

Steady on, Doc*

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You spend your life like a buoy in medical school and residency; sitting atop the waves (perhaps getting submerged by a tall one or two) and letting the big ocean carry you wherever it does. It rolls and rolls, and the small line keeping you tethered stretches and sways, but there you sit.

You canvass a large academic hospital, middle of the day or late at night, and it is hard to feel at home. You rub your eyes, read the books, auscultate a heart and hear stories of those who suffer. You see someone far from your home, the name of their hometown obscure. You do not recognise it; you do not know it. You pack up, move on to another service. See all new people with all new names, new language and new forms. That little tethering line feels so fragile. What connects you, what keeps you steady?

As I packed up my car to travel for an elective far away to Western Newfoundland, I felt a physical pain in my chest. Off I went, from my snug apartment, a beloved pet and people I knew in St. John's. Stretch, stretch. The tether, my tether, stretched to capacity.

Across barrens, through rock cuts, glaringly out of place Micky Ds signs and the reduced speed limit of national parks, I go 800 or so kilometres. My

headlights dim mid trip, and I seek solace in a deserted convenience store. It is something electrical, I'm told by a strapping male who peers into the unknown (to me) parts of my ancient corolla. I'm left flustered. There is no near motel. I'm due to start my rotation tomorrow. 'Depending now on who you belongs to, we might help ya,' I hear from someone who in the end does not know who I belong to, but decides to help out anyhow. I end up sandwiched between the two trucks, and we make our way caravan style across the twisty remaining turns of the journey. I learn about a 'triple triple' at a pit stop and notice that thanking those who believe their generosity is common place is harder than I thought. The trucks salute joyful horns as they head towards the ferry, once we've reached the end, and I turn in for town.

They called it 'mouse island,' a tiny part of Port Aux Basques. A small apartment, two-bedroom. I was alone, front windows like dark eyes reflecting my headlights when I pulled in. I could feel the hum of wind as small snowflakes surrounded me as I pulled my meagre belongings into the cold hallway. There was a bag of salt and a small shovel, heralding weather to come. Stretch, stretch, as I look at the desolate coves from my window and wonder how these 2 months will go.

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I'm broken from my rather mournful reverie with a thump on the door. I imagine there are not enough people in this place for there to be bad seeds on the prowl, so I open it. There is no one there. I do a cursory look, right to left. As I turn, a yeti appears. On closer inspection – a kind middle-aged male with a beard covered in snow smiling from the dark. My inner fear must have betrayed me, as I hear 'steady on, doc, just making sure you're making in alright'. He holds an extra shovel, and asks if I have icers for my shoes, as the lady up the road fractured her wrist last week from a fall. To help, he tells me to park my car close to 'the bridge'.

I feel a bit chastised; not realising my car was wrongly parked. I utter thanks, mentally thinking of where this bridge might be and I close my door. Look around at small sofa, clean kettle and sparse decor. Stretch, stretch. The unfamiliar hurts.

I become familiar with the nearest bridge, which is a 10-min walk. Although there are parking lots along the way, some in front of abandoned buildings, I stay true to the advice. I put my icers on. I see a person twice in 1 week, in clinic and at the grocery store, and find myself wrapped in a hug as they proclaim to curious onlookers at Coleman's that I'm new here. At the pharmacy, I find myself helped with a hairspray (unsolicited) to 'tame those frizzies in front' and someone loans me a quarter so I do not have to break a five dollar bill.

I have started to notice my heart does not hurt as much. The telephone calls home are still hard, and the loneliness seems worse in the night, but there is joy here. Something is happening. Tighten, tighten.

On a cold winter's night, the snow tumbles down. It is stormy, and the wind puts me in the centre of a snow globe. The university is closed; we students are urged to use caution and proceed to work if safe. I get a call from the emergency, 'are you coming?' It's busy, there are people to

see. Taking the little shovel and bag of salt, out I go. After too much time, it's clear I'm stuck. The ol 'put er in neutral and run at er' fails me. I call back, they understand. 'Make it if you can'. I rummage in my trunk; two clean snowshoes surprised to see me are pulled out. It's not a short journey to the health centre, but it's doable. I wade out into the snow, but it's blowing all around. Defeated.

Little orbs of yellow come down the road, and I peer into the snow. It's the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) making their way. Then, it hits me. Why not just call the police and see if they could help me? I have the number of a kind officer, could he come fetch me? Not soon after, I hear the friendly beep of the cruiser and find myself in the back for the first (and so far, last) time. I'm asked why my car was so far away. I relate the bridge advice. The officer laughs as he explains that 'bridge' means porch. Good to know several weeks in. Dropped off at the main doors of the hospital, I look around covertly. Imagine, the lady doctor dropped off at the door fresh out of the paddy wagon. Scandalous.

Inside, I meet sore throats, chest pain and delirium. See wet coats and snowy shoes, concerned faces and worry. See names I now recognise, from places I visited on my weekends off. One community of <100 people I had flown into through helicopter for a clinic. The shared joy of knowing where one 'belongs to' is a wondrous thing.

In the morning, the sky is clear and air is cold. I trot home lazily; looking around at all the houses neatly tucked in in their beds of snow. Wave hello to everyone who is out shovelling, stopping briefly to offer a hand but it is declined on all counts, one claiming that 'the day I cannot shovel, take me away'.

I look around at the beautiful place; once unfamiliar. No hurts in my heart. My tethers strong and firmly attached. I'll steady on.