

TEMPORARY SECRETARY

A Memoir(ish)

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INTRODUCTION

“IF YOU WANT TO STOP STEREOTYPES, THEN STOP BEING ONE”

Temporary / tempə,rerē / *Secretary* / 'sekri,terē/: A person employed on a temporary basis, typically a typist or office worker who finds employment through an agency, lasting for only a limited period of time; not permanent.

I'll be honest; I've struggled with writing a captivating introduction to my book. I keep thinking to myself: I've written a book, how hard can it be? Evidently, it's not as easy as I thought!

I've written and rewritten my “introduction” several times, and I'm still not sure if I got it right or not? I confess, writing the book was easy in comparison to trying to sum it up in just a few paragraphs. What could I possibly say that would entice you to read it? I'm inherently aware that the introduction could determine whether you read my book or not. I knew I needed to write an introduction that would compel you to keep reading!

In the first draft introduction, it read a lot like a term paper for a college business class. Boring. But thankfully, I scrapped it.

In the second draft of my introduction, I foolishly compared being a secretary to prostitution. One day, while feeling exceptionally cynical about my job, I decided to look up the dictionary definition of “prostitute”. Although the definition was for the word “prostitute”, I couldn't help but feel it fit my frame of mind:

To use one's abilities, etc., wrongly or in a way that is not worthy of them, especially in order to earn money.

After much deliberation, and some good advice from friends, I decided it would be injudicious to compare being a secretary to sex trade workers. It wouldn't be fair because I have choices – but for those who end up on the street, most don't.

So I asked myself, “How can I best sum up what my book is about?” I decided to keep it simple. In a nutshell, it’s about friendship, family, love, heartache, triumphs, partying, money, traveling, impersonating a candy striper and, yes, work. I don’t profess to be a literary genius; far from it. And while the subject matter of my book isn’t ground-breaking, it’s based on real stories and is written from the heart.


For those literary geniuses who may actually take the time to read my book, and who come across a thousand grammatical errors, I say this: Thank you! But seriously, before embarking on my writing journey, I read Katherine Hepburn’s book *“The Making of the African Queen: Or How I Went to Africa With Bogart, Bacall and Huston and Almost Lost My Mind”*. Her unique “conversational” style of writing showed me that the only tools I really needed to write a book was a voice, some discipline and a good story. Granted, her story was *really* good. It’s debatable whether mine is or not. But somehow I don’t think that matters? Because, at the end of the day, good or bad, I wrote a book – I have a voice and a whole lot of discipline. And understand you don’t need to be a member of some “elitist club” to write a book; anybody can do it (with the right tools). But I’d also like to add, that my book is essentially a manuscript – a work in progress (over the past seven years). I don’t for one second suggest my book/manuscript is perfect; every time I read it, I’m editing as I go along (in fact, I’m editing it right now!). So please be warned – before you judge, you’re about to read a work in progress!

I’m calling my book a “memoir(ish)” because, to be honest, sometimes I can’t recall what I did yesterday let alone 30 years ago. I’m not saying the events in my book did or didn’t happen, but if I couldn’t remember certain details then I simply made them up. In some cases, it’s like having a major do-over. For example, you know when you tell a friend a story and they respond, “I would have said [this or that]” and you think to myself, “Damn, I wished I’d thought of that!” Well, after years of telling and retelling my stories (work-related or not), I was finally inspired to commit them to paper because I knew if I didn’t, eventually my memory would fade and I’d regret not giving myself an opportunity to “improve” upon the original experience.

Because, lying awake at night, sometimes I cringe when I think of the things I've either done or said (but I find comfort in knowing I'm not alone, at least with those cringe-inducing thoughts). But rest assured, every story in this book comes from real life experiences with real people. However, I did have to change the names of the characters in my book to protect the guilty.

"Offices are the microcosm of a dysfunctional society in the history of mankind; think feudalism, fascism, and military dictatorships."

Quote: Fired Co-Worker (2011)

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**
*(Note: The original spelling of my early
Diary entries is kept throughout the
Manuscript to maintain integrity!)*

**I tried to build a cage for my squirrel today
but I couldn't.
It snowed a little.
I went sopping in the lumber yard.
And it was fun in the lumber yard.**



FRIDAY THE 13TH (AGE 31 - 1998)

Blouse: Crisp, white and see-through. I've often wondered if a man invented the standard "white blouse" for office workers.

Nylons: Black, sheer and absent of runs, of course.

Navy suit: Not today. I'm opting to wear a satin ribbon pinstriped charcoal grey power suit (I got a great deal on it at a local consignment shop).

Shoes: One pair black patent Nine West pumps (vintage, from my mom's closet).

Handbag: I bought a gorgeous black boiled wool bag from Target at nearly 70% off. It'll match my outfit perfectly.

Hair: Do I wear it up or down? Up. It's less work that way.

Lipstick: I'm feeling bold. I think I'll wear lipstick today, even if it is "nude".



In the six years I've lived here, I have yet to properly visit the esteemed Hotel Vancouver. Oh sure, I've strolled through its majestic lobby with floors of marble and walls of oak on more than one occasion. Perhaps even slipping into the piano lounge for a stupidly priced, yet graciously served, martini. But whether you're a guest or just passing through, you're always made to feel welcome as you're greeted with rows of colourful flags from seemingly every country, walls of turn-of-the century black

and white photographs, and two cuddly “comfort dogs” named Isobel and Jake (Golden Labs employed solely for the comfort of the Hotel’s guests). However, for me, most visits to the Hotel are typically preceded by an evening of drinking and debauchery with friends. Staggering home, I’ve had to pop in a time or two to visit their immaculately clean bathrooms. But today is different. Today, I’m here with a real sense of purpose and I’m standing upright, in a pinstriped suit and sober.



Reaching into my suit pocket, I retrieved the paper I’d written the job interview details on, examining it again in case I missed something. I list “strong attention to detail” under the heading “Skills” on my resume; I shall attempt to put this skill into action. Two days earlier, I spoke with Tamarah, the receptionist at Legal Recruitment, a local temp agency for legal staff. She was calling to set up a job interview. Currently broke and unemployed, and with no other job prospects, this was welcomed news. Plus, I was excited to learn Legal Recruitment was located on the 16th floor of the esteemed Hotel Vancouver. For two days, I envisioned what the view must be like from up there. I imagined a very metropolitan office with a stunning panoramic view. Why wouldn’t it be? After all, it’s located in the City’s most prominent landmarks. However, now that I’m actually at the hotel, I realized finding the 16th floor might not be so easy. The “film noir” entrance I was hoping for was now playing out like a Charlie Chaplin “keystone cop”¹ movie.

Glancing around the empty lobby, I was distracted by the sparse yet elegant pieces of oak and mahogany furniture, and beautiful vases of fresh cut flowers. The lobby décor, while reminiscent of the Overlook Hotel in the film “The Shining”, was thankfully less eerie. After a quick survey of the lobby, I finally spotted the bank of elevators. Even though the hotel was built in 1916, I was pleasantly surprised to see eight large elevators; rivaling even the most modern hotels. Casually making my way to the pristinely polished brass elevators, I pushed the button to summons one. What

¹ Fictional incompetent policemen, featured in silent film comedies in the early 20th century

felt like an extraordinary amount of time, an empty elevator finally arrived. Stepping in, I glanced at the panel of buttons for the 16th floor but was slightly alarmed that I couldn't locate one. *That's odd*, I thought to myself, *there has to be a 16th floor – I'm sure that's what Tamarah told me. Didn't she?* I began second guessing myself. For the fourth time in two days, I ran the conversation through my mind, trying to evoke any scrap of information I might have missed.

Chrystala: [*answering her cell phone*] Hello, Chrystala speaking.

Tamarah: Hi, may I speak to Chrystala, please.

Chrystala: [*hesitating*] This is Chrystala.

Tamarah: My name is Tamarah and I'm calling from Legal Recruitment. Betsy Butt received your resume and would like to meet with you. Would you be interested in coming in?

Chrystala: [*excited but holding back*] Yes, of course.

Tamarah: Are you available for an interview, say, this Friday?

Chrystala: Absolutely. And it's Friday the 13th! Good thing I'm not superstitious.

Tamarah: Pardon me?

Chrystala: [*hesitating*] Never mind...just my attempt at a joke.

Tamarah: Okay. How about ten a.m.

Chrystala: Perfect. Not too early, I like that.

Tamarah: Sorry?

Chrystala: [*stifling a laugh*] Nothing.

Tamarah: Great. I'll give you our address. Do you have a pen handy?

Chrystala: Yes...I have a pen...handy.

Tamarah: [*hesitating*] Okay, so we're located on the 16th floor of the Hotel Vancouver. Have you been to our office before?

Chrystala: No...but I've been to the hotel before.

Tamarah: Good. Then you know where we're located?

Chrystala: Yes.

Tamarah: Great. See you Friday at ten am. [*hesitating*] Oh, I see it's a Friday the 13th!

Chrystala: Really? I did not know that.

Tamarah: I hope you're not superstitious?

Chrystala: Thanks, Tamarah. See you Friday.

Tamarah: See you Friday.



Standing alone in the elevator, I stared blankly at the panel of buttons. *This can't be right*, I thought to myself again. Attention to detail – right, well then, I'll count out each button if I have to. Admittedly, I did have pre-interview nerves so I *must* be missing something.

"Slow down and breathe," I said out loud to myself. "You can do this, Chrystala...how difficult can this be?" Trying not to laugh at the situation, I bent down in front of the panel, and began counting out each button.

"One, two...ten, eleven...fourteen...fifteen." Evidently, this was proving to be more difficult than originally anticipated. *Why did I have to go out and party last night?* I chastised myself.

Looking around the confines of the elevator for any clue to the existence of a 16th floor, but finding none, I slowly re-read my handwritten notes again. I definitely wrote down the 16th floor but I was beginning to doubt myself even more. I decided I needed help. I needed to find someone, like a security guard or concierge. Casually strolling out of the elevator, I spotted the security desk conveniently located across from the elevators. Approaching the desk, I saw the lone security guard sitting behind

the counter. His nametag read "HECTOR". Hector smiled at me but didn't bother to get up.

"Ah, excuse me," I said with some trepidation. Despite his position behind the desk, he was still a man in uniform.

"May I help you, Miss?" he asked politely. I liked that he didn't call me ma'am. I missed the days of being called Miss. Lately, I was more prone to hearing ma'am, which made me feel old and tired.

I couldn't help but notice that Hector had a lazy eye. Perhaps he was born with it or perhaps, worse yet, he'd suffered an injury. Maybe, I thought, he was ex-military and was given an honourable discharge after being injured in the line of duty? I tried not to focus on Hector's lazy eye. Holding up my handwritten notes, I politely asked, "Yes, Hector, I'm looking for the 16th floor?" Judging by his reaction, this was not the first time he'd heard this question. Letting out a chuckle, Hector took a deep breath before launching into his long-winded and well-rehearsed response.

"There's no elevator access to the 16th floor, miss. You need to take the elevator to the 15th floor. Get off on the 15th floor. To the left of the elevators is a door to a stairwell. There's an intercom on the wall by the door. The door is locked so you'll need to use the intercom. Who is it you are looking for?"

Slightly flustered at his onslaught of information, I fumbled with my notes and held them up even closer for his inspection. *Perhaps, I mused to myself, with only one good eye, he couldn't see so well.* "Ah, yes, I'm looking for the temp agency Legal Recruitment," I answered. Hector nodded.

"Buzz 1607," he instructed. "When the door unlocks, take the stairs up to the 16th floor. Legal Recruitment is at the top of the stairs, to your left."

Staring blankly back at Hector, I hoped he was finished. He looked away from me but continued to smile, no doubt waiting for me to leave so he could get back to his book. Glancing down, I noticed a red dog-eared book lying on the counter in front

of him. I was surprised to see he was reading “Chaos” by James Gleick. Perhaps, I surmised, a hotel guest had left it behind?

“This all seems rather cloak and dagger, don’t you think?” I asked quietly, leaning forward so only Hector could hear me. Not that anybody else was listening.

Laughing, he nodded his head. “Yeah, but it’s easy...you’ll see.” And with that, there was nothing further to discuss. With Hector’s instruction committed to my somewhat foggy memory, I took a deep breath and began my journey to the mysterious and elusive 16th floor. And much to my pleasant surprise, Hector was absolutely correct. Within a few minutes, I excitedly climbed the stairs up to the elusive 16th floor! And even more surprisingly, I was ten minutes early for my 10:00 a.m. interview. However, thanks to Betsy Butt, I would soon discover that my cloak and dagger journey would involve more dagger than cloak.



Sitting alone in the reception area at Legal Recruitment, I looked around to get my bearings. Tamarah greeted me when I first arrived, but then directed me to take a seat in reception, leaving me alone. Right away, and to my dismay, I observed the aging eighties décor of the office, complete with mauve and green walls (stenciled with foliage), complimentary (yet badly stained) gray wall-to-wall carpeting, and a dust laden faux fern that, to its testament, still hung lively, albeit largely ignored, over a long-abandoned reception desk. Never in a million years did I imagine that the top floor of this prestigious hotel, with essentially the best view in the entire building, would boast the worst décor. How could the Hotel allow its tenant to ruin such a glorious space? I could only guess that, as long as the rent was paid, nobody cared.

I felt compelled to get up and shake the dust off the faux fern but then I was distracted by the empty reception desk. On the face of it hung a large rectangular mirror. Unless you stood less than three feet tall, the mirror didn’t seem to serve a purpose. Although, being hung so low, it did allow me to inspect my shoes for any scuffs or rogue runs in my hosiery (provided they were below the knee).

Looking around the room, my attention shifted to the countless cheaply framed (and now badly faded) Georgiou² fashion prints, circa 1980, that hung crooked on the walls. They reminded me of my friend Michelle's dad's man-cave back when I was in junior high school. I chuckled to myself as I looked around to see if I could spot a framed picture of Burt Reynolds posing naked on a bear rug, but sadly to no avail. *Darn, I thought to myself, I could really use a good laugh right now.*

Among the faded Georgiou prints, badly stained carpeting and dusty faux fern, I spied a cluttered corkboard covered with an array of aged thank-you cards from happy clients and candidates. Without getting up I tried to read them. A few cards had fluffy kittens on them, some a bouquet of flowers (I suppose the card was cheaper than the real thing) and a few simply said "Thank You". I started feeling like I was in an episode of "Outer Limits" – the episode where the girl steps through a low hanging mirror into a long abandoned, poorly decorated office where she's held prisoner, only to discover she can't escape unless she wins a challenge against the evil recruiter. However, the evil recruiter already had an advantage, because she possessed supernatural powers. She could berate and humiliate without even opening her mouth, thus rendering her opponent vulnerable and weak. Actually, I just made that up. I do that sometimes when I'm bored.

Snapping back to my eighties reality, I tried to relax and checked out my Nine West pumps in the low hanging mirror. "Excellent choice," I said quietly to myself, not that anyone was listening.

Shifting in my chair, I glanced at the entrance door, which was starting to look appealing. The door was propped open by a large cast-iron "basket of flowers" door-stop and, for the first time, I noticed the door had been hand-painted with small pink and yellow flowers on vines of green leaves. Suddenly, I felt overdressed, which was a pretty remarkable thing considering I was at such a fancy hotel. And not unlike the dusty faux fern, I was also starting to feel ignored. Glancing down at my watch, I

² During the 1980s, artist Nick Georgiou was known for his art-deco pop fashion illustrations, similar to the art of Patrick Nagel, whose art was on the cover of several Duran Duran albums (most notably Rio).

noticed I'd already been here for twenty minutes. Aside from being initially greeted by Tamarah, I'd been left in the waiting room, alone, for what felt like an eternity. Looking around for a magazine or newspaper, but finding none, I wished I had brought a book to read. Foolish me for thinking I wouldn't need one.

Growing impatient, I wondered if in fact anybody even worked here. Although, having said that, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. I quickly looked around to see if I could spot a CCT camera. Maybe they were observing my behaviour when I thought nobody was watching, to see if I would pick my nose or adjust my bra. I tried to recall if I'd done that already? I resigned myself to the fact that I probably had.

As I sat waiting, I remembered a story my mom told me once, years ago. Throughout the years, my mom also worked as a secretary. One year, she interviewed at our local high school for the office secretary position.

The interview began with a standard five-minute timed typing test. The woman in charge of testing, Maggie, brought my mom into a room and sat her down at a desk with a typewriter.

"There will be two tests," Maggie barked. "The first one won't count but the second test will." She wound and set a timer. Setting it down on the desk, she promptly left the room. Taking those instructions into consideration, my mom spent the first five minutes playing around on the old Underwood typewriter, adjusting the margins, checking the ribbon, and typing over and over again the phrase "the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog", in an attempt to loosen up her fingers. She assumed that since the first test didn't count, she would take this opportunity to warm up for the second test.

Five minutes passed, and the timer bell went off. Maggie re-entered the room, marched over to my mom's typewriter and forcefully ripped the paper out from her typewriter.

"Thank you, we'll be in touch," she said sternly. My mom was absolutely horrified.

“What about the second test?” my mom asked nervously. “Didn’t you say there would be two typing tests?” Maggie stood in front of my mom, intimidating as an army drill sergeant, her arms crossed in front of her ample chest, which she pushed out for added emphasis.

“There is only *one* test!” she responded loudly, her voice echoing around the empty classroom. “We like to see how people spend their time. You can leave now.” Needless to say, my mom never did hear back from the school. She learned a valuable lesson that day.

Distracted by noises coming from another room through an open door to my left, I was pulled out of my near slumber. I’d been sitting for so long in the uncomfortable reception chair that my bum was beginning to feel numb. I turned to watch a plump woman in her early fifties attempting to pull a new office chair out of the confines of a cardboard box. I sat smiling; my hands neatly folded on my lap, struggling to do my best Princess Diana pose, looking in the direction of the plump woman. Still ignored, however, I continued to watch her, who I guessed must be Betsy.

Betsy’s attire demanded my attention, reminding me of the faded Georgiou prints. It was Friday, which is commonly known as “Jeans Day” in the corporate world. Interview aside, Betsy wore a too-tight see-through t-shirt, a too-tight knock-off pair of designer jeans, a well-worn black blazer, and a pair of scuffed knee-high black patent boots. I wondered to myself if she ever thought to use the mirror in reception. Finally, Betsy looked over at me and, making eye contact for the first time, frowned.



“You married?” Betsy asked, bluntly.

“No.”

“What about children? Ya got any children?”

“Ah...no,” I answered hesitantly, slightly confused by her line of questioning.

“Do ya get sick a lot?”

“Pardon me?” I interjected.

“Do you take a lot of sick time?” She reworded her question, her voice raised, confusing me even more because I wasn’t deaf, I simply couldn’t understand her completely unorthodox questions. I’ve interviewed several times throughout the years, but never before had I been asked such personal questions. However, nervous and desperate for work, I soldiered on.

“Ah...no. I don’t,” I politely answered, trying to muster up some confidence. “But when I do get sick, which isn’t often – maybe once a year, if that – I usually take a few days to recover.” *Wait a second*, I thought to myself, *what the hell am I saying?* I paused for a moment, thinking about what I should say next. I was desperate for work, but perhaps this was a test? I decided to confront her. “I’m sorry,” I continued. “But can you ask these sorts of questions in an interview?”

“Look,” Betsy said indignantly. “I don’t have a lot of time, so let’s keep this rolling, shall we?” Apparently, this was not some kind of test, unless you counted my patience. She was just a diva, plain and simple. I was under the impression her precious time was being wasted. But I reminded myself how broke I was. Perhaps it was a bad idea to be confrontational. I decided to hold back.

“Um, yes, all right,” I said apologetically, not knowing what else to say.

“Your resume,” she started. In one motion, she picked up my resume before tossing it back down onto the desk, a look of repulsion spreading across her face. I sat silently waiting for her to continue. I learned during an interview to always let people finish their sentences, even if it meant a few moments of awkward silence.

“You’ve had a lot of temp jobs. What’s up with that?” Ugly Betsy finally finished her earlier thought. But I had to catch my breath before answering. I do hear this question a lot, although never asked so rudely. Perhaps Friday the 13th wasn’t such a great day for an interview after all.

“I do a lot of temporary and contract work – covering for mat leaves, vacations, illnesses and that sort of thing,” I answered. I never viewed temping as an evil profession.

“Why is that, exactly?” she questioned, her eyes narrowing at me. “Why do you like temporary or contract work?” I hear this question a lot as well (although, again, not usually asked so rudely). But it’s like asking why I buy a particular brand of toilet paper, or why I wear green eye shadow. It’s all about choices.

“Why do I like contract work?” I repeated the question, trying not to sound facetious because I was becoming irritated with her aggressiveness towards me. It wasn’t so much the questions she was asking, although they were completely off-line, but the offensive tone she took with me.

“Yes. That is what I asked you, isn’t it?” she snapped, letting out an exasperated sigh, looking over at her assistant, Tamarah. Tamarah sat quietly in the chair next to me. She smiled meekly, but without comment.

Before starting the interview, Ugly Betsy directed us into a small room located off reception. She said she wanted her new assistant Tamarah to join us as part of her training. Having already spoken to Tamarah on the phone, I liked the idea of having an ally next to me. But even though there were three of us in the room, it felt empty and cold. The room was small, but it had a desk and three uncomfortable chairs, yet noticeably absent was any form of modern technology, such as a phone, desk lamp or even a computer. In my experience, every recruiter tested potential candidates’ typing skills, but looking around the small barren room it felt more like a torture chamber. It was an odd set-up, but then again this was an odd interview.

I could feel myself losing control of the interview, although I doubted I had any control in the first place. Trying to maintain my composure, and still sound quasi-professional, I answered Ugly Betsy’s question.

“Well, I enjoy traveling, which I’ve done a fair bit of over the last few years.” I always thought traveling showed that I was “worldly”. “I also enjoy the flexibility of

temping.” And isn’t flexibility something we all look for in colleagues and staff? My response was well rehearsed, but I wasn’t expecting her next so-called observation.

“You know what I think?” she announced, her eyes still narrowed and her lips beginning to purse. For added impact and drama, she looked over at Tamarah and then back at me before continuing. I waited with bated breath for her to finish because, up until now, I had no idea what she was thinking. “I think you’re mischievous. Yup, that’s what I think.” Sitting casually in her chair, with her right arm draped over the back as if at a backyard BBQ, I couldn’t help noticing her bra was too small. The only thing Ugly Betsy was missing was a rye and coke in one hand and cigarette in the other.

If awards were being given out for the worst interview, I’m sure this one would get the highest accolades. I was completely taken aback by Ugly Betsy’s completely unconventional interview process. Why was I answering her absurd questions? Why didn’t I just thank her for her precious time and simply walk out the door? Any self-respecting person would have.

I felt my heart pounding in my chest. I wanted to stand up and run out the door as fast as I could without looking back, but the harsh realization was that I was desperate for work. After all, I reasoned with myself, rent and food didn’t pay for themselves, and sadly neither did holidays.

Pulling my focus back to the so-called interview, I realized Ugly Betsy was staring at me, impatiently anticipating my response. Instead of responding right away, I just sat there, stunned. I quickly looked away from her and tried to nonchalantly catch Tamarah’s attention, who I hoped might break the thick layer of tension in the room. Perhaps she could give me a signal that this was some kind of a windup? But she looked as uncomfortable as I did. She wouldn’t (or couldn’t) look at me; instead she leaned forward in her chair and scratched her ankle. *Great*, I thought to myself.

“I would *never* send you out as a temp,” Ugly Betsy loudly announced, interrupting my failed attempt at getting her assistant’s attention. But Ugly Betsy’s

annoying voice snapped me to reality. It was obvious by both her angry tone and loaded comments she was itching for a fight. Why she had such a hate-on for me was anybody's guess, but I had officially reached my limit. If she wanted a fight, then a fight she would get. It was time to lace up the gloves and step into the ring.

"What? *Why the hell not?*" I blurted out, my voice involuntarily rising, making me sound like a prepubescent schoolgirl, not that I cared. "Why would you *say that?*" Like taking a car out of neutral and stepping on the gas, I could literally feel the release of adrenaline surging through my veins. I was thrilled at the look of shock on Ugly Betsy's face, which aided in pushing me on. And man, did it ever feel fantastic!

"I am *totally* offended!" I continued, my voice still elevated yet somehow, I managed to maintain some semblance of composure. "From the moment I reached the 16th floor and stepped into this grotesquely eighties time-warp you call an office – which, by the way is hideous – you've had it in for me!" The fury and newfound confidence in my voice let her know this match was well underway. She may have won the first round but this one was all mine. But I wasn't finished, at least not yet.

"*Why* are you *being* such a bitch to me?" I nearly shouted. I was practically out of breath, but I stood my ground. Still sitting, although by now on the edge of my seat, I stared Ugly Betsy down and waited for her response. Not surprisingly, it didn't take long for her rebuttal.

"Because," she hissed back at me. "You may not know this, but your reputation as a temp exceeds you! And word on the street is..." she hesitated for added emphasis before finishing. "You suck!" Involuntarily, I gasped. *Where the hell did that come from?* Clearly, she was playing dirty. Now the gloves were off, and the fight had turned into a no-holds-barred anything-goes match. I felt a small bead of sweat drip down the small of my back.

"You represent *my* company," she barked at me. Clearly, she wanted full command of the ring. I let her continue. "If I sent you out on a temp assignment, and something went wrong, it would fall back onto *me*, and my reputation." She stopped only to pull more hot air into her lungs. "It's *my* reputation on the line and I cannot..."

Ugly Betsy halted her tirade for a moment, searching for the right words to say before continuing her assault. “No, let me rephrase that,” she said while pointing a finger at me. “I *will not* take that risk, not with *you*.”

Even with the adrenaline still pumping through my veins, I suddenly didn’t feel like fighting anymore. I felt sick, like I’d eaten a shit sandwich for breakfast, which wasn’t far from the truth. She was ruthless and evil. And something she said really bothered me. But my mind went hazy and I lost my focus. But either way, I had no more fight left in me. I just wanted out. I looked around for a white towel.

“I don’t understand?” I finally managed to respond. “I’ve temped on and off for years and never had any problems. In fact, I’m *good* at it,” I remarked with a hint of pride in my voice. “And I actually enjoy temping, which not many people can say.” I wasn’t being altogether truthful, but I said it anyway in the hopes of somehow placating the situation. However, Ugly Betsy wasn’t finished with me yet.

“A *good* temp flies under the radar,” she added indignantly. “Your job is to go in, do the work, and leave. That’s it.” She stopped to take another deep breath before continuing. “In fact, after you’ve left a job, it should be as though you were never there.” Scornfully, she peered at me through her squinty rat-like eyes, acting as though she knew something I didn’t. “A good temp doesn’t *gossip*, or spend time making idle chit chat, or even make friends.” To further demonstrate her point, she motioned with her hands, moving them back and forth like an umpire before finally finishing her commentary. “In...out. That’s it!” Off in the distance, I thought I heard the clanging of a bell. Round two was over and I was face down on the canvas, my face bloodied and my teeth scattered around me. I felt a headache coming on.

Ugly Betsy shifted in her chair and now sat upright and rigid, glaring back at me as though challenging me, daring me even, to respond. This wasn’t an interview, this was a verbal shit kicking, and with that stark realization I knew I’d lost the fight.

As I sat in the uncomfortable chair, stunned, I heard her voice ringing in my ears still. *Word on the street is you suck*. Did she really say that? Who told her that? And why? Calmly, I asked the dreaded question.

“Who told you I suck?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer, but ultimately the question begged to be asked.

“What difference does it make?” Ugly Betsy snapped back at me.

“It makes a huge difference!” I quickly responded, irritated that she couldn’t, or wouldn’t, back up her accusation. “Who told you?”

“Well, if you must know, I happen to be good friends with Iain McGovern, from the University,” she revealed. “Ring any bells?” My jaw dropped, and my eyes went wide as saucers. I was shocked, but not altogether surprised. This was my past coming back to haunt me; my “skeleton” in the closet. I hadn’t forgotten how I’d told my former boss, Iain, to fuck off, but that seemed so long ago now. The thought of facing the consequences of that fateful day, again, seemed too overwhelming. I’d already lived it once, and then relived it a thousand more times in my mind. In fact, for weeks and months it haunted me. How many nights of sleep I’d lost over it (too many to count)? I came to the stark realization that, unless I did something pronto, I would be haunted by my past, once again. I made a decision that was long overdue.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say that this interview is over?” I suggested, my throat tight and my mouth pasty and dry. Ugly Betsy let out an exaggerated laugh.

“Why would you say that?” she demanded. “And who says “out on a limb”? Like, what does that even *mean*?” The sound of her wretched laughter began to suffocate me. Then, without warning, I felt shaky and light headed. I tried taking shorter breaths in an attempt to calm myself and preserve what little composure I had left, but the air only tasted bitter and stale. My head swirled and the room felt claustrophobic. I was enveloped by the sound of my heart pounding loudly in my chest. I watched as Ugly Betsy continued to laugh, her mouth still moving, but I couldn’t hear anything above the sound of my racing heartbeat. The last time I felt like this was moments before I passed out when I was 14 years old. That’s when the darkness enveloped me.



Finding myself back downstairs in the hotel lobby, I quickly made my way out onto the bustling city street. The crisp winter air caressed my face as I became overwhelmed with the urge to cry.

“No goddammit!” I said out loud to myself. “I’m *not* going to let that bitch get to me.”

I hurried to make the light, crossing the street to my favourite sanctuary. Stopping outside the liquor store, I fumbled through my purse for my wallet. A street musician had taken up residence outside the entrance. He sat on an old yellow milk crate and played “Here Comes the Sun” on a beat up old six-string. I stood staring at the street musician, who continued to sing without taking notice of me.

How the hell did I end up here? In a previous life I must have been a horrible person and this was the Universe’s way of right-coursing itself. Or maybe this was a karmic debt I was paying back? I still felt dizzy and everything around me seemed to spiral as the street musician continued to sing. I could still taste the bitterness in my mouth.

“Little darling, it feels like years since it’s been here”.

What would George Harrison do? I jokingly asked myself. I wanted to laugh but knew that, if I did, only tears would surface. A string broke on his guitar but he continued on, not missing a beat.

“...and I say, it’s all right.”

I looked around for a phone booth. Spotting one, I quickly stepped in and closed the door behind me. Retrieving a quarter from my wallet, I managed to get it into the slot without dropping it. From memory, I punched in the phone number and impatiently waited for my call to connect.

“Come on. Please be home,” I said frantically under my breath as I listened to my call ring a second time, and then a third. I tried to calm my breathing in anticipation of having to speak. As my call rang a fourth and fifth time I forced back the tears.

How did I get from “big fish in a small-town pond” to “bottom feeder of a big-city puddle”? All my dreams, high hopes and aspirations all somehow seemed so silly, pathetic and stupid now. I could still hear the street busker through the glass walls of the phone booth.

“Little darling, it seems like years since it’s been clear.”

Finally, after too many rings to count, my call was answered.

“Hello?” Just the sound of her voice sent waves of excitement over me.

“Lisa!” I practically yelled into the receiver. “It’s me. Listen, can you meet me at my place?” I asked quickly, as though trying to beat the clock.

“Um, sure,” Lisa said with a hint of curiosity in her voice. She knew I had an interview today but was probably surprised that I was calling so early. “I’m just finishing my laundry. Where are you?” Lisa could always tell when something was wrong. This, among thousands of many other reasons, too many to list here, was why she held the esteemed title as my very best friend.

“Outside the liquor store,” I said hesitantly, knowing this would worry her but I couldn’t lie. She always knew when I was lying.

“I thought I could hear a busker,” she noted with a chuckle. “Okay, well, give me 15 minutes and I’ll be right over.” Hearing the compassion in her voice choked me with emotion. I found myself paralyzed and unable to speak. I tried to but my throat restricted leaving me gawping like a fish out of water.

“Hang in there, kiddo,” she soothed. “I’m on my way.”

I tried to say “thank you” or even “good-bye” but all I could do was choke back the tears. I could hear Lisa saying good-bye before gently hanging up the phone. Unlike on television and in the movies, the dial tone didn’t kick in. I continued to stand there, tightly holding the receiver close to my ear, knowing full well the call had ended. I needed to pull myself together so I could attempt to string two thoughts together. Finally, I hung the receiver back on its cradle and slowly opened the phone booth door, walking back out into the crisp morning air.

I knew if I stood much longer listening to this guy sing George Harrison I was going to have to throw him some money. But I was broke and unemployed and, unlike this guy, I couldn't busk outside the liquor store; I didn't even own a guitar.

Hesitating, I removed the last twenty dollars from my wallet. I was saving it for an emergency, but if ever there was one, this was definitely it.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**

**I played a game of poker
and I wind both games.
Kevin was screaming and he was
throwing his clothes all over.**



HOW THE HELL DID I END UP HERE?

I'm going to stop my story right here. Before going any further, please allow me to shed some light on my back-story. Don't worry, I haven't dropped the ball – you'll find out what happened at Legal Recruitment and how I escape the evil clutches of Ugly Betsy. But first, I should tell you how I got here. I think it's important to go back to the beginning before jumping to the end.

A very long time ago, when I was a little girl, I had big dreams. I dreamt of becoming an actress, a singer, a world-champion figure skater, a jockey, a veterinarian, a famous screenplay writer...in that order. For a brief time, I even entertained the idea of becoming a travel agent, that or join the Navy, so I could get paid to travel the world. So what happened? When did I go from being a little girl with big dreams, to having one of the worst days of my adult life?

Well, as I reached adulthood, I discovered that there's a price to pay for the things you want the most and dreams became a luxury I could no longer afford. So, with guidance from my mother, I enrolled in college to follow in her clerical footsteps. "A secretary can work anywhere in the world," she eagerly advised. "Office skills are transferrable in any workplace." She was right. But I knew from the moment I received my diploma in the mail, I would never truly be happy working in an office. But for reasons that escape me, that notion didn't stop me from becoming a full-time secretary. And so my journey begins.



“So, what are you going to do now that you’ve graduated from college?” I heard my mom ask as I entered the kitchen, the morning sunlight beaming brightly through the large kitchen windows, hurting my brain.

“God, how can you see with all this light?” I asked, trying to inject a little humour into what could be turning into a “dreaded” conversation. Only days earlier, I had graduated from secretarial college, but the idea of working in an office caused my empty stomach to churn. Trying to ignore my mother’s question, I followed the smell of fresh coffee.

“You didn’t answer my question?” she asked, trying to sound casual but I knew she wasn’t going to let me shrug her off. Getting up from the kitchen table, she followed me to the coffee pot.

“I dunno,” I answered sleepily as my mom came up behind me and gave me a hug. It was too early in the morning to have a meaningful discussion about my future. I needed a cup of coffee first.

“Have you applied for any secretarial jobs yet?” she asked, instinctively handing me a clean cup from the coffee mug tree. She knew me all too well. And although I wasn’t living at home anymore, I did spend nearly every weekend here. The great thing about going to college in another city is you can have the best of both worlds; independence during the week and home cooked meals, free laundry facilities and all the beer I could drink on weekends. When you’re only 23 years old, there’s not much else that matters.

“No, not yet,” I answered as I poured myself a steaming cup of coffee. Pouring in a liberal amount of fresh cream straight from the cow, I studied the pattern it made in my coffee. I preferred to do this than dirty a spoon.

As my mom pulled my attention away from the inkblot experiment developing in my coffee mug, she directed me to join her at the kitchen table. I sensed my closed answers were starting to wear thin with her.

“Your father and I have been talking about your future,” she said, as I sat down across the table from her. Subconsciously, I rolled my eyes.

“Mom, I don’t really feel like talking about it right now,” I pleaded, but she continued without taking any notice.

“Why won’t you move back to Courtenay?” she asked, leaning forward to touch my arm with her hand. I knew where she was steering the conversation but moving back to Courtenay from Victoria somehow seemed like a step backwards. I grew up thinking I’d move to a big city one day, and although Victoria isn’t exactly a big city, it was certainly more metropolitan than Courtenay. It may still be Vancouver Island, but at least it was the capital of British Columbia, which somehow made it more important. Mind you, Victoria was also Canada’s third-highest concentration of people 65 years and older. It’s commonly referred to as the city of “the newlywed and nearly dead”. It’s not exactly a city built on “rock ‘n roll”, but at least it was quasi-urban. Growing up on a small farm in a small town the grass was, quite literally, greener on the other side.

“Then what?” I asked. “What will I do if I move back to Courtenay?” As a fresh graduate from a secretarial college with absolutely no office experience, I struggled to find work in Victoria. I could only imagine how difficult it would be to find work in a smaller community where jobs were already slim. After all, Canada was in the middle of yet another recession.

“Move back and we’ll build you a house on the property,” she answered. It became obvious that my parents had been doing a lot of talking about my future.

“Seriously?” I responded. “You’d build me a house. Where? On the farm?” I tried not to laugh at the idea.

“Yes, and you wouldn’t even have to pay rent,” she added, leaning back in her chair.

“You’re joking?” I asked, even though I knew full well my mom never joked about money. Still, it seemed too good to be true. And while it was certainly an

appealing offer, I needed to do some serious thinking about her proposition. I took a sip of my coffee and rubbed my head in an attempt to stimulate my brain.

“Plus,” my mom continued, inherently knowing I would need further convincing. “If you found a secretarial job here, we could commute to work together in the mornings. Think of all the gas money you’d save!”

“Wow,” I said as I continued to scratch my head, searching for something intelligent to say. “You and dad have really put a lot of thought into this.” My mom knew that money was tight for me. Aside from my student loan, my only other source of money was from my parents. But now that I’d graduated from college, I knew it was time to get to work.

“Well, your father and I both agree that you have a bright future ahead of you and we want to help.” My mom leaned forward and stroked my arm again, like only a mother can do. After relocating 350 kilometers to attend college, I knew how much she missed having me around. After high school, I worked at a video store for nearly five years, which meant most nights were spent watching movies together. That, or playing endless games of backgammon. I don’t think she adjusted as well to my absence as my dad did. But as much as I missed being home, I felt like there was something more for me, something bigger and better than what the farm could offer. I wasn’t ready to move back home, at least not yet. Not that I had any better ideas. But it wasn’t just the idea of moving back home that bothered me. Even though I had graduated from college with honours, I hated the thought of being a secretary. This was a dirty little secret I kept hidden from my parents because the last thing I wanted was to seem ungrateful. But now seemed like as good a time as ever to reveal my secret.

“Mom,” I started, hesitating slightly. “Can I tell you something and you promise not to get angry?” Judging from the look on her face, it was evident she was expecting me to say something unfavourable.

“Absolutely, sweetie,” she replied calmly, even though her expression told a different story. My mom trusted me, but every time I asked permission to tell her

something (and had her promise not to get mad), I think she was expecting me to tell her I was busted while driving impaired or, even worse, was pregnant. Deep down, I think I secretly enjoyed watching her sweat a bit because, in the end, the news was never as bad as she initially may have thought.

“Well, truthfully mom, I don’t want to work in an office,” I blurted out, avoiding eye contact. “I hate the idea of spending the rest of my life doing something I hate.” And there it was. Not as eloquently put as it perhaps it could have been, but at least it was the truth. I took another sip of coffee as I waited for a response, which didn’t take long.

“It’s a damn sight better than working at a video store,” she countered. “Besides, you can work anywhere in the world as a secretary. You now have excellent skills to fall back on.” My mom wasn’t wrong there. I knew when I started secretarial college that my newfound skills would be transferable to just about anywhere in the world. But, by the end of my second and final semester, I knew office work wasn’t for me. It was too conforming. At least working in the video store was fun. I thoroughly enjoyed dealing with the public and every day was different. Not to mention, I was literally paid to watch movies and then give my opinion. Whether a movie was good or bad, people wanted my opinion and there was no wrong or right. There seemed to be value in what I did.

“I loved that job!” I countered, insulted that the five years I spent working at the video store were now deemed worthless.

“That may be,” my mom replied. “But if you stayed, it’s not like you were ever going to go anywhere.”

“Not true,” I countered. “I was promoted to manager, remember?” Not that the promotion came with a bigger paycheck, but it felt good to be recognized for my years of dedication and hard work.

“Yeah, and you were fired six months later, remember?” she countered.

“No I wasn’t,” I quickly responded. “I quit. Ben *tried* to fire me but I beat him to it.” The truth was: I caught the new owner of the video store, Ben DeMarco, stealing from the cash register and then witnessed him using it to buy cocaine. When I challenged him about it, he tried to fire me. I naively used the standard line “you can’t fire me, I quit”, which may not have been my smartest move. So, after five solid years in the movie rental industry, I exited stage left.

“All I’m trying to say is keep your options open,” she offered, becoming exasperated with my facetiousness. My mom spent the last decade working with lawyers. She was a court clerk and it was obvious their ability to work both sides was rubbing off on her.

“I have been. I mean, I am.” I said in a feeble attempt to defend myself. What she didn’t know was that, although I hadn’t officially applied for any jobs yet, the college had approached me. They wanted me to apply for the vacant position as their office secretary, not that I’d shown any interest in the job. But, for some unknown reason, they were keen to have me work there. But I chose not to disclose this to my mom.

What my mom also didn’t know was, even though I dreaded the idea of being a secretary, I had signed up with one of the most prestigious temp firms in the country, Kelly’s Temporary Services. Their temps were known as “Kelly’s Girls”, which my brother mistakenly thought was an escort service.

“Really?” I heard the excitement in her voice. Even though I was close to my mom, I didn’t always tell her everything. So, when I did tell her something she didn’t already know, it was exciting for her. When it comes to parenting, I think they call this a “breakthrough”.

“Well, if you must know, I’m temping for Kelly’s,” I said with only a hint of triumph in my voice, and a whole lot of remorse. The main reason I hadn’t told my mom I was temping was because I didn’t want to admit defeat. How could I say I didn’t want to be a secretary when I was surreptitiously temping? From the look on her face she was both pleased and surprised.

“How come you didn’t tell me?” she squealed with delight. Temping is considered by many (my mom included) the first step in getting your “foot in the office door”, so to speak. I hesitated before answering.

“Well, mainly because I don’t think it’ll amount to anything,” I answered. I could feel the caffeine kicking in, but this conversation was starting to bore me. Standing up from the table, I shuffled my slippered feet back to the coffee maker and poured myself another cup.

“Really?” my mom responded. “Kelly’s is a very reputable company. They’ll find you a good job.” I stood at the counter with my back to her, staring as the cream spread through the black coffee in my cup. It still felt too early to be having this conversation. But as I stood staring at my coffee cup, I recalled a funny incident from my first temp job. I tried to stifle a giggle but my mom was quick to catch it.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, trying not to sound hurt. She needed reassurance I wasn’t laughing at her.

“It’s nothing. I was just remembering my first temp job.” Turning around, I made my way back to the kitchen table and resumed my seat. At my first and only temp job, I worked for a week at the Ministry of Highways and Transportation in Victoria. It wasn’t glamorous but it paid well and the money came in handy for things like rent, cigarettes and cheap wine.

“You’ve already been working as a temp?” she asked surprised, sitting up straight in her chair. “How come you didn’t tell me?”

“I dunno,” I lied. I knew exactly why I hadn’t told her. Because if I had, it cemented the fact that, as much as I didn’t want to be a secretary, it was too late; I already was one.

“What kind of work have you been doing?” she asked enthusiastically. Clearly, she was more excited about my temp work than I was. In truth, my first temp gig with Kelly’s was fairly painless and even made for an equally funny story, which I shared with my mom.

It was a fairly straightforward job - stuffing envelopes and printing literally hundreds of mailing labels. Plans to create a new highway on Vancouver Island were well underway and now the propaganda material to those voters who counted needed to be mailed out. That's where I came in.

After days of creating labels from a massive mailing list and collating the printed materials to be stuffed into each labeled envelope, I found myself working one-on-one with my supervisor in an attempt to meet the looming mailing deadline. We had a good system; my supervisor would read from the list, I would place the correlating label on an envelope (checking the list off as we went) and together we stuffed the envelopes. It was an efficient system, and we were making good progress, until I reached a name on the list that nearly made me choke. It was so unusual that I flat-out refused to say it out loud! My supervisor was my dad's age and I was too embarrassed to say it to his face.

"What's the next name on the list?" Gord, my supervisor, asked, slightly annoyed that I was holding up the process.

"Um...I can't. I can't say it," I replied nervously, not wanting to get into trouble but too embarrassed to read the next name on the list out loud. Becoming more irritated, Gord tossed his pen down and tried to look at the list that lay on the table before me.

"Oh, *come on*. Just say it. Time is of the essence," he said, loud and clear, exasperated by my defiance. Closing my eyes, I held my breath and turned the list around for his inspection, my finger pointing at the name. Grabbing the list, he practically shouted as he read the name I couldn't.

"The Honourable George Klit," he said, louder than necessary. With my eyes still closed, I was mortified that if I made eye contact with him I'd burst into laughter. He had, after all, just said the word "Klit" out loud, and to a girl young enough to be his daughter. Realizing what he'd just said, I heard him gasp. I slowly opened my eyes, looking up as I did to examine his face for some clue of what to say or do next. I couldn't tell who was more embarrassed; me or him.

“Oh...my,” he stammered. “That can’t be right. Is that really his name?” It did strike me that it was a typo.

I could see Gord struggling not to laugh, although his face turned as red from embarrassment as mine already was. It’s not often you hear an elder use a “private” word, even if it was somebody’s last name. I could see he wanted to laugh but showed great restraint not to.

“No wonder you didn’t want to say it!” he said, finally breaking the ice. We burst into laughter, relieving the nervous tension that, but for a brief moment, had taken over the small confines of our workspace.

By the time I finished telling my story, my mom was holding her sides from laughing so hard. Luckily, I have a solid relationship with my mom and, when it came to my sense of humour, nothing I could do or say would ever offend her. Finally, she finished laughing so she could speak.

“Can you imagine if I was clerking and he was the presiding judge?” she asked as a stream of tears rolled down her cheeks, streaking her makeup. After having spent years working on-and-off as a secretary, my mom now worked as a court clerk in Provincial and Supreme Court.

“I’m trying to imagine you standing up as the Judge entered the courtroom and announcing loud and clear “All rise, the Honourable George Klit presiding.” I blurted out through a fit of laughter. My mom smacked the table with both her hands in a failed attempt to control her laughter. She struggled to regain her composure.

“I would have changed my name!” she was finally able to say, wiping the streams of tears from her cheeks.

“Oh, totally!” I replied. “I would have changed it to Clitoris!” Bursting into another fit of laughter, the two of us practically fell off our chairs.

“I wonder if he *was* a Taurus?” she managed to say as she tried to stay upright on her chair, but without much luck. Our sides hurt from laughing so hard that I doubted we’d ever be able to sit upright again.

“Oh my goodness,” she finally managed to say, catching her breath. “I haven’t laughed like that in years. Thank you.” Taking a sip from her coffee, she got the giggles again, launching us both back into uncontrollable fits of laughter. Maybe temping wasn’t that bad after all, especially if I could look back on this experience and laugh about it. Thankfully, working in an office didn’t totally kill my sense of humour. In fact, without it, I doubt I could have survived working in an office at all, not that everybody appreciates my humour. But without it, I likely wouldn’t be here today.



Much to my chagrin, I started working at the college shortly before my 24th birthday. While my mom was thrilled that I had my very first permanent office job, inside, a little piece of me died. But given the fact that I didn’t have enough experience to work anywhere else, I accepted their generous offer to be the school’s office secretary. The transition wasn’t easy, particularly given the fact that I’d just spent 11 grueling months stuck inside their stuffy classrooms, talking shit about the instructors with other students. Thankfully, however, the difficult transition from student to colleague didn’t last long and within a few weeks I’d struck up several friendships with the instructors.

While working at the college, I set my sights on working at the BC Ministry of Health. I applied through Kelly’s but, unfortunately, they advised that the Ministry of Health wasn’t interested in hiring me. Apparently, I discovered, the minimum government requirement was two years’ related office experience. I tried to argue that I had all the necessary credentials, including a secretarial diploma (with honours, no less), excellent typing and organization skills. Yet, disappointingly, it still wasn’t enough. I needed the work experience to prove I could actually do the job. I argued we weren’t shipping serum to Africa or saving starving babies; with five years’ work experience and nearly a year spent in a classroom, I could do the job with my eyes closed. My argument fell on deaf ears.

Ironically, on Tuesday and Thursday nights, I also taught a beginner typing class to Ministry of Health employees. I was fascinated by the fact that, although I didn't possess the years of experience required to actually work at the Ministry of Health, I was good enough to teach their inefficient and unskilled staff how to type.

At the end of my first night school typing class, I spoke to one student, a manager in his late forties, who expressed that being in my class was a "waste of his valuable time". He didn't see the need, or the benefit, in learning how to type and even though he was only able to type five words per minute, he still wanted to quit. When I asked him why he felt he wouldn't benefit from learning how to type he simply replied, "I type as fast as I think. Isn't that good enough?" Looking back, and knowing what I know about government offices today, he was probably right.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**

I had to go to school till 10:00 in the morning.
I got an awful lot of work to do. More than you think. There
is a new boy in our class. His name was? Christopher.



THE FINE ART OF LOOKING BUSY (AGE 23 - 1990)

“Weel,” my boss said in her thick Scottish accent. “We hate to lose ye, but I’m not a wee bit surprised.” Actually, neither was I.

“I’m sorry,” was all I could muster up in response. After three months as the office secretary at the college I had graduated from, I decided to move back to the farm in Courtenay. I took my mom up on her generous offer of free rent. It hadn’t been an easy decision, but what pushed me over the edge was the fact that I found it difficult to conform to my boss’s strict office etiquettes. Mrs. Edwina Fairholm, a former jail warden at an all-female prison in Scotland, ran her office and classrooms the same way she did a prison; with an iron fist. In fact, she never missed an opportunity to demonstrate her power. One morning, shortly after arriving at the office, Mrs. Fairholm noticed my attire.

“*Tsk. Tsk.* Yer wearing trousers?” the Warden asked rhetorically as I stood up from my desk to face her. Reminding myself of what I was wearing, I looked down to inspect my black slacks.

“Is that a problem?” I asked. It was obvious from the look of disdain on her face she was not impressed with my apparel.

“Weel, it may be fine for a casual Friday but not on a Monday,” she stated, shaking her head in disgust.

“But these pants are brand new!” I pointed out defensively. If there was a specific dress code in effect, I hadn’t been made aware of it, at least not until now. In

fact, it seemed that most things I learned on the job were on a “need-to-know” basis, which was frustrating as hell.

“I’ll let it go this time,” she informed me. “But next time ye’ll be sent home to change.” Before I could respond, the Warden was back in her office. But before closing her door, she bellowed over her shoulder, “Look busy, lass. Get me a cup of tea.”

Heeding her trousers warning, the next day I wore a dress. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of not wearing a slip underneath (although, how she knew still escapes me). I wasn’t trying to be provocative; I just didn’t think I needed one. I was immediately sent home to change.

On any given day, the Warden could be overheard in the crowded hallways of the college bellowing to students, “Lass, don’t put yer hands in yer pockets” or “don’t lean against the wall” and “don’t say “ya””. But my all-time favourite was, “Look, I’m not prepared to let ye waste me time. Ye either do yer work, or ye get oot!” It’s rumoured that a classroom of all-female students once left en-masse after she made that statement (yet it never stopped her from continuing to say it).

However, if there was one extremely valuable lesson I learned from the Warden, it was the fine art of looking busy. It’s not easy to sit at a desk for seven straight hours each and every day if you have absolutely nothing to do (try working at a government office and you’ll soon know what I mean). But thanks to Mrs. Fairholm, I learned how to look busy, even when I wasn’t. In a sense, I should be crediting her for writing this book. I was inspired to finally start writing it one boring day at work.



Two weeks after moving back to the farm, I received a call early one morning. As I ran down the hall from my bedroom to answer the phone, I cursed the caller for dialing our number at such an ungodly hour. Glancing at the clock hanging on the

kitchen wall, I swore under my breath as I realized it was only 7:30 in the morning. Even though it was insanely early for me, both my parents were already at work.

“Hello?” I said into the phone, out of breath and my voice raspy from sleep. My parent’s 2,400 square foot rancher only had one phone, inconveniently located in the farthest place from the bedrooms – the kitchen.

“Good Morning,” a handsome voice said on the other end of the phone. “Is this Chrystala?” For a brief moment, I thought I was in some kind of trouble. After all, I had only just woken up. But, something told me this caller was likely not my brother’s probation officer.

“Yes,” I replied, hesitating slightly. *What if it was a call solicitor?* I asked myself. I hated hanging up on them but, on this particular occasion, I would if only for the fact that they so rudely woke me out of a deep slumber.

“This is Al McGavin calling,” he said in his deep velvety radio voice.

“Alma who?” I inquired, confused and still groggy from sleep. I could hear him chuckle in response.

“Al,” he repeated, this time even more articulately. “Al McGavin. I’m a lawyer in town. I found your resume in my court box.” My mom, who worked at the Court Registry, placed a copy of my resume in each of the lawyers’ court boxes in an effort to jump-start my job search.

“Oh, yes. I remember you,” I confirmed, recalling who Al was. “You were my dad’s lawyer, when he had his fender-bender a few years back.”

“That’s right!” he answered, happy to hear I was finally awake. “So I was wondering if you had anything on today?” My jaw dropped as my mind raced.

“Like, you mean clothes?” I asked, clearly still too sleepy to engage in conversation, meaningful or otherwise. He burst out laughing and had to catch his breath before speaking.

“No,” he finally said, clearing his throat. “Let me rephrase that. Can you come in to work for me today?” I couldn’t help but laugh. I was pretty much useless without my morning cup of coffee, and this morning was no exception.

“Absolutely!” I quickly responded. And just like that I had a job. Before the days of free on-line databases and Internet researching, my first job working for a lawyer was photocopying case law at the courthouse library. It was a thankless task, but a good introduction to the world of law. When not copying legal cases at the court house, I sat in the small reception area at Al’s office manning the phones, typing, photocopying and providing general office support to the rest of Al’s legal team (which also consisted of making and serving coffee).

On my second day on the job, as I sat at my desk typing a memo on an old IBM Selectric typewriter, I was approached by Al’s bookkeeper Laverne. Laverne was a heavy-set woman nearing retirement, with a full head of thick curly gray hair and oversized red-rimmed glasses. Slowly, she shuffled up to my desk. She’d recently given up smoking but had a habit of walking around the office holding a tattered old unlit cigarette, pretending to smoke (no doubt in an attempt to pacify her cravings). As Laverne reached my desk, I smiled and said good-morning in an effort to get to know her. An uncomfortable silence hung between us as we stared at each other. I didn’t know what to say next, so I chose to wait for her to make the next move. Rolling the tattered cigarette between her fingers, she took a drag and exhaled non-existent smoke into my face.

“Mind the pecking order,” she advised as she continued to hold her stare. I had no idea what this meant and, feeling uncomfortable, I tried to think of something to say, but failed. Finally, I assumed I had simply misunderstood.

“Pardon me?” I finally asked.

“Mind the pecking order,” she repeated and, without waiting for my response, turned around and slowly moseyed away from my desk, leaving me confused and slightly uncomfortable. I sat pondering over Laverne’s remark for a few minutes until it suddenly donned on me. She had just dispensed my first piece of “friendly” office

advice. I was on the bottom rung of the hierarchy ladder and, if I wanted to fit in, I needed to know my place. Her message was received loud and clear.

Over the next three and a half years, I learned the basics of office life and began to build the foundation of my legal secretarial career. After working for a year as Al's receptionist, I climbed up one rung of the ladder and became his criminal law legal secretary. Primarily, his criminal practice was made up of sex offenders, but he also dabbled in weapons charges, impaired driving and the occasional murder. It was both interesting and very challenging work. I thrived in this role and Al's clients not only appreciated my hard work but also my tact and diplomacy when dealing with their files.

Working in a small office in a small town is polar opposite to working in a big city. In a small town, everybody knows everybody and, for the most part, are supportive of each other. You can't get away with treating each other badly; you get called out for bad behavior. Good staff in a small town is hard to come by and bosses will do whatever it takes to keep us happy. For example, at the end of every working day, no matter how good or bad my day was, Al McGavin always shook my hand, patted me on the back and thanked me for all my hard work. He appreciated what I contributed to the office and never overlooked a job well done. He also accepted that nobody was perfect and sometimes I wasn't immune to making mistakes. Al had class. Looking back, working at Al's office spoiled me, especially given the fact that this was my first legal secretarial job. I assumed all offices operated the same way. I couldn't have been more wrong.

In the city, secretaries are dispensable and a dime a dozen. Nobody owes anybody anything, so if you make a mistake it's a huge deal. And there's more than a good chance you'll be called out on each of your mistakes in front of your colleagues and co-workers. Think of it like a public caning or stoning, reminiscent of the 18th century, only more emotionally painful.

There is a sense of anonymity in the city that isn't afforded in a small town. Being anonymous gives lawyers free license to treat you as their inferior. Generally

speaking, when it comes to the poor treatment of support staff, lawyers are not held accountable. A lawyer once told me that if I “had half a brain I wouldn’t be working as a secretary”.

Lawyers, on the whole, are a very peculiar breed of people. They love to argue, debate and micro-manage and they thrive on being right (even when they’re not). In fact, it’s their life’s blood. Think about it; a lawyer’s sole purpose is to establish fault with the “opposition” and will stand in court for as long it takes to prove it, all in the name of justice. They discredit witnesses, manipulate the vulnerable and twist words and situations to suit their purpose. It’s worth mentioning that lawyers make up a disproportionately high percentage of politicians.

In a client-driven industry, it’s the client who reigns supreme and support staff are the bottom feeders. After all, without the client a lawyer wouldn’t have a practice. I quickly learned that without a skin thick enough to sustain the barrage of shit flung at you on a daily basis, you burn out. In fact, I read once that the burn out rate for a legal secretary is one year. This probably explains why the legal profession pays considerably more than non-legal. My colleagues and I refer to this extra money as “danger pay”. It’s dirty work but somebody has to do it.

Compared to teachers, cops, nurses and health care professionals (just to name a few), legal secretaries can earn up to double what they earn, which makes me sad because what I do isn’t useful and doesn’t make an impact on our community. We’re not changing or saving lives. One year, I paid more money in taxes than my best friend Lisa earned. Lisa was a health care professional and worked with handicapped adults. However, having said that, I give regularly to charity and not unlike like Dolly Levi³, I spread my money around to “make things grow” (which typically involved furnishing a good time). I’m no Robin Hood, by any stretch of the imagination, but by taking money from lawyers and spending it as fast as I can earn it I am, in a sense, giving back to the community, in my own little way.

³ Dolly Levi is a fictional character from the movie “Hello, Dolly!”

 **Diary Excerpt (Age 7)**

**Me and my brother bilt a hirise today [out of Lego]
toler than my brother
and hes 10 years old and it was taller than me
and Im 7 years old, know that.**



CANDY STRIPING (AGE 14 - 1981)

One hot summer day, shortly before my 15th birthday, I wound up at the hospital, but not in the way you'd think. I wasn't injured in a car accident or anything horrific like that. I was a candy striper; or rather, I masqueraded as a candy striper.

My best friend at the time, Jenny Bamford, had spent the summer candy striping. She used to tell me all kinds of stories about candy striping, which always intrigued me. It's not like I dreamed of being a nurse, or anything useful like that, but Jenny had a way of making volunteering sound like fun. But, as summer was nearing an end, so were Jenny's days as a candy striper. So when she suggested I tag along with her on her last day, I jumped at the opportunity. I had no idea what this would entail but I looked forward to hanging out with my best friend for the day. She'd been busy most of the summer and we hadn't seen each other in weeks. We both agreed it could be an adventure hanging out at the hospital. At that age, I was clueless about what was required to care for the sick, injured, elderly or disabled, but it's at that formative age when you have absolute abandon and no fear. Each day was always a new experience, if for no other reason than by default.

Jenny and I arrived at the hospital early one Sunday morning. We made our way through the maze of corridors and hallways of the hospital, eventually reaching the designated locker room area where the candy stripers kept their uniforms and personal belongings while on shift. It was there the idea was borne that I wouldn't just follow Jenny around as a civilian but I would don a candy striping uniform and

work incognito. Even though I had no formal training, and didn't have the first clue what to do, Jenny promised to show me the ropes and that was good enough for me.

Jenny sifted through the surplus of uniforms hanging on an open rack. Finally, she picked one out she thought would fit me. I was a tomboy and rarely wore a dress so it felt more like putting on a costume for a play than an official uniform. My nametag bore the name "Laura". It wouldn't have been my first choice for a name but the uniforms that bore the nametags "Bethany" and "Jessica" were too big for me.

Disguised as a candy striper, we set off. I followed her from room to room, helping with general housekeeping duties. It was by no means glamorous changing sheets, bedpans and bathrooms, but every so often I would take a few quiet moments to hold a patient's hand and talk to them. I was pleasantly surprised to discover candy striping could not only be fun but invigorating. Just by wearing a red and white striped uniform, I was making a difference in somebody else's day, even if only for a few brief moments. I was discovering a whole new world, and each patient was uniquely different. One patient in particular struck a deep chord with me. I've never forgotten him. His name was Dave. He was involved in a dreadful motorcycle accident that left him with severe brain damage. He was bed ridden and relied on hospital staff for all his needs, from feeding and bathing and everything in between. Dave was a young newlywed, in his early twenties, but not long after the accident, his wife couldn't cope and left him. He still kept a photo of her on his bedside table. I was touched by his optimism.

After completing our tasks in the patients' rooms, Jenny and I made our way to the main common area. This was a large open room where patients were invited to gather and play cards, watch television or simply sit and enjoy the view from the gardened patio. Residents were also encouraged to visit the patio, weather permitting, to enjoy the fresh air and scenery. It was a gorgeous day so we decided to take our break outside on the patio. As we approached the large glass sliding doors that opened onto the patio, we caught the eye of an elderly gentleman in a wheelchair. He was waiting near the door with a pack of cigarettes on his lap.

“Excuse me,” said the elderly gentleman. “Could I bother you for some assistance?” We stopped and asked him how we could help. As it happened, he’d been waiting for somebody to help him outside so he could enjoy a cigarette. Being wheelchair bound made it difficult for him to get through the sliding patio doors. No problem, we told him, we were going that way anyway and asked if he would join us on this sunny summer day.

Once outside the three of us started to chat. To my surprise, I discovered he was the grandfather of a classmate of mine, Clay Bohannon. Clay was in the same grade as me and we shared a few classes. Clay also hung out with the brother of a close friend of mine, so we saw quite a bit of each other outside of school. Coincidentally, by only two degrees of separation, I also knew Grandpa Bohannon. *Small world*, I thought to myself. Grandpa Bohannon was delighted that Jenny and I knew his grandson Clay and we immediately began swapping stories. Although Clay wasn’t a frequent visitor, Grandpa Bohannon was fiercely proud of his grandson and regaled us with stories of school achievements, sporting successes and Boy Scout badges. Two cigarettes, and several swapped stories later, we learned as much as we could about our classmate Clay Bohannon. Woven into these stories, we also learned a great deal about Grandpa Bohannon. Although physically trapped in a wheelchair, he was still mentally present with a quick wit, charm and intelligence.

Grandpa Bohannon’s throat was dry from storytelling and smoking so I volunteered to fetch him a glass of lemonade from the kitchen off the large hospital common area. It was getting late, but the sun was still warm and it was a nice relief to be outside, away from the stale hospital air.

As I stood alone in the kitchen, pouring out a big glass of lemonade for Grandpa Bohannon, I quietly reminisced to myself about what an awesome day I was having. But suddenly, and without notice, my blissful bubble was abruptly burst. Out of nowhere, a large, overbearing nurse, who must have spotted me in the kitchen as she walked past, came marching towards me like a rhinoceros about to charge. I stood, staring at her, my mouth gaping open as she finally reached me and stopped only a

few inches away. Standing uncomfortably close, with her large mannish hands placed firmly on her ample hips, wearing an expression of exasperation on her face, she inspected me for some small sign of recognition. Reaching down she gruffly grabbed at my nametag, reading the name out loud. "Laura!" She said with just a hint of question in her voice. Looking into her eyes, I could see the wheels turning as she quickly tried to recollect who the hell Laura was. Clearly, she didn't recognize my face but she definitely remembered the name.

"Laura!" She repeated, this time loud enough to rattle the tiles off the pristine white kitchen walls. Like a scene out of an old army movie, Nurse Ratched stood towering over me like a drill sergeant. I did the only thing I could think of...I stood at attention.

"What are *you* doing here?" She hissed at me. "You've missed several compulsory candy striping classes and have had too many unaccounted absences! You can't be working down here, especially with patients in wheelchairs!" My jaw dropped open as my mind raced. I moved my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I didn't know what to say. Finally, my brain connected to my voice and as I tried to speak my voice stammered, "Yes ma'am. I mean, no ma'am." Judging by the expression on Nurse Ratched's face, she was still unimpressed.

"I want you in my office in 5 minutes and don't keep me waiting," she bellowed, her eyes narrowing at me suspiciously. She hesitated for a brief moment, as though about to say something else but thankfully, just as quickly as that moment came, it left, as did she. With a loud "harrumph" she turned on her heels and marched straight out of the kitchen, her booming voice still echoing in the room. I exhaled, not realizing I had been holding my breath. Overcome with fear, and the rush of adrenaline, I didn't know if I was going to burst out laughing uncontrollably or freak out completely. Like a deer catching the scent of a hunter, I decided to run.

With Nurse Ratched out of sight, I immediately burst out of the kitchen in search of Jenny. Quickly scanning the large open common room area, I was relieved when I saw her slowly coming through the patio doors. She was awkwardly trying to

push Grandpa Bohannon's wheelchair back through the large glass sliding doors. I began to frantically wave my arms, signaling the urgency of my situation. I had to get to Jenny before Nurse Ratched did.

I tried to contain my laughter as I breathlessly ran up to them, rapidly recanting the story of my close encounter with Nurse Ratched in the kitchen. My mind was racing a million miles a minute. Jenny, thankfully, thought this was hysterical so, unable to contain ourselves, we both burst into laughter. However, we were starting to attract unwanted attention from other hospital residents who, for the most part, sat like zombies, strapped into their chairs, parked in front of a large television. Not wanting to make the situation any worse than it already was, we tried to pull ourselves together.

Suddenly, it struck Jenny that we needed an escape plan. There was no way I could actually go to Nurse Ratched's office. That would have been the kiss of death, for sure. Not to mention, it was Jenny's neck on the line if Nurse Ratched were to discover that I had been dishonestly hanging out with Jenny at the hospital. It wouldn't take long for the truth to come out that I was an imposter. We had no other choice but to leave the hospital.

We quickly said our good-byes to Grandpa Bohannon, giving him a hug and a kiss of affection on his cheek. I'll never forget how he smelled of stale cigarette smoke, English Leather cologne and the faint odour of whiskey. I had enjoyed my visit with him, and who knew if I would ever see him again, but we had to leave before Nurse Ratched returned. We bid Grandpa Bohannon farewell, promising to pass on the message to Clay to visit more often.

As fast as our legs could carry us, Jenny and I dashed through the long hospital halls and corridors from wing to wing, the sound of our sneakers on the clean tile floors screeching, until we finally found our way back to the locker room. Like Superman in a phone booth, we changed out of our uniforms with lightning speed and hastily put back on our street clothes. I was so worried we'd be caught before leaving the hospital, but thankfully nobody took any notice of two giggling girls speed walking

out the main exit of the hospital. We managed to escape the evil clutches of Nurse Ratched, who was none the wiser. No doubt she was still sitting in her office waiting for Laura.



To this day, I can't walk into a hospital without hearing the distant echoes of our laughter as we escaped the clutches of Nurse Ratched. And I can still hear the screeching sounds of our runners as we raced down the hospital corridors. I never did find out from Jenny what became of Laura, or if Nurse Ratched ever figured out who the "real" Laura even was. But one thing's for sure, I have never forgotten how good it felt to help people. Even if for only one day, I was making a difference in somebody else's life. But regardless of the positive impression left on me, it never occurred to me to choose it as a profession. For whatever reason, I only saw it as an escape; a chance to put on somebody else's uniform, hiding behind a false identity, wandering around a hospital incognito.

I heard it said once that the difference between who you are and who you want to be is what you do. Interestingly enough, as I look back, I realize that what I wanted to be, and what I wound up doing, were two completely different things. So what does that say about who I am? Well, I'm still trying to figure that out. But now that I know I can make a difference, I will continue to move forward in my quest to do better and be better. It's taken me a long time to realize that, but I know I'll get there eventually. And the best part of all? I don't have to wear a candy striping uniform.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**

Today I went out to play. I took Bear for a walk. Today I got to step on the gas pettle to and that was fun.

***LISA COMES FOR A VISIT (AGE 26 - 1993)***

I drove through the farmlands along the precarious 12 km's of winding and potholed roads to downtown Courtenay where I would meet Lisa at the bus depot. I was right on time; however, the bus was not. Two cigarettes later, I spotted the large 52 passenger coach slowly pull into the station. Lisa was a trooper for enduring the dreaded three-hour bus ride from Nanaimo, especially after having already suffered through the two-hour ferry trip from Vancouver. Having taken the same journey many times myself, I knew what an insufferable experience it could sometimes be.

As I watched the bus driver lug out the assorted duffle bags and suitcases from the storage compartment, I looked around excitedly for Lisa as the other road weary travelers disembarked the coach and began collecting up their luggage. Eventually, I spotted her attempting to gracefully climb down the coach stairs, struggling with her bright red carry-on suitcase. I immediately ran up to her, calling out her name as she hoisted her luggage down in front of her onto the wet concrete. Kicking into bellboy mode, I quickly grabbed her luggage so we could move out of the way of the other passengers who by this time were aggressively pushing their way past us towards the large accumulation of luggage. For a brief moment, I felt like I was back at the Las Vegas airport, watching the hordes of tourists, frantically scrambling around the rotating luggage turnstile. After a hurried hug, we eagerly made our way to my car.

"Your chariot awaits, my friend!" I exclaimed, pointing at my beat-up blue 1969 four-door Plymouth Valiant. While some laughed when I bought her, she was only \$100 and, most importantly, she ran. And although only three of her four doors actually opened, and she burned through a quart of oil a week, she was good enough

for me, at least until I could afford something better. As I opened the trunk to throw in Lisa's luggage, she turned around to introduce her new friend to me.

"I want you to meet somebody." Behind Lisa stood a young boy, who couldn't have been more than 16 years old. He smiled but didn't say anything.

"This is Damian. Damian, this is Chrystala, my best friend I was telling you about." Lisa introduced me to Damian, again encouraging him to move forward to make my acquaintance.

"Nice to meet you, Damian," I said as I extended my hand to him, but he seemed embarrassed as he limply shook my hand and only managed to meekly say "hi" back to me.

"Damian's here to visit his sister. I said it would be okay to give him a ride," Lisa announced, as I looked wide-eyed at her. I didn't make a habit of giving total strangers from a bus depot rides in my car and, as far as I knew, she didn't make a habit of picking up guys on the bus, especially ones so young. It was getting late so, against my better judgment, I decided to resign myself to the task at hand rather than make a fuss.

"Sure, no problem. But if it's okay, I'd like to make a quick pit stop at the liquor store before it closes," I insisted. "Then I'll give Damian a ride, if that's cool?" I didn't wait for Lisa or Damian to answer. Instead, I steered the two of them into the car, and closed the trunk before quickly checking the time on my watch. I had only five minutes to spare before the liquor store closed, but if we hurried we just might make it. Lisa may be satisfied with tea and crumpets on a Saturday night, but I wanted something with a little more kick to it. I needed a cheap bottle of white wine.

Leaving the bus depot, we drove around the corner to the only liquor store in town. Lucky for me, the two were right around the corner from each other. Pulling into the parking lot and putting the car into park, I turned off the engine and quickly jumped out, leaving Damian and Lisa to wait in the car.

A few minutes later, with a large bottle of white Cabernet in hand, I climbed back into the driver's seat. Reaching over my seat, I placed the brown paper bagged bottle on the floor by Damian's feet, who was quietly sitting in the back. Starting the engine, I did a quick shoulder check before backing out of the parking stall. In my rearview mirror, I caught the flash of red and blue lights, followed by a loud "woop woop" of a siren.

"Uh oh, what's going on here?" I asked myself out loud. Unable to back up any further, I pulled the car slightly forward again and turned off the engine. As I looked at Lisa questioningly, I wondered what the hell was going on. A loud tapping on my window startled me. To my left, I was surprised to see a tall uniformed police officer. He motioned for me to roll down my window. Obliging, I began to slowly roll my window down as I tried to figure out what I could have possibly done wrong. It wasn't that long ago I had been given a moving violation, but that had been rectified weeks ago.

I struggled with the window winder but finally managed to force the window down. "Miss, please get out of the vehicle," the policeman said in an authoritative but monotone voice.

"What seems to be the problem, officer?" I ask nervously, reaching across my lap to undo my seatbelt. Back in the 1960's, most cars didn't have shoulder belts and my Valiant was no exception. When you're well-endowed not having to wear a shoulder belt is a really good thing.

"Please get out of the car," he told me again, this time more firmly. Clearly, this cop had an agenda and, for some unknown reason, I was at the top of it. But I still couldn't figure out why.

As I slowly climbed out of the car, I spotted a second police officer standing at the passenger side of my car. He was leaning down to inspect the contents of both the front and back seat. The first police officer leaned down to inspect my passengers before asking them both to get out of the car as well, which they did obediently.

"Is there something wrong, officer?" I asked again, feeling my heart pound in my chest. It's fascinating how, in the presence of police, I behave like a four year old caught with my hand in the cookie jar. My pulse raced, my mind raced and, for no reason, I felt like running in the opposite direction.

"Do you have any alcohol in the car?" the first policeman asked, point blank. *Ah, so that's what this is all about*, I thought to myself. Okay, now at least we're getting somewhere. Thankfully, I'd decided against opening my cheap bottle of wine before making the long drive home. I figured I'd wait until after I dropped Damian off at his sister's place. The long drive home can sometimes be thirsty work.

"Yes. Yes, I do," I admitted quickly, demonstrating that I was being cooperative. "I have a bottle of wine in the car. But it's unopened." I gestured to the back seat of the car.

"Show me," he instructed, in a tone that indicated he was not the least bit happy with the current situation. After exiting the back seat of my car, Damian had left the door open. So in one quick movement, I leaned down and reached in, picking up the bottle of wine still wrapped in the brown paper bag. I turned around and handed the bottle to the policeman. He slowly pulled it out of the bag, inspecting both the lid and label before placing it on the roof of my car.

Meanwhile, on the other side of my car, Lisa continued to stand quietly beside the second policeman. Damian, on the other hand, had somehow managed to discreetly walk away from the scene. I spotted him at a nearby payphone, which was conveniently located at the front entrance of the liquor store. Glancing up at my bottle of wine perched on the roof of my car, I wondered why the policeman had put it there. At this point, nothing made sense to me.

"I don't understand what's going on here, officer. Have I done something wrong? I have ID to prove I'm old enough to purchase alcohol," I offered. "Only, my ID is in my purse, which is still in the car." I pointed at my car, which looked like it was about to fly away with all but one of its doors wide open, and a bottle of wine perched like an ornament on the rooftop. It reminded me of a pizza delivery car, but instead

of pizza I delivered wine and spirits (which in retrospect, wasn't such a bad idea considering Courtenay still didn't have a Dial-A-Bottle service at that time). The first policeman looked down at me and gave me a scornful look before speaking.

"My daughter is graduating from high school this week. She's going to her grad party tonight." I stared blankly at the policeman, stunned at this revelation. Not because he was old enough to have a daughter graduating from high school but because I had no idea what it had to do with my current situation. I could not piece together what it was he was trying to tell me, other than the fact that it was grad and his daughter would be participating in the festivities. Maybe he thought I was a friend of his daughter's and was bootlegging for her? Glancing back up at my wine bottle, I couldn't help but think that what I could really use right now was a glass of wine. It might help me to refocus and steady my nerves, especially given the situation. My attention was pulled away from my wine when the policeman began speaking again.

"Every year at grad, I witness the devastating effects of drinking and driving," the policeman continued. I looked over at Lisa for some clue as to what he was talking about, but she looked just as confused as me. For the first time since getting pulled over (if you can even call it that, considering I hadn't even pulled out of the parking stall), Lisa jumped in.

"Officer, I have ID as well. Would you like to see it?" Lisa offered, smiling sweetly as she took her wallet out from her purse.

"It's not you I'm worried about," answering Lisa her brusquely. "It's the fact that there is a minor in your car with alcohol." My jaw dropped as I tried to catch my breath. I felt like I'd just been punched in the solar plexus. The first policeman motioned his partner to bring Damian back to the car, who by this time had finished his payphone call and was standing idly by, watching the events transpire before him. I gave Lisa a quick glance, glaring at her briefly. I didn't even know this kid and now I'm under suspicion for contributing to a minor? Lisa caught my look and immediately launched into telling her side of the story.

“Officer, the truth of the matter is, we don’t even know this kid. I met him on the bus. He needed a lift to his sister’s place so I offered him a ride.” She glanced over at me, shrugging her shoulders. Looking up at the policeman, I hoped Lisa’s explanation would help to shed some light on the situation. Instead, he just stood there, shaking his head in disapproval. The second policeman walked back over to the car with Damian in tow. As they approached us, the police escort handed the first policeman Damian’s ID. The look on his face answered my worst fear: unbeknownst to both us, Damian was only 15 years old. Shaking his head and letting out several audible “tsks”, the policeman finally looked back at Lisa and me.

“You have a minor in your car, with alcohol. This does not look good for you,” he confirmed, with a hint of shame in his voice. Taking out his notebook, he began writing, all the while still shaking his head in dissatisfaction. I was starting to feel overwhelmed by the situation.

“This is crazy!” I exclaimed loudly, hearing the panic begin to rise in my voice. “I don’t even know this kid. I was just giving him a ride to his sister’s.” Lisa walked over to where I stood. I had no idea how we were going to get ourselves out of this mess, but at least with Lisa beside me maybe she could help to keep me calm. I was, as she used to joke, her “partner in crime”.

“I want to see your ID,” the first policeman asked me. Without hesitating, I crawled into the front of the car and grabbed my purse. Handing him my driver’s license, he asked both Lisa and me to step away from the vehicle. This gave the two policemen a chance to talk out of earshot. It didn’t take long before the first policeman came back to where we stood, as the second policeman began rummaging through my car. Unable to open one of the back passenger doors, he turned to me to ask if I could open it.

“Sorry officer,” I said dejectedly. “That door’s always been broken. I’ve never been able to open it.” So much for appearing helpful, but it was the truth. Unfortunately, this appeared to only cause more suspicion. As the first policeman continued writing in his little black notebook, the second officer went back to the

police car, retrieving several clear plastic bags that resembled extra large Ziploc bags. Returning to my car, he began rummaging through my glove compartment, carefully inspecting its contents before removing them. Lisa and I just stood there, watching the events unfold before us, feeling helpless, and rather stupid, as people slowly drove by to check out the show. It was then that I spotted my older brother in his blue Ford pickup truck. Having had several brushes with the law himself, he didn't acknowledge me as he drove past, only nodding his head slightly before turning the corner and disappearing.

As I turned my attention back to my car, I saw the second policeman remove my ashtray and slowly empty it into one of the Ziploc bags. *What the hell would he want with an ashtray of dirty cigarette butts?* I asked myself. Becoming more agitated with the situation, and the total lack of communication from the police officers, I offered up a little "positive" reinforcement of my own.

"Thanks for emptying my ashtray," I hollered out, loud enough for everyone within a 500 yard radius to hear. "I've been meaning to clean it out for days now."

I could feel Lisa struggling to contain herself as she tried desperately not to laugh. Admittedly, it probably wasn't my brightest move, but so far nothing I was doing seemed too bright, especially if you looked at it from the perspective of the law. But something wasn't right. I was being kept in the dark and I started to get a sinking feeling that my rights were somehow being violated. And I had a sneaking suspicion that the detailed inspection of the interior of my car had little to do with my suspected contributing alcohol to a minor and more to do with the suspicion that I was carrying drugs. All those years of watching *Cagney & Lacy* reruns were starting to pay off. As I began to worry about the possibility of Lisa and me spending the night in jail, I was relieved to see my brother walking towards us.

With his hands in his pockets, Kevin strode casually down the street towards me. Not wanting to attract undue attention to himself, he didn't acknowledge me. Instead, he casually walked past where we stood, then circled around before quietly

coming up behind me. I was so happy to see a familiar face, especially one who might actually be able to help.

“So, care to tell me what’s going on here?” my brother whispered into my ear. I detected a slight edge in his voice, as though insinuating I might actually have something to hide.

“I have no idea,” I whispered back, trying not to alert the police to the fact that there were now four of us huddled together. Kevin stood quietly with his hands still in his pockets, taking in the situation. After a few minutes, he made an assessment, which he thought was worth sharing.

“Looks like they’re doing a drug search on your car. Care to explain?” I turned around to face my brother, upset that he could even suggest that they were performing a drug search on my car.

“What the hell, Kevin?” I hissed back at him, as I came to the realization that he was probably right. “Is that what they’re doing? I had no idea they were doing a drug search but, I can tell you this for a fact, they won’t find anything!”

“Okay, okay...I get the message. Still, this doesn’t look good, you know what I mean?” I did know what he meant, but so far I had no idea how I was going to dig my way out of this awful mess I had somehow found myself in.

Finally, the first policeman turned his attention back to me and my posse, where we all stood hopelessly in the liquor store parking lot. Typically, churches are the center of most towns but in the center of my town was the government liquor store. We could not have been in a worse spot, as it seemed like ten cars a minute drove by to rubberneck. I was fairly certain that if my brother spotted us, then no doubt, so had other friends or, even worse, family.

“Well, well, well,” the first policeman gibed as he walked towards us. I didn’t know if having my brother here would make the situation better, or worse. As luck would have it, the two were already well acquainted with each other.

“Hi, I’m Kevin. You know my mom, Sharon, from the Court Registry,” Kevin proudly announced, not taking his hands out of his pockets.

“Yeah, yeah. I remember you, Kevin.” The policeman hesitated a moment before continuing. “I haven’t been to the Registry for a few weeks. How’s your mom?” The policeman asked and, for the first time, expressed a tiny hint of personality in his voice.

“She’s doing great, Constable Hogg. I’ll tell her you were asking about her. I don’t believe you’ve met my sister, Chrystala.” *Constable Hogg? What a fitting name*, I thought to myself, trying not to laugh out loud. As I watched the expression on Constable Hogg’s face change from “I’m going to bust your ass” to “wait a minute, I know your mom”, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Thank God. I could feel my luck changing. A huge smile spread across my face as I formally introduced myself.

“Hi, Constable Hogg...my name is Chrystala. Nice to meet you.” Constable Hogg didn’t say a word as I watched him thinking, probably wondering what to do with us now that he’d already put the wheels in motion to arrest one, if not all of us. Finally, he took a deep breath. He appeared to have come to a decision about our fate.

“You must *always* put alcohol in the trunk, especially when you have a minor in your car. But regardless, get into the habit of always putting it in your trunk. As a warning, I’m going to confiscate the bottle of wine,” Constable Hogg warned sternly. “You’re free to go.” Before we could thank him, he turned on his heels and quickly went over to my car to tell the second policeman to down tools. I turned to Kevin and gave him a huge hug. He had, without a doubt, saved our bacon.

“Thanks Kevin, you’re a real life saver. We owe you big time,” Lisa said as she followed my lead and hugged him. Kevin seemed quite pleased with himself as he gratefully acknowledged our praise. The only person who didn’t seem to care was Damian. As if on cue, a beat up old yellow Chevy Nova pulled into the near-empty parking lot. Pulling into the farthest parking stall from where we stood, the car came to a quick stop.

“That’s my sister.” The sound of Damian’s voice startled me. Up until now, he had barely spoken a word. “I called her to come and get me.” Damian’s sister laid on the horn twice, alerting him to hurry up. He shrugged his shoulders and, without so much as a good-bye, sauntered across the parking lot and climbed in the front seat of the car. As we watched them drive away, Kevin turned to us with a look of confusion on his face.

“Who the hell *was* that?” he asked, as though only having noticed Damian for the first time.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later.” I turned to Lisa, who by this time had lit a cigarette. We watched as the police car pulled away, breathing a collective sigh of relief. “In the meantime, Lisa, are you ready to go where there’s a little less action?” I asked, letting out a laugh. “Well, police action at least.” She nodded her head, laughing at my joke.

“If it’s okay with you two, I’ll leave you to it. I was on my way to my girlfriend’s place when I spotted you guys. She’s gonna kill me if I’m late again.” We said our good-byes as Kevin strolled off back in the direction of his truck, which was parked several blocks away.

“My mom’s going to freak out when she finds out what happened!” I remarked, lighting a cigarette. I figured it might be better to calm my nerves first before I attempted to drive the long and windy road home. We smoked our cigarettes in silence, watching the traffic pass by.

“I feel terrible,” Lisa finally said. “I had no idea this would happen.” She began to laugh at the sheer absurdity of the whole situation.

“Please, it’s not your fault. It never even occurred to me to put my alcohol in the trunk. And anyway, who actually does that? This is Courtenay for crying out loud!” I laughed, poking fun at Constable Hogg and his silly warning.

“I owe you a bottle of wine,” Lisa offered as she smiled apologetically at me.

“No you don’t. But I *can* tell you what you do owe me,” I said.

“What?” Lisa looked both relieved and intrigued.

“You owe me your esteemed company at Chrystala’s Cabin. I have a fridge full of delicious cream cakes and cookies at home.” I volunteered, taking one more drag off my cigarette before dropping it onto the ground and butting it out with my shoe. Walking back over to my car, I waited for Lisa at the already open passenger door like a limousine driver. The policeman hadn’t bothered to clear up his mess after rummaging through my car, and he also neglected to close the doors. No matter, it saved me from having to reopen two of them. Finishing her cigarette, Lisa cleverly flicked it across the parking lot as we watched it bounce on the cherry with a small explosion of cinders. As she climbed into the passenger seat, I closed the door behind her. Walking around the car, I gave the back passenger door a kick to close it before climbing into the driver’s seat.

“Right, so all we need now is some good driving music. I can’t drive without it. Co-pilot?” I handed Lisa a box of worn out old mixed cassette tapes. As I pulled the car out of the liquor store parking lot, Lisa chose the soundtrack for our drive home.

“No more running down the wrong road, dancing to a different drum...” Michael McDonald blared loudly from the stereo. The lyrics spoke to me, somehow holding the key to my life, as if written just for me.

“Can't you see what's going on, deep inside your heart? Always searching for the real thing, living like it's far away. Just leave all the madness in yesterday, you're holding the key, when you believe it...” Lisa knew how to reach me, even through music.

“Shine sweet freedom, shine your light on me...” As the two of us sang along to “Sweet Freedom” at full volume, we slowly drove the potholed road home.



“Have you given any more thought to my proposition?” Lisa asked, before carefully taking a sip of hot tea. I’d put out an impressive spread of tea cakes, cookies, scones and assorted biscuits from the local bakery, all of which I knew were Lisa’s favourites. Thankfully, she wasn’t disappointed. I reached for a triple cream scone

and inspected it before taking a big bite from one end, careful not to let the whipped cream squirt out the other end.

“If you moved to Vancouver, you’d have everything at your fingertips.” Lisa bit into a homemade molasses cookie covered with pure cane sugar, licking her fingers so as not to waste any of the delectable chunks of sweetness. Before finishing her cookie, she began to inspect the array of other treats laid out before her, in search of her next choice. “Not to mention,” she continued. “You’d live closer to me.”

Lisa had been asking me for years to move to Vancouver. For one reason or another, I always decided against it. Why I kept putting off the decision was a mystery because I’d never had a concrete reason for not making the move. I probably made a bigger deal out of it than was warranted. In reality, it really wasn’t that epic and it seemed like everybody I knew was moving to the city. Undeniably, I sometimes made a habit of making a mountain out of a molehill.

“It’s so expensive in Vancouver,” I debated, “I really can’t afford it right now.” Hearing this, Lisa let out a hearty laugh.

“Excuse the pun, but that’s such a cop out. If I can do it, then I know for a fact you can. You know as well as me that you are *way* better with money than I am.” Lisa popped the last of her molasses cookie in her mouth before washing it down with a mouthful of tea. I had to laugh, because in actual fact, I was never really that good with my money; I just manage to fool everybody into believing I was.

“For starters, you don’t need a car in the city; only a good pair of comfortable leather walking boots.” Lisa eyed her next choice and eagerly picked up a lemon square liberally dusted with icing sugar.

“Well,” I began. “I haven’t told anyone yet, but I’ve been thinking about doing a big backpacking trip around Europe.” Lisa didn’t stop nibbling at the lemon square, her fingers and the end of her nose now dusted with icing sugar.

“Fair enough,” she responded. “I know you love to travel, so get your trip to Europe out of your system and then move to Vancouver. I really think the change will

do you good. Besides, what are you leaving behind?" Lisa looked up at me as she took a sip of tea, washing down the lemon square.

"Other than family, of course," Lisa continued. "No offense, but what happened today after you picked me up at the bus depot is a pretty good example of what you'd be leaving behind. Besides, it's not like you're moving to Mars. You can always come back for visits, if you were ever feeling homesick." Starting to feel full, both from the tea and sugary treats, I decided to switch gears and have a cigarette. I needed my stomach to digest what I'd consumed before continuing to graze. I also wanted to digest the few truths Lisa was telling me.

"Good idea. I'll join you," Lisa announced, licking every speck of icing sugar from her fingers before getting up to grab an ashtray from the kitchen. My parents had built this house for me shortly after graduating from college. Their 42-acre farm was large enough for another house so, instead of paying rent elsewhere, my parents built this house for me. From the outside, it looked like a farm outbuilding, but inside it was a spacious 1,100 square foot, two bedroom, one bathroom open-space concept house. By not having to pay rent, I saved every penny I earned to travel and see the world (if I wasn't buying rounds of drinks at the pub). However, sometimes privacy was an issue. I was living 25 yards from my parents' watchful eye. But the fact of the matter was, I was in my twenties and old enough to make my own way in the world. Their hearts were in the right place, but it wasn't always ideal living in my parents' back pocket. Deep down, I knew it was time to cut the apron strings, even though my parents made it too easy for me stay right where I was.

Lisa rejoined me on the sectional sofa, clearing a spot on the coffee table for the unusually large ashtray I'd stolen from a pub in England two years earlier. We eagerly lit our cigarettes, enjoying a silent pause from our discussion. I always savoured each moment with Lisa, knowing visits with her would only last a short time. Tomorrow she would return to Vancouver, leaving me to my own defenses and feeling, once again, alone. She had planted the seed knowing that once she left I would

have plenty of “alone time” to think about her proposition. Lisa must have read the look of apprehension on my face.

“Admittedly, you have a really good thing here, but you’re too young to stay in a small town. You need to branch out.” She took a drag from her cigarette before continuing.

“I’ve made all kinds of great friends in the city. Like Mattias Schossberger. I told you about him, right?” Lisa asked. I nodded in acknowledgement.

“He’s the one that shares the same birthday as you?” I asked rhetorically, knowing full well who Mattias was. Lisa loved telling that story, about how she met Mattias when she was waitressing at a restaurant in Vancouver called “Penny Lane” and how, upon first meeting, they didn’t get along.

“That’s him. Did you know that we’re not only born on the same day, but the same year...and same hour, except he was born in a different province and a different time zone, but I digress.” Lisa put her cup down on the coffee table, inspecting the large Brown Betty teapot to see if there was enough tea for another cup or two.

“And there’s Rod Hampton. I never thought this possible but he loves Tina Turner as much as you love Barbra Streisand. You’d love him.” She was right; I never thought it humanly possible that somebody else could love a performer as much as I loved Barbra Streisand. But, according to Lisa, Rod could give me a run for my money. Admittedly, I was intrigued. Living in a small town, people like Mattias and Rod didn’t exist, at least not for me. In fact, I spent most of my life closeted about my passions because when they did come up in conversation, laughter usually followed. I often wondered what it would be like to sit around a table and talk freely and openly about theatre, film, show tunes and, yes, even my long-standing (and often misunderstood) adoration of Barbra Streisand. Lisa poured two more cups of tea, carefully setting the teapot down on the cake and pastry cluttered coffee table.

“Besides,” Lisa continued, making it obvious she was not prepared to give up on me just yet. “You know what my favourite quote is?” She shot me an inquisitive

look as I swallowed my mouthful of tea before answering. "You haven't forgotten already have you?" I shook my head, pausing to take another sip of tea.

"No, I haven't forgotten," I finally answered, trying not to laugh.

"Then say it with me," Lisa urged, raising her hands as though conducting an orchestra and counting in 3-2-1.

"Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death," we both said loudly in unison, bursting into laughter. I let myself relax into the deep overstuffed gray corduroy sofa, rubbing my aching belly full of teacakes, cookies and tea. Lisa had a way of constantly reminding me that life is meant to be lived. She said we didn't need permission to enjoy every moment life had to offer, but sometimes we needed a little push in the right direction. She once compared life to a fine wine or, better yet, French cuisine (her favourite); every delicious drop was to be enjoyed and each succulent morsel savoured. It was how she lived her life every day. Her laugh was contagious and her enthusiasm for life was infectious. I always thought she'd do well in sales.

"I tell you what," I said. "I'll make you a bet." Gambling wasn't my thing, but I was goal orientated. Setting a goal was like making a bet, at least in my books.

"By this time next year, I'll be living in Vancouver." Lisa looked over at me, quickly butting out her cigarette and setting her cup of tea down without spilling it. She was both surprised and delighted at the same time.

"That's fantastic!" she exclaimed. "I don't know if I should laugh or cry!" Sliding over to me on the sofa, she gave me a big bear hug. Her enthusiasm was catching as I began feeling really excited at the prospect of starting over again, especially if it meant being closer to her.

"I'm going to need your help though," I admitted, trying to be serious but unable to hide my excitement. "I'm going to need an apartment, and to learn my way around the city...not to mention I'll need to find a job!" Always the Virgo, I began organizing my future.

We spent the rest of the afternoon making plans for my impending move to Vancouver. But first things first, I wanted to spend a few months backpacking around Europe. I figured now was as good a time as ever to do it, especially while I was living rent free. Once I did that, then I could make the permanent move to the city. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous, and a little scared, but I was now determined to make the bold leap across the Georgia Strait to the bustling Metropolis of Vancouver. Knowing that I didn't have to do it alone, made me breathe a whole lot easier.



Over the next year, I spent several months traveling. Al McGavin was very supportive of my desire to see the world, and this was reflected every time I asked for time off. However, after returning to home from my last trip, I knew it was time for a change.

I won my bet with Lisa and arrived in Vancouver a year later, where I slept on her overstuffed red velvet sofa until I was able to rent an apartment of my own. It only took a month to find the perfect bachelor pad; a small studio apartment conveniently located right across the street from Lisa's palatial one-bedroom apartment in the heart of the West End. Now all I needed was a job.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**

**I whent shopping today well I got some
pipe cleaners and some candies to
yummy candies**

***LESNIEWSKI TRICHOPOULOS (AGE 28 - 1995)***

“Don’t you get it?” Clarence yelled as he lunged at me from behind his large oak desk, slamming his fists down in the process for added drama, before continuing to berate me. “Nobody here likes you!!” I sat across from him, stock-still, trying my hardest not to slide off the oversized slippery red leather barristers chair. I tried to discreetly turn my head to gauge Myrtle’s reaction, but it was clear from her expression which camp she was in. Once again, it wasn’t mine. I couldn’t bear to think of how many times I covered for her while she slept at her desk.

Clarence Trichopoulos wasn’t a particularly large man, but as he stood looming over me from behind his desk, I suddenly felt small and pathetic. He had that effect on people. He was, after all, a lawyer. It’s a great tactic in the courtroom and it was just as effective in the office. He reminded me of one of those small birds that puffed themselves up during mating season, giving off the appearance of being larger than they really are. Funny that, considering Clarence confided in me once that he was fat in high school.

My mind raced frantically as I tried to think of a quasi-intelligent response. I hated awkward moments like these, especially when there was a longer than necessary pause of silence. I wracked my brain trying to think of what to say, but how could I respond to *nobody here likes you?* Clarence was a self-confessed confrontational guy who loved a good argument, but this time he went too far. Without hesitating, I said the first thing that popped into my head.

“Coming from you, Clarence, that’s a compliment!” I said, letting out a small chuckle in the faint hope that, on this particular occasion, my sense of humour might finally be appreciated. Just maybe, if the mood lightened, Clarence might realize how unreasonable he was being. But it wasn’t even eight in the morning yet, and I was still trying to figure out what the hell was going on.



Searching for my first permanent job in Vancouver, I decided to take a different approach. After working at a few random temporary jobs, I found myself unemployed, which is a scary prospect when living alone in the city. Instead of using a recruiter, I chose to go “old school”; I bought a newspaper from the corner store and scoured the classified ads for administrative jobs. One ad in particular caught my eye:

“A small but busy downtown law firm seeks an experienced legal secretary. A sense of humour required.”

I rarely buy lottery tickets, mainly because I’ve never felt particularly lucky, but this time I felt my luck was about to change. As I watched my cover letter and resume feed through the fax machine, I had a premonition: I was going to get the job. Wanting to take in the moment, I reached over and grabbed a Kit-Kat from the rack of assorted chocolate bars. I had become friends with my local 7-11 sales clerk, Siad, since arriving in Vancouver. He knew I was good for the occasional candy bar. Plus, he never stopped reminding me that my long ashen-blond hair was the “reason he moved to Canada”. I never grew tired of hearing that.

Just as I predicted, not a moment after arriving back home, my telephone rang. I excitedly answered the phone and was not surprised that it was *the* busy downtown law firm calling to speak to *me*. They wanted me to come in right away for an interview! If I’d had any extra pocket change, I would have raced out and bought myself a lottery ticket.

I interviewed on a Friday the 13th with two lawyers, Clarence and Myrtle. We spent nearly an hour laughing and joking about everything from cooking and wine

tasting, to traveling, and my least favourite subject, golf. But as I looked around Clarence's office, I couldn't help but notice his impressive collection of golf paraphernalia. Sitting on the oversized slippery red leather barristers' chair across from Clarence's desk, my hands folded neatly across on my lap, I observed an impressive display of golf awards, antique putters and miscellaneous golf-related accouterments. Clarence's office reminded me of my grandparents' rumpus room. Despite the fact that I deeply disliked the game of golf, I was willing to put aside my differences and opinions for the sake of a job. This is described as "*flexibility*" on my resume, under the heading "Job Skills".

My lack of enthusiasm for the game of golf only came about after working with lawyers. I can't name how many times I've endured the boring details of some lawyer's day out on the green. I've grown to view golf as Scotland's revenge on the world. Although, not to sound hypocritical, I have enjoyed the occasional round of pitch and putt with friends. However, my game always involved sneaking a six-pack of beer onto the course to ease the monotony, and I rarely kept an honest score. It's not that I cheat, per se, but when it takes more than seven tries to get the ball into the bloody hole, I stop counting.

"Do you golf?" Clarence asked enthusiastically. Looking around his office, I decided the best answer for my current employment situation was "yes".

"Of course!" I lied, smiling broadly at Clarence.

"Where do you normally play?" Clarence sat comfortably behind his desk, his hands folded casually across his lap, but clearly excited at the prospect of enlisting a potential golfing buddy. I had to think about his question for a moment, but then I remembered I was raised in the recreation capital of British Columbia, which boasted having nearly as many golf courses as it did churches.

"Well, since moving to Vancouver, I'm afraid I haven't had much time for golf. But I used to golf at Crown Isle in Courtenay," I lied again. The only time I ever stepped foot on Crown Isle was to visit the clubhouse lounge, which was very impressive (what I remember of it).

“Oh, Crown Isle,” Clarence responded, seemingly impressed with my answer. “I hear it’s a good course.” I could tell from Clarence’s expression he was buying my act. Fortunately for me, Clarence had never golfed there before.

“The reason I ask,” he continued. “It’s mandatory for all staff to participate in the annual office golf tournament. I gather you’re a good golfer?” What confidence I had just got up and walked straight out the door. Did he just say it’s “mandatory” to participate in a golf tournament? If that were true, there was no way I could keep up this façade, not if I actually had to golf in Clarence’s presence. I had no other choice but to cover my tracks.

“Well, I’m no Lee Trevino⁴,” I joked, letting out a small chuckle before continuing. “But I hold my own.” Thankfully, I remembered Lee Trevino getting a hole in one while watching televised golf at my grandparents. I desperately needed the job, but if being able to play golf was a deal breaker, then it looked as though I’d blown my chances.

“Not a problem!” Clarence beamed. “We’ll register you for private golf lessons at the University.” I stared back at Clarence, a big goofy smile on my face, as I nodded my head in agreement. It sounded like I hadn’t been completely dismissed as a potential candidate for the job, which was good news indeed. I just hoped Clarence didn’t sense my desperation. I had, after all, just agreed to the unthinkable. There was no way I would ever dream of taking private golf lessons. Anyway, Clarence would likely forget all about the suggestion of signing me up for private golf lessons. After all, who remembers every detail of a job interview? No doubt he’d already interviewed several candidates. How many other assurances had he made?

“When can you start?” Clarence enthusiastically asked.

“Golf lessons?” I asked astonished, having lost my train of thought.

“You are eager!” he laughed, seemingly pleased with his decision. “No, first things first. The job is yours, if you want it.”

I looked over at Myrtle, who was smiling and nodding her head, confirming Clarence’s statement. And just like that I was hired. I stood up and shook hands with

⁴ An American professional golfer who won six major championships over the course of his career.

them both, thanking them profusely for giving me the opportunity. It would seem this small but busy downtown law firm needed me, and I was ready to settle in to my very first permanent job in the Big City. Now all I needed to do was learn how to pronounce Lesniewski Trichopoulos.



“Good morning!” I heard as I walked through the doors of Lesniewski Trichopoulos, enthusiastically greeted by my new co-worker, and soon to be good friend, Bonnie Smith. She appeared just as excited about my new job as I was.

“Good morning!” I cheerfully returned Bonnie’s greeting and eagerly shook her hand. I could tell from Bonnie’s handshake she was going to be a lot of fun to work with – it was playful yet firm, with just a hint of “don’t mess with me” thrown in. I watched a television program once that talked solely of the importance of, and communication behind, a person’s handshake. It’s proven that a person can make or break a “deal” just by their handshake.

“Let’s hang up your jacket and then I’ll show you around the office.” I was barely out of the gate but Bonnie already had everything in hand. “Clarence isn’t here yet but everyone else is, so why don’t we get started?”

In less than five minutes, I got the lowdown on Bonnie. She’d been working at Lesniewski Trichopoulos for six months, but has worked as a legal secretary for nearly six years. Born and raised in Vancouver, she has a younger brother and both her parents live in a suburb of Vancouver. Legal secretarial work is the only work she’s ever done since graduating from high school, which coincidentally was two years after I graduated. I looked forward to finally working with somebody my own age. First up, we went to Myrtle Sweetman’s office for a re-introduction.

“Welcome!” Myrtle exclaimed as she got up from her desk and came around to greet me. “Thank you so much for taking the job! I think Clarence was a little worried that you might change your mind over the weekend,” she gushed, visibly excited to have me here. I wasn’t sure why she made this statement, but I chose to ignore it.

“Why you’re very welcome!” I replied.

“And thank you for starting so soon,” she said. “We were really hoping you could start right away and you didn’t disappoint.” I was thrilled with the reception so far. I admit, I spent a good portion of the weekend stressing about my first day, but so far any apprehensions I had were put to rest.

Next up was Ally Chandler’s office. Ally looked like she was in her early thirties and with her wispy blonde hair and fair skin she looked like a Nordic fairy.

“Ally, I’d like you to meet Chrystala.” Bonnie introduced me as I stood at her desk with my hand outstretched. “Chrystala is Clarence and Myrtle’s new secretary.” Ally slowly clambered out of her chair to reveal that she was very pregnant. Based on her enormous size, she must have been at least nine months along; that, or she was giving birth to triplets.

“Hi Chrystala,” she said, nearly out of breath. “Nice to meet you.” She shook my hand before instinctually placing both her hands on her round extended belly, slowly rubbing it as though doing this would grant her three wishes (or at least one small miracle).

“How far along are you?” I asked. I didn’t actually care when her baby/babies were due, but it was my first day and I needed to appear interested. I never did have a maternal instinct, much to my mother’s dismay.

“I’m due in two weeks,” she replied, laughing. “Actually, I’m due the same day my seven-week trial finishes.” The three of us joked at the prospect of her water breaking while giving her closing summations. Or better yet, giving birth on the judge’s desk!

Finally, it was time to meet Clarence’s partner, Guy Lesniewski. Guy was an unassuming man, of average height and average build. Aside from his larger than average nose, there was nothing exciting or remarkable about him, including his first name. I’ve often wondered who names their son Guy? It’s like naming your cat Kitty or your goldfish Goldie. He was, in a nutshell, just another “guy” who, if I’d only met once, would pass on the street without looking twice. I detected a hint of an English accent, suggesting he was either educated in the UK, or at one time lived there. But other than that, nothing remarkable stood out about him. We shook hands and

exchanged pleasantries, but he appeared too busy to engage us any further so Bonnie and I quickly exited his corner office and made our way back to our desks. Looking at the clock, Bonnie decided we had enough time to sneak downstairs for a quick cigarette break before Clarence was due in the office.



Clarence knew how to make an entrance, whether it was in a courtroom or his office. He charged through the office door in a whirlwind, marching past my desk and into his office without as much as a “good morning” or “hello”. Before slamming his office door, I politely smiled and welcomed my new boss with a cheerful “good morning.” As Clarence slammed the heavy door to his office, and before I could even finish my two-word sentence, Bonnie anxiously turned to me, her eyes as wide as saucers, and dispensed her first piece of office advice to me.

“Oh no! Rule number one,” she nervously stammered. “You *never* talk to Clarence first...you always wait for him to address *you* first.” I was completely taken aback by this useless piece of information. Who the hell did he think he was? And what’s up with “Rule Number One”? Every office has its own “etiquette”, but nobody warned me my new boss came with a set of rules (although he should have come with a health warning).

And so it began. That was my first introduction to the inscrutable office culture in the Big City. In less than one hour into my very first day, of my very first permanent job in Vancouver, I was shut down.

 **Diary Excerpt (Age 7)**

**Me and my mom and dad helped my brother
get in his new room today.
It was a fine looking room to,
I mean fine looking.**

***PRIVATE GOLF LESSONS***

To my complete and utter dismay, Myrtle handed me an invoice for six private golf lessons with Cris Tabors at the local University. They started in less than a week. This completely took me by surprise. Although I hadn't forgotten what we had discussed the prior week during the interview, I wasn't exactly feeling committed to my new job. It was only Wednesday, but already I was thinking about quitting. Maybe if Clarence pretended to like me I could be persuaded to stay.

"What's this for?" I asked, playing dumb.

"It's the receipt for your private golf lessons," Myrtle cheerily disclosed. "We talked about it last week at your interview. Remember?" Standing over me, she shook the receipt in my face, indicating that I should take it from her. Ignoring her, I just sat there staring blankly at it as though magically it might disappear. I sensed she was becoming impatient.

"It's \$246 for six private lessons." Myrtle continued, exasperated. "You can make a cheque out to Lesniewski Trichopoulos or, if you'd prefer, cash will work too." Having just taken a sip of coffee, I nearly did a spit-take across my desk. I had to catch my breath before finally swallowing, carefully setting down my coffee cup in the process. I couldn't hide my astonishment. Not only was I expected to take private golf lessons, but I was also expected to shell out \$246 of my own hard-earned money in the process? It felt like Clarence had just punched me in the face. Myrtle hesitated slightly before setting the invoice down on my desk, pushing it towards me.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, looking up at Myrtle. "You can't be serious?" I don't know why I bothered to ask because I knew she was. I refused to pick up the

invoice for fear that doing so meant I had accepted the terms of our so-called “golf agreement”. Leaning over my desk, I closer inspected the invoice. Sensing my lack of enthusiasm, Myrtle stared down at me indifferently, opting to ignore my question.

“You *are* serious?” I moaned. Of course she was serious, I reminded myself; she’s a lawyer. Taking a deep breath, I continued. “So let me get this straight. I am expected to pay for these lessons myself? It was my assumption that the office paid for them?” I could feel myself becoming upset. I had barely worked here for five minutes, yet already I was losing money. This just didn’t sit right with me. Annoyed by my questions, Myrtle held out her hand as though by some miracle I would place some form of payment into it.

“No,” she quipped. “The office isn’t paying for you to learn how to golf...*you are.*” She let out a heavy sigh. “Like I said, cash or cheque?” Although Myrtle and I were the same age, she took on a role of superiority (something I would slowly grow accustomed to as a temp over the years). I needed to get myself out of this sticky situation, but I didn’t want to lose Myrtle as one of my office allies. I needed Myrtle on my team and, more importantly, to empathize with my position. I decided I had no other choice but to play the “poor” card.

“Uh...well, this is a bit of a problem,” I confided, smiling politely. I took a quick sip of my coffee and cleared my throat before continuing. “You see, the truth of the matter is, I’m broke. I don’t have \$2.46 let alone \$246. I wish I did, Myrtle, but honestly, I don’t.” In reality, this was extremely embarrassing for me to admit, but I was flat broke. I needed to hang on to every penny I had to pay my rent and all the other household expenses (the phone bill, but equally important, the cable bill). I knew I was breaking the “golden rule” of never discussing personal finances at work, but I didn’t see any other way out; my hand had been forced.

In a feeble attempt to appease the situation, Myrtle cheerfully responded. “No worries. We’ll simply take it off your next paycheque.” Without waiting for my response, she turned around and quickly marched back to her office, closing her door behind her. I hadn’t even earned my first paycheque but I already owed my boss money. It was insane, yet I felt completely helpless to do anything about it.

During my exchange with Myrtle, Bonnie had remained silent; her back to us as she pretended to work. With Myrtle safely back in her office behind a closed door, and away from earshot, she swung around in her chair and offered up her sympathy.

“Don’t worry; I have to take them, too,” she said with puppy dog eyes. “And if it’s any consolation, at least we can meet up for a beer beforehand. The clubhouse bar at the University is excellent,” Bonnie reasoned. Despite her best efforts to make me feel better, it didn’t work. I let out a sigh and slumped back into my chair. I knew there was no point in fighting this. I had, after all, blatantly lied in my interview when I said I enjoyed golfing. I couldn’t very well then say, less than a week later, that I hated golf. Just like back on the farm, the hens had come home to roost.

 **Diary Excerpt (Age 7)**

**I made a cake the same as my dads cake so yummy.
Yummy! Yummy! Yummy! Yummy!**



THE BUZZ CAFÉ

“It just doesn’t feel right,” I insisted, scooping up hot frothy foam from my steamed milk with a piece of complimentary chocolate before popping it into my mouth. “I can’t describe it; it’s just a feeling I have.”

“Well, I’ve always said to trust your instincts,” Lisa admitted, not taking her eyes off her extra sweet peanut butter mochaccino with whipped topping. Picking up her spoon, she artfully scooped up a generous amount of whipped cream and put it in her mouth, savouring each delectable drop. She enjoyed her double peanut butter mochaccino nearly as much as I enjoyed a glass of pinot grigio.

“So, tell me then, what doesn’t feel right about this job?” Lisa questioned as she shifted her focus away from her hot beverage and back to me.

“Aside from the fact that I can barely pronounce the name of the firm?” I said facetiously before taking a sip of my hazelnut flavoured steamed milk. “I sound like I’m talking with a mouthful of marbles when I answer the phone.” Lisa had to swallow her mouthful of mochaccino before speaking for fear of laughing.

“Yeah, how the hell *do* you pronounce their names?” Lisa asked, letting out a laugh. “It’s a bloody mouthful.”

“Less-new-skee Tri-cop-o-lis,” I offered phonetically, slowly enunciating each name. “Or as I’d prefer to call them “Dickhead and Fuckface.” Lisa glanced up at me with a slight look of alarm. Having only worked there for three days, she clearly had no idea I was already harbouring this much resentment for the job.

“Charmin’, m’lady!” Lisa joked in a thick English cockney accent, which she always did to make me laugh. And, as always, it worked.

"It's my boss, Clarence," I blurted out. "He hates my guts." Lisa looked at me questioningly.

"What makes you say that?" she asked before putting another spoonful of whipped cream into her mouth.

"I see it in his eyes, every time he looks at me," I observed, trying not to become emotional. "He looks like he wants to punch me in the face." I didn't have Clarence down as a violent guy, but he did get what Bonnie and I described as "stink face" whenever he looked at me. We've all seen this look before; it's the sour expression people have when they've smelled somebody else's fart. When you're at the receiving end of that look every five minutes, it's not difficult to work out what it means.

"Wow," she responded, her eyebrows raised in disbelief. "That's no fun. I've *met* people like that but thankfully I've *never* had to work with them. I can't imagine." Lisa leaned back in her chair, shaking her head and thinking. Sometimes it's unimaginable to comprehend what it's like to work with people who can't stand the sight of you. Lisa was lucky; she worked with handicapped adults who adored her. While she was enjoying homemade cookies from her clients, I was settling for a daily dose of "stink face".

I concentrated on my steamed milk, giving Lisa a moment to ponder over my predicament. She knew me so well that, whenever I needed advice, she always instinctively knew the answer. Like watching a cake rise in the oven, I didn't want to hurry the process.

"How are you two lovely ladies this evening?" Jen greeted us with her usual cheerful smile and jovial demeanour. This is why Lisa and I loved coming here for coffee; Jen always gave us rock-star treatment. Not to mention, the Buzz Café doubled as an art gallery. There's nothing more soothing and inspiring than being surrounded by oil canvas paintings depicting bowls of fruit or a stormy beach.

"Jen!" I exclaimed. We hadn't seen her when we first arrived, but sometimes she had a habit of showing up out of nowhere. The Café had so many cozy nooks and crannies that you could get lost there for hours and nobody would ever notice.

"How's the new job?" Jen asked. She never forgot a conversation; another reason why I loved the Buzz Café.

"It's okay," I lied.

"Liar!" Jen answered, letting out a hearty laugh as she bent down in the process to grab a rogue napkin off the floor.

"But a good one!" Lisa joined in.

"Not really," Jen interjected, winking at Lisa. I liked Jen's "no bullshit" approach to her customers and to life in general. I always thought she'd make a good bartender.

"So what's up? Why don't you like your new job?" Jen reached into her apron and slipped me a piece of chocolate, like a dealer passes crack. In one swift movement, I removed the wrapper before eagerly popping it into my mouth. She also never forgot that I loved dark chocolate.

"She thinks her boss hates her," Lisa jumped in for me as the melting chocolate on my tongue took over my senses, and my ability to speak.

"He's a lawyer, right?" Jen asked matter-of-factly. I nodded "yes" before swallowing the last of the chocolate. "Then I'm sure the feeling is mutual. Everybody hates lawyers until they need one."

"That's just it," I finally joined in on the conversation. "I wish I didn't need one!" The three of us laughed as Jen waved at a customer who was waiting patiently at the coffee counter. She signaled that she'd be with him shortly as she looked around for her husband Chris, who was probably out back having a cigarette.

"Well, for what it's worth, if it were me I'd give it to him back, tenfold. Fuck him if he can't take a joke." And with that colourful piece of advice dispensed, Jen gave us both a wink and made her way to the coffee counter.

"I wish I could be more like her," I mused, letting out a sigh and leaning back in my chair.

"Unless you're your own boss, I don't think you'd get away with Jen's suggestion. But I know what you mean," Lisa replied as she took a long sip of her mochaccino, examining the remaining contents in her mug before setting it back

down. "But from what you've told me, you have an ally in Bonnie and Myrtle. If you ask me, Clarence is outnumbered. He's married – the man should know better."

"He's a bully," I said without taking my eyes off my steamed milk. Working in a toxic environment was exhausting, but Lisa was right. I had two allies in the office, both of whom seemed to like me and I hoped would have my back.

"I think you need to give it a little more time," Lisa suggested. "I don't want to sound condescending, but it takes a long time to settle in to a new job. Set a goal; if things don't improve in a few weeks then make your decision." Lisa reached out to me from across the table with her kilowatt smile and gave me a reassuring nod. Just thinking about looking for a new job again was draining enough. Despite my situation, it really was the last thing I wanted to do.

"You know what works for me?" Lisa interrupted my train of thought.

"What's that?"

"I go to the gym," she confided, point blank. "If work is stressing me out, on my way home I stop at the gym. An hour later I feel great." My eyes went wide with disbelief. I had no idea. This startling little revelation of Lisa's was news to me. I had no idea she even owned a pair of jogging pants let alone exercised!

"Really?" I questioned, astonished. "Well, aren't you a dark horse. How long have you been going to the gym...and why?" I didn't want to sound shocked, but it never occurred to me that Lisa would need to go to the gym, at least for the reason she suggested. I couldn't ever recall a time when Lisa bitched or complained about her job.

"Don't get me wrong, I love my job," she declared, confirming what I already knew. "But it comes with a lot of pressure, too. I'm dealing with people who try my patience at the best of times, most of who only have the intelligence of a five year old, and that's just dealing with head office. So, before I go home, I de-stress by hitting the gym." Lisa demonstrated by flexing her right arm. "By the time I'm done with the free weights, I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders, quite literally!" Lisa loved puns, and never passed up an opportunity to use them. We both laughed.

“Well, I have a lot to think about. I think I’m still in shock that you go to the gym!” I said without trying to sound patronizing. I find it interesting to think how well you know somebody, only to discover you really don’t. Like me, I thought Lisa was allergic to exercise.

“You should get a gym membership,” Lisa suggested.

“I’m broke,” I countered.

“Who isn’t?” she countered.

“I could just buy one of those workout videos and do it from home,” I proposed.

“Oh sure, like that’ll ever happen,” she joked, letting out a hearty laugh. “It’ll end up collecting dust with your other workout videos.”

“What other workout videos?” I questioned. Clearly, I didn’t know myself as well as I’d thought either.

“I’ve seen your Tai Chi video,” she recalled. “It’s propping up a bookshelf in your living room.” Lisa gave me a Cheshire cat smile.

“How observant!” I said, trying not to laugh. “But that’s only *one* workout video. It’s not like I have a collection of them.” I had to think about it for a moment, but she was right. With the best of intentions, I had purchased a Tai Chi video using my staff discount when I worked at the video store. I bought it but never watched it. To this day, I still have no clue what Tai Chi is.

“Seems to me you also have a male exotic dancer video,” Lisa pointed out, chuckling as she emptied the contents of her mug

“I’m going to counter that a male exotic dancing video is not a workout tape.” I had completely forgotten about that video. Yet another waste of my valuable staff discount dollars.

“Or is it?” Lisa mused, making us laugh loudly, catching the unwelcome attention of a neighboring table of older ladies, who were trying to enjoy a quiet cup of tea. In an attempt not to disturb other patrons, we covered our mouths as we laughed at the connotation of Lisa’s joke.

“What exactly do you do at the gym?” As strange as that question may seem to some, I grew up on a farm – going to the gym was foreign for me.

"I like to do free weights, stretches, sit ups and pushups."

"The closest I get to a push up is my bra," I declared, laughing at my own joke.

"That's humour. I recognize that," Lisa responded with a hint of sarcasm.

And then I remembered my ten-year high school grad reunion was this summer. Perhaps it was time to think about taking better care of myself, and in the process, make myself presentable for the reunion. I don't look back on my high school years with any degree of fondness, but there was something to be said about showing up looking better than those who had picked on me.

"Fine. I'll do it," I confirmed with a hint of resignation in my voice. "I don't have a lot of money to spend on a gym membership right now, though – especially given the fact that I now have to fork out \$246 for private golf lessons." But that aside, Lisa was right; my finances were always in a mess, but that didn't mean I should put my life on hold.

"Private golf lessons?" Lisa queried, a puzzled look on her face. She knew I detested the sport, so this little tidbit of information came as a complete surprise.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" I asked, knowing full well I had conveniently forgotten about my interaction with Myrtle earlier that day. A big part of me wanted to block it out completely. Lisa sat shaking her head.

"Yeah, I have to take six private golf lessons at the University." The look of disbelief on Lisa's face did not go unnoticed. "And the best part? I'm expected to pay for them out of my own pocket!" Lisa laughed, still shaking her head.

"Ah, the penny has finally dropped," she declared, sharing a hearty laugh over my new predicament. "Now I get it. That's bloody audacious, to say the least. I've never heard of such a thing." Lisa played with a chocolate wrapper as she spoke, not taking her eyes off of it. "But, it's still no reason to quit your job. Join the gym. It'll make a world of difference. You'll see."

"Yeah, I know. I mean, I dunno..." I mumbled. "I need motivation. I'm lazy."

"Well, we can work out together," Lisa offered. "If I can do it, so can you!" To further make her point, she channeled Arsenio Hall and punched the air with her fist. Lisa could motivate a pack of sloths if she put her mind to it.

“So, what’s the plan?” Jen reappeared and dropped two more pieces of dark chocolate onto our table. “*Will you stay or will you go,*” she sang, doing her best Clash impersonation. She never stopped reminding us of how much she missed the eighties, including neon clothing, which she still wore.

“I’m going to join the gym with Lisa,” I replied, trying to sound excited but without much luck. “Apparently it’s a good for me.”

“You’re not?” Jen asked loudly, looking somewhat bemused and shocked at the same time. “You two jumping on the “Jane Fonda” bandwagon?” To demonstrate, she did a couple of jumping jacks for our amusement. I was out of breath just watching her. I wished I shared her same enthusiasm.

“Only if I get to wear leg warmers!” Lisa chimed in, causing us to break into laughter.

Jen walked away shaking her butt *a la* Jane Fonda. As I watched her clear dishes from a neighboring table, I still couldn’t shake the lingering feeling that Clarence despised me. Secretly, I knew my only resolve to the situation was to quit my job. But maybe Lisa was right? Maybe three days wasn’t enough time to settle in to a new job, let alone this one. But what difference would another day, or even a week, make? Having never worked for a toxic boss before, Lisa could never fully appreciate my circumstances. If I wasn’t a good fit for the job, sticking around longer than necessary wasn’t going to improve my dilemma. If anything, it could make things worse. It was like staying in an abusive relationship. There was absolutely no benefit for me to stay if it meant feeling this way. But, I reasoned with myself, I would give it to the end of the week and cross that bridge when I got to it, if it didn’t collapse under my feet first.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**

Today I went to school.



RAT

To celebrate the end of my first week at Lesniewski Trichopoulos, Bonnie and Myrtle thought it would be fun for all of us to go to the Rose and Thorn Pub (aka the “RAT”) for celebratory drinks. I was up for it, provided it was only the three of us. Myrtle, on the other hand, decided it was best if everybody from the office was included. Even though it wasn’t ideal, I knew she was right. Although I didn’t particularly like the other lawyers in the office, I knew we had to extend the invitation. With a little luck, I hoped Clarence wouldn’t accept. He certainly never showed any interest in socializing before, and I couldn’t imagine him loosening up with a drink in a noisy bar on a busy Friday night. I mean, it’s not that I’m a snob or anything, but what I do in my spare time, outside the office, is my business and I covet my time away from work. Spending my free time in the company of my boss (and on my turf) simply felt too forced. And I hate having to sensor myself, especially after a few drinks. Unfortunately, I couldn’t have been more wrong about Clarence. I discovered he does indeed like to socialize.

After work, we made our way to the RAT, with Clarence promising to join us a little later. It was a typical Friday night and the pub was already filling up with the usual suits and office workers eager to blow off steam. Making our way through the crowd of construction workers and secretaries playing pool at the front of the bar, we eventually found ourselves in the heart of the establishment. Businessmen in dark suits lined up along the long bar, which was adorned with brass fittings and well-worn beer pumps, reminiscent of an English pub. Several clusters of people gathered at each end of the bar; some playing darts or watching sports on jumbo televisions, while others stood around talking animatedly and loudly to be heard above the juke

box. As luck would have it, we managed to find a big enough table for all of us, which is no easy feat on a Friday night. And, shortly after the first round of drinks arrived, Clarence made his grand entrance. An extrovert, Clarence likes to control every situation and, not surprisingly, social drinking was no exception.

Socializing with your boss and co-workers, especially when alcohol is involved, doesn't always go well. However, it can make for a fascinating, and oftentimes interesting, experience. When out on social office excursions, I like to make a mental note of their choice of beverage. For example, not surprisingly, Myrtle ordered a glass of Pinot Noir (although it's worth mentioning that Bonnie later pointed out she mispronounced Pinot Noir, pronouncing it *pee-not noo-ire*). However, much to my surprise, Ally washed down a bag of salt & vinegar chips with a sleeve of light beer (mentioning that she subscribes to the new-age thinking that one beer wouldn't harm her unborn baby). Guy, on the other hand, ordered a gin and tonic, which ordinarily I would have viewed more as a ladies' drink, but it suited him so I didn't question it. Bonnie, not surprisingly, didn't waste any valuable drinking time by ordering a double rye and Coke. With a slightly competitive edge to her, she was already one drink ahead. I decided to play it safe and ordered a pint of cheap beer on tap. I was, after all, broke and already down \$247. Clarence decided on a scotch, neat, but not before having an in-depth and drawn-out discussion with the waitress about the RAT's somewhat limited selection of single malt whiskies.

The six of us enjoyed several rounds of drinks and, much to my initial mortification, several "round-table" discussions. Thankfully, these proved to be both lively and entertaining. As with all party games, I was able to learn something new about each of my new colleagues. Guy's wife is a dentist; Myrtle's grandfather was a judge; and Clarence and his wife own two Belgium Shepherds. I also learned that Ally is married but didn't change her last name, and Bonnie shares a house in Kitsilano with three roommates. I, on the other hand, surprised even myself by sharing very little. I still felt uncomfortable around them, and my confidence was at an all-time low due to my inability to relate to Clarence. After all, they've all known each other for a while now and I was the newbie. I didn't want to make a complete fool of myself

by saying something I would later regret (at least not on this occasion). Instead, I simply told them I was single with no children, that I knew of, and this seemed to satisfy them enough to reward me with laughter.

As with all good things, our evening in the pub was nearing an end. Eventually, Clarence got up to leave, but not before offering to pick up the tab. I was happy not to have to open my wallet, although I sure wished I'd known *before* I started drinking cheap beer. *No matter*, I pondered, *maybe he's not so bad after all?* But, I reminded myself, even a few rounds of drinks wasn't enough to make me see Clarence in a different light. Although I've heard it said before that alcohol brings out the true personality of a person, and Clarence did seem happy and relaxed. But it simply wasn't enough to convince me to stay at the job. Besides, it's fascinating to me when you're at the office and being paid a boss can be so cruel. But once you're outside the office, and not being paid, they're nice. In other words: during office hours, I'm paid to be an emotional punching bag and to eat shit. Outside the office, anything goes. Nope, regardless of whether Clarence bought a few rounds of drinks or not, I had made up my mind to give my notice on Monday. And regardless of my earlier discussion with Lisa, no amount of time spent in a gym could convince me otherwise.

After Clarence picked up the bar tab, Guy and Ally followed shortly behind him, leaving Myrtle, Bonnie and me with a fresh round of drinks and the rest of evening to do as we pleased. It was then that I made the fatal mistake of confiding in Myrtle. Not unlike most people, this is what happens when I have a few drinks: I naively think everyone is my closest friend. Bonnie excused herself to the bathroom, and finding myself in an awkward moment of silence, I blurted out my resolution.

"I can't do it, Myrtle," I confided. "Clarence hates me. I'm giving my notice on Monday." Initially, she looked like she hadn't heard me correctly, but then shook her head and took a sip of her wine before voicing her opinion. I was totally surprised when Myrtle returned the favour and confided in me.

"You can't!" she pleaded. "I need you." She moved closer to me so we could talk without yelling over the loud music. "I really like you. Please don't leave me!"

Myrtle was only a few months older than myself and had only been called to the bar for a few months. She took comfort in knowing she had a quasi-experienced secretary who could assist her with legal documents or procedures.

“I think we have a good working relationship, don’t you?” she asked. Admittedly, even in the very short time we’d worked together, we had formed a good working relationship.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Myrtle continued, attempting to elicit a response from me. I was taken aback by her candor. But before I could respond, Bonnie returned from the bathroom. Myrtle gave me an all-knowing smile as she reached for her purse and jacket.

“It’s getting late so I’m going to head home,” Myrtle announced, pulling on her jacket and slinging her purse over her shoulder. “Give me a call this weekend. I want to finish our conversation.” She scribbled her phone number on a coaster and insisted that I take it. As I watched her disappear through the drunken mass of people, I tucked the coaster into my blazer pocket. Surprisingly, Bonnie didn’t ask why Myrtle was giving me her number, for which I was thankful.

“Another round?” Bonnie asked as she got up to get more drinks. Instinctually, she knew my answer would be “yes”. It was nearly midnight but the night was still young.



I put off calling Myrtle for as long as I could. My gut was telling me to cut my losses and walk away from the job, but I surprised myself when I picked up the phone late Sunday afternoon. I told myself I would give it four rings. If she didn’t answer I would be, literally, off the hook. Unfortunately, Myrtle must have been waiting for my call as she picked up after only two rings.

“Hello!” I heard her excitedly exclaim into the phone. “I almost gave up on you.” Clearly, even she didn’t think I was going to call. I tried to explain my reasons for wanting to leave, without making it sound Clarence-centric. But truthfully, if Clarence wasn’t my boss, then I might feel differently. However, in only five days, I recognized that we weren’t a good fit. I further tried to reason with Myrtle by telling her I still had my Unemployment Insurance benefits. If I gave my notice on Monday, my benefits wouldn’t be interrupted. In the meantime, I could find another job just as easily as I’d found this one.

Being a lawyer, Myrtle loved a good argument. She too had spent the weekend thinking about our Friday night conversation. By the time I called, she had plenty to say on the subject.

“You’re being hasty,” she argued. “One week isn’t long enough. Give it time.” I could tell she was prepared for anything I had to say. In fact, so much so, that I wouldn’t have been the least bit surprised if she had typed up her “argument” in advance.

Unlike Myrtle, however, I was thinking more with my heart than my head, and nothing I said convinced her that my decision was, in two words, my decision.

“Myrtle, I want this to work more than anybody,” I tried to counter-argue. “Actually, let me rephrase that, I need it to work...or, more aptly, I need to work.” I tried to throw her off with a little humour, but she wasn’t laughing.

“This is my first permanent job since moving here,” I continued. “I don’t want to give up before I’ve even started, but it doesn’t *feel* right. You know what I mean?” I could tell from the long pause that Myrtle didn’t. I don’t think she had the capacity to deal with an emotional argument.

“Five days is not enough time to settle in to a new job. There are all kinds of statistics to support that,” she countered. Deep down I knew she was right, but my heart wanted something different. In school they teach children *carpe diem*, which was exactly what I was trying to do, only it wasn’t exactly working out for me.

“But Clarence hates me!” I blurted. It was a weak argument but it was all I had. And besides, from where I was standing, it was true. Who wants to work for somebody who looks like they want to punch you in the face every time they look at you? Count me out.

“No, he doesn’t!” Myrtle exclaimed. Maybe she knew something I didn’t? “He doesn’t hate you. He’s like that with *everybody*. Trust me; you are *not* the only one he treats like that. You’re in good company.” This may very well have been true, I thought to myself, but that doesn’t make it right. If Clarence relishes treating people like crap then what does that say about him? I felt a pang of nostalgia for Al McGavin. He would never have treated me that way, or anybody else for that matter. Al knew how to keep his emotions in check. Al had class. Clarence did not.

“I dunno, Myrtle. I don’t think I can work for somebody who doesn’t have respect for those around him, regardless of whether I’m on the payroll or not. I want to work where I’m respected, and I figure if I give respect then I should get it back. Life’s too short.” As I heard myself say this, I realized I was starting to sound like one of those late-night self-help “experts” on television. We’ve all heard them, as they go on and on about self-respect and loving yourself. But the truth was, how could I possibly respect myself if nobody else around me did?

“Give it more time, that’s all I’m saying,” she responded. It was evident she wasn’t prepared, or even able, to get into a spiritual debate with me.

By the end of our conversation, Myrtle had somehow convinced me to promise not to give my notice on Monday, at least for one month. I still wanted to give my notice, but at this point I was willing to say anything to get off the phone. It was getting late and I had plans to meet Lisa and Mattias at the Clover Field Pub. It was open mike Sunday and I didn’t want to be late for an evening of swinging blues, a few games of pool and lots of cheap beer. But I kept my promise to Myrtle. Monday morning I called in sick.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**

**It snowed a lot today. I had a lot of fun sliding to.
It was funny when my brother fell of the sled.**

**COCAINE AND FIREWORKS**

The buzzer rang, pulling my attention away from the magazine I was engrossed in. I had recently splurged on a subscription to *Entertainment Weekly*. After enduring six weeks of private golf lessons, I convinced myself I'd earned it. Plus, I figured if I had a magazine subscription then I was less likely to spend money on magazines in the store, which, like wine and cigarettes, were in my top three essentially frivolous purchases.

I buzzed Bonnie up to my apartment. She was an hour late but I wasn't surprised. After working with her for nearly seven months, I came to appreciate that Bonnie didn't possess an internal clock, or any kind of clock for that matter. She ran on her own time. As a Virgo, this trait should have driven me nuts, but her friendship made up for it in other ways.

"I'm back and I'm ready to party!" Bonnie cheered loudly as she came barreling through my door, a bottle of white wine in each hand.

"Wake up, roll over, go to the Clover!" I responded. Some people have secret handshakes; we had our own greeting catchphrase.

Making herself at home, she put one bottle of wine in the fridge while twisting off the cap of the other bottle. I quickly grabbed two glasses and, in one swift movement, Bonnie managed to pour two glasses of wine without spilling a drop before steering us back into my living room.

"It's mental out there!" she loudly announced as she threw herself down onto her usual spot on my over-sized sectional sofa. "What time are the fireworks?" she

asked, setting down the open bottle of wine onto the coffee table. There wasn't any point in waiting for this bottle to chill; it wouldn't last long enough in any event.

"Not until ten fifteen," I answered, grabbing my pack of cigarettes and offering one to Bonnie. Shaking her head "no", she reached into her purse and pulled out her own brand. She smoked menthol cigarettes, which I always found kind of disgusting. Not that smoking wasn't already disgusting enough, but smoking menthol never made sense to me; it was like smoking dried mint leaves.

"That was fun the other night, hey?!?" Bonnie asked through pursed lips, attempting to light her cigarette. She couldn't get her lighter to work so I tossed her mine.

"I wouldn't say the golf tournament was exactly fun, but dinner at Mescalero's afterwards was great," I revealed, taking a drag off my cigarette. "I'd never been there before." Mescalero's was a landmark restaurant nestled in the heart of the West End. It was not only popular for its Mexican inspired menu, but also for its distinguished clientele. Celebrities such as Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro and Steven Tyler were known to frequent Mescalero's. Unfortunately, there were no stars in the sky that night. But for me, it was a nice change ordering dinner from a menu that wasn't written in chalk.

"Tell me to mind my own business, but it looked like you and Clarence were actually getting along," Bonnie remarked before guzzling back her wine, setting the empty glass down heavily onto the coffee table. Noticing that I wasn't keeping up, I quickly drank mine down before Bonnie refilled both our glasses. If drinking was an Olympic sport, Bonnie would be Team Canada's captain.

"Well, I have to say, I was really surprised when Clarence handed me the "good sport" award for participating in my first office golf tournament," I recalled as I reached under the sofa and pulled out the massive blue and white golf umbrella; my award for attempting to golf 18 holes in the pouring rain. In the end, while the rest of the office finished the full 18 holes, I stayed warm and dry in the clubhouse for the last nine.

"It's massive!" Bonnie squealed as she grabbed the umbrella. Removing its plastic wrapper, she managed to get it open. "Holy crap! This thing is larger than my patio umbrella!" We both laughed at the sheer massiveness of the umbrella. Secretly, I prayed I would never have to use it.

"I'd like to see you walk down the street with this thing!" Bonnie said. "You'd take more than a few eyes out with it." She immediately jumped up and began twirling the umbrella, practically knocking over our wine glasses in the process, not to mention a few other items around my compact living room. Still laughing, she closed it and casually tossed it onto the floor before flopping back down on the sofa.

"You didn't answer my question," Bonnie said as she reached for her glass, debating whether to top it up or not. Instead, she polished off what was in her glass.

"Well, I managed to make it through my probationary period without getting fired," I joked. "Where's my good sport award for that?" Chuckling, Bonnie lit another cigarette. Following her lead, I lit another cigarette and poured more wine into our glasses. Setting the bottle down, I couldn't help but notice we had nearly polished it off.

"When I worked at Boyer & Chaplin they gave out service awards," she recalled, taking a drag from her cigarette. "We got an umbrella if we made it to one year. Maybe Clarence saw this as your service award?" Bonnie kicked at the umbrella lying on the floor. I hadn't thought of it that way, but maybe she was right? By surviving for more than six months, I had passed some kind of initiation - like a hazing ritual.

"I think you're right," I confirmed. "Lately, it hasn't been that bad working with Clarence." Part of me hoped it would stay that way, but deep down I knew how unpredictable he was.

"Drink up!" Bonnie instructed, butting out her cigarette before bounding up off the couch. "Let's go to the Clover Field while we can still get a table."

“Who’s competing in the fireworks tonight?” I asked as I emptied my glass of wine.

“Korea,” she answered loudly over her shoulder as she made her way out to the hallway without waiting for me.



“That’s him,” I said quietly, discreetly leaning in so only Bonnie could hear me.

“Who?” she asked, surveying the crowded bar. The Clover Field Pub wasn’t a particularly large bar, but at full capacity it could accommodate around 75 patrons. On fireworks night, it usually packed in at least that many and then some. With its worn wood plank floors and British themed décor, the smell of stale beer and cigarettes told the story of a thousand drunken nights. Endless nights of bar bands with catchy names like Sneaky Pete and Abandoned Youth provided the nightly entertainment. On Sunday nights, we gathered at the Clover Field to listen to drunken karaoke renditions of “Crossroads” and “Free Bird”. Back in the 1960’s, even my dad used to drink here.

“Him!” I said, inconspicuously pointing in the direction I was referring to. “He’s the guy I see everywhere around the neighborhood.” The person I was referring to wasn’t difficult to miss. He was a miniature version of young Elvis, complete with a pompadour, groovin’ sideburns and a rockabilly outfit reminiscent of “The Westside Story”. Whoever he was, he was committed to the “look”.

“He’s sitting alone by the cigarette machine,” I confided, trying to point in his direction without alerting Young Elvis’s attention.

“Oh!” Bonnie finally spotted him. “That’s they guy you were telling me about?” She shook her head and started to giggle. “You didn’t tell me he was a freak,” she announced before polishing off her bottle of beer.

“Why? What’s wrong him?” I asked, slightly puzzled. To be honest, I had the greatest admiration for those who dressed distinctively. In high school, I tried

dressing like a punk rocker, complete with blue hair, army boots and distressed clothing, but I stood out too much. I gave up after several weeks of teasing.

“He looks like Elvis Presley,” Bonnie scoffed as she pulled out a crisp \$20 bill from her wallet.

“I think that’s the point,” I declared, defending this total stranger who seemed to appear everywhere in my neighborhood, regardless of the time of day. My guess was, he either worked from home or was unemployed. That or he was a drug dealer.

Without a word, Bonnie got up and headed to the bar to order another round of drinks. As she stood at the end of the long lineup, I sat alone at a table large enough to seat eight people. Lisa, Mattias and Rod were joining us later, so when the large table became available, we took it. Feeling slightly uncomfortable that there were only two of us seated at such a large table, especially on one of the busiest nights of the week, I decided to engage Young Elvis in conversation. I was compelled to get to know him. He sat alone at a table for two with a large bag of grapes and a pint of lager. He was smoking a cigarette while popping grapes into his mouth. *Even more reason to acquaint myself with this most unique individual*, I thought to myself.

“Excuse me,” I said as I approached Young Elvis. He looked up at me and smiled.

“Care for a grape?” he asked without skipping a beat, holding up the bag of plump green grapes. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, I happily accepted and plucked a grape off a stem before popping it in my mouth. The grape exploded in my mouth and, for an instant, the sourness of it made my eyes water.

“Thank you,” I said politely. “I couldn’t help but notice you’re sitting alone. My friend and I...” My voice trailed off as I turned around to face our large empty table. I noticed Bonnie still hadn’t returned with our drinks. “Well, me and my friend,” I continued. “We’re sitting at a really large table over by the fireplace. I was wondering if you wanted to join us?” It wasn’t until I said it that I thought it must have seemed weird to him – a total stranger inviting him to her table. Or, based on his attire, maybe

not? For those who stand out, they likely receive more attention than those who fly under the radar. Young Elvis was unfazed by my request.

"I'd love to," he replied. Before I could say another word, he butted out his cigarette and began making his way to our table, his bag of grapes and mug of beer in hand. I wasn't physically attracted to Young Elvis, but there was something enigmatic about his character - I couldn't help but be drawn to him. As we made ourselves comfortable at the table, I noticed other patrons in the bar staring at us. For a brief moment, I felt like I was sitting with a rock star.

"My name is Chrystala," I offered, extending my hand. Young Elvis pushed his bag of grapes over to me and introduced himself.

"My name is Rick," he said, returning the smile and handshake. I couldn't help but notice he had a mouthful of crooked teeth.

"Jesus H. Christ," Bonnie muttered under her breath as she put down a fresh drink in front of me. "It's fireworks night and Rob is the only one working behind the bar. Where the fuck is Marsali?" Bonnie scanned the bar, seeking out the familiar face of our favourite waitress, but she was nowhere to be found.

"She's probably on her break," I defended Marsali. She was Scottish and I always had an affinity for the Scots. Bonnie threw herself down on her chair, clearly exhausted from waiting in the excruciatingly long lineup at the bar.

"Who's this?" Bonnie asked as she popped a Menthol cigarette in her mouth. Rick sat quietly with a smile on his face, taking in the conversation.

"This is Rick," I responded. "I asked him to join us." Rick stood up, reaching across the table to shake Bonnie's hand. She reached across the table and limply shook his hand.

"Hey, Rick. Nice to meet you," she said as she leaned back in her chair, picking up a lighter off the table to light her cigarette. Tossing the lighter back on the table, she exhaled and studied Rick. "What time did you say Lisa and the gang are joining us?" Bonnie asked without taking her gaze off Rick.

“Any minute now,” I answered as I checked my watch. It was nearly 8:30 pm. That would give us plenty of time to enjoy a few drinks before the Symphony of Fire fireworks started at 10:15 pm. As if waiting for their cue, Lisa, Mattias and Rod came bursting through the door of the pub, laughing. Catching their attention, they all waved and began making their way through the bar to our table.

“Busy place tonight!” Rod announced as he grabbed a chair and sat down, with Lisa and Mattias quickly following behind him. As Lisa settled in to her chair, I could see her giving me a look as she glanced from Rick then back to me. I took this as my cue to introduce Rick to my growing band of friends.

“Everybody!” I shouted above the increasing noise of the bar. “This is Rick.” Rick smiled and immediately pushed the depleted bag of grapes into the middle of the table. I’m not sure what his obsession was with the bag of grapes, but it worked well as an icebreaker. Mattias immediately reached into the bag and pulled out several grapes, popping them systematically into his mouth as he introduced himself.

With the round of introductions out of the way, Bonnie announced that she was going to the bathroom. As she made her way through the growing crowd of pub goers, Lisa placed a \$20 dollar bill on the table, indicating it was time to get in a round of drinks. Looking around, I still couldn’t see Marsali but no doubt her break was over; it wouldn’t be long before she’d make her way to our table. If there was one thing she knew how to do well, it was earn her tips.

“So, Rick,” Lisa started, leaning forward to get Rick’s attention. “Do you live around here?” He pulled his chair closer to the table and leaned in to engage in conversation with her.

“I do,” he responded loudly to be heard above the lively pub crowd. “I live on Faro Street.” Faro Street was only two blocks from the Clover Field Pub.

“Where’s the waitress?” Rod impatiently inquired, standing up to get a better lay of the land. The bar had filled up quickly with the anticipation of the night’s fireworks. Turning her attention away from Rick, Lisa picked up her \$20 and motioned that she’d buy the first round of drinks.

"I'll be right back. Can I get anybody else a drink?" she asked before making her way to the bar. Rick and I both shook our heads "no". As she disappeared through the crowd, I grabbed a cigarette from my pack on the table and offered one to Rod, Mattias and Rick. Lighting my cigarette, I nearly fell off my chair as I saw Rick's doppelganger come out of seemingly nowhere and approach us.

"What the hell?" I muttered under my breath, not that anyone could hear me over the loud volume of the bar. Young Elvis #2 stopped at our table, a wide grin on his face. With the cigarette dangling from my mouth, I quickly turned to Rick in the event my mind was playing tricks on me. Rick stood up and motioned for Young Elvis #2 to join us. As he came around the table and sat beside Rick, I immediately erupted into nervous laughter.

"Oh my God!" I unceremoniously burst out. "You're twins!" I could see both Rod's and Mattias's mouth gaping open as they quickly glanced back and forth from Rick to Young Elvis #2.

"Okay, I definitely need a drink now!" Mattias announced as he threw up his arm, signaling to Marsali who finally came into view. She was carrying a tray of shots and a broad grin on her face.

"Evening, folks," Marsali said in her soft Edinburgh accent. "A round of Jägermeister." Methodically, she placed the full shot glasses onto the table.

"Wait a minute," I said as I lightly touched her arm. "We didn't order these, did we?" I knew how expensive shooters were. They were a luxury only afforded at payday, which was over a week away.

"Your friend did. The tall skinny lass with the brown hair," Marsali replied as she stood with her now empty tray, still smiling.

"What the fuck?" I heard Bonnie's voice booming from behind Marsali. "Now I'm seeing double? Marsali, what are you putting in my drinks?" Bonnie let out a raucous laugh as she affectionately patted Marsali on the back before flopping back down in her chair. Marsali just laughed and smiled back at us.

“Dick, what can I get you?” Marsali directed her question at Young Elvis #2. For the first time since joining our table he spoke.

“My usual, please Marsali.” Clearly he was a regular here. But this was madness! How had I not seen him before? Or maybe I had, but I didn’t know it? Not realizing Rick was a twin, this must have been the first time I’d seen both of them together. But now it made total sense as to why I would see Rick/Dick all around the neighborhood. All this time, there were two of them!

“One Budweiser. Coming right up,” Marsali confirmed before making her way through the crowd and back to the bar.

“Jager shots!” Bonnie squealed as though greeting a close acquaintance. She picked up a shot glass and slammed it back without waiting for us to join her. I half expected her to toss back another one, but instead she placed a full glass in front of each of us, with the exception of Lisa who was still AWOL. Right on cue, Lisa reappeared precariously holding three drinks, her eyes as wide as saucers. Recognizing her expression, I couldn’t help but laugh. No doubt Rick and Dick were used to this reaction. Lisa carefully set the drinks down onto the table without taking her gaze off the rockabilly twins.

“That’s amazing!” she said as she carefully sat down. “Sorry for staring, but it’s incredible how much you two look alike.” Lisa reached out her hand, introducing herself to Dick. With another round of introductions out of the way, Bonnie yelled out “shots” and, without hesitation, we all picked up our Jägermeister shots and poured the contents down our throats. It was going to be a long night, to say the least.



Korea put on an amazing display of pyrotechnics and afterwards we made our way back through the throngs of people to the refuge of the Clover Field Pub. Every year, tens of thousands of people converge on the beaches of English Bay to watch the fireworks. Next to the Pride Parade, it’s the most highly anticipated event of the summer, and tonight was no exception.

By the time we reached the pub, it was already heaving with people. But for a small “fee”, we managed to talk Marsali into saving our table for us. Aside from cheap beer and Jager shots, it’s amazing what \$20 at the Clover Field can buy you, but it was worth every penny. After an enthusiastic round-table discussion about Korea’s amazing fireworks display, it didn’t take us long to settle back into party-mode, accompanied by several more rounds of shots and generously poured pints. Everybody was enjoying themselves, especially Bonnie, who was singing along to yet another of her favourite songs booming loudly from the jukebox.

“Can I tell you something?” Lisa tried to say inconspicuously into my ear as she leaned back slightly in her chair. I was intrigued.

“Absolutely,” I replied discreetly.

“I think Bonnie is doing cocaine.” I shot Lisa a sideways glance as my jaw dropped open. She put her finger up to mouth indicating she wasn’t finished.

“The last time she came back from the bathroom, she had what appeared to be white powder on her nose.” Lisa surveyed the table, checking to see if Bonnie was watching us. She wasn’t. Bonnie had taken up residence on Rick’s lap (or maybe it was Dick’s? I couldn’t really be sure) and was now singing louder than the jukebox.

“That makes sense,” I responded, trying not to look too obvious that we were talking about Bonnie. “She’s changed since I started working with her. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but if she is doing coke then it makes perfect sense.” It felt a little strange to be talking about my colleague when she was sitting right there, but this latest bit of news was cause for concern.

“Well, to each her own,” Lisa said, leaning forward to take a sip of her beer before continuing. “But I don’t know how she can afford it?” We both laughed as we watched Bonnie spill half her beer down the front of Rick’s/Dick’s white V-neck t-shirt. I didn’t know which was funnier, the fact that she spilled her beer on Rick/Dick or the fact that neither of them seemed to notice. Marsali would definitely be getting a hefty tip from us tonight.

“Well, if what you say is true...” I started to say.

“I could be wrong,” Lisa interjected. “I’ve never done coke before, but I waitressed for years. I’m pretty sure that’s what she’s doing.” We watched as Bonnie continued to pour beer everywhere but in her mouth.

“I think you’re right,” I said, supporting Lisa’s theory. “I mean, we’ve all been messy drunks at one time or another, but like I said, she’s changed. Something’s different. And if she is doing cocaine then that explains a lot of things.” What I hadn’t told Lisa was that, although I was getting along really well with everybody at work, Bonnie had become more argumentative and unreliable. I hadn’t known her long, but it was out of character for her. Since January, we’d become closer, but recently I had to cover for her at work. If she was late, I told Guy she was in the bathroom. If she went missing after lunch, I said she was at the courthouse filing documents. Once I found her asleep in the bathroom.

“Do you think you’ll talk to her about?” Lisa asked as she took out a cigarette and lit it before tossing the package across the table to Rod and Mattias, who were engrossed in a private conversation of their own.

“Probably not. Or at least, not right now,” I reasoned. “I’ll choose my moment, if I do.” I took a cue from Lisa and lit a cigarette.

I sat back in my chair, puffing on my cigarette and mulling over Lisa’s latest revelation. If Bonnie was doing cocaine then, as a friend, it was my responsibility to talk to her about it. Clearly, it was affecting her behavior, and not in a good way. They say cocaine can boost your confidence and make you feel important. But what dealers don’t tell you is that cocaine is highly addictive. If Bonnie wasn’t careful, it wouldn’t be long before she was an addict. Dealers also don’t warn you about the after-effects of addiction. Cocaine is not only expensive, but she ran the risk of it costing her job, her reputation and possibly even her friends.

I decided Saturday night at the Clover Field Pub was not a good time to stage an intervention. Tonight was about having fun with friends and that’s exactly what

we did! At some point, somebody brought out a camera, which later helped us to piece together the evening. And from what I could tell, a great time was had by all.

 **Diary Excerpt (Age 7)**

**Today I went to school.
At school I had gym (it was real fun).**



MAKING MY NEXT MOVE

“I think it makes perfect sense,” Lisa insisted as she picked at a piece of lint on her favourite purple sweater. Although, having said that, Lisa’s dad used to constantly remind her how much he disliked that purple sweater. We frequented flea markets and vintage clothing shops in search of cheap (yet stylish) clothes. On one such shopping spree, Lisa found this cozy sweater. And although it was two times too big for her, it was her favorite colour. With only \$5.00 in her pocket, she bought it. Much to her dad’s chagrin, she wore it nearly every weekend.

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” I acknowledged. How could I disagree? As always, Lisa was right. Moving in with her was not only a financially viable plan, but it also meant we could spend more time together. After all, I moved to Vancouver to be closer to my best friend. As it was, I spent more time at her place than I did my own. It just made good sense to combine our resources and save money in the process. We were both struggling to make ends meet in one of the most expensive cities in the country. Why not eliminate the financial stress of living here?

“We both have a lot more traveling to do. And this way, we can finally start saving our money,” I added, knowing full well I was preaching to the choir. But it was exciting to talk about traveling again. After moving here, it was almost unthinkable that either of us could ever afford it again. Lisa got up from the sofa, making her way to the galley kitchen to make a pot of tea. I could hear the steam-whistle kettle coming to a boil. Sitting on her overstuffed red velvet love seat, I looked outside and watched as the rain beaded down the windows. Spring and fall were my favourite times of the

year, but it felt like fall had come early this year. The phone rang, breaking my train of thought.

“You may as well get that,” Lisa announced from the kitchen before poking her head around the corner to finish her sentence. “Roomie!” I smiled and got up from the sofa to answer the phone.

“Hey girl! What are you guys up to?” It was Mattias. He only lived a few blocks away and, like me, he spent a lot of time hanging out at Lisa’s apartment.

“Mattias!” I burst out, excited to hear his voice. “We’re just about to have some tea. Are you coming over?” Happy to find us home, Mattias said he’d be right over, but he had one stop to make first. Making her way back to the living room, Lisa set down a tray of tea and goodies on the coffee table. If anyone knew how to make a good cup of tea, it was Lisa. She loved her tea and I loved to drink it.

“Is Mattias on his way over?” she asked as she carefully set out two teacups before finding her spot back on the sofa, allowing the tea to steep. A good cup of tea, she always said, needed to steep for at least five minutes. I, on the other hand, never had the patience to wait for the tealeaves to darken the pot of hot water. She always laughed at how weak I drank my tea.

“Yes,” I confirmed, reaching for my cigarettes. “He just has one pit-stop to make first, but then he’s coming right over.” Opening the pack, I offered a cigarette to Lisa before taking one out for myself. Obliging, Lisa accepted and handed me the table lighter she inherited from her grandmother. I admired the fact that she had a table lighter. They seemed to go out of style in the sixties, but Lisa held steadfastly onto old traditions. And not surprisingly, every item in her apartment had a story attached to it. In this case, her grandmother, who was born poor but married rich, had gifted the marble and sterling “art deco” table lighter to Lisa, years before she was even old enough to smoke. But that didn’t matter; it was what the lighter represented.

“Tell me again about your grandmother,” I asked as I artfully lit my cigarette, passing the heavy lighter back to Lisa.

“I remember visiting her once in the hospital, shortly before she passed away,” she recalled as she lifted the lid off the teapot, inspecting its contents before replacing it. “I asked her one time what it was like to marry for money.”

“What did she say?” Even though I already knew the story, I always loved hearing Lisa imitate her grandmother’s “posh” English accent.

“She said, “What’s five minutes out of your day, darling?”” We both erupted into laughter, catching the salaciousness of her grandmother’s statement, and picturing her saying it. I’d never met her grandmother, but I always wished I had.

“Even on her deathbed, she always wore snow-white gloves and ruby-red lippy,” she marveled. Lisa was definitely her grandmother’s granddaughter; she never left the house without her vibrant red lipstick on. It was her signature on every wine glass or teacup. She used to refer to it as “leaving a little something behind to remind them of me”. I sometimes felt like she’d been born in the wrong era.

“So, how long have you been working at...how do you say the names again?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Lesniewski Trichopoulos,” I answered with disdain, not wanting to be reminded of work on a Sunday afternoon. My time away from the office was coveted. The last thing I wanted was to think about work. “Nearly eleven months,” I said, in answer to her first question.

“But you’re still planning on quitting in the spring, right?” she asked as she took a drag from her cigarette.

“That’s the plan,” I replied. Relaxing on Lisa’s sofa, I leaned forward to flick the ashes from my cigarette into her oversized marble ashtray.

“Then our timing to move in together is perfect. Why pay all that rent on an apartment when you’ll be gallivanting around the world!” The excitement in Lisa’s voice was unmistakable. She was just as happy as I was with my imminent travel plans.

The phone rang, reminding us that Mattias would be joining us for tea. Jumping up, I quickly made my way to the phone and answered it without hesitation. I was, after all, soon to be her roommate. Now was as good a time as any to start making myself feel more at home. Buzzing Mattias in, I put the phone back on its cradle and resumed my position on the comfy love seat.

Mattias, chivalrous as always, arrived with a colourful bouquet of fresh cut flowers. It was these little touches that Lisa loved about him. He always knew how to brighten up a rainy day, or any day for that matter. Lisa jumped up from the sofa and greeted Mattias with a big hug and kiss on the cheek, leaving a trace of red lipstick in the process. Graciously accepting the gorgeous gift of flowers, she put them in a vase and placed them on the table beside the sofa. I grabbed a teacup for Mattias as we settled onto the sofas to enjoy an afternoon of tea, cigarettes and storytelling. It was afternoons like these that I never wanted to end. The rest of the week paled in comparison to a lazy Sunday afternoon at Lisa's place. Sundays were notorious for hanging out, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. It was a nice way to cap off the weekend before jumping in to the long work week ahead.

"We have some good news, Mattias!" Lisa announced excitedly as she began to pour each of us a cup of tea.

"You two are finally getting married?" Mattias cheered as he clapped his hands together like an impatient child waiting for the Santa Parade to begin. Mattias knew how much Lisa loved it when he teased us about our close friendship.

"No, we're going to open a store that sells balloon animals," she joked, laughing loudly as she balanced the big heavy brown teapot over the tray, careful not to spill any tea before setting it back down. Mattias and I both joined in, laughing at the idea. Lisa did have a talent for making balloon animals.

"Seriously, though. Chrystala's moving in with me. We're going to be roommates!" she gushed, still excited at the idea. It felt good to hear her say it out loud, as though by doing so further cemented the deal. There was no turning back now!

“That’s fantastic!” Mattias jumped up and hugged us both. It was exciting news and I was happy he felt the same way. Not because we needed his consent, but it was nice to know we had his blessing.

“We both want to travel more, and this way we can not only spend more time together but we can also save money on rent,” I added, pouring a liberal amount of cream into my teacup, opting to let the cream spread slowly instead of stirring it with a spoon. I admired the random design it made as it spread through the tea, reminding me of an inkblot experiment. I often wondered if it was possible to read cream spreading in the hot liquid the same way you could read tealeaves.

“You sound like my grandmother,” Mattias joked, letting out a laugh before continuing. “But that makes total sense. You two are inseparable anyways, so you may as well live together and save money while you’re at it.”

“I really want to go back to Turkey,” Lisa added. “And Chrystala’s thinking about moving to England for a few months, one day.”

“This sounds like a reason to celebrate!” Mattias raised his cup of tea to ours, toasting our future.

“But before we get ahead of ourselves,” he interjected. “Shouldn’t we be talking about a housewarming party first?” The three of us erupted into a chorus of laughter, nodding in unison. If there was one thing Lisa did well, it was throw a party and any excuse was a good one. She wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass without marking the occasion.

“Wait.” I countered. “Shouldn’t I move in first?” I laughed at the idea of having a housewarming party before I actually moved in. “I won’t be moving in until next month,” I added, reminding Lisa that plenty still needed to be done before I could actually move in. Given that she lived in a one bedroom apartment, she would need to clear out the only available space left in her apartment that could double as a second bedroom; the dining room.

Even though my move was still a few weeks away, the three of us spent the rest of the afternoon planning the housewarming party to end all parties. I knew this was going to be an exciting time for us. It took a while, but I was finally starting to carve out a niche for myself in the city and, for the first time, it was starting to feel like home.

 **Diary Excerpt (Age 7)**

**Yesterday my brother got a new sterow
with two speckers to.
Today I went to school.
I am saving my money for a pony.**

**DEEPTHROAT**

“You have to promise you won’t tell *anybody* what I’m about to tell you, and that means even Myrtle,” Bonnie ordered, with a seriousness in her voice I didn’t recognize. She knew that Myrtle and I used to occasionally hang out at lunchtime. Sometimes we’d go to the mall and shop for clothes. Once I helped her pick out a new home telephone.

“Agreed,” I promised. “I just want to know who the hell Veronica is and why she calls a thousand times a day?” Exasperated, I pulled a cigarette out of the package, throwing the nearly empty pack back into my handbag. “She’s so rude on the phone,” I snapped, frustrated with the situation but knowing my annoyance with the situation was misdirected. Bonnie was also fully aware of Veronica’s bitchy serial calling to the office. We did, after all, share the roll of receptionist.

Bonnie lit her cigarette and handed me her lighter, which I eagerly took. For some reason, I always seemed to lose my lighter in my “bottomless pit” for a handbag. My mom always joked that I had everything in there but the kitchen sink. Truth be told, she wasn’t wrong. I filled my purse with everything from makeup to extra nylons to my address book, and anything else it would hold. It always weighed a ton, but that never seemed to bother me, until I was looking for something. Lighting my cigarette, I inhaled deeply and handed back her lighter.

“Okay. Well, you know how Clarence used to work at Boyer & Chaplin?” Bonnie asked, not waiting for my response before continuing. “Well, so did Veronica.

She was the receptionist.” She paused for effect, inhaling deep from her cigarette, savouring the moment.

“You used to work there, too, didn’t you?” I asked, vaguely recalling Bonnie telling me she knew Clarence and Guy from her days at Boyer & Chaplin.

“Yeah, that’s how I got the job here.” Bonnie flicked the ashes from her cigarette, watching as they floated in the air before resting on the cold oil-stained concrete.

“So how come Veronica’s calling Clarence?” I asked point-blank. Maybe, in Clarence’s defense, there was a reasonable explanation. Like, maybe she was asking Clarence about an old file, or something work related? Although, deep down, I knew that was likely not the case at all.

“Their affair was common knowledge when I worked at Boyer & Chaplin, but I thought it ended when he set up his own shop,” Bonnie volunteered.

“Clarence is having an affair with Veronica?” I blurted out, quickly catching myself in case somebody else was in the car park with us. The last thing I wanted was to be busted discussing my boss’s infidelities in the parkade of the building where I worked. The chances were good that somebody who knew Clarence might unknowingly be down here with us.

“Got it in one,” Bonnie confirmed, taking another drag from her smoke, shivering slightly from the damp cold of the underground car park.

“But here’s the thing,” Bonnie whispered. We both looked around to see if anybody was within earshot. It felt like a rendezvous with Deep Throat⁵, reminiscent of the Nixon scandal of 1972. “It was assumed that Clarence ended the affair when he left Boyer & Chaplin. I mean, like I said, it was common knowledge and everybody knew about it.” Before continuing, Bonnie surveyed the car park again. The coast was still clear. “But the rumour I heard was that his wife found out about the affair, so he

⁵ Deep Throat is the pseudonym given to the secret informant in connection to the Watergate scandal. Not to be mistaken with the 1970’s porn film of the same name starring Linda Lovelace.

finished with Veronica. What I can't figure out is why they're back at it again?" She took one last drag from her cigarette before stubbing it out on the wall beside her, dropping the extinguished butt to the concrete. She never stepped on her cigarettes to put them out for fear she would burn the bottom of her expensive shoes.

"Do you think that's why Clarence's been in such a good mood lately?" I had to ask. After all, I wasn't the only one that had noticed Clarence's positive change in attitude around the office. Thanks to Veronica, we were all reaping the rewards of a more congenial Clarence.

"Who knows, but that makes total sense," Bonnie surmised, laughing.

"What's so funny?" I asked, taking the last drag off my cigarette, dropping it at my feet to stamp it out, not worried that I might burn the bottom of my cheap Walmart shoes.

"Clarence must be getting laid!" Bonnie squealed. "That would probably explain why he's had such a big stupid-ass grin on his ugly mustached face all summer. But gross...I can't picture anybody doing it with him!" We both grimaced at the thought before bursting into laughter.

"Oh, thanks for that mental picture," I scowled. "I was going to go for lunch, but now I think I'll pass." We burst into laughter again, delaying the end of our cigarette break. Finally, as we regained our composure, Bonnie motioned to the door and the two of us began making our way back up to the seventh floor.



Two days later, Clarence left for holidays with his wife. That's when the anonymous letter arrived in the mail. Our postman, Eric, delivered our mail in the usual fashion. He was very chatty and enjoyed a good natter whenever possible, and today was no exception. It wasn't until after Eric left that I spotted the unusual envelope in the stack of mail. It bore no postage, no return address and no indication that it had even gone through the postal system. The envelope wasn't marked "Private and Confidential" so, like the rest of Clarence's mail, I opened it. Carefully, I

pulled out the single piece of neatly folded paper from the envelope and opened it up. I let out an audible gasp.

As I closely examined the piece of paper, I realized it was a photocopy of a one-way ticket from Vancouver to London, England. The passenger? It was none other than the bitchy serial-caller, Veronica. But even more alarming were the two handwritten words scrawled across the face of it. The message was simple enough: FUCK YOU.

I quickly glanced around to see if Bonnie was in the office, but thankfully she'd already slipped out for lunch. I didn't want anybody to see the note, or to know it even existed. I regretted having opened the letter, but now that I'd seen it, I needed to hide the evidence. It was obvious I'd opened the envelope and Clarence would ultimately find out that I'd seen the note. I was, after all, his secretary and it was my job to open his mail. I sat staring at the envelope, trying to think of what to do next. I'd never been in this situation before. The longer you work for somebody, the more you learn about them. Sure, I've discovered embarrassing things about a boss before, but this was a first for me. And I deeply wished I hadn't because, knowing Clarence, I was very aware that something like this had the potential for career disaster for me.

Not wanting to waste any more time, I made the executive decision to slip the piece of paper back in its envelope, sealing it with tape. I discreetly tucked it away in the bottom drawer of my desk, away from prying eyes. I resolved that, when Clarence returned from vacation in two weeks, I would give it to him. In the meantime, I decided to forget the damn thing even existed.

 **Diary Excerpt (Age 7)**

**Today I went to the fair.
I went with my friends.
We had lots and lots of fun.**

***MEIN WENIG KURZE HOSEN SHITTER***

Bonnie skulked through the office door, 45 minutes late, mouthing the word “sorry”. Walking around to her desk, she quietly sat down and tossed her purse onto the floor. I was upset because, once again, Bonnie was late. And although Lisa and I had our suspicions, I had yet to confront Bonnie. Was she or wasn’t she doing cocaine? I couldn’t be sure, but all arrows pointed in that direction.

“Sorry I’m late,” Bonnie whispered apologetically. I continued working with my back to her, pretending I hadn’t heard. I let the silence hang in the air, making it perfectly clear I was pissed off.

“Listen,” she muttered, breaking the silence. “I need to go to the store and buy a new pair of underwear and tights.” I nearly burst out laughing, but managed to restrain myself. I turned around in my chair to face Bonnie, who wore a sheepish expression.

“Excuse me?” I snickered, picking up my coffee and carefully taking a sip of the hot beverage. I’d given up trying to make a decent pot of coffee at work, but the Buzz Café made an excellent Americano. As I sipped my coffee, Bonnie steadied herself on her chair. Clearly, she hadn’t slept much the night before, if at all. Her hair was disheveled and she had matching bags of luggage under her eyes.

“What’s going on?” I snapped at her. She sat rubbing her eyes before answering, causing them to water and making them redder than they already were.

“Okay. I’ll tell you, but you have to promise you won’t tell a soul,” she disclosed in a hushed tone. I detected a tinge of embarrassment.

“Sure,” I lied.

“Well, I partied all night with my boyfriend.” Bonnie rubbed her nose and cleared her throat of phlegm before continuing. “In fact, I haven’t even been home yet!” she boasted, stifling a giggle. Obviously, she was very proud of the fact that she’d pulled yet another all-nighter, this time on a Monday night. I wasn’t about to award her a trophy for this, so instead I sat quietly waiting for her to finish her story. There once was a time when I would have laughed along with her, but not today.

“Anyway,” she finally continued. “My boyfriend drove me to work and for some stupid reason I thought I’d take the stairs.” Our office was on the seventh floor. I couldn’t do the stairs at the best of times and I’m not sure what possessed Bonnie to tackle the stairs, today of all days. I nodded, giving her my undivided attention.

“This is so embarrassing!” she said in a shrill yet quiet voice, making her sound like an alien. Trying hard not to become even more annoyed than I already was, I took another sip of my coffee.

“What is?” I questioned, urging Bonnie to hurry up and finish her story. It was nearly 10:00 am and already I had a busy day ahead of me. Bonnie pulled her chair closer to me, leaning in so I could hear her.

“As I was walking up the stairs I had to fart only,” she paused, crinkling her nose in disgust. “It, ah, wasn’t a fart.” I nearly fell over in my chair as my imagination took over.

“Seriously?” I scoffed, not even attempting to hide my revulsion. Suddenly, I found it difficult to look Bonnie in the eyes. Glancing down, I noticed she was wearing her trademark micro-mini skirt, but without her signature shiny black tights. This threw me because Bonnie had psoriasis on her legs and never wore a skirt without tights.

“So when I finally made it to the seventh floor, I ran into the bathroom,” she recalled in a hushed voice. “Let’s just say, I had to throw my underwear and tights in the garbage.” I felt my stomach turn as I tried to block out her latest revelation, but

failing to escape from the grotesque image in my head. For a brief moment, I even thought I could smell shit. Bonnie shifted in her chair as she attempted to pull her mini-skirt down lower, but without luck. Normally, I'd try to be a supportive friend to her, but I was struggling to muster up the energy. It was only Tuesday morning, and my patience was already worn thin.

I figured drugs were likely the cause of Bonnie's erratic behavior of late, but I'd never officially broached the subject with her. I took the opinion that if she wanted to tell me, she would. But here I was, sitting across from my friend and co-worker, who had just confessed that, after a night of partying with her boyfriend, she'd shit her pants (well, her skirt, actually).

After some internal deliberation, I decided now would be the perfect time for a mini-intervention. But I knew I had to play my cards right. If I appeared too confrontational, I ran the risk of destroying what was left of our friendship. As annoyed as I was, my core reason for approaching her was because, deep down, I still cared. Otherwise, it was a non-issue. I decided to jump in and get it over with.

"Bonnie, can we chat?" I asked nicely, getting up from my desk to check who was in their offices. The coast was clear. Everybody was out, with the exception of Guy, but his office door was closed.

"Sure. What's up?" Bonnie's back was now to me as she booted up her computer. I needed her full attention, but given that she'd just pulled an all-nighter, I knew it wasn't going to be easy.

"You consider me a friend, right?" I queried, easing myself into this rather challenging and sensitive conversation.

"Absolutely!" she enthusiastically admitted over her shoulder. "I consider you one of my closest friends. Why do you ask?" She turned her chair around to face me, wisps of her messy brown hair sticking to her lip glossed lips.

"Well," I slowly began, searching for the right words. "This is really difficult for me, but I only ask because I care." I gently patted my hand on my chest, directly

over my heart. "It's because I care that I need to talk to you about something very important." Before Bonnie could interrupt, I sprung my question on her.

"Are you doing cocaine?" And there it was. I'd said it. There was no turning back now. Bonnie's mouth dropped open, her expression changing from happy to puzzled. I wasn't sure if she was going to laugh out loud or slap me across the face. I waited with bated breath for a response.

"Yeah," Bonnie answered casually. "So what? It's no big deal." Now I'm no behaviorist, but I'm fairly certain this was a textbook reaction. Slowly, she turned her chair back around, signaling that my quasi-intervention was over. I let out an audible sigh and tried to decide what my next move should be. I was about to speak when Bonnie picked up the phone and began dialing. I could tell from the one-sided conversation it was her boyfriend on the other end of the line. With her back still turned to me, she repeatedly thanked him for an "amazing evening". Giving up, at least for the moment, I spun my chair around and decided to tackle my massive pile of work.



After a two-week absence, Clarence returned to the office later that morning while Bonnie continued to ignore me. I was beginning to regret ever having said anything, but unfortunately I couldn't turn back the clock. I tried to block out the events of the morning. But I couldn't block out Veronica's love letter, which still lay hidden away in my desk drawer. Before heading home that night, I managed to muster up the courage to deliver it to Clarence. But I was dreading the moment.

"I have something for you," I said, trying not to look guilty. Carefully, I set the envelope on his desk and slowly pushed it towards him. "I want you to know that, although the letter's been opened, I'm the only one that's seen it," I tried to say as innocently as I could. "I'm the only one who knows about it," I added, just in case there was any doubt on his part.

Clarence looked intrigued but didn't comment, only nodding his head without taking his eyes off the envelope. I discreetly slipped out of his office, quietly closing the door behind me, feeling a sense of relief knowing that the letter was finally out of my possession. I felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders, at least for now.



"Everybody's working for the weekend," I sang to my reflection in my bathroom mirror. I loved Fridays, and not just because I could wear jeans⁶ (corporate on the top but party on the bottom). I couldn't wait for the work-week to be over so I could stay up late Friday night, sleep in Saturday morning and spend Sunday afternoon with Lisa. I'd had a rough week, starting with my failed intervention on Tuesday with Bonnie and Clarence returning to the office. After that, the week seemed to drag on forever, but finally it was Friday.

I arrived at the office on time and, as usual, I was the first person in. I turned the radio on to my favourite station and began organizing my workday. I even made a pot of coffee, even though it usually wound up tasting like hubcap water. I thought it would be a nice gesture. Fridays always put me in a particularly good mood. As I walked out of the coffee room back to my desk, I was surprised to be greeted by Clarence and Myrtle. It was unusual for them to arrive together, and so early, but thought nothing further of it as I greeted them with a cheery "good morning".

Suddenly, like a bad scene out of a "B" movie, my happy Friday came to a grinding halt. Clarence pierced my "happy bubble" with the sound of his loud, annoying voice calling out my name and ordering me to join him and Myrtle in his office. My heart skipped a beat and, for a moment, I found it difficult to move or breathe. Like a child being punished, I tried to think what I'd done wrong? I wracked my brain, but nothing immediately sprang to mind. Shrugging off the feeling of impending doom, I grabbed my pen and steno pad and did as I was told. Entering his

⁶ It's common in offices to have "casual" Fridays, where office staff are allowed to wear jeans to work.

office, he motioned for me to close the door, which I did apprehensively. I didn't like the idea of being held hostage behind a closed door in Clarence's office, not only because he made me feel uncomfortable but because I felt vulnerable.

As I quietly closed the door and turned around to face both judge and jury, Clarence motioned for me to take a seat. Myrtle sat across from Clarence's desk, closest to the door. She didn't look up as I stood beside her, knowing full well I needed to get past her to sit in the only other empty chair. Instead of moving over to let me sit down, Myrtle sat staring at her hands. You could cut the tension with a knife. I hesitated for a moment but then pushed past her legs. It felt like being in a movie theatre, except there most people make an effort to let you past them. From the moment I sat down in the chair across from Clarence, I could see from his expression he was seething. I was about to find out why I'd been summoned to his office.

As Clarence yelled at me, accentuating his outbursts of anger by lunging up and out of his chair, slamming his fists down onto his desk for added effect, I had a flashback to Veronica's love letter. I wondered if my knowledge of his supposed affair had anything to do with his outburst? Unfortunately, that was a mystery I would never truly solve. Although, deep down, I knew it had everything to do with Clarence's unsolicited fit of anger. Rage like this doesn't come out of nowhere, and for no reason. If that were the case, then I'm fairly confident Clarence would have been seeking some sort of therapy or treatment for it. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why he was so pissed off. As I tried to block out his tirade of insults, three good reasons sprang to mind:

1. I had seen Veronica's "love letter";
2. I was good friends with his wife; and finally
3. Knowledge is power. I now had the upper hand. The last thing Clarence wanted was for me to have any form of control over him. I was a liability.

So, in the end, after being informed by Clarence that nobody in the office liked me, and after my failed attempt at humour, I was ordered to collect up my things and leave. Just like that, I was unceremoniously fired.

In a move of pure genius, Clarence had somehow managed to turn his infidelity into an issue about my popularity (or lack thereof) in the office. As my mind numbed from the barrage of superfluous insults, I had a flashback to the classified ad that prompted me to apply for this godforsaken job in the first place. The ad suggested that a sense of humour was required. Obviously, my sense of humour would only be required when being fired. It's just too bad nobody else was laughing.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 7)**

**Today I went to the show cald Black Beateu.
It was a good show to! Because I love horses.**

***AFTER THE FIRE***

With just my handbag, jacket and what was left of my self-respect, I walked out of Lesniewski Trichopoulos for the last time. In a slow walk of shame, I made my way to the closest bus stop. I thought about walking home. On a good day, it might take about 30 minutes. But, at the rate I was going, it would probably take the better part of the day. As I walked along the bustling sidewalk of early morning commuters, I barely lifted my head for fear that I would make eye contact with somebody I might know.

“At least my bus transfer is still good,” I muttered to myself. I took small comfort in knowing I didn’t have to pay extra to get home. *Well, there’s a silver lining,* I mused to myself.

I found an empty seat near the front of the bus. For the first few blocks, I sat motionless, staring blankly out the window. Finally, I glanced around at the other passengers on the bus. That’s when I noticed an elderly woman sitting across from me, staring. She smiled and offered me a sympathetic look. It was then that I realized I’d been crying. I didn’t mean to, and I really didn’t want to, but I was overcome with emotion and I had to. Still smiling, the woman asked if I was okay. It’s funny how, when you see somebody crying, you immediately want to reach out, to help and comfort them, even if it’s a complete stranger. I was touched by her compassion. Forcing back a smile, I lied and told her I was fine; I was just having a bad day. Surprisingly, just by forcing that one solitary smile, I began to feel better. Sometimes it only takes the kindheartedness of one person, even a stranger, to lift your spirits.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrived home to my empty apartment. Grabbing a pillow from my bed and tossing it onto the floor, I flopped myself down on it with the grace of a drunken businessman. Most of my furniture was either sold or in storage, in anticipation of moving in with Lisa. I was surprised at how much I was enjoying the empty space of my bachelor apartment. There's something to be said about simplicity; it reminded me that I didn't need a lot to make me happy. With that thought in mind, I reached into my handbag for my package of cigarettes and immediately lit one up. I rarely smoked in the morning, but on this occasion, I felt it was totally warranted.

Leaning against the wall, I watched as the smoke curled and rose up to the ceiling. I didn't want to face the fact that, for the first time in my life, I'd been officially fired (factoring out how I'd left my job at the video store). I didn't have a benchmark for this; I had no idea how I was supposed to feel. But I did know I was completely devastated. I'd only lived in Vancouver for a little over a year, but already I felt like the city was starting to eat me up.

Six months before leaving home, I told my parents about my big plans. I told them I wanted to live in the city, which was received with skepticism and disbelief. They launched an intervention, warning me about Big City life and repeatedly cautioned me of the differences between "small towns" and "big cities". Not that either of them had much experience living in a big city. Like me, they too had spent most of their lives in a small town. But I never questioned their intentions. They were older and, by default, wiser.

My dad's unsolicited advice: the city will "eat you up and spit you out". In fact, my parents had a running bet that I wouldn't last a year on my own. I desperately needed to prove them wrong, but so far I wasn't having much luck even convincing myself.

In the short time I'd lived here, I'd already grown to sense that city dwellers treated each other differently. It's as though they were in constant survival mode. Whereas, based on my experience, in a small town, everybody seemed to know

everybody and there's a broader sense of responsibility to each other. Away from the protective shell of my family, it didn't take long for me to figure out that people were quicker to judge, and I was constantly reminded I was expendable. Today, I received that message loud and clear and, for the first time since moving here, I felt completely vulnerable. And I was scared. Scared that I couldn't survive and scared that I would be forced to move back home where I would be exposed as a fraud and a failure.

Finishing my cigarette, I decided to call my mom. It dawned on me that she might try calling me at work for a chat (as she sometimes did, especially before the weekend). The last thing I wanted was for her to find out my bad news before I'd had a chance to break it to her myself. I envisioned her calling and Myrtle or, even worse, Clarence answering the phone. It annoyed Clarence immensely when staff took personal calls. Given his fragile state of mind, I imagined him yelling at my mom before ripping the phone out of the wall and hurling it across the room.

Interestingly enough, I couldn't tell who was more upset about me being fired; me or my mom? After describing the gory details of my morning debacle, my mom gave me virtual hugs and kisses of support over the phone, saying she would call me back later. It was, after all, early on a Friday morning and she was still at work. But obviously, she wasn't *too* busy as she managed to find the time to immediately call friends and family to deliver my distressing news. In retrospect, it was probably the best thing she could have done for me. It actually gave me the incentive I needed to keep going and not give up.

I was completely taken by surprise when Al McGavin called me. Renewing my faith that not all lawyers were total douche bags, he not only offered me my old job back but he even offered to increase my salary to "whatever the asshole was paying" me. I was extremely touched by his generous offer, but I did what I had to do; I graciously declined. Not surprisingly, he totally understood. He was an East Van boy at heart, and a part of him would always be in Vancouver. But I took comfort in knowing that, if I had to, I could still return to my old life. I also took great comfort in knowing that my friends and family had my back.

Shortly after my phone call with Al, my phone rang again. This time it was my dad. My dad's not one to show his emotions but even he was upset at what had transpired. Not unlike most dads, he didn't like to see me get hurt. And even though he couldn't protect me from every sling and arrow that came my way, he certainly gave a valiant effort trying. But this time, there was nothing he could do except listen and show his support. Like traveling, I told myself, being fired is a rite of passage in life. It's something most of us will experience. And to quote the old adage; what doesn't kill us only makes us stronger.

"I can be on a ferry first thing tomorrow morning with a truck," my dad suggested. "We'll pack up your things and you can move back home. Your brother said he'd come over to help as well." Hesitating, he waited for a response, but I was understandably shell-shocked. "What do you think?" he asked. I was surprised at how quickly he'd put his plan together.

"Wow!" I finally responded. "That's so nice, dad. But honestly, I'm okay. This situation totally sucks, but I need to stick it out here." I was still upset, but I was also deeply moved by the show of support from my mom, Al, my dad and even my brother, Kevin.

"Well, if you change your mind let me know," he offered. "Kevin and I could be on the ferry first thing tomorrow morning. It's no problem at all." I knew he was serious. He really did want me to move back. Deep down, it felt good to be missed.

"Thanks dad," I answered. "If I change my mind I'll definitely call you, but I think I'll be okay," I confessed. "Besides, people get fired every day."

"Are you sure?" he questioned. I could hear the concern in his voice.

"Yeah, dad. I'm sure. People get fired all the time," I joked. At least my sense of humour was still partially intact. Although, most of it had already been used up this morning.

"Ha ha ha," he sarcastically responded. "Very funny. You know what I mean." I could still hear the concern in his voice, but he did sound relieved that I wasn't ready

to throw myself off a bridge. “Good to hear you still have your sense of humour,” he reasoned.

“I think what I need is some time off,” I suggested, trying to maintain my positivity. “I should do something fun now that I’m unemployed. It’s not like I have a schedule anymore.” I laughed at the idea, more in an attempt to convince my dad, than myself, that I was going to be okay. The truth was, I really wasn’t okay. *I should do something fun?* I know what would be really fun right now, getting blindingly drunk. I certainly didn’t *feel* very fun at the moment. I couldn’t even *think* of something fun (that didn’t involve intoxication), let alone *do* something fun.

I was surprised at how hurt and shaken I was over being fired. In fact, more so than I ever thought imaginable. I assumed I would be embarrassed. Instead, I only felt sadness. I didn’t invent sadness, but today I sure felt like I had. Huge waves of emotion washed over me, leaving only the feeling of absolute despair. Suddenly, I felt really worn out. It was probably the post-traumatic adrenaline crash. I needed to let it all out and then try to pick up the pieces. My dad and I finished our conversation, leaving it at that. It would take six months before I could finally return to work but what a fabulous six months it was going to be.

 **Diary Excerpt (Age 7)**

**Today I made a pitcher at school,
it was nice.
I went to figure skateing lessons.**

***UPSIDE DOWN (IN A DITCH)***

Aside from being fired, I loved living in the city. I especially loved the anonymity. You can walk down just about any street and go completely unnoticed, like walking through a forest of trees. For example, if I run out of laundry detergent, I can go to my local grocers and buy it with little to no fanfare. In a small town, however, this was never the case. If I ran out of laundry detergent, it was always a huge production. First of all, I'd have to get in my car and drive for 10 minutes along a long and windy country road before finally reaching civilization. Once downtown, the odds of being spotted by friends or family increased ten-fold. In the city, however, your chances of bumping into someone you knew, especially in the early hours of the weekend, are slim to none. Unless, of course, you're wearing sweatpants, no makeup and your hair is pulled back into an untidy ponytail. That or the Small Town comes to the Big City, which was the case one crisp sunny Sunday morning.

The best time to do laundry in my building was either late Friday night (which was never a good option for me) or early weekend mornings. After the traumatic events of Friday, I still couldn't sleep so I decided to tackle my ever-growing pile of laundry. As I ran down the four flights of stairs from my apartment to the basement, to check the availability of the laundry facilities, I remembered I was out of laundry detergent. As I predicted, the laundry room was empty so I raced back upstairs to grab my wallet. Not bothering to inspect the disheveled state of my attire or hair, or even brush my teeth, I pulled on an old jacket and ventured out for Tide. I figured it was early enough that I could risk not being spotted by any familiar faces. But, as Murphy's Law would dictate, this was not to be the case. As I groggily trundled down

the empty West End streets, passing by a few early morning stragglers (some who appeared to still be dressed from the night before), I heard an unfamiliar voice call out my name.

“Chrystala?” I heard. For a split second, I considered ignoring it and continue on in ignorant bliss. But something about the voice compelled me to stop and turn around. As I surveyed the passerby, I couldn’t put the voice to the face. Recognizing my puzzled expression, he simply smiled and repeated my name. I smiled back politely, but already I was regretting my decision to stop. All I wanted was my laundry detergent. I wasn’t prepared to engage with anybody this early on a Sunday morning.

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” I asked, in a friendly yet slightly guarded tone.

“It’s me!” he declared. “Stephan.” With just a first name to go by, I still didn’t recognize him, although my gut reaction told me I did. He obviously picked up on this fact as he repeated his first name again, but this time he included his all-important last name. “Stephan Manfred?” he volunteered, hesitating slightly as though unsure himself. I immediately recognized the name but the face still didn’t match up. Then suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, it struck me. I went to high school with Stephan! He’d changed so much since graduation that I didn’t recognize him. *Funny how he recognized me from ten paces away*, I thought to myself. Mind you, I never wore makeup in high school so, on this particular morning, to him I probably appeared much the same.

“Stephan!” I proclaimed. “What a surprise! I almost didn’t recognize you. What are you doing here?” I asked as Stephan walked up to me, bridging the gap between us, his arms outstretched for a hug. I hugged him obligingly, although with some hesitation. He smelled like a pub; the strong odour of stale cigarettes and beer exuding from his hair and clothes. I wondered if he’d bothered to shower in the last week.

“I’m in Vancouver visiting a friend,” he replied as he finally stopped hugging me. “It was his stag last night. Well, all night, actually.” Stephan flashed me a mischievous smile before continuing. “I was just on my way back to the hotel.” That

at least explained why he smelled like a bar. Stephan was noticeably proud of the fact that he'd pulled an all-nighter. I'm guessing it wasn't Jolt Cola they were drinking all night that kept them awake. *I wonder if he knows Bonnie?* I mused.

"What are *you* doing in Vancouver?" he asked, almost too excitedly considering the time of day. Even for me, it was too early to participate in any kind of meaningful conversation.

"I live here," I proudly declared. Despite being jobless, I never grew tired of saying that.

"Wow!" Stephan seemed surprised. "Imagine that?" I couldn't help but feel resentment at his blatant surprise that I could possibly live here.

"You seem surprised?" I asked as nicely as I could. I was becoming irritated. For starters, if I didn't hurry up, I was going to lose my valuable laundry time. And secondly, I felt like I was being held hostage on the street in my laundry-day clothes and no makeup. I never felt comfortable in public without makeup on.

"I guess I'm just surprised to see you standing upright," he answered. "I always figured I'd find you upside down, dead in a ditch." Shocked at this revelation, I was absolutely dumbfounded. All I could do was stare back at him, trying to think of a clever response. Instead, my mind went completely blank. Before moving to the city, I admit the only time I ever bumped into Stephen was in casual social situations. But what the hell did he mean by "dead in a ditch"? I always thought I was the responsible one among my friends. Evidently, the perception I had of myself and how others saw me were completely different. As I stood speechless on the empty sidewalk, I tried to think of a quick escape. Unfortunately, I didn't engage my brain quickly enough.

"Listen, why don't we go for a beer?" he suggested. "My treat." Surely, I thought to myself, he couldn't be serious? It was barely 9 o'clock in the morning, and on a Sunday no less. He sensed my resistance as I scrambled for an excuse to bail on him.

“Come on. It’ll be fun,” he insisted. “We can catch up over a beer.” Stephan started walking, encouraging me to follow. Thankfully, even in a metropolitan city like Vancouver, most bars weren’t open until at least 11:00 am.

“Stephan, it’s too early. Nothing’ll be open yet,” I replied with confidence, yet trying to sound disappointed so as not to hurt his feelings. Stephan just laughed, as though he knew something I didn’t, which, evidently, he did.

“That’s where you’re wrong, my friend!” He continued to beckon me, urging me to make a move, which I did begrudgingly. I never was good at saying “no”.

“Really?” I countered dismally.

Stephan proved me wrong when I found myself walking through the doors of Hooters, which to my surprise was actually open earlier than any other bar on a Sunday. As we strode into Hooters, I realized there was a whole other world (and probably not just on Sunday mornings) that I knew nothing about. Surveying the wide-open bar, I tried to take in the fact that I was the only female there not on the payroll. A perky young waitress, clad in the trademark orange short-shorts and tight white tank top with the owl on the front, immediately greeted us. Within seconds, we were seated by the window.

As we settled into our booth with a view of the main shopping street, I was amazed to see how many men were bellied up to the bar watching sports, enjoying pints of beer and platefuls of deep fried foods. I counted at least twenty. It seemed inconceivable to me that anyone would want to go out for beer and chicken fingers this early in the morning, unless you were in Las Vegas. Unfortunately, this wasn’t Las Vegas. But, within minutes, I found myself throwing caution to the wind and joined in with an ice cold Corona and a plate of nachos. *What the hell*, I thought, resigning myself to the situation; when in Rome, as they say.

As we became reacquainted over beers and breakfast nachos, I had to ask about his peculiar comment he’d made earlier. Was my existence in Courtenay really so bad that it was assumed that someday I would wind up dead in a ditch, upside down no less? Admittedly, my life wasn’t exactly champagne wishes and caviar

dreams, but I didn't think my outward appearance was of one so depraved. With the effects of the cold beer taking over my senses, I felt I'd had enough "liquid courage" to broach the subject. As I gingerly picked through plate of nachos for ones with the most cheese on them, I jumped right in.

"Stephan, I have to ask you something," I announced casually, continuing to pick through the nachos. "What did you mean when you said you figured you'd find me dead upside down in a ditch?" Stuffing cheesy nachos in my mouth, I waited for his answer. Taking a long drink from his pint, he leaned back, scratching his early onset beer belly, and let out an audible belch. Already I wasn't putting too much credibility into anything he had to say. But still, I was morbidly curious.

"Well, you have to admit, you partied *a lot*." Stephan stared back at me for a split second before shoveling another handful of nachos into his mouth.

"What else was there to do in a small town?" I argued. "Besides, it's not like you ever saw me outside of the River's Edge." After I turned nineteen, The River's Edge was my favourite hangout. It was a small pub nestled into the bank of the Puntledge River, and was best described as a "dive". But the beer was cheap and the cover bands always delivered a good show.

"Which was, like, all the time," he countered, chewing a mouthful of food as he spoke. I always hated it when people ate with their mouths open or, even worse, when they talked with food in their mouth. My brother called it multi-tasking.

"I guess the same could be said about you then?" I responded sardonically, not bothering to swallow my mouthful of cheesy nachos before answering. *Funny how my manners went right out the window in the present company*, I thought to myself. Stephan laughed, belched again, and leaned forward to give me a friendly pat on the shoulder. I guess if there was one thing I missed about small-town life, it was the unabashed ability to throw caution to the wind and not worry about etiquette. Thankfully, nobody knew me at Hooters.

Showing great restraint, I turned down Stephen's generous offer for a third round of beers and by 10:00 am I was back on the street. Finally, I was making my

way to the grocery store for a box of Tide. With a little luck, I'd still be able to get a few loads of laundry done before the morning was a total write-off. A block away, I spotted Lisa coming out of MacDonald's with a large coffee in hand.

"Hey Lisa!" I shouted to catch her attention. She turned around and beamed her kilowatt smile with her signature ruby red lipstick. Unlike me, Lisa would never leave the house, even early on a Sunday morning, without paying close attention to her hair and makeup.

"I tried calling you but there was no answer," she hollered back. "I figured it was too early." As I caught up to her, she carefully took a sip of hot coffee before giving me a hug.

"I'm glad I bumped into you," I said. "I'm out getting laundry detergent."

"Where? At a bar?" Lisa was trying not to laugh. "You smell like a brewery." Forgetting that my breath probably smelled of beer and nachos, I quickly covered my mouth with one hand, trying not to giggle.

"You've been drinking beer!" she teased, detecting a hint of playfulness in her voice. "Don't even *try* to deny it – I can smell it on your breath!"

"Guilty," I confessed, holding up my hands in defeat.

"Do tell?" Lisa asked mischievously.

"It's kind of a long story," I responded. "But let's just say, Hooters is open earlier than any other bar."

"Hooters? Sounds decadent," she joked. "Well, I tell you what. Come back to mine – you can use my laundry facilities and detergent and, in the meantime, you can tell me all about Hooters."

Arm-in-arm, we headed down the street in the direction of her apartment. With the sun shining and the air crisp, the streets were beginning to fill up with people. Every walk of life lived here; couples in matching Gortex jackets, young hipsters in their Abercrombie & Fitch, Gap girls, and yes, even punk rockers were alive

and well in the bustling metropolis. Vancouver, and the West End in particular, has an eclectic mix of people; a proverbial melting pot. It's why I chose to live here, and I was reminded once again why I made the pilgrimage from a small town. With our arms still linked, we strode down the street, chatting about our morning. Suddenly, I realized my early morning beer buzz was starting to wear off.

"You wouldn't happen to have any beer in your fridge, would you?" I asked, nonchalantly. Lisa just laughed and nodded her head, knowing full well where I was headed with my query.

Leaving my small town was easy; however, I'm not ashamed to admit that a part of me is, and always will be, rooted there. The transition to the Big City hasn't always been an easy one for me, and sometimes I'm even called out on that fact. But like me or not, it's who I am, not where I come from, that defines me. I'm proud of that. At the end of the day, it's all I am. And sometimes in the early morning, although not often, it's fun to view the world through beer goggles.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I mished supper.
I also went to Bowen [Park] and got dirty.**

***MOVING DAY (AGE 28 - 1995)***

They say things happen in threes, especially big things (otherwise, it's worth noting you likely wouldn't even notice the small things and therefore wouldn't be counting them). One week after being fired, it was moving day and Lisa graciously offered to help move my belongings from my apartment into hers. Fortunately, we lived right across the street from each other. And even though you could measure the distance between our two apartments with a yardstick, it was pouring rain so we decided it would be easier, and more efficient, to use Lisa's car. However, she disclosed to me that the insurance on her 1980 two-toned brown Chevy Chevette hatchback (nicknamed Pruny, short for Prunella) had run out a week earlier. Like me, Lisa found herself recently unemployed and was no longer able to afford the outrageous cost to keep Pruny insured and on the road. After much discussion, we decided if we discreetly shuttled back and forth, then it was likely we wouldn't get caught driving without insurance. Her apartment was, after all, within spitting distance.

My apartment was fairly barren of furniture so the first few carloads were mainly small items, such as clothes and bedding. Back and forth we drove, trip after trip, until finally only a few of the larger items were left, such as my stereo and speakers, plus the wall unit that housed it. While the stereo and the huge tower speakers fit no problem in the back of Pruny, the oversized particleboard wall unit posed a much bigger problem. Since it wouldn't fit in the car, we decided it had to be put on the roof. We thought of simply carrying it over, but somehow transporting it on the rooftop of the car seemed, in our infinite wisdom, to be easier. We weren't

prepared, so naturally we didn't have any ropes or bungee cords to tie it down. Instead, as Lisa drove painstakingly slow, she held her arm out the window to secure the left side of the unit. Meanwhile, I tried to hold on to it with my right hand. At inception, it seemed like a good idea. However, the laws of gravity prevailed and, only a few feet from our destination, the large particleboard wall unit came crashing off Pruny's roof, landing in a heap on the wet pavement. Now we were obstructing the main intersection outside our respective apartment buildings. *So much for not attracting attention to ourselves*, I thought to myself. We sat speechless in the car but, as soon as we looked at each other, we immediately burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh dear God!" Lisa finally said through tears of laughter. "That was hilarious. I sure hope we didn't wreck it." Truth be told, I didn't really care. I never liked that wall unit anyways. For one thing, it was ugly. But it was a great space saver in a small apartment.

Although we lived in a fairly quiet and traffic-calmed neighborhood, a few drivers were attempting to maneuver their cars around Pruny and the cast-off wall unit. Without further delay, Lisa put on the hazard lights and motioned to get out of the car to assess the damage. Upon inspection, it actually wasn't too bad. A small chunk of particleboard lay on the street but it was from the back of the unit. No real harm done. After a few moments of deliberation, we jumped into action and grabbed the unit as best we could to carry it to the curb. It was raining and we also realized that it wouldn't be long before the particleboard would turn into a pile of wet pulp if we didn't get it indoors. By this time, tenants in neighboring buildings had begun peering out their windows to investigate the situation. We couldn't stop laughing at the mess we'd made.

Realizing Pruny was still parked in the middle of the intersection, Lisa jumped back in the car and drove it a few feet, parking it in front of her building. The stereo was still in the back of the car and we didn't want to leave it unattended. In the meantime, I started feeling rather silly as I stood curbside with my now slightly

damaged and wet particleboard wall unit. As Lisa locked Pruny's doors, a police car came around the corner and into sight. To add insult to injury, the patrol car had its flashing lights on and, as it approached us, the siren sounded with a quick (and incredibly loud) "woop". *Oh great*, I thought; now the whole neighborhood will be gawking out their windows to catch the action. *This is Courtenay all over again*, I mused. The patrol car slowly pulled up beside us and came to a stop in the middle of the street. With the emergency lights still flashing, a policeman climbed out of the patrol car and proceeded to walk over to where we stood at the curb with my wall unit.

"What's going on here?" The tall and somewhat handsome policeman flipped open his black notebook and began writing, not looking at either of us as he did.

"Hi officer," Lisa jumped in. "We were moving this wall unit when it fell off the roof of my car, but we have it under control now." I tried not to laugh. The whole situation sounded rather ridiculous now that I thought about it.

The policeman glanced up from his notepad and looked at Lisa who was now standing in front of Pruny. Realizing what she'd just said, she began to get the giggles. Quite unintentionally, she'd just thrown us on the fire. I walked over to where she stood and pushed her with my elbow, gently reminding her we needed to try and be serious, if at all humanly possible. If she got the giggles then it wouldn't be long before the two of us would be on the ground laughing uncontrollably. Lisa managed to pull herself together, and stood up straight. The policeman pointed his pen at Pruny. "You mean this car here? Is this your car?" he asked as he stepped forward slightly to closer inspect Pruny. "License and registration, please."

I held my breath as Lisa quickly tried to explain that she didn't have her driver's license with her and that her purse was in her apartment, pointing up at the building to her apartment.

"So you were driving this car without your license?" he asked point blank.

Realizing what she'd just said, she bleakly responded. "Um, yes, I guess I was officer. But I was only driving from there to here." She pointed to my apartment

building across the street and then back over to hers, demonstrating that we had only driven a few feet. I stood quietly watching the police officer, feeling a damp chill go through me. I figured we were already in enough trouble; she didn't need me making matters worse. But I was struggling to keep myself from laughing.

"Shall I go up to my apartment to get my driver's license, officer?" Lisa inquired, trying her best to cooperate with the policeman.

"No, I want you to stay put for now. Can you show me the vehicle registration?" Lisa nodded her head in acknowledgment and walked over to the passenger side to retrieve the registration papers from the glove compartment. I could see from the expression on her face she was deep in thought. How was she going to get out of this dilemma? We both knew the car had no insurance. And the policeman would soon discover this fact upon inspection of the registration papers. Slowly, she walked back to the policeman and, hesitating slightly, she handed over the documents. It didn't take long before the policeman spoke.

"Are you Lisa Savy?"

"Yes," she replied.

"This car has no insurance. Are you aware of this?"

Lisa had studied theatre nearly all her life, from the time she was a little girl until a few years out of high school. She was a brilliant actress and could play almost any character. She even did summer stock theatre one year. She was no liar, and she always tried to tell the truth, but today she didn't hesitate to call upon her acting skills.

"What?" Lisa responded in shock. "What do you mean no insurance? Yes I do...I have insurance...see, right here." Her voice trailed off as she stepped forward to point at the registration paper. "Look, right there, it says I have insurance...doesn't it?" She was trying to read the document upside down. The policeman turned it around and pointed to where the expiration date was clearly printed.

"No, it says the insurance expired on October 31st."

“Let me see that.” Without hesitating, Lisa grabbed the piece of paper out of the policeman’s hand to closer inspect it. She studied the document for a moment and, like watching a Gecko change its colours to suit its environment, I watched as her expression slowly changed from confident to surprised, then finally to disbelief. It was truly a magical theatrical moment for Lisa and I was taking in every minute of it. For a second, I actually believed her myself.

“Oh,” she said quietly, more to herself than anybody else. “Oh my God, you’re right.” Her voice went up a notch as she became visibly shaken. “This is terrible. Honestly officer, I thought it was insured. I had no idea.” Her voice trembled with emotion. Any second now she could burst into tears. I took this as my cue to jump in. Walking over to Lisa, I put my arm around her in a gesture of reassurance.

“I’m so sorry officer,” she finally was able to say. “I would never have driven my car if I’d known.” As if on cue, the waterworks started. I was so impressed. I knew Lisa could act, but I had no idea she could cry like that on cue. She was giving Tammy Faye Baker a run for her money, and if ever there was a moment she needed the tears, now was definitely it. But it wasn’t me she needed to convince. The policeman showed absolutely no sign of empathy. Instead, he continued to scribble away in his notepad. This guy must be a poker player because he was absolutely impossible to read. We stood there for what seemed like an eternity when finally the he stopped writing and flipped his notebook closed. As he tucked the pen into the holder on the notebook, he finally took notice of the fact that Lisa was crying. But it wasn’t concern we saw in his eyes; it was exasperation.

“Can you tell me why you were driving the car?”

Lisa wiped at her tears with the sleeve of her jacket before answering. “Yes, I was helping my best friend, Chrystala.” Pointing, Lisa paused to informally introduce me to the policeman before continuing. “You see, she’s moving in with me today and I was helping her move her things.” I gave the policeman a full smile, dimples and all. But, like Lisa’s tears, it went completely unnoticed.

“Anyway,” she continued, pointing at the damaged particleboard wall unit, which still sat abandoned (and now soaking wet) at the curb. “We were trying to move the wall unit but it fell off the roof of my car.” Her tears had subsided but she sniffled for effect. “And that’s when you arrived.” The policeman stood silently, assessing the situation. If only I could read his expression, but he was too good – his face was like stone. For a few moments, we just stood there, patiently waiting for him to say or do something. Eventually, he spoke.

“We received a call that somebody was stealing electronic items from an apartment,” he finally spoke. Dumbfounded, we looked at each other in total disbelief. Somebody actually thought we were stealing this stuff?

“Can you open the hatch door to your car please,” the officer asked in a very nondescript voice.

“Yes, officer. Of course,” Lisa obligingly responded as she immediately opened Pruny’s hatch door. There, in the back, were the pieces to my Sony stereo; one amp, one double-cassette tape player, one CD player, one turntable and two oversized tower speakers. If the neighbors had reported us as thieves, then this was definitely not looking good for us.

“Who does the stereo belong to?” he asked.

“Me,” I jumped in quickly to answer his question. “It belongs to me, officer.” I fumbled around in my handbag for my wallet, producing my driver’s license. Hopefully, this would dispel any suspicions of having stolen the stereo. As I handed over my driver’s license, I began to explain the circumstances. *Imagine*, I thought to myself, *if I were arrested for stealing my own stereo!* The idea seemed preposterous, but standing in the cold rain on a damp November day, it suddenly looked as though Lisa and I just might be sharing a jail cell that night.


 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went swimming with my friends and
my mom and dad went to Vancouver
for fire fighting lessons.**



STILL MOVING

“Litha! Litha Thavy!” Florence’s shrill voice carried through the air and hit us in the face like a wet fish. *God, what now?* I was abruptly wrenched out of my daydream by Florence’s piercing voice. Grimacing, Lisa looked over at me, shrugging her shoulders in defeat.

“What do you want, Flo?” Lisa replied. “Now really isn’t a good time.” She tried to keep her voice down as though not to break the police officer’s concentration. After inspecting the contents of Lisa’s car, he had begun to feverishly scribble in his notebook again.

“Rent!” Florence cried out in exasperation. “I want your rent! You promised me yetherday you’d have latht month’s rent to me. I can’t carry you any longer.” The shrillness in Florence’s voice rivaled that of a police siren.

“I know. I know I did,” Lisa responded, sounding defeated. “I haven’t been able to get to the bank. I’m sorry, but it’ll have to wait until later.” Becoming frustrated with the situation, she tried to get rid of Florence as quickly as possible.

“Later? When later?” Clearly, she wasn’t going to take Lisa’s word for it this time.

“I’m a little tied up at the moment, Flo, but how about this afternoon?” she offered. Suddenly, Florence noticed the police officer, the flashing lights and the now soggy and dilapidated curbside wall unit.

“What on Godth’s green Earth ith happening here?” Flo asked as she placed her hands on her ample hips. She’d joined us outside in her favorite dressing gown adorned with ladybugs, but she didn’t have her glasses on and was severely near sighted. It was evident that she didn’t have her false teeth in either, although her hair was perfectly coiffed, as usual.

“Please, Flo,” Lisa begged. “Not now. I’ll come see you when I’m finished. I promise to have the rent money to you this afternoon.” The police officer was again furiously writing and thankfully hadn’t taken any notice of Florence yet.

Reluctantly, Florence slowly began making her way back to the apartment building, with Lisa’s reassurance that we’d pay her a visit later to settle the outstanding rent. Although, based on her expression, it was obvious she wasn’t totally convinced we’d actually show up. But, it was raining and no doubt she didn’t want to be standing outside in the same ratty dressing gown she always wore, with all the residents of the street looking on. However, just as Florence was about to re- enter the building, the police officer called out to her.

“Ma’am. Can you please come back here for a moment? I need to ask you a few questions.”

Uh oh, I thought to myself. Lisa’s landlady, Florence (or Flo, as Lisa called her), wasn’t what I would call insane but the elevator definitely didn’t go all the way to the top. Around her building, Florence’s character was as colourful as the red paisley carpet in the lobby. She and her husband Dale lived on the ground floor where they kept a close eye on the comings and goings around the building. Florence, who couldn’t have been more than 4 feet 8 inches tall, was a grandmother and, although the years had caught up with her, her hair was always flawless. What was left of each and every hair on her head was always perfectly in place. Even if you knocked on her door in the middle of the night because you’d lost your keys, her hair was perfect. I even tried looking for some clue that it was a wig, but to no avail. Florence was a product of the 1950’s – a time when it was imperative that a woman always be well groomed, no matter what the circumstances. Although, when it came to her attire,

that was a whole different matter. For some reason, she always wore an old pink dressing gown with red ladybugs on it. I suppose it made her stand out from the other neighborhood landladies. Lucky for Lisa, despite Florence's lack of dressing expertise, she heeded authority.

Florence managed to waddle back to where we stood, huddled in the rain near the police officer. I had no idea what to do except stand there and say nothing. Evidently, Lisa was thinking the exact same thing.

"Yeth, offither. What can I help you with?" Florence enquired. The policeman towered over Florence making her appear elf-life, like one of those garden gnomes you buy at Walmart.

"Do you know these girls?" He asked, pointing at us.

"Yeth. Yeth I do offither," she confirmed with a hint of self-importance. Florence identified both of us as though picking thieves out of a police line-up. Granted, Lisa did owe her last month's rent.

"Why do you ask?" she questioned, looking first at us then back to the policeman. "Are the girlths in thum thort of trouble, offither?" It was actually kind of touching to watch Florence's maternal instincts kick in. Even though Lisa was late with her rent, clearly Florence cared for her, maybe even like a daughter. It suddenly dawned on me that Florence could, quite literally, be our "get out of jail" card. Excited by this newfound prospect, I looked over at Lisa and gave her a small nudge with my elbow. She shot me a puzzled look but then the light bulb went on. If Florence could identify us, especially Lisa, he may just believe that we didn't steal the stereo. At this point, a fine for having no insurance would be a darn sight better than going to jail, regardless of who my cellmate might be.

"Ladies, I want you to wait here," the policeman piped in. "I'm going to the car to radio this in." We both nodded in acknowledgement. He began walking to his car, but evidently Florence wasn't finished with him yet as she followed him.

“Offfither, you haven’t anthwered my question,” she stated, slightly annoyed at being ignored. “What have these girlths done exactly?”

Still walking, the policeman answered over his shoulder. “We received a call that two individuals were seen loading a stereo into a car. It’s believed it may be stolen property.” The policeman flipped through his notepad referring back to his notes.

“Well offfither, I can tell you this for a fact,” Florence interjected. “I know both these girlths and neither one of them would ever steal. Do you think I’d have a thief living in *my* building?” She continued to follow the policeman to his car, her voice trailing off the further she got from us.

“So, just out of curiosity, what happened to the rent money I paid you?” I quietly asked Lisa. I didn’t want to appear upset, and I certainly didn’t want to embarrass my best friend over a small thing like money, but the question begged to be asked.

“Oh, well, I had every intention of paying Flo. It’s just that, well...” Lisa’s voice trailed off as she looked down at her feet, searching for the right words.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, worried that something might seriously be wrong. “Did something happen?” I was genuinely concerned, but I also knew Lisa could be very secretive about money, especially if she was having a financial crisis.

“Yeah, yeah...everything’s fine,” she sheepishly reassured me. “It’s just that...well, you know how I’ve always wanted a Turkish rug?”

“Yeah...” I answered hesitantly. I knew how much Lisa had always wanted a Turkish rug; she never stopped talking about it, until recently that is.

“Well, there’s this Turkish rug store in town and they were having a huge sale,” she declared. “You haven’t seen it yet but I just had to buy this rug. It’s truly *the* most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.” She hesitated before continuing, but I didn’t interrupt. “It reminded me of my trip to Turkey. The rug is hand-made, the colours are all hand

dyed, and there's even a flaw in it." Clear, she was very excited with her latest big-ticket purchase.

"A flaw?" I questioned. Evidently, I had no idea what that meant. I knew everybody was wearing distressed clothes these days, pre-manufactured with rips, tears, patches and holes, but I had no idea you could buy carpets the same way. But why would you?

"Yes...a flaw," she reiterated, thrilled at the idea of sharing her knowledge of Turkish rugs, flaws and all. "The theory is; according to Allah, nobody is perfect, therefore nothing is perfect, not even a rug. So they intentionally put a tiny flaw in it. I even know where it is! Honestly, Chrystala, it's the coolest thing." Lisa had spent some time in Turkey the previous year and had come back with a deeper love, knowledge and appreciation of the Middle Eastern culture. For weeks after returning from Turkey, she regaled me with stories of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony, the romance of the ancient ruins and relics, and the passion of the people that populated one of the oldest civilizations in the world. So it didn't come as a surprise to me that she'd bought a Turkish treasure to display in her home.

Meanwhile, the policeman was still having a discussion with Florence. Although, by this time, he was sitting in the squad car with the CB radio in his hand, while Florence chattered away.

"Okay, so you bought a Turkish rug with a flaw in it. But what does this have to do with your rent?" I already knew the answer to my question, but I wanted to hear it from Lisa.

"Right. Well," Lisa said, rather guiltily. "The rug cost me my rent, and then some."

"Seriously?" I stammered, shocked at this latest revelation. "Holy crap, Lisa. Can I take a magic carpet ride on it?" We both laughed nervously. "How much did it cost exactly?" I had no idea how much a flawed Turkish rug cost, but I was about to find out.

“\$900,” she advised, cringing slightly.

“Wha....?” This bit of news left me completely speechless.

“But wait!” Lisa interjected. “Before you totally freak out, wait until you see it. It’s magnificent! Really, once you see it, you’ll know why it was worth more than a month’s rent.” She’d obviously convinced herself of the true value of the rug, but she also knew she would have to work a little harder to convince me of this fact. After all, my portion of the rent had been contributed towards the purchase of this rug.

“Wow,” was all I could finally manage to say after recovering from “sticker shock”. “That just seems insane to me. But in the meantime, what about the rent? Do you have *any* money to pay Florence this afternoon?”

“Ah, well, not exactly,” she confessed. “I was going to talk to you about that.” I could see her struggling to convince me that the situation with the rent wasn’t so bad. All I could think about was how we were already behind in the rent and I hadn’t even moved in yet. I’d given up my own apartment to live with Lisa, yet it was more than possible we could be homeless by the end of the month – not counting the current threat of jail. But, I consoled myself; if we wound up in jail at least we’d still have a fixed address.

“So, how much?” I insisted, but not really wanting to hear the answer. “How much money do you need so we don’t find ourselves living in a cardboard box?” There was no point in pussyfooting around the subject. I did have some money saved up, so the situation wasn’t totally hopeless.

“\$900,” Lisa groaned, looking embarrassed. She never placed a lot of value on the almighty dollar, which in a way could be very refreshing. Although, at this exact moment, it was somewhat frustrating.

“So the entire month’s rent then?” I responded, trying not to laugh.

“Yes. But I promise to pay you back next month.” Lisa grabbed both my hands and held them in hers. This is what I used to do with my mom, when I was begging

her for money so I could buy another record for my growing collection. I knew this tactic very well. Now I understood why my mom always gave in when I did it.

“Or, alternatively, I’m paid up on my rent for the next four months?” I suggested, trying to make light of the situation.

“I like that idea better.” She sounded both relieved and thankful.

“Me too.” I gave Lisa a big hug of reassurance. We were best friends, and had been for a long time. I knew what she was like when it came to money, but that wasn’t important. What was important was our friendship, and having a roof over our heads.

“This rug had better be worth it!” I declared as I winked at Lisa, knowing full well it probably was. She always did have good taste and I trusted her judgment.

“Alright, ladies. You’re free to go,” the policeman announced loudly. He’d finished his business in the car and had walked back to where we stood.

“Really??” we both shrieked in unison.

“I’ve also decided to waive the fine for no insurance. But I want you to park your vehicle and put insurance on it right away. And get this piece of furniture off the street,” he instructed, waving his hand in the direction of the wall unit.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” We jumped up and down, shrieking like a couple of schoolgirls, much to the annoyance of the policeman.

“Don’t thank me. Thank your landlady,” he informed us, trying not to sound annoyed. Even though the policeman was trying his hardest to be impassive, I could have sworn I saw just the slightest hint of a smile. Lisa and I looked around for Florence, who by this time had made her way back to the building and was standing at the front door.

“Thank you, Flo! We won’t forget this! Thank you!” we both cheered. Florence just waved her hand back at us as she opened the door and went inside. “Jutht pay your bloody rent!” she hollered over her shoulder before disappearing into the building.

The policeman got into his car, turned the flashing lights off and slowly drove away. The looky-loos had all but left, leaving the two of us standing on the street alone with the now waterlogged particleboard wall unit. We managed to save our necks, thanks to Florence, but it was painfully evident there was no saving the wall unit. It would have to be taken to the back of the building for the garbage men to deal with. Oh well, we both agreed, it was a small price to pay for our freedom.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I stayed up until 1:00 in the morn
because I thought my mom and dad
were coming home.**



BITCH FACE BONNIE

After the chaotic events the morning of my move, it took a few days to settle into my new home. Not to mention, we had to figure out a creative way to set up my stereo and television without the particleboard wall unit. And, although Lisa had been expecting me to move in for several weeks, it came as no surprise that she wasn't ready for me when I eventually did. After spending a few sleepless nights on her overstuffed red velvet sofa, I was finally able to clear out enough space in her dining room, which would second as my bedroom. My new living arrangements were rather convenient, however, as my bedroom was right off the kitchen. I loved it because I could easily make a cup of tea without leaving the comfort of my bed.

Lisa isn't what you'd call a "neat freak". In fact, she's the complete opposite of me. She hates housework; I find housework therapeutic. Lisa thrives in chaos; I need order. I'm short (5' 1") whereas Lisa is tall (5' 11"). I shop in the petites section, while Lisa is a plus-size girl. I have blonde hair, which is naturally fine and thin; Lisa's head of gorgeously thick, black, curly hair is the envy of many. She always reminded me of the gypsies I saw in Paris, only much better dressed.

As roommates, friends began to compare us to the Odd Couple; she was Oscar and I was Felix. In high school, we were even compared to Laurel and Hardy. But, whatever the comparison, roommates or not, we complemented each other perfectly. She loves to cook, but I prefer to order in take-away. She loves to host parties, and I love to party. She loves to sing, and I'm her backup. Being Lisa's roommate means enjoying life to the fullest. Or, as she always says, "Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death". Having been well-cast as Auntie Mame in our high

school production of “Mame”, Lisa loves to borrow this line whenever possible. Another of her favourite quotes (taken from “Hello, Dolly!”) is, “Money, pardon the expression, is like manure. It’s meant to be spread around to make things grow”. Living with Lisa meant never a dull moment.

She also has passion for shopping, so when I finally laid eyes on the now infamous (yet purposely flawed) Turkish rug, which cost her more than a month’s rent, I was pleasantly surprised. I never doubted her motivation to buy the rug, as she only purchased items she loved. And in this case, the rug was worth every penny. To borrow another quote, this time from “The Big Lebowski”, “The rug really held the room together”. Lisa affectionately refers to her home as Savy’s Caesar’s Palace – with her exotic Turkish rug and French rococo meets Americana folk art themed home décor, at night the many twinkle lights and tea candles she scattered throughout the apartment lit the place up like Las Vegas in the desert on a warm dark night. Lisa created a home that was both warm and inviting.

Once settled in at Savy’s Caesar’s Palace, I began attempting to get a hold of Bonnie Smith. The Friday I was fired, I called her after work at home, but she said she said she was “too busy to talk”. I couldn’t comprehend why she wouldn’t talk to me? I knew something was up, but I didn’t know what. And because she wouldn’t talk to me, I filled in the blanks myself. So by Monday, I’d grown increasingly concerned about her lack of interest in the fact that I had just been fired. But more importantly, I was upset at her lack of support for me as a friend. We worked together for nearly a year, side by side, and had become inseparable during this time. I couldn’t understand why suddenly, without warning, she turned her back on me. I felt our friendship was worth more than a silly job, so I continued to pursue her. Finally, by Tuesday, I decided to call Bonnie at work. This way, I knew she would answer the phone but if she didn’t, then I’d simply hang up.

“Good morning, Lesniewski Trichopoulos, Bonnie speaking,” I heard her say in her usual “what the hell do you want” tone, which always made me laugh.

“Bonnie!” I nervously answered. “It’s Chrystala. How are you?” I was excited to finally speak to her. I was also bursting to tell her what had transpired between Clarence and me. There was a longer-than-necessary pause at the other end of the phone. I was half expecting her to hang up, but thankfully she didn’t.

“I’m fine,” she finally responded. “What do you want?” Bonnie hadn’t hung up on me, but she may as well have.

“Well, I thought it would be nice to get together. Maybe get a coffee or something after work,” I suggested. The silence on the other end of the phone rang in my ear, but I soldiered on. “I haven’t talked to you since last week. We have a lot to catch up on and I have so much to tell you.” I tried to sound jovial in an attempt to lighten the mood, but I could tell from Bonnie’s silence it wasn’t working. I decided to stop talking and give her an opportunity to respond. I could hear her let out an exasperated sigh, signaling she was at least still on the line.

“Fine,” she grumbled, sounding annoyed. “I’ll drop by your place after work, around 5 o’clock.” *This was progress*, I thought to myself.

“Great!” I cheered. “But I’ve moved. I live across the street with Lisa now. Let me give you the address.” After giving her my new address and phone number, she promised to come by and see me right after work. I was very excited to finally have the opportunity to share my story of how I’d been fired for the first time in my life. And who better to share my story with than the woman who worked beside me every day for nearly a year. If anybody knew Clarence as well as I did, it was Bonnie.

I spent the day cleaning and tidying until finally 5 o’clock arrived. I’d put the kettle on and made a pot of tea in anticipation of Bonnie’s arrival. I even went out and bought tea biscuits, which I only did on special occasions (otherwise, I wound up eating the whole bag). With the tea steeping in the pot, I tried to busy myself as the minutes slowly passed. I looked at the clock; it was now 5:15 p.m. but still no sign of Bonnie. I plumped the overstuffed cushions on the sofas, straightened out a pile of magazines on the coffee table, emptied the ashtray and even watered the plants. Finally, the phone rang.

“Hello,” I answered, trying not to sound nervous.

“It’s Bonnie,” she announced loudly. I could hear the street noise and traffic through the intercom.

“Come on up. I’m on the second floor.” But just as I was about to let her up, she abruptly cut in.

“No,” she snapped. “I don’t have time. I’m double parked on the street. Meet me downstairs.” Through the intercom, I listened as Bonnie walked away. I could also hear her beat up old Hyundai idling on the street in front of the building. I hung up the phone and quickly made my way down the hall to the front door. I pulled on my shoes and grabbed my purse and jacket, thinking that perhaps she wanted to go someplace else to catch up. I took the stairs down to the lobby, but when I got there I couldn’t see her. I looked out through the glass lobby doors until I spotted her standing leaning against her roughly idling car. I pushed through the door and quickly began to make my way out to the street.

“Hello, Bonnie!” I called out. “Good to see you!” She was leaning against her car, her back to me. Hearing my voice she turned around. As I walked up to her, without even so much as a smile, she thrust a Safeway bag at me.

“Here,” she said brusquely. “It’s the contents of your desk. I gotta go.” Without hesitating, she jumped back in her beat-up 1989 Hyundai Excel, ground it into gear and drove away, leaving me alone on the street, clutching the Safeway bag. I watched as her car sputtered and choked, until finally it drove out of sight. Abandoned on the street, I tried to come to terms with the situation. I couldn’t understand why Bonnie no longer wanted, or needed, our friendship. Why wouldn’t she talk to me? What didn’t she want to hear?

I slowly made my way back up to the apartment, taking the stairs to the second floor. I unlocked the door, and as I entered the apartment, I kicked off my shoes, hung up my jacket on the already overburdened coat rack, and dropped the Safeway bag onto the floor. There was absolutely nothing of value to me in that bag. In fact, the few personal items I had left in my desk, I’d completely forgotten about. They meant

nothing to me, and if I'd never gotten them back I would never notice, or even care. Unlike the contents of the Safeway bag, I felt my friendship with Bonnie, at least up to that moment, meant something to her.

I flopped myself down onto the sofa; the overstuffed red plush velvet cushions threatening to swallow me up. I sat silently, contemplating, and tried to come to terms with what had just happened. For me, this was the first time a friendship was born out of work. Week after week, paycheque after paycheque, my friendship with Bonnie grew. But, I reminded myself, we were two people brought together by one common thread; a job. We were paid to share a small space, day after day, week after week, and work cohesively as a team. I innocently believed our friendship went beyond the limitations of a paycheque. I didn't want to admit to myself that when my employment at Lesniewski Trichopoulos was terminated, so was our friendship. I naively believed that I could maintain a friendship with a co-worker outside office hours.

From that moment on, and from that day forward, I would always affectionately refer to Bonnie Smith as "Bitch Face Bonnie". Among my friends and me it's a moniker that, to this day, has still stuck.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I didn't do to much.
But I did play house with my friend.**



A CONCRETE PLAN

After settling in at Lisa's, we decided to take advantage of our endless free time and take a drive in Prunty. Like me, Lisa was still unemployed, so we decided to take a daytrip out to the country. We didn't have any particular place in mind to visit so we decided to simply see where the road would take us. Spontaneity was Lisa's middle name, so off we drove into the wild blue yonder of Abbotsford.

A few hours into our trip, however, we quickly realized we were lost. Not to mention, we were running precariously low on fuel. The last thing we wanted was to be left stranded in the middle of nowhere with an empty tank of gas, so we decided to find somebody who could give us directions. We aimlessly drove and drove until a few miles further we found ourselves, quite literally, at the end of a road. We'd driven onto some kind of haulage or work yard, which at the outset looked completely deserted. We pulled Prunty up to what appeared to be a worksite office and got out in an attempt to locate a living human being. It had started raining, and the sun was beginning to set. After a few minutes of wandering around, we decided to give up our search and get back to the warmth and dry comfort of Prunty. As we headed back to the car, we heard a man's voice coming out of seemingly nowhere.

"Are you lost?" we heard the voice ask. We spun around in the direction of the voice, but neither of us could actually see anyone.

"Hello?" Lisa called out, in an attempt to locate the disembodied voice.

"Hello," the voice called back. We hesitated slightly but then, like magic, a man suddenly came out of the shadows. We watched as he rounded the corner of the deserted office.

“Oh! There you are,” Lisa greeted the man, sounding relieved that we weren’t imagining the voice.

“Sorry ladies,” he responded, apologetically. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I was just finishing up my shift and was locking up when I spotted your car.” We both breathed a sigh of relief. He seemed harmless enough. At least he didn’t appear menacing and he wasn’t wearing a hockey mask, or wielding an ax.

“Actually,” Lisa jumped in. “We’re lost. I was wondering if you could direct us back to the highway?” For a split second, it occurred to me that we probably shouldn’t be telling this complete stranger we were lost. But what was done, was done.

“Of course,” he offered. “Do you want to go North or South?” The man, who reminded me of every dad I knew back home, lifted the brim of his New York Yankees baseball cap and scratched his forehead, as if doing so would stimulate his brain. I’d seen both my dad and my brother do it a thousand times.

“South,” Lisa replied.

“We’re trying to get back to Vancouver,” I added. We didn’t know how lost we were, but we knew we were pretty far off the beaten path.

“Well, traffic into Vancouver this time of day is going to be pretty heavy. You may want to wait an hour or two.” The man looked at his watch to confirm the time. I observed he wore the same brown Dickie coveralls my brother always wore, which were similarly stained and covered in dust and dirt. He was holding a gray metal lunch box covered in dents and scrapes, and tucked under his left arm was a bright yellow hard hat with a large Lucky Beer sticker stuck front and center.

“We would, but we don’t know where we are,” I confided. It was getting late and it was raining. As the sun dipped lower, so did the temperature. I wanted to get back to the warmth of Prunty, and ultimately the comfort of home.

“Where are we exactly?” Lisa asked.

“You’re at the Lafarge Concrete Plant in Abbotsford.” The man smiled proudly. It was obvious he liked his job. I recognized the look, although it had been a while since I’d felt that way about a job.

“Cool,” I chimed in. “My brother’s a truck driver and he sometimes works with Lafarge on the Island.”

“Well, this is the mother plant,” he revealed. “This is where it all happens. If you like, I’d be more than happy to give you a quick tour.” Lisa and I stood motionless, remembering all the things our mothers cautioned us about. Here we were, two young women, lost in the middle of nowhere, standing in the rain as the sun disappeared. Soon it would be dark. We only had this stranger’s word that we were where he said we were, and even then we still didn’t have our bearings. How did we know he wasn’t an escapee from a prison, or worse a mental hospital for the criminally insane? For all we knew, the man who stood before us had ulterior motives. Granted, he wasn’t wearing prison issue coveralls and he didn’t give off a scary vibe. We looked at each, shrugged our shoulders and, throwing caution to wind, gave a resounding “yes!”

I wasn’t sure if the tour would be exciting but, then again, who can say they’ve actually been on a tour of a concrete plant? I didn’t have anything to gauge it against. And although it may not be as culturally stimulating as touring a vineyard or classic car museum, I was thankful it wasn’t a raw sewage processing plant. Plus, if our gut instincts were completely wrong about our guide, then the tour could prove to be even more interesting. Admittedly, it occurred to us that we could both wind up wearing concrete boots by the end of the tour. Thankfully, our instincts were working that day, and for the next hour we learned just about everything anyone could ever want, or need, to know about concrete.

With the tour over, the stranger, who we now affectionately knew as Mike, walked us back to our car. He pointed us back in the direction of the highway and waved us off as we drove away. As we made our way onto the highway, heading south

back into the city, Pruny began to sputter and choke – the kind of sputter and choke that gives you a sick feeling in the bottom of your stomach. Pruny had run out of gas.

“Son of a bitch!” Lisa exclaimed as she pulled Pruny safely onto the shoulder. As she stopped the car and pulled on the emergency brake, we both looked at each other despairingly. I could tell from her expression she was hoping I’d have a solution to our problem. Sadly, I had none, aside from the obvious. I couldn’t name how many times I’d walked to a gas station. I knew the drill all too well.

“We don’t have any choice,” I pointed out, reading Lisa’s facial expression. “You’d better put on the hazard lights.” Peering through the rain slicked windows, all I could see was a steady stream of cars speeding past us. Unfortunately, no matter what direction I looked in, I couldn’t spot a gas station. “You stay with the car and I’ll find a gas station.” The last thing I wanted was to take a long walk in the cold, dark night along a major highway in search of a gas station. But I had no other choice. Lisa let out a mammoth sigh and nodded her head, slightly embarrassed that she’d let Pruny run out of gas.

“It’s okay,” I insisted, reassuringly patting her on the shoulder. *One day*, I thought to myself, *this will make for a good story to tell*. In the meantime, if there was going to be a story to tell with some semblance of a happy ending, I needed to get the show on the road. Not wanting to waste any more valuable time, I took a deep breath and readied myself to step out onto the busy highway. As I slowly opened the door and stepped out of the warmth of Pruny, I felt a sudden chill race through me. Closing the door behind me, I began to make my way down the highway. Cars seemed to hurtle past me at NASCAR speeds, ruthlessly spraying streams of water up from their tires, which stung my exposed face, inundating me from head to toe. Zipping up my jacket and shaking off the chill, I decided to continue north, in the direction we were heading. *With a little luck*, I prayed, *a gas station might be right around the corner*.

I hadn’t taken more than twenty strides when I spotted the truck slowing down. I watched as it drove past, but then it immediately signaled and pulled over to the shoulder. Stopping in my tracks, I apprehensively turned around to see the

flashing hazard lights of Prunty. I could barely make out Lisa's silhouette behind the wheel. Unsure of what to do next, I decided to stop walking until I could determine who was in the truck. And then it happened. I stood stock still as the steady stream of NASCAR drivers sped past me, my heart racing nearly as fast. Typically, if not for bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all. Thankfully, this time was different. This time, I had Lady Luck on my side. It was as if the dark rain clouds parted just for me and sent down an angel.

As I watched the tall dark silhouette step out of the truck and onto the wet pavement, I instinctively launched into a full run towards him. I knew if I didn't get to him soon, he might change his mind, especially if left standing out in the damp, dark and cold night for much longer. Closing the truck door, he glanced up to see me running towards him. As the look of recognition swept across his face, I yelled out his name.

"Mike!" I shouted with the same enthusiasm I usually reserve for famous people, or long lost friends who owed me money.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he hollered over the sound of the noisy traffic.

"Am I ever glad to see you!" I hollered back as I finally reached him.

"I thought I recognized the car," he began, trying to stifle his astonishment. "Are you alright?" he asked urgently, the same way a parent would respond when their teenage kid calls at one in the morning, when they were expected home hours earlier.

"We ran out of gas," I answered bluntly. There was no point in being embarrassed about it now. But I was confident Mike could help. He was definitely a "man's man". And he didn't prove me wrong. As it happened, Mike had a siphon hose and a small gas can. Like a pro, within ten minutes, he had Prunty gassed up and running again. We tried giving him money but he wouldn't accept it.

"I have a daughter about your age," Mike said as he lifted his Yankee's ball cap and rubbed his damp forehead. "I just want to make sure you two get home safely."

As the three of us stood in the pouring rain, we decided to say our good-byes and head home.

“Thank you, Mike. You’re an angel,” I praised, reaching up to give him a hug. I could feel his rain-soaked cheek against mine, but he still felt warm. Not like me. My exposed cheeks were already prickling from the cold and rain. Next, Lisa gave Mike her signature bear hug and, for the second time that day, he watched as we climbed into Pruny before waving us off. As we pulled away, we both let out a huge sigh of relief. We had somehow managed to divert disaster. We weren’t gamblers but we knew the odds of lightening striking twice were rare. As we drove towards the safety of home, we relaxed a little and turned on the radio. We knew we had somebody watching over us. A guardian angel sent to protect us. But who knew our guardian angel would be a New York Yankees fan?

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went to a play at school.
It started at 2:00 pm until 3:00 pm.
My brother thought it was dumb
but I thought it was good.
Very good indeed!**



WEST END EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE GROUP

By January, the travel bug had bit me yet again so I decided to put salve on the bite and take a trip overseas. I started my trip in England where I spent a few weeks visiting friends in Manchester. But given that it was their worst winter in 27 years, I decided to head to warmer climes, namely the island of Majorca in the Mediterranean. I found out shortly after arriving at Majorca that it was the birth place of Antonio Banderas, who in my mind at least, should be the poster child for Spain. I stayed in Majorca for a week where the temperatures never dipped below 70 F. It was glorious, but I also knew I would have to conserve my finances and eventually head home to look for work.

I arrived back home in mid-February to warm sunny weather and the cherry trees blossoming in glorious pinks and whites. Vancouver in the spring is a cornucopia of colour and is truly my favourite time of the year (next to fall). Vancouver was experiencing a magnificently early spring, so taking advantage of the feeling of rejuvenation that goes with it, I decided to enroll in an acting class at the West End Community Centre. Unfortunately, I missed the first class because I was traveling, but I decided to jump in anyways. It was at my acting class that I first met Skye Brookes.

It's always a daunting prospect to enter a classroom where everybody has already acquainted themselves (kind of like starting a new job). Try being the new kid in grade school mid-term; it's terrifying. However, not being shy, I decided to

jump in feet first with a Navy cry and join the classroom of wanna-be actors. As the newbie, the instructor, Stafford Todd-Steadman, decided to focus his attention on me, probably in an attempt to find out what I could bring to the class. He thought it would be fun to have me act out a skit, alone, in front of the entire class. Stafford said this was his way of introducing me to the other students who, he reminded me, were already acquainted.

Stafford chose an exercise he'd employed from the previous class I'd missed. He suggested I think of an experience that left an indelible impression on me, preferably one that I could easily act out in a few minutes, with as little dialogue as possible (reminiscent of the "method acting" approach). I didn't find the task difficult. I knew immediately what I would do. I centered the scene around an incident I fondly recalled from when I was backpacking through Europe a few years earlier.

I quickly found my focus and, in my mind's eye, I was transported back to Paris. It was a late October morning, and the cool crisp city air began to warm as the sun peeked out from behind white wispy clouds. The air was thick with the smell of roasting chestnuts, crepes and Parisian hotdogs. Off in the distance, I could hear the jazzy manouche of Parisian gypsy music. I quickly made my way along the wall of the Seine River, keeping up with the passing boats of tourists and blowing them kisses while shouting "J'aime Paris! J'aime Paris!" I'd fallen in love with Paris and I wanted the whole world to know! I continued my way along the wide pedestrian path that runs along the river, not wanting the moment to end. Passengers on boats waved back at me, some even stood up to blow back kisses, while others took pictures. And then, like being abruptly awoken from an enchanting dream, my magical moment came to a grinding halt – I had stepped in a large squishy pile of smelly dog poop. From behind me I heard snickering, and then laughter, and finally clapping. I got the laughs I'd hoped for. Any anxieties I may have had being the new kid were quickly dispelled.

A few weeks, and several acting classes later, Skye and I had begun to form a lasting friendship. This typically involved hanging out at the Clover Field Pub after

class, where we consumed several pints of beer (typically followed by a greasy take-away meal from one of the many local fast-food eateries that dotted Denman Street). Our classes were always on Sundays but, since I was still unemployed, it didn't matter that our "let's just go for one beer" after class always turned into several pints. By March, it wasn't unusual to find a large group of us from class at the Clover Field Pub sharing stories, cheap beer and cigarettes until the wee hours of the morning. It was a wonderful feeling hanging out with an eclectic group of actors, wanna-be actors, writers and even a director. It was on these Sunday night beer binges that I quickly came to realize that this is why I moved to Vancouver.

Growing up in a small town, I'd learned everything I needed to know about big trucks, motorcycles and how to change the oil in my car. For the first time, I found myself sitting around a table, openly sharing my thoughts and opinions about movies, theatre and who my favourite actors were, without the overwhelming feeling of being judged. Most remarkable of all, when I did have something to say, people listened. And not only did they listen, they actually heard me. I found myself surrounded by creative people (on many different levels), all of whom shared the same ideals and opinions as me. And nobody cared that I was unemployed. I was free to be myself and it felt extraordinary. And it was sitting around that table at the Clover Field Pub where it finally occurred to me that office work would never provide the creative outlet that I so desperately needed and craved. Being myself at work was virtually impossible and, in fact, had even cost me my job. It didn't make sense to work where I wasn't liked. I finally realized it was time to look for work outside of the conventional office, even if it meant less pay. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make in order to stay true to myself.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I pushed Kevin's Motor Cycle more than 6 miles
and we only stayed there for 10 minutes.
My mom and dad also worked on the bathroom
(it looks very nice).**

***MARIELLE'S ICE-CREAM***

I still had enough money stuffed under my mattress to live on, but I didn't want to leave it to the last possible minute to find a job. After deciding that I didn't want to work in an office anymore (and, more specifically, I didn't want to work as a secretary, legal or otherwise), I opted to look for a more unconventional job. I applied at Marielle's, a local ice cream parlour and coffee shop. Marielle's boasted a large variety of exotically flavoured ice cream and some of the best homemade pies in the city. I had on several occasions purchased their pumpkin pies and they truly were divine. The cover letter that accompanied my resume was a testimonial for my love for, and appreciation of, Marielle's awesome array of ice cream and deliciously delectable pies. Despite my lack of food service industry experience, I was granted an interview with Marielle herself.

I met the owner of Marielle's on a Thursday morning at her restaurant, which was located in the heart of the West End looking out onto English Bay. The view alone was worth the price of Marielle's pies. Typical of most restaurant owners, she was run off her feet when I arrived for my interview, but she took the time to show me to a private booth in the back corner where she asked me to wait. From the booth, I had great vantage point of the whole restaurant. Usually I would sit outside, or at table in the bay window where I could soak up the beautiful view of English Bay. But today it was all business, so I sat in the least social booth at the back. From there, I watched as Marielle spoke with staff, changed the till tape in the cash register and answered the phone twice. Finally, she found a break in her hectic schedule to join me. Sliding

into the booth across from me, she picked up my resume, which was laid out on the table.

“Sorry about that,” Marielle said as she quickly scanned over my resume. “Okay, so you’re interested in working here?” She put down my resume and looked at me quizzically before continuing. “Why? Tell me why you want to work here?”

Years ago, when I still lived with my parents, I applied for a job at a local donut shop. Robin’s Donuts wasn’t the only bakery in town, but their donuts were a thousand times better than anybody else’s. When I submitted my job application, I was told straight out “no” because I was only 16 years old and didn’t have the required minimum work experience. Believing in the product alone wasn’t enough to get me the job. I kept that in mind when answering Marielle’s question. I had to want the job, not just because I loved her homemade pies and ice creams, but because I had something to offer.

“I love working with people,” I confessed. “I miss working with the public. When I worked at Superior Video, I loved working with the customers. That’s why I stayed at that job for five years. I miss that.” Marielle seemed to like my answer but picked up my resume again to re-examine it. I could tell from her expression she wasn’t fully convinced.

“I can’t pay you more than minimum wage,” she confirmed without batting an eye. There was no point in beating around the bush. I had considered this might be the case but, given that I hadn’t work in several months, minimum wage was better than no wage at all.

“It’s not about the money,” I reasoned, trying to sound both convincing and indifferent at the same time. I didn’t want to look too desperate, but I wanted Marielle to at least give me a try. I’d never scooped ice cream or made a non-fat decaf latte before, but I wanted the opportunity to at least try.

“Have you ever worked in the food service industry before?” she asked. I knew it was a loaded question. On one hand, saying “no” meant I still didn’t have the required experience to do the job, but if I said “yes” then I’d be lying. I told her the truth and hoped that Marielle liked me enough to hire me, which thankfully was exactly what she did.

I could tell from her handshake she wasn’t totally convinced that I was the right person for the job but, going against her better judgment, she took the risk anyways. I must have had the right amount of persuasiveness to make up for my lack of experience.

Needless to say, I only lasted one shift. Maybe if my first shift wasn’t on a Friday night, thus cutting into my social/drinking time with friends, I might have stuck with the job. Surprisingly, scooping ice cream proved to be harder than I thought. I had to continually shift hands to scoop for fear that my right arm would develop a huge bulking muscle. And it didn’t help that my drunken friends kept popping in from the pub next door. I was jealous that they were in the pub drinking cheap beer and listening to live music while I stood behind a sea of ice cream buckets serving tourists and local stoners from the beach.

By the time I finished my first shift, I knew I’d made a huge mistake. I never did properly learn how to make an espresso or cappuccino. I couldn’t even make a half-decent hot chocolate. I spent most of the night apologizing to customers for messing up their orders. And I spent the rest of the night wishing I could be anywhere but there. Marielle had taken a gamble when she hired me but that day Lady Luck was definitely not on her side.

Aside from showing my face a week later to pick up my first, and only, paycheque (which was so small it was barely worth cashing), I never went back to Marielle’s again, not even to enjoy her amazing homemade pies or ice cream.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I didn't go to school
because I was sick.
And all day I watched T.V.
And I got very bored.**



TODA LA VIDA

"We need a break," I concluded with a heavy sigh, staring out the window as the heavy rain pelted down onto the streets below. It'd been six weeks since we'd seen a full day of sunshine, and it was starting to take a toll on our morale. It was beginning to feel like the sun would never shine again, reminding me of "Blade Runner". So, I decided if the sun wasn't going to come to us, then it was time to go to the sun. It was time to head south.

"I don't think I can afford it," Lisa remarked as she lounged on the sofa, flipping through a dog-eared copy of last month's National Enquirer. I'm not ashamed to say, I salvage them from the paper recycling bin in the back alley beside the dumpster. My only pet peeve is finding them with the crossword puzzle already done.

"Yes we can," I confided. And for once, that was the truth. I may be unemployed but while I worked at Lesniewski Trichopoulos, I saved nearly every spare dollar I could with the idea that I could travel around the world with it. But, Clarence foiled my plans and fired me before I could save enough money for an around-the-world ticket. So after being fired, I settled for a month in England and a week in Spain. As I bleakly watched the rain beading down the window, I decided I would spend what was left of my savings on the vacation of a lifetime with my best friend. Now all I had to do was convince Lisa, which I knew wouldn't be difficult.

"Really?" Lisa asked, pulling her focus away from the tabloid magazine.

“Really,” I answered. “My treat.” Turning my back to the window, I knew I’d seen enough rain to know what we needed. “We need to go someplace warm and sunny, where we can lounge on the beach and get away from this incessant rain.” Lisa tossed the magazine onto the floor and pulled herself up from the comfy sofa. Contemplating, she reached for her cup of tea and took a long sip before responding.

“I’d love to, but I have no way of repaying you,” she said in earnest. “I have no idea when I’ll be working again.” Although Lisa’s circumstances were different from mine, not unlike me, she too was unemployed. But the positive side to both of us being unemployed was that we could go away anytime we wanted, and for as long as we needed. We were in the enviable position of not having to answer to anybody (except Florence our landlady).

“It’s my gift to you,” I insisted. “Actually, I’ve been trying to figure out what to get you for your birthday.” Lisa’s birthday was still a few weeks away, but I’d been pondering over what to get her. What do you get the girl who has everything? I watched Lisa shaking her head as if to say “no”, but slowly she started to laugh with giddy anticipation. I think just the idea of the two of us leaving behind the record-breaking rainfall and going away on a holiday was enough to lift her dampened spirits.

“I couldn’t...I mean, we couldn’t. Could we?” Lisa stammered, clearly excited but checking to see if I was still serious or not.

“Absolutely,” I confirmed as I began to walk across the apartment in the direction of the door. “Grab your coat and boots, girlfriend. Let’s go book ourselves a holiday!” Lisa practically threw herself off the sofa as she ran down the hall towards the door, grabbing her purse and jacket in the process. Pulling on our boots, we started to giggle as the thrill of anticipation set in – soon we would be traveling someplace warm and sunny but, more importantly, dry.



A few weeks later, our departure day arrived and we spent the day traveling to our sunny destination in Mazatlán. By nightfall, we were sitting on the tiny balcony of our three-star Mexican hotel room, overlooking the warm tropical waters of the Pacific Ocean. While our hotel room wasn't fancy, the magnificent view from our balcony made up for it. The beaches were dotted with man-made huts covered with banana leaf roofs and the exotic smells of barbecuing meat (somewhere by the pool) filled our senses.

Taking time out to relax after a long day's journey, we sat side by side on the balcony sharing a bottle of duty-free rum. Two small tropical islands, which looked like huge floating boobs in the water, flanked the incredible view from our compact balcony; a comparison that made us giggle. Off in the distance, we watched as vendors walked up and down the beach selling their wares. Mexican women, strikingly dressed in pure white cotton dresses, carried armloads of hand-made jewelry and trinkets. Men walked side by side with their heads piled high with straw hats, while balancing layers of colourful blankets on their arms. As we toasted the scenery with cheap rum, I was overcome with emotion. It was a rare feeling of complete calm and happiness. As I began to feel the effects of the alcohol, I sat quietly for a moment, contemplating my newfound serenity.

"Lisa," I said, breaking our silence. "Did I really need to spend all this money to come to Mexico to be happy?" Our balcony was too small to accommodate chairs, so we opted instead to sit on the floor; our backs leaning against the cool glass of the sliding door.

"No, I don't think so," she responded. "But the beauty of traveling is that you remove yourself from everyday life." Lisa took a mouthful of rum and passed the bottle back to me. Taking a deep drink, I felt a wave of intoxication wash over me, reminiscent of the waves hitting the brown sandy beach before us.

"Why don't I feel this happy at home?" I asked, taking two cigarettes from the package and passing one over to Lisa. Lighting mine, I inhaled deeply, letting the

smoke fill my lungs before exhaling. The minutes passed as we sat quietly, smoking our cigarettes.

“Here’s the thing,” she started as she flicked an ash from her cigarette into the balmy wind. “You can be this happy at home. You just need to eliminate what is making you miserable.” Instinctually, Lisa always knew what to say – she was a self-described “old soul”. Taking in the brilliant view from our balcony, we sat in silence for a moment, listening only to the waves gently lapping up onto the beach and the far off sounds of sea birds.

“This may sound totally corny, but the answer is in you.” She let out an all-knowing laugh before taking another drag from her cigarette. “Besides,” she continued. “Nobody deserves a job they hate.” I knew she was right, but she also knew I hated that new-age crap.

“Okay, now you’re starting to sound like an infomercial for some self-help book,” I chimed in, trying not to laugh, but failing miserably. “Should we start singing “*Kumbaya*” now?” Erupting into laughter, we immediately launched into the chorus of *Kumbaya*, our unabashed melodious burst of energy fueled by alcohol. But soon our musical interlude diminished, as we realized neither of us knew the rest of the lyrics.

Getting up to stretch my legs, I went inside the chilly air-conditioned hotel room to locate an ashtray, which I found on a small round two-person table conveniently tucked into the corner of the room. While our room wasn’t very big, it had everything we needed for the next two weeks, including; one fully stocked bar, one industrial sized air-conditioner and two queen-sized beds. Stepping back out onto the balcony, I knelt down and handed Lisa the ashtray, my cigarette dangling from the corner of my mouth. She obliged by handing me the near empty bottle of rum, inspecting its contents (or lack thereof) as she did so.

“Care to see what’s in the mini-bar?” she asked. Nodding my head in eager agreement, I went back inside to inspect the mini-bar. Much to my delight, the mini-bar was stocked with all kinds of goodies – Pacifico beer, travel sized bottles of rum,

vodka and rye (with tequila noticeably absent), chocolate bars and even a package of Marlborough lights, which were tucked into the door of the bar. Whoever stocked this bar was a professional.

“Awesome,” I marveled as I immediately opened two bottles of Pacifico before making my way back to the balcony. Resuming my position beside Lisa, I took the last drag from my cigarette and butted it out in the ashtray. The sun had already dipped below the horizon and the warm tropical breeze felt good on my skin. It was a cold damp spring back home and the tropical Mexican climate was a welcomed escape.

My thirst took over as I nearly finished my icy cold Pacifico in one gulp. Lisa was clearly on the same page as she finished her beer, setting the empty bottle down beside her while simultaneously reaching for another cigarette. We didn’t need to say it – it was our first night in Mazatlán and we were about to get shit-faced.



Several hours and drinks later, which basically included the entire contents of our mini-bar (chocolate bars included), Lisa called room service to order more cervezas. I don’t know if it was the warm weather, the therapeutic smell of tropical flowers and cooking meat, or the fact that we were finally on vacation, but we were more relaxed than we’d been in months, and pleasantly pissed.

“Okay, so here’s the deal,” I declared, rejoining Lisa on the balcony floor. “I need to get a job.” While we waited for room service to deliver more beer, I lit a Marlborough.

“No,” Lisa jumped in. “You don’t just need *a job*, you need a job you actually like!” Once again, she was still right. That was the predicament I was perpetually trapped in; trying to find a good job and one that I actually liked. “You know,” Lisa continued with a slight slur. “If you really, really wanted to, you could get a job anywhere.” Butting out her cigarette, she quickly got up to answer the loud knocking at the door. Finally, room service had arrived.

While Lisa dealt with room service, I pondered my future. The million-dollar question was: *what job would make me happy?* If I could do absolutely anything I wanted, as Lisa pointed out, what was it? What job would actually *make* me happy? Short of winning a lottery, I had to work. Unfortunately, the odds were against me winning a lottery. The bottom line was, I didn't actually know what I wanted. If I could just figure that bit out, then maybe I could find the perfect job.

Rejoining me on the balcony with two freshly opened Pacificos, Lisa handed me one as she resumed her seat beside me. "Cheers!" We toasted before taking a deep drink of the ice-cold golden ale. Mexican beer was so refreshing and satisfying on a warm humid night.

"I bet you could get a job anywhere," she maintained, immediately taking another drink of her beer. The cold bottles in the warm night air were perspiring and droplets of water trickled onto our cotton dresses.

"Oh, you do, do you?" I responded. "How *much* you willing to bet?" I gave Lisa a Cheshire cat smile. We rarely gambled, but it was always fun to place a wager to see how far we'd go. Adding to the stakes was the fact that we were both now pleasantly pissed. She thought for a moment, pondering over my question, before coming back with her reply.

"I bet you a crisp \$50 bill that you could get a job anywhere, anyplace, anytime," she finally responded, sounding overly confident.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, excited by her wager. "Those are fighting words." Fifty dollars was a lot of money, which meant the stakes were even higher if I lost.

"If you're serious? Then count me in," I confirmed, hoping she was. This was the kind of friendly encouragement I needed.

"Great! I'm definitely serious," Lisa said as she held out her hand to shake on it.

“Okay, but we should lay down some ground rules.” I wanted to make this bet impossible for me to lose. “For example,” I continued. “I must wear sunglasses throughout the entire interview.” Lisa let out a huge laugh at this rule.

“Oh, I see what you’re doing,” Lisa jumped in. “Right, okay, well, even with sunglasses on, I’m betting you’d still get the job.” She sat staring at the view, holding her perspiring beer bottle on her knee. Upping the ante, I continued.

“Not just any kind of sunglasses,” I added. “They have to be reflective sunglasses. And I have to wear jeans...and a t-shirt.” I increased the stakes but Lisa was clearly on board.

“A Hawaiian shirt!” Lisa blurted. We howled with laughter as we tried to imagine me at an interview wearing reflective sunglasses, blue jeans and a bright Hawaiian shirt. I was starting to think I might just win this bet after all. It was a rare occasion to prove Lisa wrong and, although I’m not one to gloat, I was secretly looking forward to the day.

“Now all we have to do is get you a job interview,” Lisa announced, as she raised her beer to mine, sealing the bet with a drink.

MAZATLÁN GOLDEN ZONE
A POEM FOR CHRYSTALA BY LISA SAVY

Moonless April night
Lit only by the neon lights and jeeps like fireflies darting in and out of laughing burnt-sausage touristas
Rapid-fire exhaust and canned soup radios playing drown out the pounding, reaching surf as we chortle down the boulevard to the Golden Zone
Sensual wind fingers caress my sun-browned face and toss my billowy skirt to the passerby
I can only see the shops and restaurants and the brightly painted nightclubs
Beyond us, the rocky desert is lost in the night and the steaming sea is a black, churning broth
People are everywhere
Talking, laughing, singing, crying
Walking, smoking, joking, drinking
Dancing, waving, standing idly while we bump excitedly by
The streets are twisting – a full, rolling boil
The night lovers, thrill seekers party ‘till moist, salty, sea-swept dawn
Mexican girls in blinding white cottons, with hot pink lips artfully clicking high-heeled sandals in the streets
Armour of the night
I am lost in the dark coffee eyes of the narrow-hipped, beckoning long-lashed men
Kilowatt smiling – sinewy
Teasing
We’re going faster now
My heart pounding, my body filling with something so sweet
Every breath is delectable
“Once in a lifetime” I think
My sun bleached, humidity-curled hair
Flashing in my eyes, dancing in the wind
Tangling
Actually
But there’s no time to worry about that now because we’ve arrived at the cool-tiled palm-treed paradise
In the Spanish-strumming, shimmering Golden Zone.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

Today I had supper at Michelle's house. We had tacos for supper and they were good. We also went swimming at Beban Park School.



THIS FLIGHT TONIGHT

We arrived back home after two glorious weeks in sunny Mazatlán. The weather at home had improved slightly, so when our plane landed at the Vancouver International Airport, we were already acclimatized in our colourful matching cotton dresses we'd bought at a Mexican street market. Unfortunately, however, the weather in Manitoba wasn't as good. They were experiencing heavy fogs and much cooler temperatures. Lisa and I learned this little tidbit of what would become important information not long after our plane left the Mazatlán International Airport.

Our flight home from Mexico wasn't until 8:00 p.m., and since it was our last day at the hotel, we put our luggage into storage and spent the afternoon lounging at the poolside bar. Other guests from the hotel, who were also leaving that day, joined us. By the time we made the executive decision to pour ourselves into a taxi to make our way to the airport, a small group of our poolside-drinking buddies (all of whom were from Manitoba), offered to share the ride. We were by no means running late, but the taxi we hired drove us straight to the airport in record-breaking time (a trait we quickly picked up on when we ferried around in taxis during our vacation).

In a whirlwind of airport security and check-in counters, Lisa and I finally settled in at the airport bar to await our flight home. We'd already enjoyed several poolside drinks back at the hotel, so we were both feeling the buzz from too much sun and cervezas. When our drinks finally arrived, several of our newfound friends from the hotel announced that our flight was boarding at the neighboring gate. We heard the announcement for a Canadian flight leaving Mazatlán but, much to our detriment, neither of us paid any attention to it. Not wanting to miss our flight, we quickly

chugged back our drinks and followed the masses of familiar faces to the gate, where we immediately boarded the plane.

Thankfully, the flight wasn't full, so when we found our seats at the rear of the plane we were pleased to discover nobody sitting next to us. Settling in, we looked forward to the complimentary in-flight meal, plus a few beverages to wash it down. Having just spent several weeks eating only fresh fruit, homemade tostados and soups, we were both eager to dig in to an apportioned plate full of fatty North American food such roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy.

After virtually inhaling the in-flight dinner, Lisa and I began chatting to a few of the other passengers. The faces of those seated around us were familiar, having already met most of them back at our hotel during the last two weeks. But I started to take notice of the fact that, for example, two brothers who were seated across the aisle from us, I could have sworn told me back at the hotel they were from Winnipeg, Manitoba. Even after several in-flight cocktails, I managed to remember the younger brother's name. I motioned to him, leaning forward in my seat so I could talk over Lisa.

"Brandon, right?" I asked, smiling, as Brandon sipped his Coors Light.

"Yes. It's...Chrystala, right?" Brandon also looked like he'd enjoyed several cervezas and too much sun before boarding the flight as his nose and forehead shone bright red. I nodded, acknowledging that he had, much to my surprise, correctly recalled my name.

"Brandon, quick question," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Where are you flying too?" Brandon shot me a confused look, but then smiled and answered. "Winnipeg, Manitoba." I must have looked equally confused as I bleakly smiled, before thanking him and leaning back into my seat. Just then, the captain came on the overhead speaker to advise that we were now flying over Phoenix, Arizona. *That's odd, I thought to myself. Isn't Utah part of the mid-western United States? On the way down to Mexico, I'm sure we flew over California.*

Lisa was chatting with an older gentleman in the row ahead of us. Kneeling on the seat of his chair, facing us, he had her undivided attention. With Lisa engaged in deep conversation, I slowly looked around to see if I could grab somebody else's attention. I had a nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right, but I wanted to be sure of my suspicions before revealing anything to Lisa. I spotted a woman who I'd seen several times at the hotel pool bar. I remembered her because she was the only one who used to show up at the pool every afternoon in a brightly coloured two-piece bikini and ridiculously high stiletto shoes. She was standing in the aisle talking to one of the airhostesses. After a few moments, I managed to get her attention and waved her over to me. Recognizing me, she smiled and waved back as I got up from my seat to meet her half way.

"Hi," I politely greeted her, trying my best not to sound upset. "I have a really weird question for you but where are you flying to?" Not unlike Brandon, the woman shot me the same puzzled expression but then smiled graciously and answered without hesitation. "Winnipeg, of course. Why?"

"Oh, no reason," I lied, casually thanking her for her time before quickly returning to my seat. Lisa had ordered another round of Bloody Marys and handed me one as I sat down. I definitely needed another drink before sharing my concerns with her. I finished the Bloody Mary in two gulps, trying to think of what I was going to say, before setting the empty glass down on the tray in front of me.

"You're thirsty!" Lisa laughed as she took a daintier sip of her drink. Not unlike me, she was definitely impaired, but I needed to choose my words carefully before launching in to what I had to say. I took a deep breath before speaking in an attempt to calm my nerves. This was one of those moments when I wished smoking was still permitted on airplanes.

"Lisa, I don't know how to say this, but..." I hesitated for a moment before finishing my sentence. Lisa took another sip of her drink. "I think we've boarded the wrong plane." She immediately began choking on a mouthful of Bloody Mary, quickly handing me her glass so she could lean forward in an attempt to swallow. Finally, she

swallowed, catching her breath. She shot me an exasperated look but it was as though she was thinking of something else. I studied her face for a clue of what she could possibly be thinking, but came up with nothing. Finally, she broke her stare and began to pat her chest as she steadied her breathing.

“Good God woman, don’t say stuff like that when I’m in mid-drink,” she finally spoke, trying hard to hold back her laughter for fear she might start coughing again. I waited until I figured it was safe for me to continue. The last thing I wanted was for her to launch into another choking fit.

“Lisa, I’m not joking. I really think we’re on the wrong plane.” The captain’s timing was impeccable. At that exact moment, he came on the overhead speaker again to announce we were flying now over Salt Lake City, Utah. I shot Lisa one of my “I told you so” looks as her mouth opened to speak. I could see her trying to set her brain into motion, perhaps to come up with something intelligent to say to my recent revelation. Finally, she responded.

“No freakin’ way? There’s no way we could have boarded the wrong plane...is there?” I could tell she wasn’t quite convinced, but she was trying her hardest to persuade me.

“I totally agree, but I’ve already asked a few people on the plane and they all say they’re going to Winnipeg. Ask somebody yourself,” I urged. Deep down, I wanted her to prove me wrong. This was one of those times when I really hoped I *was* wrong.

Lisa got up from her seat and began making her way down the aisle. A few people were standing so she approached them first. With her back to me, I couldn’t hear what they were saying but, based on their familiar expressions, I had a pretty good idea. It wasn’t looking good. Person after person, I watched as she asked the same question over and over. Finally, as she began making her way back to her seat, I could see from her expression she was now convinced that we had somehow done the unthinkable – we had boarded the wrong plane. But based on her body language, she was also struggling to hold back the laughter. Sitting back down beside me, she

picked up her drink from my tray and finished it in one gulp. Carefully taking her tray down, she slid the empty glass onto it before looking over at me.

“Houston, we have a problem,” she announced, giggling. “We’ve boarded the wrong bloody plane!” Inevitably, we both broke into laughter. It seemed inconceivable in this day and age that we could have actually boarded the wrong plane, but sure enough we’d done it. Lisa motioned to a passing airhostess that we required two more drinks. Thank goodness we were at the back of the plane where service seemed so much faster.

Neither of us had any extra money. And we had no idea what we would do once we arrived in Manitoba. The flight wasn’t expected to land in Winnipeg until approximately 12:30 in the morning. What the hell were we going to do at that time of the night? And then there was the cost for our flights home, or even worse, the cost of a bus ticket each, because at this point that’s about all we could afford. It was a sobering thought but thankfully the airhostess brought us our drinks just in time.

“Lisa, what the hell are we going to do?” As serious as my question was, it didn’t stop us from laughing. At this point, laughter was our only comfort (aside from the alcohol, of course).

“I have no idea. I just want to know how this happened? How is it possible that we boarded the wrong bloody plane?” Using the journalistic *Bridge of San Luis Rey* approach, we decided to work backwards in an attempt to piece together how we’d gotten ourselves into this idiotic predicament.

This is what we came up with.

When we boarded the plane, nobody closely inspected our boarding passes (however, as Lisa pointed out, the airline staff did spend considerable time laughing at us, even going as far as calling us “the two drunken poster children for tourism Mexico”). So, although we’d left an indelible impression on the airline staff, nobody actually thought to ask for our boarding passes. Our flight to Vancouver was scheduled to leave Mazatlán at 7:55 p.m., but we were inadvertently encouraged by our newfound Prairie Pals to board their 7:00 p.m. flight, which, we noted,

conveniently left from the same gate as ours. We also checked in at the same flight counter as our Winnipeg counterparts, which likely confused airport staff. Adding to the confusion, we arrived at the airport at the same time as several hundred Winnipeggers traveling back to Canada, most of whom likely never knew we were from Vancouver. However, for the few Winnipeggers who *did* know, it was somewhat surprising that they never questioned why we were boarding their flight. Overall, the whole situation was a massive ball of confusion.

As hard as we tried, we couldn't contain ourselves as we broke into uncontrollable fits of laughter. We'd somehow managed to do what we thought was impossible – we boarded the wrong plane and, for the first time in our lives, we were about to visit Winnipeg.

“Excuse me,” I called out as an airhostess passed by. “Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could tell me what flight we're on please?” Lisa tried to hold back her laughter, but as usual she wasn't successful. I, on the other hand, tried not to sound too drunk, but that didn't stop me from taking a mouthful of what was left of my Bloody Mary. I realized how stupid my question must have sounded and I didn't want to come across as a complete idiot (at least not yet). I was fairly confident my question was uncommon. Fortunately, the airhostess, who appeared completely unphased, smiled courteously before answering in a friendly voice.

“This is flight CP307 to Winnipeg, Manitoba.” I practically spat the contents of my drink onto the back of the seat in front of me. I have no idea what I thought she might say, but now our worst fears were confirmed; we were definitely on the wrong plane.

“Is there some sort of problem?” The airhostess was clearly very patient with drunken passengers. It was evident by her mild expression that she assumed this was the case with Lisa and me. In actual fact, she wasn't wrong. Trying to maintain my composure, I grabbed my handbag to retrieve my airline ticket and boarding pass, which I promptly handed over to her. As she read the ticket and accompanying pass, her friendly smile slowly disappeared, replaced with a look of profound concern.

After all, in reality, this was probably more her fault than ours. Clearly, somebody wasn't doing their job when we boarded the plane, not that I was pointing any fingers.

"Miss," the airline hostess said to Lisa. "May I see your ticket and boarding pass as well, please?" Lisa obliged and dug around in her backpack, which had been stowed under the seat in front of her. Finally, she found the two items and promptly handed them to the hostess.

"Would you mind if I borrowed these for a moment ladies?" At this point, I didn't see what purpose this would serve but maybe, if we were lucky, we would at least be put up in a hotel room for the night.

"Help yourself," Lisa offered. "Lot good it'll do," she moaned under her breath to me, mirroring my sentiments.

"Well, we might get some free drinks out of the deal," I offered, trying to sound optimistic.

"But our drinks are already free!" Lisa reminded me, laughing at the idea.

I rooted through my handbag and pulled out my wallet, inspecting the contents for any spare change, or hidden emergency money. I was starting to regret my senseless spending habits while on vacation. How many rounds of drinks had I bought at the hotel bar? And all those big tips I'd left for the staff after enjoying the all-you-can-eat lunch and dinner buffets (I never managed to wake up early enough to enjoy the breakfast buffet, but Lisa assured me they made the best waffles). Or how many times had I generously donated my pocket change to the children begging on the beaches? Well, I couldn't feel bad about being philanthropic, I supposed, but I was starting to wish I'd been more careful with my cash. As it was, I only had \$50 left to my name. I didn't want to ask, but my guess was Lisa had even less money in her wallet.

What felt like ages, we finally spotted the airhostess making her way back down the aisle from the front of the plane, still clutching our tickets and boarding passes. After a few interruptions from other passengers, she eventually reached us,

where we sat patiently waiting for yet another round of drinks. She bent down, speaking quietly so not to be overheard by other passengers.

“I’ve just spoken with the captain. As luck would have it, due to heavy fog at the Winnipeg International Airport, we will be redirected to another airport. At this point, it looks like we’ll be landing in Edmonton, but we haven’t received confirmation of that yet.”

“Wow,” Lisa said surprised, looking at me first and then back over to the airhostess. “What are the odds of that happening?” This was really good news because if we did have to land in Edmonton for the night, we were guaranteed a free hotel room, and maybe even a free meal.

“On behalf of the airline, I want to apologize to both of you. This really is a serious mistake. We will do everything we can to accommodate you both.” It was a Sunday night and I was very thankful neither of us had to work the next day. Being away one more day wasn’t going to make a difference.

“Can I get either of you another drink?” The airhostess smiled and tried to further placate the situation. We were soaking it up. We already had drinks on order but another round couldn’t hurt.

“Would either of you like to go to the back of the plane with me, in the service area? I have something for you.” Being curious, we both said “yes” and climbed out of our seats to follow her to where all the magic happens. We slipped behind the curtain and found ourselves in the food and drink preparation area. Two other airhostesses stood at the counter, preparing several drinks. They acknowledged us when we came in and the airhostess who escorted into the back introduced us as “the girls who boarded the wrong plane”.

“Oh! You’re the girls! You two are becoming celebrities on this flight,” one of the airhostesses squealed.

“I believe these are for you.” We were handed two generously poured Bloody Marys, which we graciously accepted.

“The reason I brought you back here,” the airhostess divulged. “Is because this is where we keep a stash of high-end spirits, such as tequila.” She reached into a sliding cupboard below the counter and retrieved two small bottles of Cuervo Gold. Seeing this, Lisa and I smiled at each other. Accepting our mini-airplane bottles of tequila, the other airhostesses each gave us an assortment of chocolate bars, bags of peanuts and pretzels. They were working overtime on the damage control and we loved it. We finished our drinks and again graciously accepted two more before making our way back to our seats. Settling back in to our seats, we laughed as we opened our tequilas, toasting each other. There was absolutely nothing we could do except enjoy the rest of the flight. As we emptied the mini tequila bottles, the captain came on over the intercom system.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is your captain speaking. Due to heavy fog, we are unable to land at the Winnipeg International Airport. We have been in contact with ground control at the Edmonton International Airport, but they’re closed due to a severe weather system. Folks, we’re being rerouted to Vancouver. We expect to land at the Vancouver International Airport at approximately 12:45 a.m. Operations are working very hard to accommodate you folks in every way possible. On arrival in Vancouver, Customer Service Agents will be available to help you with any questions you may have. We apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience.”

Suddenly, the plane erupted into loud panicky conversation. While this was excellent news for Lisa and me, it was obvious this was not good news to the rest of the passengers. We couldn’t believe what we’d just heard. Somehow, we boarded the wrong plane heading to Winnipeg, but in the end we’d be landing in Vancouver. This was the best news! No disrespect to Winnipeg, but we were both ready to go home. An airhostess came on the intercom system advising what to expect when meeting with the Customer Service Agents in Vancouver. It sounded like a good deal – free limo service to and from the airport, a complimentary one-night stay at a local hotel, free meal vouchers and flights home the following day. Not surprisingly, however, very few people were happy with the outcome, limo service or not. In fact, the mood

on the plane quickly changed from well-rested and jovial tourists to unhappy and weary travelers trying to get home.

Needless to say, for the rest of the flight, Lisa and I kept to ourselves. We felt a slight pang of guilt knowing how these displaced travelers must have felt. However, thanks to Mother Nature, we would soon be sleeping in our own beds. Now all we had to worry about was our luggage.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

Today I went figure skating at 1:00 till 2:00.

It was very fun.

**I also went to Bowen Park and
almost had my hand bitten off
by an untame swan.**



THE UNFORGOTTEN BET

With Mexico behind us, Lisa had not forgotten our bet. She wasted no time scouring the local newspaper classifieds for suitable jobs for me. She was determined to win this bet. I, on the other hand, threw myself back into acting and continued working with Skye and our acting classes, which eventually formed into the West End Experimental Theatre Group. I was distracted with my acting group and lost sight of finding my perfect job. Instead, I worked with them tirelessly in preparation for our first variety show, which would be held at the local community center.

I arrived home late one evening after a lengthy rehearsal. Lisa was so excited she could barely contain herself. As I sat down on the sofa, she announced that she'd found the "perfect job" for me. Well, she admitted, maybe not *the* perfect job, but *a* job.

"Now I know it's not *the* perfect job," she proclaimed. "But Canadian Tire is hiring and I think you'd be perfect for the job!" She truly believed what she was saying.

"Canadian Tire?" I questioned. "What, working at head office in the legal department?" I clearly wasn't as convinced as she was that this could be the perfect job for me.

"Cashier!" she announced as she handed me the classifieds, now dog eared, and showed me where she had circled the ad.

"I don't know Lisa," I said with some trepidation. "It's a cashier position. What makes you think this is the perfect job I've been looking for?" I needed convincing.

"Well, for starters, you won't be working for lawyers." Lisa was right. Any job was better than working for lawyers, not including scooping ice cream. "And secondly, they pay \$2.00 an hour more than minimum wage." Which was still only one third of what I made working for lawyers, but more than what I made scooping ice cream. But I still wasn't convinced.

"That's it?" I asked as I lit a cigarette and searched the coffee table for an ashtray.

"What do you mean, 'is that it?'" she responded, sounding hurt that I wasn't as excited as her. "Don't forget, you probably get a staff discount." I'd never had a staff discount before, unless you counted the video store. I never had to pay for movie rentals.

"I never thought of that," I responded as I settled back into the sofa with my cigarette, mulling over the prospect of working as a cashier. "But have you forgotten the rest of the bet we made in Mexico?" Judging by her expression, she hadn't.

"Not in the least," she said with a hint of playfulness in her voice. "In fact, I found an awesome pair of pilot sunglasses at a secondhand store today, and their reflective." She rummaged around on the cluttered coffee table, locating the glasses. Handing them to me, I promptly put on.

"They're perfect!" Lisa cheered, clearly pleased with her purchase. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear she wanted me to win this bet.

"Don't forget; I also get to wear blue jeans and a bright Hawaiian shirt," I recalled as my eyes slowly adjusted to the sunglasses.

"I haven't forgotten that either," she responded with a sudden seriousness in her voice. "And I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of setting up the job interview for you." Lisa really was enthusiastic about this so-called bet. I knew this day would eventually come but I still didn't feel ready to jump back in to work just

yet. And while I appreciated her eagerness, I wasn't exactly excited at the prospect of going on a job interview at Canadian Tire. I took a deep breath and decided I needed to keep my eye on the \$50 prize. Besides, how often do you get paid just to do an interview? I butted out my cigarette, jumped up off the couch and went to my closet to find my favourite Hawaiian shirt.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went to a flea market
and got a ring.
I also went to the beach
and got buried in sea sand.**

**CANADIAN TIRE**

Pulling up to the main entrance of Canadian Tire, I parked the white 1968 Ford Mustang I had convinced Mattias to loan me. He had purchased the car from an estate sale a year earlier, but rarely drove it. It needed some bodywork but from a distance she looked perfect. Mattias nicknamed the Mustang “Blanche”, not because she was white but after Rue McClanahan’s character from *The Golden Girls*. As I put Blanche into park and pulled on the emergency brake, I stubbed out my cigarette in the already full ashtray and popped a piece of spearmint gum in my mouth. Chewing gum wasn’t part of the bet but Lisa wasn’t here to stop me. Besides, what would be worse at a job interview – cigarette breath or chewing gum? Adjusting the rear view mirror, I applied fresh lipstick and slipped on the reflective aviator sunglasses Lisa had bought for me. For fun, I had curl ironed my hair and teased it out giving Farrah Fawcett a run for her money. “Right,” I said to myself. “It’s show time.”

With a strong sense of self and a newfound purpose in my walk, I made my way from Blanche to the entrance of Canadian Tire. As the automatic doors opened up just for me, I walked in to be greeted by row after row of household items, overly bright fluorescent lights and a distorted voice booming over the loudspeaker asking for what sounded like assistance in automotive. Out of habit, I nearly removed my sunglasses but quickly stopped myself when I remembered it could cost me \$50. *Keep your eye on the prize*, I reminded myself. *Right, time to find somebody who can help me*. As my eyes adjusted to the indoor lighting, I spotted an idle cashier waiting for a

customer. Taking in a deep breath and mustering up as much courage as I could, I marched over to the cashier and in a demanding voice asked for Dave.

“I need to see Dave the manager,” I announced, trying to sound authoritative. Lucky for me, I had recently immersed myself into acting. If I was to win this bet, I couldn’t be my usual happy-go-lucky self – I needed to channel a different persona. But the cashier was so nice. Clearly she was accustomed to rude customers. Her nametag said “Brittney” in large black writing. I couldn’t help but notice her “i” was dotted with a heart and beside her name was a bright yellow smiley-face sticker. Politely, Brittney asked me my name and immediately picked up the intercom phone to let Dave know I was on the main floor waiting at her register. As she paged Dave loudly over the intercom, I scoped out the intercom phone. Secretly, I’d always wanted to use one but now was not the time for wishful thinking. Putting the receiver back on its cradle, she smiled and told me he’d be right with me. Staying in character, I didn’t acknowledge her, although I desperately wanted to. Admittedly, I was having fun but Brittney, with a heart above her “i”, was so nice to me. Even with my rude attitude and reflective sunglasses, I felt a pang of guilt. I started to think maybe Canadian Tire wasn’t so bad after all. Finally, Dave came around the corner with his hand already extended out to mine. He introduced himself before I even had a chance to turn around.

Dave was plump with a round happy face and a round happy belly. His head of fine mousy brown hair was slightly askew and his Canadian Tire shirt had come untucked, but he appeared incredibly cheerful. I hesitated for a brief moment before limply shaking his hand. As he released my hand, I let it drop flatly to my side. He stood staring at me for a few seconds, still smiling, no doubt wondering whether to say something about my choice of eyewear. I stood staring back at him (not that he could see) and tried not to smile.

“It’s Chrystala, right?” Dave asked as he motioned for me to follow him. “Let’s go to my office, shall we?” I nodded my head in acknowledgment and, without saying a word, followed quietly as he led the way through aisles of hardware and household

items. Finally, we arrived at the back of the store where Dave unlocked a door marked "Private - Staff Only". Following him through the door, we climbed a steep set of stairs. As we reached the top, I continued to follow Dave past a lunchroom and through what appeared to be storage for damaged or returned items. Off to the left was a row of doors to several small offices, each marked on the outside with a different name. Finally, he detoured into the last office marked "Manager". Checking over his shoulder to ensure I was still following him, he motioned with his hand. As I entered the small dark room, I realized he had the best view of the entire store. Behind his modest desk were floor to ceiling tinted windows, a two-drawer filing cabinet and two office chairs; one for Dave and one for me. He walked around his desk and sat down, pointing for me to take a seat in the chair across from him.

"Please, have a seat," Dave finally spoke, breaking the excruciating silence. In the middle of his desk I spotted my resume, which he picked up and briefly inspected before slowly putting it to one side. I sat across from Dave in the most unprofessional, yet comfortable, position I could find; slouched down in the chair with one leg across the other, my elbows propped up on the arms of the chair, and my fingers linked together. I still wore my sunglasses.

Dave studied me, not saying a word, as I waited for him to speak. I stared back at him from behind my reflective sunglasses, still chewing my gum. Usually I hate awkward moments of silence but a bet was a bet. Against my better judgment, I continued to sit comfortably waiting for Dave to make the next move. Shifting slightly in his chair, he cleared his throat as he adjusted his tie. Finally, the interview was about to begin.

"So tell me a little about yourself," Dave asked. Clearly he didn't have much of an imagination but luckily I had \$50 to gain (or lose). I waited a few awkward moments before answering.

"Well, Dave," I eventually replied. "I'm of the female persuasion. I'm considered good looking by my friends. I like candle lit dinners and long walks on the beach." Wanting to give Dave the impression I was disinterested in the interview, I

figured now would be a good time to find a distraction as I started to pick at a loose thread on my bright yellow floral Hawaiian shirt.

"I'd say you certainly have a sense of humour, which we look for in a candidate," he joked, letting out a laugh. "We here at Canadian Tire are a family and appreciate humour." He cleared his throat again as he reached for my resume, pulling it back to the center of his desk where he could examine it closer.

"Do you have any cashier experience?" he inquired, staring at my resume.

"Sorry?" I asked. Dave's question pulled my attention away from the loose thread on my shirt.

"Do you have any cashier experience?" he politely repeated.

"Oh, I thought you said "do you have any "cashmere" experience. Weird." I let out a fake laugh, trying to sound convincing as an uninterested potential employee. But the truth was, I was actually enjoying Dave's company. He truly seemed like a genuine guy, although maybe not the brightest bulb on the marquee (although who was I to judge?). He was probably a decent enough boss. Suddenly, I realized I still hadn't answered his question yet.

"Yes. Yes I do have cashier experience," I acknowledged. "I worked for five years at a video store, a year at the Pop Shoppe and one day at an ice cream parlor, although that job's not on my resume."

"Good! That's good," Dave enthusiastically responded, likely pleased that I was finally taking an interest in the interview. "And have you ever done inventory before?"

"Inventory?" I repeated. "You mean like stock taking?" I had an itch in my throat and tried to clear it but in the process accidentally swallowed my gum. I began coughing uncontrollably and, in an attempt to prevent my cough from getting worse, I leaned forward in my chair. Dave started to stand up with the intention of coming around his desk to help me but I motioned for him to sit back down. I just needed a few moments to regain my composure.

“Sorry about that Dave,” I insisted, trying not to coughing harder. “I accidentally swallowed my gum.” He shot me a look of concern but, convinced that I wasn’t going to choke to death in his office, he sat back down in his chair.

“Every quarter we do a major inventory, which requires staff to work extra hours. We do the inventory after hours. Of course, all staff are compensated for their overtime.”

“Is there a lot of overtime in this job? I’m not a big fan of working overtime.” Little or no flexibility could be a deal breaker, as it usually is when job hunting. I’ve found that even if a company boasts a work-life balance, when it comes right down to it, if you aren’t flexible you won’t get a decent raise or a bonus, if they hire you at all.

“That’s a good question,” Dave said with enthusiasm, seemingly pleased that I was still participating in the interview. “Staff are rarely required to work overtime. In fact, we try to curb it. But like I said, every quarter during inventory we have to put in a few extra hours.” I nodded my head in acknowledgment.

“I tell you what, let me show you around the staff area and the warehouse, to give you a better feel for the place.” Dave stood up, adjusting his shirt, which he tried to wear tucked in over his large belly. I noticed he was wearing the standard Canadian Tire issue blue polyester pants, which complimented the red and blue polo shirt. I also noticed that, because I was wearing sunglasses and not my prescription glasses, I couldn’t properly see detail. As my eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light of Dave’s office, I became aware of the smaller details around me. On one wall were several framed certificates of appreciation and course completions. On another wall was a two-tiered shelf that housed several trophies and awards. Dave was management material and proud of it. Throughout the short interview, he not once asked me to take off my sunglasses. In fact, he’d been extremely nice to me throughout. This was harder than I thought it would be.

Dave came around his desk to where I sat. I stood up slowly and, at that precise moment, I decided the bet was off. I reached into my handbag and found my prescription glasses. Removing the sunglasses, I slipped on my regular glasses.

Suddenly, the world around me came into crisp, sharp focus. A broad smile crept over Dave's face.

"Ah! There she is!" He seemed pleased and his expression didn't change as I smiled back up at him. He studied my face as though seeing me for the first time. Maybe he'd convinced himself that I had some sort of severe eye disorder that required me to wear sunglasses, but seeing that I didn't he was relieved. Even then, he never questioned why I wore the sunglasses in the first place. Dave was clearly a very forgiving guy.

"Let me show you around the place." Dave opened the door to his office and led me around the staff area, the warehouse, and introduced me to several members of staff we met along the way. Finally, we found ourselves back at the staff room area outside his office. Digging into the pocket of his pants, he found a set of keys and flipped through them until he found the one he was looking for. He quickly surveyed me and then unlocked the door of a metal cabinet. Opening the cabinet door, he reached in and retrieved a pair of blue polyester pants and a matching red and blue short sleeved polo shirt, similar to the ones he wore.

"Here, these should fit you, but let me know if they don't. Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of smaller sizes." Dave tossed me the pants and shirt.

"What's this for?" I was confused, as I didn't recall being offered the job.

"All staff are required to wear the uniform. But, like I said, if they don't fit just let me know." He advised as he closed the cabinet door and locked it again.

"Sorry, but I'm confused Dave. Are you saying I have the job?"

"Yes, of course! Didn't I say?" He flashed me a slight look of skepticism, as though in disbelief that I even had to ask whether the job was mine or not.

"I'll take you to see Donna, who is our go-to gal in HR. She'll give you all the forms you'll need to fill out. And then Rodney in security will get you set up with a security pass and keys." I tried to interrupt as Dave delivered his well-rehearsed dialogue but to no avail. I waited until he was finished before saying anything.

I honestly believed I would win the bet with Lisa. I wasn't expecting to have to turn down a job offer, even if it was Canadian Tire. Not that there's anything wrong with Canadian Tire, but it was a far stretch from what I was used to doing, and the money simply couldn't compare. But at that exact moment, I wasn't even sure myself if I was going to turn down the job. From what I'd witnessed so far, it seemed like a pretty decent place to work. Dave didn't have to work hard to convince me that the overall climate was people oriented, sociable and very friendly. Dave even went as far as making me feel welcome and comfortable by not asking me to remove my sunglasses during the interview. It was as though he thought there had to be a really good reason why I was wearing them in the first place. I could get used to being treated with respect in the workplace.

Finally, he finished talking. I decided to confront him with my dilemma.

"Dave, can I be upfront with you?" He shifted and adjusted his belt slightly. In the process, he noticed his shirt had come un-tucked again and tried to discreetly tuck it back in.

"Of course, here at Canadian Tire we encourage honesty. We trust our employees." Oh, this was just too much for me to handle! I tried to reason with myself; the more money I made, the worse I was treated; the less money I made, the better I was treated. What a dilemma! On one hand, I was certain that what I really wanted was a job I liked and a job where I could be liked for who I am. However, on the other hand, I wanted to make the kind of money I felt I deserved, which was more than Canadian Tire could offer. My decision to take, or not take, the job was more difficult than I'd initially anticipated. But when it came right down to it, if money was the primary factor for not accepting the job, then the decision was already made before I even walked through the automatic doors. Deep down, maybe I enjoyed being treated like a piece of crap? Maybe I was suffering from Stockholm Syndrome?⁷

⁷ A psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy and sympathy and have positive feelings toward their captors, sometimes to the point of defending and identifying with them.

“Dave, I can’t take the job. I am so sorry.” Dave’s happy expression slid off his face like melting ice cream.

“But why? I don’t understand? Don’t you want the job?” I could hear the anxiety in his voice. Clearly, he was taking this personally. How could I possibly explain my decision to him? I was left no other choice but to hand back my unworn Canadian Tire uniform and exit as quickly as possible. I apologized again and quickly ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time. I burst through the “Private - Staff Only” door and ran down the aisles of hardware and housewares until I finally reached the automatic doors. Brittney waved good-bye as I dashed through the open doors. I quickly reached Blanche and tried to unlock her door as fast as my trembling hands would let me, but I couldn’t figure out which key on the keychain unlocked the door. I fumbled one key into the lock, but no luck.

“That must be the trunk key?” I muttered under my breath. I tried a second key and with a quick turn I could see the locking mechanism pop up. I grabbed the car door handle and gave it a hard yank to pull it open. *So much for a fast getaway*, I thought to myself. At this rate, I’d still be in the parking lot by the time Dave got off work. I was startled when I felt a tapping on my shoulder. I whirled around to see Dave, a grin of understanding across his face.

“Here, you forgot these.” He held up my reflective aviator sunglasses, which I must have left on his desk. I had subconsciously employed a little trick I learned from Lisa...leave something of yours behind to remind them of you.

“You keep them.” I smiled back at him. “I won’t need them anymore.” Dave held out his hand and this time I shook it firmly.

Taking a deep breath, I climbed into the driver’s seat and put the key in the ignition. As I started the engine, Dave closed my door. I rolled down my window and looked up at Dave, who was now wearing my aviator sunglasses.

“You know,” he began. “You always have a job here if you change your mind.” I let the car idle for a moment and then nodded in acknowledgement, giving him a

wink before pulling out of the parking lot. On my way home, I stopped at the bank so I could withdraw the \$50 I now owed Lisa.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**I am sick. I have a sore throat.
I got a shot that means I got a needle in my arm.**

HOSPITAL VISIT

“Mattias, I don’t understand,” I blurted into the telephone, confused and upset. “She was fine yesterday.” Through the phone, I could hear the echoing sounds of the hospital in the background. Before responding, Mattias waited for a loud and distorted overhead announcement to end.

“We’ve been here for over three hours now, and I’m told we could be here a lot longer.” There was no mistaking the strain in his voice. He was being brave, but he couldn’t disguise his anxiety. Mattias and Lisa were close friends. In fact, as close as Lisa and I were, but at this precise moment, I felt a slight pang of jealousy. It should have been me in the emergency room with Lisa, holding her hand and reassuring her that everything was going to be okay. But deep down, I knew Mattias would provide the same level of comfort.

“I picked a lousy time to visit my family,” I said, trying not to sound guilty. Since I was still unemployed, I decided to take advantage of my unending free time and visit my parents.

“You didn’t know Lisa was going to end up in hospital.” Mattias let out a chuckle. “In fact, Lisa didn’t even know!” In a weird way, I found his attempt at humour encouraging. There was also a familiar comfort in it.

“I could be on a ferry first thing tomorrow morning,” I offered.

“No, don’t do that,” Mattias asserted. “I’ll call you as soon as she sees the doctor.”

“Any ideas how long that could take?”

“Well, the emergency room is packed. It could take a few hours. In the meantime, they’ve determined Lisa’s severely dehydrated so they’ve got her on a

gurney and they're giving her intravenous fluids." There must have been a long lineup for the payphone as I heard somebody interrupt Mattias. I waited briefly before responding, hearing him say he only needed the phone for another minute. I knew he'd have to end the call soon.

"Okay, thanks Matt. Thanks for keeping me posted. I should probably let you get back to Lisa." I wanted to say more, but was at a loss for words. "Please call me if you have any news."

Hanging up the phone, I slumped back into my mom's retro oak kitchen chair, complete with a flower-patterned bum cushion for added luxury. A cold shiver washed over me, making me feel nervous. I needed to calm my nerves. Without hesitating, I reached for my pack of cigarettes on the kitchen table and lit one up. Like a dog whistle, the smell of cigarette smoke brought my mom back into the kitchen. She'd gone into the living room to give me privacy when Mattias called.

"Is everything okay?" My mom asked calmly.

"I don't know?" I choked back my fear. I had no idea what was wrong with Lisa, but whatever it was, it couldn't be good. Why else would she be in emergency? The unknown scared me.

"But Mattias is with her, at the hospital, right?" My mom joined me and lit a cigarette.

"He said he'd call back, once Lisa's seen a doctor." I could feel my heart starting to race. Why was it taking so long for her to see a doctor? Was our health care system in such bad shape that a sick person had to wait in emergency for hours before being attended to? What was the point in even being there, if that were the case? Up until now, I'd taken very little interest in either politics or our health care system. Up until now, I had no reason to. Suddenly, I felt very ill equipped to cope with the situation.

"She's in good hands," my mom said supportively, sensing my anxiety.

"I'm scared, mom. This has never happened before." I became acutely aware that this must be one of those "rite of passage" moments in my life, where I go from

the ignorant bliss of childhood to becoming a full-fledged adult. I didn't know what scared me more; Lisa's health crisis, or the thought of growing old.

"I can drive you to the ferry, if you want." My mom always knew the right thing to say. She was quick with a helping hand, and was always there when I needed her.

"I'm sorry. I know it means cutting our visit short. You sure you don't mind?" I already knew the answer, but I felt I needed to ask it anyway.

The following morning my mom shuttled me to the ferry, and within a few hours I was at the hospital in the emergency room, holding Lisa's hand and reassuring her that everything was going to be okay. Although it was still unclear why Lisa had remained on a gurney overnight in a crowded hall outside the emergency room, but it was clear she was finally getting the medical attention she needed. Her right arm was host to two intravenous needles; one for rehydration and the other for nutrition. She'd changed into a hospital nightgown, complete with housecoat and slippers. But it was obvious if Lisa didn't get a proper bed soon, she'd end up with bed sores from the hard gurney.

"What have they told you?" I asked Lisa and Matt, not sure who, if either, would have an answer.

"I was severely dehydrated, possibly from the flu," Lisa responded, her voice croaky from lack of sleep. Since returning from Mexico, she'd been feeling sick, which she initially attributed to partying too much while on vacation. But, because it had lingered on for so long, she self-diagnosed herself with a bad case of the flu.

"There's no rooms available, which is why they've kept her here." Mattias looked tired and worn; his skin ashen gray and his thick mane of hair was limp and flat. It was obvious he'd stayed at Lisa's bedside through the night.

"So they think you have the flu?" Somehow confirming this seemed to make things better. If it was the flu, then it was curable, and Lisa would soon be back on her feet. I sensed Lisa's relief as well. As bad as the last 24 hours had been, there was a light at the end of the tunnel, and thankfully not in a biblical way.

“They want my fluid levels to go back up to normal before they release me.” Lisa smiled, trying to sound encouraging. I returned the smile and tenderly squeezed her hand. With a little luck, she’d be back home in no time.

“In the meantime, she needs to rest and hopefully she can get rid of this flu.” Mattias stood up to stretch, yawning in the process. He ran his hands through his hair and rubbed his scalp, which seemed to help stimulate him to move. “I need a coffee. Can I get you one?”

“I’d love one. Thanks Matt.” We watched as he slowly made his way through the crowded hall of nurses, wheelchairs and waiting patients until finally he disappeared out the emergency exit.

“I’ll be fine,” Lisa said, without prompting. Perhaps she read the worried expression on my face. I still needed to hear it from her to be certain.

“Were you scared?” I asked. I knew how scared I felt when Mattias had called me the day before at my parents. I needed to share that with her, but not if the timing wasn’t right.

“Totally,” she confirmed.

“Me too,” I said with relief. “I had no idea what had happened, or what was going on.”

“Tell me about it!” Lisa tried to readjust herself into a more comfortable position on the rock-hard gurney, but without much luck.

“I’m just glad Matt was here for you, and you’re okay now.” I took both of Lisa’s hands into mine and gently rubbed them. They felt rough and dry to the touch. Not that I touched her hands a lot, but they felt opposite to how I thought they should. No doubt the dry hospital air combined with her dehydration had caused it. I reached into my handbag and found a bottle of hand cream. Squeezing a liberal amount onto the palms of my hands, I immediately began working the velvety cream into her palms and fingers. I could feel her relax under my touch.

“Guess where the hand cream is from?” I asked.

“Where?”

“I stole it from our hotel room in Mexico!”

“I thought I recognized the smell,” she said, letting out a small laugh. I could see it was still hard for her to get a deep breath, and laughing, while a cure for many things, was probably not advisable for the time being.

“Thank you,” she said, watching as I massaged her hands with the skill of a manicurist.

“You’re welcome,” I tenderly replied, as I continued to repeat the same motion over and over with my hands on hers. I could feel her skin starting to soften. *Not bad hand cream*, I thought to myself. If only I’d taken a few more bottles while I had the chance.

Mattias returned with coffee, which I gratefully accepted. As we sat in the cramped hall outside the emergency room, we whiled away the hours regaling each other with stories of childhood, family, friends, and work. Remarkably, time didn’t matter as we held vigil with Lisa. And while we didn’t openly acknowledge it, it was then that the three of us realized we had moved into the next chapter of our lives. We were no longer kids; we were officially adults now, where all things mattered, even the things that scared the shit out of us, like mortality. While the change may have been subtle, like the changing of the leaves at the end of summer, it hovered in the hallway with us, ever present.

DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)



**Today I went to the fair.
I went with my friends.
We had lots and lots of fun.**

THE NEXT CHAPTER

Finally, nearly a day later, and with the blessing of the ER doctor, Lisa was discharged from the hospital to convalesce at home. Her overstuffed red velvet sofas were a welcomed respite from the uncomfortable gurney she'd spent two days on. She spent most of her days relaxing with a book, or watching reruns of *Gilligan's Island*. I spent most of my days scouring the classified ads, looking for a job. But in the meantime, I took comfort in knowing I was home with Lisa where I could help nurse her back to health.

"Bite the bullet," I heard her say from the sofa as I prepared a pot of tea in the kitchen.

"Bite what bullet?" I responded, not sure what she meant.

"Go back to your recruiter. What was their name again? Kelly's?"

"Seriously?" I asked, poking my head around the corner from the galley kitchen. "I haven't used them in ages." Actually, I'd forgotten all about Kelly's Temporary Services. They helped me find temporary office work when I first graduated from college, but it never occurred to me to use them again. Since moving to Vancouver, I'd not had a problem finding a job. My problem was keeping one. I'm not sure why, but using a recruiter felt a lot like admitting failure. Although, at this point, admitting failure would be a step up because, so far, my job hunting skills had proven to be far from superior. I needed a job, I needed money, and I needed help.

"Besides, no offense," Lisa started. "But you need to get back to work. Don't get me wrong, I love having you around, but it would do you a world of good to get out of the apartment."

“What’s the matter? Don’t like my nursing skills?” I joked, laughing as I re-entered the living room, leaving the tea to steep in the kitchen.

“I’m going to be fine,” she interjected, ignoring my question. “You need to get back out there again. You need to get back on your own two feet.”

“I will,” I promised.

“I know you will,” she assured me, smiling as she snuggled further into her overstuffed sofa. “I’ll have that cup of tea now,” she ordered, teasingly.

“Good to see you still have your sense of humour!” I chuckled as I got up from the sofa. As I went back into the kitchen to fetch the tea, I realized why I was hesitant to go back to Kelly’s. Using a recruiter meant a legal job. Recruiters don’t place you in jobs at dollar stores, ice cream parlours or pie shops. Recruiters work primarily in the legal field, which meant I had to face the facts – I was destined to work in an office again. Regardless of how I felt, if I was going to survive in the city, and on my own, I needed to earn a decent wage. So, the next day, taking Lisa’s advice, I called Kelly’s and, not surprisingly, by Monday I was back working at a desk.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I did the dishes
even though I did them yesterday.
I didn't go to the show
but my brother did.**

***THE ICE BERG***

Kelly's offered me a six-month contract at Dubby Burgers Head Office in their legal department, which I eagerly accepted. The legal department at Dubby Burgers was small, consisting of two people; a paralegal named Lynda Hockberg, who I reported to, and me. Lynda was a single mom with a teenage son. She loved aerobics and, much to my disliking, golf. In fact, she loved the two so much she had an ongoing deal with her boss, Gottfried DeCasserres, to take several hours off from work each week to teach aerobics and golf. It was an unusual arrangement, but I didn't care much as it meant she was rarely at the office.

I once read that older women have a tendency to wear their hair much the same way they did when they felt their prettiest which, for a lot of women, was when they were in their early twenties. I never gave that theory much thought until I started working with Lynda. I began to see there might actually be some truth in that statement. She had naturally curly hair, which she wore teased out with brassy blonde highlights. Her hair reminded me of the popular hairstyles worn by women in the late 1970's and early 1980's – big and frizzy⁸. To complete the look, Lynda wore her much loved tight red leather pants with a double-breasted blouse, tucked in to show off her small waist. The outfit was complete with a matching red leather jacket, eerily similar to the one Michael Jackson wore in "Thriller". Lynda reminded me of Olivia Newton-John at the height of her "Let's Get Physical" period. I pictured a

⁸ As the saying goes: "The higher the hair, the closer to God"

younger Lynda hitting the disco dance floor with her girlfriends, wearing her tight red leather pants, her hair teased out and a red and black Bonsai bandana tied across her forehead. But who was I to judge? I was still in my twenties and, being on a tight budget, I wore clothes from Walmart. I wasn't exactly the poster-child for fashion. I only hoped that, when I hit middle age, I wouldn't find myself still wearing my favourite old pair of Walmart pants. With a little luck, they wouldn't last that long anyways.

Like most jobs, there's a hierarchy amongst staff. Lynda wasn't a lawyer, but she certainly acted like one. She'd been at Dubby Burgers long enough to earn her rung on the ladder, which was at least one rung higher than me. She wasn't mean, but she wasn't friendly either, which made her difficult to read. In fact, around the office, she was known as "The Ice Berg". A nickname, I would soon learn, she had rightfully earned.



Four months passed and I'd somehow managed to hang on to my job at Dubby Burgers. The Ice Berg never seemed to fully warm up to me but, then again, she was rarely given the opportunity to. She was not only distant in her attitude towards staff, but she was rarely physically in the office. Most days she was either teaching aerobics or golf, which was just fine with me (not that it mattered what I thought). I enjoy working with little or no supervision. There's nothing worse than being micro-managed. However, the down-side of not having your boss around was that you didn't always have the proper assistance or guidance. This could often lead to problems because if I made a mistake in my work, the results could be catastrophic. Not for Lynda, but for me. On more than a few occasions, I had to shoulder such mistakes. There was little room for error, or forgiveness.

Although Lynda had earned her title as The Ice Berg, she seemed to warm up to me and by September my contract position was made permanent. I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay in that position permanently, but I figured since there was so much

growth at Dubby Burgers, another opportunity to move laterally might present itself in the future. Plus, I didn't want to rule out the potential for the possibility of moving up in the company as it continued to grow in leaps and bounds.

With my finances secured in a permanent job, I figured it was time to move out of Lisa's dining room. Lisa was devastated that I was looking to move out but she completely understood, and supported, my decision. I was a full-grown woman living in my best friend's dining room. It wasn't exactly helping my social life, not to mention my non-existent love life. So with the financial confidence I needed, I asked Florence if I could view the vacant bachelor apartment that had just come available on the seventh floor.

We met in the lobby, where she greeted me in her customary well-worn ladybug dressing gown. But, as always, her hair was flawless. After a long wait for the only elevator in the building, Florence and I had run out of things to talk about as we made our way to the seventh floor. But as we stepped out of the elevator and rounded the corner to apartment 703, that was about to change.

Like most apartment buildings, each floor was laid out the exact same way, and the seventh floor was no exception. The bachelor apartment was kitty-corner from where Lisa's apartment would be, which was on the other side of the elevator. And just like Lisa's front door, it had a two-way peephole with little metal doors you could open, reminiscent of the 1950's. You could conveniently leave notes (or treats) in the peephole if somebody came to visit but missed you (but unfortunately pieces of litter were more commonplace). As Florence unlocked the door to apartment 703, I knew right away it was perfect for me.

Florence entered the apartment two steps ahead of me, stopping first at the bathroom. The bathroom, which was directly to the right of the front door, was newly renovated. The white subway tiles gleamed brilliantly as she flicked the bathroom light on. Much to my delight, the bathroom looked as though it had never been used. Like the front door peephole, the green and black floor tiles were also very

reminiscent of the 1950's. Moving on from the generously sized, and spotless, bathroom, we made our way down the long narrow hall, which opened up to the main living room area. As I inspected the living area, I noticed to my left an entrance to a small but well laid out kitchen. To my right was a large walk-in closet, which Florence explained could also double as a bedroom (pointing out that it was large enough for a single bed mattress). The freshly varnished hardwood floors glistened as the sun peaked between the flesh-toned window blinds. I could still smell the fresh paint on the walls.

"It's perfect," I cooed, enthusiastically announcing to Florence. "I'll take it!"

After moving in with Lisa, there were no more hick-ups with the rent being paid so Florence didn't hesitate to usher me back downstairs to her apartment where we could finalize the deal. She said it was viewings like these that made her life easy; she didn't need to call references and she didn't require bank information. She knew I was as good as my word, and that was good enough for her.

I signed on the dotted line and, just like that, the apartment was mine. And because the apartment was already empty, Florence said I could move in right away. With that, she handed me my very own set of keys and I was once again the renter of my own domain. Feeling exhilarated by my newfound responsibility, I immediately headed to the second floor and grabbed Lisa, escorting her up to the seventh floor to show off my new digs. It goes without saying that, although Lisa was sad to lose me as a roommate, she was excited for me.

"Wow, this is actually bigger than I thought it would be," Lisa beamed with excitement. "And what a great view from up here." She stood at the window peering out through the blinds. The apartment had a south facing view, which was a change from Lisa's north facing street view. From my new apartment, I had a corridor view of English Bay. And with a little luck, I might actually be able to watch the annual Symphony of Fire fireworks display in the summer.

“I bet we could watch the fireworks from here,” I observed as I walked over to Lisa to soak up the view with her. It was truly breathtaking. I loved that I could see the ocean. Off in the distance, I could make out the foreign trader ships dotting the bay.

“Well, I guess we’d better get you packed and moved,” Lisa said matter-of-factly as she turned to me and gave me a big hug. It wasn’t like I was moving far, but it did feel like the end of an era. No more late night cigarette and coffee chats, or impromptu song and dance sessions to Barbra Streisand or Ethel Merman. And no more falling asleep with the TV on after a night of channel surfing, with me on one sofa and Lisa on the other. But with that feeling of loss came a renewed sense of independence and freedom that I’d desperately been longing for. It was time I stood on my own two feet and it was time I started taking care of myself.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went roller skating with
my new pair of roller skates.
For supper I got meat, peas and potatoes.**



ANOTHER MOVING DAY (AGE 29 - 1996)

One bottle of red wine (and half a bottle of white) later I was fully packed and ready to move up the five flights to my new palatial bachelor pad with the stunning view. Lisa had ventured out to the back of the building where, as luck would have it, she managed to locate an old abandoned shopping cart in the back alley near the dumpsters. Sneaking it past Florence, Lisa managed to get the shopping cart into the elevator and upstairs into her apartment. We loaded it up with the packed contents of what was my life and began to make the move.

After emptying the first shopping cart load of my earthly belongings, I quickly realized it wasn't Florence I needed to worry about placating; it was my nosey neighbor. Leaving my apartment with an empty shopping cart, a neighbor who lived in the two-bedroom apartment next door to me greeted us in the hallway. He couldn't have been more than 55 years old but his toothless grin, brill creamed thinning gray hair (which he wore to his shoulders) and a stained tight t-shirt over his large extended belly made him look twenty years older. As he tightened the rope on his tattered old jogging pants he introduced himself.

"You moving in?" He pointed at the empty shopping cart.

"Yes, I'm moving in today. My name is Chrystala." I extended my hand out to his but, although he shook it, he acted as though he didn't know why. Perhaps this was a social etiquette he wasn't familiar with?

“Mel. The name’s Mel. I live here with my wife and son. My son is deaf.” Mel began to itch his right armpit. It was obvious that social situations made Mel uncomfortable. Perhaps the armpit itching was just a nervous twitch? On second thought, maybe he just had an itchy armpit, I reasoned with myself. Lisa moved away from Mel and pushed the button to summons the elevator.

“I think I’ve seen you and your family around the neighborhood. I’ve actually lived in this building for a while now.” Mel gave me a vacant stare. “I was Lisa’s roommate up until today.” I pointed over to Lisa and continued to smile at Mel in an attempt to try and make him feel more comfortable. Unfortunately, I failed miserably but at least Mel finally stopped itching his armpit before muttering something inaudible under his breath. As the elevator arrived and the door opened Mel disappeared back into his apartment, closing the door loudly behind him. I could hear the locking mechanism click into place and the security chain being replaced.

“You don’t think I upset him, do you?” I asked as I pushed the shopping cart into the empty elevator as Lisa held the door open. The elevator was at full capacity with the cart and the two of us crammed into it. *Hopefully nobody else needs to go down*, I thought to myself, as I tried to make more room for Lisa.

“No, he’s always been like that, ever since I can remember.” Lisa pushed “2” on the panel of buttons and looked up at the numbers to make sure the elevator was actually working (as it sometimes neglected to do).

“I don’t think he works so I see him out walking all the time, usually with his son. His son looks about 18 years old, but I could be wrong about that,” she informed me, shifting slightly trying to move the shopping cart away from her stomach, but there wasn’t much room to accommodate.

“Is he a little odd, or is it just me?” I probed, wanting to know if there was any juicy gossip I should know about my new neighbor.

“Well, that’s one way of describing him. He drives Florence crazy sometimes.” I was beginning to wonder if my new neighbor was going to be a problem for me. I was so comfortable with Lisa’s neighbors, which included two taxi drivers, a nurse and a secretary. In the entire time I lived with Lisa, we’d only one noise complaint and that was because we were playing one of my Barbra Streisand albums too loud (laugh all you want, but it’s true). It was the nurse who rapped on our door late one night. I think she was more embarrassed than we were that she was making the complaint in the first place, but she said she had a 4:00 a.m. shift and couldn’t sleep with the loud music. Needless to say, it never happened again.

The elevator came to a bumpy halt and the door slowly opened to the second floor. Trying not to scrape the arborite faux wood grain walls of the elevator we managed to get the shopping cart free and back into Lisa’s apartment for the second and final trip. And then, just like that, it was official – I was no longer Lisa’s roommate.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Marlis came over to my house to play.
I played dress ups today.
I am still saving my money for a pony.**



SHALLOW HOUSEWARMING PARTY

In true Lisa fashion, she organized an apartment warming party for me. I still didn't know a lot of people in Vancouver so she invited her fan-base of friends. Luckily for me, she was extremely popular and when it came to her infamous parties everybody came. It probably helped that Lisa had already lived in Vancouver for nearly six years. She started her career in Vancouver as a waitress at a popular restaurant called Penny Lane. Rumour was that George Harrison had a stake in the restaurant so naturally that attracted all the stars, and wanna-be stars, most of whom Lisa had the privilege of serving. Most notably; Maxwell Caulfield (from Grease II fame), Kirsty Alley and Steven Tyler. It was at Penny Lane where Lisa first met Mattias. From there, her friendship base grew by leaps and bounds.

Lisa loved throwing themed parties. She threw a birthday party for me my first birthday in Vancouver. She invited some of her friends but the invitation came with conditions – we each had to arrive wearing our hair the same way we wore it on our first day of school. But it didn't stop there. We also had to wear a similar outfit, which in my case were black tights, black platform shoes, a grey cardigan and a red kilt. I didn't own a grey cardigan so instead I wore a red velvet top I purchased in from a street vendor in London. To complete the outfit, I wore my hair in braids. Lisa also threw a lot of "murder mystery" dinner parties, which usually carried on into the wee hours of the morning. If you didn't like parties then you wouldn't want to be her roommate, especially if you occupied her dining room.

On the day of the apartment warming party, Lisa arrived early with a box of party decorations and an extensive collection of cassette tapes of her 1970s party favourites, which just happened to be the theme – the 1970s. It was a simple theme and she chose it with the idea that everybody could easily participate, even if they didn't have a perm or sported a moustache. Lisa reasoned that everybody hid a pair of bell-bottom jeans somewhere in the back of their closet.

She wasted no time organizing her invitation list. She spent the week phoning friends, letting them know what to bring and reminding them to stick as close to the theme as possible, including what kind of booze to bring, which consisted mainly of Old Keefe's Extra Old Stock beer and the always beloved Spumante wine.

We went to work right away decorating the apartment and taking stock to ensure we had enough snacks, backup booze and ashtrays. The only seating I had was the gold sofa, which also doubled as my bed. It was the Cadillac of sofas and I could boast that it seated six comfortably, but Lisa was confident at least 12 people were coming to my first apartment warming party.

As we finished up the party preparations it was time to transform ourselves back in time. Lisa made her way back down to her apartment, leaving me alone with my curling iron and robin egg blue eye shadow. Unlike Lisa, I rarely had parties. But, as I applied the last of my make-up and inspected my best attempt at a Farrah Fawcett hairdo, I became excited. I didn't have a lot but what I did have was special to me. I was looking forward to sharing my new space with friends, both old and new. Hosting a party is another rite of passage that we all should take and, with Lisa's help, it was going to be a success.

As I applied the finishing touches to my makeup I heard my phone ring. I knew by the double ring that it was the first guest to arrive at my party. Naturally, my friend Skye Brookes from my acting classes was invited. However, much to my surprise, she was early. Skye was one of the few friends I'd made since moving to Vancouver. Although I found Vancouver to be a friendly city, I was struggling to make friends. I'd

been in the city for two years now and Skye was the only friend I'd made on my own so far, excluding Lisa's closed knit group. And although I really appreciated Lisa's friends, I was eager to branch out on my own and make my own connections. But, in the meantime, I was content to hang out with Lisa's entourage. Besides, it's not like I didn't enjoy their company, too.

Moments after buzzing Skye up, she came bursting through my apartment door, weighted down with liquor store bags and goodies for the party. Her outfit was fabulous, resplendent with bell-bottom blue jeans and a paisley patterned loose fitting blouse with long butterfly sleeves. Her full head of naturally curly red hair was very teased out, reminiscent of Bette Midler. Moments later, Lisa arrived in full 70's garb with three of her closest friends; Delmer Belliveau, Mattias and Rod. Lisa took a page out of Bea Arthur's book and wore an outfit indicative of Maude. Even though Mattias is far from balding, he came as Maude's husband, Walter. All we were missing was Adrienne Barbeau, which Rod insisted (albeit somewhat sarcastically) was hilarious when I insinuated he could be Maude's daughter Carol. Even with only the five of us, it started to feel like a party.

Throughout the evening, more of Lisa's friends showed. By nightfall, my first apartment warming party was in full and 1970's fashionable swing. Although my apartment was less than 450 square feet, pockets of people were congregating in the small galley kitchen or sparsely decorated living room. I excitedly made my way around the apartment with trays of deli treats, clean ashtrays and fresh cans of ice cold O'Keefe's. The BeeGee's were pumping out of the stereo and everybody seemed to be having a really good time. Everything was going smoothly so, with fresh cans of beer distributed and clean ashtrays at every available space, I found myself scoping out a free spot on my long gold sofa to relax a little and enjoy a much needed cigarette. Flopping down on the couch, Lisa's friend, Delmer, spotted me from across the room and decided to join me for a smoke. I loved parties but they could certainly be a lot of work, if done right. Delmer squeezed into the empty spot next to me and borrowed a cigarette, relaxing a little as he settled back into the sofa.

“Great party,” Delmer announced as he lit his cigarette.

“Why thank you very much,” I replied. “I’m glad you could make it.” I’m always fascinated when people show up to parties, housewarming or otherwise, when they barely know the host, if at all. Mind you, in a roundabout way I felt like I already knew Delmer. After I met Lisa in High School, she regaled me with stories of how they grew up together until he relocated with his family to Vancouver the summer before they started grade ten. Like star-crossed lovers about to be torn apart, Lisa did what most young women did; she slept with Delmer for the first time. Although the long-distance love affair eventually fizzled out, they remained good friends. Since moving to Vancouver, Lisa spent quite a bit of time with him. But, since he was in University, she rarely saw him socially. But that aside, I’d only met him on a few previous occasions so it was fair to say we didn’t know each other very well.

“Of course. I would never miss an opportunity to wear bell bottoms!” Delmer joked, lifting a leg to show me his impressive wide-leg vintage Levi’s.

“And this party isn’t just about fashion,” I said. “I encourage everyone to behave as though it were the 1970s. For example – smoking.” To demonstrate my point, I took a long drag from my cigarette, attempting smoke rings as I exhaled.

“Drinking too much,” I continued, pausing a moment to take a long drink from my can of beer.

“And, of course, the music!” I finished. Delmer laughed as he emptied his can of beer, setting it down amongst the other empty cans on the cluttered coffee table.

“So tell me, how are things?” Delmer asked as he leaned back on the couch, shifting sideways as he looked at me intently. Feeling slightly uncomfortable with his directness, I shifted slightly on the sofa beside him.

“Things are going really well.” I answered, somewhat guarded. “I’m working again, which is always a good thing, and I’m loving having my own apartment.” I

paused for a moment, hoping Delmer would interject. But he didn't. Instead, he just sat there staring down at me. Nervously, I continued to ramble.

"It's so nice having friends over. I should do this more often!" I held my can of beer up in celebration, taking a long drink before setting it down with the other empty cans on the coffee table. Unsure what to say next, I went back to smoking my cigarette. Delmer was difficult to read and he seemed either disinterested in what I had to say or just completely bored with my conversation. Either way, I was familiar with the look so I decided to end the conversation and get back to hostessing. I took one last drag off my cigarette before putting it out in the now overflowing ashtray and decided to rejoin the party, which was still in full swing.

"Let me get you another beer," I offered as I stood up from the sofa.

"So, are you dating anybody?" he asked, seemingly out of nowhere. "What's going on in your love life?" I resumed my seat back on the sofa beside Delmer. Based on his expression, it was my understanding the conversation had ended but clearly he didn't think so. I know he'd already consumed several beers during the course of the party but I couldn't figure out where his line of questions were coming from. *Surely he wasn't the least bit interested in my life or what I had to say*, I thought to myself. Was he trying to get to know me better because I was friends with Lisa, or was he simply being nosey? Given his state of intoxication, I decided to humour him.

"What love life?" I laughed. "Can I get you another beer?" I didn't feel comfortable continuing a conversation about my non-existent love life with somebody I hardly knew, so I opted instead to put my hostess hat back on and check on the snack status. Not waiting for Delmer to answer, I got back up from the sofa, picking up a few empty beer cans and the full ashtray before making my way to the kitchen.

As I entered the kitchen full of people, I realized this could very well be the hub of the party. *And isn't that always the way?* I mused to myself. I've had some of the

most memorable conversations in kitchens at nearly every party I've attended. And if you think about it, the kitchen is probably the best part of the apartment; there's a fridge to keep your drinks cold, an oven for making h'ordeuvres, a counter for sitting on and a sink, which can double as an ashtray. It has all the basics, plus it's cut off from the rest of the party, which means you can have some colourful conversations, in almost full privacy. All the kitchen is really missing is a toilet, but unbeknownst to me there was already a party for two taking place in my bathroom.

Leaving the kitchen to mingle, cleaning dirty ashtrays along the way, I felt so good about how the evening was going. In my mind, I was already practicing my thank you speech to Lisa. As was the customary tradition after every party Lisa threw, I stayed until the end to recap the evening before eventually falling asleep on the sofa. I went back to the kitchen to grab myself another beer when I realized I really had to go to the bathroom. Funny how once the "seal is broken" you have to go to the bathroom every five minutes. I could hear the music in the living room getting louder as somebody turned up the stereo. Obviously, it was a fan of the Jackson 5 as a very young Michael sang "A-B-C".

Staggering down the darkened hallway, I noticed the bathroom door was slightly ajar, with only a flicker of light from a scented candle peeking out from behind the door. I hadn't noticed who was missing from the party. I quickly wondered if perhaps love was in the air? If there was a couple in the bathroom, who could it be? I tried to remember where I last saw Skye? As I discreetly leaned against the wall outside the bathroom door, I tried to listen for voices. Straining, I leaned in a little more. I could definitely hear a man's voice, but he was talking so quietly I couldn't make out who it was. I really had to pee but, if love was in the air, I didn't want to disturb whoever was in my bathroom. But curiosity got the best of me. As Michael Jackson finished singing his A-B-Cs and 1-2-3s, a welcomed moment of silence allowed me to pick out what was being said.

"Why do you hang out with her?" I heard the male voice ask.

“What do you mean?” I immediately recognized Lisa’s voice.

“She’s so...shallow. What could the two of you *possibly* have in common?”

“Del, that’s not fair,” Lisa quickly responded. “You asked her a personal question at a party for God’s sake. She barely knows you! What did you expect her to say?” Slowly, I pulled my head away from the bathroom door, their barely audible voices diminishing as yet another popular song from the 1970’s loudly emerged from my stereo. I recognized the voices in the bathroom. It was Delmer Belliveau and Lisa, but in my drunken stupor I tried to figure out why they were alone in my bathroom. And who were they talking about? I felt the room around me start to spin, making me feel like I was on a ride at the fair rather than standing on solid ground. I needed to sit down but, more importantly, I needed to sit down on my toilet to pee.

Well, I finally decided, whatever Delmer and Lisa needed to discuss was going to have to be done someplace other than my bathroom. I couldn’t wait any longer, but just as I was about to knock on the bathroom door there was a loud knocking at my front door. *Weird*, I asked myself, *who could that be this time of night?* Conveniently, I was already at the front door so I didn’t have far to go to answer it. Taking advantage of my peep-hole, I got on the tips of my toes to see who was knocking at my door. As I closed one eye to peer through the peephole, my neighbor Mel came into focus.

“Oh great,” I muttered under my breath. “What the hell does he want?” I secretly hoped he wasn’t looking for an invite. Reluctantly, I opened the door. Mel stood in the deserted hallway, his arms crossed over his large extended belly. His face was covered in displeasure as he shook his head at me. I stood there drunkenly smiling at him, but he just stood there shaking his head in disappointment.

“Hi Mel. What’s up?” I asked, trying to sound sober. I decided it was important to get rid of Mel so I could go to the bathroom rather than play silly games with him on my doorstep.

“Nooooo way,” Mel smirked, still shaking his head. “Oh no you don’t.”

“What? What do you mean?” I questioned. Unfortunately, Mel seemed to have the upper hand here; he was sober. I was drunk and slightly confused, which is never a winning combination.

“The music,” he responded angrily. “It’s too loud. Turn it down.” Clearly, he was agitated and my drunken state was likely not helping.

“Really?” I asked. “It’s not that loud is it? It’s before 11:00 pm.” I tried to reason with him, but he was having none of it. Becoming annoyed with my unwillingness to cooperate, he raised his voice.

“Turn the music down or I’m calling Florence,” he responded angrily through clenched teeth. Uh oh, those were fighting words. The last thing I wanted was for my landlady to show up and shut down my first party. Not known for her timing, Skye staggered up behind me and threw her arm around my neck, with a drink in her free hand and a cigarette dangling from her lips. Somehow she’d gotten a hold of my purple feather boa.

“What seems to be the problem, occiffer?” Skye slurred louder than necessary. She was what I called a “three-drink drunk” and tonight she was three times over her limit. Purple feathers from the boa were getting caught in her mouth as she tried to speak. I motioned at her to remove the lit cigarette from her mouth, speculating how flammable the feathers might be. Removing the cigarette, she tried to spit the feathers away from her mouth as she exhaled cigarette smoke in Mel’s face. I smiled apologetically but by this time he had turned three shades of red, starting from the collar of his sweat stained t-shirt, working its way up to the top of his oily balding head. Through my beer goggles, he was beginning to look like a scary clown. And for a moment, albeit brief, I felt sorry for him.

"I'm not going to ask you again to turn the music down," Mel retorted, the muscles in his jaw clenched. "My son can't sleep it's so loud." Clearly he had a limit and he'd reached it.

"I thought you said you weren't going to ask us again?" Skye interjected, slurring the words in her sentence so it sounded like one long word. "And hey man," she paused for a moment to spit another feather out of her mouth. "I thought your son was deaf?" She looked over at me quizzically but I didn't dare look at her for fear that I would burst out laughing. I quickly tried to turn Skye back around in the direction of the party, attempting in the process to dislodge her arm from around my neck. She stumbled slightly as I got her arm free but remarkably she somehow managed to maintain her balance.

"Oh boy," I muttered under my breath. "You know what would really help me right now, Skye?" Becoming slightly befuddled with the situation, I thought I'd better redirect her focus elsewhere. "If you could go back to the party and see if anybody needs a drink, that would be great." She attempted to focus on me but without much success, even with one eye closed. She looked mildly perturbed that I was fobbing her off but she did as I suggested.

"Jesus, people! The music's not *that* loud," she broadcasted loudly over her shoulder as she slowly began making her way back to the party. With Skye safely out of earshot, I turned my attention back to Mel.

"I'm so sorry Mel," I said, in an attempt to placate him. Trying to regain my composure and sound as sober as I could, I figured it was time to do some damage control.

"I'll turn the music down," I said politely. "But honestly Mel, it's not that loud...is it?" I turned in the direction of the party but when I turned back around Mel was gone. I could hear the faint sound of his door locking and the chain being replaced. Standing alone in my doorway, I decided it wasn't worth pursuing him any

further. Stepping back into my apartment, I locked the door and was immediately reminded that I still hadn't gone to the bathroom. Not being able to wait any longer, I knocked on the bathroom door, startling Delmer in the process. Opening the door, he quickly made his exit, not looking up as he slid past me.

"Sorry, but nature calls," I said as I stuck my head through the open door and smiled at Lisa, who was sitting on the edge of the tub smoking a cigarette.

"Oh! Hey there, Chrystala!" Lisa exclaimed. She took one last drag off her cigarette before throwing it into the toilet. As she got up from the side of the tub, she flushed it, dropping the lid in the process.

"Sorry about that," Lisa said apologetically. "We were just chatting." I gave her a double wink and a smile. Catching my meaning, she dismissed me with a wave of her hand and a roll of her eyes. She slipped out the bathroom door, leaving me alone to do my business.



As we stood out on the darkened street in front of my building, I finally spotted the taxi coming into view. With one arm, I propped Skye up and with the other I attempted to wave down the cab. As it slowly pulled up to us, I repositioned Skye's weight in anticipation of pouring her into the backseat. As I struggled to open the rear door, I was reminded that one day I would have to start exercising more, and in particular with weights. We'd only waited a few minutes for the cab but already my arm was killing me. As I was about to slip Skye into the backseat of the cab I looked down at her feet.

"What the hell happened to your shoes?" I asked, shocked to finally notice that Skye was no longer wearing her shoes. Looking around in the dark, I tried to spot them on the ground but to no avail.

“What shoes?” Skye asked, looking down at her bare feet. Finding the situation funny, if not a bit exasperating, it dawned on me that we’d likely left my apartment without her shoes. It was fair to say that Skye wasn’t the only one who’d had too much to drink tonight.

“Sorry,” I said to the driver. “But my friend forgot her shoes. I’ll have to call another taxi.” The driver muttered something inaudible under his breath and then yelled in broken English to close the car door, which I did obligingly. With my right arm nearly asleep from propping Skye up, I decided the only solution was to head back up to my apartment to retrieve her shoes. I couldn’t risk leaving her out on the street alone.

“Hey girl!” I heard an inebriated voice say loudly behind me. Turning my head, I spotted Raimondo leaving my building.

“Raimondo!” I nearly shouted from excitement. He’d come to my party dressed resplendently as Liberace. Rod had invited him and, although we’d never met before, we had several animated chats throughout the evening. As he approached us on the curb, I could see two of his friends in tow.

“You’re not leaving already are you?” I asked, sad to see the best-dressed guest leaving so soon. If I *had* been giving out prizes for best costume, it would have gone to Liberace, hands down.

“We’re heading to the Waldorf for an after party,” Raimondo answered as he played with his long silver feather boa. “Are you taking this cab?” he asked, bending down to see if anybody occupied the vehicle.

“No,” I replied, shifting Skye’s weight again. “It’s all yours if you want it.” Raimondo nodded his head and tapped on the window, motioning to the driver that he wanted to get in.

"I'd invite you, but it looks like your friend has probably seen enough fun for one night," he joked as he opened the taxi door and motioned his two friends to into the back.

"No worries," I replied. "Have fun!" Raimondo leaned in and kissed me on the cheek before piling into the back seat with his friends. Closing the door behind him, I watched as the taxi pulled away from the curb. With my free arm, I waved them good-bye until the car turned left onto Denman Street and finally out of sight.

"Right," I said, turning my attention back to Skye, who was surprisingly still awake. "Time to find your shoes."



With the evening nearing an end, most of Lisa's friends had already left leaving Lisa, Mattias and Rod. I knew I could rely on them to help clean up and carry on the tradition of recapping the events of the night. After rounding up all the empties and putting the leftover snacks away, I lured Mattias and Rod to join Lisa and me for one final drink and cigarette. It was already nearly 2:30 in the morning, but I'd caught my second wind and felt rejuvenated knowing my party was a success.

With Lisa finishing up in the kitchen, I collapsed onto the sofa with Rod and Mattias, resting my feet up on the coffee table. Mattias passed around the last pack of cigarettes, which was coveted at this time of the morning. Lisa came out of the kitchen and slowly sat down on the floor, joining us for a round-table recap of the festivities. Overall, we all agreed, it was a resounding success. As Lisa tried to make herself comfortable on the floor, she let out a long sigh.

"You okay?" I asked, noticing how worn-out she looked. She had a look of concentration on her face, so I waited for her to answer.

“Yeah,” she finally responded. “I think I’m just tired.” Looking up and smiling, she waved her hand at us. “Don’t mind me. I just need to take a load off my feet,” she laughed, re-adjusting her position.

“So tell me, Matt. What was your favourite part of the evening?” I asked as I settled into the sofa, taking a drag from my cigarette and blowing the smoke at the ceiling. Mattias laughed, having remembered something that was obviously noteworthy.

“Well, do you remember the guy dressed like Liberace?” The four of us nodded and laughed. Clearly, we all knew exactly who Mattias was talking about.

“Yeah, totally,” I agreed. “How do you know him? His outfit was so over the top. I loved it.” We all nodded in agreement. Taking a drink of warm beer, I decided to get up and grab a cold one. “Anybody else need a drink?” I asked, heading into the kitchen. Clearly, we were all on the same page as I heard a decisive “yes” from everybody.

“Oh, that was Raimondo. He’s my hairdresser,” Rod interjected. “He’s also a professional drag queen. Wasn’t his outfit fabulous?” From the kitchen, I could hear Lisa and Mattias agreeing that Raimondo was a hit at my party.

“Well, at some point in the evening, Raimondo was attempting to dance with Skye to a Madonna song, but Skye fell down in the process. Raimondo wound up grabbing her by the legs and twirled her around on the floor like a mop.” Mattias started to get the giggles as he recanted the events of the “dance that never was”. With four cold cans of beer in hand, I returned to the living room, setting them down on the coffee table. We each grabbed one, eagerly opening them before taking that first gloriously cold and refreshing sip.

“Wait a minute, Madonna’s not from the 1970’s?” Rod queried. “I don’t remember any Madonna music from the 1970’s. Who put that on?”

“I think it was on one of my mixed tapes,” Lisa interjected, trying not to laugh.

“I think I remember hearing “Borderline”. That was the early 80’s. But that’s close enough, isn’t it?” I interjected, debating whether to put some Madonna on while we relaxed and enjoyed our last drink of the evening.

“What about you, Chrystala? Any favourite moments of the evening?” Lisa asked as she picked up a purple feather off the floor. I’m not sure how Skye got a hold of my feather boa but she wound up wearing it all night. Looking around, I could see remnants of it floating around the apartment. No doubt I’d be finding purple feathers for weeks to come.

“There are a few favourite moments, but one of the funniest ones is when my neighbor, Mel, came over to complain about the music being too loud.” Everyone looked surprised when I said this. Aside from Skye, I guess nobody heard my altercation with Mel.

“Really?” Rod asked enthusiastically. “Details please?”

“Well, it’s not a party until there’s a noise complaint,” Lisa chimed in.

“Oh, for sure. I get at least one neighbor complaining every time you guys are over, but it’s usually about the choice of music and not how loud it is.” Mattias pointed at us, laughing. “So when did Mel complain?”

“I can’t remember what time it was, but it was definitely before 11 o’clock,” trying to recall the events of the evening, I took another drink of my beer before continuing.

“I’m guessing he was pissed off?” Lisa asked, trying not to sound flippant. I could tell from her tone that it was more of a rhetorical question.

“Yeah, a little, but I think he was okay when he left.” Deep down, I was hoping Mel didn’t complain to Florence but I figured I’d wait and cross that bridge later. There was no point worrying about it now.

“How come we didn’t know about this?” Mattias asked as he looked around at each of us. “I never heard anything.”

“Maybe because the music was too loud!” Rod let out a hearty laugh before negotiating another drink of his beer.

“Ha! Well, I remember standing outside the bathroom when he came by to complain, so I was already at the door when I heard him knocking. That’s probably why you didn’t hear my exchange with him.” I recounted the entire story, including how Skye had greeted Mel at the door, resplendent in my purple feather boa, beer and cigarette, and how I had managed to fob Mel off by promising him we would turn the music down.

“What were you doing hanging around outside the bathroom?” Rod queried, with just a hint of salaciousness in his voice.

“Oh yeah, that’s right!” I exclaimed, looking over at Lisa and smiling coyly. “You were in the bathroom with Delmer.”

“Ooooh.” Clearly all our minds were in the gutter as the three of us teased Lisa.

“Were you now?” Mattias asked coyly. She blushed slightly but maintained her composure. That, or she was ignoring our teasing.

“I totally forgot about that,” I said. “I meant to ask you Lisa, what *were* you two talking about in the bathroom?” Looking slightly uncomfortable, Lisa shifted her position on the floor as she lit another cigarette.

“I don’t really remember,” she quietly replied. “Why, what did you hear?” She inquired, picking up another stray feather that was floating by.

"I heard Delmer say something about somebody being shallow...and you saying something about asking personal questions." My voice trailed off as I started to recall my brief conversation with Delmer on the sofa earlier in the evening.

"Delmer said what?" Rod sounded annoyed. It was no secret that he was not a member of the "Delmer Belliveau Fan Club".

"What happened? Who's shallow?" Mattias asked, looking slightly confused as he looked to Lisa and then back to me for clarification. Distracted, Lisa played with her cigarette, rolling it around the ashtray, knocking off any extra ash.

"I really don't remember who he was talking about," Lisa said, glancing up to look at me as she took another drag from her cigarette. "Does it matter?" she asked as she exhaled, fidgeting again with her cigarette in the ashtray. I sat quietly on the sofa, trying to remember the details of my run-in with Delmer earlier in the evening.

"Well, Delmer said somebody was shallow. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black," I mocked. Taking a drag from his cigarette, Rod blew smoke rings as he exhaled. I could feel our energy waning as the evening was nearing the end. Looking at Lisa, I knew it wouldn't be long before she made her way back down to the second floor. Mattias joined Rod and tried to blow smoke rings as we all sat in silence.

And then it occurred to me. What if Delmer had been talking about me? I shot a look at Lisa, who looked up at me quickly but then just as quickly looked away. I couldn't hide my disbelief. How dare Delmer come into my home and judge me? I never understood what Lisa saw in him and now my feelings were confirmed. And what kind of a name was "Delmer" anyway? Looking uncomfortable, Lisa continued.

"Well, you know what Delmer's like. He can be very judgmental. Who cares who he was talking about. Either way, it doesn't really matter. Just consider the source." Lisa tried to give me a look of comfort, but she could tell by my expression that I was hurt. I knew exactly whom Delmer was talking about. And looking over at Rod and Mattias, it was obvious they knew too. But, I also knew Lisa had stuck up for

me; that much I *had* heard. I wasn't really surprised Delmer felt that way about me. He always came across as a self-absorbed narcissist. And in the brief time I'd known him, it was obvious he was guarded. But I guess that was okay for him. Delmer probably thought he was being mysterious. I was simply being shallow. As I sat quietly with my thoughts, I could sense Rod was aching to throw his two cents into the ring but instead he waited for me to finish.

Lisa got up from the floor and came over to me to give me a hug. It was hard to hide the fact that I was hurt, and what was the point in hiding my feelings anyways? I was in my home and I was free to feel, or say, what I wanted. Wasn't that the whole point of having your own place?

Lisa resumed her spot back on the floor, picking up yet another stray feather and placing it on the coffee table with the others she had already collected. At this rate, I could make two boas out of the stray feathers.

Mattias announced he needed to use the bathroom, breaking the silence in the room. I read once in one of those "Chicken Soup for the Soul" self-help books (that my mom bought me) that the only person who can hurt me is me, saying something along the lines of "only I have the power to give people permission to upset me". Now as much as I really disliked that new age kind of advice, there was some truth to that statement. I decided to take the high road and simply dismiss Delmer's comment, and Delmer for that matter. He may be Lisa's friend but he wasn't mine.

Mattias strolled back into the living room, giving me a reassuring look before sitting back down on the sofa next to Rod. Lisa picked up the remote control for the stereo and turned the volume up slightly as Marvin Gaye began to sing Lisa's favourite song "What's Going On".

"Girl, if you ask me, it's Delmer that's shallow." Rod leaned over and gave me a hug, patting me on my head in the process. Rod always did know how to make me laugh.

“I totally agree with Rod.” Mattias shrugged his shoulders in apology to Lisa. “Sorry Lisa, but you know how I feel about Delmer.”

“I know...I know,” she said more to herself than anyone in the room. “He’s always been judgmental. I’m starting to wonder why I even hang out with the guy.” Lisa raised her beer to make a toast. “Oh well, live and learn as they say.” Taking Lisa’s cue, we all raised our beers. “To Chrystala! Thanks for throwing a great party and congratulations on hosting your very first apartment warming party!”

“No doubt the first of many!” I interrupted as Lisa continued her toast.

“To good times and good friends always. Cheers!” Rod announced. With our drinks still raised to Lisa’s toast we cheered “Here! Here!” and drank back our final beer of the evening before calling it a night.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went to school.
I am also grounded.
And I hurt my finger really bad
(and that's a fact).**



BACK IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Next to fall, spring is my favourite time of the year. In particular, February is probably one of the loveliest months. The trees blossom in glorious pinks and whites, and almost overnight the crocuses sneak up to the surface in all their purple and yellow glory. Most remarkable about February, the sun shines nearly every day. The days are crisp but the sun is bright and it's a welcomed sign that winter is nearly behind us and soon it will be summer again.

By the end of February, I had still managed to hang on to my job at Dubby Burgers. I'd worked there for nearly nine months and, with a little luck, I might break my 11-month Vancouver employment record. One of the things I really liked about Dubby Burgers was what they referred to as "climate". At Dubby Burgers, climate was work-speak for the overall office atmosphere. They threw expressions around like "feelings are fact" and "co-workers are your friends". I've never had much interest in new-age ideas, especially at work, but Dubby Burgers managed to put a modern spin on some old ideas and I liked it. Unfortunately for me, I worked in a department of only two people and my supervisor, the Ice Berg, didn't subscribe to Dubby Burgers' philosophies of respecting your co-workers feelings and treating them as your friend. Instead, the Ice Berg spent most of her working day teaching aerobics or golf, which didn't leave a lot of time for work related activities. I, on the other hand, learned to dislike her working style and decided to approach HR in an attempt to plead my case.

It was socially secluded where I worked. I wanted to be a part of a larger department, at least in theory. I was young; I wanted to participate in the many monthly celebrations, such as birthdays, anniversaries or milestones. HR supported my case and by the end of February I was part of Purchasing, which was the largest department at Dubby Burgers. And, as luck would have it, my timing was impeccable. Purchasing was having their monthly celebration and I was invited to join them. Finally, it was a chance for me to get to know my colleagues and find out a little more about where I worked.

The monthly team celebration lunches typically ended late in the afternoon, with the common understanding that anybody who attended was free to go home afterwards. Not thinking that I was the anomaly to this rule, I took advantage and immediately went home after sharing a long lunch with the fun folks in Purchasing. The following morning, in a mood that would set the tone for the rest of the day, the Ice Berg approached me.

“Where were you yesterday afternoon?” she grumbled, her hands placed firmly on her hips. I stopped typing and turned my chair to face her, noticing her stance and clearly recognizing she was in one of “those” moods again.

“I was with the Purchasing Department for their monthly celebratory lunch,” I replied confidently. I was, after all, allowed to celebrate with my office “friends”, even if she didn’t see the benefits of it.

“I’m not talking about *that*.” Lynda hiss at me. I looked up at her blankly. I could feel myself breaking into a sweat, and the sound of my racing heart pounding in my chest began to drown out the drone of the office. I knew exactly what she was talking about, but I decided to do what I did best; act dumb.

“Where were you yesterday afternoon?” Lynda hissed. I couldn’t believe she was calling me out on this, especially since she herself was never in the office. I needed to be extremely articulate and clear with her before answering. I needed to

choose my words carefully. If I didn't, she would pounce and there would be no re-do's for me. Trying not to sound sarcastic, or insolent, I attempted to answer her question.

"It was my understanding that after lunch we were free to go home. At least that's what I was told." Looking at the expression of shock creep across her face I realized that, although I was well intended, I couldn't manage to hide the disdain in my voice. When I'm nervous I struggle to hide my real emotions. It didn't help that I was not only incredibly nervous but also hung-over.

Lynda turned on her heels and stomped away from my desk. I quickly tried to think of something to say, or do, but came up with nothing. In retrospect, that was probably for the best. What I didn't want to do was make matters worse. However, taking this path has sometimes led to people saying that I simply "turn off". I disagree with that observation. In fact, what I attempt to do is remain calm and think before I speak. It's been the opposite of that behavior that has cost me both jobs, and even friendships, over the years.

By the time I turned my chair back to face my computer, I could see over my computer monitor that Lynda had left her desk. In fact, looking around, I could see she'd left our area completely. But where, I wondered? Hopefully, she'd left to teach aerobics, or golf, which might help her to calm down a little. Besides, I tried to reason with myself, if she was that upset at me for leaving early yesterday then all she had to do was tell me and I wouldn't do it again.

I spent the rest of the day recovering from my hangover, thanks to the previous day's outing with the Purchasing Department (it didn't help that copious amounts of wine was consumed with lunch, which, much to my delight, was totally encouraged). Luckily, it was a very quiet day with not a lot of work on my plate. As the clock neared four, I started to get ready for my commute home on the SeaBus. I enjoyed taking the SeaBus to and from work. It was only a ten-minute ferry ride but it was unique to say I took a boat to work each day. And that time out on the water was incredibly soothing

and peaceful. It was a great way to start and end each day, and it was something I actually looked forward to. As I counted out my ferry fare, I spotted the Iced Berg coming around the corner towards me. She looked calm, and remarkably collected, considering how upset she'd been with me earlier in the day. Pulling my attention away from counting out my change, I looked up at her and smiled.

"I'd like to speak with you," she said nicely, glancing down at my handful of change. "This won't take long." Quickly depositing my transit money into my blazer pocket, I obediently followed Lynda into the nearest boardroom. Entering the boardroom, Lynda wasted no time taking a seat, motioning me to join her. Sitting down, she immediately began speaking.

"This is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do," she firmly started. "You're fired." My jaw dropped. I nearly had to pick it up off the floor. I was in complete and utter shock. Having been down this road before, I was semi-prepared for what was to come next, but thankfully my skin was a little thicker and I didn't cry. In fact, surprisingly, I didn't feel anything at all. I was actually quite relieved and not in the least upset. Subconsciously, I knew it was coming.

"Do you have anything you wish to say?" Lynda formally asked, which was a surprisingly welcome change from her usual lackadaisical manner. I'd been staring at her the whole time, trying to process what was happening. In the months I'd worked with her, I never learned to read her. Careful not to put my foot in it, I didn't answer right away. This was a tough call. I mean, at this point, it really didn't matter what I had to say. I was fired. Finito! So why hold back? Why not give her a piece of my mind? But I also knew I'd likely regret saying anything at all. But on the other hand, if I said nothing then I was being submissive. I decided to flip a coin on it. Reaching into my blazer pocket, I pulled out a quarter.

"Call it," I commanded, holding up the shiny quarter for Lynda's inspection. I admit, I was feeling rather pleased at that exact moment. I was going to let fate decide the outcome of this meeting. The Ice Berg's face was full of confusion and disbelief.

“Pardon?” Lynda asked, somewhat confused. For a brief moment, she looked like she might smile...laugh even! But then it was gone.

“Call it,” I instructed. “Heads or tails? Do I, or don’t I speak?” Lynda shook her head, as if to deny any involvement in this mad-cap scheme. Smiling like the Cheshire cat, I squinted my eyes, challenging her. I nodded again, letting her know the game was on. I wasn’t going to let her back out. Hesitating, she held my stare, and the moment. I held my expression, and my position. I needed her to call it. The room had become deathly silent. All I could hear was the 60-cycle hum of the lights overhead the grandiose boardroom table, and the pulse of the office muffled behind the closed door. Neither of us moved. Neither of us backed down.

“Heads you speak, tails you don’t.” And there it was. The game was on.

Nodding once in acknowledgment, I winked at my adversary and, taking in a deep breath, I ceremoniously tossed the coin up into the air. As if in slow motion, we both followed the path of the coin as it traveled up into the air, where it seemed to hold for a split a second before beginning its quick descent back to Earth. Reaching out, I grabbed the quarter with my right hand. Nodding again, knowing that the Gods of fate had now spoken, I skillfully placed my right hand onto my left. I could feel the coolness of the coin on the back of my hand. Hesitating, I raised my eyebrows in heady anticipation of what would happen next. The Ice Berg was now sitting on the edge of her chair. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was a gambler.

Slowly, I removed my hand to reveal the coin. We both leaned in to take a closer look. It wasn’t good, at least not for me. Tails. Dammit. The Ice Berg looked relieved. I sat back in my chair feeling defeated. Deep down, I had a lot to say. But perhaps this was fate telling me something. Besides, I reminded myself, it was, after all, my idea.

“You know, I did have a lot to say,” I finally answered, placing the coin back in my blazer pocket. “But, fate has spoken.” Lynda nodded and smiled, relief washing over her face.

“This really is difficult for me, you know,” she repeated, trying to sound concerned but failing miserably.

“Really, Lynda?” I answered back, not bothering to hide the contempt that had crept into my voice. “Because from where I’m sitting, it doesn’t look like you’re having much difficulty with it.” I hesitated briefly, giving her a platform to respond, but she just sat there, silent. Finally, I decided it was time to catch my ferry.

“Are we done?” I asked, the irritation in my voice seeping through. I could tell she wanted to speak, but instead she just nodded her head “yes”. Without any further conversation, I got up from the chair, walked out of the boardroom back to my desk and grabbed my only personal item – my handbag. Exiting the building for the very last time, I hesitated slightly before pushing through the door. Not looking behind me, I quickly made my way to the SeaBus station. Glancing down at my watch, I was relieved to see I could still make the 4:15 p.m. ferry home.



The SeaBus docked at the Vancouver station and, in typical fashion, the throngs of passengers were catted off. I began to feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of people. In the city, it seems like somebody is always touching you, whether you’re riding the bus or simply walking down the street. The constant bumping and jostling as you make your way to your point of destination can sometimes take its toll. When I lived in a small town I was alone, but in the city I am lonely. Here, there is never a lack of people around. But even so, I’m lonely. As I herded down the pier with the other passengers trying to make it to dry land, I decided to deviate from my usual walk home.

Counting out the change in my wallet, I managed to scrape together enough money for a bottle of pre-mixed Long Island Iced Tea. There's a small park I sometimes stop at on my way home from parties. There, I can sit with a beer and enjoy a cigarette, for the most part undisturbed. The park is next to an AIDS hospice and people of all ages and backgrounds come to enjoy it. Many times I've sat in this park, at a bench under a trellis of roses, lost in my own thoughts, watching people quietly strolling through the park.

I made my way across the park over to my favourite bench, which thankfully sat unoccupied. I took off my shoulder bag and threw it down on the bench beside me, pulling out my cigarettes and the unopened bottle. Leaving the bottle in the brown bag, I twisted off the top and drank a generous portion. As the alcohol washed down my throat, I felt myself relax a little. Leaning back, I lit a cigarette. It was late February, but the weather had been unusually warm. As the sun began to set, I could still feel the heat from the day emanating up from the concrete path.

I couldn't believe it. I'd been fired, again. With no money tucked away for a rainy day, and no references from the last two jobs, my future was starting to look bleak. I took a huge breath and decided I wasn't going to think about it tonight. Between today and tomorrow nothing was going to change. To worry about it tonight would just be a waste of alcohol.

As I turned my attention back to my bottle, I spotted a piece of litter on the ground. It was a small brown plastic disposable coffee cup, the kind you get from one of those beverage dispensing machines at ice rinks and hospitals. Watching the abandoned cup rolling around on the concrete path reminded me of watching my brother play hockey when he was a young boy. My mom would always buy me a hot chocolate to warm my hands as we sat on the cold bleachers watching my older brother try to stay upright on his skates.

Suddenly, I felt a chill. Buttoning up my jacket, I noticed a couple with a baby stroller approaching along the path. They chatted quietly to each other as they passed

by, unknowingly pushing the stroller over the plastic coffee cup. As they continued on the path I looked back at the cup, which was now broken into two pieces. *And then one became two*, I reflected. Another couple with a golden retriever came down the path, smiling and oblivious as they stepped on a piece of the cup, breaking it down into smaller pieces again. As I sat quietly observing the plastic cup, I wondered to myself how long it might take before the cup would disappear completely? How many baby strollers, pairs of feet and pets would pass before the cup simply vanished?

I sat transfixed on the disappearing cup as my mind wandered back to the events of the day. I had promised myself I wouldn't think about it, but it was inevitable. I loved living in the city but I had to face facts. I was struggling. I wasn't fitting in and the only person to blame was myself. I felt like the plastic cup; I was being pushed and pulled and trampled on and slowly I felt like I was disappearing. I decided it would be okay to cry, and let off some of the steam that was building up. Releasing the pressure valve, I pulled myself in and let the tears roll down my cheeks. It was getting dark but I had no fear of anybody noticing that I was sitting alone in a park, bottle in hand, crying.

Remarkably, a few moments later, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Drying my eyes with a spare tissue I pulled out of my jacket pocket, I made the decision to go home, put my glad rags on and meet Skye and Lisa for a beer at the Clover Field Pub. What I needed right now was a night out with friends, not a night alone on a park bench getting drunk.

As I tucked my cigarettes and half full bottle back in my shoulder bag, I looked around to see if I'd forgotten anything. Glancing around, I tried to find the remaining pieces of the scattered coffee cup on the ground but I noticed that they were gone.

"Well that's not going to be me," I declared. Throwing my bag over my shoulder, I took a deep breath of the crisp evening air and began my journey home.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I got grounded again.
For a whole week!
Anyway, I went to the boat
and help paint!
It was lots of fun.**



BLIND DATE

I was rudely awoken to the sound of my phone ringing. Judging by the ring, somebody was at my door. Picking up my wristwatch from the coffee table, I barely made out that it wasn't even 8:00 am yet. "This had better be good," I grumbled to myself as I swung my legs over the side of the gold sofa and shuffled my way over to the phone, which hung on the wall in my kitchen.

"Hello?" I asked, my voice raspy as sandpaper. I could hear the sounds of the city street below as a barely audible voice on the other end responded.

"Courier." What on Earth was a courier doing at my place this time of the morning? I buzzed him up and quickly made my way to the front door, inspecting myself in the bathroom mirror first. I was horrified at my reflection. I could never get away with not washing my hair every morning; it had a mind of its own. But besides that, my makeup had somehow gone from my eyelids to under my eyes, making me look like a zombie. I decided it was more important to quickly wash my face before the courier came knocking than to fix my hair, which at the moment made me look like Elvira⁹ after being caught in a violent windstorm.

In record time, the courier made it up to the seventh floor and was now knocking louder than necessary. Curious, I didn't hesitate to open the door. A short

⁹ Elvira Mistress of the Dark is an LA television horror hostess, played by Cassandra Peterson.

Persian man who stood with a clipboard under one arm, a pen in one hand and a letter in the other, greeted me.

“Sign...line 10,” he instructed in broken English as he unceremoniously thrust the clipboard at me. I still didn’t know what I was signing for so, instead of simply signing at line 10, I asked what was in the envelope.

“Letter. Sign...line 10,” he ordered again, holding the letter up for my inspection. I quickly grabbed it from him and, upon closer inspection, I realized it was from Dubby Burgers. *I wonder what this could be?* I groggily thought to myself. Much to Mr. Courier’s annoyance, I tore open the envelope and retrieved its contents. I let out a heavy sigh as I realized it was my termination letter. I quickly skimmed over the contents until I found the paragraph with the dollar sign in it.

“Flipping heck!” I blurted out loudly as I looked up at Mr. Courier, who was also in no mood to be engaging in any kind of conversation this early in the morning.

“You sign, or what?!?” He shook the clipboard at me, insisting that I take it from him. But I ignored his animated gestures and continued to read over the letter. I felt like I’d just won the lottery.

“I’m rich!” I announced loudly, bursting at the seams.

In a nutshell, Dubby Burgers was prepared to pay me three months’ wages if I didn’t file a wrongful dismissal suit against them. Turning the letter over, I saw the cheque in all its glory. I could feel the heavy weight of all my financial burdens lift and suddenly I was in a very good mood. Basically, I was being paid to stay home. My problems from yesterday were solved!

“Ma’am,” Mr. Courier interrupted my train of thought. “*Please sign...line 10!*” Clearly he was growing more impatient and didn’t share the same enthusiasm for my newfound good fortune. I quickly stuffed the letter and cheque back into the envelope and promptly signed on line 10, thanking Mr. Courier over and over for making me the happiest girl in the world, which went largely ignored. Going back into my

apartment, I left Mr. Courier and my problems out in the hallway and immediately called Lisa to share my good news.



I somehow managed to convince Florence to let me break my lease on my seventh floor apartment. I was again unemployed, but Lisa enthusiastically agreed to let me move back in with her. Plus, she'd already begun making plans for a trip to Greece and Turkey, so it made good sense to combine our financial resources again. And I figured there was no point in throwing away good money on rent if I wasn't working. Plus, I wanted to make the most of Dubby Burgers' "hush" money. I decided to go back to college, only this time I would study broadcast and media communications in radio. After a long heart-to-heart discussion with Lisa, Mattias and Rod, it was decided that I needed to branch out, try something totally different and, most importantly, follow my heart. Although classes didn't start until September, I figured I could get by with temp jobs in the meantime. Besides, I really missed living with Lisa and I was eager to return to our old routine.

Having moved several times now, Lisa and I both knew the drill. She went out behind the building to scavenge an old shopping cart while I made several trips to the liquor store for empty boxes. It didn't take long to pack up my belongings and move back down to the second floor.

After unpacking, we decided to settle in for the evening with a pot of tea, a package of cigarettes and the latest issue of the local lifestyle, news and entertainment weekly magazine, *The Fraser Portal*. We loved to scour the Adult Classifieds, where local singles appealed for friendship, love and more.

We sat side by side on the floor, settling back against the large red overstuffed velvet sofa. *Oh, how I'd missed these sofas*, I thought to myself. Come to think of it, I missed everything about this apartment. I missed Lisa, our late night chats, and waking up to the smell of fresh coffee and toasted bagels. But most importantly, I missed the feeling of being home. Being back in Lisa's apartment really felt like home.

And even though I loved the idea of living on my own, being alone didn't feel like home.

"Here's one," Lisa said, pointing to a particular adult classified. "Tall, dark hair, my friends tell me I'm good looking." We both groaned, as nearly every ad used this line. We surmised it probably meant they weren't good looking, but we had no idea of actually knowing. Still, it was as worn out as saying "I love long walks on the beach". It lacked originality. "University educated...yada, yada, yada...looking for SWF, smoker, social drinker, for friendship and possibly more. Sounds boring."

"A smoker? That's unusual," I observed. We both agreed; smoking was becoming more and more socially unacceptable. Unless, of course, you were drinking. Then it seemed like everybody smoked, and naturally the so-called "non-smokers" continually borrowed cigarettes from the smokers. Heaven forbid they should buy a pack of their own cigarettes. They wouldn't dare, because then they would be deemed a "smoker".

"Want to call?" Lisa asked, grabbing the phone before waiting for my response.

"Not particularly," I answered. I wasn't interested in meeting anybody through an adult classified ad. It was fun reading them, but the idea of actually connecting with somebody, without having met them socially, seemed awkward and foreign.

"Come on! Where's your sense of adventure?" Lisa dialed the number, putting it on speakerphone. As the phone connected to *The Fraser Portal* adult classifieds number, we could hear the cheesy music in the background.

"Welcome to *The Fraser Portal* adult classifieds. Please enter the five-digit code for the person you wish to connect with." The process seemed sterile to me, but Lisa was on a mission. Entering the five-digit code, she held up the phone so we could listen in.

"This is fun!" Lisa exclaimed, as we waited to connect to mailbox 33576.

"This is so voyeuristic!" We both laughed. "Have you done this before?"

“What do you think I did when you lived upstairs?”

“Hi, thank you for calling.” We fell silent as a man’s voice came over the phone. “I have a degree in commerce and work as a marketing executive for a high-profile gaming company.” We both looked at each and shrugged our shoulders. “I’m a social drinker, and I’m looking for somebody who enjoys nights out. I smoke, so you must either be a smoker or be okay with smoking.”

“Sounds okay so far,” Lisa mused, shrugging her shoulders again.

“I’m looking for somebody who likes to have fun and has a sense of humour. If that’s you, please leave your number and I’ll call you back.” Immediately, Lisa picked up the phone and before I could register what was happening, she was leaving a voicemail message.

“What are you doing?” I whispered frantically, practically lunging at her in an attempt to grab the phone from Lisa. She waived me off, preventing me from stopping her. And just like that, she’d left a message on the marketing executive’s voicemail, asking him to call her back. But what I didn’t realize was that Lisa’s plan was to set *me* up on a date with this complete stranger. Less than a week later, I was about to discover my fate. Begrudgingly, I found myself agreeing to meet Mr. Marketing Executive at one of my favourite local hangouts, the Flagrante Lounge.



As I entered the Flagrante Lounge, a familiar waitress acknowledged me. I liked coming here on Friday nights, usually on payday. Tonight, I was here on a Wednesday, which hosted a slightly different crowd. Lisa agreed a weekday would be quieter, thus make for a more “romantic” evening. As I made my way to the heart of the establishment – a large round oak bar with an impressive center-top of stained glass – I looked around to see if anybody fitting the description of my blind date had arrived yet. I only had a cryptic description to go by: a tall, dark and supposedly handsome man, wearing a dark blue suit. It felt more like a job interview than a date.

Lisa played cupid and set up the rendezvous. Wanting to maintain an air of mystery, no names were exchanged – only a brief description of what we would each be wearing. Entering the world of “classified” dating was a whole new realm for me. I could feel the butterflies in my stomach fluttering. I was nervous. But my nervousness was about to turn to bitter disappointment.

“Chrystala?” I turned around when I heard my name. There was no hiding the look of shock and disappointment on my face. I stood gawping for a moment, trying to think of what to say. In retrospect, I probably should have waited a little longer before responding.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out,” I scolded. Even nervousness couldn’t take the full blame for my failed attempt at humour. This was one of those moments when I desperately wished I had a rewind button. Sadly, I didn’t. And there was no denying the look of bewilderment on *his* face.

“When did you get here?” he asked in an attempt to be polite, ignoring my comment.

“Just now,” I replied, trying to return the favour.

“I didn’t see you when I came in?” he questioned, wiping his hands on his pants. “I was just in the can,” he said, offering a plausible explanation as to why he didn’t see me earlier.

“I’m meeting somebody,” I offered, looking around the bar but for who I still didn’t know. There was a moment of silence between us.

“A blind date, perhaps?” he asked point-blank, steering the conversation. His question hit me like a wet fish to the face.

“Excuse me?” Oh, I’d heard correctly alright, I just didn’t want to know the truth. “Ah, yes...” I stammered, my worst nightmare confirmed. I couldn’t believe my ears. Mr. Delmer Belliveau was Mr. Marketing Executive? *Did Lisa know?* I asked myself. *No, she couldn’t have, could she?* For a split second, I thought about running in the opposite direction. I felt like racing home to confront Lisa. I definitely had a

bone to pick with her if she did in fact know she was sending me out on a blind date with my nemesis. I never forgot how he called me “shallow” at my own housewarming party.

“What’s your poison?” Delmer asked, borrowing a line from *The Breakfast Club*. “I’ve got a bar tab going,” he bragged, motioning to a booth. “Sit down.” His arrogant demeanour was already starting to bother me. What made him think I wanted to socialize with him? Was it even remotely possible that *he* know before agreeing to the blind date? Resigning myself to the situation, I decided to take the high-road and accept his offer. Quietly, I slipped into the booth across from him. At least he chose a large booth so I didn’t have to cozy up next to him, and one with a stunning view of English Bay.

“Did you know?” It was the million-dollar question that was begging to be asked. He practically laughed in my face.

“Hell no. Did you?”

“No, of course not!” I confessed defensively, not even trying to mask my disdain. We both sat pensively, weighing our options. Silently, we both came to the same conclusion.

“Well, we’re here now. Let’s try and make the most of it,” Delmer offered as he waived over a waitress.

“Fine,” I groaned. “I’ll have a double Harvey Wallbanger”. I figured the only way to make Delmer pay for this ludicrous mix-up was in drinks. Because, at this point, I wasn’t totally convinced he didn’t know. He’s a friend of Lisa’s. He must have recognized her voice? Maybe he thought *she* was going to be his date? Who knows. But either way, I was going to milk the situation for all it was worth.



“Lisa,” I whispered into the phone. “Get your ass down here *now!*” I tried to stifle a laugh as I covered the phone with one hand. Aside from having a wonderful

ambience, my next favourite thing about the Flagrante Lounge is that each table has a telephone. You can't make long distance calls on them, but you can dial any local number for free. I spent more than my fair share of time job hunting here.

"How's your blind date?" she asked excitedly.

"You're gonna miss all the fun if you don't get down here now." I covered the phone again as the noise level in the bar increased. I could hear two waitresses arguing. "And bring my camera!"

"Your camera?" she asked, puzzled. "What's going on?"

"Seriously, Lisa. Just do it. You'll find out when you get here."

"Okay, I'll be there in five minutes."

"Excellent. Hurry!" I urged.

"Wait! Does the camera have film in it?" Lisa quickly asked.

"Don't know. Buy some on your way here. I'll pay you back." Before I could finish my conversation, a half empty pint of beer slid across the table and landed on the seat beside me. "I gotta go. Hurry, Lisa!"

"Why don't you fuckin' like me?" Delmer's slurred words and exaggerated facial expressions made him seem clown-like. While he may have earned a university degree in commerce, he hadn't earned my respect. He had absolutely no social skills. He also didn't have a filter. I picked up the empty pint glass from the seat as I stood up in search of a towel.

"Delmer, stay here," I instructed. "I'll be right back." During the course of the evening, with each sip of alcohol, Delmer seemed to lose all sense of reality, not to mention sobriety. He claimed he had no idea I was his blind date, and agreed it was a huge mistake. Yet, when I dismissed his advances, he felt rejected. I've heard it said that alcohol is like a truth serum. This was definitely the case with Delmer, as the evening quickly turned into a drunken confessional.

It started like this:

"You've never liked me."

"That's not true, Delmer."

"It is, Chrystala! It is. Why wouldn't you talk to me at your costume party?"

"It wasn't a costume party. It was a *theme* party. And I did talk to you."

"No you didn't. I wore a costume to your party."

"So you did. I liked your Levi's. You kept asking me personal questions, and I didn't want to get into with you. I hardly know you!"

"That's what I mean! I didn't even know you liked my pants! You wouldn't talk to me!"

"I'm glad I didn't, now that you've brought it up. You called me "shallow" at my own party!"

"Because you are!"

"Oh yeah? Well, lucky for you so was your beer mug when you decided to spill it all over me!"

From there, the conversation only went further downhill. At one point, I suggested a truce – we could wipe the slate (and beer-soaked table) clean and start over again. After all, I confided, if Lisa liked him, maybe one day I could too? But Delmer wasn't having any of it. Pandora's Box had been opened, and there was no turning back. It only got uglier from there.

As I finished wiping up the spilled beer from the seat of the booth, I spotted Lisa entering the bar. Thankfully, she had the camera with her.

"Liiiiisssaaaa!" Delmer yelled across the bar. Obviously, he'd spotted her too. Lisa shot me a baffled look.

"What's going on?" she asked as she approached our booth, a confused smile on her face.

"It's a long story," I groaned, trying not to laugh but without much success.

“Lisa, old buddy, old pal.” Delmer stood up and threw his arms around her, his suit pants sagging down below his waist. Lisa stumbled under his drunken weight.

“Don’t tell me *this* is your blind date?” Relieved to hear she had no part in this, I nodded yes.

“Lisa, help me out here,” Delmer started, releasing his vice-like grip on her. “Why doesn’t *she* like me?” He turned to face me, throwing his arms up in the air for added dramatic effect.

“I think we need a drink,” Lisa mused, seeing that our table was cleared of any glasses or drinks. The bartender had been watching our table and motioned to one of the waitresses. Whispering in her ear, the waitresses nodded and walked over to where Lisa and I stood.

“I don’t mean to be a downer, but we can’t have patrons pulling their pants down in the bar. We’ve already had one complaint.” I smiled at the waitress, letting her know I completely understood. I was on her side. Lisa burst out in laughter.

“Pardon me?” Lisa interjected. If she wasn’t confused before, she certainly was now. “Who pulled down their pants?” Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a table of patrons sitting off to one side, shooting us dirty looks. Clearly, they weren’t impressed. But then again, neither was I. The waitress motioned to Delmer to sit down. Looking dejected, he slumped into the booth.

“Oh my God!” Lisa exclaimed in disbelief. “Tell me you didn’t pull your pants down in the bar?” Without hesitation, Delmer was back up on his feet and began unbuckling his belt, letting his pants fall down around his ankles. Instantly, I yanked Lisa’s camera from her and quickly began taking pictures with the skill and dexterity usually bestowed on fashion photographers. Delmer waivered around like a Weeble¹⁰, his ankles bound by his fallen pants, pointing at his manhood, which

¹⁰ A popular “roly-poly” egg-shaped children’s toy from the 1970s, which is designed to wobble but not fall down.

thankfully was still tucked into his underwear (and in case you were wondering, they were briefs, or “tightie whities” as they’re affectionately known).

“If it was good enough for you, Lisa,” he began defending himself, faltering slightly. “Then why isn’t it good enough for *her*,” putting added emphasis on the word “her”. No longer able to contain myself, I burst into laughter.

“Alright! That’s enough,” the bartender yelled from behind the bar. Taking this as her cue, the waitress finally stepped in.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t serve you if you’re with him,” the waitress announced to Lisa and me, as she struggled not to laugh. “He’s had too much to drink.”

“Jesus H. Christ, Delmer,” Lisa spewed, reaching down to grab the belt of his pants in an attempt to hoist them back up around his waist. “Put your bloody pants back on!” Obeying her instructions, he pulled up his pants. Struggling with the belt buckle, Lisa jumped in to assist. But by this time, the bartender had made his way to our table.

“Out! Out or I’ll call the cops.” Obviously, he was upset. No doubt he’d seen this sort of behaviour before. Although, maybe not at the Flagrate Lounge? But I felt a sense of relief when he shot me a quick wink. It probably helped that he knew me. And despite tonight’s performance, this was the first time I’d ever caused a scene in his bar, not that I was the one disrobing.

With his pants successfully back up, Lisa helped Delmer out of the bar to the street. The bartender had kindly agreed to call a taxi, which was waiting for them outside. Moments later, Lisa returned to the bar, her head shaking with disbelief. I got up and quickly moved to a different table, waiving her over in the process. I figured if we were planning on staying for a drink, we might as well get out of sight. Besides, I was fed up with the neighboring table of conservatives shooting me dirty looks.

“If I didn’t need a drink before, I sure do now!” Lisa cajoled as she flopped down beside me in the booth. “What the hell happened?”

“You honestly didn’t know he was my blind date for the night?” I questioned, sure of the answer but asking anyways.

“That’s insane!” Lisa laughed at the sheer absurdity of the situation. “I had no idea. What a mess, literally. How did he get so drunk?”

“Clearly he can’t handle his booze,” I surmised, scratching my head in disbelief. Tonight had been a total disaster. While I had managed to keep up with Delmer, drink for drink, he’d clearly had a head start. He had, after all, already opened a bar tab before I’d even arrived.

“What can I get you ladies to drink?” the waitress asked.

“I’ll just have a small glass of your house white, please” Lisa said.

“Excuse me?” I question Lisa’s choice of beverage. “Is Delmer’s bar tab still open?” I asked the waitress, remembering how he was quickly ushered out of the bar; too quickly to close his tab. A smile crept over the waitress’ face.

“Why yes it is,” she confirmed, nodding her head as though reading my mind.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I asked Lisa, as though seeking permission. After all, he was her friend not mine.

“I’d like to change that small white wine to a dry martini, please,” declared Lisa, sounding a lot like James Bond. “Make that a double. And shaken, not stirred; it bruises the gin.”

“Make that two,” I joined in. The waitress gave us a wink and a smile.

“Menus?” the waitress suggested.

“Why yes, that would be lovely,” Lisa confirmed, before breaking into laughter.

Over several double martinis, and a full course meal, I explained how the events of the evening had unfolded, in finite detail, including how Delmer’s pants ended up on the floor the first time. I couldn’t wait to have the film developed.



The following day, hangover aside, I practically ran to the drugstore to have the film developed. While we've all heard it said that a picture tells a thousand stories, these pictures told only one (albeit, a very funny one). Picture after picture garnered a thousand laughs, which in my estimation was worth every penny we put on Delmer's tab. Later that day, I slipped a copy of Delmer's bar tab and one of the photographs into a "Thank You" card and immediately mailed it to his office.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today my mom and dad
were going to go fishing
but the boat broke down.
So they had to come home.**

**WHALES. PRETTY, PRETTY WHALES**

Lisa loved to read and she read ferociously. One time she found a paperback copy of *Jurassic Park* in the laundry room. She came upstairs, drew a bath and read the entire book while she soaked in the tub. Lisa was a speed-reader; a method I never fully understood. I asked her to explain to me once how she could read so fast, but I could never fully comprehend what she was doing differently from me. Sometimes it took me months to read a book, even though I read every day.

Being such an avid reader meant Lisa spent a lot of time in bookstores cruising the aisles for new reading material. On one occasion, while mulling around the Book Barn in the West End in search of a new title to read, she spotted a flyer that read:

**Join us this Friday at 7:00 p.m.
For book readings,
music, poetry and more.
Everybody Welcome!**

We were both unemployed, again, which meant any opportunity to join in on free activities in the city was readily welcomed. Eagerly, she brought home the flyer and stuck it predominantly on the fridge, right next to the picture of Drunken Delmer.

“It could be fun,” Lisa surmised, although only half convincingly. Truth was, I’d never been to a book reading before so it did sound appealing. My only hesitation was that it was on a Friday night. But as Lisa quickly pointed out, when you’re unemployed, every night is a Friday night.

Friday night arrived, and a better offer didn't come up, so we slipped into clean clothes and made our way to the Book Barn. As we approached the store, I thought we might be off the hook as it looked closed. But as we pushed through the door, a bell rang alerting staff that we'd arrived. Closing the door behind us, a middle-aged woman with long flowing brown tangled hair and a loose fitting tie-dyed cotton top with a matching flowing skirt, came around from behind the counter and greeted us with a broad smile and open arms. Lisa gave me a quick glance – we had entered the “book zone”. The book zone is kind of like Dungeons and Dragons, only without the dragons.

“Lovely to see you!” she beamed at us, the smell of incense wafting with her as she shook our hands.

“My name is Marcia. Are you here for poetry night?” she asked as she brushed strands of her long hair off her face, reminding me of Cher during her Sonny Bono days.

“Hi, Marcia. My name is Lisa and this is my friend Chrystala,” Lisa introduced us, trying not to laugh. “Yes, we're here for the poetry reading.”

“Well, thank you for joining us. Do come through.” Marcia directed us to follow her, taking us through several rows of overstuffed bookshelves. As we walked by shelves of biographies, fiction and non-fiction books, we were ushered through a beaded curtain doorway that led into another smaller room. The room was lined with yet more shelves, over-stuffed with self-help and new age books. Being removed from the rest of the store, this room was quiet and peaceful, adorned with well-worn vintage chairs, a few small reading tables and colourful paintings by local artists.

Several people had already arrived and taken up camp on the floor, sitting comfortably on pillows strewn about for added comfort and ambience. It looked more like an old cluttered flat in London than the back room of a local bookstore. Everybody looked up as we entered the room and greeted us with the same cheery smile and hello that Marcia had. We stood awkwardly for a moment, feeling like two new students on their first day of school. But Marcia quickly introduced us to the

group before directing us to find a cushion on the floor with the others. She disappeared back through the beaded curtain, leaving us to become acquainted with the others. In the process, we realized that most of the group was here to present, with only a few of us as actual spectators.

One woman in the group, Nancy, had brought her beat up old acoustic guitar. Brian, a thirty-something tree planter from Prince George¹¹ was going to read his poetry. Michael, a ginger-haired man with a ruddy complexion, recently published a book about his travels to Turkey and was going to share a chapter with us. He had traveled to Turkey in the late 1980s but it took him several more years to finally write his book. While Vivian, a lawyer, thought it would be thought-provoking to take a creative tour of her deceased mother's diary (a survivor of two wars). A few others in the group shyly offered to read their own poetry or writings, but only if time permitted.

"Right then. I think that's everybody," Marcia announced as she reappeared through the beaded curtain. "If anybody would like a cup of herbal tea, please help yourself." She pointed to an orange and blue linen covered table in the corner of the room, which sat a large industrial teapot, several cups and other amenities. I figured since I couldn't enjoy a cold beer, I might as well take advantage of the free hot tea. Lisa and I immediately got up and helped ourselves to a cup of strong herbal tea. Marcia had laid out an impressive collection of teacups. I wasn't surprised that she didn't use disposable cups; instead, she set out a colourful assortment of vintage teacups and coffee mugs. We carefully examined each one for cracks and chips until we settled on two that looked the least beat up. A few others followed suit, and with our cups full of tea we made our way back to our cushions on the floor to settle in to a night of spoken word poetry, book readings and music.

Lisa was excited when Michael volunteered to kick off the evening with a passage from his book. She loved Turkey and was eager to hear about his experiences,

¹¹ Prince George, with a population of 71,973, is the largest city in northern British Columbia, Canada, and is the "Northern Capital" of British Columbia.

and possibly swap stories afterwards. Michael had a lovely tone and speaking voice and it was obvious that whenever he read from his book he always chose the same passage as he delivered it with ease and elegance. Granted, it was a little long winded for my liking, and admittedly on more than one occasion my mind wandered to the case of cold beer waiting for me at home. Next up, Marcia opened a book which was lying next to her, reading from it an Edgar Allen Poe poem, *The City in the Sea*, which was a nice segue out of Michael's interesting, but lengthy, reading about the historical site of the Battle of Gallipoli.

Next up, Brian took the stage with his powerful, yet quirky, reading of an original poem called "Cellular". For nearly a minute, Brian simply repeated the word "cellular" over and over (while over enunciating "cell-yooo-laaar"), until I thought I was going to burst out laughing. I could feel Lisa on the pillow next to me shifting her position, no doubt in an attempt to prevent herself from getting the giggles. As much as I wanted to look at her, I knew that that would be a fatal move. Instead, I tried to maintain a poker face for as long as I could, not allowing myself to look over at Lisa for fear I would lose control and fall into a fit of laughter. I'm a lousy gambler but, when my hand is forced, I can hold a poker face for a few minutes, or at least enough to get me by.

After a quick bathroom break, and a chance for Lisa and me to exchange notes on the evening thus far, Nancy picked up her acoustic guitar. Marcia disappeared through the beaded curtain but quickly reappeared with an old wooden stool. Nancy graciously accepted the stool, sitting down with her guitar on her lap. I adjusted my pillow so that I wouldn't be tempted to look at Lisa. The evening so far had been interesting, to say the least. But I had to hand it to these people, egos aside, they were getting up there and doing their thing. I had to keep reminding myself that these people weren't here to be judged, or laughed at. They were here to be creative and uplifting. And even though Lisa and I were desperately trying to keep a lid on our laughter, overall we were enjoying the variety show.

Nancy lightly strummed her guitar, signaling she was ready. We quieted down and gave her our full attention. Nancy was probably in her late fifties who, although well preserved, dressed much older than her age. She wore loose fitting, high-waisted faded jeans that had an elastic waistband for added comfort. Tucked in to her jeans, she wore a large t-shirt with what could only be described as a bad painting of a “spirit wolf”. To complete her outfit, she wore dream-catcher earrings with long dangling feathers that blended in nicely with her shoulder-length graying brown hair. It wasn’t a particularly flattering look but she seemed happy and contented and, most importantly, very comfortable.

She introduced her song simply as “Whales”, a little tune she’d written while whale watching in the Queen Charlotte Islands¹². As she prepared to perform the song, she took another sip of tea to clear her throat. Slowly, she carefully placed each of her fingers on the fret board, eventually finding the “G” chord. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and strummed her fingers across the strings, hesitating for just a brief moment before finding her voice. She opened her mouth and then quietly sang the solitary word “whales”. It wasn’t particularly musical but she held each one of us in the palm of her hand as we patiently waited for the next word, and correlating note.

Opening her eyes, Nancy looked down at the fret board and carefully placed each finger on the “C” chord. Strumming her fingers across the strings, she closed her eyes again and this time sang the words “pretty, pretty whales”. I impulsively turned my head to look at Lisa. Clearly her expression mirrored exactly how I felt. I had to look away before the giggles set in.

Repeating the first two lines of her song, Nancy strummed the “G” chord again and, remarkably out of tune, sang the word “whales”. I couldn’t figure out which was the verse and which was the chorus. But by the time Nancy had managed to place all her fingers correctly on the “C” chord again, and sing the words “pretty, pretty

¹² Also known as Haida Gwaii, the Queen Charlotte Islands is an archipelago on the North Coast of British Columbia, Canada, populated mostly by Haida people.

whales”, I sensed a feeling of disbelief from the rest of the group. One by one, I looked around at the other faces in the circle and realized that pretty much everybody was thinking the same thing. Thankfully, Nancy continued to strum, and sing, while the rest of us held our breath through a series of painful “G” and “C” chords. Just as Nancy was about to repeat the next four words of her original song, Vivian fell off her pillow in a loud fit of laughter.

Aside from Vivian’s hysterical fit of laughter, the only other sound in the room was the sustain and release of Nancy’s guitar strings. As each of us watched Vivian in horror, it was obvious she was unsuccessfully trying to catch her breath long enough to stop laughing. Slowly, I looked over at Lisa, who sat wide-eyed in shock. Honestly, in my opinion, this was way more embarrassing for Vivian than Nancy. But not a moment too soon, Marcia eased herself up from the floor and began to slowly clap her hands, pulling our attention away from the near hysterical Vivian, who by this time was laying on the floor holding her sides, tears of laughter rolling down her heavily made-up cheeks. Nancy sat motionless on her stool, her hand still poised over the fret board, ready to strum the “C” chord. She held this pose as though in suspended time.

“That was lovely. Just lovely,” Marcia finally spoke. “Thank you so much, Nancy.” Taking our cue, we joined Marcia and loudly applauded. As though our applause held some secret power, like that of the Amazing Kreskin¹³, Nancy came alive once again and slowly stood up, sheepishly taking a ceremonious bow. As the clapping died down, Vivian finally caught her breath and stopped laughing long enough to speak.

“Oh, that was funny,” Vivian said as she sat up and began wiping the tears from her cheeks with a tissue. She proceeded to look around the room before continuing. “Oh come on. You have to admit, that was funny, right?” The room remained silent as the expression on her face changed from satirical to sarcastic humour. Clearly, she didn’t have children of her own. Because if she did, she would have had enough sense

¹³ The Amazing Kreskin is a mentalist who became popular on North American television in the 1970s.

and experience to be able to sit through a lifetime of musical recitals similar to this one, maybe not about whales specifically but definitely about unicorns or ponies.

“I think now would be a good time to take a ten minute break,” Marcia interjected. “When we come back, perhaps Vivian would like to take the floor with her reading?” Marcia didn’t look like she had a sarcastic bone in her body, but her tone was definitely mocking. I didn’t profess to know Marcia, but already I knew I liked her.

Both Lisa and I welcomed the break and took the opportunity to go outside for some fresh air, and enjoy a much-deserved cigarette. Once outside, we collectively let out a reserved giggle. We needed a release, but after the whale song fiasco we didn’t want to look hypocritical. Taking out a package of cigarettes from my handbag, I removed two cigarettes and handed one to Lisa. As we lit them, we couldn’t help but notice the sun starting to set over English Bay. This was definitely our favourite part of the day.

“That was truly unbelievable,” Lisa volunteered as she studied the sunset.

“I’m looking forward to hearing Vivian,” I added, not bothering to hide my sarcasm. “Even if it’s not funny, I’m going to laugh, just cuz.” The traffic was starting to die down along Denman Street, but the sidewalks were busy with locals and tourists making their way to the beach to watch the setting sun, and eat gourmet ice cream from Marielle’s.

“You know, lawyers are just as bad outside of the office as they are in,” I observed, flicking ashes from my cigarette.

“Really?” Lisa sounded a little surprised as she turned away from the sunset, focusing her attention on our conversation.

“For sure,” I responded. “They’ll take any opportunity to show you up, or point out your faults and flaws, and usually in front of an audience. They’re definitely a breed all their own.” I wanted to hide the disdain in my voice but didn’t see the point.

“Well, I’m happy for her success,” Lisa happily responded, although the sarcasm was radiating in her voice. Whenever we encountered people like Vivian, Lisa always took the high road; a skill I had never quite mastered.

Finishing our cigarettes, we took one last look at the shimmering red sun as it dipped below the horizon of the bay. Turning away from this awesome display, we pushed open the door to the bookstore and headed back into the dungeon for the final act of the evening.

Finding our spots back on the floor, with a fresh cup of tea in hand, we settled back down onto our cushions to enjoy the last performance. Vivian sat across from us with a small book on her lap, her mother’s diary, which Vivian would be reading from. I wasn’t exactly sure why Vivian thought it was appropriate to read from the pages of her deceased mother’s diary, especially to a room full of strangers, but my best guess was that it held some funny anecdotes or even thrilling historical narratives that might prove to be entertaining. Either way, I was curious. But based on what I knew about lawyers, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise when Vivian’s reading turned into a vanity project.

“October 3, 1977.” Vivian began her reading, clearing her throat to silence the audience. Waiting until we were settled, she continued. *“Today my youngest daughter...umm...was called to the Bar. What an exciting time for us all. She has worked so very hard and, umm, the fruits of her labour are now going to pay off. Vivian has been telling us how much money a lawyer can earn, especially, umm, in family law, and it does indeed sound like she could exceed all our financial expectations. Umm, I only wish my two eldest children had the same drive and ambition as Vivian. I try to hide my disappointment but...umm...it is so very hard to be proud of a school counselor and a music teacher. I mean really, is it not too much to ask that my children, umm, want to be successful? Vivian has brought dignity once more to the family name.”*

How touching, I thought to myself. Like mother, like daughter. Annoyingly, Vivian “ummed” so much through her reading that she sounded like she was about to

launch into a Gregorian chant¹⁴. And in typical lawyer fashion, Vivian was actually enjoying herself. She not only made her mother sound like a narcissistic self-absorbed bitch, but she didn't do herself any justice either. I looked in Nancy's direction, who to my surprise was giving Vivian her full and undivided attention. I wondered secretly if she was a legal secretary, too. Anybody else would have left the room before Vivian even opened her mouth.

As Vivian droned on, reading articulately, and loudly, from her mother's diary, my mind drifted away to a quieter, happier place that didn't involve lawyers. In a few weeks I was going back to college. For the next two years, I would be attending a local polytechnic institute, best known for its broadcast and media communications program. For the first time in a really long time, I was excited about my future and what it might hold. Studying radio could open up so many new and interesting doors for me. I wasn't particularly interested in being a DJ, per se, but with my background as a secretary, I thought I'd try my hand at producing. However, it never even occurred to me that, with the advent of the Internet, radio was becoming as obsolete as Gestetners¹⁵, rotary dial telephones and carbon paper. But that's me in a nutshell, one step forward but 25 behind.

¹⁴ A form of monophonic, unaccompanied sacred song of the western Roman Catholic Church

¹⁵ The Gestetner, named after its inventor David Gestetner, is a type of duplicating machine, invented in the 1800s and used until the 1980s.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went to school.
I had lots of fun to.
I just hope the weather
will be nice on Saturday.**



CHRISTMAS TURKEY (AGE 30 - 1997)

It felt odd having a full month off, especially around Christmastime. But, not one to protest when it comes to taking time off, I embraced my free schedule by staying up late, sleeping in past noon and generally doing a whole lot of nothing. I finished my first semester at college and, after ten final exams in five days, I was both mentally and physically exhausted. A month off was going to be pure heaven. Lisa, on the other hand, wasn't afforded the same luxury. In late September, she returned to work and, with the exception of Christmas Day, had to work over the holidays. But when you worked with handicapped adults, as Lisa did, few exceptions were made for statutory holidays. So, since Lisa had to work over the holidays, her parents, Tony and Louise (who we affectionately refer to as Pops and Poodles), decided to change things up and spend Christmas at our place. It was going to be a tight fit accommodating four people in her one-bedroom apartment but Lisa optimistically convinced herself it would be a cozy Christmas, and secretly she hoped for snow.

Not unlike everybody else during the holidays, we were broke. I wasn't working, surviving only on my student loan. Lisa was barely scraping by with her occasional work as a home care worker for handicapped adults. Skye, on the other hand, although broke herself, had offered to bring the Christmas turkey if she could join us for Christmas dinner. She usually spent Christmas with her family in Alberta¹⁶, but this year she had started a new job. Being at the bottom of the corporate ladder

¹⁶ Alberta is a province of Canada.

meant she had to work over the holidays. None of us knew how much a turkey cost but no doubt during the holidays, like everything else, they were double in price. Either way, it was going to be nice to hang out at home and gorge on turkey and all the trimmings with friends and family.

With little money to spare on entertainment, Friday nights were spent with a six-pack of beer or cider, typically up on the rooftop of our building where we enjoyed the amazing view of the mountains. On this particular Friday night, with only two days left before Christmas, Skye arrived straight after work with a large 2-litre bottle of BC apple cider, a fresh pack of smokes and the warmest coat she had. It was a crisp, clear night making it the best time to take advantage of the stunning view of the mountains from our communal rooftop patio. With the routine engrained in our brains, we wrapped ourselves up in our warm coats and blankets like a couple of old ladies to spend a few hours on beach chairs, reminiscent of our childhood. With our first glass of cider poured, and our first cigarettes lit, we relaxed into a night of drinking, smoking and catching up on the latest television, gossip and events of the week.

“So you know I offered to buy the turkey for Christmas, right?” Skye and I both kept our gaze on the twinkling lights atop the mountain. It was a clear night but remarkably it wasn’t too cold. Perfect weather conditions if it was going to snow.

“Yeah, that was really generous of you Skye. We’re all so broke this Christmas. You’ve made me and Lisa very happy.” I looked over at her and gave her a smile, confirming my appreciation. She didn’t look at me as she continued to stare thoughtfully at the mountains before taking another sip of cider. This was the great thing about Friday nights with Skye; you could just sit there and enjoy the view. You weren’t expected to talk; sometimes the silence was a nice relief from the general hubbub of the city.

“Well, about that.” Skye finally broke her silence and looked at me. “I have a confession to make.” I gave her another reassuring look. I had no clue what she was talking about but, whatever it was, it couldn’t be that bad.

“What’s up?” I prodded her to continue.

“Well, you know how I just started this new job?” I nodded in acknowledgment. “I was told when I started back in October that every Christmas, each employee was given a gift certificate for one turkey at Safeway.” She stopped to take another sip of her cider before continuing.

“And...?” She had piqued my curiosity.

“Well, I found out today that I don’t qualify for the gift certificate because I haven’t been at the company for one calendar year.” Skye looked thoroughly embarrassed. For an instant, my mind raced as I remembered that it was only two days before Christmas. And if I understood Skye correctly, now we don’t have a turkey. My mom always ordered our Christmas turkey weeks in advance. Never having bought a turkey before, I had no idea if we could even get a turkey this close to Christmas. I reached under my blanket for my cigarettes and took one out, lighting it before saying anything. Skye followed suit and lit one too, taking a moment to think of what next to say.

“Well, no worries,” I offered. “I mean, it’s not your fault, right?!? You were told one thing and found out another. I’m sure Lisa will understand.” I wasn’t so sure about the last statement, but what choice did we have?

“Any ideas how we might get a turkey two days before Christmas?” I asked, trying not to sound too concerned, but we were cutting it close.

“Well, here’s what I was thinking. If the three of us pitched in we could do it, but I can’t afford a whole turkey on my budget.” That seemed like a good enough solution to our turkey conundrum.

“That just might work, although I have no clue how much a turkey costs? Do you?” Pouring more cider into our near empty glasses, Skye gratefully accepted and raised her glass to mine.

“I haven’t the faintest, but how expensive could they be? They’re basically an overgrown chicken.” We both laughed. Unfortunately, much to our surprise, we were about to discover the hard way that this was not the case.



I never recommend a trip to Safeway after a few ciders, especially at the peak of the holiday season. But after breaking the news to Lisa that we no longer had a free turkey for Christmas dinner, panic set in and we quickly realized we didn’t have a moment to waste. We had to find a Christmas turkey and pronto. Lisa had spoken to Mattias earlier in the evening. Due to a heavy snowstorm blanketing mid-western Canada, he decided last minute not to fly to Saskatchewan¹⁷ to spend Christmas with his family. Mattias graciously accepted Lisa’s invitation to our Christmas dinner and a few minutes later Rod called asking if there was room for one more at the table, which of course there was. However, we had one major concern; without a turkey there would be no Christmas dinner.

To help cover the cost of the turkey, Lisa asked Rod and Mattias if they could make a donation towards the cost of the turkey (we all agreed that excluding Lisa’s parents in this financial transaction just made sense). They were both on board so, with lightning speed, Skye and I raced to Safeway before it closed to bag us a turkey.

As we made our way up and down the aisles in search of the meat department, we found ourselves getting hungry. Passing aisles of Cap’n Crunch and Frito Lays without buying them was difficult at the best of times; it took every ounce of energy to stay focused on our mission. Finally, after we cruised nearly every aisle, we spotted the meat department tucked away in the back corner of the store.

The meat department, and pretty much the rest of Safeway, was so picked over it actually looked like it had been looted. Skye and I rarely grocery shopped so we

¹⁷ Saskatchewan is a province of Canada.

had no idea what to expect. But we were certainly expecting to find more variety than what was presented, even if it was two days before Christmas.

Laying before us in an open-topped deep-freeze were three lowly frozen turkeys, each roughly the same size. Skye and I hovered over the deep-freeze, staring at our three choices as though magically more turkeys might suddenly appear. Lisa had suggested buying a 20-pound turkey, enough to feed seven people on Christmas Day, plus provide enough leftovers for a week of open-faced sandwiches and soup. Having no clue what a 20-pound turkey looked like, I decided to roll one over to read the label. Unfortunately, the label gave the turkey's weight in kilograms and I had no idea how to translate kilograms to pounds.

"What do you think? Does this one look okay?" I asked as I pointed at the turkey I was inspecting.

"I guess...let's figure out how much it costs." As I rolled over the frozen bird, we both spotted the large red price tag and immediately gasped in horror.

"Wha...? How much?" Skye was clearly just as appalled as I was. We both had sticker shock.

"Oh my God, Skye. It says this bird is \$59.89! That can't be right?" I'd never shopped for a turkey before, but suddenly I had a newfound appreciation for them as they were worth their weight in gold.

"Well, if that price is correct, then that's a total rip off," Skye said indignantly. She was right, but then again it was two days before Christmas.

"Let's try and find somebody to help us. That price simply *can't* be right." Taking my cue, Skye began to walk away from the meat department in an attempt to locate a Safeway employee, leaving me standing over the three turkeys that lay in their frozen coffin. I didn't want to leave them in case there was a sudden rush for turkeys. We had dibs on one and I didn't want to lose it, even if it was going to cost us a small fortune. A short while later, Skye returned with a Safeway employee in tow. As the two approached me, I noticed the employee looked tired and a bit fed up.

It probably didn't help that Skye and I had already consumed a torpedo bottle of cider, but no doubt he was accustomed to the "late night shopper". I read his nametag: "Johanne".

"What's up?" Johanne asked, mustering up a little bit of enthusiasm.

"Two things, can you please tell us how much this turkey weighs in pounds and can you confirm that this is the actual price, 'cuz it looks like a mistake to us." Johanne leaned over the deep-freeze and, rolling over the turkey we'd selected, read the label out loud.

"It says its 11.793 kilograms, which is approximately 26 pounds, and yeah, the price is right. It's \$59.89. They're the last three turkeys in the store." He released the bird, letting it roll back into its original position. Skye and I stood in silence, looking vacantly at each other. This was way more money than we had bargained for. No doubt Skye was starting to regret ever having made the offer to bring the Christmas turkey in the first place.

"It's a Grade C utility turkey, which is all we have left." Johanne may as well have been talking in Latin; I had no idea what that meant. However, not wanting to look foolish, I opted not to ask him for clarification. I leaned over the deep-freeze and inspected the price tags on the other two turkeys. Not surprisingly, there was very little price difference between the three.

"Right, well, it looks like we don't have much choice in the matter," I declared, turning to Skye. "They're basically all the same weight and price. We may as well just get the biggest one." Skye stood quietly, thinking, before agreeing with me.

"Well, if five of us contribute to the total cost, that would mean each of us would pay roughly \$12. That sounds workable," Skye offered, letting out a heavy sigh. This was a tough lesson to learn about the market value of turkey less than two nights before Santa was due to arrive.

"Granted," she continued. "We haven't even factored in the cost of vegetables or desert yet. But still, I promised a turkey and I can't disappoint." We reached down

into the deep-freeze and with a small struggle managed to hoist the turkey up and out, letting it drop heavily into our shopping cart.



Lisa's parents arrived mid-day on Christmas Eve, just in time to help us get started on the Christmas dinner preparations.

"First thing first," Lisa's mom instructed. "We need to get the turkey out of the freezer and into the sink. Let's take off the wrapper, remove the giblets and let it defrost overnight. It'll have to go in the oven first thing in the morning, around 5:00 a.m."

Having no previous experience cooking a turkey, we were thrilled that somebody knew what they were doing. Lisa and I got to work right away, delegating Poodles' instructions to each other. Lisa located the large cooking pan that Poodles brought and, in the meantime, I took charge of getting the turkey into the sink where I could free it from the packaging. Lisa then retrieved a small pot out of a cupboard for the giblets, which Poodles said we would cook and add to the soup we would make later with the remains of the turkey.

After a few precarious moments, I finally managed to get the turkey from the freezer to the sink without dropping it. Poodles watched over every step with the authority of a Sergeant General. Finally, she was able to closer inspect the now-infamous turkey. With a watchful eye, Poodles quietly waited as I freed the turkey from the confines of the white plastic wrapper. As I peeled away the wrapper, I let out an audible gasp.

"It's missing a leg!" I exclaimed loud enough to alert Lisa's dad, who had by this time taken up residence on the sofa in front of the television. I could hear Lisa down the hall in the linen cupboard trying to find a festive tablecloth.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed loudly, a knee-jerk reaction to seeing the mutilated turkey. "Why? Why is it missing a leg?" I turned to Poodles, who was still standing next to me, with Lisa coming up from behind, looking over her shoulder.

Hearing the alarm bells in the kitchen, Pops was now standing behind Lisa, craning his neck to get a good look at the turkey.

“You bought a utility bird. They always remove something from utility birds. In this case it was a leg. Sometimes it’s a wing. That’s why they’re called a utility bird,” Poodles sternly verified, as though everybody should know this little tidbit of information. Granted, Johanne had mentioned it was a utility bird at Safeway, only he neglected to mention the part about missing appendages. I stared at the turkey’s missing leg but decided there was absolutely no point in worrying about it now. It was what it was. Besides, I tried to reason with myself, too much brown meat isn’t good for me. This much I did manage to pick up from watching various cooking shows on late night television. It’s just too bad there wasn’t a cooking show that prepared only low-grade utility meats.



In the end, we all agreed Christmas dinner was a huge success. Upon Poodles’ suggestion, we decided to let the turkey thaw in brine overnight in the hopes that our overpriced mutilated Grade C turkey would not be too dry. We envisioned it turning out like the Griswold’s turkey on *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*. Thankfully, our fears were never realized and the turkey was not only juicy but very tasty. And even though we had plenty of help from Poodles, it was the first turkey Lisa and I had ever cooked and we were very proud of our culinary achievement. Although, we both agreed we would rather poke hot needles in our eyes than ever cook a turkey again.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went fishing with my dad
and I had to get up at 4:00
in the morning.**

***MAGNUM P.I. (PERFECT/PRE INTERVIEW)***

After finally completing my first grueling and intense college year in the radio program, I decided to take a summer contract position at Mobile Gas. Getting the job took some additional training on my part but this was, by far, one of my favourite interviews. At the end up my second term at college, I signed up with Kelly's again. I always had good luck with Kelly's in the past and this occasion was no different. I walked through Kelly's doors unemployed, I walked out with a job interview.

My interview at Mobile Gas was on a Thursday morning at 10:00 a.m. Not too early, but early enough that it didn't cut into my entire day. Leaving my apartment with plenty of time to spare, I began to make my way through the West End to the City Centre.

Walking briskly, I could finally see my destination come into view. Catching my eye, I also couldn't miss the shiny long blue stretch limousine parked outside of a Starbucks on the corner. Suddenly, as I approached the shiny blue limo, I heard the voice. It was unmistakable. I grew up watching television shows like "Three Company's", "All In the Family" and "Magnum, P.I.", so when I heard his voice I knew right away who it belonged to. It was the voice of none other than Tom Selleck! I quickly scanned the outdoor seating area directly across from where the limo was parked and sure enough, there he was, in all his brilliance. Tom Selleck was sitting at a Starbuck's patio table, smoking a cigar and enjoying a cappuccino, surrounded by his entourage. I never wanted this moment to end so I slowed down to take it all in. As I approached Tom and his handsome entourage of men he looked directly at me; I

held his gaze for as long as I could, refusing to look away first. I was taken aback by how gorgeous this man still was, nearly twenty years after Magnum P.I. went off the air. I'll never forget what he wore; a deep blue wool blazer, bluer than blue jeans and a crisp dark collared shirt. There was nothing disorderly about him; every detail, right down to his shiny hair and bronzed skin, was absolutely flawless. In a word, he glowed. But noticeably missing was his trademark moustache.

Regretfully, my fleeting moment with Tom ended and I was forced to refocus my attention and finish my journey to Mobile Gas. If I delayed any longer, I ran the risk of being late. But I couldn't help but think that Tom Selleck now new I existed. All was right in the Universe. I quickly crossed the street and carried on, but with a newfound skip in my step, all thanks to Tom.

With Tom still on my brain, I arrived at Mobile Gas. I entered the lobby and checked in with security, who directed me to the 11th floor where I was meeting with Joe Kendler, Cynthia Didmore and Tatiana. Arriving to a small reception area, a young receptionist, who seemed to possess absolutely no personality, greeted me. Within moments, she directed me to a boardroom only a few steps from where she sat, guarding the 11th floor. Entering the boardroom, I couldn't help but notice it was windowless. But the room still seemed bright and airy with beige walls, a large cherry wood table and a healthy Ficus tree in the corner. Three people, who practically sat arm-in-arm on the other side of the table, greeted me with the usual introductions and invited me to take a seat.

Joe Kendler, was flanked by two women; Tatiana (who I would be replacing) and Cynthia Didmore, the HR Manager. Cynthia was a blond, middle-aged woman who wore an uncomplimentary light beige oversized suite and a matching beige blouse. She blended in so well with the boardroom wall she looked like a floating head. Joe was a youthful 50-something and, from what I observed, he appeared athletic. Tatiana reminded me of a French Gypsy dressed in a billowy burgundy velvet

dress and long flowing wavy brown hair. She looked more like a L.A.R.P.er¹⁸ than an office worker.

With the introductions over, I was still bubbling over with excitement from my close encounter with Tom Selleck. I simply couldn't contain myself.

"You won't believe who I just saw on my walk over here?" I proudly announced.

The panel looked intrigued, yet not altogether amused. I didn't wait for a reply; instead, I forged forward and blurted out, "Tom Selleck"! The expression on Cynthia's face changed from bemusement to pure delight. It would appear I wasn't the only sycophant in the room.

"Oh my goodness!" Cynthia gasped. "I absolutely *love* Tom Selleck! How exciting! Where did you see him?" She was fidgeting in her seat like a teenager eager to share hot gossip. I'm not sure how I knew exactly, but as luck would have it, I was sharing a boardroom with a huge Tom Selleck fan. And she was more than happy to put the interview aside to discuss the magnitude of Magnum. I happily recanted my story, in complete detail, as Cynthia didn't want me to leave out even a tiny morsel of information. Joe and Tatiana sat quietly, looking on, as Cynthia shared my experience. Eventually, the conversation wound down and it was time to get on with business. But the ice was broken and I was no longer feeling nervous about the interview. The rest of the meeting was clear sailing and by the end, Tatiana was showing me my desk. Remarkably, with nothing further to discuss, the job was mine. I never thought I'd ever get a job because of Tom Selleck, but it certainly worked. I would be eternally in his debt.



¹⁸ L.A.R.P.er is an acronym for Live Action Role Player; one who dresses like a character from a particular time or place (such as the Medieval Era) and acts out different scenes with other like-minded people.

It was a great summer working at Mobile Gas. After only seven weeks, and feeling financially confident, I moved out of Lisa's dining room into an amazing bachelor apartment less than a block away. The view from my new apartment was breathtaking. I was on the 8th floor, above all the trees in full bloom. From my French balcony, it looked like a carpet of large green leaves. The apartment was bright and airy with refurbished parquet hardwood floors and eggshell white walls. And my queen-sized mattress fit snugly in the large storage closet, which doubled as my bedroom. One floor up on the rooftop, I could watch the Symphony of Fire fireworks held every summer. It was a magical apartment and at \$700 per month it was worth every penny. Each night before I went to bed I stood in my living, with the city lights dancing on my ceiling through the leaves of the trees below, and said "thank you". I truly loved this apartment.

That summer was, for me, the beginning of a really great chapter in my life. I had a lot to celebrate. Firstly, for the first time in a while, I was living on my own again and my apartment was within walking distance from work. Not having to take transit to work every day was a real blessing, not to mention money saver. Secondly, I was working 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., which meant I was home and up on my rooftop with a glass of white wine by 4:00 p.m. I didn't know which was better – the fact that I could walk to and from work, or the fact that I was enjoying my first glass of wine by 4:00 p.m. each day. Either way, both were beneficial to my health.

The temp job at Mobile Gas was going exceptionally well. I was making friends at work and for the first time in years I was actually enjoying work. Joe was very complimentary and he always made me feel of value, reminiscent of my Al McGavin days. Everything seemed perfect and I was savouring every moment of it. Deep down, I hoped it would last.

Nevertheless, shortly before the end of July, only eight weeks after I started at Mobile Gas, Kelly's called to say they had a new assignment for me. Naturally, I was apprehensive. I was in a groove and I wasn't ready for a change.

“This is a really great opportunity for you,” my recruiter enthusiastically told me. “Besides, it’s a legal position and we have no legal secretaries on staff. The job you’re currently doing doesn’t require a legal background.”

“That may be so,” I pointed out. “But it does require extensive software training that’s exclusive to Mobile Gas, which I have.”

“True,” my recruiter agreed. “However, we trained you on the software. We can just as easily train somebody else.” How unpleasant to hear that, once again, I was so expendable. “At least let me tell you about the posting.”

“Fine. But honestly, I really like it here and I’d rather stay.” Begging to keep my job was never beneath me.

“The position is at the University in Development.” So far my recruiter was not catching my attention. It sounded pretty boring to me.

“It’s a legal secretarial position; they require a minimum of five years’ experience, which you have.” A minimum of five years’ experience seemed a bit excessive, at least in my experience as a temp. But how difficult could it be to find somebody with five years’ legal office experience? Surely, they could find somebody else to do that job?

“How much are you making an hour at Mobile?” My recruiter clearly needed to up the ante if I was to be swayed to take this position.

“\$13 an hour,” I admitted, somewhat embarrassed. Although it wasn’t a lot of money, surprisingly it kept me in cheap wine and cigarettes. And I was always on time with the rent for my new bachelor apartment.

“But honestly, I don’t think I’m interested in commuting all the way out to the University every day.” With nearly 45,000 full time students attending the University each day, the commute was grueling. I worked with people who graduated from the University and it wasn’t uncommon to hear complaints about the transit, or lack thereof, when reminiscing about their school days.

“The University position pays \$18.49 an hour.” Nearly dropping the phone, I held my breath for a moment.

“When do I start?” Admittedly, that last piece of information grabbed my attention. Even though I was happy at Mobile Gas, once again the lure of the almighty dollar won me over.

Later that day, I gave my notice at Mobile Gas, said good-bye to my new friends and, on my way home, purchased a bus pass.



Less than a month later, I was officially a college drop out. It shouldn't have been a difficult decision. After all, I only had two simple choices:

1. stay in college and graduate, or
2. continue temping at the University.

I dropped out of college because I'd finally found a job where I thrived, fit in and I couldn't have asked for a better boss. Alannah Chadbourne was my new Al McGavin. She was easy going, laid back and appreciative of everybody's contribution to their jobs. She not only made a great boss, she was also a good friend. She recognized hard work and never hesitated to reward it. I gave up a lot for Alannah when I dropped out of college, but she knew it. It may have only been a temporary position, but I liked the sense of family at the University and I wanted to stay. I needed to stay.

During my second semester at college, I read Shakti Gawain's "Creative Visualization". The constant pressures of school, the massive egos of my classmates, and the unrelenting homework began to wear me down. While it's difficult to admit, I fell into a depression, so a classmate suggested I read this book. I'd already read "The Healing Power of Humour" and "The Zen and Art of Motorcycle Maintenance". Although they both offered some insight into my situation, I still couldn't see the "light". Then, after some hesitation, I picked up "Creative Visualization". In a nutshell, Shakti says, "If you can close your eyes and picture yourself doing it, then you can do

it". I closed my eyes, but hard as I tried, I couldn't picture myself working in radio. I was in a "here and now/fight or flight" time of my life, but I took this as a sign. Periodically, I look back with some remorse (after all, who wants to be known as a drop out or a quitter, which is probably why I continue to smoke - I'm not a quitter!). But I never regretted staying on at the University. Interestingly enough, however, when I closed my eyes I couldn't visual myself working as a secretary either. But the people drew me in, so I used the power of my imagination to create what I wanted to see.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

Today I didn't do very much except play.

***THE "C" WORD***

Every Saturday morning, Lisa and I would meet at the Grove Restaurant, our favourite breakfast joint. And every Saturday morning, we ordered the same thing. Being creatures of habit, I liked my eggs sunny side up, crispy bacon and white toast. Lisa enjoyed her eggs over easy, butterfly sausages and brown toast. I always traded a piece of crispy bacon for one of Lisa's butterfly sausages. On this particular Saturday morning, however, something was different. Lisa was an early riser but, on this particular day, she called shortly after 9:00 a.m. to say she needed more time. She woke up feeling nauseous and couldn't get herself motivated yet. She said she'd call me back in about an hour. I hung up the phone and immediately fell back asleep. An extra hour of sleep was exactly what I needed.

Several hours later, I was awoken again by the telephone. I tried to focus on the red glowing display face on my clock radio. *That couldn't be right*, I thought to myself. According to my clock radio, it was nearly noon.

"Hello," I said groggily, laying my head back down on my warm feather pillow.

"Hey, Chrystala. It's Lisa. Sorry it took me so long to call you back." She sounded distracted, even worried, and I hoped she didn't think I'd be upset. I loved going for brunch but I also liked sleeping in. And personally speaking, I was never a big eater first thing in the morning. The later we went for breakfast, the better for me.

"No worries, Lisa. I'm still in bed anyways," I responded, stifling a yawn. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, but I still feel gross. I don't know if I can do breakfast today." I could tell from her tone something other than an upset stomach was weighing on her mind.

“That’s okay. I’m broke anyways. How about you put the kettle on and I’ll come over to yours for cup of English Breakfast?” I rolled over, trying to summons the energy to get out of my warm and cozy bed but only managed to stifle another yawn.

“That would be great. See you soon?” I could hear the relief in her voice. If I was broke then there was a good chance Lisa was too, except the difference was it never embarrassed me.

“Give me 15 minutes,” I said between yawns. “I’ll be right over.” Hanging up the phone, I finally managed to muster up the energy to drag myself to the bathroom. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I promised myself that I would never drink the cheap beer on tap at the Clover Field Pub again.



Twenty minutes later, looking worse for wear, I arrived at Lisa’s apartment. Thankfully, she’d already let the tea steep to strong perfection. My body welcomed the familiar comfort of her overstuffed red velvet sofas. Among other things, I really missed those sofas. My sofa was a donation from my dad and, although it was a very generous donation, it was far from comfortable. Perhaps that’s why he gave it to me? But it beat sitting on the floor because, without it, that’s exactly what I’d be doing.

Lisa brought a tray of tea and an assortment of biscuits into the living room and carefully placed it on the coffee table. She’d set out my favourite coffee mug, which had a circus bear on it holding a bunch of colourful balloons. Without asking, she repositioned the mug and poured a steaming cup of hot tea into it, passing it over to let me add the cream. She poured herself a cup and, without adding any cream or sugar, took a small sip, relaxing slightly as she settled into the sofa across from me. I was hung-over but I could still sense something wasn’t quite right with Lisa. Having been friends and roommates for several years we learned to read each other.

“I have to ask,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Is everything okay?” I pulled a package of cigarettes out from my handbag, offering one to Lisa. I definitely knew something was up when she declined my offer. The room was quiet as she struggled to find her voice.

"Is it okay if I smoke?" It felt odd asking and I'm not even sure why I did. In the years we lived together, I never had to ask if I could smoke. But today I knew something was different. It felt like the polite thing to do, given her mood. She looked up at me and nodded "yes" but didn't say anything. I put my tea down and lit my first cigarette of the day.

"Lisa, I can tell something's up," I said, pushing her to speak. Her silence was starting to worry me. "Is everything okay? Is it something to do with money?" She didn't answer, only shaking her head without looking up. She seemed transfixed on something invisible to me. "Is it your parents?" I further enquired, grasping at straws. Lisa's parents were older and I know she worried about them, as we all did. I tried to search my brain for what else it could be.

"No." Lisa continued to shake her head, but I was relieved to hear her finally speak. "No, it's not my parents." Finally, she looked up at me. "They're fine." I noticed a deep sadness in her eyes I'd never known before. I'd been living on my own for several months now, but there was a change in Lisa I didn't recognize. This was a different Lisa from the girl I lived with. When you live with somebody you don't see the gradual changes, like when they gain or lose a few pounds. It's when you stop seeing them every day, that's when you notice even the subtlest of change. I knew something was different, but what?

"I have cancer," Lisa blurted out, taking me completely by surprise. I stopped breathing. I felt a cold chill come over me. For a moment, I felt like I had tunnel vision. I searched her face for some sign that this was a joke, albeit a cruel one, but saw only pain mixed with anguish. For a split second, I felt the way she looked. It hurt like hell that she blurted it out like that but like ripping off a Band-Aid, perhaps there was no other way to do it. As my chest tightened, I realized I was holding my breath.

The "C" word hung in the air like a bad smell. I felt my skin prickle with cold and my hands grew clammy. Suddenly, I didn't feel like smoking anymore, stubbing my cigarette out in the ashtray as I got up to join Lisa on the other sofa. She didn't stop me from sitting down next to her. Nor did she stop me when I reached over to hug her. In fact, it was at that exact moment that Lisa let go of the tight grip on her

emotions and started to cry. We sat on the sofa, holding each other, literally for hours, the afternoon slowly drifting by, but neither of us taking any notice. We sat silently, listening only to the sounds of the city through the open windows, comforting each other.

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, Lisa asked if I wanted to stay for supper. She suggested we order in sushi, which sounded like a brilliant idea. Other than a few sips of tea, I hadn't eaten a thing all day. Finally, she was ready to talk.

"You probably have a lot of questions," she said, straightening herself out as though getting ready for an interrogation. "Let me tell you everything I know." I had no idea what was going on, but I needed to know. The initial shock had worn off, and now I needed answers. How could my best friend tell me out the blue, with seemingly no warning, that she had cancer? Or had the warning signs been there all along but I'd chosen to ignore them? I hadn't forgotten about Lisa's stay in the hospital when she had the "flu".

"You remember when I was in emergency?" Lisa asked, as if reading my thoughts.

"Yes," I replied, as though being tested.

"Well, I never really felt the same after that. I think it was like a warning sign." She readjusted herself on the sofa, plumping up one of the pillows in the process.

"Can I ask what kind of cancer it is?" I didn't want to jump the gun and pepper her with questions, but somehow knowing what kind of cancer it was might help me to better understand where to go from here. Nodding and smiling, she took a deep breath and exhaled loudly before answering my question. It was obvious from her expression that this was still very difficult for her, but necessary.

"It's colorectal cancer," she answered, smiling bleakly. She must have seen the myriad of questions written all over my face. "Even my doctor admits it's typically known as an "old man disease"," she said using air quotes, making us both giggle nervously. "But any old ideas about cancer don't apply anymore. In fact, my doctor said she has another patient who's only 21 years old and has colorectal..."

“What happened?” I asked, jumping in before Lisa could finish her sentence. “How’d you find out?” Lisa readied herself to answer my questions.

“Well, shortly after I got out of the hospital, I saw blood in my...” Lisa’s voice trailed off as she searched for the right word. She never used words like “shit” or “fart”, unlike me who adored bathroom humour. “I know this may sound gross, but I saw blood in my stool.” She paused momentarily, as she relived that horrible moment in her mind. I couldn’t imagine how difficult it must be to talk about it, so I let her speak in her own time.

“Anyway,” she finally continued, still shaking her head. “As you can imagine, I freaked out and immediately went to my doctor. She ordered a whole bunch of tests, including a colonoscopy. It was then that they discovered a small tumour on the inside wall of my colon.” I remained silent, listening intently as Lisa continued to recant the events that led up to today.

“I never told you because I was waiting for so many test results, and I didn’t want to make much ado about nothing, especially if the tests came back negative.” I nodded my head, acknowledging her decision. “I wanted to wait until I knew for sure.”

“Of course.” I assured her said. I wanted her to know I fully supported her choice to handle this in her own way.

“But I still have several more tests to do before the doctor can properly prescribe my treatment, and surgery, if required.”

My head was reeling from all this newfound information. A tumour? Treatment? Surgery? I knew what all of this could mean, but for the first time in my life I had to face it, for real. In my limited experience, these conversations were reserved for older people, like my parents. They’d both lost parents to cancer. They were wiser and better equipped to handle this kind of subject. I didn’t feel like a grown up yet.

I also knew nothing about colorectal cancer, other than it was oftentimes a fatal disease. My mind raced as I remembered laughing at the colon Cancer awareness commercials on television that featured people’s rear ends. I promised

myself I would never laugh at those commercials, ever again. Letting out a sigh, I searched my tired brain for the right words to say, but came up with nothing. In situations like these, what was the right thing to say? I couldn't think. Lisa continued.

"My doctor said if it's caught in the early stages, it's both treatable and operable and my chances of survival increase." I gasped at the word "survival". I felt my heart pounding in my chest as my throat tightened. I desperately wanted to be strong, at least for Lisa, but I couldn't hold back the tears no matter how hard I tried. My emotions were too raw. Lisa got up and went to the bathroom, returning with a box of tissues. She pulled out a tissue and handed it to me, resuming her seat next to me on the sofa.

"I have several more tests that have to be done over the next little while. I was hoping you could come with me?" I could hear in her voice it was more of a statement than a question. *Like she even had to ask*, I thought to myself. Finally, I managed to pull myself together.

"Of course, Lisa. Anything. You know I'm here for you. If there's anything you need, just ask." I practically blurted out. I didn't want to start crying again but Lisa so rarely asked anything of me, only for my friendship. I wanted to help her in any way I could, even if it was only to hold her hand.

"Actually, there is something I really need from you." Her mood turned serious again as she took my hands in hers, looking at me intently. "I need you to be strong. I can't carry both us through this. It's going to be hard enough for me to handle this; I simply can't be there for you. You'll be my leaning post throughout this. I know you want to cry, and no doubt you'll be angry and even confused at times." *No more than usual*, I mused to myself I tried to hold it together. I wiped away my tears with the tissue as Lisa continued to speak. "You can turn to Mattias, or Rod, for support. And I'm told there's an ongoing support group at the Cancer Clinic, if you're at all interested." I caught my breath but managed to hold back more tears. I had to give Lisa credit; she was handling this way better than I was, at least for the moment. "I have another colonoscopy scheduled for Monday morning," Lisa said, matter-of-factly. "I know it's not much notice."

“I’ll call Alannah and tell her I need some time off. I’m a temp, it’ll be fine.” At this point, it was safe to say both work and money were no longer a priority. Funny how priorities change when it involves mortality and life changing issues.

The phone rang, reminding us that we’d ordered Japanese take-away earlier. Lisa picked up the phone and buzzed in the delivery person.

“I’ll get through this,” Lisa announced, hanging up the phone. “I’m going to fight this “thing” every step of the way. I’m not done with this life yet!” It was absolutely remarkable how optimistic she was. She didn’t sound like a woman who’d just found out she had a life threatening disease. She sounded more like a woman who’d been given the kick in the rear, no pun intended, that she needed to once again embrace her life.



Like fall, winter came and went and the city blossomed into spring once more. As the months passed, Lisa’s friends rallied around her. In fact, so many of her friends offered to help out that we had to put together a roster to help us keep track of who was doing what. Some days, I was taking Lisa to chemotherapy, while other days I was on housekeeping duty. Her friends were on the clock 24/7 to ensure that she always had somebody with her, regardless of the day or time. And throughout all of this, Lisa showed remarkable strength and courage, making it seemingly easy to be her leaning post. Sometimes I felt like I wasn’t doing enough because, aside from driving her to the doctor, washing dishes or fetching her prescriptions, I felt that between her large group of friends, and her family, she pretty much had everything in hand. The only thing Lisa outwardly struggled with was coping with the side effects of her chemotherapy. Thankfully, however, she had medication for the nausea, and her chemotherapy treatments were only one week a month. However, the downside was the effects of the treatment were so strong it really took a toll on her physically. She’d lost a considerable amount of weight but as Lisa reminded us all, she had plenty to lose to begin with. But the one thing she never lost throughout her treatment – her amazing head of thick black curly hair.

As Lisa settled in to her routine of chemotherapy treatments, doctor visits and the barrage of constant testing, I eventually returned to full-time temp work, opting to stay at the University of British Columbia for the flexibility it offered and the decent pay. My job with Alannah Chadbourne was gone by the time I returned but the University had plenty of other great options for me to choose from. However, once I returned to work after taking several months off to help care for Lisa, I no longer felt the same motivation or focus that I once had. I was showing up for work physically but mentally my mind was elsewhere. I couldn't help but focus on the bigger picture of life, whatever that was.

For the first time, I was at a crossroads in my life and I didn't know which direction to go, or even how to consider the choices presented to me. Suddenly, everything I was doing seemed meaningless. Day in and day out, I sat at my desk and ask myself if this was it? My best friend was battling cancer, the biggest battle of her life, and with a courage and strength I'd never seen before. Every day she forced herself to carry on and always with a smile on her face. Here I was, healthy and fit with everything in life to look forward to, but I was stuck in a rut so deep that I couldn't seem to get myself out. I desperately wanted to look to Lisa for the answers to all my problems but she was on a different path from me. From now on, I had only myself to look to. The next few months would prove to be both the best of times, and the worst of times, for me. But as they say, sometimes you have to hit rock bottom in order to bounce back up again.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went to school I
didn't do to much rather
than go to school.**



WHERE TO GO (AND HOW TO GET THERE)

“Why don’t you just fuck right off!” The next few moments played out in slow motion. I could hear the words forming in my mouth but I couldn’t stop myself from saying them. My brain had disconnected from my mouth. The words hung in the air between us, the echo of them still ringing loudly in my ears. I knew by the look on my boss’s face that the next two words out of his mouth would be “you’re fired!”

I stood completely frozen, staring blankly back at my boss, Iain McGovern, the Associate Vice President of Land and Buildings Services at the University. He wasn’t much taller than me, which wasn’t saying much, and he spoke with a thick Australian accent (a heritage he was fiercely proud of). I had taken a short-term contract at the University to work for Iain and, after only one week, I was already preparing myself for the inevitable. I snapped back to reality when Iain finally spoke, breaking the nauseating silence.

“I’ve fired people for less, I’ll have you know!” I could tell by the tone of his voice he was absolutely livid, and perhaps even a bit hurt; but he stood his ground and waited for me to respond. With my brain still disengaged from my mouth, I was on a roll.

“Then fire me, Iain!” I practically yelled. “Do me this one courtesy and just bloody fire me!”

“I should,” he proclaimed. Even he looked slightly confused that he hadn’t fired me yet. “I should fire you!” he finished, raising his voice but still maintaining his

composure. He had a reputation as a leader on campus, and now I knew why; even though he was clearly very angry, unlike me, he still managed to behave like an adult.

“Then do it already,” I urged, annoyed that this conversation was going on longer than I wanted. “FIRE ME!” I yelled, throwing my arms up in exasperation. If I was going to be fired then I wanted it over with; like removing a Band-Aid, do it quickly so it’s relatively painless. Besides, it’s not like I wasn’t expecting it. But then it happened. Nothing could have prepared me for what Iain said next.

“Chrystala, I’m not going to fire you,” he said, matter-of-factly. “You may not believe this but you are exactly what this department needs. I want you to apply for this job permanently!” I can only imagine the expression I wore on my face; no doubt a look of shock mixed with puzzlement. I was completely thrown off my game. It literally took me a minute to regain my composure and pull my thoughts together. For a brief moment, I even thought he was playing a cruel joke.

“Why?” I asked, confused. “Why on God’s green Earth would you want me to do that?” I paused to let Iain respond, but he only smiled back at me. “Did you not hear what I just said to you, Iain? I told you to fuck off?” He shook his head and chuckled.

“Actually, fuck *right* off were your exact words.” He was smug. He loved it when he had the upper hand.

Instead of answering right away, I controlled the overwhelming urge to burst out laughing. After all, this was not exactly the type of conversation one has with their boss on a Monday morning, or any day for that matter. This was definitely not how I had envisioned starting my day. It probably didn’t help that I was a little hung-over.

Why hadn’t Iain fired me yet? I should be on a bus on my way home by now. If I hurried, I could still catch Regis and Kathie Lee. The silence had become awkward between us but thankfully Iain made the next move, interrupting my train of thought.

“I like your tenacity,” he finally said. “We could sure use a little more of that around here.” Not quite sure how to take this, I looked him straight in the eye to see if he was serious or not. Although, nothing about this day could surprise me anymore. But Iain really was serious about his proposition; he meant every word of it. For the first time in a very long time I was completely speechless.

Six days earlier, I came to this job with high hopes and aspirations. My recruiter told me the job was being posted on a permanent basis and that all resumes were welcome, including mine. For now, I would stay until the position was filled permanently. Truth be told, in the five days I’d been on the job, I was actually considering applying for it, even though I wasn’t sure if I wanted a permanent job. But it really wasn’t a bad job, despite the long commute by bus each day. On the positive side, there were only three of us working in the office – myself (the office secretary), Iain and Judith Novoa, a project manager. It was a welcomed change working in a smaller office, given the larger firms I was accustomed to. Most days, Judith and I were left on our own as Iain was rarely in the office. He spent most of his day strolling around campus, inspecting the countless university buildings, roads, parking lots and the land they were built on. That was his job. Iain’s long absences from the office meant Judith and I had plenty of free time to get acquainted, which usually consisted of several cigarette breaks and the occasional beer or two during lunch at the campus pub, The Singing Shark.

Working with Judith was easy, not to mention a lot of fun, which was a welcomed change. And I learned more about her in five days than I had about any other co-worker. Over beers one lunch hour at The Singing Shark, Judith told me the story of how her husband, Phil, won a multi-million dollar settlement against Starbucks Coffee. They used to live in Winnipeg and one year they went to Los Angeles for vacation. While in Los Angeles, they visited a Starbucks where Phil used the men’s washroom. After sitting down on the toilet, he realized that the toilet paper was not in its usual place but sitting on the toilet’s tank behind him. As he turned around to reach for the toilet paper, the toilet seat suddenly shifted from side to side,

causing his penis to be caught and crushed in between the seat and the top of the ceramic bowl. Ouch. Phil sued Starbucks and won \$2.5 million. After receiving their huge settlement, Judith and Phil moved to Paris where they lived lavishly, hanging out with film directors, actors and the like, until after only one year the money ran out. They decided to move to start over and moved back to Canada. Within a few weeks, Judith was working at the University with Iain McGovern. Not exactly a fairy tale ending but an interesting story all the same.

When I arrived at the office on Monday morning, Judith called in sick, leaving me alone with Iain for the first time. I wondered how my day would have played out if she had been at the office instead of home sick on the couch watching reruns of *Temptation Island*? I knew it was going to be “one of those days”, when shortly after arriving to work, I was startled to see Iain standing directly outside the window by my desk. I had no idea how long he’d been standing there, watching me. I quickly tried to think if I’d been doing anything that might be interpreted as “embarrassing”. Unconsciously, people sometimes do things they wouldn’t ordinarily do when they think nobody’s watching. Through the window I heard Iain say, “I can see you, you know.” I didn’t know Iain very well; perhaps he thought he was being funny? It was actually kind of creepy.

Now I found myself face to face with Iain, trying to figure out how I was going to get myself out of this mess I’d gotten myself into. Was he finally going to come to his senses and fire me? Or was he still serious about wanting me to apply for the position permanently? Could I really enjoy a job with no boundaries? It was only Monday; there was no telling what might come out of my mouth on Tuesday. Besides, I hadn’t forgotten about the window incident earlier that morning. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something not quite right about Iain. I knew I needed to follow my gut on this one.

In retrospect, telling my boss to “fuck right off” probably wasn’t the smartest decision I’d ever made. That morning, we’d been going over the details of his day and each instruction he gave, I wrote down and repeated back, only as a way of

demonstrating that I did in fact understand (and to ensure that I'd heard him correctly). Unfortunately for me, this method seemed to exasperate Iain. He acted as though I didn't understand what he was asking me to do. I've learned over the years that every boss is different, which oftentimes resulted in miscommunications. My habit of writing out each instruction, and repeating it back, became my way of covering my own ass. So I developed a system to eliminate any future miscommunications. But in this instance, it backfired on me. Eventually, he blurted out, "Obviously, I need to go over this with you *again* because it doesn't sound like you're getting it". It wasn't just *what* he said; it was *how* he said it. And at that precise moment, it came down to a simple case of being fed up with being treated like an idiot (to put it mildly). Everybody has a breaking point and clearly I'd reached mine. But, now it was time for damage control.

"You can't really be serious, Iain. You don't want me as your permanent assistant. You may find my tenacity refreshing today, but it'll wear thin after a while." I couldn't think of what else to say.

Iain, on the other hand, was still determined. Secretly, perhaps he was just as shocked as I was that somebody had the guts to tell him to fuck off to his face. And if he did fire me, maybe he thought it would emasculate him? Perhaps firing me would have the opposite effect and demonstrate to his superiors that he couldn't control his staff?

"I had a secretary once who used to pick out my ties for me. She always made sure I looked respectable. She would tell me when my jacket didn't match my trousers or if my tie was wrong." A smile spread over Iain's face as he recalled this story with fondness. I was relieved that he'd calmed down a little since our initial interaction.

I didn't want to upset him any more than I already had, but I needed to be honest with him. "That sounds more like a wife than a secretary. I'm not interested in picking out your ties, Iain. What you need is a "yes" girl. Trust me when I tell you I'm not that girl."

With that, Iain and I both agreed that I would stay until he hired a permanent secretary. I knew I would have to look for a new recruitment agency as I'd pretty much burnt this bridge down to the ground.

In the end, six weeks later, he rehired his former assistant, Felicia, who demanded an extra \$5,000 a year pay, that she be allowed to work remotely from home three days a week and that she receive five weeks' paid vacation each year, as opposed to the meager three weeks.

Felicia may not have said what I did on that fateful Monday, or at least not in so many words, but she certainly implied it. All I was left with was a tarnished resume, again, and no job. I had to find a new recruiter.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today is a holiday.
Wow.**

**PEOPLE RECRUITING**

Taking Yetta Binford's advice, I accepted a three-week contract at *Live Magazine*, a local health and nutrition magazine. Yetta, my marvelous new recruiter, had emigrated from South Africa nine years earlier and started up her own agency, People Recruiting. Primarily, she dealt with corporate versus legal jobs. But she employed an intimate group of faithful temps, myself now included, whom she farmed out for bargain-basement wages.

I spent seven and a half hours each day cold-calling over 3,000 health and nutrition stores across Canada. I was pitching a "complimentary" seminar hosted by the brass at *Live Magazine*, which was really just the President's way of selling his magazine to new subscribers. My biggest challenge was cold-calling people in the province of Quebec, because there everybody speaks French. I vaguely remembered learning French in grade 8, but somehow I managed to muddle my way through the list of French contacts.

Nutrition Store: Bonjour, merci d'appeler la Chambre de nutrition, comment peux je vous aide?

Chrystala: Bonjour, j'emappelle Chrystala avec *Live Magazine*. Parlez-vous Anglaise?

It's fair to say my French is horrendous, sounding more like a small child with a mouthful of marbles than an adult speaking an expressive foreign language. But, thankfully, the person on the other end of the phone was usually more than happy to speak English rather than endure listening to my failed attempt at French. That is, however, if they didn't hang up on me first.

I figured taking the job at *Live Magazine* might be a welcomed challenge from the world of law. The low pay was reflected by limited duties and responsibilities, but I was hopeful it would be worth the sacrifice. Besides, it was only a few weeks and it was time for a break from lawyers.

One particular morning, while pouring my second cup of coffee, a colleague sauntered into the kitchen. Being new at *Live Magazine*, I was still unfamiliar with many of the faces that strolled past my desk or into the kitchen on any given day. I decided it was time to break down the “stranger barrier”.

“Morning. My name is Chrystala.” I said, inviting conversation with a smile.

“Hey,” she acknowledged. “My name’s Bonita. You’re new here, right?” she asked, as though unsure herself. Not that *Live Magazine* employed a particularly large staff, but it was easy to get caught in the office silo and not know somebody you worked with.

“That’s right. I’m just here for a few weeks,” I volunteered. “I’m pitching the free seminar. Which department do you work in?” I asked, in an attempt to get to know Bonita.

“Subscriptions,” she replied as she grabbed a coffee mug and poured herself the last cup from the urn. While not big on words, I could tell I’d like Bonita. She reminded me of Bitch Face Bonnie, just a little.

“How long have you worked here?”

“Not long,” she answered. “A couple months, maybe?”

“Where did you used to work,” a common question when getting acquainted in the work-place kitchen.

“I was in marketing before.”

“Marketing?” I asked. Curious.

“Yeah,” she said. “Why?”

“I know somebody in marketing,” I said, unsure as to why I remembered that unimportant piece of information.

“Who’s that?” Bonita pushed.

"Delmer Belleveau?" I asked, confident she would have no clue who that was. But I couldn't have been more wrong.

"Sorry, did you say Delmer Belleveau?"

"Yeah, why? Do you know him?"

"Know him? That prick? Oh yeah," she confidently confided. "I used to work for him." Suddenly, a strange look came across her face, like I'd touched on a hot-button topic. But it was too late, I was far too curious to drop the subject.

"When was that?" I asked casually, hoping it wasn't too much of a sore spot for her and would want to discuss it. Already, I was anxious to know more!

"Oh shit, that was a while ago now," she pondered over her answer. Thankfully, she hadn't totally shut the conversation down, at least not yet.

"What a sec," Bonita said, a sense of familiarity in her voice. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Chrystala," I answered. Her jaw dropped open and the expression on her face suddenly changed.

"Holy shit! No fucking way?" Bonita practically yelled, although mindful of the fact that she was still at work. She stood motionless for a moment, holding me in her gaze as though she'd just met a celebrity.

"What?" I pleaded, not sure what was happening. She started laughing, making it difficult to speak. I stood there, smiling and laughing along with Bonita, although I didn't know why. Finally, she stopped laughing long enough to speak.

"You are *not* going to believe this but I remember *the card*," she started, still holding me hostage in her gaze. "You sent that card, remember? The "Thank You" card, the one with *the picture* in it!" she squealed with delight! And then it happened; the penny finally dropped.

"Oh my God," I stammered. I hadn't forgotten about that day, but part of me had tried to. I couldn't believe what was unfolding before me! It was almost too good to be true. I couldn't wait to regale Lisa with *this* story!

"That was *by far* the most hilarious thing I'd ever seen!" Bonita divulged. "In fact, you were a celebrity around the office!" Naturally, I was flattered by this last

tidbit of information. When Lisa and I decided to send the now-infamous “Thank You” card, we never imagined what the outcome would be. As it turned out, Bonita had opened the card first, which made sense as she was Delmer’s secretary and opened all his mail. But what I didn’t know was, she despised Delmer so much that she scanned the photo first before giving it to Delmer, and in the process she posted a copy of it on the corkboard in the office kitchen. But it wasn’t long before Bonita quit her job, which thankfully, she disclosed, was not as a result of the photo. She said opening that card and seeing the photo that dropped out of it had only cemented in her mind that it was time to move on.

If ever there was a happy ending to a bad situation, for both of us, this was it!

After that, Bonita and I became good friends around the office. I rejoiced in our office alliance because, around her, I felt like a celebrity. In the end, we didn’t stay in touch after I left *Live Magazine*, but I’ll never forget Bodacious Bonita, who never let me forget that sometimes life works in very mysterious ways and that karma is alive in well in the Universe.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went to see my Nana and Grampa
and we had ham, pickles and potatoes.
Lunch.**



TURKEY BOMB

“I think it’s a fabulous idea!” I chimed in. Over a pot of tea at Lisa’s apartment, Mattias announced his brilliant plan to host a “Cancer Relief” benefit party at the Konos Room. His idea was two-fold: invite all the people who helped support Lisa during the difficult months of her chemotherapy as a way of saying “thank you”, and host a silent auction to help raise the extra money she needed to pay for her holistic treatments (which weren’t covered by her medical insurance).

“Me too,” Lisa agreed. “I think it’s a wonderful gesture. Thank you. It’s my anniversary, you know.”

“Really?” Matthias began. “Has it really been a year already?”

It had been a year since Lisa’s diagnosis with colorectal cancer. The small tumor they’d found in her colon was eradicated thanks to the aggressive chemotherapy treatments. And although surgery wasn’t ruled out, for the time being she was on her way to being cancer free.

“Wow. I can’t believe how fast the last year has gone,” I said, recalling the day Lisa told me she had cancer. It seemed so long ago now.

“I feel like I’ve been given a second chance,” Lisa confided. “I think a party at the Konos Room would be perfect!”

“Awesome!” Matthias cheered. “Let’s get the party wheels in motion then, shall we?”

Within a few weeks, we'd reserved the Konos Room, book several local bands and approached a multitude of local businesses for donations to the silent auction. And with her artistic talent, Lisa designed the poster. Most surprising of all, Mattias asked me to host the event! Even going as far as suggesting I open the show with a stand-up comedy routine (should I be brave enough!). I had no clue what I was getting myself into, but I happily (if not naively) agreed. Stand-up is the ego's last stand and it was the scariest thing I would ever do, but then there's nothing like a bit of fear to remind you you're alive.

Over the next several weeks, Lisa and her posse of friends, including Mattias, Rod and myself, rallied forces and pulled together the many details and fine-tuning for the party. In the meantime, I began writing my comedy routine. I'd stopped watching standup comics years earlier, although live comedy used to be a weekly staple of my party diet. But as the years passed so did my desire to see standup comics. Now, I was doing my homework and nearly every night I channel-surfed my television for comedy acts. I even embraced Saturday Night Live again, having stopped watching after Chris Farley's death. I kept a clipboard by my bed so when I awoke from a nightmare (which usually consisted of me being pelted with rotten fruit and vegetables in some old vaudevillian theatre), I could quickly write down my ideas and just as quickly fall back to sleep.

I'm a firm believer that everybody should try something that scares them at least once in their life, be it skydiving, learning to be a trapeze artist, or even stand-up comedy. I realize it's not a new concept, but it's one I try to embrace. I'd always wanted to try stand-up comedy, having always had a deep appreciation for stand-up comics. But it wasn't until the frantic moments leading up to my comedy debut that I suddenly realized why I'd never tried to tell jokes on stage before. I was scared shitless!

During my comedy research, one of the first things I observed about many of the notable comics is that they used gimmicks on stage. Howie Mandell carried his infamous "hand bag", Judy Tanuchi played her accordion and Steve Martin had an

arrow through his head. I don't recall how I came up with the idea, but I decided my gimmick would be a cape made out of white satin wedding gown material. When I finally made it on stage, I announced that my white satin cape was probably the closest thing my mother would ever see me in wedding dress.

Mattias had, not surprisingly, pulled together the biggest and best party any of us had ever seen. Over 250 guests were invited (and not surprisingly even more showed up) and over a dozen incredible gifts were generously donated for the silent auction, including a Native drum, original artwork by local artists and locally hand knitted sweaters, scarves and mittens. Several live acts were set to hit the stage, and even Mattias would perform his own stylistic vocals. I was the host, and to kick off the show I started with my live stand-up comedy act. As my mind raced and my heart pounded dangerously fast, I managed to swallow my stomach back down long enough before running through the audience and up on center stage (accompanied by the song "Joy" by Apollo 100 playing loudly in the background).

As I grabbed the microphone with shaky hands, I stood frozen by fear, staring out at the sea of faces. I don't recall engaging my brain but suddenly I was speaking.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name is Chrystala and I'm originally from Vancouver Island."

Much to my relief, the audience starting cheering, and I hadn't even made a joke yet! Their encouragement gave me the fuel I needed to keep going.

"I'm from Courtenay on Vancouver Island. There's a sign on the highway when you drive into Courtenay that says: "Welcome to the Recreation Capital of British Columbia" but somebody changed the sign more aptly to read "The Recreational Drug User Capital of BC"". Cue the laughter. As I became more comfortable behind the microphone, my heart slowed down and stopped pounding in my ears. And then the unthinkable happened. As a stand-up comedienne, you have to be prepared for this. But, deep down, I was hoping I wouldn't have to be.

“You think you’re pretty funny, don’t chya!” I immediately recognized his loud drunken slurring voice. It was my worst nightmare, but I turned to face my heckler in the crowd.

“Look,” I nervously started, addressing my heckler. “I only have a few minutes to make an ass out of myself. You have your whole life.” The audience nervously cheered.

“You suck!” my heckler responded. I tried to maintain my composure as I nervously attempted to think of what to say next.

“Well, that may be,” I began. “But at least my pants aren’t down around my ankles.” Admittedly, only a select few in the audience had any clue what my joke meant. But for those who didn’t, they would soon find out.

“Oh yeah?” he yelled back at me. “At least I’m not *shallow!*” I sensed the audience was growing increasingly uncomfortable. I desperately wanted to take back my act, but I knew I was failing miserably. I had to think quick. Being able to respond quickly and intelligently was the true test of a stand-up comedienne (not that I wanted to test this theory). Instead of continuing the painful banter with my heckler, I said the first thing that popped into my head.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to deal with assholes – I’m a secretary not a proctologist.” Thankfully, that line seemed to put the audience at ease. Unfortunately, it didn’t have the same effect on my heckler. He jumped up from his chair and began to stagger his way up through the crowd. As he made his way up on stage, I decided the only thing to do was let him make a fool of himself on his own. He certainly didn’t need my help.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I enthusiastically announced. “The incomparable Delmer Belliveau!” As I introduced my heckler (and arch nemesis), I bowed graciously and quickly handed him the spotlight. But before I could make a speedy exit stage left, Delmer aggressively grabbed the microphone from my hand. What followed can only be described as a drunken barrage of pathetic banter. I could hear

the restless audience starting to heckle him as he tried not to stumble around the open stage.

“Oh sure,” he said loudly into the microphone, causing feedback. “She’ll talk to *you*, but she won’t talk to *me*.” It was evident that Delmer was still harbouring ill will towards me. It didn’t take long for somebody in the audience to give him a dose of his own medicine.

“You suck! Get off stage!” somebody from the crowd shouted and the audience went wild. Suddenly, everybody was heckling Delmer. For a moment, he looked dazed and confused. Not one to pass up a golden opportunity, Rod jumped in.

“Hey Delmer! Why don’t you drop your pants again? We’d *all* love to see that!” The audience didn’t know whether to cheer or jeer. Not surprisingly, Rod had said exactly what I was thinking. Ever since that fateful day in the Flagrante Lounge, I kept a picture of a very drunken, and pantless, Delmer on my fridge. It never ceased to garner a few laughs.

Playing out like a scene in a movie, the sound guy immediately joined in by playing David Rose’s infamous song *The Stripper*. The audience went wild! Suddenly, the entire room erupted into a chant: “Stripper! Stripper! Stripper!” Even I couldn’t resist, and immediately joined the now ravenous crowd. I could see Rod making his way up to the front of the stage, his camera in hand.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you!” Delmer tried to yell over the roar of the now feverish audience. They wanted a stripper, and I prayed deep down Delmer wouldn’t disappoint.

As *The Stripper* song continued to play, Delmer unceremoniously dropped the microphone and then his pants. The crowd exploded into raucous cheers and cameras began flashing throughout the room. It was official; I’d lost control of my audience. The evening had gone in a completely different direction than any of us had planned. The initially polite and gracious audience had turned into a room full of lecherous heathens. It was fantastic!

Standing beside the stage, I buckled over in laughter. Even though Delmer had hijacked my act, this was by far the best punch line ever! My role as stand-up comedienne was to warm up the audience. And from where I stood, the audience was well and truly ready for an evening of entertainment, whatever that may be. But Delmer wasn't done, at least not yet. Fueled by the now voracious audience, he was about to take things a step further.

"You like what you see?" A pantless Delmer goaded the audience, who responded with a roar of laughter and applause. And then suddenly, without notice, Delmer projectile vomited across the stage. And we all know what happens when one person vomits – more follow. Like a mass exodus reminiscent of that famous scene in the movie "Carrie" after the bucket of blood landed on her head, half the audience ran out of the building shrieking, hoping to escape the violent scene that was taking place on stage. But for those who stayed, the moments that followed were caught on camera.

It was then that I realized I had no other choice but to take back my so-called "act" and try to rescue the evening. Without hesitating, I ran back up on stage and immediately began escorting Delmer to safety. For a brief moment, I almost felt sorry for him. He was a complete mess. He was holding up his pants but his now crumpled blue dress shirt was covered in vomit. Not only that, he wore a mixed expression of shock and embarrassment. Putting my arm around his shoulder to guide him off the stage, I smiled weakly at him. I knew I'd be left with the arduous task of cleaning him up. Unfortunately for Delmer, he'd once again taken what could have been an incalculable joke to a whole other level (and not a level that any of us wanted to go to). The "joke" was officially over, as was my very first (and last) time as a stand-up comedienne.



With both Delmer and the stage cleaned up, and the evening nearly over, everybody who participated in the fundraiser was left with a feeling of

accomplishment and deep-rooted friendship. It was truly amazing to see how many people Lisa had touched throughout her lifetime, and how many people wished her well and wanted to help, in whatever capacity they could. And I wasn't the only one touched by this overwhelming sentiment; so was Lisa. With only one more act to take the stage, and the silent auction finished, Lisa took the stage to express her deep gratitude for the phenomenal show of support for her.

"I stand up here tonight humbled and proud; proud to call each of you my friend," she began, stopping to stifle a giggle. "Yes, even you Delmer." The audience erupted into laughter. Who could forget the earlier events of the evening? Waiting for the crowd to quiet down, she continued.

"They say friendship is a blessing and, after tonight, I know how truly blessed I am. I want to thank each and every one of you for helping to make this evening a success. But most importantly, I want to thank each and every one of you for being my friend, and helping me to get through one of the biggest challenges of my life. My doctors said it was important to surround myself with the healing power of positive thinking, and to find a positive support group to help get me through this. Well, I did that alright, tenfold." The audience erupted into cheering and applauding. Lisa had that effect on people.

"A lot has happened in my life over the past year. A lot of changes; some good, some not so good." Lisa made a face before continuing making the audience laugh. "And I truly believe that because of all your support I beat this thing called cancer..." Again, the audience broke into loud applause, with a few wolf whistles thrown in. You could always tell who the small town folks were; they were the ones who knew how to wolf whistle. But even though the audience was cheering Lisa on, they also hung on to every word she spoke.

"I've been given a second chance. A second chance at life, and I'm not going to ever take it for granted. I love life so much, and I will do anything it takes to stay here as long as I can. I've decided to follow my heart and to follow my dreams. In a few weeks I'll get the all clear from my doctor," Lisa raised her thumb in a show of

positivity, the audience responding with waves of cheers. “And then I’m moving to one of my favourite places in the world, besides here of course, Turkey.” The packed-to-capacity crowd was louder now than ever, but they were drowned out by Lisa’s words echoing in my head. *She’s moving to Turkey?* Did she really just say that?

“Thank you again, each of you, for your caring and support. Honestly, I could never have beaten this thing without you. Enjoy the rest of the evening!” Lisa threw her arms up in the air and for a moment held her Jesus pose. Bending forward, she took a deep bow, the now boisterous audience of friends and family championing her. Suddenly, I felt very alone even though I was surrounded by hundreds of Lisa’s adoring fans. As I stood amongst the crowd, being jostled and pushed as several people tried to get closer to the stage, I began feeling claustrophobic. I turned around to get my bearings on the exit and, spotting the door, I made my way through the crowd. As I reached the door, Mattias spotted me. Clearly, he had the same idea; to escape the confines of the packed-to-capacity room and get outside for a cigarette.



As we stood outside the club, silently smoking our cigarettes, I tried to search for answers. I knew Mattias felt the same as me, yet neither of us spoke. On one hand, I was thrilled for Lisa. But, on the other hand, I didn’t want her to leave. We nearly lost her once; I didn’t want to risk losing her again. Turkey seemed like a world away. What if I never saw her again? Mattias and I turned around as we heard the club entrance door push open.

“Ah, there you are. I’m glad I found you two.” Lisa stood in the doorway, hesitating a moment as though waiting for an invitation before stepping out onto the sidewalk.

“Mind if I join you two?”

“No, not at all, come join us...we just having a smoke.” Mattias flicked his cigarette butt out onto the street and went up to Lisa, giving her a big hug. I debated

whether to give Lisa a hug or not, but decided to give her and Mattias a bit of space, at least for the moment.

“Guys, I know this is a lot to take in.” Lisa let out a small laugh. “It’s a lot even for me to take in!” Mattias and I both nodded in support as Lisa continued.

“I would have told you about my decision before tonight but I wasn’t even sure myself until I took the stage. I wanted to make sure it was really what I wanted.” She paused for a moment, allowing us time to absorb what she was saying.

“My home is here, with you and my family, but my heart is also telling me to go to Turkey. I have an affinity for that place; it calls out to me. It’s not something I can put into words. But I have to do this. You understand why I’m doing this, right?” Lisa’s decision was made yet she understood how difficult it was for us. She’s my best friend and deserves all the happiness in the world, yet the selfish side of me screams out the fact that without Lisa I am completely alone. But I also recognized the journey she needs to take and it’s not about me. How could I be so selfish as to not support her in her decision to move to Turkey and follow her heart?

“Besides,” Lisa said, interrupting my train of thought. “You can come and visit me anytime. No doubt all I’ll be able to afford to rent there is an abandoned one-room cave in Cappadocia but I’m sure we can all squeeze in!” We burst out laughing, breaking any tension that may have hung between us.

“I’ll miss you.” I went up to Lisa, finally giving her the hug I had so desperately wanted to give her when she first came outside, but couldn’t.

“I know. I’ll miss you too.” Lisa hugged me back.

“Can anyone join in or is this a private party?” We turned to see Rod and Skye leaving the club, making their way towards us.

“Group hug!!” We all cheered in unison. As the five of us stood in a huddle, outside The Konos Room on a deserted sidewalk in the middle of the night, we all knew that this would be the last time we’d all be together like this. But instead of

acknowledging it, we stayed outside, lingering for as long as we could, talking and laughing, and embracing the moment before finally breaking the spell.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**Today I went to school
and at school I had gym.**

***MINI-MELTDOWN***

After only two temp jobs with Yetta Binford, I decided to branch out and investigate other temp agencies in the city. I would have continued working with Yetta but unfortunately I burnt a bridge at *Live Magazine* by insulting the receptionist. After enduring her wrath over a two-week period, I made the fatal mistake of calling her a bitch on my last day. Subconsciously, I knew I'd overstepped a boundary by saying it, but damn it felt good! In my defense, she proclaimed to anyone who would listen that "everything that came out of my mouth was fluff". True or not, I'd endured a barrage of nonsensical insults from her, so when she revealed this useless piece of information on my last day, I decided, once again, to disengage my brain and say the first thing that popped into my head. Needless to say, she called Yetta, who decided it was best if we parted ways. Which brings me back to where my story started.

I interviewed with Ugly Betsy at Legal Recruitment on a Friday the 13th. I've never been the superstitious type, but perhaps I should have been? I had no way of knowing it would be my last interview with a legal recruiting agency. The interview, which can best be described as the worst interview of my entire career, left me scarred, bruised and beaten. However, remarkably, there was a silver lining to all of this. It was the push in a new direction I desperately needed.



After escaping the evil clutches of Ugly Betsy, I found myself at my safe haven – the liquor store. After purchasing a cheap bottle of Chilean wine, I left the liquor store and tossed the busker some change. He sat on an old yellow milk crate and

continued to play “Here Comes the Sun”, the sound of his beat up six-string guitar drowning out his voice. Taking notice of me for the first time, the busker looked up and gave me a wink and a nod as I began to make my way home. Knowing Lisa was meeting me, I managed to hold back the bottled-up anger and frustration long enough to make it home. I walked through the door of my apartment and immediately put the wine in the fridge to chill. As I closed the fridge door, I noticed my answering machine on the kitchen counter. My heart leapt as I saw the flashing light indicating I had a new message.

“Holy crap!” I said, jumping back from the answering machine as though possessed by an evil spirit. “It can’t be Ugly Betsy?” I thought out loud. I swallowed hard, unsure of why I thought it might be her in the first place. Granted, I hadn’t made the most graceful exit when I left Legal Recruitment, but the last thing I wanted was to hear her obnoxious voice on my answering machine punishing me yet again. Reluctantly, I pressed the “message” button. As my answering machine whirled and beeped, I leaned back against the kitchen counter, waiting for the machine to finally tell me who called.

“Hey Chrystala. It’s me, Lisa. I’m just waiting for my laundry to come out of the dryer. I’ll be there in about 30 minutes, tops. Hang in there. I’ll see you shortly darling.” *Beeeeeeep. Bummer*, I thought to myself. I was really struggling to hold it together. Knowing I was left on my own for another half hour was frightening. I needed my best friend to console me.

Slowly making my way from the kitchen to my bedroom, I decided to change out of my uncomfortable interview clothes. But, before I could even take my blazer off, I threw myself onto my bed and began sobbing uncontrollably.

“How the hell did I get here?” I questioned through gritted teeth, berating myself for making such a colossal mess of everything. At that very moment, I hated everything about my life and all the lousy choices I’d made that all brought me to here. How could I have done exactly what I told myself I would never ever do? How could I have wasted away my entire life? What valuable lesson was there to learn from having one of the most pungent interviews of my so-called career? All it did was

remind me that I'd thrown away the best part of my life for people and jobs that didn't matter. Distraught and crying, I didn't even care if my neighbors could hear me. Not that it mattered, since most of them, unlike me, were probably at work anyways.

Lisa's decision to move to Turkey was more than I could take. Just as she'd predicted, she was given the all-clear from her doctor. She was definitely moving to Turkey to start her life over, leaving me to somehow pick up the shattered pieces of my pathetic life to carry on, without her and alone. She was my one true friend and now she was doing exactly what she wanted with the sort of emotional abandon I so deeply wished I possessed. I lacked the inner confidence and strength that Lisa had and, for the first time, I envied her. She had the one thing I felt I never would – the knowledge of knowing that she was doing exactly what she was meant to do. Against so many odds, she'd beaten cancer and now she was about to embark on an even bigger journey. She was on her life's path and she knew exactly where it would lead, and she was making it happen. The day she decided to move to Turkey was the first day of the rest of her life (not to sound too cliché but Lisa used to have a poster in her apartment with that quote. I would lie in bed most nights and stare at it. Needless to say, the quote left an indelible impression on me). Lisa's energy was being thrown into living her life exactly as she planned it. All my energy was spent throwing myself a pity party.

Eventually, my tears ran dry and with my makeup running down my face, and my gray pinstriped pantsuit well and truly wrinkled, I somehow managed to pull myself together to make my way back to the kitchen. I knew what it felt like to have an anxiety attack, having had one years earlier, but I didn't see the signs or symptoms of what I was about to experience.

Alone in my kitchen, I began having what can only be described as a total meltdown. Out of seemingly nowhere, I was overcome with rage, blinded by total fury, spurred on by the feeling of absolute despair and utter sadness. An overpowering feeling of destruction took over what little self-control and rational thought I still had. Grabbing the first thing I saw, I lifted the small cooking pot that was sitting atop my ceramic stovetop, and raised it above my head. With

unrecognizable force and power, I brought it smashing down onto the stovetop. As it played out in slow motion, I wanted desperately to stop myself, but by the time the small pot came crashing down with every ounce of force I could muster, it was too late. I felt my rage transfer from my brain, travel down my arm and through the small pot. I helplessly watched as the ceramic stovetop shattered into hundreds of tiny little fragments. Large and small bits of dark red ceramic glass went flying in all different directions, landing all around me. I stood frozen, staring at the huge mess I'd just made. I had no idea I was so strong, or that one brutal hit could cause the stovetop to break so easily. But in that one instantaneous moment of rage, I managed to completely destroy the top of my ceramic stovetop, rendering it totally and utterly useless. Little did I know that this pointless act of destruction would end up being the best thing I could have done and could very well have saved my life.



“Frank, it’s Chrystala in apartment 802.” There was a pregnant pause as Frank tried to compute who I was. It wasn’t noon yet but no doubt he hadn’t waited like I had to enjoy a drink or two. Thankfully it didn’t take him long to recognize my voice. I was dreading having to call my landlord and tell him what I had done to the stovetop, but I knew I had to make the call. It was time for me to grow up and face the music.

“Oh yeah, what’s up?” he asked. I could hear him light a cigarette. Good idea, I thought. I think I’ll join him. It might make it easier for me to say what I have to say if I was smoking as well.

“I have a confession to make, and you’re not going to like it,” I said, trying to ease both of us into what I knew would inevitably be a painful conversation. Frank seemed distracted on the other end of the phone and didn’t respond.

“I’m really sorry, Frank, but I broke the ceramic stovetop,” I explained quickly, squinting as though anticipating being hit with a snowball. But that seemed to get his attention. Through the phone I could hear him telling somebody to shut up.

“Whaddya mean you broke the stovetop?” he barked. I could hear the anger in his voice, but he wanted answers so luckily for me, he was holding back the big guns. I’d only seen Frank angry at me twice before: once when I stole his parking spot and once for a noise complaint. But deep down, he was a pussycat and if I said the right things I knew I could talk him down.

I gave Frank an alternate version of what led me to break the ceramic stovetop. I told him I was trying to take a large metal container filled with coins down from the cupboard above the stove; unfortunately, the heavy container slipped in my hands and crashed down onto the stovetop, thus smashing it into tiny little bits.

“What the hell were you doing with a huge container of coins for Christ’s sake?” Frank bellowed into the phone.

“I was saving it up to donate to my nephew’s soccer camp.” I lied so convincingly I halfway believed it myself. He seemed to buy my version of the story (it probably helped that I started to cry). Convinced that I hadn’t broken the stovetop on purpose, he came to my rescue and said he would “deal with it”.

Relieved, I hung up the phone and immediately went to my fridge for my chilled bottle of cheap white wine. With the rush of adrenaline leaving my system, I couldn’t help but giggle as I spotted the now dog-eared picture stuck to my fridge of Delmer Belliveau – his pants down around his ankles. How many times had Lisa and I reminisced over that picture? Standing in my kitchen, staring at Delmer’s pathetic pose, I felt a slight pang of remorse. Not because I’d taken the picture. I’m a firm believer in capturing those “magical” moments on film and preserving them for years to come. I’m very sentimental. But I felt remorse for the loss of my youth. I yearned for the “good old days” again. I yearned for the days when everything somehow seemed less complicated and simple. I wasn’t ready to take on being an adult, at least not yet. I felt as worn out and dog-eared as the picture stuck to my fridge. But, as my mother used to say, youth is wasted on the young.

Letting out a deep sigh, I reached for the fridge door, remembering why I’d come into the kitchen. I was startled by the phone ringing, pulling me away from my

thoughts. I'd almost forgotten that Lisa was coming over. Quickly answering the phone, I was relieved to hear her voice. She was downstairs and eager to hear all about my job interview.



"So let me get this straight," Lisa said before taking a sip of wine. We sat beside each other on my ugly black velvet sofa. I don't know why, but cheap wine always tasted better at Lisa's place. She swirled the mouthful of wine in her mouth as though about to launch into a description of its bouquet and flavor. Swallowing, she continued.

"You told Ugly Betsy to fuck herself and then ran out of the interview?" Remarkably, the way Lisa said it, it actually didn't sound that bad. She always had a way of making even the worst situation seem okay.

"Yup, that pretty much sums it up." I tried not to laugh for the sheer embarrassment of it. I couldn't believe what a weird day I was having. I was having one of "those days", where I wished I'd never gotten out of bed. But then again, it was Friday the 13th.

"But before running out the door, you tripped and fell on a chair in reception and vomited on the floor?" Lisa began to giggle and I could tell from her expression, and not just from the sheer absurdity of my story, she was about to break into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Letting go, we began laughing hysterically. Tears of laughter rolled down our cheeks and it seemed like every time we looked at each other we laughed even harder. I now know how the expression "side splitting" came to be; I hadn't laughed this hard in a long time and it felt so good I literally thought my sides were going to split. Eventually, the laughter subsided and we both took a long drink from our glasses. Getting up, I went to the fridge and decided to bring the entire bottle of wine into the living. Who was I kidding?

"Oh dear," Lisa finally spoke as she tried to wipe away the stream of tears from her face. "That is by far the funniest fucking thing I have ever heard!" I threw back

my head and groaned, partly from embarrassment and partly from disbelief that Lisa actually found it so funny.

“Seriously!” Lisa said in an attempt to convince me. “I’ve heard bad interview stories before but this by far ranks as the best one I’ve ever heard.” She was right and if ever there was a sign that my temping days were over, this was it.

“Well, in my defense,” I interjected. “I didn’t exactly vomit...it was more like dry heaving.” I tried to dress up my situation but even dry heaving sounded pathetic. Either way, we launched into another fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Trying to regain her composure, Lisa continued. “Was that before or after you hugged Ugly Betsy’s assistant Tamarah and gave her your deepest sympathies?” Lisa was probably one of the funniest people I knew and, given the opportunity, she could turn just about any event into a humorous anecdote. She always believed in the healing power of humour.

“Before!” I exclaimed. I surprised even myself when I hugged Tamarah, but it’s interesting what one will do when provoked and fueled by anger and adrenaline. I could see Lisa was trying to control her laughter as she held her side with one hand and her wine glass in the other.

“Well, I’m just sorry things didn’t go well for you today,” she said with genuine sincerity in her voice. While I really appreciated her sentiment, I just wished she’d gotten here sooner.

“Thanks, Lisa,” I replied. “But my “Ugly Betsy” story is only the half of it.” Lisa raised her eyebrows. I looked around the coffee table for my cigarettes and quickly spotted them. Clearly, I was looking for a distraction before launching into the second half of my story.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” I still felt the necessity to ask since Lisa quit. She nodded her head “yes”.

“Actually,” I said, putting the pack of cigarettes back down on the coffee table. “I need to show you something.” With that, I got up off the sofa and motioned for Lisa

to follow me as I made my way into the kitchen. Like one of Bob Barker's¹⁹ models from "The Price Is Right", I stood beside my shattered stovetop, using my hands to artfully demonstrate what I wanted to draw Lisa's attention to. As she drew closer to the stove and examined the unsightly mess, her jaw dropped open.

"Whoa," she said under her breathe before looking up at me for clarification. "What the hell happened? Are you okay?" She smiled but I could see a look of concern in her eyes. I bowed my head slightly before launching into the full story. As painful as it was to recant the climactic aftermath of the worst interview of my life, I also felt a sense of relief as I unloaded the burden of what I'd done. Instinctively, Lisa gave me one of her signature bear hugs and, for a brief moment, I felt like I could stay in the protective fold of her arms forever. But the truth was, I had to face the consequences of my actions and try to somehow find a way to forgive, forget and move on.



A bottle of wine later, a very frustrated Frank called me back to let me know he'd contacted Trail Appliances about replacing the ceramic stovetop. Much to my shock and horror, it cost \$1,000 to replace, which Frank insisted I was paying for. But Frank wasn't just pissed off about that. By calling Trail Appliances about the stovetop he discovered there was a faulty part on the stove that had been recalled by the manufacturer. One of the burner switches was faulty and could spontaneously catch fire. He would have to repair all of the new stoves in the building. Otherwise, if the stove caught fire the building insurance would be null and void. Who knew that my moment of madness could very well have saved my life and the lives of the other tenants in the building?

"The manufacturer is sending a replacement part to you directly; I'll deal with the other stoves. In the meantime, I'm washing my hands of this. When the recall part comes in, give Trail Appliances a call. The replacement ceramic stovetop should be in by then, too. Both should take about a week. They'll send somebody out to fix

¹⁹ Bob Barker is the former host of the American television show "The Price is Right", from 1972 to 2007.

it,” Frank said in a dead-pan voice and with some authority. It was evident he’d already had too many drinks to be properly dealing with this situation.

“Thank you so much Frank. I owe you one. I really do,” I gushed into the phone, but Frank was having none of it. He grumbled something inaudible under his breath before gruffly broadcasting over the phone, “Just deal with it!” And with that, he loudly slammed down the receiver in my ear.



The week passed and, as promised, the replacement part for the defect in my stove arrived. I contacted Trail Appliances to confirm the part had arrived and the lovely Brenda in parts and services told me that a repairman would show up at my place sometime between noon and 2:00 p.m. on Friday. Thankfully, I had enough money left on my credit card to pay for the stovetop, which saved me from the embarrassment from having to tell my mom what a bad tenant I was. I cringed at the thought of having to borrow the money. But it also meant I was flat broke and had no extra money for the bare necessities, such as cigarettes and wine.



I was unemployed, so it wasn’t a problem for me to hang around on a Friday afternoon waiting for the stove repairman to show up. Surprisingly, shortly after 12:00 p.m., my phone rang. It was the repairman, advising that the intercom system at the front of my building was broken. Unfortunately, this meant I had to go downstairs and personally let him in to the building. *What else could go wrong?* I asked myself, not wanting an answer.

I made my way down to the lobby and went to the front door, opening it to see if I could spot the repairman. As I swung open the door, I spotted the Trail Appliances’ van parked out front, but no repairman.

“Sorry about that, somebody let me into the building when I couldn’t get buzzed in.” I swung around to follow a voice behind me. He stood with his bag of tools and a clipboard, smiling.

"I hope you don't mind," he continued. "I figured I would wait for you in the lobby." *That's weird, I thought to myself, I hadn't noticed him when I walked through the lobby.*

"You wouldn't want to fix the intercom system too, would ya?" I asked sardonically. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to shake off my bad mood, I tried to backtrack.

"No problem," I responded, mustering up as much cheer as humanly possible. "That's totally fine." I returned the smile and extended my hand to his. "My name is Chrystala. Shall we go upstairs?" He shook my hand.

"My name is Adam," he introduced himself. He had a kind face and calmness about him. If I didn't know better, I could have sworn I'd met him before.

We rode the elevator up to the 8th floor, chatting about the weather and how busy the traffic always seemed to get on Fridays. As we entered my apartment, Adam took his shoes off and pointed to my kitchen.

"That looks like my room there," he laughed, making me smile. A repairman with personality seemed like an unlikely match, yet he appeared to possess both with ease and an underlying confidence. I trusted him completely with the repair of my stove.

"Can I make you a cup of tea, or coffee?" I asked, filling up the kettle before waiting for an answer.

"I'd love a cup of tea, thank you," he replied as he began setting out his tools on the counter, like a surgeon preparing for an operation.

"It's going to be quite the job to remove the broken glass from the stovetop," he said out loud, more to himself than to me. "You know, I see this type of thing more often than you'd realize." He slipped on a pair of protective glasses and, examining his tools carefully, he picked one up and turned to me.

"You may want to stand outside the kitchen while I do this. I'd hate for a shard of glass to go flying and hurt you." I nodded my head and stepped backwards out of the kitchen, allowing him to begin the arduous task of removing what appeared to be hundreds of pieces of broken glass.

I stood mesmerized as he wasted no time in quickly, yet artfully, removing the many small fragments of glass that were once my ceramic stovetop. He had a system and it was working, and it was evident he'd done this before. Fascinated, I quietly watched. Finally, with most of the smaller pieces gone, Adam looked up at me, still smiling.

"Nearly there," he said, nodding at his handy work. "You can come back into the kitchen if you like. I could sure use that cup of tea now." I'd become so entranced watching Adam that I'd completely forgotten about his tea.

"Right!" I exclaimed. "Sorry. I was distracted by your surgical expertise over there." We both laughed. Grabbing the kettle of boiled water, I poured the hot water over two bags of Earl Grey in the teapot.

"Do you mind if I ask what happened?" Adam asked, not looking up; staying focused on the task at hand. I stood there, speechless, not knowing what to say, more from embarrassment than anything else.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he interjected, in the absence of my response. "It's none of my business. Forget I even asked." He stopped working and put the tool he was using down on the counter. He looked at me with genuine concern, and care. I felt bad because all I could do was stand there gawping, my mind racing, trying to figure out what I should say next, if anything.

"No, it's fine. Really," I finally answered. I hadn't known Adam long but, in the brief time I had, I knew I could trust him. Sometimes you can just feel it in your gut. It's a rare feeling, but every now and then in a person's lifetime you get it.

"Let's just say, I was having a really bad day," I said, staring at my feet. "I had what you could call a bit of a meltdown and unfortunately the stovetop got the worst of it." Distracting myself, I lifted the lid to the teapot, inspecting its contents. Grabbing two clean mugs from the cupboard, I poured us each a mug of tea, placing one in front of Adam.

"Do you take milk or sugar?" I asked. Adam picked up his mug of tea and blew on the hot contents.

“This is perfect, thanks.” He took a sip of tea before putting the cup back down on the counter.

“Well, we all have those days,” he replied reassuringly. “Trust me, I’ve done things like that too.” I didn’t know if I should be embarrassed by his honesty, or relieved.

“Well, I guess the silver lining is that if I hadn’t broken the stovetop I would never have known about the faulty burner switch. I could very well have saved my life, or possibly the lives of the other tenants.” I said with an air of self-assurance, as I leaned against the counter top. The two of us stood smiling at each other while we continued to drink our tea.

“Actually,” Adam interjected nonchalantly. “The faulty burner switch isn’t really that big of a deal. I see that sort of thing all the time, too.” I was taken aback by this comment, especially given the fact that Frank made it sound like we could have all perished in a fiery pit of hell if I hadn’t discovered the recall.

“Really?” I asked, trying not to sound offended. “According to my landlord, he made it sound like a really big deal, like the manufacturer put the fear of God into him about it.” I had to question what Adam just told me because, up until this point, I felt like it was divine intervention that caused me to smash up my ceramic stovetop. I was actually starting to get a bit of a hero complex over it.

“That’s what the manufacturers want you to think,” he answered. “It’s an insurance thing, and a way to cover their, um, backsides.” I got the sense Adam picked up on the fact that he was telling me something I didn’t particularly want to hear. I smiled bleakly at him, suddenly feeling less like a hero and more like the Incredible Hulk; a freak with anger issues, but without the green skin. At that, the conversation came to a grinding halt until finally he spoke.

“This is a really nice apartment you have. Great neighborhood, too,” Adam observed, looking around. I was grateful for the icebreaker.

“Yeah, but I’m probably going to give my notice soon,” I responded dejectedly. I actually hadn’t given it a whole lot of thought up to this point, but the idea was definitely lingering in the back of my mind. In fact, I wasn’t even sure why I was saying

it out loud. But, the truth of the matter was, with Lisa leaving Vancouver, and no work for me, there was nothing keeping me here anymore. It was Lisa who urged me to move here and, as much as I loved this city, there was really no point in staying. I'd only been here a few years but without Lisa it wouldn't feel like home anymore.

"Oh, that's too bad. Where are you thinking of going?" Adam queried, setting his mug of tea back down on the counter.

"I dunno...I've been thinking of moving to Europe, or maybe England. I have friends over there and I've always wanted to live there." Saying it for the first time, I suddenly felt a newfound sense of happiness, like a small weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Just saying it out loud made me feel a thousand times better. I *had* always wanted to live in England and it wasn't entirely a crazy idea. Besides, if Lisa can do it why can't I?

"My Nan lives in England, just outside of Manchester." Adam seemed excited at being able to share something personal with me. "She lives in an upstairs/downstairs house in a small village called Littleborough," he said, picking up his cup of tea and taking another drink.

"Sounds quaint," I said enthusiastically. "I love Manchester. I've been there a few times but not recently." Adam could tell I was becoming excited as the subject of conversation turned to traveling. It was what used to get me out of bed in the morning. My motto used to be: If not for traveling, what was the point in working?

"You know, this may just be a coincidence, but my Nan is looking for a lodger," Adam informed me. "She's getting on in years and she's not as mobile as she used to be. She lives alone but she really shouldn't. If you're serious about wanting to move to England, I know my Nan would love you." I was absolutely dumbfounded. This was probably the craziest conversation I'd ever had with a stranger but I couldn't help but get excited. One minute I'm smashing my stovetop and the next minute the repair guy is setting me up with lodgings in England!

"Seriously?" I asked, making sure he wasn't just messing me about.

“Seriously. I think you and my Nan would get along great.” Adam reached into his coveralls and retrieved his wallet. Opening it up, he pulled out a business card with his name and phone number on it.

“If this is something you really want to do, let me call my Nan first thing tomorrow morning. Here’s my phone number. Give me a call around noon tomorrow. If my Nan says it’s okay then I’ll put you two in touch. No pressure, obviously.” Adam handed me his business card, which I eagerly accepted. I knew everyone would think I was crazy but I never felt more sure about anything in my whole life.

“Life is fleeting, and sometimes you need seize these opportunities. I haven’t known you long but I think you deserve this break. Besides, my Nan makes a mean potpie. Seriously, Betty’s hot pot has nothing on my Nan’s.” Adam laughed, inherently knowing I would get his Coronation Street reference. I suddenly felt giddy, and light headed as the old familiar feeling of happiness once more flooded over me. It’s moments like this that you wait for all your life, and I didn’t want it to end. My mind raced as the word “yes” repeated over and over in my mind.

“Yes,” I blurted out. “I am *totally* serious. I really want to do this.” I took a deep breath and with a detectable tone of giddiness I proudly announced, “I would *love* to live in England with your Nan.”

For a moment, we stood silently in my kitchen, staring at each other. The universe had thrown me a wild card and I was about to play it. I wasn’t much of a gambler but I did buy lottery tickets and I was finally dealt a winning hand.

 **DIARY EXCERPT (AGE 10)**

**The smorning I slept in
till 15 minits to 9:00
and I didn't get to school till 9:30.**



***UNTIL WE RIDE AGAIN
(31 GOING ON 21 AGAIN)***

The next few weeks went by quickly as I made arrangements to leave my life in Canada behind. I packed up all my belongings, storing most of them at my parent's house. I quit the West End Experimental Theatre Group and I gave my landlord notice. Before vacating the premises, we did the standard walk-through inspection. Frank hadn't even noticed the new ceramic stovetop. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. In the meantime, Lisa began preparing for her impending move to Turkey. Since I'd given my notice at my apartment, Lisa graciously offered me her sofa until I was ready to take my journey to Littleborough. As it turned out, I was leaving Canada two weeks before Lisa was scheduled to make her pilgrimage to Turkey. Everything seemed so whirl-wind, but there was a definite calm in the center of all the chaos that helped to keep me focused.

It was nice living back with Lisa, even if only for a short time. And with the two of us not working, there was nothing to distract us from enjoying our last few weeks together. Mattias and Rod were planning our sendoff party, which we both eagerly looked forward to. It wasn't going to be like the Konos Room party, by any stretch, but it would be a chance for us to say good-bye to our closest friends. And although it felt bittersweet, we both agreed it was the beginning of something great, and closure to the end of a long chapter in our lives. Lisa's appetite for adventure was contagious and I was thrilled that I could share it with her!

"I'm glad you're doing this," Lisa said while we sipped tea on her comfy red overstuffed sofas, enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun through the open windows.

“Me too,” I responded. “Thank you for being such an inspiration to me. I wouldn’t have done this without you, you know.” Looking around the half-empty apartment, so many memories flooded back. I could hear the echoes of our intimate late-night conversations about life and love, our fears and dreams, in a time when it felt like the whole world was our stage. My mom was right – youth is fleeting. And while youth is sometimes wasted on the young, it’s only because it can pass us by so damn quickly. It’s hard not to look back and feel guilty for taking it for granted.

“You did all this on your own,” she countered. “You didn’t need me find what you were searching for. I told you before, the answers are inside you.” I rolled my eyes, laughing before Lisa finished her sentence. “I know, you don’t have to remind me – you hate that new age banter – but you know it’s true.”

One thing’s for sure, I’ll miss Lisa reading my thoughts. Good, solid friendships like this are hard to come by. How was I ever going to fill the void that Lisa’s friendship would leave? I suppose I could place an ad in the local paper that reads: “Wanted, One Best Friend”. Or I could write a book about my life and call it “Temporary Secretary” (hey, not such a bad idea!). That way, if somebody did answer my “Friendship Ad”, I could simply mail them my book with a covering letter that says, “Read this. If you’re still interested in being my friend, call me.” But how do you substitute a lifetime of inside jokes, inside language and inside knowledge?

“I want you to make me a promise,” Lisa said out of the blue, interrupting my inner dialogue.

“Oh, yeah? That sounds ominous,” I replied, curious to know what she had in mind.

“No, seriously,” she interjected. “I want you to promise me something. Something very important.”

“That I quit smoking?” I asked, with a small hint of resignation in my voice. When Lisa found out she had cancer, she had done what we all thought was the impossible and quit smoking cold turkey. And she never stopped reminding me how easy it was, and rightfully so.

“Oh, make that two thing,” she said, half-joking. “But seriously, I want you to make me a promise.” She jumped off the sofa and made her way to the kitchen where she immediately began rummaging around, for what I had no idea. I could hear her opening and closing drawers, until finally she returned to the living room. Sitting back down on the sofa, and clearing a spot on the coffee table, Lisa threw down a pad of paper and feverishly began writing. If not for the fact that she was concentrating so hard on the task at hand, I would have interrupted her to find out what the hell she was doing. Finally, she put down her pen and stood up, motioning me to me to do the same.

“Stand up and raise your hand,” Lisa encouraged, raising her right hand in demonstration.

“What for?” I was excited because Lisa was excited, but I was also very curious at the same time.

“Just do it,” she ordered, trying to stifle a laugh. “Repeat after me.” Doing as she did, I raised my right hand.

“I, Chrystala...” Lisa said with an authoritative tone. I couldn’t help but giggle, but did as she instructed.

“I, Chrystala,” I repeated.

“Do hereby swear,” she continued.

“Do hereby swear,” I repeated. I wanted to actually swear, say a curse word of some sort, but I decided against it.

“That I will I *never ever* work in a law firm or for a lawyer again for as long as I shall live. Amen.” Picking up the pen and piece of paper that lay in front of her, she handed them to me. Examining the paper, I burst out laughing. Lisa had actually drawn up a formal contract for me to sign.

“I want you to repeat what I just said. If you look on the contract, it’s all written there. And then sign on the dotted line.” Clearly, she was very proud of her contract as she sat back down on the couch, arms folded across her chest and her chin thrust out.

“That’s hilarious!” I laughed. “I love it.” Still standing, and with my right hand raised, I proudly finished repeating the oath of my contract. Taking my seat back on the sofa, I signed and dated it before handing it back to Lisa.

“Good,” she said as she took the contract from me and inspected my signature. “I will keep this with me for safekeeping, and if I ever find out you’ve broken the agreement I will come after you myself! You got that?” She tried not to laugh, shaking her finger at me like a teacher, while trying to look imposing. We both began laughing uncontrollably, embracing the moment, and allowing the laughter to flow without holding back. We hadn’t laughed like this since my interview with Ugly Betsy. The release felt good.

“I’m going to miss the hell out of you Lisa,” I said, trying to choke back the tears that inevitably, like the laughter, would soon surface, no matter how hard I might try.

“I know. Me too,” she replied, discreetly wiping away a solitary tear that had managed to sneak down her cheek, despite her best efforts to stop it. “More than words can say. But this isn’t good-bye, you know.” I had to look away for fear that I might start crying, too. “This is “adios Amiga...until we ride again! We will have many more adventures together, but for now our paths are taking us to different places, and who knows what the future holds for us?” I nodded in acknowledgment. I knew exactly what she meant. There were things we both needed to do, and we couldn’t always do them together. This was the time in our lives when we needed to take our own personal journeys.

“Until we ride again!” I jubilantly repeated.

“Think of our lives’ paths like a serpentine; twisting and bending in different directions, but eventually finding each other again,” Lisa said quietly, as though thinking out loud to herself. For a moment, she seemed lost in her own thoughts. We sat without talking; one of the many joys of being such close friends. The sign of a true friendship is when you can have these comfortable moments of absolute silence.

We spent the rest of our day lounging around, drinking tea and reminiscing of days gone by, talking excitedly about what the future held for us and sharing our uncertainties of the unknown. We both knew this was our last call at Savy’s Caesar’s

Palace, where for a few leisurely hours we could pass the time away, drinking up the days of our youth and, if but for a fleeting moment, raise a toast to our hopes and dreams of tomorrow.

The Beginning

EPILOGUE

England

The black hearse parked out front of Irma's terraced house should have been a dead giveaway that something was amiss, but I was more focused on the fact that it was parked up on the sidewalk. However, my taxi driver reassured me that this was a common practice in the UK.

About the Author- taken from her grade 9 school annual:

Chrysta Gejdos -Midget enjoys embarrassing herself publicly. Her ambition is to become a famous screenplay writer. She likes people who are nice to her, her favorite saying is “Holy sheep-dip”

