

# TADDLE CREEK



*"Jungle Beach Party,"  
by Pat Dorian.*

**NO. 47-A • SUMMER NUMBER, 2021 • \$2.65**



## THE EPHEMERA

If there's one thing *Taddle Creek's* history of successful postal solicitations has taught it, it's that people love to get mail. Which is why the magazine thought, with so few things to look forward to in these pandemic days, it would spread a little joy by splitting its summer issue up into three individual sections and, at no small cost to itself, mail them to subscribers on a bimonthly basis. (If you're one of the fifty-three people who, according to the magazine's most recent COVID-era distribution numbers, buys *Taddle Creek* at the newsstand, unfortunately, this issue means two extra curbside pickups for you. Reader loyalty has its privileges.) Since such a generous undertaking doesn't come cheap, the magazine has opted to present these issues in the format known as the "story paper," a late-nineteenth–early-twentieth-century format also referred to as a "nickel weekly" or "penny dreadful." Story papers were not unlike pulp magazines, though thinner, usually featuring a self-cover, and often aimed at children. While the latter trait is not relevant in *Taddle Creek's* experiment, readers still can look forward to two more cheaply printed editions of the magazine as the year progresses.

A quick congratulations to Sam Shelstad, whose story "Ex-Smoker," from *Taddle Creek* No. 46, recently was nominated for a National Magazine Award.

—TADDLE CREEK



*The most stoppable force in publishing.*

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# TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME



@MIRSKTOONS

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## THE FICTION

# TOO MUCH

*An excerpt.*

BY SOPHIE MCCREESH

Aubra wanted to take a picture of the sky. The colours reminded her of the glitter Silly Putty she used to play with as a kid, swirling two different balls together then pulling them apart so they stretched into a long, gooey rope. She'd take the rope and coil it into a circle so the colours blended more. The sky was pink and purple. She felt like she could look at it for a long time.

Something was moving on the roof. She recognized the silhouette of a large raccoon that came and went, a creature she knew operated with both fear and curiosity, because of the way it tested things before it touched them, then darted from the slightest sound. The raccoon was pressing its paw against a light branch that grazed the peeling shingles of the roof. What if the raccoon fell and got hurt? She'd have to deal with it right before her friends arrived. She was relieved when it turned its body, strolling along the ledge of the roof until it was out of sight. It would be tiresome to deal with death so late in the evening.

The raccoon had friends. They would sometimes surround her while she was in a daze, before she noticed what was happening. One time, she looked up to see six of them standing on the fence beside the stoop. They were all babies except the big wobbling one. Lined up, they looked like furry versions of Russian tea dolls. They all stared at her in a way that was meant to conceal fear, their bodies in freeze mode, stunted and withdrawn, suggesting a readiness for attack. Aubra knew they just wanted her garbage, and she tried to recall what she'd recently discarded—some expired potato chips and a few sheet masks. It's possible a raccoon could eat one of her used sheet masks and die. She thought about what it would be like to die from a sheet mask. One of her enemies could sneak into her apartment and inject the package with a quick-acting poison. That sounded fine for her, but she didn't want that for the raccoon.

How would her friends react? Liv would probably stare at the raccoon and take a picture, then post it so she could seem tough. To be honest, most of her friends would do the same. Harrison would be sad; he loves those little critters. Maybe her friends would help her move it, call the city to pick it up. Peggy might suggest some sort of burial service. But all this could be avoided if the raccoon didn't show up again just to die.

Aubra went inside her house to collect some plates. She wanted to start setting up some food and snacks, mainly a

package of blue cheese she'd bought at the market without realizing it cost fifteen dollars. There were some gourmet truffle chips that cost the same.

She left the food on her kitchen counter and walked over to her desk, where her computer was open. Aubra wanted to clarify what a pink sunset actually meant. Did it mean the sky was polluted, or was that just a myth? She was going to find out for certain, then tell her friends. Some e-mail notifications popped up. An Internet bill. One more from an address she didn't recognize. The subject line was "too much." All lower case. She clicked on the message so it expanded to fill the entirety of her screen, and what she saw made her feel embarrassed, maybe disgusted. It was her own face. It had been turned into a meme by the person who had sent the e-mail.

She'd taken the photo a few months ago, in the morning, when the light was reflecting in a pleasing manner on the walls of her bathroom. Her eyes looked wide and scared, but Aubra kind of liked it. She had pressed herself against the wall to take the photo.

The meme wasn't very creative. It showed her face and a cock that looked like it was drawn with Microsoft Paint. Above and below her face reading, "DESPERATE."

She walked to the kitchen and pumped a large amount of evergreen-scented soap onto her palm, lathering for a long time and applying pressure to each of her fingertips with the opposite hand. After she dried, she took a cloth and some antibacterial spray then began to clean the tiles underneath her oven. She heard her phone ring and ignored it. She moved on to the tiles near the bottom of the fridge, wondering how she could have let it all get so dirty. Aubra was scrubbing at a faded orange stain when she heard a knock on the door.

Her apartment had an unusual number of mirrors. One of them was positioned above her sofa, in the living room across from a large front-facing window. It allowed her to see who was at the door. She didn't feel ready to talk to Harrison. She sent him a message saying that she was peeing and that she'd be right out. Then she walked to her freezer and took out a bottle of vodka. She grabbed a glass from the cupboard and went to her room.

When she met Harrison at the door, she took out a couple of cigarettes to mask the smell of the vodka. She didn't want to appear to have been drinking before her guests arrived. Harrison didn't have much to say at first, and she knew it



would be better if she asked him some questions about his day to get him talking. Aubra's stomach felt warm, and the cigarette was making her feel dull and woozy in a way that made her think that she would be O.K.

Thinking about who made the meme was a dark trap that would leave her tired at best. She began to lead Harrison through her home to the backyard, where everyone was hoping to take advantage of a mild evening in the early spring. She paused in the kitchen to pick up the plates and food she'd put aside.

Outdoors, the sky had dimmed to a dull grey. Aubra walked to the iron patio furniture and said, "Only the best for my friends," as she unfolded a black tablecloth. Harrison smiled and took a seat. He lit another cigarette, which prompted Aubra to grab the ashtray she kept on the steps near the door.

"I'm going to get more chairs," Aubra said.

Once inside she made sure Harrison couldn't see her through the screen door as she went in a direction opposite to the one she had stated. Hypervigilance wasn't necessary. She could probably just take the bottle of vodka out and start

chugging from it and Harrison would be left unfazed.

She had to appear like she was consuming a respectable type of liquor at a casual pace. If she kept making trips to her room, she could drink the way she wanted. She pulled the e-mail up on her phone, ignoring texts from friends who were arriving and probably waiting. Harrison could let them in.

What bothered her the most was that she didn't know if the photo of her face being featured in the meme was good enough. Maybe that was the point. She thought of one of her exes who said that she should assume every photo she posts of herself is going to be turned into a meme. "That's the way the Internet is," he'd told her before making her promise she would keep all her accounts private. This comment, although it was made many years prior, could make him a candidate for suspicion. But it was unlikely it was him. Based on this logic, and his paranoid removal of every photo of himself, it would be difficult to find him on the Web, if she even could recall his name. Aubra didn't feel anything from the vodka, so she drank more. She sprayed a sample of a perfume on herself in case anyone could smell the liquor on her. No one

would get close enough to smell her, unless she could arrange something for after the party.

Her mind had already gone into mourning. It was as if a serenity of voices was coming at her brain, explaining that she was in danger and that it might stay that way forever. Aubra had no idea what she was mourning, as if her happiness before the stalker was something even viable enough to lose. She sat on her bed, curling her legs into a fetal position while her friends socialized. If she stayed much longer, they would wonder why she was shutting herself in there. She'd have to get up. At least then she could drink more. Then she would go back outside.

"We let ourselves in," Peggy said when she saw Aubra emerge. Peggy's partner, Jake, was filming the neighbour's cat through the wire fence that separated their yards. Aubra's garden was sparse and dry, while her neighbour had an abundance of vegetables and flowers. None of this mattered in the dark.

Harrison was talking more than usual, teaching Jake how to connect a tiny speaker to his phone, via Bluetooth, in a hushed and deliberate way. Harrison always ended up taking over the music, playing punk songs from bands some of the others had maybe heard of without knowing their history or context. He'd explain when people asked.

Aubra smiled at Peggy as she sat down at the table to arrange the food she'd brought out.

"I bought this special mayonnaise."

"What's special about it?" Harrison asked.

"It has ketamine in it."

"Really?"

Harrison sat down at the table and started to rip the bag of truffle chips open.

Aubra wanted to dance to the music that was playing. For now, Harrison had chosen the soundtrack to *Fire Walk with Me*, and dancing to it felt good and right. Peggy got up and joined. Harrison filmed everyone swaying gently with eyes closed, mimicking Audrey's dance in the *Twin Peaks* diner. Then the dancing stopped because they all wanted to see what the video looked like; if it was good enough to post on social media.

Aubra went inside and thought about whether or not she had a right to mourn. She walked into the room and sat on her bed, wondering if she could share these vacant feelings with her friends. She thought of the music that could get her to a point—similar to an orgasm—where she could just feel grief. It wasn't about the Internet stalking, although that had moved her to access a deeper feeling of unease.

She lingered for a moment, playing the song she thought she needed. It was a symphony of moans and hums, and Aubra knew it was the only song that could make her feel a thing. She waited to feel, and it came. It made her stomach feel empty. She stared at a spot of paint on her wall. And what was this mourning about? The chords of the violin felt fran-

tic and jarring, as if they were prompting her to relive a terrible, repressed memory or make one up.

Aubra wondered if she could match the nuanced calm of the conversation that was ahead. When she got outside, no one was dancing anymore. They were all standing around the table while Liv prepared to give Peggy a tarot reading.

Aubra joined the circle and smiled at Harrison. He had a look of determined patience on his face. When Liv had finished shuffling the deck, she placed it in her palm. She presented it to Peggy, indicating that she should rub it.

"Think of a question you need answered."

Aubra knew Liv wanted someone to take her picture while she was doing the tarot reading. She didn't offer.

"O.K., I got it."

Peggy looked serious and hopeful while she gave the cards a delicate rub.

"You're not going to tell us?" Aubra asked.

"I'm thinking, well—"

"You don't have to tell them, Peggy," Liv said.

"I'm wondering if I should quit writing poetry."

"Fair," Aubra said, wondering if she sounded like a bitch.

Liv either didn't know how to do tarot readings or she was just a beginner. Peggy drew a card and everyone stared at it, making sounds that indicated appreciation and awe. Then Peggy took her phone out of her pocket to look up what the card meant. If she had any idea what she was doing, she would know each card by memory. It could also be that memorizing the meanings of each card took time and that it was for the people who were making money off it, people who were invited to art fairs or had a separate Instagram based on their tarot skills.

"What's the card again?"

"Aubra! It's the Fool."

"Aren't we all."

"Exactly," Harrison said as he turned his head to scan the garden.

"It means we are all on a great adventure." Liv spoke softly and without irony.

As amused as she was by the mix of earnest wonder and ennui from each person in the group, Aubra didn't want to read tarot any longer. Her stomach felt warm, but she could feel the wind hitting her wrists near the cuffs of her yellow coat. She decided it was time to tell a story.

"This reminds me of something."

She introduced it in a cheap way she hoped would tie whatever she said to the hope and mystery of the Fool.

Her friends stared at her.

"I was at the park with my friend, and we saw a kite stuck in the tree. It took a long time for my friend to be able to place it. I had to direct her line of vision. When she finally saw it, she had the same reaction as me. She said, 'Woah.'"

Aubra paused to make sure her friends were interested. After all, it was a story of subtext and she needed them to pay attention.

“And what does ‘Woah’ mean, exactly? In this case, and in many others, I believe it’s a reluctance to express any opinion. My friend Gwen might not have cared about the kite in the tree as much as I did. Maybe it didn’t ignite a feeling of loss and longing the way it did for me. I thought about what I should say to her next. The last time I flew a kite was, well, average, or maybe it was just a difficult emotional experience because I was with my dad. I felt like I had to do something significant with the kite, but not even that. I felt like I had to invent a new type of kite in order to impress him. I told none of this to Gwen, my friend. The park was pretty full that day. Gwen and I were drinking these low-calorie sparking waters with vodka. I can’t speak for her, but the drinks were making me feel like I was stoned. I was thinking about how boring flying a kite must be for a kid in this day and age. Like they probably just wanted a fucking drone instead. I looked at the kite and tried to note each different colour and the way that it contrasted with the tree’s leaves.

Then I made a comment about how all kites look the same, with these simple rainbow patterns, and that the designers should come up with a concept that is more interesting. But in the end, what do I know about kites? What do I know about the feeling of control you get when it hits the wind the right way and it’s yours, you know? I have spent my whole life chasing that feeling. I have diminished myself to try and find that joy. I asked Gwen, ‘What if the kid flying the kite crashed it on purpose because they didn’t want to do it anymore—they just wanted to stop?’”

Aubra’s friends nodded in a contemplative way.

Liv said, “Oh Aubra! Imagine if you had a Twitter.”

“Why would I get one now?”

Peggy stepped in with wisdom: “There’s a kite that’s the fastest in the world. I forget how fast it flies—”

“A hundred and twenty miles per hour,” Jake said, as if he had been hoarding this knowledge, waiting for the chance to be recognized for it.

Harrison took a bottle of Jameson out of his bag. This sudden reveal of the whiskey made Aubra wonder if he had been holding on to the bottle but trying not to drink from it. A strange thought, as it was pretty normal for Harrison to drink heavily. He unscrewed the lid and started to pour the whiskey into his mouth, lifting the bottle so a stream formed onto his tongue like, a professional athlete would drink with a bottle of Gatorade.

“Want a glass?” Aubra asked, because getting one would serve as an excuse for her to go back inside and drink more vodka. She didn’t know how much of her vodka was left, and began to wonder if asking Harrison about the glass had inadvertently shamed him. People can do what they want. Maybe she could grab the bottle and start drinking from it like Harrison was. But if it was her, it would just seem sad.

Harrison said, “Yeah.”

Aubra felt like problems were sorting themselves into categories of irrelevancy in her head. She was being given the gift of a grand perspective that had to do with her place in the world, and she wanted this feeling of enlightenment to continue. She would bring Harrison her finest glass. She would even add an ice cube.

On her way into her house, Aubra walked into the screen door. She didn’t have to check if her friends had noticed because she could hear them all laughing in a subdued and empathetic way. They knew she was fragile.

The bottle was next to her mirror with light bulbs all around the edges. It was balanced precariously on her dresser. She’d found the mirror at the thrift store. Only a few of the bulbs still lit up, barely highlighting her face, which felt dry and painful. She applied some rosehip oil to her forehead and underneath her eyes while studying the liquor bottle. It surprised her that it was still half full, indicating she had been limiting her intake unconsciously.

She listened to her friends’ muffled voices as she walked into the kitchen and opened her freezer door. She had this ice cube tray with skull-shaped moulds. Sometimes it took a second to extract the ice. She’d broken a nail trying to do it once. Harrison’s voice became audible. He was yelling something about how he was a man. Aubra brought both their glasses outside with her so she could witness the spectacle. Some of the vodka was falling out as she carried what was a pretty heavy pour. It stung her cuticles and she wondered if people would smell it on her hands.

She loved it when Harrison got rowdy. It reminded her of a punk show. All his movements and words were an unpredictable outpouring of rage. It turned out Harrison hadn’t been yelling about how he was a man at all. He’d been yelling at his phone, perhaps making a video.

“I know that I can,” Harrison drew out the letters of the word “can” and raised his hands in the air as he finished his vague yet optimistic declaration of competence. Some of the whiskey spilled out of the bottle he was flailing. It must have landed on his phone because he started to wipe it with his black T-shirt. Aubra had never noticed that Harrison had abs. She made a note to ask him about it later, as if he could give her advice.

Everyone was laughing. Peggy was trying to record Harrison while hiding her camera under the table. Aubra knew Peggy was filming sheepishly because she didn’t like being perceived as eager.

“I know you can, Harrison,” Aubra said in a tone of feigned seriousness as she sat down.

“Thank you, Aubra,” Harrison nodded while making meaningful eye contact that was half-intended as joke, something she was used to doing with her close friends.

Everyone watched Harrison drink more whiskey. Then he sat down in an empty chair and was quiet. ☺

# THE UN-SALAD

*Culinary rules are made to be broken—and nothing breaks them more than a salad consisting of soda and marshmallows.*

BY BRIAN FRANCIS

I worked at Dairy Queen for a short stint, during my teenage years. When customers ordered a banana split, I'd ask what toppings they wanted. They were always shocked they could have toppings other than the usual strawberry, chocolate, and pineapple. It made me realize how many people assume there are unspoken rules when it comes to their food. And I say, those rules should be broken. Take the concept of salads, as an example.

Usually, when people think of the word “salad,” a number of things come to mind: iceberg lettuce, sliced radishes, the chunky, Silly Putty-hue of Thousand Island dressing. But how often do people stop to consider all of the other ingredients that can make up a salad? Ingredients like canned crushed pineapple, Jell-O, Cool Whip, and multicoloured miniature marshmallows. You just have to open your mind. And really, really loosen up your definition of the word “healthy.”

This issue, I'm bringing you the electric-green glory that is Seven-Up Salad. Yes, you heard that right. This is a salad made with soda pop, as well as melted marshmallows, Dream Whip, and sugar. (Truth be told, sugar is really the main ingredient in Seven-Up Salad. But the recipe does call for two bananas. And crushed pineapple. There's also lime Jell-O. Which counts as another fruit . . . for some people, I'm sure.)

For those unfamiliar, 7Up is a lemon-lime soft drink, first invented in 1929. It originally was called Bib-Label Lithiated Lemon-Lime Soda. Needless to say, the name change was a smart move.

The recipe for Seven-Up Salad comes from my copy of *The Beta Sigma Phi International Cookbook: Salads*, published in 1970. There are two thousand salad recipes in this book, including Tuna Parfait Mold, Hot Dog Salad, and Eggnog Salad. (Suddenly, Seven-Up Salad is sounding a lot less weird, isn't it?)

In spite of your likely reservations, I can assure you that Seven-Up Salad, not unlike the drink itself, is light, refreshing, and perfect for a hot summer day. In terms of being able to discern the taste of 7Up, the jury is still out on that. In fact, I'm not even sure why there are melted marshmallows in it. But why analyze when you can just eat? Besides, the real star of the show is the topping for the salad. The pineapple juice, Dream Whip, and egg combine to make a

light custard that is soft, sweet, and fluffy. I'd even make the topping again and use it to frost an angel food cake. It's that good.

You can serve Seven-Up Salad in a bowl, but I think serving it in tall glasses creates a sense of whimsy that plays up the recipe's namesake. Just don't serve it with a straw. Pineapple chunks are considerable obstacles, and they're very, very hard to suck through narrow passageways. Some of your guests might pass out trying to do so. I'm speaking from experience.

Sparkling, fresh, and very, very green, Seven-Up Salad is the perfect way to add more salad to your diet. And if the cut-off jean shorts start getting a little tighter this summer, don't blame it on the salad.

## Seven-Up Salad

(Serves 12)

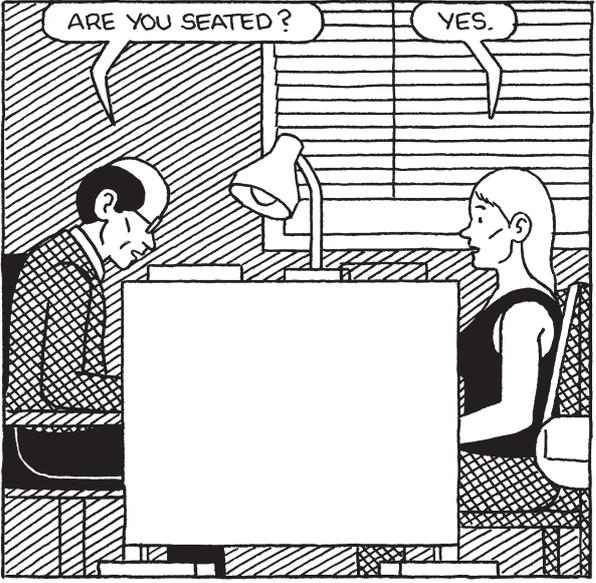
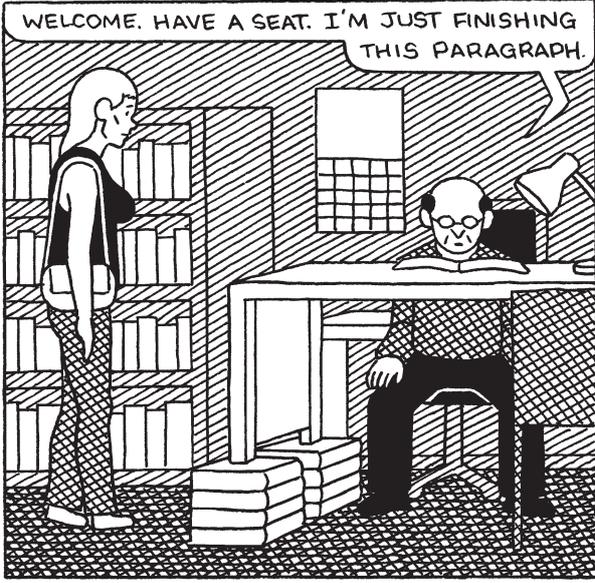
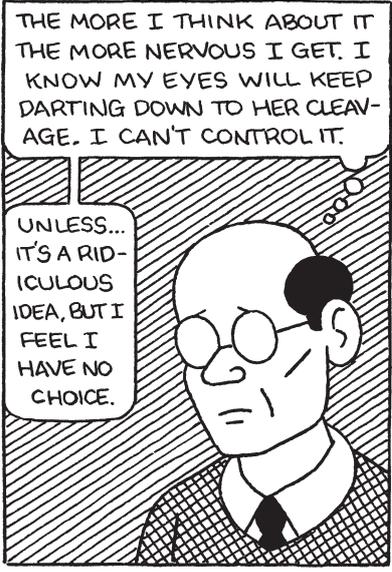
### Ingredients

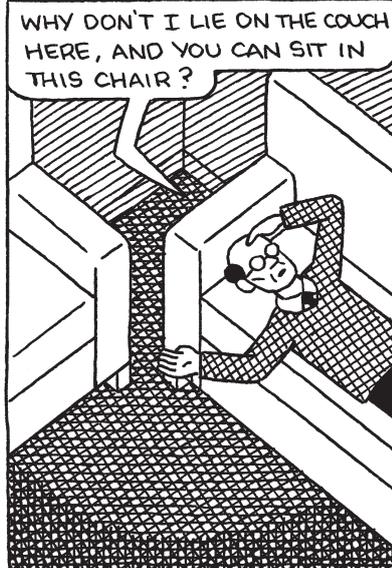
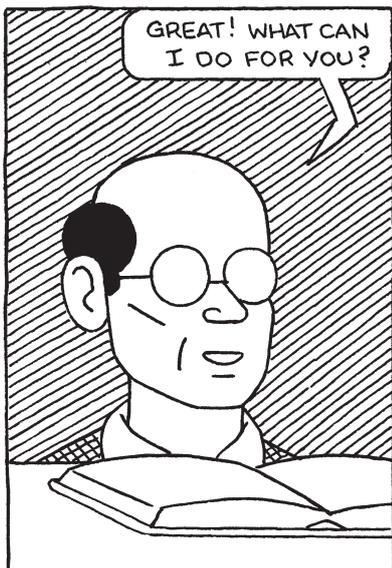
- 2 100-gram packages of lime or lemon Jell-O
- 2 cups hot water
- 16 large marshmallows
- 1 litre of 7Up
- 1 520-millilitre can crushed pineapple, drained, and 1 cup juice, reserved
- 2 bananas, diced
- 1 egg, beaten
- 2 tablespoons flour
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 cup Dream Whip, prepared

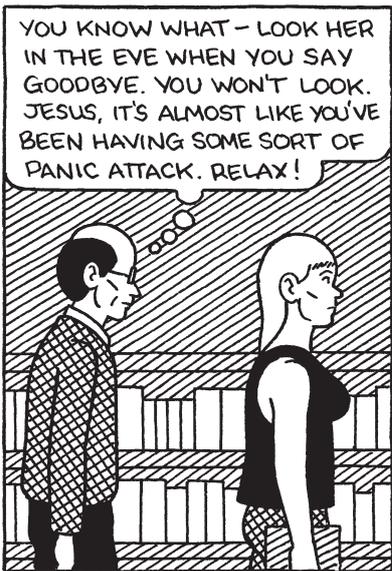
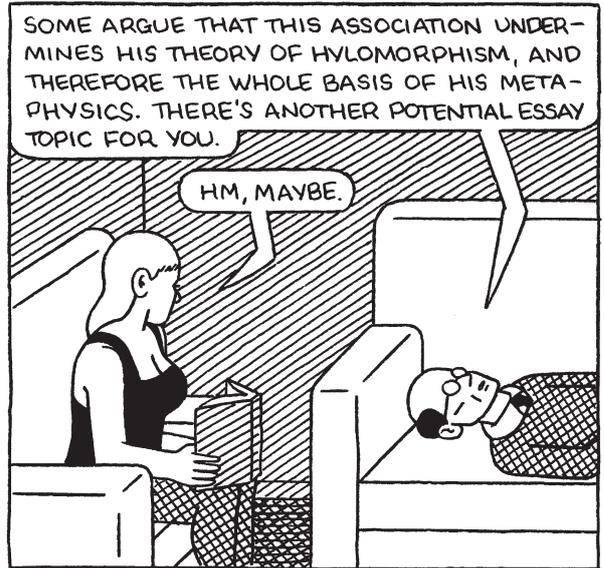
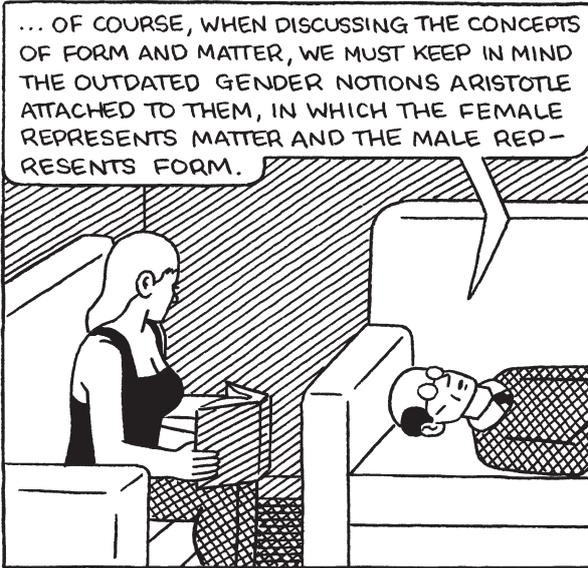
### Directions

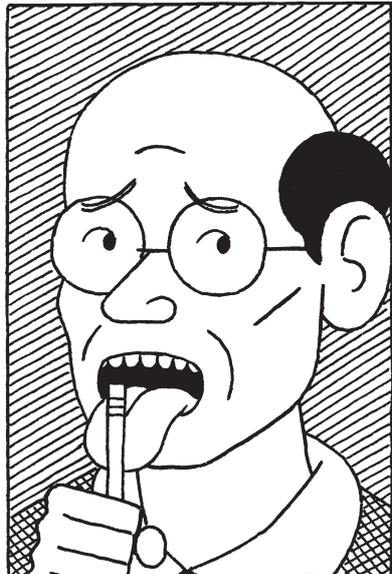
1. Dissolve Jell-O in 1 cup hot water.
2. Cut marshmallows and add to 1 cup hot water. Let melt, then mix with Jell-O and let cool.
3. Add 7Up to mixture. Let set partially, then add pineapple and bananas and let set until firm.
4. If necessary, add water to reserved pineapple juice to make 1 cup liquid.
5. Whisk together pineapple juice, egg, flour, and sugar in saucepan over medium heat. Stir constantly until thickened. Let cool.
6. Fold in Dream Whip. Spread over Jell-O and garnish with chopped nuts, if desired. ☺











## STORIES WE TELL

*Sometimes routine is the best way to cope with uncertainty.*

BY JULIE CAMERON GRAY

Lately I've been thinking about a collection of stories from the Middle Ages, by Giovanni Boccaccio, called *The Decameron*. I wouldn't say it's aged particularly well (although Shakespeare, Tennyson, and Molière all borrowed stories from it and remade them into their own), but the plot surrounding the hundred short stories contained in the book has never felt more relevant to me.

Let me set the scene: It is the fourteenth century, and the Black Death is sweeping the globe with staggering mortality rates. To avoid contracting the plague, seven young women and three young men flee Florence and stay at an abandoned villa in the countryside for two weeks. At night they tell stories to keep each other entertained. It was a pre-Netflix world, so this is clearly what needed to be done so that no one was alone with their grief and misery.

Can you imagine? Zero work responsibilities, together with your friends, in an Italian villa to ride out the pandemic? Without any Internet?

I attempted something like this, in our modern equivalent. I rented an Airbnb with my family and one other—eight of us in a beautiful old house in a nearby countryside that never ceased to feel borrowed. We had swapped the box that we live in with all our stuff for a bigger box we had to bring a bunch of our stuff to. We didn't feel different or happier, it just imbued the days with a sense of “we should get out and *do* something” to make the most of our time there.

But I did not want to make the most of my time there. I wanted to lean against the walls of the small box I live in, succumb to all my hermit tendencies, and do the things that gave me a false sense of purpose or direction, like laundry or filling an online shopping cart with items I never end up buying. I did not want to rummage through the cupboards of a guest kitchen trying to find salt, experimenting with what it would be like to live somewhere else. I wanted to embroider napkins and dream of sitting in parks with coffee and croissants and attempting to reboot friendships that got thin with time and distance.

So that's what I did—one Sunday morning when the sun was shining but the case numbers were too high to consider really going outside. And then again at night while shovelling in episode after episode of a miniseries, coaxing a needle full of thread through the corner of a napkin, one straight line after another, until a constellation emerged under my hands and I dreamed of sitting in cool grass and laughing with literally anyone I didn't live with.

And now that that time is here and we can see more of our friends, maybe even new ones, we are telling our stories—the then-sad, now-silly stories of what we have done with our time—how we languished on couches, how we tried new hobbies, all the small tragedies and glories of where we failed and where we flourished.

That hope, that simple conversation where you say something true and vulnerable and it becomes a helium balloon tied to your wrist, a silvery ghost of all the anxiety you've carried. And then you'll tell your small stories, of how you tried to bake bread and, while the comforting smell of warm yeast filled your kitchen, in the end, it tasted dry and rough and not at all like the comfort it promised. And then you'll let go of that balloon, and it will drift up and over the trees—a shiny coin winking like a star. Then a friend, who feels more like an acquaintance now that so much time has passed, will tell one of their stories, and you'll laugh and wince until the sun sets and the stars appear, dappling the sky.

**Star Embroidered Napkins***Materials*

Cloth napkins

Embroidery/sewing needle

Embroidery thread in colour of your choosing (sample shown is D.M.C. 3024, and the metallic version is D.M.C. Light Effects thread in E168)

Embroidery hoop (example shows a 6-inch embroidery hoop, but any size that you are comfortable with will work)

Optional: pencil, wash-away stabilizer

*Directions*

If using 100% natural fibre napkins, like cotton or linen, prewash and tumble dry to ensure that any fabric shrinking will occur before you add your stitches.

Place napkin in embroidery hoop and arrange fabric until you have the corner secured within the frame.

Trace a star design onto your wash-away stabilizer, or you can draw the design freehand on your cloth napkin with a pencil.

Separate your embroidery thread in half (there are six strands in embroidery thread; you will use three at any given time). Thread the three strands into your needle, and begin stitching the design, all done with straight stitches.

When design is complete, wash away stabilizer (if using), or just wash and iron gently on low. ☺



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Carnival  
Time*



*Colin Smith*

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# TADDLE CREEK



*"Bat-Brains,"  
by Pat Dorian.*

**NO. 47-B • HALLOWEEN NUMBER, 2021 • \$2.65**

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*Charlie has all the fear.*

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**Dave Lapp** (“People Around Here,” p. 47) is finishing a new book. His previous book is a collection of *People Around Here* strips from *Taddle Creek* and elsewhere.

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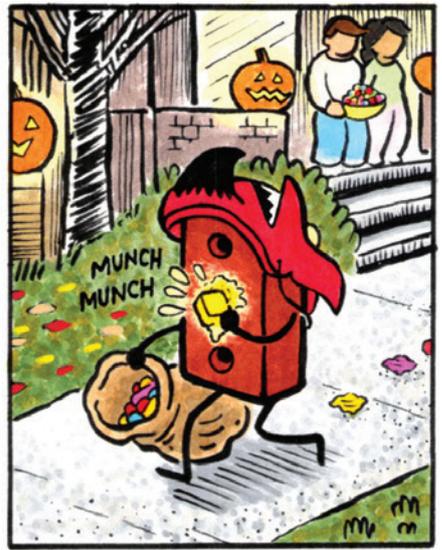
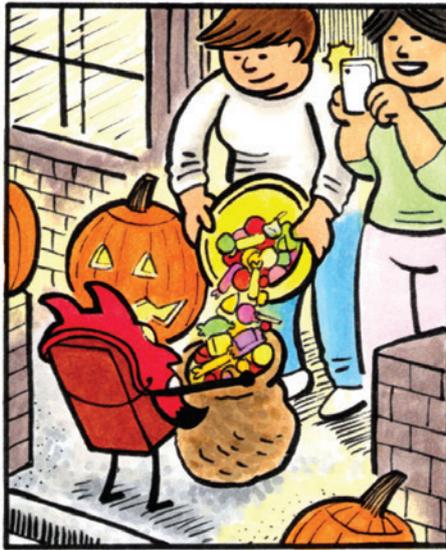


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## THE FICTION

# THE DAM

BY MICHELLE WINTERS

I'm reading the new Zoey Malone: Paranormal Detective mystery under the covers with my U.F.O. night light when I hear Conrad's bedsprings creak down the hall. I listen for Dad and Rachel's bedroom door to open and close. The sleepwalking started when we moved here a few weeks ago, right after we found the dam.

Dad said moving to New Brunswick was a "no brainer." It's "getting out from under," it's "living mortgage free," and it means Conrad gets a "natural childhood." He's too young to remember the tiny square of grass in front of our house in Toronto, where a grillion pictures of him got taken on a blanket a little smaller than the lawn.

But I know the real reason we moved here is that Dad lost his sales job at the solar panel company.

Conrad is my baby brother, but not my real brother, because Rachel, his mom, is my stepmom. I'm not allowed to call her that, because she doesn't like the sound of it. She prefers "sister." She painted a peace symbol on my face at an Earth Day parade about a year after my mom died. She and Dad talked for a few minutes before she painted her phone number on his hand. She's fifteen years younger than Dad, but he says souls have no age. When Rachel delivered Conrad, she did it holistically, in a plastic tub at home. I could hear her from down the hall, where I sat with her friends, who lit sticks of dried leaves and gave me one to wave around, cleansing the air.

"He's going to be so special," one of her friends said to me, raising her voice above Rachel's screaming.

It's so cheap to live in the Maritimes that Dad doesn't even need to work. He says if he never has to put a suit on again, it'll be too soon. Rachel got a job as a wellbeing counsellor with a bank here, teaching the staff how to live better through salads and yoga. Dad will stay home with us. "Rachel's career is important," he said, ruffling my hair that first morning, as we watched her drive off down the road, "and it'll give me a chance to spend some time with my girl."

We found the dam on our first walk across the property. Our new house sits on five acres of land. Dad says he's going to plant a permaculture garden and told Rachel he'll go out every day and pick her the perfect clove of garlic for the fancy meals he'll make. He was holding Conrad's hand as we walked that day, so I was the first to see the mountain of sticks looming up over the hill. My mind raced through all the animals I knew, trying to figure out what could have built it. It wasn't birds or moose, and bears hide in caves. It must have been a witch.

"Ba-dah?" asked Conrad when they caught up, jabbing out his fingers.

Dad hoisted Conrad in his arms.

"Is that a . . . ?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Dad after a second. He didn't look happy. "Looks like a beaver dam."

"Beadum," said Conrad.

I'd done a presentation at school last year on the beaver, and I knew they built dams and lodges out of sticks, but some of these sticks were *logs*. The beaver is our national animal and is also a symbol of Canadian industry. Their teeth contain iron. For my presentation, I included a picture of a giant maple trunk chewed right through by a beaver, to demonstrate the power of their jaws and commitment to labour. They never get tired of chewing. The beaver is the only other animal, next to humans, that can do as much to change their environment. I thought I knew everything about beavers, but I didn't know they could build anything this big.

"O.K., let's go," said Dad, putting his hand between my shoulder blades and steering me back toward the house.

That night, for dinner, he made a whole wheat pasta with field mushrooms, lemon zest, and Parmesan.

"Rachel, I found a beaver dam!" I said when we sat down at the table. "Right down at the creek! It's huge!"

"Beadum!" Conrad spluttered from his high chair.

"Wow," she said, giving him big eyes and wiping his drooly chin. Then she looked at Dad.

"Beavers," she said, raising her eyebrows.

"Mmm," said Dad, raising his eyebrows back and tucking a noodle in his mouth with his fork.

"Why didn't the realtor say anything?" she said. "That's an infestation."

"I don't—"

"You know a man in Belarus got killed by a beaver last year," Rachel said. "Walked right up and bit his leg, David. It severed a femoral artery. He bled right out."

"Rachel—," said Dad.

"It has to go," she said to her pasta.

"You can't just destroy those things," said Dad. "They're a part of the ecosystem. We could end up killing whole species of fish if we get rid of—"

"Well, what do you suggest, David?" she said, "Are you going to pick them some garlic?"

"It's illegal, you know," he said. "There are fines."

"Well, I'm sure you'll come up with something."

That night, I heard the front door latch after I was supposed



to be asleep—sometimes, Rachel smokes cigarettes. But it wasn't Rachel. It was Conrad. I looked out my bedroom window to see him in his spaceship pyjamas, walking barefoot across the property, toward the dam, like a zombie. I ran downstairs and caught him before he reached it. He was dead asleep.

Dad and Rachel had another fight at breakfast.

"It's stress making him act out," said Rachel. Dad exploded into a tiny laugh.

Conrad does it every night now. He gets up, pees on the floor, and heads for the dam. Dad installed a gate at the top of the stairs and extra high chain locks on the front door. He and Rachel had another fight at dinner where he said, "We don't always have to go storming in like the paratroopers, Rachel."

If you catch Conrad in time, you can guide him to the bathroom and he does the whole thing in his sleep. You can tuck him right back in without even waking him.

The toilet flushes and two sets of footsteps rustle down the carpet toward Conrad's room. The springs groan and his bedroom door closes. I listen for the sound of Dad and Rachel's door, but instead, the gate at the top of the stairs opens and clicks shut, feet pad down the stairs, the high chain on the front door tinkles against the frame. I run to the window to see Dad heading barefoot across the yard, toward the dam. It's hard to make out colours by just the sliver of moon outside, but I know because I watched him go off to work every morning for all those years, that he's wearing his blue suit. ☺

## THE PROFILE

# WORLD OF WONDER

*Scott McClelland's sideshow legacy.*

BY CONAN TOBIAS

The house on the corner of Irving and South streets, in Spencerville, Ontario, is, architecturally, unlike any of the homes that surround it. Its gothic windows and slate roof make it reminiscent of the haunted house in an old horror movie or a Scooby-Doo cartoon. In this case, however, there isn't a demonic resident peeking out from behind the curtains, causing hushed talk amongst the locals. Instead, he can be found sitting in full view, on his front lawn, chatting with and waving at the town's residents as they pass.

For nearly thirty years, Scott McClelland, in his guise as Nikolai Diablo, the devil incarnate, has hosted and operated Carnival Diablo, a travelling circus sideshow that, in the nineteen-nineties, was a major force in re-popularizing and reviving—with a modern twist—the genre. After spending most of those years on the road, McClelland's latest incarnation of Carnival Diablo is a stationary one, located in a town with a population of between four hundred and five hundred people, and whose biggest attractions are—or were, until McClelland's arrival—a two-century-old stone gristmill and a fall fair that dates back almost as far. McClelland, who recently turned fifty-seven, has no interest in retirement, but has found a happy medium in his new rural setting, still able to perform, but without the strains and headaches of touring.

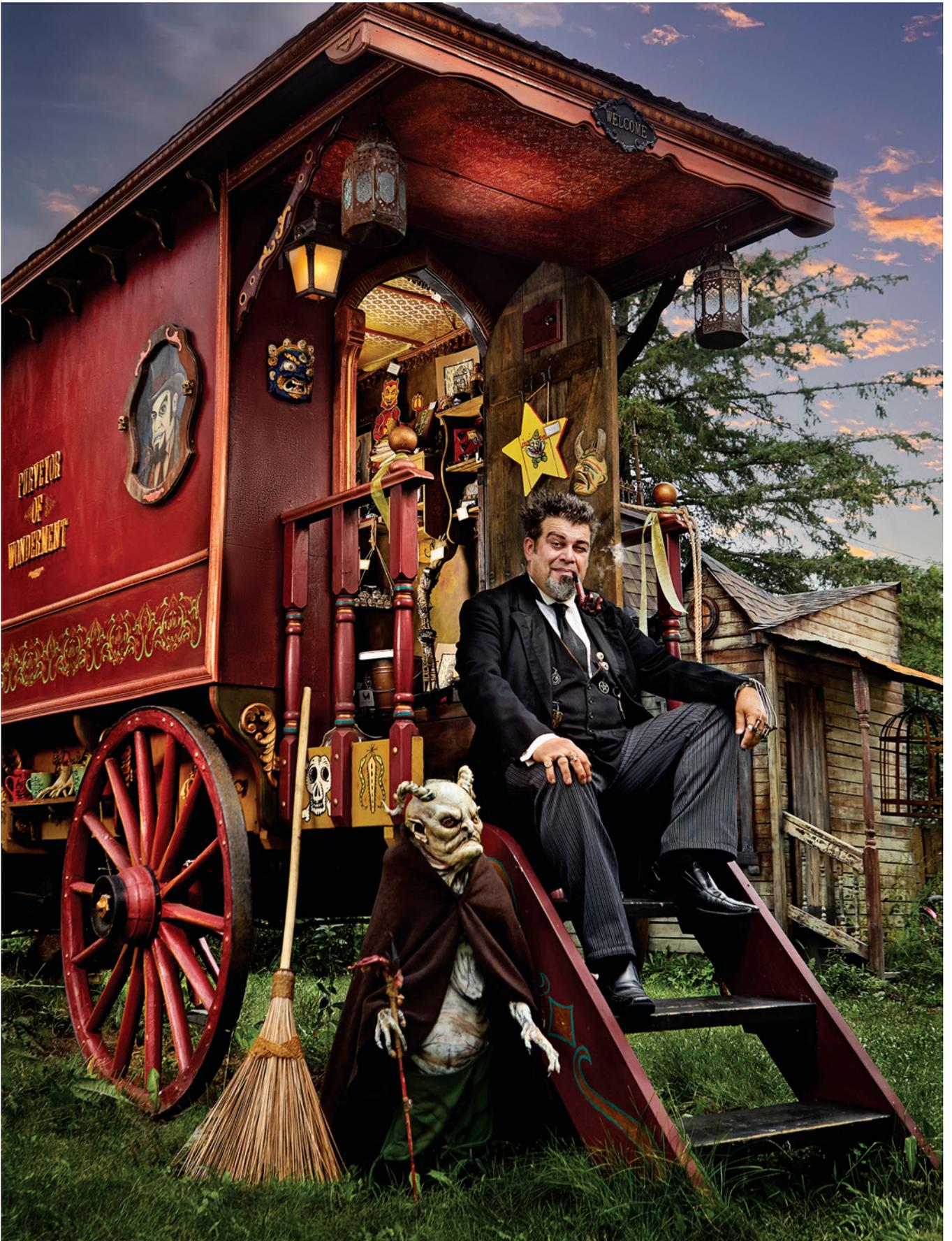
One day this past August, despite the intense heat, McClelland was once again seated on his lawn, smoking a pipe and dressed as one might imagine a circus performer does while off duty on a summer day: loose striped pants held up with suspenders, a white tank top, and a black vest adorned with various talismans. Parked behind him was a recreated showman's caravan with the words "PURVEYOR OF WONDERMENT" on the side and filled with items for sale, including McClelland's own artwork and mojo bags for witches. Further back was a small wooden house even more out of place than McClelland's main residence, with faux blacked-out windows, a peaked roof, and "Crypt of Agramon" written above its entryway in gothic lettering. A boy who looked to be in his early teens approached and greeted McClelland with a friendly wave. "Hi," he said. "I wanted to show you my new demolition hammer. And to tell you I think I might get the job at the sawmill I told you about." McClelland gave the boy a wide, genuine smile, clasped his hands together, and replied, "That's wonderful!"

In 2018, McClelland's landlord informed him he needed to take over the house McClelland was renting, and gave

him two weeks to vacate. In a panic, McClelland started scouring listings for a new home suitable to his unique needs. Within ten minutes he found the house that would become Diablo Manor—a two-storey boxy structure, originally built as the Spencerville Orangemen's lodge, which accounts for its unique architecture—and long since converted into a residence. Within two weeks of moving in, McClelland had created a ground-floor parlour, filled with historical books, oddities, and freaks, including a mummy's hand, a Fejee mermaid, a shrunken head, a jackalope, and, supposedly, the skeleton of Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man. Many of the items in McClelland's collection originally were amassed by his grandfather, a sideshow impresario who performed for nearly fifty years under the name Professor N. P. Lewchuk, and to whom McClelland pays tribute in Diablo Manor, with a display of memorabilia from Lewchuk's own storied career.

On weekends, as the pandemic allows, McClelland hosts a paranormal show and dinner for up to ten people each Friday and Saturday night. The evening begins with a tour of the manor, including the stories behind many of the unusual artifacts housed there, before moving to the dining room for a three-course meal and more tales of the supernatural. Visitors then return to the parlour for the evening's finale: a seventy-five minute Victorian-style paranormal magic show and séance. Throughout the week, from his ornate lawn chair, McClelland greets visitors to his property, telling stories, selling his artwork, and, on occasion, making spell kits for witches from ingredients found in his caravan. (Despite being off the beaten track, McClelland's fame precedes him enough that visitors from as far as New Zealand have made the trip to visit Diablo Manor to date.)

For a fee, visitors can also book time in the Crypt of Agramon, a gothic escape room McClelland built from scratch this spring with help from some friends. "If anyone has an expectation before they come, it's not going to be what they expect," McClelland says. "My puzzles are fucked up. There are three levels. The first level—many people have gotten stuck. You don't get to leave through the exit. If you don't get the first level after thirty-five minutes, you do a walk of shame out the entrance. If you make it to the second room, it's hard, but it's nothing compared to the third room. When you enter, you are inundated with so much information, you don't know what to do with it. And it's spooky. We've only had three out of seventy-eight people make it out so far. But all of the others happily



said they were going to come back to fight Agramon again.”

Spencerville is located about eighty kilometres south of Ottawa. Its main strip is little more than one block long and features a few amenities, including a bakery, a pub, and a gas station. Within a short walk can be found a brick post office, an antique store, and a stone municipal building. The town is also home to three large churches, an indication that religion still plays an important part in the lives of local residents. It wouldn't be unreasonable to think the townsfolk might offer some resistance to having the devil set up shop in their midst. But McClelland says the locals have embraced him. He quickly formed a social circle when he arrived and brought on the nearby restaurant Little Sisterz as the official caterer of Diablo Manor's weekend events. Together with some local A.V. professionals, McClelland recently shot a series of promotional videos in his yard for the Diablo Shopping Network, a live monthly YouTube channel he launched in September to sell art, mementos, and historical artifacts from his career. Post-pandemic, McClelland plans to pitch his big top in a small park down the street from his home and perform a one-man version of Carnival Diablo in the summer months. “I've never felt so welcome in my life,” McClelland says. “I can now make money on my property and never have to travel again. This is my forever house.”

In 1902, McClelland's grandfather, Nicholas Paul Lewchuk, then aged six, boarded the S.S. *Armenia* and sailed, with his parents and brother, from the Ukraine to Canada, where the family planned to purchase an undeveloped parcel of land and start a new life. The Lewchuks landed in Halifax and made their way west, eventually settling in Yorkton, a small town located in what soon would become the province of Saskatchewan. Lewchuk spent his youth working on his family's farm and hungrily acquiring knowledge, not only in public school but also through independent study and correspondence courses. Over the years, he developed skills in a wide variety of areas, including photography, taxidermy, painting, motion picture operation, commercial printing, and record production. Lewchuk also developed an interest in magic and taught himself a few simple parlour tricks. (As a teen, he successfully hypnotised a bird after reading a book on the topic.) In 1914, after watching a touring magician perform in Vegreville, Alberta, Lewchuk was inspired to make magic his life's work. “Magical miracles were performed one after another, followed by thunderous applause,” he wrote of the Vegreville performance, years later, in his self-published autobiography. “The stage setting and displays were wonderful—to me, this was IT! It was so fascinating that I decided, ‘This is the life I want to have. . . I'll travel with my wife and perform in a magic and vaudeville show.’”

Although his magic and vaudeville training were well underway—Lewchuk spent several years working in the local Ukrainian theatre, where he was active acting, creating scen-

ery, making costumes, and as a makeup artist—Lewchuk still needed a wife before he could put his plan fully into motion. In 1916, he noticed a young girl shopping for groceries with her family. The grocer told him they were the Humeniuks. Lewchuk soon paid a visit to the Humeniuk home and introduced himself to Anastasia, known as Nellie. Nellie proved to be equally interested in Lewchuk and, after a brief courtship, the couple were married.

Now with a lovely assistant at his disposal—though Nellie would become much more than that—Lewchuk continued his studies of magic and vaudeville in preparation for the day he would perform his first show. “I visited fairs, theatres and any other place I could find to watch performance in all its details,” he wrote. “I had met a few magicians . . . and explained to them my interest in magic. . . . Usually they were friendly and free to swap ideas.” Lewchuk perfected his show while continuing to work his parents' farm and by 1919 began hiring performers and stagehands, whom he trained throughout the winter and following spring. The next year, he and Nellie, along with their new troupe, finally hit the road, touring the Prairies with a two-and-a-half hour show that utilized many of Lewchuk's talents, including magic, hypnotism, juggling, drama, tap, feats of strength, fire magic, and clowning.

For years, the Lewchuk Vaudeville Company toured the Canadian Prairies and beyond. New performers were added to the act as each of Nicholas and Nellie's children became old enough to walk onstage. An entirely new show was created each season, with Lewchuk making all of the equipment, scenery, and costumes, as well as printing the company's posters and handbills. Nellie quickly came into her own as a performer, managing to remain unscathed while sitting in a box punctured by swords and excelling as a sword swallower to such a degree that she was posthumously inducted into the Sword Swallowers Association International's hall of fame.

Lewchuk reinvested his profits and by the nineteen-forties had begun to build his own midway rides. The first attraction of what eventually became known as Lewchuk's Midway and Shows was an aeroplane ride, powered by a belt that ran from the ride's shaft to the back wheel of Lewchuk's truck. Lewchuk's Flying Saucers, today known as the Teacups, gave the rider control of how fast they spun, via a central wheel. He also invented a mechanism that allowed previously stationary merry-go-round horses to move up and down. Lewchuk eventually added his first freak to the midway: a stuffed two-headed calf, which he displayed in a small tent. He later purchased a large collection of freaks of nature from a museum in Illinois, which he housed in a thirty-two-foot-long trailer, labelled “WORLD-WIDE WONDERS,” making it the largest freak exhibit of its kind on the road.

By the time Lewchuk stopped touring, following Nellie's death, in 1968, Lewchuk's Midway and Shows consisted of a stage show, several rides, a Ferris wheel, a freak museum, a live animal exhibit, and concessions. When he retired, Lewchuk

opened the Fun Spot, a permanent fair on the property where he and Nellie had later settled, in nearby Canora, allowing the general public to visit his museum, rides, and games, for years to come.

Scott McClelland was born in Regina, in 1964, but spent much of his childhood moving with his family across the Prairies, before settling in Calgary. His mother, Sonia, was the youngest daughter of Nicholas and Nellie Lewchuk and spent her own formative years working concessions and games at her parents' midway before running away to escape the circus at the age of eighteen. His father, Bob McClelland, worked as a newspaper journalist for several Prairie dailies, including the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Calgary Herald*, eventually ending up at *The National*, CBC-TV's nightly newscast. Only Scott, of Lewchuk's dozens of grandchildren, showed a fascination with the family business. "At the age of eleven, I got a letter from my grandfather that said, 'Dear Scott, Every time you come to my carnival you always have a group of people around you because you're such a ham. Have you ever thought of becoming a magician like me?'" McClelland says. "And I was like, Of course! So he said in the letter, 'You can apprentice under me and I will teach you what I know.' So I spent two months every summer, from the age of eleven to twenty-five, apprenticing under him. And that meant doing menial tasks, watching him work. I got to learn how to be a producer, how to be a showman, what the psychology is behind why people want candy floss and candy apples when they're at a carnival, and what makes them want to go on one ride over another."

By the time he was thirteen, McClelland had developed an act of his own—Professor Crookshank's Travelling Medicine Show—and was appearing at major fairs including the Calgary Stampede, Edmonton's Klondike Days, and Buffalo Days, in Regina. "It was an old-time medicine show," McClelland says about his performance, in which he starred—under a fake moustache and spectacles—as a forty-something medicine man. "In the early nineteen-hundreds, a doctor

would come onstage and pitch this snake oil, but in between his pitch would be magic acts and ventriloquism and song and dance to keep people watching so they'd stay and hear his pitch again. I loved the idea, and I created a show that basically was just a parody of that time period. I wasn't selling anything." McClelland's act received media attention across the country, and soon he began appearing on kid-centric television shows like *Going Great* and *Switchback*. "My grandfather was not involved with my show," he said. "When I apprenticed under him he was like, 'I'm cutting the cord now, and if you fail, it's on you.' He didn't want to pamper me."

For more than a decade, McClelland toured his medicine



McClelland in his parlour. Photo by Thomas Blanchard.

show across Canada. His school teachers, noting his early success and confident he had a future as an entertainer, were unusually lenient about time missed. After an aborted attempt at art college, McClelland began getting regular side work as a character performer, dressing up as Charlie Chaplin, the Joker, and a creation of his own, Roscoe P. Rigormortis, for corporate functions. In 1991, two years after the death of his grandfather, McClelland realized he needed to make a change. "I was at a point with my life where I thought, I've been doing this since 1979. For me, that was a lifetime," he says. "I was twenty-six. I was like, Do I want to do this every week, every month of my life? The same show I produced when I was thirteen? It was a family show,

but I have a very dark side to me. I love monsters, I love vampires, witchcraft. And I thought, Wait a second, Grandfather had a dark side. He had the circus sideshow. He had the freak show. And he had taught me shit. There's something I could play with. But I have to go dark with it. Grandfather would 'kill' my grandmother in his act every show. My family has been doing horror onstage since the nineteen-twenties. I can't do anything but. I'm not going to be a happy magician and pull rabbits out of a fucking hat. And so I thought, Wouldn't it be great if the devil owned a carnival? And all the performers were demons—they could never be killed, and that's why they could harm their bodies. That was the seed that started Carnival Diablo."

As McClelland began planning his new act, he heard about a friend who had recently taken over a block-long building in downtown Calgary and turned it into an art gallery, with an upstairs space he had no use for. McClelland stopped by. “He takes me around back, and there’s this rickety staircase up to a red door,” he says. “I asked, ‘What’s up there?’ And he goes, ‘Nothing.’ I asked him if he could show me. He pulls this archaic key out of his pocket, he puts the key in the lock and slowly opens the door—and my whole life changed.”

Behind the door was an empty block-long warehouse with fourteen-foot ceilings. McClelland rented the space on the spot and got to work building a Victorian horror carnival. Word of the project soon leaked around town, prompting industry professionals to offer their services. The lighting technician for *The Phantom of the Opera* provided and installed interior lights. An old friend of McClelland’s, whose father managed Calgary’s Palliser Hotel, called offering up the hotel’s lavish Victorian curtains that were being replaced. A retired circus stager dropped by and got to work building seating for a hundred and forty people. At the same time, McClelland was looking for talent, training performers, and writing a show.

Carnival Diablo opened on April 1, 1992, and quickly became the biggest underground attraction in Calgary. The space’s centrepiece was its live show, performed three times a night, at 7 P.M., 12 A.M., and 3 A.M., and hosted by McClelland. (He would eventually host the show in his guise of Nikolai Diablo, who McClelland describes as equal parts Mok, a character in the animated Nelvana feature *Rock & Rule*; B. L. Zebub, from another Nelvana production, *The Devil and Daniel Mouse*; and Boris Karloff’s Grinch, from the TV adaptation of Dr. Seuss’s classic children’s book.) “I had to invent what I felt a sideshow should be like,” McClelland says. “I was doing the nail in the head, swallowing razor blades, the shark hook through my tongue, eating fire, plus some mentalism. That became my standard: open the show with twenty-five minutes of creepy-ass mentalism and move to physical stuff.” McClelland was followed onstage by other members of his troupe, including a human pincushion, a strongman, and a sword swallower. In between shows, patrons could watch old cult movies in a side theatre, browse Professor Lewchuk’s collection of freaks, play carnival games, or simply lounge in the unique atmosphere. “We were open seven days a week, from five in the evening until five in the morning. We had no liquor license, which meant you went there to socialize intellectually. We had coffee on. We had muffins. And we had a library of stuff you could read and boards on every table so you could play checkers or chess with your friends. This became the hub for the arts community.”

Carnival Diablo was critically acclaimed and received national and international media attention in publications ranging from *Maclean’s* to *Omni*. At the same time McClelland was reviving the sideshow in Canada, a performer named Jim Rose was serendipitously doing the same thing in the United

States. In 1991, Rose, a Seattle performer, developed a troupe of his own and founded the Jim Rose Circus Sideshow, an act that exploded in popularity when it played at Lollapalooza the following year. Together, McClelland and Rose were largely responsible for the re-emergence of sideshow performance throughout the nineties. “Jim’s sideshow was the top of the heap,” says McClelland. “I was second, because I’m Canadian. And I have no problem with that. It was a great rivalry. It was positive. It was friendly. And so for the nineties, we were the only games in the book. I rode that wave right into the early twenty-first century.”

After only nine months, the building that housed Carnival Diablo was shut down due to illegal activities taking place on other parts of the property. Carnival Diablo quickly pivoted to become a touring act, and the troupe spent the next several years playing the same fair circuit McClelland had toured as a teen with his medicine show, along with clubs, festivals, and university campuses. “It was a two-and-a-half-hour show, which is a very long show, but the acts were so exciting and dangerous, it was easy for the audience to sit through, because they just enjoyed the hell out of the fact they were seeing something they couldn’t see anywhere else.”

Five years later, McClelland invented another act, the Paranormal Show, which allowed him to dabble in his love of parapsychology, the supernatural, and witchcraft. “In 1997 I had a troupe that drove me crazy on the road,” McClelland says. “Being the boss is hard when you have a lot of egos involved, and this troupe was maddening. It soured me on wanting to do Carnival Diablo, so I thought, Why don’t I take my production background and do a one-man show for a while.” By this time, McClelland had settled in Toronto, and the Paranormal Show began a two-year midnight run at the Poor Alex Theatre, every Friday and Saturday night. “I’ve had an interest in the paranormal since I was nine,” McClelland says. “In producing the Paranormal Show I was building in as many things that had to do with paranormal activity as possible: imported objects, telekinesis, E.S.P., hypnotism. Parapsychology is also about being able to basically detach your mind from your body to do horrifying things, so I integrated into the Paranormal Show some feats from the circus sideshow as well.”

McClelland revived Carnival Diablo with a new troupe in 2000. Along with touring the now familiar carnival circuit came continued television appearances, including MuchMusic Halloween specials and a recurring role on the late-night Citytv show *Ed’s Night Party*. “I was with Ed the Sock for seven years,” McClelland says. “I was supposed to play his neighbour that he asks for sugar or whatever. Ed’s shtick has always been that he puts everybody down. We came up with the idea that Ed the Sock is scared, for the only time in his life, of Nikolai Diablo.”

McClelland created another new attraction in 2001: World of Wonders, a thirty-five-foot-long trailer dressed as a Victorian haunted house. Inside, McClelland displayed his collection of

freaks for the first time since the original stationary Carnival Diablo had closed. “We had that booked at all the major exhibitions across the country: the Calgary Stampede, Klondike Days, the Red River Exhibition, in Winnipeg, the C.N.E. We were doing fifteen-hundred-seat auditoriums while the World of Wonders was being run outside. We were really doing well. We were happy. We were very on the cutting edge.”

In 2004, Conklin Shows, North America’s largest travelling amusement operator, merged with several other midway companies to form North American Midway Entertainment. Conklin had been showing signs of financial strains for years, leading it to sell off many of its largest rides. Eventually came a shutout of the independent operators who travelled with the show, including Carnival Diablo. Without access to his most lucrative circuit, McClelland reworked the act to play smaller fairs and events, but touring was beginning to hold less appeal for him. In 2008, the troupe was hired to work its first of two years at the Ottawa-based Carnivàle Lune Bleue, an outdoor event reminiscent of Depression-era travelling carnivals, inspired by the HBO show *Carnivàle*. The chance to perform under a big top seven days a week for three shows a day was, for McClelland, the epoch of Carnival Diablo. “I had a big troupe doing big things,” he says. “The stage show was crazy. We had a fourteen-foot guillotine, like Alice Cooper would use. It was a lot of fun.” In 2010, McClelland

was invited to play what ended up being the final installment of the Ottawa SuperEX. (The fair, founded in 1888, had originally planned to go on hiatus the following year while its grounds were redeveloped, but was never revived.) “I brought out the World of Wonders again. I did a lecture three times daily on the history of the circus sideshow. I brought out all of my freaks, had a great big warehouse filled with my equipment and we showed it off. It was like a big goodbye to the SuperEX, and, for me, it was the beginning of the end of touring for Carnival Diablo.” Aside from a few big contracts, McClelland began focusing his time on the Paranormal Show and Professor Crookshank’s, which he revived in 2010, at last having aged into the role he’d developed as a teen. “In 2017 I got it in my head that I wanted a big top. So I purchased a beautiful old-time big top circus tent: canvas with wooden poles and hemp ropes. It was a beautiful sight to see, because it looked like how a circus tent should. I toured within a five-hundred-kilometre radius of home doing a one-man show. I was doing that right

up until COVID hit, so that was my last thing with Carnival Diablo. I’ll probably bring it out again next year. But I won’t be touring it like I did. In my mind, my touring days are done.”

In 1978, N. P. Lewchuk and his son Orest were hired by the City of Canora to create an attraction for the town. Forty-three years later, their fifteen-foot statue of a Ukrainian girl dressed in traditional garb continues to welcome visitors, with an offering of salt and a loaf of braided kolch bread.

McClelland has been thinking about his own legacy for a while. As the only grandchild with any serious interest in his grandfather’s career, and with no children of his own, he has single-handedly carried on—and added to—a family legacy that now spans a century. “The reason I never had kids is because I didn’t want to be an absentee father—being on the road so much—because I came from a very good family. But I’m at a point now where I’m pretty stationary and I have

good health. I’d like to have a kid and teach them everything I know, like my grandfather did to me, and hope they’re inspired enough to want to carry it on.”

McClelland has tried several times over the years to train an apprentice, but each time ended in disappointment. “It’s hard,” he says, sitting in his parlour, among his family’s rich history. “I don’t know if there’s a generation of people, or a person, who’s interested enough. I would love somebody to carry on what I’m doing in



McClelland and his grandfather, at the Calgary Stampede, 1989.

any aspect, in paranormal-type work or circus sideshow. If I could find someone between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, I would apprentice them, if they were serious. There was a young woman I started corresponding with online a while ago who seemed really interested. She travelled all the way from Calgary, and when she finally got here discovered apprenticing wasn’t about learning the tricks of the sideshow. I said, ‘Hold on. We’ve corresponded. I told you I wanted to teach you how to produce a show, how to write a show, the logistics of building props.’ No. In her mind, somehow, she read past that or skimmed it and was only here to learn how to eat fire. I train people how to be sideshow performers in my show. That’s not apprenticing. That’s nothing.

“I had a legacy to carry on. Every time I was interviewed when I started out, before I mentioned myself, I’d mention my grandfather. If we stop talking about him, he’s forgotten. We need people to remember who he is. I know how important it is to keep his vision alive. That’s why I do what I do.” ☺

# CLOSURE

a comic by Rebecca Rober

I've been having a hard time letting go of losses lately.

Casualties of circumstance and decisions I've made.

Lost dreams, lost relationships.



On the phone with my therapist, I lay down & close my eyes.



What does the loss feel like?  
What does it look like?

It's like looking down a long tunnel.



I can see someone I love, or a dream that hasn't come true so clearly.



But it's way out of my reach.

It sounds like you're experiencing grief.

Yeah. I think so too.

Maybe you need to do something to get closure.

What about covering the hole?

O.K.



What does the cover look like?



It's a big, round lid made of poured cement, like the cover for a well.

Do you need help moving it?

Yes, it's really heavy.

Who do you want to ask to help you?

Would you help me?

Of course.

It is heavy!

On three. One, two...

(Huuuh!)



I think I should say a few words.

R.I.P. the dreams that didn't come to be. Friendships lost and faraway.



We should lay some flowers on the grave.

Is there something you could do to mark the closure in 'real life'?



I could plant some bulbs by the New River.

So at least something good can come of it.



RROher 2021

## THE STITCH

# FEAR OF POSSIBILITY

*Change is frightening, but lack of change can be haunting.*

BY JULIE CAMERON GRAY

What we now know as Halloween has origins as a Celtic ceremony marking the end of one season and the beginning of another. This makes sense to me: We dress up as anyone other than ourselves, decorate our homes with symbols of mortality, and snack ourselves into a sugared frenzy by the light of a jack-o'-lantern as winter approaches. It feels primal—it feels right for this time of year.

It's the season where we play with fear on purpose and call it fun. Not the fears that keep us up at night, like fear of failure, missed opportunities, or never forgiving ourselves for the mistakes littering our doorsteps like leaves. Nothing so drastic. Just the mortal fear of death, which we confront with humour and wit, attending parties advertised as Dracula Spectaculas, Bogeyman Barbecues, and Sorceress Soirees. They all look the same: dim lighting, pumpkins aplenty, skeleton cookies on a plate, and red wine claiming to be the blood of your enemies.

If you're thinking of throwing a Halloween party this year, feel free to run with any of the above ideas. Actually, not the Sorceress Soiree. I'm keeping that one.

Every year, I craft a Halloween costume for a friend's annual party I end up not being able to attend because I can't find a babysitter. There was the year I carefully crafted a Gal Gadot-esque Wonder Woman costume (because I have never been about the sexy costume but felt like it was time to try something bold). Or the year I bought a blond wig and a brown faux-fur coat to be Margot Tenenbaum, from Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and the faux fur was accidentally donated in a fit of closet purging when I didn't remember it was part of a Halloween costume. I regret getting rid of that coat. Regret is its own kind of haunting.

What I find scary about this time of year, this Old World magic new year, is that anything feels possible: ghosts, vampires, the undead looking for brains upon which to feast. These are, in fact, just metaphorical labels for the types of people you meet at parties. So my fears are not completely unfounded. But that fear is really about possibility—the idea that the veil between what is and is not possible thins, and anything imagined, good or bad, could happen.

We dress in Halloween costumes to play with this idea of infinite possibility, including the possibility that we can transform. Our costumes conjure up magic, a sort of glamour around ourselves: we can dress for the job we want (celebrity, superhero) not the job we have (zombie, any character from *The Office*). This only works early in the night, of course. A couple of hours into any Halloween party and the fiddly bits of our costumes have been discarded, itchy wigs left like pelts of mythical beasts on the floor or on a lampshade. Later, at home, after you've scrubbed the remainder of Halloween makeup from your face, you might pause to look at yourself in the mirror, glimpsing a ghost behind you as that previously costumed self slides out a back door, an open window, into some other life you didn't choose.

We entered the night dressed as an other, cloaked in disguise, but we wake up on November 1st, the dawn of a seasonal new year, our same old selves. Change is frightening, but lack of change is sometimes a haunting of what could have been.

### Knitted Pumpkin

This pattern works for a variety of sizes, so you can absolutely use bigger yarn and needles—you'll just end up with bigger pumpkins. Different-sized pumpkins shown are all knit with





a cast on of 54 stitches, but some were slightly larger and knit for more than 2 inches. The biggest was 3.5 inches of fabric in height. Using worsted weight or D.K. yarn and knitting until fabric is 3 inches from cast on will yield a pumpkin approximately 3 inches in diameter. Pumpkin knitted as written below will yield a pumpkin approximately 2.5 inches in diameter and 1.5 inches tall. Feel free to experiment with the fabric length—the shorter the knitted fabric from cast on, the smaller the pumpkin.

#### Materials

Assorted yarn (40 to 60 yards per pumpkin), in fingering or D.K. weight

3 mm double-pointed knitting needles, or 3 mm circular needle in 9 inch length (2.75 mm/ U.S. 2 also works well)

Tapestry needle for sewing in ends and assembly

Stuffing for pumpkins, ideally polyester fill (I also often reuse yarn ends for stuffing)

#### Pumpkin

Cast on 54 stitches and join for working in the round. Place stitch marker to mark beginning of round and work as follows:

\*K8, P1\*, repeat from \* to \* until end of round.

Continue as established until fabric measures 2 inches from your cast-on edge. Then cast off all stitches knit-wise.

#### Stem

Cast on 4 stitches.

**Row 1:** K1, P1, K1, P1

**Row 2:** P1, K1, P1, K1

Repeat those two rows until stem is 1 inch long. Cast off and weave in end for the top, leaving the long cast-off tail at the end to sew it to the top of your pumpkin.

#### To assemble

Using your tapestry needle, run your cast-off tail of yarn through every third loop on the cast-off edge and pull tight, like a drawstring, adjusting the fabric as you go. Sew any remaining

gaps shut with a few stitches of the yarn.

Turn over the pumpkin and, using the long cast-on tail or a new length of yarn, thread it through every third stitch of the cast-on edge. Before drawing it in tight like you did the other side, stuff the pumpkin with the polyester fill. Then pull the yarn tight to close off the pumpkin and finish with a few stitches in the centre to hold it in place.

Using the long cast-off tail from your pumpkin stem, sew the pumpkin stem to the top of your pumpkin. The top can be whichever side of the pumpkin closure you would like it to be—there is not an official top or bottom to the pumpkin before you sew on the stem. ☺

**brokenpencil**

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# TADDLE CREEK



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by Pat Dorian.*

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## THE EPHEMERA

Given that reducing frequency is so in vogue among mainstream magazines these days, *Taddle Creek* hopes you have enjoyed its recent zag into the world of bimonthly publishing. This rare opportunity to be somewhat seasonal following a near quarter century of semi-annual frequency certainly was a treat for the magazine. So much so, in fact, that *Taddle Creek* isn't ready to return to its reduced schedule just yet. The magazine's upcoming twenty-fifth volume will include one more number than usual. What usually would be *Taddle Creek's* winter issue will be dated spring, to allow some space between it and this holiday issue, while summer will see one of the magazine's rare bonus numbers—a "rarities and B-sides" collection of previously available but uncollected-in-print pieces, mainly fiction and poetry from the early days of the *Taddle Creek* Web site. This special issue will not be available on newsstands and will not be sent to subscribers (and, as such, will not count against readers' subscriptions), though can be obtained by request, free of charge. Should live events be advisable by that time, there likely will be some sort of launch, at which copies can also be had. Finally, a fall issue will mark *Taddle Creek's* twenty-fifth anniversary, with a giant-sized spectacular featuring many of the magazine's regular contributors. If you've never read *Taddle Creek* before, its upcoming anniversary issue will leave you feeling that you have. Don't miss it.

—TADDLE CREEK



*Crep is good for you.*

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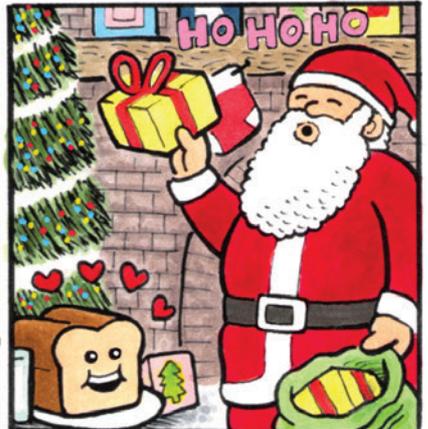
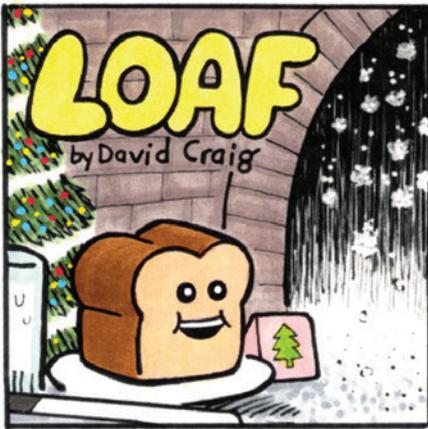


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THE FICTION

# THE SNOWMEN

BY KATARINA GLIGORIJEVIC

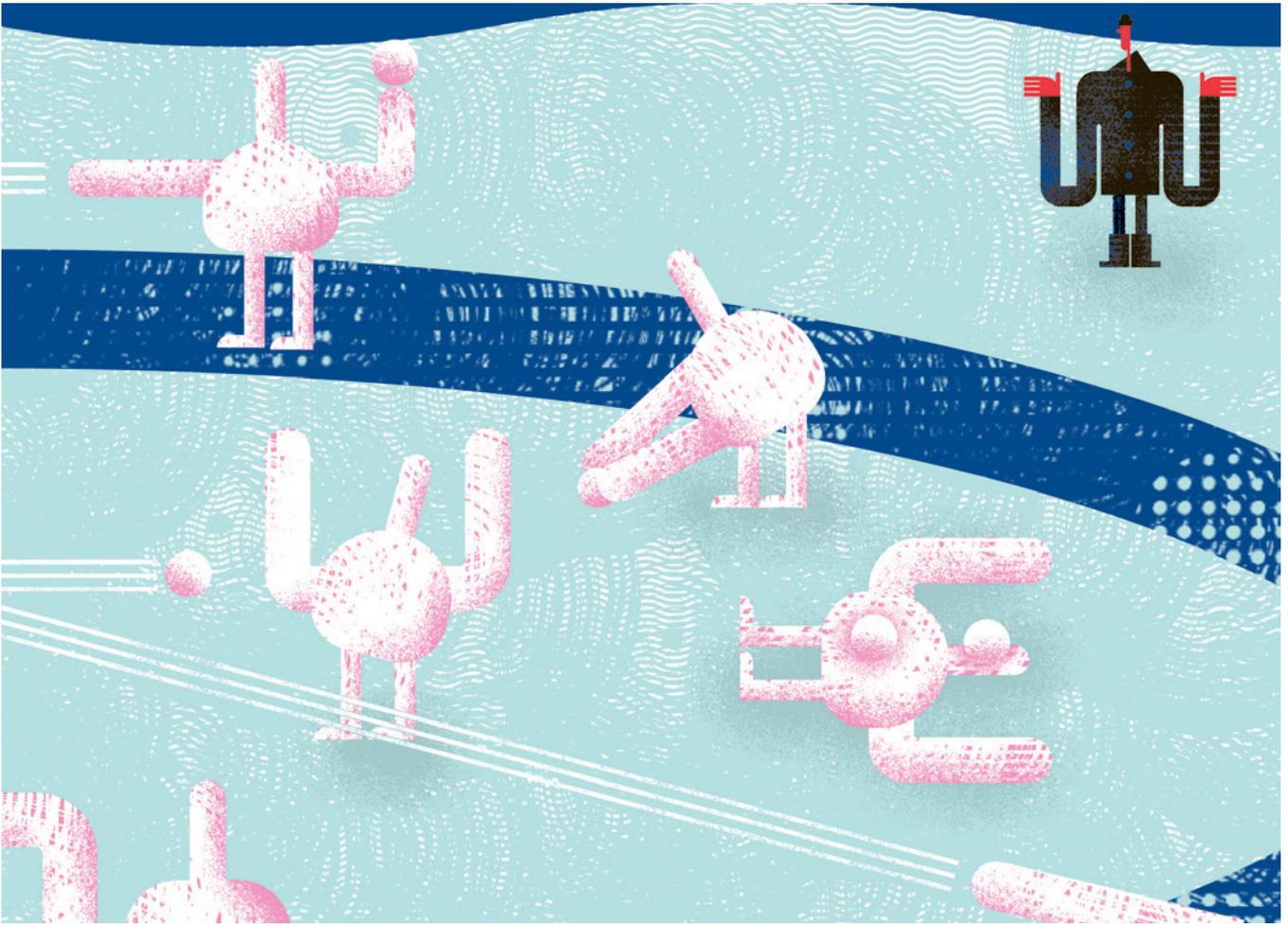
Jessa paces across the cashew-coloured wall-to-wall broadloom of her cramped off-campus apartment, pursued by the cloying smell of her Chapagetti instant noodles. She is spending the evening alone, drinking flabby wine and resenting her ex-roommate Lena for getting into an exchange program and moving to France. This is how she has spent most evenings for the past seven weeks. She is resentful because it was her, not Lena, who first discovered the program, then spent the month leading up to the deadline daydreaming about sitting in a café in Nantes and falling in love with a brooding sculptor, while Lena actually compiled and submitted an application. The injustice of this burns Jessa like a chronic case of acid reflux.

Her phone emits a short whistle. "Get here," the text reads. It's Wednesday, which means nineties karaoke at the pub, where Jessa usually loves to unironically belt out hits from

the time of her birth. Tonight, she doesn't feel like leaving the house, but she also doesn't feel like ever again missing out on anything that might turn out to be exciting. With a resigned slump of her shoulders, she laces up her puffy boots and steps out into the crisp air.

The undisturbed snow glitters in the light of street lamps, their buzz sawing through the still night. The air is so cold it stings Jessa's hands and face. This sleepy residential street full of narrow Victorian houses sits next to campus, a few blocks from its pulsing heart. This is where Jessa always finds herself: adjacent to the action.

She walks down the centre of the street, where the blanket of snow is flawless. No cars will cross her path. Her neighbours all have small kids, so instead of going out in the evenings, they prefer to bore Jessa with their chatty explanations about how it's hardly worth having to pay for a babysitter and



parking just to go to the movies, which, by the way, have gotten so expensive. She crosses the street, toward the single storey yellow-brick elementary school at the end of her block, and looks up at the moonlit field. It looks as if a blizzard is raging there, but the air around Jessa is undisturbed. The hairs in her nose freeze into tiny icicles. It takes several seconds for the scene to come into focus and start making any sense.

Behind the school, in the gleaming white oval at the centre of the running track, a dozen, maybe fifteen, snowmen are throwing snowballs at each other. Not the round-bellied, carrot-nosed snowmen of Christmas carols, with pebble smiles and scarves wrapped around non-existent necks. These are man-shaped mounds of snow, with arms and legs and heads, all smooth and featureless, like Play-Doh figures come to life. Jessa moves out of the streetlight's beam, not wanting to be spotted, but unsure by whom. She can't stop watching, afraid to breathe or blink. They can't see me, she thinks. They have no eyes or ears. The thought is so grotesque and funny that a chuckle escapes her chapped lips.

The snowmen are bending, scooping, rolling snow in their mitten-shaped hands, throwing it, then bending again to restart the mesmerizing cycle. Some of the snowmen absorb the snowballs that land on their torsos with a muffled thud,

while others disintegrate before her eyes, injured arms falling into a soft, powdery heap, only to reform moments later into another loose-limbed white marionette.

Jessa sees a man on the far side of the field staring at the scene, laughing to himself. His rosy face peeks out of a charcoal parka, and she can see the puffs of his shallow breath. She opens her mouth to call to him and break the spell, but she's interrupted by the crunch of footsteps behind her. She whirls around to see a couple walking toward her, embroiled in cozy conversation, arms linked. They walk past, strolling along the fence separating the snowy madness from reality as Jessa knows it. They don't look up or appear to notice anything at all.

Jessa wonders for a second if the snowmen are invisible to them, when a loud crack ruptures the silence and she flinches, ready to duck or crouch or run, dread rising in her chest. She turns toward the sound and sees the man in the charcoal parka. He's swooning now, and the remains of a jagged, snow-encrusted rock of ice lie on the road in front of him. As the man turns toward her, she sees a crimson thread trickle down his temple, where he was struck.

Jessa's breath catches in her throat. She's forgotten how to swallow, and her mouth is too dry to make sounds. An

icy hand squeezes her heart as she comes to a ghastly realization: *They can hurt us*. The snowmen aren't looking at the man. They almost knocked him out, but they don't even know he's standing there. Are they alive, Jessa wonders, or are they just a kind of weather? An unseeing storm that destroys without feeling?

The man staggers, weaving as he hurries down the street, away from Jessa and the swirling mass of animated snow. Jessa is slower to react, her body leaden as she spins on the heels of her boots, snow squeaking under her. She looks around for the couple, to see if the loud noise roused their attention, but they're gone. She tries to run quietly, but each footfall echoes with a loud crunch, her breath and the swish of her pants amplified in her ears. She runs past the school, down one side street, then another, weaving through laneways until she reaches the strip of bars marking the western edge of the campus.

She sees three pink-cheeked girlfriends, arm in arm and stumbling, and she tries to calm her ragged breathing. The sight of drunk students makes her knees buckle with relief. A group of smokers spills out from the grey façade of a nondescript bar Jessa knows would be neither fancy nor divey enough for her friends, the refrain from "Sweet Home Alabama" trailing behind them.

Jessa leans against a wall, elated to be among flesh-and-blood people. She brushes past the cluster of smokers and enters the bar, taking a deep, grateful breath of stale beer and mildew. The music is cranked and everyone is shouting, but it's not crowded. She sees three empty stools at the bar and slides into the middle one, gesturing for a pint. The bartender slides it toward her and she downs a third in one gulp, her heart still thudding. Minutes pass, three, or maybe ten, and a dark puffy coat enters her peripheral vision. She glances to the right and sees a man, older than the average clientele, ease himself onto the next stool. She rolls her eyes. Not now, she thinks. The last thing she needs is a past-his-prime graduate student trying to make conversation.

She starts to lift her numb body off the stool when the man turns toward her with a curt smile and she spots a red smear on his temple. A chill ripples through her body as the man orders a drink, his slender fingers emerging from the charcoal sleeves of his coat and closing around the bottle. She is surprised at the smallness of his hands.

"I saw you," she says, before her good sense can intervene. The man gives her a thanks-but-no-thanks look, but Jessa keeps staring, waiting for him to take another sip before she continues.

"The field," she says. "The snowmen," and all the warmth slides off his face. He stands up, puts a hand on her elbow, and guides her to a nearby booth.

They slide into the soft vinyl and lean in toward each other, their drinks almost touching, their hands vibrating with adrenaline.

"At first I thought it was some kind of freak weather thing.

A miniature tornado," he says. "I don't know if those exist."

"I thought it was a blizzard," Jessa says.

"I wanted to take a picture, but I just stood there," he says, shaking his head.

"I didn't even think of that. I was so scared of attracting their attention."

"For one horrible moment I thought they were trying to kill me," he says, touching his temple and staring past her. "Then I realized they weren't even looking at me."

"I'm not sure they could see us. Or see at all," Jessa says.

"I've never . . .," and he trails off, his eyes landing on the side of her face. "Have you?"

"No," Jessa whispers. "I hope I never do again."

"When I get home, I'm looking into cheap flights. Someplace tropical," he says with a tight laugh, running a hand through his thick hair. Jessa can't stop staring at his hair, the colour of television static, a dizzying blend of black and grey.

A volley of laughter blows in from the front door like a blast of wind, and they both flinch. The man's eyes find hers and grab on.

"Do you think they're still out there?" he asks. "Should we go back?"

Jessa drops her gaze to her hands, her knuckles turning white around the pint glass. The man isn't as big inside his parka as she thought. He's wiry, with a fine-boned face and a delicate neck. She takes another long sip, not wanting to answer.

"I can't believe I didn't take a picture," she says. "I take pictures of everything."

"We should do something," the man says. "Alert people."

"I saw a couple pass by, but they didn't see anything. Or they were just too interested in each other."

"Maybe it's just us. We're cursed," the man says with a chuckle. "Or the field is cursed."

"Maybe it is," Jessa says, too seriously. "Do you remember the old guy who froze to death in that same field a few years ago?"

"What old guy?"

"He was a coach at the school who slipped on the ice while he was cleaning up the athletic shed. Cracked his head open, and nobody found him till the next day. He might have survived except for the cold. It was pretty tragic."

"I remember the story," the man says. "But he wasn't old."

"He was at least forty."

A small smile crinkles the man's face.

"I'm forty," he says. "And change."

"You don't look it," Jessa says, embarrassed. You look like a person, she thinks.

"Thanks," he says, shifting in his seat and looking away from her. "While we were out there, I kept thinking about my kid. We were building a snowman together two days ago."

It hadn't occurred to Jessa that this man might be a father. What does a father look like? Can a father be just any person, sitting in a bar, wearing a parka?

"When I was a kid," he says, reading her mind, "I thought parents were this whole other species."

Aren't they, Jessa thinks.

"I thought, before you become a dad, you graduate to a higher level of understanding of the mysteries of life."

He smiles at her, a glint of tears in his hazel eyes.

"Then people around me started having kids and I realized the terrible secret," he says, leaning conspiratorially toward her. "Parents are just us. No different and no wiser than before. Just us, with less free time."

"I never thought my parents had any mysteries figured out," Jessa says.

"No?"

"One time," she says, "they forgot me outside in my stroller. We were coming home from a birthday party, and they spent the walk home arguing, I don't know what about, because I don't actually remember this. I was two. When they got home they parked the stroller by the back door and went in to unpack all their bags, and then my mom started cooking dinner and my dad went downstairs to do who knows what. They remembered me when my mom was calling everyone down to eat."

Jessa picks at the label of a ketchup bottle in the condiment caddy and clears her throat, embarrassed that she's telling this to a stranger, but unable to stop.

"I had fallen asleep," she continues. "I was fine."

"I'm sorry," the man says.

"Now my mom tells the story as if it's a funny example of how bonkers the early days were with three kids."

"Sometimes, even when you're doing your best, it's not enough," he says. "There's no forgiveness for the parent who tried hard and fell short."

"It was winter," Jessa says. "I could have frozen to death. Anyway, it only happened once, but it's a good example of their usual level of chaotic energy."

"What are their names?" the man asks.

"Who?"

"Your parents."

Jessa furrows her brow.

"Maxim and Eileen," she says. "I never think about them as Max and Eileen."

"I get it," he says.

"Did you ever forget your kid out in the snow," Jessa asks.

"No. But I've wanted to forget him a few times. And before you give me a look, let me assure you, my wife's thought it more times than I have."

Jessa's mouth curls into a crooked smile.

"I never asked your name," she says, taking in his winter tan and laugh lines. He whispers, "Roger." A perfect dad name.

"I'm Jessa," she says.

"Hi Jessa," he says. "Where were you headed tonight?"

"Just walking. My friends are at karaoke, but I wasn't in the mood, so I thought I'd wander for a bit, try to get lost in my

own neighbourhood, you know?"

"Earlier tonight I was thinking about how much I miss the days I could just do whatever I wanted with my evenings. I thought it'd be so nice to just stroll around, pretend to be free."

"It's overrated," Jessa says.

"What is?"

"Freedom. I spend most nights alone with my computer."

"Alone with a computer. Sounds like another sort of heaven."

Jessa smiles.

"It must feel good to be needed?"

"I guess," he says.

"So were you out just being free tonight?"

"Not exactly. I was heading home from my studio."

"Are you a sculptor?" Jessa asks too quickly.

Roger gives her a puzzled look.

"No. It's just a small recording studio in my friend's office. I do a podcast with some friends."

"Have I heard it?"

"It's about travel. Or, right now, it's about all the places we would travel to, if we didn't have kids. We talk about food a lot too."

Roger runs his fingers through the salt and pepper waves of his hair, and Jessa is surprised to realize she's kept count of every time he's done it. Her body contracts around the pint of beer sloshing in her stomach.

"I wanted to move to France, but my roommate did it instead," Jessa says.

"How did that happen?"

"She actually applied for the year-abroad program, and I fucked up."

"I do that at least once a week," Roger says. "Tell myself I'm going to start running again, or cut out sugar, or take a deep breath and count to ten before snapping at my kid. But then, you know. Life."

"My mom tells me I don't have follow-through."

"Making big plans is fun," Roger says. "Finishing things is another story."

"Maybe life made the right decision for me?"

"To making decisions," Roger says, raising his bottle. "Or letting life do it for you."

Jessa taps the bottle with her glass and opens her mouth to take a sip.

"If you'd moved to France, you would have missed all this," Roger starts, gesturing at their dingy surroundings, then trails off as they both remember the snowmen.

"I need some air," Jessa says, standing up and placing an awkward hand on Roger the dad's shoulder. A fluttering sensation rises in her throat. She turns toward the door, slapping it open to take huge gulps of freezing air on the sidewalk packed with cigarette butts and sparkling snow. A moment later, Roger slides into the spot between her and the overflowing garbage can.

"Let's go," he says. "Let's see if they're still there." ☹

# ALL IN THE FAMILY

*Give yourself the greatest gift of all this Christmas morning—time.*

BY BRIAN FRANCIS

Let's face it—the holidays can be a chaotic time for even the most organized people. There are living room windows that need to be spray-snowed, tinsel to be delicately strung, strand by strand, on the artificial tree, and all those presents that have to be wrapped using masking tape (once you discover your Scotch tape has run out). And then there's the food! Cheese balls that must be lovingly rolled in chopped nuts, shortbread cookies requiring the intricate placement of maraschino cherry slivers, and rings of shrimp that require careful dethawing. Throw some rum-and-egg nog cocktails, a pumpkin pie, and a forty-seven-pound turkey into the mix and it's no wonder many of us can barely muster the energy to return all of our gifts on Boxing Day.

Thankfully, I'm here to the rescue. Or should I say, the Royal Bank employees behind the *Royal Recipes: For the Love of Tiny Hearts* community cookbook are here to the rescue. This recipe for Christmas Morning Wife Saver is easy to prepare, full of flavour, and guaranteed to give you the most precious gift of all this holiday season: time. In spite of its sexist name, you don't have to be a wife to make this dish. A husband, an aunt, a distant third cousin, or even an elf could pull it off. If you know how to make a sandwich, you're laughing. It's that easy.

What I appreciate about Christmas Morning Wife Saver is its thoughtfulness. Christmas breakfast rarely gets the care and attention it deserves. Everything is always about opening presents, checking to see if Santa took the carrots for his reindeer, and eating full boxes of Toffifee by 10 A.M. while wondering why your onesie is feeling a little snugsie. But that's the glory of this recipe.

Christmas Morning Wife Saver is essentially a strata made with bread, eggs, ham, and whole milk that you assemble the night before and bake in the morning, after adding a topping of crushed Corn Flakes and melted butter—because who couldn't use more butter over the holiday season?

A note: The recipe calls for a scattering of diced green pepper on top, but I also added red pepper. It's important to use every opportunity available to add red and green accents on as many foods as you can at this festive time of year. You could also use pimento, sliced cherry tomatoes, or even chopped up chilies, if your family rolls that way. However, I would not use red maraschino cherries. Because cherries and Worcestershire sauce. The recipe also calls for a pound of shaved ham. I used a four-hundred-gram package, which seemed more than enough.

In terms of taste, Christmas Morning Wife Saver is guaranteed to put the jingle in your bells. It's cheesy, salty, and hammy, and the Corn Flake topping provides a perfect crunch. It will taste all the better as you watch the rest of your household tear into it quicker than they tear into their presents. All you'll have to do is sit back in the new velour robe you'll be returning on the twenty-sixth and savour a small moment of grace. While trying not to think about the forty-seven-pound bird waiting in your fridge.

## Christmas Morning Wife Saver

### Ingredients

16 slices of bread, crusts removed  
1 pound shaved ham  
450-gram package of cheddar cheese, grated  
6 eggs  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon pepper  
1 teaspoon dry mustard  
2 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce  
6 shakes Tabasco sauce  
3 cups whole milk  
¼ cup minced onion  
¼ cup finely diced green pepper  
¼ cup finely diced red pepper  
½ cup butter  
½ cup crushed Corn Flakes

### Directions

1. In a buttered nine-by-thirteen-inch glass baking dish, lay out 8 slices of bread. Don't overlap.
2. In layers, spread ham and then cheese evenly over bread. Top with remaining bread, making it look like a sandwich.
3. In bowl, beat eggs, salt, pepper, dry mustard, Worcestershire, Tabasco, and milk together.
4. Pour mixture evenly over top of sandwiches.
5. Spread onion and peppers over top.
6. Press down to wet bread with the egg mixture.
7. Cover tightly and refrigerate overnight.
8. In the morning, preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Melt butter and pour over top of dish. Sprinkle crushed Corn Flakes on evenly.
9. Bake, uncovered, for one hour. Let stand 10 minutes before serving. 🍴





## THE STITCH

# A MIND OF WINTER

*Holidays can be filled with bittersweet moments of happiness and sadness.*

BY JULIE CAMERON GRAY

December's build up is too much, too soon. Gatherings multiply exponentially and all of a sudden you need to buy (or make or bake) a lot of things all at once, and it doesn't let up until one day the holiday suddenly is over. There are expectations—of gifts, family, friends, laughing, and joy—and the music declares it's the most wonderful time of the year, insisting upon a joyous celebration of peak decadence. There must be lavish food, buckets of drink, the persistent sound of jingling bells that no one ever admits is super annoying, for fear of being labeled miserable.

But it's not like that for most of us, is it? Family is complicated. Ghosts of people, of events and times past, haunt us with their absence, in contrast to the abundance of everything we're told we should be quaffing down. We eat too much and then feel bloated and lethargic. We make too many plans and then feel rushed and stressed. It's supposed to be this magical, happy time, but it inevitably feels like an empty gesture, like we're all missing out on something magnificent. A Hallmark movie happiness laced with shimmering lights and cozy sweaters and the scent of spiced cookies and wine. We're doing all the things, so why doesn't it feel like the carols say it should?

I feel that while the holiday music gets it wrong, the old holiday fairy tales get it right. They are filled with the bit-

tersweet moments of both happiness and sadness, and a fair bit of mortality. One of my favourites is Hans Christian Andersen's story of the little match girl. An extremely poor girl wanders the wintry city streets on New Year's Eve, trying to sell matches. She's so cold she starts lighting one match after another for warmth, and with each match she lights a golden scene of holiday splendour appears before her: a living room with a fully decorated Christmas tree, a dining room with a lavish feast—including a cooked goose—laid out and waiting.

I think about that story around the holidays when I embark on my favourite December tradition of putting on my coat and boots, all the woolly accessories, and going for a walk after dark (easy to do since it's pitch black by five o'clock) to catch glimpses of Christmas trees and menorahs through windows. I love how many people tend to put up decorations near windows and then leave their lights on, glowing their colourful glow, sometimes flashing, making a merry little disco.

Each is an apparition, a match struck against a season that otherwise is filled with the kind of dark that is edged in sharp teeth, a dark that is a head-clearing whiff of memento mori. Those walks remind me that it is impossible to appreciate those warm, bright living rooms full of people without the contrast of the cold, dark walks in the early twilight of winter.

Not that every walk is a delight. On the winter days when

it does not snow, and hasn't for a long time, the wind bullies your face and you must carefully watch for patches of sidewalk pocked with ice. On those days, I scowl at the chore of being outside, away from the warmth of the great indoors, and stuff my mittened hands deeper into my pockets.

But when it snows, everything is softened. The snow silences the wind, holds a mirror below the street lamps so their light is cast back up and radiates outward in all directions. And somewhere there is a faint melody of music, without jingling bells, and your face softens like the snow into something resembling a smile.

### Microwaveable Hand Warmers

These hand warmers are small enough to tuck inside a pair of gloves or mittens without adding too much bulk. They're great in pockets, too. You also can make them bigger if you like. Example is ½-inch thick when stuffed with rice.

#### Materials

One hundred per cent cotton or linen fabric (With repeated use, synthetic fibres can easily catch fire in a microwave, and sparkly fabric has metallic elements that might cause your microwave damage. If you are unsure of the material of your fabric, do not use.)

Sewing needle

One hundred per cent cotton thread (polyester thread will melt in the microwave)

Scissors

Approximately ⅓ cup of dried, uncooked rice (any type) per hand warmer

Ruler, for measuring

#### Instructions

1. Measure and cut out the fabric you will use for your hand warmers. A 2½-inch square will, when sewn, yield a hand warmer approximately 2 inches square.

2. Turn the fabric so the wrong side is facing out on both sides, and begin sewing the edges on one side. You want to make small, tidy stitches—blanket stitch would be a good choice, but a running stitch that is closer together would also work well.

3. Sew three sides, then turn your pouch inside out, so the right side of the fabric is now facing you.

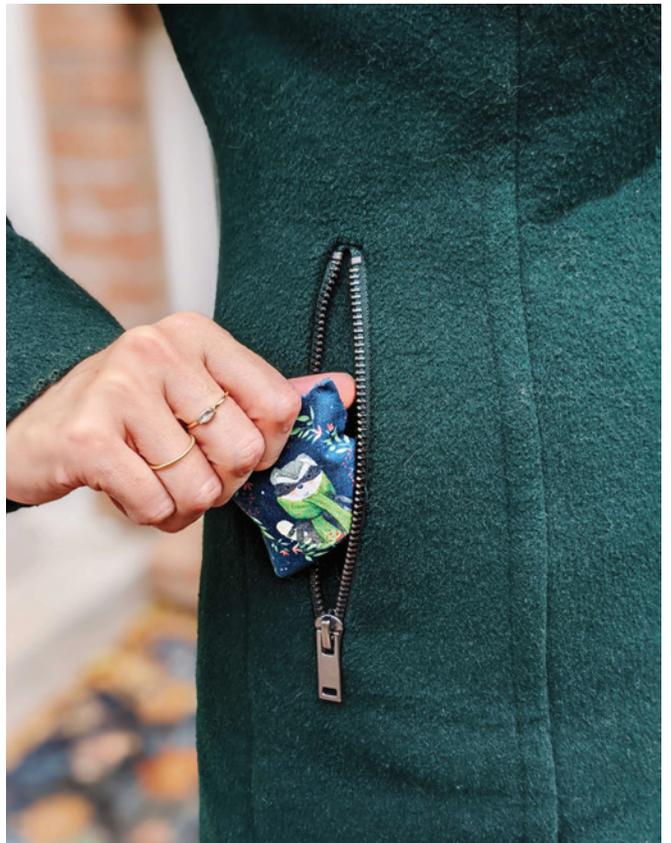
4. Fill the pouch with the dried, uncooked rice, leaving some room to stitch it shut. You want the pouch to have a beanbag-like consistency, not be really stuffed and immobile.

5. Sew the open seam together carefully.

6. Repeat instructions for second hand warmer.

#### To heat

Heat up your hand warmers in the microwave for approximately twenty-five seconds and no more than thirty seconds. Be careful when removing hand warmers. If they are too hot,



allow to cool a bit before putting them into your mittens, gloves, or pockets.

Note that if the fabric gets wet to the point of saturation, you will need to discard the warmer. The rice may be partially cooked and likely get mouldy. ☹️

## THE FICTION

# SATURNALIA

*An excerpt.*

BY TAMARA FAITH BERGER

I woke up huffing and nauseous that day at the clinic, my neck like a spike at the edge of the chair. I called her for the first time six weeks later, totally unaware of the spell. My swelling had gone down. My cough was less wet. She was shocked when I told her how sick I'd been.

I remembered her necklace, a hanging gold cross, laying flat on her papery hospital gown. She had dyed blond strands in her pulled-back hair. A pecan-coloured forehead, plush-looking cheeks. I stared up, worm's eye, at the coils of her profile.

"You look pretty," she said, as soon as I woke.

She handed me a pink plastic hand mirror. My lips were skinless, like livers.

"It takes at least twenty-four hours for the swelling to go down."

I saw girls being led into the clinic through my stunted peripheral vision. My nurse had a doll's pucker. She took back the mirror.

"If you have any problems," she said, slipping me her card.

I knew she was doing her job and lying to me. I already understood that plastic surgery reordered society. You were sliced and then let loose to climb up the ladder. It was metamorphosis, sanctioned by the state. And your family was free to psychologically manipulate.

At home, I couldn't stand up or shower. I didn't want to brush my teeth. My mother begged me to get out of bed. Go outside, see your friends, they won't even notice, she said. But I tracked each new cell of topographical lip skin: I'd become amphibian.

After I'd told my nurse on the phone that I'd been in the hospital for a week, she said, "Oh God. Thank God. Thank God you called."

Then she paused for a very long time.

I waited in the kitchen, on our phone attached to the wall. There was an air pocket in the wallpaper; the lines didn't sync.

"Why?" I said, into the void.

My nurse was mixed, model-like. I imagined her partying life.

She cleared her throat a few times. Pieces of our wallpaper were not glued down right. Sweat seeped under the receiver and penetrated my cheek.

"Are you still there?"

Her voice felt like a rush, the beginning of pain. I knew my mother was insulted that I didn't want her face.

"I think maybe it's better. . . . Do you want to meet up?"

I thought I'd called her out of boredom. I thought I'd called because I could.

She told me to meet her at Mindu, outside the cafeteria. My saliva tasted bitter. It had been almost six weeks since my procedure. I'd met her just once at the clinic, before I got sick. She'd seen me unconscious. I forgot my sunglasses. I was not thinking straight.

It took me thirty minutes to walk there through Novo Aleixo, where you could buy liver, intestines, and feet. Blades of grass floated in the bloody corners of butchers' windows. Mindu Municipal Park was for tourists, with pink and yellow painted bridges in a maze. I pretended I didn't see her walking up to me. Sun sliced my eyes. Children licked soft ice cream. I felt this force field between us. She wore bright red lipstick, a bathing-suit-style dress. She really looked like a model, a *lingerie* one. I saw a little roll of flesh above the line of her underpants. Kids ran around like puppies, mothers yanked arms like tails. Her hair was wild, all black. There were no more blond streaks. Immediately, I knew coming here had been a mistake.

She squinted at my mouth.

"Are you happy now?" she said.

I licked my lips and folded them in.

"You look good. It's all healed. You look sexy," she said.

I could tell she was nervous, talking quickly, in spurts. My stomach was mangled. I felt like throwing up.

"Hey. Looking sexy is a compliment."

We were the same height, the same body type. I felt like she could be my sister from another life.

She asked if I wanted coffee, if I took sugar or milk.

"Anything," I mumbled.

My face had been replaced.

I wanted to get away from all the families. It was too hot for coffee. I watched her walk into the cafeteria, wiry spandex wrinkles around her waist. It felt as if my tongue was stuck in the ridges of the tube that children's ice cream coils pushed through.

My mother had led me into a factory for faces. I imagined an arena, everyone rapt when I spoke. When my nurse emerged from the building, she held out two Styrofoam cups. Her nipples looked like thumbprints. Dead leaves rose from the ground. I thought that with my new mouth, people would listen to me.

"Thanks," I said. My voice was hoarse.

She kept looking over at me as we walked down the path.

"Is it O.K.?" she asked.

I nodded and scalded my tongue. The plastic top of my



coffee leaked a pustule of foam. We approached a green, armless bench in front of a crooked rubber tree.

"Here," she said.

I put my drink down on the bench, twisting to sit.

"You have a bit on your nose," she said, inching closer, reaching out.

Before she could touch me, I swatted my own face.

"Are you O.K. with us meeting?"

I guessed that she was at least twenty-one years old.

"Look, I just need to tell you something," she said.

I felt the wind blow through my ears to the bridge of my nose.

"Since you came to the clinic, I can't stop thinking about you."

She wasn't looking at me. She was looking away. I forced myself to drink back more syrup and foam.

"*Fuck*. Do you want to just hang out again?"

I felt almost seasick. I liked how she said "fuck."

"Does that mean yes?"

Yes. Completely struck dumb.

After my procedure, to make me feel better, my mother said, "You better get ready. Boys are going to be crawling to you." I thought about boys on their hands and knees looking up at my lips, the exact same way I'd seen hers from underneath. I thought about slapping the boys, how I'd seen people do to their pets. I'd tower over them and big-toe their heads to the ground. I hoped my mother was right. I'd never had a boyfriend. Men had always flocked to her bedroom. I heard her grunting most nights. But ever since going to Mindu to meet my nurse, I'd stopped telling myself stories about boys, dog-like. My mouth had turned into a plump glossy blossom. I saw things in images now. Like her swinging gold cross. Her black and blond stripes. Thumbprints circling in spandex, nipples printed through a dress.

She was "fuckable," I knew the guys in my class would've said. But the more days that passed since our coffee on the bench, the more it seemed, I guess, completely far-fetched. Like, why did she say was she thinking about me? And why did she want to meet again? Didn't she know my real age? I felt my lips itch.

I was sure she stroked every girl's arms going under. She greeted every single one with that same mirror when they woke.

I couldn't function at school. I ate soft white ice cream and yogurt to cool myself down. I drank milk with a straw. I sucked slivers of ice. I tried lozenges, too. Questions got parsed in my head. What did her thinking about me actually mean? And how did looking sexy fit in?

I decided to put on lipstick for our second meeting. I wore a crop top and my jean short shorts. She'd arrived before me on our bench. She was sitting there smoking, with crossed legs in flip-flops, slick black hot pants, like a braided horse tail. God, what could I ever say to this person that wouldn't make me sound dumb?

Tree roots twisted in front of us. My thoughts rushed to the future.

"Do you think I'm old?" she asked, bouncing her tightly crossed legs.

"No," I got out, squeezing my thighs till they hurt.

I felt myself trying not to smile, staring up at the powdery sky.

"Well, I feel like I'm old. And I feel like you think I'm old."

Before I could say no again, she told me she'd been working at the clinic for three years. She had a cosmetic assistant's certificate and she wanted to go to nursing school.

"You think that's a good idea?" she asked, blowing smoke away from me. "I was a real fuck up in high school. I don't know if I could pass."

My lips stuck together from the lipstick. The clouds were a graph made of pillows overhead. I tried to figure out if they were thickening or parting for the sun.

"I need a better job," she continued. "So that I can do music. I love house. You like house? All my friends are D.J.s."

I wondered which high school she went to. And what did "fuck up" mean?

"I bet you're really good at school," she said.

I tried to not think about how different I already knew that we were. I just tried to focus on saying something back to her. But I felt so embarrassed. I didn't know house. My tongue lay in glue. I hadn't told my mother where I was.

She sighed and stood up, lighting another cigarette. Her white tank top billowed, her hot pants reflected the sun. I liked English class and Spanish. I liked reading true crime. The thing was, this whole time, I'd assumed she *was* a nurse.

"I'm trying to quit," she said, after a few puffs, throwing her cigarette on the ground.

I knew I was disappointing her by being mute again. I stared at her red shellacked toes and junkyard cigarette butt.

I dreamed of being an adult, escaping our house. My mother was teaching me how to clean chicken, how to separate eggs. "You need to learn how to function when I'm not here," she said. We lived alone in our high-rise. It was always just us. I think my mother thought she was preparing me for the "real world."

"Look, I'm just going to say it."

Her eyes were glassy, laser-like.

"I think maybe I'm in love with you."

My stomach felt like a balloon that had just popped. I was slouching in pain. I glared at the dry, broken ground. Dead leaves were burned here, I thought, to make mulch. I tried to stand up. She took a step toward me.

"I have to go now," I said. I felt bile rise.

"Wait," she said.

But I started to run. The whole sky white and electric. There was no real world.

I ran up the pathway, back to the cafeteria. I was sweating, so stupid. How could a *woman* be in love with me? I'd thought I'd loved this guy once, when I was thirteen. I felt sick. I felt dread. That was nothing like this. My flip-flops slapped the ground. Thinking about being in love was not the same as feeling it. ☹

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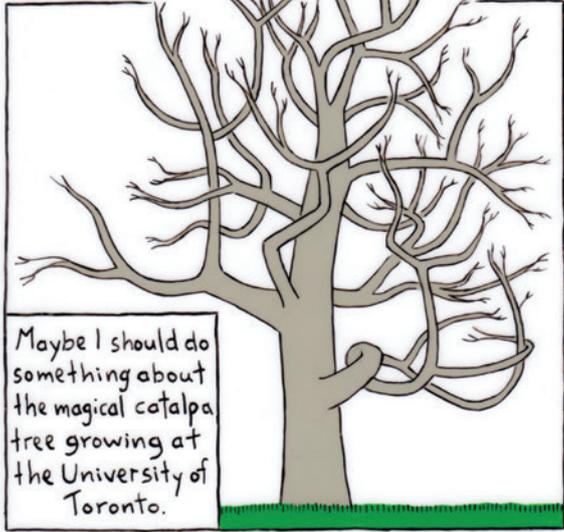
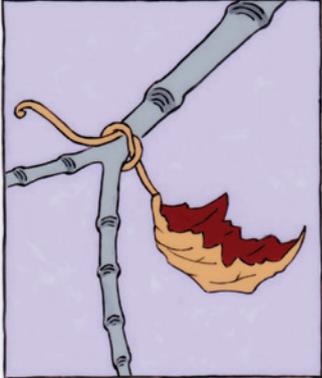
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What am I supposed to do? Write something about the guy on Wellesley Street who yelled at my wife?

IT'S ALL THE CHINESE'S FAULT! THEY SHOULD BURN DOWN CHINATOWN!



Or making a knot in a maple leaf stem and watching it survive all winter tied to a branch in Queen's Park?



Maybe I should do something about the magical catalpa tree growing at the University of Toronto.

Or maybe how I used a pair of binoculars to watch a red-tailed hawk capture and eat an entire pigeon... head, feet and all.



Who would want to read a crass story about a friend who was in the middle of having sex with a prostitute when her cat started barfing and she lept off him...

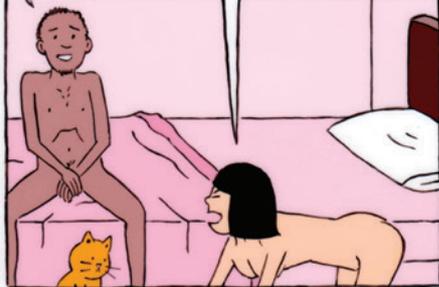


...and while she cleaned up the cat puke he began to laugh nervously...

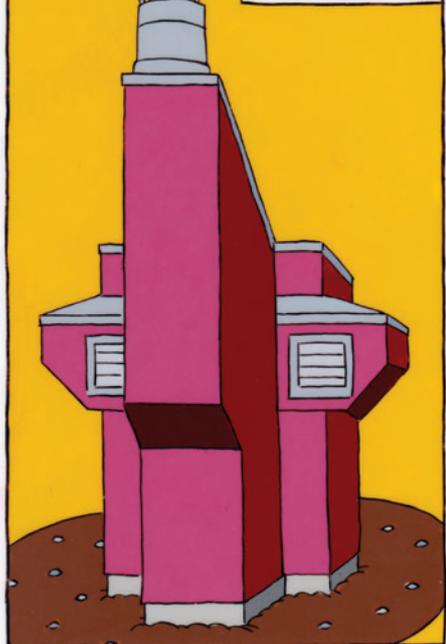
hee hee hee What are you laughing at?!

Um, the awkwardness of the situation.

There is nothing funny about it.



The strange structure in St. James Town is definitely worth consideration...



...or daring to embrace a non-believer with a protective hug bag™ over my head.



I suppose during this time we're all stuck with the same old stories.





# Canada's PREMIUM BEER