Memoir Draft

Submitted by: Jennifer Hakola

October 26, 2019

WRNM 605

 His rented U-Haul trailer to move west across the country was aptly named ‘the puffin’ due to the large puffin painted on the side. No hidden meaning, no creative nickname, named solely based on its picture, like his black rabbit he had named *Black Rabbit*. The contents were equally unimaginative; an oversized beige leather sofa, honestly, that’s all I can remember. It was so dull. This should have been a red flag for me, but I was in love. I was thrilled when that half empty moving trailer pulled into my driveway. My parents, wanting me to be prepared for anything on this adventure to the mountains, began filling every available space in the trailer with mementos from the ancestors; my grandma’s green metal ironing board, my grandpa’s shovels, both long and short, my great uncle’s life jacket and tent, my dad’s big tarp in case of rain, my great aunt’s mix master for all the cakes I was going to bake, and my mom’s metal sewing machine in case of rips. We finally set off, him in his truck with trailer, and me behind in my little car, *Nesta Mae*.
 It was moving day and I had packed all the CDs I owned in a binder along with three country western audio book cassettes which I had listened to by the end of the first day. By the third day of driving I was getting stir crazy all alone in my little car. Every hour I heard on the CBC radio a repeat of the story about a city being over run with yard chickens. I think it was the time zones causing the repeating stories, but I couldn’t be sure it wasn’t just me. I could see in my mind that man they kept interviewing named George, “…and then I looked up out the front window and there were five more chickens so I called Sue to come and have a look.” It seemed like such a peculiar story to hear over and over again. I thought perhaps there was some meaning or metaphor I could glean to mark my road trip to a new future, instead it was just graffiti on the tunnel wall of the vortex taking me across the country. Space and time expanded to be never ending until I found myself outside a gas station restaurant in Alberta filing my nails, with my feet on the dash board, (two things I never did), wondering who I would be in my new life. I did not want to drive anymore, no more canola fields, no more radio, no more transport trucks, I didn’t want to go anymore. Inside, I ordered chicken fingers with plum sauce just like always, so I knew I must still be the same and I should just keep going.
 But something was changing, I was gaining a sense of just how small I was in the world. I thought about the importance of my life compared to the life of the butterfly I accidentally hit with my car. Alone, my mind turned into a philosopher with no boundaries of societal assumptions such as, humans are more important than bugs. As the miles passed it became less clear what was the point of life. I had always felt such purpose and meaning in my life and by day three I wasn’t sure. Maybe there was no meaning to life, maybe we were all just like dead bugs on the windshield. I remembered a card my mom had on the fridge with a quote warning that looking for a purpose in life is like riding a horse on a horse. I was realizing that too didn’t make sense anymore and what a ridiculous thing to send someone on a card. Who had done that to her?
 Although I was going to attend graduate school to follow my dreams and live my bliss in the mountains, I’m not sure why I willingly left home. Maybe it was to not work another country fair painting children’s faces, maybe not to drink any more late-night coffees at the Husky gas station in town, or maybe just to make sure I could actually leave. Regardless of the motive, I was heading west and imagining that I wasn’t leaving anything behind. I knew I would go to school, gain a skill and come back home to serve my community and give back. I assumed everything would stay the same in my wake, no one would change and no one would age, trapped inside a snow globe, safe from time, waiting for me to return. As it turns out, I did accidentally leave everything behind and everything I took with me was eventually left behind too.

 On a straight stretch, part of my little car came off and was dangling down on the road making a scraping sound. I pulled over onto the shoulder to investigate. There were two options really, rip it off or attach it back on. It seemed like an important decision and one that might be holding the metaphor and wise meaning for which I had been searching for. I stood looking out over the prairie grass for a long time when eventually my travelling companion came back to find me standing in the road’s ditch with swarming grasshoppers jumping at my legs in the tall grass. He was exasperated saying, “I looked in my rear-view mirror and there was no one. I thought, ‘Where is Jenny?’ I was alone! I had to figure out how to turn this trailer around on the Trans Canada Highway!”, always as though the suffering was his and not others’. But I was in love so I was just happy he came back and touched he noticed I was missing.
 *Jenny* was my name from childhood, reserved as an adult for close friends and family members. It harkened to a hint of true self and a favourite layer of mine; a youthful, creative, fearless and deeply caring, unjaded version of myself. It turned out he was asking a question I should have been asking myself throughout life, “Where is Jenny?”. I see now I should have been checking on her more often, keeping track of her whereabouts. Perhaps I would have avoided many pitfalls and lived a different life if I had kept asking myself, “Where is Jenny?”, at all major forks in the road. I likely never would have sold condominiums and worn a purple pantsuit with fake nails that kept falling off whenever I shook hands with potential buyers. I likely never would have dyed my light hair black and pretended to be a jerk. I definitely would never have spent so much time with non supporting people. Such as it was, I didn’t really wonder where Jenny was with any conviction until I turned forty. Thankfully by that time it was not too late and that beloved layer of myself was still there waiting for me to find her in knee deep grasshoppers. As though she had sat by witnessing me living, always there with me, shining light on certain aspects but mostly in quiet observation. Was this true self the voice I hear when needed, the muse channeling creative ideas to me when needed, the presence of strength to lean on and rise up with? What part of me was this and how much longer was it going to wait for me to smarten up?
 Always the lady, I asked him which option we should go with, rip it off or attach it back on. He said to tuck it up and fix it later. This option proved to be the rabbit hole I spent the next 20 years travelling down. Keep one foot on the dock and one in the boat. Don’t make a decision now, limp it along and decide later. So, I stayed away from home for fifteen years until I realized I was not really living fully in my life away from home. Part of me was always still expecting to go home. Part of me was not committing fully to the community because I might be leaving at any time. When I visited Back East, I always said I was going home for a holiday, but wasn’t I actually leaving home for a holiday? It’s fine to belong to two places, so why does it seem I should choose one, or commit to one? I’m in a liminal space, an in between of my own making. My home is a part of who I am. It doesn’t need to be identified as other or external, and yet we insist on a sense of belonging as part of human nature. We must belong to feel whole.
 My friend and I tried to leave home when we were twenty. Our tickets booked, our plans planned, we were packed and ready. Leaving is never easy, there is a certain momentum that must be built to spring you forth from the daily pattern. In this exhaustion, we fell asleep in our seats before the plane even took off. We awoke hours later thrilled to be free and looking for our geographical cure, realizing the plane was still waiting on the tarmac. Three hours had gone by and we had not made it anywhere. When we had finally reached Mexico, I had my tarot cards read by an ancient and withered Mexican man in a café. I pulled the card which had a picture of a person holding up the head of a man by the hair and another head in his out stretched palm. He said I had troubles because I did not let go of the last man’s head before grabbing the next head, so that I could never fully embrace the new head with two hands because I was still holding on to the other head with my other hand. The way he described it, I thought he was literally talking about men, but decades later I wonder if he was also talking about geographical location. Every summer I return home and every year someone asks me if I ever think about going back. I always say, oh yes, of course, I love it here, one day I hope to come back. But each year goes by and I never do move back. I get more immersed in my everyday life and another year goes by and I still have not moved back. I can’t help but wonder if I am waiting until the last minute; waiting to see if it can ever be too late, that there is a time when the draw bridge goes up and traps me here. What could cause that? Global catastrophe? Nuclear war? Earthquake? Tsunami? Am I really unconsciously seeing how far in I can go and still make it out? Am I really unconsciously looking for challenge in my life at the expense of ease and familiarity of the past, or am I truly living the life I want and unable to admit it to myself?
 Leaving home again was nothing like the first time when I involuntarily left home. After high school I thought I wanted to go to university until my parents started driving me there; all of my bags packed with my shower caddy and my milk crates for shelving. After the first hundred miles I started pleading with them to turn around and take me back. After the next hundred I switched strategies and laid out an argument for humanity to be more tribal and stay with their families in intergenerational communities. They just kept driving and saying pacifying things like, “That’s nice dear.” and “Remember that time you wanted to get a goat, honey. This is like that time.” My instinct was to stay in my home town, but small-town northern Ontario does not have a university option, so the youth are forced to leave or stay home to get to work and raise families. After my parents helped me move my belongings up four flights of stairs into the dorm, they said their goodbyes and drove away. I sat on the steps for a long time thinking that they would surely circle the block and come back and get me, that they couldn’t actually be leaving me there, but they never did come back. Good thing too because of course university was mostly great. I had always assumed I would move away, but it seemed counterintuitive to have spent my life building relationships, a sense of belonging and meaning only to leave them and set off to where no one knew me.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 The voice on the other end asked, “This is the RCMP, are you having an emergency?” I was struck into a pause; no one ever asks you that in everyday life. I stopped walking in the driveway and looked up to the top of the giant cedar tree. Was I having an emergency? Did she know something I did not yet know? Was my cell phone alerting to an impending heart attack? I told her I had not called the emergency number. She said, “Yes you called 911. Are you having an emergency?”. I was stopped short again; maybe I was having an emergency. I turned to look around behind me, no threat was evident, the only movement was wind in the long grasses. I looked to the children climbing in the back of the truck, had I called 911, was I losing my mind, how would one know? I wanted to say, “define emergency exactly”. Is it like now when my children are yelling about whose bicycle goes in the truck first, or five minutes ago when my dog jumped the five-foot-high fence and chased a car? Is it an emergency that the pump in the well broke five days ago and I’m bathing in the river and washing strawberries with bottled water, unable to wash the stink off my other dog who killed a skunk in the back field last night and left it in the driveway for me to deal with? Having to eat grilled cheese for three days because there are no pots or dishes left to cook with? What kind of emergency is she referring to? Do I have to be being robbed, dying or shot at to answer ‘yes’ to her question? We may be a better off society if cops did randomly call people and ask them if they are having an emergency. What about my current divorce process? That feels like an emergency. All of these at the same time? I am definitely having an emergency. Thanks for asking. Please do send a nice policeman over to spend some time with me, I could use an adult to take care of the problems and hang out with for awhile; maybe take a walk in the trees and chat about the weather, later have a drink on the deck and laugh about our childhoods.
 I would have thought less of the experience, but over the next two months my phone accidentally called emergency five times. I never knew when my phone was dialling 911, so when I would get the call back it was always as surprising as the last if not more. Each time a kind but hurried voice would ask, “This is the RCMP, are you having an emergency?”. I wanted to say, ‘Yes I am certainly having an emergency this time, please send someone.” Instead, I would put my hand on my chest to double check I wasn’t dying, and then I would apologize profusely for wasting their time, and then curse my phone and google more solutions on how to stop this embarrassment. Sometimes the voice would be a man’s; on the phone they always sound heroic, as though they really can come and save you. The catch it seems is that they only save you from death, they won’t save you from life. It was somewhat reassuring to have the police falsely checking in. It gave me the chance to check with myself, and know that I’ve got this, I can take more, I am not yet at emergency levels. It forced me to confidently say aloud on a biweekly basis to a stranger, “No I am not having an emergency”.
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 When it was time to move the dead skunk, the three of us stood for awhile looking down at it. I was wondering how to scoop it up with as little movement as possible. My little son, reassured me, “Don’t worry mom, it can’t spray you dead. I looked it up.” My daughter bent down for a closer look and asked, “Is that what happens to eyes when they die?”. I seemed to be struggling to get the skunk on the shovel because Sam stepped in offering to do it himself. At seven he was taking brave steps into independence. “Why is this skunk so heavy?” he asked. “That’s just the death, honey. It does that.” I said distracted by thinking about where to dump this thing without attracting bears. At four, Abby said, “You know he only has one tooth, one really, really sharp tooth.” We all bent down for a closer look. He did have only one really sharp tooth sticking out. It seemed shameful somehow that death would leave him with this mocking expression. I wondered who would miss him. Did he have a family watching from the bushes? Did anyone even know he had been alive? Did he have a sweetheart up the road? Sam asked, “Why is his butt all squeezed out? Is that how he died?” I hoped the world had some mercy and explained, “I’m sure he died before that happened.” I carried him out the driveway on the shovel with the kids behind letting me know if I tipped the shovel too far one way or the other, and the dogs behind them looking a little too proud. I heaved him over the bank into the bushes and Sam yelled, “Goodbye Skunky, I hope a coyote eats you.” Abby asked as we walked back to the yard, “I sure have seen a lot of dead skunks this year right mom?” Only in childhood can you keep up with the personal inventory of death events, eventually its too many to keep track of, but so far for her, Skunks 6, Dogs 1, Deer 2, Humans 2, Birds 1.