SPECIAL EDITION

THE WALRUS

CANADA'S CONVERSATION ✦ THEWALRUS.CA

Time to Rethink Aging

Canada's *Most Important* Conversation

is found in The Walrus

If you're enjoying this issue of The Walrus, subscribe and get Canada's best stories and art delivered straight to your doorstep.
Already subscribed?
Buy a gift subscription and share The Walrus with your friends and family.

Support independent Canadian journalism. Subscribe to The Walrus today.

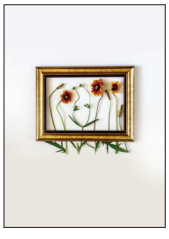
thewalrus.ca/important

THE WALRUS | CANADA'S CONVERSATION

Subscribe Now


p.38

THE WALRUS
SPECIAL ISSUE 4
JULY 2025



ON THE COVER
Photo illustration by Zoya Shepherd

Zoya Shepherd is the design director at The Walrus.

IMAGE (ABOVE) BY MICHELLE PATEROK
COVER IMAGES BY ISTOCK

Subscriber Services

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTERS

thewalrus.ca/newsletters

The Walrus (ISSN 1708-4032) *is published eight times a year and sells for $9.95. A one-year print subscription within Canada costs $37.25. A digital edition is also available.*

To order The Walrus *or to manage your subscription:*

ONLINE

thewalrus.ca/subscriptions

MAIL

The Walrus, PO Box 670
Alliston, Ontario, Canada L9R 1V8

PHONE

1-800-936-7492

Customer Care office hours:
Mon.–Fri. 9 a.m.–5 p.m. ET

PRIVACY PREFERENCES

The Walrus occasionally makes its subscriber mailing list available to like-minded organizations whose products or services may interest our readers.

If you prefer to be removed from this list, please go to ***thewalrus.ca/privacy-policy*** or contact us by phone or mail.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

We also acknowledge the support of the Ontario Creates Magazine Fund.

Canada

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C103458
www.fsc.org

ONTARIO CREATES | ONTARIO CRÉATIF

THE WALRUS

411 Richmond Street East, Suite B15,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5A 3S5 • 416-971-5004
info@thewalrus.ca • thewalrus.ca

The Walrus Foundation is a registered charitable nonprofit with an educational mandate.
With the support of our donors, partners, and volunteers, we create forums for conversation on matters vital to Canadians.
We thank the following community leaders for their continued support of Canada's conversation at The Walrus.

CHARITABLE REGISTRATION NO. 861851624-RR0001

THE WALRUS TRUST

With the multiyear commitment of exceptional donors, The Walrus Trust will secure the long-term future of fact-based journalism at The Walrus.

DONORS

Diane Blake and Stephen Smith ❦

Ira Gluskin and Maxine Granovsky Gluskin ❦

Janelle and Pierre Lassonde

Kim Samuel ❦

The Walrus is eternally grateful for the continued generosity of our founding donor, The Chawkers Foundation.

We also thank The Walrus community of over 2,000 donors who are helping fund independent, fact-based journalism this year.

❦ We thank our donors who have made a subsequent commitment.

OPTIMISTIC CANADIANS

We gratefully acknowledge the following donors, who share our belief in provocative long-form journalism, innovative ideas, and continuing the Canadian conversation.

VISIONARY DONORS

Barry and Laurie Green Family Charitable Foundation ❦

Geoff Beattie and Amanda Lang

Donald K. Johnson ❦

Mike and Martha Pedersen ❦

Rosemary Phelan

CHAMPION DONORS

The Lewis Cohen Family Foundation

Zai Mamdani, Mamdani Family Foundation

Peter and Sarah O'Hagan

Gail Singer

AMBASSADOR DONORS

Shelley Ambrose and Douglas Knight

Helen Burstyn ❦

Jodi and Gerald Butts ❦

Michael Decter ❦

Kevin and Roger Garland ❦

Blake and Belinda Goldring

Dr. Eric Jackman

Lakshman Family ❦

Jennifer F. Longhurst

Bruce MacLellan and Karen Girling

Rodney and Karen McCann

Nadir and Shabin Mohamed ❦

David and Dr. Patricia Morton

Chima Nkemdirim

Tim and Frances Price

Irfhan Rawji

Dani Reiss

NATIONAL PARTNERS

AIR CANADA

The Walrus is proud to recognize Air Canada as our Exclusive Airline Partner.

bullfrogpower

We are thrilled to partner with Bullfrog Power as our Green Events sponsor.

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Ontario

We are grateful for funding provided by the Government of Ontario and the Ontario Arts Council.

RBC

We thank RBC for their continued support of Canada's emerging creators at The Walrus.

ROGERS

The Walrus is grateful for the commitment by Rogers to support fact-based Canadian journalism.

TD READY COMMITMENT

The Walrus is proud to recognize TD Bank Group as our National Inclusion Partner.

CANADA NEEDS

IDEAS
ACCOUNTABILITY
FACTS
HISTORY
DIVERSITY
TRUST
CONVERSATION
YOU.

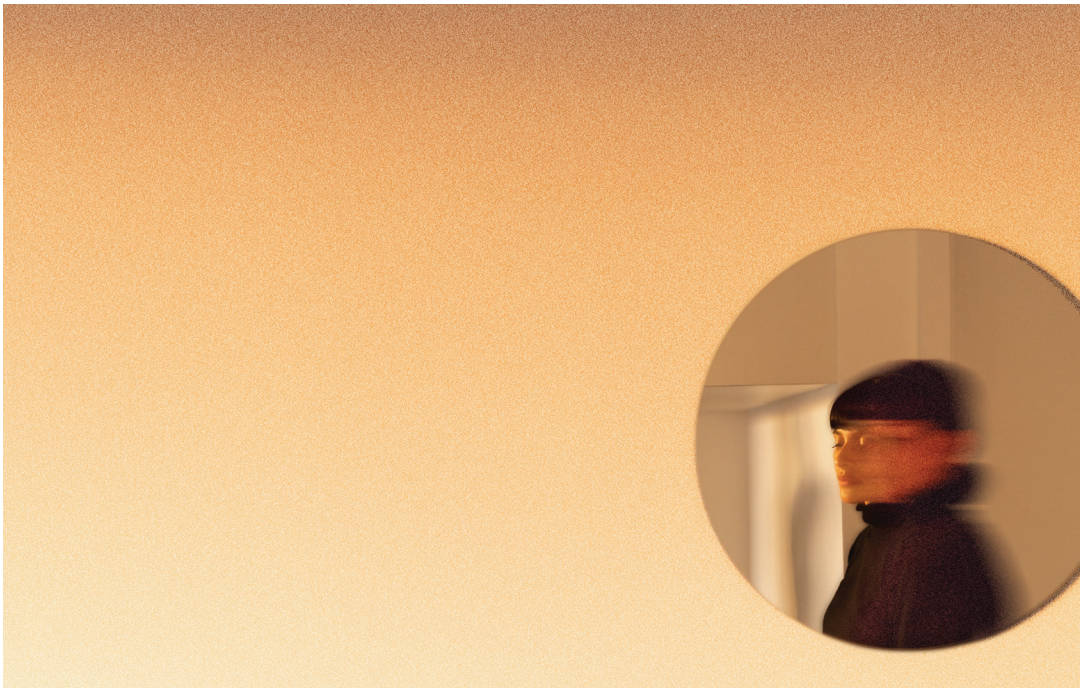
The world around us is changing, and our conversations need to change too.

At The Walrus, we work hard to provide the facts and spark conversation on today's biggest issues.

To do this, **we need you.**

Pledge your support:
thewalrus.ca/support

THE WALRUS | CANADA'S CONVERSATION



Editor's Letter

A COUPLE HOURS into the first shift of my very first job, a customer looked me up and down and asked, "Are you having fun *playing store*?" I was nearly sixteen and looked younger. Getting unsolicited feedback on my age and appearance from the middle-aged women who frequented the clothing shop became a regular part of my part-time job. If it taught me anything, it's that people have complicated feelings about getting older and the ways their bodies change, especially when asked what size pants they wear by a clueless teenager.

This issue covers similar territory, but much more generously. It features stories about aging and what that means for the mind, body, and even pocketbook (see Cathrin Bradbury's "The End of Retirement"). The articles expand into conversations about technology, memory, and how our relationships with work, art, and loved ones evolve over time.

Take Kevin Chong's feature on multigenerational living, where occupying a home with his wife, kid, and mother puts him in the role of adult and child simultaneously. The piece also raises questions about how society treats grandparents. In our era, it feels like elders are meant to exist separately from the orbit of the nuclear family—even as that model reflects fewer and fewer actual lives.

I should warn readers they will likely be brought to tears by Stephen Trumper's "My Wife Developed Alzheimer's. This Is Our Love Story." And their hearts might break following Jen Sookfong Lee's memoir about grief and *Anne of Green Gables*. But the stories aren't just about lives ending, even though several tackle the difficult subject. They also explore the mastery of skills and new personal highs that come in our golden years, whether it's elderly painters reaching peak creativity, eighty-something-year-olds completing gruelling marathons, or "granfluencers" going viral on social media.

I am inching closer to the age of my former customers. I still feel like the same person who cleared out fitting rooms and vacuumed the shop after closing. But also not. And perhaps that's what makes aging such a fascinating topic: it compels us to see all the ways in which we're changing and all the ways we're becoming more fully ourselves.

—Monika Warzecha, digital editor

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANA LUISA O. J. / IMAGE BY ISTOCK

THE WALRUS STORE

Share your love for good journalism—and wear it too!

Save When You Bundle.

Embrace any season with T-shirts, toques, socks, and an issue featuring Canada's best writers and artists. Proudly support great storytelling when you shop online: ***thewalrus.ca/bundles***

CANADA'S CONVERSATION

Shop Now

A Snoring Problem Made Me Confront My Mortality

I wanted a quick fix even if that quick fix was strapping a glorified bike pump to my face

BY JORDAN FOISY
ILLUSTRATION BY CELINA GALLARDO

I THINK OF MYSELF as a good sleeper. Give me a large book and a horizontal position, and I could fall asleep strapped to the top of a bullet train. Sleep has been a constant ally, a friend. When I was a teen, it was a refuge. I used to pray for sleep; its temporary oblivion was a welcome respite from anxiety and obsessive thoughts. It was a pause, not a death but close enough to it. Every time I fell asleep, there was a chance of resurrection, to wake up new.

My girlfriend, Allison, however, does not think I'm a good sleeper. She knows the truth. At night, I'm thrashing around and screaming. Occasionally, it sounds like my breathing stops. Worst of all for her, I snore. Badly. She's shown me a video of it, and it's horrifying: my thin, wheezing inhales are interrupted by a wrenching tear of a noise. It sounds like someone ripping a carpet in half inside a cave. It sounds like a Hans Zimmer score. It's awful.

We sometimes get into these little fights when I wake up. She's had a terrible sleep and is justifiably pissed. She can't stay mad for long, though, because who is she mad at? It wasn't me snoring, not really. Certainly, it was my body, my lungs, my soft tissues getting flabbier with age and drinking. Those are the guilty parties. But I wasn't even there. Ask anybody.

When my girlfriend is flipping my sleeping body over and plugging its nose, or occasionally smothering my face with a pillow or two, who is she smothering? How unimportant is the self to our life when

IMAGE BY ISTOCK

we are sleeping—something we spend a third of our life doing; something that if we didn't do, we would die—that it can be completely absent?

I tried treating my snoring with the junk-drawer solution of purchasing every anti-snoring device available at Shoppers Drug Mart. Nose strips, mouth guards, some kind of nasal spray—anything that the store had on sale on those two shelves promising snoring absolution between the Ricolas and the orthotics. Nothing worked. Every time, there would be a slight glimmer of hope, a placebo-infused sleep where we would try to convince ourselves my snoring was better. But, every time, it soon became clear the only difference was that the top of my mouth was now shredded from the cheap plastic of the so-called snore guard.

Allison wanted me to see a doctor about the snoring, but it's hard to take snoring seriously as a health problem. It seems more like a joke, like a health problem that a sitcom dad would have after getting electrocuted by Christmas decorations. It doesn't seem like a health issue but more like a personality defect.

According to Nick van den Berg, a PhD candidate in experimental psychology at the University of Ottawa and a member of the Canadian Sleep Society, "Snoring occurs as our muscles in the upper airway relax so much that they narrow the airway." This is why snoring gets worse as we get older, as our once taut and virile inner neck muscles become flabby and weak with age. The real threat of bad snoring is it could be a sign you have obstructive sleep apnea—which is when your airway is completely blocked. This blockage causes you to wake up constantly. The lack of sleep—for you or your partner—caused by snoring can be a serious health risk, as insufficient sleep has been linked to cancer, diabetes, and Alzheimer's.

More than the health issues, a lack of sleep can cause almost existential issues. Sleep is essential to your functioning as a human being. "Sleep is key to memory consolidation," van den Berg told me. It is not entirely clear how, but when we are asleep, our brain organizes, processes, and saves our memory. More than that, he added, "Sleep doesn't just stabilize our memories but also enhances our memories." He told me about studies where the subjects are taught a basic skill before bed, and when they wake up, not only do they remember the skill but have actually improved upon it. Sleep, then, is more than necessary; it's where we are forged. Every night, we throw our day-to-day experiences, memories, and lessons into the kiln of sleep, let them bake for hopefully eight hours, and remove a better, stronger, fuller version of ourselves in the morning.

So my girlfriend was right to insist I deal with the problem, but I was resistant. I'm in my mid-thirties, I haven't had a doctor since I was a kid. My health care subsisted on walk-in clinic visits and youthful hubris—a faith that things will work out and a belief that a problem doesn't really exist until you deal with it. But I think what really scared me off was that going to a doctor about my snoring would be my first confrontation with the way I live and its repercussions, almost like being shown a mirror to my mortality. Certainly not a face to face with the Grim Reaper, seeing who would blink first, but definitely footsies: the first acknowledgement that I'm not impervious to the effects of time and decisions made, that my body has limits, that it can break and fall apart, and that, to live a good life, one has to make good decisions. And as someone who thoroughly enjoys bad decisions, that's an unpleasant pill to swallow.

It has been a tough year. A friend passed away suddenly and tragically. Then my grandmother followed. A chronic knee problem I had turned into a full-blown meniscus tear, dashing any hopes of a late-life bloom in a guy who is "surprisingly athletic" and revealing a body that is eroding with time. My eyesight became distorted. A visit to the eye doctor revealed I had fluid under my retina, a condition called central serous chorioretinopathy. It's caused by stress. I started seeing a therapist again. Within minutes, over Zoom, he told me I looked depressed. Things felt harder, time less plentiful. I was reminded that there's no guarantee that things will just work out. It was a year of the space capsule of my youthful fantasy breaking up on contact with an atmosphere of reality and repercussions, all soundtracked by some of the worst snoring you've ever heard.

But there are other things to be afraid of besides aging, and fearing a breakup or an unexplained disappearance, I tried what Allison had been asking me to do. I went to a doctor.

The doctor asked me how much I drank a week. I gave him a number that was high enough for me to know he should factor it in his diagnosis but low enough that I could say it out loud without being embarrassed. He figured I had sleep apnea and said I should drink less and lose weight. He referred me to a sleep study to confirm the diagnosis. To get a CPAP machine for the apnea, I'd need the study results. A CPAP machine is a device that shoots a steady flow of pressurized oxygen into your nose and mouth. It involves a hose, a mask that covers either your nose or mouth or both, and a head harness, resulting in the wearer looking like a cozy fighter plane pilot, like *Top Gun*'s Maverick if the undisclosed enemy country were your dreams.

The sleep clinic was in Toronto's St. Joseph's Health Centre. I entered the hospital ready to get my sleep on. I felt nervous and excited and blisteringly sober. I had successfully adhered to the guidelines sent out by the clinic: no alcohol in the past twelve hours, no coffee in the last two, and no naps. My mind was unadorned—free from its usual coating of hangover shame, too-late coffee worry, and post-nap delirium—and hungry for some answers and clarity.

Next, a technician saw me and asked a couple of questions, the most provocative being: What position do you sleep in? I'm mostly a mix of side and stomach, with one leg pitched like I'm doing a hurdle. Overall, though, I would describe my sleeping position as maximum obnoxious. My limbs are splayed as far as they can reach, and I am continually thrashing and rolling from side to side in erratic and irregular movements. Basically, I

sleep like David Byrne dances.

I sat on my assigned bed, waiting for the sleep lab to begin its work. "Lab" was really a strong word for the experience. There were no beakers, or mad scientists, or stainless-steel tanks with anonymous figures floating in green fluid. There was just a generic hospital room: infinite white walls; a thin, hard bed that felt like I was lying on an H&M clothing shelf; a clunky, foreboding radiator; and a pillow that had all the comfort and support of a bag of napkins. Worst of all, there was an AC unit that something was dripping onto, producing a sharp, arrhythmic, metallic smack.

At quarter to eleven, the technician came in. He was disappointingly less of a mad scientist than I was expecting. Instead, he seemed sleep deprived and grumpy. He began sticking the sensors to my body for the electroencephalogram, or EEG. Created in 1924, this test uses electrodes to measure your brain waves without being invasive (cutting your head open). It is still the gold standard for sleep studies. Sensors were also placed on my arms and legs to measure my movement, and a sensor was placed below my nose and a harness around my chest to measure my breathing. I don't know what it says about my self-esteem, but I found being a specimen thrilling. The thrill quickly passed as I proceeded to have the worst sleep of my life.

Ideally, there are two types of sleep that can be divided into four stages. The first three stages are of NREM, or non-rapid eye movement, sleep. It is in these three stages that typical sleep occurs. Stage one is the drifting-off period: those fifteen minutes of drowsiness where it is hard to tell if you are asleep or not. Once you are out, the second stage begins. It is marked by slower brain waves and short, fast bursts of brain activity called spindles. Both are thought to be involved in memory consolidation. The third stage of NREM is slow-wave sleep. Your brain waves are now deep, long curves, similar, at times, to those seen in people under anaesthesia. It is in these last two stages of sleep that the majority of restoration happens.

Suddenly, the second act of sleep occurs: REM sleep. The brain explodes with activity; it appears awake. This is when most dreaming occurs, especially the intense, emotional genre of dreams—the ones that are like "I'm on a date with a book report I didn't finish" or "I started playing hockey again, but I didn't realize that my skates are made of everyone I've ever disappointed." Your body reacts accordingly. Beneath the eyelids, your eyes start to dart around wildly, and your heart races. If your body weren't paralyzed, your limbs would be thrashing around. It's not entirely clear why this happens. Van den Berg's favourite theory is that it is preparatory. "If NREM is recovery from the day before, REM seems to be preparation for the day ahead." This would explain why some dreams can be so intense: they are training modules for the most heightened emotions you can experience.

When you have a good night's sleep, these different acts and stages are a harmonious cycle. Of course, many things can disrupt this harmony: electric light, caffeine, a long night out, or—as I found out—being covered in wires that precariously cling to your body with every toss and turn. Many thoughts can keep you up at night, and in the lab, I discovered a new one: "I sure hope that when I turned over, I didn't ruin this experiment being performed on me." Another pressure point in the delicate dance of the sleep stages is if there is an unceasing arrhythmic drip onto an air conditioning unit the entire night and the drip sounds like someone didn't turn off the tap in your brain—a drip that erodes who you are, who you were, and who you would be into a howling nothingness begging for sweet release.

I was woken up at five-thirty after maybe two hours of gruel-thin snoozing. The wires were removed, and I strolled home in the dawn light, feeling like my sleep–wake cycle and circadian rhythms were utterly and completely ruined. I didn't know what kind of information they could glean from my dire snooze, but I learned that there were limits to my sleeping abilities, and one of them was getting the Weapon X treatment.

After two months, the results of the study came in. There was no sleep apnea. I have what the report called "mild primary snoring." As far as the study could tell, there is no particular reason for it. Aging, drinking too much, and rapidly deteriorating neck muscles are all it takes. The snoring wasn't a condition; it was the sound of time catching up to me.

These were not the results I was looking for. I had been hoping for a condition, a disorder, another of life's petty aggrievements I could list and point to whenever I indulged in a self-pity wallow. I wanted a quick fix even if that quick fix was strapping a glorified bike pump to my face. Instead, what I got was consequences. I used to not believe in consequences. Not really. I thought I could do what I wanted. Any suffering that came along was something I didn't have control over; it was something to get used to, like the weather. The responsibility you have to yourself and others eluded me. But decisions have consequences, and they aren't a one-time deal. Instead, they coalesce and compound and reverberate, like a snore off the inner walls of your throat. There is no guarantee things will just work out: injuries worsen, tragedy happens, your girlfriend gets fed up with you snoring. When you don't sleep, you don't just get it back by sleeping in the next day. It takes days for you to recover.

My snoring has gotten worse since the study. Louder, more frequent. Thankfully, my girlfriend and I have figured out a staggered sleep schedule that seems to work. More than that, I'd like to think I'm trying. I'm working out more, eating slightly better, drinking less. From this study, I learned you are not just your moment-to-moment thoughts and feelings. You are an accumulation of everything you did before. The person you are today builds from the person you were the day before: when you ate, what you learned, how you slept. You have to take care of yourself and others. Things aren't just going to get better on their own. $_{zz}$Z

JORDAN FOISY is a comedian and the head writer on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

Arriving at the Age of Looking Back

Before and after have gripped fists at the fulcrum of forty-five

BY LISA MOORE
ILLUSTRATION BY JULIETA CABALLERO

Here's what happens when you turn forty-five. You realize you will only ever read so many books—how much time have you got left for reading?—and you had better only read the good ones. There are only so many movies, so many trips, so many new friends, so many family barbecues with the sun going down over the long grass. It has always been this way. Finite. But at forty-five you realize it.

Your daughter will go away to Montreal for her first year of university, and briefly her excitement feels like your own, you are filled with it, and then you realize that it is not you going to university in a new city for the first time. You will never go to university for the first time again. You will never go to Montreal for the first time again either.

There might be more behind you than ahead. You realize that there is no *now*.

And worse, your daughter has grown up. Your daughter is a beautiful young woman with the whole world in front of her, and she is striking out on her own.

You and your husband and your nine-year-old son will feel like the house is too big. You will decide a trip is the thing. You will think Turkey, you will think the southern States.

We could go back to Cuba. Cuba could be over, you think, very soon. You'd been to Cuba eleven years before, and here is your fear: What if it isn't new? What if there comes a time in life when nothing is new?

Not so much, is that all there is? Rather, is that all there was? And: I want more.

Being a tourist, if you are not careful, will start to feel like a familiar experience, no matter where you go. Here is the heat. Here is the beach. Here is the same broken English and the same hard sell on the streets. The same silver and turquoise jewellery, the same bongo drums. The eerie azure of a tropical ocean is the same everywhere, and that palm tree—they just move it around. It's the same palm tree, you are sure, they had on that beach in India/Florida/Tasmania.

There might be more behind you than ahead. You realize at forty-five that there is no *now*. The now is always infiltrated by the past. Now is swallowed up. Forty-five is a fulcrum. *Before* and *after* have gripped fists at the fulcrum of forty-five, and they arm-wrestle, and *gone* wins, hands down.

A bus ride to the Bay of Pigs. You've bought a book of Che Guevara's essays and read about his first meeting with Fidel Castro. How they stayed up all night talking about the revolution. How Guevara knew, by the time dawn broke, that the revolution was a cause for which he was willing to die. He was twenty-seven.

My husband, Steve, and my son, Theo, are in the row behind me, and Steve has taken out the jar of peanut butter and a sleeve of crackers. He passes me a cracker over the top of the seat.

The sky gets dark, and lightning bleaches all the green out of the dense vegetation. The world goes X-ray white, and then colour bleeds back even brighter, more saturated. Thunder slaps the bus, vibrates in my solar plexus.

Rain makes the world look jellied. It starts to drip in steady threads through the roof onto the empty plush seat beside me, and the bus fills with a dense, fishy stink. The asphalt ahead has turned red. A plush red carpet.

Crabs, I call back to Steve and Theo. This is astonishment. The unexpected smell. And now the smell of crabmeat is welded forever to the taste of peanut butter and the Bay of Pigs, still to come. The notion of dying young for something you believe in. For ten minutes, thousands and thousands of crabs cross the road.

Later, when we rent a car, I ask the agent if he has read the Guevara essays.

Those essays, the agent says. I read those when I was young. He rubs his big stomach. Those essays, he says, I have had my fill.

While I sign the papers, Steve blows smoke rings with his cigar. One, two, three. Theo pokes his fingers through them, and they tatter and dissolve. The agent has a cigar, too.

Can you do that, Theo asks him.

No, only your dad can do that, the agent says.

You could learn, Theo says. The agent tilts his own cigar and contemplates it. He sighs.

I am too old to perfect this talent, he says.

We drive to Vinales to see the caves. Forty-eight kilometres of caves going into the centre of the mountains. Seven different floors.

The guide gives us each a helmet with a tiny flashlight and shows us how to turn them on. He points out vegetation along the path up the mountain to the entrance of the cave. His own helmet has a carbide lamp, and there is a flame dancing in the middle of his forehead. It's hard not to think of the flame as thought. As imagination, flickering like crazy. He climbs up the hill, whistling now and then.

Tarzan rope, he says. And I grip the vine with both hands and wrap my feet around and swing.

It's very hot outside, but inside the cave feels very cool. The air is musty and sharp. We walk for about forty minutes through rooms with high ceilings dripping with stalactites. The guide stops and points to show us a tiny frog, about the size of the tip of my pinkie—how had he seen it? There are rock formations that make me look back at my husband and raise an eyebrow. They look vaginal, folds of flesh-coloured stone. After an hour, the guide suggests we turn off the lights on our helmets. And so we do. One by one. The guide's flame is the last to go out. And the dark in there is absolutely dark. There is not a speck of light. We are quiet. Then the scrudge of a shoe on the sandy floor.

If our lights ran out, Steve asks the guide, would you be able to get us out of here?

If there were no lights, the guide asks.

Yes, if we had no lights.

No. Absolutely no. It feels like we're in the womb, or like we are dead, I think. Or halfway in between.

Have you ever been in a cave before, my husband asks in that deep black emptiness.

I've been in caves, I say. But nothing like this. ❍

A version of this story was published in 2009.

LISA MOORE is an award-winning novelist based in St. John's.

You Don't Have to Move into a Nursing Home

A bold experiment in elder care is giving Canadians control over where and how they grow old

BY CATHRIN BRADBURY
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JULIETA CABALLERO

Like many Canadians who watched news footage of nursing homes during the COVID-19 lockdown—the blurred faces looking out at families on the other side of the window; the masked and exhausted staff; the terrifying ongoing tally of the infected and dying—I made a pact with myself that there would be no old-age home in my future. How I'd make that so, however, was as blank as a sheet of paper. Or it was until the cold Tuesday afternoon I joined the raucous soup social at the Stanley Knowles co-op in midtown Toronto.

On the outside, the co-op is a non-descript brown-brick low-rise. But inside is a social movement that could change the future for the 2.5 million Canadians moving into their peak care years like a thundering avalanche (the silent generation we are not). Many of those older Canadians are moving out of their single-family homes and into multi-residential buildings, looking for the same kinds of things: a turnkey operation, so they can spend less time on maintenance; no stairs; less economic pressure; easy access to amenities; and, especially, a built-in community of people who value their autonomy and independence. People who are prepared to "do everything they can" to avoid being housed in an institutional setting, according to a National Institute on Aging and Canadian Medical Association survey of Canadians sixty-five and over.

"All of us here have many people who died in nursing homes during COVID." Christina Doyle, my tablemate at the Tuesday soup social and a resident of Stanley Knowles for thirty-nine years, waves her hand around the packed room. There's a lot of joyous and possibly competitive picture sharing on iPhones, along with shouts of "Who needs a ride tomorrow?," plus I can't stop watching two guys poking around at the ceiling panels over by a large flat screen TV. "The government's big idea is to take us out of our environments instead of keeping us in our homes," says Doyle, eighty-three. Ontario premier Doug Ford's controversial More Beds, Better Care Act of 2022 can move aged, extended-stay hospital patients to nursing homes as far as 150 kilometres away. "It isn't the way any of us want to go."

And now it doesn't have to be, thanks to something called NORC, which stands for naturally occurring retirement communities. Toronto's University Health Network (UHN) runs a NORC program designed to help people age in the place of their choosing by bringing services to where older Canadians have already congregated in large numbers. In Toronto, that mostly means the boom in high-rises that is quickly changing the skyscape of the city. Stanley Knowles is one of the first of Toronto's now twenty-three operational NORCs.

"The question was: How do you make a model of an aging community?" I'm talking on the phone with Jen Recknagel, the director of innovation and design at UHN's NORC Innovation Centre. "And the answer was: Start with where *they* are."

That NORC is not trying to create something new is the most radical thing about it. Instead, it's energizing or "catalyzing"—a popular NORC word—an existing movement of a whole bunch of people with similar needs living under the same roof. People who value being "members of a community where their voices and opinions matter," says Recknagel.

To qualify for UHN's NORC program,

IMAGE BY ISTOCK

those pre-existing communities need to have 30 percent or more adults aged sixty-five and over; 76 percent of Stanley Knowles residents, for example, are sixty-five and older. Once NORC is established in a building or community, UHN delivers a variety of health and social supports, coordinating a network of care partners to bring in things like talks from paramedic teams, vaccine clinics, exercise programs, and social events—whatever the community itself decides it wants most.

NORCs have been successfully operating in New York City since the mid '80s and are even publicly funded there. But in Canada, they're little known outside of Toronto—and hardly known there either. Rental apartment buildings, condos, and co-ops like Stanley Knowles are what are known as vertical NORCs, while a horizontal NORC might be any congregation of single-family homes within a specific geographical area. (UHN does not currently have any horizontal NORCs in its program.) So far, there's no open application process to join UHN's NORC program, but there is a do-it-yourself (DIY) guide for people interested in starting up an aging-in-place network in their own community.

"What used to happen when we needed help was we'd call around to our local MPPs and social service groups, trying to figure out what was available in our catchment," Doyle says. "They were all so busy and overworked." Having helped navigate my parents through the gauntlet of assisted home care, I'm familiar with the acres of time it can take. Doyle heard about NORC in 2020, during lockdown, and immediately investigated how her co-op could join. Today, nurse practitioners, monthly check-ins with paramedics, equipment sharing, foot doctors, and social events like the one I've joined today are all supported and sometimes funded by NORC. And, vitally, after Doyle fractured her pelvis last summer, the NORC nurse practitioner quickly arranged for her to go to the hospital for X-rays and then to rehab after surgery. When Doyle came home, the NORC occupational therapist came to see how she was doing, checked her apartment for tripping hazards, and helped Doyle choose a walker. Without any these supports, Doyle might have easily been moved to a long-term care facility, the place she dreaded most. In the future, Doyle would love to see one or two personal support workers working full time in the building, but for now, "NORC is here for what we decide we want and need."

"More bike racks out front, add that to the list," says a fit man carrying a helmet as he joins our lunch. Howie Abrams turns out not to be a co-op resident but a general internist at Mount Sinai Hospital and UHN and one of the initial movers behind NORC in Toronto. "I saw too many seniors abandoned to understaffed hospitals, with nowhere else to go but government-run nursing homes, to believe that there couldn't be a better way."

Abrams says there's a ton of great research going on but very little practical help for our aging population. He is the director of UHN's think tank, Open Lab, of which NORC is an offshoot. "You need to approach a problem like this with humility, because you don't know the answer; you often don't even know the question," he says. "Success is when a resident comes to me at an event like this with a new idea."

I ask if all twenty-three active UHN NORCs are like this one, and Abrams gives me a quick tutorial: There's no right model to "catalyze" a NORC. Some have full- or part-time NORC staff on site (Stanley Knowles has a staff member three days a week); others are run by the residents themselves, using NORC simply as a resource. The program is funded by a "very generous and anonymous private donor," Abrams says. Abrams and Recknagel are ambitious for their model to be repeated across Canada, with NORCs integrated into and supported by Canadian health care systems. "It's twenty-first-century integrated care using community-led solutions for aging in place with dignity and choice." Abrams could be reading this from a brochure, but he isn't. He's just passionate about NORC. "Who can argue with that?" he says.

When I wonder aloud if there are any NORCs in my neighbourhood, Abrams shows me the data map of the nearly 500 potential NORCs in the city, and I'm surprised and pleased to see at least four of them are a few short blocks from where I live. I like the idea of staying close by if I move to a place that is less demanding than my house but is not the dreaded nursing home. I'm not sure I'm a community person, though. I like being on my own.

"True, some people just aren't community oriented," Abrams says. But he also points out that social isolation is a huge risk factor for health issues. And "even bacteria form communities." Abrams looks at me. "*You* are a community of bugs. There are more bugs in you than you."

Plus, there's the neighbour capital: retired CEOs, lawyers, plumbers, electricians, doctors, and engineers could be living right next door. "Can't open a can? Can't change a light bulb?" (My regular bottle of cranberry juice requires my son to come by and open it, and I haven't been able to change a pot light since 2008.) "There's going to be someone nearby who can."

By now, one of the two guys over at the TV has brought out a ladder and is climbing up to look behind a ceiling panel while the other uses a flashlight built into the end of his cane to light the way.

"What are you guys up to?" I love a man with a tool kit.

"We want to mount this TV on the wall," says Bryan Day, the one with the flashlight. Please don't ask me what ceiling panels have to do with wall-mounting a TV; it's out of my ken. See above, re: pot lights.

I sit down with Bryan, who shows me the various attributes of his terrific cane, which also has a built-in alarm. "The problem with a lot of older people is they start to get frightened and isolated" instead of helping each other, Bryan says. "Things need to get done, and they don't get done if you don't go up the ladder."

CATHRIN BRADBURY is a Toronto-based journalist.

The Age of Creativity

My father is a remarkable painter. And he's done some of his best work in his eighties

BY EMILY URQUHART

In September 2016, I accompanied my father, Tony Urquhart, to the Art Gallery of Ontario, in Toronto. We'd been at a memorial service for a family friend that morning, and we were spending the afternoon touring the gallery. My father, who was then eighty-two and has had white hair for as long as I can remember, guided me to a collection of Canadian postwar paintings on the second floor. As we stood in the centre of the room, he asked, "Do you see any of your friends here?"

Sometimes I can identify the hands behind the brush strokes, but that day, I was uncertain. My father opened the catalogue to the page referencing the east wall and ran his finger across the list of paintings and their makers until he came to rest on his own name. *The Earth Returns to Life* (1958), by Tony Urquhart, born 1934.

"No death date," he said. "I'm the only one still alive."

The painting was completed in my father's final year of art school, when he was twenty-four. It's a landscape in oil, with an atmospheric background and otherworldly organic matter. Patches of earth, frothy water, trees, and roots have all been tossed apart by some unseen natural force. The work has the kind of frenetic energy we associate with youth, and it hints at his later and better-known abstract expressionist paintings that are now in collections across North America.

My father is a remarkable painter, and this was clear even from an early age. At twenty-three, he'd already had his first one-man show at Toronto's famed Isaacs Gallery; in *Painting in Canada: A History*, published in 1966, he was referred to as a "child prodigy." But as we stood in front of *The Earth Returns to Life* that September day, he had his own choice words about his painting: it was immature. He told me that he'd rather see one of his later pieces displayed in the AGO, to better represent the peak of his painted work. He even had one in mind: *Allegory*. It's a mysterious tangle of earth and weed set in a deep blue fantastical landscape. It was completed in 1962—when he was still a young man, though less so.

I understood my father's position, though I thought he was wrong about *Allegory*. Like many of his other early to mid-career works, it's a fine painting. But I'd argue that in his ninth decade, my father has honed his skills, and his art has reached its zenith. I may be biased, but I'd say his recent works show a powerful coupling of intellect and experience. Young Tony Urquhart was undoubtedly gifted, but senior Tony Urquhart, at an age when we expect artists' careers to fade and their output to end, is constantly surprising me with the unpredictable, often astounding ways he sees the world.

My father's large-scale oils from the 1960s to the 1980s were earth-toned abstractions inspired by the European countryside. Spooky shapes were often foregrounded by a hovering darkness. These were the products of uneasy times: Canada was on the fringes of the Cold War, and his art was imbued with nuclear threat. That changed when he entered his sixties. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, freed from those earlier anxieties, vibrant, almost supernatural, colours appeared on his canvases in a series of self-portraits called *My Garden*. The tension of his earlier work remained, but the mood had lifted. Where there

ABOVE
Tony Urquhart's *My Garden with Me and Rainbow* (2003)

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICHOLAS TINKL/IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JAMES ROTTMAN FINE ART

had been foreboding, there was now intrigue. Something spiritual glowed on the horizon.

Perhaps the best example of his new vision, though, is *Strong Box I* (2013), the first of a recent series. The painting shows a central peach-hued rectangle bracketed by a pinkish red so intense it seems backlit. The repeated rectangular shapes are ambiguous, suggesting a cage or a series of rooms—familiar territory for my dad, as is the marbleized effect of the blended background colours and the mottled balls of organic matter that cling to the four corners of the painting's sharp, straight lines. But the colours—that pink!—are new, and they are electric. Just shy of his eightieth birthday, he'd imagined and executed something novel.

We tend not to associate aging with creative bursts. Historically, critics saw advancements by elderly artists as peculiar. According to twentieth-century art historian Kenneth Clark, the work of older artists conveyed a feeling of "transcendental pessimism," best illustrated in the weary, lined eyes and pouched cheeks of Rembrandt's late self-portraits. Claude Monet's contemporaries decried his *Water Lilies* series as a symptom of cataracts and advanced age. The paintings were dismissed as "the work of an old man" in *Comœdia*, France's most important daily arts journal at the time. Fellow painter André Lhote described them as "artistic suicide." In J.M.W. Turner's final two decades, as he painted rain, steam, and speed in his increasingly abstract landscapes, he found himself brutalized by peers—a kind of aesthetic elder abuse. Turner was "without hope," wrote John Ruskin. Another less tactful critic said that Turner's late work was the product of "senile decrepitude."

Many older artists, however, sense the significance in their new creations, even if the public reacts with hostility. In the eighteenth century, Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai, known for his *Great Wave* woodblock print, claimed that everything he'd "done before the age of seventy is not worth bothering with." Above a black chalk drawing of a formidable old man propped on two walking sticks, wild-haired and defiant, an eighty-year-old Francisco Goya inscribed: "I'm still learning." And he was; Goya was in his seventies when he mastered the emerging process of lithography.

"Now it's recognized that there was not a falling off of creative powers [as an artist ages] but that their creative powers have changed," says Ross King, author of *Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies*. "They were deliberately working in different ways." One brush stroke from Monet—a silhouette of a petal at dusk—holds all the shadow, richness, and texture of a life as a painter. But this is something that people often overlook. Today, it's doubtful that most gallery patrons know that Monet was in his seventies when he created the most famous paintings in his *Water Lilies* series. Turner's late creations are now widely recognized as works of incomparable brilliance. The same could be said of art from Paul Cézanne, Titian, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt.

We have been conditioned to think that age is a barrier to creativity. But, in reality, it is ageism that can be stifling. As legions of baby boomers tilt toward their third act, the old artist will become less of an outlier. It's time to rethink creativity as the realm of the young and embrace Carl Jung's statement that "the afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning." Our lifespans elastic, our twilights are stretching. For some artists, the finale will be the best part of the show.

A more recent argument that older people are less creative than the young can be traced back to *Age and Achievement*, a 1953 book by psychologist Harvey C. Lehman. He tracked artistic success in various disciplines over five-year periods and concluded that each art form has its own unique decline corresponding with age. Poets peaked in their mid-twenties, classical composers and painters withered in their thirties, and prose writers prevailed, if they were lucky, into their early forties. Old artists may possess wisdom, Lehman conceded, but their best work was behind them.

New research contests Lehman's methods and theories. His critics say that he drew conclusions based on citations in art-history books and encyclopedias—texts written by the same gatekeepers who dismissed Monet and Turner as useless geezers. (Women and people of colour were also largely absent from these books; therefore, much of the population wasn't even considered.) In the late 1960s, psychological researchers discovered that older people are actually brimming with cumulative wells of skills, knowledge, techniques, and style attained over their lifetimes. Still, the damage from Lehman's book was done, and his thesis still pervades our popular culture. A 2017 article about genius in *National Geographic* featured an infographic drawn from Lehman's study.

"There are two very different kinds of creativity," says University of Chicago economics professor David Galenson, author of *Old Masters and Young Geniuses: The Two Life Cycles of Artistic Creativity*. One type, Galenson explains, is a "conceptual innovator," a person who works from a single idea. These people tend to be radical: they may draft a quick sketch of a concept, and then, almost immediately after, assemble a masterpiece (consider Pablo Picasso and his *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or Andy Warhol's screen prints). Then there are "experimental innovators," who progress incrementally, learning with each sketch and layer of paint. These people often work on series and angle toward an ideal vision that can feel just out of reach—think Rembrandt's late self-portraits and the 250-odd paintings that make up Monet's *Water Lilies*. Galenson's theory applies to the artist's process, but he also noticed a second trend: "There's a tendency for conceptual innovation to come early and a tendency for experimental innovation to come late." The idea that creativity declines with age is, in Galenson's opinion, "just wrong."

There is a theory concerning a shift in technique, medium, or scale that can occur in an elderly artist's work.

ABOVE
Tony Urquhart's *Strong Box I* (2013)

It's called *Altersstil*, or old-age style. Some art historians, Kenneth Clark among them, claim that the same old-age style characteristics appear across different forms and genres: an aging artist's work is seen by experts as increasingly abstract, spiritual, or ethereal, and the blurring of formal and informal styles is described as a nod to eternity.

But others in the art world say the idea that formal attributes can correspond with a creator's age is absurd. Galenson, for one, finds the idea ridiculous and ageist. "I mean, is there a middle-aged style?" he asks. This school of thought argues that there are no definitive attributes that characterize late-stage creativity: yes, Monet, Rembrandt, and Goya were all geniuses in their later years, but each in their own incomparable ways.

A sudden bolt of brilliance late in an artist's life is something that has been repeatedly documented. The author of a 1989 study published in the journal *Psychology and Aging* looked at more than 1,900 works by nearly 200 classical composers and identified what he termed the "swan-song phenomenon"—a burst of creative output in the final stage of life that is often considered the musician's best work. Richard Strauss composed *Four Last Songs* as his finale. It is my father's favourite piece of music. I once asked him to describe it to me. "I can't," he said, his eyes welling with tears.

The crowning example of a swan song in visual art may be Monet's *Water Lilies*. "He was an old man in a hurry," says King. "I guess that's one of the things you do when you get older—you begin thinking about posterity and also wanting to make an artistic statement. You don't have decades left and, therefore, you have to synthesize what you've learned and create a final masterpiece or series of masterpieces."

Consider Nunavut-based artist Elisapee Ishulutaq, whose drawings and prints depict life in the Arctic. Her early works were typically smaller than two by three feet. Then she learned to use oil sticks, and her canvases expanded. She began working in a drastically different scale

when she reached her mid-eighties. In a 2010 review, *Georgia Straight* visual-art critic Robin Laurence wrote, "The oil stick medium seems to have given the octogenarian Ishulutaq licence to bust out of all constraints of colour, form, and scale." In 2016, at ninety-one years old, Ishulutaq created her largest work to date. *In His Memory* is a four-panel oil-stick drawing that stretches thirty feet. It's a monumental work to honour a harrowing event: the paintings depict the aftermath of a young boy's suicide in the 1990s and its impact on Ishulutaq's small Arctic community. In the third panel, small brightly jacketed people retreat from a modest cairn topped with a cross. Two members of the group, a young child and an adult, reach for each other. It's a small gesture of hope, writ large.

Not all older artists have the same opportunities to show their work, however. And if we don't check our biases, their art might be lost to obscurity. This is particularly true for women who've sharpened their skills over decades. In some cases, their creative work was done while caring for their families or tending to a husband's larger artistic ego. The belated critical acclaim for artist Sonia Delaunay, whose colourful geometric abstractions cross the boundaries of fashion, decorative art, and visual art, serves as an example. Her husband, pioneering abstract expressionist Robert Delaunay, died in 1941, and it was only after this that Sonia was recognized as a serious artist in her own right. She was celebrated in 1964 with a one-woman show at the Louvre—the first for a living woman—when she was seventy-nine. Cuban-born American painter Carmen Herrera was 101 when she had her inaugural solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2016. It focused on her work from 1948 to 1978, and included many pieces that she created in her fifties and sixties. Herrera, however, only made her first sale after she turned eighty-nine.

"The art world finds it very hard to accept older artists if they're not already well known," Galenson tells me. He argues that more resources, such as prizes and grants, should be focused toward older artists. "It's not just from an equity point of view, it's not just about fairness," he says. Rather, it's about "making our society as creative as possible."

Prompted by our conversation at the AGO, I visited my father over the next three seasons and we spoke about the past, present, and future of his creative work. We sat together in the drawing room of my parents' home in Colborne, Ontario, where pens are corralled in silver soup tins on his desk and jars of black ink line the windowsill. His newest creations—cactus-inspired mixed media on paper—were stacked in modest piles along the seat of a high-backed sofa that was made by our undertaker ancestors (furniture making being a natural side business). His record player and extensive collection of classical music occupies the space to the left of his desk. A ticking clock keeps a background beat to his days.

This room has become his world. He has mostly abandoned his current painting studio, which is poorly heated and cramped compared to the barn-like structures he occupied during the years of my childhood. Those cavernous spaces aren't really necessary now. In the past decade, my father hasn't been able to lift the large canvases that he previously worked with, some of which reached ten feet long. His newer paintings are smaller and fewer. But his technical skills remain sharp; his weird sense of the world, attuned; and his work ethic, unwavering. He continues to make art every day. "You have to work hard at it," he told me. "It's like sports—you can't sit around and then do your best score at the golf course. You've got to be doing it all the time."

I asked him if he felt that his greatest creation might still be ahead. He isn't sure, but he doesn't rule it out. "It would be nice to think that the best painting I'm ever going to do is still waiting to be done, but I have a hunch that that won't be the…" he trailed off, glanced at a pile of drawings. "The best work on paper might be," he said. "But you can't will a masterpiece."

Above where we sat, on the top row of the bookshelf along the east wall, there is a line of fraying red Michelin travel guides to Europe, evidence of past artistic journeys. France, 1958: his first trip to the continent. It was just after he had painted *The Earth Returns to Life*, and during the voyage, he underwent what can only be described as an aesthetic conversion, brought about after seeing the Roman Catholic churches—flickering candles, the solemnity of High Mass, the gilded and the golden, the frescoes— paleolithic cave paintings, and, the crowning event, master draughtsman Goya's drawings in the Prado archives during a jaunt to Madrid. Deutschland, 1967: stationed in Dublin for the summer, he took a short trip to Bavaria with his then wife and saw the pilgrimage churches and their triptychs and diptychs. He returned home, and, using a sabre saw, he pried apart the sculptures he'd been creating. He then made doors to form curio cabinets that opened to reveal three-dimensional landscapes. He calls them, simply, boxes. The most recent, finished this past spring, is speckled with tiny pebbles from Middle Cove Beach that we'd gathered together when I lived in Newfoundland. Inside, antique keys hang like bats in the crevices of a cave.

Aging, however, does change the reality of being an artist. In the last decade, there have been several long gaps in the string of Michelins on my father's bookshelf. Suitcases must be lighter now and can't contain art supplies when going over or gallery catalogues when coming back. Travel itself can be exhausting.

Another recent issue for my father is that his ideas can be elusive. They come, but, almost as quickly, they go. His "idea books," which is what he calls his small portable sketch pads, now double as a kind of *aide-mémoire*. "The notes are in the drawings and in the paintings, and that doesn't change," he said. "You may add to it, but, nevertheless, it's there, literally in black and white."

The notes are also on the wall. My father has always kept a corkboard across from his place at the kitchen table. He pins up unfinished drawings,

which he then surveys while eating. "It happened this morning," he told me one afternoon in mid-August. He showed me a black-and-white pen-and-ink sketch of a split-rail fence. It had been pinned to the board for six months, but today, something in it had sparked plans for a new painting. "While I was sitting there eating my breakfast, I kept seeing it," he said. "I kind of had the idea, and I think it will work."

THERE IS A MISSING chorus in this story: the voices weakened by frailty and hampered by failing senses. In the process of researching late-stage creativity, I set up several interviews with artists who are over eighty, but for whom the realities of aging ultimately made meetings impossible. They were still making art, their gallerists and caregivers assured me, but age intrudes. It happened to them as it happened to Georgia O'Keeffe, Edgar Degas, and Monet, all of whom experienced vision loss in their later years. Each of those artists continued to work, but, as Degas said, "Everything is trying for a blind man who wants to make believe that he can see."

My father doesn't know if he'll see the art he's creating today displayed, purchased, or revered in his lifetime, but it's possible. Based on the recent successes of older artists, such as Herrera, it seems that the art world's gerontophobia is poised to shift—and maybe, based on demographics, that's inevitable.

In 2016, Britain's prestigious Turner Prize got rid of its age limit, previously set at fifty, and is "acknowledging the fact that artists can experience a breakthrough…at any age." Eighty-eight-year-old Yayoi Kusama, arguably the most successful living artist in Japan, opened her own museum in Tokyo in 2017. A quick survey of exhibiting Canadian artists who are over eighty include Ann Kipling, Mary Pratt, and Rita Letendre, who was the focus of a recent solo exhibit at the AGO.

So far, aging hasn't kept my father from making art, but it's something that he fears could come to pass. "I think about that occasionally and then promptly forget it because it would be terrible," he told me, adding that he's following a strict regime—plenty of water, a good night's sleep—in an effort to maintain his working life. "I enjoy it as much as I ever did," he said. "I'm still discovering things."

Take, for example, the genesis of *Strong Box I*. When he was seventy-nine, my dad visited me in Victoria, British Columbia, where I lived for a time with my husband and children. In the past, rain or shine, he would leave our house to ramble, perhaps discovering a grouping of oddly pollarded trees or some vegetation germinating on a tombstone to sketch. On this trip, though, he remained in our living room. There, he spent several dark winter days drawing a battered First World War chest that we'd inherited from my husband's family and used as a coffee table. I was surprised by his interest in the trunk, but even more so by his reluctance to leave the house and explore the outdoors, which has long been his muse. Months later, when I visited my parents in Ontario, the trunk was there, immortalized in an oil painting hanging above the fireplace. The trunk's worn, brown patches were converted into rose, fuchsia, and vibrant blues, my living room eclipsed by a fiery-red background. And that fluorescent-pink was at its centre. The trunk was still familiar, as was my father's style, but both appeared to be transformed.

"What is it about the trunk, Dad?" I asked.

"I don't know why I like that trunk," he said, shrugging.

I think I know the answer. As a younger man, my father found inspiration for his large-scale oils by trekking across European landscapes and into the dark flicker of far-flung churches. Those destinations are now unreachable, but there is one place that remains accessible to him: the terrain of his imagination. ❁

A version of this story was published in 2017.

EMILY URQUHART is a folklorist and writer.

The End of Retirement

Want to keep your house? Support your kids? Stay alive? Never stop working

BY CATHRIN BRADBURY
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHLOE CUSHMAN

I'M STANDING on my back stoop looking out at the eighty or so people jammed into the backyard for my retirement party. They're here to celebrate my forty years in journalism. There's the gang from *Domino* fashion magazine, where I got my start in the can't-spend-enough, cocaine-stoked '80s. The *Globe and Mail* crew, from the ambitious middle of my career, hang out with colleagues from *Maclean's*, the *Toronto Star*, and *Metro*. (I moved around a lot.) The CBC News crowd are huddled to my left, protecting themselves and their fat budgets from the circling sharks of underfunded journalism. My final job was with them: we were together for the COVID-19 shutdown, the murder of George Floyd, the storming of the Capitol in Washington, DC, the invasion of Ukraine, nuclear threats from Russia, and blazing forests and atmospheric rivers at home. It was the most punishing news cycle of my career. I wasn't sad to be leaving.

Just beyond the guests and beyond the hornbeam trees where I've strung fairy lights for the party, I think I can see my future. The grind of work is finally over, my retirement dream cued up. April in Paris! Reading by the sea! Spanish lessons in Antigua so I can better speak to my grandson. I'll be playing with him, too, in the open-ended days my children rarely knew with me. I'm not saying I deserve a life of ease. But I worked hard to earn my retirement, dropping giant chunks of my salary into company and government pension plans throughout those forty years. It's time for the famous social contract to hold up its end of the bargain and take care of me, the way it did my father before me, to deliver on the idea that retirement is my right after a life of work and the promise that I will have the time and means to enjoy it.

Except none of that happened. The year since my retirement party has not been a dreamy passage to a welcoming future but a nerve-shattering trip into the unknown. My debt is swelling like a broken ankle; my hard-won savings may or may not be sucked into the vortex of an international market collapse. Can I keep my house? Who knows? The macroeconomy is messing with my microeconomy. The future keeps shape-shifting. And none of the careful planning I put into my retirement is going to change that.

When I left my last job, I felt sad for friends determined to keep working to seventy and beyond. How eccentric they seemed. Now I repeat the same two words whenever I see them: "Don't retire."

ROUGHLY ONE THOUSAND people are retiring each day in Canada, Fraser Stark, president of the Longevity Pension Fund at Purpose Investments in Toronto, told me. That's about a million currently retired. Ours is the largest generation in Canadian history to move into retirement, and we tend to get distracted by the sheer number of us snailing through the system like a row of snowplows on a four-lane highway. But the bigger issue with retiring at sixty-four, which is the average age Canadians leave the workforce, can be summed up in one increasingly terrifying word: longevity.

Anyone retiring in Canada right now can expect to live at least until eighty (women until eighty-four). But those numbers are averaged out. When I began to discuss retirement with my financial planner in early 2022, he put my life expectancy at ninety-four. "Why, thank you," I said, "I do try to keep fit." "No," said Benjamin Klein, senior portfolio manager at Baskin Wealth Management, "life expectancy is not randomized. When we factor in your gender, genetics, access to good health care, education, and lifestyle, that's how long you'll live."

Stark doubled down on that number. The oldest Canadian is believed to have died at age 117. "If you want to accurately plan, that's the number that you need to write down," he said. Retire at sixty-four and you could have fifty more years to save for.

Every generation lives longer than the one that came before—nothing new there. But a fifty-year span between the end of work and the end of life is a long way from the original purpose of paid retirement, which was a very short bridge of financial support. Or no bridge at all. Otto von Bismarck has been trotted out and smacked down many times for his invention of paid retirement: in 1881, he proposed that all Germans had the right to government support after a life of work, with payments kicking in at age seventy. Except that life expectancy in the 1880s was about forty years. When Canada created its own pension plan, in 1965, to address the growing poverty of retired Canadians sixty-five and older—thank you, Lester B. Pearson, for my monthly CPP cheque—the life expectancy of men, who made up the bulk of the workforce, was sixty-eight.

By 2019, 37 percent of Canadians fifty-five and older were concerned they wouldn't have enough savings when they retired, according to the Canadian Financial Capability Survey. And that was before the rush of retirements during COVID, a third of them earlier than planned. Lockdown's low interest rates and curtailed spending gave false hope to retirees such as me—those unspending days when the money in my bank account seemed to self-spawn like guppies. And, also like guppies, its lifespan was short lived.

"There's not enough gold in my golden years," I told Klein a few months into my retirement. I could feel him smiling sympathetically across the phone line. "You're not alone," he assured me. Rents, mortgages, groceries—Canadians are suffering. I described the little house graphic on my gas bill: the house keeps getting smaller, thanks to my ferocious vigilance. But the bill keeps getting bigger, thanks to the cost of gas. And that's just standard housekeeping. Throw in the unexpected, like a family wedding or grown kids moving back home, and many retired people land "somewhere on the spectrum of panic," Klein said.

According to BMO's thirteenth Annual Retirement Study, Canadians believe they need $1.7 million to retire, up 20 percent from 2020, when they put it at $1.4 million. The number is not statistically supported, but it's a good gauge of people's emotional preparedness for retirement and how anxious they feel. That third of Canadians who were worried, in 2019,

that they wouldn't have enough money has jumped to more than half of us in 2023, and 74 percent are concerned about inflation and rising prices.

Fewer than a quarter of retiring Canadians have a defined benefit pension plan, Stark said. Instead, "many of us retire with a lump sum of money." The amounts vary, but the massive uncertainty of how long the money will last doesn't. "We don't know how long we're going to live; we don't know what the interest rates will be; we don't know what the stock markets will do; we don't know what inflation rates are," said Stark. "Every one of us when we retire is on a unique journey of insecurity."

It's not only the retired who need to worry about supporting themselves in the long stretch of their future. Working generations coming up behind them will also shoulder this burden. A metric called the dependency ratio calculates the proportion of the people not in the workforce who are "dependent" on those of working age. According to Statistics Canada, dependents are aged zero to nineteen and sixty-five and over. Productives are twenty to sixty-four. The international tool is often cited by government and business and has been a driver of pension-reform debates around the world.

A low dependency ratio—in Mexico, for example—means that there are enough people working to support the dependent population. A high ratio—Japan and South Korea are at the top—indicates more financial stress on workers. Across all OECD countries right now, there are about thirty people sixty-five and over for every 100 people of working age. In 1950, that ratio was fourteen to 100; by 2075, it is predicted to increase to fifty-five non-working adults for every 100 working.

In Canada, we're at the lower end, with dependency expected to hit about thirty-five by 2025, according to 2015 data from the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. But by 2075, our dependency ratio is projected to be 49.9—one dependent for every two working-age Canadians. That's a big burden for Xs, Ms, and Zs. "The shrinking percentage of young people means that in the future, the number of workers may be insufficient to finance the pensions of retirees," according to StatCan.

The original meaning of the word "retire," from the French "retirer," is the act of retreating, falling back, withdrawing into seclusion. Except the retirees I spoke to for this story had go-go schedules that I was worn out just hearing about. Many had taken on dramatically different types of paid employment after leaving their careers; others had unleashed their inner rebels to become tireless advocates for social justice and climate change; still others were full-time caregivers.

"The government pays very little" for retired Canadians, said Thomas Klassen, professor at York University's School of Public Policy and Administration. Of the experts I spoke to about retirement, he was the only one of traditional retirement age, so you could say he had a stake in the debate, but I found him reliably dispassionate. He pointed out that retirees in new jobs pay income tax, taxes on their retirement income and government subsidies, HST and GST, and they contribute to the economy by spending money. "And yet we keep hearing that boomers are hoarding all the money and that we will bankrupt younger people," he said.

Samir Sinha called the dependency ratio outdated and misguided. The director of geriatrics at Sinai Health and University Health Network in Toronto and a passionate defender of the rights of older Canadians argued that such concepts hold us back. "They don't recognize the new reality that at sixty-five you're likely to have twenty years" of good and productive life ahead.

The retired are among the country's biggest contributors to child care and volunteer work, Sinha said. "Think about the amount governments save for the unpaid care that mostly older people are providing. When we've priced out the unpaid caregiver, we're valuing that in the billions and billions of dollars every year."

Mieko Ise might be called a "silent retiree": someone who quietly leaves the workforce to look after family members in need. For years, she juggled looking after her own and her husband's parents while working full time for a Toronto nonprofit. "I started to have issues with being a caregiver and a full-time employee," said Ise, now in her sixties. "I would take vacation days. I would book time off. My boss was not particularly sympathetic. I get it. I don't believe employers should carry the load of your life burden." When it became too overwhelming to have two jobs, Ise quit the one we count as work.

Sinha pointed me to a Japanese movie called *Plan 75*, directed by Chie Hayakawa and released in 2022. In a dystopian future, Japan—which in real life is the demographically oldest OECD country, with a projected dependency ratio of seventy-seven to 100 by 2075—offers $1,000 to the elderly to terminate their own lives and relieve society of the burden of supporting them. The movie, which I watched with my seventy-six-year-old sister (a lawyer who retired at seventy-two), opened with a violent murder off camera. We heard the blast of gunshot and saw a wheelchair toppled on its side. "Cheery beginning," said Laura. (It turned out—spoiler—the real *Plan 75* was to sell the older generations' ashes for profit to a recycling company. The message of the sweetly weird movie was it's better not to kill our elders.)

The year before *Plan 75* came out, Yusuke Narita, an assistant professor of economics at Yale University, suggested mass suicide and disembowelment for Japan's aged. "I feel like the only solution is pretty clear," he said in a 2021 video. Narita later softened his comments in response to questions from the *New York Times*, saying they were an "abstract metaphor" (disembowelment seems pretty visceral to me). But he did win a big audience: he now has more than 600,000 followers on X (formerly Twitter).

It's true that the number of people over sixty-five is growing faster in countries across Asia than anywhere else in the world at the same time that the size of their younger generations shrinks. That means as many as half of Japan's employers report shortages of full-time workers, according

to *New York Times* reporting from earlier this year on aging in Asia. Workers in their seventies and even eighties are stepping up to fill the gap, taking lower-paying jobs as delivery drivers, office cleaners, and store clerks—jobs that the younger generations don't want. A quarter of people sixty-five and over in Japan are currently working.

The number is the same in Canada and increasing: 24 percent of Canadians aged sixty-five to seventy still work in jobs that can be measured, up from 11 percent in 2000. But the dependency ratio reinforces the belief that those sixty-five and over are not working. Workers are not counted as workers because they've *aged out* of the way that we count them.

"THE GREYS" is what the older generation working for *Succession*'s Waystar RoyCo were called. They were often shot bunched together like an endangered species. They put on compression socks before flying. They plotted for their golden parachutes. Or maybe "one last rodeo," as Karl, Waystar's CFO, suggested to Frank, former vice chairman, in the final minutes of the hit series. Cut to Tom, the brand new CEO: "Frank, dead. Karl, dead. I really don't need those two old cunts on my shoulder."

I thought it was funny as hell. Or I did before my conversation with Lisa Taylor, president of Challenge Factory and co-author of *The Talent Revolution: Longevity and the Future of Work*. Taylor described ageism as "the last socially acceptable form of prejudice." She and her company have set 2030—the year the last of the boomers reach sixty-five—as the target for solving what she described as the far-reaching and urgent issue of this country's age-biased workforce.

I was skeptical. Surely, there are more important workplace issues to solve, like equity and fairness for people of every race and gender. But after a couple of hours on the phone with Taylor, I came to believe that treating retirement as a default outcome of aging is a workplace bias that will affect the life expectancy, financial dependency, and long-term care costs for a generation retiring earlier than it needs or wants to. Not to mention the impact on the economy. Taylor said if we want to take advantage of our full workforce—in 2022, Canada had nearly a million job vacancies—we need to get to a point where we "recognize and call out ageism with the same level of comfort as we do other prejudices in our workplaces."

Systemic ageism was meant to have been legislated out of the workplace in 2006, when the Ontario Human Rights Commission won the argument that Canadian workers don't come with a best-before date stamped on their foreheads. (I was a manager at the *Globe and Mail* at the time, I was fifty-one, and there was a lot of backroom worry about carrying the Greys on our backs—and a lot of wisecracks about a superannuated newsroom.) But even though sixty-five hasn't been the legal age for retirement for seventeen years, "we're constantly looking for ways to push them out the door," said Sinha—with retirement packages, buyouts, and pension contributions capped at sixty-five.

"Sixty-five hasn't been the legal age for retirement for years, but we're constantly looking for ways to push them out."

Taylor's company did a workplace survey of the financial services industry in 2015, and it showed that as early as age forty-nine, workers were no longer sent for training or high-performance programs and future-focused career conversations had slowed down. By the time someone hit fifty-five, "the conversation about leaving had been going on for years, except no one was actually saying it."

My own conversations with retired Canadians, particularly men in finance, bore this out. Raymond Betts worked most of his life in the frenetic world of institutional equity in New York, Boston, and Toronto. (Betts asked that his name be changed for this article.) When he turned fifty-three, the company hired a younger employee to do the same job as his, without discussing it with him. "My desk was originally thirty-six inches long; they kept moving me to a smaller desk until I ended up sitting at one that was twenty-four inches long." Betts left that world at sixty, taking his skills and work ethic to his second career as a real estate agent.

Many people buy into the company storyline that their best years are behind them—the proverbial coasting into retirement. "People start to say, 'Susan's checked out. Susan retired a few years ago, she just hasn't told us,'" said Taylor. "It's attributed to age instead of the company's mismanagement of talent."

It's not a big step from there to the accepted myths about older workers: they're slower and less productive. They're over the hill, so training them is a cost instead of an investment. Ditto spending any time performance-managing them. The stickiest myth is that the long-time employee is too expensive. "Get this senior person off the books and hire two younger people to replace them," is how Sinha put it. I've been part of those conversations myself about retirement-age people; likely my bosses also had them about me. But seeing the older worker as a financial burden is a failure of math.

"Calculations of how much employees cost a company generally include salary and benefits packages," said Taylor. However, their not having to learn on the job, be trained, or engage the resources of a mentor, let alone the asset of being used as a mentor for younger staff—all of this also saves costs. "I have the experience, the relationships, the contacts. I work incredibly hard," said Betts. He still does: he's sold 132 houses in the seven years since he turned sixty.

I mentioned to Taylor that some of the Greys at CBC News seemed to struggle with technology during COVID. She stopped me. "We give a pass to the twenty-three-year-old with cats walking back and forth on camera," she said. But we snicker when someone over sixty leaves their mike off. I blamed imminent senility, especially when the person on mute was myself.

Taylor was unsurprised. "Ageism is also self-imposed," she said. Her example was the joke birthday cards we send each other. "If you replaced age with any other characteristic, you would never send it," she said. I don't mention the card I just received for my sixty-eighth birthday, a *New Yorker* cartoon called "Senior Charades." The old man's word bubble says: "Two words—I forgot what they are." It got a big laugh and led to various tips about how to behave at work to appear less old: Don't groan when you stand up. Smile in meetings so your face doesn't sag into resting-old-face. And never rummage for anything, especially glasses. (Actually, never say the word "rummage.")

Taylor, who recently turned forty-nine, (and says she's been losing her glasses since she was twenty-two), is a long way from retirement; so are most of the experts I spoke with. I found their dedication moving; they saw it as realistic. "Unlike other prejudices, 100 percent of people will feel age prejudice if we don't solve it," said Taylor. Klassen thinks it will take twenty years for the workplace to reflect the law. Sinha said we're still in the "baby steps" of realizing that longevity has implications for how long we work. "The workplace has not caught up with the reality of life expectancy, and therefore of career expectancy," he said.

Working longer because you're likely to live longer is not everyone's idea of how best to reform retirement. It's an anathema in France, to give the most widely reported example. President Emmanuel Macron finally pushed through his pension reforms in spring 2023, increasing the retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four over a seven-year period. In the often-violent street battles that fed headlines everywhere, protesters lost a thumb, an eye, and even, to one officer's club in Paris, a testicle. One of the many slogans from the protests stood out for me: "Leave us time to live before we die."

But here's a more existential problem with retirement: it could kill you. People who stop working too soon may *not* have much time to live before they die. "You hear about the doctors whose entire life and identity was at the hospital," said Sinha. Then they retire and "they're dead a few months later." Similar sudden-death stories circulate about a certain type of driven, lifelong journalist, and I always assumed they were apocryphal. Or that the victim had been ignoring long-standing health issues.

Shortened life expectancy can be predicted by a lack of purpose, Sinha said. He referred to a "meta-analysis" project from 2010 that combined research from 148 studies involving 308,849 people to show that social connection and purpose increased survival by 50 percent. A lack of social relationships created the same risk of death as well-established factors such as smoking, drinking, and obesity. It was a gobsmacking discovery thirteen years ago; a lot of subsequent research has since supported the finding that early retirement can mean less time to enjoy it. The Blue Zones research into the world's longest-lived people, much publicized by *National Geographic* and now a Netflix docuseries called *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zone*, also links longevity with purpose. "In the island community of Okinawa"—in Japan, where very long-lived women thrive on a diet of sweet potatoes, mugwort, and goya—"everybody can tell you what their sense of purpose is," said Sinha. "They have a word for it: ikigai, which means 'reason for being.'"

Every society uses markers as shorthand for people to understand each other. "In some societies, it's your last name or who your parents were," said Taylor. "Americans use job titles, but they're equally likely to identify each other by the city they grew up in, or what university they went to, or what sports team they're a fan of." In Canada, she said, "we almost exclusively use our job titles to define who we are." Sometimes we go so far as to use our previous job to describe ourselves after we retire, in what Taylor calls a "backwards-looking identity." Even when we're not working, "we reinforce work as a critical piece of our own identity."

John Davey worked at Dow Chemical in his hometown of Sarnia, Ontario, for thirty-two years. He left at age fifty-eight. "I didn't retire. I *was retired*," Davey, who's now seventy-two, told me. It was part of a company-wide downscaling (he bears no grudges). It took less than a month for him to understand he was not the stay-at-home type. "One day, I sat in my living room and hoped it would snow so I could go out and shovel." He's worked ever since, most recently as a flower-delivery-person. "I know men who say they are going to regrout the bathroom or whatever, but that's done and then what?" he said.

Don O'Connor put the perils of not having purpose more starkly. He was in wealth management and real estate at TD Bank, in Toronto, for thirty-six years, so his financial literacy was better than the average Canadian's. COVID made him realize how much he hated the three-hour commute, and so he retired last year, at sixty-two. Now he works part time at a funeral home in Burlington and loves everything about it—two-minute drive, flexible hours, every day is different—and puts up with the mild astonishment of his friends about his new job, because, as he told me on our call, "if you don't do anything, you're on an express route to death."

Here's a bleak prospect for many retiring Canadians: they will leave or be pushed out of the workforce too soon and without enough money. They're financially prepared for the short and medium haul of life after work, but not the long one. They will go on to live too long, in too poor health (increased life expectancy has also increased the number of years people spend being sick), with a dwindling ability to support themselves or live independently. Ultimately, they'll become wards of the state, housed in long-term care at great cost to the government and society. Sinha said: "This is where our destitute end up, in these government-run facilities." According to a 2019 report by the National Institute on Ageing at Toronto Metropolitan University, long-term care costs are expected to triple from $22 billion to $71 billion by 2050. "It will be the equivalent of the modern-day Victorian poor house for our old," Sinha said.

"The human brain is very optimistic, which is great, but it can't process the bad things that will happen in the future."

"We know this for a fact: the human brain is not equipped to make long-term decisions," said Bonnie-Jeanne MacDonald, director of financial security research at the National Institute on Ageing. "The human brain is very optimistic, which is great, but it can't process the bad things that will happen in the future." Decisions made now are not just for yourself in five years but for you in thirty years. "And that's going to be a much more vulnerable person than you are right now, health wise."

The National Institute on Ageing report says that, by 2050, care in one's own home will cost up to $25,000 a month; care in a retirement home or residence could be as much as $10,000 a month. Those options will be unaffordable for most Canadians. Meanwhile, the number of people caring for family members at home will decrease sharply. Between now and 2050, Canada is expected to have 30 percent fewer voluntary caregivers, according to Sinha. Paid health care workers will not fill the gap: Canada's universal health care system "was never designed to cover the provision of long-term care services," including home and community care nursing, Sinha said. Long-term care insurance (LTCI) is now mandatory in Germany, South Korea, and Japan. Here in Canada, home-based care doesn't even cover prescription medications. According to that 2019 Canadian Financial Capability Survey, a third of Canadians also worry they won't be able to afford health care costs as they age, and rightly so.

"We spend the majority of our life savings paying for care in the last ten years of our life," said Klein, the financial manager who put my life expectancy at ninety-four, which is sounding less and less like good news.

If we could create a different kind of retirement in Canada, a more inclusive, more creative, and flexible concept of work—and one that erased the grim picture of poor houses for the old—where would we start? After talking to dozens of experts and retired Canadians, three ideas, or ideals, formed my personal retirement manifesto.

The first would be to make measures against ageism part of every company's fair-employment practice. Imagine a legacy career path that sees Canadians move from a forty- to a sixty-year work life, without censure or ridicule for being too old to work. I think of what Taylor said: "People change jobs all the time, but as we get older, we think we must continue doing exactly what we're doing now or fall off a cliff. These are extreme alternatives." The more high powered the job, and the higher in pay scale, the more we believe there is nowhere for workers to go but out. But many older workers prefer to forgo the intensity of management responsibilities, higher salaries, and relentless climbing and return to the craft work they excelled at in the beginning of their careers—even for a lot less money. Go ahead and ask them. As my own career wound down, I often thought—but did not say—that I wanted to go back to writing and editing, to revive my love of words that had taken me all the way to senior news director at the CBC, where I wasn't allowed anywhere near copy.

The second tenet of my manifesto is phased retirement. This one took me a while to get to, even though every expert and most of the retirees I spoke to were for it. I asked fellow CBC leader Greg Reaume, sixty-eight, who retired from running world news at CBC News a few months before I left myself, what he'd have said if I'd asked him to stay on a couple of days a week for the next two years, or if we'd opened that option to everybody. "A minefield," Reaume said. "And complicated to manage." "Right?" I agreed. Which is exactly the problem. Even if bosses like us believe in and desire phased retirement, taking on the labour-intensive job of juggling the options (do you make it mandatory to offer, but voluntary to accept?) and coordinating the schedules of part-time staff would keep managers from getting on side. We need to get them on side, though, because think of the benefits: to the worker who wants to keep contributing, to the employer who keeps getting returns on their experience and work ethic, and to the Canadian economy in need of workers. Figure that out and we move toward retirement becoming an adaptive and gradual transition rather than an on/off switch. Indeed, Klassen's research showed a strong preference among older workers to gradually ease out of full-time employment, working fewer days over a period of several years. His definition of retirement is "a transition from working mostly full time to not working mostly full time."

Finally, I propose we find new words to describe both retirement and retirees. A line from a 2014 *Atlantic* story on American retirement puts the lie to the core idea of traditional retirement. "I don't know if it's ever going to be realistic that everyone saves enough to spend the last third of their life on vacation," New York economist and author Allison Schrager was quoted as saying. (When I called her recently to ask if she still stood by this idea, her answer was a firm *yes*.) That vision of retirement, the one my father enjoyed and the one I had teed up for myself? None of it makes any sense anymore. Media, banks, and self-help books have lately been bandying around the term "The New Retirement," but we should really be talking about the end of retirement. Instead of talking about "The Retired," we should be talking about "The *Un*retired." Not the undead—not yet—but maybe as indomitable.

Except that's not right either. If our goal is to have Canadians work for as long as they're excited and willing and able and empowered to do so, how about if we just call them workers? Because the essential zeitgeist of the retiree in 2023 is to keep working, however that looks.

Raymond Betts, even as he moves from being "goal oriented to soul oriented," told me he will "never retire. My father worked until he was ninety-seven and died four months later, at ninety-eight." Betts wasn't sure he'd see the point in going on without work. "Work gives me a reason to call someone," he said. "I have a mission. I have a reason to talk to people."

Mieko Ise believes retirement is a time to take risks in a way that younger people who need to keep their jobs can't. "Speak out!" she said. "I want to be reinvigorated, not retired." Vicki Obedkoff, who retired in Saskatoon at seventy-one, after forty years as a minister with the United Church of Canada, fights for the same causes she's always supported: climate change, human rights, and social justice. She quoted Alice Walker: activism is my rent for living on the planet. "I think about her often," said Obedkoff. "I can't see a time in the future when I will let this work go."

Marjorie Beaucage, a seventy-six-year-old artist and Elder who lives in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, was baffled by the whole idea of retirement. "I don't know any of those retired people," she said. "Elders don't retire. Neither do artists. For Elders, this time of life is the busiest. You have to be there for your community."

THE WAY I think about my own retirement has changed significantly since I started working on this article. I'm part of a generation that will live the longest in history and also work the longest, if the big thinkers—and the workers themselves—succeed in moving Canadians from a forty-year career path to a sixty-year one. It's new terrain, and the best way through is to be alert, adaptable, open to failure, and ready to act fast on success.

I don't see retiring when I did as a failure—I had my second career as a writer I wanted to focus on and that grandson I'm gaga to spend time with. But I wonder why I didn't have the conversation about a staged departure into a different kind of role, or why no one else had it with me.

I'm newly alert to dinner-table banter that turns ageist. It is without exception driven by people my age. "It's time for the old farts to make way for the next generation," said one retired financial industry executive at a recent dinner party when the conversation turned to the *Globe and Mail*'s leadership. (Phillip Crawley, publisher, announced his retirement a month later, at seventy-eight.) "Hold on," I said and then held forth on what I've learned about age prejudice. It may have been obnoxious. I will probably keep doing it. (Speak out, inner rebel!)

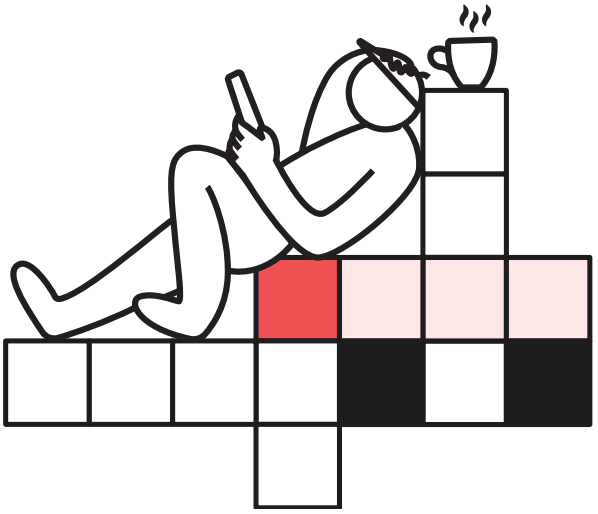
For now, I'm following Benjamin Klein's simple financial advice: more input, less output. "Those are the only two things we can control," he said. Which could mean getting a job—and not in management or journalism but something completely different. I've been an admirer of people who dedicate their retirement to volunteer work but felt pity when I saw someone my own age shelving groceries or working as a greeter. Now I think, "Long life headed your way, my friend!" I've stopped "backwards identifying" myself by the work I used to do, after Lisa Taylor asked me to "please be bold and to introduce yourself as you are now." In my case, that's as a writer. Now and then I even try to picture my future self, thirty years from now, but Bonnie-Jeanne MacDonald is right. It's unfathomable. I accept that older Cathrin will be more fragile. Hopefully not in the poor house but perhaps a modest room or two, with a few things to remind me of the people I love—and also with the people I love. Likely I won't be working. We can but hope.

A version of this story was published in 2023.

CATHRIN BRADBURY is a Toronto-based journalist.

THE WALRUS

You can't ignore the news



—but you can take a break from it.

Play The Walrus Games.
A new game every day. Play for free.

thewalrus.ca/games

THE WALRUS GAMES

The World's Oldest Ultramarathon Runner Is Racing against Death

Dag Aabye is eighty-one and pushing his body to its absolute limits

BY BRETT POPPLEWELL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK FRANKOWSKI

Time stalks everyone, but when it catches up with a professional athlete, it can be brutal to watch. It's why so many of the greatest names in sport often fade from the spotlight once they leave the field, to age out of sight. And it's why, as the clock ticked down toward 8 a.m. on July 31, 2016, I stood at the start line of the Canadian Death Race, willing the oldest contestant to do what few believed possible.

For fifteen years, Dag Aabye had been coming to Grande Cache, Alberta, to push his body further and faster than many of his fellow competitors, the majority of them less than half his age. Many who started the race never finished, and those who did often took up to twenty-four hours to push and drag their bodies around the 125-kilometre mud-sloped inclines and exhausting switchbacks that make up the Death Race. Dag had completed it a record seven times, each time as its oldest competitor. But now, seven long years had passed since he last crossed the finish line. And though he was markedly slower at seventy-five than he had been at sixty-nine, he refused to give up. When he ran, he did so for sport, for pleasure, and for his own survival.

But there was something fleeting to it all. A general understanding that if he ever stopped running, he would stop existing altogether. As one of his fellow contestants noted, Dag seemed to have "an ephemeral, monk-like presence" on the trail. His slow yet relentless style appeared almost spiritual and evoked comparisons to the legendary Japanese monks of Mount Hiei who run-walk 1,000 marathons in 1,000 days in order to attain enlightenment. But he also evoked comparisons to a freak of nature: a veritable wolverine who, like the tortured mutant from the X-Men comic books, seemed to age slower than anyone else and had a capacity to withstand inhuman degrees of pain and keep pushing forward.

At any given time, he looked the part both of a battle-hardened warrior and a sage, old mystic. It was the latter image that tended to endear him to most people. Especially when he slowed his pace, approaching a fellow runner who was keeled over in pain and on the brink of collapse. He would appear to

them like some half-naked septuagenarian messiah, his figure distorted through their sweat-blurred vision as he planted his feet next to theirs, placed his hand on their shoulder, and imparted some ancient-sounding wisdom.

One racer would later recall Dag's words like so: "Look down. It does not matter where your feet were yesterday or where they are going to be tomorrow. It matters where your feet are at this moment."

Dag never liked to start a race from anywhere but the very back of the herd. It allowed him to slip into his own meditative rhythm. He stood back from the start line and breathed in the optimism of the first-time competitors while filtering out the sound of the beats pumping out of the loudspeakers nearby. He preferred to listen to the beat of his own heart when he ran. It was the inner metronome he kept pace to. Two beats to every step—three if he was going uphill. There was a synchronization between heart and mind when he really got moving, when he swore he could feel his pulse inside his brain. That's when the endorphins would kick in, creating a runner's high that he called his "gateway to clarity." Once he passed through that gateway, he could hold his pace for several hours.

Dag knew his body couldn't move like it used to, but he was determined to push it as hard as he could for as long as possible. It didn't bother him that he was losing momentum. He knew that ultimately his days as a Death Racer would end, not because he couldn't handle the race but because his body would slow to such a pace that he would fail to reach the first checkpoint before the cut-off time. The prospect that someday he would be told that he was essentially too old and too slow to even start the race didn't bother him either. Because that day still seemed distant.

Soon a rush of the youngest, most competitive runners pushed over the start line. None knew what lay before them, that by nightfall some runners in a hypothermic state would be rescued while others would be treated for exhaustion.

Dag watched the first few hundred racers disappear into the forest, heading along a mud-soaked trail that would lead them 19 kilometres toward an abandoned rail line and onward to the

base of an 1,800-metre mountain. The herd was thinning out, the race already several minutes old, when he finally pressed his finger to his stopwatch and began to move. He was all alone as he crossed the start line, an elderly man who had already fallen behind the pack. He was last, but he was just getting started.

It was curiosity and desire, not ego, that drove Dag back to the Death Race again and again. Despite his advancing years, his best finish had not been his first but rather his third, when, at the age of sixty-four, he crossed the finish line after 20 hours and 56 minutes—1 minute and 54 seconds faster than he had run at the age of sixty-two. What he craved above all was the magical feeling he experienced most often on the trails near the school bus in which he lived on the side of a mountain in British Columbia, when he would reach a marker in the bush and check his stopwatch, only to surprise himself that he was running faster than he had in several years. He lived for those moments, rare as they were now, because it was then that he felt a connection to something preternatural. "It's like touching the fountain of youth," Dag had told me. "Juan Ponce de León went looking in the wrong place. He didn't need to sail to Florida. All he needed was a stopwatch, a journal, and a pair of running shoes."

There were inherent risks associated with running such a long distance, but no one went into the Death Race expecting to die. And yet, like any ultramarathon, the race had a way of making you feel as though you were pushing toward death. Much of that came from the reality that running such distances demanded much more than the expected wear on the joints, muscles, and ligaments. It disrupted multiple parts of the body's internal function, the most common being the diversion of blood from the racers' stomachs into their muscles, stopping their digestion and causing uncontrolled nausea. Sometimes a racer would double over with stomach pain or turn their head sideways and vomit over their shoulder while they ran. Some experienced a temporary loss of vision as their corneas swelled from a buildup of fluid. Then there were those who would end up so fatigued on the trail that they would begin to hallucinate. They were the ones who could prove a danger to themselves, seeing and hearing things along the trail that weren't really there and, in the most problematic cases, wandering into the wilderness and getting lost.

Most elite runners reach their peak between age thirty and thirty-five. Then muscle mass, bone density, and maximal aerobic capacity begin to decrease. And though some runners do manage to run faster at fifty than they did at thirty-five, it is generally because they performed below their capacity when they were younger. Athletes running at their peak will experience a gradual trail-off from age thirty-five, and by fifty, they will have lost roughly 2 minutes and 45 seconds per year over the course of a 42.2-kilometre marathon. After age sixty, the performance declines become more drastic as the human stride shortens and ankle power decreases.

For all Dag knew, his capacity as an ultramarathon runner had probably peaked in the early 1970s, when he was in his early thirties. But he had only just begun running at that time and had confined himself to simple marathons while also living the life of a professional skier in winter and working as a full-time logger during the summers. He ran his first marathon in northern Washington in his early thirties—in a pair of jeans and without training. He finished in just under four hours, which put him in the range of intermediate runners in his age group. He competed in ten more marathons before he was fifty. In his late forties, his finishing times were hovering around 3 hours and 20 minutes. He was fast enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon, but he never bothered to enter. By his late fifties, he had also taken up competitive cross-country skiing, and by the time he turned sixty-one, he was a Canadian championship ski racer, placing fourth in his age group at the 2002 Masters World Cup cross-country ski race in Quebec despite never having had a coach.

Then someone slapped a promotional flier for the Death Race onto a table while he was eating and said, "Here's something you're probably too old to do."

Dag was sixty-two when he hitched a ride to Grande Cache and entered his first Death Race. He finished in a gruelling 20 hours, 58 minutes, and 16 seconds. The next year, he crossed the finish line in 23 hours and 48 seconds. Then he came back again twelve months later, at the age of sixty-four, and posted his personal best—20 hours and 56 minutes. He ran an average of 6 kilometres an hour during that year's race, covering roughly 560 metres more each hour than he had the year before. He used that personal best as the benchmark to track his aging and his decline up until 2009, when he finished the race for the last time, in 23 hours, 5 minutes, and 26 seconds, his pace having dropped back to roughly the same as it was when he was five years younger. It was the last time he was able to complete the entire 125-kilometre circuit in the requisite twenty-four hours.

But he never stopped trying, and every subsequent year that he fell short of the 125-kilometre mark, he succeeded in finishing what race organizers called the Near Death Marathon, a 49-kilometre ultra that was itself 7.8 kilometres longer than a regulation marathon. The Near Death Marathon, which was essentially the first half of the Death Race, had its own designated cut-off time—9.5 hours—meant to safeguard both the competitive nature of the contest and the health of its contestants. In 2010, Dag had completed the Near Death Marathon with 45 minutes to spare and used that feat as the new barometer by which to challenge his body as he entered his seventies. In 2011, he actually got faster, shedding 28 minutes from his time the previous year.

Though Dag was always the oldest person on the trail, he was inspired by runners even older than him who continued to compete in more traditional marathons around the world. Among them was the Sikh road runner Fauja Singh, who in 2011, at the age of 100, became the first centenarian to complete an organized marathon when he finished the Toronto Waterfront Marathon. Dag had read about Singh in the *Globe and Mail*,

cut out the article, and taped it into one of his journals for inspiration. Singh was born in British India in 1911 and was so malnourished as a boy that he did not walk until the age of five. He lived through Partition and the birth of modern India and was already beyond his life expectancy when, in the mid-1990s, he took up running as a means of therapy after the deaths of his wife, a son, and a daughter. He competed in his first organized marathon at eighty-nine and set his personal best aged ninety-two, when he completed the Flora London Marathon in 6 hours and 54 minutes.

Singh, who attributed his physical longevity to abstaining from smoking and alcohol and to a vegetarian diet, lived on the outskirts of London, England, trained primarily on asphalt, and subsisted on a simple diet of phulka, dal, green vegetables, yogurt, and milk. Compared to Dag, Singh treated his body like a temple. "I take lots of water and tea with ginger," he told a reporter with the *Indian Express* in 2004. "I go to bed early taking the name of my Rabba [God] as I don't want all those negative thoughts crossing my mind." Like Dag, Singh started every day with a long-distance run and, like in Dag's case, the act itself was almost spiritual. "The first 20 miles are not difficult," Singh said of his experiences as a marathon runner. "As for the last six miles, I run while talking to God."

Dag didn't speak to God as he ran, but he did speak of a more personal transcendence, which he struggled to describe other than to say that it was when he was nearing exhaustion that he felt closest to his own mortality. "I have to push to my limitations in order to accept my limitations," he said.

Dag viewed age as a "state of mind" rather than an actual figure. He had read articles—which he also cut out and taped into his journals—about scientific studies that found age-related deterioration to be the side effect of a sedentary lifestyle rather than of aging. He lived by the belief that he could modulate his decline through increased training. And so he ran like few others on the planet and nobody else his age. He had worn out an average of two and a half pairs of running shoes each year ever since 1978, when he started recording such things. It's how he knew that the Hokas on his feet were the eighty-fifth pair he had bought.

Though he accepted that he was moving slower, Dag tried to maintain the total distance he ran each year by simply increasing the hours he spent training. Where once he could routinely run 10 kilometres in under 40 minutes, it now took him over an hour. He once read that the average human walks roughly 2,200 kilometres a year, a pace that would take them roughly eighteen years to circumnavigate the globe. By contrast, Dag ran about 8,000 kilometres a year. He had reflected on that math, drawn up some calculations, and realized that, despite his age, he was running the equivalent of the entire equator once every five years. He had the logbooks to prove it.

Incredibly, by my calculations, he may have run enough miles during his lifetime to cover the distance between Earth and the moon. Dag shook his head in bewilderment when I told him how far I believed he had travelled. Then he smiled and paraphrased a quote from his childhood hero, Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian explorer who led the first crossing of Greenland on skis: "If it's difficult, I'll do it right away. If it's impossible, it will take a little longer."

It was 5:26 p.m. —9 hours and 26 minutes since the start of the race. Dag was well out of sight, having just run through a cemetery as storm clouds thickened overhead. The skin on his bare legs contracted against the cold as he propelled himself through the cemetery and back into town. His shoes were wearing out, his toes bleeding through his wool socks. He could feel the dampness of his blood cooling against his feet as he planted each step into the gravel on the only route back into Grande Cache.

More and more competitors were now abandoning the race as the temperature dropped toward zero. A race steward's radio crackled at the nursing station. "We've got heavy winds at the top of Hamell," the voice said. Mount Hamell was the next major peak in Dag's path—a 2,100-metre mountain, the highest summit on the Death Race—a stunning strata with a swooping lookout that offered no protection from the elements. The route near the top of the mountain was devoid of much vegetation longer than grass. Then another voice came over the radio. It said that organizers were preparing to retrieve runners breaking down on the mountainside.

A crash of thunder echoed through the valley. A skeletal figure could be seen cresting the horizon. His pace was steady but slow—the same as it had been seven hours earlier when I watched him run along an abandoned railway track. His feet chugged along the pavement, and he was humming again—"As Time Goes By."

The race clock registered 9:29:31 when Dag crossed the 49-kilometre checkpoint. He had reached the cut-off with 29 seconds to spare. Someone offered him water. He took a sip, handed back the paper cup, stood with his hands on his waist, and looked at the storm over Hamell. It was another 21 kilometres to reach the next checkpoint. I knew, and he knew, as did the stewards watching him, that if he carried on with the race, he was destined to get disqualified at the next cut-off. He looked back to the nursing station.

"I guess this is far enough for one day," he said.

He raised his arms, filled his lungs with the cold air, looked at his time on the race clock, and shook his head. It was the worst time he had ever recorded.

"Look at that," he said. "A new record to break."

A version of this story was published in 2023.

Excerpted and adapted with permission from Outsider: An Old Man, a Mountain and the Search for a Hidden Past, *written by Brett Popplewell and published by HarperCollins.*

BRETT POPPLEWELL is an associate professor of journalism at Carleton University.

Multigenerational Living Isn't Always Easy

With my mother at home, we get free child care and help with expenses. But all those perks come at a cost

BY KEVIN CHONG
ILLUSTRATION BY CORINA LO

Now that I live with my mom, my preferred mode of communication with her is by text. We're in each other's faces enough these days. Her first messages come in the morning, before sunrise, when she hears my heavy tread from her suite downstairs in our Vancouver Special, a mainstay structure in the city's residential areas. Once deemed boxy and cookie cutter, the architectural equivalent of a Honda Element, Vancouver Specials are now touted for their ability to accommodate two households, one on each floor. I'm in the kitchen, making my eight-year-old's school lunch, when my phone buzzes and my mother puts in her breakfast request.

Until she started dialysis at the end of 2022, my widowed, then seventy-one-year-old mother managed to be both active and sedentary, gamely driving in her SUV to a slate of appointments, school pickups for my daughter, and mahjong nights. The arrangement had served us well since we all moved in together in 2021, a decision made with my wife's approval. My mom had been on her own since my brother married and moved out, right before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In early 2023, dialysis, new medication, and an injury left her on her back most of the day. My brother and I took her to hospital appointments and blood tests that always seemed timed to crater our workdays. We endured her criticisms and round-the-clock bedside requests—my brother, who lives a few minutes away with his wife and in-laws, more stoically than me. While my mother was out of commission, my wife and I took over the school pickups and cooked her meals.

From the outside, we are enacting the best practices of urban family resource management. With rising housing costs and changing demographics, multigenerational living has finally gained social acceptance. Advocates trumpet its economic and emotional benefits.

Despite being so on trend, I don't feel especially cool living with my mom. And even an hour from sunrise, I'm already exhausted.

I don't feel especially cool living with my mom. And even an hour from sunrise, I'm already exhausted.

Multigenerational living, according to a 2019 United Nations report, is a norm for older people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Some scholars argue that, in the United States and in Britain, the nuclear family is a relatively new phenomenon that occurred as industrialization splintered extended households and drove them from their farms to cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other places, that shift never occurred. The UN report found that over 90 percent of seniors live with family in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Canada, there are almost 442,000 multigenerational households, according to the 2021 census, a number that has swollen by about 50 percent since 2001. The figure would increase further if we expanded the idea of multigenerational living to include families residing in adjacent properties, such as laneway homes. In 2023, the Trudeau government began offering a multigenerational home renovation tax credit at an estimated cost of $44 million over the next five years. A *Globe and Mail* headline proclaimed that "2023 Is Shaping Up to Be the Year of the Multi-Family House." The trend line is clear, and there may be no going back.

The reasons for that trend, at least in Canada, are multifaceted: an aging population and rising life expectancy, increasing housing costs, and shifts in the country's cultural composition. Multigenerational households are more likely to be found among immigrant and Indigenous communities. In Nunavut, for example, 13.5 percent of all households are multigenerational.

In immigrant-heavy suburbs like Surrey, BC, and Brampton, Ontario, supersized dwellings built for extended families have been tarred as "monster homes." One seething missive to the *Province* in 2009 described Surrey's monster homes as "eyesores…riddled with garbage and with numerous cars in the driveway and on the street." Bending over to similar uproar, some Canadian cities have cracked down on "illegal suites" and lowered the maximum allowable square footage in residential neighbourhoods. A middle-aged friend of mine who grew up in East Vancouver recalled that his family didn't have cable at their house for a period of time because their service provider had determined that the cable splitter they used to share their TV signal with his grandparents was against company policy.

But the decision to share a roof is now catching on outside of cultural backgrounds where multigenerational living is the norm. After their daughter and son-in-law sold their home in October 2022, Jo Ann Lorimer and her husband welcomed them and their three elementary school–aged boys to their 4,000-square-foot home in Saltair, a community on the east coast of Vancouver Island. Lorimer and her husband also have a forty-one-year-old son, who lives on their twelve-acre property. Lorimer and her daughter cooked meals together, while her son-in-law helped with yard work. (The daughter and her family have since moved out.) "They do cushion our lives," Lorimer noted at the time. "But I cushion their lives."

In his 2016 book, *The Death and Life of the Single-Family House*, Nathanael Lauster interviewed Vancouverites who've reconceptualized the idea of "home" after their dreams of a detached single-family house bit the dust. As more Canadians have moved in with their parents, Lauster, an associate professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia, says our stories and expectations should similarly shift to validate our own new identities. "If you can't," he says, "then it becomes the stigma associated with living with your parents."

Despite owning a downtown condo, for instance, Herman Cheng and his wife, Moon, live with his mother in a South Vancouver bungalow to help offset her living expenses while paying a below-market price for rent. Cheng frames his living situation in terms of financially assisting his mother, who doesn't have any wealth outside the value of her house. In Cheng's arrangement, his mother, who lives upstairs, does all the cooking and pitches in with child care.

In addition to talking about perks like sharing appliances and daily, low-pressure interactions with her parents (as opposed to holiday visits), Michelle Cyca positions her choice as a rejection of the consumerist exhaustion of maintaining an independent household. "The nuclear family is fantasy now," says the writer (and frequent contributor to this magazine), who recently welcomed into the world her second child and shares her parents' home in Kerrisdale, an affluent Vancouver neighbourhood. "It feels like this capitalist trope. The idea that it's better and more worthwhile to strip away any social or familial support and do it all on your own is a scam."

"The idea that it's better and more worthwhile to strip away any social or familial support and do it on your own is a scam."

My wife and I are covering the mortgage for a house on which my mother placed a seven-figure down payment, while I'm taking my mother to appointments, hauling out her garbage, and doing her internet troubleshooting. In exchange, we're living in a space and a long-gentrified neighbourhood we love, one we couldn't otherwise afford. We also get free child care that consists of trips for dim sum and lightly supervised iPad time for my eight-year-old daughter.

And yet that narrative still gets steamrolled by the stigma. At an appointment at the kidney clinic, my mom will tell the nurse that we live together. I am always quick to blurt out my qualifiers: WITH MY WIFE! AND MY CHILD! (WHOM I CONCEIVED DOING ADULT THINGS!) ON SEPARATE LEVELS!

When describing the tensions of multigenerational living, the people I spoke to named situations that might not feel out of place on *Everybody Loves Raymond*, that American sitcom where the title character's belligerent parents live across the street.

Michael Kwan, whose mother lives in a suite below the one he shares with his wife and kids, talks about lack of privacy, especially before a second kitchen—a must-have accoutrement, I've found, along with separate entrances and doors that lock on both sides—was installed. "It took a long time for my parents to respect the staircase as the boundary between our zone and their zone," he says. (His father has since passed away.) "That got better, and then it devolved when we became parents, because the kids are just running up and down between the two parts of the house."

For Cheng, handling conflict between his mother and wife is tough. "They're fairly friendly to each other," Cheng says with nervous laughter. "But if there's something they're not happy with, they tell me directly."

My mom and I have had our sitcom moments too: my wife and I laughing as my mom came and went at all hours, the sound of the garage door waking us as she returned from the casino or a mahjong game at one in the morning. Then there are times that leave me feeling like a petulant forty-eight-year-old teenager, responding to her questions with monosyllabic grunts and eye rolling as I storm out of the room.

Like Cheng and Kwan, my ethnically Chinese background should leave me culturally predisposed to living with my mom. Maybe that's why I end up feeling like a bad Asian, the way I do when I use my horrid Cantonese at a restaurant and get a dismissive response in English.

That sense of guilt is quickly walked back with another realization: *I've never wanted to be a good Asian*. Growing up, I rejected the materialism of my Hong Kong Chinese upbringing. (By contrast, my wife and fashion-forward stepson tote around my mom's old Louis Vuitton bags.) I hated going to Chinese school on Wednesday evenings because it meant that I couldn't watch *The A-Team*. I disliked the rigid hierarchies—how parents expected default obedience and flew off the handle when it wasn't received. That ambivalence and sometimes active resistance to my cultural patrimony is, for better or worse, who I am. But living with my mother has been a breach of that firewall.

Old resentments resurface. When I was growing up, my mother, like many Asian moms, could ruthlessly pick away at her sons' self-esteem. To put it mildly, I was an awkward teenager: bookish, obsessed with girls but too clumsy to do anything beyond yearn. Not infrequently, before I stepped out of the house, my mother, who routinely urged me to lose weight while demanding I finish any leftover food at a restaurant so we wouldn't have to take it home, would tell me I looked ugly and fat. Pretending those words didn't matter shaped my personality—prickly and aloof at my worst.

In January, my mother's medication for latent tuberculosis interfered with her appetite to the point that she fainted and hurt her back. My brother and I took turns taking her to different medical appointments, to acupuncture, to get her hair done. I brought her toast and coffee every day, soup at night. One morning, before an all-day dialysis training session, she started complaining about my brother. "He's so stupid," she began. "Stupid" continues to be a frequent putdown, directed at real estate agents and bad drivers as well as friends, relatives, and her sons when they do anything she doesn't like. (I have a work friend from Hong Kong whom I recall shrugging when I described my mother to her: "She sounds like a typical Chinese mother.")

"Don't call him stupid," I told my mother. "He does so much for you."

My mother's face broiled in disgust. "You just wish I was dead," she barked.

"I don't care," I said, leaving my response open ended.

I watched her attempt to put on her shoes, nearly weeping in pain from her wrenched back, until I got on my knees to help her.

Again, I must blurt out my qualifiers: I love my mom, and she has done so much for me, not the least of which includes remortgaging her home in the 1990s so I could do an MFA and later taking care of my daughter, when she was a toddler, for three full days a week when her daycare proved to be a bad fit.

I love her, she is a good mom, and I am not an irredeemably screwed-up person, but—ugh. But this. This—why? Why this? Given a choice, why would anyone choose to reinhabit their childhood trauma just for cheaper rent?

After taking my mother to her appointment, I wrote a stern but collected message in which I outlined my years of resentment, the kind of note I wish I could have written for myself thirty years earlier, the kind of note, one could argue, that I wouldn't have been able to write if I didn't live with her. To my surprise, she apologized!

You could say that this new-found level of communication is worth the anguish of multigenerational living. You would be fucking wrong.

You could say that this new-found level of communication is worth the anguish. You would be fucking wrong.

STATISTICS SHOW that police-reported violence against elders in Canada increased by 22 percent between 2010 and 2020. In 2020, about a third of these incidents had been committed by a family member or intimate partner. One 2016 study indicated that about 10 percent of non-institutionalized elders in Kingston, Ontario, and Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, reported a family member being violent toward them—defined in the study as "[being] screamed at, insulted, threatened, cursed, talked down to or physically hurt"—in the preceding six months. Being single, having few or weak relationships, being a woman, having self-reported money problems, having issues with mobility and daily activities, and being a smoker all increase one's likelihood of experiencing violence from a family member.

"Family, frankly, can be bad news," says Lynn McDonald, a professor emeritus in the faculty of social work at the University of Toronto. As an alternative, McDonald points to Canada HomeShare, which she created the pilot for in Toronto in 2018 as the head of the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly. In that program, people over fifty-five rented out their spare bedrooms to post-secondary students, who paid heavily reduced rents and spent about seven hours a week helping their older landlord–roommate. The program, overseen by a social worker, was such a success that it's now being run in six Canadian locations.

This type of arrangement is successful, McDonald speculates, partly because "there is a bit of a distance. It's not your mother or your father, and they can't tell you what to do. And they know it's not their kid." When I ask McDonald, who recently partially retired, whether she would ever live with her kids, her response is quick and punctuated by laughter: "Never. *Ever*." She might consider, however, renting a room to a student.

I quickly game-plan a home swap with, say, three engineering students, but I know it wouldn't fly with Mom. And yet while Canada HomeShare might not work for everyone, it adds another option. If the best thing about the new trend in multigenerational living is that it's a choice, then the freedom to choose something that works better for you still remains vital.

I remember when my mother's mother, my poh-poh, stopped living with us and moved into a senior's apartment near Vancouver's Chinatown. My mother and I, talking about it by text, can't agree when that occurred. She says it was when we relocated to the city from the suburbs, when I was twelve, and Poh-Poh wanted to be closer to friends and allow us to have our own family life. (I remember a few languorous summers I spent in that apartment, playing mahjong with her and watching TV with my brother, well before that age.) In our exchange, my mother reminded me that my grandmother had helped with the down payment on our first house—that equity that lives on in our current home.

For Poh-Poh, multigenerational living was a sacrifice she gladly made, but when the time came, she was ready to chart her own path. She lived on her own for another twenty years or so before she was moved into a nursing home.

"You and Dan"—my brother—"learned good habits from her," my mother texted me from downstairs. "I am proud of [you two]."

In the months following my mom's fall, our relationship evened out. I brought her coffee and toast every morning—a tacit acknowledgement of our shifting roles—until she recovered. Now that she's regained her health, she's back to her mahjong games, back to picking up my kids and making her medicinal soups. Recently, she drove my wife, our daughter, and me to the airport, and we hit a traffic jam. My mother quickly cut into a side street, tearing through a residential part of Vancouver, crossing two commercial arteries without the help of a friendly traffic light. She was like a seasoned Uber driver, albeit with a septuagenarian's muffled reflexes. I would probably rate my ride five out of five anyhow, because I am forever non-confrontational, but she and I know how we really stand with each other.

A version of this story was published in 2024.

KEVIN CHONG is the author of seven books. He lives in Vancouver.

My Wife Developed Alzheimer's. *This Is Our Love Story*

To prepare for a future of losing her, bit by bit, I recited the details of our marriage

BY STEPHEN TRUMPER
ILLUSTRATION BY MICHELLE PATEROK

"Judy and Steve met on the most gorgeous day of the summer."

I have recited this sentence, or a longer variation of it, to my wife, Judy Wilson, thousands of times. Additional sentences always follow, and together, they form the longest-running love letter of our four decades together.

In December 2012, at age sixty-one, Judy received a diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's. The news was deeply distressing, igniting within me a burning anxiety over how I, a wheelchair user born with a spinal cord malformation and living with bunches of body parts that don't work so well, could possibly help my able-bodied spouse as the disease robbed her of not just mental acuity but also physical strength. Thankfully, Judy was still relatively spry and lucid, and I thought it would be more productive to channel my energies into anticipating her future needs, starting with a new avenue of communication between us.

The following spring, at the National Magazine Awards ceremony, I was expected to make a speech as the recipient of the annual outstanding-achievement award. Even before I began to write the speech, I knew I wanted to include a short, simple passage that would serve as the opening for an evolving love letter I would recite to Judy every time we were alone together. I saw it as my best opportunity, through ample repetition, to reach into her heart at every stage of Alzheimer's. As I gave the speech, Judy smiled and laughed. When I arrived at the passages about her, tears flowed. "We met by chance, on Cumberland Street in Toronto, on the most gorgeous day of the summer," I said while looking directly at her. "I was immediately smitten, remain smitten, and will always be smitten no matter what twists and turns of life await us."

That evening, after we returned home, after we drank some wine, after Judy fell asleep holding my hand, I lay with her, wide awake, marvelling once again, as I had done thousands of times before, at my good fortune in finding her. Now, I had to prepare for a future of losing her, bit by agonizing bit. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on your perspective—Judy and I, individually and together, already had a wealth of experience in living through difficult times. Still, on that night nearly a decade ago, and every day since, I have found myself, sometimes on the edge of panic, wondering: What will become of us? What will become of me without her?

Judy and I attended the same high school. She is three years older, and one of her close friends is the elder sister of buddies of mine, twins, who were my designated wheelchair pushers in grade nine. Though there were several other links between us, it still took us about twelve years to finally meet. If the fates had indeed been bringing us together, as Judy believed, they sure had been taking their time. Or maybe they had just been waiting for that most gorgeous day of the summer: a Saturday afternoon in late August 1979. I had spent much of that day at the *Toronto Life* offices, where I was a junior editor. The magazine was behind schedule, and several of us had agreed to work the weekend. However, I had to leave early: a friend's wedding was coming up fast, and in mid-afternoon, I headed to the shops to buy a gift.

Back then, the right side of my body was strong, robust even, but I had little use of my left arm and hand. My left leg was weak, so I walked with an ungainly limp and lurch, always a bit unsteady, which is why I frequently used a wheelchair for longer distances, such as high school hallways, museums, and airports. I could also drive, which is how I travelled that day: in my zippy Honda Civic, with windows down and jazz blasting from the speakers. After finding a parking spot, I clambered out, and seconds later, I heard, Steve!

The call came from a woman I knew from high school. We chatted briefly, and then she said, *I'm waiting for my friend, Judy Wilson. We're going for coffee. Would you join us?*

Oh yes.

Within a few minutes, there she was, sashaying sprightly toward us. Even from afar, Judy emanated merriment and mirth, her face brimming with cheer and her smile as inviting as the day itself. She was stylishly dressed in a wide-brimmed straw hat, a flouncy white blouse, and a yellow floral-print skirt. *Finally, we meet!* she said, laughing.

We headed to a café about ten steepish steps below street level with one small patio table. Judy could see the effort it took me to carefully descend. *I will get the drinks and bring them out*, she said. She did more than that. She treated me to a cookie along with my Earl Grey tea and then deftly peeled off the top seal of my plastic milk pod and poured the contents into the tea. That little bit of unexpected help was more elegant than my usual one-armed method, which was to plunge a fork into the pod's seal, trying to avoid spilling milk on myself (or anybody else), then turn the pod upside down, squeezing the milk out.

Judy told me she worked at the *Toronto Star*, where she had started as an airbrush artist. She spoke excitedly about her passion for creating art, dolls in particular, which she sold at a downtown gallery.

What struck me most about our first encounter is how much Judy and I talked about the importance of embracing joy wherever you found it—or it found you. We shared some of our most joyous experiences, and with each example, our smiles grew bigger.

When the time came to say goodbye, I nervously asked Judy if, one day soon, I could treat her to lunch.

I don't do lunch, she responded, beaming.

Just dinner.

Our courtship started at a Greek restaurant specializing in seafood. As at the café, Judy was witty and ebullient, though I did begin to wonder: Was there a sombre, less rosy side? The first indication came when Judy abruptly said, with a sigh, *Of course, I know that life can be horrible*. With that observation, she briefly stared off into space, deep in thought, evoking the poignancy Amedeo Modigliani frequently captured in the faces of his portrait subjects.

I became more intrigued. I am drawn to people who have struggled. It usually forces them to think deeper about life, which, often, makes them relate better to disability. What struggles did Judy have?

Over dessert, she told me about her dad, who for years had been faltering from Alzheimer's, and her mom's commitment to caring for him at their home in Cobourg, Ontario.

I revealed that my mom was in decline as a result of an adulthood of dealing with the frequent, volatile bouts of anger and paranoia associated with her schizophrenia. She had been hospitalized for it and lived at that time in a rural group home.

I drove Judy home that night. She did not ask me in, but she did give me a tender, lingering kiss. We made another date and, elated, I drove back to my apartment. A few days later, with the mail, came a card from Judy, which simply read, in her elegant, distinctive handwriting: "To Joy! Thank you!"

We would go on to send dozens of cards to each other during our two years of dating. As the relationship deepened, we'd each study the visuals on a card received, searching for clues as to how the other was feeling about us. I knew, for instance, exactly when Judy started to see a future together after I received several cards adorned with stylized stars, a reference to a lyric from her favorite musical, *West Side Story*:

> But here you are,
> and what was just a world is a star.

Ever since our first encounter, Judy has continuously, unobtrusively assisted me, making my life much easier and giving me the opportunity to live larger than I had thought possible. It started small. At our early dinners, for instance, she was eager to cut up my meat entrees into bite-size pieces (almost impossible to do with one hand). On our first night together, she gleefully helped me off with my clothes and, the next morning, back on with them. Judy once said she tried hard to anticipate my needs so I didn't have to ask for help.

Throughout our first seventeen years, we often playfully explained our relationship to others by saying that Judy was my left arm and leg while I was her wheels. I loved driving; she loved being driven. The car gave me greater independence and a continuing opportunity to transcend the limits of what my body could do.

We would, during those years, take dozens of motor trips throughout southern Ontario and upper New York state. Judy was our onboard DJ, and her musical tastes are wide-ranging—pop, jazz, classics, reggae—though, at heart, she is a '60s rock 'n' roll gal.

Judy is deceptively strong. I didn't discover that until she started pushing my wheelchair over all kinds of terrain, which included propelling me up and down several San Francisco hills as well as through myriad parks, shops, and museums in New York, London, and other big cities. She would say her greatest push came on a drizzly evening in Manhattan. We had tickets for *Cats*, but no cab would pick us up at our hotel—they chose, instead, to ignore and speed by us (a frequent experience for wheelchair users). Frustrated and annoyed, she said, *I've got this*, and off we went, Judy in a favourite little black dress, green trench, and black leather heels, swooshing past throngs of soggy New Yorkers and tourists, tilting me and the wheelchair up and down dozens of curbs, arriving at our seats just as the overture began. *Yes!* she exclaimed, grinning, panting, and looking mightily pleased with herself.

A couple of years before that triumph, early in our courtship, a more tentative Judy asked if I was in constant pain. *I'm not sure I could handle that*, she quietly added. I assured her that pain was not an issue. She looked relieved, and it wasn't long after this exchange, at a dinner date, when she gracefully, almost surreptitiously took hold of my paralyzed left hand, gently cupping my curled fingers with her hand and, seemingly, never letting go.

We were in the car, stressed and rushing cautiously, around four on a crisp November morning. Judy was in labour, focused on taking deep breaths. The hospital at which we were scheduled to have our baby had unexpectedly closed due to an outbreak of the Norwalk virus, nullifying all our carefully arranged plans for getting assistance on arrival. Instead, we headed to a hospital with which we were not familiar, the degree to which the staff would help us uncertain. This was the latest stage of a big journey into the unknown that began when Judy raised the idea of starting a family.

At first, the notion of having kids terrified me. As so often happens with disability, my early response was to focus on what I couldn't do: properly hold a baby, change a baby, pick up a baby, dress a baby, bathe a baby. I worried about the possibility of our baby having a disability. I'm too aware of how that can often make everyday life frustratingly difficult, even traumatizing, particularly in childhood. I also worried about the extra physical work Judy would have to take on in the baby's early years. Might it be too hard?

For weeks, we talked seriously about the barriers and possibilities associated with having a child. Judy assured me she'd be able to deal with the additional physical effort required, and she was certain I'd be an ideal parent for a disabled kid should that eventuality happen. *You have so much of your own experience you could draw on*, she concluded.

After arriving at the hospital, we successfully marshalled assistance and were quickly led to a delivery room where, following several more hours of labour, our baby daughter was born. We called her Hannah, a name the editor in me fancied, in part, because it is palindromic.

As Judy cradled the beautiful baby Hannah in her arms, I gazed intently at both of them, filled with relief that the delivery had gone smoothly and that the arms, legs, head, eyes, and more of our newborn daughter were gloriously active. All early indications showed that we had a happy, healthy baby in our lives. Still, I worried. Signs of my disability hadn't

shown until I was five. Indications of my mom's schizophrenia hadn't presented until her late teens. And I'd had a baby brother who lived for only three days.

These misfortunes did nothing to eclipse the excitement I was feeling, but they were much on my mind when the nurse brought baby Hannah over to me.

I looked deep into my new daughter's squinting brown eyes.

Hi Hannah, I'm your dad. Then I made my first promise to her. *If there is something wrong inside you*, I whispered, *I will do everything possible to help you through it*.

And to help your mom too.

WE HAD OUR SHARE of sorrows early on. My mom died suddenly just two months into Judy's and my relationship. We each lost our fathers years later. Then, following Hannah's birth, there was a series of miscarriages, which haunted both of us, and I frequently found Judy staring off into space with that same Modigliani poignancy I'd seen on our first date and many times throughout our first decade.

I suggested to Judy that she might consider seeing a therapist. She was reluctant at first but came to embrace the process. She slowly bounced back, though not without struggle. Her grief was profound, but as it turned out, miscarriages weren't the only trauma darkening her soul.

At the time, we had a Saturday ritual: a nanny would come to take care of Hannah while Judy and I would jump into the car, go for breakfast, do some shopping, maybe catch an early movie, and perhaps talk at length about how each of us was feeling. Back then, we frequently picked up Saturday breakfasts of large cappuccinos with warm gooey cheese croissants from a French bakery and then drove down to the shores of Lake Ontario to eat and chat.

One morning, after we finished our croissants, Judy, sounding calm but nervous, said, *I have something I need to tell you*.

We held hands and she told me a dark secret she never thought she'd reveal. Many years earlier, she had been sexually abused. She told me who had done it, over what time period, and what she intended to do about it now, which was to try to help me understand why it had taken so long to inform me and why she wanted no part of confronting her abuser.

Judy also explained that she and her therapist had talked about my possible reactions. In fact, they had role-played through several scenarios, including: What if I responded with intense anger and wanted to end the marriage?

As Judy spoke, my mind immediately went back to our first date, to that Modigliani look, when I first sensed some kind of turmoil within her that went beyond a father's Alzheimer's. Throughout our years together, I had gone back and forth over whether to press Judy on what was troubling her, but each time I had decided that she would tell me when she was ready. That time had now arrived.

I squeezed her hand as she hesitantly yet determinedly continued with the words she clearly had rehearsed several times.

I have frequently been in awe of what my wife can deal with, but perhaps never more than on this morning by the lake, parked at a favourite vista, the lapping waves offering some soothing calmness. She was resolute in how she wanted to handle the situation and said she absolutely needed me.

When Judy finished, she asked, not without some fear, what I thought.

It makes me love you more, I said, in the most reassuring tone I could muster despite my rising ire toward her abuser.

We spent a long time that morning down by the lake, talking about summoning courage, hiding suffering, what I could do to best help, and how love can heal. When we ran out of words, we watched the swooping gulls, followed the passing parade of people and dogs on the boardwalk, and gazed at the waves, reflecting on the momentousness of what had just happened.

I have frequently been in awe of what my wife can deal with, but perhaps never more than on this morning by the lake, parked at a favourite vista.

In the days and weeks that followed, we spoke often about the aftermath of abuse. Judy was candid about the shame, embarrassment, and guilt it had provoked within her. She told me she worried I would judge her harshly. I didn't. I couldn't. All I wanted to do was soothe and protect—and hold her closer than I ever had before.

SUCH DEVOTION, we overheard my neurosurgeon say to a nurse as they walked away from my hospital bed. He was referring to Judy and me. We had met with him a few times previously, and each time he commented on our closeness as a couple.

What had brought us to this hospital stay, in 1997, was my spinal cord. Something had gone wrong (again). In the summer of the previous year, when I was forty-three, I had noticed a sudden weakening of my body's right side. Moving my arm had become difficult, and my fingers were stiffening. Walking, never easy, got trickier.

In the years following my first spinal cord surgery, when I was seven, I had been assured by my parents and medical specialists that there should be no further complications. My dad, an advertising copywriter, had described the medical predicament to seven-year-old me this way: two bones at the back of my neck had grown into each other—something like a wishbone—and, as I grew, they grew too, right into the part of the brain area that controls my body movements. The doctor, dad had added, would snap that wishbone and protect my head, neck, and everything else.

Thirty-seven years later, I was facing a modern version of the same surgery I'd had in 1960, a spinal decompression, complete with the same possibilities that I might not survive or that

cutting into the base of my brain might provoke collateral damage. In our house, we refer to these times as *Spinal Cord I* and *Spinal Cord II: The Adventure Continues*, an eerie sequel starring rampaging scar tissue as the villain. Both were terrible periods, but both surgeries went as well as could be expected.

In the hands of many able-bodied writers, our story would most likely be portrayed as yet another example of what people in the disability community often call "inspiration porn." These superficial, supposedly feel-good vignettes usually cast the disabled person as the hero, or superhero, and the able-bodied spouse or parent as the saint or angel. Those terms, as the diplomatic editor in me would say, are perhaps poor word choices. Judy was more direct.

Poppycock, she once stated, adding, *Calling me a saint or angel dehumanizes both of us. I can be crabby, judgmental, and impatient, and calling me either of those words insults you, suggesting you are so awful that no ordinary human would love you.*

I was in hospital and rehab for approximately three months. Every day, Judy was at my side after dropping Hannah, then eleven, off at school or at a friend's place. Every day, together, we discussed and explored our new realities for a life in which, aided by personal support workers and nurses, Judy would continue to be my left arm and leg but would also become my right leg and, sometimes, my right arm.

It took us about a year to return to something like our old existence. Finances were an urgent issue. Neither of us was working full-time, though Judy continued to create and sell her fine-art dolls. Debts were mounting after our insurance company resisted my claim for long-term disability benefits. We worried about losing the house, in which, a few years earlier, we had installed an elevator. But, thanks to the efforts of a determined lawyer, the insurance company succumbed, bringing in needed revenue until I went back to teaching part-time at Ryerson University's school of journalism and, eventually, to serving as an executive editor at the *National Post*'s business magazine.

Still, I was mindful of Judy and caregiver burnout. She has always cherished her privacy and was rankled by the parade of often moody and insensitive PSWs, nurses, and other health care practitioners who marched through our doors to assist me after I was discharged. She called the worst of them "home invaders" and "scaregivers." Judy once told me, *I can do all your caregiving. I want to do all your caregiving. I love you. We will, however, need to build in breaks and getaways for me and find ways to offset some of the grittier things that need doing.*

Though I could no longer drive, I could still deliver, arranging for spa escapes, fragrances, bath and shower relaxants, regular days when PSWs would stay with me while Judy did whatever she wanted, a trip to New York City, a wide array of CDs, food and wine, and multitudes of fresh flowers.

The first time I went to Judy's apartment, there were flowers. She always had flowers. When we moved in together, more flowers. For our first New Year's Eve in our apartment, we filled the place with approximately a dozen bouquets. I was amazed by how many vases she owned. Our annual celebration of ringing in the new year with rooms in bloom continued for more than thirty years.

At some point between our twentieth and twenty-fifth wedding anniversaries, I decided I should buy Judy flowers once a week, maybe more. Every week, I would go to the florist and select a single rose, either yellow, red, pink, or white. We had gone through so much together; I wanted to regularly celebrate that devotion—and our marriage—with a symbol not just of beauty but also of fragility, of not taking life, or each other, for granted.

The morning after receiving Judy's Alzheimer's diagnosis, we lay in bed in silence and dismay.There was no reason to get up. We listened to classical music, and at one point, Judy quietly, softly stated, *Well, that's life. Things come and things go*. My only response was to hug her, not knowing what else to do or say.

I thought a lot about the marital bed that day and how it is such a complex setting. As long-time happy couples discover, it's a refuge on which to romp, play, relax, sleep, recharge, and heal. For Judy and me, the bed was all these things, but perhaps more than for most twosomes, it was a place of comfort and comforting. After sitting in a wheelchair all day, for example, it's a huge relief to stretch out and sink into soft layers of foam—so much the better if a good bottle of wine and two glasses, one with a straw, are within reach.

Throughout our years together, there have been moments when I felt overwhelmed by disability and a world that is frequently unwelcoming to me. Judy would usually suggest we lie in bed, where she would hold me tightly, rhythmically stroking my cheek with a curled index finger while wiping away my tears. (I am the weeper in the family.) At some point, I would ask something like, *Aren't I just too much for you?*

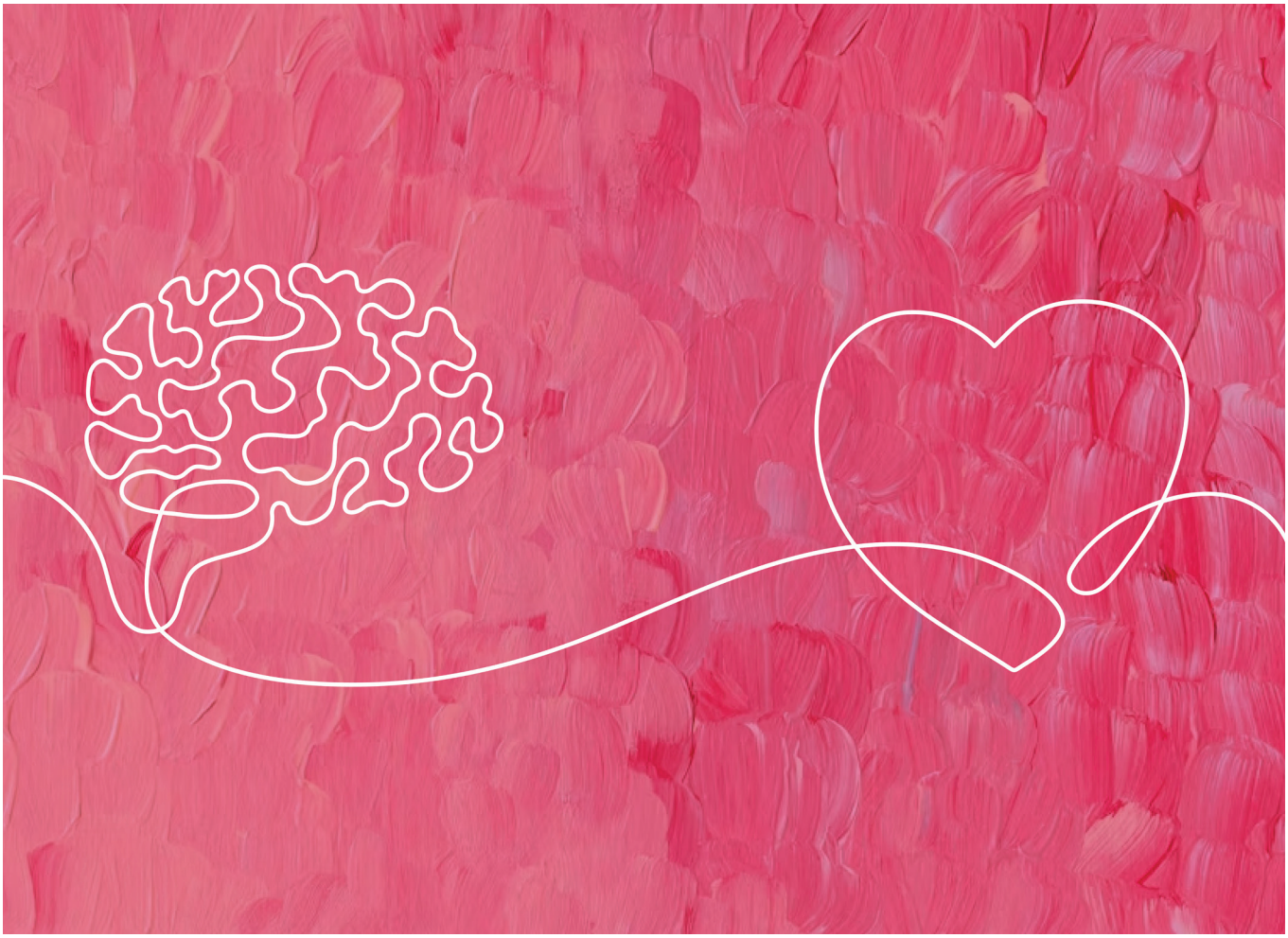
Her responses were firm yet soothing, variations of: *No, you aren't. A fool or someone with anger issues is too much. I love you.*

A few days after her diagnosis, Judy told me, *I am so sorry. This is going to be very hard for you.*

Hanging in our bedroom is a framed poster for the opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, a wrenching life-and-death-and-life story, based on a Greek myth, in which two lovers are reunited in Elysium, the underworld paradise where everyone is in a state of bliss. Judy gave it to me after the emergencies of *Spinal Cord II* had passed. It's a lovely piece of graphic design, and on the back, she wrote out a verse from the opera—when Orfeo first comes for Euridice and the chorus calls out:

> Return, fair one, to your husband,
> from whom merciful heaven
> wishes you never more to be parted.
> Do not lament your lot,
> for a husband so true
> can be called another Elysium.

The story of *Orfeo ed Euridice* was much on Judy's mind throughout *Spinal Cord II*, particularly in the early weeks, as she would venture daily into the underworld of downtown Toronto's St.



Michael's Hospital, where, in the basement, the MRII area is just a short stroll away from the morgue. She was on a mission: to help rescue me in any way she possibly could.

My mission has become quite different. There is no rescue from Alzheimer's, of which Judy, having watched her father's slow demise from the disease, was particularly aware. But what still astounds me is the calmness she brought to accepting her fate, even through torrents of tears at times, and how steadfast she was in continuing on as best she could.

One evening, as we lay in bed, Judy started to cry. She whispered, *I'm afraid of forgetting everything*.

I know you are, I responded, *but try not to worry. I will be your memory*.

Judy relaxed, smiled, squeezed my hand, and quietly said, *Good*.

FOR THE FIRST several years of living with Alzheimer's in the house, my emotions were often in upheaval. One example: I cursed my disability—frequently. Though I have learned many positive life-altering lessons over the decades, such as that out of loss and weakness can come new strengths and insights, I couldn't envision any possible good coming out of watching my Judy slowly slip away. That I would never be able to reciprocate all that physical help Judy had bestowed on me seemed particularly cruel. Could I ever come to terms with that?

Inside the minds of most people in the early stages of Alzheimer's is a swirl of anxieties that can be frightening and debilitating, especially as the light of day ebbs away. Music can help to soothe, so Judy and I spent countless hours together, particularly in the evenings, lying in bed, face to face, enjoying a stream of oldies. As I listened to the chart-busters of our youth, it slowly dawned on me how many "boy meets girl, boy loses girl" hits have a new resonance for those of us in long-term relationships as disease or death take our loved ones from us.

It was in bed with Judy that the idea for the evolving love letter came to me. Initially, Judy worried about suddenly wandering away from our house and getting lost—or worse. In response, one evening, I reminded her of the children's book *The Runaway Bunny*, which she loved reading to Hannah. *If you wander away*, I said, echoing Mother Rabbit to her adventure-seeking offspring, *Hannah and I will always find you and bring you home*.

I would frequently repeat this line, and each time I could see Judy relax, if only for a little while. She never did wander away, and through this example and numerous others, we learned how much Judy valued and needed to hear our voices.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ZOYA SHEPHERD / ISTOCK, UNSPLASH

I have never been shy about telling Judy how much I love her. Each time, it would make her beam, and I started to realize that those three words would be even more powerful to her as the fog of Alzheimer's steadily, stealthily rolled in, confusing and scaring her, making her feel alone and unprotected.

I launched my oral love letter a few nights after the National Magazine Awards. "Judy and Steve met by chance, on Cumberland Street in Toronto, on the most gorgeous day of the summer," I told her. "I was immediately smitten, remain smitten, and will always be smitten no matter what twists and turns of life await us." I then added a slightly edited passage from the speech. "You are the love of my life, who literally and figuratively, physically and emotionally keeps me going. You are a tremendously talented artist, specializing in dolls and collages, with a rare gift of making unexpected pairings that are particularly magical, just like our marriage."

I followed that with brief descriptions of treasured memories: the afternoon we met, the morning Hannah was born, the purchase of a cherished opal ring, watching a particularly spectacular Atlantic sunset, and other joyful moments of two lives tightly intertwined.

When I finished, Judy quietly sighed, kissed me, and made a request. *Would you say that all over again?*

On a sunny August afternoon, about five months into the pandemic, Judy, Hannah, and I were sitting comfortably in the back courtyard of my wife's long-term-care facility. We were surrounded by blooming hostas, black-eyed Susans, geraniums, and other flowers in addition to a variety of carefully positioned trees and bushes—all of which offer residents, staff, and visitors shade, privacy, and an aesthetic relief from the more institutional feel inside. It's an area designed for quiet contemplation, tender conversation, and lots of physical movement along a smooth pathway in the shape of a large infinity loop.

Judy has resided here since June 2017. Hannah and I had been determined that she stay at home with us for as long as we could manage, aided by PSWs and a few remarkably thoughtful relatives and friends, knowing full well we would likely need to place Judy in a nursing home eventually. That is the trajectory of Alzheimer's, and we were able to hold off that wrenching transition for more than five years.

We were visiting on an auspicious day in our lives: the forty-first anniversary of when Judy and I first met, on that most gorgeous day of the summer. She and I were in our respective wheelchairs, Judy's newer and sleeker—and hers tilted back, which is safer and accommodates her frequent naps. We listened to Hannah as she read aloud from *Within a Budding Grove*, the second volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Judy hadn't discovered Proust until her mid-forties, when he quickly became her favourite author. She treasured his vivid, detailed descriptions; his wry, sometimes snarky social and personal commentaries; and his musings and observations on love. Hannah had started reciting selections from Proust to Judy a few weeks after the diagnosis.

As Hannah read, I was reminded of a conversation I'd had with Judy shortly after settling in back home following *Spinal Cord II*, twenty-two years earlier. Our daughter was twelve at the time, and I had asked my wife, *Do you think we should get Hannah more involved in assisting me to help take some of the workload off you?*

Judy thought about my question for a few moments, then replied, *No. I don't want to force her to help. I want her, as she gets older, to observe how we handle difficult situations and learn from our example and the way we embrace life despite bigger problems than many. It would be much better if she decides she wants to help.*

After about twenty minutes of Proust readings, Hannah, now in her mid-thirties, departed for her COVID-19 test, which she did weekly as an essential caregiver to her mother. Suddenly, Judy and I were alone for the first time in weeks. Even before pandemic quarantining began, we had been apart for almost two months. I'd had a particularly difficult winter. It had started with a deep cold—first with Hannah, then with me. But mine had quickly degenerated into quadruple pneumonia, and I'd spent much of that December and January in hospital, mostly in ICU, hovering near death three times and hooked up to a ventilator for several weeks, constantly worrying about Judy and feeling incredibly guilty that I could not be with her.

It's hard to accept that Judy may have forgotten about me, but living with disability has shown me how delicate human bodies and minds can be.

Before the deep colds and the arrival of the pandemic, Hannah and I would visit Judy three or four times throughout each week. On some visits, she'd be somewhat alert; other times, not so much. No matter what her state, I was happy to be there, feeling an inner peace and contentment I had not expected. This calmness only intensified when Hannah would give us time to be alone together and I could recite my love letter, which I have done well over 5,000 times since 2012, often up to ten times a day.

"Judy and Steve met …" I would begin, and in almost every instance, Judy would react by reaching out and clasping my waiting hand. In time, as Judy moved shockingly quickly from early Alzheimer's to middle and then to late stages, she still frequently attempted to grasp my hand as I began to recite. She often missed, but it was gratifying to realize that the letter and I were still connecting with her. But could that connection stay intact through the onslaught of quadruple pneumonia and a global pandemic?

As Hannah headed inside, I looked at Judy. Her eyes were half closed and her head was slumped slightly forward, though not enough to dislodge her black wide-brimmed sun hat.

I am often asked if Judy still knows who I am. My answer: I don't know, but I think, when she is aware of my presence, she does recognize me as someone familiar.

It's hard to accept the possibility that Judy may have completely forgotten about me, but a lifetime of living with disability has shown me how delicate human bodies and minds can be, how little it can take to dramatically, traumatically alter—or end—lives. Two rogue bones in my neck. Plaque on my beloved's brain. Great love stories begin with such heady promise and end with such sadness and grief—but, at least in my case, also with memories of immense joy throughout a muscular marriage of two strong, supportive partners with challenges aplenty.

I started to recite. When I came to the third *smitten*, I noticed Judy's arm moving slightly toward me. Am I still getting through? Does my love letter continue to resonate? Or is she just a bit uncomfortable and simply repositioning her arm?

I'll never know for sure. I searched her face for a clue, but there was no indication. I continued reciting all the components of my letter, speaking a little louder than usual to offset the muffling effects of my face mask. When Hannah returned, she picked up where she had left off in her Proust reading until a nursing-home worker told us that our time was up so another family could have a visit.

We said our goodbyes, told Judy we would see her soon, and strolled along the infinity loop to a waiting accessible cab, which took us back to an emptier, quieter home where, in the living room, a vase of fresh flowers can usually be found. ❁

Author's note: Several of the ideas, passages, and descriptions in this article first appeared, in sometimes slightly different form and context, in "Lost & Found," my quarterly column for Abilities *magazine.*

A version of this story was published in 2021.

STEPHEN TRUMPER was a writer, editor, and journalism instructor.

And Then Came the Day

BY SARAH WOLFSON

And then came the day when we had written enough lists,
drunk enough serums, procured the perfect rice cooker, been kind

enough to ourselves and our neighbours. Could fit again
in the black-mesh, embroidered bird-of-paradise dress,

could craft a cummerbund, train a wombat to hang, sloth-like,
from a sugar maple. The elephants had been transported

from circus to reserve, we'd re-inflated the drowned moon,
dredged the pond for our little lost boot. So then we sat,

growing older by breaking open while the knotty grubs
processed their way through the planet. There, now. There, there.

The tightrope of striving: end it. We've solved heartburn,
Sudoku, the quest for Neanderthal art. Now is the time

for a pivot. Darling! Let's buy something, strap it
to the car and go somewhere! Let's drive with a great gleaming thing

atop our perfect vehicle. Let's sling butterfly nets
from the window like a happy dog's flapping tongue.

Afterward, let's go home and lay failure, longing,
and some lost cicada husks all belly up on the table.

The house will sink into an architecture
of our smallest sorrows, play tour guide

to our own splintering alter egos. Let us let down
the blinds of ourselves, build with our two hands

a Trojan rat through which we might crawl
back into our smallest true nature. Let us free the ants

from their incessancy. Let us sit on the sloping porch
and shrug and say Oh to everything that passes.

Oh to the stroke, Oh to the stork, Oh to the ache,
Oh to the mutating frog, Oh for the lack, Oh

for the praise-song, Oh for the shark, Oh to the child,
Oh to the pathos of a poisoned bird in flight.

What *Anne of Green Gables* Taught Me about Grief

Reading L. M. Montgomery at eight and thirty-eight

BY JEN SOOKFONG LEE
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANA LUISA O. J.

In 1984, the year I turned eight years old, my father was diagnosed with nasopharyngeal cancer.

Before he moved to Canada, at age thirteen, he had lived with his mother and three older sisters in a two-room house in a community, the name of which, translated into English, is Lone Tree Village, one of many small towns in China's Pearl River delta. There, his neighbourhood of winding alleys and stone houses was built around central communal spaces: the well, the pig pen, the fire pit, and, most famously, the giant tree in the main square with its drooping, heavily canopied branches. I was told that their home's main source of heat was a coal-burning stove that, after generations of use, had coated the walls with a thick black layer of sticky dust. My father's illness, a particularly difficult cancer, was one that was seen in a high number of Chinese men of his generation who spent their childhoods in heavily polluted southern China, where foods preserved in salt were linked to a higher risk of developing nasopharyngeal cancer.

IMAGE BY ILNUR KALIMULLIN, UNSPLASH

When he coughed at night, it was constant. If he slept, or if my mother slept beside him, I still don't know.

Also in 1984, and not coincidentally, I read *Anne of Green Gables* for the first time.

Like most of my books, this one came from the shelves in the dining room, where my four older sisters would leave books they had already finished. The Norton anthologies. *Scruples* by Judith Krantz. *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood. I owned very little that was mine alone; it seemed like everything, from the frames of my glasses to my banana-seat bicycle, had been used by my sisters before me. I was used to reading, and mostly abandoning, their books. Some were too sexy. Most were from their university English courses. But this boxed set containing the first three Anne books, with its illustration of a thin, sad-faced little girl, seemed meant for me. I was thin, and I was a little girl who was continually left alone, who worried about cancer and chemotherapy, and whose face in the mirror was almost always sad. Maybe this book could be mine.

Scrappy, red-headed Anne Shirley, along with hockey players and maple syrup, may very well be Canada's most famous export. Tourists flock to Cavendish, PEI, Lucy Maud Montgomery's hometown and inspiration for the fictional Avonlea. *Anne of Green Gables—The Musical* has been in perpetual production since 1965 in Canada, of course, and also toured in Tokyo and London. Screen adaptations crop up every generation, each slightly different but mainly telling the same story of Anne's abandonment, adoption, and propensity for mishaps, both domestic and social.

By the time I started reading the novels, in 1984, Anne had become a lucrative industry, in the same way that the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling once dominated entertainment, travelling far beyond the books themselves and spawning films, stage plays, even a theme park in Japan. Both Anne and Harry are orphans, dealing with grief and loss and a world that seems to value them less than it does children with two living, affectionate parents. People love underdogs, but more specifically, child readers, with their sensitive minds and developing emotional intelligence, often love to be immersed with fictional children who have suffered the biggest of losses: the deaths of their parents. Think of Mary in *The Secret Garden*, Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*. It's a kind of grim reassurance. If these orphans could go on to accomplish great things and experience love in other forms, then maybe all children have the chance to try again, to behave better, to be happy. Or, at least, that's what I believed.

My older sisters, tasked with the job of keeping me distracted while my father underwent surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy, bought me the rest of the Anne series, in small paperbacks that cost $3.50 each. That winter, I read through them all once, then read through them again, curled up on my bunk bed, my desk lamp twisted backward during dark afternoons after school. My mother was rarely home from the hospital before five, when she cooked dinner in a fury before leaving the dishes for Emma, who was fifteen and had a Billy Idol–esque spiky haircut, and me. At 6:30, with Pam and Tina, my two middle sisters who, by then, were in their twenties, she returned to the hospital until visiting hours were over.

When they came home, I was often already asleep, books on the floor beside me, spines cracked at the passages I had read over and over. I have my old copy of *Anne of Green Gables* even now, and it always falls open at page 203, where Anne meets her mentor and teacher, Miss Stacy, who sees Anne's passions as an asset and who encourages her to perform and write. "We have to write compositions on our field afternoons and I write the best ones," Anne tells Matthew and Marilla, the middle-aged brother and sister who have adopted her. I never spoke of my school accomplishments at home: the short story that won the school contest, the spelling bee, that one time I performed more sit-ups in a row than anyone else. These were small successes that only made me feel valued for a day, maybe two, before I remembered that there were darker, more important things to worry about.

My mother didn't say much, caught as she was in a tornado of doing, caring, and surviving. She had come to Canada to be a bride in a marriage that was not entirely arranged but not entirely of her own choosing either. In 1958, the year she arrived, people in Hong Kong were looking ahead to the day in 1997 when the colony would cease to be part of the Commonwealth and be returned to China's governance. I grew up hearing stories of women like my mother who looked for potential husbands that could get them far away from the looming threat of Communist China. My father, a Canadian citizen whose family was firmly established in Vancouver but whose origins were in a small Chinese village close to where my mother's family also had their roots, seemed like a wise choice. He was handsome, employed, and wrote charming letters after their two mothers had made introductions through photographs sent in white-and-blue airmail envelopes. That was enough for my mother to believe she was in love, board a steamer for the very first time, and move to Vancouver.

My mother married and had five daughters and never worked in any job for more than a year. Her opportunities for learning English were limited, and by the time I was born, my sisters were old enough to earn their own spending money, and my father's salary as an accountant negated the need for my mother to work outside the home. Her English fluency diminished, and she grew uncomfortable speaking it at all. When I was six, I remember my father and I convinced my mother to enroll in an English-conversation class. At the time, she had registered me for Chinese school, which I hated, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. The teachers taught us by rote, repeating sentences in Cantonese over and over again, their rulers banging out a relentless rhythm on the chalkboard.

"If I have to go to Chinese school," I declared, "then you have to go to English school."

My father laughed, pointed at my

mother, and said, "Jenny has a point." Later that week, he pulled out a catalogue of night courses and circled the English class that was running at the high school three blocks away. As he dialled the number to register my mother, he nodded and said, "So convenient. We should have thought of this years ago."

I can still picture my mother sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, staring into middle distance, her face folding in on itself as if she were about to cry.

She lasted two evening classes before dropping out. "The teacher hates me," she shrugged. We never spoke of it again.

My father became the husband who filed the taxes, completed the forms, and met with the teachers, while my mother stayed where she felt safe: in our home and in the shops of Chinatown.

Years later, long after I was an adult, my mother told me that, while my father was fighting his cancer, she spent long nights worried about what would become of her in a country whose languages she did not speak and whose systems were unintelligible to her. She was a woman who had married at nineteen, who had never lived alone, who had been coddled by her mother because she was the pretty daughter with the pretty singing voice. Growing up, my sisters and I left her out of our conversations about school or work or the latest episode of *Knots Landing*. When we watched television, she stayed in her bedroom, where she listened to Canto-pop cassettes her sisters-in-law sent her from Hong Kong. Back then, I watched the fear creep across her face whenever a stranger spoke to her in English—a bus driver, a sales lady at Woodward's, the mailman. Rather than answer, she pushed me in front of her so I could translate both the language and the social codes. When my father stayed overnight at the hospital, I could hear my mother weeping. I heard her. As clearly as I heard my father's rattling cough when he was home.

In *Anne of the Island*, Anne, on a break from her studies at Redmond College, visits her birth home in Bolingbroke, where her parents, a young couple named Walter and Bertha, were schoolteachers. It's a "shabby yellow house in an out-of-the-way street" where a woman gives her a bundle of letters—found in the closet upstairs, tied with a faded ribbon—that Walter and Bertha had written to each other over the course of their courtship. Through these letters, Anne discovers that her parents were very much in love, that she was a deeply anticipated baby, and that their family was, in the brief time they were all alive, as flawless as a family could be, good people who lived good lives. They were very much in love and well liked in their community. They had plans for the future. And, most importantly, they had *wanted* Anne.

Marilla was my mother in novel form: flawed, unable to accurately express the roil of emotions under the skin, defined by rules.

Although this scene in *Anne of the Island* is brief, it's hard not to feel a pang of pity for Marilla, who is first described in *Anne of Green Gables* as, "a woman of narrow experience and rigid conscience." Marilla is certainly not beautiful or young or in love, and Anne never imagines a romantic narrative about her past, as she does about Bertha. Marilla believes in hard work, in a decorous life, in plain Protestant virtue. She denies Anne a puffed-sleeve dress, until Matthew goes ahead and buys one for her himself. Anne often turns to other women, pretty, younger women, like Miss Stacy and Mrs. Allen for advice.

In the end, however, Marilla becomes the mother that Anne has always needed, a firm ballast whenever Anne finds herself lost in a tumble of emotions. And, in that process, Anne softens Marilla's angles so that she permits laughter, sadness, and empathy to escape her thorny exterior. In the books, motherhood—the real, working motherhood—isn't pretty. While Bertha might have been beautiful and expressive, she isn't the one who is able to give Anne stability or education or a moral centre. It's Marilla, the spinster with a broken heart who lives with her bachelor brother, that does that. It's Marilla who encourages Anne to attend university at a time when most young women didn't. It's Marilla who travels to care for Anne during the births of her children.

Growing up, I had many substitute mothers, women I turned to for the kind of comfort and understanding my mother, terrified for her husband and the life he had built for her, could never provide. During the years my father was sick, I remember there was Sue from church who listened to my worries. There was my friend Klea's mother, Margueritte, who let us doodle on a designated living-room wall. There was Mrs. Carleton from school who called me her "talented little writer." When my mother used up all her energy in caring for my father, managing our family, and, later, fighting a deep depression that lasted my entire adolescence, it was these women who hugged me, told funny stories, and said I was doing okay, even if it was abundantly clear that I was not. It was Sue who cleaned the wounds on my shins, where I was scratching the skin raw, my insides wound so tight with anxiety that I wanted to break open the surface of my body with my fingernails to release the tension. I saw myself in Anne. But I saw other, more perfect, mothers everywhere.

Marilla, in the beginning of *Anne of Green Gables*, before we know what she is capable of giving Anne, was my mother in novel form: flawed, unable to accurately express the roil of emotions under the skin, defined by rules. When my mother was at home, it seemed like the only words she spoke were orders about meal prep or laundry, or she would sometimes rage about small mistakes: a ball of hair in the shower drain, spilled juice in the fridge, a hole in the seat of

my pants from climbing a tree. I don't remember her asking us how we were doing, what school was like, if we were seeing our friends. Like Marilla, she seemed to care nothing for fashion or her daughters' feelings.

Now I know she was grieving and scared, unable to break out of her anxiety to see that the lives of her daughters were continuing, despite my father's cancer. But, at eight years old, confused and worried, I needed the comfort of knowing that not all mothers were perfect, but that, maybe, eventually, they might say the loving words their children needed to hear. It was okay that they weren't all tolerant and pretty and interested in the small lives of their children. Sometimes they didn't speak English. Sometimes they collapsed in bed without saying one word to their youngest daughter, pulled the covers over their head, and cried themselves to sleep.

Near the end of *Anne of Green Gables*, Marilla, changed by years of parenting, opens up to Anne. "You blessed girl!" she says after Anne decides to stay home and delay her university education. "I feel as if you'd given me new life." In a few years, I hoped, my own mother might say something just like that.

I REMEMBER ONE afternoon, two years later, my mother saw me reading on the couch, angled so the dim light from the table lamp illuminated my copy of *Anne of the Island*, the Anne book I had reread the most, chiefly because of her romantic interests (this was a fantasy that my nascent boy-crazy brain was just beginning to find exciting). From the kitchen, she glared at me and yelled, "How long have you been reading that?"

I couldn't remember, but it had likely been ever since I had come home from school. "I don't know," I mumbled.

"Stop reading and help me cook dinner." My mother pointed her spatula in my direction. "Now."

"No," I said. I calmly continued to read.

Without saying another word, my mother, furious and almost certainly emotionally and physically exhausted, marched into the living room and pulled the book out of my hands. Then I followed as she walked into my bedroom and swept all of my Anne books off their designated shelf.

"Stay here until I come back," she barked. I did as I was told. From the doorway, I could hear her moving objects in the kitchen, muttering as she dragged a chair across the linoleum floor. I had only been reading, something I had been doing for months, alone and undisturbed. Waiting, I tried to remember the last time my mother had noticed anything I was doing. And I couldn't.

When she returned, she said, "I hid them. You're not getting them back until you help me cook dinner."

Like me, Anne Shirley was a talker, a child who craved affection and connection, even from the adults who would never love her.

In the kitchen, she stood at the stove, at a blazing hot wok. Instead of standing beside her so I could watch and therefore anticipate what ingredient she needed next (something I had watched my sisters try, with mixed success, for most of my life) I sat down on the floor with my back against the refrigerator. I had no plan, I only knew that I was angry, and if I couldn't have what I wanted, my mother wouldn't either. When my mother turned around to open the fridge door for a bottle of oyster sauce, I was right there, staring at her.

"What are you doing? Get up. I need the fridge."

"No. I'm not moving."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not moving until you give me back my books."

What my mother likely hadn't considered until that moment was that my books, and my Anne books in particular, were the constants in my life. My oldest sisters were trying to manage my father's insurance and health benefits. My sister Emma was a teenager, spending most of her free time in the weights room at the high school, where building muscle mass seemed a way to control at least one thing when everything else was uncontrollable. My grandfather fell into a quiet depression, spending more and more time in his room off the hallway as his only son grew sicker and sicker. There was very little time for anyone in our household to pay any attention to me. I walked to and from school alone. I completed my homework alone. I was a talkative, restlessly social child, who chatted nonstop at school (I remember my report card that year said, "It's a challenge for Jennifer to understand that sometimes her input isn't appropriate"). As soon as I entered our house, the silence enveloped me, and I hated it.

Like me, Anne Shirley was a talker, a child who craved affection and human connection, even from the adults who would never love her. Before she arrives in Avonlea to live with Marilla and Matthew, she creates imaginary playmates at the orphanage and the one family home where she was treated more as a nanny than an adopted child. In Avonlea, she finds her true family and is loved and celebrated for the sensitive, creative, and passionate little girl she is, not the decorous, quiet little girl Marilla might have once wished for.

Matthew, near the end of *Anne of Green Gables*, says, "Well now, I'd rather have you than a dozen boys, Anne. Just mind you that—rather than a dozen boys. Well now, I guess it wasn't a boy that took the Avery scholarship, was it? It was a girl—my girl—my girl that I'm proud of." In my own small, dark place, worried that my father would never get better, that I had ruined my parents' last chance to have a son by being the fifth and youngest girl, this affirmation was what I needed, even though it wasn't about me. This comfort was what I turned to, again and again, when there was no one to notice what I had eaten for my after-school snack or to read my most recent short

story. In that kitchen, while the winter rain rattled the steamed-up windows, the injustice of having this comfort stolen from me lit an intense rage.

I remember my mother stood in front of me. I knew she was thinking of pushing me aside, something that would be hard for her if I were determined to hold my ground. At ten years old, I was already at my mother's height. Her parenting style had always been strict and unwavering, with very little concession made for the wishes of her children. But I also knew my father was, at that very moment, lying in a hospital bed, a thin curtain separating him from another man who was succumbing to a brain tumour and who cried for his sons long into the night. My mother spent most of her waking hours brewing medicinal soups, hoping something might help, and bringing them to my father in a green Thermos. She brushed his teeth, trimmed his nails, held him upright when he sat on the toilet.

This was not the moment to fight.

She pulled a chair from the table, climbed on the seat, and opened a high cupboard, where my books were piled behind a stack of rice bowls. She dropped them, one by one, onto the floor. *Anne of Green Gables*. *Anne of Avonlea*. *Anne of the Island*. *Anne of Windy Poplars*. *Anne's House of Dreams*. *Anne of Ingleside*. "There," she said quietly. "You win."

IN LATER BOOKS, Anne learns to control her passions, to muffle her temper, to wear fashionable clothes. When I was eight, this seemed like success to me, or at least a success that I understood. That year, I began having panic attacks at school, for reasons that were seemingly unrelated to my father's illness. I remember one morning, I arrived at my classroom after the bell had rung. I panicked in the cloakroom, hyperventilating behind a row of coats, crying and thrashing so hard that my teacher had to hold me to keep me from accidentally punching the walls. One afternoon, that same teacher read aloud stories we had written, and the bell rang before she got to mine. I burst into tears and didn't stop until she pulled me to her in a tight hug, once again holding me so I could not hurt myself as my body tried to kick out its frustrations. I remember she wrote a letter to my parents. "We are working with Jennifer to help her learn that not every small mistake is a catastrophe." After that, I visited our school counsellor every week in a corner of the library, where I was allowed to pick from a table of toys while she asked gentle questions about what scared me and what I liked about myself. "I'm good at school," I said. I remember that she paused with a Jenga block in her hand. "Is that what you like about yourself, or is that what everyone else likes about you?"

What I wanted most was to no longer worry, to no longer panic that one tiny misstep would unleash a chain of disastrous events, leading, as all of my panic attacks led, to a dystopian

IMAGE BY ISTOCK

daydream of my family being torn apart. Sometimes I feared death. Sometimes I feared that my sisters would be kidnapped. Sometimes I imagined a man in a black top hat slowly walking up the sidewalk toward our house. What he would do when he arrived was amorphous, a shapeless cloud of evil. But I knew he would destroy everything and we would be separated, never to find each other again.

At eighteen, Anne starts university and dreams of becoming an author, but in the end, sets aside her ambitions to marry Gilbert Blythe and raise six children. It is her son Walter who becomes the world-famous writer, after he is killed in battle in World War One and one of his poems, about the cost of war and reminiscent of "In Flanders Fields," is read around the English-speaking world. Anne channels her creative energy into her family. She no longer has her rage or any true passions outside of domestic life. She gardens. She mothers. She tells stories to her children.

This calmness, the possibility of becoming an adult without dark thoughts, with a beautiful home and the kind of family that the world recognizes as valuable and worthy of praise, was a fantasy I buried myself in every single day. One day, I wouldn't care if anyone read my stories or not. One day, I might marry a doctor like Gilbert, who would know what to do if anyone fell sick. One day, I could shape a noisy, affectionate, tightly bonded family of my own. And then there would be nothing left to fear.

In 1988, the year I turned twelve, my father died.

I answered the phone when our family doctor called and asked to speak to my mother. It was a Saturday morning in September, and I was getting ready for Chinese school, which I was still attending, six years after my mother had dropped out of her English classes. I remember the doctor called my mother weekly, explaining to her the details of my father's treatments in Cantonese, which the oncologist at the hospital didn't speak. He didn't usually phone on Saturdays, but I didn't think of what a weekend call might mean, only passed the phone to my mother silently as she packed another day's worth of food for my father, which, by then, he rarely ate. If he tried, he would usually throw it back up before tearfully apologizing. "I'm sorry," he would whisper. "It's such a waste."

I remember my mother listening with the receiver pressed against her ear. I remember her wailing for my sister Tina before she dropped the phone and collapsed in a heap on the kitchen floor. We were at the hospital in half an hour, huddled in my father's room with a nurse and the family doctor.

I have replayed that moment many times in my life, that hour we spent with my father's body in a palliative-care ward at Mount Saint Joseph Hospital in East Vancouver. It was a small room, with one tiny closet that fit one change of clothes and a coat. There was a television mounted in a corner near the ceiling. The curtains were open, and it was sunny. In the bed, I remember my father was lying partially upright, as he had been doing lately to lessen the constant ache in his throat. His skin was grey and yellow at the same time, an impossibility in life and an unmistakeable sign of death. His mouth was open, as if he had died while calling out in pain, as if he had been calling out for us—his five daughters, his wife, anyone who remembered him from before. When he was a teenage boy walking the Stanley Park seawall with his father. When he was a handsome young accountant in a glen-plaid suit with the pretty wife who sang Doris Day songs in her pretty voice. When he was a father and taught his girls to play badminton and to never, ever rely on a man for their livelihoods.

As a teenager, I no longer wanted to be Anne. If anyone, it was an amalgam of Winona Ryder, Betsey Johnson, and Margaret Atwood.

My mother held his face in her hands and wailed, "What were you trying to tell me?" I turned away then and began to empty his closet into a plastic Safeway bag I had found on a shelf. A nurse gently took the bag away from me and whispered, "Don't worry about that." But I did worry. Because worrying was what I had always done best.

For years afterwards, my mother slipped in and out of a deep depression. She spent the bad days sitting on the sofa with the living-room curtains drawn tight, staring at the shut-off television, sometimes crying, sometimes silent. On good days, she made me elaborate breakfasts with ham and eggs and hash browns. On most days, good or bad, she stayed home. If she talked to me, she started crying, so I avoided her as much as possible.

In those years, my anxiety was relatively quiet. My father had already died. My mother left me almost entirely alone. My sisters moved out, one by one. There were weddings. As a teenager, I no longer wanted to be the adult Anne, the wife of a respectable doctor. Instead, my brain was filled with Kurt Cobain and Keanu Reeves, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Sylvia Plath. If I wanted to be anyone, it was an amalgam of Winona Ryder, Betsey Johnson, and Margaret Atwood.

And yet I turned to Anne every few months, on long nights when a Sinéad O'Connor song wasn't enough, on nights when I acutely missed my early childhood, those years when my father brought us a box of long-johns after work, when we all piled in the copper-coloured station wagon and went to White Spot for dinner, where my father would order the chicken pot pie.

Near the end of *Anne of Green Gables*, Matthew dies after reading about the collapse of the bank where he had invested the family's savings. This chapter—in which Anne is unable to cry and she and Marilla have to reorganize

their lives without Matthew and without money—was the one I read over and over, weeping at his death and the aftermath. Even then, as a teenage girl, I knew that when I cried reading about Matthew, I was really crying for my father.

In the years that followed, my anxiety would spike and wane, and at its worst, when my marriage was ending, I experienced panic attacks up to seven times a week. The promise of a peaceful, contented life, in a big house, surrounded by children, never materialized for me, even when I lived in a big house and was a stay-at-home mother. When it came time for my ex-husband and I to divide our library, I found all of my Lucy Maud Montgomery books in a box in the basement, and read them, yet again, at the age of thirty-eight. I was shell-shocked, sleepless, and worried about how my son and I would survive, but I slipped into Anne's story as easily as I ever had.

The last Anne book, *Rilla of Ingleside*, chronicles World War One, with all three of Anne and Gilbert's sons enlisting as soldiers. Jem and Shirley return, but Walter dies in battle. Rilla, Anne's youngest daughter, fears she has lost her sweetheart to war also, after communication stops between them. In the end, he comes back for her, a white scar running down his face, and the promise of love is hers again. An older, traumatized love but love nonetheless.

Newly separated and raw, I read this and cried. I realized then that this happy ending of Anne's was no happy ending at all. War had scarred or taken each of her children. Her red hair, the one part of her body that spoke to her unruly emotions, turns white. Her happiness as a wife and mother, it seems, was temporary, and no defence against death and war. Anxiety, for me anyway, is often about searching for the magical *one thing* I could do to make everything better, even when I know that often there is no solution, no list I could make or email I could write that would change the outcome. The idea that Anne could only earn her peaceful happiness for so long, by suppressing her anger and ambitions and wandering brain, was a comfort far different from the comfort I sought as a child. Even she, the irrepressible Anne, couldn't stop the war from coming. There was nothing she could have done, in the same way there was nothing I could have done to prevent my father from dying and nothing I can do now to change the decisions I made during the last years of my marriage. Acceptance, perhaps, is the antidote whenever we fear disaster.

Anne lost her birth parents and, later, a child. She was an orphan who was given a second chance with a loving family and a community who accepted her shortcomings and celebrated her successes, with a husband and children who adore her. And then, in the end, she loses her son, her life bookended by mirrored traumas. Her happiness rises and then falls again. Like mine. Like yours. Like everyone's. Anne, it seems, has stayed with me almost my entire life, different parts of her story fitting into my troubles like a key in a lock. ⊶

A version of this story was published in 2019.

JEN SOOKFONG LEE is an acclaimed novelist and broadcaster. She lives in North Burnaby, BC.

How Not to Ask Your Dad about Family Secrets

I tried to get answers about my grandmother's mysterious past. Turns out, I still had a lot to learn about myself

BY SADIYA ANSARI

Sadiya Ansari spent six years investigating a period in which her paternal grandmother left her seven children in Karachi, Pakistan, to move 1,000 kilometres away to be with a man.

Daadi, as Sadiya called her, returned to the family fifteen years later, living with her family in Markham, Ontario, for the last decade of her life. As a child, Ansari knew nothing about this period in her family's history until a chatty aunt mentioned it in passing when she was ten years old. A decade after her grandmother died, Sadiya first broached the topic with her family, but it took another decade to delve into the investigation that would turn into her memoir, In Exile: Rupture, Reunion, and My Grandmother's Secret Life.

PHOTOS BY SADIYA ANSARI/THE WALRUS

On a quiet afternoon, I sat with my parents in the room Daadi used to live in on the ground floor of our home that we had since turned back into a family room. I was twenty-five years old, home for the holidays from journalism school, pulsing with an obnoxious desire to practise my interviewing skills.

Squished on the couch between my parents, I asked my dad what it was like to see Daadi after eighteen years of separation. "Awkward," he responded. I was so used to elders being spoken about with the utmost reverence that this single word felt like a revelation to me. I asked my mother what it was like to meet her during that visit to Karachi. She smiled wryly and told me the first thing my grandmother said to her was that my father was supposed to marry someone else. He looked up at her, surprised. "You never told me that."

Perhaps the most vital element of growing up is becoming aware that the stories you are told and the stories you tell yourself have primarily been shaped by your parents' world view. The realization that history isn't simply recorded but also invented. It's arriving at the understanding that your parents don't know everything, and in passing down what they do know, they can be unreliable narrators.

The latter can be motivated by many things: faulty memory, protecting the next generation from a painful past, or intentional myth making. But I started to realize that the gaps I was coming up against in our family history were as important as the mythology. When thinking about the impenetrable silence over Daadi leaving, I wondered about the source of this silence: Was it shame over what happened or regret over what didn't?

All of this prompted another question: What else could I uncover if I had the courage to ask?

Author Elif Shafak has talked about families like mine—those who have been forced to migrate, collecting and carrying various kinds of trauma with them—and who is most likely in those families to investigate their history. The first generation are those like Daadi who experience the brunt of hardship, and they often don't have the language to talk about what's happened. The second generation is trying to make a new life for themselves, or, as Shafak explained in a 2021 podcast interview on Monocle Radio's *Meet the Writers*: "You just need to find your feet and you can't look back." It's the youngest in these families who tend to ask the most difficult questions about their grandparents' stories. "I have met young people with old memories," Shafak said.

I was confused about the stories I was hearing. They didn't fit the narrative his family told about themselves. That they were a "good" family: devout, educated, traditional.

There was so much distance between my life and my grandmother's—between the choices I was able to make versus the choices made for her—I didn't feel as though her story would unravel me. For my dad, the few choices she made for herself ended up being incredibly painful for him—losing his mother for nearly two decades. And as my dad and his siblings aged, I realized his generation would become my ancestors one day; honouring their memory hinged on learning about their past.

In my thirties, I decided to interview my dad more formally. It was a lazy Sunday in late February when my dad and I sat down for our first official conversation, feeling momentous even though we were just at home in our pyjamas. I was staying over for the weekend, having made my bimonthly pilgrimage to the suburbs from Toronto, where, much to my parents' chagrin, I lived on my own.

It was well below zero degrees outside, so my dad's insistence on wearing a kurta necessitated a sweater vest over the flimsy cotton. He sat on the couch, armed with chai, his hair and beard completely white, heavy black frames sitting on his curiously unwrinkled face. My dad and I began by looking through old photo albums, the kind most families have shoved to the back of a closet somewhere, full of mostly five-by-seven photos and a few four-by-six photos with rounded edges from the 1960s and '70s. I had seen most of the images dozens of times but always flipped past people I didn't recognize—pictures from India and Pakistan from long before I was born. This time, I asked my dad to tell me about the mysterious figures. There were so many people I had never heard of before: his aunt who left her husband after he took a second wife, his uncle who married a British woman, another aunt who never married at all.

I was confused about the stories I was hearing. They didn't fit the narrative his family told about themselves. That they were a "good" family: devout, educated, traditional.

That included Daadi. Behind her pious persona, I recognized a fierce independence and wondered how she managed to maintain that part of her during a lifetime that saw the emancipation of the Indian subcontinent without the emancipation of Indian women from the heavy expectations of religion, culture, men, and, well, other women.

She often employed a strategy many women before her, and unfortunately after her, have used: placating expectations outwardly while covertly doing what she really wanted. She dressed up her demands as religious duty, softened her harsh words by offering sweets. And visually, she cultivated an image that made her almost disappear into the background: a dupatta loosely fixed to her head, donning colours a widow wears—white, ecru, slate grey. But this performance wasn't what I was interested in. It was the ellipsis in her story that was driving me: *Why did she leave? What was her exile like? Did she feel cast out? Did she feel free? Why did she return?*

I wasn't sure who had the answers to these questions, but I thought I may as well start with my dad. While almost everyone in his family is a good

storyteller, that doesn't mean they have sharp memories or care about accuracy. My dad, in particular, doles out well-rehearsed anecdotes at parties, knows when to pause for laughter, recites poetry as punchline. So I found it strange in those early interviews about his childhood when he mostly gave me facts, rattling off names, years, locations, and asked me to verify what he couldn't quite remember with more "senior people" (he was seventy at the time, so I'm not sure whom he was referring to). I didn't expect single-sentence responses or long pauses where he squinted, looking past me, either genuinely excavating long-buried memories or searching for some he thought were acceptable to share.

I asked him the same questions over and over. Finally, out of exasperation: *How can you just not remember?*

I REALIZED the answer to that very question a week later, when, in therapy, I was asked something similar: "What was your childhood like?" I had just started working with someone new, and it was our second session. Other than being surprised by such an obvious question, I drew a blank. So I gave her the basics: my parents worked a lot, I had an older sister, and my grandmother lived with us when I was young. I told her that I read a lot and found ways to entertain myself. Then she asked: "Were you lonely?"

Tears sprung to my eyes, and I wasn't sure why. I spent a lot of time alone as a kid—reading, watching television, scribbling in journals. I had some after-school activities, like choir and drama club, and my mom took us to the library as much as she could, but there wasn't a lot of money for anything else since my parents poured their income into living in a middle-class neighbourhood. As realtors, they often worked when their clients didn't—evenings and weekends were for ferrying prospective buyers from house to house. My sister was a bit too old to be my playmate, and my parents didn't like me going to friends' homes.

This day-to-day isolation was in sharp contrast to my father's siblings and their children coming over on weekends for dinner parties and horror-movie marathons or making organized trips to Niagara Falls or Canada's Wonderland. As more cousins immigrated to Canada, the reasons to get together multiplied—birthdays, weddings, celebrating a cousin finishing the Quran, or observing their first fast during Ramzan. Daadi was at the centre of these events. She was the reason we often had guests over, why our house was always full on Eid. And while it seemed like there was so much love around us, it was conditional on feeding the "good" family narrative.

The South Asian obsession with marriage is a clichéd topic to write about. But the way it can terrorize a woman—no matter how educated or aware of her worth—cannot be understated.

When my sister had a boyfriend at fourteen, a cousin who went to the same high school spread the news like wildfire. My sister was lectured by aunts, ostracized by uncles, labelled troublesome. There was so much concern about her "reputation" and how that reflected on the family. But there didn't seem to be concern about the fact that her boyfriend was nineteen, five years older than her, already out of high school as she entered it. Her actual safety wasn't at the core of the concern, nor was the boyfriend's responsibility in pursuing her questioned.

When my parents became increasingly concerned about her very normal teen behaviour—wanting to go to the movies, being on the phone at all hours, talking to boys—they sent us to an Islamic summer school an hour away from our house. While that summer ended up being not as tragic as I had predicted, it wasn't lost on me that my parents wielded religion as punishment. God was a figure you feared, not loved. And to earn God's love, you had to be good.

I was ten years old when that crash course in Islam ended. But I was still haunted by the idea I was "bad"—that I should pray more, control my urge to gossip, lie less. Daadi enforced these feelings with her watchful eye over what we wore, when we left the house, and which friends came over.

Despite vocally denouncing her own experience as a young bride, Daadi glows with pride in a photo of my cousin's engagement party, when she was engaged at seventeen to a man ten years her senior.

I knew my parents would never want me to get married before I finished my education, but the trajectory of my life seemed at odds with the shows I watched on TGIF. The middle-school dating dilemmas of *Boy Meets World* and Kelly and Zack's never-ending drama on *Saved by the Bell* seemed like another world to me.

In my thirties, being single became like a rash on my face I had to explain. At every family wedding I attended, I fielded three to thirty queries about why I wasn't married. "You can't find anyone?" one aunt asked. (This was the same aunt who often asked me how much I weighed.)

As I looked at the marriages around me, especially in my family, I wondered why women, so often hobbled by their rings, were particularly keen to push the idea onto me. "I don't really see great examples of partnership around me," I answered honestly to the weight-asking-aunty at yet another wedding. She acted surprised, while her son—going through a divorce himself—snorted with laughter beside her.

The South Asian obsession with marriage is as clichéd and cringeworthy a topic to write about as the expectation to become a doctor or engineer. But the way it can terrorize a woman in particular—no matter how feminist, educated, or aware of her worth—cannot be understated.

The unremarkable fact of being a single woman in her thirties who lived on her own made me feel like an alien in my family. I could see the looks of pity from aunts and uncles. What they couldn't, or didn't want to, understand was that perhaps *I* had evaded marriage. And after all, I wasn't the pioneer of living alone as an unmarried woman: part of the pull I

felt toward my grandmother's story was that I had a hunch she was an alien too. Years after being asked about my childhood by that therapist, I still resist thinking about it. My memories of childhood seem like photographs growing sepia at the edges, darkening as I see how lonely I was, how small I felt, how small some people wanted my life to be.

FOR MY FATHER, revisiting his childhood meant reaching back half a century to access pain he hoped he had left behind. And it's unsurprising that, at first, he could only remember bits and pieces—it's literally how memory works. "Remembering something isn't like playing back a movie; it's more like pulling in scraps from different parts of the brain," explains the host of the podcast *Every Little Thing*, distilling the work of memory researcher Charan Ranganath.

When we access long-buried memories, it can resurface the trauma those events caused. At the same time, the emotional tone of a memory can change, become more dull, because of accessing them with a new lens. The only way out is through, but it's not exactly an appealing process. I later realized my dad may well have been doing the same thing I was: avoiding discomfort by refusing to dive in all at once.

Revisiting that first audio recording, I cringe at my impatience with him. I was frustrated when what he told me contradicted what I thought I already knew.

Only at the very end, when I stopped recording, did my dad speak about his mother. And finally, I heard a familiar story. "I think the real trouble started for Daadi when she got married at such a tender age," he told me. "That was very unjust." ✘

Excerpted from In Exile: Rupture, Reunion, and My Grandmother's Secret Life *by Sadiya Ansari, 2024, published by House of Anansi. Reprinted with permission from the publisher.*

SADIYA ANSARI is a Pakistani Canadian journalist based in London, UK.

IMAGE BY ISTOCK

Me, My Selfies, and I

Those of us on the line between Gen X and millennial are watching our identities shift and age in a way no previous generation has

BY ERIKA THORKELSON
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN ILANGO

IMAGE BY ALPGIRAY KELEM / ISTOCK

I came across a TikTok recently that articulated something about my face I'd been struggling with. It was one of those videos where the speaker sits in the front seat of her car as if she's been so overcome by an epiphany that she had to pull over and share. In this one, the thirty-seven-year-old user, @lesswastedliving, expresses bewilderment at her struggle to recognize her changing face in the images she produces nearly every day. "It's just odd to seek yourself in the mirror or on camera and not being able to find it and having to become okay with this new person," she says.

I encounter previous versions of my face every day. Past and present exist simultaneously, making the self that once seemed unified appear fragmented into a series of different faces.

I understand how she feels. Since my fortieth birthday, I've found it increasingly difficult to take good selfies. It's not so much an issue of wrinkles or grey hairs—although I have both. It's that the muscles of my face are weakening. To keep my eyes from drooping before I hit the button, I pop them open wide and come out looking surprised, even a bit manic. Though I've recognized small changes in my face before, this is the first time they've challenged my photography skills. With each new shot, I wonder: *Who is this woman that I'm trying to capture?*

Endless pages have been written about the cultural meaning of the selfie—whether it represents the essential vanity of millennials and Gen Zers or, as many feminists have argued, it offers a vital source of self-definition that short-circuits the male gaze. A large chunk of research done on selfies focuses on the effects they have on the self-esteem of teens and young adults, periods of life that were already marked by self-consciousness long before filters came along to confuse things.

There is far less research on the long-term effect of this behaviour: how taking and sharing selfies over a period of decades affects a person's perception of aging or time itself. Women around my age—those of us who live on the line between baby Gen X and elder millennial—are watching our identities shift in real time in a way no previous generation has experienced en masse.

This proliferation of images calls to mind the work of Taiwanese artist Annie Wang. In 2001, the day before her due date, Wang took a photograph of herself sitting on her bed, with the words "My Belly / My Baby" written on her bare midriff. That image was the beginning of a series called "The Mother as a Creator," where, over time, she photographed herself and her son every year or every few years with the previous portrait in the background. Wang has called the resulting mix of images, the most recent of which was taken in 2022, a "time-tunnel" in which the past and present all seem to exist simultaneously.

The project is a powerful statement about the erasure of women from the art world once they become mothers, but I'm also drawn to its frank depiction of a woman's face as she ages. While the most dramatic changes appear in her son as he goes from toddler to young adult, I linger on the relatively subtle movement of time in Wang's face over twenty years. Lines develop around her eyes and mouth, her hair and mood change—evidence of a life.

To age on the internet is to exist in an accidental version of Wang's time tunnel. In my social media archives and in profile photos, I encounter previous versions of my face every day. Past and present exist simultaneously, making the self that once seemed unified appear fragmented into a series of slightly different faces.

I posted my first selfie on Instagram in 2013, the year that "selfie" was declared the word of the year by Oxford English Dictionaries. I took it in a salon mirror, my hair sticking out in foils while the hairdresser who encouraged me to adopt Instagram checked to see if the bleach had done its work. Before that, the selfies I posted on Facebook or used as profile photos had always been of the finished product, but Instagram felt fleeting enough that I could post it as a joke for my small number of followers. It was my opening salvo in a conversation that has lasted a decade.

Though I was already in my early thirties, Instagram was the first place I can remember feeling a sense of shared celebration around my appearance. We tend to divide women into attractive and unattractive and assume the former category is too visible while the latter is invisible. My experience has never been that clear-cut. I'm not traditionally attractive by our society's narrow standards (the word "cute" is occasionally thrown my way), but I've experienced both unwanted attention and the feeling of fading into the background.

In posting selfies, I was able to command that visibility on my terms and for my pleasure. I began sharing my hair-colour experiments, enjoying the rush of likes when I went deep blue or bright purple. Changing my profile photo became an event. I came to know how I wanted my face and body to be seen and gave my image the same care and attention I'd been giving the photos I'd been taking of friends since I got my first film camera as a teenager.

Somewhere in the background was that other Instagram, the one dominated by thin, wealthy influencers that Jia Tolentino writes about in her 2019 *New Yorker* essay "The Age of Instagram Face": the celebrities who all look the same, the ones who "alter photos out of a simple defensive reflex, as if FaceTuning your jawline were the Instagram equivalent of checking your eyeliner in the bathroom of the bar." But that wasn't my community. It was play I craved rather than perfection.

Likewise, the people I followed on Instagram had faces and bodies that weren't often celebrated in media—people who aren't white, straight, thin,

rich, and able bodied. Sometimes they played with makeup in wild, theatrical ways, and other times they captured themselves from purposefully awkward angles to confront the expectations of the form. I was hungry for this variety of faces.

The more I shared, the more my archive grew, but unlike the prints of my childhood photos, these digital shots don't bleach with time or curl at the edges. They look the same as on the day I took them. I, on the other hand, have changed a great deal in ways that are all the more obvious because of that archive.

A few weeks after her first post, the woman on TikTok came back with an update for her image problem: part of the solution, she claimed, is to learn more about skin care. I understand the urge. For many women, to enter middle age is to face a well-documented slide toward invisibility, a loss of the small amount of power that comes with youthful beauty, and acting against it feels like a moral imperative.

There is no shortage of options for the modern woman seeking to stop time. One skin care clinic in my neighbourhood has green walls that recall a nineteenth-century sanatorium. For a few hundred dollars, they'll shoot me full of plumping agents, inject me with hyaluronic acid or Botox, and grind off my dead skin with diamonds to reveal the baby underneath, freezing me in time or even reversing it. If it weren't for lifelong allergies, I may have already walked through that door.

Perhaps it's not the loss of beauty the TikTok influencer and I fear so much as a slide into irrelevance. After all, the internet is a land ruled by the young.

In her book *The Beauty Paradox: Femininity in the Age of Selfies*, Université du Québec à Montréal professor of sociology Chiara Piazzesi calls this "successful aging." Women, she writes, "are constantly confronted by a discourse that says that the passage of time, and its effects on their bodies, is a problem, a challenge, a nuisance that they must successfully confront—which means aging as little, as slowly, as invisibly as possible."

Through interviews with eleven women of various ages, Piazzesi explores the meanings of beauty in an age where digital photography underpins and expresses our identities. According to her subjects, selfies now figure into the aging process in multiple ways. They can be a source of positive attention, which is rare for older women; they can help women cope with the process of aging through flattering self-portraits; and they can provide a "visual journal of one's gradual bodily transformation, hence entailing a materialization of the fading of beauty over time."

We see these uses on social media in the selfies of celebrities for whom aging is apparently a source of terror and fascination. Some use the medium to defy time or shoot back at critics. Martha Stewart juts her chin and pouts in her shots, somehow looking more fifty-something than eighty-two. After being pilloried for noticeable plastic surgery at the Grammy Awards in 2023, sixty-five-year-old Madonna posted a selfie of her face with the caption "Look how cute I am now that swelling from surgery has gone down."

Others use selfies to reveal the small details of their aging process that we rarely see in movies and television. Gillian Anderson is a master of the form; in one video diary, she's resting her head on her hotel room pillow after a long day of filming, grey roots peeking out of her trademark strawberry blond, the lines on her forehead and under her eyes marking every one of her fifty-five years. It feels intimate and comforting to see that a woman long admired for her beauty is aging too. But even her graceful version of the journey through middle age seems like an impossible ideal. These are the selfies of people who have seemingly infinite aesthetic budgets, people whose appearance is their livelihood.

What templates exist for the rest of us? For a more relatable "visual journal" of the body aging, I look to women artists who have explored time through self-portraiture. There's the series of sixteen self-portraits by Finnish artist Helene Schjerfbeck, beginning as a stern twenty-two-year-old in 1884 and ending as a wraith-like sketch in 1945, a year before her death at eighty-three. Or the work of American artist Cindy Sherman, who has been interrogating our culture's relationship to gender and photography for decades. Her most recent collection of playful portrait-like digital photo collages exaggerates the stretch of pores or the bleed of lipstick into wrinkles, all the details that women are expected to hide. Like me, these artists are less interested in beauty than in confronting the steady, ineluctable impact of time.

Perhaps it's not the loss of beauty the TikTok influencer and I fear so much as a slide into irrelevance. After all, the internet is a land ruled by the young. In my lifetime, I've already seen and adapted to the rise of so many world-changing technologies, from the arrival of home internet in my teens to the birth of social media in my twenties and the rise of artificial intelligence in my forties.

Each new way of communicating has brought with it a complex negotiation of social assumptions that glorifies those on the cutting edge while relegating those who fall behind to irrelevance and ridicule. Just think of the endless TikToks pillorying millennials who use duck face in their selfies or the Gen X habit of lifting the camera high enough to hide eye circles and sharpen the chin.

The style of my selfies hints at their age—the low resolution of my old iPhone camera, the out-of-style grainy film filters. University of Waterloo associate professor Aimée Morrison, who has long studied the selfie as a form of communication, articulates this pressure to remain up to date. "It's okay for me if I look old, but I don't want to look clueless," says

Morrison. "I don't want to look like I don't know how to take a picture."

She agrees that, with the rise of video, selfies are no longer the internet's lingua franca. But we still need them to communicate in other ways. There is an expectation, for example, that we update our profile photos regularly or risk being seen as dishonest. "You can put a photo of yourself when you're twelve, and that's fun," she says. "But you can't be forty and have a picture up from when you were thirty-five, because now you're a forty dressed up as a thirty-five. There's some kind of fakery going on there."

This is true in my work as a university instructor, where so much of my interaction with colleagues and students now happens online. I have an avatar in Zoom for when my camera is off and ones for WhatsApp and Slack. I even have a selfie profile photo in the course management software that my students see every time I post. Keeping these up to date has begun to feel like a part-time job.

I've noticed that a few of my contacts have begun to use AI selfie generators to opt out of this altogether. Instead of a candid shot, apps like Lensa offer faux artistic portraits at a tiny fraction of the cost of a human artist. Ethics aside, I can see why this is an attractive option.

Out of curiosity, I uploaded the requisite ten recent images of my face and waited for the Lensa app to do its work. The result was a collection of women's faces in a variety of styles—sci-fi landscapes, anime, fairy princesses, etc. I could see my nose here, my eyes there, but most of them only vaguely resembled highly idealized versions of me. They were younger, thinner, and more symmetrical than I am. They had big pouty lips where mine are small and thin, and their skin was smooth and creamy where mine has freckles, scars, and lines. Several resembled younger versions of Drew Barrymore or Kirsten Dunst. One bore a striking resemblance to a *Boys for Pele*–era Tori Amos.

Looking at this selection of cultural signifiers the app had plucked from the internet, I felt a familiar disappointment. This was not the unified self I was looking for. It didn't even have that frisson that comes from having someone photograph me. If anything, it exaggerated my distance from that thirty-something I'd captured in the salon mirror and from those cultural ideals of beauty I'd always pushed against.

This made me think of a self-portrait by Emily Carr I'd seen recently at the end of an exhibition titled *Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment* at the Vancouver Art Gallery. After wall upon wall of images by and of women who had been excluded from the visual culture of their time, the small painting of the artist at sixty-seven years old struck me hard.

In it, Carr's eyes are severe, discerning. Her cheeks and mouth are covered in lines that imply both wrinkles and a lifetime of movement. Her body takes up more than half the picture frame. Carr hated painting portraits and hated her aging body, but I can't help seeing the power of her presence, how she makes herself as formidable as she might a mountainside in one of her famous landscapes. Carr doesn't jut out her chin and pout. She doesn't cringe in horror or tear up over the loss of beauty. She stares back at the viewer, one eyebrow slightly raised.

"To paint a self-portrait should teach one something about oneself," Carr once wrote. I'm no painter, but if I continue to take selfies as I get older, maybe I'll come to accept the changing landscape of my face rather than fear it. ♥

ERIKA THORKELSON is a freelance journalist and culture critic living in Vancouver.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN ILANGO / IMAGES BY STEVE GALE, LAURA CHOUETTE (UNSPLASH)

Meet the Granfluencers

From funeral fits to dating hacks, elderly TikTokers are slaying online

BY NICOLE SCHMIDT
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANA LUISA O. J.

"PLAY THIS VIDEO at at my funeral," says the ninety-four-year-old Lillian Droniak while enthusiastically addressing her some 14 million TikTok followers, who know her simply as Grandma Droniak. What comes next isn't sappy or sentimental but outright hysterical. "Don't be sad," she continues. "I slayed every day, and now I'm going to lay every day. I hope you slay while I decay."

Droniak later clarifies that she's not dying—at least not yet—but, at her age, she says it's good to be prepared. Her feed is a mix of videos you'd expect to see on any influencer's page—with an endearing spin. She has a "Get Ready with Me" series, which she films ahead of various outings: her ex-boyfriend's funeral, an appointment to sign her will, a trip to see her gravestone ("It was $3,000 and better look good," she says before slathering on a coat of pink lipstick). In some videos, she dances; in others, she offers dating advice, warning viewers to steer clear of guys who don't like bingo.

Social media has long existed in silos: Gen Z tends toward TikTok; millennials, Instagram; and Facebook is for the boomers. But Droniak has joined a clan of "granfluencers" who are blurring lines and defying stereotypes. There's Helen Elam Van Winkle, a.k.a. Baddie Winkle, whose Instagram bio reads, "Stealing yo

IMAGES BY ISTOCK / NECHAMA LOCK, UNSPLASH

man since 1928." At ninety-six, she posts photos of her over-the-top outfits—tight rainbow swimsuits, sequined raver gear, her signature baby pink bedazzled cane—and does, indeed, look good enough to turn heads. Joan MacDonald, seventy-eight, is a fitness influencer with triceps worthy of being immortalized in marble. Her workout videos show her dead-lifting and bench-dipping with ease. There's also the Old Gays, a group of five friends in their sixties and eighties who keep up with TikTok's dance and meme trends. In a recent video, filmed to the backdrop of "We Got the Energy" (an Irish children's rap hailed as the song of the summer), they strut out in neon outfits, dancing and lip-synching with animated force, as if they had six cans of Red Bull for breakfast.

Watching seniors thrive on TikTok makes me feel at ease. Perhaps it's because I miss my grandparents, who were my bridge to an earlier world and taught me how to bake a pie and play cards.

For the average scroller, this content can feel like a gift from the algorithmic gods. When I signed up on Instagram in 2012, I revelled in dog videos, selfies from friends, and food photos with terrible sepia filters. These days, digital joy is harder to find, buried under ads, viral reels, and an increasingly grim news cycle.

Granfluencers offer an escape from the monotony of social media. Watching seniors thrive on TikTok makes me feel instantly at ease. Perhaps it's because I miss my own grandparents, who were my bridge to an earlier world, passing down a "waste not, want not" ethos from the Great Depression and teaching me how to bake a pie and play cards. Since they died, I've felt a generational disconnect. But granfluencers have narrowed the gap, offering perspectives from a life well lived. Having the "two generations speaking to one another," said Old Gay Mick Peterson on the show *Today*, is "not only therapeutic but I think it just helps the world."

Granfluencers portray dimensions of aging helpful for both the young and old alike. Last year, while I was working on a story about recasting the role of seniors in our society, I spoke with gerontologist Stephen Katz, one of the founders of the Trent Centre for Aging and Society. He told me that when he teaches classes about aging, he always asks his students how old they can envision themselves being while still feeling like themselves. The majority say sixty-five. "There's no blueprint beyond that—no model of life that looks attractive into the last third of life," he told me.

Granfluencers are supplying that blueprint. While Droniak has used her platform to speak openly about the less glamorous parts of aging—the transition into an assisted living facility, the difficulty of being the last one alive in her family—she's also quick to highlight the joy she's discovered in her twilight years. She fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming famous (something she wishes her late husband was around to see, even though he would probably be jealous) and fell in love again in her nineties.

Her unapologetic outlook is long overdue, especially in the West, where anti-aging sentiments are everywhere. Walk into any drugstore and you'll see shelves of creams and serums that promise to dissolve wrinkles and give your skin a youthful glow. As of this year, Statista reported, the worldwide anti-aging market is worth $76.6 billion (US). Birthday greetings for people above a certain age often feel more like insults than well wishes. On Etsy, one of the top results is a card with flames that reads: "The secret to having a smoking hot body in old age? Cremation." Another bestseller, its cover adorned with drooping breasts, says, "If you're old and you know it, clap your tits." Seniors are frequently depicted as lonely, frail, naive, or grumpy. While strides have been made with other types of diversity—mainly around race, body, and sexual orientation—positive portrayals of greyness are few and far between.

The past few years have seen progress. In 2023, model Carmen Dell'Orefice was on the cover of *Vogue* Czechoslovakia, at age ninety-one, under the apt title "Eternal Glamour." That same year, Martha Stewart became the oldest model to ever appear on the cover of a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. And in September, ABC debuted *The Golden Bachelor*, its spinoff of *The Bachelor*, featuring a cast of women over sixty who compete for the heart of seventy-one-year-old Gerry Turner.

But trends take time before they're mainstreamed into popular culture. Social media, however, gives everyone a platform, and granfluencers are shifting the narrative. On her Instagram page, Grece Ghanem, the fifty-nine-year-old Canadian Lebanese queen of "ageless style," showcases outfits that look pulled straight from a designer catalogue: Ghanem drinking an espresso in a red and white checkered picnic dress, strutting across the street in a full denim jumpsuit and wearing a two-piece green satin. "We are still here, we are still working, we are still beautiful, we are still contributing to society," she told British *Vogue*.

After my conversation with Katz last year, I spent a lot of time thinking how old I could picture myself being while still being myself. It's not something I'd ever really considered. Probably because I, too, had fallen into the trap of assuming that getting older meant decline and decay. Grandma Droniak recently turned ninety-four. On her birthday, she posted a video of the festivities, which included her getting ready in her floral wallpapered bathroom, a hot pink deely bobber, complete with glittery pom pom crowns, perched atop her head. It cut to a shot of her cake, which had "Hotter Than Ever!" spelled out in blue frosting. She makes getting older feel like something to celebrate. ✺

NICOLE SCHMIDT is a freelance writer, editor, and fact checker based in Berlin. She was previously an associate editor at The Walrus.