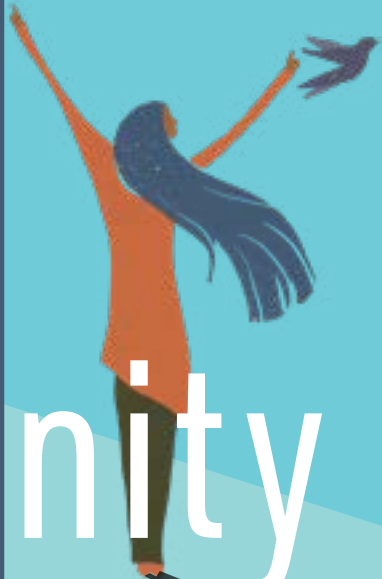


Vol 7, 2024/25

Opening Doors Through Stories: Community

Writing from Newcomers to Regina





Opening Doors Through Stories: Community

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MESSAGE FROM RODS

Writing has a unique power to unite people, foster connections, and create a community. In 2024, the initiative “Opening Doors through Stories: Community” celebrated our creative writing contributors’ shared experiences and remarkable achievements. For the sixth consecutive year, the Regina Open Door Society (RODS) Welcoming Community for Newcomers (WCN) program, in collaboration with the Saskatchewan Writers’ Guild (SWG), proudly hosts this inspiring initiative. It continues to provide newcomers with a platform to learn, grow, and share their unique stories, highlighting the importance of community in building meaningful connections in Canada.

This year, we invite participants to share something special from one community to another. Doing so makes us part of everyone’s journey and strengthens our sense of community. We are excited to hear from the diverse voices of talented newcomers as they explore the concept of community and share their powerful stories. This initiative celebrates the creativity, resilience, and diversity that make our communities vibrant and meaningful. Together, we aim to create an inclusive and supportive environment where every story brings us closer. We’re grateful for your participation and the unique perspectives you bring. Let’s create a future where everyone feels connected.

Keith Karasin
Executive Director
Regina Open Door Society

MESSAGE FROM SASKATCHEWAN WRITERS’ GUILD

In the fall of 2024, author Marie Powell led newcomers to Regina through the creation of new writing that has become our seventh chapbook, *Opening Doors Through Stories: Community*. An apt title that encourages our participants to recognize the new communities that surround them in Saskatchewan. Through their writing, participants are exposed to pockets of people and places on the prairies that enrich their lives and are wholly enriched because of them. The work in this chapbook helps us to find collective kindred connections with one another, and we are all better for it. From the SWG, we welcome you to the growing writing community in Saskatchewan! Enjoy.

Cat Abenstein
SWG Program Manager

INTRODUCTION: “OPENING DOORS – COMMUNITY”

BY MARIE POWELL



What a great theme, right? We certainly thought so. As you open this chapbook, be prepared to find the concept of community thoroughly explored in short fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. Each of these writers engaged as intensely with their writing as they do with their own various communities, whether personal, social, geographical, spiritual, or cultural. It has been my honour and privilege, once again, to work with all of them.

During four Saturdays in November, we met in person and online in a hybrid setting, hosted by the very hospitable Regina Open Door Society (RODS). For a month after that, we continued to work together online to refine and develop their writing. As they challenged themselves—and me—we forged our own community of writers in a way that surpassed my expectations.

As you thumb through these pages, we invite you to consider and expand your own exploration into this important theme: community.

Marie Powell
Editor



COMMUNITY

by Abu Zafor Chowdhory

Community is the tea-stall where I have fun and gossip with my neighbors about daily life
I can smell the flowers, hear the birds singing, and listen to the prayer call from the mosque

Community is the platform where everyone extends their hand when we need support
I have a deep feeling about my community, and these feelings encourage me to contribute

Community for me is the cooperation and well-being of every individual
I live in a community surrounded by nature, wildlife, parks, and neighbours
Dogs barking at midnight, children squealing on the field, and the rustling leaves of trees

Community is the place where we continue our life from birth
I know someday, after my last breath, my body will be buried in my community

ROOTS AND WINGS

by Abu Zafor Chowdhury

On August 14, 2024, Regina's soil absorbed my weary steps—a traveler laden with dreams and 36 hours of exhaustion from Bangladesh. The journey wasn't just a physical passage, but a profound transformation waiting to unfold.

My preparation had begun long before this moment. In 2023, I made the monumental decision to leave behind a ten-year career, a robust professional network, and the comfortable familiarity of my homeland. Every piece of paperwork, every visa application, every goodbye was a stitch in the fabric of my ambitious dream—pursuing my Master's of Public Administration in a foreign land.

The first morning in Regina was a revelation. I stepped out of my basement suite into a world painted with fall's gentle palette. Winds danced through Saskatchewan trees, their branches telling stories of resilience and change. The crisp air carried a promise—a mixture of challenge and opportunity that would become my daily companion.

My family—my wife and two children—carried their own silent hopes. We were more than immigrants; we were explorers charting an unknown territory. The weather, culture, community, and job market were dramatically different from everything we had known. Each day was a new lesson, each challenge a potential opportunity.

The job hunt became my first true test of resilience. Many warned me about Regina's tough job market. "No jobs for newcomers," they said. But I refused to be defined by these limitations. My strategy was simple yet powerful: determination coupled with relentless effort.

Every day, I would visit 5-10 stores, résumé in hand, hope in heart. Rejection became my teacher, persistence my weapon. I walked into businesses, introduced myself, expressed my willingness to work, and never lost hope. Some days were discouraging, but I remembered why I had come—not just for myself, but for the future of my family and the knowledge I wanted to acquire.

My breakthrough came unexpectedly at Dollar Tree. A chance meeting with the store manager turned into a 15-minute conversation that would change everything. She spoke about seasonal hiring for Christmas, and I listened intently. My genuine interest and enthusiasm caught her attention. Weeks later, her call offering me a cashier position was more than a survival point—it was a validation of my journey.

That moment of joining Dollar Tree was transformative. It wasn't just about earning a paycheck; it was about proving to myself that hard work transcends borders, that dreams have no geographical limitations.

I learned that success isn't about avoiding challenges, but about how you respond to them. Patience, kindness, and a willingness to support others became my silent strategies.

Life, I realized, is not a series of hurried moments or complete pauses, but a continuous process of learning, developing, and integrating.

My goal extends beyond personal achievement. I aim to complete my studies, overcome challenges, and ultimately add value to my new community. Sustainable development isn't just an academic concept for me—it's a lived philosophy, a commitment to growth that extends beyond individual success.

Regina, with its wide-open skies and welcoming spirit, is teaching me that home is not a place, but a state of mind. Each day is a step towards understanding, towards becoming, towards contributing.

This journey is my story—of leaving, learning, and ultimately, belonging.





AND THE TRACE REMAINS

by Amira Lotfy

Photo: Lotfy Omar, provided by Amira Lotfy

With the arrival of winter and its cold breezes, it is not only my body that feels the cold, but my feelings are infused with renewed sadness. When I heard of my father's passing, I was far away from him in Saudi Arabia and had no chance to see him again. I've lost him physically, but his spirit is with me and his influence remains. Inevitably, his spirit still lights up my life and gives me strength despite the harshness of time and events around me.

Years have passed since his departure, which happened at the end of one year and the beginning of a new year. His memory continues to bring me hope, renew my spirit, and inspire optimism, much like the sunrise after every sunset.

He didn't think about himself much. His requests were simple, like him, and he was always content and giving, my dear father, the unique one. His kindness extended to animals as well as human beings. Stray cats would gather in his way, and he wouldn't leave until he patted them with tenderness, affection, and compassion. Sometimes he would return home seconds after leaving, and I would run to open the door and wonder, "What happened, father?" He'd reply: "The cat needs some milk and food." This is my father, and do whatever you want with that.

My father was a poet who wrote about everything and anything with his unique fingerprint—our occasions, our births, our growth, his joy for us, some of his friends, and various situations. A personal notebook filled with his handwriting, with the sweetest poems and tender words, is still in our family home in Egypt. Even today, my mother lives in that house, along with my two brothers and their families. She keeps my father's

notebook with his glasses, some of his books, his clothes, and his personal belongings in their room. Under the glass of the dressing table, there are many pictures of him in his prime and later at different stages. There are also pictures of my father holding my son, my first child, and playing with him during the summer. When I am in the big house with the family, I browse the albums my mother keeps. I wipe the frame of his picture, which was the last picture he took before his death. Next to the albums, there is a copy of the Qur'an that he used to read from. This was my father, may Allah have mercy on his soul.

* * *

One of my mother's hobbies was to sew our clothes on her home sewing machine. She also used to draw creative paintings on canvas and embroider them. One of her designs showed four embroidered cats, representing each of my three sisters and me. So my father composed a beautiful song describing us as these four cats. He sang: "I have four cats, beautiful and pretty, beautiful and pretty." He would list our four names and always sing it to compliment us on our beauty. Sometimes he would say that no such beauty could exist on Earth, and that we are the daughters of the moon. He would always praise and compliment us to build our confidence in ourselves. It was truly psychological support. Over the years, I have found it much more important than financial support. It creates an effective, independent person, who walks with confident steps like a king. From this support, a person can become a good, productive, and effective part of the community, confident in actions and behaviours, no matter the circumstances.

My father showed his love for us in many ways. For example, when he stayed up late, he would come to tuck us in and tighten our blankets, especially in the winter. During the hot summers, if we went to sleep early, he would bring water to us for hydration, to make sure that we were relaxed and slept well. Both Mom and Dad were always responsible for us.

When I was in elementary school, at the end of each week, we would be so happy to sit together for a beautiful family gathering, knowing that tomorrow would be a holiday. I'm the eldest of six children, four girls and two boys. My mother would prepare treats, and often she would slice watermelon. After we ate it, she would roast the seeds from it for us to snack on. Later we would play. When sleepiness finally took over, I would find myself being carried like a princess to bed with kisses and hugs, and a delightful story from either my father or mother.

While we lived in Egypt, my mother would sew us the most beautiful clothes. My father was happy to see me and my sisters dressed up, and would greet us with his beautiful words. He would then take us in his arms, and we would play, sit together, and return with a bag of toys. When my father received his salary, he would give us some money, which we would use to buy sweets and snacks. He was happy to see us so joyful. We would put the money in the piggy bank and hide it in a safe place. This was my father: he was a teacher, but he was a man before everything. At home, he taught

me how to be responsible and how to take responsibility for my siblings, to be a role model for them. He was a helper to my mother, never leaving her to do anything alone. He was a true supporter.

As a mother, I picture my father dealing with my first child and his first grandson. My first child always told me, “I remember my grandfather singing to me as he taught me to walk.”

“*Wabda Wabda, Mizo Yalab, Warab Gedo. Wabda Wabda.*” One by one, Mizo, let’s go. Follow grandfather. One by one.

When my son was young, I worried about how thin he was. I can recall my father on his knees in front of my son, who was sitting in his child-sized chair. He offered my son food, encouraged him with a beautiful smile, and convinced him to eat. My father was affectionate and kind and had a magical ability dealing with children.

As I navigate my parenting journey, I strive to give everybody the same compassion and kindness my father demonstrated. I want to create a loving environment for my children, just as he did for me. The moral of this story focuses on taking care of our children and supporting them emotionally and spiritually while we are alive with them. We also have to celebrate their success and support them through their challenges. Our life may be short, and our children may face difficulties beyond their control, but our love and Allah’s guidance will remain a source of strength for them even after we are gone.

Each of these memories contribute one piece of the mosaic that is my father’s legacy. I love that he continues to inspire us and lights the way for generations to come. It is this love that we pass on, ensuring that when we are no longer physically present, our spirits live on in the hearts of our children, empowering them to face whatever life throws their way.

Finally, my father—may Allah have mercy on him—was tender, kind, caring, and responsible. He was a true man in every sense, and his memory remains, despite his departure. May Allah bless you, *Abie* (my father).



STORY OF FLOWERS

by Ananta (Dimple Mehta)

Alex barges through the door and walks straight to Ananta's desk.

"I need this order to be issued today. Can you send this to the court right away? They'll close at 4:30." Alex hands over a bunch of court documents to her.

"Sure. I can do that," says Ananta.

"Thanks," says Alex and disappears through the same door. She always finds it amusing that her Canadian boss would thank her for doing her job as a legal assistant.

It must be important, she thinks. Alex doesn't often make such a demand. Ananta puts aside the work she's doing to fill out a court runner sheet. She hastily makes her way to reception and places the documents on the receptionist's desk.

"These need to go to the Queen's Bench. Please call Primetime courier. It's ur—"

Even before Ananta completes her sentence, the elevator doors open and a man holding a bouquet of flowers steps out. He walks directly to the reception desk, hands the bouquet to the receptionist, and makes her sign a delivery receipt before he leaves.

These flowers are so pretty, Ananta thinks. Wonder who they're for. Flowers are rare in a law firm, but not unusual. Happy clients sometimes would send flowers to say thank-you.

The receptionist turns to Ananta and holds out the bouquet of flowers and says, "Here... These are for you."

"For me!" asks Ananta, confused and surprised at the same time.

"Yes."

“Who sent it?”

“I don’t know.” The receptionist shrugs her shoulders.

Ananta is completely perplexed as she takes the bouquet of flowers in her hands and returns to her cubicle. She sets the flowers on her desk and stands there for a couple of minutes, staring at the flowers and wondering who could have sent them.

Ananta carefully removes the cellophane wrapped around the bouquet. She could not help but notice how intensely vibrant the red, yellow, and pink of these spring flowers were, dazzled in their round green glass vase. She notices a Canadian maple leaf flag sticking out among the flowers, and a little white envelope next to the flag. Ananta picks up the envelope. Inside is a bright yellow folded paper from Wascana Flower Shoppe on Victoria Avenue, with a typed note that simply read:

Congratulations on your first year in Canada
Happy to have you with us!

Except for those words, no name or information of any sort on that yellow piece of paper indicated who had sent the flowers.

Ananta tries to guess who—out of the handful of people that she knows in Regina—could have sent her these flowers. Donna, the office manager, walks in, notices the flowers, and exclaims, “Oh! These have arrived. Aren’t they beautiful. They’re from Greg.”

“From Greg?” Ananta’s eyes open wide.

“Yes.” Donna smiles. “Greg asked me to order these for you because of the cake you brought to the office today.”

Earlier that day, Ananta had taken her favourite chocolate coffee cake to work and left it in the office kitchen. She sent an email to all her colleagues expressing her gratitude for completing one year in Canada and asking them to grab a piece. Throughout that morning, she had been replying to emails from many of her colleagues, who were happy to share her joy and send their congratulations and best wishes. But nothing had prepared Ananta for the surprise of receiving a bouquet of flowers with that precious note.

Ananta can’t believe that Gregory Willows, K.C., one of the senior founding partners of Willows Welsch Orr & Brundige, had ordered the flowers. She collapses into her office chair with a thud and sits there, holding that piece of yellow paper in both her hands, staring at the bouquet. She closes her eyes, overcome with strong emotions.

Her thoughts take her back to this date a year ago, when their plane landed at the Regina Airport, a little after midnight. Everything had felt so different and unfamiliar, as if it was some sort of dream. It was hard to believe that only twenty-four hours earlier, she had left her birth country, bidding goodbye to everything that was her life up to that moment—the only life she had known.

Though she came with almost no expectations of how it was all to turn out in Canada, she could not feel anything but grateful for the amazing experiences and people

that had come her way in the past year. Last night, Ananta had told herself that she would celebrate her first three-hundred and sixty-five days in Canada in her own little way, despite the huge personal challenges that she had kept to herself, of a marriage that had crumbled before her eyes, and an almost certain divorce that she still feared facing.

Ananta feels extremely grateful, and at the same time, there is a sense of deep pain in her heart. Tears trickle down her face. How can two conflicting emotions be present within a person at the same time? Yet here she is, experiencing them, right here and now. She quickly wipes away her tears and gets back to work.

During that afternoon, Ananta pauses to admire the lovely bouquet of bright and colourful spring flowers and each time she feels more cheerful, and her heart grows more and more grateful.

That evening, Ananta can hardly wait to share the details of the happy flower surprise with her family in a phone call.

"I don't think I have ever heard of anything like this here in my last twelve years in Ontario," says her brother Aditya. "I am glad you live in Saskatchewan."

"Really?" asks Ananta, realising how special it is to receive this bouquet of flowers. "Wow! I am humbled."

Ananta decides to place the flowers on the coffee table, where she will always be able to see them. As night falls, Ananta sits on the couch, marveling at the beauty of those flowers, while she reflects on the day.

It was completely unexpected and a very kind and thoughtful gesture of my office colleagues. What does this all mean? Is it some sort of message from the universe?

Ananta glances at those flowers for the hundredth time, and each time their brilliant colours fill her heart with more joy, warmth, and gratitude. Her eyes settle on the little Canadian flag sticking out of the vase. She gets out her diary, where she writes three things to be grateful for each day, and writes:

When you love Canada, Canada loves you back.

Ananta's smile quickly turns into a yawn, and she decides to lay down on her living room couch. Over the past six months, in her two-bedroom rented condo, the couch had become her bed, a place where she had cried herself to sleep almost every night.

But tonight, it is different. Ananta takes one last glance at the flowers as she lies on the couch. She closes her eyes and immediately a sense of deep calm and peace infuses her entire being.

In that moment, Ananta knows she is going to be okay.



THE HERITAGE COMMUNITY

by Chinedu Ezeala

“Where do you live?” my friend asked.

“Downtown,” I said.

Her eyes widened. “Downtown?”

“Yes,” I answered, wondering why she seemed so shocked. I have lived in the Heritage Community for over a year, but I haven’t noticed anything to make me regret it.

“Is that place safe?”

“Sure. Why do you ask?”

“I have heard a lot of bad things about downtown.”

I smiled.

“It is not a laughing matter,” she continued. “I heard that they rob people at gun point and burgle homes.” She went on and on about all she had heard. That was my first time hearing that such things happen.

“Those things you heard are not true,” I said to her.

My friend found it hard to believe that all she had heard was false. I still wonder why. I don’t know about other parts of “downtown” or what is obtainable there. Heritage is located just east of the downtown core. I moved to this area when I first arrived from Nigeria and have yet to consider moving to another part of town. I haven’t seen any reason to do so.

I remember the first day I came to the Heritage community. I had come into Regina as a student. I was received by some friends and taken to my accommodation, which had



Photo: Realtor.ca

been paid for prior to my coming. From my residence in the community, I go to my daily activities, minding my own business. I have never seen anything untoward happening.

There is a lot of love shown in the Heritage community.

My personal experience with people and organizations in the community has been very positive. For example, Queen City Wellness Pharmacy is one place where people show how much they care for their visitors. When I had my prescription sent to them, they saw that I was a student and couldn't afford to pay, so they told me about the drug plan offered to people with low income. They helped me fill out the form, made calls where necessary, and ensured I got the prescribed drugs at no cost. They could have left me to struggle with paying. I mean, it was not their responsibility to tell me what to do or go ahead to help me do it. The workers there are really empathetic and kind.

My first Regina meal was at Wascana Donair. They serve the best rice and lamb I have tasted so far. People can sit inside to eat a meal there, but I live nearby so I generally get take-out.

There is also a police station in the area that ensures there is peace and safety, even though they have not had much to do because of the well-behaved nature of the community residents. One day, I was on my way home and saw some area residents giving CPR to a man. They stayed there until the ambulance arrived and the paramedics took over.

At Heritage, we are not just a community, but a community with a sense of community; a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.



FINDING HOME: THE REBUILD

by Marwa Abu Eita

Roxie stared at the infinite space on the screen. She could see the small, illuminated dot getting bigger and bigger as the spaceship soared its way towards them.

It had been two years since she had last seen her son. Noah was a smart kid, and she missed how he used to engage her in meaningful conversations about each and everything that came to his mind. She could hardly wait to see him again.

Adam's hand touched hers. Roxie turned her head to her husband, standing on the landing dock beside her. She could feel his anxiety through his rigid posture. It's going to be his first time seeing his son—their son.

"Don't you worry," she said. "I've been telling him stories about you. He'll be able to recognize you as soon as he sets foot on the ground."

"I just want to be a good father to him," Adam replied anxiously. "I have lost so much of his life. He is already 19 years old."

Roxie pressed Adam's hand to reassure him, as her mind went back to her own arrival two years ago, on a mission to find her husband. Adam had gone back to Earth almost twenty years ago to search for signs of life, after the war had destroyed everything. He only had time to send one video back before they lost contact with him. Searching for him was the best decision she had ever made. Not only had she found Adam again, but she had also discovered that planet Earth was ready to welcome the human race back. The group of people who had survived the war were rebuilding life again.

Now they were standing there on the dock, waiting for their son among the first wave of the returning Earthheans. Her hope of a better future for their home planet was growing, and she was certain they wouldn't make the same mistakes as before.

"I want to make up for all that lost time with Noah," Adam said, bringing her back to the present. She turned to him and smiled reassuringly.

"He has all of your traits," Xavier chimed in, giving Adam a pat on the back. Xavier had led Roxie's mission and had been a great help in finding Adam. "This is going to be so much fun, watching you two interact. I've watched Noah grow up to be a significant young man, just as you were."

The loud roar and rumble of the spaceship landing drew their attention back to the dock. They could see the landing gear deployed and the parachutes opened to slow it down. When the spaceship touched down, all eyes were drawn to the exit doors, waiting for the newcomers to emerge.

Noah was the first to step out. When he took off his helmet, his eyes darted in all directions, looking for her. He had Adam's deep blue eyes, and his hair—black and silky just like hers—stuck out in all directions. Adam ran to meet him, and Roxie followed. Tears flowed freely from their eyes as they hugged.

* * *

The next morning, a welcoming committee assembled in the great court of the domed city. As the survivors welcomed the newcomers, Adam, with Noah and Roxie by his side, stood in front of their small group.

"Earth has revived itself, in spite of us and our destructive war. We should choose to preserve our planet from our greed. Weapons manufacturing has to be banned. We cannot afford repeating the mistakes of the past."

"We're going to make it right this time," added Roxie. "We need to discuss a set of rules to rebuild our society and vote on them. Remember the teachings of the elders on the purple planet, and how they treated their land. But most importantly, let's make sure that our planet has a say this time on how we are going to treat it."

The survivors have used the time before the settlers arrived to prepare monitoring stations for the environment that will capture the slightest abuse to nature. The energy needed to operate life processes were only taken from renewable resources.

"Each one of you is well educated and ready to share knowledge with the rest," she continued. "We need to build an inclusive community. The protective dome has to come down one day. Our target is to locate all the survivors out there and help them integrate into our community to avoid the mistakes of the past."

Noah stepped forward and said, "I am willing to lead expeditions to look for survivors outside the dome. Who would volunteer to accompany me?"

A few people declared their interest in joining the expedition.

"You can't go out there, Noah," Adam said. "You have just arrived, and you don't know your way around Earth yet. It can be extremely dangerous."

Noah looked at his entwined fingers for a moment before turning to face his father, "You might not know this, Father, but I have been studying the geography of Earth since I was a child. Mum made sure I walked the forests, climbed mountains, and sailed

the seas through virtual reality. I can navigate any area blindfolded.”

“But there’s a big difference between training and field work,” Adam said.

“Noah is smart enough to know the difference,” Roxie pointed out. “Let him try and decide for himself.”

* * *

The next day, Noah and his group started their search, but they came back every night empty handed. Adam continued working with the other survivors, and he hadn’t spoken to Noah about it. After a full week of unfruitful search trips, Roxie prepared a special dinner for Noah and Adam.

“I know you are eager to find every survivor and include them in our community, Noah,” she said. “But we haven’t had the chance to get together since you arrived here. We can also discuss how to expand your search.”

“That sounds great, Mum,” Noah said. “I’ve missed your cooking. And it looks like you’ve prepared my favourite corn pepper steak, too.”

“Corn steak has always been my favourite too,” Adam said, “and no one can make it as perfectly delicious as you do, Roxie.”

“Why did you leave us, then?” Noah said in a bitter voice.

Roxie was shocked at her son’s outburst. Adam looked at his entwined fingers and seemed lost for words.

“It was supposed to be a quick mission,” Adam finally said, “to find out if Earth was ready for our return. We didn’t expect to find survivors, and when they approached us, we panicked. We destroyed all the communications gear to protect you—and everyone we loved. I did what I felt I had to do.”

“You also did a wonderful job helping those survivors with the technology you had left, Adam,” Roxie said. “Look at this amazing community we have now. The dome you established is a protective shield, and gives everyone a surveying base for the surrounding area.”

“That might be the reason you haven’t found any other survivors around,” Adam said. “The satellites and radars cover a large area. We haven’t encountered any human life in years. We’ve expanded south and covered most of the land. But the northern mountains are still out of range. I would suggest looking into them.”

“That’s a brilliant idea, Dad,” Noah said, reluctantly. “My next trip will be to the north.”

As Noah started the preparations for the long trip, Xavier insisted on accompanying the group as it was expected to last for months.

“I would love to see you leading the expedition, Noah,” Xavier said. “I wouldn’t accept anyone but you in that position, other than myself.”

On the day of the trip, Adam injected them with tracking chips to be able to locate them at any time, and waved goodbye with a proud smile on his face.

* * *

One night, laughter and talk erupted from the speakers in the control room. Everyone gathered around the screens to watch a streaming of their surroundings. They waited in anticipation as the noise grew louder on the surveillance cameras outside the dome.

Finally, Noah appeared and waved to the camera with a beaming smile. He was followed by his crew and a group of other people. Adam rushed to greet them at the entrance, with the rest of the crowd behind him.

As the doors opened, Roxie watched, wide-eyed, as more than ten families walked through. They had dirty, torn clothes, but smiles on their faces, and their eyes were bright with joy. Noah introduced everyone as they gathered in the city square.

"After we passed the mountains, our radars spotted a secluded valley with what seemed like small huts," Noah said. "When we landed, the children were jumping and dancing with excitement. It was a group of people who had lived together in one place but never tried to look further than necessary to find food."

"We didn't know about the existence of any others," one of the newcomers said. "Noah convinced us to join the new community and led the way back to the dome."

"Except for one girl," Noah added in a trembling voice.

After the meeting, Roxie nodded at Noah for him to follow her. When they were alone, she turned to him.

"Tell me everything about this girl you mentioned."

"There is nothing much to say." Noah looked at his entwined fingers for a long moment. "She has the longest shining golden hair that reflected the sunlight. I spotted her as soon as we started descending the mountain."

Roxie waited quietly, knowing he would add more if she gave him time.

"But she is the most stubborn person I have ever met," Noah added. "She refused to listen to any of my proposals and insisted on staying behind. She values her freedom and assumes the dome will be a prison."

That's the first time Noah has shown interest in a girl, Roxie thought. He had always been engaged in his studies of the geography of Earth and his scientific research.

"Do you want me to meet her?" Roxie said. "Maybe I can talk to her."

Noah shook his head and turned away.

* * *

"Everyone has blended in well," Roxie said, sipping her tea. Jasmine, the botanist, looked up from the book she was reading. They were having tea together on the terrace.

"Remember when we first arrived on the purple planet, as refugees after the war?" Roxie said.

"Yeah, I was surprised at how easily they took us in," Jasmine agreed, putting her book down.

"Their teachings were able to create harmony between the different groups from Earth," Roxie said, thinking back. "Once we understood that, it really was that simple. We prioritize nature as our home and the community as our family, and then individual wellness."

Noah approached them on the terrace, and asked, "I'm still worried about that girl."

"What girl?" Jasmine said.

"The girl I couldn't convince to come with us. I can't imagine how she is living alone in the mountains."

Roxie exchanged a knowing smile with Jasmine. "Okay, I am ready to go with you, whenever you want," Roxie said.

"I'd like to come with you," Jasmine said. "It would be a great opportunity to study the mountain plants closely. I might also help convincing the girl to come back with us."

Xavier secured the preparations for their journey and accompanied them. Adam stayed behind to work on a new project, building towers that will control mining the earth's minerals without over-consumption.

Noah, Xavier, Roxie, and Jasmine headed out the following day. They flew one of the flying capsules directly towards the northern mountains.

"I can't see her anywhere near the village," Noah said in a panicked voice. "I shouldn't have waited so long."

"Calm down," Roxie said, "I am sure she is fine. We can trace her as soon as we land and set up our equipment."

They landed near the deserted village and quickly set up camp. Xavier started the heat detector while Jasmine operated a special device to detect flora damage.

"I can see a faint graph of her body heat," Xavier said. "It shows she was here not more than two days ago."

"We can follow the direction the heat graph is showing to find her," Roxie said.

"My device will trace her footsteps," Jasmine said. "It's portable, so we can carry it with us to confirm we are on the right path."

They traced the girl's footsteps to the edge of a cliff. The girl was still nowhere to be found. They spread out to look for signs, and suddenly Noah yelled.

"I can see her hanging from a tree branch down there." Noah was lying at the edge of the cliff, looking down the mountain. "She's not moving. She must be unconscious."

"We can use the pulley and rope to retrieve her," Xavier said. "But someone needs to climb down there to tie her to the ropes."

"I will go," Noah said without hesitation.

Roxie watched as her son made his way carefully down the sheer mountainside, with only the rope around his waist attached to the pulley. Her heart pounded with each inch he gained.

Noah finally reached the girl. He tied the ropes around her as well as himself and freed her from the tangled branches. Noah and the girl started the long ascent back to the clifftop as Xavier manned the pulley. When they neared the top, Roxie and Jasmine reached out to help them up, and Noah carried the unconscious girl back to the camp.

The girl slowly opened her eyes to gaze into Noah's.

"Noah!" Her voice was scratchy and faint.

Noah grabbed his canteen and put it to her lips, letting her take small sips. When she could finally speak, she wouldn't look directly at him.

"I am really sorry for my stubbornness," she said. "Living alone proved to be too difficult."

"And deadly dangerous, too," Noah replied. "I am so relieved that you are safe now." He smiled and tried to catch her eye. "I see that you remember my name from our previous encounter. You stormed off without letting me know yours."

"It's Scarlett," she said, softly.

"Scarlett," Noah said, as if tasting the name. "I am happy to meet you... again."

"I guess I don't need my speech to convince you to join us anymore," Roxie said. "I am Noah's mother. He brought me along as a backup. I just want to assure you that we didn't plan the dome to be a prison, as you seem to think. It's meant as a temporary protection for us until we study our surroundings, so we can make sure it's safe, to give humanity a second chance."

"Maybe I could help in the process of restoring our legacy?" Scarlett said.

* * *

Roxie stood on the top of the hill and took a deep breath of fresh air. It had taken them three years to finish the towers, reclaiming the scrap metal from before the war. From several miles away, they looked a little like the Eiffel Tower she had seen with her dad when she was a child.

"They are fully functional now," she said to Adam, standing beside her. "I'm happy everyone voted in favour of limiting the mining of minerals and fossil fuels. The technology in those towers will ensure that we are only mining what is needed."

"Our planet belongs to the future generations. It's our duty to preserve our resources for them," Adam said. "I am sure our community is heading in the right direction now."

A baby cooed as if confirming that statement. Noah's and Scarlett's son Colin was the firstborn outside of the dome. A new beginning for mankind... a bright future for our planet Earth.



RANDOM CALL

by Munit Vikram

Content Note: Story contains depiction of a suicide attempt, suicidal ideation, loss of a loved one, and grief. Please take care while reading.

As sweat beaded on his forehead and his heart pounded in his ears, the images from his life flashed in front of his eyes — regrets, happy times, sad times, all his memories rush through him. He could hardly catch his breath, not sure if it was the heightened emotions or the noose in his hands. His thoughts gave little nudge to his failing confidence.

If I take more time, the weaker me will not let me do this.

He moved the noose closer to his neck. His legs shook as he stood on the chair. His heart hammered in his chest. Tears welled up in his eyes as he lifted his head, but the picture frame sitting on the dresser caught his eye.

Beautiful smile, grey eyes, and long black locks. My Gloria. Long walks, hand in hand, tasting local lasagna with Bolognese sauce for the first time. They were in Italy for the winter holidays. It's been a long year, all alone, waiting. Just waiting. . . day after day, night after night, waiting to be together again. . . I can't wait anymore for death to bring me to you.

With a loud grunt, Richard collected all his strength for a final goodbye to his

life. He held the noose tightly in his two hands. This was the moment. I can do this.

The thunderous ring of the desk phone interrupted his resolve. Richard started, pulled back, and stared at the phone.

Am I really leaving for good? Suicide seems so negative. I don't like it. It makes me a quitter. Am I not? That's what I'm doing. Why can't I do it? Richard left the thought hanging as he tried to ignore the phone and channel his attention to the task at hand.

The phone rang again, searing the silence of the room. Exasperated, Richard let go of the noose and put his hand on the back of the chair.

There is no way I can do this with the phone ringing in the background and my conflicted thoughts. Maybe I should unplug the phone.

He gently stepped off the chair, feeling defeated and disappointed with himself. He walked towards the telephone, as it rang again. He automatically picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" An awkward silence followed by deep breathing interrupted his disturbed thoughts. Richard prodded, "Hellooooooooo? Anyone there?"

After a muffled sound, a heavy, soft voice said, "Hello. Hello." The second time, the voice was a little louder.

"Hello. Richard here."

The voice went silent again for a few seconds, and Richard, exasperated, thought, I'm getting a little tired of these intermittent silences. I should hang up. Why am I standing by the phone, hearing someone breathing in between these silences? Richard wanted to ask him straight away to stop crying and tell him about it. He finally said, "Sorry but you need to speak up, or call some other time—"

"Please don't hang up." The man on the other end of the phone gave a long deep breath, followed by sniffles and a few muffled words.

Richard realised the other man was crying and making an effort to speak. A part of him felt a need to pacify the man, as it was a natural reaction because of his long teaching career. Richard pulled the receiver closer to his ears to make sense of the words and wondered what triggered such a reaction from a stranger.

I cannot let him be and just hang up the call. Richard's extensive experience working with young men and women helped him realize one thing: if you leave them on their own, then the emotions get the better of them, more often than not, which eventually leads to terrible situations. Richard had many regrets, but he was not willing to add one more to the list.

He was brought back to the scene when the voice asked, "You can hear me, right?"

"Yes, I can hear you. I can feel that you are not fine. Something is disturbing you. You have my attention, if you want to talk." At first, the other man didn't answer, so Richard continued. "Talk to me, if you feel comfortable. I'm a retired professor, and I've seen many students and have counselled them with their issues."

"I did not know that," the voice said. It was much more audible, and Richard realized it was a younger man. The sad and husky tone still worried him.

"You don't have to provide any specifics to me," Richard said. "Just tell me, what's going on?"

This time, the young man sniffled, crying harder. Richard stood with the phone stuck to his ear, trying to imagine the other person's situation, and simultaneously reflected on his own sadness, misery, and pain. When did this world become so hard to live in?

"Do you even realize," the young man said, "that before making a call to you, I was contemplating committing suicide? I'm so done with everything, and I can't take it anymore." With a growled, muffled sniffing, he went on, "You know what, I got scared. . . I could not muster courage to do it. . . though I wanted to, and I still do."

Richard was baffled. Did he hear that right, or was it a divine intervention for him to reflect on his own situation? The young man again interrupted his thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," the young man muttered. "I shouldn't have called you and disturbed you. I'm not sure what I'm doing, or why I'm doing this. Maybe I need to think about it. Sorry I called you. . . Just forget everything. . . and. . . sir, you have a good day."

"Hold on, hold on!" shouted Richard. "Don't you hang up the phone. I hear you and appreciate you calling me to talk about it. Please tell me what triggered you to think of giving up?"

After a few moments of silence, Richard heard the young man's voice.

"Hhhmmm. I'm in my second year of my Bachelor of Science, but I have to work part time to support my studies. I usually have to pick up extra shifts, which axed my ability to take classes. With festival season on, I have to put in more hours, so I'm even further behind in my studies. Big time. Hhhffffff!"

After a little sigh, he continued. "I failed my last assignment. . . Our first in-class exam is next week. If I fail my exams, I will lose a year and even my partial scholarship. It will get me all messed up." With that, he angrily said, "What do I do? I messed up big time."

Richard heard a hard thud from the other end of the phone, as if the young man planted a fist on the table.

"Isn't this a funny turn of events?" Richard began.

"Do you find this funny? You have no idea what I'm talking about—"

Richard quickly cut him off, saying, "Actually I do, and very clearly. My name is Richard, and I'm a retired mathematics professor. Doesn't that sound weirdly coincidental?"

"A math professor?"

"Yes," Richard said.

"Oh fishhhhhhhhh. You're not kidding me, are you? Math is pushing me to my limits."

As Richard sensed disbelief in the young man's voice, he felt a release of the tightness in his chest. While holding the phone in hand, his eyes moved upwards. It was not the ceiling that he was looking at, but a superpower that was unravelling the beginning of something beautiful. Filled with gratitude, Richard smiled and mouthed, "Thank you," with his gaze fixed on the ceiling fan.

"Hell yeah it is," the young man said. "You know what, you gotta help me. If you

can help me with mathematics then I'm sure I can manage the rest. You'll help me with it, won't you? Please?"

"Of course I can help you," Richard said. It had been a long time since Richard had felt valued and needed. The thought that someone needed him filled him with pride. "Tell me what you need."

"My name is Trent, and I study at the University of Regina, in my second year. Finals are four months away." He finished in one breath.

"Trent, why don't we meet at a library so that we can talk in detail before we move ahead."

"Yes, I guess that would be a better idea."

Richard heard the excitement on the other side of the phone. He gave a cursory glance across the room at the noose hanging from the ceiling fan and thought of the unmade bed. He needed time to compose himself.

"What about the library on Lorne Street?" Richard said.

"The Central library? Okay. It's close to my work and I can drop in afterwards. When do we start?"

"What time do you get off work?"

"Usually by 2:30 in the afternoon."

Richard thought for a moment. "We can meet around quarter to four.

"Perfect! See you at 4:00 pm tomorrow, sir," said Trent.

"Hmmm," Richard said. "See you then."

Later, tossing from one side to the other side of his bed, Richard turned his head to look at the big hanging clock. It was only 1:30 am. I still have lot of time. And I don't have to go to the college by 8:00 am anymore. He had been doing that for the last two decades, but he hadn't realized how much he missed interacting with his students until now. Smiling, he rolled over to continue sleeping.

* * *

Trent woke up to the "Ring of Fire" song on a loop, and surprisingly, it relaxed him on some level. His thoughts instantly went to the phone call of last evening. Is he really a professor? I call a random number, and it connects me to him? How did I get so lucky? He felt like a phoenix as he hummed along with the Johnny Cash number.

At the end of the song, he sprawled in his bed and looked at the clock.

"Fiiiiisssssshhhhh," Trent blurted. "I need to get up. I have to be at work before 7:45. I'm so late."

* * *

Richard parked in the parkade and walked towards the library. To see Trent as soon as he arrived, Richard sat near the front entrance, sipping his regular Tim's medium double-double and glancing at the door every once in a while.

He was about to take another sip from his mug when he saw a red Chevy pulled

in near the library. A tall young man stepped out of the vehicle, wearing blue jeans and a grey sweatshirt with a baseball cap and a backpack slung over his shoulder. When the young man reached into the back seat and picked up some books, Richard realized this must be Trent. Richard waved his hand as Trent entered the library and shook Trent's hand as they introduced themselves.

"Let's take that corner space. That will not disturb the others."

Their conversation instantly turned to mathematics. Trent passed his textbook and papers to Richard. "I don't understand the concepts of two topics: Permutation and Combination, and Integration and Differentiation. Both happen to be major chapters."

Nodding and flipping through the pages, Richard said, "I can explain the fundamentals and even give you time to practice here. If you can take out two hours daily, then I'm sure you will be well prepared for your tests."

Richard opened the chapter "Permutation and Combination" in the book and grabbed his pen. He started by simplifying the concepts and went on to help Trent solve the problems, while answering any questions that Trent had.

A thud made them both look up. The librarian was closing a book, and they glanced at the clock overhead.

"It's 6:16 pm." Both spoke at the same time.

"We will stop here," Richard said, "and you need to finish the two exercises by tomorrow."

"For sure, I will." Trent smiled and sounded more confident as they left the library.

* * *

After meeting in the library for a few weeks, Richard said, "What do you think of continuing the future classes from my home? We can put in some extra hours without being worried about others. It will save time for me in commuting, too."

"I would love that, if it's not a hassle for you." Trent was beaming.

With more meaning to his days now, Richard's daily routine began to have a beat which was in sync with his mental beat. The first day, as he waited for Trent to arrive, Richard had an early supper. Afterward he made room for a study table and pulled out two chairs from the storage room. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat on his chair, gazing through the glass window. Finally, the doorbell rang.

"Good afternoon, sir," said Trent.

"Afternoon," said Richard and gestured for him to enter the house. "Come in."

Trent looked through the rooms and remarked, "You have a quiet and beautiful house, sir."

"Thank you," said Richard, pleased. "Would you like to have something? Tea, coffee or water?"

"Nothing sir, but thank you for everything," said Trent while looking down at his shoes. "You are the kindest person I've ever met."

"Let's get started. Show me your solved papers and we can start from there," Richard

said, walking towards the study table.

Trent followed him and sat across him with backpack on the table, trying to get his book out from the bag. They lost track of time as they worked on Trent's assignments.

The next time they met, Trent bought muffins for Richard as a small token to thank him.

"Save your money, son. You don't need to bring goodies for me," Richard said, taking a bite. They laughed together while eating muffins and discussing how to solve the problems. When the session ended, Richard noticed Trent arranging all his worksheets and sticking them neatly together.

Curiously he asked, "These are the rough sheets, you don't have to clip them all. They are from your textbooks. . . why are you collecting the rough sheets?" Richard saw him smile.

"I am saving these because of your time and effort," Trent said.

Richard shrugged and thought, How thoughtful and sensitive of him.

* * *

After four months of tutoring Trent, they had covered the full syllabus. On the day they would get the results of Trent's final exams, Richard invited Trent for lunch as a mini celebration.

Time had passed quicker than Richard had anticipated. He was nostalgic because the last few months had been full of purpose and excitement and had elevated his self-worth. As he garnished the stew, Richard reflected on Trent's progress, not just academically but emotionally.

He is a sweet and a bright boy. I wish he could spend more time at school and not have to miss classes. If only he was blessed with a little financial support. Gosh, life is unfair.

Later, sitting on his couch and sipping his coffee, he reflected on the beginning of his relationship with Trent. It had transformed into a strong interdependent equation. Richard was confident that Trent would pass the exams with flying colors, but he was feeling sad at the end of this saga—a beautiful journey. He felt closer to Trent than anyone else after Gloria, his beloved wife. Richard smiled and looked at her portrait on the wall.

"You would have liked this kid, honey. He is the son we never had. He is sensitive, helping, and so much like us. . . I know you sent him to me because it's not time for me to join you up there. He taught me so much more than I taught him, and more importantly, gave meaning to my incomplete life."

A loud sound and knocking on the door brought Richard back to the room.

"Open it! Open it! Open it!" someone yelled.

Richard stood up, using the support of the couch, and walked eagerly towards the door. Trent was holding a brown package in his right hand and a set of papers in his left hand as his backpack slid from his shoulders, and he quickly hugged Richard.

"I did it . . . I did it. . . I did it. . ." Trent was laughing with tears of joy rolling down

his cheeks. Richard could not hold in his tears too and hugged the boy tightly.

Trent held Richard's hand and ushered him towards the table, saying, "I have two surprises for you." Trent showed the results to Richard, "I got distinction in math. Do you believe it, distinction!"

Richard was taking in all the excitement, the laughter, and all the happy vibes.

"I had full faith in you. This is the result of your hard work. You deserve this." Deep down, Richard knew he had treated Trent as his own from the moment that red Chevy drove up in front of the library.

"So, what is the second surprise?" Richard asked.

Trent placed a package wrapped in brown paper on the table. Richard opened it and unfurled a manuscript and an official document that seemed to be some kind of contract. Surprised, Richard's hands shook as he held the manuscript and then turned his head towards Trent. "What is this, son?"

"This is the draft of a book," said Trent excitedly. "And this is a contract from the University of Regina Press. I wanted your efforts to be recognized in so many ways, while saving the knowledge to be used by many more students like me. You remember that I collected all your notes and writings from day one. I collated all your notes, mapping them with our textbook, as a study guide for students to refer to. I discussed it with the university committee, and they evaluated it. Here is approval letter and contract for you to sign. It's a small token from me to you, for all your efforts that you have put in."

Richard looked at the manuscript in his hand, titled *Mathematics Simplified* by Richard Gare. Holding in his tears, Richard couldn't find his voice to respond.

"The University's publishing house was more than pleased to give it the shape of a book," Trent continued. "The in-house publishing team will proofread it and make some necessary changes while maintaining the sanctity of your copyrighted property."

Richard was mesmerized, confused, and happy. He said, "This was one of my unfulfilled dreams. To write a book and impart my knowledge to more students. How will I be able to thank you? You have made me indebted to you for life. You not only have given me a reason to live but carved a path for me to walk on."

"Sir, what you did for me, right from the moment you answered my call, you changed my life in more than one way," Trent said, and Richard could hear the lump in his throat. "In the past couple of weeks, I have learnt so much from you, not just academics, but all that it takes to become a strong successful man. I dread to even think what would have had happened to me that night if you hadn't answered my call."

"The world would have lost two people that day," Richard said softly. Neither spoke for few seconds, their gazes locked as they re-lived that night.

"Hmm, phhhheeeewwwwwww," Trent exhaled. "I wish I could continue to meet you regularly and not... not... not... in the capacity of student-teacher, but more like a family."

"You are like a son to me now." Richard hugged Trent, sealing a bond which went beyond the professional realm.

"Are we not celebrating today?" Trent slowly created a little space between them.

"Of course. I have a Regnard Chablis Premier apt for our celebration," said Richard, and turned towards the other room to get the bottle.

* * *

Later, Trent recalled Richard's words. The world would have lost two people that day. It baffled him. As he parked his car in his own driveway, he decided to walk for a few minutes. The weather is so nice and yeah, I don't feel like going inside the house yet.

He crossed the driveway with car keys jingling in his hand and walked towards the sidewalk. He slid his hands in pocket and secured his keys there while walking along the dark and secluded road.

So, Richard was also at his lowest that night. I was so engrossed and self-contained. How did I not notice Richard's fight, or his struggles with life? Why did I presume that he did not have another side to him?

This loud persistent inner voice contrasted the quiet and peaceful night. That call changed two lives. Random calls can be so important. If only there was someone for everyone. What if I had called another number?

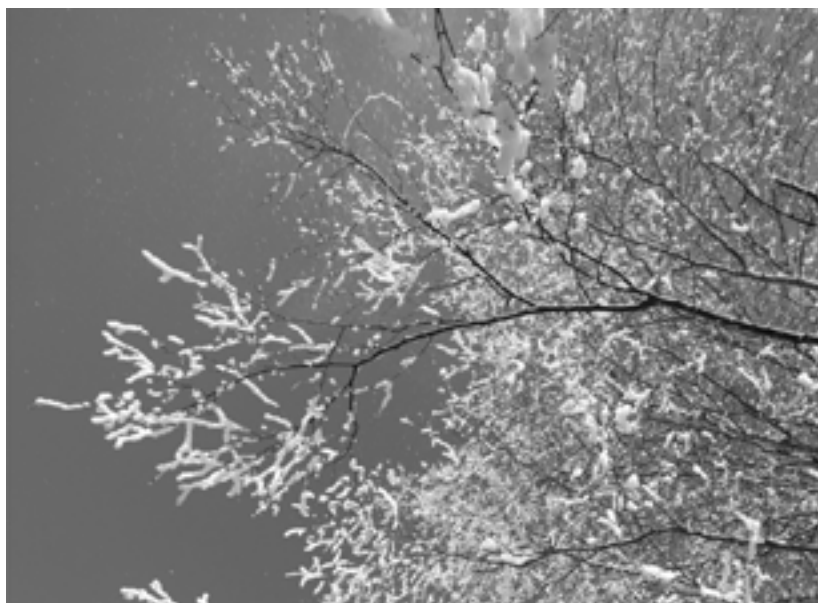
"Noooo!" The sound of his own voice checked Trent's thoughts. He continued walking aimlessly until he saw the walk light flash red and finally turn green. Before he could take his next step, he heard his phone ringing. He stopped in his tracks and checked the phone.

I don't recognize this number... maybe it's random. Wait. Random? Trent clicked the button to answer it.

"Hello... hello?"

He heard a snuffle and a silence. The green traffic signal turned to red once again, but Trent stood there. He had already decided to be someone else's Richard.

"I can hear you," Trent said. "Please talk to me. Don't hang up."



MY FIRST GLIMPSE

by Nazam

My first glimpse of Regina, Saskatchewan, was at the airport in August 2023. I landed with a lot of luggage, four kids looking up at me, and feeling lost because I had lost my phone in the Lufthansa airport. I had to put on a bold face. I walked to meet the security personnel at the airport so that I could use their phone to call my Airbnb host, to let her know that I had arrived, I'd lost my phone, and I was on my way.

From the window of the taxi, I could see a quiet, peaceful, small city in the sunset. No skyscrapers. No flashing lights, and no traffic congestion, which was very good. And it was not even dark at 9:00 pm. That was extraordinary because I came from Nigeria where it gets dark at 6:30 pm.

All my emotions were jumbled up and I couldn't think straight. The plane flight was really long, and I hadn't slept well in a while. A part of me was relieved that our long journey had ended, and another part of me wished I was still in the air soaring over the clouds. I knew the moment I stepped off that plane that I was stepping into a new life, where I would meet new people and go to new places.

When my husband came from work to meet us, he said Regina's air was crisp and fresh. We were very happy to see him. You could see the excitement on the faces of the

children. They were all speaking at the same time, trying to tell him about their new school and their new friends.

The first thing he did was take us out to a restaurant in Regina. What stood out for him was the way restaurants add cheese to most of the dishes they serve. He travels a lot in his job as a pipeline engineer, and he says he doesn't see that in other cities. He now incorporates cheese in his omelettes, which the children look forward to whenever he comes home.

* * *

When I settled in and began school, I felt out of place because I had ended my undergraduate schooling more than fifteen years ago, in Port-Harcourt, the city where I was born and grew up. At the University of Regina, I felt like a polar bear in the jungle; I didn't know anyone, and no one knew me. At the University of Port-Harcourt, we did everything by hand, but here, everything was done with technology: over email or by computer. There, we had larger classrooms and more people, but here the graduate classes were smaller, and we had more access to the professors. Over time, I made some friends, but I still miss my old ones.

* * *

Since I was new to Regina and had never seen or experienced snow in my life, everyone I met and everyone around me kept trying to warn me about how cold it could get. And then it snowed.

I remember that day vividly. It was the morning of October 24th, a Tuesday. I woke up and looked out the window. How beautiful and peaceful it looked, as the snow fell from the sky, blanketing everything and anything that crossed its path. The children called out, "Mummy, mummy! Everywhere is white!"

I was surprised because I was my children's alarm clock, and that means I'm always the one that wakes them up to get ready for school. But on this day, they were already up and ready, because of the excitement of the snow. We were ready for the winter with winter gear for all of us, as advised by friends. Three layers: thermal, a long-sleeved top and trousers that felt warm on the skin; middle, a sweater and trousers; and outer, a winter jacket with a hood and ski pants, winter gloves, and winter boots.

When we were fully kitted up in our winter clothing, we looked like puffed penguins. I tried to suppress my laughter. Back home in Nigeria, our coldest temperature was about 16 degrees above. Here in Regina, the temperature read minus, so you can imagine the difference. I told myself that it was better to look funny than to catch a cold. When I told my spouse, he talked with our children about the danger of exposure and showed them some videos of people who had frostbite.

When spring came, I welcomed it with open arms. Finally, it was time to put away our winter clothing and forge ahead.



DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF LIFE

by Ningning Zhang

Outside my window, snow drifts through the air like cotton, blanketing the world in quiet serenity. Inside, the delicate fragrance of Dragon Well tea lingers, curling in soft tendrils around the room. The familiar melody of “River Flows in You” floats through the air, weaving a tapestry of peace and romance that draws me into a realm of nostalgia. For a fleeting moment, I imagine myself in China, in the familiar embrace of Beijing.

The first rays of sunlight piercing through the mist over Shichahai Park might catch me strolling along the lake’s edge, watching elderly locals practicing Tai Chi. Their movements were slow yet powerful, seamlessly blending with the morning breeze, creating a harmonious tableau.

By noon, I could find myself in a quaint teahouse tucked under the eaves of the Forbidden City’s corner tower, nestled among ancient trees. There, I could savour the rich flavours of Chinese tea while listening to the impassioned arias of Peking opera artists, immersing myself in the deep cultural layers beneath the imperial roots.

In the afternoon, I might shift to the forefront of technology in Beijing—Zhong-guancun Street—to witness the unveiling of the latest technological innovations. Each new product showcased Beijing's modern strength and innovative spirit, captivating and dazzling all who watched.

Dusk might find me driving to the vibrant heart of Beijing's fashion scene—Sanlitun. The area felt alive under the neon lights. The bustling bars and chic boutiques, the fervour of live bands, and the kaleidoscope of lights all conspired to make the nights unforgettable, drawing me deeper into the lively heart of the city—

A sharp knock at the door shattered my reverie, abruptly pulling me back to reality. I glanced at the computer screen before me and realized—oh, I am in Canada. I opened the door to receive a delivery from Canada Post. After signing for the parcel, a question arose in my mind: My physical body is indeed in Canada, but where does my heart belong? Where can I find a haven that settles both my body and my soul?

* * *

The Search Begins

I can still vividly recall that night two years ago. My father's hand grew cold in mine, and countless memories flooded my mind like a film reel. I saw the mornings he walked me to school, his quiet patience as he helped me with homework, and the joy on his face when he took me hiking or to the grasslands. I could smell the delicious fish soup he made just how I liked it and hear the soft strumming of the folk songs he played as we talked about Life. I could feel the gentle push of his encouragement, urging me to capture my thoughts in writing and to find my voice through words.

In middle school, he noticed every tiny detail—whether it was a blemish on my face or a cough I tried to hide. When I struggled to find my footing in high school, his words always were an anchor: “Don't rely on others. Work hard, and you'll achieve your goals. I trust you.” His faith in me was a constant, a foundation upon which I quietly built my world. Our time together became a fleeting luxury, but one memory stands out, glowing with undiminished clarity.

In 2019, my father and I embarked on a journey to Xinjiang Province in China, a land where time seems to stretch and the soul finds space to breathe. I can still picture him vividly, his eyes wide with childlike wonder as he marvelled at the fiery splendour of the Flaming Mountain Park, the serene beauty of Tianshan Tianchi Lake, and the tranquil charm of Hemu Village. His uninhibited laughter echoed across the vast expanse of Keketuohai Park, blending effortlessly with the wind. He truly loved life. In that rare moment, we shared a conversation that would linger in my soul for years—standing in front of Kanas Mountain Park, enjoying the blue sky, smelling the fragrance of the *Larix sibirica* trees.

“The meaning of life is not as a race to run but as a treasure to be unearthed. It is about discovering beauty in the ordinary and finding your unique value.” His words etched themselves into my heart that day, though their significance eluded me. It wasn't

until much later, amidst the silence of reflection, that their weight and wisdom shaped how I began seeing the world.

After my marriage, a quiet distance began to grow between my father and me—both physically and emotionally, shaped mainly by the inevitable differences in perspective. A relentless and demanding life swept me away, leaving little room for anything beyond the pursuit of success in adulthood. And I had fewer opportunities to accompany my father. Yet, his love remained steadfast, unwavering in its quiet strength.

Whenever my mother planned to visit me, my father would thoughtfully exhort her to bring my favourite dishes. “I’ll be fine staying at home,” he would say with a casual smile, always putting my needs ahead of his own. Though he never said how much he missed me. The night before his passing, he sent me a video call request. I ignored it because I was too preoccupied with trivial tasks then. Now, I reflected on how little I gave back to my father and how seldom did I pause to cherish the love he offered.

His sudden passing left a deep wound in me, bleeding guilt and sorrow. But it also compelled me to confront the questions I had long avoided. If I had been given a second chance to truly understand my father’s words about the meaning of life, would I have lived differently? Would I have loved more deeply and listened more intently? When facing life’s inevitable end, would I have enough courage to make every decision from my inner heart rather than be pushed by life?

A year later, carrying these questions, I arrived in Canada. In this unfamiliar land, I sought answers, hoping to uncover the true meaning of life.

* * *

The Journey from Questions to Discovery

Since moving to Canada, my life seems to have been caught in an endless cycle of busyness: renting a house, buying a car, arranging daycare for my son, attending graduate classes, completing assignments, cooking, cleaning, and managing an ever-growing list of tasks. These responsibilities consume me day after day.

Countless nights were spent juggling English studies and academic deadlines. I would soothe my child to sleep while frantically scouring academic papers, trying to decipher their dense and complex language. Time slipped through my fingers until birds chirping at dawn startled me out of my trance. I’d glance at the clock, realizing I had been working from 9:00 a.m. the previous day to 6:00 a.m. the next. Those were days of constant struggle—against the challenges of a new life, the pangs of unfamiliarity, and the heavy weight of isolation. I was so consumed by survival that I had little time to connect with my family, let alone be present for my child.

Though I tried various ways to adapt—accepting help from others and seeking methods to relieve stress—an invisible barrier always remained. I felt like a passerby in Regina, a transient figure in a place I couldn’t call home.

But everything changed on an ordinary yet unforgettable day. I drove downtown to visit my favourite antique store, hoping to find something to decorate my home. As

I parked by the curb, the sky suddenly darkened. Thunder rumbled across the heavens as torrents of rain began to pour, each drop drumming a relentless rhythm. Lightning tore through the gloom, carving fleeting shadows across the street. Shielding myself with an umbrella, I hurried toward the store. But just before I entered, I was drawn to a figure standing under the eaves—a homeless man, hunched and bedraggled, seeking shelter from the storm.

His clothes were tattered, his pants barely staying up. Beside him was a battered cart holding what seemed to be all his possessions, some blankets and a few other items. He stood motionless, staring at the sky blankly, but his face seemed weighed down by something I couldn't quite describe—despair, maybe, or exhaustion.

I hesitated briefly but asked, “Do you need an umbrella?”

At first, he didn't respond. He just looked at me, unsure if I was talking to him.

“Do you need an umbrella?” I repeated.

After a long pause, he nodded and softly said, “Yes.”

I handed him my umbrella and said, “Take it. It's yours now.”

For a second, he froze, staring at the umbrella in my hand as if it were something utterly foreign to him. Then, slowly, he reached out, his hands trembling. “Thank you,” he whispered, his voice almost drowned out by the rain.

As he walked away, hunched over and disappearing into the storm, I watched him with mixed emotions. That was my favourite umbrella, but then I recognized it might be everything to him—shelter, warmth, and hope.

When I finally entered the antique store this time, something felt different. I wasn't in a rush like I usually was. Instead of grabbing the first thing I saw and leaving, I took my time, carefully looking at each item on display. The store was quiet, and the warm lighting made everything feel softer. The objects, each with unique features and history, seemed more beautiful than I had ever seen. I even chatted with the clerk happily and naturally—something I rarely did.

Back at home, I reflected deeply on the experience. I realized it wasn't Canada or its unfamiliarity that made me feel out of place. It was the walls I had built around myself. My pursuit of belonging and immediate success had closed my eyes to the quiet beauty of connection, the worth I carried within, and the simple joys of life. That small act of kindness reminded me of an essential truth: even at our most vulnerable, we have the power to bring light to others and, in doing so, find it within ourselves. It encouraged me to slow down, open my heart, and rediscover the meaning of life—not in grand gestures or instant achievements, but in the quiet, often unnoticed moments of compassion and connection.

* * *

Embracing Life's Meaning

From that day on, I gradually opened my heart and began connecting with the world around me. Whether it was helping a neighbour push their car out of the snow, sending

holiday greetings to new friends, or attending workshops to better integrate into the community of Regina—these seemingly simple acts brought me closer to understanding the beauty of community life and the warmth of human connection.

I still vividly remember that snowy afternoon. The sky was grey, and the cold wind cut through the air. My neighbour's car was stuck in a snowdrift, wheels spinning helplessly in the thick snow. His lips were pale, his brows furrowed with worry, and his face was tense with frustration. Without hesitation, I walked over to help. I shovelled the snow, pushed the car, and even called out to a passersby to lend a hand.

After several attempts, the car finally roared to life, its engine steaming as it moved out of the snow. My neighbour sighed in relief, his face lighting up with gratitude. I felt an indescribable sense of fulfillment. It wasn't just about getting the car unstuck but about creating a connection built on trust and shared effort. Through experiences like these, I began to feel the warmth of this city and find a sense of belonging in my heart.

As I became more involved in the community, I felt a growing desire to help others more meaningfully while also seeking a more profound sense of purpose. Joining the RODS volunteer program was a turning point in my growth. Each opportunity to serve taught me to look beyond simply completing tasks and focus on actively listening to my client's needs, understanding their challenges, and offering my best support and encouragement. In the process, I was deeply moved by their trust and gratitude. More than that, I saw the beauty of kindness that transcends language and culture. I realized that giving back is not just about helping others; it is a two-way exchange, a process of discovering and improving oneself through connection.

One occasion left a lasting impression on me. A client with limited English proficiency was initially reluctant to practice English conversation in class. His resistance sometimes made me feel hopeless, but I didn't give up. I helped him build confidence through active listening, gentle encouragement, and targeted guidance. Finally, after four weeks of effort, he introduced himself fluently in English. That complete, clear sentence lit his eyes with confidence and joy as if a heavy fog had been lifted from his mind. I felt a profound sense of satisfaction. I realized that language is not just a tool for communication. It is a bridge that helps people rebuild their confidence and hope. What I was doing wasn't just teaching a skill; it was assisting others to recognize their potential and reclaim their self-worth.

* * *

The Meaning of Life, Rediscovered

These experiences reshaped my understanding of life's meaning. I learned to focus on the present, to pour my heart into every small step, and to treat every act of service as an opportunity for meaningful connection. Gradually, I realized that the meaning of life is not about chasing dazzling achievements. Instead, it lies in fully engaging with every ordinary moment. In each one, I discovered the beauty of life and found my unique value. Most importantly, I learned how to use my efforts to bring warmth to others and

to add small but genuine light to this community.

Today, I am still sitting in front of my computer, sipping Dragon Well tea, with the familiar piano melody lingering in the air. But this time, I am reading this article I wrote for the Regina community. A wave of emotion rises in my heart like a warm ray of sunshine melting away the confusion and loneliness of the past. I turn to the old photos of my father and me in Xinjiang province, and it feels like I can hear his voice under the blue sky: "Life is not a race but an exploration." I finally understood his words, and the answers to the questions that once puzzled me gradually became clear.

Isn't life's journey just like this? It is found in the fragrance of the earth, the warmth of a smile, and the beauty of human connection. It does not wait at some distant destination but exists every second of the present.

I am deeply grateful for my father's timeless wisdom, which illuminated my understanding of life; for the Regina community, which opened its doors and embraced me with warmth and kindness; and for the resilient version of myself, which has never stopped searching for the meaning of life. On this journey, I have discovered my value and inner strength, and I have seen that a bright future can be forged through effort.

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES



Abu Zafar Chowdhury is from a small port city in Chattogram, Bangladesh. He emerged from a big family with an ambitious dream of legal excellence. As a registered lawyer with the Bangladesh Bar Council, he's been driven by a passion for justice and good governance. His academic journey through law has revealed the critical need for legal reform in Bangladesh, where regulatory compliance remains a significant challenge. He is currently pursuing his MPA at the University of Regina, where he balances family responsibilities with academic goals. Despite the challenges of studying abroad, he remains dedicated to becoming a policy advocate who can drive meaningful change in international development and corporate sectors.



Amira Lotfy is an Egyptian person with a Bachelor's degree in Engineering. Amira worked in engineering before moving to an Arab country where Amira had the opportunity to first volunteer and then work as a teacher, which she loved. Amira learned how to be a good teacher from her parents. When Amira moved to Canada, she volunteered with RODS as an Arabic interpreter. Amira has published work in "Opening Doors Through Stories: Imagine". Amira believes that psychological and emotional support is much more important than material support and is necessary to face life's challenges and difficulties. This resilience creates communities of healthy people capable of adapting, living, respecting others, and gaining confidence. Amira dedicates her writing to her father's soul, her loved mother, her siblings, her sons and daughter. *(To honour her father, Amira has requested to put his photo in place of her own.)*



Ananta (Dimple Mehta) hails from India. She calls Canada home now and is grateful for many amazing people and experiences that have come her way. She speaks Gujarati, English, Hindi, and bit of Marathi. She enjoys furniture painting, dancing, and tending to plants. She loves cats and cheesecake. Writing, for her, was an escape into a different world, as a very shy teenager. Soon after joining law school, she stopped writing. A chance enrollment to RODS' creative writing workshop last year, has allowed her to tap into lost creativity after nearly two decades. She is excited about publishing her first non-fictional work.



Chinedu Ezeala is a creative writer who makes up for his quiet disposition with lots of writing. He has written over 10 books and has a blog where he posts his writings for fun. His story telling style makes his works intriguing and captivating. He hopes to one day become a Global Best Seller.



Marwa Abu Eita was born in Cairo, Egypt. She is an architect with more than twenty years of experience in the design of villas and buildings. She had been working in Dubai and arrived recently in Regina working as a designer in an architectural firm. She is taking steps towards being a registered architect in Canada. She is passionate about reading and writing fictional stories and likes swimming.



Munit Vikram was born in Allahabad, a small city in Uttar Pradesh, India. She currently lives in Regina, Canada and loves the quietness and calmness of the place. She has Master's in Human Resources and Psychology with huge experience in Human Resources. She has an innate interest in human behavior which motivated her to write her first book "Embrace Yourself" about human behavior within the corporate world. This is her second time contributing a short story for the "Opening Doors Through Stories" chapbooks, her first story appeared in "ODTS: Home". In addition to writing, she enjoys baking and crocheting.



Nazam immigrated to Canada in 2023 with her four children to pursue studies in Adult Education and Human Resource Development. With a background in adult education, Chinazam firmly believes that it's never too late to learn. Her journey reflects her dedication to lifelong learning and her desire to make a positive impact on her community.



Originally from China, **Ningning Zhang** has extensive experience in public service. Currently an active member of the Regina community, she participates in a diverse volunteer program, including providing settlement support for newcomer families, tutoring English for youth and contributing to projects that foster social progress and community unity. Through these efforts, Ningning has gained a deeper appreciation for the value of helping others and the meaning of life.

Passionate about art design, hiking, and outdoor adventures, Ningning finds joy in capturing her journeys and reflections through travel diaries. Guided by her core values of sincerity, justice, fearlessness, and compassion, she firmly believes that even small actions can inspire meaningful change and create a better world.



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