

EX-SMOKER

BY SAM SHELSTAD

I finally decided to quit smoking while rewatching *Avatar*. The film's beautiful Na'vi wouldn't smoke. They'd think I was insane for smoking. I'd be turning thirty-five in a few months—it was time. When the credits started rolling, I shut the laptop and grabbed my pack of Pall Malls and my lighter. I needed a cigarette in my mouth while mulling over the idea of quitting.

I slipped on my shoes and stepped out onto the fire escape. Carefully shut the door. Listened. Some light traffic on Locke, a dog barking somewhere in the neighbourhood. But otherwise quiet. I started down the narrow staircase. Stepping softly, with precision, in an effort to minimize the wobbly, echoing sound of my shoes on the metal steps. At the first landing, I turned and began descending so I was facing the house. Right in front of my sister and Abraham's bedroom. The light was on, curtains closed. On the other side, Denise likely was watching a documentary about human trafficking and clipping her toenails onto the bedspread, oblivious. I continued down the steps. When I passed by the kitchen window, on the main floor, I could see a blurry shape that had to be Abraham standing in front of the fridge, facing away from me. I clenched my jaw, kept going. He didn't turn around. I stepped onto the grass.

I walked around the side of the house, toward the front yard. I pushed the gate open, pressing down on the handle so it wouldn't squeak, and stepped out past the garden to the street. I started moving down the sidewalk toward Locke when I heard a door swing open and a voice call out to me.

"Peter," Abraham said. "You going to the store?"

I turned around. Abraham had his iPad in one hand, a can of Pepsi in the

other. A beach towel around his neck for some reason.

"I am," I said.

I wasn't.

"Grab me an ice cream bar? Oreo sandwich or Klondike."

"All right."

"Just slip it through the mail slot."

I turned the corner and walked to the Anglican church. The bench I liked was empty, so I sat down and lit up. My favourite spot to smoke, but I could only use it if I knew for sure Denise and Abraham were at home and wouldn't happen by. My sister thought I'd already kicked the habit. I needed her to keep thinking that.

I couldn't afford my rent after Grace left me, so when the lease ended I moved in with my sister's family. They'd renovated their attic into a compact, private apartment. A fire escape led from their backyard to my own separate entrance. Abraham, my brother-in-law, picked me up in their minivan. I'd donated my furniture—I'd never get it all up the narrow staircase—so it was just bags of clothes, boxes of kitchen stuff, cleaning supplies, a few books. It took two trips. Abraham sat in the vehicle while I loaded everything in from my old apartment's lawn and out to his driveway. When all of my stuff was at the house, Abraham got into his hammock and watched me haul the boxes up the fire escape, one by one. He claimed to be waiting for a conference call, though nobody ended up calling. I didn't mind. I had a new, affordable place. Close to family. Furnished with Denise's old Ikea stuff from college. I could save money, pay off the debt I owed my sister, and eventually find a new place of my own. Work through my broken heart. Build a life again.

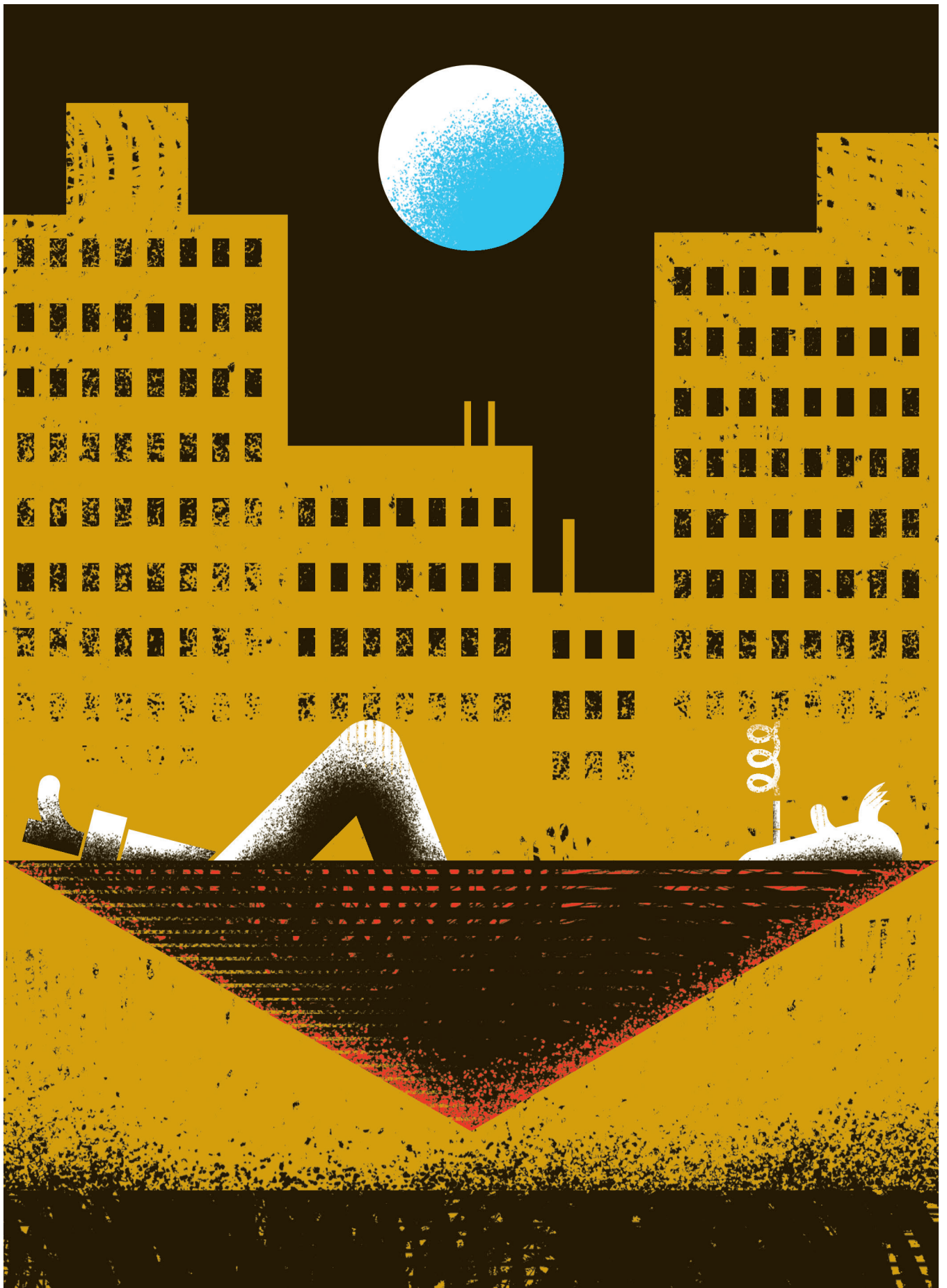
But I couldn't smoke. Denise was clear on that condition. Not just in my

apartment or on the property—I was no longer permitted to smoke anywhere in the world. She didn't want me to be a bad influence on Tad, her eight-year-old son. But mostly she thought she was doing me a favour. Giving me the proper motivation to really quit. It was actually written into the rental agreement my sister threw together. So if either my sister or Abraham's whereabouts were unknown and it was possible I could run into them on the street, I'd have to go out behind the church, by the dumpsters. Which was sketchy. Sometimes there were teenagers back there who would scoot off when I appeared, and I'd feel like the neighbourhood creep.

Denise and Abraham were definitely at home though. I was safe. I sat smoking on my favorite bench and watched over the quiet street. I thought about *Avatar* and my realization that I needed to quit for real. Not in a few weeks. Not when things "settled down a little." I had to quit now. My lungs weren't off in some safety deposit box in the Falkland Islands. They were right here, in my chest. I needed to live a better life. A healthier, more natural life, like the Na'vi. Grace would be impressed. And I could stop sneaking around like a criminal. This cigarette, I decided, would be my last.

A few puffs away from finishing, however, I realized that I would need one more. I'd committed to my decision to quit in the midst of smoking and didn't smoke with real purpose and the proper ceremony required to make it a true, final cigarette. A final cigarette should have weight, so that the decision sticks.

I extinguished my penultimate cigarette and took a minute to collect myself. I let the heft of my decision enter my mind. I often worried that if I quit smoking, I'd start doing something worse. Like cigarettes were a necessary,



lesser evil that kept much darker forces at bay. As long as I kept smoking, I'd have my finger in the little crack in the dam and the quaint village downriver would remain safe from flooding. What if I stopped smoking and started killing people?

But I was ready now. I took several deep breaths. It was time.

As soon as I lit up my final smoke, Nolan sidled up out of the shadows and sat down beside me. Nolan was twenty and lived with his parents, two doors down from my sister. He wore sweatsuits, like a middle-aged wise guy. Shortly after I'd moved in with Denise, Nolan saw me smoking on my bench and asked if he could have one. I didn't see the harm. Now he wanted a cigarette every time I ran into him. It seemed like he regularly patrolled the neighbourhood looking for me. I'd try to avoid him if possible. This time, it wasn't.

"Hey," Nolan said. "Can I bum one?"

"Take the whole pack," I said, handing it over. "I'm quitting."

"Really? Thanks, man. Although where am I gonna get smokes now, once these are gone?"

"You can try the store."

"I don't smoke so much that I need to buy them. I like getting them from you."

"Guess you'll have to bother someone else."

"Nobody else smokes in this neighbourhood. Everyone's all healthy and professional and has their shit together. No offense. By the way, my parents are going to Florida soon. Do you want anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you want anything from Florida, I can get my parents to grab it for you. Just give me the money and maybe write down exactly what you want."

"What would I want from Florida?"

"Yeah, I'm having trouble deciding too. Anyway, thanks for the cigs."

Nolan left.

I stamped out my cigarette. That couldn't be my final one, I realized. Nolan had ruined it. There had been no ceremony to the moment. I went to the

Dictators at Night

Abbreviated lions, on their sides long hours,
dreaming of a passing, rusty birdcage or
severe fathers and screaming schoolmates.
Did Hitler sleep well in clean sheets, white
as the Russian winter, pulled taut by anxious,
loving maids long since scuttled away?
On D-Day he slept till noon and Panzer tanks
that needed his personal orders sat still.
To live is to see a slowly assembling ghost
town of the mind: all you can't have back.
Perhaps Hitler's younger brother, dead
of measles morphed from resting boy to hill
as Hitler ran up, in his dreams, endlessly.
But what poor little damn fool can only
look outward, seek to reshape the landscape?
Maybe dictators dreamed of the dinosaurs near
enough to a sudden, key event: turning to look
at a coming, eclipsing cloud of scalding steam
and debris. Not understanding, but certainly,
it's the natural thing to do, to turn and look.
In my dream I'm deep in a chair with a book
and a tall man approaches with a gun. I say
one word: wait. And he doesn't. Good night.

—ALEX BOYD

store and bought Abraham's ice cream sandwich and a pack of Pall Malls.

Back home, I swept in front of the fridge and got down on the floor with my computer. Denise refused to move the router up to the second floor, where it would reach my apartment and hers equally, because she liked the way it looked in the living room. Which meant I had spotty access to their WiFi. It seemed to work best if I placed my laptop on the kitchen tile.

I opened up the browser and went straight to Naviboards, a popular *Avatar* fan forum. I visited the site several times a day. I never posted anything myself. I just wanted to observe. Users dissected the Na'vi language, posited theories concerning the upcoming sequels, and shared fan fiction. They argued over minute details in the film. They planned meet-ups. In one old thread, a group of users discussed start-

ing a commune in the woods, where they would live according to the philosophy and principles of the Na'vi. People would even talk about their lives. I'd keep up with new posts and watch the discussions play out in real time, or else I'd read through older exchanges in their entirety. Certain names would pop up again and again. As I became more familiar with these members and their personalities on the forum, they began to feel like my personal acquaintances. I'd be reading through a thread about the movie's filming locations, see a comment from Jaycoffee and think, There's Jaycoffee! I knew that LydiaV lived in Florida and was married to a man in the air force. I knew Bopster taught karate out of his garage. Any forum member who posted with any frequency soon fell under my radar.

I was still invisible to them, however. Jaycoffee and Bopster and the rest didn't know I existed. I was a tourist

amongst the locals. I didn't mind. I felt like part of the community, even if I was only lurking in the shadows.

"Peter," someone said, startling me awake. "Hey, Peter."

It sounded like it was coming from inside my own head. A familiar voice. I pushed aside my comforter and crawled to the foot of the bed. Looked down at the rug.

"Can you hear me?" the voice said. "Hey, Peter."

It was Denise. She was in Tad's room, shouting up into the vent in his ceiling, which was also the vent in the middle of my bedroom floor.

"I can hear you," I said. "What do you want?"

"That's crazy!" Denise said. "We have to do this all the time now."

"I was sleeping."

"Oh, please. I have a present for you. Come downstairs."

I put on jeans and a T-shirt and descended the fire escape. Denise was waiting for me in the backyard. An envelope in her hand.

"What's this?" I said.

"Just open it," Denise said.

I opened it. Inside was a voucher for the downtown Cineplex.

"Oh, wow," I said. "What's this for?"

"It's just a gift."

"That's nice. Thank you."

"But there's one condition. You have to use it next Sunday."

"Why next Sunday?"

"I don't want this to be weird, but we're going to have a little thing for Abraham's fortieth that day."

"O.K."

"It's mostly people from Abraham's work. We discussed it and we feel it would be best if you didn't come. You won't know anyone and it will make things slightly tense, having this stranger buzzing around and disrupting things."

"That's fine. I don't need to come to your party. But why do I have to leave? I can stay upstairs. I won't be bothered."

"No, we discussed it. I'd feel weird if you were moping around up there while we were having a party. And guests

might see you up in the window or hear footsteps and start asking questions."

"I don't mope around."

"It'd be like we have some deformed freak in the attic we're hiding from the world. Just enjoy the movie. Then maybe hang around for a while after, get a tea somewhere. I'll text you when it's safe to come home."

"Safe?"

"Sorry it's just one ticket, but I honestly couldn't think of who you could go with. And it's a movie so you can't talk anyway. There's tons playing."

"Jesus Christ, Denise."

"Or, you know, 'You're welcome.'"

That night, I read through a lengthy LydiaV post about the despair she initially felt after watching *Avatar* for the first time, because the idea of living on the planet of Pandora was so much more desirable than having to live in the real world. She sunk into a deep depression and eventually had to seek help from a therapist.

"I'm O.K. now," she wrote. "Watching the film makes me happy. I'm still working through my issues, but I'm glad to say that *Avatar* now only brings me joy."

The thread continued below LydiaV's post with several people sharing similar experiences with depression after watching the movie. The fantasy of life on Pandora with the beautiful Na'vi was too compelling for some people, and reality could never compete. Reading through the comments, I understood what these people were talking about, but couldn't relate. I had the opposite experience when I watched *Avatar* for the first time.

This was only a few months earlier. I'd just moved into my sister's attic. The movie had already been out and escaping my attention for nearly a decade, but I came across a DVD copy at the library and added it to the stack I'd planned on taking home. I had no expectations. I just wanted to throw movies on when I wasn't working in order to occupy my brain. Unlike LydiaV and the other forum members, I was already in a drab, dark place when I entered the

world of *Avatar*. Grace had left me. The life I'd built with her over four perfect years was gone. My world was empty.

And then I put on *Avatar*. It was only meant to be noise and moving shapes, a way to make part of the day pass by with minimal dread, but something happened when I finally rested my eyes on the planet Pandora. A new, lush world of vibrant colours and natural beauty. The mesmerizing, blue-skinned Na'vi people and their perfect society. For the first time since Grace left, I felt hope. I sat up in my bed and stared at the screen in awe. The universe suddenly had something in it that was worth being awake for. When the movie ended, I paced around my tiny attic apartment for a while, thinking about what I'd just seen. And then I put it back on and watched it again. Sure, I didn't actually live on Pandora. Pandora didn't exist. But I got to live in a world where the film *Avatar* existed. That was enough to keep me going.

Part of me felt compelled to post about this experience on the Naviboards thread. I had no one to talk to about my *Avatar* obsession and thought it might feel cathartic to share my story. Ultimately, however, I preferred to stay invisible. Once I actually wrote something on the forum, I'd cross an important threshold. I'd be one of them. Anonymously observing their conversations was an intellectual exercise, I thought, reflective of a curious mind. Participating in the discussion would be taking things too far. I couldn't help but sense something slightly sad and pathetic about the Naviboards users. By keeping them at arm's length, I held onto a small feeling of superiority.

My elbows and knees were starting to hurt. I went into the bedroom and came back with my comforter, which I spread out on the kitchen floor. I got back down and continued reading through the threads until three in the morning.

I slept in the next day and had to rush off to work. I jogged down the street, smoking. My bus was late. I lit another smoke. Cabin Club, the bar I worked at, was out by the airport, and it took

nearly an hour to get there by bus. Best to fill up on nicotine beforehand.

I'd never realized how I structured my entire life around smoking. Now that I was in the process of preparing to quit, the control it had over me seemed absurd. I had to have cigarettes and a lighter on me at all times. I'd smoke a cigarette both before entering and upon exiting buildings. I had a smoke before sitting down for a meal and one as soon as I'd finished eating. I had a morning smoke upon waking. Before bed, I had a final cigarette to last me through the night. I'd smoke before and after work and try to cram in as many cigarettes as I could on my breaks. As soon as I butt out a cigarette, a clock would start ticking in my head, counting down until my next one. The only time I didn't really think about smoking was while I was smoking. If I did consciously think about the act of smoking while I was actually smoking, it usually ruined the whole experience. To truly enjoy a cigarette, you have to think about something, anything, else. Everything in my life revolved, to some extent, around carving out little moments throughout the day where I could smoke cigarettes and not think about smoking cigarettes.

The bus eventually showed up. We chugged along toward the outskirts of town. Time dragged. I thought about what Grace had said when she ended things. That I was too controlling. She felt trapped by my need to orchestrate everything in our lives. This seemed like an exaggeration to me when she said it, but maybe it was true. I'd often guilt her into staying home with me when her friends wanted to meet up. I had a habit of planning out our weekends. I ate up all of her free time. I meant well, but I could see now how suffocating that would be. Maybe being in a relationship with me was akin to being a smoker. I was like a cigarette, dictating Grace's life for her. Now that I was quitting, maybe I wouldn't need to control every little thing. In fact, I could already feel myself loosening up. Letting go.

I walked in to work and sighed. Cortez was already there. Two or three times

a week, Cortez would come into the Cabin Club and work the TV remote. Usually in the evening, however. I thought I'd be safe with an afternoon shift. Cortez would sit at the bar and flip through channels. Comment on everything. He'd get a meal and then drink two rum swizzles. This went on a tab that, he promised, he'd "settle up when the universe settles up with me." I had to tolerate him—his sister was married to Bob Stairs, my boss.

I went into the back room and leaned my forehead against the wall. Maybe Evelyn, the other bartender, would let me sneak out for one last cigarette before I started. I'd just had one before I came in, but I'd be quitting soon anyway, so the amount I smoked now didn't matter. I could chain smoke all day and night, as long as my last one was my last. But Evelyn came into the back room in a hurry and put on her jacket. I took mine off and went out to the bar.

"This absolute tool is going to win the whole goddamn thing," Cortez said, apparently to me, since there was nobody else around.

A cooking competition show played on the TV behind the bar. The contestants were children.

"Look at this little prick. Put me out of my misery."

"Hello, Cortez," I said.

"Are you sick right now?" Cortez said.

"No, why?"

"You sure? Maybe you need to shave then. With your complexion, you need to keep up with the shaving or you look like you're withdrawing from opiates. You should think about a multivitamin."

"Hey, come on."

"Don't shoot the messenger. Anyway, I'm done with this show. Let's see what else is on. What do you want to watch?"

"Just find a hockey game."

"I can't see the puck. You know what I wouldn't mind? HBO. I'll talk to Bob about that. We could watch *True Blood*. Any halfway decent bar has the premium channels."

Cortez eventually left. A group of flight attendants came in and kept to themselves in a corner booth. Oth-

erwise, it was pretty quiet. I spent most of my shift looking at my phone. I read through a new piece of fan fiction someone had posted to Naviboards. A full-on sex scene between the film's main characters, Jake Sully and Neytiri. At first I cringed at the thought of someone posting their original *Avatar* erotica on the forum, but as I read on I found myself getting a little excited and had to put my phone away.

Later, Bob Stairs and three of his business-school cronies came in. Bob was my manager. His father owned the place. He usually came in during the afternoon and sat in the back room, playing online poker on his laptop. Now he sat down at the bar and his friends crowded around him. They all wore suits, ties loosened, faces red and puffy.

"Behold," Bob said, lifting his hands up into the air, "the saddest bartender in the world."

"Good evening, Bob," I said.

"Jesus Christ. You look like you just watched a dog drown. You've got to be the gloomiest motherfucker on the planet. No wonder this place is empty. Be honest with me—how many people walk in here, take one look at your sadsack face, then immediately turn around and walk back out? Give me a number."

"I'm sorry, Bob. I'll try and smile more."

"Good Lord. You guys hearing this? That's got to be the most depressing thing I've ever heard. You need to grow some backbone."

"I see you, Bob."

"What?"

"I see what you mean, Bob."

"You're a strange man, Peter."

The Na'vi say "I see you" to each other in *Avatar*. It means "the God in me sees the God in you." They believe that everything in nature is connected through their great mother Eywa, and so when you tell somebody you see them, you are saying that you are both bonded together through Eywa. And Bob and I really were bonded together, I thought, as I prepared his daiquiri. We were both imprisoned. I was under the control of cigarettes. He was a boozier. A gambler. But it wasn't just that. We were trapped by our jobs, our

societal obligations, our attachment to material things. Our worries. It all ran counter to the Na'vi way of life. Things had to change.

I set Bob's drink on the bar. I started working on another drink and began to laugh. I couldn't help it.

"What's so funny?" Bob said.

"Sorry," I said. "Excuse me."

I walked into the back room and put on my jacket. It was all so clear now. I didn't need Bob, or any of this. I walked back out.

"Hey," Bob said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Off to the races, Bob," I said.

"What?"

"I said I quit."

That night, I reread the forum thread from five years earlier about starting a Na'vi-inspired commune. I wondered if any of the people who had participated in the discussion went through with their plans. If I could find their little community in the woods and live among them.

Inspired by the thread, I decided to spend the night outdoors. If only Grace could see how impulsive and adventurous I was now, I thought. I put on long underwear and two sweaters, then went down the fire escape to Abraham's hammock. The Na'vi slept in hammocks. It was cold, but it wasn't that cold. I fell asleep within minutes. I awoke a few hours later and lit a cigarette. I didn't care if Denise looked out her window and saw me there. If she kicked me out, I'd sleep somewhere else. I liked sleeping outside. I'd abandon all my things and live in the moment, like the Na'vi. They didn't need apartments. All they needed was each other. If you stepped out into the world with nothing but the clothes on your back and wandered the Earth, everything would be fine. You wouldn't die. You would find food and water and somewhere to rest for the night. It wouldn't be easy by any stretch, but it would be better than stressing over all of the little complications involved with modern life. That kind of stress will kill you.

I awoke the next morning to something



THE SPOTLIGHT

TANGIBLE PASTIME

Camilla Gibb held on to boxes of old magazines for years, thinking one day her daughter might enjoy the art of collage as much as she did. Ultimately, the pleasures of cutting and arranging images into new pieces of art were not passed down, but Gibb was grateful to have kept her collection during the early days of the current pandemic.

Before the COVID-19 lockdowns, the Toronto-based author had picked up her old pastime. When the pandemic hit, she was just finishing a new novel, *The Relatives*, and found herself unable to write anything new. Collaging offered both a tangibility and a physical immediacy Gibb found satisfying.

Gibb's collages are nostalgic in subject, which is in part an aesthetic choice, but also a practical one. Vintage magazines, with their sturdy thick stock, are easier to work with. Gibb is drawn to natural elements: many of her pieces—like *The Determined Canadian Facing Environmental Odds*, above—feature familiar landscapes, with a few unexpected intruders. A bat morphs with a cabbage. An elk pops its head out of the domed window of a Canadian Pacific train car. A ballet dancer poses in formation with a flock of Canada geese.

"Some of them are just absurd, and some of them make me laugh," Gibb said. Although her collages are analogue, Gibb shares them on Instagram, where they've gained an online audience. As an author, she considered the expectation that there would be words waiting to accompany her art. "I thought, No, that's not the point. The point of the story is there," Gibb said. "It's whatever you take from it."

—SUE CARTER

jabbing me in the legs. My nephew, Tad, was standing next to the hammock, holding a stick. He and Abraham hovered above, looking down at me.

"I see you," I said.

"Dad?" Tad said. "What's wrong with him?"

"Let's go on inside," Abraham said.

I continued to sleep outside for the rest of the week. Breathing fresh air all night filled my body with an incredible energy. I could bound up and down the fire escape with ease. I had so many ideas running through my head. Denise was initially concerned that I was acting strange, but I told her I'd been having issues with my back and sleeping in Abraham's hammock really helped. I couldn't tell her about the new journey I was embarking on—at least not yet. How quitting smoking had helped me to identify all of the constrictive elements in my life. How I'd be shedding these elements in order to live a more natural, pure existence. Denise wouldn't understand. She'd mock me. Soon enough, however, she'd see how trapped and sad her life was when compared with mine.

I didn't want Denise to know I'd quit my job, so I left the house according to my usual schedule. Instead of taking the bus to the airport, I went to the park and looked at birds. I'd take off my shoes and socks and feel the grass between my toes. The sun warming my cheeks. Really take things in. Or else I'd head to the library and book a computer. Comb through Naviboards.

I found a video that Silent_Heart had posted in an old thread. He'd edited together footage of the New York City meet-up from a few years earlier. The video began with a lengthy montage of still photos of Silent_Heart's plane trip to New York, set to the final battle music from *Avatar*. I clicked forward until I got to footage of the attendees meeting each other at Penn Station. A man with a bushy moustache held up a sign that said "Kaltxi," a common greeting in Na'vi. Another man in an *Avatar* T-shirt and *Avatar* shorts stood beside him, waiting for ar-

I REALLY LIKED YOUR READING LAST NIGHT

You came alone and sat at the back of the room.

We gave each other a friendly hug
and chatted before the show. Your breath smelled

thinly of gin. "There are a lot of good poets,"
you said and smiled, by way of slant reply,

after I'd commended your performance.
It's slant like that

that makes one
feel disclosed.

You didn't introduce your poems,
just read them in a modulated tone—

"I" embedded,
hunkered down: a foreign correspondent in a war zone.

I wanted a book, you didn't have one to sell.
We both had salvation in pieces we read.

I couched it
Salvia divinorum, as in the psychoactive plant.

You used the word straight-up—like you had earned it.

—ELANA WOLFF

rivals, which was shown using time-lapse photography. Seeing these people from the forum on camera was surreal. IndestructibleEd was there, and Mary-TimesTwo. The video continued with another montage of the group sightseeing around the city, then moved to a hotel suite, where most of the attendees were gathered. They were watching a Na'vi language lesson on YouTube and practising their pronunciations together as a group.

In the video and on the forums, everyone was so respectful of each other. They lifted each other up. I needed people like that in my life. I needed Grace. She lifted me up and respected me up. The problem was, I hadn't lifted her up in return. I'd pinned her to the ground with my controlling behaviour.

Monitoring everything she did, making judgemental comments. Trying to mould her into someone she wasn't. Things were changing, however. I was on my way to becoming the partner she deserved. Once I actually quit smoking, everything else would fall into place. Great Mother Eywa was watching over me. I could feel the universe shifting.

The evening before Abraham's fortieth birthday party, my sister took down the hammock to make room for chairs. I tried sleeping in my bed again, but it didn't feel right. After half an hour of restlessness, I went down to the yard and slept on the grass. The ground was hard and cold, but the night air was fresh. I could hear crickets. My body

was sore in the morning, but I didn't mind. I went upstairs, cooked an egg, and felt stronger than ever.

That afternoon, while my sister and Tad decorated the backyard, I watched *Avatar* again. It still had the same impact on me, watching the Na'vi and their beautiful society on Pandora. It was even more powerful now, considering what I'd been going through that week. Quitting smoking. Quitting my job. A whole new way of looking at the world. I couldn't stop smiling at the screen. Tonight was the night. I would make things right again.

Halfway through the film, I heard wobbly steps coming up the fire escape. I hit Pause on my laptop and stepped outside. Nolan was on his way up.

"Sup," Nolan said, out of breath. I moved back through the door so there was room for him on the landing.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"I tried knocking on the front door. Your sister said you were up here. You tired or something?"

"Why are you here, Nolan?"

"Can I come in?" Nolan said, pushing past me. "Your place is hilarious. Can I bum a smoke?"

"You can't come to my apartment to ask for cigarettes."

"We can hang out, too. I can bring my Xbox over."

"I'm busy."

"I'll bring it over later then. I'd have you over to my place, but I think it would weird out my parents. Anyway, let's smoke."

"I quit, remember?"

"So you don't have any?"

"Fine," I said, reaching for my pack. I had two cigarettes left. I handed him one. "You can have one, but that's it. I really am quitting. Don't come up here again."

"What about later? I can bring my Xbox. I have this insane porno game."

"Absolutely not."

"Oh," Nolan said, looking defeated.

"Here," I said. I took out my wallet and pulled the Cineplex voucher from inside, handed it to Nolan. "Go see a movie."

"Nice," he said. "I just watch stuff on

my phone though."

I didn't say anything. I waited for Nolan to say something else, but he just stood there, staring at me.

"All right," I said. "Time to go, Nolan."

Later that afternoon, I walked to the Greyhound station and spent my last forty dollars on a bus ticket. I still only had the one cigarette, and now I didn't have enough to buy another pack. I didn't even have enough for a ticket home. But that didn't matter. Things would work out naturally. And I only needed one cigarette.

I boarded the bus and found a seat near the back. I noticed some of the other passengers giving me these looks. No one sat next to me. I hadn't showered all week, and there was mud and grass stains on my sweater and pants. Sweat pooled around my collar. I had a headache. I hadn't boarded a bus without first smoking a cigarette in nearly two decades. I'd get through it, though, I knew. I eventually fell asleep against the window.

We arrived in Midland two hours later. I looked around the station, feeling nostalgic. Only five months earlier, I'd stood in that same waiting area. Christmas. Grace's parents usually picked us up. They were always so friendly, so welcoming. This time, I'd be on foot. I looked up the directions on my phone and started walking.

The sky was dark by the time I reached the house. A car was parked in the driveway. Lights on in the living room window. The curtains drawn. I sat down on the curb opposite the house. Hopefully she was in there and not out shopping with her mom or seeing an old friend. My clothes were rumpled and stained and I probably smelled foul. But she'd see through all that. She'd recognize how much I'd changed already. I took out my final cigarette and looked it over. Then I lit up.

I didn't think about anything while I smoked. My mind went blank. I savored the rush of nicotine entering my bloodstream for the last time. When it was finished, I walked up to the house and knocked. ☹



Living in a bubble since 1997.

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