

SEPTEMBER

I fumbled around my backpack for a calculator as I tried to study in the noisy campus coffee shop. While poking in one of the pockets, I accidentally unscrewed my pencil sharpener, flicking wooden shavings up my nose and making me sneeze. I looked around as I wiped any remnants of lead dust from my face, but thankfully no one was paying attention to me. As usual. Small blessings.

Students scattered around in groups like geese or cattle, but I was a lone wolf. Everywhere I looked, young bodies navigated the area like snakes writhing in a carpeted pit. Books, pens, and cigarettes were clustered across every precious inch, creating a funky stew of ashy, caffeinated undergrads. It would look like we were piled in a giant, dirty ashtray if one peered down from above. There was never enough room because there were limited spaces to go between classes, and it was one of the few places students could smoke indoors.

I glanced over the calculations in my scribbler and saw him. *Him*. His dark energy drew my eyes from the page like a magnet. My body sensed his presence even before I physically spied him. He was the most beautiful being I had ever encountered – a true force of nature, flawlessly constructed for all to admire. Not that he'd

notice; he didn't seem to concern himself with others and mainly read in solitude.

I wasn't in his classes, but I had a sense of his schedule, so I tried to be at the coffee shop or along the same pathway so I could soak in his beauty. After a minute or two, I scanned the room to see where he was sitting. It wasn't creepy if I never got found out. Mr. Darkness sauntered to the urn and poured a steaming cup of coffee, wincing as he took a drink before paying the cashier. Remnants of rain beaded on his fuzzy coat collar. I wanted to run over and gently wipe the drops away, tracing my fingertips over his scruffy cheek and long eyelashes – his penetrating gaze would beam thanks and then we'd sit together in the giant public ashtray. My legs tensed as if they were going to move, but I shifted around on the smelly carpet and forced my attention back to my binder before I did something unforgivably embarrassing.

He looked a bit sad today. My heart ached for the ability to make him laugh. I desperately wanted to be that special someone who had an influence in his life. From my side-eye, I noticed his friend took a seat beside him, and Mr. Darkness' eyes beamed hello. He could shift from dark to light in a nanosecond. In either realm, he was perfection. I turned towards him, and he flicked his sharp focus in my direction. Our eyes locked before I sneezed and forced my face behind my notebook, frantically trying to look like I was passively studying for a test. I peeked up

again, and he was still staring, almost daring me to look at him again, but I wasn't that brave. I gathered up my things and went to my next class, even though it didn't start for another twenty minutes or so.

I bumped into my friend Drew on the mossy concrete steps of the main science building, and we talked about plans for the evening. I told Drew I didn't have any funds for going out, so I would probably lay low.

Drew lightly punched me on the shoulder. "No worries, Faith. I got you covered."

"I think my tab now sits at a million dollars," I joked. "I don't deserve you."

"I know, but you got me. Besides, it's my dad's money. You can thank him."

I shook my head. "I'll get you to thank him on my behalf. I don't think he likes me."

"Don't take it personally, Faith. He doesn't like anyone," Drew smirked as he opened the classroom door and gestured for me to walk through. I saw Tammy, my best friend, in the back row. She would be up for going to the campus pub directly after our class. She was always up for anything, especially when Drew paid.

We ended up having way too many drinks, and around eleven o'clock, I stumbled home alone to a darkened apartment. I made my way to my freezing bedroom and lit a candle. It gently flickered on my nightstand, casting a yellow haze across the shadowy pages of my book, gasping out little bursts of revolt like a toddler lashing out

at a parent. The sputtering flame wasn't sure if it wanted to live or not, so it fought and beat on itself, furiously punching out light then anxiously grasping it back. Or maybe I incorrectly projected anger onto the candle. Perhaps it felt perfectly happy.

I stared at the flame, the white of the light paradoxically contained as it danced. Did it fight for more territory, or was it so comfortable in its space that it simply licked the outward oxygen intermittently as it pleased? It fascinated me how different candlelight looked in the darkness as opposed to when a light bulb took over a room. When candlelight flickered in a space brightened by electricity, it seemed so meek and pathetic, which was a far cry from its majestic presence when the candle broke through the black solely on its own accord.

I was supposed to be studying but instead wasted time reading my newest library book. What did people do without books and shows? Stories in whatever form were the most cathartic and healthy instruments known to humankind – my true loves. They comforted me yet pushed me to accept that life was full of trials and tribulations; it was the definition of existence. Without sorrow, I couldn't experience happiness.

Live life to the fullest.

Live and let live.

And so on.

Stories soothed my soul, intermittently making sense of reality while providing escape. Escaping the

fact that I lived in an old apartment with leaking windows. Or that I've gained excess bulges lately. And if I didn't watch it, I'd be an obese twentysomething with ugly, mousy hair. I recently haven't bothered with my appearance because no one else did – who cared if I gained ten pounds? Only I noticed the love handles.

I felt like a flower that withered for so long no water could replenish its petals. All of this would change because I was starting a new regimen. I decided to tone my body, dye my hair, and drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids. I was officially starting my diet after a massive bag of ketchup chips this evening (and a chocolate bar ... and some ice cream ... food and books pair so well together).

I needed to prepare for self-imposed famine.

I jumped up as I heard a mouse squeak. It scurried along my bedroom wall before scampering into the remnants of a bag of chips in the corner. Was it better to know there was a rodent nearby or was ignorance preferable? I didn't even shoo it away. I pretended I was from another century, trying to make my pitiful situation a bit more romantic. Apartment dwellers in the 1990s weren't supposed to live with vermin – that wasn't romantic, just gross. But I guessed it always was. I felt bad for the mouse, though. It wasn't his fault he was repulsive. Even so, I needed to make sure I didn't leave any more food around my room.

Anyhoo – how did I feel now that I was starting a new journey towards being thin?

Excited.

I thought I could do it now that my roommate, Steve, was dieting. We were going to the farmer's market tomorrow and picking out healthy fruits, veggies and multigrain bread. It was going to be awesome. I was 5'5 and around 170 pounds with all my clothes. I didn't know how much Steve weighed, but he was fairly hefty. I considered having a big to-do with both of us jumping on the scales and documenting our successes together in matching notebooks, but I didn't want him to know how big I was, so I decided to have more of a solo launch party.

My goal was to go down to 120 and then go dancing at clubs with a different crop top each evening. I wouldn't even need money for drinks because skinny girls always get them for free. It would all work out perfectly.

Earlier today, I took a couple of steps forward in my future. I gathered up three or four grad applications sprawled across the shellacked wooden table at the student resource centre and talked to professors about letters of reference. I felt proud of myself. Usually, I procrastinated until the point of no return. It facilitated the process if the decision was made through apathy. But checking this off my list was a bit discomfoting, which was confusing. I shared this with Drew and Tammy over drinks this evening, but they just shrugged it off as one of my analytical moods. Maybe they were right. I read

too much into situations; deciphering kept me from experiencing.

I turned my focus back to my bedroom candle, noting I'd checked a box towards my next road. Now I needed to figure out where to go. Could I do it? Did I have the initiative? The ambition? Brains? Talent? Even though I got good grades, I wasn't sure if I was smart enough for a master's program. I took a test last summer to work for the Federal government as a student worker and got a 70%, which might as well be a fail, so I had to keep working at the video store, earning about half as much per hour.

I stared into the flame and closed my eyes. Please make getting into grad school an attainable goal. I would die if I lost in this life. I needed to be a success. I was okay with failing up to now, but I couldn't fail at adulting.

I scanned my bedroom to ensure the mouse was gone, then blew out the candle. The acrid smoke cuffed my lungs in annoyance for extinguishing the flame. I snuggled under the blankets, plumping up my pillow beside my belly, pretending to spoon Mr. Darkness. I wanted to intertwine my body with his, wrapping my legs around his waist. I visualized my fingers threading through his thick hair, spreading it across my face to smell each individual strand.

A couple of hours later, I woke up in tears after an unsettling dream about my mother. I waited for a few minutes under the sheets, debating whether I should go to the fridge for a

snack. These types of dreams made me terribly hungry. Plus, my diet didn't officially start until daylight, so it would be perfectly acceptable to have a bit of a binge. I stubbed my toe on the way to the kitchen, hoping this wasn't a sign that I shouldn't be getting up. I made a toasted cheese sandwich and carefully navigated back to my room, practically falling asleep while I ate it. When I eventually woke up, there was crusted mayonnaise trailing from my cheek to the inside of my ear. I rolled out of bed with the first sunbeam, putting on my frumpy, extra-large flannel shirt I used as a bathrobe and trotted down the hallway to the bathroom to get ready for the market. Along the way, I banged on Steve's door, not caring if his girlfriend, Tonya, stayed over and would be annoyed at the racket.

The trip to the farmer's market was very fruitful. I bought tiny potatoes and carrots and hearty bread for supper, as well as oatmeal and honey for breakfast and a ton of apples, so I was well on my way towards a new way of living. My backpack felt super heavy, but I was as happy as a clam on a massive sandbar.

I couldn't believe how many people went to the market. It was bustling with shiny nuclear families pushing their rosy-cheeked kids in colourful plastic strollers. I pretended Steve and I were married, placidly looking for our collective grocery items, not two fat students on our way to becoming a hot young couple. I wondered how

fast Steve would bolt out the door if he could read my mind.

My contentment was short-lived, and I felt viscerously ill the next day. I spent approximately 24 hours sleeping. I either caught a virus or had a minor case of food poisoning. I hadn't been able to keep anything down since yesterday. On the upside, I might have lost some weight.

I wanted to feel better by this evening because Steve and I were supposed to go to the movies tonight. I wrote reviews for the school newspaper, so the tickets were free. Steve figured we should venture out on Sunday nights because it was a regularly priced night, and there weren't as many people at the cinema. Steve was very strategic.

Steve and I got along quite well as roommates. We met at one of those provincial government student job placements the year we graduated high school and hit it off because we were both the quiet ones. Initially, I found Steve's silence comforting, and by the end of July, we became pretty chatty. Midway through August, I asked him if he wanted to move in together. Steve wasn't sure if his mother would approve of him moving in with a girl, so he had to check it out with his parents before making any decisions. He was considering commuting, but he lived in Summerside, which was about an hour away from the university on the winter roads. I was initially going to live with my father to save money, but the opportunity to escape Dad's new family was

very appealing. Steve and I found an apartment that September and have been together ever since.

I recognized Steve and I didn't have a future together after he moved out. Steve met his girlfriend, Tonya, in freshman year. She was nice; but a bit jealous, which was very annoying. Steve planned to marry Tonya (not Tanya – no one never, ever called her Tanya) and we would lose connection. It was inevitable. I had a secret desire for Steve to be my boyfriend, but I knew this was impossible, especially as he had no idea how I felt. I was hoping to get a real boyfriend after I became thin. I ached for someone who would love me back. I knew I was a decent person, and there was a yin out there somewhere. Love of family and friends was the most critical thing in life. Everything else was just the icing.

I briefly contemplated becoming a travel counsellor if I didn't go to grad school. It was a respectable profession, and I could take courses at the local college after university. It seemed like a secure option – people would always travel and need an agent to book their flights and hotels. That was never going to end. And it might provide opportunities for exploring this big world. Besides childhood trips to Nova Scotia, I had never been anywhere outside my imagination. It would be great to explore exotic places and get paid for it – the perfect combination of being responsible and exciting all at the same time. My feet itched to walk on different ground. It would be so amazing to travel down streets I've never seen,

my footprints mixing with the dust of millions of other soles. I'd have expensive cocktails with crystal clear ice cubes paid for outright with generous per diems. I'd watch shows on Broadway and write reviews for fancy hotels and wear beautiful black dresses that were never worn by anyone else. Or I could start my own adventure tourism business, trekking the globe in a van filled with notebooks. I would courier my writing from each new city to an editor who would do all the formatting and tedious parts of the job. I'd totally be living the life. And in all the excitement, it wouldn't matter that my family didn't miss me.

I came from a small clan, and my circle has become ever more minuscule over the years. My extended family lived in Nova Scotia, which wasn't far away, but it was distant enough that my parents and I only travelled there in the summer when the ferries were running from Wood Islands. It was always an adventure to go to the mainland, but my favourite part was being on the ferry with my mother holding one hand and my father tightly holding the other so they wouldn't lose me in the throngs of fellow travellers. We'd buy greasy food from the canteen, then go outside to eat it with the wind blowing our hair into each of the messy bites. My mom tended to get seasick, so we would circle the passenger deck of the ferry, my parents sometimes letting me run ahead while I trailed my fingers on the steel railing, periodically stopping to watch the waves bubble and foam alongside the boat. I could still

remember the taste of the water droplets birthed as the ocean crashed against the ship. It was like the salty sweat of God landed on my lips as we strolled along the lower deck. We even saw a pod of porpoises once, which my dad said was rare because they're such shy creatures. He and Mommy called me their tiny porpoise for the rest of the trip because I was such a timid girl, and we were an incredibly close little pod. I was in heaven.

My family died when I was quite young. Well, not every member of my family – just my mother and then the unit itself. My mom succumbed to ovarian cancer when I was eight. So that meant she kind of left us when I was six because she was sick for a couple of years. My dad ended up working extra shifts to make up for her lost income, so I became her caretaker, and the television became my babysitter.

To give me a reprieve, my parents sent me to my grandparents for the summer when I was seven years old. My uncle would be home from Alberta, which was apparently a big deal. He did well for himself out west, and everyone thought it would be a real treat for me to hang out with him. In the beginning, it was great. He called me his little princess and bought me lots of presents. But after a couple of weeks, he bought me toys for other reasons, and I never quite felt like a princess after that.

When Mommy died, he came back from Alberta to attend her funeral. Even before I saw

him, his sickly, expensive cologne slashed the back of my nose and throat, immediately making my entire body ache and heave. That's when I had my meltdown. Dad assumed I was distraught over my mother, and I never told him otherwise. To everyone in attendance, I just appeared to be an unhinged kid who couldn't deal with her emotions. Maybe they were right. It didn't matter, as my uncle and his smell left in a panic, so I was able to attend the funeral in peace.

Dad started dating a year later. One night, after I had one of my regular nightmares, I toddled down to the kitchen to look for my father. He and his fiancé were at the table preparing paperwork for their wedding. I was a bit annoyed that she was keeping him from comforting me, so I silently sat at the bottom of the stairs, sulking and fidgeting with the lace on my nightgown.

As I invisibly listened to the two of them talking, he came across my birth certificate and shared with his fiancé that he married my mother when I was around five months old. The name of my biological father was listed as unknown. My young body froze at the bottom of the stairs, not knowing what to do. I felt like throwing up but didn't want to make a mess and get found out. I slunk back to my bedroom and never slept a wink the entire night, all dreams and nightmares forgotten. I remember looking over at my mother's Bible on the nightstand. I started to pray and then stopped. God didn't feel like my benevolent caretaker any longer. What kind of a

loving shepherd would allow life's wolves to snatch my family away from me? My mother was lovely, and now she lay in a Nova Scotia cemetery, with the vast expanse of saltwater keeping her ghost from visiting me. And that left me utterly alone because now my new knowledge effectively took my father away, too.

As I was immature and beyond exhausted to care about anything, I confronted Dad the next day, and he tried to convince me I was his daughter, no matter what a piece of paper said. But paper cuts were powerful enough to sever connections like a hacksaw. Plus, his second wife had two young daughters, giving him three new porpoises, and two of them were smaller and cuter than me.

Moving in with Steve allowed me to leave the pod so my father could freely frolic with his replacement family. Unfortunately, his first one didn't work out so well.

So now I was podless in a chilly apartment. But the cold froze your nose, keeping you from smelling the saltwater surrounding Prince Edward Island. Salt air made me despondent instead of nostalgic. And as a result, I was one of the few people in PEI who didn't like the beach.