

Worldly

By Jason

Something's burning!

The pot crackled on the stove. Smoke curled towards the ceiling. Then the fire alarm went off. Turbulence and disorder in the kitchen!

Crap.

My first night and I was already setting off the smoke alarm.

I grabbed a dish towel, waving it frantically beneath the detector. Smoke and the smell of burnt pasta lingered. The scent of tomato sauce mingled with the smoke from the open jar close by.

Footsteps approached, and a roommate appeared in the doorway, squinting through the haze.

"Hey, planning any cooking classes?"

I laughed, embarrassed. "I think I'll need to", I nervously responded.

We ordered poutine instead.

That night, sitting around mismatched chairs with people from different countries, not understanding a word, I understood something I hadn't back in Toronto: here I was, in a new city — a new language, and I had no idea who I was yet.

A few months earlier, I woke to a text message.

You love languages. Would you move to Québec City?

I could hear the birds speak their language as I woke up, and my first class was high school French. The autumn breeze rattled the windows, the birds flew west, and the light on my phone forced me to squint my morning eyes.

Oui.

I replied.

That's about all the French I knew.

I grew up in Toronto, where life was always busy, but we lived in a small neighbourhood by the lake in the west end. Water tapped gently against the rocks below our apartment, a calm contrast to the constant motion downtown. The morning sun crawled into the big window in our living room — comets of orange dust. Mom loved it.

It was early January in 2008 and the days were short and cold. The air from Lake Ontario sliced through my chest as I navigated my way down slippery streets to the subway station.

Was I going to find a job? Would I finish high school? Was Québec *really* that much different? Would I make friends?

Was this the right move? Was I crazy?

About a month away from moving to Québec City and I felt my identity smothered under the snow. I was 17 and barely knew myself. But I knew I was moving.

Please stand clear of the doors.

The subway's automatic chimes faded as I took the train home to continue packing.

When I told Mom that I was moving to Québec City, she had one word for me:

Worldly.

She didn't hesitate. She was excited.

"Be worldly", Mom said. Toronto will always be here. Go see the world.

Mom was a free spirit. She believed in taking the uncertain road.

It was time to take the train to Québec City and a blistery winter wind whipped up steam coming from the sewers outside. People wearing expensive suits dashed to work. Their lives seemed so normal, stale and repetitive.

And here I was; one big bag with all my belongings — about to embark on the least normal thing I could do — move to a new city and language at 17, without a high school diploma or learning enough French to get by.

I got on the train and, unlike the birds outside the apartment, headed East. The CN Tower was barely visible through my window seat. I wondered what Québec City looked like. The window then fogged up, and the Toronto skyline looked like a watercolour painting. The city became more out of focus as I travelled East, and so did my life.

“Is ce bus le bon un?”, I anxiously asked the bus driver in broken French.

“Quoi?!” the driver belted out in response.

“Je ne parle pas français.”

I quickly gave in.

I just got my first job and needed to get to work but didn’t know how to ask if I was on the right bus. My interview was me trying to put random French words into mostly English sentences, but the manager at the Second Cup gave me a chance.

I got off the bus and my first thought was that I needed a warmer winter jacket. The wind sent streaks of snow into the air, and I could see the murky lights of the mall where I started work.

I slowly got used to the bus system and knew how to get to school and work. The snow started to melt and patches of white dotted areas of the city as the comfort of spring took over.

But I wasn’t comfortable with my French yet. At work, I stood in front of customers who expected me to just know what to say. That was scarier than the winter storm that year. People were nice and gave me the chance. After all, I was trying my best. I learnt French backwards, first saying sentences I didn’t know how to write, then going to school to figure out where the accents went.

I can speak in English if you want...

People would say this to make me feel comfortable, but I wanted to feel uncomfortable. I needed to make mistakes.

Slowly, something shifted, and the snow turned into puddles of water. I could see my reflection of the person I was becoming through French.

The more I spoke French, the more I felt I fit in. I was joking with friends... *in French* and finished my high school diploma... *also in French*. The reflection showed a person who wasn't from Toronto, or Québec City, or any city for that matter — I felt like I was becoming someone. And it wasn't about where I was from, but who I chose to be.

French became more than communication. It became belonging and a part of my identity.

Soon enough, I could navigate the city without fear. I had a job, friends and a rhythm. Oh and I learnt how to cook pasta without burning it.

Christmas in Québec City was beautiful. Little markets and holiday lights danced under snow. I had already been in Québec City for 2 years. I was bilingual with a high school diploma, and something was pulling me back to Toronto.

When I returned to figure out what's next, life felt off. I got a job at a bank as a teller and just like the sky of November, each day felt darker. I couldn't figure out why, but I was scared.

Mom kept telling me she was okay, but I felt she was hiding something. I felt like I was only existing, anxiously waiting to leave the city for my next adventure.

That spring in Toronto, the birds returned. They hovered over the rocks by the water, with their tiny feet etched in the barely left snow. Their footprints created a roadmap to where they'd been.

I was about to turn 23 and had no idea where I was going yet.

Happy birthday Jay, Love you.

I got her text while waiting at a streetlight.

I thought about my reply.

Thanks Mom, I love you too. Mom are you okay? I want you to be but lately you've seemed more quiet.

I never got a reply.

Mom had been battling cancer and hid her diagnosis from me. She died in her sleep from a blood clot in the middle of the night, three days after my birthday.

She looked fine. Nothing looked wrong.

Mom died on a rainy Friday. A day so devastatingly normal. I fell to my knees. The shock destroyed me. Life stopped. I had no idea she was even sick.

She tried protecting me from the grief of a terminal cancer diagnosis. I learnt later that she chose not to undergo treatment.

After Mom died, Toronto felt different. Every corner of the city grieved, like me. And I couldn't hide. I wanted to go back to Québec City, where I'd built a life. So a few months later, that's what I did.

Grief followed me, but so did everything I built in Québec City — the language, routines, the version of myself I fought to become. That summer I cried every day. My first time in Québec City, I grew up — lived. My second time here, I learnt about grief. But I still had to live.

Mom raised me on her own. She taught me that it's possible to climb any mountain.

“Jay, you can do anything if you put your mind to it”, she used to tell me growing up.

I thought about the mountains surrounding Québec City. I decided to return to school — Cégep this time.

I thought French was learning a new language. About words.

It wasn't.

It was about learning how to live when things get hard. How to rebuild when life shatters. How to dance between two identities without needing to choose just one.

Toronto is turbulent, and also home.

So is Québec City.

But beyond that, Québec City taught me something else.

It was early in the day, and the morning light peeled away the last few layers of night. I was waiting at the corner to cross the street for my first day of Cégep. Life around me was just beginning. I had another day here, and not everyone gets that chance. At that moment, I realized something.

Somewhere between the two cities, in between English and French, I realized I was becoming someone new.

Not perfect — far from it, but *Worldly*.

Just then, the light turned green and one of the streetlights flickered red, dancing along the lines of turbulence and order.