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1 i k e n e s s

m a g a z i n e

hello, stranger

Low Entropy is headquartered in Kwikwetlem First Nation Territory of the Coast Salish people, and in the shared territory of the sə́lilwətaʔt təməxʷ, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Stz'uminus, Qayqayt and S'ólh Téméxw nations.

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About Low Entropy: Founded in 2015, the Low Entropy Foundation is home to free programs and events that focus on personal and community growth through empowerment, authenticity and meaningful interpersonal connections.

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Foreword

There is a nothingness right in that thin film between contact and the conceptions of before. Before the onrush of assumptions and intuition—that's when we instinctively, compulsively try to make sense of things, because we have to, or . . . that way madness lies, I suppose—before we start gathering evidence of what is to come.

Because we don't know. One could argue that we never really do, but before it happens, we definitely don't. Our lives are lived in afterthoughts and feeble attempts at premonitions.

We encounter strangers, and their histories, their dimensions reveal themselves insofar as we are able to notice them, insofar as they are willing to share. This pattern repeats and we grow together, apart.

This volume revels in those instants when there are more questions than answers—eventually, those instances might remind us that there are always more questions than answers. We settle into this state of not knowing because it gives us the gift of tentative interpretation: we have the opportunity, here, to ask permission, to negotiate the import of knowledge.

I probably don't know you, and that is the beauty of this exchange. These are pieces of us, for you, stranger.



Editor, Low Entropy

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Hello Stranger

Shayan Afkari

She stood out like a forgotten page from another era, pressed against the cold steel of the subway car. Her crimson gown whispered of a distant century, yet she was surrounded by indifferent faces lost in the rhythm of the modern world.

No one dared to ask where she came from or why her gaze lingered as though she could see something no one else could. But when the doors slid open, and she stepped into the crowd, it was as if time itself held its breath.

"I confess to getting a real buzz when lucky enough to overhear my subject's conversations"

MY GUILTY PLEASURE

Jayne Seagrave

It is, of course, something of a guilty pleasure. We all do it to varying degrees, some with only a fleeting interest, with maybe only a passing thought. But for others it is a regular activity. An addiction. An obsession. I fall into this second camp.

It costs nothing. It harms no one. It is immensely entertaining and can be very time-consuming. It is highly therapeutic and frequently humorous. And, like listening to bad country music; enjoying trashy television; or consuming a king-size bar of chocolate at midnight in bed and letting the crumbs drop on the sheets and melt, then scraping them off the next morning to eat, it is an unshared activity, not confessed to. It is harmless. It brings satisfaction, though also a sense of shame.

I am referring to the art, and it is an art, of

"people watching."

As I get older, I find I have an increasing amount of time and an insatiable appetite to pursue this guilty pleasure. I love to watch my fellow humans in a myriad of settings, and in so doing, pose myself a multitude of questions about the age of my subjects, their careers, loved ones, lifestyles, hobbies, desires and hates. I imagine their lives and con-



Photo by
Linh Nguyen

struct their existences, all for my own indulgence. Should I really be confessing this? At its worst level, I confess to getting a real buzz when lucky enough to overhear my subject's conversations when close at hand, when they are totally oblivious of my existence and describe experiences, acquaintances, family members or lovers to their adjacent friend, and unknowingly, to me. To this end, my hobby has developed to the extent that I now have favourite locations (coffee bars, specific seats in restaurants, park benches) that I know will feed my guilty pleasure. These places do not have loud music or noisy coffee brewing equipment and are patronised by individuals meeting others.

I have honed my skill and use it to aid my **understanding of a vast array of groups,**

including the younger generation, the opposite sex, construction workers and restaurant employees. When using public transport, I try to sit close to couples engaged in conversation. This technique has been invaluable during frequent visits to France to learn the language. Being seated near to gossiping locals is great for enhancing language skills. I would advise those recently arrived in Canada and whose first language may not be English or French to develop and improve their language skills and their understanding of the idiosyncrasies of their new culture by employing this method.

Occasionally I employ the art of people watching to be entertained by “eye candy”—to notice the good-looking stranger, seated alone and deep in thought in the coffee bar, as I try to ascertain the title of the book they are reading, contemplate why they chose to wear purple socks that day and fantasize about what they will look like in 10 years’ time.

Guilty pleasures have traditionally been thought of as indulging in a particular food (like chocolate or ice

cream), binge-watching television, spending time on useless social celebrity media posts or pursuing an unusual hobby. Seen as something that brings us enjoyment, but that deviates from what is deemed good or proper, guilty pleasures distract us from societal norms, hence the term “guilty.”

Some believe pursuing a guilty pleasure can have a positive effect on mental health and are, in fact, a form of self-care. For obvious reasons, I like this analysis and identify with it. Self indulgences reduce stress, make life more fun, elevate mood and can be sources of relaxation, providing a balance can be achieved to prevent healthy pursuits from becoming over-indulgences—better to not eat an entire tub of ice cream every night. But this is where my guilty pleasure of people watching wins out. I am harming no one, not even myself. I am increasing my understanding of

the world and the people in it.

I am learning from the experiences of others. I am having harmless fun.

Jayne Seagrave is a BC bestselling author. The ninth edition of her book *Camping British Columbia, the Rockies and the Yukon* was published by Heritage House in April 2023. Over 60,000 of her camping books have been sold. She also writes fiction, non-fiction and freelance articles, and occasionally teaches writing and publishing courses.

Anna writes from her love for the natural world, lessons from her journey through illness and trauma, and gratitude for the wisdom of the ancients. Her essays have appeared in literary magazines and eco-conscious journals. Originally from South India, she presently lives in Montreal (Tiohtià:ke), on the unceded lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka.

Mysteries, unraveled

Anna Mallikarjunan

I recently read *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins. Published in 1868, it is often hailed as one of the first detective novels in English. It begins with a British soldier plundering a precious gemstone from an Indian temple. Upon his death years later in England, the stone passes on to the soldier’s niece, Rachel Verinder, as a gift on her 18th birthday. It disappears the same night, and the search to recover it forms the main plot of the novel. The threads of the mystery are woven delicately, and after a series of subplots, the solution is unraveled sensationally. At the heart of the story is the Verinder family, with Rachel’s mother, Lady Verinder, at its helm. Their faithful house steward, Gabriel Betteridge, divides his loyalty between the family and his copy of *Robinson Crusoe*, a book to which he turns for comfort and guidance. Aside from Rachel and her suitors, there are servants, a gardener, lawyers, Brahmin priests, doctors and an unrivaled sleuth of their times, Scotland Yard’s Inspector Cuff. The narrative is slow, yet engaging as it unfolds through the eyes of several narrators and winds its way between the family’s homes in Yorkshire and London. The language is elaborate but unpretentious and warm.

I loved every page of it.

My loyalty, however, remains steadfast to the queen of mystery—I have read virtually everything Agatha Christie wrote. She is the most original writer I have read, and her writing has a quality of freedom that emerges perhaps from a happy childhood, something she talks about in her autobiography. The protagonists of her novels—Hercule Poirot, Miss Mar-

ple, Parker Pyne, Mr. Quin, Tommy and Tuppence, Arthur Hastings, Inspector Craddock and many others—are endearing, rich personalities. The plots, twists, and turns in her stories are sheer genius. Some of her novels—*The Sittaford Mystery*, *The Secret of Chimneys*, and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, to name a few—are fiendishly clever. In many of her books, one can readily see that she drew inspiration from her own experiences, but it is a rare and unique talent who can imagine such a multitude of mysteries, each one rivaling the other, sometimes in the intricacy of the plot and sometimes in its self-deprecating humour that leaves me

chortling in my joy.

Deduction is something I often have to employ in my own line of work. Some of the problems I solve on a daily basis are reminiscent of the best mystery stories. Bear with me if you are a techie, for I am about to describe the rudiments of computer programming. Software code is written in what are called high-level languages. Also called programs, they are in a human-readable format, which can be easily understood by anyone with a knowledge of the language. But for a program to work on a machine, it has to be translated into what a machine can understand, which is a sequence of binary digits, also called the machine language. A compiler is another program that performs this translation. In binary or machine language, every character or symbol is represented as a combination of 0s and 1s. Put simply, a program includes a high-level language

Photo by
Markus
Spiske



component, called the *source code*, and an *executable* that can run on a computer.

I once had to deal with a program that was hardwired to run only on machines that had a specific pattern of network addresses. The consequence of this limitation was that, for the program to work, network addresses could not be changed. “Just remove the limitation from the source code,” I hear you say, now that we have established how it all works. Unfortunately, over the course of time and several unforeseen events, we had lost the program’s source code. Without the source code, a program can no longer be altered. In this case, all we had was the executable, which was incompatible with the new addresses. Here was a conundrum on our hands—

how could we change the pattern of our network addresses and still have the program run on machines with the new addresses?

The field of software research and development has always made room for openness and sharing. Every problem I face is likely to have been faced by other professionals, and we share our problems and findings through forums and articles. Although there was no turnkey solution to my lost code problem,

I was able to find the clues that would unravel the mystery. Bit by bit,

I managed to put a solution together.

First, I found a way to search the executable for the hardwired, offending line of code. This is similar to searching for a phrase in a paragraph of text. But searching binary paragraphs is a painful ordeal. Fortunately, I found a way to read the executable in hexadecimal, a format slightly more readable than binary. Further still, I found a way to modify the hardwired digits to the new format and create a new executable that we could run on machines with the altered network address format. And that was it—one more mystery unraveled.

Now, moving from the fantastic and mundane to the sublime. Understanding and knowing oneself is largely detective work. Like any endeavour that seeks the truth, it requires unbiased observation and perception. But the ego, the “me” or the “I,” has many disguises, with which it casts a veil of bias and ignorance over everything we perceive. Only when the “me” subsides can there be true perception and insight. Insight, with its clear observation and intelligence, must be loved and respected, but it cannot be sought, cultivated or even earned. It has its own laws—it is unknown and unknowable, and therefore, to me, is the greatest mystery of them all!

Celebrate without Hate

Alex Andy Phuong

Some would seek out glory
Rather than live and forgive
By practicing humility
And demonstrating maturity,
And knowing how to appreciate
Rather than hate
Could teach people
How patience is virtuous
By learning how to wait,
And then seek to understand
How to help out the weak
All throughout the land
Every day of the week
Could create a way to celebrate
The beauty of being a human being
In a world filled with diversity
Much like a beautifully woven tapestry

**ALEX
ANDY
PHUONG**

Alex Andy Phuong earned his bachelor of arts in English from California State University, Los Angeles in 2015. Emma Stone inspired Alex to become a poet. He now writes hoping to inspire dreamers everywhere.

"The best kind of closure is the kind you forgot you



wanted, and eventually didn't want at all anymore."

Photo by Unsplash

To Forgive

Tomas McGrath

Have you ever been treated as though you held no power? No influence? Pushed around and down simply because others thought they could? Well then, dear reader, you've been bullied. I'm sure most of you out there reading have been, and I have as well. It's a massive problem in any workspace on Earth. Bullying is an endemic, unpredictable and destructive thing that can even cause more bullying. Here's why.

When someone is bullied, they feel isolated and refuse to share their feelings and condition as they feel as though someone will poke fun at them for it. As a result, the negativity builds up over time like limescale. Eventually, the pressure caused by this bottleneck of emotions leads to the hunted becoming the hunter and moving on to bullying someone else. This restarts the cycle of pain and struggles for a whole new set of people, as if it were a disease.

While this is the case, there will always be a way to break the cycle. It only takes one person to start the cycle, and it only takes one to stop it, though it may take immense strain and effort. While harming someone in this way may be a downhill fight, recovering from bullying is a task that can be compared to ancient mythos or history. Examine the case of Sisyphus, founder and first king of Ephyra (currently Corinth). He was a tyrannical ruler, perhaps, and escaped death two times. As such, he was punished by the gods and sentenced

to push a large boulder up a hill for eternity.

His task was a struggle, repetitive and took much strength to make the slightest of progress. Sisyphus started at the bottom of a hill (comparable to having been bullied for a time), and pushed his boulder (the

weight of being bullied) upwards (towards closure), usually for it to roll back down (being bullied again). He faced much struggle during his task, just as those who've been bullied do. While the task might feel futile, eventually the boulder will not roll down the hill again, and some degree of forgiveness will be had.

While some might find it easy to forgive, others—perhaps even most of us—find it difficult on a level not seen in most tasks on a daily, or even monthly to yearly, basis.

Forgiveness is a powerful tool, but a costly action.

We may feel incomplete without retribution against those who've wronged us. Forgiveness is a tool against the real enemy, not the bully, but the vicious loop of bullying itself. So, it's true, living well is the greatest revenge.

The easiest way to forgive someone is to forget about them. Or at least, what they did. Just don't think about it for a while after it ends, and you'll find that, at some point along the way, you stopped caring about the past. The next easiest way to forgive someone is to befriend them. The second most difficult way to forgive someone's actions is to reconcile with them. You might hold a hatred towards them for what they did that makes you reluctant to forgive, but the only more difficult way to forgive someone is to not do so. To take vengeance is too hard, so don't. The best kind of closure is the kind you forgot you wanted, and eventually didn't want at all anymore.

Jasmine Sethi is the founder of Zorbawave, where she combines her passion for helping individuals express their individuality and self-confidence through unique jewelry and animal wellness products with her dedication to making a positive community impact and raising awareness for animal welfare.

SHINING A LIGHT ON SMALL BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

Jasmine Sethi

Introduction

It's time to spotlight values and concepts that often go unnoticed, yet hold immense importance. Small businesses, especially those striving to make a positive community impact, are frequently undervalued. The common misconception is that small businesses, due to limited profits, lack the capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. This couldn't be further from the truth.

As the proud small business owner of Zorbawave, I can attest that running a small business while making a significant and positive difference in the community is not only achievable, but immensely rewarding. At Zorbawave, we sell a fusion of contemporary, traditional and vintage-inspired jewelry designed to be both affordable and inclusive, celebrating individuality across diverse communities.

The name Zorbawave originates from the Greek term "Zorbas," symbolizing This philosophy shapes our business, allowing us to create unique products while championing causes

close to our hearts.

A commitment to animal welfare

Since our inception, Zorbawave has been deeply committed to animal welfare, particularly advocating for senior and disabled dogs. This cause became



even more personal after the recent loss of our beloved dog, Jacky, to cancer at only seven years of age. After countless treatments and consultations, we were devastated to learn that our beloved dog was battling a rare form of cancer about which little research exists. He suffered a lot and this experience was not just a personal loss, it was a call to action.

Pets are more than just companions—they are cherished members of our families, providing unconditional love and joy. The thought of other families enduring the same pain and helplessness is what drives our mission. Jacky's passing ignited a stronger resolve within us to support shelters, fund evidence-based research and provide resources to improve animal care in Canada. We believe no pet

parent should be left without options due to a lack of research or resources.

This is why we are committed to raising awareness about rare diseases in pets and supporting initiatives that prioritize the well-being of animals. By addressing these gaps, we hope to ensure that other families never have to face the despair of losing a pet to conditions that could one day be treatable. Our pets deserve better, and so do the families who love them. This mission is dedicated to our second dog, Jasper, to ensure he enjoys a healthy and happy life—

one where resources are readily available and every condition is treatable.

I hope he will not need any treatments in the future, but the thought that resources will be readily accessible if he should provides me with peace of mind.

Our goal extends beyond financial contributions: we aim to raise awareness about rare diseases in animals and shelters that often struggle with limited resources. By combining our business with this advocacy, we're proving that small businesses can make a tangible difference. In 2025, we'll take this mission further by launching an animal care line featuring handmade dog accessories, and working with suppliers to create wellness products. A share of the profits will go directly toward our animal welfare initiatives, ensuring that our passion for this cause is deeply embedded in our business model.

Breaking stereotypes about small businesses

The stereotype persists that small businesses cannot juggle profitability and community impact. However, as a small business owner, I firmly believe that we can and must do both. Beyond selling jewelry, we're creating avenues for small businesses to collaborate, share their community outreach efforts and amplify their causes. Through Zorbawave, I've initiated a one-stream community outreach program where small businesses can share stories of their impact, provide resources and express support for meaningful causes. This platform aims to foster connections between startups and established non-profits, especially as businesses rebuild in the post-COVID era. I invite fellow small business owners to join this initiative, collaborate and amplify the importance of giving back.

The true value of supporting small businesses

When you shop small and local, you're not just purchasing a product, you're supporting livelihoods and dreams. For businesses like Zorbawave, each order represents more than revenue: it's a step toward making a meaningful community impact. We're proud that a portion of our profits goes to animal shelters in Toronto, and our hope to be able to expand our reach internationally, like supporting stray dogs in India. Additionally, we've extended our efforts through creating handmade greeting cards for paw pet-parents through our business.

Yet, we know there's still more to do. One order might seem small, but to us, it's monumental. It fuels our creativity, sustains our livelihood and helps us give back to the community, all at the same time. The small business is our bread and butter, but it's also a way to give back to the community authentically and make a real difference.

Call to action—concluding thoughts.

As the holiday season approaches, I encourage everyone to shop small and support local businesses. Behind every small business is a story waiting to be told—a story of perseverance, passion and purpose. Together, we can create a ripple effect of positive change, proving that small businesses are not just about profits, but about making a lasting impact on the world. Let's take a moment to celebrate and support small businesses that dare to dream big while making a meaningful difference in their communities. At Zorbawave, our commitment to animal welfare is unwavering: whether we generate revenue or not,

nothing will deter me from pursuing this cause.

My passion for giving back stems from a deeply personal place. Supporting disabled and senior dogs is more than just a mission, it's a legacy I'm determined to uphold. Through the community outreach program I've created, I aim to amplify the role small businesses can play in creating a positive impact. Optimizing impact as a small business owner isn't just an option—it's a responsibility I proudly embrace.

Together, let's redefine what it means to run a business while making a positive impact, to show that success isn't just measured by profit margins, but by the communities we uplift. The journey is far from over, and I remain committed to making a difference for the causes that matter most.

"I can't believe how many times I encounter these strangers of books and fall in love with each one."

ALEXIS KING My name is Alexis King and I am a writer. I have been writing for some years now and I truly love what writing does to and for me. I am currently working on a novel and in a program called LitCommons that is helping me reach my writing goals.



Photo by cottonbro

Untitled

Alexis King

“Hello, stranger” is what I say to books that I meet for the first time, where I fall in love with something I’ve never seen before. The words are what tie my heart and make it flutter, happy. The description of the characters and the music in the background of your head that plays when you know you are about to read something good, or you have high hopes. What about not knowing where the story takes place, where it ends, or even the middle of it? All you have is the book, the colors of it and maybe one or two characters, but other than that you are completely unsure. Unsure about these feelings that you have for a book, but you also know that the feelings make you feel like no one else.

Some of you may ask why they are so meaningful to me . . . well, I’m going to tell you. A book, to me, is like wanting something you know that you’ll

probably never get in real life,

or a dream that you have in your head that you know will only come out on a page. It’s something that can and will get your mind off of the real world and into characters that aren’t real, and that becomes your escape to an imaginary fantasy world that has nothing to do with you or your life. A place

where the focus is not on you anymore, at all. You fall in love with the ideas, colors and possibilities of something or someone else, and it becomes something that you

can grab when you are not feeling the way you want or need at the moment.

I can’t believe how many times I have run into these strangers of books and how often I fall in love with each one, and of course they are the ones that draw my attention. Below is a list of stranger books that I have fallen in love with, and who knows, if you like the descriptions of them, maybe you can go and purchase one and two and fall in love with them as well .

Extreme stranger of a book

Lately, just like people do in dating, I’ve decided to switch up what I’m used to and go outside the box to read things that I normally wouldn’t. I normally read historical fiction, psychological fiction, womens fiction, literary fiction and realistic fiction, but I love to adventure into new and different things. I have recently started reading a book called *House of Bone and Rain* by Gabino Iglesias. My exact thought was nothing. I heard it on the NPR book podcast

Photo by
free-
stocks



and heard a man's voice, talking about young boys' problems that turn into those of young men. I was instantly interested but still hesitant, because it wasn't something that I had read before. After listening to what it was going to be about, I swiftly went and bought it from a nearby Barnes and Noble. Not to give away too much, but a storm is involved, along with some boys that grew up together. What made me fall in love with the stories of the adolescents was that most of the time stories from young men or even men in general aren't heard or taken seriously, especially when it comes to

their childhood experiences or what causes them pain.

It is rare to encounter emotion and vulnerability in stories about men, so it was nice for me to hear about those things. It opened up my mind to continuing to read out of the box.

My current stranger

I am over the hills in love with this book. I just started reading it not too long ago. This book is called *And So I Roar* by Abi Daré, and it's the sequel to Daré's debut novel, *The Girl With The Louding Voice*. This book has made me fall in love by opening my heart to children that live in developing countries and how they don't

get the same education or legal protections that we do. It allowed me to learn about other languages, be more kind and also open my heart to learn outside of what was familiar to me. The little girl in the book is fighting for an education because she wants to be successful and take care of her family and, in particular, her little brother, because her mom told her that education is her voice. She is striving to become something that is extremely hard for her to become. It inspires me to keep pushing, because if she can do it, so can I. This is a very educational, inspiring book for everyone to read, but it's also pretty sad (especially the first book)

My current stranger's big sister

My current stranger's big sister is *The Girl With The Louding Voice*. It was a heartbreaker for me. It was so sad. All the things that the main character Adunni had to go through because of her mom passing away, all the things she had to do to take care of her family, all the things that I would say she was forced to do. It was very heartbreaking, but throughout the book she came across some very good people and they helped her along the way. Throughout both books it seems like things keep coming up to try to break Adunni,

but she continues to keep going.

These two sisters have to be two of my favorite books. A main theme in this book is showing you how sometimes it can be your family that is your worst enemy, and they can lead you down a dark and ugly path.

A childhood stranger

The Skin I'm In by Sharon G.Flake. This book is close to home. Not too many times does this happen, but just from the picture on the cover I knew it was something that I knew about, a story that I have always heard, but I fell in love with how it was told. It was told beautifully. This book is about skin color and how when you have darker skin people talk about you. It was mostly about bullying, and how the main character Maleeka was bullied because she had darker skin and full lips, and wore clothes that her mother made her. The story also has a theme about loving yourself no matter what you look like, and I think

our children need that these days,

with all the messaging in social media outlets and music videos. This book made me fall in love just with the picture on it. The picture is exquisite, and looks like people in my family. With this one I knew I was going to fall in love by what I saw on the front cover.

A stranger I didn't know I needed

The Happy Vagina by Mika Simmons was such an educational book for me and I'm certain it would be

for any other women who want to learn about their bodies. This is the perfect book to read. It teaches you all about women's body parts and also debunks all the incorrect things that people say about them. Books like this

should be read in high school

sexual education classes, and students should have to write papers on them. This is how important I believe this book is, and of course there are other similar books that are just as important. This book made me fall in love because it spoke to all the stuff I thought I knew, all the lies I inflicted on myself and how I made myself feel like there was something wrong with me. Spoiler alert, there's nothing wrong with me or any other women out there.

A trauma stranger

Triggers by David Richo is by far the best book to read if you are trying to unlearn your triggering ways and how to handle those triggers when they pop up. This book showed up as a stranger as I was trying to learn how to stop letting the things that bother me bother me. It was bittersweet because although it helped me, it was also calling me out. Calling me out on things I didn't want to take accountability for, and even some things that I wasn't ready to realize. This book was exactly what I needed at the time, and at times still is. Do you struggle with your triggers and want to learn how to manage them? This book will never fail you.

Hello, Stranger

Balreet Sidhu

It all comes back. It stays. No matter what one says. Nights to days, the wise say patience pays.

There's to move ahead instead of living in a limbo synonymous to the dead. There's things in my head and heart's the colour red.

I need to speak to you even if for just a few. Yes! Yes! There is always some new for you, and strange that my love for you only grew. Without a thought out you threw, I chose not to live in blue.

I was told it was just a game
And there maybe some guilt and shame
Even forbidden to say a name.
Nothing there to complain.

Our Bad decisions make for great stories.
I want to finish the conversations of your unsaid glories.

The others' hisses and your perception of their disses, will you let them take away your blisses?

I want to take that chance without a second glance. Gazing into your eyes is falling into a trance, makes me want to do the love dance!

THE FRENCH SUICIDE

Jayne Seagrave

Please note that this article discusses suicide, including a description of a specific instance.

It had not started off as being memorable, a day that would be stamped in the mind with every detail crystallised, never to be forgotten. No. It dawned as a totally normal day, the sort of a day, albeit in another country, experienced hundreds of times before during my 62 years travelling the world. But it evolved into a day which continues to haunt me, and will do for the rest of my life.

In June 2023 I was in the South of France for three weeks, attending a French language school. During one of the weekends when I was not expected to be in the classroom, I decided to leave the touristy crowds of Montpellier, where the school was located, and visit Toulon, a large city on the coast. Unlike many other southern French cities, such as Marseille, Nice and Monte Carlo, Toulon is a city devoid of tourists. Having suffered extensive bombing during the Second World War, it had lost many of its historical buildings. I am attracted to such places; with a travel writer's desire to witness real French culture away from the crowds, I enthusiastically committed to a weekend sojourn.

Research revealed to me an area of Toulon that had survived the bombings, a former red-light district characterised by dilapidated apartment buildings



with shuttered windows, decaying walls of plaster and large wooden access doors leading to tight staircases, all casting shadows on potholed narrow streets with uneven surfaces. These tightly packed, working-class environments of run-down accommodation dated back to the turn of the century. This historical area, in addition to a couple of museums with Second World War artifacts, offered unique attractions and cemented my decision to visit Toulon.

On the Sunday morning of my weekend away I had eaten a buffet breakfast in the Ibis hotel, consisting of croissants, fruit, yogurt and strong black coffee, and sat over my food meticulously planning the day.

Photo
by Tara
Evans

Debating which route to take, I decided to initially explore the old historical area first, before it got busy, then head to the harbour and finally to the National Maritime Museum, which did not open until 11:00 a.m., before taking the train back to Montpellier and my language school. I had a specified agenda: everything was ordered, planned and well-researched. There was no room for surprises, as time was at a premium. It was hot, but I rationalised that walking in the residential area would be heavily shadowed, making the morning significantly cooler.

Leaving the hotel, I headed towards my initial destination, speaking French to myself in my head, savouring my own company and congratulating myself for making the decision to visit this diverse city, devoid of crowds. Walking slowly along the quiet ancient lanes, my mind was distracted and in full “tourist mode,” daydreaming and satisfied to be in a city which in every aspect was different to my home of Vancouver.

Suddenly, I was catapulted away from my daydreams at the sound of a thud and a woman’s scream. Immediately in front of me on the ground was a disarranged, young, skinny male body, with no footwear, red T shirt and faded, torn, blue jeans, and a copious quantity of blood pooling from his head over the sidewalk. A man riding a motorbike quickly stopped, his bike still running when he let it fall to the ground as he ran to the body, pulled off his helmet, stood and stared. A woman exited an apartment building and screamed, “He has six children!” but my French is not perfect, so maybe I did not hear her correctly, as he looked too young to have children. Another older woman wearing too many clothes for the heat arrived with roll of kitchen paper, tearing at it, I presumed, to mop up the blood, an action which seemed totally irrational and bizarre, but like the rest of us, she just stared at the lifeless body, continuing to tear at the paper,

not knowing what else to do.

The victim had jumped from the old residential apartment building I was about to walk past. The narrow street meant that, despite attempts to move away, my distance from the body was minimal, and I could not help but look and reflect on how quickly the pool of blood had formed and that it was a dark brown colour, not red as would be expected. I was also conscious of the unconventional positioning of his

legs and the silence of the other witnesses. A group of about seven of us collected and stayed a short distance away, looking on but not able to move, speaking in whispers. Some men gathered to redirect the intermittent traffic. I stayed until the paramedics arrived, then walked away.

I knew immediately that, for me, Toulon had changed. It would not be remembered for the informative, Second World War museum or the spectacular views of the harbour from the cable car ride, or the unique lavender-flavoured ice cream. If I had taken an additional piece of fruit for breakfast, or stopped longer to admire the street art, or taken a slightly different route, I would not have heard the thud, I would not have heard the women scream, I would not have seen a dead body,

I would not have witnessed a suicide.

I spent the next few days reliving the experience. I had disturbed sleep for a few nights, reflecting upon what could have gone wrong in this individual’s life for him to choose this action and why specifically he had made the decision early on that warm, sunny, June morning. Now, when I watch television and there is an image of a head injury with a copious quantity of blood, I am immediately transported back to that Sunday in Toulon, to a quiet, run-down community, with dilapidated apartment buildings, to a young man whose life was so challenging that he decided to kill himself. Likewise, when I am listening to the radio and the issue of suicide is introduced, and someone inevitably mentions that it is the leading cause of death for young men, I return to Toulon.

In 1982 the band ABBA released a song entitled “The Day Before You Came.” The lyrics reflect on a life before the arrival of a significant person and chronicles the ordinary, mundane day of an individual before an influential person arrives to forever disrupt their equilibrium. Those lyrics can also be applied to this event. I did not know the young man whose suicide I witnessed, but he and his actions I will never forget, and are stamped on my memory forever. Life was different before that Sunday morning in Toulon.

