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# Voices: A TMI Writers' Journal





# Deadline Junkies

Dominic Varvaro

We coalesce during the pandemic, a rebellion against quarantine with a spoken manifesto of maintaining the momentum we had enjoyed in a TMI classroom. I'm convinced it is words that cement us. Vivid descriptions, showing not telling, precious snippets embodying images unique to each listener, invocation of memories long buried in the turmoil of the past.

It's our fourth anniversary of crafting essays and memoirs, fictions and fantasies, tall tales imbued with personal revelations. Some of us first met in January 2020 at a TMI fiction-writing workshop, when, a few weeks into the course, epidemic mushrooms into pandemic, governments curtail public gatherings, and our fledgling course is officially kiboshed. Undeterred, budding authors with instructors Pauline Beauchamp and Karen Nesbitt agree to pursue assignments to completion with reviews and submissions shared via email.

There are eleven of us now, all wards of TMI poetry and prose curricula. "Offshoots" is how we describe ourselves and we meet virtually several times a year for critical readings of our latest creations.

Ellen Rubin, the self-proclaimed matriarch and Offshoot instigator, brings a critical eye to the group's submissions. Her writings, sometimes fictional and other times based in the reality of the day, are poignant. On Forden Crescent, one of her pieces that stands out in my memory, recounts a tragedy that befell her neighborhood, about "a PhD student cycling to McGill who could have been my daughter," she laments.

...he turns onto that dipsy-doodle hill crowded with trig-and-trim landscaping and stone houses and he grins as he slaloms downward from curve to curve as the unseen shiny black compact squeals around a corner at the bottom of the dipsy-doodle hill the kid with the new clean driver's license cranking up the heavy metal and crushing a pristine white Nike hard on the gas...

Maureen Fitzgerald is a recent member of our writing circle. A retired nurse, she joins us following Erin Lindsey's "Returning Writers' Room" series of multidisciplinary workshops: "I am a fervent pilgrim of bookstores in general. It's like sitting in my living room and going on a voyage of discovery," she explains. Her passion shines through in her poem Ode to the Bookstore:



Emporium of volumes rare,  
 That welcomes me with corner chair,  
 And never challenges my right  
 To sit and read through day and night.

O bookstore, you have woven magic;  
 A bibliophile's refuge. Socratic.

Susannah Prince, confident contributor and intrepid trekker into her own past, peels back layer upon layer of her youth. She reads a series of connected stories, each one a continuation in the chapter book she is authoring. She describes the Black Light Days chapter as "...an outlet. I use my new outlet to write about my old outlets."

I break a piece of hash off the small, square gram enjoying its sweet, musky smell. Crumbling it into tiny bits, I mix it in with some tobacco and distribute it in a neat line along the flat bleached paper...Lighting up, I inhale deeply, multiple times and pass it to Rebecca. Bowie's piano fills the room. We float on his lyrics.

What strikes me the most about what that pre-pandemic session gave us is the license to create. Our instructors provided simple constraints: word counts, story flows, relevance to a given prompt and countless writing craft techniques, like active voice and tense and, my favourite, "killing your darlings". This is now the lingua franca of our group, the tools we use to poke and prod each other at our readings. I use my creative license to write *Obit*, a tongue-in-cheek, first-person fiction told from beyond the grave.

A piece of loose carpet at the top of the stairs latches onto my foot. Slow-motion cartwheels down the flight of stairs. Hands slip past upside-down banisters. Fingers claw at cascading steps. The wet thud of my head coming to an abrupt halt. Cold marble on one cheek and warm blood, my blood, pooling around my ear. There's no pain in this body that just bounced down an endless number of steps. But I can't move.

Nathalie Gregoire boasts of the group's fellowship, "...the feeling of camaraderie and the mutual desire to elevate our writing" and of the inhibitions that fall away by the simple act of documenting a memory. *In Hockey: The Comfort Zone*, she tells of "the willingness to share the light and dark, the deep and delightful, the facts and the foibles."

There is no penalty for playing outside of your comfort zone. I learned that the easy way when I started playing recreational hockey 10 years ago... My brain hadn't fired on those pistons in eons – it was exhausting and energizing...It reminds me to keep my feet moving and of the simple joy of skating freely.

## 4 Deadline Junkies

I question myself as to why this small community of writers can be so prolifically diverse and collaborative. There is a social component of our efforts. Occasionally, we assemble in a park for a pot-luck picnic and to escape our convenient two-dimensional electronic firmament. Ultimately, though, self-imposed deadlines are our ethereal muse and the mother of at least 60 original pieces.

We write therefore we are, as one of our instructors imputed. And so, writing is the central theme of the group. For me, however, the discussions about what we hear versus what we say, the unexpected parallels and metaphors that emerge, and the brave new worlds ventured are the true magic of our collaborations.

# Introduction

Pauline Beauchamp

The following pieces were developed in TMI's various writing courses over the past few years, notably in Fiction Writing, Memoir Writing and the workshop, Polishing Your Craft.

The courses generally began with short assignments that focused on a particular technique, as represented in the first piece here, by Elisa Martinez-Avilés, where she shows as much as possible about a fictional character, by describing his belongings.

The next piece in this handout is an excerpt from a novel being written by James Forbes, which he presented and developed in our Polishing Your Craft workshop. It showcases the complexities of plot, character development, tension and dialogue, as he draws his readers into an imaginary world.

In our memoir writing courses, the challenge was usually to choose a specific, narrow focus that would convey meaning and help the readers feel the same emotions as the memoirist. The piece might focus on a best or worst moment, a challenge, a burden overcome, a significant place in one's life, or a defining life event. Esther Spector and Susannah Prince both wrote about an important object from their past (a dress), but each story conveys the distinct character and history of its author. The story by Anne Stevens also grows out of a cherished object, but takes us to a place of deep emotional significance to her, a place that still calls her back. Ellen Rubin brings us into the joyful, creative world of a pottery class, only to surprise us with a moment that stays with her many years later. And Dominic Varvaro immerses us in a cold, wet and gruelling bike challenge, to raise money for cancer, during which he prompts us to reflect on our comforts and on how much we are prepared to give for others.

We hope you will enjoy these short excerpts, and we thank all our writers for their hard work and commitment to producing their very best work.

# Bill's Stuff

Elisa Martinez Avilés

Bill gets to his car in the parking lot and realizes - after patting down all his pockets - that he doesn't know where he's put his keys. He sets his red gym bag on top of the hood of his car and starts to run his fingers along one of the bag's ribbed edges. Aside from the wear on the navy blue straps and the faded adidas logos on the front and back panel, the bag looks just like he remembers it from his childhood. He grabs the zipper's pull tab while making sure to hold the navy blue flap located below it taut - otherwise the zipper's teeth jam. Everytime he opens his bag, Bill is reminded of a sausage being slit open to reveal its contents.

Everything inside the gym bag is in Ziploc bags. Bill takes out the two largest ones first. One holds the white jacket and the other the pants of his Gi (his karate uniform), each folded up Marie Kondo style . He pats these down feeling only the thick cotton cloth beneath the plastic. He sets them next to the gym bag. He then takes out a smaller bag containing his black belt which is rolled up like a licorice pinwheel.

Next, Bill takes out the Ziploc bag containing his Tim Horton's travel mug and gives it a shake to make sure his keys aren't inside the mug - you never know. No rattle answers his shake, so no cigar. He loves this mug with its red lid - it is so old that the white plastic on the outside has a light yellow tinge and the inside has permanently been stained a light brown. The mug is a testament to Canada's two official languages with the red lettering reading "Tim Horton's Always fresh" on one side of the mug and "Tim Horton's Toujours frais" on the other side.

The only Ziploc bag left is the one containing his three emergency Kit Kat bars. He takes it out -no sign of his keys. Bill decides that his current predicament qualifies as an emergency. He slowly pries apart the plastic tabs at the top of the bag. He is always fascinated by a Ziploc bag's closed purple seal turning into separate blue and red edges. Bill takes out one of the Kit Kat bars from the Ziploc bag which he then slowly closes up restoring the purple seal. He tears the metallic foil apart along one of the two zigzagged edges of the wrapper. He then snaps the wafer on the edge below the opening and pushes it out. He bites off the chocolate ends of the Kitkat stick first. Holding the wafer between his lips and teeth, he puts his Ziploc bags back inside his gym bag in the reverse order of which he took them out, zips the gym bag back up. He chomps the remainder of the wafer while pacing around his car. Where is his Marvin the Martian keychain?

# Bolshevik Assassin in Canada

James Forbes

(excerpt from opening chapter of novel)

BORIS STRELNIKOV stood in Lubyanka Square looking up at the Moscow headquarters of the Cheka, Russia's secret police. The feeling of fear he'd had all morning gripped him anew, his breath came in quick gasps, and he rested against a tree to regain his composure.

The fact he'd made enemies inside the Cheka: first Yakov Peters whom he knew in London before the Great War when he and Yakov were exiles fleeing from the Czar's police; Yakov had never forgiven him for learning English so well he could pass for a Cockney, while Yakov – fat, smiling, corrupt Yakov – could never pass for anything more than a foreigner who spoke broken English. Then there was Severnyi in Odessa. That sadistic little bastard! Severnyi loved nothing better than to make his prisoners run around the yard while he took pot shots at them with a rifle. Severnyi hated Boris for refusing to join in the so-called sport. Severnyi, his Mongolian features hardened in a grimace of hate that pulled the skin taught over his high cheek-bones, had screamed in his face, “Who do you think you are? An accursed Barin? (Barin was a term of respect that serfs used in the olden days when addressing a land-owning noble). Boris reflected that even the lowest types like Severnyi sensed that he (Boris) was different from them. How ironic, considering the strictures of Latsis who laid down the law that Cheka must shoot all upper-class Russians! Yes, the worst crime a Russian could commit was to be a member of the upper class.

And now Felix Dzerzhinsky, supreme chief of the Cheka, had summoned him (Boris) to an interview in the Lubyanka. Boris felt certain why Dzerzhinsky wanted to see him, and he wondered if he would be dead in half-an-hour. He pushed himself away from the tree he had been leaning against, and continued to walk along the sandy path leading to the police headquarters. Boris was only too aware of Dzerzhinsky's reputation: Dzerzhinsky sometimes took only twenty minutes to decide the fate of an accused, then he would call “Guard!” over his shoulder, the accused would be taken down to the execution yard at the back of the Lubyanka and shot. Boris knew the procedure only too well. He himself had often officiated at state executions, he remembered the white faces and staring eyes of those facing the firing squad. On occasions the volley of shots did not kill all; some lay on the ground bleeding and yelling in pain; and it had been Boris's job to approach the writhing bodies and shoot them two or three times in the head with his pistol. Poor Mother! How upset she would be....



# The Designer Dress

Esther Spector

You have to be of a certain age to remember Auntie Mame. She was a flamboyant character in the 1955 novel of the same name. Not only do I remember the book and the movie that followed; I can claim to have had my very own Auntie Mame. Her name was Alice and she lived in New York. When she visited us, her visits weren't just an event, they were a Happening.

Aunt Alice loved expensive fashionable clothes, perfumes, and dramatic jewelry. You could both smell and hear her approach from several rooms away as the cloying scent of lavender wafted through the air and her wrists, laden with heavy bracelets, clanked and clattered with every theatrical gesture.

The September that I was twelve, Aunt Alice visited us and brought me an expensive pale blue taffeta dress. It had a full crinoline lined skirt and three tiny black velvet bows attached, one apiece, to three horizontal narrow strips of black velvet ribbon sewn across the front of the bodice. She announced majestically that it was a designer dress from Saks Fifth Avenue. It was beautiful but had one major flaw. It was not me. I did not suit the dress and the dress did not suit me. I thanked my aunt and told my mother in private that no matter how expensive or fashionable the dress was, I could not wear it. My mother did not argue and we hung it in my closet.

I had just started grade seven in a new school. Fortunately, I was not shy and made new friends easily. There was another new girl, Patsy, tiny like me. Unlike me, she was extremely shy and withdrawn. My teacher asked if I would take her under my wing.

"If the other kids see that you are friends they will accept her more quickly."

I took care of Patsy. She and I did not have much in common but I persevered and she seemed grateful for my attention. Gradually, she began to make her own friends and we drifted apart.

The first social was approaching. There was electricity in the air as boys asked girls for dates. It was the main topic of conversation at school. A whirlwind of excitement captured everyone's attention.

I spoke with Patsy and learned, sadly, that she was not planning to go to the dance because she had nothing to wear. She confided in me that her family could not afford the luxury of a party dress for her.

I got an idea. Why not give Patsy my blue dress? She was the same size as me. That would work as long as my mother could afford to buy me a new outfit and didn't mind my parting with the designer dress. I got my mom's approval and approached Patsy telling

her that I had just received this dress from my aunt but that it did not fit me well. If it fit her, and she liked it, it was hers.

Patsy came home with me the next day after school and tried on the dress. It looked beautiful on her, the way it was supposed to look. She loved it. Her smile was as wide as the room. I told her that no one needed to know that she got the dress from me.

My mom and I went shopping for my replacement outfit. We found a white organza dress textured with tiny miniature velvet flowers in pastel pink, blue and green. It had a white satin sash at the waist. It may not have come from Saks but it made me feel like Cinderella.

The big night arrived and Patsy entered looking truly resplendent in the blue taffeta dress. There was buzz in the room. Where did she get that amazing dress? Surely, she was too poor to afford such a creation. Some of the girls asked me if I knew anything about it. I shrugged and said I had absolutely no idea where her dress came from. We had not talked about anything other than who was going to attend the dance.

Patsy was the centre of attention and appeared to enjoy every moment of it. When no one was looking, I gave her a discrete wave and a smile. Otherwise, we did not socialize. Her secret was safe with me.

I remember feeling happy in my own dress and certainly didn't mind being upstaged by Patsy. I felt like a parent who watches their child take their first steps. It was my first real life experience in understanding the meaning of the Jewish word for charity, Tzedaka. The highest form of Tzedaka is when the donor and the recipient do not know each other. I don't know where my act of charity falls on the list of values for giving but I do know that I enjoyed that dress more, seeing it on Patsy, than if I had worn it myself. The dress that I gave away brought me much more pleasure than if it had stayed at home in my closet.

# The Dress

Susannah Prince

“Where did you get that dress?” Barbara gushes. “It’s gorgeous!” She’s my downstairs neighbor who pokes her head in while I’m packing.

This dress has history. It’s really the story of three inamoratos, the dress and me.

Barbara’s words echo my own, 45 years ago. I’m in my bedroom and my sister rushes in, her arms full of designer clothes. “I just came back from garage-saling and look what I got.” She lays the treasure out. But I’ve got tunnel vision fixed on a dress of shimmering, turquoise sequins, and beads. I lift it off the bed and shift the fabric in my hands; it moves like a slinky, with a life of its own. I feel the knife edge of envy rip through my guts. “I hate you,” I say.

“Don’t worry. You can borrow it any time.” She’s positively gleeful. And, in truth, it’s my lucky day because Rebecca is in her androgenous phase with cropped platinum hair, shaved eyebrows and a penchant for men’s broad-shouldered suits. Plus, she’s a slip of a thing whereas this dress was definitely designed for a more full-figured gal, like me.

Rushing to the bathroom I pour into the dress which fits like a second skin. It’s sleeveless, lined in silk and falls just above the knee. I feel electric, transformed--- a superheroine.

I wear the dress often. Our favourite spot is Les Foufounes Electric, a punk club on the east side of town. This is where I meet disaster boyfriend number one. He’s a tall, reedy fellow with bad skin and stylish clothes. With his dirty blonde, spikey hair he resembles Johnny Rotten, of the Sex Pistols--- and I’m smitten.

Every weekend, from Thursday to Sunday, I’m raging on that dance floor, blue-green light refracting off my core. We writhe, en masse, to the Clash, Iggy Pop and The Dead Kennedys.

Two years later I’m fed up with Olivier’s infidelities, his drugs, and his clothing. But ditching him proves difficult. He’s violent and out of control; and smashes a bottle beside my head in the club one night.

He breaks into my house, slashes my duvet to ribbons, steals my flute and cuts up my beloved sequinned dress. I use duct tape to repair the duvet and hang my dress in the closet. I’m not ready to throw it out yet.

A year later I meet disaster boyfriend number two. He’s older and very good looking. Charming Peter is brilliant, artistic and a psychopath.

We are homebodies. He’s a high school drop-out, self taught and better educated than

most people I know. His dad is the Vice-Principal Academic at McGill University.

Peter can do anything. He paints, cooks and is a wizard with the sewing machine; his latest project is a chain mail suit.

One day, we're having supper at my house, and he steps out to buy some wine. Suddenly I hear sirens clanging down the street. Half a block away the paramedics are loading my boyfriend into an ambulance. That's how I find out that my partner of two years is a drug addict and has overdosed on heroin, the needle still protruding from his ankle.

In the hospital, his sister tells me he's been lying, cheating, and stealing for years to supply his drug addiction.

His parents persuade him to go into rehabilitation. He, laughingly, tells me, "I don't have a drug problem but if they want to waste their money, I'll go."

Several months later we're at a New Year's Eve party and decide to leave early. Departing, we meet two young men whom Peter knows, arriving. I stop, assess, and say, "I think I'll stay. Some cute guys have arrived!" My overconfident, self-absorbed beau laughs. "Have a good time." And I do.

I spend the rest of the evening chatting with Mike and arrange to meet at a party the following Saturday.

The next day I mention the upcoming soiree to Peter and pull out my turquoise dress. "Do you think you can stitch this up for me?"

The party is hopping and Peter leaves early. Shimmying onto the dance floor, I begin to spin like a disco ball scattering tiny shards of turquoise light in all directions. And that's how I hit the jackpot with boyfriend number three. He's confident, gorgeous, kind, bright, honest, and funny. And I sweep him off his feet.

We've been together 35 years, raised four children and still behave as though we just met.

So, when Barbara admires my dress, I pick it up, heavy with secrets and sequins. "My daughters don't see the appeal," I say. "But I'm not ready to give it up yet." I pause. "And who knows, maybe one day I'll have granddaughters who will treasure it. And I may still be around to see them hit the dance floor."

# A Visit to Fire Island

Anne Stevens

The time has come for me to part with my beach towel—or what’s left of it. The faded design still depicts a long-lashed lady cat bedecked with pearls. Its flowers and curlicues are poignantly reminiscent of the 1960s, when my father gave me this towel during one of my yearly visits to his home in New Jersey.

Because my father was a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, our holidays involved hiking, camping, or a few days at the beach. A couple of times, we stayed on Fire Island, off Long Island, where the Club owned a lodge. Fire Island is part of a narrow strip of land that forms a barrier between the Atlantic Ocean and the Great South Bay.

From the ferry dock to the lodge, we followed the sand-dusted boardwalk that stretched the length of the island like the spine of a sleeping child. On my right, I caught glimpses of the glimmering bay between pastel summer houses and balmy pine trees. On my left, I heard the relentless pounding and whooshing of the ocean beyond the dunes. Tall grasses waved between weatherworn fences, while signs cautioned against treading the dunes.

“Why can’t we walk on the dunes?” I asked my all-knowing father.

“Because they’re fragile,” he explained. “The grasses and fences help prevent Fire Island from being washed away.”

The lodge was a clapboard house on the bay side. It had a large, book-lined open living space and a deck overlooking the water. I picked a bunk bed in the women’s dorm, changed into my bathing suit, grabbed my lady-cat towel, and hurried to my father, wondering on which side of the island we would play.

From the deck, we went down to the bay’s edge. Sheltered by the island’s embrace, the calm water gave off an organic, brackish smell. Wavelets lapped against the idle sailboats, making their hulls list and scrape gently, while the halyards and tackles clinked a whimsical rhythm. Further out, white triangles glided against the backdrop of the city skyline.

A whiff of a breeze was blowing, so my father took out a sunfish and taught me to trim the sail. When he passed me the rope holding the mainsheet, I was surprised by how forcefully it tugged, like a subdued wild animal on a leash. My father eased the sail out, and we coasted to a stop. I jumped off the small dinghy into the tepid water and showed him I had finally learned to swim.

In the evening, after the shared chores and communal meal, we watched the sun go down in glory with its retinue of pink and orange clouds.



“Why is the sky so red?” I asked.

“Because of the pollution over New York City,” came the bewildering answer. “The light is scattered by the dust particles.”

The next day we took a path that crossed over to wooden stairs spanning the dunes. From the top step, I beheld the boundless ocean and its myriad hues of steel gray, aquamarine, and brilliant white.

“What’s over there?” I asked.

“Europe,” was the terse reply.

I squinted to curve my gaze over the horizon, hoping to see the Eiffel Tower.

In contrast to the tranquil bay, this side of the island was all noise and excitement—crashing waves, laughing adults, squealing children. Exhilarated by the salty gusts, I ran to the shore in a whirlwind, my fluttering towel raised high.

My father showed me how to tame the ocean: when a big wave reared up, he dove into it and emerged behind the crest. I soon mastered this skill. As soon as I spotted a large one coming, I readied myself to confront the frothy-mouthed beast that wanted to engulf me. I took aim and plunged headlong. The wave hurtled over me and pummelled the beach in frustrated rage.

Inside the belly of the ocean, I heard muffled sounds echoing from the shore and was jostled to and fro by cold currents, while weeds and debris caressed my skin. When I couldn’t hold my breath anymore, I kicked my feet and burst to the surface in a glittering spray, blinking hard, ecstatic at being alive.

For years I held on to my lady-cat beach towel. I showed it to my children and told them of the little island that braved the ocean’s assaults. While I thought I would keep it forever, I am now holding up its threadbare pieces for one final look. Just as time has ravaged this tattered remnant of my childhood, so I fear the waves will overrun the flimsy grasses and fences, and the ocean will devour what’s left of Fire Island.

# Clay Remembers

Ellen Rubin

At about the age of ten I fell in love. The object of my adoration was a clip from a documentary shown at school that showed the hands of a Japanese potter magically turning a lump of spinning wet clay into a deep and shapely bowl. His slurried fingers pulled the mass up, simultaneously controlling forces which bellied the pot out. He then slowed the speed and carefully rounded the faintly wobbling rim. Some small adjustment to the placement of his thumbs and index fingers made the wobble disappear. He then stopped the wheel, drew a taut wire under the base of the bowl and slid that lovely thing onto a board.

That is all that was imprinted in my memory: a grainy black and white bit of movie that lasted perhaps two minutes. In later years it distilled to a mental snapshot of wet hands pulling up spinning clay, and I knew that one day my hands would do just that. My love simmered.

The time was not right until I was in my mid thirties. I started evening pottery classes and my love was requited with not only clay, but fire and metallic oxides and the organic shapes that filled my imagination whenever life's chores permitted.

In the class there were several women my own age, and Leonard, a troubled man in his early twenties who barely spoke. Our teacher was Phyllis, an energetic, exuberant, yet low-key woman who, as a chemist, had become an artist, and whose art had chemistry and physics at its root. She was in her early sixties then. She had no-nonsense short white hair and a lopsided smile that somehow made her glasses appear crooked. She looked calm and homey yet exuded a robust energy.

Phyllis was all about life and science, beauty and nature, and form with function. She enjoyed the serendipity inherent to her craft, despite the science. She never filled the air with unnecessary words, nor was she ever ruffled or indifferent. When she addressed the class everything she had to say was useful and interesting. If she held up someone's mistake to use as a teaching tool it was always with humour and enthusiasm and never as criticism.

Strangely enough I did not immediately grab a hunk of clay and rush to throw it down on the wheelhead to quench my long-awaited heart's desire. As a beginner, I admired the potter's wheels from across the large canvas-covered table on which I learned the nature of clay from first principles: by doing hand building. I would savour the prospect of wheel work until I was deemed ready to start.

My first project was to construct a box. I needed to roll slabs using two half- inch wood slats on either side of my work as a thickness guide. After learning to wedge the air holes out of the clay, I vigorously applied the rolling pin in all directions. Phyllis explained that even though my slab looked smooth, even and uniformly thick, the fact that I had rolled in many directions would cause uneven shrinkage during drying. This deformity to the internal structure of the clay body would eventually try to realign itself causing torsion or even cracking during the firing process.

“Clay remembers”, she said.

One evening, many hours of potting later, all of us were bent over a wheel or the table finishing pieces for the final firing of the term. Phyllis was scraping hardened clay off plaster bats while enduring a prolonged litany of our personal complaints.

It’s strange, but when part of your brain is intensely occupied with focused activity, thoughts come tumbling out of your mouth with little filtering. You blabber away but don’t really hear the content. We were all griping rather loosely about “my parents this” or “my family that”, stuff from our childhoods that apparently gave unending cause for the problems of the moment. Everyone but Leonard had something to say to keep that particular train from falling off the track.

After much muttering and sighing there was, finally, a small silence. Phyllis put down her scraper and leaned forward, hands planted business-like on the table. She glared over the top of her glasses and remarked, “Surely girls, there has to come a time when you stop blaming your mother!”

Everyone quit working, straightened up, and gawked wide-eyed at nothing in particular, even Leonard. Phyllis continued scraping, then poured water into the bucket of dry clay. We just sat there, wordless, digesting.

Later, we all agreed that we had not felt chastised so much as jolted, just like a wobbly pot knocked back on centre. Simply recalling that single phrase even now has the power to realign the substance of my thinking.

Decades later, three of us still get together and eventually recall the “Surely girls” experience. We laugh now over that shared memory, secure in a maturity that comes from more than simply the years we have acquired. Generally, after the laughter, there follows a sigh and a pause while we realign and reflect again.

# Commitments

Dominic Varvaro

I find my team in the muddy coffee tent while rain pours relentlessly around us. My hesitation to take on the worsening weather is as palpable as the humidity emanating from the bodies huddled inside this temporary shelter. The knot that normally twists my innards before any team ride tightens a notch this morning in the worsening weather while en route to the Montréal-Nord start line.

Some team members are new to this event, bicycling from Montreal to Quebec City over two days raising funds for cancer research. Many are event veterans. Some are cycling machines while others, like me, are meanderers. Some are cancer survivors; at least one rider is undergoing treatment. That captain asterisk beside my name on the team roster means one thing to me: Convey confidence that this challenge is not as daunting as it seems.

We assemble with the crush of riders. I stand silently, listening to moving testimonies from appreciative survivors and caregivers. The speeches heighten my awareness of those around me, their tributes to loved ones drawn onto their legs, sewn onto their jerseys and affixed to their bicycles. Nicole nudges me in sympathy when a brief sob escapes me as I think of Louis, a friend and associate who had died recently from cancer. This is not Nicole's first ride and I know she's dealing with her own demons, her head bowed avoiding eye contact.

My anxiety evaporates when I lock into my pedals and assimilate with the peloton of 1,222 spandex-clad, pedaling dervishes: 1,222 commitments of hope to sponsors, supporters and survivors through the relentlessly butt-numbing effort needed today along the Chemin du Roi and tomorrow up endless hills to Quebec City.

A drab veil of rain is in my face and obscures the surrounding countryside. Rain-covered glasses garble my view of riverside estates and an active St. Lawrence Seaway. And last year's rainbow kite-surfers are nowhere to be seen. Instead, I spin through ocean-deep puddles. I pedal, head down, through grimy wheel-spray rooster tails as our peloton collectively invokes the name of every sacrament imaginable.

I start shivering at the first rest stop, an hour into the ride. Rain by itself isn't a problem for me. Cold weather has its challenges but is usually bearable. Headwinds are a manageable deterrent. But everything together conspires to make me question my choice this morning: the frigid easterly headwind drives knife-edged sheets of rain through my three layers of clothing, burrowing deep into bones, organs, and psyche. All that specialized, super-

wicking clothing in which I've invested sheds as much body heat as it does moisture.

I worry about the amount of water on the road and whether the conditions are causing me to hallucinate. "Did you see that woman runner on the other side of the road wearing a sports top and shorts?" I ask Nicole after I find her in the snack line at a rest stop.

"I know," she answers with a quick laugh. We're relieved that both of us saw the same thing and aren't losing our minds. We speculate, incredibly, on the wisdom of someone braving today's cold and puddle tsunamis.

We sit, lunch boxes in our laps, under a parking structure relishing the reprieve from the rain. We're wrapped in shiny Mylar blankets the organizers provided, like giant potato-chip bags. Dan, a role model for our team and a natural athlete, sits beside me with his special meal in hand. He's been struggling with cancer for years. I watch a smiling Dan work his way through his bag of medication. It occurs to me how much he must go through every day to take part in this event.

A while later, I think of my wife's admonition. "Put on your 'big boy' riding pants. The people you're cycling for don't get to choose their weather," she said this morning when I whined about the impending storm.

I fear that every second I sit in this shelter, growing more and more comfortable, reduces my chances of crossing the finish line on my bicycle. "Don't be a jerk!" I'm told with a smile by Maxime, last year's team captain, when I proclaim we should get back on the road. I laugh while we insert swatches of those Mylar blankets inside our jerseys, helmets, and shoes.

"Are we there yet?" I ask the group as we resume cycling. Fellow riders hurl expletives questioning my parentage. I'm honoured that they're still talking to me.

We cross the first day's finish line in Trois-Rivières several hours later and shuttle off to our hotel. It's a surreal reversal of the day's harshness. I'm transported into the hotel's luxurious warmth, my skin still stinging from the continuous assault of wind and rain.

The day's riding apparel ferments in a plastic bag on the tiled bathroom floor as the scalding shower penetrates the grime embedded in my pores. The shivering continues once I've dried off even after I retreat into a pile of blankets. "I'd be nuts to ever leave this bed," I mumble to my roommate as the generous bedding helps convert consciousness to coma.

The soaked and soiled road warriors I knew by day have morphed into the evening's groomed and perfumed dining companions. Over cocktails, we tell a few tall tales about the day's adversities, but mostly we talk about happier adventures unrelated to cycling. I'm not inclined to discuss the weather forecast and, not surprisingly, no one else brings it up either. I wear a sweater under a windbreaker throughout dinner and the shivering in me stops with the arrival of dessert. I'm quietly relieved that no one is talking of abandoning the ride, even though we're less than a two-hour car drive from Montreal.

Breakfast's buttery croissants and warming espressos are a faint memory when we halt an hour later to repair Maxime's flat. If you ask me how many cyclists it takes to do this,



## 18 Commitments

I'll tell you it takes just one to change the tube but several more to debate technique and another to post the story on social media. Today, in a sympathetic spectator's driveway, ten of us huddle around Dan and Maxime shielding them from the elements. Maxime holds the inverted bicycle as Dan masterfully replaces the tube and reassembles the wheel. Advice and tools abound. Applause erupts when all is done. But the rain has not let up and no one lingers for a social-media pose.

At the next rest stop, a sobbing Isabelle approaches me. She's a young first-year team member, riding in memory of her late aunt. We talk for a few minutes. Nothing about the ride or whether she should continue. Just talk. She needs to validate that she isn't the only person suffering. And then she smiles as if grateful that her burden of doubt has been lifted. I'm lifted too.

I climb into one of the plush coach busses organizers have parked at the next rest stop. Its heater is running on high and the humidity from wet cyclists fogs my glasses within seconds. I find Nicole and other team members quietly seated there. "I'm not going on," she tells me even before I say hello.

I get it. The bus is so warm. Its seats are so soft. The bicycle saddle is so unforgiving on my road-weary butt. "Just five minutes more on the bus," I tell myself, like hitting the snooze button on that early-morning clock-radio. No one is budging. If I join them and sit out the rest of the ride, I'm sure that no one will fault my leadership, that my sponsors will be sympathetic, that supporters will understand. The bus is the perfect harlot, seducing my inner self at its most fragile moment, enticing me to break my promise to finish the ride in exchange for a few moments of comfort. "No one will know," the harlot whispers in my ear. "How could anyone expect more?" it continues. "There's no rush. Sit. Close your eyes."

I smile at my friends but don't sit down. And then my riding companions get up and step off the bus. The rain has stopped. We mount up, the clacks of cleats snapping into pedals is music to my ears. We finish the ride a few hours later. Commitments are met. Family and friends applaud and embrace us. We hug each other in self-congratulatory recognition, pleased with ourselves that we've somehow put a dent in the sadness and pain caused by this disease. In the elation of the moment, I can't possibly imagine that cancer will claim Dan's life in two short years. I stop shivering in the car on the way home beneath a sunny and cloudless sky.