

Stories

poetry, prose, and personal reflection

Vol. 5 — February 2022



*Gratitude is the single most important ingredient
to living a successful and fulfilled life.*

~ Jack Canfield

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Publisher

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First-time writers for *Stories* are asked to send a brief (two to three sentence) bio with their submission.

Because of difficulties with some articles sent in the body of emails, we cannot accept submissions in this format. Please send a word doc attachment.

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Publisher's Ponderings



Every month that I put this magazine together, I am reminded of how very blessed I am to be able to do it. The stories, poems and personal reflections that are submitted each month are heartwarming and inspirational, and I am moved to tears each time I finalize the monthly issue, and I am so very grateful for each and every person who submits something.

I am a little late in getting the magazine live this month. A fall down the stairs last week put me out of commission for a couple of days. But, even for that, I am grateful. I learned a few lessons ...

1. Slow down!
2. You don't have to do everything at once!
3. Don't beat yourself up because you feel like you've fallen short.

Perfectionism isn't all it's cracked up to be!! But I am learning ... and last week's mishap resulted in a total change of perspective, and behaviour. And so, this weekend especially, I focused on gratitude. The birds at the feeders on my back deck, the giggles and the hugs of my grandchildren, relaxing with a good book and a cup of tea more time will be spent focusing on these types of things!

The work will continue to get done, no question. But it will not be done in an atmosphere of tension or anxiety. And I know, when I create an atmosphere of gratitude and peace of mind, that only more good will come of it!

Lisa



The Gift of Grateful ***Francine Houston***

Early February 2022. We are deep in the cold of winter here in the Northern Hemisphere, not to mention quickly closing in on year 2 of what has been an unprecedented time in recent history. We have been dealing, globally, with a monumental shift in perceptions, and priorities. I believe that we are seeing fundamental changes in how so many people are moving in their lives, and how they are moving on the planet.

We haven't seen a world encompassing change like this since World War II and the end of the Cold War. In fact, it has been 100+ years since we've seen an illness spread so uniformly around the world, impacting all of us so uniformly, and that was not, apparently, created by humans. Most of us weren't even alive the last time something like this world "Pandamitt" hit. We simply don't have first-hand experience with dealing with this type of event.

We have been forced to move differently in the world. We have had to create different ways to interact, to connect, work and play. The upshot of all this, is that for many of us, there has been, because of our need to pause the day to day routine hustle, a profound examination, and recognition that the way we had been moving in the world was detrimental to ourselves and the important relationships around us. This has been both good and bad.

I am certainly not going to suggest that there has not been a VERY high price for many to pay. We may be on the same ocean, but we most certainly are not in the same boat: Some of us are on massive ocean liners, and are and have been able to navigate the last 2 years with minimal impact. There are others who barely have a waterlogged stick to hang onto, or are barely holding their heads above water. I have profound respect for anyone who is struggling, and I believe that all of us, regardless of the size of our craft,

have had moments of panic, struggle and profound grief.

In spite of the struggles, emotional, physical and sometimes financial, I am still grateful for the time that the closures and changes have engendered. I knew, before all of this began, that I was already struggling. I am a deeply introverted person, and while I can manage for short periods of time, in a busy environment, I most certainly do not thrive, over time in a bustling environment. This was where I found myself: I was working in a busy health food store. I was happy to be helping the individuals who came into the business, and was grateful for a steady income. This said, I was pressed emotionally, and physically. I was increasingly stressed, struggling with some significant issues associated with having to deal with my own stress and sub-vocalized fear that was in the general environment, as well as the tensions and emotional challenges that the customers were bringing into the store with them.

My ability to cope was becoming more and more compromised because of the stress and grief being expressed in the general population, and in the interpersonal relationships with the staff. In spite of that stress, or maybe because of it, I am SO profoundly grateful. This whole situation with the world changes has been, for many of us, a world altering blessing. It has given us the space, emotionally and psychologically to see what has and has not been working in our lives. Most of us have been able to do the "Great Pause," or at least a "Great Shift." We have taken a hard look at what was working well, and what wasn't working: sapping our energy, focus and heart. I, like so many others, have arrived at the realization that we don't have to do things the way they have always been done, if it isn't working well. Individuals who love their jobs, but who had commute times of several hours a day are recognizing that they are more effective, efficient and productive being home, working remotely. Many businesses, after some adaptation, are realizing that their businesses are more efficient and their employees are happier and

more productive. Problem solving that might have had to wait for several days because people were not in the office, are now dealing with situations effectively and efficiently. Many of these employees and businesses recognize the savings of no longer maintaining such large brick and mortar establishments, as well as often embracing a better life/work balance, and generally (but certainly not always) enhanced family relationships.

I am deeply grateful, every day, for the emotional, physical, and spiritual growth that this strange time of upheaval has provided. Sometime easy, sometimes tough, it has been a gift that has brought me deeper and more completely aligned with meeting my deeper, more authentic self, and moving in the world with a more profound and fulfilled sense of Truth.

* * *

To Be Loved That Much ***Lisa Browning***

I left you long ago

I didn't understand
who you were
then

I don't need you
I told myself
You are stifling me

I tried to believe it
to convince myself
that you were not who
deep down
I knew you to be

But you never left

And you are here
still
after all this time

I look forward
you are there
I look back
you are there

I hear you singing sweetly
wherever I go

You are in the many colours of souls
I see

It all means something
I know

I want to wrap my arms
around
your stripped, raw exterior

I want to ease your pain

The way of the butterfly
A kiss on the nose

You are worth more than many sparrows

I am astounded
to be loved that much





The Way to a Woman's Heart *Marilyn Helmer*

Ginger, honey and cider -- the bouquet of aromas rushed at Mary as she opened the oven door. The braised lamb roast was browning to perfection. A pot of leek and potato soup simmered on stove. The Welsh cakes sat next to the griddle, ready to be baked. It was a Valentine's Day dinner that would delight any Welshman, and her tall, brawny Hugh was nothing if not a true Welshman.

On their trip to Wales last summer, as Mary helped her mother-in-law prepare yet another gastronomical feast, Morwen lapsed into Welsh. "Y ffordd i galon dyn yw drwy ei stumog." Hugh grinned and translated. "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach." Those words were certainly true of Hugh.

Mary leaned against the counter, lost in thought. Food might be the way to Hugh's heart but it was not the way to hers. For Mary, food merely served a purpose. It sustained the body but not the soul, too quickly consumed and gone. She yearned for something she could hold onto, something she could have forever, an everlasting symbol of Hugh's love.

Unfortunately, Hugh did not understand. Every year on Valentine's Day, he came home with an armful of red roses, a comical card and a box of chocolates from the I Love Chocolate Shop in town. Endearing

though those gifts were, they were impermanent symbols of love. The beautiful flowers died quickly. The chocolates were delicious but they were eaten in no time. When the day was over, the card was put away.

Last Valentine's Day, Mary ordered Celtic cufflinks for Hugh from a company in Wales. She fretted for days in case they didn't arrive in time or that they wouldn't be as handsome as they looked on the computer screen. When the cufflinks finally did arrive, they were everything she had hoped for, and Hugh was delighted them.

Mary had tried to mask her true feelings when, once again, Hugh presented her with the roses, the chocolates and the funny Valentine card but she knew he sensed her disappointment. "I hoped for something special from you, Hugh," she tried to explain, searching for the words that would make him understand. "Something I could have forever, something that tells me how much you love me."

She remembered the puzzled look on Hugh's face. "But, Mary, you know that I love you. And you love flowers, so the roses..." he broke off, "and the chocolates, they're your favourite kind and the card made you laugh."

"But those things don't last, Hugh." Mary took his hand and placed it on her heart. "I want something that is a symbol of your love, something for my heart." She could tell from the look of confusion on his face that Hugh did not understand, so she never mentioned it again.

The sound of the front door opening now jerked Mary from her reverie. "Something smells wonderful," Hugh called from the hall. Moments later he came into the kitchen, roses in one hand and chocolates and a card in the other. "Happy Valentine's Day," he said, putting his offerings on the counter and folding her in a hug.

Stories: poetry, prose, and personal reflection

“Happy Valentine’s Day to you, too.” Mary smiled and wrapped her arms tightly around her husband. Sometimes you simply have to accept the inevitable. Hugh was the love of her life. That would be enough. “I’ve made a Welsh feast for my favourite Welshman,” she said. “I’ll put the roses in water.”

“Wait, Mary, I have something else.” Hugh reached into his jacket pocket. He took out a small package and put in Mary’s hand. The package was wrapped in white tissue paper that looked suspiciously like it had been left over from some other occasion. The red ribbon around it was tied in a loopy bow.

“Go ahead, open it.” There was no mistaking the anxiety in Hugh’s voice.

Carefully Mary untied the ribbon and peeled back the tissue paper. She stared at the gift, too astonished to speak.

“It’s a Welsh Love spoon, Mary. I know the workmanship is crude. I wanted to buy one for you but...” Hugh paused, then hurried on. “Although I found many beautiful Love spoons online, not one of them said exactly what I want to say. So I carved this one myself, from the wood of our yew tree.”

“You carved the spoon yourself? From our yew tree?” Mary’s voice caught. The beautiful yew tree in front of their house had been struck by lightning in a wild autumn storm. Mary cried when Hugh cut it down because they had planted it together the year they were married. Tears slid down her cheeks again but now they were tears of happiness, not sorrow.

Hugh leaned over her shoulder and touched the spoon. “The padlock at the top is a symbol of my faithfulness and the anchor, that I will always be with you.” He kissed her cheek. “The twisted stem means we have become one and the double heart bowl tells of my love for you, always and forever.” He turned the spoon over in Mary’s hand. On the back, around the outside of the double heart bowl, were printed the words *Gyfer Mary yr un sydd yn fy nghalon*. “For Mary, the one who is my heart,” Hugh translated. He gave a rueful smile. “I’m not a skilled carver by any means so the spoon is not a thing of beauty.”

As Mary ran her fingers over the carved symbols, she thought of the hours of work and planning that Hugh had spent, creating the spoon. A rush of joy rose in her, like a bird taking flight. She turned and looked at her husband. “This spoon will always be a thing of beauty to me, Hugh, because it is from you, the one who is my heart.”



Inner Candle
Brenda Cassidy

My light dims and flickers,
And sometimes feels like it's going to go out.
But somehow I manage to reignite the flame,
Slowly but determinedly,
with hope and sadness intertwining at times,
Until hope gains the hold,
creating the spark once again
For the dim light that flickers and
sometimes feels like it's going to go out.

"Sometimes our light goes out but is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being."

Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light"

-Albert Schweitzer



Something to be Thankful For!
Joan Almond

With February's chill settling in, Emma shivered beneath her woolen coat. Walking the short distance from her apartment complex, to the street, felt like miles. The dampness of the day reminded her of her sister's words.

"You need to get out more," Emma's sister told her over the phone. "Go for a walk! Get away from that computer of yours!" Emma sighed, knowing debating with her oldest sibling was pointless.

"I write for a living," Emma said, after she hung up. "Does she think stories appear out of nowhere, that writers magically publish their work?"

By now, the fresh fallen snow of early winter was gone, leaving a combination of brown slush and water. It began to rain. Emma pulled on the handle of her umbrella. In the next moment, a car sped past, soaking her to the skin.

"What!?" she yelled, pointing her broken umbrella at the driver.

Emma stopped to examine the damage. "Maybe I should just go home," she said out loud. "Maybe going out was a bad idea."

"Depends where you're going," said an unfamiliar voice.

Emma turned. An old man stood before her. He was holding the leash of the most beautiful golden retriever Emma had ever seen. The stranger's beard was white, and his belly round, with a smile as jolly as St. Nicholas himself.

"I'm headed to the café on Southfield," Emma told him.

“Coffee shops can be life-changing experiences,” the old man told Emma. He paused, giving the young writer a knowing wink.

“Keep going,” he told her, patting the dog’s head. “The rain has stopped. Now there’s something to be thankful for!”

Emma looked into the old man’s eyes. There was a sparkle there she didn’t quite understand. Emma glanced down at the man’s dog. The canine had the same light in his eyes, as though both pet and owner shared a secret.

“There’s more than a cup of coffee waiting for you,” said the old man.

Suddenly, thunder rolled in the distance. Emma looked up to the skies. “That’s odd,” she said, staring at the clouds. “Not unheard of in the middle of winter, but strange nonetheless.”

Emma turned her eyes back to the sidewalk. “Where did they go?” she said. “It’s as though they both vanished into thin air.” Emma shook her head.

“I’m not telling my sister this one,” Emma said. “If she thinks I’m imagining strange men, she’ll do more than suggest a walk.”

She thought about the old man’s words. “More than a cup of coffee?” she said to herself. “Writers take their coffee seriously, but come on!”

Without warning, the sun appeared from behind the clouds, as though Emma’s story needed a new direction.

“Now, there’s something to be thankful for,” the old man’s voice resounded. Emma looked around. He was nowhere to be seen.

“Great!” grumbled Emma, waiting for the light to turn green. “It’s the Vulcan Mind Melt meets Jack Canfield quotes.”

Emma headed into the intersection. “No!” she said to herself. “The Universe is conspiring against me, not to mention my sister! That’s it!”

Reaching the other side of the street, Emma crossed the narrow parking lot. Rounding the corner of a red brick building, she approached The Healthy Café.

“You’re here just in time!” said a young couple leaving the café.

Emma smiled, trying to be polite.

“No, seriously,” they said again. “You’re here just in time!”

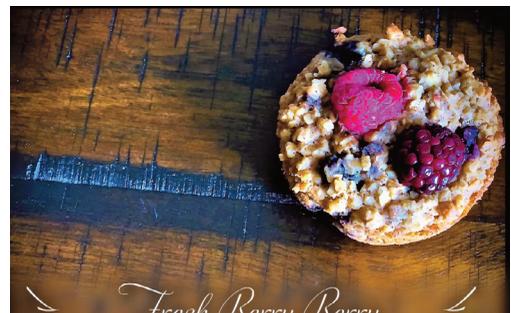
Emma nodded. “This day gets weirder by the minute,” she said to herself.

Taking a deep breath, Emma walked through the open door. Suddenly, she took a step back, unprepared for the aroma of fresh baked goods! Like a welcome embrace from a dear friend, the smells flooded her nostrils.

“Hello!” came a friendly voice from behind the counter. “Looks like the rain has let up?”

Emma nodded, relieved by the pleasant small talk. “What’s that smell?” she asked.

The woman laughed, her eyes dancing, like raindrops across a puddle in the warmth of summer. “You’re just in time!” the woman answered. “Our fresh berry just came out of the oven.”



“I’ll have one,” said Emma, without hesitating. “With a cup of coffee.”

“Will that be bold or regular?” the woman asked, her eyes still twinkling.

“Bold!” said Emma.

“Good choice,” the woman answered. “I’m a bold coffee drinker myself. Will you be eating in today?”

Emma looked around The Café. A simple display of fresh cut flowers sat in clay vases, on wooden tables. Music playing in the background, transported Emma to her youth, the memories filling her up like an ocean. The tasteful simplicity of the café drew her in, like a fire burning in a hearth, on a cold winter’s day. “I’ll stay!” Emma announced.

The woman smiled. “Take a seat,” she said. “Julie will bring your order to your table. If you like you can hang your coat, and umbrella on the coat rack.”

Emma nodded. She found a hook for her things, before moving to a small table by the window. Rays of sunlight poured over her, like water glistening over gentle waves. Soft moments of laughter filled the café, as customers engaged in sweet conversations.

“Enjoy!” said Julie, presenting Emma’s order. The fun in the young woman’s voice told Emma the welcome was sincere.

Emma took a bite of The Berry Berry, and then another. The fresh summer fruit exploded inside her mouth, refreshing her with each taste. Watching the steam rising from her coffee; she pondered the old man’s words once again.

“Now, there’s something to be thankful for!” she was sure she heard him say.

Little did Emma know she’d come to a place, where for the next six years, she’d be known as the regular. The Healthy Café would celebrate her

accomplishments as a published writer, cry with her, and laugh with her. The menu would be more than healthy fare, it would feed her soul and her spirit.

Six Years Later...

“You’re ready to go,” said Laura, the owner of the Healthy Café.

“Yes,” said Emma, holding back tears. “You know, I’ll walk into the cafe one day when you least expect it!”

“I know,” answered Laura, her eyes beginning to water. “I have something for you, Emma.” Laura held out a small cake covered in clear wrap.

“Plum cake!” Emma shrieked. “There’s nothing like your plum cake!”



Laura smiled. “Goodbye Emma,” she said. “I’ll be waiting for that visit!”

Emma turned to go, making her way past a young family. Her head spinning with emotions, Emma ran to her car. Her small SUV was packed to the brim. Another journey, a new chapter was beginning!

“Oops,” she said, looking down to see a beautiful golden retriever at her feet. “Sorry fella, I need to watch where I’m going.”

Stories: poetry, prose, and personal reflection

“Our fault,” said a handsome man, holding the dog’s leash.

Emma paused, looking up. There was something about the man’s eyes that seemed familiar.

“Have we met?” Emma asked the handsome stranger. “You remind me of someone.”

“Someone to be thankful for I hope?” he answered, winking at Emma.

Emma laughed! The man laughed! The golden retriever barked!

“Definitely!” Emma said. “Most definitely!”

Author’s Notes: The Healthy Owl, at the corner of Davenport and Northfield, in Waterloo Ontario, is the inspiration for this fictional tale. For the six years, prior to my move West, the café was more than a place I went to have coffee. The food and flowers were all created by The Healthy Owl. We remain in touch, now that’s something to be thankful for!



Literacies Research Group (LsRG) presents our Second Annual Author Panel

Monday, February 14, 1:30 – 2:30PM(EST)

SAVE THE DATE!! More information and a link to RSVP will be shared soon!

Please feel free to share with others!

Featuring: Lindsay Brant and Lee Airtton

Authors will read an excerpt from their book, talk about their experiences as a writer and how they work through the writing processes, and chat about the benefits and challenges of interweaving their narratives. There will be an opportunity for a Q&A/Discussion at the end of the author presentations.

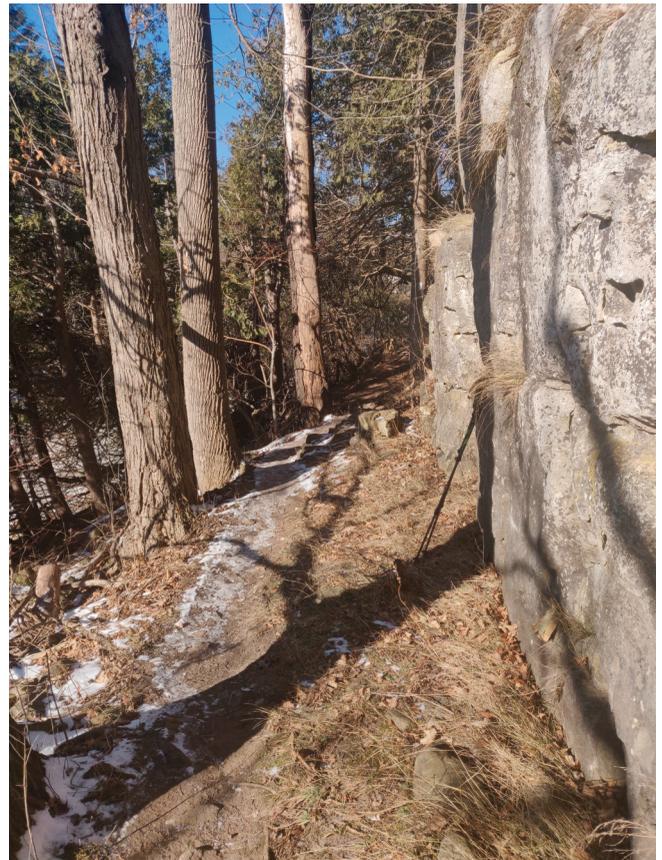
Bruce Trail, End to End (part 5) **Clay Williams**

In early June 2021, my good friend Debbie and I decided that we would hike the full length of the Bruce Trail, all 800+ km, by doing day hikes on weekends throughout the coming year. This is the next chapter in our adventures on and off the trail.

January 8th, 2022 was our sixth day on the Bruce Trail, and was one of our nicest hikes to date. Hiking in the winter is much different than in the summer. I grew up in northern Manitoba and Debbie in Quebec, so we had a little experience and respect for the cold. When I left home it was pretty cold, -16°C in my driveway. It was still really cold by the time we started our hike, with bright sunshine early on. As it warmed up it got overcast and a breeze started. Although the temperature was warmer, the breeze made it feel colder. I wasn't sure how much warm clothing I was going to need so I brought extra layers of warm clothing in the car but ended up leaving them there.



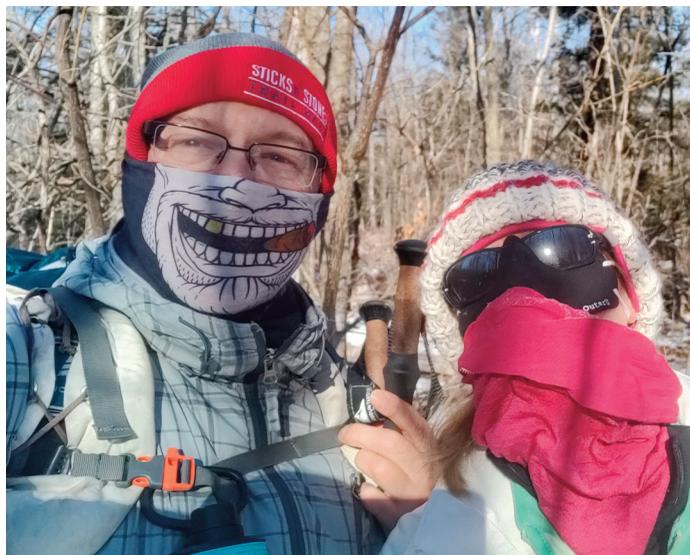
I also brought a small backpack; I didn't want to carry my big pack because I had suffered a herniated disc in my upper back. I ended up just wearing a belt to carry a water bottle and I stuffed food and things in my pockets. It made me bulge in some weird places, but it made my supplies easier to access. The 16.5 km long section was only moderately difficult with a couple of little steep hills but nothing very high or challenging. The trail snaked its way through the Terra Cotta Conservation area and the Silver Creek Conservation Area. It was mostly trail with only a couple hundred metres of road, so we had plenty of time on the trail, surrounded by trees. It was very peaceful with very little traffic noise, or intrusions from the hectic outside world.



There was a little bit of snow on the trail, but neither of us had a "slip and fall", only a couple of slips and stumbles. Unlike most of our previous days on the Bruce Trail, we saw a lot of other people enjoying the trail, mostly couples, and a few small groups of four

or six. One other hiker asked Debbie where she got her skirt, in winter she wears a quilted windproof skirt and leggings. I said Happy New Year to one couple that we encountered, then asked how long it was OK to say Happy New Year. The reply was: "I keep saying it in hopes that it will eventually be true." It was one of our longer hikes so far this winter, and at the end of the trek Debbie had a sandwich made of a gluten free bagel and bacon. I was jealous, all I had was a Rice Krispies square.

Day 7 January 15th. As Debbie was getting stronger, healing from her surgery, we were taking longer and longer hikes. I was initially thinking of planning a 20 km section for this day, but the weather forecast called for really cold temperatures, and I thought it would be best to keep it a little shorter, just in case the cold weather became a problem. This leg of the trail started at a motel (don't tell my wife, hehe).



It was about -20°C when we started, and definitely felt colder than the previous week. Nice warm winter clothing can be very bulky, so I chose to wear a bunch of layers instead. I had on a spandex base layer, a technical long sleeve t-shirt, a light sweater, a heavy sweater, a windbreaker jacket and another windbreaker jacket. I had on a big toque and a buff that I had pulled up above my nose and over my ears. It was

a challenge to keep my glasses from fogging up and keep my nose warm at the same time. This week's trail went through the Limehouse Conservation area. There were a few places where wooden walkways were built over land that was wet and marshy in the summer. They were frozen on this day, and the walkways made loud cracking sounds as we stepped on them and they settled slightly under our weight.



There was also a spot as we climbed up the escarpment where we had to squeeze into a little crevasse between the broken rocks and then climb up over the broken boulders to get to the top. It would have been a great place to take a photo if our hands weren't so cold. During the previous week's hike we came across some icy spots on the trail, little sloped areas where people had been slipping, making it slick. This time we were both prepared with slip-on spikes that we had to put on a little later in the hike as we went through some high traffic areas. Part way through the hike I heard a notification on my phone that I had received a text, so I checked it right away. It was from my wife, and at first glance I thought it said: "You got a pig."

I thought that was kind of strange, then I wondered if it was a live pig, a stuffed pig, maybe just some pork? I took off my fogged up glasses so I could see the phone a little better, and it said: "You got a

pkg.” A package. That makes much more sense. But a pig wouldn’t have been so bad.

As we were getting close to our end point for the day, we walked past the house where Debbie’s husband spent a lot of time when he was growing up, a nice coincidence.

Before this week’s hike, I did a little more preparation for the end point. When we got to the car, it felt really good to open the thermos full of hot lentil soup that I had packed, and have a sip of the savory steaming goodness. It was a wonderful warming end to a bitter cold day.

* * *

The Great Sled Race Paul Hock



January 1, 1931

Every New Year’s Day, for as long as anyone could remember, the little town of Mannigan held a sled race down a steep embankment behind the ‘Happy Pickle Factory.’ It was the town’s only factory, and the locals had nicknamed the slope ‘Vinegar Hill.’ The competition had become known as ‘The Great Annual Vinegar Hill Sled Race.’ It was a New Year ritual, and a good portion of the town’s population always showed up to cheer on the contestants.

One rule was that no one over the age of fifteen could enter. That rule had been implemented three years earlier by Judge Ogilvy when Reggie Knucklescrum, age thirty-three, had decided that he deserved one more ‘kick at the can.’ He had never won this race as a child. So, with his friends’ encouragement, Reggie was determined to try once again. There he stood, all six-foot-two inches towering over the crowd of bewildered children. Still, despite Reggie’s age and experience, he ended up placing a dismal ninth place out of nine participants.



In 1892 the owners of the pickle factory had donated a magnificent oversized silver-plated Trophy. Two golden pickles formed the handles, topped with a perfect wooden replica of a Flexible Flyer racing sled. The walnut base sported engraved nameplates of the annual winners.

It had affectionately been named the ‘Golden Pickle.’ Jonathan’s father’s name, Richard Brimble, was engraved as the winner for the 1910 race, as was Agnes’ son, David Sweetwater, for 1911.

The winner also received a Golden Pickle with their name engraved to cherish forever.

Winning the Golden Pickle meant your name would be on display in the front window of Mulligan’s Hardware and Dry Goods for all eternity.

Although he had come close many times, Jonathan's name had yet to grace that trophy. This year he was determined to make his family proud and remove the smirk off the previous year's Winner Charlie Ritter.

Charlie continuously bragged about it, but now, with the gift of the Flexible Flyer from Agnes, Jonathan felt he might dethrone that braggart. The hill's surface glistened with a light powder of snow that covered a hard-packed base, perfect conditions for the contest.



There would be a total of four races to crown the champion. The first three were elimination rounds. To begin this annual ritual, Judge Ogilvy would pull out the rule book and bellow in his best courtroom voice the rules and procedures. He assured everybody that these rules gave each child a fair chance at winning the coveted Golden Pickle. They went something like this:

- The participants will divide into groups for three qualifying races, and the winner of each race will automatically advance to the final.
- The 2nd, 3rd and 4th place participants of the first race will advance to the second race.
- Anyone who places 2nd, 3rd or 4th in two qualifying races will advance automatically to the final competition. When someone has done so, the participants behind them move up in position for that particular race.

Judge Ogilvy looked up and surveyed the crowd. Many were scratching their heads. He continued to the people's dismay who had suffered through his oratory in previous years. "I see that some of you are confused. Let me clarify."

- In each qualifying race, 1st place will advance to the final, and the 2nd 3rd, and 4th place participants will proceed to the second qualifying race.

- In the second race, the 2nd 3rd and 4th place participants will advance to race three, however, if any of them also placed 2nd 3rd or 4th in race one, they will automatically qualify to race in the final and not have to participate in the third qualifying race, and the participants that followed them will move up to fill their position; therefore, qualifying them to step up to the third qualifying race unless of course they had placed 2nd 3rd or 4th in the first race and now find themselves moved up into 4th place in the 2nd race; therefore, qualifying for the final round."

Feeling confident of his clarification, the Judge gripped his lapels and scanned the crowd again. More people were scratching their heads, some having removed their toques, hoping the chilly air would help to cool the processors firing on the left side of their brain. Others had given up and just stared vacantly.

The Judge looked annoyed. "Hmm... Let me put it another way."

- If, for instance, the 3rd and 4th winners in the second race had also placed in the top four of the first race the 5th and 6th participants would move into the 3rd and 4th place positions; therefore, qualifying them along with the child that had placed 2nd to go into the third and final qualifying race."

Only one person was nodding his head in understanding. It was Dr. David Mitchell, a math professor who, although nodding affirmatively, was also tapping his upper lip with an index finger, the gears turning, working out the equation looking for a mathematical fallacy. He was skeptical that these rules were as fair to everybody as the Judge believed they were.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when the Judge suggested they get on with the event.



Rebecca Clutterbick had the honours of starting the race. She stood to one side nervously, clinging a large pistol. Her instruction was to fire it into the air while the Judge, with his stopwatch and keen eyesight, would focus on who won and placed in each race. He also intended to catch anybody who cheated. No one questioned; however, many believed the Judge could use more powerful spectacles.

Rebecca had drawn names from a hat, and Jonathan was not in the first race. Charlie Ritter was, and to Jonathan's dismay, he saw that Charlie was carrying a brand-new Flexible Flyer racing sled.

He thought, *oh no, there goes my advantage.*

Grandpa saw Jonathan's look of concern and patted him on the shoulder. "Fly down that hill in as straight a line as possible. Don't go weaving around like I did when the Red Baron was on my tail."

"The Red Baron?" Jonathan exclaimed.

"Yes! Charlie might have the same sled, but you have my lucky flying goggles and hat. However, I must admit that von Richthofen did shoot up my airplane. I had to make a forced landing. Then that Red Triplane buzzed me, flying so low, I saw the Baron salute me before he headed back into the fray. So you see, I was lucky.

Jonathan knew his Grandpa had been a World War One pilot, but this was the first time he had heard this story. He stared at him, mouth open. "You had a dogfight with The Red Baron?"

Grandpa put a finger to his lips, "Our secret, after all, it was hardly a dogfight, rather one-sided, I'd say."

On top of the hill, ten contestants had lined up an assortment of sleds and toboggans. Rebecca Clutterbick closed her eyes and, with both hands, gripped the large revolver. It wasn't your average little starter pistol; it was a forty-five-calibre that had served the Judge well in the Boer War. He insisted on

using it and had the gun cocked and ready for Rebecca as she raised it above her head. When she fired, the repercussion knocked her on her behind into a snowbank. She immediately dropped the gun, causing it to discharge a second time. Luckily it was loaded with blanks. Rebecca ran to her mother's arms, as did several other children.

At the crack of that gunshot, the sleds launched. Half of them stopped when they heard the second blast, thinking there had been a false start. Judge Ogilvy gave Rebecca a scornful look as he retrieved and dried off his precious weapon. Once the racers returned to the starting line, he raised the heavy pistol into the air and, suffering a momentary memory lapse, hollering. "Okay, platoon forward and no retreat!" He fired, and the sleds were off.

Jonathan cheered and encouraged his friend Hughie, who immediately took the lead. He stayed in front of the pack to the bottom. Hughie won, with Charlie Ritter right behind him and a young girl that Jonathan didn't recognize, finishing a close third.

Jonathan found himself positioned between Charlie and the girl in the next race. She couldn't have been more than eight years old. He was impressed by her performance.

The pistol fired, and they launched. Charlie and Jonathan were neck and neck with the young girl right behind them. Halfway down, Charlie used his right foot to nudge Jonathan's sled. It sent him off the track, causing him to fall behind a few feet. It was a subtle move on Charlie's part and almost went unnoticed. The Judge squinted, uncertain of what he had seen. The nudge had cost Jonathan the race, placing him a disappointing fourth behind Charlie, the young girl, and Ralphie Slamdunker, a friend who lived up to his surname on the local basketball court.

Although the Judge couldn't be sure, he addressed Charlie at the finish line. "Charles Ritter, I believe you are up to your usual shenanigans! You will not automatically move up to the final. You must race

again, and if I catch you cheating, you will be sitting on the sidelines this year and for next year's race as well."

"But that's not fair!" Charlie protested.

The Judge waved a finger, "Your choice, qualify or step aside."

Grudgingly Charlie marched back up the hill. Jonathan's anger was showing as they prepared for the next run. Now assured a spot in the final, the young girl had joined him as he trudged back up the hill.

"I saw what he did. I was right behind you. I think you would have won."

Her remark caught him off guard. "Really? You think so?"

"I do, and I think you still can, but don't let him upset you because he'll just use that to his advantage."

"Gee, thanks... I don't know your name.

"Moonbeam."

"Nice name, good luck in the final, Moonbeam, and thanks again."

"You are welcome. Besides, if you make it to the final, it will be me and not Charlie you have to worry about."

Jonathan nodded in agreement as he studied Moonbeam's sled. It was beautifully crafted, made of wood. The runners had thin metal strips inset. Jonathan thought he had seen one like it before. He slipped on his goggles and turned his attention back to Vinegar Hill's steep slope.

From the start, Charlie and Jonathan shot ahead of the pack. Charlie, seeing Jonathan inching forward, couldn't resist implementing his dirty trick once again.

It backfired as his boot got caught up in Jonathan's runner, causing the bully's sled to make a sudden lurch and sending both of them end over end across the finish line. The accident allowed three others to shoot ahead of them. Charlie was fourth and Jonathan fifth.

"Hah, I beat you, and I qualified!" Charlie yelled at Jonathan, who was brushing the snow off his breeches.

Before Jonathan could protest, the Judge bellowed. "Afraid not, Charles Ritter, because I saw what you did! You are hereby disqualified from this race and next year's competition as well. You, Jonathan, qualify for the final. The crowd cheered at his decision.

Charlie's father approached his son. "Is it true that you cheated?"

Charlie looked up at his father. "Well yeah, but if I hadn't, he would have—" His father snatched the sled from his Charles' hands and surveyed the crowd of youngsters. Jonathan's friend Hughie and his younger brother Richard stood to one side. Mr. Ritter thrust the Flexible Flyer into young Richard's hands.

"You take this young man; Charlie won't be needing it anymore."

Richard's eyes opened wide. "Gosh, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure, now, take it before I change my mind."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Ritter." Richard ran over to show his friends the unexpected gift.

Charlie was led away by his father, scolding him, not for cheating, but for getting caught.



The final contestants met at the top of the hill and were allowed a short break. Someone gave each contestant a cup of hot chocolate before the grand finale. As they sipped on the warm beverage, Jonathan turned to the young girl. "You were right; I'll have to keep an eye on you. Is Moonbeam your real name?"

"My full name is Annie Moonbeam Robertson, but I prefer Moonbeam, or... she thought for a moment. You could call me Flies Like the Wind."

Jonathan laughed, "You sure do, Moonbeam, you're like a blizzard going down that hill."

As they lined up, Jonathan felt he had a chance at finally winning the trophy. This time it would be a clean race with no dirty tricks from the likes of Charlie Ritter.

He looked over to his opponents, "Okay, 'Flies Like the Wind,' you had better live up to your new name."

"Oh, I will." She said, smiling.

The gun thundered, and Jonathan soon realized he was in trouble. His sled kept pulling to the right, and he had to force it to stay on track slowing him considerably. Soon he was passed by Moonbeam, Hughie and a host of others.

As Annie Moonbeam Robertson flew first across the finish line, the crowd roared their approval. Jonathan came in last. Still, his dog Topsy came running over, jumping on him and knocking him into the snow,

excitedly licking his face as if he had won. Then Topsy ran to the winner and started licking her face as well.

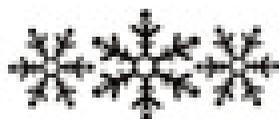
"Traitor!" Jonathan hollered. Moonbeam laughed.

Jonathan inspected his sled and realized that the earlier crash with Charlie had caused a slight bend in one runner, just enough to slow him down.

The family gathered around them, and Jonathan's Grandma studied the young girl.

"My goodness, is that you, Moonbeam?"

Recognizing Jonathan's Grandmother, Moonbeam pulled off her mitten and, digging deep into a pocket, removed a wooden nickel and held it up to her. "Yes, it's me."





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Believe you can, and you're halfway there.
Theodore Roosevelt



Call for Submissions

In recognition of Sexual Assault Prevention Month, a “Special Edition” anthology of empowerment stories about sexual abuse, addiction and recovery will be published in May 2022.

Submission deadline: April 1, 2022.

If you are interested in submitting a story, visit www.sharinganthologies.com for details, or email lisa@onethousandtrees.com.

All proceeds will go to
Recovery Speaking Initiative
(www.recoveryspeaking.org)

The Loneliest Month of the Year *Bill Brubacher*



In my opinion, February is the loneliest month of the year.

Why? Because it stands out alone in the bleak, grey blue, post-Christmas winter, seemingly endless and hopelessly cold, shivering and helpless, pitifully all by itself with little to offer – as an unwelcome guest given the cold shoulder at a party (if there were any these days), and nobody gives it any further notice, other than to complain about its presence and want it to leave so we can all get back to life.

I don't know about you, but that pretty much sums up the way I also feel about my life at this time: lonely, barren, in-between, helpless, angry, frustrated, lost, lethargic, and a lot more, which is to say, would only make me feel more depressed to go on.

Who of us really needs February anyway? What did we ever do to deserve this whole pathetic month?

If I had a say, I would replace it with March so we could get right on with spring.

Ok, let's get realistic. We've still got 28 lousy days to put up with. How are we going to do that? Oh, while at the same time, still dealing with the punitive and depressing effects of the ongoing 'pandamit' (I call it), and its prodigious offspring: read unwanted variants.

My God, will it ever end?

No wonder it's February because that's the way February feels, to me, as I said!

So what's left? Quick, someone please pass me my 'dog-eared' Monthly Survival Manual!!

Now, where's the Survival Chapter on February and what to do about feeling: alone, depressed (again, still), frustrated, angry, running out of patience, anxious, worried ... and more.

What? February's missing!

Can't even depend on the Manual! Now what?

What do they whoever 'they' are, expect me to do? This is almost too much to bear and I'm beginning to feel victimized.

Why me? Why this month? How am I going to survive these 28 dismal days?

I'm only human!

So, what is being 'human' anyway? And how does it have anything to do with me? I know it's a rhetorical question, I should know better.

Come to think of it, I've heard some pretty incredible stories about being human in difficult times; but they were always about others.

This is about me. And as I said, I'm only human.

I suppose I should give some serious thought to my options for a month if I want to get through it.

Maybe a good place to start is to remember, I've survived February before, in fact, all my life, when I stop and think about it.

And what did I learn from that experience? Well, obviously very little, it seems; likely because it was always hell and I did my best to ignore it hoping it wouldn't turn up again next year!

Seriously though, I must have survived in spite of myself.

So, what if I take it a day at a time, presumably like before, and I just may get through this ill-begotten month once more.

Hm... that's kinda interesting. And maybe that's how I can get from day to day by simply making the best of each one, because I can't change it. And maybe that's how I will get through this horrible month as well, one day at a time.

And, if I don't overthink this month too much, I may be able to think of other things I can do to work around it. Might be worth a try.

In fact, that almost sounds challenging. I wonder, could I even make it fun? Ok, that may be going a little too far!

But maybe February won't be so bad after all, if I outsmart it and work around it. Maybe I can get through it by taking some control over my life and doing that, I might be able to take some control over the month.

WOW. Think of the possibilities. No! I don't want to get my hopes up. My life is already complicated enough.

My immediate goal is to survive February and I think I might have come up with something that might

work. I could try just taking it one day at a time and not getting too upset by it.

I wonder: should I share that 'solution' with others?

No. I really don't think anyone else will understand.

After all, February is, a pretty CRAPPY MONTH – with the exception of **Valentine's Day!**

Oh, ***Happy Valentine's Day!***



* * *

Better and Better ***Colleen Heighington***

I hope that you are all having a great start to the year 2022, in spite of everything that is still going on around us.

I just came back from my walk in the mall, and things haven't changed much from what they used to be. I am again greeted by a security guard asking me all of the same questions concerning Covid-19. I had

Stories: poetry, prose, and personal reflection

hoped by now, that this would be all over with, but it isn't!! The food court is again closed and it feels so eerie not to see anyone in it. The food venders have hardly anyone there and my heart goes out to each and every one of them.

On the positive side of things, I have seen some really long line-ups in the mall consisting of children and grown-ups waiting to get their Covid-19 vaccination and booster shots. Hopefully, things will get better. It has been over two years now since the beginning of this and I believe that eventually all of our mask-wearing, keeping our distance, and hand washing will pay off.

As I am finishing this up, the children are back in school. This is wonderful news for the students and parents. BRAVO!!!! The line-up for the Covid-19 and booster shots are winding down, and that is good news. A lot of people have gotten their shots and this in itself will certainly help out in our fight against Covid-19 and the variants. Also, there seems to be a more positive feedback in the news and in the newspaper about the current situation of Covid-19 and, in my opinion, things are getting better and better. Let's continue to pray that this year 2022, will be the one that we have been hoping and waiting for!!!

Reflections on the Theme

The following photo was submitted by Arlene Davies-Fuhr, in response to the monthly theme of gratitude. Here's what Arlene had to say:

"This photograph captures gratitude since there's several trees which represent community, and the sun itself looks like it's dancing with joy and gratitude."

The photo was taken at sunset in Winnipeg, in the summer of 2021.



Animals and Our Emotional Wellbeing

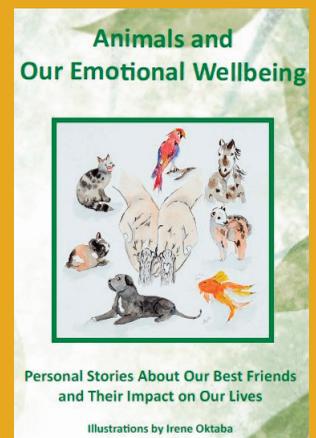


Left: On the shelf, at McNally Robinson Booksellers in Saskatoon!
Right: One of the authors (and a contributor to this magazine!) ... Joan Almond!

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This Month's Contributors

Joan Almond

Joan is a Canadian writer and self-taught photographer. Mentored by Dan Needles and Joe Kertes, she has been encouraged to follow the “heart” in her writing. Most recently, the author’s short stories are published in *Our Canada*. A third publication in the October/November edition of the national magazine will show case her Children’s writing. A proud supporter of the Canadian Society of Children’s Authors, illustrators, and Performers, Joan’s great joy is reading Canadian children’s literature. Joan is thankful to award-winning author Marilyn Helmer, who encouraged her to submit her story to this anthology. The author extends gratitude to Lisa Browning who first gave her a voice in February of 2019, in the online publication known as *One Thousand Trees*.

Bill Brubacher

Bill is a long-time resident of the Region of Waterloo, a former successful business entrepreneur and an internationally published author of 15 national bestselling books. He is a Certified Bereavement Specialist, and a Certified Conflict Coach/ Elder Mediator, helping seniors and their families through difficult time through Caregivers Oasis, Pathfinder Canada, and Heart and Soul Bereavement for Seniors. Bill has recently authored a new book about his amazing life’s journey. His book, *Against the Odds*, is a ten-year testament to his incredible emotional, spiritual and mental tenacity as he fought to reinvent himself after experiencing tremendous loss. His model and message are an inspiration to all who struggle to survive in the face of defeat. His latest book, *The Secret Pond*, is a classic love story fantasy about the shared journey of a young boy and an unusual stranger finding healing from grief and loss at a mystical pond in the midst of an ancient magical forest. For more information about his books go to <https://legacypress.ca/> or contact Bill at billbrubacher@gmail.com.

Brenda Cassidy

Brenda has written two children’s books, *Who Needs Little Brothers Anyway?* and *Who Needs Little Sisters Anyway?* In addition to writing for children, she is also interested in writing about her spiritual journey, and hopes to achieve this in the future. In the meantime, Brenda also enjoys writing short poems and her own personal musings.

Colleen Heighington

Colleen is happily married to a wonderful husband named Ken. They have been blessed with three beautiful children, and four terrific grandsons. She enjoys reading, writing stories and poetry, and she keeps fit by walking 3 to 4 kilometres every day. Her summers are spent at their trailer in Orillia, and she really enjoys the time she spends with family and friends. She has been a volunteer with Hospice Wellington since 2015.

continued ...

Marilyn Helmer

Marilyn is the award-winning author of many children's books including picture books, early chapters, retold fairy tales, riddle books and novels. Her short stories, poetry and articles have appeared in numerous children's magazines and anthologies in Canada and the United States and her penchant for entering writing contests has resulted in success with short adult fiction as well. Marilyn has just published a collection of her short adult fiction called "Birdsong on a Summer Evening" with One Thousand Trees Publishing. Visit her website at www.marilynhelmer.com.

Paul Hock

Paul is an author, illustrator, songwriter and storyteller. Two of his books were inspired by songs he has written. "A Pilgrimage to Memphis" inspired a novel he completed in 2014 and has published in 2018 and a children's chapter book "The Tree" published in December 2017, inspired by a song he wrote of the same title. For more information, Visit his website at www.paulhockpublishing.com.

Francine Houston

Francine is an animal lover, transformational intuitive, and full-time creator. She spends her time writing, doing fibre arts, and supporting individuals in telling their personal stories.

Clay Williams

Clay is a 61-year-old Manitoba-born father of two living in Elmira Ontario with his wife of 40 years. He manages the Engineering Department of a manufacturing company in Kitchener and has worked in Northern Ontario, Germany and South Carolina. Clay is an avid distance runner, having run dozens of marathons and longer runs, and creator of the Canal Pursuit for Mental Health, a 785 km run along two of Canada's longest canals as well as The Monarch Ultra, a 4300 km run following the migration path of Monarch Butterflies.

STAY WELL STAY HAPPY KEEP WRITING!

**Deadline for submissions for March is
Friday, February 25.**

Here's a focus quote to inspire you ...

“It is spring again. The earth is like a child that knows poems by heart.”
— Rainer Maria Rilke

