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— Route
● Subway interchange

Vision Transit Commission
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○ Stop
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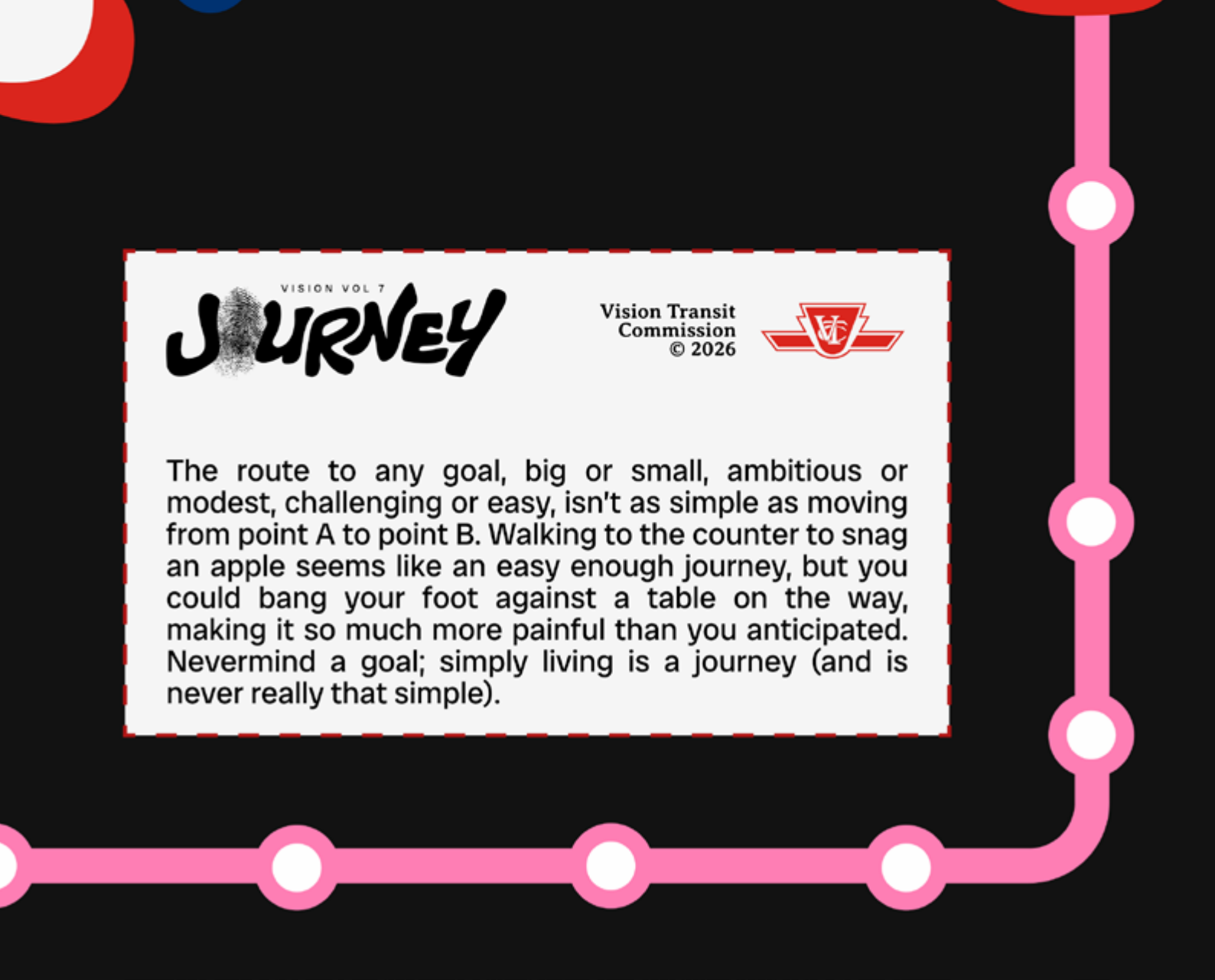


VISION VOL 7
JOURNEY

Vision Transit
Commission
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The route to any goal, big or small, ambitious or modest, challenging or easy, isn't as simple as moving from point A to point B. Walking to the counter to snag an apple seems like an easy enough journey, but you could bang your foot against a table on the way, making it so much more painful than you anticipated. Nevermind a goal; simply living is a journey (and is never really that simple).



Preface

Letter from the Executive Creative Director

Hello to all my fellow readers.

First of all, I'd like to thank everyone who made this magazine possible. From talented photographers, filmmakers, videographers, designers, writers, journalists, marketing, web design, and artists all came together to make this possible. I want to give my directors a special thank you, for their dedication, hard work, and innate creative talent who they so kindly used to create this.

As we first developed the concept of this year's theme, we wanted to come together to compile the stories of students' voices, a theme that would feel personal and authentic to them. We wanted to highlight both the struggle and joy of what it means to be human and a young creative. A space for students to not think about criteria, grades and curriculum, but a community and space where they can let themselves practice, explore and let their creativity run wild. In this VISION Volume, and our rebrand as a magazine, we have managed to expand our team to about 42 members this year, introducing a system of directors and departments to look after this project. In this massive 104 page multimediu production giant, we are extremely proud for all the hard work that we have poured into this. It is only a testament of the passion and talent the students hold.

As people, not just alumni, we go through many challenges and joys in our lives. We have moments of doubt, uncertainty, and vagueness, moments where our goal is to simply get through the day. Journeys come in many different forms. Within this magazine, our talented writers share stories of the small little things that get us through life, the subtle decisions that gradually build into impactful changes, to major changes such as immigrating to a new city, having our identity challenged as who we are, to stories of those who helped us get through this. Displacement, apathy, and empathy – connecting with our loved ones, protecting them, and cherishing them. VISION represents their voices, as who they are and their core, to share both joys and struggles with us.

Mariana Ramirez-Zablah
Executive Creative Director

Preface

Letter from the Creative Operations Director

When we started looking at the theme of the issue I was looking for the spark. The moments of joy that keeps you going and that show there's more in the world than what the news makes it seem. As we continued the process, the importance of the light brought with it the darkness. One without the other makes it all pointless. Empty.

The importance of happiness is only there because you know what it is like on the other side of the coin. You go through the successes and victories as much as through the hardships and sorrows. Nevertheless at the end it is all worth it as you see that finish line approaching. It becomes even more sweeter as you remember all the trials and tribulation you needed to face to get there. The goal is what motivates but the journey is what makes it worth it.

Through these twelve writings, seven featured illustrations, two documentaries, and one photo series divided in three acts, you'll traverse the darkest and brightest moments. You will find tales of anxieties, discovering, growth, comfort and love. Wrapping you in a whirlpool of experiences and feelings that I hope you'll be able to relate at least for a moment and discover that while every path is different by design, we all go through it and get out not the same but anew.

I hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoy piecing it together and remember to enjoy the journey.

Camila Rodriguez Tinoco
Creative Operations Director

catalyst

act I

Trust

holy grail

by Mariana Ramirez-Zablah

edited by Mayukha Pelluri

photography by Abdullah Shahid

& Angela Stoddart

illustration & design by Jelani Hanson

Prologue

**Three priests stand in line.
Four nuns each beside.
As each bystander witness stands.**

**A goat in a black suit, diametrically opposed to God.
A red veil falls, the scene has been covered.
Like the eyes of those who are blind to wonder.**

**Alas,
This is the tale of my childhood story.**

**A small chapel, hidden in the heart of my home,
The goat man, omnipresent.
His eyes follow the movement of the young girl,
Each breath, step, and depth.**

**Guilt filled the room,
From those without the truth.
The young girl wore her patterned dress,
One to fit amongst the sheep.**

But, her mind cannot be tamed.

**Never missed a detail of the mask at hand.
Instead, she hid within.
Her world inside,
Full of heart and blood,
Pain and love.**

Repressing her mind, a storm began to fester inside.
Rotting and clashing with her swirl of thoughts.

Pray the day it's let out.
One to be mad,
Her power will change the world.

As the stars rose and the night fell, she stood in the hallway.
A dilemma at hand.

The chandelier's light shone bright across the house,
Giving light to the surface,
Growing shadows to the hidden.

Her eyes blurred and drifted.
Sweat ran down her skin,
Sticky and heavy.

Eyes followed her every move.
Body heavy, light-headed.

At the corner of her eye, she witnessed the golden standing.
With the head of a goat, and the body of a man.
The stairs ran long, the silence deafened her.

He stood, and watched.
She never questioned his presence.
She wondered why she felt fear.
If the woman who protected was the one in the clear.

The woman who wore the sage veil, her hands clasped.
Her look and smile, deeply entranced.
She was none other than the mother of sinners.

The girl put her back to the wall, walking alone and slow.
She longed to be held,
She wanted to cry.

But a glance of resentment became her only comfort.

To reach her parents room,
where blind faith hollows,
A path safely covered.

Carved out and easy to follow.
The sage veil, ready to protect
those who never piqued and dread.

Goat man, standing in front.
With each step toward him,



He leaned in.

**Her blood runs cold.
His breath runs hot.
His fangs gripped her neck.**

“Eyes wide open.”

He stepped away.

**The path he proposed,
Pain and suffering are ensured.
Question and isolation, he bestowed.**

**Where the mold crumbled,
One was truly born.
Yet,
Which path would she take?**

**The green room is where she'd rule.
In God's hands, one is conditional.
A crimson mind is born.**

**As the years go,
The sage woman's eyes filled with tears,
She lost her wit,**

Her sharp mind.

Despite the age, despite the pain,
Once the Judge of trial, she hides away in denial.

The red veil unravels,
A crimson woman in the golden standing, with the head of the goat at her grip.
Her eyes dark like the night,
Her shoulders broad like knights.
Strong and firm, she holds her head high.
The goat man who once scrutinized her, became her blaze.
Her sword at hand.

Her eyes that shine crimson,
Now ponder and wonder.

She is not nice, and yet she is kind.

“I will protect you,” She looks at the young child.

“But so will you.”

The green room is where she'd rule.
A path is carved, uncovered.

A crimson mind is released.

She sees.
She is free.





ELLA & MIA

ELLA & MIA

BY **AMISHA ANAND**

EDITED BY **LINZY ZHENG**

ILLUSTRATION BY **JUNA ABUTAHA**

DESIGN BY **IRIS CIOBAN**

NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.):

Today marks six years since Mark Grey, forty, was found dead in a house fire on July sixteenth, nineteen sixty-nine. His daughter, Ella Rose Grey, eighteen, vanished the same night. Authorities suspect foul play.

INT. DETECTIVE'S OFFICE – NIGHT (1975)

It was a chilling night in 1975. Case files and paperwork cast a shadow in the detective's office. Detective Arthur Daniels, known for his dashing looks and chilly wit sits behind his desk with Detective Daphne Bloom, typical American sweetheart with voluminous blonde hair resembling Farrah Fawcett. Opposite them is Mia Haji, looking composed yet troubled, and Ella Rose Grey, determined and focused, awaiting instructions.

DETECTIVE DANIELS:

Alright, let's start from the beginning.

Detective Bloom flips open her notepad and clicks her pen.

ELLA:

The year was 1969.

Detective Daniels nods, encouraging her to continue. Ella looks over at Mia.

ELLA:

That was the night she saved my life.

DETECTIVE DANIELS:

Before we move on... Mia, there's something in your file. Says you ran away when you were thirteen. Wanna tell us what happened?

Mia nods.

INT. ABORTION CLINIC – NIGHT

Outside a rundown clinic in a secluded part of town stands thirteen-year-old MIA, clutching her stomach. The moon hangs low over the empty street. Her hands tremble as she reaches for the door, her knuckles tapping softly against the old wood. The door creaks open.

She steps inside a narrow waiting room, peeling paint, dusty windows, a single flickering bulb overhead. A faded plaque on the wall reads: DR. H. KANAAN, M.D.

Behind a thin curtain, a small examination room waits one bed covered with an old blanket, a metal tray of instruments beside it.

Dr. Kanaan (40s), exhausted but gentle, steps forward and gestures toward the bed.

Mia hesitates. Her eyes move slowly across the room, absorbing every detail with quiet fear.

She sits.

DR. KANAAN:

(softly)

You're brave, kid. Not many your age come here alone.

Mia nods. Her voice catches in her throat, unshed tears glistening in her eyes.

Dr. Kanaan places a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Mia flinches then steadies.

DR. KANAAN:

Sweetheart, start counting back from ten.

Mia closes her eyes.

Thunder rumbles in the distance.

Her breathing slows.

Darkness.

INT. DETECTIVE'S OFFICE – NIGHT (1975)

MIA:

That day, I learned that bravery is more than facing danger; it's about making decisions for your own sake, no matter how difficult they are.

Detective Bloom, still taking notes, looks over to Ella.

DETECTIVE DAPHNE:

Ella, sweetie, your mother passed away that same year, right?

Ella looks down and pauses..

INT. ELLA'S BEDROOM – NIGHT (1964)

Thirteen-year-old ELLA sits on her bed, hugging a worn teddy bear to her chest. A purple bruise darkens her cheek. Her eyes are wide, her brow tightly furrowed as she listens.

The room is dim, lit only by flashes of lightning from the storm outside. Thunder rattles the windows.

Voices shout beyond her bedroom door, her parents locked in another heated argument.

MARK:

(angrily)

You are useless, Sarah! You can't understand anything I'm trying to say.

He picks up and throws her guitar against the wall, just missing her. Sarah flinches in fear.

SARAH:

(In a desperate plea)

Please, Mark, not now. Ella can hear us.

The fight continues, growing in intensity, as Ella trembles in her bed, tears flowing down her cheeks. She is familiar with this scene. Sarah runs into the room, her face covered in tears and bruises. She kneels beside Ella and pulls her into a tight

embrace.

SARAH:
(in an agitated whisper)
Shh, sweetheart. We will find a way out of
this. I promise.

Ella clings to her mother, seeking shelter from the storm,
both inside and outside their home.

SARAH:
(whispering)
You're very brave, Ella. Stronger than
you realize.

Mark's voice suddenly rises outside the door, accompanied by
a tremendous smash.
Sarah's face turns pale, but she immediately recovers her calm
for Ella's sake.

SARAH:
(hurriedly)
Listen to me, Ella. Tomorrow, we'll...
(pauses, nervously looking at the door)...
figure something out. I promise.

INT. DETECTIVE'S OFFICE - NIGHT (1975)

Ella snaps her eyes at Detective Bloom.

ELLA:
She didn't keep her promise.

INT. ELLA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (1964)

Ella nods, tears still running softly down her cheeks.

SARAH:
(softly)
Sleep now, dear. I'll be right back.

Sarah walks towards the record player and chooses a vinyl to
drain out the sound.

As Ella closes her eyes, hugging her bear, she falls asleep
to "Dream A Little Dream Of Me" by The Mamas & The Papas as
thunder continues to rattle the windows.

INT. DETECTIVE'S OFFICE – NIGHT (1975)

Both detectives look at the girls, eyes filled with sympathy.

DETECTIVE DANIELS:

So, how did you two meet?

MIA:

It was the day I realized there was nothing left for me.

INT. MIA'S CHILDHOOD HOME – EVENING (1969)

The walls seem closer than she remembers, the air thick and unmoving. The room that once held birthday decorations and whispered bedtime stories now feels tight, suffocating. The distant chime of the ice cream truck drifts through the window, a sound that once sent her running barefoot down the driveway. Now it only echoes, hollow and far away.

Now eighteen, she knows there is nothing left for her here.

Her parents, who had long ago fell to their addictions, left only a legacy of neglect and broken promises. The walls that were once riddled with childhood fantasies, appeared to close in on her with each passing moment. She touches a photo of herself, a bittersweet memory of the last time she smiled with her family. She packs up her bag and walks out of her room

MIA:

Goodbye.

She caught a glimpse of her mom lying in her room, passed out with a needle still in hand. As she walked downstairs, she looked at her dad slumped over on the couch, also not moving. It was like life had already left. She didn't hesitate to begin her way out the door when a loud bang echoed through the house.

OMAR:

(angrily)

Mia! Where the hell do you think you're going?

MIA:

What does it look like? I'm leaving.

OMAR:

Where?

MIA:

Away from here. Away from you.

Her father reacts, slapping her against the wall.

OMAR:

You've got no money, no career, no education, no one! You can't even fucking read, you illiterate piece of shit.

MIA:

I'm don-

OMAR:

Running away, huh? Just like when you were thirteen? Don't think I don't know about that clinic.

(smirks)

Slut.

Mia gives her father one last look of disgust and she opens the door and slams it shut behind her.

EXT. CALIFORNIA STREET — EVENING (1969)

She took a deep breath of relief. In, out, with no regret. Not knowing what lies ahead, she made her way out to the porch on a hot California evening, her steps lighter as they no longer bore the heavy weight of her pain. Tears stream down her cheek. A small smirk forms as the feeling settles in. She is finally free. Independent now, Mia looked up to the sky ahead. She reached into her purse to pluck out her cigarettes and a lighter. Lighting one, she took a long drag, and enjoyed the flavor of newfound freedom.

As cars went past, Mia strolled along the sidewalk, glancing across to spot a mother and daughter playing on the swings. Pausing momentarily, she felt guilt for what might have been, reminding herself she was just a child back then. Continuing down the California roads, she soon noticed a diner and headed towards it.

INT. DETECTIVE'S OFFICE — NIGHT (1975)

The phone rings abruptly, cutting off Mia. Mia gives Arthur a pointed look and Ella chuckles. He picks up and immediately hangs up.

DETECTIVE DANIELS:

Sorry about that. So, Ella, how did you end up in the diner?

INT. ELLA'S CHILDHOOD HOME - EVENING (1969)

Ella sits on the floor of her quaint bedroom, a bruise on her cheek after a fight with her father. She pulled herself together and went inside her closet, her childhood teddy bear held firmly against her heart. From the living room, the voice of her father could be heard echoing throughout the house.

MARK:

(angrily)

Ella! Come downstairs now!

Ella holds onto her breath, shivering in fear he will soon find her. His heavy foot steps draw closer and the closet door opens up with a sudden bang. Ella lets out a small scream.

MARK:

Come out!

Mark yanks her by the arm and she falls below him banging her head on the ground. He tosses her bear across the room and continues to yell at her.

MARK:

(shouting)

You deserve to be in hell with your mother!

ELLA:

My mother is free now, free from YOU.

Furious, Mark smacks her again and she stumbles onto the ground. Struggling to pull herself together, she begins to cry.

ELLA:

(sobbing quietly)

Mama, I need you.

MARK:

I'm leaving. Stay here.

Mark left the room in a rage and the door closed behind him with a loud thud. Meanwhile, Ella wiped the tears from her face, helpless and exhausted from how her life turned out. Despite the severe torment brought upon by her remorseless

father, she found the strength to get up and take the money that's been secretly stored under her bed before running out of her house. As she leaves, she takes in a breath of fresh air and heads to the nearby diner.

INT. DETECTIVE'S OFFICE - NIGHT (1975)

DETECTIVE DANIELS:

Did you often go to that diner?

ELLA:

Yes, I would sneak out to that diner every chance I had.

Detective Bloom's composure wavers. She clears her throat, straightens in her chair, forcing her pen to move across the page. Her eyes glisten, but she doesn't let the tears fall.

INT. LOCAL DEPARTMENT STORE - (NIGHT) (1969)

Mark makes his way to the department store to gather supplies for a desperate act: setting fire to his home to bring an end to his life and Ella's.

INT. DINER - NIGHT (1969)

They move through the same space, unaware of how close they are to colliding.

Ella rushes to the bathroom, splashing water on her face to compose herself, passing Mia sitting at one of the tables, zoning out. "Dream A Little Dream Of Me" is faintly playing on the jukebox in the background. One of the waitresses walks towards Mia and asks her what she would like to order. Mia snaps out of it and takes a look at the menu. As she attempts to read, her vision blurs and the words begin to jumble.

While this is happening, Ella has come out of the bathroom and took a seat at an empty booth facing Mia.

Mia continues looking at the menu, now starting to get frustrated and on the verge of tears as she struggles to read it, memories of her father's cruel words beginning to flood her mind.

Across the diner, another waitress has approached Ella, and she orders a sandwich with fries and water. She takes Ella's

menu and walks away. Ella is sitting in her seat, shaking her leg and looking at the pictures posted on the wall beside her.

Mia is still in distress, confusing the waitress.

WAITRESS:

What can I get for you, dear?

Struggling to hold back tears, Mia hands over a handful of crumpled bills.

MIA:

Um, what can I get with this?

WAITRESS:

(kindly)

You can get fries and a soda.

The waitress notes down the order and walks away.

Mia takes a few deep breaths and starts looking around the diner, her eyes settling on Ella who is sitting alone. Their eyes lock, and "Coney Island Baby" by The Excellents begins playing on the jukebox. Ella and Mia felt a connection, a sense of comfort and empathy washing over them. They gave each other a small smile.

Mia took the initiative and got up to walk towards Ella, when they heard the bell on the door chime. Ella breaks eye contact with Mia, and looks towards the door. Her face drops. Mia notices and turns around to see a man at the entrance. She looks back at Ella.

MIA:

Do you know him?

Ella gets up quickly and before hurrying out of the diner with the man, she slightly points to the direction of her house.

ELLA:

(whispers)

1550.

Mia's mind was in confusion when she saw Ella leave with the man. A suspicion began creeping over her. Something was off. She was convinced that Ella was not safe. Mia made her way out of the diner and headed in the direction Ella pointed to.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE DINER – NIGHT

She begins walking down the street as the sun is setting and starts to see smoke coming from Mill St.

Approaching Ella's home, the windows created shadows with an orange glow. The door was locked and smoke can be seen coming from the house. Mia's suspicion was correct. She couldn't get the door open and was coughing due to the smoke. In the meantime, Ella's father's voice could be heard echoing off the walls ominously inside the house.

EXT. ELLA'S HOUSE – NIGHT (1969)

Mia gets inside, finding a cracked window and entering quietly so no one would hear. She searched through the house looking for something to protect herself with. She finds an old revolver on the floor. She checks the chamber, loaded. Slowly walking up the stairs, listening to the cruel words from Ella's father, reminded her of her own father.

In a shocking encounter, Ella and Mark were locked in an intense confrontation.

Mark holds a match over the gasoline he poured on Ella, who is tied up on the bed.

MARK:

This is the end.

Mia suddenly pushes the door open, startling Mark who drops the match. She points the gun at him and the fire quickly emerges. Ella is struggling to scream through the tape on her mouth and falls to the floor when Mark pulls out a knife charging towards Mia.

BOOM!

Mia opens her eyes to see Mark laying on the ground, his lifeless body bleeding out.

Coming to her senses, Mia drops the gun, crawls to Ella, and begins to untie her. Ella, finally catching her breath, looks at Mia with a mix of disbelief and relief. A window bursts and Mia covers Ella with her body and tightly hugs her to shield her from the glass. They get up to run, but Ella stops as she sees both her teddy bear and the gun on the floor. She picks it up and follows Mia out of the house.

MIA:
(yells)

Let's go!

When they stumble outside, the house collapses into a roar of flames. They stood in silence as they watched the smoke billow into the sky, still tightly clutching each other Ella had no words.

Faint sounds of police sirens could be heard. Mia grabs Ella's hand to run to a nearby forest using darkness as a safe haven, when she looks up at the house across Ella's. Her blood runs cold when she sees someone standing at their window, looking right at them.

Together they ducked under a rock, holding each other's hands, hearing nothing but rustling leaves and sirens that were becoming fainter in the background.

ELLA:
(whispers)

So what now?

MIA:
(whispers)

Don't look back.

THE END.



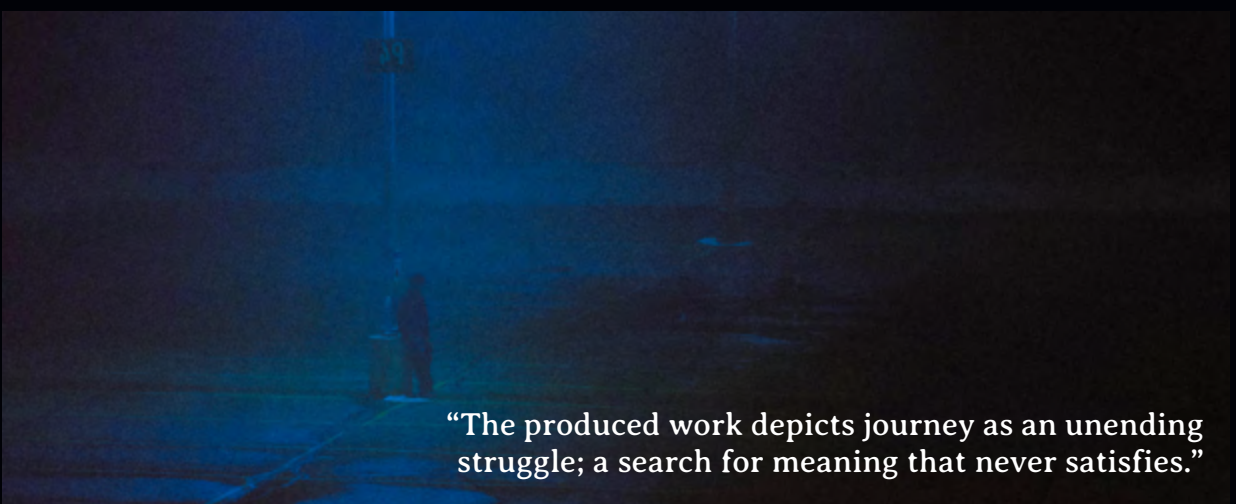
Featured Artwork
Digitally Bound
Juna Abutaha



Featured Piece
Royal Quest
Michaëlle Knights



Photography Series
Abdullah Shahid



“The produced work depicts journey as an unending struggle; a search for meaning that never satisfies.”

PATH OF REVOLUTION

BY MARYUM MENON

EDITED BY TYLER MEDEIROS

ILLUSTRATED BY SAMEEHA FATIMA

Where I started and where I am now.
Everything I went through now seems like a series of droplets,
droplets slowly filling a cup,
until it finally tipped over.
Now I can't look back.
Here I am, playing the rebel,
exactly what they expected me to be.

Now what about all of Ferrix? The prisoners on Narkina 5? Aldhani?
All the droplets for every life lost, every false sentence, every glimpse of hope?
They all drop slowly into a basin.
A basin building in pressure within the walls of the empire.
It will grow until the pressure gets too much, until the dam breaks and the wa-
ter bursts through the cracks in the walls.

What will the final droplet be? The tipping point that's enough to destroy the
structure and oppression they built around us?
I didn't know it then but now as I stare it in the face, I understand.
As I finally reckoned with how my actions brought us here,
my actions which seemed so big at the time, which I threatened my life for-
they were just tiny droplets of water.

But it was enough for them to panic, bring their walls higher and make them
stronger, suffocate us in shadows even darker than before.

I thought I had made a mistake joining the chaos,
but now as I watch the funeral of my mother as they use her as their bait,
unable to show my face, hiding in the towers,
I refuse to take their bait.

I see the wolves below as they wait patiently to take me.
As they stalk, hungry and ready, alongside the same people who brought me
into this mess.
The wolves and the hunters,



never on the same side until now.
They wait to capture or kill, whoever gets a hold of me first.

As I stared the consequences of my actions in the face,
and I see the people of Ferrix with a look in their eyes I haven't seen before-
looks of defiance.
I realize,

Oppression breeds a rebellion.

Reminds them of their place, makes them feel that anger,
makes them see that darkness they've grown blind to, as it envelopes every as-
pect of their lives.
And then they will act.
More tiny droplets,
and the cracks in their system start to show.

Now they're starting to show.
The streets flood with empire officers, with their soldiers.
Another drop.
The funeral carries on, and my mother- once just a foolish rebel- now a star
lighting the way.
Another drop.
A standstill of defiance, the empire is panicking.
Another drop.

I see it clearly now,
One more drop and Ferrix will erupt like a burst through the dam,
and the people will fight,
and I know my place for the first time.
I know I will join them,
even if it takes my life,
because finally I accept that,
I am a rebel.

How Stories Keep Us Going

by Madhav Ajayamohan
Edited by Tyler Medeiros
Design by Aria Zheng

“It’s like the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn’t want to know the end because how could the end be happy? ... I know now folks in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going because they were holding on to something.”

— **Samwise Gamgee, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers***

At this point in the series, Frodo is terrified of going to Mordor. It is a journey he is struggling to complete... and one he doubts he can finish. Yet, Sam encouraged him to push forward, drawing strength from the stories of heroes who came before.

Not all of our journeys take us to Mordor to destroy the One Ring, but our paths are not without peril. We struggle to move forward and lose faith, just like Frodo. However, just as with Frodo and Sam, the stories that surround us can propel us forward. In this article, I interviewed members of *The Vision* journal about the stories that helped them move forward.

The Strength to Keep Going

One of my favourite characters in all of fiction is Madao from the anime *Gintama*. Madao stands for *MARu de DAME na Ossan*, or Good-for-nothing Old Man. Madao was once a high-paying government official, but got fired for following his ideals. His wife and child left him soon after, followed by his home. He was kicked out on the streets, with nothing but his sunglasses to remind him of his former prowess.

Throughout the show, he gets many opportunities to claw his way back. For example, he once won a “*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*” game show. However, each time, he sacrifices those chances to do what’s right: like donating his winnings to a sick child. He never gives up on his convictions, even to his own detriment. Each time I hear his theme song, even when I feel like collapsing, I feel like I can take one more step. I believe stories have the power to inspire us when we’re hopeless. They push us to keep striving for our goals.

For me, it was Madao. For Mariana, the Executive Creative Director of *Vision*, it was the world of *Persona 5*. Mariana characterized the world of *Persona*

5 as “being stuck in a system that doesn’t benefit you,” and seeks to push you down. While she played the game, Mariana saw the injustice the protagonists face, and realized that “it’s not just me that wants to change, or is willing to fight for things.” Finding others fighting injustice strengthened her determination to bring change to the world.

For Michaëlle Knights, an artist at Vision, stories not only strengthened her desire to become an artist, but even brought her out of a long creative slump. Michaëlle shared how “while going through one of the longest art burnouts of [her] life,” she encountered *Blue Period*: an anime where a high schooler discovers his passion for art, and aims to become an artist.

The protagonist’s passions for his art, and the struggles he encountered creating something unique, reminded Michaëlle of “why [she] loved art and that pain and exhaustion wasn’t unique to [her]; it’s something [she] can overcome.” For Michaëlle, *Blue Period*’s story gave her a way to understand her struggles as an artist, and a way to overcome them. Throughout her interview, Michaëlle revealed how stories have helped guide her throughout her journey.

To Create A New Path

“When I was growing up, I treated myself more like a pale imitation of humanity,” Michaëlle said. “I listened and responded in a way people would like, rather than ever showing my true self, because I didn’t want to upset my friends.”

The books and shows Michaëlle consumed gave her a safe place to process the emotions she felt, and how to deal with them. Michaëlle shared a memorable example where the show *Sophia the First* helped her understand her feelings towards her new baby sister.

“*Sophia the First* is about a girl in an adoptive family who has to deal with a new financial situation,” Michaëlle explains. “In the middle, Sophia’s introduced to older princesses who dealt with similar circumstances, who gave her guidance. She meets Cinderella, and they talk about how sisters can be mean, but they deserve love.”

Michaëlle saw herself in Sophia and Cinderella: and their lessons helped her “navigate her own feelings of jealousy” towards her sister. Throughout our journey, we often get confused and stuck in places, with seemingly no way to get out. At these times, stories can be the mentors that show us a new way to overcome the obstacles in front of us. Whenever we don’t know what to do, we can always turn to a story for advice.



To Rest in the Solace of Words

However, stories don't always have to be about moving forward or overcoming a problem. Sometimes, indulging in a story can be your rest, before you face the world again. For Jessy Fan, a writer for Vision, the story she could rest in was the anime *Atashinchi*. "No matter what I'm feeling— anxious, depressed, angry, or overwhelmed—I put it on, and something in me immediately softens," Jessy shared.

For Jessy, *Atashinchi* is more than a show: it's entwined with her childhood in Taiwan, amidst her cousins and grandparents. When she rewatches the show, she's "visiting a feeling of home, of being cared for, of a time when everything felt manageable." Jessy herself admits that the show "doesn't solve [her] problems or change reality, but it gives [her] a gentle escape— a pause.... And sometimes, that's exactly the kind of support [you] need."

For Mayukha Pelluri, our Writing & Editing Director, her rest story is *How to Train Your Dragon: Race to the Edge*. Whenever she was undergoing a major change, like moving homes or experiencing her first exam season in UTM, she craved *Race to the Edge*'s stability: sometimes even rewatching a single episode multiple times.

"I always feel like I'm in the middle of an episode, where things are most hectic... where people are struggling the most," Mayukha explained. "But then I watched an episode [of *Race to the Edge*] till the end, when the team solved the major conflict of the episode."

Mayukha took solace in the idea that our problems and conflicts can eventually be resolved, just like how the characters in *Race to the Edge* resolve their issues.

Using Stories to Create Our Own

As we go on writing our own stories, it's always interesting to see how other stories influence our path. Whether it's as motivation to move forward, a mentor in difficult situations, or a place to take rest, stories always leave an indelible impact upon you.

We're all still walking on our own, personal journey to Mordor. At times, we'll stumble and lose faith, just like Frodo and Samwise. However, I hope you can find the story that will help you get back up and keep moving on.

~ Sincerely, Madhav Ajayamohan



ACT II

act ii
WAYFINDING
design by Jelani Hanson



WAYFINDING



Featured Artwork
Wings
Iris Cioban



My Mother's Footsteps

by Natalie Ramadan Jerashy

Edited by Linzy Zheng

Design by Naomi Chan

Once a girl from Bethlehem marched,
past olive trees whispering home

Dreams of chalk dust and lessons,
lay scattered beneath a foreign sky,

before the world learned angry headlines,
before bombs learned how to swallow cries.

She taught her children how to say,
the names of towns taken away,
keys kept warm for waiting doors.

In snowy streets they roamed
Like olive leaves, not knowing home

In the quiet, under their breath,
they whisper, Raji'een.



Tunnel Vision

by Judy Zhi

Edited by Mayukha Pelluri

Illustration by Ollie Paredes

Dad gulps down the remainder of his coffee. He sets down the mug with a resounding clank on the glass coffee table. A stack of coasters lay on the surface, with rings of water clinging on.

He sits on the leather couch, scattered pillows surround him. The faint soundtrack of a Christmas movie seeps through from the family room. Light spills in from the window as snow blends into the white sky, reflecting off of his metallic navy framed glasses. Dad blinks expectantly.

“Let’s begin with name, age, occupation; stuff like that to introduce yourself,” I say.

“My name is Jun Zhi, I’m fifty-seven, and I do electrical engineering for a living.” He clasps his fingers together loosely in his lap.

“It all started late January last year. I went to get my blood tested, and saw that my white blood cell count was on the lower side. I asked my family doctor, but they said it was still in the average range, so it should be fine. I was simply told to watch if anything out of the ordinary arises.”

He leans back and his eyes scan the ceiling.

“A few months passed and I went back in for another blood test, and the white blood cells got even lower. The doctor said it was still not past the minimum white blood cell limit.” He paused.

“Half a year later, the white blood cells finally went past the minimum limit.”

He sighed. “The doctor recommended more testing and referred me to a specialist. The more blood tests I did, the more the white blood cells decreased. I was nervous, but not too scared.”

He taps his finger on his knuckles as he speaks.

“I was at the mall one day, and all of a sudden I felt like I had lost all my energy. I had suddenly gotten so drained that even breathing felt exhausting. I couldn’t keep walking. I couldn’t even drive home. That’s when I thought ‘This is serious.’ So I went back to the doctor and got everything tested for every little possibility.

“They took fourteen vials of blood at once,” he throws his hands up in frustration.

“But they still didn’t find anything abnormal. Other than low white blood cells,” Dad shrugs.

“One night, I felt my heart rate rise higher than usual. I started feeling pain in the bones of my forearms and legs. I woke up sweating, and my bedsheets and blankets were completely soaked. My whole body was slick with sweat.” He runs his hand back and forth across the length of his arm.

“I asked my doctor, but they still refused to take it seriously. They said it might be just leftover symptoms from previously getting Covid. They didn’t give me any medications, just told me to go home and get some rest.

“I found that my collarbone also hurt. A long time ago, way before this, I got my collarbone checked out for a lump on the bone. Even then, the doctor just told me to keep an eye out for any changes.


“I would get woken up multiple times throughout the night by my bones hurting, and I would have terrible nightmares. But one night, I was woken up by something entirely different. All of a sudden, there would be a... a hwaaaah feeling. Like a flood of intense heat that burns from the collarbone lump, spreading all the way to my lungs.”

Dad raises his eyebrows, and his eyes widen. “It scared me, bad.”

“I got up in the morning and felt that something must be wrong. It felt like cancer was spreading. Why do I have full body bone pain? Was it bone cancer?”


“So I went to the emergency room. There was this senior doctor, and I asked him, ‘What symptom is this?’ He replied with a medical term I didn’t understand. I asked, ‘Is this cancer spreading?’ and he said, ‘Yes.’

The doctor began to leave but he turned back to say ‘But I’m not your doctor,




you need to listen to your family doctor.”

He clears his throat.




“And then he just left.”




“I waited in the ER, washed beneath the sterile white fluorescent lights. My heart raced as if it was my final moments. I tensed up as a different, younger doctor came in. He said ‘All the other doctors have reviewed your symptoms and have discussed this. This is indeed cancer.’ That nearly scared me to death. I clutched my hand to my chest, ‘If this is cancer, then quick, refer me to a cancer centre,’ I told them.”

His gaze goes to the corner of the room. “Then the doctor said, ‘Okay, then let’s first get your blood tested.’ After I did the test, he said ‘Huh? Your blood test is all normal.’”

Dad hesitates,




“‘How is this possible?’ I ask. ‘Perhaps you have vitamin deficiencies of some sort,’ the doctor replies.”




Dad exhales. “That day I went back home pretty happy that it wasn’t cancer. But still, I couldn’t sleep. I was sweating and in constant full body pain, and the nightmares chased any sort of sleep away.”

Dad slouches, rubbing his temples. “Not being able to sleep is terrible.”




He stays silent for a few seconds.




“Can you describe the bone pain?” I ask.


“Like ants eating away at your bones. They start crawling up your spine, up, up, up, all the way to the top of your head, then all over your face.”



“Can you describe other symptoms and if they affected your day-to-day life outside of sleep?”



“I would be scared to go out for a walk or drive. I was worried I’d break a bone because of the bone deterioration. I always needed someone to lean on when I walked, and I would walk very slowly and carefully. I wouldn’t even think about exercising.”



He ended up taking a doctor approved, short-term disability leave from work for a month. He would mostly lie on the couch, but when I got home from school, he would hand me sheets of paper. Water bills, rental payments, bank account passwords. He would try to teach me the things I would have to take over once he’s gone.

As he speaks, he pulls down the collar of his distressed, faded Adidas T-shirt,

and feels his collarbone with his fingertips.

“I was thinking, that’s weird, eh? Nothing abnormal in the tests but it would still hurt everyday.

“I even went for an MRI at my own cost because, one, the doctors wouldn’t let me get an MRI unless they found something seriously wrong. Two, it would result in months on a waitlist.”

“How much did you pay for it?” I say.

His eyes narrow and shift to the side.

“It was \$3,000 for a full body MRI. Afterwards I would feel new symptoms coming on. Then I would suspect that something new developed after the MRI, so it wouldn’t show on the test,” he says and raises his eyebrows.

“I would think I had lymphoma, which causes lymph nodes to grow into lumps throughout the body. I would feel for my lymph nodes and notice they were indeed swollen. Oh, it was scary.”

He presses his lips together, his eyes gazing into the distance.

“I would lie in bed at night and think to myself, ‘I should go to the ER and do another few tests, or else in the future, I wouldn’t even have the energy to actually go to the ER myself.’”

He frowns, “I kept insisting on more tests. My family doctor actually told me to stop coming and find a new family doctor. She just didn’t want to keep dealing with my case.

“The doctors would tell me it’s just anxiety. I told them, ‘It couldn’t possibly be anxiety. My physical symptoms are so strong, my whole body is in pain.’


“Then they prescribed me four pills of highly strong anxiety medication. I thought that they weren’t even listening to me. I tell them all these terrifying physical symptoms and instead of taking it seriously and getting me help, they just chalk it up to anxiety? How could anxiety cause such strong physical effects?”

Dad pauses. His mouth pulls up into a half-smile.

“After taking the four pills, eh? My bones stopped hurting at night, isn’t that strange?

“They switched me to different anxiety meds and the pain never resurfaced again. I even went to do checkups back in China, and the doctor said everything looks fine. Everything felt like it was finally fixed. I even stopped taking my anxiety meds because I didn’t need them anymore.”

He lifts his hand, “I still don’t know why those symptoms emerged,” he says.



Dad rubs the bridge of his nose.

“It wasn’t until I read an article about how nowadays, many young people go through this same cycle of searching for and suspecting they have a life threatening illness based on their symptoms. It was only then I realized how other people go through the same thing.”

“Has your perspective on life changed after this experience?”

“Yes. The whole time I thought I didn’t have much time left. I stopped placing so much importance on money and work. I thought, if my illness could possibly be cured, I’ll definitely not go back to work. Why would I work? Why would I earn money?”

“Do you still feel that way now?” I say.

He throws his head back and laughs.

“I reverted back into the mindset of a regular person. Work, earn money. But having this experience, I can look back to it once in a while, and realize,”

He looks me in the eye.

“Some people live their whole lives in a tunnel visioned view with money as their sole priority. I realized that I had placed so much importance on money and my job. If I died, they would all be useless to me. I told myself, if I get a chance to return to my normal life...”

“I will just live happily.”



Featured Artwork
Waiting While the World Passes
Sameeha Fatima



Greensleeves

by Linzy Zheng

edited by Mayukha Pelluri

illustrated by Iris Cioban

design by Jelani Hanson

Dust floated around the kitchen looking like glitter in the sunlight. Baba stood tall with his two arms in the sink, scrubbing the dishes with an old yellow and green sponge. Soap splattered all over the counter. I watched from the dining table, my eyes following his movements. Scrub. Scrub. Scrub.

A soft hum filled the air. A familiar song with no name that I knew of. I hummed in sync with the tune. My body swayed side to side, a grin appearing on my face. Baba kept scrubbing the dishes. His hands, from gardening in our backyard, had become rough with calluses and tough skin.

“What’s the song, Baba?” I asked in my shrill six-year-old voice.

“I don’t remember,” Baba paused to recall, his fingers fiddling with the brown, worn-out, leather watch he wears on his right wrist, “Let me think.”

Baba then began running the dishes under the ice-cold water and transferring them to the left side counter. Mama doesn’t like to wash the dishes because she has arthritis and it makes her hands hurt, so Baba does them for her. Even if he comes back home from work mirroring a deflated, unwatered plant, only revived by taking an afternoon nap.

Baba stopped washing the dishes and wiped his hands on the apron. He then adjusted his eyeglasses.

“I think I remember now,” Baba answered me as he then turned away to put the dishes away, “Greensleeves.”

“How do you know this song?” I ran up to the kitchen counter and rested my head on the tabletop to look at Baba. I stared at his beard hairs that he usually shaves off. Sometimes when I kiss him on the cheek they would prick me. I changed my gaze to his hair; a few grey hairs peaked out against his black hair.

“Your Yeye, my dad, used to hum it,” Baba replied.

“Like you!” I giggled.

I have seen Yeye two times; once when I was a baby and could not form any memories, the second time in the summer after kindergarten when we went to China for a month and a half. It is hard to recall his appearance, yet I remember his hair is completely grey and balding. His wrinkles mostly formed around his eyes. He is always smiling and praising Cayden and I whenever we facetime on WeChat during Lunar New Year. Yeye used to take me on walks around the pond and shop for toys in the old, rundown convenience store. I wonder if Yeye still hums the song like Baba.

“Yes. Isn’t that a nice way to remember someone? By song?” Baba smiled at me.

I nodded my head up and down quickly.

“Yeah!”

“Rong Rong get over here right now!” Mama yelled. I could hear her growing impatience. Meaning that I would be receiving a lecture if I don’t obey her soon. I really hate listening to her long lectures. She always repeats the same things over and over again like a parrot that only knows one phrase.

I frowned, my cheeks puffing up. No one else I know has to do homework. They get to play all day. Why can’t I get the same thing? It’s not fair at all.

“Rong Rong, listen to Mama,” Baba patiently demanded.

I sighed, my shoulders relaxing in defeat.

“Why do I always have to do homework?”

“You’re young, so you have time to learn. Now go. Be a good girl.” Baba turned away to do another task.

“No one else has to do it though,” I retorted.

“Well our family is different. You know how Mama values your education. Now go listen to her.”

Mama grew up as the top student in her small town in China, because of that she had the opportunity to study outside of her town away from her parents in high school. Mama graduated as an engineer and met Baba at work. Baba and Mama came with Linda to Canada and Mama studied computer science at Saskatchewan Polytechnic. For her, studying is opportunity, so she’s always yelling at me to do homework.

My eyes shifted to the picture of the five of us hanging on the wall. Baba is carrying my toddler brother, Cayden, in his arms while Mama lays her hand on my shoulder, standing beside Linda, my older sister. I looked at my smiling face

and then at Mama's.

Mama always took me to fun events ranging from festivals, to art workshops, to science shows. My favourite event Mama took me to is the Home Depot kid's woodworking program. She helped me create a bug cage to catch the insects in our backyard. One time I caught a spider and Mama would find a way to capture dead flies to feed it.

Mama also buys me ice cream and snacks whenever we go on trips. I really like it when she lets me buy ice cream when I go play on the beach.

Baba is right. I should listen to her, but I really don't want to. I know Mama cares. Just maybe too much.

"Fineeee," I pouted.

"Rong Rong!"

"Coming!"

I stood by the school printer waiting for my music sheet. I wanted to try playing the piano in the Roy Ivor common room. It's almost the end of the second semester of my first year at the University of Toronto Mississauga and I'm determined to try all the facilities and maximize my tuition money.

Far from home, I found myself homesick almost constantly, my heart like a cup with a hole leaving it to constantly be unfilled. I didn't think moving away would be as hard as it truly was for me. I missed watching movies with my brother on Fridays with our microwave popcorn, sprawled across our chosen sides of the couch. I missed my mom coming in to check on me working with a bowl of fruit to snack on. I missed sitting in a circle on the hallway floor to eat lunch with my friends. I missed so many things I didn't even think I would. My dreams of the perfect university life with a huge friend group, getting to experience the world, and discovering myself just wasn't as ideal as all the movies and TV shows cut it out to be. Maybe it was because I graduated high school with people I knew since elementary school, moving to a new place felt so jarring.

The sheet music for "Greensleeves" finally finished printing. I grabbed the warm paper, tucked it into my worn out tote bag, walked to the end of the CCT building and pushed the doors open. A cold breeze hit my face, forcing me to squeeze my eyes.

I walked under the dim lights on the way to Roy Ivor. I, like Little Red Riding Hood, trudged alone, along the pathway in the forest, hoping that no wolf would get to me.

I finally arrived at the three-story brick building lined with giant windows revealing the lobby. When walking to the entrance, there is a singular window to a dorm room. That would be mine.

I swiped my residence card and strolled into the lobby straight to the common room. I flipped the light switch on, took off my jacket and placed the music sheet on the music stand of the piano. I haven't played piano in years and my cold fingers fumbled with the keys, but as I played the familiar rhythm, I couldn't help but smile. At least this song is relatively easy to play.

Bring. Bring.

I fumbled through the pocket of my jacket to reach for my phone. The screen lit up with Baba's Wechat call. I swiped it to answer.

"Hi Baba," I smiled.

"Hi Rong Rong. Where are you?" Baba asked.

His eyes squinted at my background, trying to figure out my location without his glasses on.

"I'm in the common room playing piano," I said.

"That is good," Baba said. "How is school?"

When I first left for university, I remember catching Baba tearing up as he said goodbye to me. I really wish he were here. School would be a lot easier if I didn't feel so lonely and homesick, even if I really appreciate the independence and growth from this experience.

"It's good. I've been keeping up with my assignments and my CGPA should be good enough for POST. I quite like my major, Professional Writing and Communications."

"That is good. How are you with living by yourself? Do you remember to eat?"

It is like Baba to worry about such things. As I thought about food, I yearned for Baba's cooking. I really miss it. It is so much better than what they are serving in OPH. Cafeteria food is not it.

"Yes Baba. I clean the dishes by myself too. There have been no problems with the chores so far."

"That is very good. You must be responsible now since you are an adult. Remember to eat, you often forget."

"Yes Baba."



“It is very late, you should go to sleep.”

I’m sure if Baba knew how late I usually sleep I would get quite the scolding.

“Okay Baba. Tell Mama and Cayden I said hi.”

I grabbed my things and headed upstairs to Block C. My room is on the third floor, but I’ve gotten quite used to taking multiple flights of stairs without an elevator.

I inserted my key card and walked into the dark living room. My roommates and I constantly left the lights off. I suppose it’s because we mostly stayed in our rooms to finish assignments and never came out except for meals.

I turned on the lights, spotting my dishes in the sink. I made a mental note to do them after I put my stuff away.

Coming back to the kitchen, I stared at the dirty dishes I used to cook dumplings. Not the homemade kind my parents would feed me, the slightly too thick wrapping folded by hand, filled with beef and carrots, but the frozen grocery store ones with thin wrapping pressed together by machine with pork and cabbage inside, made perfect for selling standards and convenient for a busy college student.

Okay. Roll up the sleeves. Pour some soap. I like this soap, it smells like oranges. Now turn on the tap. Okay! Perfect!

I began scrubbing the dishes. Out of all the chores I have to do, this one is the easiest. I find it relaxing, the continuous motion and lack of thinking involved. The task was almost like mediation.

I started humming to Greensleeves. Swaying from side to side I imagined myself as the rom-com lead as a part of a daily life montage. Maybe I could have my big break soon. I closed the tap water, left my dishes on the towels to dry and called it a night, my voice slowly trailing off. It’s just another night before school, but a lovely night nonetheless.



Featured Artwork
Strangle
Shanna Wong

The Stories of Toronto

by Reem Maklad & Malak Ellassiuty
Writeup by Colleen Petric

We join Malak Ellassiuty and Reem Maklad in *The Stories of Toronto* (2026) as they meander through the hustling city—through College Street and Ossington Avenue, Avenue Road and Bloor Street West, Yonge Street and Dundas Street West.

Passersby, from “all walks of life,” respond to the following questions: “What is something you had to unlearn?” and “What is something you have forgotten about yourself that someone reminded you of?”

Ellassiuty and Maklad layer soothing tracks alongside narration by Sidra Azziz. They juxtapose clips of bustling pedestrian walkways with tranquil park benches, restless TTC stations with ethereal, dusk storefronts.

This documentary forces us to slow down. It invites us to enjoy the journey—to pause, to breathe, to not only take in the vast, breathtaking sights of the city but also to reflect on our own experiences.

Like you and I, everyone has unique quirks, histories, and, of course, stories.

You can access *The Stories of Toronto* (2026) by visiting the QR code.







The Curves We Don't See

*by Aymaan Chowdhury
Edited by Mayukha Pelluri
Design by Jules Lee*

Late-night walks on campus always hit different when you're alone. The December chill settled in; not the kind of cold that bites your skin, but the kind that slips into your thoughts and tucks in, long after you've gone home.

I was supposed to be heading to Square One on the 110 by now, scrolling mindlessly on my phone, pretending the day hadn't drained me. But the group meeting went overtime, because course it did. The bus rolled off the second I stepped out of Davis. I watched the lights fade into the dark, and for a moment, it felt like a metaphor for my semester.

Always almost catching up, just barely missing something. Watching life pull away just a little too fast.

So I walked.

It's strange how you don't truly realize how exhausted you are until you start moving without direction. The campus was quiet in a heavy, thoughtful way. Streetlamps buzzed with a warm orange glow that made everything look softer, like the world was apologizing for being too harsh.

As I passed the bench near the library, something caught my eye.

A small, perfectly placed, black notebook.

At first, I kept walking. I wasn't in the mood for surprises. But something



tugged at me; not curiosity, more like recognition. A feeling like this thing, whatever it was, had been waiting.

I turned back.

I slowly walked over and carefully picked it up. The notebook was warm. That was the first odd thing, like someone had just been holding it. The second was the faint gold text embossed in the corner:

“For the ones still walking.”

Those words hit harder than they should've.

I sat down and opened it. The first page was already written.

I used to think journeys moved forward. You make a plan, follow it, and life falls in line. Then my father died, and the road I thought I understood broke apart. I didn't say goodbye. I didn't say I loved him.

People talk about closure like it's something you earn. I don't think it works like that. Some wounds don't close. They just change how you walk.

If you're reading this, the path won't wait for you to be ready. Change the path you take. I read it twice. Not because I didn't understand it, but because it felt too real, too close. The wind scraped leaves across the pavement. I turned the page.

A few pages later, the handwriting changed.

Everyone thinks journeys begin with a decision. Mine began with exhaustion. I had been running from expectations, mistakes, a version of myself I thought I had to be.

Then one afternoon, I didn't run. I sat at a bus stop and cried loudly. And for once, I didn't care who saw.

Sometimes the first step isn't forward. Sometimes it's stopping long enough to feel what you've been avoiding.

Something in my chest tightened. Stopping wasn't something I did.

I turned the page again.

This time, the ink felt heavier.

I thought the worst thing was losing my relationship. It wasn't. The worst thing was realizing I lost myself long before that.

Losing yourself happens slowly, a piece here, a piece there, until one day



you don't recognize the person staring back.

But losing yourself also gives you the chance to choose who you want to become next.

I closed the notebook for a moment. Different handwriting, different voices, but all carrying the same kind of heaviness.

I flipped through the remaining pages.

Blank.

The silence felt intentional.

I wondered; what does my journey look like right now?

I opened the first blank page. As I pulled out a pen from my bag, my hand shook. Not from the cold. I stared at the page for a second, then wrote my title at the top:

The Weight I Carry Quietly

People see the surface, the events, the achievements, the smiles, but they don't see the weight behind them.

The truth is: I've been tired. Not physically tired. Soul tired. The kind you don't admit to because you don't want people to worry or think you're falling apart.

But pretending has a cost. One I've been paying quietly.

I always thought strength meant silence. But reading these entries, maybe strength is honesty.

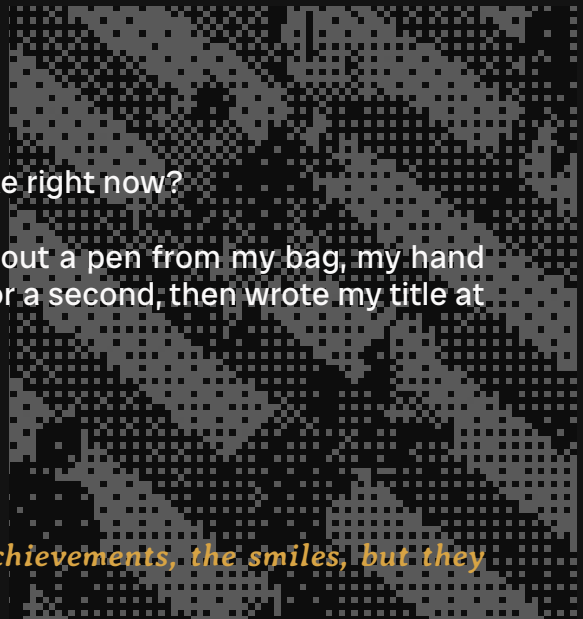
Writing that felt like pulling a splinter from my chest, painful but relieving. I turned to another blank page. A memory rose, slow but certain.

It wasn't one dramatic moment that changed me. I just looked in the mirror one morning and realized I didn't recognize myself.

Not my face, not its characteristics, but its heart. Its emotion. Its soul. Like I had drifted far away from myself without noticing.

Life was normal. Nothing had gone wrong. But I felt like a passenger in my own life.

Maybe losing yourself isn't failure. Maybe it's the beginning of finding who you're meant to grow into.



The air around me felt warmer. Less lonely.

Then something new caught my eye, a page I didn't remember flipping through before. The ink looked fresh.

If you're reading this, you're in the in-between — not who you were, not yet who you're becoming.

It feels lonely. Heavy. Confusing. But you are not lost. You are rearranging. Transitions feel like breaking before becoming. Be patient with yourself.

Don't rush. Don't compare. Don't punish yourself for not being "further ahead." There is no behind. Only unfolding.

And when you're ready, leave something here for the next person walking this curve.

It felt like someone had reached through the page and taken my hand.

I closed the notebook gently. It was full of memories, confessions, pieces of lives that somehow overlapped.

A quiet thought surfaced inside me:

Maybe I was supposed to find this.

I turned to another blank page. This time, I didn't hesitate. I wrote another title, smaller than the first, but more certain.

Where I Am Now

I used to think a journey had to be big. A move. A major change. A dramatic event. But journeys happen in quiet moments too, the ones that change you softly, without announcement.

I'm somewhere in the blur right now. Not at the beginning. Not at the end. Just learning, healing, trying to understand why the person I used to be doesn't feel like me anymore.

I'm still walking. Still figuring things out. Still trying.

Maybe that's enough for now.

The words felt like they had been waiting for me.

I held the notebook to my chest. For a moment, it felt like holding something fragile—not just the notebook, but myself.



I checked the pages again, and then I noticed something tucked between two of them:

A folded piece of paper.

Soft. Worn. Handled many times. It was written by the original owner of the journal. I pulled it out and opened it.

Life will bend you in ways you don't expect. Not to break you, but to shape you.

Walk your journey at your own pace.

And when it becomes too heavy, let the world hold you.

You don't have to carry everything alone.

I didn't realize how much I needed that sentence until I read it. Not because it was dramatic, but because it was gentle. Because it said the exact thing I never allowed myself to believe: that I didn't have to be strong all the time, that I didn't have to keep moving just to prove I could. That slowing down didn't mean failing.

I slipped the paper back where I found it, my fingers lingering on its edges, as if comforting the person who wrote it, just like they comforted me.

Someone who'd been hurt.

Someone who had healed.

Someone like me.

The wind brushed past again, colder now, but I didn't feel swallowed by the night.

Instead, I felt steadier, like the darkness wasn't something to fear but something meaningful, something I was meant to walk through.

I rested the notebook on my lap and looked at it for a long time.

There was one more thing I needed to write.

This time, not for me—but for whoever would find this next.

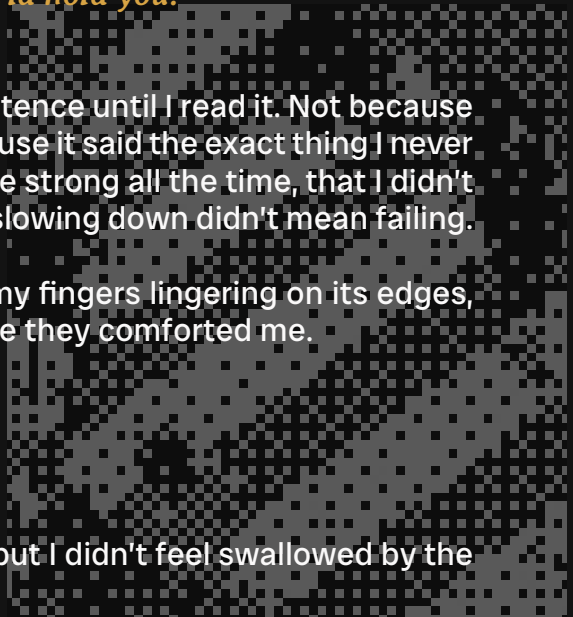
I turned to the final blank page near the back.

The paper felt new. Waiting for me.

I pressed my pen to the page one last time.

If you're reading this, you're not alone, even if it feels like you are. I don't know your story, your pain, your hopes, your heartbreaks, but if you're holding this notebook, then something in you was meant to stop here.

Whatever brought you to this bench matters. Your journey matters.



You're allowed to be tired, uncertain. You're allowed to not have every answer.

This notebook helped me see the parts of myself I ignored. I hope it gives you what you need: comfort, clarity, or simply the reminder that someone walked this curve before you.

Wherever you're going next, go gently. You deserve that.

When I put the pen down, I didn't feel lighter.

I felt whole.

Not because everything suddenly made sense.

Not because my problems disappeared, or because I "fixed" myself.
It was something simpler:

For the first time in a long time... I didn't feel like I was falling behind in my own life.

I closed the notebook softly, letting my fingers rest on the cover like I was afraid to break the gentle magic that lived inside it. Then, for the first time that night, I leaned back against the cold metal bench, and breathed.

The kind of breath you don't realize you've been missing, one that reaches places inside you that are forgotten when life moves too fast.

The campus was quiet, but not empty.

The silence felt shared, full of voices from people who had written before me; tired, hopeful, lost, healing. People who didn't know each other, yet understood each other in ways words rarely allow.

I opened the notebook again and flipped through everything. The grief. The burnout. The heartbreak. The rediscovery. confusion. Honesty. hope. Moments from strangers woven into a single, human thread.

Then a gentle realization unfolded inside me:

Every page was someone trying to find their way back to themselves.

Not back to perfection.
Not back to who they used to be.
Just back to feeling human again.

I had forgotten what that felt like.

I'd spent months trying to be productive, reliable, strong, always okay, no

matter what.

I forgot that being human meant breaking sometimes. And rebuilding. And wandering. And finding pieces of yourself in unexpected places.

Like a random notebook left on a cold campus bench.

I held it against my chest, letting the weight of everything settle in me. Then I stood up.

It felt strange to let go of something that had held me together like nothing else, but keeping it didn't feel right..

I placed it back exactly where I found it.

On the edge of the bench.

Waiting for the next person who needed a pause.

A reminder that they weren't walking alone.

I stepped back and looked at it, a simple black notebook under a flickering streetlamp on a quiet campus night.

It didn't look magical.

But it was.

It held pieces of people all tied together in a way none of us would ever fully understand. And now, it held a piece of me too.

I lingered for a moment, watching the notebook like it was a quiet witness to something important. The streetlamp cast a soft glow over it, making the black cover look almost gold from where I stood.

For the first time in a long time, I felt... steady.

I slowly walked toward the bus stop. The silence felt different now, peaceful. The campus buildings weren't looming shadows anymore. They felt familiar, almost comforting, like they'd heard my story and decided to hold it gently.

When I reached the stop, I turned back one last time.

The bench was a small shape in the distance, but I could still see the notebook resting on it. I knew someone else would find it.

Someone who needed it just as much as I did.

I sat on the cold metal bench of the bus stop and let myself exist, without

rushing, without pretending, without holding myself together out of habit.

The bus approached in the distance, headlights cutting through the night, engine humming a familiar sound. But this time, I didn't feel like I was running to catch it. I didn't feel late or overwhelmed.

I felt... ready.

Ready to go home.
to keep walking.
to face the parts of myself I had avoided.
to grow, even if the path wasn't clear.

Because the truth is:

Journeys aren't about arriving.
They're about becoming.

When the bus finally stopped in front of me, I stepped on with a lighter chest and steadier breath.

I didn't have everything figured out.
I didn't know exactly where I was headed.

But for the first time in a long time,

I trusted myself.

I walked down the aisle and took a seat by the window. The glass was cool against my forehead. Outside, the campus lights slid past slowly, then faster, until the bench, the one that held everything tonight, disappeared from view.

But the steadiness stayed.

The night stretched out ahead like the road I wasn't afraid of anymore.

The bus rumbled forward, and I whispered to myself, softly, but with a confidence I hadn't heard from my voice in a long time:

"I'm still walking.

And that's enough."

I watched the faint outline of the library fade into the distance, the streetlamps glowing like a trail of small suns. The world looked different now, not because it changed, but because I had.

As the bus pulled onto the main road, I leaned back and closed my eyes for a moment.

Even with life pulling you in every direction, moments are waiting for you. Moments that find you when you're not looking. Moments that shift something inside you in ways you don't fully see until later.

For me, it was a small black notebook on a cold campus bench.

I opened my eyes again as the bus hummed beneath me. My reflection looked back from the dark window, not transformed, not perfected, but... more honest. More honest. More me.

And maybe that was the point all along.

About the quiet steps no one sees.

About the parts of yourself you rediscover when the world finally slows down.

Outside, the streetlights stretched into long, warm streaks. The buildings blurred gently. The night opened up ahead like a promise of possibility.

And for once, that was enough.

When the bus slowed at the next stop, a few students got on, laughing, tired, with coffees and backpacks and lively conversations I wasn't a part of.

But I didn't feel separate from anything anymore. I felt connected in a soft, invisible, but real way.

Everyone was walking their own curve.

Everyone was carrying something quietly.

Everyone was becoming, even if they didn't know it.

The bench.

The notebook.

The voices from strangers.

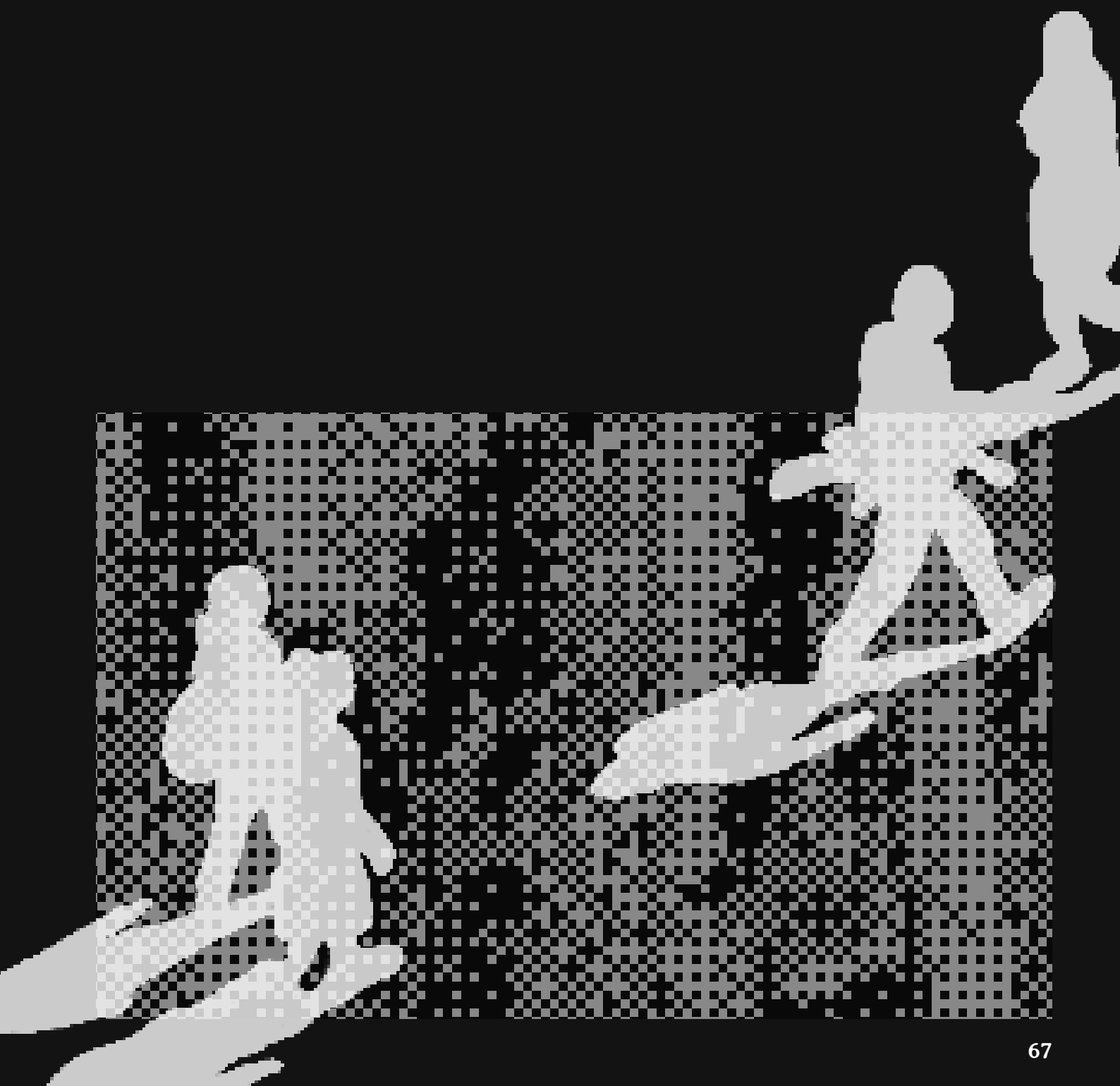
My own words added to theirs.

It all became part of the same journey, a shared, unfolding story none of us would ever fully see, yet all of us had shaped in our own small ways.

I took a slow breath.

As the bus rolled into the night, I whispered again:

"I'm still walking. And that's enough."





Featured Piece
Gold-Haired Woman
Iris Cioban



DENOUEMENT

act iii
DENOUEMENT
design by Aria Zheng



ennement

BETWEEN ARRIVAL AND BECOMING

*by Aishat Abdulrazaq
Edited by Mayukha Pelluri
Design by Skylar Zhang*

I didn't realize my journey had begun the moment I chose to leave Houston. At seventeen, I thought I was simply choosing a school. I didn't understand that I was choosing distance; from my family, from familiarity, from a version of myself that always existed within reach of home. I told myself I wanted independence, growth, a second chance at loving a country I was born in but never quite felt connected to. I told myself university would be the place where everything clicked.

But arrival is never the same as becoming.

When I first arrived, Toronto felt cold in a way that had nothing to do with the weather. The campus was loud and full, and yet I felt invisible. People walked with purpose: headphones on, backpacks slung over one shoulder, fluent in a language of confidence I didn't yet speak. I remember thinking that everyone else seemed to know exactly where they were going—not just physically, but in life. I didn't.

My days fell into a quiet, repetitive rhythm. I would wake up late, scroll through TikTok in bed until guilt nudged me upright, grab food at OPH, sit in lectures absorbing information absently, return to my room to do it all again. I spent hours alone, convinced that solitude would somehow translate into discipline, into success. People assumed I must be doing well. "You have so much time," they said. "You must be locked in."

But I wasn't thriving. I was surviving.

There were moments when the loneliness felt almost embarrassing, as if I were failing at something everyone else had figured out. I would sit in lecture

halls surrounded by hundreds of people and feel completely detached, convinced that everyone else had already found their rhythm, their people, their purpose. I learned how to exist quietly; how to take up as little space as possible, how to blend into the background so no one would notice how unsure I felt.

Some days, I convinced myself that independence meant isolation. That learning to be alone was the price of growth. But at night, when the campus grew quiet and my thoughts grew loud, I questioned that belief. I wondered whether belonging was something you earned over time, or something you were simply lucky enough to stumble into. I wondered if I was already mourning a life I hadn't yet learned how to build.

It was during these moments that I realized how deeply the people around you can shape your experience. Isolation shrank me. Distance made me doubt myself. And slowly, almost without realizing it, I began to understand that my journey wasn't just about proving I could survive on my own, it was about learning how to let myself be supported.

Despite all that isolation, my grades hovered somewhere painfully average. Not bad enough to fail, not good enough to feel proud. Each midterm returned felt like a quiet indictment of my effort. I questioned myself constantly. Was I not smart enough? Was I wasting time? Had I misunderstood what university was supposed to feel like? I was at the highest institution I had ever entered, yet I felt smaller than I ever had before.

At night, the loneliness grew louder. The campus quieted, and that's when the ache set in, the kind that presses against your chest without asking for permission. I missed home in ways that surprised me. I missed my mom's cooking and the house smelling like something familiar. I missed my siblings arguing over the TV, I missed my dad rushing out the door with tea in one hand and nuts in the other, always running late for the masjid. I missed the aunties at the mosque who critiqued everything I said with love disguised as interrogation. I missed being known without having to explain myself.

The only thing that felt like home was him, my partner.

In the quiet, consistent way that made the days bearable. He was the one person who knew the full extent of what I was carrying. The only person I could admit to that I felt out of place, that my future felt blurry, that sometimes I lay awake wondering if I had made the wrong choice entirely.

There were nights I called him just to hear someone who understood me breathe on the other end of the line. He didn't rush me. He didn't minimize the fear. He listened. Sometimes he challenged me, gently but firmly, reminding me why I came here in the first place. Other times, he simply let me be unsure. He didn't carry my weight for me, but he never made me feel like I was carrying it alone.

He didn't save me. He stayed.

And sometimes, that's what keeps a person moving forward.

Looking back now, I understand that this discomfort wasn't a failure. It was the beginning. Growth rarely announces itself. It arrives quietly, disguised as doubt.

Change came slowly, then all at once. It came through decisions that felt small at the time: applying to clubs, showing up consistently, speaking even when my voice shook. I stopped waiting to be invited into spaces and started entering them myself. I talked to people I admired instead of assuming they were unreachable. I let myself be seen; imperfect, unsure, still learning.

There was a moment, unremarkable to anyone else, that marked a shift. I was standing in a Tim Hortons line before class when I recognized a girl from my program and one of my clubs. I had seen her LinkedIn posts and assumed she was confident, driven, someone whose life was already neatly organized. A small voice in my head said, You could be friends. Another voice told me not to embarrass myself.

For once, I ignored the second voice.

We talked about fashion, rushed mornings, our families, our goals. It wasn't cinematic. It wasn't life-altering in the moment. But it was the first time I chose courage over comfort. That girl became one of my closest friends. Even now as I write this, she sits beside me, a quiet reminder of how much can change with one small risk.

From there, belonging began to take shape. Not all at once, but steadily. Friendships deepened. Conversations became honest. My confidence grew as I realized I had something to contribute, that my voice mattered. My grades improved as my anxiety softened, as I felt grounded enough to focus rather than spiral. Leadership roles followed, not because I chased them, but because I was finally comfortable standing in responsibility without shrinking under it.

Toronto began to feel different. The city didn't change, I did. Streets I once rushed through became familiar. Cafes became routines. Campus became something I was part of, not something I was passing through.

As I grew, my relationship grew with me. It didn't define my journey, but it walked alongside it. We learned how to support each other's ambitions without losing ourselves in them. We learned how to communicate honestly, how to hold space for growth without fear. He was not the center of my story, but he was one of the constants that allowed me to become the main character of my own life.

By my later years of university, I noticed a different feeling settling in—something heavier, quieter. I was grieving. Not because I was unhappy, but because I was afraid of losing my happiness. University had become a cocoon: my friends, my professors, my routines, the comfort of being surrounded by people who understood this specific version of me.

What unsettled me most was how quickly everything began to feel fragile. I had spent so long trying to get here, to feel grounded, confident, secure, that I hadn't considered what it would mean to eventually let it go. University had become the place where my life made sense: where routines offered comfort instead of confinement.

There is a strange grief that comes with realizing you are living inside a memory you haven't lost yet.

I began noticing time in smaller increments; the last lecture of a course, the final group meeting, the way campus felt quieter toward the end of term. I thought about how temporary this version of life was, how soon the structure that once overwhelmed me would be something I missed. For the first time, I understood why people say growing up feels like a series of goodbyes you don't always get to prepare for.

And yet, woven into that grief was gratitude. Gratitude for loving this chapter enough to fear its ending. Gratitude for the people who made it meaningful, the friends who became family, the mentors who believed in me, the partner who stood beside me while I figured myself out. If this was what it felt like to grow, then maybe the ache was not something to resist, but something to honor.

There is something deeply unsettling about realizing a chapter is ending while you're still inside it.

I began thinking about childhood, about how we only get to experience it once, how we spend so much of our lives trying to be grown before we're ready. I thought about Barbie movies and read-alouds at school, colouring books and algebra worksheets. Like a snake shedding its skin, except the old layers don't disappear. They stay underneath, shaping everything we become.

When I look in the mirror, I still see the little girl who loved Princess Tiana, who was nervous on her first day of school, who moved countries and learned how to be new again and again. I see the version of myself who arrived at university doe-eyed and uncertain, unaware of how much she would change, for how much she would stay the same.

And yet, even in this grief, I recognize how fortunate I am. I am surrounded by goodness, people, opportunities, love, so much of it that I am afraid to watch it change. But I remind myself: if I built this once, I could build it again. Belonging is not something you lose, it's something you learn to create.

By my final year, the lesson I needed most was balance. I learned that rest is not failure, that slowing down does not mean giving up, that pressure is not the measure of worth. I learned to trust the earlier versions of myself who fought to get me here. I learned to honor my journey not by pushing endlessly forward, but by allowing myself peace.

Soon, I will walk across the stage and leave this chapter behind. Change has always been part of my life. I was born alone, but I carry the blood, spirit, and

prayers of my parents, my ancestors, and my faith within me.

This story is about that journey, about learning where I belong, understanding how deeply the people around me shape who I become, and accepting that growth often comes with grief. It is about leaving, returning, and beginning again, and trusting that wherever I go next, I will know how to build a home,



Featured Piece
On the Shoulders of Giants
Farah Baset

The Candle Ivy me

by Dana Al-Habash
Edited by Linzy Zheng

Design by Jelani Hanson
Illustration by Iris Cioban

Phase 1: The Unlit Wick

The candle had been sitting on my nightstand for weeks, untouched.

I slowly peeled the price sticker off the glass, leaving behind a faint residue no amount of rubbing could remove. I twisted the lid open and leaned in, expecting something warm, something comforting. The scent of *Warm Ocean Breeze* was barely there. I screwed the lid back on and slid it toward the edge of the table, where it joined the others I never lit.

In those final days of 2020, I was that candle. I had all the components of a person—body, mind, potential—but I was unlit.

My phone buzzed at 1:30 PM. I stared at the ceiling for a moment before reaching for it, waiting for a spark that never came. My hand moved out of habit to reach my phone, before I had even fully woken up. I scrolled through TikTok for hours, without comprehension of what I was consuming. When I finally stood, my body felt heavy, like it hadn't quite agreed to be part of the day.

Downstairs, the fridge light hummed as I stood in front of it, unmoving. Everything felt like too much effort. Whether it was waking up, making my bed, doing my skincare routine, or making a simple meal. I grabbed a protein bar and ate it slowly, not because I was hungry, but because it was there.

By the time I sat on the couch, the house was silent again. Snow fell outside in thick, quiet sheets, covering the roof and the street. I watched it for a while, wishing I felt the same sense of purpose. The snow knew exactly what it was meant to do; eloquently drifting down to rest on the ground. I was just waiting for the day to end.

It was late December 2020. The days didn't have names anymore. They just passed. At the time, I didn't know this was a phase. I thought this was just who I was. Hollow, empty, predictable.

Phase 2: The First Burn

The muffled New Year's fireworks outside my neighborhood seeped into the walls of my dimly lit room. The only light coming from the new candle I bought, sitting on the edge of my night stand. Cheers from neighbours felt like screams. I was sitting on my bed, pillows stacked to give my neck support as I scrolled through my phone. My family was fast asleep; the noise of the fireworks distracted me from hearing the silence I always wanted to avoid.

Suddenly, everything went blank. No more fireworks, no more cheers. My room felt too still. The same room that used to give me comfort felt dangerous. Sleeping felt like a risk and closing my eyes felt permanent. Why can't I breathe? I asked myself. What is happening to my body? My chest felt tight as my thoughts rushed through my brain.

Memories flashed out of sequence.

October: waking up tired even after twelve hours.

November: promising myself tomorrow would be different.

December: the quiet shame of doing nothing and calling it "rest."

They collided before I could hold onto any of them.

Things that should have been anchors suddenly felt foreign, my walls, bookshelf, even my prayer mat. I placed my hand on my chest trying to take deep breaths. It felt like being trapped at the bottom of the ocean. I tried to breathe, but my chest wouldn't cooperate, as if my lungs were pushing against water instead of air. Every second stretched. The effort to inhale felt heavy, delayed, like swimming upward through something thick and resisting. I stretched my hands out and looked at them from both sides. My body didn't feel real, it didn't feel like it was mine.

I forced my eyes toward the candle. The flame was small, but it was fighting. It flickered, leaning as if it might go out, then steadied itself. I counted my breaths against the movement of the flame. I inhaled as it leaned and exhaled as it steadied.

At that very moment, I thought I was going to die. It feels weird to say so aloud, but my body could testify. I felt lightheaded and detached from the rest of the world. It made me realise life is valuable. My life is valuable and inevitably temporary. I realised that I wanted to achieve so many things, before death greets me. That is when I understood this hardship. This pain I was feeling was preparing me for something much greater. My regrowth. A new journey ahead.

Phase 3: The Steady Burn

The hardest piece of wax to let go wasn't one of my bad habits; it was the noise. For so long my phone's hum would drown out the silence, I was terrified of what I might find if I was left alone with my thoughts. However, the burn of my anxiety forced me to escape that cycle, to let go of my numb repetitions and learn

how to be okay in my own company.

It wasn't a seamless transition. There were moments where my body slipped back into my old habits. In those moments, a spark of panic returned, a warning sign that I was losing my steady flame. I learned new ways to stay upright. I learned to not let panic be my shield.

Journaling became a way to trap my anxiety. I would dump my thoughts onto the crisp sheets of my navy-blue journal. I could feel the ink trapping my fears, leaving just the facts in my mind.

Prayers changed, I stopped praying because I was taught to and started praying because I wanted to. In the solitude of my room, with only the candle for company, my prayers shifted from routine words to a lifeline. I realized that while the world felt foreign and my body felt unreliable, God was the only one who could keep me steady. He was the comfort I had been yearning for.

When the panic tried to return, I didn't fight it with force. I acknowledged it. I felt the heat, slowed my breathing, and turned back to the light. I was no longer a solid, unmoving block of wax; I was becoming something intentional, something being reshaped into a clearer version of myself. I saw the flame of the candle as something purposeful, functional, preparing the candle for something beautiful.

Phase 4: The Beautiful Scent

I began to notice beauty in places I had ignored. The morning sun slipping between the light grey blinds, the quiet peace in my room when the world was still asleep, the warmth of my tea after prayer. I held my warm pink mug with small watermelons painted all over it, feeling the heat, and I was present to feel it.

My life didn't suddenly become easy, but it became more meaningful.

The flame inside me was no longer something I feared. It was something I tended to. Something I protected. In this stage, I realized that the purpose of the candle is not just to burn but to illuminate. The purpose of hardship is not just to hurt me, but to transform me.

I understood the light in me was never gone. It had simply been waiting for me to grow into someone who could carry and embody it. Just as the candle needed to be burned to let out its beautiful, fresh scent. I needed to be burned.

The journey of a candle is a mirror of my own rebirth. It is a reminder that to reach growth we must begin in the dark.





the **Yes**
that *changed*
everything

by **Aya Al-Tabba**
edited by Linzy Zheng
design by Jelani Hanson

Meaningful transformation, I have learned, is rarely the result of a single breakthrough moment. It is almost never sudden or dramatic. Instead, it unfolds quietly through the accumulation of intentional choices, many of which seem insignificant when they are made. Looking back, every meaningful turning point in my life began internally long before it became visible in action. It began as a thought, a belief, a subtle shift in perception. Before anything changed externally, something changed in how I chose to respond to uncertainty.

My journey across Damascus, Dubai, and Toronto is often described geographically, but for me, these cities represent mental and emotional frameworks that shaped how I understand growth, ambition, and identity. Each place taught me something different, not just about the world, but about myself. Together, they revealed a simple but powerful truth: saying yes opens doors not because the outcome is guaranteed, but because movement itself creates possibility.

I was born in Damascus, a city layered with history, beauty, and contradiction. Growing up there taught me early that stability is never promised. Change did not arrive gradually; it arrived without warning. Forced displacement introduced loss long before I had the language to describe it. Leaving Syria was not merely a physical relocation. It meant losing routine, familiarity, and the assumption that tomorrow would resemble today. That early rupture reshaped my relationship with certainty.

Adaptation became instinctive. Survival became a skill. I learned how to adjust quickly, how to remain alert, how to rebuild a sense of normalcy from frag-

ments. Resilience was not something I consciously cultivated; it was something I practiced without naming it. Yet over time, I also learned that survival, while necessary, is not the same as growth.

Endurance teaches strength, but it can also teach restraint. When you have experienced instability, safety becomes precious. Gratitude for security can quietly evolve into fear of risk. I began to recognize how easy it was to confuse caution with wisdom and stillness with stability. Survival conditions you to protect what you have, even if it limits what you could become. Transformation, however, does not begin through endurance alone. It begins when choice replaces necessity.

That shift became visible in Dubai.

Dubai is a city defined by momentum. It does not wait. It does not dilute ambition or apologize for scale. People speak in timelines rather than hypotheticals. Movement is expected, not exceptional. In this environment, opportunity does not wait for perfect readiness. It rewards decisiveness. Exposure to such a mindset reframed what I believed was possible. Hesitation became costly. Action became the default.

Dubai taught me that beginnings can be chosen rather than imposed. Growth does not require flawless preparation; it requires willingness. Saying yes became a defining behavior. Yes to conversations. Yes to opportunities. Yes to uncertainty. I observed doors opening not because people had everything figured out, but because they were willing to learn in motion.

At the same time, Dubai also revealed the complexity of speed. Momentum can be intoxicating. Constant movement can blur the line between progress and performance. Ambition expands rapidly, sometimes faster than clarity. Dubai sharpened my hunger, but it also planted an important question in my mind: is speed alone a sufficient measure of success?

That question followed me to Toronto.

Toronto slowed everything down. Unlike environments defined by immediacy, Toronto demanded patience. Progress here was incremental and often invisible. Belonging was not immediate. Confidence had to be built, not assumed. This city became a space of quiet construction, where discipline replaced adrenaline and repetition replaced novelty. Growth here was less visible, but more durable.

One of the most defining moments of my time in Toronto appeared small on the surface. I attended a university event alone. I remember standing outside, hesitating, debating whether to walk in. I worried about not knowing anyone, about feeling out of place, about confirming the fear that I did not belong. But I said yes anyway.

That single decision changed everything.

One conversation led to another. Conversations became connections. Con-

nections evolved into leadership roles, creative risk, and responsibility. What began as an uncomfortable evening became a catalyst. I learned that growth often begins at the exact moment discomfort appears. Feeling out of place was not a warning sign. It was evidence that I was expanding.

From that moment forward, a pattern emerged. Every yes created momentum. Saying yes to visibility led to responsibility. Saying yes to responsibility led to confidence. Saying yes to uncertainty reshaped how I saw myself. Opportunities I once imagined from a distance became lived realities. The life I once hoped for slowly took shape through action rather than waiting.

This mindset became especially significant when I graduated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was no ceremony. No closure. No traditional sense of arrival. For my generation, milestones dissolved overnight. Timelines collapsed. Certainty disappeared. Waiting for ideal conditions was no longer an option, because ideal conditions did not exist. Graduating during a global shutdown forced me to confront a difficult truth early: readiness is not granted by circumstance. It is constructed through action.

That realization shaped my TEDx talk, where I spoke about new beginnings and the power of internal permission. Graduating during COVID did not offer resolution. It demanded authorship. There was no audience, no applause, no signal that it was time to begin. The choice to move forward had to come from within.

Saying yes became an act of agency.

This philosophy matters even more in today's world, one defined by rapid technological change and accelerating uncertainty. Artificial intelligence is reshaping industries, automating decisions, and redefining what skills remain valuable. In such an environment, it is tempting to wait for clarity, to pause until expertise feels guaranteed.

But I have learned that waiting is not preparation. It is avoidance.

In a world where technology evolves faster than certainty, learning in motion is no longer optional. Saying yes and figuring things out along the way is not reckless; it is adaptive. Artificial intelligence can optimize processes, but it cannot replace belief, intention, or courage. It cannot decide who someone becomes.

The most durable skill in an ever-changing world is mindset. The ability to adapt. To imagine beyond present constraints. To act despite incomplete information. Machines can analyze patterns, but they cannot generate meaning. That remains uniquely human.

Launching a marketing agency at a young age became one of the clearest expressions of this belief. The decision invited scepticism. Doubt from others echoed familiar narratives about readiness, experience, and timing. Yet I reframed em-

barrassment not as failure, but as the cost of building something meaningful. Fear immobilizes. Action creates momentum.

Across Damascus, Dubai, and Toronto, I came to understand that geography influences opportunity, but perception determines outcome. The most powerful force shaping my journey was not place, but mindset.

Everything begins in the mind.

Before any action occurs, it exists as a thought. A possibility. A quiet internal permission. Thoughts are not neutral. They function as instructions. They shape what we attempt, avoid, and believe we deserve. When belief changes, behavior follows.

Every meaningful beginning in my life started the same way. As a thought that resisted fear. As a belief that growth was possible. As a decision to say yes before certainty arrived. Action followed belief, not the other way around.

Ultimately, my journey is not defined by displacement, opportunity, or age. It is defined by choice. Lives are not shaped solely by what happens to us, but by the thoughts we allow to guide us.

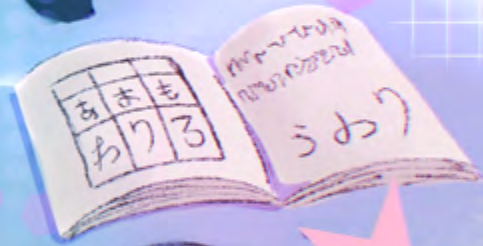
In the end, the mind is the master.

And every beginning starts there.



yea

you good?



「おやすみ」

by Jessy Fan

edited by Linzy Zheng
illustrated by Michaëlle Knights
design by Jelani Hanson

(goodnight)

A swipe. A Match. A Lazy “Hey.”

He replied with a photo of his cat perched on his shoulder like a pirate’s parrot, one eye half-closed, tail flicking against his ear. I laughed harder than I meant to. It had been a long day. Maybe a long month. The kind where your inbox multiplies like weeds, the dishes sit in the sink gathering congealed regret, and your socks never match because the laundry never quite gets folded.

I wasn’t expecting anything. I don’t think he was either.

At first, it was casual. Memes sent at odd hours. Light teasing and flirting. Messages that disappeared into the silence and reappeared without a warning. No pressure. No timeline. I told myself I was just here to talk. That’s all I could handle after unravelling something long-distance, all edges and no center. Complicated. Blurry. I wasn’t ready to trust myself again, let alone someone else.

But then came the phone calls.

Every night, without fail. Around 10 p.m., like clockwork, my phone would light up with his name, Josh. And the sound of his voice, low and lazy with the end-of-day softness, would settle over me like a favourite sweater. Sometimes ten minutes, sometimes seven hours. He told me about his gym, his fear of skydiving, and his mom’s lasagna. I told him about the kids in my ESL class who mix up “cheap” and “sheep,” how I secretly preferred snowy days because I didn’t have to explain myself for staying in. I said too much, probably. But he never interrupted. Just listened. Like my words mattered.

He knew things. Like how I can’t sleep if my closet door is open even a crack. How my hands shake when I speak in front of people, but not when I teach. How I eat dinner standing up in the kitchen most nights, too tired to plate things properly.

I didn’t tell many people about him. Just Liv. She was the kind of person who met her boyfriend at a wine tasting and wore matching wool socks with him in

winter. When I told her about Josh, she tilted her head like I'd said I was adopting a raccoon.

"But like... are you guys ever going to meet?" she asked

"I don't know," I said, honestly. "But this isn't supposed to be serious anyway."

I started teaching him Japanese. Just phrases at first.

"おいしい" (oishi: delicious)

"だいじょうぶ" (daijoubu: it's okay)

"かわいい" (kawaii: cute)

He liked how I broke things down, how I used stories to explain grammar. I liked how he repeated my examples back, slightly mispronounced, his voice gentle and trying.

He'd end our calls with "おやすみ" (oyasumi: Good night). Always mispronounced, like "oh-yass-moo." I never corrected him. I liked the way he said it. It felt like us. Familiar, in a way I couldn't explain.

I kept telling myself this was harmless, that this wasn't supposed to mean anything. Just a voice in my ear. Just pixels and data stretching across two cities. Him in Manhattan, me in my dim Toronto apartment, where the radiator wheezed like it had asthma and the kitchen light flickered like a haunted movie set.

Then came the photo.

It was around four in the afternoon. Sunlight sliced through the blinds, leaving tiger stripes across the dusty coffee table. I was mid-email, fingers stuttering across the keyboard, when my phone buzzed.

A gym selfie.

He was flushed, still sweat-slick, smiling the kind of smile people wear when they've conquered something personal. Confidence radiated through the screen.

"Felt good today," he wrote.

"You look good!" I replied, fingers moving faster than my brain.

He texted back, "Thank you, baby."

And I just froze.

"Baby."

Not “dude.” Not “bro.” Not even my name.

Baby.

I reread it. Once. Twice. Too many times. Something small and warm unfurled in my chest, like the first sip of coffee on a cold morning. I didn't want it to mean anything.

But it did.

That night, he called me like always. He told me he always wanted to try an onsen in winter. I teased him about being shy around nudity. He laughed. I laughed. My apartment was dark except for the ghostly blue glow of my laptop and the soft yellow light of the hallway bulb I always forgot to switch off.

It felt normal.
Until the next day.

I opened the app. The dating app. Just to scroll, waste a few minutes between tasks. And there it was.

That photo.
The same gym selfie. Same smile. Same caption.
Posted publicly.

My thumb paused mid-scroll. My chest tightened in a slow, deliberate way, like a hand curling into a fist around nothing.

Why that photo? Why now?

He had just sent it to me. Just called me baby. Just told me his fear of group nudity. What was I missing?

I didn't ask. Told myself not to spiral. Maybe he just liked the picture. Maybe it didn't mean anything.

That night, when he called, I picked up like always. Laughed when I was supposed to. Asked about his workout. But something had shifted, and I couldn't stop replaying the question I wouldn't say aloud.

What are we?

He'd said early on that he wasn't ready for anything serious. That he needed to get his life in order first. Working hard to get the promotion, get stable, and become the version of himself he could be proud of.

He said he wanted to “preserve” what we had.

But preserve what, exactly? This half-formed, almost-romance that looked and felt like a relationship but couldn't be called one?

I didn't have an answer.

I whispered the same sentence to myself every night like a prayer.

We are fine.

We are fine.

I am going to be fine.

Stop overthinking.

We are fine.

I was lying. And deep down, I knew it.

The real shift came on a Wednesday.

No call.

No text. No "busy today, talk tomorrow."

Just a yawning silence where his voice should've been.

I sat curled by the window, phone screen bright on the armrest, the city outside pulsing with spring. Sirens, laughter, the scrape of skateboard wheels three floors down. Inside, just me. Watching the phone. Willing it to light up.

It didn't.

The next morning, his text came.

"Sorry, I passed out. You good?"

I lied.

But this time, it didn't feel small. It felt like I'd swallowed something sharp and was pretending not to bleed.

I started scrolling back through our old messages, past the memes, the "lol"s, the "I'll call you in 5"s. Looking for signs. Moments that could confirm what I wanted to believe, that this meant more than he let on. That I wasn't imagining the connection. The care. The intimacy.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he had texted weeks earlier.

"Miss hearing your voice."

"Can't sleep until I hear you say goodnight."

And then, "Thank you, baby."

It wasn't nothing. I hadn't made that up.

We'd never met in person. Never sat across from each other at a café. Never

brushed fingers in the space between joke and confession. But some nights, his voice in my ear felt closer than the streetcars rattling down Queens Street.

I didn't want to admit it.

But I was falling.

And I don't know what hurt more.

Falling, or pretending I wasn't.

The next night, my phone rang.

10:03 p.m. On time. Like always.

I hesitated. Long enough to feel it. That tight pinch behind the ribs. The knowing.

Still, I picked up.

"Hey you," he said, voice warm and lazy, like nothing had changed.

I mumbled something back. Casual. Normal. Except it wasn't.

He launched into a story about a man with a tuba on the subway platform playing the Jurassic Park theme to a crowd of bored commuters. I laughed, but I couldn't find the rhythm of it. My smile felt off. My voice, too high.

He didn't notice. Or he pretended not to.

Then he asked, "How was your day?"

I glanced out the window. A streetlamp flickered on.

"Fine," I said.

I almost told him.

You didn't call. You didn't text. You left me hanging like an idiot and then sent a casual "you good?" like I'm just... casual.

But I didn't.

Instead, I said, "You update your profile?"

The silence that followed was sharp.

"What?"

"Your dating profile," I said, softer now. "I saw the gym photo. Same one you

sent me.”

Another paused. Longer this time.

“Oh,” he said. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, I liked the photo.”

I swallowed. Tried to keep my voice even.

“Right.”

He exhaled through his nose. I imagine him scratching the back of his neck, staring at the ceiling, trying to phrase it right.

“I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“It’s not,” I said too quickly.

Except it was.

Except I had imagined, just a little, that maybe the photo was for me. That the words, *thank you, baby*, meant something more than a habit or a reflex.

I wanted to ask. What am I to you? But I didn’t. Because I was scared the answer wouldn’t match the version I’d written in my head.

Instead, I asked.

“Are you still looking?”

He was quiet. I could hear a siren passing on his end. A low hum of traffic.

He let out a breath. Not a sigh. Just air, like he’d been holding it.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t been swiping or anything. I just... left the profile up.”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. My mouth felt dry.

“It’s not about the photo,” I said. “Not really.”

“I know.”

Another pause. The quiet between us was no longer soft.

“I like talking to you,” he said, finally. “I look forward to calling you every night. I like your stories about your mom’s weird tofu obsession and how you always misquote movies and pretend you didn’t. I like how you say ‘shut up’ when I compliment you. I like this. I like us.”

I stared at the coffee cup on my table, untouched since dinner. My reflection

trembled in the cooling surface.

“But?” I asked.

He hesitated. “But I don’t know what I’m ready for. I thought I’d figure it out before it got serious, but it got serious faster than I expected. You weren’t supposed to mean this much to me.”

That got me. Not in the way I expected. Not in the swoon, not in the way I used to dream of being meant for someone. But in a real, aching way. A shared confession. I hadn’t meant to mean this much either.

“You could’ve said that,” I said, quieter now. “Instead of leaving me wondering.”

“I know,” he said. “That part’s on me. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I guess I thought not saying anything would protect... something.”

We sat with that. “I’ve been here before. Not knowing where I stand. Trying not to ask too much, because I’m afraid I’ll lose even the little I have.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“You’re not too much,” he said. “You’re just honest. And I haven’t caught up to that yet.”

I looked out the window. The light outside was colder now. Someone on the street was singing, badly, to a half-remembered pop song. I almost smiled.

“So what now?” I asked.

He didn’t answer right away. I pictured him rubbing the bridge of his nose, the way he always did when he was thinking too hard. The silence stretched, but it didn’t feel as hollow this time. Just honest.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he said softly. “But I don’t want to string you along either. If you need more than this. If you are ready for something real, with labels. I understand. And I’ll step back.”

There it was. The choice.

But for the first time, I didn’t feel like I was begging someone to stay. I wasn’t shrinking myself to fit inside a maybe. I was standing on solid ground, not reaching anymore. Just waiting to be met.

I breathed in.

“I don’t need labels,” I said, my voice low, the kind you use when you’re afraid of breaking something delicate.. “Not today. But I need honesty. No more half-truths. No more pretending this is ‘just talking’ when it isn’t. If you’re still

figuring things out, fine. So am I. But I need you to meet me where I am. No more disappearing. No more silence where there should be care.”

On the other end, I could hear him shift. Maybe sitting down, maybe just settling into what I’d said.

“Okay,” he said. “That’s fair. I can do that.”

“And take the photo down,” I added. “At least off the profile.”

He laughed, a real one this time. Not a deflection. Not nerves,

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s more than fair.”

It wasn’t a grand moment. No fireworks. No cinematic ending. Just a quiet agreement between two people trying, imperfectly, to figure out what they could be. Even when it’s messy.

We stayed on the line a little longer. Not talking, just being. The silence between us finally softened again. Shared. No longer something to be afraid of.

And when he said “おやすみ,” he pronounced it right.

For the first time.

I smiled.

Didn’t correct him.

Didn’t need to.

I just said it back.

“おやすみ。”

Then I turned off the light. The radiator hummed behind me. Outside, someone on a bike yelled into the spring night.

I slipped beneath the blanket, phone still warm in my hand.

It was peaceful.

Not because I had the answers.

But because, for once, I knew I had been heard.



JOURNEY

DOCUMENTARY



by Colleen Petric
Edited by Tyler Medeiros
Design by Naomi Chan

Through everlasting mornings and gloomy evenings, a group of five students—yes, only five—lugged their Sony’s, their Canon’s, their Fujifilms around UTM’s campus. The creatives conducted interviews and captured VISION’s creatives in their element.

Team lead Jacqueline (Jacky) Vazquez managed the production of VISION’s first-ever documentary. As the documentary filmmaker, Vazquez initiated the core idea. Vazquez recounts in an email, “I have been a part of everything. I have helped with scripting, filming, probably not editing, but I have been as involved as possible.” She emphasizes the need for strong interpersonal communication skills in directing. “I also reach out to the other departments to request their help, update the directive team, schedule meetings, and map the structure of the document,” she adds.

Vazquez, always grinning, extends her gratitude to the dedicated documentary production team.

“They are full of passion and excitement, and that is lovely,”

Vazquez claims that DeMello, the multimedia editor, generates some of the best creative ideas. In an interview, DeMello explains why she joined VISION. “Given my background in and my interest in filmmaking, I wanted the opportunity to test my strengths with something more professional, and I think this also gave me a good opportunity to.” Vazquez shares, “She started the improvised short films.” Ever worried about getting left on read? DeMello would never. Vazquez commends DeMello for her rapid responses to Discord messages.

Vazquez adds, “[She] has the best camera quality for video so far.”

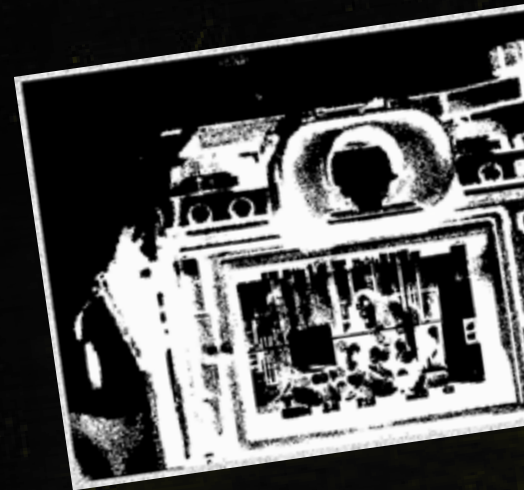
DeMello comments on her journey through the documentary’s production team: “I really enjoyed the journey, probably almost as much as the final product.” She claims this project is unlike other projects she has worked on: “I grew really fond of my team, and every time I knew we were meeting up, I was excited ... I know I was gonna have a really funny, goofy time but also work on something I love and I want to put effort into.”

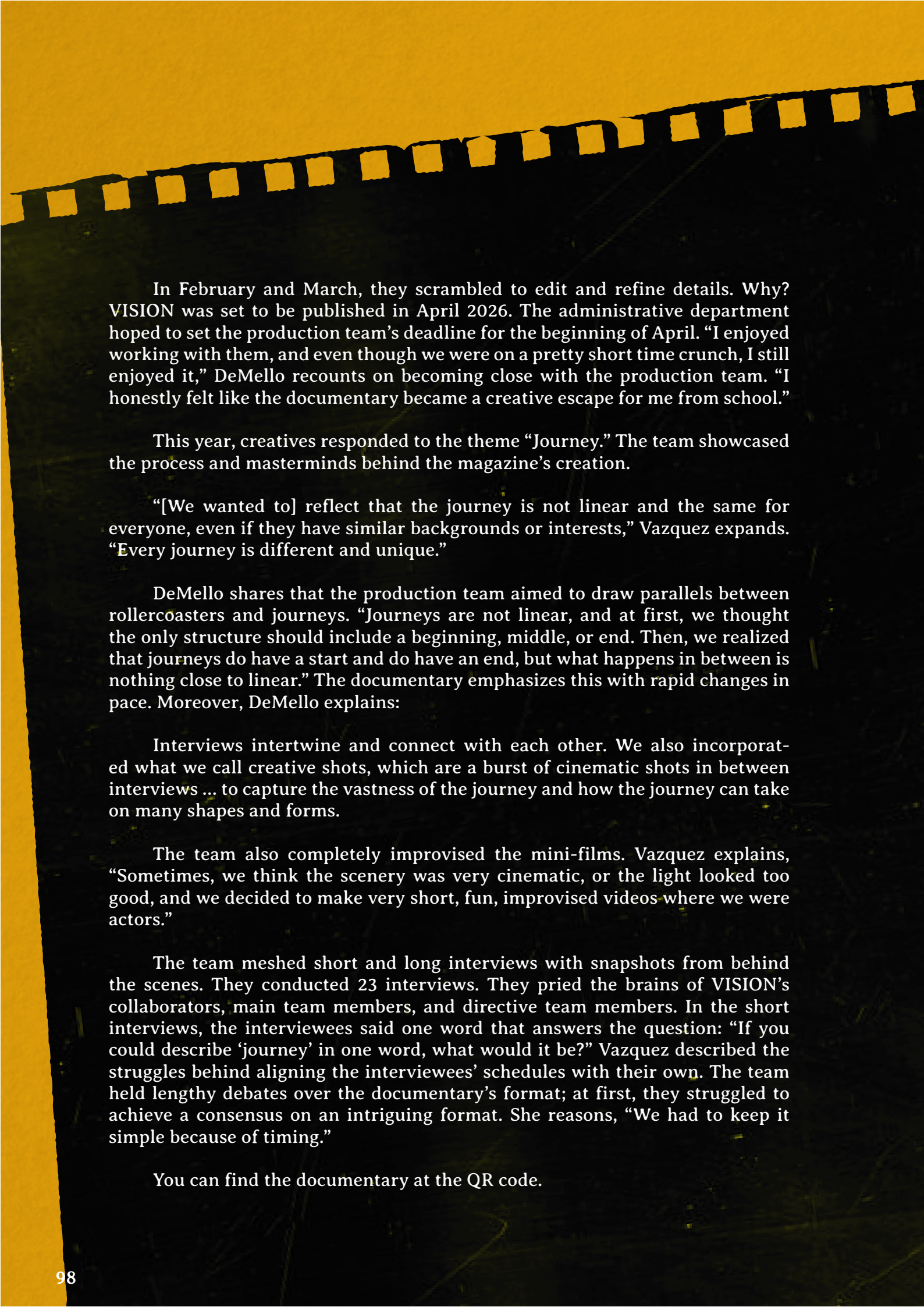
And Shahid, photographer and videographer? He has an “absolutely insane” amount of equipment. Abdullah claims that he has “Gear Acquisition Syndrome” (GAS for short). He has a collection of more than 10 camera bodies and 20 lenses. But he only has a few favourites—his Fujifilm XT4, Ricoh GR III, Nikon Z6.

Vazquez adds that you can find Shahid cracking “VISION” and “Journey” jokes. Shahid calls them “pieces of wisdom.” Want an example? “For example, when I click ‘send’ on this email, this email is going to have its own journey, unique to itself, it is going to travel through a collection of internet routers, SMTP servers, just to deliver this information to you,” he describes.

Last but certainly not least, Vazquez praises Stoddart’s “talented eye.” Stoddart, photographer and videographer, can find “the most ideal shots, angles, and places.” She also writes powerful scripts.

From generating content ideas to finalizing scripts, the team spent the entire fall semester planning for their 20-minute film. Then came filming. The team recorded from the beginning of January to mid-February. Vazquez reminisces on the encouraging atmosphere: “It is very nice to see everyone doing what they love the most ... the dynamic as a team is great, so spending time with them has been really fun.”





In February and March, they scrambled to edit and refine details. Why? VISION was set to be published in April 2026. The administrative department hoped to set the production team's deadline for the beginning of April. "I enjoyed working with them, and even though we were on a pretty short time crunch, I still enjoyed it," DeMello recounts on becoming close with the production team. "I honestly felt like the documentary became a creative escape for me from school."

This year, creatives responded to the theme "Journey." The team showcased the process and masterminds behind the magazine's creation.

"[We wanted to] reflect that the journey is not linear and the same for everyone, even if they have similar backgrounds or interests," Vazquez expands. "Every journey is different and unique."

DeMello shares that the production team aimed to draw parallels between rollercoasters and journeys. "Journeys are not linear, and at first, we thought the only structure should include a beginning, middle, or end. Then, we realized that journeys do have a start and do have an end, but what happens in between is nothing close to linear." The documentary emphasizes this with rapid changes in pace. Moreover, DeMello explains:

Interviews intertwine and connect with each other. We also incorporated what we call creative shots, which are a burst of cinematic shots in between interviews ... to capture the vastness of the journey and how the journey can take on many shapes and forms.

The team also completely improvised the mini-films. Vazquez explains, "Sometimes, we think the scenery was very cinematic, or the light looked too good, and we decided to make very short, fun, improvised videos where we were actors."

The team meshed short and long interviews with snapshots from behind the scenes. They conducted 23 interviews. They pried the brains of VISION's collaborators, main team members, and directive team members. In the short interviews, the interviewees said one word that answers the question: "If you could describe 'journey' in one word, what would it be?" Vazquez described the struggles behind aligning the interviewees' schedules with their own. The team held lengthy debates over the documentary's format; at first, they struggled to achieve a consensus on an intriguing format. She reasons, "We had to keep it simple because of timing."

You can find the documentary at the QR code.





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Printed in Canada
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