

**A Short Radius of Familiarity**

by Zoe Guigueno





### Author's Note

These stories take place on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Lenape, the WSÁNEĆ Nation, the T'Sou-ke Nation, and the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, though I have mostly used colonial place names in my writing.

The following is an account of my experiences in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some names and details have been changed, though if you know who I'm talking about, you know. I am grateful to everyone who appears in these pages for their friendship, kinship, romance, generosity, trust, inclusiveness, and of course, their stories, though nobody knew at the time I was writing them down.

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## Upstate

*I'd find me a spot on some mountain top / with no one around me  
with valleys and streams, and birds in the trees / and lakes that surround me  
A place I'd feel loose / Some place I could lose / these Tennessee Blues*

– from “Tennessee Blues”, by Bobby Charles

It took me three days before I thought to look on a map to see where I had been taken. I had been preoccupied with studying ladybugs moving across the old rafter beams, getting to know the feel of the towels, the sheets, the finicky way the antique dresser drawers opened and closed, where the floor squeaked, how long it took the hot water to come, and wondering how Eli and I would settle in together.

I knew the house was built in the 1850s, at one point functioning as an inn to lodge transient workers, at other times housing large families. Eli showed me a photograph from 1890 of such a family posing in front of the house; children knelt in the grass, women in bulky dresses stood near them, while two hatted, bearded men held the saws they would have used to fell hemlock trees. Hemlock bark had a tannin that was extracted to make leather, which was the main industry in those parts back then, along with the mining of bluestone quarries. When Eli bought the house in the early 2000s, he'd gutted it, building it back on its frame as a modern yet still rustic-feeling mountain getaway that did not look out of place. He brought in backhoes and reshaped the land beside the house, creating a level area where he dug a pond. You'd never know it hadn't been that way all along. Most of the time he rented the place out, though he spent at least a few weeks a year there, hosting friends, or retreating alone to write a script. The kitchen faced east over the pond and a grassy stretch bordered by rhododendrons to the south and lichen-wrapped beech trees to the east. A wrap-around porch hugged two sides of the house, starting at the front door, passing under the barbeque, and making its terminus at the sauna and hot tub.

When I did finally look up my coordinates on Google Maps, I had to zoom in so far to see the name of our hamlet that all geographical context was lost. We were about two and a half hours north of New York City, up in the mountains, tucked in the trees, with no neighbours in sight. Just downhill a ways the road narrowed and hairpinned around sharp cliffs; closed for seasonal maintenance with some pylons and a misspelled sign hanging over a simple gate, it meant we had no traffic passing by and could use the road as our private trail, counting the rusting cars that had been tumbling off the edge for the last hundred years. There were other trails, too. Trails that led deep into hardwood forests to waterfalls, mountain peaks, beaver-made lakes, swampy tick-infested fields and fast-moving rivers and

streams that glowed full of polished, purple stones.

I felt this freedom and vast sense of potential in the house as well. It had an open-concept main floor; a long black walnut dining table, a wood stove flanked by leather couches, a library nook, a sturdy, modern kitchen, a kitchen whose tools had weight, whose knives were sharp, whose counters were marble, whose drawers had those things that slowed them down on their rollers when they closed so nothing ever slammed. An upright piano sat between the library and the stairs to the basement, and Eli brought down other instruments from the attic - a gorgeous old 50s Martin guitar, a resonator guitar, an open-back banjo, a sparkly gold Tele, cratefuls of recording gear. He filled the cupboards with groceries, the basement with boxes of beer and wine. There was also a section of pantry dedicated to an array of mysterious herbs and tinctures that his Brazilian witch-doctor friend had recommended as potions to ward off the virus; unsure of how to prepare them, they remained untouched.

The CDC was telling us to wash our hands for at least 20 seconds, so I taped the lyrics of a John Hartford tune I wanted to learn above the sink. We gave our mail a three-day "time-out" in the foyer. We took to heart a Youtube video that advised us to think of the virus as "glitter" - that it would get everywhere, and that when bringing in groceries, one must disinfect every single last grape before safely stowing in the fridge.

The pandemic had swept all our work away almost overnight. The official cancellation emails trickled in as formalities, apologetic in their predictability, redundancy, unoriginality. I was no longer doing those one-offs in Florida, the recording session in western Mass or teaching that music camp in New Hampshire. For the first time in our lives, there was nothing on the docket, and we couldn't put anything on it. So accustomed to PlanningPlanningPlanning, the present moment only existing to serve the future.

It was like a lucid dream that just went on and on. In the mornings I would wake up early without an alarm, and bring my coffee to the small table I had commandeered as a desk, looking out over the pond. In case it proved somehow interesting later, I was keeping a tally of when and into which window the cardinals were attacking themselves. Never more fascinated by the news, I consumed hours of articles and graphs and podcasts, distracted only by the cardinals and the gusts of wind that would ripple the green pond into shimmers of white, like a dancer flashing crinoline under a skirt. Then a couple hours later Eli would bound down the stairs, bursting into the main room zipping up his huge puffy down jacket and heading out the door with a roll of blue painter's tape or a drill, off to Improve the Compound. He didn't even drink coffee.

Eli was full of wires and fuses, calibrated to some alien standard of productivity, hemorrhaging with creative ideas and all too aware of his mortality. In our first week together, he wrote his will, changed all his passwords, plotted landscaping projects and mused about writing a memoir, referring dotingly to his Inner Child. If I brought up what I'd been reading in the news, he would become agitated to the point of tears. While I chopped onions, he told me about his ex-wife, whose name had 13 syllables, how she was a passionate dancer, didn't think more than 10 minutes ahead and never told her father about their shotgun, green-card wedding, not only because he was a devout Catholic but because he was claiming her as a dependant on his taxes, and in Italy, according to Eli, tax evasion is like a national sport. He told me how he used to have a studio in Paris, would paint by day, usher at a theatre in the evenings, braving his schoolyard french on the cute theatre-lobby-barista. How when he was 8 or so his mom pulled him and his brother out of school in California and together with the mom's boyfriend they drove their Volkswagen van to South America, sneaking onto the freighter that was

meant to carry only vehicles past the Darien Gap. His mom and the boyfriend taught gestalt therapy workshops in communes all over the continent while he and his brother made mischief with the local kids and kept diaries for school credit back home. With some birthday money from his grandmother, he bought himself a necklace of human teeth, illegally excavated from an Incan ruin somewhere in the Andes. He returned home with three days left in the school year; just in time to show off his teeth-necklace, tan, journal and fluency in Spanish.

We took turns cooking, cleaning, navigating the chores with little conflict. I noticed that he didn't say "please" when he asked for something. He would say "Turn up the volume. Pass me the butter." It was his director voice, efficient, clear, and not unkind. I don't think he knew he was doing it. He was very sensitive and absorbed the paranoia of others, including his prepper sister down in Texas, who was the kind of person who for Christmas would buy you a seatbelt cutter and a window hammer, in case you ever found yourself in a sinking vehicle. Despite our having moved in together, Eli was still elbow-bumping me and clinking my glass at the bottom. Maybe I'd been wrong to think of our rendezvous in Marin County, California, as a date. Maybe he truly just wanted the company of a roommate. Maybe he'd already written me off for my age.

Down in the valley the cherry trees were budding, but at our altitude it was still proper winter. The sun-snow patterned and textured the air, and when it got several feet deep I toddled in it, trying to fall over without bending my knees, to imitate a video clip of my friend's two-year old which made Eli and I laugh to the point of tears. Most days I wore something resembling a camping uniform – wool baselayers and one of Eli's hoodies. So when it came time for our afternoon hikes, it was a simple matter of zipping on the outer layers, spraying on tick repellent and pocketing a couple clementines. We tramped down the gravel driveway, asking the other if they'd locked the door, taking in deep pulls of cold mountain air. We never missed a day, whether it was piss-pouring or snowing heavily. Some days we packed lunches and bagged peaks, others we did quick hour-long-jaunts out to nearby waterfalls. I noticed how Eli hoofed it up steep inclines, barely breaking a sweat. He'd shield his eyes from the sun and point out over the Hudson valley, indicating various towns and highways in the distance, boasting of how beautiful it would be in the spring when the mountain laurel was blooming. We ate our clementines in thick snowflakes sitting in the grand furniture built from bluestone slabs by foregone trekkers, got obsessed for hours filming falling icicles in slow motion. I tried to memorize which mounds were which: Indian Head, Sugarloaf, Overlook, Twin – and which trail led to which lean-to or look-out – Devil's Kitchen, Pecoy Notch, Huckleberry Point.

Back on the property, over the hill and through the wild blueberry bushes was a decrepit graveyard, the Civil War tombstones fallen and greened with moss and lichen. We struggled to read the engravings; some of the deceased were just children, who'd probably died from a disease that at the time wasn't preventable or treatable. Mink prints trailed through the snow, criss-crossing the slender shadows of young maple and peeling birch.

But my favourite part of the property was the pond – a teeming metropolis, shared by an unfathomable number of species in all stages of life. I spent hours laying on my belly, watching red-spotted newts sunbathe or play in the accumulation of dead leaves clogging up the shallows. Tadpoles and goldfish and big warty frogs also seemed to love the warm fringes of the water. When we got 80 mature trout delivered by two gaitered men in a big truck, Eli showed me how to rig up a rod, land a fish on the grassy bank, knock it out with a rock, and slice it open from its 'pooper' to its gills, pulling out the colourful guts and glands. And we weren't the only ones hunting. Osprey studied the water from their high perch, patiently waiting for the moment to loosen their grip and fall divebombing off their

branch without bending their knees, and our resident mink, bored with disemboweling rabbits, took its catch to eat in privacy under the sauna. Eli became fixated on protecting the trout. He found an old trap in the barn and MacGyvered it so we could see from the kitchen window if it had been engaged. If I noticed the stick was down, I'd holler up to Eli and we'd go check it out together, no one wanting to miss out on any action. Eli persisted with setting and adjusting the trap, even though we only ever caught trembling chipmunks.

These were our main concerns. Meanwhile, in Bergamo, Italy, there were so many people dying that hospital staff couldn't keep track of the bodies, sometimes forgetting to notify the families. Running out of space and equipment, doctors admitted they were prioritizing younger patients who had 'longer to live'. If my grandmothers, Eileen and Holly, lived in Italy and got COVID, they might have just been left to die. Police patrolled the streets, enforcing shelter-in-place edicts.

In New York City alone, hundreds of people were dying from COVID every day. Hospital triage spilled out into the Eastern Meadow of Central Park. Medical students who hadn't yet graduated were being allowed to practice. In Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, people shoplifted soap and store managers turned blind eyes, or rather, eyes twitching from stress and lack of sleep. Things like toilet paper and flour were sold out everywhere you went; in store aisles, you could see the hole-punched, particleboard backing of the platinum metal shelving. Memes of the word "hamsterkauf" were volleyed around the internet. Arrows taped on the floor encouraged one-way traffic through the aisles, and the check-out line wrapped the perimeter of the store, everyone spaced apart, slouched, humdrum, staring at their phones, in matching blue polypropylene masks. Cuomo had deployed the National Guard to New Rochelle to help manage an outbreak. The iconic Brooklyn Bridge, probably not since 9/11, was empty; the souvenir hawkers, as much a part of the bridge's character as its gothic arches and galvanized cables, had moved on. The 'rescue' hospital ship, the U.S.N.S. Comfort, that everyone had been monitoring with anticipation, finally docked at Pier 90 in Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan; what people hadn't realized was that the ship wasn't admitting COVID patients, nor could they triage non-COVID patients, and so its staff sat around bound helplessly in red tape, looking at Instagram on their phones.

One had to dig deep to find news unrelated to the pandemic. This didn't bother me; it was the only thing I was interested in, too. People started talking about 'waves' of infection. About how life as we knew it would never be the same again. Though I'd brought books, and Eli had a well curated library, I had no appetite for any other story.

Eventually I would transition into some other activity, the dark tales of death and suffering gradually receding in my mind. I had to finish the renewal of my US work visa; Eli was up in his attic editing a music video he'd recently shot for a song off his album. I got asked to do a couple remote recording projects; having never recorded myself before with a proper microphone and software, I spent hours watching YouTube tutorials, usually from young scrubbly men in the UK with slick home studios. I shifted my music students over to Zoom, their parents knocking dishes around in the background, reprimanding the dog, and the low bass notes cutting in and out, making the lesson so tedious that after a while I'd resort to guessing what they'd played by watching their fingers. Most of my students lost steam, dropped out; one said to me that he felt like a stick figure trying to walk. I talked to my roommate back in Brooklyn, Jackson, about once a week – in the past we'd never stayed in touch when I was away, but things were different now. I FaceTimed with my friend Michael Winograd as he spun himself idly around the poles in his basement apartment. A bunch of my friends were pregnant. Many were planting gardens, learning to bake sourdough. I was often myself in the middle of some elaborate recipe that required several hours and days of prep. Eli was still half-assedly



trying to social-distance from me, though he had started casually calling me 'dear' and 'sweetie'.

We clambered down into the clove one day, a deep gorge that the Platte Kill river cuts through, falling off stratified rock ledges and into itself in a series of roaring waterfalls. The pathless forest was slippery and steep and at my slightest fumble Eli cried out for me to be careful; not too long ago a boy had died in there while ice-climbing with his father. I was happy to take my time; everywhere I looked, dripping ice sculptures, the remnants of frozen rivulets, gleamed like wet jewels, sunlight pinging off the dripping, throwing light around like a disco ball. The sculptures were spiky forest spirits, with eye sockets and spines and smooth appendages, their very existence and beauty due to their dripping decay – they were precisely what they weren't, a study in negative space. I placed each foot carefully, noticing how the different parts of my body worked together to maintain balance. We made it to the bottom and parked ourselves on a sunny rock in the riverbed in the mist of a waterfall, near a slope of baby hemlocks, and dug our thumbs into our mandarins, releasing the spritz of the sour bright sugar.

And finally it was here sitting in the thunder of the waterfall without speaking that he put his hand on my back and I put my head on his shoulder. And it was not too long after that that we drew together smooth and slow melting, pure and uncorrupted as analog, thorough as a reader saying every word out loud.

So at last we could dance again, like we danced the first time we met at that out-of-the-way bar in Red Hook, when I'd been leaning against the wall until he took my hand, this tall, handsome man who moved his body with confidence, fluidity and a sense of humour, leading me with practiced cues that I could follow despite my relative inexperience. We danced like we had on our first date out in Marin County, where we'd both happened to be for work – he'd taken me to a saloon where we tore it up so good the locals, smoking inside, asked us where we were from and where we'd learned to dance like that, and we stayed until the band wouldn't take any more encores. He'd dropped me off, fumbling seatbelts kiss?hug? and me dropping my hat in the driveway and leaving it there. Glowing, racing. Beaming. Texting. When we get back to New York, let's go out again. Let's go swing dancing. I just gotta go on tour in Germany first. It was late February, 2020.

I'd gone to Germany, with my klezmer band; the only precaution the festival organizers took was to make sure no performers had recently been in Hubei Province in China, or the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy. Things were weird and getting weirder all the time. Speculation city. Our programmed tantshoyz at the festival in Fürth was canceled, but then at the jam session we hosted instead, people joined hands and danced in flowing spirals anyway. We played a raucous Purim party in Berlin, bottles of hand sanitizer at the door, but then a sweating, heckling mosh pit, trays of hamantaschen passed around, limbo dancing. And then suddenly the WHO declared a pandemic and Trump declared a travel ban from the EU to the US and we shelled out thousands of dollars to flee home before the curfew. Eli fled his trailer in LA, bypassed his Brooklyn apartment and retreated upstate, and invited me to join him. Indefinitely.

And here we were and finally we had broken the seal. We pushed the furniture aside and in our socks on the hardwood floors he taught me the lindy hop, the swing out, the back step one-two-three step step one-two-three, and in the flowing structure of our frame we found a pocket, in tandem and swinging, I flew through his whole life, dancing with all my teeth showing, and he was my darling and my greatest prize. One night, instead of cueing up a playlist of 30s big band hits, Eli put on Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, and in the space between the kitchen island and the long walnut dining table, we danced

slowly, and he gazed down at me and said *Remember quarantine?* I felt myself fill up with sadness, like God was pouring liquid sadness in through a hole in the top of my head.

I was emotionally alert. Everything around me - the patterns in fences, rock strata, train bridges, ironwood leaves glowing translucent yellow in the brown and grey deciduous winter forest - pulsed with rhythm, tonality, metaphoric potential. I felt a pressure, like a creative bloating, or like a sense of having received a hundred invitations but not having RSVPed to any of them. It made me feel strangely powerful, omnipotent. I made field recordings on my phone; of the clatter and sonorous vibrations of the rainwater caught in an old crankshaft, when kicked - of a windchime blowing in the wind, hanging from the eavesdrop of a cabin we found on a neighbour's property, or the pre-show, tuning orchestra of dishes coming out of the dishwasher, clanking onto the shelves. Later I'd put the sound clips into a recording program and overdub bowed bass notes, or droning, wordless vocalizations. I felt a heightened sense of connectedness.

And it wasn't just with visual information, or sound. One afternoon, after thawing a chicken in the sink, I slipped it out of its plastic casing and found myself unable to put it down or proceed with its preparation. Its skin had that soft traction and elasticity, the smooth grip of silk. I stroked the dead chicken, thinking about how even my most undemonstrative friends had reported symptoms of withdrawal. And it's not just the hugs. It's sweating on someone at a Purim party in a low-ceilinged club, giving someone a leg-up so they can hop the fence into Greenwood Cemetery when you're on the opposite side from the only open gate, or feeling a stranger's warm thigh on the subway. It's even the reiki of someone's hand hovering above yours as they drop change into your palm at your bodega, or standing close enough behind someone in line to see the little glob of hair gel that didn't quite get worked in.

I put the chicken down and reached for the salt; I had Eli, and in a way I felt more grounded than I ever had, happier in a way I hadn't exactly known before, sitting down for dinner with someone every night. We'd pour a glass of wine, light a candle or two, and maybe I'll mention that I don't think I'd ever eaten that well in my life - roasted vegetable pies, trout stuffed with garlic, balsamic reductions drizzled on spinach and goat cheese salads, barbecued ribs, toasted walnuts, chocolate tortes. After dinner we'd usually start a game of chess, and even though he forced me to take back bad moves, he still won most games. Vexed, I studied *Winning Chess Tactics* on the brown leather couch while he tidied up, but he was a tough opponent. We became addicted and often someone would start a game in the morning, the vulnerable white pawn sitting out there on E4, our intermittent moves throughout the day tracked with a film canister. By the fire at night, or out on the porch on a warm enough day, we taught each other songs, working out harmonies to "When I Die" by The Stray Birds, or "Tennessee Blues" by Bobby Charles. He showed me cajun fiddle tunes called "Le vache au lait est morte", "Cher Jouis Roses" and "Cankton Two-Step", straight into "Rolling Pin Special". His fiddle playing was scratchy and rough and full of energy and joy, and when he sang he locked eyes with me, leaned in.

In early April, over in County Clare, Ireland, my great-uncle Tony passed away – not from COVID, but the pandemic meant we could not go grieve with our cousins, and a proper mass was not even allowed, though I heard the priest at the church in Tuamgraney was sneaking people in. I thought of visiting Ireland with my dad, years ago, Uncle Tony counting the cows in his tweed cap, or trying to talk about the war without crying. Now his life had gone out, leaving his closest family members alone in their loss. All around the world, scattered families were going through the same thing. People had resorted to hosting funerals and weddings over Zoom; I listened in to bits of one on a podcast, like an auditory obituary.

Everything had gone online. Many of my friends were live-streaming concerts from their bedrooms in New York, or their balmy back porches if they lived in Nashville, when they were supposed to've been on that CD release tour they'd spent months and thousands of dollars booking and promoting. Other friends of mine had to cancel the theatre piece they were working on about homosexuality during the Holocaust, or come back early from Ukraine where they were studying religious iconography for their new collection of poetry. I happened to be sitting on an album of my own. I felt hopeless and didn't want to stress about it, so I drafted up an email newsletter, posted on Facebook and released the album online, where it wandered off by itself and got lost. I felt a little guilty about this; Alec – my dear friend and producer - and I had worked so hard on it. But a few days later, I spilled an entire cup of tea straight into my laptop. Life got even simpler. I went outside.

The pond was starting to see more action as migrating birds stopped through, helping themselves to the trout. Livid, Eli again huffed off to the barn and emerged with long strips of wood, a cordless drill, and bags of foam. With a sledgehammer he drove a stake into the ground at the pond's edge, the metallic knocking echoing sharply and then grating harshly as the slanting stake began to argue with a rock below. Once righted, he bound the 7 foot by 2 inch strip of wood to it, and we dressed it with the navy blue work jumper Eli said was too small for him anyway. We thread the other piece of wood through for arms and Eli drilled the cross tight. We tied the ankles and stuffed the whole outfit with foam and bubble wrap. For a head, we caught air in a white kitchen garbage bag, drawing almond eyes with a sharpie. For hands, we affixed used aluminum pie plates. On the back of her uniform it read PSC 725 (possibly the union chapter of Baton Rouge's Petroleum Services Company? Eli, did you get this in Louisiana? I spent an hour Googling it) so we christened her Pat the Scare Crow. She looked like she was flying, or dancing, with her arms outstretched and her one free leg bent at the knee.

In an effort to create structure and routine, we were trying to be 9-5ers, pursuing our own practices during the week, with weekends being designated for construction projects, yardwork or general household chores. We righted a post at the foot of the driveway and hung a chain between it and the barn to discourage weekend hikers from parking in the driveway. I moved several loads of scrap wood from the side of the barn to the burnpile with the pink & blue wheelbarrow. One of my favourite jobbers was collecting the hewn logs in the woods and carting them to the shed behind the house, chopping kindling, securing a big tarp over the shed. I collected little acorn hats from the forest floor and tried to arrange them in artistic lines throughout the firewood stack à la Andy Goldsworthy. Eli got to work investigating an electrical problem in the barn, looking very serious with his headlamp and voltage metre. On a sunny afternoon, he showed me how to use the circular saw so I could help cut boards for the outdoor shower. We spoke in French and blasted Liz Phair. I made dinner, Pat's pie-plate hands flapping in the wind, flinging flashes of light in through the window.

Some weeks in, after reading hours of depressing news, I couldn't hold it in and broke my rule and told Eli what I'd learned. He starting crying too, which made me instinctively stop; in effect, he had stolen my cry. The tiniest minnow of resentment twinged somewhere within me. But it wasn't a big deal.

One day we found ourselves lying on some shale that bridged a stream, looking up at the grey sky. Eli asked me what I was thinking about. Your life, I replied. Just trying to connect the dots, see the map of it. After a pause, he said, You've probably done the math by now on my age. And I had: he had been to East Germany before the wall fell. He had slides of his wedding photos up in his attic. I'd

trolled his IMDB, stretching my imagination to conceive how young he credibly could have been on those gigs making music videos for some of the most famous artists of our time. And anyway, I'd seen the dates in his journal from when he was 8, playing in the Bolivian jungle. I grew up with Harry Potter, chain-email surveys over dial-up; I was in high school when Eminem's "My Name Is" and Sublime's "Santeria" were radio hits. I had been with older men before, but this was more. It wasn't as big as the gap between David Lynch and his current wife, I reminded myself sometimes, but it was a bigger gap than you normally hear about. But hell. Here we were, up in the mountains together with things in the outside world weird and getting weirder all the time. And there was never a dull moment with Eli. He would wake up at 3am with an idea, get his glasses on and start jotting down thoughts, ordering supplies online, researching. He was a clown, an entertainer, a patient teacher, a nimble mountain goat, and he had stories about hanging out of helicopters and pilots navigating by the stars and going fishing with Dennis Hopper in Southeast Asia, so many stories, I never needed to ask for them, and can't remember them all. And here we were.

Eli was pretty much the only person I interacted with, in the same physical space, for weeks. When we needed groceries, or something from the hardware store, Eli went alone. I had left the property, but only to go hiking, sometimes exchanging nods on the road with someone from the Bruderhof community. But Eli had started to make noise about borrowing a truck; he wanted to clean out the barn, and it would involve at least two trips to the dump, and an extra set of hands.

Finally the day came. We loaded the back of the truck with broken, rusting appliances filled with mouse shit, heavy duty garbage bags filled with god knows what, crates of empties. As Eli drove we kept an eye in the mirror for defectors, stopping a couple times to run back along the road.

Before too long we were beyond my short radius of familiarity, and I took in the fresh curves of the road, the houses, the woman building something in a yard, a chicken coop?, the crippled fences. Then something appeared ahead of us, something I vaguely recognized. It was a road sign. It was posted at an intersection and it had two town names on it - Hunter, if you take a left, or Tannersville, if you carry on straight. Road signs. Towns. Multiple towns. Going from town to town. Sitting in a moving vehicle. Watching the scenery. I remembered my life. I remembered the last 10, 12 years of my life, doing this exact thing, day after day. I didn't speak aloud, I just stared at the sign, wondering where we were going, not knowing where the dump was. We turned left.

When we arrived at the dump, it felt like we had walked into a blaring nightclub on the Malecón in some Latin American tourist city. Noisy scraping front loaders, dump trucks and bulldozers. Trucks and cars parked all around like it was a convention. A middle aged woman in hiking shoes, ill-fitting green slacks, a pink down jacket, purple scarf, and pink lipstick carrying a thin lamp from her hatchback to the Scrap Metal bin. A young dark haired man in long shorts tossing returnables into a smaller bin, pong, pong, pong. Then the young couple with face piercings, tattoos and John Lennon glasses, looking fresh out of Williamsburg and waiting out the lockdown at one of their aunt or uncle's summer cottages. An older guy heaved a black garbage bag out of the back of his truck and Eli called to him, Hey Jimmy! How's it goin' man? Yadda yadda... Hey do you know my friend Zoe? and just as I was shaking my masked face no Jimmy was nodding defensively, as if to say, how dare you insult me, of course I do. SLAM! Some machine offloaded a pile of sheet metal. I felt a twinge of sympathy, imagining Jimmy's accelerating memory loss, the denial, the dark nights of the soul. You still want those old beams? asked Eli; Jimmy made a so-so humming noise, Seems Too Much Trouble.

In the plastic sorting area, Eli accidentally slipped an aluminum can into the wrong container. It

got unloaded into the bigger crate, where it would be a pain in the ass to retrieve, and the boss man, the tall, bald, gruff, scary-looking boss man with the yellow safety vest flipped out at Eli. Shortly after, Eli had started the truck and though I pointed out we still had a few bottles, he waved me in impatiently. On the return trip, he kept his sunglasses and cap on.

We stopped next at the hardware store. I surveyed the lumber yard as we drove in, the cars parked in the lot, the glass entrance doors with a sign posted about Easter hours. It was a true place of commerce. A place where transactions are made, where merchants sell their gleaming wares, where neighbours bump into each other and chat about the weather and how is the renovation coming along. A place to get your fill of enamel paint, turf edgers, pressure treated beams, joist hooks. Eli opened the door with his sleeve and I walked in ahead of him. There was another sign posted, this one about Social Distancing, 6 feet, and minimizing your shopping time. In the front entrance was one of those slanted cardboard displays of seed packets. I studied them, not so much thinking about gardening, but seeing them as beautiful little envelopes with pretty pictures that you could buy for a couple bucks. My heart went pitter patter. I reached into my pockets and realized I hadn't brought my wallet or phone. In fact, I had no idea when I'd last seen either of them. No matter - a wave of psychedelic passion came over me; I was going to Inspect The Shelves. I was going to Browse. I suppressed a giggle and looked around for Eli, locating him at a counter giving his lumber order to a clerk through a transparent plastic barrier - 10 2 by 6 by 8 foot cedar, blah blah blah, stuff for the swim dock he's designing because he's putting off tackling his scripts and film editing work and such. Resistance. But just as soon as it had come on, I came down, and remembered what's going on in the world and how loitering in stores was not appropriate behaviour. So out of respect, I suppose, out of duty, and a disinterest in helping Eli find his bits and bobs, I saw myself out of the store, and hopped into the back of the truck, waiting there like a dog in the lukewarm sun. Another dog a couple trucks over starting barking, arrhythmically.

Eventually Eli came out, climbed into the cab, and drove around to pick up his wood. I stayed in the back and morphed from a dog into a teenager at a tailgate party in the mountains in BC somewhere; the smell of campsmoke, sound of cheap beer cracking open, someone with a guitar, laughter, snapping twigs of someone coming back from peeing in the bush.

It was a fantastic day. But despite living in what truly was the lap of luxury, after a while I began to retreat emotionally and bruise like a mushroom at anything Eli said. The sound of his voice felt like wet socks bunching up at the bottom of gumboots. I stopped speaking and could barely even bring myself to grunt in response to his stories – no matter how deliciously outlandish they were, I heard the words, but I was too far down in the well. My behaviour made Eli so anxious that I found him one afternoon catatonic in the back of his car. My withdrawal aggravated his insecurities, and I couldn't think of anything to say to him so I lay on the couch inside, catatonic as well. Studying the pond had gotten old; I was treading water. Despite everything Eli had done to make me feel at home, despite his bottomless generosity and despite how much we enjoyed each other's company, I was starting to feel acutely like a guest, and yearned to be on my own turf. It wasn't just that sometimes, in certain moments, I really noticed his age. It wasn't because he stole my cry that one time. It wasn't because he was sometimes boastful. It wasn't even the parenthood question; he was open to it. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I just knew, and probably had known from before the beginning, that he and I wouldn't last.

I didn't see how I could make it work to move back into to my apartment in the city. My friends were getting unemployment benefits; I was not eligible due to my immigration status. I was also not

eligible for CERB while in the US. There was next to no work for musicians, and due to the limitations of my work visa, I couldn't be legally employed in any other field. If I stayed in Brooklyn I would be draining my savings just to pay rent, and the situation was too fraught to entertain the idea of a subletter. Besides, even though so many of my dear friends were there, the locked-down city held little interest for me under the circumstances. I always suspected I wasn't a die-hard New Yorker, and maybe this proved it. It was time to go home.

So I went and knocked on the sauna door, where Eli, with his characteristic chutzpah and initiative, had been working on a proposal for a job he was inventing for himself at a nearby environmental education centre. The dry, fragrant wooden box was illuminated by sunlight coming through the blue and green stained glass that Eli's father had cut, decades before. I asked if we could talk, and, registering my tone, he closed his laptop. I explained as kindly as I could how I felt and told him I was going to buy a flight to BC. He took off his glasses and tented his fingers around his face, massaging the information into his temples. He listened without interrupting, then responded at length, working out loud through his disappointment, into understanding, acceptance, and then those silver linings, as is his way. Though it hadn't in any way been a fight, we slept in separate rooms that night.

I bought an absurdly cheap flight to Victoria for May 5. My parents gleefully supported my decision with promises of warm weather, lower COVID case-loads, and motorcycle rides to charming swimming holes. I asked Eli if he'd drive me back to the city in a week's time. And he was so gracious and supportive that then, like waking up to the first snow, he appeared to me as the most beautiful creature, and I loved his bad jokes and his rippling laugh and the way he stared intensely out the window through his binoculars, guarding his kingdom. The way he cut my hair on the porch without a plan, without hesitation. The way he teased me for weeks with that disappearing-dollar-bill magic trick, the way he purred when I scratched the bumpy scar on his upper back, the way our clothes would fall off at any time of day. Though, thank god, I had no idea there was hard liquor in the house, Eli procured some rye and vermouth and mixed some very strong Manhattans, and we danced by the fire, turning the music up loud, me in my camping uniform and Eli in his brown Fedora he'd been using as a costume piece for a spoofy promotional video, speaking in a cartoonish, slapstick accent. As he spun me, I laughed and laughed, and felt that bottom-line happiness. I loved him, of course, but you never know how people will interpret these things, so I held off on mentioning it. When we tired ourselves out dancing, we sang through all our songs, Eli checking the voice memos on his phone to remember his harmony parts, his hand on my knee and his other hand holding his fiddle and bow against his chest, furrowed brow, trying to recall the words to the Delta Queen Waltz.

Two days later, I got an email from WestJet; flight canceled. Not delayed, not rescheduled, but flat out grounded. I Kayaked another flight. Nothing. On that day, or on any day. After losing myself in a hundred browser tabs I called the Canadian embassy in New York; they directed me to some emergency centre in Ottawa. The guy in Ottawa audibly shrugged and used phrases like *impossible to say* and *hope for the best*....

I had a two-day melt down, sucked into a black hole. To make things worse, Eli was nothing but compassionate and accommodating. I felt foolish for making a plan, for telling so many people. I put my pride aside and asked Eli if I could stay, after all, and he gathered me up in a tight hug and lifted me off the ground. And we just ... resumed our routines. But even though we were still on good terms, things could not be unsaid. I thought about buying a car, driving across, sleeping at gas stations. A friend talked me out of it. But my heart was set on coming west. Friends of mine had done so already; they had planted gardens, revered Bonnie Henry. There was more in the news about the

projected Waves of Infection. I realized that I didn't want to just go west 'for the summer', keep my options open, maybe this maybe that. I wanted a clean cut.

A flight eventually came up; June 5th. This was it. The end of our second date. It had been nine weeks. I said goodbye to Pat, kissed the stand mixer, and Eli and I drove down to the city, holding hands the whole way.

### **Moving Out/Brooklyn**

*"Be careful what you wait for!"*  
-Robin Macmillan

It took my wrists a moment to remember the doorknobs of my apartment. The kettle felt too light, the floor felt grotty under my bare feet. I thought at least when I stepped into my room I'd feel that no-place-like-home dopamine surge. But though I'd left it tidy, and it was full of light, it seemed cluttered, sunken. I'd felt it when Eli and I had driven over the George Washington Bridge, and the New York skyline had come into view; I'd felt sick, full of deranged, parasitic butterflies.

Ask me at any other time, and I'd describe how coming home to Cortelyou Road was like

breathing with both lungs again. Like returning to myself. Returning to headquarters, where I had a door to close, instruments, books, a closet of clothes promising parties, gigs, dates. It was an absurdly large room, for the price, for New York – with a fire escape and a ladder to the roof, in a neighbourhood with bagels and barbers and a library and a Tibetan restaurant right over the subway tracks and London-plane-lined streets with such attractive old Victorian houses there were often film crews shutting down parts of Rugby, Albemarle or Westminster. This room was the reason I'd impulsively moved to New York seven years before; I had been at a crossroads, happened to be in the city, was looking for a sublet while I assessed my life - came across this flat, borrowed cash from a friend for the deposit. I never got over the way the light poured in the clunky old half-broken south-facing windows that rolled squeaking and shuddering open with ropes on a pulley, into which I had to wedge folded tears of cardboard to stop them rattling in the wind, though nothing kept out the draft. I was still in a honeymoon phase with the spinet a friend had given me over a year before; the day the Magic Piano Movers<sup>1</sup> had wrestled that thing up our three narrow flights, I had paced around the kitchen, as if my best friend was going into labour in the next room. I'd hear my neighbours practicing wind instruments, singing along to Bangla pop, whistling kettles, I'd smell their cooking, butter, spices. Outside my window rose a beautiful catalpa tree, leaves bigger than my head, trunk taller than our building, whose shade I read by, whose trunk the squirrels ran up and down, whose white blooms brought birds and bees. Beyond the tree, the houses and apartment buildings turned their backs on a courtyard-like space of dormers and dirt yards and laundry lines, and scanning them I knew under which eaves and gutter pipes the birds hid their nests, which sunny patches the neighbourhood strays napped in, and where puddles remained for days in the depressions of a low tarmacked roof. Seven years in this room. With Jackson - staying up in the kitchen with him drawing and smoking at the shitty little card table by the window and me sitting on the cracked floortiles by the pantry and drinking cases of Two Hearted and discussing movies and music and painting and travel and politics and have you talked to Roy about calling the plumber or the roof guy or the exterminator.

It had taken a while to build a life here. In my first year I was broke, lonely, doing all kinds of sketchy Craigslist jobs, getting on the wrong train, forcing myself to go to jam sessions where I was often the only non-cis-male musician – but I kept my head up, and eventually jam sessions turned into gigs turned into tours, and acquaintances turned into friends turned into people I couldn't imagine life without. I hadn't been planning on leaving anytime soon. I still hadn't had the chance to complain about the monotony of a Broadway gig, to run into Michael Shannon at Sycamore, or to drop acid and go to the Natural History Museum, which a rapper from Coney Island I'd sat next to on a plane one time told me had changed her life.

I emptied my shelves, drawers and closets, strewing everything about the room, covering every surface. I slept under piles of used bass strings for a few nights and felt like a big tangle inside. When I tried to make a start, I lapsed into my eight year old self, sitting crosslegged in the detritus, my nose in a book, photos and old love letters falling out of the spines. Stalling.

Eventually I was able to clear my mind enough to tackle one thing at a time. Donation centres were closed, and of course I couldn't have people over for a going-away, giving-away party. I put art supplies out on the salt box that the neighbourhood used as a trading site. I finally let go of my huge binder of stuff from college - transcriptions, set lists, charts, compositions, notes from private lessons, heaving it all into the recycling bin. I took pictures of clothes and shoes and put them on the Ditmas Park "Buy-Nothing" Facebook page. Jackson leant in my doorway, asked me if I didn't think I was being impulsive with this moving-away business. Couldn't I just... busk in the park? I went around with

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<sup>1</sup> Actual name of the company.



my friend Max stuffing my books into all the little free-libraries I could find. It was hot out, and people had taken to hanging out on the grassy boulevards on Albemarle or East 17<sup>th</sup>, working out, picnicking, or setting up easels within high-five range of passing cars. Everyone wore masks, but by now most people had cute cotton ones with colourful prints. Most of my friends happened to live in my neighbourhood, so it was on these boulevards that I arranged my one-on-one, masked, hugless goodbyes.

In the middle of this, on May 25th, the news broke of the murder of a black man outside a convenience store by the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer. The country erupted with rage. Protestors took to the streets in the name of George Floyd. Though the demonstrations were largely peaceful, many disintegrated into a pandemonium of pepper spray and batons and smashed windows and ransacked stores. For the first time since World War II, a curfew was imposed on New York City. Protests broke out against the curfew itself. Nobody spoke of anything else, in person or on social media. People rolled out Black Lives Matter banners from their fire escapes as a heatwave descended on the eastern seaboard.

As if things weren't surreal enough, one night after a couple drinks on the roof, Jackson took my hand and pressed it against his chest so I could feel his heart pounding. He kept his eyes closed, or averted, and I searched his face, feeling my own heartbeat quicken. Almost a year before, after years of living together, I had realized I was terribly and irreversibly in love with him, but I couldn't tell him, seeing as he was my roommate and one of my best friends, so instead I lived in anguish for eight months or so, until I finally worked up the courage, and he had so kindly, so benevolently cushioned me against his rejection, trying to keep things upbeat at the house, and it was only days or a week after this that I'd met Eli at that bar in Red Hook. The world had turned inside out, but Jackson's hand holding my hand against his chest that night felt crazier than a global pandemic, crazier than the deep-rooted racism in America, crazier than a 9-week long second date.

He didn't want to talk about it. Not wanting to pressure him, I listened closely for clues, for any hint of what was happening, feeling like I was in a foreign country within a dream within an apocalypse. We walked under the magnolia trees in Greenwood Cemetery, and I told him I was going to move to this place called Tofino. It's on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Jackson, it's such a special place, you've got to visit me there. We'll go surfing, we'll hike up mountains. We went to his studio and he drew my portrait, flicking the paper off the table every 10 minutes or so. Sheet by sheet he painted and flicked, until there were about six versions of my face in bold, black strokes on the splattered floor. As I posed, my breathing shallow with concentration, I rested my gaze on the paint drippings on the lower part of the wall, seeing in them fences, fields, houses, roads, trees. In the kitchen, back at home, as he waited for water to fill the kettle from our slow-dripping filter, I'd touch his arm or his hair, but he was as unresponsive as the statues in Greenwood.

The day of my flight came, and I woke up in his bed. He brought me a cold glass of water and a coffee and left the room again, closing the door gently. I pulled a surf mag off his shelf and sat on his couch, sunlight squealing in around me like a girlfriend begging for the details. I looked one last time out over Cortelyou Road, the school, the library, the mediocre taco truck, the 24 hour bodegas.

Sound bounced off the walls of my emptied bedroom as I did my final futzing. When it came time, Jackson and I hauled my stuff downstairs and into his truck, and he drove me to LaGuardia. I hugged him goodbye, insisting he come visit, though neither of us had any clue when that could be.



## Quarantine

*Why do it if it isn't gonna hurt a little / first step is always learning how to fall /  
don't worry just because it's never happened before*

- from "Hurt A Little", by Alec Spiegelman and Ana Egge

In the Vancouver airport I managed to find a few seats together without armrests, to pass my 11 hour overnight layover. The terminal was deserted. The lights, thankfully, were dimmed, but every 30 minutes an automated message peeled out of the intercom: ATTENTION PASSENGERS. PLEASE MAINTAIN A DISTANCE OF 2 METRES FROM OTHERS. PLEASE WASH YOUR HANDS FOR AT LEAST 20 SECONDS... The flight to Victoria was less than an hour on a little turboprop plane with the low cabin ceilings. My dad had left me his 1991 cherry red Volvo to drive myself to my quarantine hut: a cabin on the Saanich inlet owned by some family friends. I drove through rolling farmland, through tunnels of cedar, past red Canada Post boxes, listening to Alec's band Cuddle Magic, and I don't know if it was the song "Working On Me" or the post boxes or the sleep deprivation or the smell of the trees through the open window or the stab of understanding of what I had done, but it all went to my face, which turned into hard ugly sobbing like you can only do when alone in a car, and then to see if I could really wring it all out and be done with it, I screamed, compressed screams that wanted to come out at a certain pitch, like throwing a javelin from the core, straight out the throat beautiful strong and painless.

I spent much of those two weeks staring out the window. A pinecone fell out of a tree and knocked and bounced with a deep tock on the damp deck, and as if in response the refrigerator would start to hum and rattle. The dock squiggled its floats and all the critters clinging to it sucking waterbugs and the blue and white pleasure-boat tied up with rope, squeak squeak squeaking. It took me a few days to realize the harshest squeaking was the rusted hinges at the top of the dock ramp. When the wind died down and the tide came up, the angle changed and the squeaking calmed. All day I saw the boat and the dock and the ramp and the water moving and rolling and bobbing and swaying, and I started to feel like the pulse of my blood was syncing with the ocean. I saw my thoughts hanging around on the dock, their faces turned up to the rain, and they didn't mind if I wrote them or even noticed them. To meet me would just be another encounter in their day. They filled their own cups. It was good to take a break from always being self-conscious, reacting to others.

I got in a kayak and paddled around the inlet, harvesting oysters and mussels, moving the paddle through mucousy jelly fish, purple and pink and orange, star fish peeping in the rock crevices like gobs of jam. Eli texted me, said he hoped I wasn't too lonely. I wondered if I was supposed to be. It felt peripheral. The real loneliness was yet to come.

## Cancer

*The arches of her feet are like voices  
of children calling in the grove of lemon trees,  
where my heart is as helpless as crushed birds.*

-from *Finding Something*, by Jack Gilbert

Even so, I was looking forward to completing my 14 days and relocating to Sooke to stay with my parents for a couple weeks. When the day came, I packed the Volvo and drove down through the Highlands, that cool dark dense forest squeezing the road in so tight that at points cars cannot pass each other, and must sound their horns to take priority over blind hills and bends. I was putting the odds and ends of my quarantine groceries away when my mom, leaning against the stove, warned she had some Bad News. “Is the baby okay?” I reacted – my cousin had just given birth that morning. “The baby's fine. It's Grandma.” Her cancer was back. And it didn't look like it was going to be okay. I was quiet for a while, then said, “That's bullshit.” Mom nodded, slipped on her crocs and went to pull weeds for a few hours.

My Grandma Holly was 77 and had just started dating a spry, goofy, retired biologist who she met at People Meeting People, one of her dance groups. Married and divorced four or five times, she was always pining after some gentleman or another, but this was the first time she'd gone steady in years. She had also just moved out of my parents' place into her own apartment in Oak Bay, where she and my mom had painted her thrifted furniture her favourite bright yellow, displayed her sprawling earring collection on framed mesh, and stuffed her closets with colourful dresses and scarves and hats and dancing shoes. Until COVID, she and Jim had been going on road trips all around the island and lower mainland in his Subaru, sleeping on a mattress in the back. Whenever I saw her, we'd dance, trade massages, or walk to the gas station, especially if it was raining, to get ice cream cones. She could do a three-minute plank, and knew all the two-letter words.

But the cancer was back and because of COVID delays, the oncologist couldn't see her months ago when she was supposed to've had a check-up, and it was detected too late. It was Stage IV.

So what do you do? Even if there wasn't a global pandemic and we could have gotten on a plane and gone anywhere, Grandma probably wouldn't have cared to - unless, of course, everyone else was going, in which case she hated to be left out. But mostly she was a here-and-now person. She loved a good meal, she loved dancing, thrifting, snuggling, slaying at word games, being with her friends, family, being helpful. A couple days after we got the news, in an attempt to do something normal and

pleasant, but still special, she agreed to be treated to lunch and a pedicure. We got in the car, and Grandma struggled to operate the window button in Mom's new Audi. Mom teased, "Mom, it took you five years to figure out the Mini - you don't have that much time with this one!" Grandma laughed like it was a real knee-slapper, while I sat wide-eyed in the back. Jokes? But how else to cope?

Grandma looked healthy, normal. It was hard to believe she had a tumour spreading in her gut like black mould. After the pedicure in Langford we met up with my dad for lunch in Esquimalt. We took our food down to a little harbour. Dad waved me over to point out the double-something-gaff-rigged cutter, and as we walked back to the benches where Mom and Grandma were sitting, I overheard medical words, including the acronym MAiD.

My mom, who works for the Pacific Opera Victoria, had the inside scoop on a 'pop-up show'; the opera, in an effort to use its budget and pay its musicians, while following COVID regulations, was quietly sending its singers around town to perform with recorded tracks. My mom, grandma and I waited on a bench outside the Royal BC Museum; the courtyard, normally packed on a summer's day, was more or less deserted, the odd crow or pigeon picking around in vain for the non-existent crumbs of non-existent tourists. The singer arrived, her colleague neatly placing small orange cones 2 metres apart. When nobody else showed up, the colleague cued up the track, and the singer began, singing to us and the cones, her voice fluttering out like ribbons and evaporating into the harbour breeze, the granite stucco walls behind her indifferent. I snuggled against Grandma. The singer's delivery was clear and straight and melancholy, and I felt her voice touch me on the back of the neck, like when you are touched by someone you've been craving to touch you forever. Live music. I had a flashback to people dancing in a barn, throwing back tequila, a big black iron cauldron of gumbo bubbling in the back, people circled around a fire jamming swing tunes under a starry sky sleeping in tents singing in harmony and making eye contact again with that stranger you noticed earlier before going back in the barn and pulled onto the dance floor again by another stranger and the band keeps the tune going around and around and the accordion player leans over to the drummer to make a joke as the air fills up with dust and dirt kicked up from the old barn floor. But I wasn't in Louisiana, and I wouldn't be there anytime soon, and I wouldn't be able to take Grandma there, because, although I know I could have lured her with the promise of dancing and good food, she had Stage IV cancer and there was a pandemic, so I listened to the opera singer and kept my face turned from my mom.

Walking back to the car from the museum bench, we passed the old schoolhouse, one of the oldest in BC, where Grandma's great-grandma, Julia Apnaut, was a pupil. Apparently the Royal BC Museum has recordings that an ethnographer had put together of Julia singing traditional Kwantlen songs. Frustratingly, Mom's bugged them twice and they say they can't find them, they're lost in the archives. Grandma complained her legs were hurting, that her 'butt muscles' were not as strong as they once were.

MAiD, or Medical Assistance in Dying, only became legal in Canada in 2016. Grandma knew all about it; she'd supported a friend through it. She had long maintained that animals were treated more humanely than humans when it came to prolonged suffering. She believed people should have some agency, over when they go, what shit quality of life they're not willing to endure.

She couldn't do radiation due to her heart condition, and she didn't want to try chemo. She did not want to suffer, or 'be a burden', which at first, as the family member who wants nothing but to give care, is very hard to understand or accept. She wanted to say her goodbyes, she wanted a lamb dinner under the fruit trees in Sooke. Jim, bless his soul, put her in the passenger seat of the Subaru and drove

her all the way to Saskatchewan, to see her daughter Michelle, her son-in-law Tim and her grandchildren Skyler and Meeka, and her close friends of more than 40 years living in Saskatoon.

It can feel wrong to think about your own life when someone you love is sick, but it also does no good to shut your life off completely. I still had my eye on Tofino, though I didn't yet know how or when it could work out. I thought of William Finnegan, whose surf memoir Jackson had given me before I left - chasing waves around the globe in the 70s, sleeping on the ground, or in a hammock if there were poisonous snakes - eating cans of beans over the fire, finding girlfriends, finding jobs, finding temporary housing in rat-infested shacks - as long it was close to the beach. My parents had a funky old RV that had already served twice as a rescue boat, and for a while I seriously pictured if I could practice my upright bass in it. But there was still the issue of where to park it, how to hook it up to water and sewage, how or whether I would have access to power. Pad fees alone cost so much it hardly seemed worth it. Nowhere online could I find housing advertised; there was a Facebook page for Tofino Rentals, but only hopeful tenants posted there; landlords could browse it, like going to the pound and choosing a new pet. I was beginning to realize what I was up against; I wanted a very popular and very limited thing. I would need to weasel my way in. So I reached out to a family friend, Andrew Struthers, who I knew had lived in a pyramid in a tree in Tofino in the 90s and might have some leads. He gave me a phone number. When I called, the guy who picked up went on about woofers and some past situations and something about his sister in France, not giving me a clear answer, and making me doubt whether I'd asked a clear question. Mom said he probably needed to see the whites of my eyes, so when Grandma and Jim were in the prairies, we went on a reconnaissance mission.

Since I was a teenager I'd been one of those half-million tourists flocking up to Tofino and Ucluelet every year, taking a surf lesson with the pink Surf Sisters rashguard ovetop my wetsuit, panting to the instructor on the way back up the path at Cox Bay, Man, I just really one day want to live somewhere where I can do this all the time. I loved the drive up from Victoria - Coombs, Cathedral Grove, Sproat Lake. As Mom and I passed through Port Alberni, handmade signs started appearing on phone poles and truck beds - FRESH FISH, FRESH SALMON, FRESH SEXY SALMON. We pulled over, tugged on our masks and approached two women sitting in the shade of an umbrella in their front lawn. They gestured towards a big blue cooler, and we bought two big shiny sockeye, caught that morning. We stopped for ice at the Tseshaht gas station - our "special spot", cause that's where Grandma Holly was asked for her status card & how the whole investigation into our genealogy got going, and how we found out that Grandma was descended from a Kwantlen woman - the grandmother of Julia who'd been a pupil at that little schoolhouse by the museum down in Victoria. Then we got to the part of the drive that always put the Goldberg Variations in my head, heel-toeing around the bends and sharp turns of netted rock walls trying to keep my eyes on the road and not too long on the splendour of snow-capped mountains and the ocean-like expanse of Kennedy Lake.

We slowed to a stop at the road construction at Kennedy Hill. I put the car in park but didn't turn it off, optimistic, naïve. In my mirror I saw the passenger door of the car behind us open. A long pair of legs emerged, bringing with them a woman around my age with long blond hair, wearing a flowing, light-coloured top, maybe an organic material of some kind. For some reason I checked her feet to see if she had shoes - she did have sandals. She walked back along the road, comfortably, casually, and then I saw a man, also wearing shoes, also looking very relaxed, standing outside of his car. He was eating something out of a small paper box, like what you'd get berries from a farmstand in, and extended it to her as she reached towards it, taking a handful. And as she did, I started to feel a bit sick to my stomach. Like I had shown up to a party wearing the wrong thing, a party where I didn't know anyone, where everyone else went way back. These attractive young people sharing berries knew

the drill at Kennedy Hill. They'd been around long enough to belong, or to feel that they belong. I pictured myself alone in my new Tofino digs, whatever they ended up being, writing emails to friends out east and on season 15 of Grey's Anatomy, while locals had barbecues and babysat each other's kids. I remembered how lonesome that first year in New York was, moving there on my own with no prospects, no connections, no plan. Searching for my people, for work, for a sense of belonging. I thought again of my catalpa tree, of Jackson's posture, about walking into the Owl and knowing the bar staff, but then the road opened and I shifted back into gear.

The next day I met up with Struthers' friend at the Driftwood Cafe. His girlfriend came along too, and the three of us had coffee looking out over North Chesterman beach. Before we went to look at the apartments he'd mentioned, I texted my mom to let her know I'd be a bit longer than I thought – I was going to help my prospective new landlord pick up some boards from the lumberyard first. There was some snafu & the boards weren't ready, so we swung by the place and checked out the units. There was a one-bedroom available for eight months, starting in October, and I guess I had sufficiently emitted good tenant vibes. My lucky star seemed to have pulled through again.

I took a surf lesson with a woman from Ukee who was also a DJ and sound tech, around my age. The smell of the neoprene wetsuit was like a releaser pheromone, the sound of the surf like a dance caller. Out in the water, Jess shouted PaddlePaddlePaddle! I managed to climb to my feet, and though I don't even remember if it was actually a small, peeling wave or just whitewash I was riding in towards the shore, what I do remember is angels were singing and I laughed the way Eli would make me laugh when we danced. We stayed out until my muscles were foaming. Jess said she could see that I had stoke and to my amazement, gave me her number, suggested we stay in touch.

I went out at dawn the next morning. It was my first time surfing alone, without anyone to hold my hand. I sat on a wet log on Wickaninnish Beach in my pajamas, drinking my coffee, watching the waves. It was low tide and the beach was wide, long and grey, sand as smooth as Eli's marble countertops, mist hanging in the wind-bent trees, a gull flying overhead. In the distance, another early riser walked along beside their intertidal reflection. When I got into my suit and into the water, I found my arms were still shot from the day before, so I just bobbed around lazily on the board. A round brown head with big brown eyes popped up only a few metres away. My heart softened and I gazed at the seal, the sun all but breaking through the clouds, diffusing its light on the grey-blue sea. Then with a flick the seal dove back under.

I wish we could have brought Grandma up with us. In 2011, we'd come up on a rainy winter weekend, and Mom and I had taken a surf lesson. Like I mentioned, Grandma didn't like being left out, so she got into a wetsuit too and splashed around in the whitewash on a boogie board, laughing.

When Grandma got back from the prairies, having just been gone 10 days, she looked like she'd aged 20 years. She'd become frail and weak, was having trouble with stairs, or walking much at all, complaining that she felt "ishy". She started soiling the bed, losing her appetite. I got more involved, saving various nurses' numbers in my phone. One day she had a cane, the next a walker, and before we could get her a scooter she needed a wheelchair. Calls to her doctor somehow failed to produce pain meds, so that all she had was ibuprofen and some weed gummies procured by Conall, my brother.

Soon enough she needed around the clock care. We took her sleigh bed apart and fit it into the Volvo, packed her meds, her nightie, her tablet with her stories, and brought her home to my parents'. Mom's office quickly was converted into a bedroom, the big window looking out over purple-blue

hydrangeas. We fed her strawberries from the garden, juice squeezed from the apple trees in the yard. Mom baked crusty loaves of sourdough and slathered them properly to the edges with butter and homemade blackberry jam from berries Grandma had picked in the driveway the summer before. Hummingbirds vibrated around the sugary bird feeders hooked under the roof overhang.

I started to play guitar and sing for her, my mom often joining in on ukulele. We played her songs we knew – Paul Simon's "American Tune", John Prine's "Long Monday", an old Wilson Pickett tune called "Somethin' You Got". She hummed along as we played, or threw in a joke (*a place I feel loose...* "Like a goose!"), even though she was barely speaking. My mom played her some Hawaiian songs she'd been learning from Ukulele Underground (this Julia person I keep bringing up – her maiden name was Hamburger, for her father was a German Jew, but she'd married a Hawaiian guy, Apnaut, who was descended from the Kamehamehas - Hawaiian royalty.) One afternoon, Grandma had a rare wave of energy, and I danced with her to the low volume of her tablet. Our feet were clumsy, and I couldn't tell who was leading and had to ask, offending her. She said she hadn't danced in a while, then accused me of dancing to my own drummer. She requested "something Latin", so I put on Gal Costa, and while she smiled, I could tell her morale had plummeted.

I stayed up late brainstorming songs to learn for her, my bedroom door ajar and my ears open, in case she needed help getting to the commode or in case she was just feeling ishy and needed comfort. With the dog pacing around, the rustling of my dad working through the night on deadline, the cat's bird bell, the wind in the trees, or an appliance clicking on or off, I was constantly sifting and sorting the sounds.

My brother came up for dinner one night and my mom roasted a delicious, lemony chicken. Nobody spoke. My brother and I exchanged a look through the vase of roses from our parents' recent anniversary. Eventually Dad started talking about his column, and Grandma focused on bringing her fork to her mouth, slowly, with a new tremble in her wrist.

When I was with Eli, upstate, collecting earthworms for bait, or trying to identify leafless trees, 'living in the moment' was bliss. But sometimes the moment is the last place you want to be. I hated that Grandma was dying. I hated that my mom was losing her mom, her best friend. I hated the pandemic. I missed New York. I thought about the year that instead of getting another roommate, Jackson used the third room of our apartment as his studio, and how when he was away at his other jobs I would go stand among the jars of brushes, the boxes of paint, the works-in-progress leaning against the walls, the shelves of hardcover art books, the trailing plants hanging in the window, the rough, mismatched curtains; it felt like a temple in there. And missing him made me miss everything else.

I let myself dream about the future, too. Tofino. Who lived there? Would I make any friends? Would it be anything like the small town I grew up in? How was I going to make a living?

One night, Grandma was feeling especially shitty, couldn't get to sleep. She moaned "What can I do?". My mom and I got her into the wheelchair and rolled her carefully out into the living room, transferring her onto the couch, lying her on her back, in such slow motion, like we were underwater, time an insult, a white lie. I asked Grandma if she wanted me to read to her, and she nodded, eyes closed. I went into my room and picked up the book beside my bed - *The Great Fires*, a collection of poetry by Jack Gilbert.



Lying on the couch opposite her I flipped through the book, choosing shorter poems. *Michiko is dying in the house behind me/ the long windows open so I can hear/ the faint sound she will make* I feel ishy. What can I do? *when she wants/ watermelon to suck on.* We have some in the fridge. Grandma hadn't eaten much in days. I sliced the tiniest baby slice, and savoured her savouring it, right down to the rind, no pink left. *or so I can take her/ to a bucket in the corner of the high-ceilinged room/ which is the best we can do for a chamber pot./* Yes. *She will lean against my leg as she sits/ so as not to fall over in her weakness.* Barely peeing, a dribble. Eyes closed in exhaustion.

*How strange and fine to get so near to it.* To get so intimately near to someone who is dying – or maybe he meant Michiko getting so near her own end. Or maybe he meant about how strange and fine it was to get so near to finding words to describe the experience. It all fit.

Grandma kept asking me to sing for her, and before long I ran out of the few songs I knew that weren't about death or loss or heartbreak or life's disappointments. I'd been hesitant to play, for example, Your Long Journey, even though I knew better. When I am in the depths of despair, I want Beck's *Sea Change*. I want Mount Eerie's *A Crow Looked At Me*. I want that Jack Gilbert poem. So I know I'm not alone. So I broke the seal and sang her the Rosa Lee Watson song I had harmonized so many times with Eli back in the mountains, thinking of the boy who had perished ice-climbing. *God has given us years of happiness here/ now we must part / and as the angels come and call for you / the pangs of grief tug at my heart.* I sang it through to the end and watched the tears roll down her cheeks as she lay on her back in bed. My throat had been on the verge of closing up the whole time but I just sang quieter and quieter until I got through. She squeezed my hand and thanked me and said how much a relief it was, how good it felt, to finally cry.

I've been playing music since I was 10, a slew of instruments. I went to school for it, started touring right out of college, can't remember all the bands I've played in. I'd had a few out-of-body experiences from it, but always while playing with other people, improvising, flying, flushed. But those days when I played for my grandma, just the two of us in her room with the window that opened onto the hydrangeas, something else unlocked that I hadn't felt before. I love singing, but I've always tended to stick pretty squarely to a melody, preoccupied with staying in tune, as if that's what mattered most. But as I sang to my grandma, I felt something loosen in my throat as it never had, and the music came from some unknown depth, somewhere where the javelins were. I felt myself as a canyon, so seemingly bottomless and ancient and striking was the conviction that these moments were the reason I ever started playing music in the first place. I finally knew what it meant to sing the blues.

The morning after the Jack Gilbert poems, she could barely sit up, even with assistance. She did not leave her bed, did not eat, could not swallow her pills, could get no relief. I massaged her feet, feeling the tough ridges at the edges of her toes, wishing she would stop crushing my heart with her apologizing. Her misery became so terrible that the doctor agreed over the phone that we should take her to the ER. I felt she would be making her ferry crossing at any moment. I can't remember if it was me or Mom who drove her to the hospital, checked her in. Who went to Starbucks to get who a cappuccino. Who called who with the updates (“but I thought they said...” “Yeah, but that was three hours ago!”). Those kinds of things are a blur. But I do know that whenever I was in the car alone, I put on India.Arie's album *Worthy*, and turned up the volume as loud as I could bear it, the low frequencies shaking the car, and I knew the words and would open my mouth to sing along, but what came out was projectiles of private, guttural release, and Indie.Arie wrapped around me and letting me howl all over her.

*Moon is horses in the tempered dark.*

It may have been the narcotics she was finally prescribed, or the possibility that the cancer had spread to her brain, or a combination of both – but she was losing it. And the rules for MAiD, at that time, required the patient to be 'of sound mind' at the last moment before consenting to the procedure. It would have to be done soon if it was to be done at all. We were in the hospital now, though Grandma thought we were in a casino, and that I was a 'hussy', doing inappropriate things with the staff. My mom and I couldn't look at each other, knowing it would set off that ticking bomb in the throat of uncontrollable laughing and crying. We were exhausted, too. There was a knock, and the MAiD doctor entered the room with a clipboard. She was a compassionate woman in her early 40s in a flattering, floral dress. The long and short of it was due to Grandma's declining mental state, we'd have to do it in the next three days.

Originally Doc had said 6-12 months. It had been only six weeks. Suddenly it was an emergency of last chances. If there was anything I wanted to ask Grandma – I don't know, what was her childhood like, or who had been the love of her life, or what had been her favourite or worst job, or what did she think about feminism? I should have spent more time with her. But I'd had my whole life, and now she was too weak for these conversations. I thought of how when she and my parents and I had gone to Hawaii on a 'research trip', the four of us crammed into one tiny hotel room in Honolulu, and how she and I would sneak out before dawn and walk an hour each way in the quiet humid palm-lined streets to this donut shop to get there right when it opened, the smell of sugar and fat in the air. We had all that time together, but the thing was, it was always pretty hard to get Grandma talking about the past. She always took her time thinking about what she wanted to say, then she'd start, but stop herself, and then say something cryptic and final like "He was a troubled man", leaving me more or less hanging. But not all relationships are based on conversation. I'd always felt a bond with her, just being in her presence.

We got her home from the hospital and my aunt came over from the mainland to help. I had taken over Grandma's cell phone, which had been blowing up with calls and texts from worried friends. She did not have the energy to see them, even speak on the phone to them, and it broke my heart to know they would never get to say goodbye. Jim would come up with little baskets of blueberries from his garden and sit at her bedside holding her hand, leaning in close to whisper with her, making jokes, the door ajar. One afternoon my aunt was walking past and, glancing in, saw Jim squeezed in beside Grandma in her single bed, like teenagers sharing a sleeping bag at a summer music festival, and gently closed the door.

Grandma's pain was more or less under control by now; the doctors had left the IV lines in her arm and a nurse had come by to show me what syringe was what and how to attach it to which tube. The drugs made Grandma sleep hard, with her mouth wide open, waking up with dry, chapped lips, disoriented and often hallucinating. Again, like the doctors said, it could also have been that the cancer had spread to her brain.

On her last morning, my mom went to Grandma's bedside and gently fed her a soft, sourdough crêpe with maple syrup and strawberries from the garden. But though she could barely move, she wanted to come sit at the table - the rest of us were eating menemen, a sort of Turkish shakshuka - my mom had been cooking incessantly, channeling herself into making food for Grandma, and everyone, as I had been with music. We wheeled Grandma to the head of the table where she sat weakly with her

thin lavender housecoat pulled round her nightie and her lips gleaming with vaseline. We put a straw in her apple juice, and spoonfed her. My cousin and her husband and the new baby had arrived the day before from Agassiz, my brother and dad were there, and Eva, the dog, curled up under the table. The only person missing was Jim, who knew very well that the MAiD doctors were arriving at 4pm. Again, to break the silence, Dad started talking about his column and we half-heartedly pretended to listen. When we'd finished eating, my cousin bounced the baby lightly on Grandma's lap, while we wordlessly cleared dishes.

My mom or aunt asked Grandma if she wanted a shower, and she did. We wheeled her into the bathroom but she wanted the toilet first. Getting her in and out of the wheelchair was by this point excruciating. No pressure could be on her abdomen, and she couldn't engage her core muscles. I draped her arms over my shoulders, somehow keeping her upright. I kissed her head, and she kissed my neck, the part of me that was closest to her lips. Somehow we got her on the toilet and back to her feet, but we'd hit an impasse. All she had to do now was rotate 90 degrees and then take a few steps back, stick her bum out and sit on the shower assist, but it wasn't happening. I wasn't sure whether taking our time was helping or was just drawing out the agony. Grandma's head was bowed, her feet not responding to her brain's commands. Mom took my place and gave Grandma specific instructions: Right foot back. Like you're dancing, Mom. I watched Grandma respond to this analogy, summoning all her strength, and she managed to slightly shuffle her foot. Every shuffle was a victory. I felt bad that we were putting her through all this, but I knew it would be worth it. Finally she was down on the shower assist, a towel folded thickly under her feet.

I held the shower head over her soft hand to okay the temperature. At her signal, I ran the water over her, and she melted, sighed, pleasure coming off her like steam. As I moved the water and soapy cloth over her, I talked to her: Okay, I'm doing your back now, now your legs, your crotch, under your boobs, okay? She nodded blissfully to everything, her eyes closed, her face serene. I washed her black and white speckled hair, holding the nozzle in one hand, working the shampoo through with the other, massaging her scalp. Water flooded the bathroom floor, and could have flooded the house, for all I cared.

With Grandma's approval, Mom dressed her in a loose, pretty, dark blue dress, and got her back down in the bed. Jim had still not shown up. We had about two hours. The night before, I had finally learned for Grandma a song she had been humming; Helen Rhodes' "Parce Que", written in 1902, best known in its English translation from Mario Lanza. It is a beautiful melody that lilts through major sevenths, diminished tensions releasing into suspensions releasing and tightening and releasing again. *Because God made thee mine / I'll worship thee/ through light and darkness through all time to be.*<sup>2</sup> My throat was on the verge of closing up, but it was the feeling from before. The holy ghost. The song hung in the air. Mom and Aunt Renée were sitting behind me. Grandma's cheeks were wet too. She asked quietly where Jim was. He'll be here soon, I said, praying it was true.

We all hung out around her bed; my brother held Grandma's hand, the baby cried melodically, the dog, usually needy and hyper, sat calmly with us, maybe putting her head in someone's lap. Mom played ukulele, and Grandma danced with subtle shoulder movements. She called us her darlings, her

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<sup>2</sup> The original French lyrics have a slightly different message: *Quand j'entends tes pas comme en un rêve* and *Et puis tu viens à moi et je frissonne* – it is clearly about dreaming about our deceased loved ones. Being visited by their spirits.

angels, having to concentrate to move the muscles in her face to bring her lips together and forward to return kisses. My aunt and cousin and I found ourselves in a kind of cuddle puddle on the couch in the living room, staring off into space, twirling each other's hair. Still no sign of Jim. Typical boyfriend, my brother joked.

With half an hour to spare, Jim finally showed up, in a dress shirt and tie. Said he'd been picking blueberries, had lost track of time. My brother and I exchanged a glance. We left Jim alone with Grandma until the doctors arrived. While they were getting her final consent, I went and sat beside Conall in the adirondack chairs outside and he passed me the bottle of Jamesons and we held hands in a firm grip. My whole body suddenly started trembling, and my jaw ached. He said, I hate the world. I nodded. Drank. Mom came out and had a pull. It was a sunny, cloudless summer day, the sky as blue as it gets, the fruit trees heavy with pears, plums, apples, roses and clematis and honeysuckle climbing over the garden fence, hanging in thick clusters, and beyond the trees of the neighbour's yard, the blue triangle of ocean twinkled. Conall said, I love you. I said I love you too. Then the doctors came out and said we could go have our last moments. The last-last.

So we went in and Mom and I played "The Book of Love", by the Magnetic Fields. Everyone had already been crying and drinking and laughing and singing for hours. My aunt picked a clematis from the garden and tucked it behind Grandma's ear, even though she didn't know the story about Grandma proudly showing Mom all the weeding she'd done one day, only to discover she'd pulled the clematis, and Mom'd been teasing her about it for a year until one day it suddenly sprouted up again and climbed sassily up the fence, spilling purple blooms. Then the doctors came in, the compassionate woman in the floral dress and her young intern, who Grandma especially liked. I guess we'd been sitting kind of far back like a bunch of strangers at a focus group, and when the doctors warmly encouraged us to scooch closer, there was an instant scraping of chairs and stools dragged closer to the bed. And then it was time for 'last words', I guess, which felt pretty weird since we'd been having last words for weeks now and it's like when you are trying to get off the phone with someone and you seem to keep saying goodbye over and over until it gets awkward and maybe you don't want to be the first one to hang up in case you accidentally cut off the other person saying one last thing. But it has to happen eventually. So at last Grandma nodded towards the doctors and said unwaveringly, "Proceed." And with our hands on her arms, her legs, on each other, holding each other, rosaries threaded through my dad and brother's fists, the doctors administered the first drug through the IV line, and Grandma's breathing slowed, and then the second, and it slowed more, and then the third, until Grandma's breath stopped altogether, and she was still, and we all held each other like a party barge, like tandem skydivers in a silent film, a web of touching, connected by love, history, marriage, blood, and in this net of grief we shook and wept over her, sniffing and heaving in muted moans, not noticing the doctors slip out of the room.

I had never seen a dead body before. I had thought it would be scary. But sitting with her in her first few hours of death, like bathing her in her last few hours of life, was the greatest honour, the holiest experience. Eventually our chain of sobbing broke up, and we spread out about the house, the yard, coming in and out of Grandma's room, drinking, singing, telling stories and laughing, my mom cooking salmon on the barbeque. I got kind of wasted and had trouble putting together a salad. But when the undertakers arrived, I sobered up in an instant. I felt protective, defensive, like I was losing Grandma all over again. I resented them, though I knew that was unfair. They shifted her onto a pallet and carried her out to the hearse, and I touched her leg one last time before they slid her in and closed the door.

## **Mayne Island**

*May your hands always be busy  
May your feet always be swift  
May you have a strong foundation  
When the winds of changes shift  
May your heart always be joyful  
May your song always be sung  
And may you stay forever young*

-from "Forever Young", by Bob Dylan

There's a lot of stuff that has to happen after someone dies, and my mom and aunt took care of

most of it, though I helped however I could. We all wanted a memorial; Grandma had so many friends, and much more family, that hadn't had the chance to grieve her, to celebrate her. We didn't want to do it over Zoom; there needed to be a dance, so we decided to postpone it for a year, though we had no idea what the world would look like then.

In time, I got on a ferry and went to Mayne Island. My childhood home had long since been sold, but I had a cluster of close friends there who lived on several acres of land that wrapped around a bay on the east side of the island, and they had invited me to join their pod for as long as I wanted.

My friends had been growing vegetables and marijuana and children, harvesting chanterelles and button hedgehogs and nettles and salal berries, pickling green beans, getting more canning lids from the hardware store, fixing chainsaws, wearing hardhats, building decks, writing, playing, recording and producing music, making vats of plum wine and huckleberry mead, carving spoons, reading novels, and slaughtering roosters. I dragged a mattress out into the grass to watch the Perseids, and never moved back into the house. I read by headlamp, snuggled under several blankets, sometimes accompanied by Nina, Meg's dog, who'd lay near my feet and provide a comforting counterweight. There was no WiFi and not much cell reception; the Times Square that was the internet was wonderfully far away. At night the phosphorescence was so strong you'd step in the shallowest part of the water and the blazing, glowing trails of hundreds of tiny fish would shoot out from under your feet.

A lot of the old cast and crew from my childhood were still around, and I would see them when I biked across the island to Don & Shanti's store to get an oblong zucchini muffin and a coffee and check my email. I would run into Gin, who worked at the store, who had a bag of housewares for me for my new place. I'd see Farmer Don himself, who'd played "Forever Young" at the open mic when my friends and I had just graduated high school and were about to move away to college, when we were way too young and full of ourselves to appreciate the sentiment. Roberto might show up, in his spandex cycling costume, greeting me in French. Maybe Helen O'Brian would be there holding a shopping basket against her hip, and refer to an inside joke from when I was a young teen; I had deep roots here, which I take for granted though I know I shouldn't. I'd probably also see Gail Noonan, animator and musician, in clashing patterns, who'd lean back from the waist elastically, laughing, who now runs the bookstore my mom opened about 20 years ago, scoring me an advance copy of Grant Buday's new novel, Grant who works at the recycling depot and is married to Eden who is the main reason to frequent the Saturday farmer's market for her cinnamon buns and lemon tarts and pork pastries, the market which happens outside the Ag Hall, which is where that open mic used to be, and which is across the road from the dilapidated and tiny little thrift store which is open 3 hours a week, which has had the same woman running the cash box since before I was born, who with a 1970s sense of monetary value considers calmly the price of your kerosene lamp or wool sweater, saying nothing aloud except the total. The kind of person you feel you could trust with your most shameful secrets.

In an attempt to pull my weight around the property, I tried to get the lawn mower going, but it was out of fuel. I found a jerry can in the shed and went down to the gas station, which has one pump and shares a building with the real estate office, post office, bait and tackle shop, resource centre, and auto-shop. But when I returned and filled up the tank, the lawn mower still wouldn't start, something wrong with the spark plug. This time of year Campbell Bay's fields are normally shorn and trampled by festivarians - my friends had been running a much-beloved music festival there for the last ten years. Tents would be bordering the trees, vying for shade. This year the yellow grass was tall but you could still see Nina bounding through it in joyous visits to the rotting hide Meg had skinned off a fallow deer shot by an impressively fit octogenarian named Bob who had a cull license and more calorie-packed

carcasses than he could use; Meg and Chris had hung the animal in the festival kitchen and butchered it about three days later. On that day, it rained so hard that one of Elise's young squashes exploded; she made a green pumpkin venison curry, which we ate on the outside couch while spiders in the upper corners of the sliding glass doors, harnessing the indoor light, mummified looper moths.

But again, as much as this was paradise, I was a guest there, and as my Tofino move-in day approached, I dragged the mattress back into the house and packed up my stuff, again.

### **Moving In / Tofino**

*Not the attendance of stones  
nor the applauding wind,  
shall let you know  
you have arrived*

-Mark Strand

I bought Meg's 2002 Subaru, my first car, inheriting the CDs of friends I would have normally been seeing on the festival circuit: Corin Raymond, Trent Freeman, Taylor Ashton & Courtney Hartman, Sarah Jane Scouten. Making the drive for the first time alone, I stopped wherever I felt like it - the delightfully overstocked used bookstore in Coombs, that 'hole in the wall' trail across from Coomb's Candy Store (which is not in Coombs). Before I was halfway to Tofino, I had the feeling I'd regained something. Some traction, some independence, some kind of moving forward, at last.

When I got to the Kennedy Hill closure I turned off the car. People ambled about in flip flops, someone yelled "'till 5!". Baby-making music pumped out of a bluetooth speaker placed on the hood of a car. A curly-haired man yawned and stretched, his raised arms slightly lifting up his shirt, offering a glimpse of his chiseled torso. In my side mirror I saw a group playing ski-ball. Eavesdropping, I figured they didn't know each other, and one couple were definitely not from BC as it had to be explained to them where Nelson is. A woman walked by wearing socks in Birkenstocks. I got out and walked self-consciously down the road.

Then the light changed and the road worker signalled us through, and we single-filed around the cliff, Kennedy Lake vast and blue to the north. I got to town too early; my 1 bedroom apartment was still being cleaned after its four months of serving as a vacation rental. I drove down to Grice Bay and stood at the water. Looking at my watch every five minutes.

Finally I pulled into the driveway, guessed at a parking spot. Key under the doormat. The apartment was painted yellow and decorated with generic watercolours of sailboats, Parisian café scenes. I took all the artwork down, realized I didn't have much to replace it with, and put half of it back up. The water pressure was so intense that I soaked my shirt the first time I used the kitchen sink. The electric fireplace, that had a shelving unit built around it, smelled like burning dust when I turned it on. There wasn't really any natural light in the place, but there were venetian blinds on all the windows for privacy. No roommates. And I giggled to myself sometimes just making toast. *I'm in fucking Tofino.*

Before I unpacked, I went and bought a brand new 5/4 wetsuit from Surf Sister. A used board was harder to find. Jess, the DJ-soundtech-surfer girl from Ukee, helped me get admitted to the local Facebook groups – the Tofino Trading Post, and the Tofino Bulletin Board. I felt like I had stepped into a giant barn where the flea market and the town hall AGM were happening at the same time. I read threads of comments shaming the tourists and their bad beach fire etiquette, debates about the proposed temporary skating rink, requests for rides to Port or was anyone going to Wal-Mart and could they pick up a box of diapers? The Trading Post offered boxes of canning jars, water bottles, crop tops, artisanal charcuterie boards, surfboard socks, knee braces, boat motors, dog crates, handwoven cedar roses, a baby-wipe warmer, french tarot cards, high-rise pre-faded pre-ripped jeans that were the wrong size but weren't worth waiting in line at the post office to return. I was instantly addicted. I refreshed the feeds sometimes hourly - hunting not only for a surfboard, but for a pie plate, social opportunities, a zester, and things I didn't know I needed. I saw multiple posts from someone named Grandma Marg; after a while, I gathered that she ran a daycare in town, out of her house, but she was clearing her basement. Mostly out of curiosity, I at one point borrowed some allen keys from her, poking my head in, four or five little toddlers looking up at me with blank faces.



I'd spend time communicating with someone about coat hangers, then made the retrieval of them a significant appointment in my day. It felt justifiable in so many ways: exercise (I'd usually bike), getting out of the house, finding a new street, and if I was lucky, making the transaction in person, maybe having a small conversation, trying to read facial expressions behind masks. I wanted to see who lived here, what their houses looked like, what their yards looked like. I traded a guitar capo for a triangular blue plate and some socks with a young tree-planter/surfer/jeweller, who pulled up in my driveway, hauling open the door to the Sprinter van she lived in. Some people left me houseplants on their doorsteps or in their woodsheds, sometimes even with little welcome-to-town notes. I would leave one of my CDs in return.

Finally a board came up on the Trading Post; I wrote to the seller immediately. It was a slightly damaged, 8ft Wavestorm; the exact kind of cheap beginner board I'd been hoping for. I met Jesse at the "Rainforest Trail", and he helped me lash the board on top of the Subaru with my single, 20ft strap. Jesse was also new to the area - he was living in a trailer in a campground in Ukee; the Telus guy had hooked him up with WiFi so he could do his UVic business classes from the motorhome. He was also friendless and terrible at surfing, so we met up every couple weeks, shouting at each other in the water, or sometimes just walking along the beach as the ocean tantrumed. I watched his posts on Instagram; the image wobbling as he balanced his phone on something, then his brown Filipino body walking calmly into the icy ocean, in just his trunks, up to his neck, then waiting, submerged, timing himself. He said he was trying to make Winter his god. One thing or another would give out with the RV - the alternator, the ability to keep water out - and Jesse was often in Port, waiting for parts, staying in a motel, keeping up with his classes. But no matter how much work he put into it, the trailer still shook like a dead tree in the storms. Before Christmas he'd had enough, sold the RV and everything in it, and flew to Zambia to take care of some business. I was sorry to see him go.

But I had started to meet some other people too. I had announced myself as a musician on the Bulletin Board, and not long after was sent a message from someone named Sophie. She said she was booking shows at the Hatch and did I possibly want to play a gig there. Live music indoors was stop-start, but maybe the current rules would last till early November. See what Bonnie says. Sophie was a musician as well, and seemed to know everyone in town. She'd started up various community choirs, founded the Tofino Jazz Festival, managed the community theatre. Used to be a water taxi driver, or help ferry the kids back and forth from Opitsat. She was effusive, hardworking, driven. Not too long after the Hatch show, she invited me to be part of a small a capella group, work up some jazzy holiday music and perform in people's driveways on Christmas Eve.

In accordance with my default life strategy, I said yes to this, and to everything else. I went for a beach-walk interview with a local writer to see about maybe doing some dog-sitting; that didn't work out, but she suggested I sign up to work the snap provincial election. I missed the training day, but the job was pretty straightforward. Through verifying voter's IDs, I got to know the names of all the streets in town and the First Nations communities in the area. Sometimes I recognized names from the Trading Post or the Bulletin Board and tried not to make it too obvious as I looked back up at the voter with renewed interest. I knew things about people already, perhaps from the ads for their businesses in Tofino Time, or the fact that a poem of theirs was on the wall behind me, or maybe because I'd eavesdropped on them in line at the post office. My cloth face mask and full-face visor protected me in multiple ways.

A young guy with long dark hair came in and showed me his driver's license; he had a bandana covering his face instead of a regular mask, and I recognized him from a surf shop. Conveniently, the

polling stations were at capacity and I asked him authoritatively but politely to wait with me in the foyer. I felt like an armoured knight, so I started making small talk. He said he played music too. I had not played music with anyone in several weeks, and I was a knight, so I got his number.

Bandana Boy showed up at my apartment with a case of Tofino Lager and showed me how to 'mash' in drop D like a heavy metal player. I didn't recognize any of the bands he listened to, and he didn't recognize mine. It was easier to just chat than to play so he told me about a mushroom trip where the trees were growing down towards him and then disappeared and became ocean and he was sure he was going to die but then he got into the mainframe of the universe and saw Everything, every symbol and alphabetical character flashed through his mind in two seconds, he saw his dead grandma in the rearview mirror, and then knew that he was sludge in a drainpipe.

The next long-haired surfer boy I met was also a musician, and he invited me over to jam. He had a spacious living room with a yoga mat in the middle of the floor, and a massage table folded in the corner, which he said he used for his cranio-sacral practice. The windowsill was covered in crystals, burning incense, and aloe vera plants, and on a coffee table were books on self-realization, alternative healing and Sanskrit prayer. We smoked a joint and after singing some folk ballads in harmony he showed me the 20 minute long electronica piece he'd been creating in Cubase, while, in Rome, I stretched out on the yoga mat.

The incense-burner invited me to jam with a reggae drummer he knew; I agreed without hesitation. We met up in the community theatre, which since COVID was being used here and there by a few musicians in town as a space for jamming, rehearsing, and teaching. We made up riffs, four chord jams, some of our originals, shooting the shit. After this jam, I started to get together to play one-on-one with the drummer. He lived in a one-bedroom with his family, sectioning off a part of the living room to make a zone for his daughter. We talked about Fairy Creek, about the pandemic, about the bands we were into, and about the bands we were in, how it worked to be a musician in this remote town.

Though I've maybe made it sound otherwise, and even though I've been doing this most of my life, I still got anxious before these jams. As the time of each rendez-vous got closer, I would run through lists of songs I knew in my head, wondering what musical background the other person was coming from, whether they were going to be bored, think my songs were lame, or that the jam wouldn't get off the ground at all. Would we find anywhere to meet, musically? Would anything click? It was similar to how I felt every time I went to the beach, struggling with my bulky foam board. I was hesitant about where to enter the water, unsure of where my place was in relation to the people already here. My body would buzz with desire and instincts of self-preservation.

But I also felt invincible, in my thick winter wetsuit. I had always been a water baby, immersing myself impulsively in the ocean in summer or winter, naked or fully clothed, night or day, sober or drunk, alone or with friends. There's nothing quite as invigorating as the shocking cleanse of cold ocean water on bare skin, but in a wetsuit, I was truly a marine mammal. I could stay in for hours. Although, after my first few days of paddling and turtle rolls and weak pop ups that landed me on my knees, my neck and shoulders were so sore and stiff I had to turn my entire body to look at something, and in the mornings had to hook my foot on the side of my mattress to drag myself to the edge of the bed, where I could then slowly roll over the edge.

I got in the water most days, but I wasn't only working on surfing. I taught a workshop over

Zoom to a high school music class, I still had a couple private students. I did some remote recording projects, slightly more comfortable now with the process, but still spending hours with the slick Brits on YouTube. An old college friend said he'd pay me to make piano reductions of his indie-orchestral tunes, which I spent weeks on, but in the end, he decided he didn't have the cash. Moving on. I did get paid to transcribe a Chris Wood bass performance for some lady up in Alaska who wanted to play it with her band. More of that, please. I was also in a songwriting group that held me accountable to produce a song each week, for three months. I had recorded a couple songs back on Mayne in the summer with my friend Adam in his studio there, just for fun, but realized in the fall that an album was forming. Journals and notebooks lay open on my desk, table, and keyboard stand, pencils and pens and manuscript paper littered surfaces. I did speed-writing sessions sometimes, co-ordinated with friends who'd do them at the same time, miles away. 20 songs in one day. Start writing from the moment you wake up, prep meals the day before.

I was pivoting best I could, but thank god for CERB. I plugged away, stayed busy as I could, but my sense of purpose kept slipping away, for days at a time. Right foot back, Grandma. One step at a time. Mostly, during the day, I felt optimistic. I soaked beans, fed the starter, only checked the Trading Post and the Bulletin Board once or twice a day.

But in the evenings, I lost my stride. My apartment, sick of me, tried to squeeze me out, but there was nowhere to go. BC was in its second wave; provincial COVID restrictions were getting tighter and tighter. By late November, no public gatherings were allowed, of any size. We were to hang out with our immediate household only - "safe six" was out the window. Those who lived alone were allowed to have an exclusive bubble with one or two other people, but I didn't know anyone in Tofino well enough to make such an intimate proposal. I had saved a bunch of Grandma's recipes from when we'd cleared out her apartment; they were mostly desserts, her neat, cursive writing in ballpoint pen in small, ruled notebooks. I would make her carrot cake, with lemon-cream-cheese icing, and would eat the entire thing over the course of a few days. It was so easy and comforting to open a bottle of wine, smoke a bowl on the front stoop, and crawl into bed with a pound of cake and my laptop. I had never before let myself eat in bed – thinking guiltily of Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street. I would stay up till 3 or 4, bingeing episode after episode of the Crown, like an infant on the boob, dehydrated and paralyzed in some contorted position, fully numb and doused in royal drama.

I found myself talking to objects around the house. Hey babe, I would say to the kettle in the morning. Usually had the radio on, Tom Power, Carol Off, Matt Galloway. Comforting voices. Thought of my Brooklyn kitchen, Brian Lehrer, Jad Abumrad, Peter Sagal. Out for walks, I'd hear myself cat-calling an especially attractive tree. Or, belly-down in the loam, inspecting some peculiar fungus growing out of a decomposing log, I'd whisper my confidences. I could amuse myself this way. But sometimes it wasn't funny anymore and I was just plain sad. I didn't know why I'd left the mountain paradise with Eli. Why I'd abandoned my life in New York. Why Grandma died. Why I was out here in the boonies far from all my friends and family. Why people were perishing in droves from this virus. Why the forests were all burning up. What I was doing with myself. Nothing made sense, and I was of no use to anyone. I was supposed to be brave and go out there and make new friends, but even when the bars were open, the thought of showing up alone and risking rejection made me feel nauseous, so repulsed by my own loneliness.

So when one late afternoon Cranio-Sacral guy texted "surf? pick u up in 5?", I dropped

whatever I was doing, and was out on my stoop in 2 minutes, wetsuit in a blue IKEA bag. He was there 30 minutes later, joked about 'keeping women waiting', then hauled open the side door of his '76 Chevy, but not all the way because otherwise it catches and can only be released with the screwdriver that also serves as the key to the ignition. The van was rigged up with a bed in the back, a stove, dreamcatchers. Summers treeplanting, a 6 months/6 months lifestyle. We got down to North Chestie and the sun was a minute from the horizon. Big waves, choppy water. "Have you paddled past the whitewash? Confidently?" he asked, but before I could answer he had disappeared over a wall of water. The waves punched down on me, wrenching the Wavestorm out of my hands. I knew I didn't have anything to prove, and he was long gone anyway, but I harnessed his words, losing my board with every breaking wave. Get back on, point to the horizon, try again. Eventually and suddenly, it was several decibels quieter, and there was no more white crashing in my face. I was in a big sloppy just-about-to-boil soup, by god I had made it, I was out in the big-kids zone. Scores of black-suited bobbers, I hadn't seen them from shore. Waiting. The sky was rich, gold, pumpkin, reflecting purple in the east. The set came in, and I clenched my board between my thighs, carried up to the crest, and down into the trough. It was my first time out here. Past the break. You could choose to skip waves, there was a thin sense of safety. But there was only one way back in. The waves were bigger than any I'd been in. My heart raced and my stomach ached, and the sky kept shifting colours. Forced myself to go for one. And the next hour was flying off my board, somersaulting through and swallowing water. Forgot to cover my head, came up to a fin in the temple. I hadn't seen Cranio-Sacral since we stepped foot in the water. Finally it was all but dark and I came ashore, looking for Poppy, his free-range, three-legged dog. I found the path to the van, and moments later my driver showed up, energized, stoked, he'd actually surfed some waves, caught some fun ones. His headlights were burnt out so we drove slowly with the blinkers on, Poppy in my lap.

Christmas choir was now meeting twice a week. There were four of us: Sophie, me, a British kayak guide/environmental activist who lived in a trailer with her partner, and a young musician from Saskatchewan who worked at the pharmacy and also lived in a trailer. Sometimes we'd rehearse in the gazebo in the Village Green, and Sophie would bring us camp chairs and blankets and sleeping bags to ward off the wind and cold; with our sheet music in our laps and mugs of tea, we hoped people would think we were an ultra-COVID-safe knitting group, and not condemn us on the Bulletin Board. We sat yards apart, barely able to hear each other, Sophie's little Mexican rescue-dog tap-dancing her long claws on the gazebo's wooden boards. The music and our social ease with each other developed slowly, each rehearsal a thawing, relaxing. We called ourselves the Sugar Plums, and when Christmas Eve arrived, we hit the town. We sang at the cul-de-sac for a few families on Lone Cone. We sang outside Caravan Beach Shop, outside the pharmacy. We sang for the Sisters with their competitive outdoor Christmas light display. We were mindful not to fall in the pool at a multi-million dollar house on Chesterman Beach, and we sang standing in a marsh on the inlet; someone brought a propane firepit to keep us warm, and they gave us goodie bags of fudge as we left by the long dock. We sometimes sang a bit off key but sometimes quite well. Either way, everyone loved it.

But this was some weeks away yet. I was still trying to make it through fall, cope with the pandemic blues. Some days, I felt like I had tangible goals, and other days I felt apathetic. It didn't take much to trigger a longing for my life in the before-times. Standing at the sink looking out at the fifth consecutive day of rain, I'd eat a navel orange, and I was in someone's backyard in Los Gatos, under swaying palms, laughing at an inside joke, in the middle of a tour with Della Mae; this is where I should eat oranges. Cheese should come from markets in Paris, and grilled corn from street vendors in Quito, and bad muffins from airports. I hadn't gone this long without getting on a plane since I was 16. I kept COVID-canceled things on my calendar, taking some perverse pleasure in frequently

contemplating this alternate reality, this life that might have been. The weekend Blackpot would have been happening - the camp and festival in Louisiana with the bubbling gumbo and the dusty barn floors – I sat on the couch scrolling through my text messages, trying to think of people to hit up. Bzzz – a message would come in. It was Jim, again. Grandma's boyfriend. He'd been messaging me pretty regularly since Grandma died. Sending me photos of his now lonely ramblings around Vancouver Island. Jim on some pebbly beach. Jim at a diner. Jim volunteering somewhere. Hearing from him depressed me even more.

At the same time, it didn't take much to cheer me up. Any remotely interesting interaction or unexpected discovery out in the world gave me something to literally write home about. I composed a long email to my parents about the dead dolphin on Chestermans. Jess and I had met up for a beach walk one afternoon, climbing over the massive logs that the night before's storm had washed up, blocking the main beach access path. We strolled south, running into several people Jess knew who shared the news over and over. Eventually we saw a little crowd, where we found more of Jess's friends, and as their dogs ran around off-leash everyone stood chatting casually in a semi-circle around the reeking corpse as if it was a bonfire on New Years Eve.

And the flying house. One blah day, just to get out of my apartment, I walked the 20 minutes into town to get a coffee. There was no one else on the MUP, just crushed Lucky cans in the ditch and littered masks and cigarette butts. There was no one at the controversial temporary iceless skating rink. There was a man loading groceries into his car outside the Co-op, but he wouldn't make eye contact with me. The Common Loaf was still allowing limited indoor seating, so I parked myself there, hoping someone else would come in that I could observe or eavesdrop on. I scanned the aged flyers on the cork bulletin-board. Cleaning services, dog walking, ISO RENTAL, tidy single non smoker no pets etc. No shows, no events, no meetings. I finished my coffee and left, feeling dull and vacant, thinking of my friend Val who'd said in an email "I miss people I don't know yet". But then as I passed the Roy Henry Vickers gallery something caught my eye and I looked east toward the inlet and saw a house flying through the sky. A squat gable-roofed house just like a Monopoly gamepiece. Keeping my eye on it, I ran down Third Street toward the water, and saw that the house in fact was being carried on a chain or cable or something by a helicopter. The chopper then paused mid air and hovered as it slowly lowered the house down into the trees of Beck Island. I was right in the middle of town, and there wasn't a soul on the street.

Sometimes I hung out with my landlord at the Driftwood Cafe, in the Wickaninnish Inn. He talked about construction projects, his girlfriends' woes at the restaurant she managed in Ladysmith, how the pandemic restrictions were making his life miserable, how the government was interfering too much, fearmongering. Then he took me to the Carving Shed where there were two men working, a very pretty and tall Norwegian, and a gregarious, curly-haired man wearing a Tuff City Radio t-shirt and wide, bright green wool pants. The shop smelled of cedar, sawdust, was full of tools, works in progress, light, sound of scraping, waves crashing nearby. These were the disciples of master carver and local legend Henry Nolla, and I heard myself telling Green Pants that I make sound collages, field recordings of industrial noises overlaid with acoustic improvisations. It just bust out of my mouth, hardly even true. I think I just wanted so bad to be part of the club. He said it sounded avant-garde.

Sometime that month, November, I needed some music gear, so I got out of town. And this time, on the drive back, when I got to the Kennedy Hill closure, I stopped the car and got out lazily and easily, like the woman I'd seen the summer before. I strolled back along the road with my hands in my pockets, looking into car windows, smiling at people. No one else was getting out of their cars; maybe

it was too cold, maybe no one was in the mood. I was a few dozen cars down the line when I started to hear ignitions turning on. Goddamnit. I turned and ran as fast as I could in my clunking Blundstones, cramping in my shoulder, which is where I cramp when I run. I forced myself to keep going, avoiding any eye contact, and made it back just as the car ahead of me rolled forward.

I gave the Common Loaf another shot, and this time I met a leather-clad biker who was shoving a bag of day-olds into the custom-built trunk on the back of his motorcycle. He warned me the winter would be long and rainy; I said I didn't mind. He said his bike had broken down here 44 years ago and he'd never left. I wondered if that would be my story, too - showed up here to surf out the pandemic, learned how to mash in drop D, never left.

I saw an ad on the Bulletin Board for a couple looking for childcare; sure – I hadn't babysat since I was a teenager, but why not? Maybe the parents would be my new friends. I met the young family outside Rhino. The mother was warm and outgoing, and we chitchatted easily. The father said little, and though we were outside and unmasked, his face was unreadable. But when I told them I was a musician, a folk bass player, he seemed to brighten, and asked if I played jazz drums. Umm... no, I'm a bass player, mostly play folk. Oh, he said. It's just that jazz drums is really cool. You seen Whiplash? I said I hadn't. He then went on to sing its praises, a full, glowing, review, though while he celebrated what he saw as the many virtues of the film, his face remained blank, unchanging, not even a glimmer in his eyes. He concluded by remarking that he sure had worked himself up. I had avoided this movie for years, but that night I gave it a go. I almost turned it off during the opening scene, but tried to stick with it. Had to skip through several parts. I don't get truly angry very often. I quietly decided I would never babysit for this man. And as it turned out, I never heard from them again anyway.

I was invited out to the brewery one night with my landlord, his daughter and a friend of his. When I got back to the outdoor table with a round of pints, the friend was in the middle of updating us on the sex lives of his daughters. One of them was dating a black "rapper", and "once you go black, you can't go back". I must have had it written all over my face because he then said defensively "What, is that okay? Can't I say 'black' ? Or is it 'coloured' ? You're from New York, what are we allowed to say?" He went on to the next daughter, who had slept with a 'cowboy' so he guessed 'love is blind'. I thought there was maybe something I wasn't getting: was he rehearsing lines for a play? He then went on to his third daughter, a teenager who had worked hard at a summer job, then cashed all her cheques and pinned half the \$20 bills all over her bedroom walls; the other half, she spread over her bed so she could roll around in them. Then there was the brother out in Sault Ste Marie who had borrowed money to, he claimed, buy new workboots from Mark's Work Wearhouse for his new job up in the rigs in Fort Mac; he was given an ultimatum - be clean for at least a year before bothering to reach out. The brother ended up out in Ontario, worked as a long-haul trucker for a while before getting fired after a random drug test.

It was definitely a play, I decided. I went and got another pint. When I returned the man had moved on to his mother, who had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She'd clearly had dementia for years, though - she'd been hiding her own bras and undies and then accusing her boyfriend, who also had dementia, of stealing them and giving them to his mistress. The estranged brother was asked to come out west to help; when he did, he promptly started stealing money from the defenceless mother and leaving her sitting in the car while he made transactions in parking lots.

The party moved back to my landlord's house. I was poured a beer into a glass, then given both the glass and the rest of the can, like what you hope happens on an airplane. Stepping into the house

felt like a milestone; you know the feeling, when you are traveling alone and it's cold and you just want to be invited into someone's cozy house, feel connected, learn something about the local culture, not just go back to your shitty hostel bed and read your book with a headlamp. The house was well lived in, well loved. There was a giant framed nautical map of Clayoquot Sound, a 4-foot high lego lighthouse, a phat record collection, bits of shells and driftwood on the ledges, ancient boxes of soap. The landlord's daughter fired up the Nintendo rig.

I wanted this. I wanted Tofino. I wanted to be inside people's houses, hear about their families, look at their stuff, I wanted to ride to the surf with my board in a rack on the side of my bike, wanted to run into people on the beach, to be able to identify wild mushrooms, wanted a week-long kayak trip like Joanna Streetly, wanted to play music, teach music, perform. I wanted to contribute, be part of things.

I wanted a boyfriend, too. The parking lots at the beaches always seemed to be rife with beautiful men, the neoprene arms of their wetsuits dangling from their bare waists, but I felt like a dork around them and couldn't think of anything cool to say. One day when I was changing in the parking lot, holding a towel in my teeth and trying to keep it draped over my chest as I struggled out of the blubber, one such Hot Man who was sitting in the driver's seat of his van, brushing his teeth, asked me how the waves had been. I didn't really know the lingo and said something about them being 'okay'. In fact, it was super windy and choppy that day and the waves had been a mess - I had been the only person out there, floundering around, but I didn't mention this. He said he'd probably be leaving town soon cause he didn't want to live in his van through the winter and there was nowhere to rent and the work would be winding down anyway. I let him drive away without getting his number, opting to instead obsessively regret it for days.

I did feel cool, however, going around conducting business in my wetsuit. Every time I tried this, I did my best to conceal my thrill. I walked dripping wet in my booties into the brewery to pick up a four pack of tall boys, feeling like I was Miley Cyrus at the Grammy's - of course I was there, wearing that, I do what I want. The wetsuit was warm and cozy and comfortable especially after I'd been in the water and the warm water sloshed around in my booties.

Water is everywhere in Tofino. We are surrounded by ocean, it rains constantly, and it is deceptively humid. Looking for something in the backseat, I finally detected the source of the fust in my car. The seatbelts were thick with furry, green and white mould. Horrified, I doused the entire interior of the car in baking soda, which I like to believe is a cure-all the way my dad is with his Tums or the guy from that rom-com with his Windex. The baking soda didn't do much, and when I went to my choir friends for support, they one-upped me with tales of actual mushrooms growing on dashboards. I spent the next three days spraying all kinds of anti-mould solutions in there, vacuuming, scrubbing, running a heater, or airing it out if it wasn't raining.

The winter stretched on. I had a very sensitive fire alarm and had to open all the windows in the house when I cooked. When the power went out, I boiled water in my driveway over an antique Coleman stove and spent the day reading by candlelight. The results from the US election were finally in, after four long days of ballot counting. I called friends in New York to celebrate, they sent me pictures of outdoor gatherings, everyone in masks, cheering, playing music. I was proud of Eli, who'd spent the months leading up to the election using his powers to make campaign videos for the Democrats in Pennsylvania. Back in 2008, he cut his hair, bought an outfit he deemed convincingly Conservative, drove to Dayton Ohio, got a cap and stickers from an organization called Republicans for

Obama. In this disguise, he spent a month canvassing, talking to swing voters.

In early December, the kayak guide in my Christmas choir mentioned she'd been going for early morning swims, sans wetsuit, with a group of friends, whoever could make it. In case it hadn't sunk in yet, I was definitely not in New York anymore. In New York, people didn't go out to socialize until after 10pm, meeting at bars and shouting at each other over \$15 drinks. Here, one of my few opportunities for socializing was to undress in below zero temperatures, in the freezing rain, and walk into the icy ocean at 7:30am. Taking what I could get, I met the swim team one morning at Mackenzie Beach, kelp scribbling the sand in tangled clumps. One woman had her wee infant dressed in a tiny wetsuit, and waded out into the water with her. I'll be damned. I submerged and retreated, but my choir mate swam all the way out to one of the little rock islands. I wrapped myself in a towel and in the grey drizzle waited for her, shaking my head.

Jesse of the Zambian Mine and the Leaky RV had left me a replacement friend, a van-life busker from Calgary with a big beard, scraggly hair, glasses and worn out loafers. We met one sunny crisp day on the beach with our guitars. When I played, he just listened or percussed on his guitar like a drum; when he played, I noodled around with my limited single-line guitar playing. He'd been a full-time busker for the last ten years, traveling solo, all over the world. He parked his van on logging roads, cooked rice in parking lots, and had recently been attacked by a drunk with a knife outside the Ukee liquor store, but it was no big deal. There was a lull in our conversation and we both sat on the log looking out at the horizon. He said he dreamed of getting a sailboat. So he could be even more alone.

But he seemed to also be into making friends, and we agreed to go surfing together. After a mildly embarrassing moment in the parking lot where I waved eagerly to another vanlifer changing into a wetsuit, I found the right person and we headed down to the beach.

The waves were ginormous. Though I knew better, I paddled out after the busker, who skimmed ahead of me on his zippy, white short board. As I turtle-rolled under each oncoming wave, their tremendous force and power torqued me out of the water with aggressive warnings. I knew it was stupid but I kept going, planning to catch up to him, tell him I was going in, but by the time I reached him, we were past the break. We straddled our boards in the rain as waves built under us, big as hills, listening to them explode ahead of us, kicking up inverse waterfalls of spray. I was terrified. The busker laughed, assured me I was fine, offering some unhelpful wisdom about "Big Momma" and her whims. These waves were way bigger than the sunset waves at North Chestie that other time, and the busker and I were the only ones out there. The last time I had feared for my life like this was on the slopes at Big Sky, Montana, where I was playing at a bluegrass festival. Only having skied twice before, on high school field trips, I spent a morning on the bunny hill. But I wanted to be with my friends, so I forced myself onto the lift, vertigo coursing through my body as my skis dangled in the air. My black-diamond friends were gracious enough to accompany me on one of the green slopes, and as we slid towards the edge of the hill, one by one I watched them slip off the edge and glide away. I stood at the lip and felt my heart ache with terror, my feet throbbing. Seriously considering taking off my skis and walking down the hill, no matter how long it took.

I went for it. But somehow, my morning practice on the bunny hill hadn't involved learning how to zig-zag, how to slow down with the 'pizza' shape, or how to stop. I shot straight down the hill like a bullet, screaming, crouched forward tensely, accelerating faster and faster and faster, rocketing past my friends at twice their speed. At some point my blood-curdling howl abruptly ceased and I had a very



serious conversation with myself, during which I'm pretty sure God was #holdingspace for me. I whispered to myself, to God, that I'd had a really good life, I'd been #blessed, and I felt grateful, and almost peaceful, and death was not scary at all. Then I remembered that I could kill someone else too if I wasn't careful, and then every last brain cell was called on deck to make sure I did not do this. I went over some small bump and was airborne for a moment, making a smooth landing. This set off a laughing attack, which continued until finally the slope's gradient eased enough that I was able to safely drop into a fluffy snowbank in a laughing crying pile of goosedown and wool and Gore-Tex.

So, fuckin giv'er. At the busker's whistle-coach encouragement, I went for a wave, knowing full well I was fucked. It pinched me in its giant grasp and yanked me out of the water and flung me in the air, then pinned me back down into its breast and punched down on me. I felt my limbs being torn in all directions. I knew I shouldn't panic, but wasn't sure how. My legs tangled in my leash, and I kicked frantically, holding my breath with all my might, not knowing for how long I'd have to. I would come up gasping for air, swallowed throatfuls of water, just in time to refill my lungs before another wave mashed down on me, drop D, sludge in the drainpipe, dead grandma, failed relationships, mutating viruses, millions dead. With the wetsuit hood snug around my head, I began to doubt my ability to discern water from air, tumbling, tumbling. I was quickly so exhausted I could barely pull myself onto my board between thrashings. There were no peaceful moments of divine counsel, no release of laughter. It was like having Nāmaka's thugs break my bones in a back alley, with only the lonely busker to find my bloodied corpse and somehow contact my family. But finally, my feet found the sand, and I limped up the beach and collapsed, my heart racing, feeling like a pulverized piece of kelp.

You have to cross the line sometimes to find where it is. The next time I took my board out it was perfectly flat at Mackenzie. I paddled from one end of the beach to the other, lying on my back on the board, looking up at the sky. I had the whole place to myself, except for the occasional overhead seagull, diving murre, jumping fish or curious seal. I never got cold – I still loved those first few steps into the ocean, not feeling anything but the grip of the water, like I could feel the bonds between the hydrogen and oxygen atoms, feeling like a seal myself. Sometimes I went at sunset and blissed out on the light fringing the clouds and reflecting on the water, and the crest of shoreline ahead and the beach dotted with small fires, people huddled together, laughing, the pale moon smudged behind a cloud, little islands offshore black against the shifting light show. I felt not just content, but full of gratitude for being alive, for being in this place, for being free. And for the endless waves. Endless, endless waves.

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