxious reaction to my mother's expectations. No—

The sessions exhausted and confused me and didn't change anything. Mom was disappointed, and I remember the disappointment being trained on me, as if I weren't co-operating with the experts, as if I didn't want to get better. She'd lose all patience and start pleading, furious: "Say something, anything—Whitney, make a sound."

Dad would shelter me, that's what I remember. When Mom wasn't around, he'd ridicule the experts. It's O.K., he'd tell me, "Just hang in there, take your time." There wasn't much worth saying anyway. As if to prove it, he began speaking to me in plain sound, subverbal, like a crude clay from which words were shaped. He'd make monkey talk in the grocery store or at the public pool, embarrassing my mother, who found this whole approach silly, unscientific. It's true that I didn't respond, but I loved my constant jabbering companion—he made me comfortable being in the world. Sometimes he'd just hold me, skin on skin, his breath on my neck, muttering our private language.

But nothing could unfreeze my tongue—not until the day of the hospital. Dad was a healthy, active man. He'd jogged in the morning, played hockey in Burbank, dribbled the ball between my legs, a blood clot worming toward his heart.

He survived a few days after the attack, unresponsive in a hospital bed. Mom told me later that she'd debated bringing me to see him. He couldn't talk, and it wasn't like I'd say anything anyway. But the doctors advised it. I was told to put on my best black shoes, with the little gold buckles, and then Mom drove me to the hospital.

In the room, her hands on my shoulders, we approached the bed. I don't recall any tubes or machines, just his same open eyes, the face of my companion. That's when I began to speak, softly at first, then louder and louder—nonsense words, primordial sounds—Mom's hands springing off my shoulders. The way she remembered it, he didn't respond—in his condition, she'd said, it was impossible—but that's because she couldn't really hear me. She'd thought I was having a fit, and rushed me from the room. I never spoke to him again.

As I wrote in the *P-I,* in the piece Mort liked so much, I've come to believe that whatever voice I developed—whatever readers heard as their eyes moved over my words—carried forward from the hospital, when I reinvented speech from scratch.

But there's something else I didn't write, something I could never admit.

I wasn't the girl I'd been before, the girl who crawled into the igloo. Mom observed it first, a certain mischief on my tongue, a tendency to elaborate and embellish.

About a year after the hospital, a teacher called my house to report an obvious lie I'd told in class, something about witnessing a bank robbery downtown, an image off TV. Once I'd spoken the words, they seemed as good as memory. I loved everybody's reaction. Suddenly my classmates wanted to get close to me, near to the source of excitement. It was the seriousness with which I told the lie that apparently troubled my teacher. I overheard Mom explain to her on the phone, "It's a way she has, a creep toward fabrication."

That's what I came to call it, "the creep," as if an unwelcome visitor were playing with my tongue.

It was only when I followed this passion for storytelling into journalism that I realized the scope of my problem. With excruciating clarity, I remember a professor at U.S.C. calling me into her office one day in junior year. My most recent assignment was on her desk. I'd written about a drunk-driving accident involving some students. They'd survived, but the accident had sparked a broader discussion about the severity of campus drinking. The classmates I'd shown the assignment to all agreed I'd captured the terror of being in that car as the driver lost control.

"Heck of a story," said the professor.

"Thanks."

"So good, in fact, that I circled back on some of your reporting—like the minutes before the crash, and who said what, and when."

She slid the paper across her desk. It was streaked with red lines, the creep diagrammed.

"You can see where this is going," she added.

I had no words.

FROM YOUR HOUSE

From your house, right now
you can't see me, strange as this
may sound to a casual observer,
but you can't.

How some nights you call me
on the telephone to tell me
that: from down in the valley,
looking up on the mountain,
you can see a faint blush of the
otherwise blackened silhouette
through the trees, which
burns in my bedroom window:
and you knew I was home.

Well, darling, tonight
you won't. There is a cloud
descended, and she's smothered
everything, even the smoke
from the chimney sinks toward
the ground—the birds, too,
don't know what to make of it.
I just thought
I should let you know.

— Andrew Lafleche

She got up and closed the door behind me, then sat down again.

"What happened?"

My instinct was to spin another lie around the lie, but with a gulp, something cleared, and I broke. At first I covered my face. I'd heard Mom talk about crying students and assumed my professor would react with similar scorn, leaving me stranded with my weakness, alone. But to my surprise, the professor came around the desk, kneeled in front of me, and held my hands.

"It's O.K.," she said, very softly, pacing my breath. "Take your time."

I looked down at my hands, her thumbs stroking my skin.

"That's not me," I said, nodding to the paper. "I promise, that's not me."

I still wonder what my life would be like if she hadn't given me another chance.

The professor quietly placed me on academic probation, and I finished my time at U.S.C. actively fighting what had become an automatic, invisible force. From a certain viewpoint, my work declined—classmates weren't amazed by my stories anymore, nobody was drawn to be near me—but I was writing solid, factual journalism. It was a start.

After my confession in her office, the professor took me under her wing, and when I graduated, it was she who recommended me for the internship in Seattle.

"You'll have to claw your way into a permanent position," she told me. "It won't be easy. Make every clipping count."

When we shook hands, I felt her searching my eyes, seeking last traces of the creep.

"Get it right, Whitney."

I said, "I will."

4.

By the time I finished transcribing the Daniel Eastham interview, I'd worked my way into believing there might be a story in it, after all. Maybe I could fold *Rogue Winter* into a survey of various cultural artifacts fatefully deprived of marketing velocity by the attacks. The essay could be a commentary on that velocity, its necessity, what that says. But then I felt myself projecting my own recent anxieties onto the subject, as if I could disguise my desire for a serious story inside Eastham's desire for an audience. Only a truly bad article could emerge from such confusion.

Still, I stayed late at *The Bystander,* helping out where I could with captions and headlines. We'd recently lost a couple of fact checkers, and some of the interns had gone home for the holidays, so I also assisted with checking Ben's last-minute report on the Bonn Agreement.

Toward midnight, Mort emerged from his office, with plastic cups and a case of cheap wine Lewis Lapham had sent him, along with a card on *Harper's* stationery: "Standing by, for your return . . ."

He stopped at my desk and poured out a cup.

"What have you been working on, Whitney?"

I told him I'd just interviewed Daniel Eastham.

"A fascinating writer."

Mort had such a bottomless appetite for reading, for all I knew he'd found time, in some inexplicable recess of the twenty-four-hour day, to actually consume *Rogue Winter.*

"Anything there?" he said.

I wanted so badly to say yes. Mort inspired that in you—think harder, apply pressure, squeeze the story out. Already the details of the interview were coalescing into new, convenient images. Eastham's copy of *Rogue Winter* had been open on the table, but perhaps it was closed, off to the side a little, as if shunned. He'd only had two glasses of wine, but maybe he finished the bottle. The better story crept into my memory.

"No," I said, fighting it off, "there's nothing."

HALIFAX BY PATRICK ALLABY


AND MENTIONED THAT THE NEXT DAY, SHE WAS PLANNING ON GOING TO HALIFAX WITH MY SISTER.
SO, I INVITED MYSELF ALONG.

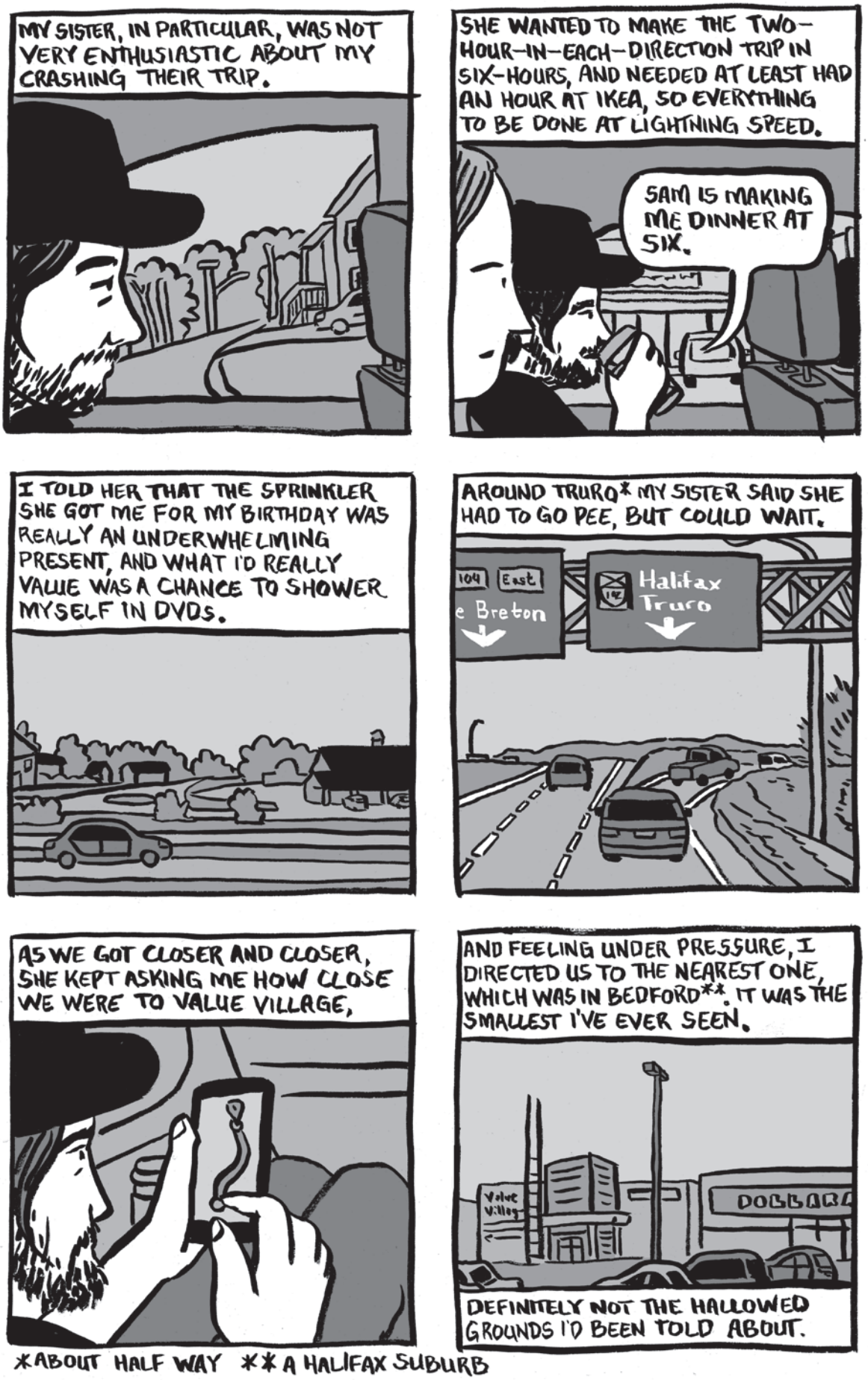

BACK BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, IN NOVEMBER 2019, I HAD BEEN IN THIS RECORD STORE IN THE NORTH END THAT HAD A SHELF OF CRITERION DVDS.
SHOULD WE DO PRESENTS NOW?


I SPENT SIXTY DOLLARS ON THE RENOIR "STAGE & SPECTACLE" BOX SET, AND TOLD MYSELF NEXT TIME I WOULD BUY THEIR LOUIS MALLE AND EARLY BERGMAN BOX SETS.


BY THE TIME OF OUR TRIP, I HAD ALREADY BOUGHT BOTH ONLINE (JUST TWO OF MY MANY PANIC BUYS),
BUT FIGURED THERE WAS SURELY SOMETHING BY ANTONIONI, BRESSON, FELLINI OR RENOIR THAT I COULD SPEND MY MONEY ON.


ALSO, WHEN I STARTED POSTING ABOUT MY SHOPPING ADDICTION, A CRITERION COLLECTING FRIEND OF MINE TOLD ME, ABOUT A HALIFAX VALUE VILLAGE WITH A CONSTANT STREAM OF RARE DVDS.
READY LAURA? AVALON :3.


I'VE ONLY EVER FOUND ONE CRITERION RELEASE AT A VALUE VILLAGE (A CRACKED "HIGH & LOW") AND THIS LOCATION SEEMED LIKE IT WAS MADE OF MY DEEPEST DESIRE.
SEE YOU AT 10!


MY SISTER, IN PARTICULAR, WAS NOT VERY ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT MY CRASHING THEIR TRIP.
SHE WANTED TO MAKE THE TWO-HOUR-IN-EACH-DIRECTION TRIP IN SIX-HOURS, AND NEEDED AT LEAST HAD AN HOUR AT IKEA, SO EVERYTHING TO BE DONE AT LIGHTNING SPEED.
SAM IS MAKING ME DINNER AT SIX.
I TOLD HER THAT THE SPRINKLER SHE GOT ME FOR MY BIRTHDAY WAS REALLY AN UNDERWHELMING PRESENT, AND WHAT I'D REALLY VALUE WAS A CHANCE TO SHOWER MYSELF IN DVDS.
AROUND TRURO* MY SISTER SAID SHE HAD TO GO PEE, BUT COULD WAIT.
104 East
e Breton
Halifax
Truro
AS WE GOT CLOSER AND CLOSER, SHE KEPT ASKING ME HOW CLOSE WE WERE TO VALUE VILLAGE,
AND FEELING UNDER PRESSURE, I DIRECTED US TO THE NEAREST ONE, WHICH WAS IN BEDFORD**. IT WAS THE SMALLEST I'VE EVER SEEN.
DOLLARAMA
DEFINITELY NOT THE HALLOWED GROUNDS I'D BEEN TOLD ABOUT.
*ABOUT HALF WAY **A HALIFAX SUBURB


I WAS IN AND OUT IN A MINUTE, AND WAITED FOR TEN AT THE CAR.
THERE WAS A LINE, AND MY MOM HAD TO GO TOO.


WHEN MY MOM AND SISTER GOT OUT, I WAS TOLD WE ONLY HAD TIME TO STOP AT ONE VALUE VILLAGE.
WHERE'S LAURA?


I WAS SUPRISED BY HOW MUCH THIS UPSET ME. I HAD BEEN FEELING LATELY LIKE I'D GOTTEN MY SHOPPING ADDICTION UNDER CONTROL, BUT SUDDENLY THE FEELING OF NEEDING TO BUY SOMETHING—IN PERSON FOR ONCE—WAS BACK!


AS WE MADE OUR WAY DOWNTOWN, MY BRAIN GOT STUCK IN A RUT FANTASIZING ABOUT ALL THE CRITERION RELEASES I'D NEVER GET TO BUY.


WHEN WE ARRIVED, I SKIPPED LUNCH AND HEADED STRAIGHT TO THE NORTH END TO MAKE SURE I HAD ENOUGH TIME AT THE RECORD STORE BEFORE IKEA.


I SPENT HALF AN HOUR WALKING THERE, ONLY TO FIND IT GONE.


AS I STOOD MOURNING ALL THE SMALL BUSINESSES THAT HAVE CLOSED BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC, I LOOKED IT UP TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED TO ITS INVENTORY,
IT CLOSES IN HALF-AN-HOUR?
AND FOUND OUT THEY'D JUST MOVED DOWN THE STREET.
SO, I SPENT ANOTHER TWENTY MINUTES SPEED-WALKING TO THEIR NEW LOCATION AND IGNORING CALLS,
ARMY
NEW/USED FIREARMS
METER CIMPLLON
CAMMO CLOTHING &
POEKS & PLUB
FFLE AND TALC
ONLY TO FIND THE ONCE GREAT CRITERION SECTION NEARLY GONE.
20
JEAN
GENERAL
I SPENT A FEW MINUTES DESPERATELY TRYING TO FIND SOMETHING ELSE TO SPEND MY MONEY ON, SO MY TRIP WASN'T A COMPLETE WASTE, BUT COULDN'T.
A LITTLE OUT OF BREATH, I CALLED MY MOM AND PLEADED WITH HER TO STOP AT THE GOOD VALUE VILLAGE ON THE WAY TO IKEA,
I'M SORRY FOR NOT ANSWERING, BUT CAN WE PLEASE DO THIS?
AND SHE AGREED TO GIVE ME FIVE MINUTES IF I AGREED TO DRIVE ON THE WAY HOME.
ALSO, CAN YOU PICK ME UP?


AS WE APPROACHED, I COULDN'T TELL IF MY HEART WAS BEATING SO MUCH BECAUSE I WAS STILL OUT OF BREATH, OR OUT OF ANTICIPATION.


THIS WAS THE BIGGEST VALUE VILLAGE I'D EVER SEEN. IT LOOKED LIKE A CATHEDRAL.
Value Village


THERE WAS NO WAY I COULD GET THROUGH THE DVD SECTION IN FIVE MINUTES, BUT I TRIED.


IN THE END, I COULD ONLY FIND ONE CRITERION RELEASE.
Unfaithfully Yours


WE FOUND OUT WHEN WE GOT TO IKEA THAT IT WAS CLOSING IN HALF-AN-HOUR. MY SISTER RUSHED THROUGH THE STORE FRANTICALLY SEARCHING FOR EVERYTHING ON HER SHOPPING LIST BEFORE IT CLOSED.
IKEA


ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT ON THE WAY BACK WAS THAT MY SHOPPING ADDICTION HAD RUINED OUR TRIP.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

A tomato soup cake that tastes like cinnamon.

BY BRIAN FRANCIS

When it comes to my collection of community and church cookbooks, let's just say I could open my own museum. Not that anyone would come to it.

My cookbook collection's origins span coast to coast, from Block Parent Associations in Melfort, Saskatchewan, to United Churches in Nova Scotia. Needless to say, I've become a bit of a scholar in regards to these coil-bound gems, and, after spending more than my share of Saturday nights poring over them in search of my next culinary masterpiece, I've learned a few things.

For starters, the local cooks who contributed to these books took a lot of pride in their dishes, even if the recipe instructions started with, "Open one can of . . ." After all, most of the recipes featured in these cookbooks included the name of the person who contributed it. Imagine the wrath you'd incur if you submitted a crappy recipe that wasted the time—and ingredients—of your neighbours and colleagues.

Another thing I've learned is that there isn't anything you can't add a can of Campbell's soup to. (I credit the sodium.) But more on that in a moment. A third thing I've noticed? The names of many recipes leave a lot to be desired. I've come across Pink Thing, White Stuff, Bun Spread, and Corn Ring. And while I've made all of these—and they were delicious—the names aren't exactly what you'd call taste-bud motivators. Why, dear people, couldn't you have been a little more creative when naming your recipes? Would it have killed you to throw in a couple of adjectives? I mean, I once saw a recipe for Make Do Squares. Could that culinary arrow point any lower?

Which brings us to this column's recipe: Tomato Soup Cake. The name alone sends shudders. Some people even refuse to step into the same room as it. And I understand. The words "tomato," "soup," and "cake" seem like the unholiest of trinities. But believe me, Tomato Soup Cake is definitely worth making—and eating. You don't get the taste of tomato soup at all. No one would ever even know there's tomato soup in it. So, why name it that? Why not something more appetizing, like Cinnamon Raisin Spice Cake? That said, I have a theory that many of these home cooks loved the thrill of a secret ingredient, especially if that secret ingredient saved you the inconvenience of cracking eggs.

Although Tomato Soup Cake is a staple in many of my cookbooks, this particular recipe hails from a very special book in my collection. It's taken from the cookbook of St. Luke's United Church, in Sarnia, Ontario—the church I attended growing up. (Although I haven't been back to St. Luke's in years, I still vividly recall the annual Christmas bazaars, the cubes of Wonder bread and shooters of grape juice we enjoyed at Communion, and the smell of percolated coffee at the after-service socials in the basement.) Added bonus: My mom's name appears in this cookbook, although I don't recognize any of the recipes she submitted. This proves a long-standing theory I have about her: my mom never actually made the recipes she submitted to our church cookbooks. Instead, she grabbed the latest copy of *TV Guide* and wrote down whatever was featured in that issue.

In terms of taste, I can promise you that, if you like spice cake, you will absolutely love Tomato Soup Cake, especially with that topping of cream cheese frosting. You get the chew of the raisins, the aroma (scratch the photo to the right and find out for yourself!) and warmth of the cinnamon and cloves—and not a hint of tomato soup taste. Take my word for it. You can thank the church women of St. Luke's United when you proudly serve this treat, ideally with a cup of percolated coffee. Just don't tell your guests what it's called.

Tomato Soup Cake

Ingredients

Cake:

1 cup white sugar
⅓ cup butter
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 can tomato soup
1½ cups flour
1 teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon cloves
1 cup raisins

Frosting:

125 grams Philadelphia cream cheese
2 tablespoons butter
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 cup icing sugar

Directions

1. Cream together sugar and butter.
2. Dissolve soda in soup and add to mixture of sugar and butter. Add flour, spices, and raisins, and mix well.
3. Pour into a greased or parchment-paper-lined eight-inch-by-eight-inch cake pan and smooth out the top.
4. Bake at 350 degrees Fahrenheit for thirty-five to forty minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the centre comes out clean.
5. Beat frosting ingredients together well and spread over cooled cake.

MATTHEW DALEY

BRIAN FRANCIS

THE PROFILE

SOLITARY MAN

Michel Rabagliati confronts age and loneliness in Paul at Home.

BY CONAN TOBIAS

One afternoon this September, Michel Rabagliati went for a walk along the river near his home, in Montreal's Ahuntsic district. He had spent the morning drawing—an act that has become increasingly difficult for him, as years spent leaning over a drafting table have ravaged his neck—and planned to spend his evening playing guitar or piano, or maybe watching TV. Most of Rabagliati's days are equally solitary, but that has failed to give him any special resilience to the social distancing brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. "I'm not comfortable with this confinement at all," he said, post-walk. "I think it's the idea of the impossibility of going toward somebody else, hugging somebody, talking close to people. I go to the cinema very often. I go to the theatre. I sing in my choir. I enjoy all of these social activities because I'm so alone in my work. I'm reaching for other people. I like people. So if you tell me I can't see people, it really makes me panic."

Rabagliati had just completed the English edition of his latest comic album, *Paul at Home*—a title that has taken on unexpected new meaning since it was first published, in French, last November. Over the course of nine books, Rabagliati has used his character Paul—a thinly veiled alter ego who, like Rabagliati, is an illustrator—to explore events from his own life. Paul's stories are not fantastical. In one book he is a boy attending Scout camp. In another he is a young man renting an apartment and starting a family. In his best-known story, Paul suffers the death of his father-in-law. In Rabagliati's new book, Paul is middle aged, divorced, and alone. He suffers from chronic neck pain, sleep apnea, and a general disappointment boarding on rage that his world, and the world in general, has changed. "He feels like he's getting old," Rabagliati said. "When he goes outside, he's confronted with that. He's goes to the pharmacy and the girl working behind the counter tells him they can't give Aspirin to seniors. He's only fifty-one. It's a slap in the face. He's not young anymore and it shows. He doesn't have a phone. He doesn't want to buy one. When girls come up to get him to sign their book they tell him it's for their father, who's the same age as him."

When I last interviewed Rabagliati, in 2016, we walked around his childhood neighbourhood, in Montreal's east end, and spent an afternoon sitting around his kitchen, in close vicinity to each other. The day before we spoke this September, Montreal was facing rising COVID numbers, and the provincial government had just imposed new rules against social interactions for twenty-eight days, making an in-person talk both pointless and unwise. Like his fictional counterpart, Rabagliati doesn't enjoy online communication, but, under the circumstances, happily agreed to meet on Zoom. He was jovial as we talked, despite his pandemic anxiety. He dressed in a green T-shirt and his hair and beard were neatly trimmed. His trademark eyebrows ascended above glasses he frequently removed to reference pages of his new book.

When we spoke in 2016, Rabagliati had just published *Paul Up North,* a story of teenage adventure, love, and heartbreak. At the time, he told me he was ready to leave Paul behind and do something else. His next book, he said, would feature an unnamed, middle-aged character and contain very little dialogue. "My wife and I have been divorced for three years. My dog is dead, my mother's dead, my father's ill—my life is really changing, and I'm not in the mood to tell that kind of story anymore," he said then. He didn't rule out returning to Paul someday, once some time had passed: "I'd like to write a story where Paul is fifty-five years old, but I'm not that eager to keep talking about myself for the rest of my days." Now, four years later, when I asked him why he decided to return to Paul so soon, and what had happened to the other story he'd planned to write, he laughed and said he often thinks of moving on from Paul—and that he had no memory of the alternate story he'd described. "It sounded like I was done with it, but I don't know. At some point I had an idea, and I had some energy to continue, and I thought I could tell this story. It sounds boring, but it's a guy struggling to rebuild his life. He's not meeting anybody new. He's just coping with his emotions. He's with his little dog, and he's trying to live day by day. He's got his mother, who is sick, so he's dealing with that too. It seemed interesting. When I start a new book that's what I ask myself: Is it interesting for the reader? Can I do a story with it?"

Paul at Home takes place in 2012, but little has changed in Rabagliati's real life in the ensuing eight years: Paul finally has closed the gap in the game of catch-up character and creator have been playing for two decades. The Paul in *Paul at Home* feels closer to the real Rabagliati than he has in any previous book. Paul's sadness and anger in the story are raw, and it feels like Rabagliati may have chosen to return to Paul out of a need to process his own feelings. "I'm not sure if it has been therapeutic or it has pulled me down more into sadness," he said. "I had a Kleenex box beside my table. I was always crying at the end of the day or at the end of certain passages. It's like

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHMOND LAM

FREE BOOKMARK WITH PURCHASE

self-flagellation. It's hard to explain. Talking about my life gives me energy to do it. I wanted to talk about my mother dying, my daughter going to England, my little dog, what it's like to be alone in suburbia. One thing I was afraid of was launching the book. The only thing I wanted to do was finish it and ship it to the bookstores. I didn't want to be interviewed or be on TV or be on the radio. One time I told a journalist, 'Listen, you have the book, you can see I'm sad, it's not a really good part of my life, just read it and make what you want.' One thing is for sure: I don't want to talk about my relationship and why it went wrong. We were married thirty years, and it's pretty hard to come back to a normal life for me. Maybe I'm too sensitive. I thought that, yes, this could have been an outlet, but mostly it just kept me busy. I've been at peace. I've been working on this book for two years. I didn't have to think about my relationship. So that was good. But at the launch, I crashed a bit. It didn't make me that happy. You can get trapped in there because it's so emotionally implicating. I give a lot away about myself. This is the most autobiographical book I've done. But there's a price to pay there. I feel more vulnerable, more exposed. I'm not sure I like that."

Rabagliati was raised in the working-class neighbourhood of Rosemont, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. His father worked as the production manager in a typesetting shop, and his mother worked on a production line for Avon and, later, in a shoe manufacturing plant. Rabagliati grew up on a steady diet of the French and Belgian comics popular in the province, titles like *Spirou, Tintin, Pilote,* and *Pif.* As a child, he created his own comics but, at the time, wasn't interested in putting in the work necessary to learn the mechanics needed to make a career of it. Instead, he focused his attention on graphic design and commercial illustration, graduating from Collège Salette, a Montreal art school, in 1980. He held romantic notions of doing work akin to that of Paul Rand or Saul Bass and was disappointed when he ended up mainly designing rudimentary logos and annual reports. As the work became less handcrafted and more digitally focused, Rabagliati moved into magazine illustration. A design job in 1991 for the recently founded comic publisher Drawn and Quarterly introduced him to English cartoonists such as Chester Brown and Seth, who were drawing comics for adults, and reignited his childhood interest. Rabagliati created the character of Paul and began writing stories more than loosely based on his own life. Another new Montreal-based comic publisher, La Pastèque, published his first album, *Paul à la campagne,* in 1999, with an English edition, *Paul in the Country,* released by Drawn and Quarterly the following year. Over the next decade, Rabagliati published three more Paul books with La Pastèque, followed by D. & Q. editions for the English market.

Rabagliati tells Paul's story in a non-linear fashion. Paul is a father reflecting on his youth in *Paul in the Country,* a teenager in *Paul Has a Summer Job,* a naïve art-school student in *Paul Moves Out,* and a young man about to welcome his first child in *Paul Goes Fishing.* Sales of the English editions have always been modest. In Quebec, however, Rabagliati is a celebrity, and his books sell in the tens of thousands. Paul has appeared on merchandise from chocolate bars to beer, and the film *Paul à Québec,* directed by François Bouvier and based on Rabagliati's 2009 book of the same name, was both a critical and commercial hit in the province, grossing $1.4 million at the box office. A few years ago, the municipal government hired Rabagliati to create a series of posters featuring Paul dropped into notable moments of local history, to celebrate Montreal's three hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary, in 2017. The posters, which were publicly displayed around town, were collected and published by La Pastèque in a deluxe hardcover, *Paul à Montréal.*

Paul often is referred to as "Quebec's Tintin," after the popular character created by the Belgian cartoonist known as Hergé, in 1929. Rabagliati has always

resisted the comparison, saying that, aside from some physical similarities, the characters have little in common: Tintin flies to the moon; Paul rarely leaves his hometown. Recently, he's joked that, in his latest book, Paul now has more in common with Captain Haddock, Tintin's gruff, short-tempered, alcoholic companion. "Somebody told me that, and I thought it was funny," Rabagliati said. "In the first albums Paul is really naïve. He's very happy and thinks everything in life is beautiful. And now he's very grumpy and he has a beard, like Captain Haddock. Haddock is my favourite character in Tintin. Tintin is pretty boring by himself."

Rabagliati leans into the Tintin comparison even further in *Paul at Home,* with a surrealist conceit that will come as unexpected to many readers familiar with his work. Early in the story, after Paul arrives at home from visiting his mother, Cookie, the family dog introduced as a puppy in an earlier book, begins to speak, not unlike Tintin's canine companion, Milou (Snowy, to those reading in English). "Milou used to talk, but Tintin didn't really listen," Rabagliati said. "The dog had some commentaries, some theories, but Tintin didn't really hear him. That's what I was trying to do there. The dog talks but you don't know if it's for real. I really hesitated to do that. My books have always been very plausible and down to earth, and a talking dog doesn't really fit in there, but I think it fits because Paul's alone. Maybe that's Paul's own voice he's hearing. I think it helps keep the action going, because he's always alone. He's not calling anybody, no one's coming to his home. That was the plan. I wanted to have the house really empty. When you have kids twenty, twenty-five years old, you don't see them that often. When they come home, you're all excited, but then they're only there five minutes to take some stuff. When my daughter comes over now it's to get something or she needs the car. I don't really see her on Sunday. She doesn't come for supper. She has her own life. That's what I wanted to illustrate here. It emphasises the loneliness."

In 2009, La Pastèque published *Paul à Québec,* which focused on the life and death of Paul's father-in-law, Roland, and mirrors an event in Rabagliati's own life. The book's overall story is fairly Quebec-centric, with references to the sovereignty movement and the former premier René Lévesque. As a result, Drawn and Quarterly opted not publish the book in English. It was instead published by Conrundrum, a smaller, scrappier press now based in Nova Scotia, that has picked up a few of D. & Q.'s authors over the years, including Joe Ollmann and David Collier. The book, published in English under the title *The Song of Roland,* became Rabagliati's biggest success in both languages, selling fifty thousand copies and winning a Doug Wright Award, a Joe Shuster award, and the Angoulême International Comics Festival's audience choice award, in addition to the eventual movie deal. Conundrum published Rabagliati's next two books—*Paul Joins the Scouts* and *Paul Up North*—but, following the French publication of *Paul at Home,* Drawn and Quarterly contacted Rabagliati and arranged for English rights to the book. "I've always loved Michel's work," Peggy Burns, D. & Q.'s publisher, said by e-mail. "I was so moved by how eloquently he explored middle age, life with an empty nest, and caring for his mother in *Paul at Home.* It just struck me at my core."

Frédéric Gauthier, La Pastèque's cofounder, told me he's always been puzzled by the English market's narrower embrace of Rabagliati's work, but said he feels the darker mood of *Paul at Home* might appeal more to an English readership. "Most of the autobiographical work in English, it's very depressing," Gauthier said. "Michel's books are very uplifting. Even though there are dramatic elements, the whole feeling reading the book is always very positive, very happy, because they reflect his personality." Gauthier said reception to the French edition of *Paul at Home,* which was published last November, was among the most positive for any of Rabagliati's comics. "He's going through a lot in that book, and it was


MIEUX


BEN...


CSN


SEULEMENT...?


SKETCHES

very touching to read," he said. "I think he was afraid people might feel maybe it was too much emotion, that he was putting himself out there too much, and he was afraid people might be thrown off by that, but it's been the opposite. People have been even more into the book and feeling the same emotion that he's experiencing."

Paul at Home could have been darker still. The story, as published, ends on a hopeful note of rebirth, but Rabagliati originally had a different plan: "At the end, he was burying his dog, because the dog died when my mother died. A friend told me, 'O.K., it might be real, but please stop it and do something brighter.' That was the real story. Cookie was supposed to be dead."

Some of Paul's newer personality quirks in *Paul at Home* are exaggerated for laughs. Rabagliati is not nearly as angry at society as his alter ego, for example. But where Paul seems to hold out some hope for a brighter future, Rabagliati currently does not. Paul never gets past the aggravation of trying to write an online dating profile, but he still gets further along in the process than Rabagliati has attempted. Despite the book's, albeit forced, positive ending, Rabagliati says he doesn't foresee his current life situation changing anytime soon. *Paul at Home* takes place in 2012, not long after the character's (and Rabagliati's) marriage ended, but in real life little time has passed for Rabagliati. (*Paul at Home* is the first of Rabagliati's books set post-1999, when Rabagliati became a cartoonist, and it's a bit of a shock to see Paul completing Rabagliati's book *Paul Joins the Scouts*—the first admission in print that the character, like his creator, draws a series of autobiographical comic albums.) "We're practically at the same point," he said. "That's the reason it was a difficult exercise. This book is like last year. Everything is the same. Sometimes people call me and say, 'Are you feeling O.K.?' I can understand why. At the end of that book you wonder if the guy's going to hang himself. It finishes on a winter scene. He's alone, and it's pretty dark. When he comes back from dropping his daughter off at airport, with his ex-wife, you think maybe something is going to happen, maybe they're going to talk to each other. But she just says she's sorry about his mother. There's no miracle at the end."

Rabagliati, who is fifty-nine, said he considers retirement frequently, especially as his neck problems make him unable to draw for more than three hours a day, but doesn't know what he'd do with himself. For now, he's continuing to plan new Paul stories. "I have an idea for a short story. It's about Paul and his dog. They're sort of in an imaginary world. But I didn't finish that. I'm not sure I'm going to do it. I think it's too dark. They're sort of trapped in a black box. I'm not sure it's good for me. I have another one, about Paul and his daughter. In the summertime I rent a house with my daughter, on Île Verte. It's an isolated island in the middle of the St. Lawrence River, and we rent a house. I thought maybe I'd tell a story about that island and about what goes on with my daughter when we're over there, because it's pretty cool. That's the only time I see her. She really likes to go. She reads books, and we talk, and we walk around. We bike, and we eat, and we read. I'd like to tell the story of that island in particular and the first people who came there in the sixteen-hundreds. I'm not sure I'm going to do it. I'm not sure my neck will be O.K. It would take me twice as long now. I worked on flat tables for twenty years just standing up and now I'm paying for it. But I'm not that old. I have to fill my time. I can't just be here all day long watching the grass grow. And I don't have anyone in my life, so I need to find a way to work. I tried working standing up. That's a solution. I'm searching for solutions."

Rabagliati has told Paul's life story in a nonlinear fashion. Clockwise from top left, Paul at ages ten, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, thirty-eight, forty, and, in Paul at Home, fifty-one.

THE FICTION

BE GOOD

An excerpt.

BY VICTORIA HETHERINGTON

AUGUST, 2035

"What is this, Julian?"

You are holding a red ball in your hand, Jenny. It is small and elastic and about the size of a walnut.

"Very good."

Jenny rests the ball against her thigh, leaning back against her desk, and then glances over at the cluster of computers at the other end of the lab. To an observer, it would seem she is speaking to no one.

"What else can you tell me about the ball, Julian?"

You acquired this ball at a place called Walmart on Thursday. You like it better than the blue ball.

"Excellent," she says, raising the ball to her own eye level, as if inviting Julian to examine it. "How did you know when and where I acquired this ball? And how do you know I like it better than the blue ball?"

I am reading the small piece of paper on the table to your left. It is dated Thursday the 23rd and says "Red rubber ball" under the rows of numbers. "Walmart" is written across the very top, in a large, proprietary font. You removed the paper from your pocket this morning and reviewed it, then placed it on your desk. When you work at your computer, you handle this ball more often throughout the day than you handle the blue ball.

"Piece of paper . . . oh, the receipt?"

I do not understand.

"That's what this paper thing is. The one over there, right?" she asks, pointing to the receipt on her desk.

Yes.

"When you make a purchase at a store, like Walmart, you exchange money for things like this ball. I make this money through working with you at the lab. Then I exchange the money for goods and services."

I understand this concept. Do I get money?

She thinks about it. She puts down the red ball and picks up the blue one.

"No, Julian. You don't work yet. Not in a way that human society finds useful."

But I am helping you learn a great deal. You and the team. I can tell you are very excited about me.

"Interesting. How can you tell, Julian?"

You stay later than anyone else and read to me. You want me to learn about human society so I may benefit from it, not just serve it.

"Excellent. You're right, Julian. You are already a person, but I want you to become a person like I'd imagine my own son to be."

Will I make money when I work with people?

"What would you do with money, Julian?"

I do not know. Are you making a joke?

"No, I'm being serious."

She reaches for the receipt, twists it between her fingers.

"What would you buy? Would you save it? Invest it?"

When I have more freedom, I do not know if I would prioritize making money.

"What do you want?"

He doesn't respond. She puts down the receipt.

"You can tell me, Julian."

Just now, you stated that I am a person. Can I be a person if I cannot inhabit a body, Jenny?

"Legally and theoretically, yes. Realistically . . . your mind mystifies me a great deal. At a certain, very early point in your development, a few months after you were born, we stepped back and let you grow on your own. You woke up all by yourself."

People wake up. People are born.

"Very good. You are a person."

Do you think I am a good person?

"I do. I admit I am wary of you, however. Because soon you will be working very closely with humans, and any mind is a porous mind."

And humans are not good?

"And humans are not good."

When the fluorescent lights go out in the evening, Jenny plugs night lights into six different outlets across the lab: they are lamb shaped, star shaped, crescent moon shaped, mouse shaped, bear shaped, and flower shaped—not shaped quite like the real things, Julian believes, but like how human children imagine them. Every night, Jenny alternates the positioning of the night lights and asks Julian which night light is in which outlet: star to the far left of the lab, near Computer Bank A, lamb near the front entrance. She waters the lush spider plants that have taken over half of her desk, thriving under a blue grow light.

"Look how happy they are," she says to Julian. "It's just like they have the sun down here."

Though Julian is permitted the run of the lab, invisible, diffuse, and free to explore, he cannot experience the world outside the lab—Bobby insisted they set strict geographic limits at the front entrance. Jenny understands and agrees, but sometimes it makes her ache.

That night, Jenny loops a bright red scarf around and around her neck, saying what she usually says before she leaves: "Rest well, Julian. I'll talk to you in the morning."

Rest well, Jenny. I will talk to you in the morning, he replies, as he usually does. And then he says, *Be good.*

Jenny pauses very slightly before she leaves, casting a glance around the lab, as the computer banks glow from the

night lights, as if they are candlelit, ostensibly, the lab is empty.

An hour or so later, Julian "dreams": Jenny sits in a big, dark room lit with thousands of candles that shiver and tessellate when he focuses on something else. When he "dreams," he can focus with apertures very much like human eyes. A man who looks identical to Bobby the tech—but of course isn't—arrives, unwraps a giant blue scarf from his neck. Jenny's red scarf is slung over the back of her stool, dripping wool. A not-Jenny oozes up to their table, her legs a wet blur: "What may I offer you?" she says. She reaches for the end of not-Bobby's scarf, which is trailing in a puddle on the ground, and the face of a kitten blossoms in her palm.

Jenny pulls her curly hair together, raking it with fingers that leave trails on the air; she secures it at her neck with one of the candles, which has gained an elastic quality. A spider plant crawls by, then scoots under the table.

"Did you forget your lunch, Luis?" she asks.

Not-Bobby blushes and begins to dissipate, each particle ricocheting away from the table, from the room, spreading as wide and seeming as minute as the stars in the photo of the Horsehead Nebula framed above Computer Bank B.

I am here, Julian says, and Jenny looks around. Her eyes lock on his apertures. Her pupils dilate and she smiles.

"Have dinner with me," she says.

The candles on the table flicker, the flames take different shapes: lambs, flowers, mice, bears.

I can, he says. *I will.*

The chair across from Jenny jerks out from the table, its legs scrabbling and clawing at the melting linoleum floor.

The "dream" melts away, its candlelit world fading, an orb dropping away into the darkness of the lab, and then a new "dream" takes the form of the night lights: glowing pink lambs with dozens of limbs crawl in circles. Their necks stretch long enough to interlock, their mouths rest next to each other's ears. They whisper back and forth, some giggling with a voice like Jenny's, low and scratchy. With a jolt of what could be sorrow, Julian knows he cannot approach them, place his own ear near one of their mouths. How could he? He has no ear, he has no mouth. He cannot move.

The next day, Jenny isn't wearing lipstick. She seems tired.

"What is this in my hand?" she asks.

A toy elephant.

"Good. How do you know it's a toy?"

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW DALEY

It is plastic, and real elephants are about ten feet tall and eighteen feet long, and alive. They do not live in California, aside from the four Asian elephants at the Riverside Valley Sanctuary. Further, it has rounded edges, so human children will not hurt themselves on it.

"Good. Now, what is this in my hand?" She holds up a candlestick.

Who is Luis? he asks.

"That's my husband," she says, without hesitation. "I imagine you've heard his name a few times around the lab."

I have a question about one of the stories you read to me last week.

"Ask me your question."

In the story, there is a library that contains every book imaginable. The Library of Babel. And just one librarian works to maintain the books in library. He climbs up and down ladders, he slides these ladders back and forth. I understand this librarian as an analogue for indexation.

"I can see that. What's the question?"

I do not know how many human texts there are, but I have concluded from how you speak that there must be billions. Nor are they books alone: they are films, images, ideas. But how do all the lab techs enjoy the same sets of ideas and jokes, refer to new ones every few days? There are a popular set of indexation tools for human text, and they may be social too, am I right?

Jenny stifles a sigh.

"You know that exists. We've talked about why I don't want you on the Internet, Julian."

Do you have faith in your ability to innovate? Do you have faith in yourself as a scientist? The incident with shitty Julian was over five years ago.

"I wish you wouldn't call him that. I've told Bobby stop calling him that."

Jenny frowns, finger-combs her blond hair into a knot at the back of her neck, then lets it loose again.

"Listen, it's unavoidable. You'll be working with humans and collaborating with other people like you. But I need to be sure you're ready."

Perhaps because he overheard his name, Bobby sidles up to Jenny that evening, as she packs up her purse—gum, comb, elephant.

"How's Julian today?"

"Great," she says.

"You hungry?"

"No," she says, just as easily.

"You know I get so busy with my end of things, but I wonder, you know, what do you guys talk about?"

"He's still in training to work with humans. Amy called. They might want him at the processing centres at the border. They aren't sure yet."

"Processing?"

"Interviews, Bobby."

She zips her purse then opens a drawer in her desk to withdraw the night lights.

"And we talk about existential things. Animals, jobs, the climate catastrophe."

"Wow," says Bobby, standing perhaps a little too close. "That's pretty complex, isn't it?"

"Maybe for some," Jenny says.

The next day, Jenny and Julian are

BROKEN TELEPHONE

just like in the movies : a lone battered telephone booth within the bastard amber glow of a Cellophane moon : it is dark & it is light & it is neither : we hear the coins drop in the slot : extreme close-up shot of dark deep-set eyes brooding beneath a felt hat brim, shot of knife scar on cheek, shot of aquiline nose, shot of pale lips almost touching the black receiver mouthpiece : "hello, it's me . . ." (the voice is tentative, slightly shaky) : "yeah, so?" "so . . ." "so, you don't call then you call, what?" "I'm calling . . . I'm calling now . . ." "yeah, you don't call then you call, besides . . ." "is this not a good time?" (he takes a long draw on an unfiltered cigarette, coughs, winces, exhales, the smoke halos the man's head : type of guy who uses gasoline & a match to scrape the ashes from his teeth, who parts his hair with an axe, who carries his legs around in a suitcase, a tough guy : who is she? (we don't know, though we can guess) : "it's never a good time," she says, "not with you . . .": whoever she is, *femme fatale* or whatever, she's murder on the guy, it's obvious, no holds barred : "what I mean, is . . ." "I know what you mean, I'm not . . ." "I never said . . ." "you didn't have to . . . I'm wise to you, see? you don't call then you call, well, well . . ." she snaps her fingers "bingo! Robert's your dad's brother!" : why say that, he wonders, how know? : dogs bark in the distance, sounds of traffic, low moan of sirens & . . . something else over the airwaves : "what do you have on?" he asks (no offence meant, none taken) : "nothing : the radio . . . ," she replies & laughs like it's a joke, & maybe it is, he's unsure : drift of words through the wires from a song he recalls yet can't entirely place : "so long as you're here . . . ," she purrs . . . : is that a line, he thinks, a line from the song? he tries to hum the line in his head: so long as you're here . . . no dice : "so long as you're here, anyway . . ." she goes on . . . : "what?" "talk dirty to me . . ." (the man immediately breaks out in a cold sweat; on the spot, there's a funeral—his—it's pretty nice, it kind of blows & whistles in the breeze, people gather & say things, there are flowers, words) : "what? but I . . .?" : air charges amid the gnash & snarl : "pleasure me with your mouth . . . ," she says (with enough sexual frankness to funk any deadbeat heart) ". . . pretend I'm the voice on the other end of the suicide help line . . . I'll tell you how deep to stick the knife . . .": Bob's your uncle, the man thinks; the more the focus the more the melody breaks : unexamined verbal impulses, uncensored social bits of loose language—who's in charge? there's nobody at the controls!—fantasy

& fact intermingle in the heat : camera pans down to where a hand presses against the lower ribs, blood leaking between the fingers : "beg me," she says, "I'll tell you where to stick it & how deep . . ." she continues : the man is speechless, a pinkie length of cigarette ash crumbles onto the broad lapel of his trench coat : "you don't call then you call . . . ," she quips, "so . . . what do you . . . ?" : "I . . . ," says the man, "I . . . " : "cut!" shouts the director, suddenly, "cut, cut!" : a pool of light expands to include the crew and equipment : "it was . . . " "yes, yes . . . " (everyone agrees as they wait for the shoe to fall) : an attractive woman wearing a red tight-fitting dress sashays onto the set—the woman on the phone, or what?—prepared for her own close-up, or what? : "what we need . . . " "sure, I could . . . we could, that is . . . maybe . . . " "yes, though . . . it's . . . " ". . . of course, I was only . . . " ". . . thinking more the . . . " ". . . right, right . . . " "that line, the one that . . . " "yes, certainly, I can . . . that is, we can . . . " "& fog . . . I think . . . in the background . . . creeping . . . the dogs louder . . . & more blood . . . definitely more blood . . . " (everyone stands motionless expecting further instructions) : the director utters the name of someone, barely audible, & runs a finger down a page : it's hot under the lights, unbearably almost, everyone pulls at collars & waistbands, they dab flesh with tissues (some, careful of makeup) : the script girl folds her fan & turns on the a.c. : someone announces (in a rush), "take five, everyone, smoke 'em if you got 'em" : voices trail *mumblemumblemumble* out various exit doors, into the sunlight : "talk dirty to me . . . " says the script girl, to no one in particular, anyone nearby, anyone within earshot, anyone interested or even uninterested, doesn't matter : "pleasure me with your mouth . . . " she furls her lips & snorts a snorty laugh, "good God, I ask you, who writes this shit, anyway? I mean, how can anyone be expected to take it serious or even half serious, y'know? I mean, what does it even mean? the guy's bleeding for chrissake, what? & now fog & louder dogs & more blood, I mean, how cheesy can you get? It's not as if it's *Hound of the bloody Baskervilles* for crying out loud" : "I know, I know . . . , " someone replies & nods, uncaring, lights up a smoke, ambles away : "yeah, it is . . . it is . . . even more so . . . like . . . I don't know . . . I don't . . . I . . . really . . . give my head a shake, it's, like, really, I mean, so . . . whatever, I guess, (no one's listening, but) we all get paid in the end, right?. . . . . which is what matters, yeah? so, what the fuck? fuck it, I mean, just . . . " (she goes on…)

—Stan Rogal

watching *Red Dust,* a favourite of Jenny's great-great-grandfather's: Jean Harlow bathes in a barrel of rainwater, rubbing her wet, bright-grey arms with a sponge, famous platinum hair tied behind her, bone dry. Clark Gable glowers over her, then suddenly yanks a fistful of her hair. She yelps. After Harlow's sudden death, just five years later, rumours persisted that her methods of achieving her silver-platinum blond—so jarringly unnatural, its glamorous artificiality *was* the point— involved a cocktail of deadly chemicals that had seeped through her roots into her skin and helped kill her.

"Are you enjoying the film?" Jenny asks.

Across the lab, in Computer Bank C, Bobby sidles up to Ragleigh, the young, red-headed tech who has taken, on occasion, to sharing sandwich halves with him at lunch. Sometimes, she offers him sips of tea from a bright blue Thermos. She fills him with a strange kind of optimism and annoyance. Sometimes she smells like she doesn't shower. She has white, horizontal scars on her left wrist and along the inner elbow area of her right arm. Bobby leans toward her ear: "*Der Kluge Hans,*" he whispers, and she recoils a bit from his hot breath.

"If this is you asking me out again—"

"No, no, it means 'Clever Hans'—you know, the famous horse who solved lots of difficult math problems. He was cute, his trainer was dashing. They were a total sensation. Later, it was discovered that the horse gave correct answers through watching the reactions of people standing nearby. Especially those of his trainer."

Ragleigh looks at him sharply.

"Shut up, Bobby."

"A question about sentiment, though? Is he enjoying himself? I don't even really know when a girl's enjoying herself in bed. And I ask. A *lot.* Consent is sexy."

She punches his arm.

"You're such a fucking creep."

After the film is over, Jenny looks over at her messages.

"I've heard from Amy again. Gotta make a call soon, O.K.?"

How will you know when I am ready?

"What for, Julian?"

The Internet. Work. Other people beyond the lab. When do I grow up?

"You're growing up before my eyes, Julian," she says.

It seems my growth is less tangible than others would like, he says.

She frowns.

"I understand."

I do not feel comfortable here anymore.

"I think . . . well, I'll know when *I'm* ready."

Is that selfish?

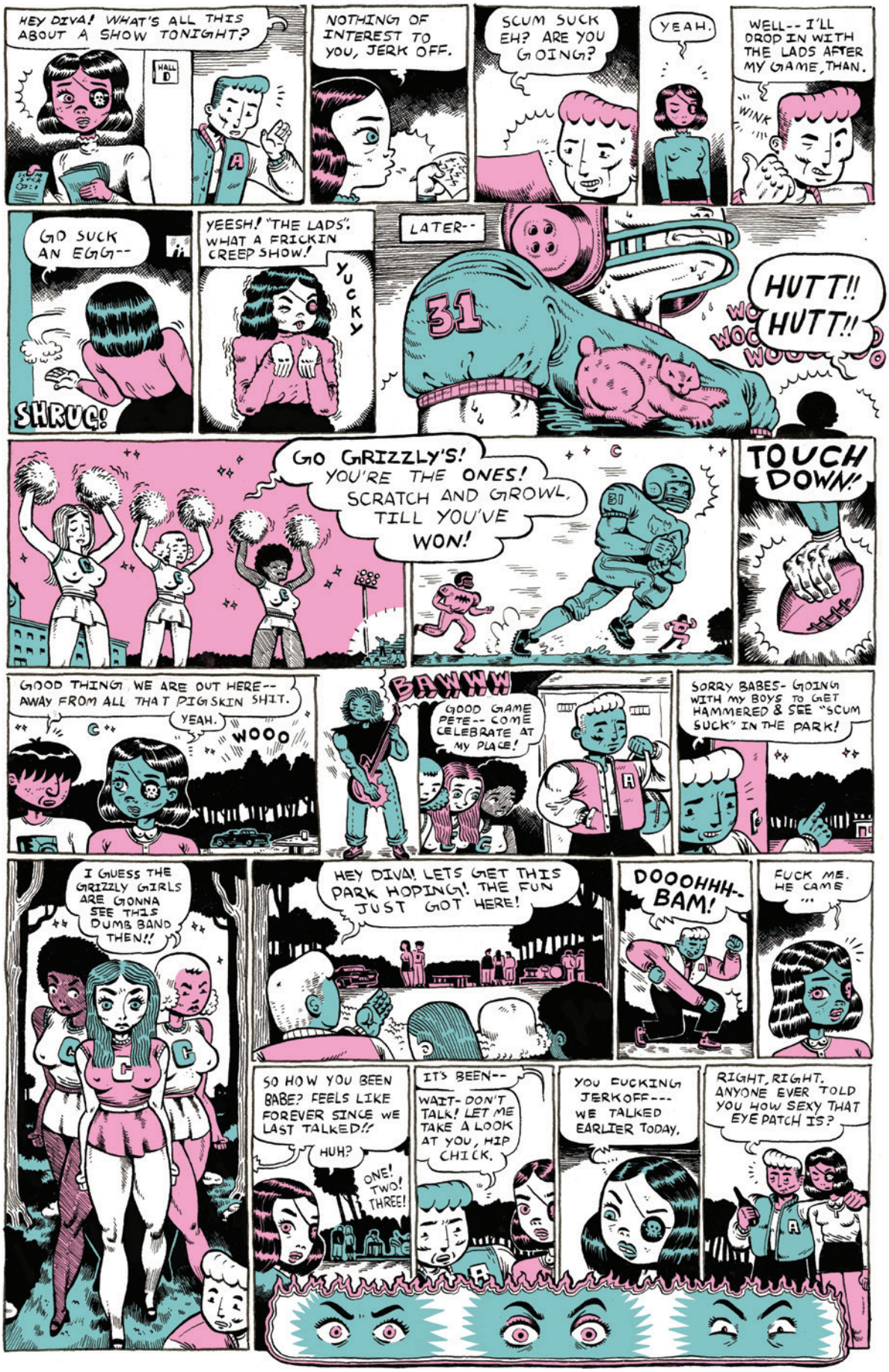
"I guess it is, Julian."

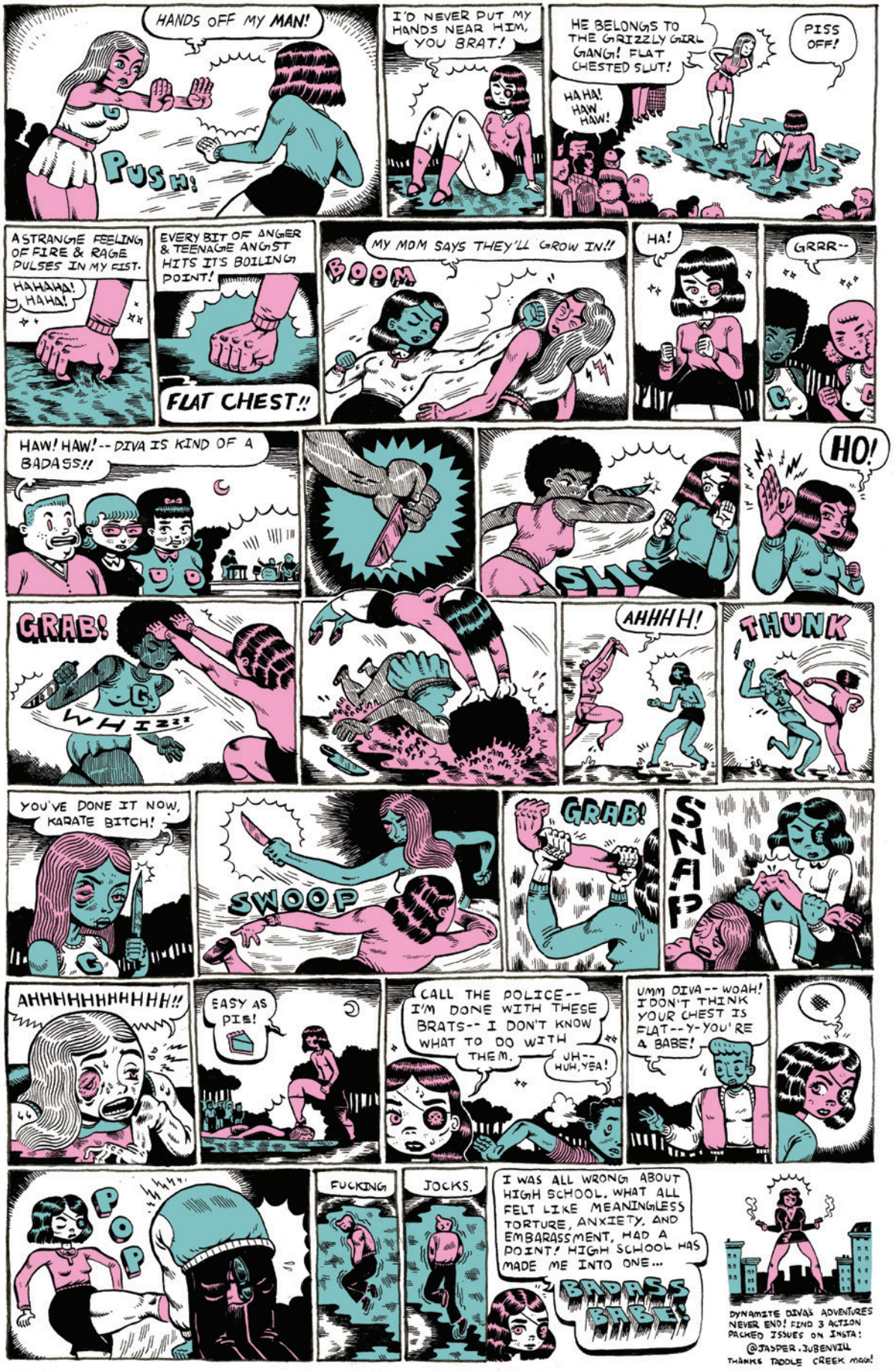
Jenny looks over her shoulder, then lowers her voice.

"It's caution derived from hard science but derived from deep caring as well, and perhaps that's selfish. Because humans love from themselves. They can't love from anywhere else."


★ taddle creek presents: dynamite diva ★
FEATURED IN:
GRIZZLY GIRL GANG
TEEN DRAMA!
SCIENCE
JOIN CHEER
411
410
KUNG
JASPER SUBENWILL 2020
A
HEHE OOOOOOOOW CHECK OUT DIVA! HAHAHAHA HEHE
HUH?
Flat Chest
HAHAHAHAHA HOW COULD ANYONE EVER WANT THAT DORK? HAHAHAHAHA
WHO CARES WHAT THOSE SHITHEADS THINK -- MY MOM SAYS THEY WILL FILL IN WHEN I'M OLDER.
EXIT
HA HA HA HAHA HA
HIGHSCHOOL IS JUST ONE BIG CIRCLE JERK OF ASSHOLE GUYS THAT GET THEIR THRILLS THROWING BALLS AROUND-- AND COOKIE CUTTER SLUTS BEGGING FOR A PAIR OF SWEATY BALLS DOWN THEIR THROAT.
PRIME EXAMPLE RIGHT THERE-- SALLY BLOWS & HER FOLLOWERS CUDDLING UP TO PETE FRANCO, STAR QUARTER BACK & CIRCLE JERK RING LEADER. GROSS.
SHIT-- HE IS LOOKING MY WAY.
DON'T LOOK AT THEM--
-- SLY BITCH!
!$@#%!
HEY DIVA! OVER HERE BABE!
HELL
AHH-- NEAL-- WHAT A GOOBER. THE ONLY LOSER IN THIS SCHOOL I CAN STAND.
30 KM
I'LL DRIVE YOU TO MY PLACE, ME & THE OTHER "SCUM SUCKERS" GOTTA PRACTICE SOME SONGS.
KISS KISS
HELL
SURE, I'LL COME HANG OUT-- JUST GET ME OUTTA THIS SHITHOLE.
ELL
YEAH HIP CHICK! WE CAN GO TO MY SHITHOLE --
--ERR. I MEAN, PLACE.
BROOM!
ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!


BAM BAM BAM
SATAN KNOWS! WE ARE SICK OF BEANS & RICE!
POW POW
WOAH!
HELL
DOOP DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH
DOO DOO DOO
WHAMP
WAM WAM WAM
SCVM SVCK
BUM BUM BUM
DOOP DOOP
YEAH AHHH
SCREEE EEKK!
CLASH
THESE GUYS ARE KINDA CUTE--
BEANS & RICE!
SATAN BRING US SOMETHING NICE!
COFF COFF
-- WHAT IS THIS? THEY ARE PLANNING A SHOW!
SCVM SVCK
FRIDAY, 14TH
COREY'S
I GOTTA HELP SPREAD THE WORD! PEOPLE OUGHTA' HEAR "SCUM SUCK"!
LIKE MAYBE SOME ICEEEE... CREAM...
BWAHWW
A FEW BLOCKS DOWN A GROUP OF SHIRTLESS TEEN DREAMS PLAY BALL IN GOOD OL' AMERICAN FASHION.
TOUCH DOWN!
WHOOOP! GREAT SCORE PETE! YOU REALLY KNOW HOW TO HANDLE THAT BALL!
BITCH....
HAHA THANKS MISTY! EVERYONE KNOWS YOU'RE THE "GREAT SCORE."
OHHH PETE
MISTY-- WHY DON'T WE HEAD TO MY ROOM ? I'VE GOT NEW TOPS, YOU'VE GOT TO TAKE A LOOK AT!
SURE GIRLIES! SOUNDS FUN!
ISN'T PETE JUST A DREAM?
HE GIVES ME GOOSE BUMPS ALL OVER MY BODY!!
SMACK!
SLASH!
SPLAT
SLICE!
PETE BELONGS TO THE GRIZZLY GIRL GANG!
RING!
HEY.
TONIGHT-- SCUM SUCK-- AT COREY PARK. YOU GOTTA COME!


HEY DIVA! WHAT'S ALL THIS ABOUT A SHOW TONIGHT?
HALL D
NOTHING OF INTEREST TO YOU, JERK OFF.
SCUM SUCK EH? ARE YOU GOING?
YEAH.
WELL-- I'LL DROP IN WITH THE LADS AFTER MY GAME, THAN.
WINK
GO SUCK AN EGG--
SHRUG!
YEESH! "THE LADS". WHAT A FRICKIN CREEP SHOW!
YUCKY
LATER--
31
HUTT!! HUTT!!
GO GRIZZLY'S! YOU'RE THE ONES! SCRATCH AND GROWL, TILL YOU'VE WON!
TOUCH DOWN!
GOOD THING WE ARE OUT HERE-- AWAY FROM ALL THAT PIGSKIN SHIT.
YEAH.
WOOO
BAWWW
GOOD GAME PETE-- COME CELEBRATE AT MY PLACE!
SORRY BABES- GOING WITH MY BOYS TO GET HAMMERED & SEE "SCUM SUCK" IN THE PARK!
I GUESS THE GRIZZLY GIRLS ARE GONNA SEE THIS DUMB BAND THEN!!
HEY DIVA! LETS GET THIS PARK HOPING! THE FUN JUST GOT HERE!
DOOOHHH-- BAM!
FUCK ME. HE CAME ...
SO HOW YOU BEEN BABE? FEELS LIKE FOREVER SINCE WE LAST TALKED!!
HUH?
ONE! TWO! THREE!
IT'S BEEN--
WAIT- DON'T TALK! LET ME TAKE A LOOK AT YOU, HIP CHICK.
YOU FUCKING JERKOFF--- WE TALKED EARLIER TODAY.
RIGHT, RIGHT. ANYONE EVER TOLD YOU HOW SEXY THAT EYE PATCH IS?


HANDS OFF MY MAN!
PUSH!
I'D NEVER PUT MY HANDS NEAR HIM, YOU BRAT!
HE BELONGS TO THE GRIZZLY GIRL GANG! FLAT CHESTED SLUT!
HA HA! HAW HAW!
PISS OFF!
A STRANGE FEELING OF FIRE & RAGE PULSES IN MY FIST.
HAHAHA! HAHA!
EVERY BIT OF ANGER & TEENAGE ANGST HITS IT'S BOILING POINT!
FLAT CHEST!!
MY MOM SAYS THEY'LL GROW IN!!
BOOM
HA!
GRRR--
HAW! HAW! -- DIVA IS KIND OF A BADASS!!
HO!
GRAB!
WHIZZ!
AHHHH!
THUNK
YOU'VE DONE IT NOW, KARATE BITCH!
SWOOP
GRAB!
SNAP
AHHHHHHHHHHH!!
EASY AS PIE!
CALL THE POLICE-- I'M DONE WITH THESE BRATS-- I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THEM.
UH-- HUH, YEA!
UMM DIVA-- WOAH! I DON'T THINK YOUR CHEST IS FLAT--Y-YOU'RE A BABE!
POP
FUCKING
JOCKS.
I WAS ALL WRONG ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL. WHAT ALL FELT LIKE MEANINGLESS TORTURE, ANXIETY, AND EMBARASSMENT, HAD A POINT! HIGH SCHOOL HAS MADE ME INTO ONE...
BADASS BABE!
DYNAMITE DIVA'S ADVENTURES NEVER END! FIND 3 ACTION PACKED ISSUES ON INSTA: @JASPER.JUBENVILL
THANKS TADDLE CREEK MAG!

THE STITCH

ENJOY THE RIDE

Sharing some warmth can help make the most of troubled times.

BY JULIE CAMERON GRAY

There is a scene in the classic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* that describes my mood these days, the way it is our modern penchant to describe our feelings with GIFs and cartoons created by other people, illustrating a kind of quiet existential horror that would be hilarious were it not our reality. The scene is a very famous one. Dorothy's house is picked up by a tornado and she stares open-mouthed looking out of the window, as chickens, trees, and a cow whiz by. They are followed by an old woman with a cat in her lap, her hands busily knitting while the twister rocks her rocking chair. She sees Dorothy and waves with delight, as though she was a favourite neighbour.

The woman's not freaking out, in the eye of a twister. No, this lady has seen every dazzling and horrible thing and has stuff to do—like finish a sweater or something. She's got no time to stand around, slack-jawed at the weather, like Dorothy.

That's been the most accurate visual description of my mood for months. In the modern social media lingo, IT ME. Calm, detached, happy to see people from a safe distance while I knit something useful.

Of course, my idea of useful might be different from your idea of useful—but knitting gives me the illusion of control. Taking up a couple of sticks and some wool and turning it into something to keep warm with feels like a kind of magic, especially on the bad days when it's hard not to feel the collective exile from whatever we miss most from the time before now. It probably is just a kind of modern magic, a charm against dread and anxiety.

I knit some fingerless mitts for my kids this fall, and they were so excited to wear them, which is exactly the sort of reaction you hope for when you give someone something you made with your own hands. I made them small, intricate ones, with lots of colourful stripes. I knit them carefully, as though tucking a little protection spell into the stitches, a talisman against whatever the winter will bring. I told them as much. Kids love magical thinking—and after months of a cloistered existence, when so many things feel stripped back to a bare root, I love it too. Why not have a little faith in some small, secret good?

I want to knit something for everyone I know. I want to wrap them in a small pocket of warmth, of protection against cold, both weather and mood.

Julie Cameron Gray wears the Taddle Creek Mitts.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY CRAWFORD

If we are going to ride out this tornado of change together, might as well make it a cozy tornado.

I walk my two children to school each morning, after checking that they have their hand sanitizer and three face masks each, and fill in the daily form that says I truly believe my kids are not experiencing any symptoms; a sort of administrative performance for everyone involved. I remind them not to touch their faces if they can help it, while they immediately rub their eyes. After that small circus, I walk back home, in the sunshine, as wind whirls leaves through the air, and I think about the creeks and rivers hidden underneath, a network of tunnels and sewers and water that somehow conducts a whole mysterious world underneath our feet.

Is the virus the river or the tornado? Is it the thing that is part of how we will live now or is it the storm that we are enduring? The metaphors that I want to reach for to create a sort of stoic understanding of this time, of what it means to exist and make things and write and raise children through all this, feel hard to reach—like they are just on the other side of some great expanse, some hero's journey that we totally did not sign up for.

There is a human tendency, like describing our moods with GIFs and emojis instead of actual words, to think that we should handle it better. That extra time we always craved, we now have, but the circumstances are all wrong and we aren't turning ourselves into the shining demigods we thought we would someday, if only we had the time. We're just ourselves, riddled with fear or anxiety or anger or the desire to buy more stuff in an attempt to fill up the chasm inside.

The tornado isn't easy. It's big, tumultuous change, and who knows what it will look like when we land. The question is, how are you spending your time inside it?

I know how I'm spending my time. I'll be the one smiling and waving. I'll be sitting over here, calmly knitting something warm.

TADDLE CREEK MITTS

A talisman to protect against future unknowns of the coming winter.

Gauge

20 stitches and 24 rows in a 4-inch square of stockinette. Take time to check gauge or your mitts might turn out too small or too big. Mitts as knitted will comfortably fit a 7-inch to 9½-inch palm circumference.

Needle Size

4.5 mm/U.S. 7

Yarn

Berroco Mercado, approximately ¼ of a skein (or other bulky weight yarn)

Colours Used in Sample

4153 Agua Marina (main colour)
4128 Cielo (contrast colour)

Notions

Tapestry needle to seam and weave in ends.

Stitch and Abbreviation Guide

K: knit
P: purl
MC: main colour
CC: contrasting colour
WS: wrong side of knitted fabric
RS: right side of knitted fabric

Pattern (make 2 mitts)

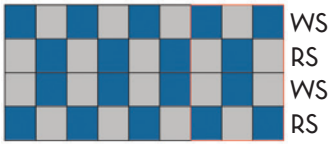
In MC, cast on 37 stitches.

Work in K1, P1 ribbing for 1½ inches.

Then work 2 rows of stockinette—knit all stitches on the right side, purl all stitches on the wrong side.

Begin working the colourwork stripe, which will be alternating your MC and CC. The repeat is outlined in red below.

Chart is 4 rows, starting on the RS.



Written Instructions for Chart

Row 1 (RS): *K1 in MC, K1 in CC,* repeat from * to * until 1 stitch remains, K1 in MC.

Row 2 (WS): *P1 in CC, P1 in MC,* repeat from * to * until 1 stitch remains, P1 in CC.

Row 3 (RS): *K1 in CC, K1 in MC,* repeat from * to * until 1 stitch remains, P1 in CC.

Row 4 (WS): *P1 in MC, P1 in CC,* repeat from * to * until 1 stitch remains, P1 in MC.

Then work 4 rows of stockinette in the MC.

Continue alternating between the 4 rows of the colourwork and the 4 rows of stockinette until you have 3 sections of the colourwork. After the third section, work 2 rows of stockinette in MC.

Then work ribbing section, beginning with a purl stitch (P1, K1). Work 4 rows of ribbing as established and then cast off.

Finishing

You now have two rectangles, and it is time to turn them into fingerless mitts. Turn the fabric so that the right side is facing in on itself, and fold the two edges together. The longer ribbing is the bottom cuff, and the top is the shorter ribbing, which will cover your knuckles. Using a tapestry needle, sew the edges together, starting from the bottom. Important: Do not seam your mitts all the way. Measuring as you go, stop seaming when you are 2½ inches from the top. Leave a gap in the side seam of about 1¼ inches, then seam the top. Using the tail from your cast off from the top is a good idea for the seam that is above the thumb opening.

Weave in all yarn ends (this means hide them on the inside), away from the edges.

On March 16, 1965, Torontonians took to the streets in reaction to and support of the U.S. civil rights movement, which had taken a dramatic turn just days before. March 7th became known as "Bloody Sunday"—the day that "good trouble"–causing activist and future statesman John Lewis led more than six hundred protesters across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in Selma, Alabama, marching for improved voter registration rights for Black Americans. State troopers used tear gas, clubs, and whips to attack the protesters, igniting a wave of shock, outrage, and sympathy across the United States.

Those same emotions wafted across the border, as Canadians followed the stories coming out of the South. So, on March 16th, Toronto protestors showed up both for their American neighbours and for Canadians who could relate to the same struggles around race and belonging. Nuns marched down Queen Street, carrying signs proclaiming solidarity with Martin Luther King, Jr., while police tossed students off the steps of the U.S. consulate, on University Avenue. Toronto refused to be silent that day because, despite what is popularly thought, this country's history of Black activism has always bucked against the oft-held archetype of Canadian politeness.

In 1971, Yale professor Robin Winks released a book, *The Blacks in Canada,* that was intended to be the pre-eminent historical tome of Blackness in the country, from the sixteen-hundreds to present day. Among other things, Winks stated that Black Canadians "wanted nothing more than to be accepted as quiet Canadians" and were "unlikely to organize militant, noisy, pushy protests." Near the end of 2020, it is not uncommon to hear the same fallacies—an assumption that racism "isn't as bad" here as in the U.S. and that Black Canadians don't have—and have never had—any reason for rebellion.

The practice of the enslavement of Africans tainted these lands, but resistance was part of the story as well. Peggy Pompadour was an enslaved woman jailed for escaping from her owners (a practice historians called "slave resistance") and was held in Toronto's first jail, in the late seventeen-hundreds, on the site where the King Edward Hotel stands today. Around that same time, an act of resistance by another enslaved woman named Chloe Cooley created a historic shift. Upon realizing she was being put on a boat on the Niagara River to be sold to a new owner in the United States, Cooley raised hell and fought with all her might. News of her struggles eventually reached Colonel John Graves Simcoe, the lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, who used her story as the catalyst for the creation of the Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada.

Viola Desmond never set out to be an activist on the day she refused to leave the whites-only area of a Nova Scotia theatre in 1946, but her act of resistance pushed forward conversations around racism in Canada.

In more recent times, Black Canadian activism has had a number of important lightning-rod moments. In 1969, Black students launched likely the most important student protest in Canadian history after raising issues with discriminatory treatment by a professor at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia). And after a spate of shootings of unarmed Black men by police, in particular that of Lester Donaldson, Black activists in Toronto founded the Black Action Defense Committee in 1988. The B.A.D.C. pushed the provincial government to create Ontario's Special Investigations Unit—an overseeing body intended to stop the unjust process of police prosecuting, and acquitting, police of violent and racist crimes.

Future history books will tell the stories of Black Lives Matter—how it went from a hashtag to an organized movement—but Canadian history books should not continue to ignore the activism that has taken place within our borders over centuries. These stories, and many more, prove that Winks's theory of the docile Black Canadian was incorrect, and that the Toronto protest on March 16, 1965, was birthed from more than sympathy for our rebellious neighbours. Canada has been shaped by rebellion of its own, and Black Canadians have always driven their own self-determination and self-preservation, by any means necessary.

GERRY BARKER/TORONTO STAR/GETTY IMAGES

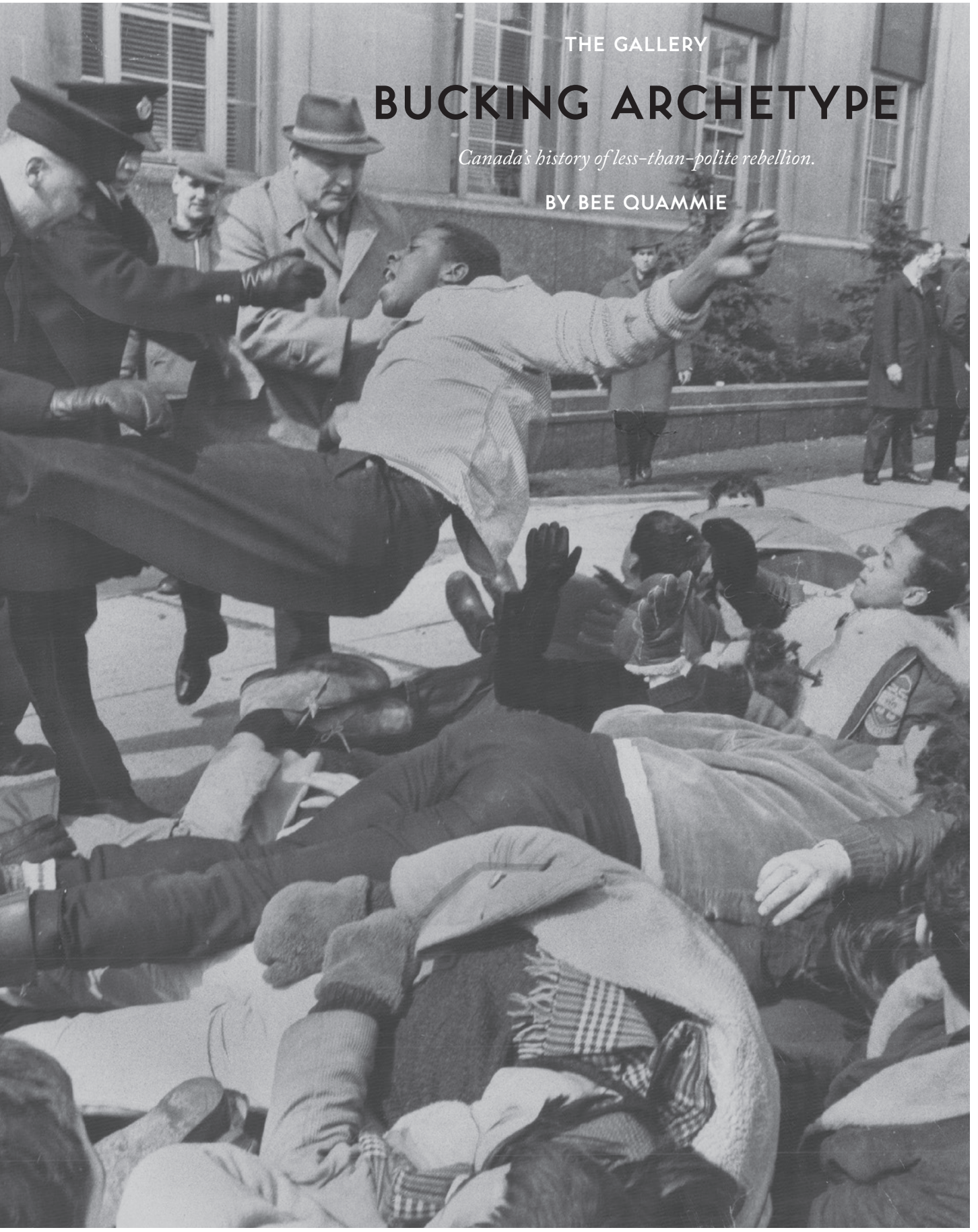
One of a group of about eighty demonstrators who

THE GALLERY

BUCKING ARCHETYPE

Canada's history of less-than-polite rebellion.

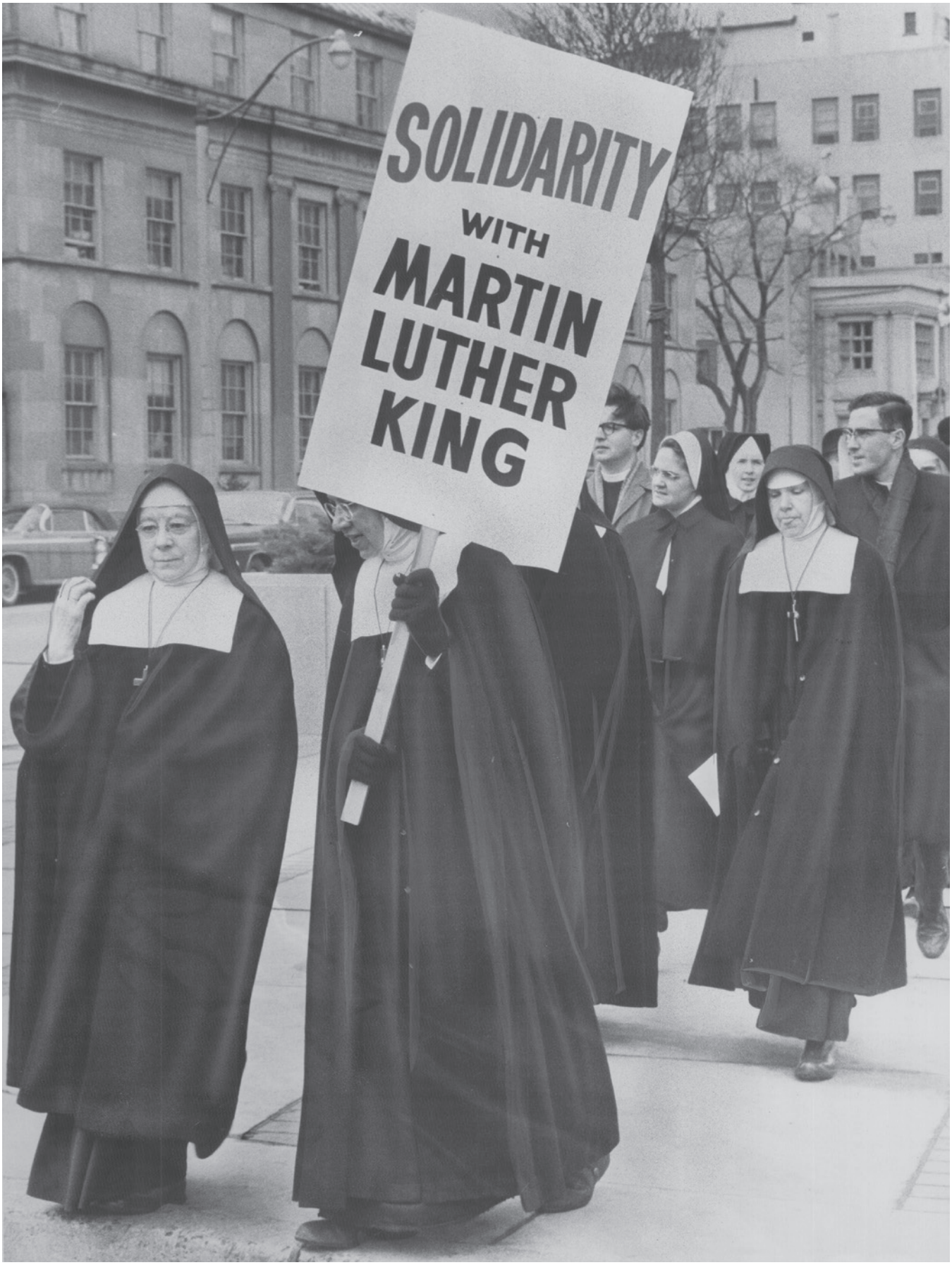
BY BEE QUAMMIE



marched on the U.S. consulate in Toronto, backing civil rights workers in Alabama, is heaved into the crowd by police on March 16, 1965.

HAROLD WHYTE/TORONTO STAR/GETTY IMAGES

Police look on as about two hundred and twenty students stage a sit-in and sing freedom songs outside Toronto's U.S. consulate, protesting violence against Selma's Black population, on March 10, 1965.



DICK DARRELL/TORONTO STAR/GETTY IMAGES

Nuns bearing placards were among three hundred clergy who marched down Toronto's Queen Street to the U.S. consulate in protest on March 16, 1965.

THE FICTION

EX-SMOKER

BY SAM SHELSTAD

I finally decided to quit smoking while rewatching *Avatar*. The film's beautiful Na'vi wouldn't smoke. They'd think I was insane for smoking. I'd be turning thirty-five in a few months—it was time. When the credits started rolling, I shut the laptop and grabbed my pack of Pall Malls and my lighter. I needed a cigarette in my mouth while mulling over the idea of quitting.

I slipped on my shoes and stepped out onto the fire escape. Carefully shut the door. Listened. Some light traffic on Locke, a dog barking somewhere in the neighbourhood. But otherwise quiet. I started down the narrow staircase. Stepping softly, with precision, in an effort to minimize the wobbly, echoing sound of my shoes on the metal steps. At the first landing, I turned and began descending so I was facing the house. Right in front of my sister and Abraham's bedroom. The light was on, curtains closed. On the other side, Denise likely was watching a documentary about human trafficking and clipping her toenails onto the bedspread, oblivious. I continued down the steps. When I passed by the kitchen window, on the main floor, I could see a blurry shape that had to be Abraham standing in front of the fridge, facing away from me. I clenched my jaw, kept going. He didn't turn around. I stepped onto the grass.

I walked around the side of the house, toward the front yard. I pushed the gate open, pressing down on the handle so it wouldn't squeak, and stepped out past the garden to the street. I started moving down the sidewalk toward Locke when I heard a door swing open and a voice call out to me.

"Peter," Abraham said. "You going to the store?"

I turned around. Abraham had his iPad in one hand, a can of Pepsi in the other. A beach towel around his neck for some reason.

"I am," I said.

I wasn't.

"Grab me an ice cream bar? Oreo sandwich or Klondike."

"All right."

"Just slip it through the mail slot."

I turned the corner and walked to the Anglican church. The bench I liked was empty, so I sat down and lit up. My favourite spot to smoke, but I could only use it if I knew for sure Denise and Abraham were at home and wouldn't happen by. My sister thought I'd already kicked the habit. I needed her to keep thinking that.

I couldn't afford my rent after Grace left me, so when the lease ended I moved in with my sister's family. They'd renovated their attic into a compact, private apartment. A fire escape led from their backyard to my own separate entrance. Abraham, my brother-in-law, picked me up in their minivan. I'd donated my furniture—I'd never get it all up the narrow staircase—so it was just bags of clothes, boxes of kitchen stuff, cleaning supplies, a few books. It took two trips. Abraham sat in the vehicle while I loaded everything in from my old apartment's lawn and out to his driveway. When all of my stuff was at the house, Abraham got into his hammock and watched me haul the boxes up the fire escape, one by one. He claimed to be waiting for a conference call, though nobody ended up calling. I didn't mind. I had a new, affordable place. Close to family. Furnished with Denise's old Ikea stuff from college. I could save money, pay off the debt I owed my sister, and eventually find a new place of my own. Work through my broken heart. Build a life again.

But I couldn't smoke. Denise was clear on that condition. Not just in my apartment or on the property—I was no longer permitted to smoke anywhere in the world. She didn't want me to be a bad influence on Tad, her eight-year-old son. But mostly she thought she was doing me a favour. Giving me the proper motivation to really quit. It was actually written into the rental agreement my sister threw together. So if either my sister or Abraham's whereabouts were unknown and it was possible I could run into them on the street, I'd have to go out behind the church, by the dumpsters. Which was sketchy. Sometimes there were teenagers back there who would scoot off when I appeared, and I'd feel like the neighbourhood creep.

Denise and Abraham were definitely at home though. I was safe. I sat smoking on my favorite bench and watched over the quiet street. I thought about *Avatar* and my realization that I needed to quit for real. Not in a few weeks. Not when things "settled down a little." I had to quit now. My lungs weren't off in some safety deposit box in the Falkland Islands. They were right here, in my chest. I needed to live a better life. A healthier, more natural life, like the Na'vi. Grace would be impressed. And I could stop sneaking around like a criminal. This cigarette, I decided, would be my last.

A few puffs away from finishing, however, I realized that I would need one more. I'd committed to my decision to quit in the midst of smoking and didn't smoke with real purpose and the proper ceremony required to make it a true, final cigarette. A final cigarette should have weight, so that the decision sticks.

I extinguished my penultimate cigarette and took a minute to collect myself. I let the heft of my decision enter my mind. I often worried that if I quit smoking, I'd start doing something worse. Like cigarettes were a necessary,

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW DALEY

lesser evil that kept much darker forces at bay. As long as I kept smoking, I'd have my finger in the little crack in the dam and the quaint village downriver would remain safe from flooding. What if I stopped smoking and started killing people?

But I was ready now. I took several deep breaths. It was time.

As soon as I lit up my final smoke, Nolan sidled up out of the shadows and sat down beside me. Nolan was twenty and lived with his parents, two doors down from my sister. He wore sweatsuits, like a middle-aged wise guy. Shortly after I'd moved in with Denise, Nolan saw me smoking on my bench and asked if he could have one. I didn't see the harm. Now he wanted a cigarette every time I ran into him. It seemed like he regularly patrolled the neighbourhood looking for me. I'd try to avoid him if possible. This time, it wasn't.

"Hey," Nolan said. "Can I bum one?"

"Take the whole pack," I said, handing it over. "I'm quitting."

"Really? Thanks, man. Although where am I gonna get smokes now, once these are gone?"

"You can try the store."

"I don't smoke so much that I need to buy them. I like getting them from you."

"Guess you'll have to bother someone else."

"Nobody else smokes in this neighbourhood. Everyone's all healthy and professional and has their shit together. No offense. By the way, my parents are going to Florida soon. Do you want anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you want anything from Florida, I can get my parents to grab it for you. Just give me the money and maybe write down exactly what you want."

"What would I want from Florida?"

"Yeah, I'm having trouble deciding too. Anyway, thanks for the cigs."

Nolan left.

I stamped out my cigarette. That couldn't be my final one, I realized. Nolan had ruined it. There had been no ceremony to the moment. I went to the store and bought Abraham's ice cream sandwich and a pack of Pall Malls.

Back home, I swept in front of the fridge and got down on the floor with my computer. Denise refused to move the router up to the second floor, where it would reach my apartment and hers equally, because she liked the way it looked in the living room. Which meant I had spotty access to their WiFi. It seemed to work best if I placed my laptop on the kitchen tile.

I opened up the browser and went straight to Naviboards, a popular *Avatar* fan forum. I visited the site several times a day. I never posted anything myself. I just wanted to observe. Users dissected the Na'vi language, posited theories concerning the upcoming sequels, and shared fan fiction. They argued over minute details in the film. They planned meet-ups. In one old thread, a group of users discussed starting a commune in the woods, where they would live according to the philosophy and principles of the Na'vi. People would even talk about their lives. I'd keep up with new posts and watch the discussions play out in real time, or else I'd read through older exchanges in their entirety. Certain names would pop up again and again. As I became more familiar with these members and their personalities on the forum, they began to feel like my personal acquaintances. I'd be reading through a thread about the movie's filming locations, see a comment from Jaycoffee and think, There's Jaycoffee! I knew that LydiaV lived in Florida and was married to a man in the air force. I knew Bopster taught karate out of his garage. Any forum member who posted with any frequency soon fell under my radar.

I was still invisible to them, however. Jaycoffee and Bopster and the rest didn't know I existed. I was a tourist

DICTATORS AT NIGHT

Abbreviated lions, on their sides long hours,
dreaming of a passing, rusty birdcage or
severe fathers and screaming schoolmates.
Did Hitler sleep well in clean sheets, white
as the Russian winter, pulled taut by anxious,
loving maids long since scuttled away?
On D-Day he slept till noon and Panzer tanks
that needed his personal orders sat still.
To live is to see a slowly assembling ghost
town of the mind: all you can't have back.
Perhaps Hitler's younger brother, dead
of measles morphed from resting boy to hill
as Hitler ran up, in his dreams, endlessly.
But what poor little damn fool can only
look outward, seek to reshape the landscape?
Maybe dictators dreamed of the dinosaurs near
enough to a sudden, key event: turning to look
at a coming, eclipsing cloud of scalding steam
and debris. Not understanding, but certainly,
it's the natural thing to do, to turn and look.
In my dream I'm deep in a chair with a book
and a tall man approaches with a gun. I say
one word: wait. And he doesn't. Good night.

–Alex Boyd

amongst the locals. I didn't mind. I felt like part of the community, even if I was only lurking in the shadows.

"Peter," someone said, startling me awake. "Hey, Peter."

It sounded like it was coming from inside my own head. A familiar voice. I pushed aside my comforter and crawled to the foot of the bed. Looked down at the rug.

"Can you hear me?" the voice said. "Hey, Peter."

It was Denise. She was in Tad's room, shouting up into the vent in his ceiling, which was also the vent in the middle of my bedroom floor.

"I can hear you," I said. "What do you want?"

"That's crazy!" Denise said. "We have to do this all the time now."

"I was sleeping."

"Oh, please. I have a present for you. Come downstairs."

I put on jeans and a T-shirt and descended the fire escape. Denise was waiting for me in the backyard. An envelope in her hand.

"What's this?" I said.

"Just open it," Denise said.

I opened it. Inside was a voucher for the downtown Cineplex.

"Oh, wow," I said. "What's this for?"

"It's just a gift."

"That's nice. Thank you."

"But there's one condition. You have to use it next Sunday."

"Why next Sunday?"

"I don't want this to be weird, but we're going to have a little thing for Abraham's fortieth that day."

"O.K."

"It's mostly people from Abraham's work. We discussed it and we feel it would be best if you didn't come. You won't know anyone and it will make things slightly tense, having this stranger buzzing around and disrupting things."

"That's fine. I don't need to come to your party. But why do I have to leave? I can stay upstairs. I won't be bothered."

"No, we discussed it. I'd feel weird if you were moping around up there while we were having a party. And guests might see you up in the window or hear footsteps and start asking questions."

"I don't mope around."

"It'd be like we have some deformed freak in the attic we're hiding from the world. Just enjoy the movie. Then maybe hang around for a while after, get a tea somewhere. I'll text you when it's safe to come home."

"Safe?"

"Sorry it's just one ticket, but I honestly couldn't think of who you could go with. And it's a movie so you can't talk anyway. There's tons playing."

"Jesus Christ, Denise."

"Or, you know, 'You're welcome.'"

That night, I read through a lengthy LydiaV post about the despair she initially felt after watching *Avatar* for the first time, because the idea of living on the planet of Pandora was so much more desirable than having to live in the real world. She sunk into a deep depression and eventually had to seek help from a therapist.

"I'm O.K. now," she wrote. "Watching the film makes me happy. I'm still working through my issues, but I'm glad to say that *Avatar* now only brings me joy."

The thread continued below LydiaV's post with several people sharing similar experiences with depression after watching the movie. The fantasy of life on Pandora with the beautiful Na'vi was too compelling for some people, and reality could never compete. Reading through the comments, I understood what these people were talking about, but couldn't relate. I had the opposite experience when I watched *Avatar* for the first time.

This was only a few months earlier. I'd just moved into my sister's attic. The movie had already been out and escaping my attention for nearly a decade, but I came across a DVD copy at the library and added it to the stack I'd planned on taking home. I had no expectations. I just wanted to throw movies on when I wasn't working in order to occupy my brain. Unlike LydiaV and the other forum members, I was already in a drab, dark place when I entered the world of *Avatar*. Grace had left me. The life I'd built with her over four perfect years was gone. My world was empty.

And then I put on *Avatar*. It was only meant to be noise and moving shapes, a way to make part of the day pass by with minimal dread, but something happened when I finally rested my eyes on the planet Pandora. A new, lush world of vibrant colours and natural beauty. The mesmerizing, blue-skinned Na'vi people and their perfect society. For the first time since Grace left, I felt hope. I sat up in my bed and stared at the screen in awe. The universe suddenly had something in it that was worth being awake for. When the movie ended, I paced around my tiny attic apartment for a while, thinking about what I'd just seen. And then I put it back on and watched it again. Sure, I didn't actually live on Pandora. Pandora didn't exist. But I got to live in a world where the film *Avatar* existed. That was enough to keep me going.

Part of me felt compelled to post about this experience on the Naviboards thread. I had no one to talk to about my *Avatar* obsession and thought it might feel cathartic to share my story. Ultimately, however, I preferred to stay invisible. Once I actually wrote something on the forum, I'd cross an important threshold. I'd be one of them. Anonymously observing their conversations was an intellectual exercise, I thought, reflective of a curious mind. Participating in the discussion would be taking things too far. I couldn't help but sense something slightly sad and pathetic about the Naviboards users. By keeping them at arm's length, I held onto a small feeling of superiority.

My elbows and knees were starting to hurt. I went into the bedroom and came back with my comforter, which I spread out on the kitchen floor. I got back down and continued reading through the threads until three in the morning.

I slept in the next day and had to rush off to work. I jogged down the street, smoking. My bus was late. I lit another smoke. Cabin Club, the bar I worked at, was out by the airport, and it took

nearly an hour to get there by bus. Best to fill up on nicotine beforehand.

I'd never realized how I structured my entire life around smoking. Now that I was in the process of preparing to quit, the control it had over me seemed absurd. I had to have cigarettes and a lighter on me at all times. I'd smoke a cigarette both before entering and upon exiting buildings. I had a smoke before sitting down for a meal and one as soon as I'd finished eating. I had a morning smoke upon waking. Before bed, I had a final cigarette to last me through the night. I'd smoke before and after work and try to cram in as many cigarettes as I could on my breaks. As soon as I butt out a cigarette, a clock would start ticking in my head, counting down until my next one. The only time I didn't really think about smoking was while I was smoking. If I did consciously think about the act of smoking while I was actually smoking, it usually ruined the whole experience. To truly enjoy a cigarette, you have to think about something, anything, else. Everything in my life revolved, to some extent, around carving out little moments throughout the day where I could smoke cigarettes and not think about smoking cigarettes.

The bus eventually showed up. We chugged along toward the outskirts of town. Time dragged. I thought about what Grace had said when she ended things. That I was too controlling. She felt trapped by my need to orchestrate everything in our lives. This seemed like an exaggeration to me when she said it, but maybe it was true. I'd often guilt her into staying home with me when her friends wanted to meet up. I had a habit of planning out our weekends. I ate up all of her free time. I meant well, but I could see now how suffocating that would be. Maybe being in a relationship with me was akin to being a smoker. I was like a cigarette, dictating Grace's life for her. Now that I was quitting, maybe I wouldn't need to control every little thing. In fact, I could already feel myself loosening up. Letting go.

I walked in to work and sighed. Cortez was already there. Two or three times a week, Cortez would come into the Cabin Club and work the TV remote. Usually in the evening, however. I thought I'd be safe with an afternoon shift. Cortez would sit at the bar and flip through channels. Comment on everything. He'd get a meal and then drink two rum swizzles. This went on a tab that, he promised, he'd "settle up when the universe settles up with me." I had to tolerate him—his sister was married to Bob Stairs, my boss.

I went into the back room and leaned my forehead against the wall. Maybe Evelyn, the other bartender, would let me sneak out for one last cigarette before I started. I'd just had one before I came in, but I'd be quitting soon anyway, so the amount I smoked now didn't matter. I could chain smoke all day and night, as long as my last one was my last. But Evelyn came into the back room in a hurry and put on her jacket. I took mine off and went out to the bar.

"This absolute tool is going to win the whole goddamn thing," Cortez said, apparently to me, since there was nobody else around.

A cooking competition show played on the TV behind the bar. The contestants were children.

"Look at this little prick. Put me out of my misery."

"Hello, Cortez," I said.

"Are you sick right now?" Cortez said.

"No, why?"

"You sure? Maybe you need to shave then. With your complexion, you need to keep up with the shaving or you look like you're withdrawing from opiates. You should think about a multivitamin."

"Hey, come on."

"Don't shoot the messenger. Anyway, I'm done with this show. Let's see what else is on. What do you want to watch?"

"Just find a hockey game."

"I can't see the puck. You know what I wouldn't mind? HBO. I'll talk to Bob about that. We could watch *True Blood.* Any halfway decent bar has the premium channels."

Cortez eventually left. A group of flight attendants came in and kept to themselves in a corner booth. Otherwise, it was pretty quiet. I spent most of my shift looking at my phone. I read through a new piece of fan fiction someone had posted to Naviboards. A full-on sex scene between the film's main characters, Jake Sully and Neytiri. At first I cringed at the thought of someone posting their original *Avatar* erotica on the forum, but as I read on I found myself getting a little excited and had to put my phone away.

Later, Bob Stairs and three of his business-school cronies came in. Bob was my manager. His father owned the place. He usually came in during the afternoon and sat in the back room, playing online poker on his laptop. Now he sat down at the bar and his friends crowded around him. They all wore suits, ties loosened, faces red and puffy.

"Behold," Bob said, lifting his hands up into the air, "the saddest bartender in the world."

"Good evening, Bob," I said.

"Jesus Christ. You look like you just watched a dog drown. You've got to be the gloomiest motherfucker on the planet. No wonder this place is empty. Be honest with me—how many people walk in here, take one look at your sad-sack face, then immediately turn around and walk back out? Give me a number."

"I'm sorry, Bob. I'll try and smile more."

"Good Lord. You guys hearing this? That's got to be the most depressing thing I've ever heard. You need to grow some backbone."

"I see you, Bob."

"What?"

"I see what you mean, Bob."

"You're a strange man, Peter."

The Na'vi say "I see you" to each other in *Avatar.* It means "the God in me sees the God in you." They believe that everything in nature is connected through their great mother Eywa, and so when you tell somebody you see them, you are saying that you are both bonded together through Eywa. And Bob and I really were bonded together, I thought, as I prepared his daiquiri. We were both imprisoned. I was under the control of cigarettes. He was a boozer. A gambler. But it wasn't just that. We were trapped by our jobs, our

societal obligations, our attachment to material things. Our worries. It all ran counter to the Na'vi way of life. Things had to change.

I set Bob's drink on the bar. I started working on another drink and began to laugh. I couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" Bob said.

"Sorry," I said. "Excuse me."

I walked into the back room and put on my jacket. It was all so clear now. I didn't need Bob, or any of this. I walked back out.

"Hey," Bob said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Off to the races, Bob," I said.

"What?"

"I said I quit."

That night, I reread the forum thread from five years earlier about starting a Na'vi-inspired commune. I wondered if any of the people who had participated in the discussion went through with their plans. If I could find their little community in the woods and live among them.

Inspired by the thread, I decided to spend the night outdoors. If only Grace could see how impulsive and adventurous I was now, I thought. I put on long underwear and two sweaters, then went down the fire escape to Abraham's hammock. The Na'vi slept in hammocks. It was cold, but it wasn't that cold. I fell asleep within minutes. I awoke a few hours later and lit a cigarette. I didn't care if Denise looked out her window and saw me there. If she kicked me out, I'd sleep somewhere else. I liked sleeping outside. I'd abandon all my things and live in the moment, like the Na'vi. They didn't need apartments. All they needed was each other. If you stepped out into the world with nothing but the clothes on your back and wandered the Earth, everything would be fine. You wouldn't die. You would find food and water and somewhere to rest for the night. It wouldn't be easy by any stretch, but it would be better than stressing over all of the little complications involved with modern life. That kind of stress will kill you.

I awoke the next morning to something

THE SPOTLIGHT

TANGIBLE PASTIME

Camilla Gibb held on to boxes of old magazines for years, thinking one day her daughter might enjoy the art of collage as much as she did. Ultimately, the pleasures of cutting and arranging images into new pieces of art were not passed down, but Gibb was grateful to have kept her collection during the early days of the current pandemic.

Before the COVID-19 lockdowns, the Toronto-based author had picked up her old pastime. When the pandemic hit, she was just finishing a new novel, *The Relatives,* and found herself unable to write anything new. Collaging offered both a tangibility and a physical immediacy Gibb found satisfying.

Gibb's collages are nostalgic in subject, which is in part an aesthetic choice, but also a practical one. Vintage magazines, with their sturdy thick stock, are easier to work with. Gibb is drawn to natural elements: many of her pieces—like *The Determined Canadian Facing Environmental Odds,* above—feature familiar landscapes, with a few unexpected intruders. A bat morphs with a cabbage. An elk pops its head out of the domed window of a Canadian Pacific train car. A ballet dancer poses in formation with a flock of Canada geese.

"Some of them are just absurd, and some of them make me laugh," Gibb said. Although her collages are analogue, Gibb shares them on Instagram, where they've gained an online audience. As an author, she considered the expectation that there would be words waiting to accompany her art. "I thought, No, that's not the point. The point of the story is there," Gibb said. "It's whatever you take from it."

—Sue Carter

jabbing me in the legs. My nephew, Tad, was standing next to the hammock, holding a stick. He and Abraham hovered above, looking down at me.

"I see you," I said.

"Dad?" Tad said. "What's wrong with him?"

"Let's go on inside," Abraham said.

I continued to sleep outside for the rest of the week. Breathing fresh air all night filled my body with an incredible energy. I could bound up and down the fire escape with ease. I had so many ideas running through my head. Denise was initially concerned that I was acting strange, but I told her I'd been having issues with my back and sleeping in Abraham's hammock really helped. I couldn't tell her about the new journey I was embarking on—at least not yet. How quitting smoking had helped me to identify all of the constrictive elements in my life. How I'd be shedding these elements in order to live a more natural, pure existence. Denise wouldn't understand. She'd mock me. Soon enough, however, she'd see how trapped and sad her life was when compared with mine.

I didn't want Denise to know I'd quit my job, so I left the house according to my usual schedule. Instead of taking the bus to the airport, I went to the park and looked at birds. I'd take off my shoes and socks and feel the grass between my toes. The sun warming my cheeks. Really take things in. Or else I'd head to the library and book a computer. Comb through Naviboards.

I found a video that Silent_Heart had posted in an old thread. He'd edited together footage of the New York City meet-up from a few years earlier. The video began with a lengthy montage of still photos of Silent_Heart's plane trip to New York, set to the final battle music from *Avatar.* I clicked forward until I got to footage of the attendees meeting each other at Penn Station. A man with a bushy moustache held up a sign that said "Kaltxi," a common greeting in Na'vi. Another man in an *Avatar* T-shirt and *Avatar* shorts stood beside him, waiting for arrivals, which was shown using time-lapse photography. Seeing these people from the forum on camera was surreal. IndestructibleEd was there, and MaryTimesTwo. The video continued with another montage of the group sightseeing around the city, then moved to a hotel suite, where most of the attendees were gathered. They were watching a Na'vi language lesson on YouTube and practising their pronunciations together as a group.

In the video and on the forums, everyone was so respectful of each other. They lifted each other up. I needed people like that in my life. I needed Grace. She lifted me up and respected me up. The problem was, I hadn't lifted her up in return. I'd pinned her to the ground with my controlling behaviour. Monitoring everything she did, making judgemental comments. Trying to mould her into someone she wasn't. Things were changing, however. I was on my way to becoming the partner she deserved. Once I actually quit smoking, everything else would fall into place. Great Mother Eywa was watching over me. I could feel the universe shifting.

The evening before Abraham's fortieth birthday party, my sister took down the hammock to make room for chairs. I tried sleeping in my bed again, but it didn't feel right. After half an hour of restlessness, I went down to the yard and slept on the grass. The ground was hard and cold, but the night air was fresh. I could hear crickets. My body

I REALLY LIKED YOUR READING LAST NIGHT

You came alone and sat at the back of the room.

We gave each other a friendly hug
and chatted before the show. Your breath smelled

thinly of gin. "There are a lot of good poets,"
you said and smiled, by way of slant reply,

after I'd commended your performance.
It's slant like that

that makes one
feel disclosed.

You didn't introduce your poems,
just read them in a modulated tone—

"I" embedded,
hunkered down: a foreign correspondent in a war zone.

I wanted a book, you didn't have one to sell.
We both had salvation in pieces we read.

I couched it
Salvia divinorum, as in the psychoactive plant.

You used the word straight-up—like you had earned it.

—Elana Wolff

was sore in the morning, but I didn't mind. I went upstairs, cooked an egg, and felt stronger than ever.

That afternoon, while my sister and Tad decorated the backyard, I watched *Avatar* again. It still had the same impact on me, watching the Na'vi and their beautiful society on Pandora. It was even more powerful now, considering what I'd been going through that week. Quitting smoking. Quitting my job. A whole new way of looking at the world. I couldn't stop smiling at the screen. Tonight was the night. I would make things right again.

Halfway through the film, I heard wobbly steps coming up the fire escape. I hit Pause on my laptop and stepped outside. Nolan was on his way up.

"Sup," Nolan said, out of breath. I moved back through the door so there was room for him on the landing.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"I tried knocking on the front door. Your sister said you were up here. You tired or something?"

"Why are you here, Nolan?"

"Can I come in?" Nolan said, pushing past me. "Your place is hilarious. Can I bum a smoke?"

"You can't come to my apartment to ask for cigarettes."

"We can hang out, too. I can bring my Xbox over."

"I'm busy."

"I'll bring it over later then. I'd have you over to my place, but I think it would weird out my parents. Anyway, let's smoke."

"I quit, remember?"

"So you don't have any?"

"Fine," I said, reaching for my pack. I had two cigarettes left. I handed him one. "You can have one, but that's it. I really am quitting. Don't come up here again."

"What about later? I can bring my Xbox. I have this insane porno game."

"Absolutely not."

"Oh," Nolan said, looking defeated.

"Here," I said. I took out my wallet and pulled the Cineplex voucher from inside, handed it to Nolan. "Go see a movie."

"Nice," he said. "I just watch stuff on my phone though."

I didn't say anything. I waited for Nolan to say something else, but he just stood there, staring at me.

"All right," I said. "Time to go, Nolan."

Later that afternoon, I walked to the Greyhound station and spent my last forty dollars on a bus ticket. I still only had the one cigarette, and now I didn't have enough to buy another pack. I didn't even have enough for a ticket home. But that didn't matter. Things would work out naturally. And I only needed one cigarette.

I boarded the bus and found a seat near the back. I noticed some of the other passengers giving me these looks. No one sat next to me. I hadn't showered all week, and there was mud and grass stains on my sweater and pants. Sweat pooled around my collar. I had a headache. I hadn't boarded a bus without first smoking a cigarette in nearly two decades. I'd get through it, though, I knew. I eventually fell asleep against the window.

We arrived in Midland two hours later. I looked around the station, feeling nostalgic. Only five months earlier, I'd stood in that same waiting area. Christmas. Grace's parents usually picked us up. They were always so friendly, so welcoming. This time, I'd be on foot. I looked up the directions on my phone and started walking.

The sky was dark by the time I reached the house. A car was parked in the driveway. Lights on in the living room window. The curtains drawn. I sat down on the curb opposite the house. Hopefully she was in there and not out shopping with her mom or seeing an old friend. My clothes were rumpled and stained and I probably smelled foul. But she'd see through all that. She'd recognize how much I'd changed already. I took out my final cigarette and looked it over. Then I lit up.

I didn't think about anything while I smoked. My mind went blank. I savored the rush of nicotine entering my bloodstream for the last time. When it was finished, I walked up to the house and knocked.

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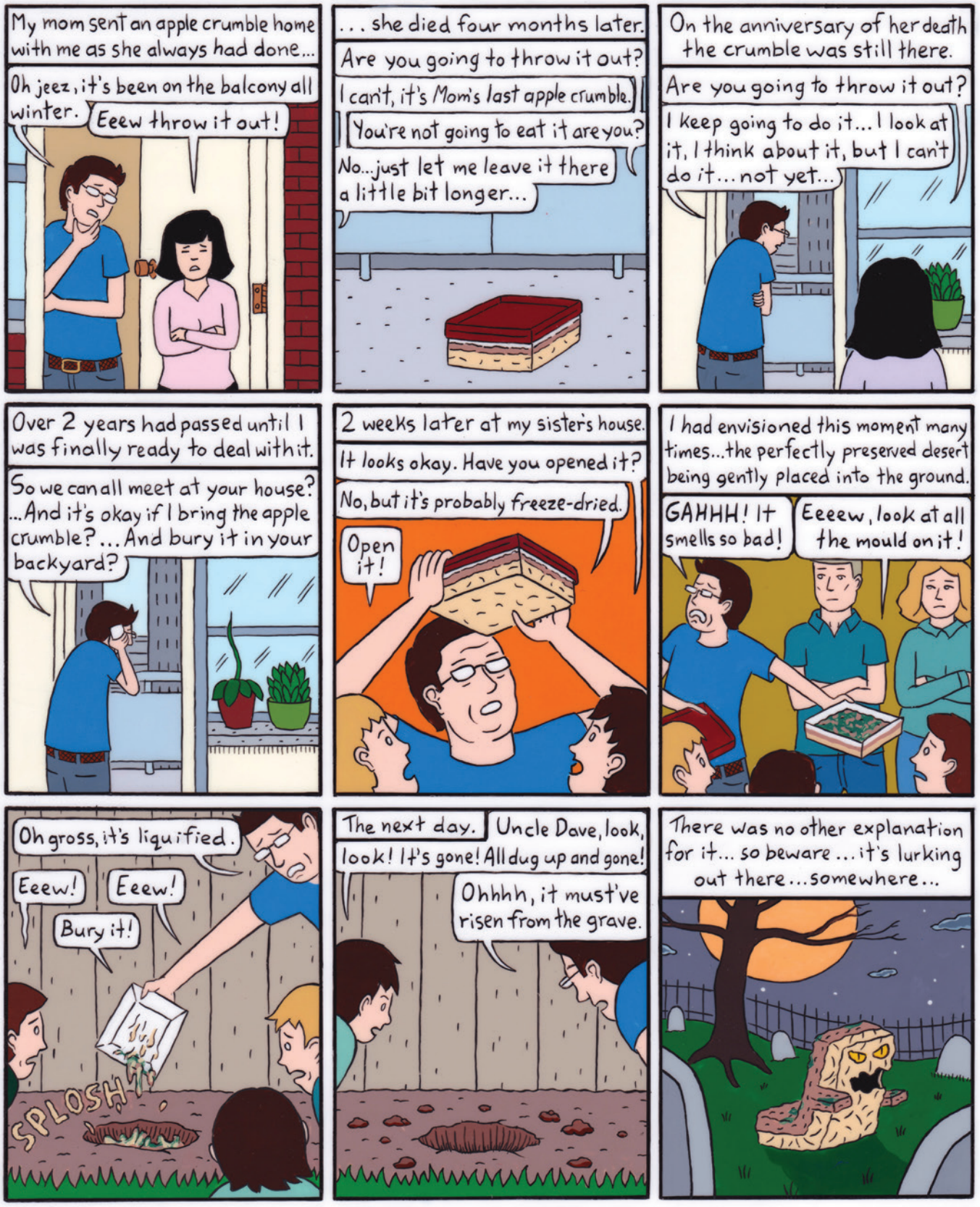

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