

CONNIE BOLAND

I Have a Question

IF YOU COULD TIME TRAVEL, what would you change?

We were nuzzled together on a lumpy couch. Cocooned in a groove carved by movie nights, sleepovers, and three a.m. feedings. We were reading Judy Moody. Or maybe it was Dork Diaries. My daughter wore her favourite Hannah Montana pyjamas. She clutched a faded baby blanket in her tight fist. Mickey Mouse caressed the chickenpox scar on her button nose.

"I saw the guidance counsellor today," my then seven-year-old said. Greyish-green eyes. Grin as wide as an ocean. The tip of her tongue slithered between missing front teeth. "Everyone thought I was in trouble, but it was about Jessie, writing notes, again." Jagged, red crayon letters. Jessie wrote that he loves her cherry lips.

"I told Miss it was okay, but she said it's not okay. It's not okay at all."

When I was pregnant, we lived in a claustrophobic apartment that stank of cigarette smoke, stale beer and deep-fried everything. The ceiling in our living room was the colour of urine, first pee in the morning. Our upstairs neighbours were shadow people glimpsed in passing. A tall man with a craggy face, grey hair and loose limbs. A woman with a baby in the crook of one arm, leaning out a window, curtain slapping her face, dragging tobacco deep into her lungs. We nodded in the way strangers do.

The first time I heard it, I was alone in the apartment, curled like a fetus in our sagging leather recliner, reading *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

“Shut it up. Shut that brat up. Shut it up, shut it up, shut it up!”

“Stop it! Stopitstopitstopitstopit.”

Fists, like a jackhammer, on the walls.

Feet, stomping. Ceiling fan, quivering. Yellow paint and dead mosquitoes slapping my sheepskin slippers. Gyproc dust in my hair. I hobbled to the bathroom; hove spinach salad into the toilet bowl. Tiny flecks of undigested vegetable splashed upward. My fingers grazed the telephone. It was cold, but I jerked my hand away, as if I'd burnt it.

My stepdaughter stood in the kitchen, watching through a window as our grandson shot hoops on the hard-packed gravel driveway.

“Hey Mom, watch.”

Thump. Thump. Thump. Woosh.

“Maybe you're overthinking it,” I said. “It's not like that here. Relax, have a tea.”

Thump. Thump. Thump. Swish.

“Hey Mom, betcha LeBron can't do that.”

Terri sighed. She sank into a chair, sliding long legs under the kitchen table. Her fingers kept time with the bounce of an orange and black ball.

“Oh, she meant it. Ignorant bitch. I thought it would be different, being back.”

In Toronto, they lived in a tiny apartment. After they moved home, Terri finished school. She found a job. She saved long and hard for a professional photo shoot.

“I asked the photographer to take a picture of him with his ball. She laughed and said, of course he plays basketball, they all do.”

Terri wrapped her fingers around the still warm mug. “She asked if she could touch his hair.”

Terri closed her eyes. “She wondered what black hair felt like.”

I tuck my hands deep into jacket pockets, pretending to watch a field of six-year-olds trip over their own feet, falling when they should be connecting with a soccer ball.

“Daddy!” A tiny girl barrels up the artificial turf. Blond pigtails held together by matching purple ribbons. Blue eyes, flushed cheeks. The child slams headfirst into daddy's stomach with the force of a confident child. It's late October. His breath fills the space above her head. He steps backward, catching her in his arms.

"Did you see how fast Jimmy runs?" The girl grabs a bottle from daddy's hand.

"Which one is Jimmy?" he asks.

Her mouth is ringed by a bright red moustache. "The one in the blue shirt." She darts away.

"But you're all wearing blue shirts!" The girl's laughter floats back toward us, reaching across the centre line.

Rising from the bleacher, I stretch and walk toward the man who asked about my grandson. Parents stand three deep, in clusters. "She meant the black kid," a woman announces. "There's a reason they can run like that."

I turn and stroll the other way.

We were standing around a fire barrel when he first talked about the screaming. He saw pure, uncut cocaine sparkling in the sunlight. He cared for no one. People faded. Images blown away, like powder. We were watching flankers shoot from the rusty barrel into a star-studded January sky. Friends gyrated on a snow-packed backyard to AC/DC's Thunderstruck.

"Want a beer?"

The bottle was wrapped in a booze sleeve decorated with tiny yellow needles. "Have a seat." He yanked an aluminum lawn chair closer to the barrel. I nestled the bottle between my legs. The air smelled like yeast and rotten eggs. "It's homemade," he said.

He told me about Fort Mac. Ten Newfoundlanders in a three-bedroom apartment. Night-shifters going to bed when day-lighters left for work. The red kettle reminded him of home. Always on the stove. Always half full. Always warm. Beer bought by the case. Cheap wine. A bit of weed to chase away memories. When Alberta spit him out, Toronto was waiting. Couch surfing. A sporty two-seater flying as high as its driver. He tore off the licence plate. Abandoned the car, wrapped around a light pole, on Yonge Street.

He detoxed alone, at an isolated cabin, back home in Newfoundland. Withdrawal sounded like a visitor's guide to the nine circles of rehab hell. He said his clothes stank of sweat and waste. He filled two five-gallon beef buckets with water. The first twenty-five steps were excruciating. Wire handles digging into soft palms. Snow trapping his legs.

The hag pounced at night, kneeling on his chest, black tongue licking cold sore lips. Her claws raked his cheeks. He was lost in the stench of burning flowers.

He said he walked those beef buckets one kilometre, then five, then ten. He chopped wood, sweat mixing with shavings. Days. Weeks. Months. We grew to love simple things. The tinkle of melting snow. Sunrise. Sobriety.

My daughter was fifteen. Her screams were inhuman. Terrifying. Drawn in one breath.

"I don't want to die. Pleeeeee don't let me die. I don't want to die. Pleeeeee..."

I imagine the coach bus flipping. My daughter tossed into the air seconds before windows shattered. Head, arms, legs, tumbling. Teenagers falling around her, friends slamming into friends, landing on each other, breaking bones and scraping flesh from each other's bodies. The lights go out. The windshield explodes. Heads strike hard surfaces.

She was in the back of the bus, watching a movie, eating junk food.

Candy flies.

The bus is on its side. Someone kicks open the emergency hatch and bodies fall out. Confused, concussed kids wander toward the highway. They hug themselves or wrap their arms around their friends. A chaperone does a head count. A child is missing. Coaches and emergency workers dig through glass and debris, searching.

"Mom, Imoutsidethebusandthebuscrashed.MomImnothurtbutilove-youandthepolicearehereandthebuscrashedandIamsocoldsocoldsocoldthe-buscrashed."

Photos were posted on Twitter. Emergency lights illuminating twisted metal. Backpacks, leopard-print blankets, pink travel pillows and decapitated stuffed animals litter the side of the road. Suitcases and sleeping bags spill from undercarriage.

One lone figure skate. Blood on the toe pick. Resting in the middle of the divided highway.

"Mom, I love you. I'm so cold so cold so cold."

The hospital is a scene in a horror movie. Girls with bandages on thin arms, bruised faces and muscled calves. My daughter can't find her boots, or her best friend.

When I get there, she's sitting in an empty hallway. Her feet stick out from under a bulky jacket. Orange sock on the right foot; black sock on the left. She's clutching a faded baby blanket. Mickey Mouse caressing the bloody fingerprint on her button nose.

A baby grows into a troubled little boy who writes troubling letters
to little girls.

A mother moves home to give her son a better life.

A grandmother doesn't speak her truth.

A man speaks his.

An accident that could have changed everything.

To live with our decisions, what is the peace we make?