# Story Is Medicine

## Opioid Addiction: Healing and Hope through a 'Two-Eyed Seeing' Framework

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## Abstract

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This is a story within a story that spans over a hundred years and four generations. It takes the reader from war-torn Russia during a famine to the urban streets of Toronto and then to the Canadian North.

The story is a memoirette, or a '*not quite long enough, but almost a memoir'* of a mother's journey navigating life after her son discloses his addiction to Fentanyl. The mother finds little if any support from family, friends or conventional support programs and instead turns to her oma's harrowing stories of survival as a source of knowledge, strength and medicine.

The analysis explores storytelling as a legitimate method of learning, pedagogy and research. It explores the concept of story as medicine through Etuaptmumk. A Two-Eyed Seeing framework created by Mi'kmaq elders in 2004 (Sylliboy, Latimer, Marshall & McLeod, 2009). The power of the narrative is discussed through 'Western' and 'Indigenous' lenses.



Keywords: story as medicine, Fentanyl, Etuaptmumk, Two-Eyed Seeing, narrative, memoir, addiction, opioids, healing through story, story as pedagogy

## Acknowledgements

The backs of my legs stuck to the plastic patio chair. It was a blazing Toronto afternoon and the humidity that had settled in made us feel like we were inhaling pea soup instead of air. I was passing through town and had stopped into see Karleen. A little inconvenience that went by the name Covid-19 had kept us from having in-person, on campus classes for over a year. My thesis advisor and I had spoken through a screen, but we hadn't been able to brainstorm, analyse or dissect ideas or knowledge face to face. It was such a great afternoon to be able to sit across the table from Karleen and talk about life and work and writing.

"I think that's what you should write about," Karleen said.

The statement was so matter of fact; she said it like it was so easy. Never mind that I had been working on a completely different thesis for almost two years.

"I think that this is the story you have been wanting to tell all along," she encouraged.

Stunned; I sat and imagined the work that it would take to start all over again. I couldn't do it. And yet I couldn't not do it. I soon realized I was being pulled by a force greater than my own will. How did Karleen know this was going to be the most meaningful and fulfilling writing in which I'd engage?

I grew up playing sports. A lot of sports. I thrived when a coach would pull me aside to tell me they wanted more out of me. Sure, they'd point out some strengths, but

that was never what I wanted to hear. I lived to make my game better, to improve my technique and to grow as an athlete. And it felt good to make my coaches proud. The whole way through this process, I really felt that my thesis committee members have been my coaches. This group of formidable women gathered around me not simply to cheer me on, but to help me make my thesis-game better. They've all been incredible coaches.

Dr. Karleen Pendleton Jiménez has been a gentle, insightful, kind, supportive and encouraging influence on me, my learning and writing. I am deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of her lectures and seminars and am even more appreciative that she has been my thesis advisor. Despite the demands of being a graduate student, whilst working full time and being a mom, this is a time in my life I will look back on with such fond memories. I am incredibly grateful for everything she has given me.

I must thank Dr. Alexandra Arraiz Matute for challenging my thinking and encouraging me to theorize more deeply. I'm grateful for the intellectual push. She also encouraged me to own and to recognize my writing and work as meaningful knowledge. I stand taller because of her.

Dr. Nicole Bell read my course work and long before I started writing this thesis. She introduced me to elders Murdena and Albert Marshall's Etuaptmumk framework. It has been far more than intriguing for me. The Two-Eyed Seeing lens has changed the way I see everything now. It has helped me become a better teacher, writer and academic. But most importantly, Two-Eyed Seeing has allowed me to see myself as

someone who is fortunate, instead of someone who is only half of something. My life is forever changed.

Agatha Bergen, whose name only reads as 'oma' throughout this thesis continues to influence me. I strive to be as strong, kind and brave as she was. I endeavour to find the glory life offers. I reflect fondly on the time that we were able to spend together in her long 95-year life. I am grateful for every second.

R.R. taught me to write. This started when I very tentatively began my post-secondary education as a mature student. More than a writing instructor, he's been a cheerleader and mentor. Not sure I could ever write anything of interest or importance, he believed in me, long before I believed in myself. I'm sure I wouldn't writing a Masters thesis if it weren't for him.

Most importantly, I'm here because of my sons. I wanted to do this grad-work in part, to create a better life for all three of us. I intentionally leave out their names to maintain their privacy and anonymity. But it is important for me to thank them for their support and encouragement. My wonderful sons, I learn so much from you both. You continue to be the most important people in my life as well as my most influential teachers.

## Land Acknowledgement

My opa's (grandfather's) family fled war and famine to come to Canada in 1926. His father and uncle had been shot and murdered in an attempt to protect their little village from pillagers and bandits. His mother, Justina, alone and pregnant had three other children who were depending on her to keep them safe and alive. They had been robbed of all valuables and they were now poor and at risk of starving. At sixteen years of age, my opa was the man of the family now. His responsibility was to help his mother and family find safety and start a new life.

The Mennonites had been persecuted for thousands of years. For the last 200, they lived quite peacefully in the south-western part of the Soviet Union, present day Ukraine. But revolution and famine changed everything. Villages were pillaged, men were murdered, crops and livestock were stolen. Women and girls were raped. Disobeying men were stripped naked, flogged and forced to walk through town. The terror made them run.

And so my opa, still a boy by today's standards, found himself standing by his mother's side when they were about to cross the Atlantic Ocean on an ocean liner headed for peace and freedom. The attendant who must have been some kind of immigration officer – although the details are vague, told Jacob's mother, my great-grandmother, that they would be going to Mexico (there were a few Mennonite settlements in North and Central America). Justina wouldn't hear of it.

"Canada" she said firmly.

My opa recalls that there was quite a bit of squabbling between the authorities and his mother. And Justina stood her ground. She looked into the guards eyes and said the only English word she knew.

"Canada"; she was completely unwavering. This was where her extended family was moving. Others from her community back in the Soviet Union were also going to settle there. She would not be separated from them.

Justina settled with her family in Elmira, Ontario. There were fields for her sons to work and people who spoke a language she understood. Eventually they would move to Kitchener and when grown, my opa would build a family of his own.

He had a small house and a steady job at the shoe factory down the road. He walked home for lunch each day. He'd push their table to the corner of the kitchen and play baseball with my father on winter days when it was too cold to go outside. My grandfather was grateful for everything he had. My opa loved his life in Canada.

But like so many other Canadians, Jacob didn't know his wonderful home didn't feel safe for all who lived here. In 2000, Jacob died peacefully at the age of ninety. He would never know that the word 'Canada' didn't mean joy, safety, opportunity and freedom to others like it did for him. He would never understand that although he, his family and Mennonite community were given the freedom to speak their own language and practice their religion, other people, people who had lived here long before it was called Canada did not.

Like my opa and many other Canadians, I hadn't been told about the atrocities inflicted on Indigenous People of Turtle Island by the Federal Government of Canada and before that the British Crown. I never learned about The Indian Act, Residential Schools, or about Treaties. None of this was in the curriculum.

I am deeply conflicted. I am proud my grandparents fled war and survived famine and despair to come to Canada. I am grateful they got on the boat headed for Quebec City and not the one to Mexico. I love that Canada helped my family. Listening to my opa's stories of the old county and of his arrival here when he was just sixteen, I always thought we were welcomed on to this land.

But now I realise that we were welcomed here by someone who didn't have the right to do so. In 1940, Jacob bought his first little house and the land it sits on from someone who had taken it from someone else. All this time, my family has been here we have had health care, education, housing and clean water but others who were here long before us did not and still do not.

My land acknowledgement includes these thoughts and reflections and the understanding that I am a visitor and must behave like one. I love to paddle and swim the waters, ski though the forests, skate on frozen lakes and cycle along the river. I benefit from this beautiful land every day. It heals me when I'm anxious. I have travelled to and lived in so many parts of Turtle Island. I am grateful to be living and working on land that is beautiful and restorative. I am currently working and writing from the

unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg.  And as I grow older, I appreciate its gifts and beauty more with each passing season.

## Terminology

Within the context of this paper, I will be using terminology that I have come to understand is the most responsible and respectful way of referring to specific groups of people. I will be using the word Indigenous to refer to people who have also been called: First Nations, Métis as well as Inuit. Terminology has been inconsistent and has changed over time. This is in part because of historical colonialism, racism and oppression (Vowel, 2016). The re-righting and the re-writing of culture, language and identity of Indigenous people has given voice to a variety of things including the language and terminology we use. I have read articles that still use the term Aboriginal (Dion, 2007; Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2009) and this is still the term used in Australia to refer to the land's first peoples. However, there are Indigenous scholars I have heard speak who find the term Aboriginal to be negative and focused on the prefix 'ab' which is a negation or the abnormality of something 'original' (Sinclair, 2018: Crowe, 2017). With these opinions in mind, I have chosen the word Indigenous in an attempt to be as culturally responsible and sensitive as possible.

Finding the words to describe peoples other than the Indigenous has been more challenging. When I lived and studied education in New Zealand, I came to understand and use the words: Māori and Pakeha. The word 'Pakeha' is the te reo Māori word for anyone who is not a Māori and directly translates as 'non- Māori'. The term is not derogatory and is used by Māori and Pakeha alike.

Of course, there are words in Indigenous languages on Turtle Island that mean 'the other'. But we have not adopted any of these words in to our own English vocabulary. The words used most often now seem to be 'non-Indigenous' and 'settler'. (Vowel, 2016). The term 'settler' does carry with it the concept of a power-imbalance and has been identified by some as a word that invokes blame which can at times put Indigenous and 'the others' at odds. Although the term 'settler' may create a negative image and narrative between the two groups of people, I argue that the history of this narrative is important. And although calling myself a settler is uncomfortable, it is accurate. The Indigenous scholar and educator, Susan Dion (2012), explains that feeling that discomfort plays an important role in understanding our collective history. So within this thesis proposal, I will be using the terms: Indigenous, non-Indigenous or settler to refer to these two groups of people.

# Table of Contents

# I am a Hybrid

I approach my ball that sits on the deep emerald fairway, just a meter in from the fringe. It's an easy decision to make; I reach for my most trusted and reliable club.

I haven't been playing all that long. I'm still not as consistent off the tee as I'd like to be. I still don't hit the ball as far as I'd like. But I'm usually straight and most often, I get a good lie. For a novice golfer, that's more than half the battle.

The spongy ground springs back a little beneath my feet. A flag waves in the slight evening breeze. This is my target – my bullseye. If there is any club that's going to set me up for a nice putt, it's going to be my hybrid. I love this club. It's light in my hands and the weight of the club head swings around effortlessly. When I hit this baby on the sweet spot, there's a magical ping that I can feel and hear. The ball launches with the perfect combination of arc and distance. It lands softly with muffled tap.

This artful invention isn't a wood or an iron. It's a little of both; a hybrid, which provides the distance of a wood with the loft of an iron. For the amateur golfer like me, it's genius.

The hybrid club became popular about 20 years ago and is incredibly useful for wanna-be golfers because it's designed to produce both distance and height- something us newbies can struggle to achieve. It shouldn't be a surprise that this combo-club is also called a 'rescue club'; because it gets us out of so many jams.

Interestingly, this best- of-both-world's club has allowed me to reexamine where I come from. What I used to see as a deficit and disadvantage, with a new perspective, I now see my cultural-hybrid as a unique and powerful gift.

Growing up, I used to hate being half Italian and half Russian Mennonite. At times, I desperately wanted to be blonde and blue-eyed and go off to Mennonite summer-camp like the cousins on my father's side did. And at the same time, I wanted to be able to understand what all my Italian relatives seemed to be yelling about over our homemade ravioli and meatball dinners. I wanted to visit my mother's family farm in the 'old country'. But without the ability to speak Italian, I was embarrassed to go. I was an outsider in both cultures. I felt like I didn't belong to either group.

Yet now, after decades of feeling like a cast-aside mixed breed, I see my strange cultural combo as an advantage. I am not half and half. I am a fusion of fiery-passion and quiet servant, of a chatty extravert and reflective introvert. I can easily see two sides of so many things without either better than the other because I have lived life in two very distinct and different ways. Belonging to these seemingly opposing cultures allows me two different vantage points or the vision from two different lenses. I have the best of two cultures that make up my DNA. I am the versatile club in the golf bag. I am a hybrid.

Mi'kmaq elders and knowledge keepers Murdena and Albert Marshall created a framework they call "Etuaptmumk" over twenty-five years ago after Murdena graduated

from Harvard and was teaching Integrative Sciences at the University of Cape Breton (Hatcher et al., 2009). The framework and concept can be translated into English as 'Two-Eyed Seeing'. In an article from 2009, the Marshalls explain that Etuaptmumk refers to "learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing and to using both of these eyes together" (Hatcher et. al, 2009, p. 146). Furthermore, "Two-Eyed Seeing intentionally and respectfully brings together our different ways of knowing, to motivate people to use all our gifts so we leave the world a better place and do not compromise….." (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2007 as cited in Hatcher et all, 2009); One eye from the Indigenous-scientific world and the other from the Western-scientific world. The Mi'kmaq Elders emphasize that the two philosophies are not in competition with each other and are not hierarchical. Rather these two ways of seeing the world dovetail to create a more complete understanding of science and nature (Hatcher et. al., 2009, p. 146).

Albert Marshall continues exploring and evolving the Etuaptmumk framework after the death of his wife in 2018. He says that it is an "inherent way Aboriginals think" (Humber College, 2020) because longer than anyone else in Canada, the Mi'kmaq have been forced to have a foot in the 'Western' way of life and at the same time, have been navigating their own cultures and ways of knowing for hundreds of years.

As someone who has been straddling two very different cultures my whole life, this framework resonates with me. Although I am not Indigenous, I feel I have each of

my feet in two very different places. And instead of seeing this stance as unbalanced or flawed, I see that through having lived in and with these two different places, experiences, languages and cultures, I connect with the concept of Etuaptmumk or Two-Eyed Seeing.

As Canada and the world is becoming more multi-cultural, Albert Marshall says we must "humble ourselves to really hear and listen to other perspectives" (Humber College, 2020). He encourages positioning ourselves as co-learners and to "train [ourselves] to weave through multiple ways of knowing?" (Humber College, 2020). I humbly attempt to do this as I explore storytelling as medicine. Scholar Margaret Kovach (2017) says that non-Indigenous students are increasingly using Indigenous methodologies to seek "ways to understand the world without harming it" (p. 11). Certainly, sharing stories about a mother's journey through the hells of opioid addiction is sensitive and painful and calls for a delicate approach. But as the reader will see over the course of this body of work, storytelling isn't just a gentle way of sharing, storytelling has been healing and lifesaving.

## Learning on her Lap

"Tell me again about life in the old country." I'd ask my grandmother this every time I went to visit. We would squeeze into her oversized reading chair. I'd sit partly on her lap and let my legs hang over the upholstered arm.

Oma usually acquiesced, but sometimes she'd respond, "oh…..you don't want to hear those stories again."

Yes. I always did. My paternal grandparents lived in an old and creaky, spotless, A-framed house. You knew what day of the week it was by what chores my oma was doing that day: Monday was laundry, Tuesday was vacuuming and Fridays the kitchen floor got washed, waxed and polished until it shone like a brand-new gymnasium floor. They lived frugally, they went to church every Sunday and they had a caring circle of close friends. They were also the happiest and most in-love couple I have ever known.

In their den, my oma had her broad chair with the wide arms. It was there that I would sit and listen to her stories for as long as she'd tell them. At first they were happy stories. I imagined her life, almost like Laura Ingles or Anne of Green Gables. She and her family lived simply, with a big vegetable garden, a couple of chickens and sometimes even a goat or pig in the yard. They knit their own socks and sweaters and never threw anything away. Her mother made her older brother a winter jacket from scraps and repurposed pieces of fabric. The air was so clean and pure she said, that when a gasoline car was driving up on the road, well out of earshot, they could smell the petrol that wafted by.

But her stories of life back home grew as I grew. She would tell me stories of her life during the Russian Revolution, about living during the famine, about her father hiding in the forest at night to avoid being killed by bandits. As I got older the stories got darker and were about their village being robbed and pillaged at gunpoint and about girls being raped and walking down the street to the doctor's house the following morning after the attacks.

To say I loved that time in that chair with my oma and her stories does not go far enough in giving them the rich value they deserve. These stories gave me the experience, the connection, and the knowledge that nourished my development and fed my spirit and soul when I needed it most.

When she told me about the flour-patties made with used coffee grounds to add a wee bit of flavour that her mother would fry in sesame oil, I could smell them frying in the pan. And when she'd recount the story of my great-grandmother being held at gunpoint by soldiers as my grandmother clung to her mother's leg, I felt like I was back in that tiny kitchen with her. I could smell the earthiness of their dirt floor and the pungent odor that gets stuck in your throat when she'd recount the part about the pig that had to live in the corner of the kitchen to keep it safe from the bandits. I thought I could taste the thin broth they ate at dinner when all the food was gone. My own stomach seemed to burn with hunger when she told me about her malnourished, distended belly.

I connected with these stories, but I just thought I loved them because they were rich and engaging stories about someone I loved.

What I discovered recently is that there are biological reasons why my oma's stories fascinated me. Indigenous people have known and utilised this method of sharing knowledge for thousands of years. Indigenous scholars have also known that storytelling is and has always been an effective and intentional way of sharing knowledge and passing down information. (King, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Kovach, 2009).

Contrary to this understanding by Indigenous people, evolutionary and neurological scientists are arriving at the 'storytelling methodology-party' very late. Like me, they're only learning now what Indigenous people have known for generations – humans are wired for story (Dubner, 2016).

In his book *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall, says that "science can help explain why stories…have such a power over us" (loc 107). Neuroscientists have begun to dissect and analyse the effects of stories on human brains and have begun to discover why humans are so drawn to stories.

This story takes us to a lab at The University of California, Berkeley. Neurology researcher Dr. Jack Gallant was able to physically see what happens in the brain while it listens to story (Dubner, 2016). The experiment consisted of student volunteers lying in an fMRI machine and listening to a variety of audio stories. In the podcast Freakonomics, *This is your brain on podcasts*, Dr. Gallant explains that more than just the auditory cortex ignites. Previously, developmental psychologists thought that we hear and listen only using the part of the brain called the auditory cortex, which is a small section in the left hemisphere – just above and behind the ear. But what Gallant and his team observed

wasn't what anyone was expecting. What they saw, blew their minds; pun intended. Gallant describes what he and his team observed when their subjects were in the fMRI as a "constellation of neurological activity" (Dubner, 2016).

When the protagonist in the story is in the forest running away from danger, the area that detects and interprets danger is lit up in the subject's brain who is lying passively in the fMRI. When the character in the story is elated, the result is the same; the brain of the person lying in the fMRI lights up and fires as if they are experiencing the elation themselves. Gallant saw the same result for all emotions and feelings as well as when the character in the story was problem solving. He further explains that when the story is talking about a certain smell, the part of the brain responsible for processing smell ignited. When the story talked about numbers or math or addition, the part of the brain responsible for solving math problems lit up like a Christmas tree.

What Gallant and his team concluded was that there is a neurological mirroring that is happening. The listener of the story's brain fires as if they are experiencing the events firsthand. From this experiment, he deduced that we listen to stories with our whole brains – and not just our auditory cortex as previously thought. The listener's or the reader's brain activity is EXACTLY the same as the person who is actually experiencing the pain or joy or fright.

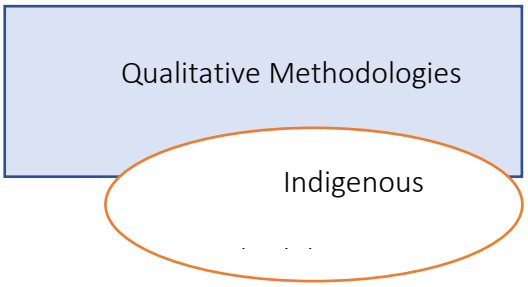
When we listen to dates or facts – we use our auditory cortex. When we listen to or read stories – we use our entire brain. This is why we remember a woman's recounting of her time during the war much better than we remember dates of battles.

Dr. Gallant has observed and recorded fMRI imaging that illustrates what Indigenous knowledge has known for millennia; storytelling is one of the most effective ways of passing on information and knowledge (Dion, 200; King, 2003; Kovach, 2009). Psychologist and novelist Keith Oatley calls stories the flight simulators…. of life…. Just as flight simulators allow pilots to train safely, stories safely train us for the big challenges of the social world. (Gottschall, p. 58)

Despite having known that stories are the best way to pass on knowledge for thousands of years, Indigenous ways of knowing and methodologies continue to be seen as inferior methods to Western ways of knowing and methodologies. "Knowledge is neither acultural nor apolitical" (Kovach, 2009, p.7) and as a result, Indigenous scholars continue to defend and justify traditional teachings, pedagogy and research methods like storytelling. In her book, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*, Jo-ann Archibald, an Indigenous studies scholar from the Stó:lō First Nation in British Columbia, explores the methods and outcomes of stories and storytelling with elders from her community. Early in her work and research, Archibald (2008) explains she has "coined the term 'storywork' because I needed a term that signified that our stories and storytelling be taken seriously" (p. 3). Archibald also couches the word *teachings* with the explanation that the word includes lessons and understandings (p.1.). Dion, a professor at York University describes a false but present duality between story and literature; "particularly in the context of university study" (2017, p.2). She identifies a "greater prestige on 'literature'" (2017, p.2). This work in justifying methodologies by

Indigenous scholars highlights the fact that knowledges are still hierarchical within the academy.

Margaret Kovach, the Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux researcher addresses the stratification of qualitative methodologies and goes to great lengths defending the legitimacy of Indigenous research methods. In her book *Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Context*, the professor at the University of British Columbia explores the hierarchical relationship between Western (Qualitative) research methods and methodologies and Indigenous research methods. Kovach presents the concept of placing Indigenous methodologies within qualitative methodologies:




Kovach (2009) p. 31

The oval shape that represents Indigenous methodologies is placed within methodologies as a legitimate method, without caveat or an explanation. However, this suggestion and model is not without its share of concerns or critics.

Leanne Simpson quite explicitly says “Nishnaabeg intelligence has been violently under attack since the beginning days of colonialism” (2017, loc. 2566). And that it is time to stop trying to fit Indigenous intelligences into the Western academy.

> We cannot carry out the kind of decolonization our Ancestors set in motion (if our) life work is concerned with the regeneration of these systems…..or attempting to "Indigenize the academy" by bringing Indigenous Knowledge into the academy on the terms of the academy itself. (Simpson, 2017, p. 2562)

The Etuaptmumk framework and perspective eliminates this need for explanation and hierarchical comparisons. Albert Marshall says two-eyed seeing embraces "the spirit of collaboration and the spirit of co-learning" (Humber College, 2020, 26:10); where we take the best of Indigenous and Western teachings and use them and the knowledges in tandem. Marshall explains, that Etuaptmumk positions the academy's and settler scientist's Western knowledge alongside Indigenous knowledges, without stratification, without hierarchy, full stop. When we do this, our knowledge is richer and more compete. Once we do this, we can see the power of storytelling through both eyes. Despite the fMRIs, the time in labs and the thousands of years of proof that storytelling is a legitimate and effective way of sharing knowledge, stories as academic-level writing continues to fight for its place in the academy. I reflect on the question that Connor (2006) writes in his article: *Michael's Story: I get into so much trouble by walking,* in which he explores the valuing of narrative and its prestige or legitimacy compared to other forms of writing (p.154). This sentiment is echoed by the editors of *Read, listen, tell: Indigenous stories from Turtle Island* (McCall, Rede, Gaertner & L'Hirondelle, 2017) where they present the idea that there is a different cachet attached to literature and to storytelling. Traditionally, literature has been seen as more prestigious and storytelling,

more colloquial (p.2), because of the value Western and Eurocentric cultures have placed on these mediums.

Despite, or perhaps in spite of the battle of knowledges, I am excited to be using storytelling in my own research. After reading so many dry articles and chapters in academic books and journals, I know which type of writing I'm more drawn to and prefer to read. Jonathon Gottschall's image of humans as being "storytelling animals" (2012, p. 18) means that just like other human adaptations such as apposable thumbs and having language, telling stories is something humans are hard-wired to do. And we have always done this to make facts memorable and to make warnings about dangerous waterholes interesting. Our storytelling ancestors wrapped all the important information up in stories. So I reason that if I'm going to go through all the effort of collecting information and presenting it – say for this thesis, then it makes sense that I use a medium that will yield the greatest retention of information, content and ideas possible. If I am going to write about heartache and grief and about love and joy, then I am going to use a tool, like storytelling that not only reveals knowledge and learning, but one that takes the reader along on the journey.

In 1999, the form of the novel as a dissertation in educational research [was] a new phenomenon in Canadian universities and [was] still relatively new in the United States and internationally (Dunlop 2002, p.2, as cited in Crooks, 2001; Dunlop, 1999; Geelan, 1998; Sellito, 1991). Although Story is Medicine is a memoir and not a novel, it is also a narriative presentation of information and knowledge. And I have specifically

chosen the narrative as vehicle for this knowledge. "Were novels supposed to delight or instruct?" Rishma Dunlop queries. (p.3). If our brains light up like fireworks in ebony skies listenening to stories and we connect with and retain imformation without cognitive effort then this leaves loads of brain power left for comprehension and retention. I suggest that it is *in* the magical delight of reading and listening to stories that instruction and deep learning has the space to happen.

Gottschall also says surrendering to stories is something done unconsciously and automatically; "we don't realize it's happening" (2012, p. 4). Stories seize hold of us emotionally and cognitively (p.49). I believe that writing my thesis using storytelling as a method will be more memorable for my readers. By writing my thesis in the form of a story, I contribute to the bodies of works that positions storytelling as valuable and influential work. Right along side traditional academic literature.

As a settler on Turtle Island, I research, write and create this thesis with caution. I am concerned about using Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing responsibly and respectfully. I echo the thoughts of Celia Haig-Brown (2010), a settler-researcher and professor when she asks herself "am I contributing to disrespect for its origins, severing the language from its specific meaning and proper protocol" (p. 943). And "I do not feel secure enough in the knowledge to be sure I am using it respectfully?" (p. 944). I position myself here as a life-long learner who has been exploring Indigenous ways of knowing for many years and is still a cautious but curious student. And if I can model using non-

western ways of learning and knowing respectfully, then I hope it will encourage other settler-students to look outside of ‘western ways of knowing’ to seek knowledge.

The primary question driving this thesis is: ‘as a mother navigates life with a child battling opioid addiction, what types of learning and healing are possible through a "two-eyed seeing" framework?’ And the secondary questions asked throughout the entire writing process is ‘how does story support and heal?’ And ultimately, ‘how is story medicine?’

## Chapter Overview

Each chapter in this thesis intentionally begins with a story. This has been done because I want to do more than simply say that storytelling is a legitimate way of conveying knowledge; I feel it is important I demonstrate that it is.

Chapter three contains the lion's share of my writing and it is presented in what I have called a 'memoirette'. I have invented this word because I don't feel this piece represents a full memoir and hope that the reader will understand that although it is quite thorough, it is only part of my story. I use pseudonyms throughout the memoirette to maintain some anonymity and privacy for my children and everyone else mentioned in the narrative. I have chosen to present my oma's stories in italics to make it easier for the reader to keep track of the two separate stories. I also thought this made sense aesthetically.

Chapter four is a reflection and self-discussion about what writing the memoirette has done for my own learning and growing. It explores the impact that my oma's stories had on me navigating the hell of being a mother of a child who is battling addiction. The chapter also discusses the physical act that writing has had on how I look at myself as a person and as a mother.

Chapter five is a discussion about the implications storytelling has on how someone battling addiction sees themself and how others see them. The goal of this chapter was not to discuss or debate the different addiction theories or models, rather it

was included with the intention of giving the reader an idea of how addiction models affect how people with addiction and their families are treated.

Chapter six, the conclusion, attempts to synthesize the ideas presented in the memoirette and the findings in the reflection in order to consider the effectiveness of storytelling as a method for sharing knowledge. In this final chapter, I also speculate where my learning will take me.

And so, we return to the story of a grandmother retelling stories of a revolution back home in a land where her whole village lived in fear. Where stomachs burned with hunger because the enemy stole food stores and burnt what was left in their fields. Where mothers hid their daughters from the rapists in chimneys and root cellars.

What neither my oma nor I could have possibly known was that listening to those stories when I was six and seven and eight and eighteen would prime my brain. Her stories would act as a dry run for me to be able to overcome my own of fear. Stories of my oma's life helped me survive a nightmare that would start one Christmas Eve day when my son dropped a bomb shell that would drag us through hell and change the rest of my life. Her stories were medicine.

## Story is Medicine- A Memoirette

### Heal Thyself

"Am I going to have to heal myself?" I ask the doctor helplessly.

The world is closing in all around me and I feel more sensitive to my surroundings. The chair under my hips and legs feels cold and hard. As the rain pours outside, I can feel the clouds pushing me down. I have been fighting to keep the fog of desperation from completely enveloping me.

The last few months have been especially rough. Moving to a new city, starting a new job, finding a place to live. Each one of these things would be tough to do on their own and stressful in combination. Then add on the worry and terror I carry around on top of that – it is pushing me over the edge. My life-changes have tipped my already very delicate balance way off its fulcrum.

"You wouldn't be the first one to have to do that". He answers.

I feel like I am outside of my own body. Thinking about myself in the third person. His response jolts me back into his examination room. It is jarring. I like this doctor. He's not being rude or cheeky. He's being honest – and I appreciate his candor. We've been trying to find a psychologist for months.

"Let's keep looking for a therapist that fits your needs. But I'm not all that sure about finding someone who's going to be able to give you what you're looking for".

My heavy heart sinks further. The doctor's words blanket me with a darkness that I'm not sure I can fight. I am a mother of a young man who plays Russian Roulette with his life every time he puts an unknown amount of Fentanyl into his body. Where am I going to find the energy to heal and to make it through this hell we're living? How am I going to find the hope and strength to do this?

## Land of the Long White Cloud

I couldn't control my sobbing. As the plane lofted higher through and above the clouds, I whispered a quiet good-bye to New Zealand. It had been an incredible eleven months; full of highs and lows. Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud was my magical place and I was not ready to bid it farewell. I had learnt here. I had met friends forever here. I had grown here. I was finally able to put an end to so much self-doubt and self-hate. Nasty seeds planted in my soul when I was still a child. These seedlings were nurtured and tended to by my former husband, the father of my children. He made it his mission to see the sprouts grew tall and strong and everlasting.

New Zealand gave me the physical distance from him and from painful flashbacks of years of emotional and psychological abuse. Here I focussed on my studies and travelled during my breaks. I trekked and tramped up mountains and across landscape that looked like scenes from The Lord of the Rings. I camped on rugged beaches and took weekend cycling trips across the Canterbury planes and through wine regions. Although I loved every minute of my time in Aotearoa, I couldn't wait to see and hug my boys. I had such mixed feelings about leaving for so long. But in our family meeting, the three of us had decided that me going to Christchurch and getting my B.Ed. in eleven months instead of the two years it would take in Ontario was a good move for my career and for our family. They told me they'd be really upset if I didn't go. Mac, my older son was away at college for one last year and Joe, my younger, would move in with his father

for the year. So, with feelings of guilt and reluctance, I set off for an adventure of a lifetime.

As lovely as my time was, I missed them terribly. We'd Skype (although they'd never open their camera) and I wrote letters every week or two. I'd send care packages full of trinkets and t-shirts and chocolate Tim Tams every couple of months.

As much as I didn't want to get on the plane to leave my friends and my new life behind, I was anxious to see my boys. Missing them was the most painful thing I had ever felt. To say I missed them didn't begin to describe the physical emptiness I felt deep inside of me. I couldn't wait to sqeeze them tight. Christmas was around the corner and I desperately wanted to be with them. What I couldn't have known was the news that was waiting for me back in Ontario. It would rock me to the core and cut me off at the knees. On Christmas Eve, I would get news that no mother ever wants to hear.

## Gingersnaps and Cranberry Sauce

Mac would be arriving any minute. My stomach churned with excitement. I couldn't wait for him to be within arm's reach.

I hadn't enjoyed Christmas in so many years, but this year, things were going to be different. When the boys were small, Christmas was okay. I made sure that each year the boys would add a new special ornament to our tree. Maybe one we had picked up when we were away on a vacation or maybe just one I knew they'd enjoy. The three of us would set up our little Christmas village with a train and a tiny ice rink for the miniature boys and girls. I made gingersnaps that melted in your mouth and always had homemade cranberry sauce for Mac because even though he was young he already had a refined palate and did not like the one that came out of the can. We'd sit on the floor and build the Star Wars or Harry Potter Lego they'd received from Santa. I remember playing and building and cooking and baking; all the while, their father sat on his chair in the living room and read. He never played with them and he helped in the kitchen even less. So alone, I did everything I could to make the holidays as magical as Hallmark ads said they were supposed to be.

Then their father and I split up and Christmases became harder and even painful and lonely. His family lived out on the west coast, so some years they'd all go away for a week. I'd celebrate with them when they got back, but somehow it always felt hollow. The years they were with me, it was still painful. Money was always tight. The Santa that

was giving their friends electronics and cellphones and trips to sunny destinations wasn't leaving the same presents at our house.

But this year I knew it would be different. I had scrimped for six years as I worked full-time by day and studied in the evenings and the wee hours of the mornings to get my B.A. Even though I had borrowed money this year to go off to N.Z. for that B.Ed., I had put a little aside for a special Christmas with them now; the two young men who I had missed so much.

As I spotted him coming down the corridor from the train, my heart skipped a beat. There he was – my blue-eyed boy. The year hadn't changed him much. His hair was a lot longer, but so was mine. His full, ginger beard and his checkered flannel shirt made him look somewhat like a lumberjack. He looked good. I couldn't have guessed he was struggling for his life.

We all had dinner at my brother's place. We shared stories and laughed and filled in the gaps my year away in New Zealand had created. It was the next morning when my life changed forever.

"You've only got four more months until you graduate". I said to Mac over breakfast the next morning. "Do you need any money to help you get to the finish line?" I asked.

"You shouldn't give me any money mom." He paused only slightly and then continued so matter of fact that you would have thought he was telling me what his favourite colour was. "I'll only spend it on drugs. I've got a drug problem."

I felt nauseous. The room starting spinning. But he looked in my eyes and said it so calmly sitting across the breakfast table from me.

"What kind of drugs sweetie?" I asked with my stomach in my throat.

"It's called the patch mom. I've been using almost every day since summer."

I couldn't make sense of what Mac was saying. I had heard of 'the patch'. But in 2016, news was just beginning to trickle out about the opioid crisis and being in New Zealand for the year had sheltered me from what little coverage there had been.

Over the next three days we were together, Mac painted a clearer picture of what was happening in his life. With my encouragement, he had taken a job in Northern Ontario to train and work as a bush firefighter. The money was great, he loved being outside and had never shied away from hard work. So, when he was exploring summer jobs the year previous, I thought firefighting would be a good experience for him. Instead, it seemed like a perfect storm of circumstances that summer led Mac to be introduced to the devil that would control his body and mind for years to come.

As fires raged in British Columbia's interior that summer, things weren't as bad in Northern Ontario. His crew worked hard, but not around the clock like the teams in the West. This meant Mac and his work buddies had long periods of time when there was nothing to do. So, they'd play cards and drink.

Looking back, I think about the kind of person who would be attracted to a job like forest firefighting. Who would want to helicopter over blazing treetops, land in the middle of nowhere, and fight a fire for 12 or even 15 hours without a break? I imagine it

is someone who loves a thrill. Someone who gets a bit of a high from being in a potentially dangerous situation. Someone like Mac.

He told me about peeling off a little piece of the patch, then melting it and inhaling the fumes. He explained his workmates were doing it and he was curious. Although some of the others might have been able to use it occasionally, by autumn, Mac was inhaling the Fentanyl every day .

He returned to college in the fall and slowly inhaled his way through his student loan and all the money he had made that summer. When the account was empty, he'd walk to the pawn shop and sell almost everything he owned to buy his Fentanyl. He said he realized what the drug was doing to him and his life and he wanted to stop. He said he had a plan; when his winter semester loan arrived, he would take the entire amount and go back to the pawn shop and buy back everything he had sold.

Making sense of what I was hearing was impossible. The next few days were emotionally exhausting. Waves of vomit would hit me without warning. I cried non-stop. My brother had an adorable picture of seven-year-old Mac on his wall and I couldn't look at it anymore. I couldn't figure out how we had gotten to where we were. Mac was quiet and kind and as a toddler, he never let me out of his sight. I affectionately called him my Velcro-child because he always seemed to be wrapped around one of my legs. I almost collapsed on the floor one evening while do the dishes at the kitchen sink. How were we going to get through this? My sister-in-law helped me up and pulled me in tight. "Don't worry, we're going to help you both get through this." She assured me.

Phoebe and I were close. We loved and cared about each other just like sisters. But there in her arms, I felt like an alien. Like a stranger in a strange land. Neither she nor my siblings knew what I was feeling. I wasn't even sure how I was feeling yet. I did know that I had never felt so alone, scared or empty. As much as my siblings loved me, somehow, deep down, I knew I'd be travelling this hell on my own.

## Ripping off the Band Aid

I couldn't put off telling Mac's father any longer. Mac and Joe were heading up to their dad's place in Ottawa the day after Christmas. He needed to know that giving Mac money for Christmas (which we did now that they were older) was a dangerous idea. I hadn't had any interactions with their dad in years. I protected myself by keeping my distance. Years of emotional and psychological abuse by their dad had put me through the wringer. I had to maintain a relationship with him when the boys were younger. But now that they were both over 18 and considered adults under the law, I kept a safe distance from him and communicated with him as little as possible.

I had made an agreement with both my sons. Once they were 18, they were in control about what their father knew about their lives. Were they doing well in school? Were they travelling somewhere with friends? I would leave it up to them to communicate with their father. He had always been quick to explode and had a nasty temper. All three of us found it hard to communicate with him. When the boys were younger and we were still married, I told him that he needed to be open to listening to them, even when it was something he didn't want to hear. If they couldn't go to him and tell him they had failed a test in school without him freaking out, they wouldn't be able to tell him they had put a ding in the car. And they certainly wouldn't be able to go to him and say they were in serious trouble.

Mac had asked me to be the one to break the news to his father. As I dialed his number, I thought Dean would scream at me and blame me for Mac's drug use. Because he blamed me for everything else.

"How are you going to tell him?". Mac had asked me in a way that reminded me after all these years, he was still worried about disappointing his father. "What are you going to say?"

"We're just going to rip off the band-aid sweetie". I said gently. "There's not an easy way to do this. But it will be okay." I assured him. "I'll make sure it's all okay."
I don't remember my lede into the left hook I delivered that Christmas Eve night on the telephone. I think I was just brief and frank. Probably something like: "Mac has told me he has a drug addiction and that he is using Fentanyl everyday".

However, his father's reaction sticks with me to this day.

"Does he know what he's done to us?!" Dean screamed into the phone. "Does he realise we're going to be living in fear now!? And for the rest of our lives!"

I was stunned. And sat in silence, holding the phone. I had thought about a lot of things in the last three days regarding Mac's situation. I was scared and I was worried – but for Mac, not for myself. I also felt incredible sadness and fear for my child. He had this juggernaut of a devil he was going to have to fight. He had the battle of his life ahead of him. What a terrible thing for my baby to have to manage. I would have given anything to switch places with him. I wanted to be the one to fight this fight. I'd do anything for my child be healthy and happy. Of course, I was scared I'd lose my child.

But I never saw my fears as Mac's burden. Worrying about your child getting ill was part of being a parent. My great-grandmother had lost a son to illness back in the Soviet Union. It was common for parents to lose children just a couple of generations ago. I had just spent the last three years supporting and helping a dear friend whose toddler was battling cancer. Fear of loss was a chance I knew I took when I decided to have children. I wasn't mad at Mac for ruining *our* lives like his dad was. I just desperately wished I could do more to help him tackle this and be healthy.

## Wednesdays

"This is bigger than you." My brother said to him.

Mac and my brother Luke were close. Luke lived with us when Mac was little. Mac trusted him and I was sure he'd listen to his uncle.

"People at rehab will support you and give you the tools you need."

"I can do this on my own," was how he responded whenever any of us brought up leaving school for a bit or about going to rehab. He had one semester left and he was adamant that he would graduate with his friends and peers.

How could he possibly do this on his own I wondered. I didn't know much about addiction, but as far as I knew, families had 'interventions' and then the one using would go off to rehab and try to get better. What I thought then was that rehab was the only way Mac was going to get better.

But we never argued and we never raised our voices. Even though we were talking about opioids and addiction and rehab. Even when we were in the thick of it all, Mac and I were always able to discuss things calmly. And even more surprising, he was trying to help me through this all just as much as I wanted to help him.

"Why don't you talk to Kate about this?" He offered one day when we were chatting. Kate's son Ryan and Mac were classmates in elementary school. They had become best friends in junior kindergarten and stayed great friends up until they went to different high schools. Kate was a good friend of mine. She had been a tremendous support when I was going through my separation and divorce. Ryan battled a

methamphetamine addiction when he was still in high school. He had gone to Northern Ontario for a program for kids under eighteen. He was doing well now.

"I think she'd be a good support for you, Mom."

Mac finished the semester at college while trying to stop taking opioids, cold turkey and on his own. Meanwhile, I waited to hear about being accepted into a graduate program in town. I was also desperately looking for work. The irony was that I finally had some degrees to my name, but I couldn't get a job. I applied to work overnights at a warehouse and at the bookstore at the mall. No one would hire me. I was still living at my brother's place, but without a job, I was forced to withdraw some of my retirement savings to support myself and to put food in Mac's fridge.

Dwindling savings, waiting to hear about the grad program, and thinking that every morning was going to be the morning the police phoned and told me that Fentanyl had slowed down and stopped my son's heart the night before. Or maybe they wouldn't call. Perhaps they'd arrive at my doorstep with news like that. Would they come to me, or would they tell my ex-husband, who was a police sergeant first? Would I have to find out about my son dying from a man who had hired lawyers over and over again to try and take our sons away from me? There was no 'off' switch for the tape recorder that played this scenario or one similar as I tried to fall asleep, as I ran on the path by the lake, as I tried to search and apply for work. I lost my appetite, I got thin, I slept fitfully.

Even though I wanted to hide away from the world, I knew our only way out of this was to find some kind of job, and to stay connected to my boy. Mac needed to know

that no matter how dark things got or how deep he fell, I'd be right there to help pick him up, dust him off and encourage him on as he kept on fighting.

Wednesdays would be the days we'd spend together. Wednesdays became my days of terror.

I'd pack up my little candy apple red Fiat and hit the road right after breakfast. My buggy was packed with some homemade soups and sweets, sometimes a book or two and the toiletries I thought he would need. He attended college in a small town in the Kawartha Lakes region; just two and a half hours northeast of Toronto. We had holidayed in the area every summer for over a dozen years and up until then, I had picture perfect memories of that part of the province. Mac, Joe and I had all learnt to waterski up on the lake not far from the college Mac was attending. We spent one memory-making week skiing, tubing, swimming and jumping on the water trampoline every summer for a dozen years

We loved going to that lodge so much that even the long drive across highway seven and finally up the smaller county roads was something the three of us enjoyed. When they were little, I printed off maps of our road trip for each of them. I highlighted our route from home to 'The Lodge'. They were able to follow our journey up to the lake by tracking the small towns we'd drive through. The highly anticipated road trip up, kicked our week off with excitement. Time in the Kawarthas with my siblings and all our kids was always the highlight of our summers.

But now I felt fear driving up to the Kawarthas instead of joy. What state would I find Mac in? Would he look worse than he did last week? Was I going to be able to hold it together and enjoy our time together? I dreaded Wednesdays in so many ways. Wednesdays terrified me. I resented being scared to visit my own child. I swallowed my fears and knew that this was what I had to do. Although it all scared me to death, this was what I wanted to do. I wanted to spend time with my child.

Our visit always consisted of lunch, grocery shopping and sometimes an errand or two. The deal was that I wouldn't give him any money, but I'd make sure he had everything he needed to get through the week. The small town didn't offer much by way of lunch options, but Mac and I both seemed to like the Wednesday routine we fell into. I'd pick him up and we'd go to lunch at the Sushi place. I got such a kick out of seeing Mac take the card from the table and start checking off all the things he wanted. Over our miso, the conversation was a bit superficial, like we were getting to know each other again. But once the plates of hand rolls and sashimi arrived we'd be talking about how his courses were going and how my job search wasn't going. He had an appetite. This had to be a good sign I reasoned. I never asked him if or what substances he was using. I left that for him to bring up and discuss. Usually, he didn't.

I tried to act at ease when we were together. On top of everything he must have already been feeling, I didn't want Mac to be worried about me too. The few people I had talked to about our situation, told me I needed to tell Mac how stressed and petrified I was. They said this would help him clean up his act. I saw things so differently. I never

saw Mac carrying guilt, shame or worry other people were feeling was a way of helping him out of addiction. He wasn't responsible for how I felt. And besides, I wanted him to focus on himself. So, as we sat at the wobbly table with a sticky plastic tablecloth, I'd sip my Jasmine tea and do my best to choke down a little bit of food as he'd talk about the hikes he and his mates had taken, or the field work he'd done collecting and dissecting fox poo.

After he was stuffed with sushi, we'd head over to the supermarket. We'd load the cart for the week. My own cart at home didn't ever look like the one we filled for Mac. I had to make significant cutbacks with my own shopping in order to buy his groceries. He had two good friends at school that he would invite over and cook for. I wasn't just buying food for Mac, I was also buying food for him to feed his friends. I rationalized using my savings for his groceries by telling myself that cooking was a form of therapy and being with friends who cared about him and wanted him to get better was priceless. I scrimped at home and didn't think twice about it.

Much of that time together is a blur for me. My body ached with exhaustion and although I couldn't concentrate, my mind would never turn off and sleeping was almost impossible. Although it was a challenging time, I kept reminding myself that it wasn't anything compared to what Mac was going through. Some Wednesdays were less stressful than others and I'm not entirely sure why. Whether it was because of my own state of mind or because Mac looked better some days than others, I cannot say. One week we hung the prayer flags from Nepal I had brought back for him in his room.

Sometimes we'd listen to vinyl from his record collection. One gut-wrenching and enlightening mid-week visit is burned into my memory forever.

## In the Middle of Main Street

It was a dreary February afternoon. The little mounds of snow on the boulevards were the brownish, dirty colour that snow gets when it's been hanging around for months. Cars were filmed with dust from gravel and lots of road salt. It was the claustrophobic time of winter when squeezing between parked cars left your jacket and pants as dirty as your car. Sometimes it felt exhausting just trying to get out the door with hats, boots, mitts and scarves.

Mac said his college town wasn't what I thought it was. He told me it was actually sketchy and rough. And yet to me, its main street looked like something out of a Hallmark movie. The little downtown was so charming; cute independent shops filled with high end clothes and bougie home décor. The extra wide main street allowed cars to park nose in and on an angle. Nice, wide space between cars meant you to swing your car door wide open to get in. I appreciated these tiny things on days like this one.

Mac and I started our day together with a quick nip into the bank machine. There was a seemingly older man sitting on the floor between the two sets of doors. As we entered, he asked if I could spare some money to help him get something to eat. We made eye contact, and I told him I would be happy to and that I just needed to use the machine first. I made my few transactions at the terminal and when Mac and I were leaving, I bent down and gave the stranger a ten-dollar bill. He thanked me and I said that I hoped it would be enough for some breakfast. I thought our exchange was over, however he continued to explain that it was humiliating to ask for money, but he was out of work and

very hungry. I told him I didn't mind at all and that I'd be thinking about him today. I wanted to do more than just throw money at him. I didn't know exactly what to say but I wanted him to know I saw him as a person and not a burden. Saying 'God bless you' didn't feel right to me, but what do you say to a stranger who is sleeping on the freezing sidewalk?

Mac and I left the bank and began to walk down the main street toward the shoe store. I heard sniffling and thought the cold February air was making Mac's nose run. I reached for a tissue in my purse and at the same time looked up at my son. He wasn't sniffling from the cold, he was crying. My boy was shaking uncontrollably; overwhelmed with emotion, he sobbed right there on the sidewalk. I was confused. Had I done something to upset him?

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

"That man….." was all he was able to choke out.

"What?, didn't I give him enough?" I continued "Do you want me to go back and give him more?"

"No". Mac pushed through the tears. "But couldn't you see how humiliated he was?"

It was at that moment I realized Mac had felt the way this stranger felt. Embarrassed, alone, humiliated, desperate. My son had felt all those things. I grabbed Mac and squeezed him tight. For a moment or two he let me hold him close as we wept together – right there in the middle of main street.

Driving back home was always awful. I never wanted to leave Mac there. I always wished this would be the week where he'd say he'd take a leave of absence from school and come back with me to get healthy. But every week I left alone. And in my little Fiat, I'd cry the whole way home. That Wednesday was worse. To think that my child had felt so shitty about himself was devastating. The gun-metal gray sky mirrored my mood. My fear felt deeper, my helplessness was more acute and I was blanketed in the sadness of those dark grey clouds. I needed to fight through the despair and find hope.

I needed to dig deep and find strength to persevere. I turned off the radio and in the silence, I thought about a story my oma had told me.

The famine in Russia was at its height when she was about five or six years old. This was just on the precipice of the Russian Revolution. Crops, stores of food and livestock had been stolen. When the robbers and bandits and military couldn't carry out anymore, they would burn and destroy what was left in their fields. My grandmother's belly was distended from malnutrition. The cupboards were bare.

My oma told me about these little pancakes her mother would make for her as a special treat sometimes. My great-grandmother would take some flour and water and mix in a sprinkle of used coffee grounds – just to add a bit of flavor. She would pat the mixture into a bit of a patty and fry them in sunflower oil. My grandma told me that at the time, she thought they were delicious. And the bit of flour and water took the burn out of her belly.

When hunger was at its worst, she said a horse drawn cart came along every day to deliver broth in her village. She told me they were from the Mennonite Central Committee (a peace agency and relief service). Each person in the household received a ladle of broth and a fresh baked bun. My grandma remembers sitting at the table sipping the thin soup and devouring the bun. She also remembers her mother taking her own bun, breaking it in half and giving the two pieces to her children. My oma would often weep when she got to this part of the story. As a little girl, it had never crossed her mind that her mother was also starving, and yet gave up her own food to feed her children. She told me it was only by way of a miracle that her mother could have survived on a little bowl of broth.

As I wound past the dormant, winter farms on my way to the freeway and back to the big city, I thought about the strength of my oma and her mother. I told myself that we shared the same DNA and that their strong and resilient blood ran through my veins. Mac and I would get through this because our families were survivors.

## The Phone Calls

I was a few months into my full-time, post-grad program at a university in Toronto. This one-year, additional qualification was the key to me getting a good teaching job. I was working about 40 hours each week, bartending and serving at a bistro evenings and weekends and studying full time during the week. Every moment of every day, I was either in class, or working 8–14-hour shifts serving overpriced pizzas, pastas and pints off the arm. The pace was grueling, but I reminded myself that it only needed to be maintained until the end of June. Then, the program would be done and I'd finally have a full-time teaching job in September. Every time my alarm went off at 4:15 am, I'd remind myself that the finish line was within reach.

On sunny days, I could see the top of the CN tower from my kitchen window apartment. But this was a deary Sunday morning, with a soupy fog that had settled over the downtown. By some rare alignment of the stars, I had the day off and was making breakfast and planning out the upcoming week. The phone rang. My heart dropped when I saw Mac's name appear on my cell phone screen. Fear and panic washed over me every time he called.

It was a terrible feeling to be so afraid of receiving a phone call from a child. I had gotten a call on New Year's Day, just a few months before. Mac's voice was weak and he was crying. He told me about the night prior, drinking and partying with friends. He said his buddies seemed to be able to handle drinking and using coke socially. He said they

weren't controlled by it like he was. He told me he didn't want this to be his life now or when he was twenty-five or twenty- six.

I had also gotten a call one morning before I was scheduled to give an important presentation for work I was trying to win. I had made the trip up to Ottawa, where Mac had been living. Moments before the conference call was to start, my phone rang; Mac's name and number flashed up on my screen. He was calling from a drug house. He had been there all night and wanted to leave. But he he told me he wasn't in any shape to drive. Could I come and get him? His plea came just as I got word that they wanted to do a mic check. How was I going to help him and deliver my presentation? With my heart pounding out of my chest, I started to feel faint. I asked Mac if he knew the address of where he was. I ordered an Uber that would pick him up and bring him to the B and B where I was staying. Once Mac was dropped off, we'd figure out what to do next. As I presented over the conference call, Mac quietly slipped into the tiny bachelor B and B I had rented. He took off his pants and crawled into my bed. I sat at the desk watching him as he rolled up his left sleeve to show me the poke marks in the crook of his elbow. Four or five black punctures where some kind of poison had been injected. I don't think anything I said on the conference call was intelligent or coherent.

After my call, I watched him breathe shallowly as he finally slept. I called my friend Kate who worked at the mental health facility in town. She quickly spoke to a nurse and advised me to watch his lips. If they started to turn blue, I was to try to wake him and call an ambulance. Mac's breathing never became that laboured. But he slept

all day in my bed. I was on edge, but exhausted. I took a few blankets and pillows and tried to sleep beside him on the hardwood floor. Every half hour or so, I'd take his pulse and check the colour of his lips. When he finally woke at six that evening, I went and got us some Pho soup from a little hole in the wall in Chinatown and we ate together at the small makeshift dinner table. Mac said it was one of the best beef Pho he had ever had and the thinly shaved pieces of meat were perfectly cooked. While he savoured the rich soup with lots of comforting noodles, I savoured the time with Mac. He had trusted me when he wanted help. He wasn't hiding from me. He knew I'd never turn him away and I'd do anything I could to bring him closer to me. That had to mean something.

The third ring jolted me back into my kitchen in Toronto. Sometimes Mac called just to say hello. He didn't only call when he was in trouble, I reminded myself. I held my breath and answered the phone, trying to sound cheery and positive. But Mac's voice was heavy and rough. He wasn't just calling to say hello.

"I want to go to rehab." He told me fairly soon into our conversation.

"That's great sweetie." I encouraged him gently. I looked out across the city from the eleventh floor of my apartment. Where was I going to get the money? I was just making ends meet working full-time while studying. There weren't any more hours in the day.

We chatted for a bit. He was down and discouraged. He didn't like who he was or what he was doing. He wanted to feel better.

"There are a lot of good places around. I'll start looking if you'd like me to?" I asked when I felt I saw an opening.

He cried softly into the phone.

"It's going to be OK sweetie. This is a really good thing that you're going to do".

"But what will Joe think of me?" He choked out.

Mac's concern took me by complete surprise. He was Joe's elder by almost two years. My sons weren't even really very close and they had different friends and different interests. Although I'd wished they were closer, they never even hung out together. It was shocking to me that Mac would be worried about disappointing his younger brother.

Mac thought his brother would see going to rehab as a weakness and a real flaw in character.

"I don't think we need to worry about what an 18-year-old thinks right now Mac." There was silence through the phone and so I continued. "Understanding addiction is new to all of us, sweetie. If he doesn't understand now, he will as he matures."

I poured myself a third cup of coffee. I wanted to make sure that Mac was feeling positive about his decision before we hung up. On calls with Mac, I tried to frame everything as the glass half full. I tried to be the cheerleader; encouraging and positive. I could always hold it together while on the call with him. But, after we said good-bye and I had time to process the stories he told me about where he had been and what he had done, I'd completely fall apart. I'd feel nauseous, my breath would shallow and my

mind would spin. I'd often retreat to my bed. The weight of the duvet and blankets felt comforting and grounding.

As I sipped the remaining cold dregs in the bottom of my cup, it seemed that Mac was feeling okay about the next few months of his life. We'd find a rehab facility. It would be hard work, but he'd start to get better.

## The Dreams

It turned out that finding a rehab facility was a lot easier on TV and in the movies than it was in real life. I spent days combing through webs sites and making phone calls to public and private facilities. The publicly run rehab programs had wait lists three to six to twelve months long. Mac could realistically overdose while on a wait list to help him. The private programs cost anywhere from fifteen to forty thousand dollars. Some of those clinics had spaces right away. I wanted to get Mac into a program now, while he was eager. We just couldn't take a chance and wait for a program that was government funded. If I asked Mac's dad for half, I'd withdraw that last of my retirement savings and we'd be able to afford to get our son into a program immediately.

As much as I tried to convince Mac that I wanted to spend my savings on his health, he refused. There was no way he was going to let me do that. And Mac's father also said he wouldn't pay for a program if there were ones out there for free. Neither seemed to see that waiting for a spot to open in a program through our provincial health care system might cost Mac his life. So even if I had been able to borrow the money from my parents (as I thought I might when Mac's dad refused), there was no point. Mac wasn't going if I had to pay for it on my own.

So, I spent days researching and phoning programs around the province. It was a full-time job. At night, I'd toss and turn and imagine Mac with those poke marks in his arms. Some dreams played out with Mac being dead and a police officer coming to find me. Sometimes I was at home and they'd knock on the door. In other dreams, they

would find me in my classroom at university. They'd take me out into the hall and tell me my son was found dead. In the work-dreams, the police officers would take me and sit me down in the staff room, bring me glass of water and tell me my boy was found without vitals and he couldn't be revived.

My dreams have always had the same ending. I'm faced with going to see Mac in a hospital. The last time I get to see him, he is pale blue and cold and stiff. The last time I get to hold him close, he is lifeless.

The nightmares weren't reserved for when I slept. I had day terrors walking downtown. I saw a homeless person huddled under a hoodie or a blanket and I'd think of Mac. I'd see a weathered and scabbed hand holding a paper cup or ball cap and I'd think that it looked like Mac's hand. The thoughts came as I walked or rode the subway or served customers at the bistro. They were unrelenting and try as I might, I couldn't ever find the 'off' switch.

The world felt like it was collapsing in on me. I found it hard to breathe. I didn't want to see anyone. When I passed a group of strangers chatting and laughing on the street, I had a strong urge to scream at them – how dare they be happy; didn't they know people were struggling and suffering. I had violent thoughts of punching the laughing strangers in their faces.

My stress grew more intense at school. The program was intimate, with only a dozen students. Everyone shared what they did on the weekend and the jobs they were applying for. They were all chatty and close. It was impossible to be anonymous in that

crowd. If I was quiet and reserved, I was pegged as aloof and antisocial. I was struggling just to get my work done and submit assignments on time. I didn't have the energy to pretend to play the charade of being happy and social. Getting to school and being at school was absolutely stimulation overload.

The courses were offered online to the students in the part-time program. They were recorded live during our classes and then posted a few hours later. I began staying home, in the safety of my little bedroom in downtown Toronto and watching the lectures online. My assignments were always handed in on time. I sent an email to one of the profs who was also the director of the program. She was not supportive of me working online at home. I let down my guard and told her the truth; my son was ill. He was battling addiction and I was trying to find him a program and I was really struggling with being in class but studying online at home was working for me. I told her I couldn't afford to take a leave from the program. I was a solo-income household and I needed to find work teaching as soon as I possibly could. Her response was cold and formal. She sent me some long forms that a doctor would need to fill in to make such request.

I was new to Toronto and didn't have a family doctor. Luckily, I found a soft spoken, kind and caring doc at a walk-in clinic just a block from my apartment. I could barely look at him. When I tried to share my story, I broke down in tears. I'm not sure I had ever said the words aloud before; "my son is addicted to Fentanyl". He immediately wrote me a note on a prescription pad and told me he'd fill the forms in and get them back to me the following week. He suggested I look into programs for parents and loved

ones of ‘addicts’ at CAMH – the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. He escorted me to the door with a shiny brochure.

The low-in-the-sky, winter sun was a welcome visitor that February afternoon; a break from the dreary weeks we had been getting. Battered but not beaten, I felt like a boxer on their knees struggling to lift themselves from the bloodied canvas. I needed to find the strength to fight another round. I lifted my face and reveled in the sepia sunlight splashing across the urban landscape as I walked down Eglington toward my apartment. “Dig down and fight for this”, a little voice within me said. “You’re not quitting”.

The alluring scent of rich coffee led my nose and me into a little funky coffee shop. The environment was just as you might expect from a hipster café in a hipster part of town. The lights were soft and warm. There was an exposed brick wall that ran the length of the café. Shelves made of iron brackets and live-edge wood were stacked with books left from previous customers as well as retro board games to use while one sat and sipped on their six-dollar coffee. Glazed pastry with dusted icing sugar and slivered nuts filled the chilled display case. I hadn’t eaten properly in over a year. Food was tasteless and felt dry and dusty whenever I tried to eat. And yet here I was, ordering a bowl of café au lait and a croissant packed with almond paste. In a time that was full of turmoil and stress, I needed to see joy and hope in life. The coffee and pastry were my tiny moment of joy. I sat down and placed them in front of me on the table. And my mind wandered.

My oma was born on January 8, 1917 – the then USSR, and now the Ukraine. She was raised with so little. And yet- she was the most grateful and happy person I have ever known. She was a starving, homeless refugee when her family made the trip across the Atlantic to Quebec City and then further west to Manitoba. She was brought up during the Russian Revolution. The violence she'd witnessed toward her family and community was what nightmares were made of. She had every reason to hate life. When so many other people might have been bitter – my oma saw beauty and joy in life. They had a tiny two-room home with a dirt floor. She slept at the foot of her parent's bed on wooden crates that had been made into her bedframe. Their mattresses were made of straw from their fields. Her wooden boxes were luxurious compared to the accommodations her brother had. Seven years older, her brother slept in one corner of the kitchen. In the winter months, their pig would occupy another corner. The only way to make sure their livestock wasn't stolen was to move it into the house. My grandmother said the pig also helped warm up the room once winter set in.

Daytime was worrisome, but nights were terrorizing. My grandfather always told me that Revolution meant there was no law or order. Everyone was on their own. No one was there to protect society or enforce civility. This meant my grandmother's family and the Mennonite communities in general were easy targets. Looters pillaged villages, stealing livestock and burning the crops they couldn't take with them. Waves of bandits and Bolsheviks stormed through towns as well.

My oma said that men were often targeted and killed. Murdering the protector and head of the house must have meant the rest of the family would become even easier targets. At night, her dad would pack up and leave their home. He'd go and hide deep in the forest, away from the gangs of bandits who would pass through the village. My grandmother remembers men banging open their door, demanding her mother tell them where her husband was. My grandmother's mother would plead with them. She said she didn't know where her husband was – she begged the men to leave her children unharmed. My grandmother remembers clinging to her mother's legs- refusing to let go. She recalls the men holding a rifle to her mother's head; saying she must tell them. But my great-grandmother didn't know where her husband was. She could only tell them that he wasn't home.

I sipped my milky coffee and sunk my teeth into my flaky, buttery pastry. If there was ever a time that I needed to tap into the strength of my oma and her mother, it was now. They had faced such violence and they persevered. They must have been afraid of what their tomorrow was going to look like. My great-grandmother must have been absolutely terrified of what the bandits and Bolsheviks would do to her children. And yet somehow, this incredible mother found the strength to press on.

I'd be able to get through the last five months of the program studying and working in the safety of my room. I'd go to CAMH and see about support.

## The Ball Cap

The next morning, I sat at my desk, opened my laptop and started to plough through my schoolwork. I had emailed the doctor's note to the directors of the university program and thought I was going to be able to focus on the tasks for the day. One of the first emails I read that morning was from one of the co-directors. Her email very pointedly said that the letter from the doctor was not sufficient and that I needed to complete an actual form from the university. The email also said that if I did not present myself in class the following morning at 8:30, I'd be involuntarily removed from the program.

My mind spun. I reread the message a few times because I couldn't believe I was reading it properly. It was a punch to the gut and I was flooded with a mix of emotions. I was hurt that they didn't care my son was sick and fighting for his life. I was angry they were so insensitive. I was scared that I'd be chucked out of school.

It felt like discrimination. A classmate of mine had needed time off to help look after her sick parents. She had received a leave from classes, was given extensions for all her assignments and they postponed her practicum placement until she felt she was able to cope. The university never asked her for a doctor's notes or forms to be filled. I knew this for a fact – because we were apartment-mates that semester. The department gave her all the time she needed to attend to her family.

Yet, my family's crisis was being handled completely differently. I had indicated to the directors that I was willing to do all the course work, assignments and work

placements. I'd hand everything in on time. I was simply asking that the former be done at home, where I felt I could better cope.

I was petrified. I couldn't afford to be kicked out of the program. I needed to graduate and find a good teaching job. The salary wouldn't help Mac get better, but the steady income would alleviate one huge stress in my life which would free up some of my emotional energy. I was crushed and felt completely unsupported by the directors. Could they not see me reeling and struggling? How could they not understand that I was consumed with fear that I would lose my son? I felt discarded and dirty. Feeling completely defeated, I knew I had no choice.

I arrived in class the next morning wearing an oversized sweater, some baggy trackpants and a baseball cap. The two subways and then a bus ride to campus were almost impossible to manage. The screeching metal sounds on the subway, the proximity of all the people, even the smells of coffee, people's hair products and aftershaves were overwhelming. I pulled my ball cap down as far as I could, trying to block out the rest of the world.

The morning was a blur. I sat silently and kept my head down. They told me I needed to be there, but they never said I had to make eye contact with anyone or participate. I was a bit of a loner in class, so I was surprised when a classmate approached me during the coffee break. She told me I looked exhausted and unwell and that I should go home. I told her why I wasn't allowed to do that.

Trish had four kids. Although I didn't know any of the details, I had heard her mention that one of her boys was a real challenge. We had chatted a bit about work and kids and travel before. On this particular day, her jaw dropped when I briefly told her about Mac and why I had been forced to show up to class. She told me to grab my jacket and backpack.

Trish knew the campus well because she had also done her undergrad degree and teacher's college here. We walked across the commons to the Student Success Centre. The queue was long. All the seats in the waiting room were occupied and the overflow of students were standing and sitting on the floor. I felt claustrophobic and desperately wanted to bolt. Instead, I grabbed the little paper ticket from the red plastic wheel. Trish waited with me as I waited for my turn to speak to the receptionist.

We were eventually told that I would have to book an appointment to see a counsellor. The wait would probably be about two weeks. Trish calmly but firmly told the woman behind the counter that I was at risk of being kicked out of school if I didn't see someone today. I didn't know where to look. The room felt like it was closing all around me. I wanted the earth to crack open so I could fall in.

The woman disappeared and a few minutes later she reappeared with her supervisor. Trish explained the situation again; the director of our grad program had threatened to kick me out and that I needed help immediately. They shifted some papers around on the desk and made a couple of quick phone calls. Within a few minutes I was told they had found me an opening. Trish hugged me and told me she'd help with

anything else I needed. She gave me her cell number and returned to class. I was escorted into a counsellor's office.

I hadn't spoken to a therapist about what had been happening over the year and a half with Mac. The seemingly young man sat in the chair across from me and listened as I choked out some information. He occasionally gently asked for more details. We talked about Mac's drug use, but I also told him how Mac had asked for groceries instead of money. I told him about Mac's concerns about how I was coping and his suggestions to get help and support. Saying all this out loud was difficult because it was making everything feel real. Up until now, I had played this game in my mind that things weren't so bad. Mac wasn't really battling addiction. Mac's situation was different.

"Your son is a unicorn." The counsellor said.

"Pardon?" I asked, confused.

"I've been working in addiction for many years and I've never heard of an addict worrying about how their mother is coping." He continued. "Nor have I heard of a drug addict telling their parents not to give them money. – He's a unicorn."

The discussion shifted from Mac to me. I told him how much I hated walking downtown now. And when I passed a group of people chatting and laughing, I had the urge to jump them, grab them by the collar and shake the smiles off of their faces. I explained that getting out of bed was getting harder and that places like grocery stores and subways were completely overwhelming. I admitted that I felt safest when my baseball cap was pulled down near my eyes.

He assured me my feelings were normal and that he thought I was experiencing sensory overload; the external stimulus was just too much for me right now. He thought studying from home and attending the on-line classes instead of being in class was a great way to alleviate some of my stress. He told me he was appalled and embarrassed that I was being treated like this by the university. I told him I didn't have the energy to fight my directors. He said that in his opinion, this shouldn't even be an issue. So, we filled in a couple of forms. He fired an email off to someone and said he'd get it all sorted.

Leaving the campus behind was such a relief and a bit of weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Trish and the counsellor seemed to understand how scared I was and how unwell I was becoming from the stress of trying to cope. They believed me. Maybe going to CAMH wouldn't be such a bad idea.

## Tuesdays

I finished filling out an intake questionnaire then had a discussion with a woman at CAMH. She was encouraged to hear that Mac and I spoke regularly and that he was sharing his struggles and feelings. She also said that yoga and painting and taking guitar lessons were all great ways of taking time for myself but, she thought I could still really benefit from a group session that would be starting every Tuesday. The program was for family members of addicts.

Both she and the counsellor had both referred to Mac as an 'addict'. The word made me both uncomfortable and angry. My cousin has been struggling with Schizophrenia for most of our lives. Six months older than me, we used to hang out at family functions and on holidays. When he turned sixteen, he was diagnosed with Schizophrenia. Now almost 45 like me, he had spent most of his life in and out of institutions in London and Toronto. He had even spent a couple of years at CAMH. My aunt and uncle devoted their lives to helping him. My uncle was even the president of Schizophrenia Canada for many years. He had lobbied the government to improve the education of police departments regarding their protocols and interactions with people with mental health illnesses. When my cousin and I were still young, he told me something that has stuck with me. He said it was important to refer to them as 'people with schizophrenia', not 'schizophrenics.' Their illness is not who they are; they are people and they are not their illness. So, it gets my back up when Mac is called an 'addict'.

He is my son and a brother, a grandson and a nephew. He has a dry and brilliant sense of humour. He loves cooking and collecting vinyl records. He has the most beautiful and mischieveous laugh in the world. He is battling addiction; he is not an 'addict'.

I told the counsellor at CAMH that I was struggling to be around people and that I really didn't want to be part of a group session. I was a loner, I explained. I liked to run and kayak and paint and knit. My hobbies were all ones I could do on my own because that's the way I like it. But she thought I'd really benefit from being with others who were going through the same thing I was going through. From the very start, I had wanted to do what was best for Mac. Every time we spoke, I tried to make sure everything I said was supportive. I didn't want to add any grief or guilt to everything Mac was already battling. Maybe I could learn how to best interact with Mac and in turn, help him get better. After some long silences, lots of tears and a bit more coaxing, I acquiesced and told her I'd join the Tuesday group.

I wasn't feeling any happier about the group program the following week when the sessions started, but I decided I'd bookend the discomfort and unpleasantness of going to CAMH with things I enjoyed. Tuesdays would be my 'me' day. So, I'd get up each week and walk down to the Centre from my apartment at Yonge and Eglington. I knew exercise was important and I didn't have enough energy to do anything more strenuous. It was nice walking along Queen Street West and passing all the funky store

fronts and Ramen cafes. But on every block and at every corner, I was reminded of how close my son was to being homeless and strung out.

It was a mirage of hell. I would pass mound after mound of sons and daughters on the sidewalks, living under piles of damp blankets with grimy and battered hands holding out a frayed paper cup. I knew it was completely realistic to think that Mac was only three or four weeks away from being one of those kids sleeping on a piece of cardboard. I'd lose my breath and my chest would tighten. Was this going to be our life? Could I get more scared than I already was?

The group sessions were divided into different units and topics. We were given course workbooks and encouraged to write down our reflections and thoughts. Each week started with a sharing circle. One by one, the family members would share the events of their previous week. They would offer details about their family member's activities for the week which often included the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol. For the circle of strangers, they would chronicle the fights they had had with their family member.

I rarely shared. What Mac did was Mac's story to tell, not mine. I was looking for counsel as to what to say and do to help my child. I wanted to be given advice as to how to support him best. I hated sitting there listening to the stories about people still battling addiction after ten, fifteen and even thirty years. These people's life-long struggles with addiction weren't bringing me comfort, hearing the stories only made me

fear that Mac wouldn't be able to beat this and that this was going to be our hell forever. Each week I left feeling more hopeless instead of hopeful.

By week six or seven, the workbook finally got to 'The Stages of Grief'. The chapter explained that there were five phases or stages of feelings we all experienced: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and hope or acceptance. We may encounter them in a different order, but this is what we were or would be experiencing. I read the list. Some of the feelings resonated with me, but in the last year and a half, I had never ever been angry with Mac. I was angry with people who didn't understand what we were going through. I was angry when friends told me Mac was a grown-up and responsible for his own actions. I was angry when I saw people whose kids were battling illness like cancer being shown all kinds of love and support, yet when I told friends my son was battling addiction, they grew distant and some completely stopped contacting me. I was angry that this program was supposed to be helping me and yet it wasn't. I was angry Mac and I were being treated as lepers. Oh I had been angry alright, but never with my son.

We were asked to write down how we were feeling and then if we were comfortable, share with the group. I was finally going to get some useful advice. The opportunity to share made its way around the circle to me.

"I feel scared…. I feel absolutely petrified…. I wish it was only alcohol my son was addicted to….I worry that what my son does to himself will slow down his breathing and

stop his heart……I am sad for this burden he has and the battle he has to go through…..every moment of every day, I am afraid my son will die."

"You must be angry with him sometimes." The moderator suggested.

"No…..why would I be." I tried to explain. "I wouldn't be angry with him if he got cancer or any other illness…..so why would I be angry with him now?"

I looked up at the rest of the group. The fifteen sets of eyes around the circle didn't seem to connect with what I was saying. In a room full of people who were apparently going through the same thing I was, I felt more alone than ever.

The CAMH moderator looked at me and said. "You probably don't feel angry because of all of the guilt you're feeling."

I'm a slow processor and so it took me a few minutes to absorb what her comment meant. She was suggesting it was impossible for me to ***not*** be angry. Not only was this counsellor negating my feelings, but she was also further suggesting I had feelings that I wasn't even experiencing.

I was angry now. But it was because she wasn't hearing me. And I felt like this counsellor was trying to make me feel something I wasn't. It was my experience that mothers feel guilty about so many things already. How was it helpful for her to make me feel guilty about not being angry?

The sun was taking up a warmer place in the sky that afternoon and I was able to walk home without my winter jacket. It would only be a few more weeks until I could think about kayaking down at Queens Quay. Spring always brought feelings of hope.

I didn't want to continue with the group sessions. Mac was the only one in the group who was using opioids. My fears and experiences weren't like the others. I wasn't getting support or answers from the weekly five-hour sessions and my interaction with the counsellor today was the straw for me. How discouraging it was to be seeking help from one of the country's best facilities and not finding it.

Walking east toward Yonge Street, I passed a vegan restaurant. It was warm enough that the café had brought out their patio tables and propane heaters. I doubled back and decided to take the time and sit down for a late lunch. My appetite hadn't returned, but I realized it was three in the afternoon and I hadn't had breakfast yet. I ordered a wrap and a glass of white wine and took out my refection booklet. As I sat on the sunny corner patio, I knew I had to think about the positive things that were happening in my life as well as in Mac's. I had to frame the things that were happening to us as positive and hopeful. I sipped my pinot grigio and raised my face to the sun like a sunflower in the garden.

*In 1926 their paperwork had finally come through and they were granted a small window to leave the country. They were given a day's notice to pack up a few possessions in a crate and baskets that they could carry.*

*The chariots that would lead them out of fear and terror, out of hunger and despair, to safety and freedom, were nothing more than filthy, smelly, dark cattle cars. The cargo trains were made for transporting livestock, not humans, but this was how my grandmother, her family and hundreds of other fleeing Mennonites would find their*

*freedom. She remembers her mother and other women from the village taking buckets of soap and water – to scrub and wipe down the insides of the cars. She told me they lined up crates and boxes around the perimeter of the inside of the cattle cars– which provided seating space for at least some of the passengers. Only seven years old, my grandmother couldn't understand why she wasn't allowed to take her dog, her best friend with her. Squeezed into the box cars with hundreds of fellow Mennonites, she sat heart broken and wept in her mother's lap.*

*Each cattle car had a huge pot of water boiling over a drum of fire. Families took turns boiling their potatoes. Occasionally the train would stop in the middle of open fields. The passengers took time to get a bit of fresh air and relieve themselves. The train also stopped for periodic checks. Bandits, the military, or whoever these men with rifles were, would make their way through the packed cars. Rifles pointed down at the passengers, they took whatever they wanted. No one had much of anything left. Most people's personal treasures were long gone. But my grandmother's cousin, quite a few years older, somehow still had a brooch in her possession. More than likely it was a simple piece of gold with a few sparkly stones. miraculously her cousin had been able to keep it through the years of violence and looting. My grandmother remembered what happened at one particular stop.*

*The men with rifles went through each of the cattle cars and demanded everyone empty their pockets and place their hands on their laps – palms up and open – to show that no one was hiding anything. The men approached my oma's cousin and demanded*

*she open her hands. But the young woman couldn't. She knew that when she opened them, the men would see the brooch and take one of the last things she cherished. She also knew she could be in big trouble for trying to conceal it.*

*As the man stood in front of her, he said, "open your hands". With her eyes squeezed shut, she opened her hands. She could not bear to look. She waited. She opened her eyes. The brooch was not there. He passed right by her and on to his next victim. She closed her hands back into fists. And when the men with rifles were gone, she opened her hands once again. Her little gold brooch was back in her palm. I remember my grandmother choked up when she told me that story. All these years later, the power of that story still overwhelmed her.*

*A while later my oma was woken from a sleep with the sound of a familiar hymn. Her mother quietly explained that they had passed through a tunnel that had led them out of the USSR.*

One thing I've always loved about Mennonite services is the singing. They sing everything in four-part harmony – and it is breathtakingly beautiful. When my grandmother told me that part of the story, I could hear her, her family and her fellow refugees, singing like they had never sung before.

They were free.

My wrap arrived and I put down my pencil. Mac and I were a long way from our own journey through hell being over. What did it take to be able to experience a bit of magic like my oma's cousin did with her disappearing brooch on the train, I wondered? If

I could dig down deep and find strength to hang on and push through this nightmare like my oma and her family had, maybe Mac and I would find our train to freedom too.

## The Car Ride

I'd always had a challenging relationship with my mother. From the perspective of a child, it seemed like she always had to have things her own way in her marriage. And she never really learnt how to compromise. My father is a pacifist, and never engaged in arguments. Nevertheless, that didn't stop my mother from spouting off fiery insults when she was angry. She'd lash out with insults to my character, my body and my intelligence. When that happened, I'd retreat to my bedroom or immerse myself in sports to escape her wrath. Most of the time though, she ruled her house and her marriage with passive-aggressive Catholic guilt trips. She was the only person in the house who needed to be happy. Her four children and husband were expected to do as she wanted.

When I was nineteen, I moved to the West Coast; three time zones away in order to put a comfortable distance between me and my self-centred, dysfunctional mother. I studied and skied. I met someone, got married and had two sons. It would turn out that in many ways my husband ended up treating me with the same disrespect my mother had. And the cycle repeated-as cycles tend to.

Years later – even once I had a career and two grown children, my relationship with my mother hadn't changed much.

I had finished my specialist teaching qualifications in Toronto and landed a job in Peterborough, at the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board. Even though the Kawarthas had originally held such magical summer cottaging memories for me. My feelings about the place was now clouded because of the six months I spent driving up to

visit Mac each week. He had graduated by now and was living in Ottawa at a in-patient rehab centre. Did I really want to move to Peterborough and be reminded of those scary months I had lived through? Could I enjoy Peterborough even though Mac's college town was less than an hour down the country road?

I made a decision to apply for the job. I could avoid going to his college town. I could choose to remember the summers we spent in Buckhorn, just north of Peterborough. I would think about the summers my siblings and our children spent in cottages on the lake. I'd remember the days we spent swimming and waterskiing together. I'd recall the campfires at night and the sight of the calm still lake in the mornings. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I couldn't let the horrible memories of a few months battle out and beat the years of incredible memories we had all had in the Kawarthas.

I was settling in to living and working in a new town. I had moved so much growing up, that changes like this weren't uncommon for me. But there were still the everyday challenges that came with living and working in a new city, like finding a dentist, figuring out where the closest drugstore was, and getting to know the layout of your new grocery store. Weekends were lonely. Sometimes, in the quiet of my little apartment my internal tape recorder would play over and over; Mac was sick, Mac's heart was slowing down, Mac was dead. Some days I couldn't figure out how to turn it off.

The first few weeks of a new job just blurred by like a ride on a roller coaster. Thanksgiving weekend came quickly that first year up in Peterborough and my parents

had invited me down to their place about an hour west of Toronto for the long weekend. October was behaving better than expected and we were having unseasonably warm and sunny days. My father suggested I pack my golf clubs so the two of us could go out to the driving range or play nine holes together. The thought of spending time outside alone with my dad was a pleasing one. We didn't get that opportunity very often.

I liked spending time with him on the range. His instructions were targeted and concise.

"Keep your head still…..watch your club make contact with the ball…..hit with 60% of your force."

Great coaching; simple instruction, applicable advice. The time on the driving range that day was reminiscent of the time we spent together when he coached me in baseball and hockey when I was growing up. He was the cool-headed coach in the dressing room. He was the coach athletes responded to best. I especially loved our time together after practice – when we'd be driving home in the car together. My rep hockey team practiced late at night and my dad and I would drive home in the dark, with most of the town already tucked away in bed for the night. Sometimes we'd sing to the radio, but what I remember most is that even after a long day at the office and a ridiculous 90-minute commute home, my dad still made sure he was on the ice with me for those late Thursday night practices. The drive home after golf that afternoon ended up being the same; but different.

We were most of the way home when my father stopped for gas. He got back in the car but pulled forward away from the gas bar. There in the station's parking lot, he looked over at me and said, "Your mother is really upset."

My heart leapt into my throat. My ear drums starting pounding. The smell from the gas station made me feel nauseous. I was breath-taken.

"Your mother is having a really difficult time with all of this. She needs you to call her more……you know, check in with her more frequently. She feels like you're shutting her out."

My poor father, in the middle of my mother and me like he had been all through my teenage years. He was Switzerland – just trying to keep peace.

Was this why he had asked me to go golfing with him? So he could get me one-to-one and tell me what a terrible and selfish daughter my mom thought I was being? That's the way most conversations had gone with my mother as I was growing up; my mother would be unreasonable and moody. My father would be subjected to listening to her complain for days. She'd mope around and cry in bed about how terrible I was. Then, my father would pull me aside and ask me to make peace with my mother. I always did. I'd apologize to my mother for whatever it was she wanted and then she'd be content again.

"Dad……" I began but didn't know what to say next. But my mind was drowning in an ocean of emotions. I was exhausted and petrified and now I was angry. I didn't even know how I was feeling. How could I explain this to my father?

"Dad." I tried again. "I've just moved to a new city, I've got a new job, I don't know anyone there…. I'm scared all of the time Dad."

I had wanted to protect my aging parents from most of Mac's mis-attempts. They knew he was battling addiction to Fentanyl. They knew he had gone into an eleven-week rehab program. What good was it telling them he had been kicked out of rehab four days before graduation because he had gone home on a weekend pass and used. What good would it have been to tell them that when I was away in New Zealand, Mac was visiting the food bank in order to feed himself. They didn't need more to worry about. Besides, that was all Mac's story to tell people, not mine. But I was at a breaking point and my father happened to be there with me when my dike of emotions and pain burst open and let the waters come flooding in.

I began a story. "Dad, I'm afraid of Mac dying every single day. I worry all the time. I don't sleep, I battle through figuring out my new job in a new town. I'm barely scraping by."

He was silent. And so, I continued. "One evening after work, I turned the corner to my street and approached my duplex. As I got closer to the house, I could see a cop car sitting in my driveway. Dad…..my heart started pounding out of my chest and I thought I would throw up right in the car. "

He allowed space for me to continue but I didn't know how to explain my hell. "You know that feeling you get when you're on the starting line-up of a race….."

I was sputtering and sobbing and trying to find any breath to catch so I could finish. "You know how it feels dad…..when you're there on the line and you're so nervous you feel like you're going to shit yourself?..... that was me. Sitting there, frozen in my car. I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe and I couldn't think. I was sure they had come to tell me Mac was dead and that I'd never see him again……Dad, I'm barely looking after myself. I'm barely getting through my days…..Dad, I can't look after mom's needs – because I'm barely looking after my own."

Snot and drool and tears smeared all over my face. I used the tail of my shirt to sop some of it away. I looked up at my dad, who had been sitting in silence this whole time. His eyes were filled with tears. He was quietly sobbing. We sat there together in the parked car and just cried. Without any more words, together we cried for me and for him and for Mac.

I don't remember how that day, or that weekend ended. I hadn't wanted to betray Mac's privacy and I hadn't wanted to worry my elderly father. I'm not sure I was successful in either case. But I do know that I felt my father had heard and understood me.

## Moving North

"Hi mom." came Mac's voice as I fumbled for my phone at work one day. He never called during the day. I went into my default panic mode and assumed something must be terribly wrong.

"I've got a job in Yellowknife." he said right off the top. He sounded excited and relieved. But I could also sense a little nervousness. It wasn't easy breaking news about moving across the country to your mother. I remembered the mixed emotions all too well. Twenty-five years earlier, I had told my parents the same thing as I set off to go to school in Vancouver.

"How exciting sweetie." I was genuinely thrilled for him. What an adventure!

"When do you start?" was the logical next question.

"In two weeks from now." he responded.

"WOW!" Was all I could manage to choke out.

My plan and organized-obsessed mother brain had already kicked into high gear. What kind of job was taking him five thousand kilometres away? Did he have warm enough clothing? Where would he be living? Who would he be living with? Maybe being in the North would be soothing and healing? Wasn't the cost of living astronomical up north? Could he really afford this? But, getting away from his negative routines in Ontario might be a good thing. Aren't there lots of drugs up north?

We chatted for a bit and he began to fill in some of the blanks; his dear and incredible friend Luke had a job in Yellowknife and there was an opening. Luke and Mac

went to college together. Luke stood by Mac and remained a loyal, caring and concerned friend while Mac was in steady decline. Luke offered to go to NA or AA with Mac anytime he was ready. Luke and their friendship had probably saved Mac's life.

Mac was living in Ottawa with his dad. Working and trying to live a healthier lifestyle. But so many of his high school friends still partied all weekend. The pub and bars in his Ottawa suburb were full of cocaine. Mac told me he wanted to get away and try to make a clean start. How could I argue with that? He had my adventurous gene. Maybe a fresh start in a new environment would be helpful for Mac.

I made a quick trip up to Ottawa the weekend before Mac was to leave for the North. He was excited and a bit nervous. I don't know if I had ever seen him nervous before. I helped him book and pay for his one-way plane ticket.

"It seems so official now." He said as I hit enter on my laptop to confirm our purchase. I didn't let on that I was petrified of never seeing him again. I didn't tell him I was worried sick about him overdosing in a pub or worse, alone, up north, far away from anyone who could help him.

"Mom, I can find anything I want within five minutes of being in any bar." He had said to me not that long ago. "It doesn't matter where I go mom, drugs are always going to be around."

That was a hard image for me to conceive and to come to terms with. How I wished I could make an environment for him to live without any of his temptations.

Mac became a 'man of the North' very quickly. He loved the intimacy of the small town. He said he liked knowing the people he passed on the street and came across when he was in the supermarket. He bought a kayak and would paddle and hike on local trails and lakes by himself on many weekends. He learnt how to cross-country ski. He eventually bought a snowmobile and got his hunting license.

I loved that he was finding peace in nature. I was happy he was taking up hobbies like kayaking and skiing. I understood the draw to be out in the forest or on a lake in a kayak because my experience of being in nature and particularly out on the water was the same as Mac's. Water soothed and revitalized me. Being among trees and trails and in the quiet of nature was something I craved and sought out because it was so healing. But sharing this connection to the land with Mac didn't stop me worrying about him day in and day out. He still wasn't completely clean. I'd cringe when he talked about weekends he'd spend at the pub. On more than one occasion, Mac said that he should give up drinking because it lowered his inhibitions which he recognized led to poor decisions like doing cocaine.

"I wish he could stop all of it". I told my family doctor about it one afternoon when I was in his office.

Although my GP never had a magic answer for me, he was easy to talk to. I knew that the philosophy in the addiction world was a harm-reduction model now and not abstinence. But I felt that was easier for a doctor to explain than it was for a mother to

live with. I just wanted my baby's body to be clear of all the drugs and the poisons that were out there.

"Is he moving in the right direction?" My doctor asked me.

This simple question gave me pause. I hadn't thought about harm-reduction quite like this before. Compared to two years ago, Mac was living a healthier life now. He had stopped taking opioids. I think he had even stopped poking drugs into his veins. Mac hadn't been able to quit using all substances, but he was moving in the right direction. Framing Mac's journey like this was helpful for me. I needed to focus on the path Mac was on. After that appointment with my family doctor, whenever my mind started racing with worry and my brain would start spinning, I'd replay that conversation and ask myself if Mac was moving in the right direction. However slow the journey and however long this was all going to take, Mac was moving forward.

Even though I knew this was mostly a solo-journey to sobriety for Mac, I continued to wrestle with feelings of helplessness. Being so far away from him was agonizing at times. If and when he stumbled, how could I possibly help him when he was so far away.

There was one afternoon he called me. I checked the time. I often gauged what kind of a phone call it would be by what time of day Mac called. If he called in the evening, it was just a 'hello and how are you doing call'. But if he called me and it was morning, I was always worried that it was an 'I screwed up last night and I'm feeling

terrible this morning' call. A quick glance at the time on my phone told me this call was probably the latter.

Unfortunately, I wasn't wrong. Mac had found some used needles in the back of a truck his friend had lent him. They were in one of those bright yellow plastic boxes with the red hazardous waste symbol on it. He told me seeing the box and knowing what was in it was enough to start the urges. He told me he had used a needle from the box last night and now, the next morning, he was worried about who had used the needle before him. What residue was in the syringe he has stuck in his vein? He was feeling hung over, but also scared. After quite a long conversation about options, he decided he'd call up the guy who owned the truck and ask him what the box of used needles was from. But Mac was still down. He was mad at himself. He was exhausted and hungry. He told me there wasn't much to eat in the house and he didn't have the energy to go get groceries. How I wished I could take something to him.

It was Sunday afternoon for him. There weren't many restaurants open in the town. Even fewer of them offered delivery. I finally found a Chinese restaurant that would charge my credit card and deliver food to Mac's door. I ordered him some soup and rice, stir fry and egg rolls. I made sure there were a couple of meals worth, so that he could have lunch and dinner. My panic always set in after we said goodbye and hung up, frantic and feelings of complete uselessness. I am his mother and I'm supposed to be able to fix things. Why couldn't I make him better? When he was little I looked after him when he had the chickenpox or when a fever would spike. I'd help him to the toilet to

make sure he barfed in the bowl. I desperately wanted to help him now. But all I could do was have soup and stir fry delivered.

## The Corona Virus

People were scared; not only for themselves but also for their loved ones. The world was in an absolute panic. Scientists and politicians filled the television screens, the radio airwaves, and social media. Fear was palpable. Every city's downtown looked like the set of an apocalypse movie. Covid was blooming across the globe.

I wanted to scream from the rooftops; "This fear you all have! This panic and worry, the pain that is in your heart, the nights that go by without being able to sleep! This is how I feel every day! This is how I've been feeling for the last five years!" The truth was, I felt what I was going through was exponentially worse than what the corona virus was throwing at me. I was petrified and worried and sad and on edge every minute of every day. This is how many parents of children with a deadly addiction feel every day, all day. And there isn't an international team of scientists and doctors racing to find a cure for our children's illness. An opioid overdose could take down my child in minutes. He'd never even get warning symptoms or a chance to fight. Just a bit too much of the poison he puts in his body could stop his heart immediately. The fear of my child dying was never going to go away. There was no hope of a vaccine to help him. I would fear losing my son forever. His death wouldn't be newsworthy. His 'brave fight' story wouldn't trend on social media. His illness would continue to be a story of failure and shame.

I felt so distant from everyone freaking out about the virus circling the globe. The anger that raged in me a couple of years ago when I was walking down the streets in

Toronto felt like it was bubbling up in me again.  I was scared and worried and lived in fear alright, but it didn't have anything to do with Covid 19.

## A Different Lens

The damned corona virus did keep us apart. I had planned to go up to visit him in Yellowknife the summer of 2020. Of course, those plans were squelched. We had hoped that he'd come down to Ontario that Christmas. But because the Northwest Territory had such strict travel regulations, he'd have to quarantine at home for two weeks once he returned to Yellowknife. He couldn't afford to take that time off work. Coming home for the holidays was out of the question.

I sent Mac a box of Christmas gifts and goodies. I packed a stocking so he could have one to open on Christmas morning. He had such a big circle of friends up in Yellowknife. Many of them also had families thousands of kilometers away.
"I'm going to make a turkey with the fixings here." He told me on Christmas Eve. Friends and strays would gather at his place for a meal. "We'll probably play some music and have a dart tournament." He added.

Was he as lonely as I was? It didn't sound like it. I never wanted to cry when I was on the phone with him. I didn't want him to feel responsible for my feelings. Should I tell him how desperately devastated I was that we couldn't be together and that I couldn't see him? That felt like a self-centred thing to do. I was still navigating the right way to balance honesty with boundaries. I didn't want him to feel guilty. One thing my boys didn't like was when I made too big a deal out of things. They were both quite low key and rolled with the punches that life threw. I thought this would be one of those times when he thought 'I worried too much'.

Was there strength from my Mennonite heritage I could channel? My oma, her mother and all those Mennonite families had been through far worse than this. Some of them had left their families forever. They got on that train knowing they'd never see each other again. A Christmas away from my son seemed to pale in comparison.

*The ship left from Antwerp Belgium. It would take about two months to cross the Atlantic. My oma told me she was sick the entire way. She wasn't alone. Surrounding her were bodies, weak and weary. This ship didn't have separate cabins. Or if it did, no one my oma knew was travelling in one. The hull was carpeted with ill bodies, sleeping, groaning and vomiting. Knowing my oma was already suffering from malnourishment, I'm not sure what her body had left to throw up. Occasionally she said she'd make her way up onto the deck for some fresh air. But watching the ship ride up and down on choppy waves set her tender tummy turning again. I recall that right into her old age, she never regained a fondness for boats or water travel.*

*She remembered landing in Quebec City on a windy April morning. She was thrilled to have land beneath her feet. They were all loaded onto another train by evening. She said she didn't know where she was headed, but she trusted that wherever it was, it was going to be better than the life they had left behind.*

*When they finally disembarked in Kitchener, they were surrounded by friendly faces and a language she recognized. Trays of sandwiches on thick, soft bread were passed out. She and her brother got to eat as many as they wanted. The rich meat and cheese were too much for stomachs that hadn't eaten properly in months and many*

*people couldn't hold down their lunch. Her grandmother warned this would happen. But the smell of the fresh bread and the sight of the endless trays of food were far too tempting.*

*Her family eventually ended up in Manitoba. They shared a farmhouse and land with cousins and aunts and uncles. The families had to work incredibly hard to pay back the Canadian Mennonites who had sponsored them and their passage out of Russia. Many refugees worked on their sponsor's farms until their debts had been paid. But not every Mennonite was meant to be a farmer.*

*"Don't unpack. We're not staying," was what her father had said to her mother when they arrived. He was an office worker back in Russia, the town's secretary and bookkeeper. He wasn't used to working on a farm and it didn't suit him.*

*My oma loved her time on the prairies. In Mennonite tradition, each first born son is named after the paternal grandfather. The first-born daughter takes their paternal grandmother's names. My grandmother and all the first-born female cousins were all called Katarina after her father's mother. One fond memory she shared with me many times was when she and her cousins were out playing in the fields. They'd hear 'Katarina, come!' yelled by an adult from the wooden wrap around porch. Not knowing which one was summoned, the four girls would all get up and run home. She laughed each time she retold the story.*

*She, her brother, and parents spent a year in the farmhouse. The prairie home was bursting at the seams. Her mother's brothers and sister were also there with their*

*respective families. Each family had a bedroom to themselves. The kitchen and living rooms were shared. The four families were shoe-horned into the house together and by the end of the year my oma's father decided to find factory work in Kitchener-Waterloo. So, they packed up and moved again.*

*My oma was too young to realize how poor they were. They arrived on the precipice of the Great Depression and she recalled her mother telling her they had never lived so well. It wasn't until she was an adult that she realized they must have been penniless.*

*She always seemed to be able to see what she had, not what she was lacking. She and her cousins made dolls with corn cobs and scraps of fabric their mothers could spare. She recalled playing 'tea party' with small pieces of broken china that they imagined were their little plates and teacups. This is where she first attended school. A horse-drawn cart would collect the girls from the farmhouse in the mornings. During the wintertime, her older brother along with another boy, would arrive at the schoolhouse early to light the fire. Oma said that draughty little building would finally start to warm up just as classes were done for the day. He toes hadn't thawed yet and she'd ride back home on the cart sure her toes were frozen solid.*

*She loved Christmas time. It meant a special service at church. She said it also meant a few walnuts and an orange in a stocking.*

I always admired her ability to see the joy in life. Despite the hell she and her family had been through, despite the fear and heart ache and loss they had experienced,

my oma told me she felt like the luckiest person alive. I reminded myself that I needed to view my life through my oma's lens.

I waited as patiently and as Mennonitely as I could. I imagined how wonderful it would be when we could see each other. I thought about all the things we would do together when I finally got to visit. As the ice and snow melted away, hopeful signs of spring emerged from the thawing ground. People spent more time outside. Vaccines were being administered and the country was beginning to cautiously open up again. The Northwest Territory was no longer requiring a quarantine period for people entering the territory. I phoned the one-eight hundred-information number on their website. I asked the woman who answered the phone if she thought I'd be able to come up to the territory to see my son who had been alone for almost two years.

"You can apply to come to the territory to visit him through a family reunification application." The friendly voice explained on the other end of the line. I was so shocked, I was speechless. I mustn't be understanding this properly. There was actually a way for me to visit my son?

Her hopeful voice filled the long silence. "It's the most common application we process. If you'd like to give me your email address, I'll send the application to you now." We exchanged the necessaries and good-byes. I sat on my bed and took the deepest breath I had taken in a year and a half. My eyes flooded with tears. Family reunification application; what glorious words. I hadn't expected an actual person to answer that

government phone number when I called it and I certainly hadn't thought I would be getting news like this today. I screamed out in absolute joy. I was going to see my son.

## Kayaks and Floatplanes

It wasn't the type of reunion you see in the movies. My scheduled flight was already arriving late in Yellowknife, but a two-hour delay on the tarmac in Calgary pushed my arrival time in Yellowknife well past midnight. Mac started work at 7:00 am each day. I was imagining he wasn't thrilled with my flight delay. We finally arrived and the passengers disembarked and walked from the plane and into the tiny airport. Many travellers were being greeted with big, long enveloping hugs – just like I had been imagining my reunion would be with Mac.

I collected my luggage and looked for my blond-haired, ginger-bearded boy in the sea of faces. But Mac wasn't among the crowd. I waited and wondered and worried. When it finally occurred for me to look at my phone, I saw several messages from Mac. I targeted in on the last one he had sent me. 'text me when you finally land and I'll head over.' Damn. I went outside to wait for my boy.

I had left behind a never-ending August heat wave back in Ontario and the chill of the night air was surprising and welcoming. I rifled through my backpack to find the one sweater I had packed. Taxis asked if I needed a lift into town. I politely declined and waited out in the cool northern night air for Mac.

I finally saw the headlights of his twenty-year old truck round the bend in the parking lot and head toward me. The poor guy needed to be up in a few hours for work. I was feeling guilty about taking him out of his cozy bed.

My sons weren't huge huggers anymore. When they were little, I learnt to do everything while holding one or the other on my hip. I could never seem to leave the room when they were toddlers. As soon as they'd lose sight of me they'd start hollering 'ma!' I remember often having one of them sitting on my lap when I peed on the toilet. I never used to have a moment to myself because they were clung to me like Velcro. In the thick of it, I hadn't thought I'd ever miss those times……

I pulled him close and apologized for flight delays that were far beyond my control. I got a hug, but it wasn't as long or as tight as I craved. In true Mac fashion, he said it was no big deal (so little ever seemed to bother him). He grabbed the bigger piece of luggage I had with me and chucked it into the bed of his rusting, beat up and yet somehow charming pick-up. We headed for the B and B I had rented. Mac said he knew where it was. I supposed in a town this size, one knew where most things were. The sun had just set in the late summer sky and was already preparing to rise in an hour or two – nature's gift when you lived so far north. I glanced over at his silhouette and smiled as we drove toward Old Town.

I took a gamble back in April, when the world was still tightly locked. I saw a beautiful Air B and B advertised for half the regular going rate down in Old Town and I jumped on it. The host warned that if I couldn't travel in August, I wouldn't be getting my deposit back. I took my chances. All summer, I thought about my trip North and hoped the B and B I had rented was as nice as the reviews had promised.

Old Town is perched near the end of a slip of a peninsula right on Great Slave Lake. It is traditional Indigenous land that got its English name because of the tools Indigenous people made that had a golden-yellow hue. It was then settled by prospectors who had travelled North in search of freedom and fortune during the gold rush There are still hints of the rugged lifestyle of a century passed, the old Wild Cat Café, the original meeting place for hungry and exhausted settlers. Weaver and Devour Trading Limited, still selling everything from dried goods to bear spray, in a building that looks more like a small airplane hangar, positioned strategically on the thin strip of land that separates Great Slave from Back Bay. And Bullock's, a postage stamp-sized, wooden, A-frame shack with the most delicate fish and mouth-watering chips for eight thousand kilometers.

Despite the time change and my exhaustion from the extra-long journey, I woke a few hours after arriving. I put the water on for my coffee and unpacked the provisions and packages I had brought with me. The sun was peaking up across the lake and a light mist was rising in unison. Already, the water was warmer than the August air.
The B and B had a marvelous sunroom that overlooked our dock and the lake. I moved the couch as close to the window as I could. I left the sliding door to the rest of the house open. As I cupped the steaming coffee mug, I watched the sepia-toned light dance off Great Slave. It all felt like a magical dream. There I was, in a cabin on the lake, listening to my son's soft snoring in the loft just above me. I closed my eyes and willed time to stand still.

"Come over and see the secret ingredient". I called to Mac.

He ambled over to the kitchen counter. "So what is it?" he asked.

I was squishing the ground pork and beef through my fingers; making sure the garlic and parmesan and parsley were all being incorporated. This was my Italian grandmother's method. We had grown up eating predominately Italian food, cooked by my nonna and my mother.

"See the bread cubes in the bowl there." I said adding the dried oregano. "The bread has been soaking in milk. That's your great-grandmother's secret. Soaking the bread in milk before adding it to the ground meat……and lots of cheese. Make sure to add a generous amount of parm."

Mac stood at the counter watching me roll the mixture into balls and then placing them on a cookie tray.

"Your nonna would have fried these in a bit of oil. But I always bake them in the oven." I added this caveat because Mac was a foodie. I knew he'd make my grandmother's Italian meatballs at some point. He'd appreciate the difference in texture and flavour between a meatball that had been fried and baked.

I'm not sure if he was genuinely interested or merely humouring his mother. But he seemed to make a mental note. It was important for me to share this recipe with Mac. Family and support and unwavering love were all ingredients in this recipe. It had been passed down from my nonna to me. I wanted Mac to have the knowledge as well.

I popped the tray into the oven and went on cooking. In fact, I cooked something for Mac each morning. By the end of the week, I had a freezer full of soup, sauce, meatballs and other things that Mac took home.

Each morning, as my coffee brewed on the stove, I'd pack up a lunch for him to take to work. He said by the third day, the guys at the mine would all watch him as he unpacked a lunch that didn't look like any they had in their lunch boxes. Mac told me they 'oohed' the day he took out a meatball sub with mozzarella, a side salad and a big slice of banana bread. I wondered if he was embarrassed taking a lunch that his mother clearly made and packed for him.

"Are you kidding? Everyone's jealous. One guy even offered to buy it from me yesterday."

Along with clothes for the week, Mac had brought his bass guitar and his amp down to the B and B. In the evenings we'd often sit in the sunroom together. I did some knitting and Mac would play his bass. He'd practice a familiar song I knew or play me something original he had been working on. We'd watch the floatplanes come and go off the lake in front of us.

One morning at around 1:30, I heard a light tap on my bedroom door.

"I can see the lights tonight mom," came Mac's voice on the other side of the door.

It took me a moment to figure out what was happening.

"Oh, great!" I said as I shuffled around to put on a sweater and trackpants.

"They're not great, but you'll be able to see them." He said as he went back to bed and pulled the covers up to his ears.

I slipped outside and scurried up the huge round rock that jutted up beside our cabin. Millions of years of wear and tear had smoothed the pink rock into a rolling hill. I laid down and watched the green and yellowish lights of the aurora borealis float and dance high above me. It might have been a less than glorious display, but it felt magical to me. There I was, under a sky of northern lights, up high above the sleeping town. I loved being so far north. So far away from the rest of the world. I loved being here with Mac.

Mac worked a couple of half days and took some other days off entirely. We hiked the Ingraham Trail one afternoon. He brought both his kayaks down to the B and B and we went for a few paddles together. We got groceries together, meandered in the bookstore, made meals and watched a movie on Netflix. We shared a platter at the little Ethiopian hole in the wall restaurant downtown and one sunny and warmer afternoon, sat on the patio of Bullock's and had their incredible fish and chips. The magic in all of this for me was that in many ways, we passed an ordinary week, doing ordinary things. There were so many times I was never sure if I'd do anything ordinary with Mac ever again.

"You worry too much mom." He said to me one afternoon when we were driving in his truck. "You can't live life worried all the time."

He wasn't angry when he said it but I sensed his frustration. I wasn't sure how to respond. How could he possibly understand what it was like to be a parent so afraid of losing their child? Was this the moment where I try to explain how his lifestyle and life choices have been horrifyingly unbearable and has caused me to lose years of sleep? Did I try to make him see that any parent would be worried if their child had been going through what he was going through? How afraid I was every time he called me? Did I tell him he'd told me things that continue to haunt me?

"Every parent just wants their children to be happy and healthy, sweetie. And it's hard sometimes when life is tough on them. But I am working at seeing the joy in life……I'm working really hard."

I replayed that conversation over and over and second guessed my decision to keep my thoughts to myself. Maybe another parent would have laid it all out, I just didn't think it would help Mac at all if he knew the toll his addiction had had on me. This was supposed to be about him, not his mother.

The night before I flew home we took the kayaks for one last spin. Even though it was well past the summer solstice, the lingering setting sun allowed us to paddle late into the evening.

"It's choppy on Slave Lake mom". Mac said confidently. "That usually means Back Bay will be calmer. Let's head that way."

I loved that Mac was so familiar with the rhythms and patterns of nature. We got into our crafts and headed around the point of land to Back Bay. We passed a few homes

on the rocky shore, but mostly we passed pristine land that hadn't been touched or harmed by humans. Mac said he loved that he could paddle so close to town and yet still be so far away from any sign of development.

"Down in Southern Ontario, all this lakefront property would be built on," he speculated.

He was probably right. I had been paddling for years and never seen so much untouched shoreline. I could see why he loved it up here.

We rounded the most eastern point and headed into Back Bay. The sun's angle cast a warm, sepia light across the water. Floatplanes took off and landed in the distance. We kayaked through long chartreuse-coloured grass that was fine and hollow and made a beautiful sound, like rain pelting a windowpane, as it tapped the sides of our boats. The grass was thin but abundant. I stopped to collect some. I'd take it home with me and dry it. A couple of times I lost Mac and his kayak among the tall green shoots. I'd scan the water. The low light, not ready to set, still casting a golden filter in front of me. Magic.

Click, click. I took a few pictures on my cellphone.

Click, click. I snapped one or two of Mac weaving through the long grass, backlit by the setting sun.

Click. I wanted to freeze time.

## Notes from a Mother

"I think I'm beginning to settle in." I said to Mac over the phone one October afternoon as I was just finishing up the dishes in the sink.

He had called me to say hello and to see how the new school year was unfolding for me in Ottawa. Mac called almost weekly recently now. Seeing his name and phone number on my screen was becoming less worrisome. The conversation shifted.

"Sometimes I still have moments of panic." He tried to explain.

But I didn't understand. Mac was such a relaxed character; I didn't think there was anything that could ever bother him. "You're so chill, sometimes I have to check for a pulse." I had teased in the past. "What do you mean 'still'?"

"There are times when I'm fine and then the next minute I'm in a panic. I have flashbacks…. The places I've been, the people I was with, the situations I've been in." His voice quieted.

How to respond, I quickly asked myself. Don't freak out. Be supportive. "That sounds like PTSD to me sweetie." I said softly.

Silence lingered through the phone. Of all the things I had imagined, Mac suffering flashbacks about his drug use wasn't one of them. How does anyone get over seeing the things he has seen and doing the things he has done? I guessed that numbing those feelings and flashbacks with a substance of some kind would have been rather tempting.

"Sometimes going into a bathroom stall in a restaurant or pub is really challenging too." he added.

I was still learning so much about addiction and how Mac was navigating his own journey to health. "Do you want to go to someone and talk about any of this?" I asked. "I'm sure you have coverage through work, don't you Mac?"

"I do have coverage. But I don't want to talk to anyone. I have good strategies. I just have to keep using them."

Maybe now was the time for me to finally share. "You know I often feel panicky when you call me sweetie."

"Really?" he asked, genuinely surprised.

"Think about it. Think about all the scary calls I've received over the years. Calls on New Years morning. Calls from a drug house in Ottawa. A call when you used needles found in the back of a truck." There was silence and so I continued. "A lot of the calls have been nerve-racking, sweetie".

He paused for a long time. I'm sure I could almost hear him playing back everything we'd been through, but this time looking at it from my point of view. At that moment, I felt he might just have an inkling of what I'd been experiencing the last five years. He might never know until he was a parent, but I felt like he was beginning to understand how terrifying this has all been for his mother. Then in true Mac style he laughed his mischievous, devilish laugh that I loved so much.

"Yeah, I guess you're right mom. You have received a lot of shitty calls. That's gotta suck."

I wiped the tears away with the tea towel I had swung over my shoulder. "Yeah Mac…….sometimes it does."

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Like most stories, Mac's and mine doesn't end here. It continues to ebb and flow like a river carving its way through the land on its long journey out to the sea. Mac continues to live in the North, cook moose stew, ice- fish, hike the Canadian Shield, pluck out tunes on his bass and fight to break the back of addiction. And me, his mother, stands on the sidelines. I continue to dig deep in order to cheer for him every step of the way.

## Reflections and Lessons Learnt

His cheeks were scarlet, his eyes glazed and half closed. My son lay in my arms, trying to find sleep. I waited rather impatiently for the Tylenol to take effect, hoping his fever would begin to drop. My baby had grown so much quicker than I ever thought imaginable. I looked down at him now and remember swaddling him as a newborn. It was just a blink ago. How had this happened? Yet on nights like this one, when a spiking fever in the middle of the night made him vomit all over the two of us and all our bedding, it felt like the feeling of safety and clarity that morning brings would never come. Time was clever I thought. It played tricks on me, oscillating back and forth. Too fast. Too slow. Too fast. Too slow.

There was less room in my lap for him now. My abdomen growing bigger by the week. His little brother or sister would be born soon. It was just the two of us home. His father worked shifts and was out on an over-night. We dozed fitfully on and off. When he'd wake and cry, I would give him sips of water. Occasionally we'd try a bit of ice-cold juice. He was so uncomfortably miserable. Being in his mother's arms didn't calm him. The only thing that kept his mind off his discomfort were stories. There was a stack of storybooks on my nightstand. When he woke and couldn't settle, I'd grab a book from the pile and read. He would sip his water or juice and lay in my arms while I read him back to sleep. It was stories that soothed him on nights like these.

As he grew, the chunky board books turned to storybooks and then to chapter books. I read to him and his brother in the bath and in the highchair and every night

before bed. When I was driving, I'd push a CD into the car's stereo system and we would listen to audio books. The Boxcar Children, Judy Blume, Beverley Cleary and Flat Stanley. *How to Eat Fried Worms* was their favourite. For my older son's ninth birthday I got us tickets to see Stuart McLean on stage. We sat in an auditorium full of adults and senior citizens listening to McLean's stories. After the show we stood patiently in line to purchase the latest CD and have Stuart McLean autograph it.

Storytelling has been part of my children's lives since infancy. Could this be why I felt the best way to navigate everything I have experienced with my son through a narrative? Writing my story was emotionally painful and exhausting. The first eighty percent of the book was hell. I had pushed what had happened to my son down to the basement of my brain. I had packed away some of the incidents like going to visit him at college and my weekly meeting at CAMH into big plastic bins – and sealed them up tight. When writing the memoirette, I was forced to open those bins and revisit memories and worse, the feelings those memories conjured up. At times I didn't think I could write another word or finish a chapter. When the story was dark and I wasn't sure I could write anymore, what saved me was knowing that I'd be writing about the time we spent together in Yellowknife this past summer. The last couple of chapters saved me.

The American novelist Stephen King (2010, p. 49) writes every day. The easier work, the reading he does, is reserved for afternoons. But the tough work, the writing, is done each and every morning. He has followed this regimen for decades. As I endeavoured to write this narrative I tried to follow a routine not as vigorous, but in the

spirit of Steven King. I would sit down at my desk and write the body, the real meat of the memoirette in the mornings.

Stephen King's first paid writing gig was as a sports reporter for a local weekly rag called The Lisbon Weekly Enterprise. His editor, John Gould gave what King declares is the best advice he's ever received as far as writing goes. This is when you're writing your first draft – write it with the 'door closed' and write it for yourself (King, 2010, p. 57). This is how I wrote "Story is Medicine". I shut the door and wrote from my gut. I unabashedly wrote about the things that scare me most. I wrote about my nightmares and about the urges to hit strangers in the face. My goal was to get my feelings and nightmares out of me and up onto the page. It was 'just for me' writing. I never once worried what my thesis advisor or committee members would think. There was a force bigger than me and my fears pushing me to write. I think when we're writing for ourselves and only ourselves; this is where the emotions flow. The story was tangled up inside of me and I felt compelled to get it out.

At times it was like the story had "a life of its own" (Archibald, 2008, p. iv). I would start out having a sense of where the story would go. I had a chronological outline, but not much more than that. Putting the first sentence or two down on the page was the difficult part. But once I began writing, the story unfolded and a narrative grew on the pages in front of me.

I noticed the chapter I was currently writing would stay with me throughout the day; simmering like a pot of soup on the back burner. Then an interesting thing would

happen. A turn of phrase or a better and stronger line would work its way into my consciousness even when I was doing something else. As I paddled in the Gatineau or cycled along the Ottawa River, a strong line would come to me. It was in my unconscious that the poetry would percolate. I'd find myself playing with the lengths of sentences, alliteration and other poetic devices.

Poet and professor Carl Leggo (2008, p. 169) explained that poetry invites an interactive response between the intellectual and the emotional and aesthetic response. He further suggests that it has been Western tradition to separate aspects of the self (emotion) and the mind (intellect). Poetry marries the self and mind. Poetry has the ability to stir deep within us. It moves us – creating a deeper relationship with thoughts and ideas than essay ever could. I have written the memoirette with poetry in mind. I have written about sunlight on the streets of Toronto and in Yellowknife. I have intentionally personified the sunflower when I wrote about lifting my face to the sun. I wrote about the sounds that the kayak made weaving its way through the lake grass. All of these were ways I attempted to bring poetry into my writing.

Audre Lorde (1984, p. 55) said that this is 'the erotic' – which comes from the 'Eros', a Greek word, meaning 'born of chaos'. She explains that chaos is a fusion of creative power and harmony. Lorde said that the 'erotic' is found in history, dance and even in work. The erotic, or fusion of power and harmony can also be felt in storytelling. As cited by Leggo, American novelist, essayist and poet Barbara Kingsolver suggests that poems are everywhere (2008, p. 171). She argues that poems are in stories, advertising

and even political manifestos. I think about the songs that move me. They are songs written by Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell. It is their poetry that stirs and sometimes even haunts me, not their chord arrangements. When I think about great advertisements during the Superbowl, I don't remember the product their peddling; I remember the story they are telling. Reflecting on the craft of writing, Stephen King (2010) says that great storytelling happens through powerful, thoughtful and feeling language (p. 59). This combination of story and feeling produces narrative poetry.

I worked for a couple of years in a Parliamentary newsroom in Ottawa. I learnt a lot about writing in the two years I spent there. One of the biggest things the Bureau Chief drilled into all our heads is encapsulated in the simple phrase 'show don't tell'. He wanted his journalists to take him 'into the room' and to 'paint him a picture. He didn't want us to say 'it's cold outside', he wanted us to show him by what we saw and what we heard people saying.

Stephen King's bandmate and close friend Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club*, says that when she's on a book tour and is participating in the Q & A sessions after the reading, no one asks her about 'the language' (2010, p.8). The two writers both agree that they have a much harder time getting the language right than they do the plot. The poetry is the part of the story they play with.

Adding the poetry to my own writing was just as important as the story for me. It was in the poetry of the writing that I intended to have the reader feel the emotion I was feeling. I attempted to do this by bringing the reader into my space. I wrote about

intimate moments of being in my car, my apartment, the therapy sessions and the café. I wanted to convey state of mind and emotion. I didn't want to tell the reader; I wanted to show the reader. I attempted to do this by writing about my environment and surroundings. I wrote about the sounds of rain on the window and the smells inside the café. Writing about sounds and smells are the brushstrokes of the painting which lead to a more visceral piece of writing.

Telling this story was so emotionally draining for me. I had to break the sequences of events down into smaller, digestible chunks. Although I usually love to write, sometimes I had to talk myself into writing *Story is Medicine*. I found that some days I had to negotiate and I did this by having self-dialogues. I reminded myself that I didn't need to tell the whole story all at once. I simply needed get that single idea, situation or occurrence down on the page and the rest of story would wait. Following my own advice and writing to my outline wasn't always easy. My brain would sometimes scramble ahead. Like a racehorse out of the gate, the story wanted to bolt down the track. Reining the story in and controlling its power and energy was a struggle at times. My strategy for this was to write shorter and tighter chapters. If I could contain one idea or one event to a chapter, I found I had much more control over the narrative. It also felt good to see chapters building in the folder on my desktop. Once I had written the first two or three chapters, the ones that followed came easier and with more control.

I also wanted to make sure I wrote my story – and not my son's. It was never my intention to describe in too much detail what he was going through or what he was doing

to his own body. This was challenging at times. Although I did describe a few instances with his interactions with needles and drugs, I feel that most those experiences are really for him to tell. What I tried to do in *Story is Medicine* instead was to explain how his experiences were affecting me. My goal was to document how the lifestyle of someone battling addiction was affecting their mother.

Writing *Story is Medicine* has made me feel that my journey of having a son struggling with addiction has legitimacy. This is the first time I have shared many of the stories of what my son and I have been through. Before writing this memoirette, there have been times when I have felt I am lucky or at least not as bad off as a parent whose child is living on the streets. Other times I have felt I haven't had the right to be so scared or upset because my child is still alive. Writing and reading the story back to myself, I am able to start recognizing the hell I've been living. Without feeling sorry for myself, I can see how difficult life has been for the last six years. I recognize that I do have a right to feel as petrified and profoundly sad as I have. Writing my story has made it all feel more real.

Indigenous author, lecturer and educator, Thomas King (2003) says that "the truth about stories is that is all we are" (p. 153). If this is the case, then as I read *Story is Medicine* back to myself, I begin to see who I am. I do see that I am a mother who loves her son more than anything else in the whole world. But I see more than that now. I see that like my oma and her mother, I am strong. I have also begun to understand that I have navigated my son's addiction incredibly well with very little help or support. This

wasn't because I didn't want the help, it is because when I screamed out in desperation, no one answered. As much as my siblings said they wanted to help, they couldn't really identify with how I was feeling. Some friends stopped calling. I noticed so many friends backed away when I really could have used help and support. Not only did I not get support from the professors at University, they made it extremely difficult for me to get through the program and graduate. Even at CAMH, I didn't get the support I was looking for. Despite all these obstacles, I pushed through pain and fear and exhaustion to give my child the support I thought he needed and deserved.

Cree scholar Neal McLeod states that "telling, listening and retelling stories is a way of coming home" (McCall, Rede, Gaertner & L'Hirondelle, 2017, p.4) and that they act as vehicles to transmit information and link generations. Adding my grandmother's stories of the famine, revolution and her escape to the memoirette has allowed me to not only share how her stories of survival and strength helped me through my own dark times, but I think it is a written example of how my family has connected through story. Stories of survival were shared with her by her mother and then given to me. The stories of strength and hope were passed down from one generation to another. Adding her experiences to the memoirette has allowed me to highlight a pattern of inner strength that has been passed down through my family.

"'Deep learning' involves knowledge gained through direct teaching – and not necessarily in schools" (Gee, 1996, as cited in Haig-Brown, 2010, p. 136). Throughout the course of writing, rewriting and editing *Story is Medicine,* so much personal 'deep

learning' has occurred. I have learnt about myself as a mother and a person. I have learnt about my own perseverance and strengths. I have learnt about my darkest fears and about what makes me the most happy.

The purpose of writing *Story is Medicine* was not one of self-indulgence. Nor was it one of self-harm (although at times, I did wonder why I was revisiting and reliving such painful memories). I endeavoured to write this memoriette to explore firsthand, the powers of storytelling; to experience the act of writing this narrative and to see the medicinal properties that stories could have on me. Ultimately, I've come out the other end of this story feeling happy with my writing and work as well as a believer in story as medicine. I feel lighter. I feel healthier.

"Stories can play in teaching, learning and healing" (Archibald, p. 85). I learnt through my grandmother's stories that I come from a lineage of strength. Reflecting on the time I spent on her lap, I knew I had always been entertained by her stories of 'the old country', but I hadn't seen the stories as teacher. Now that I realize my grandmother's stories have a foundational role in who I am as a mother and how I navigate stressful and harrowing experiences. I see a direct connection between what my grandmother and her family lived through leaving the USSR and how I was able to manage living through my own nightmare. There were times I'd get up in the morning and think about how scared I was for my son and for me. Looking back, I don't know how I studied full time and held down a job and did the all the things a mom does for her family. But I also never understood how my great-grandmother survived all those years

without much to eat. I don't know how she was able to stand up to men pointing rifles in her face. But somehow when I was in the thick of it all, like her, I had the strength to get through the day. I got up each morning and knew I'd be able to push through.

I am intrigued by the article by Anne Bell, "A Narrative Approach to Research". In the introduction, she cites environmental historian and writer, William Cronon (2003**,** p.95) who says that the "narrative is fundamental to the ways in which humans organize experiences". Through the experience of writing *Story is Medicine* I see my instincts with regards to interacting with and supporting my son have been good ones. Reflecting on this writing, I have taught myself I am a smart, kind and strong mother. Many people told me to break ties with my son. Some told me if he really wanted to stop, he would. I recall another night when a good friend told me he was an adult and he needed to figure this out on his own. But I chose to follow the strong feelings I had to support and love my son through his highs and his lows. I chose to be proud of how hard he was working at slaying the addiction dragon. Looking back, I wouldn't change much of what I did in response to my relationship with my son. And that makes me proud of myself too. Reading the memoirette back to myself, I see a few themes emerge that I hadn't realized were in my story.

There is no doubt that these past years have been hard. Before my son's health challenges, navigating a nasty divorce and deciding to go back to school whilst being a single mother with very limited income was already hard. Mac's crisis made a tough life a

little bit tougher. Reflecting on this memoirette, I see a theme of land not as escape, but as medicine.

The year I lived in downtown Toronto and attended university and the CAMH program, I'd head down to Queen's Quay every chance I could get. Between working and studying full time, I had very little free time. But whenever I had a couple of hours to myself, I'd head to the water and sit on a little concrete wall. When it got warm enough, I'd rent a kayak at the Canoe and Kayak Club and paddle out to and around Toronto Island. It was the summer the island was flooded. No ferries ran. The zoo wasn't open. The island was pretty much deserted. I could paddle through the bogs and along the shore of the island without seeing a single person. More birds came to the island that summer and I'd float quietly in my kayak and listen to them call and respond.

When I moved to Peterborough, I'd paddle the nearby Kawartha Lakes every moment I could. I'd be out in my craft as early as April (with ice still floating across the lake's surface) and be paddling well into October. One autumn I paddled on the first weekend of November.

My favourite is Stony Lake. It has thousands of soft pink rocks that have rolled up to the surface. They've always looked like the backs of brontosauruses to me. Sometimes I'd pull up on one of the rocks and take out a snack. I'd sunbathe for a bit and then dive in for a swim. I always rub the rock, the back of the brontosaurus, and tell myself this is the same smooth pink rock that reaches all the way up to Yellowknife. This is the same ribbon of rock Mac is hiking on. The rocks connect me to my boy.

When I am scared or unsure or anxious – I am not drawn to florescent lights and the business of malls. I'm not interested in going into busy cafes. I retreat to the forests – and the quiet lakes – both when I lived in the Kawartha region and even now that I am living in Ottawa.

Meech Lake is a short drive from my apartment. I pack a lunch and book and head out for the day. I dip my paddle and pull the water. Dip my paddle and pull the water – the rhythm and the motion are soothing. My heart rate slows. My breathing becomes more relaxed. The grip of my stressed-out tunnel vision loosens. I swim most days I go out for a paddle now. I create a similar rhythm with my body. Dip my arm, pull the water. Eyes closed, I feel weightless and free.

Besides kayaking, yoga is an activity I also do barefoot. I'm sometimes guided to draw the prana (energy) from the earth up through my feet and into my body. I close my eyes and see life's energy moving from the ground and up into the souls, then through my legs, torso, arms, face and head. This calms me. But why wouldn't it. I am literally *grounded*. Some synonyms for the adjective 'grounded' are alive, awake, conscious, mindful and wise. The earth's energy has the power to do all these things.

Food is another example of land's power to help and heal. When I was up in Yellowknife with my son, I'd cook with him and for him. It was important I showed him how to prepare traditional food my grandmother had taught me to cook. One day I was walking uptown and I passed a wild patch of raspberries. I jumped into the bush among the prickly rasps and picked all the little red berries I could. It would have been easier to

have just bought some at the supermarket up the road. But I wanted to take the time to forage. On a hike one afternoon, Mac pointed out the plant he called Labrador Tea. We picked it together and took it home to steep it that night. We also collected tiny Arctic Cranberrries from a low growing bush along one part of the trail. They were tart. Mac told me he picked these scarlet berries and liked to add them to his morning oatmeal when he was out camping on his own. These were magical moments. I loved to learn about the lake and berries and fauna from Mac.

"In a study of berry harvesting amoung Gwich'in women, Brenda Parlee [explains] that berry picking connects these women to their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual selves, to each other and to the land" (as cited by Kermoal, 2016, p. 118). What I understand now is something that these women have known for generations – that the process is just as powerful as the product. I see that the berries themselves are only part of the medicine. I have experienced the medicine that comes from taking time to pick leaves and berries, from taking time to cook together and taking time to paddle and walk with my son.

When Mac had overdosed and was lying in my bed, I went and got him soup. When I visited him each week at college, our time together revolved around eating sushi and grocery shopping for the rest of the week. When he was far away and had called in despair, I couldn't hug him, hold him or be there for him. So I ordered take out and had it delivered to him at home. When I visited him in Yellowknife, we cooked together and I shared family recipes. There is no doubt that I cook and prepare food as a way to show

my love for people – especially my sons. This makes me wonder about my grandmother's mother. She had very little food to offer her hungry children. She scraped together flour, seeds and coffee grounds to offer them something other than bread and broth. It must have been a desperate feeling not to be able to feed your own children.

At the top of my work I identified myself as a hybrid; half Mennonite and half Italian. This hybridity serves me well as a mother. The Italian part of me has that instinct to grab hold of my son, pull him tight, feed him a big bowl of pasta and then be there to wipe the sauce off of his chin. My Mennonite instincts are different. That's the part of me that reminds me to slow down, give him space, give him time to come to you, don't judge him and love him just the way he is. Being a hybrid-mama, I have different instincts that seem to be polar opposites of each other. But navigating this journey trying to support my son, I see they worked in tandem with each other – like Two-Eyed Seeing is meant to.

Singer and songwriter Adele said in her interview with CBC radio show Q's host Tom Power, that we don't write beginnings or endings of our lives. We write the middles (2021). I think we can tell a lot from our 'middles'. When I'm golfing, I'm usually pretty tight and nervous off the first tee. By the eighteen hole, I'm often tired and sometimes I've even lost a bit of focus. But my game is never lost or won here. When I'm playing at my best and my scores are the lowest, I've been strong through those middle sixteen

holes. In other words, I've had a hell of a strong middle. *Story is Medicine* is the middle of the narrative of life with my son. So far the middle with my son looks awfully strong.

## A Few Words About Addiction

There is a story about a group of rats that spent time in an unusual space. The enclosure was so novel and so engaging, that the environment and what happened within its walls is now simply known as 'Rat Park'. The story goes like this:

Canadian psychologist Bruce Alexander from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia had been studying addiction in rats' brains. In 1978, he decided to build a huge enclosure for the lab rats. It wasn't just a big space, it was the Disney World of enclosures. The rats had wheels in which to run, plants and tunnels to explore and lots of rat-friends with whom they could play. Alexander didn't just make 'Rat Park' for fun. This was an elaborate experiment in which he compared the behaviours of typical lab-rat, those that lived alone in cold, wire cages, with the behaviours of the 'Rat Park' rats.

The experiment was quite straight forward. Alexander placed bottles of plain water as well as ones with a water-morphine mixture in both the wire cages for the single rats and in the 'Rat Park' enclosure. His observations are detailed (Foddy, B. & Savulescu, J., 2010). He explains that the water morphine mixture is a little bit bitter and so they add sugar to the solution. The psychologist describes how the rats in 'Rat Park' play and interact with each other and run on their little wheels and how they sleep together in little rat packs. He also explains what happens to the rats in the cold wire cages. But his fascinating findings have influenced how many psychologists are approaching addiction-therapies today (Lewis, 2016). That story will have to wait for a moment.

There are two main models for addiction (Foddy, B. & Savulescu, J., 2010) that divide therapists, doctors and specialists. These two camps have opposing views about what addiction really is. On one side, there is the 'addiction is a disease' model and on the other is 'addiction is not a disease'. Psychologists and neuroscientists have been debating this for years (Lewis, 2015; Foddy, B. & Savulescu, J., 2010). Lectures have been given, journal articles and books have been written about the subject (Lewis, 2015; Lautieri, 2022; Docket & Simon, 2017). Defending one side or the other would be the work of an entire thesis. Never once did I refer to my son as having a disease. This was an intentional decision. I said he was ill and unwell and had an illness. But I stayed away from using the word 'disease' in the memoirette, *Story is Medicine*.

The 'disease' model might be beneficial for some members of society. Over the last decade or so, people battling addiction seem to be treated less harshly and with more sympathy by law enforcement agencies and the legal system (Foddy, B. & Savulescu, J., 2010, p. 11). Chief of Waterloo Regional Police says his police department and others across Canada are starting to see 'addicts' not as criminals, but as people with mental health conditions (Pfeffer, A., 2021). And the 'disease' model has influenced how people with addiction are criminally charged as well as jail sentencing (Foddy, B. & Savulescu, J., 2010, p. 4).

This chapter does not endeavour to figure out which theory is correct. Nor does it attempt to convince the reader to take up an opinion in either camp. Because the theoretical model of addiction really isn't important for me, the mother of a son

struggling with addiction. Regardless of whether addiction is a disease or not, I am still afraid of losing my son and I am still deeply worried about him having a happy and healthy life. However, what happened in 'Rat Park' is important. What Alexander found in that beautiful rat-amusement park *is* important to me.

When the rats were isolated and in boring and unengaging cold wire cages, they favoured the morphine drink to the bottles of water (Foddy, B. & Savulescu, J., 2010). But interestingly, the rats in 'Rat Park' did not. The rats in the enclosure full of engaging things to do and filled with little rat-friends chose the water over the morphine. Even when Alexander added the sugar to the slightly bitter morphine-water, the rats in 'Rat Park' chose the water. The experiment and findings are regarded by Marc Lewis (2015, p,21), a Canadian neuroscientist and as well as other addiction-therapist, as a living example of how to support someone who is struggling with addiction. And this is important to me, the mother of a boy who is battling addiction. Through our whole journey, I always wanted to make sure that I was doing everything I could to help my son.

Johann Hari is an American-Swiss journalist and author. His Ted Talk: *Everything You Know about Addiction is Wrong* has been viewed over nine million times. Hari, who went to interview Bruce Alexander, the 'Rat Park' professor, presents the idea that America's abstinence drug- model as well as the punitive approach to drug addiction is completely backward (2015, 1:55). I know first had because my own son was enrolled in and then kicked out of an abstinence-model rehabilitation program. And he also attended AA and NA meetings. None of these programs worked for him. He ended up

being kicked out of one and feeling like an outsider in antoher. He rather astutely pointed out to me on one of our hikes, that going to AA is focussed on how many days he was sober. The moment he slipped up, he had to start back over at zero. He wouldn't end up returning to any of them.

Hari says to look at a successful model and approach to battling drug addiction, we need to look at what a little country in Europe is doing. Portugal has completely decriminalized all drugs; everything from marijuana to cocaine and heroin. Portugal now looks at drug addiction not with regards to the chemicals people are putting into their bodies, rather, they are looking at people struggling with addiction as being in the equivalent of one of Alexander's rats in their cold, lonely and isolated cage (2015, 6:15).

Portugal has taken all the funding and resources they used to use for drug enforcement and criminalization and have put it into social programs for people battling addiction. The story they present here is that people battling addiction need places to live, jobs, counselling and to feel connected to others. Most importantly, they need opportunities to develop healthy and supportive networks. In Portugal, the addiction story is being rewritten. Stigmatization and the shame around drug addiction as a result has been reduced. People battling addiction aren't as isolated. They are surrounded by the support of caring people. They have been taken out of lonely cold cages and instead have been put in warm, engaging, stimulating, loving, accepting environments; like the rats of 'Rat Park'.

I'm not entirely sure what kinds of specific reactions my son has received over the course of his battle with drug addiction. His reaction when we were walking into the bank that Wednesday afternoon in 2016 tells me a little bit about his experience. I know by the way he completely fell apart that day on the sidewalk that he has felt deep shame and humiliation. He also told me about how he felt when each day he took one or two of his possessions; his turn table, his records, his gold chain, and walked them down to the pawn shop a couple of blocks away. I imagine that using all your pawned money for Fentanyl and then needing to go to the local food bank to feed yourself would also have been demoralizing. He has told me a little bit about the embarrassment and shame he felt when I was away in New Zealand and without telling anyone, he went to get food at the food bank. I can understand how escaping all of this to the warm and blissful hug he says that Fentanyl offers would be a strong draw.

I also know how my child and I have been treated by some of our family and friends. Some family members really struggled with their understanding of what he has been going through. A very close family member continually told me that my son just needed to try harder. Comments like these just made me feel more ashamed and isolated. I was very selective about how many people I spoke to about my son's struggles. I did decide to tell some of my then close friends. Many of them cut ties. I have lost most of my closest friends who seemingly don't want to have anything to do with me anymore. I suppose I was guilty by association. I felt like we were outcasts. I too have been put in a social wire cage.

Without realizing what I was doing, I offered my son as much love, support and acceptance as I could possibly muster. As I mentioned in my memoirette, I was never mad at him. I never once lost my patience. I reacted the same way I did when he was flushed with fever or when he had the stomach flu. I just assumed this is how every mother would treat a child who was suffering. But when I got to the CAMH program, I realized that wasn't the case. I had assumed every parent saw their child as someone who was ill and needed help. But most of the parents in my group were angry and upset with their kids.

I often thought that I never got mad at him because his behaviour was different. I told myself that perhaps if I had caught him stealing money from me or taking my jewellery or electronics and selling them for drug money, well then of course I would have been angry. I thought the nature of his behaviour is what kept me from ever getting angry with him. I rationalized that I was lucky we never had to go through situations like that. But I'm also not naive. I know my son didn't tell me everything. I do think that there were probably some occasions when he told me he needed money for groceries or for schoolbooks or rent and he may have used the money I sent for drugs. I assume that things have been left out in the retelling of some of his stories. I'm not sure why I never got angry. I sometimes think that maybe my pacifist Mennonite DNA helped me remain loving and unjudgmental. I am proud of the interactions I have had with my son.

Family and friends also put great pressure on me to tell my son about my fears and worry. There was even discussion at the CAMH support group as how to tell the

'addict' how their behaviour was affecting you. I recall a friend telling me it was the only way for my child to see how his addiction was negatively impacting my life. But I held off telling him. I resisted the idea because I didn't want to burden my child with any more pain. I was sure he was able to guess how a mother would be feeling in my situation. I didn't think he needed the added guilt of being responsible for my sleepless nights and all my worry. I figured that telling him this would add to his burden and only make him feel worse about himself. In retrospect, I'm so glad I waited. And I'm grateful we were both able to laugh about how worrisome it was for me to see his name appear on my cellphone. In both instances, my instincts as a mother served me well.

Indigenous writer, lecturer and scholar, Thomas King tells the story *'The Woman Falling from the Sky'*. The main character is Charm, a woman pregnant with twins and looking for a place to raise her children. It is a beautiful creation story of how animals work together (King, T. 2003, p. 12). One little otter eventually grabs a handful of mud from the water's depths. The mud becomes the land where cooperative creatures work and play together with humour and love and in a complementary world. King compares the Indigenous creation story of Charm to the creation story in the Old Testament. In this story, man and woman are pitted against each other. It is a life not seen as complementary, but as one of extreme opposites: man versus woman, light versus dark and good versus evil. Thomas King laments on what life would be like if we looked at life through the Indigenous creation story and not the Western Old Testament story. Would our world be less misogynistic if the story hadn't been about Eve being a sinner? Would

it be less violent if the story wasn't about the "hierarchical nature of Western religion and Western privilege" (King, 2003, p. 28). Would we have a more benevolent world if our creation story had been about caring and humour and love and cooperation and sharing?

I think about our world of opposites and how this influences how we look at addiction. Anecdotally, I have spoken to people in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) programs and they have referred to themselves as 'clean'. I have also heard people say they are 'clean and sober' or 'I have been sober for twelve years'. In this diametric world we've created, I wonder where it leaves people who are still using substances. If they're not 'clean', do they then qualify as 'dirty'? No wonder people with addiction feel such shame. The adjectives we have chosen to use have shaped this story.

I know what it is like to see my son battling addiction in this Western world of dichotomies. And I imagine life differently for someone battling addiction in Thomas King's '*Woman Falling from the Sky'* world. Charm, her twins and the animals would be less judgemental. They would be more embracing and supportive. They would have rallied around my son and me. They would have laughed and joked and they would have been there to pick us up when we stumbled.

## Conclusion

It was the year 1296 and the Republic of Florence was flourishing. Seven hundred years before Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the city-state decided they would flaunt their wealth and success the same way as every other city. They would build the biggest cathedral in the world.

After decades of work and generations of men who would not see the project through completion, the Republic realised they had a problem. Only the nave of Florence's Cathedral was covered. They had built the cathedral so massive that a dome one hundred and fifty feet wide was required to cover the apse. The structure would need to be built one hundred and eighty feet about ground and they estimated the dome would weigh about ten thousand pounds. No structure of this scale had ever been built before. So, the apse and altar sections of the church remained open. When the parish attended mass, they sat in their church exposed to the searing skies of summer and the chilling rains in the winter.

For one hundred and fifty years, the Florentine's waited. It wasn't new technology or knowledge that would eventually lead to their prayers being answered. Their dome was built with ancient methods. They hired an architect called Filippo Brunelleschi to finish their cathedral. The young artist was inspired by ancient art and architecture. He and Donatello travelled back to Rome to research and unearth forbidden archives and discovered knowledge the Catholic Church had deemed paganist. (Il Grande Museo del Duomo Florence, n.d.). In the next fifteen years, Brunelleschi was

able to cover the apse with il Duomo di Santa Maria del Fiore – or quite simply il Duomo, the largest dome in the world. This was done with knowledge that had been hidden, but not destroyed.

This is a story that could end here. If it did, then maybe it would be seen as a story about hope, or about the power of prayer. But I see it as a narrative that demonstrates the importance and influence of ancient knowledge; maybe even more specifically about lost and forbidden ancient knowledge.

Stories as research and knowledge are ancient ways of knowing and learning (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Now this is not an exact parallel, because unlike the knowledge lost in ancient Rome, the knowledge of the power of stories has never been lost to Indigenous people. But it is a story so beautiful, I just couldn't resist. And, to draw a closer parallel to the story of Il Duomo, the ancient knowledge of the power of story has been lost on many 'Western' academics. It wasn't until the brain scientists got out their wires and fMRI machines that they began to realise what many Indigenous cultures have known for millennia; stories teach, guide, heal and create connections.

I have experienced first-hand that stories have done all these things for me. As a mother and educator, the work I have done through this thesis has influenced how I think about passing on knowledge to my students and my own children. I have seen that passing down stories from one generation to another is an effective medicine to heal even the modern ills today.

When I first started analysing the idea of stories varying between the reader or the listener I thought about a kaleidoscope and how the glass beads fall differently as each person turns the cylinder, holds it up to the light and peeks in at the pattern. But I think a better comparison is if we look at stories like Rorschach ink blots. Each person sees something different. As a result, we each pull a different lesson from the same story.

Stó:lō elder Shirley Sterling explains the magical properties of story well. I've always had the sense that stories have their own life……because when you tell a story to a hunter, the hunter will take, interpret that story differently than say the basket maker. And the basket maker may remember other details. So the story takes on a life of its own and it travels from person to peron and it…..takes a different shape….Each person interprets slightly differently. (as cited in Archibald, J. , 2008 p. 97)

The medicine of story doesn't just change between the listeners, it changes over time. When I was a young girl I looked at the story of the famine from my oma's point of view. As she recounted her experience, I thought about sinking my teeth into that warm and crusty loaf. I thought about how delicious that freshly baked bun must have tasted. But now that I am a mother, that story has changed for me. I sit at the same table but in the place of my oma's mother. How did she feel to divide her own meal and give it to her children? How painful it must have been to see your children starving and have so little to offer them. What kind of strength did it take to be hopeful in such terrifying times?

As I think about story changing to meet listeners' needs and changing within the same person and they grow and mature, I see story as a unique medicine because no pharmaceutical has comparable medicinal properties.

Alexa Scully (2012) believes incorporating Indigenous pedagogy like storytelling will help empower Indigenous and settler students as well as teachers. She suggests that it could also be a better way for Indigenous students to achieve greater academic success. I believe that recognizing and actively accepting Indigenous methods offers much more.

Storytelling was not only a viable way of conducting research and presenting information, but an optimal way of doing so. Hungarian born mathematician and philosopher, Michael Polanyi, said that 'we know more than we can tell' (as cited in Eisner, 2008). Writing down the stories of my oma, my son and me, and reading them back, lessons have leaped off the page. I have written documentation now that we are a family of survivors and that my instincts are strong. By taking the reader along on my story, I have been able to share things I never thought I could share with anyone. I have given voice to a quiet story that bubbled inside of me and caused pain and loneliness. Sandra Weber (2008) said that creating art allows us to 'discover what we didn't know we already knew'. What a simple way of expressing something that is so complex and layered. Reading and considering this has allowed me to look at my story in new light. Writing the story of being that mother struggling to help her son and save herself uncovered feelings I didn't know I was having. This story has helped me see beauty and

joy where I never thought I would. I hadn't seen that we both loved cooking so much. I hadn't realized my son and I share a love of nature and find peace from being on the land. It has allowed me to see a closeness my son and I share. It has shown me that I am a good mother.

Hearing stories helps me understand, heal and forge a powerful bond with my son. I am drawn into his life, his emotions and his vulnerabilities. The neuroscience lens tells me that when my son shares stories and experiences, my brain ignites and fires in a way that mirrors his brain. When he tells a story about panicking in a washroom stall, fear in my brain fires too. When Mac shares the feelings of shame and humiliation he felt walking his possessions down the street to the Pawn Shop to get cash for a fix, I can physically feel shame and humiliation.

The Indigenous lens reminds me that the process is as important as the product. Making time to share story is valuable. For these deep and intimate stories to be shared, a trusting and caring environment is vital. Upon reflection, I recognize that my son must feel extremely safe in the space we share if he is able to share the stories he has.

Stories support and heal with their medicinal properties. Story allows us to hear and understand that we are not alone and that our experiences are not unique.
As I said earlier in this thesis, story is like a flight simulator or a dry run. Story allows us exposure to situations we haven't yet experienced first-hand. They are like a booster – an immunity-sized shot of pain, hardship, fear or despair. Just like allergy and booster

shots prime the immune system, these stories prime the brain. Stories give us a small dose of what ails us and as a result, stories ready the brain and act as a dress rehearsal for some of life's toughest trials.

Having sat and listened to my oma's stories over the course of my life, I can see I come from a long line of strong and resourceful women. I know that we can do hard things. I see that when the odds are stacked against us – the mothers in my family push through with kindness, perseverance and grace.

Reflecting on the memoirette and my own story and experience, I see my strong instincts to keep my son in my life instead of casting him aside is the right thing to do. I can see that creating an environment where he felt he could come to me and is loved and supported regardless of what has happened is the best medicine for him.

As educators, we should embrace the concept of Etuaptmumk or Two-Eyed Seeing. We have a responsibility to create a space for Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. We have a responsibility to name the knowledge as Indigenous Knowledge. We must remove the hierarchy from what we see as stories and storytelling as valuable and important pedagogy. Once we do this, we as educators have an opportunity to learn more about the first people on Turtle Island. We also have the opportunity to become better educators. We'll be able to reach students more effectively because more information will be retained. When we harness the magical powers of storytelling and bring it into our pedagogy and our curriculum, students brains will illuminate and fire just like Gallant's experimental subjects' brains did in the fMRI machines at Berkeley.

What could students learn about each other and about themselves if we wrote more stories in the classroom? Writing, teasing out themes and reflecting on my own story has taught me about myself and about how I nagivate the world. It has allowed me to see myself differently.

We also have the opportunity to become enlightened personally and professionally. We must begin to see Indigenous ways of knowing as the mainstream and not the alternative; as viable and powerful. Until Indigenous Knowledge is appropriately positioned and recognized, this will not happen.

Award winning Nigerian writer and storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shares a story from her childhood (2009). Her middle-class family had a houseboy called Fide. Adichie knew his family was poor. Sometimes, when she failed to finish the food on her plate, her mother would scold her and tell that Fide and his family didn't have food to waste like this. The image she had for the houseboy and his family was singular. They were poor. As a result, she felt pity for them.

It was strange for her then when one weekend she found herself at the home of Fide and his family. She saw was shocked to see a beautiful raffia basket that Fide's brother had woven. "It had never occurred to me that Fide and his family were anything but poor" (3:45).

"How vulnerable we are in the face of a story" Adichie cautions (2009, 1:30). And "the worst thing we can do is start a story with 'secondly'" (10:24). Adichie had not seen

that Fide's family was clever and skilled. The single story she had was that they were poor.

Similarly, what is the story we are told about addiction and the people who are battling it? I know the story I was told: Don't do it, don't try it, just say no. People who try and do drugs are bad and weak and lose their friends and family. They are 'addicts', not people battling addiction. They steal and lie and hurt everyone around them. They must hit 'rock-bottom'. They end up on the street. Their teeth fall out. They ruin their lives and then they die. They are not worthy of our time. They are a lost cause.

I also know the story I was told about what to do if someone you love is using drugs or about someone addicted to drugs. Gather people they care about. Hold an intervention. Take turns telling the person how their drug use has affected you. Put them on the spot. Shame them. No matter what it takes, get them into rehab. This is the one and only way to sobriety.

Thomas King writes a similar story. "We have stories we tell about Sanctioned Addictive Drugs and Banned Addictive Drugs" (King, T., p. 157). "The stories we tell about alcohol are romances. Wine is for lovers, single-malt scotch for successful entrepreneurs…The stories we tell about cigarettes are action adventures. We smoke to look cool…to say screw you" (p. 158). But what are the stories we tell about Banned Addictive Drugs? Those are stories of failure and loss, of weakness and death. "This is the danger of a single story" (Adichie, 13:57).

Yet, neuro and developmental psychologist Marc Lewis says that 85% of people who use drugs don't become addicted (2015, 12:11). "Of those who do become addicted, the majority of them stop. [And further], of those who do stop, the majority of them quit using drugs without any formal treatment" (12:30). Meaning, they stop on their own. I know that when I went to CAMH as a participant and patient in their 'family support' program, we were given a booklet through which to work. I cannot speak about how others in the group felt, but I know I felt like this booklet was supposed to be my guide. And it laid out the steps and stages of what it was like living with and loving someone who was battling addiction. I felt that if my feelings and experiences didn't match the charts and lists that were in that book, I was doing something wrong. And I was actually told by the program facilitator, not to trust myself and that I wasn't recognizing or understanding my own feelings. Why? What I was experiencing didn't fit into their booklet or their single story.

Nigerian storyteller, Ben Okri says "One way or another we are living stories planted in us early, or along the way, or…living stories we – knowingly or unknowingly-planted in ourselves" (as cited in King, T., 2003, p. 153).

I have known all along that my son is wonderful and loving and kind. I've also seen first-hand that when I've told someone about him battling addiction, they seem to forget about this part of his story and instead they choose to see "a single story of catastrophe" (Adichie, 4:40).

The wonderful and helpful counsellor at university sat and listened to me talk about me and Mac that afternoon when I was so desperate. He concluded that Mac 'was a unicorn'. What I understood this to mean was that Mac's story was unique because Mac was looking out for his mother and he was worried about her and how she was coping. Because even though he was using substances, hurting himself and selling everything he owned to get his next fix, he still loved and cared about how his mother was doing.

But what if Mac isn't a unicorn? What if some of the people addicted to drugs and alcohol and whatever else - what if they are worried about their moms too? What if many people addicted to drugs feel this way - and we just haven't heard their story? What if this is because we're too busy telling them the single story of addiction, instead of making space to listen to theirs?

When we are shown and told the same story repeatedly, it becomes a single story (Adichie, 9:30). The single story of addiction relegates people battling addiction and their families to the margins. The single story of addiction dehumanises. It is important to understand that there needs to be room for more stories like my son's story. There also needs to be room for more of their mother's stories. As well as stories of hope and love and kindness and healing. It is my intention that in sharing this story, I contribute to a body of work that tells a different story.

"Stories can control our lives" (King, T, 2003, p.8). Certainly, I have seen my son battling the story that he is an 'addict'. I have seen him fighting to break away from a story of bad decisions and wasted money and the loss of time. King says sometimes "I feel like I will be chained to these stories as long as I live" (p. 9). I worry too that my child will be chained to what has happened. But Marc Lewis, the neuropsychologist who treats people battling addiction and who was addicted himself looks at story not as a chain, but as a journey (2016). We must help them to see that they've been abusing drugs and maybe made some really bad decisions. Now they can continue their life and make other decisions and rewrite the narrative. Lewis says family and friends can throw a life raft to someone in the middle of the addiction storm. We can do this by helping them see "their life as a narrative" (58:14). Lewis is literally saying that one of the best ways I can support my son is to help him see that this stage of his life is just a single chapter of a long book that is his life. This is an example of how Western science and medicine are also seeing story as the way to healing. Lewis's theory is an example of Western theory in the Eptuaptmumk, Two-Eyed Seeing framework.

Writing the memoirette hasn't been a way to the end of my struggles, but it has been a way through. The best and most interesting parts of everyone's story isn't the beginning or the end, it's the middle. *Story is Medicine* is just that, it is *my* middle. Stories can be used to heal. Thomas King calls them 'saving stories' (2003, p. 119). They are stories of his own life he tells himself and his friends because they make him "feel alive". As life with my son goes on, I will continue to look back to the 'strong- women

stories' passed down from my oma to continue to navigate my life. I also now have *Story is Medicine* to reflect on and use as a narrative tincture. The story about Mac and me is far from over. For now, I will flip to a fresh, blank page. And I will keep on writing.

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