

Memory Lane....

DEBBIE ROLFE

“Memory Lane” est un voyage à plusieurs niveaux, un voyage de souffrance et de perte. C’est l’histoire d’une femme au mitan de la vie qui a mené sa fille à l’université à Montréal, où il y a 25 ans, elle a mis au monde un premier enfant qu’elle a donné pour adoption.

1997. I glance over at Sally, seated beside me in the front seat. She has her feet on the dash, her young and vital body keeping time to the music on the radio. This is my baby, the first one I could keep. For 19 years she and her younger brother Bryan have been the centre of my existence. And now she is leaving.

We barrel down the 401 toward Montreal, the sun peering at us through light clouds. The jeep is jammed with the necessities of life, and memorabilia that Sally will need to establish her new home in residence at McGill University.

We have left the earlier goodbyes behind us, the painful separation from Sally’s boyfriend Peter; the casual goodbye to her Dad, Michael, who will fly in from Toronto to join us this evening in Montreal; and the let’s-pretend-it’s-not-happening goodbye from her 13-year-old brother Bryan. I have recorded these moments religiously with my camera; everyone’s image captured except my own.

“I hate driving to Montreal,” I say. “It’s not as straightforward as it looks. If you choose the wrong exit, you’re in trouble.”

“Courtney and I had no problem, Mom. We made it in four hours.”

“Maybe it’s changed. I remember all those trips your Dad and I made from Kingston to Nova Scotia when he was in Military College. It always seemed to be a big deal passing through Montreal.”

“If you’re too nervous Mom, I don’t mind driving.”

“No, I have to do this.”

As Montreal approaches and we pass through the suburbs, I keep my eyes straight ahead, hands gripping the steering wheel. I feel excited as we pass through the

streets approaching the university—Sherbrooke, University, McGill. Twenty-five years have passed since I, too, at 19 years old, left home in Nova Scotia and temporarily made Montreal my home. We pull up in front of Royal Victoria College, the place Sally will call home for the next eight months; a stately old building at the base of the mountain, close to classes, and nightlife.

Michael meets us with perfect timing as we begin to unload the jeep. Up we go with the dolly to the seventh floor. Sally’s door has her name on it, and is bright yellow. She has a single room with a military-style bed, and a tall window facing the mountain.

By the time we go for dinner it’s late and we’re all over-stimulated in different ways. As we drive along Sherbrooke, we pass Peel St. where I took the metro to work, then the Ritz Carlton, and finally rue Musée, the street where I had lived.

We turn right onto Crescent St., short and one-way, teeming with people, restaurants, and discos. It’s also the street where six weeks ago Sally met her 24-year-old half-brother, Kent, for the first time. They met at Sir Winston Churchill’s, a bar affectionately known as “Winnie’s,” and have kept in touch ever since. I snap a picture of it as we head for a nearby Italian restaurant.

At the restaurant, my eyes are drawn to the window, away from my husband and daughter. I can’t seem to integrate the reflections from the past with the present moment.

“Stop looking out the window, Debbie,” says Michael.

“I can’t help myself. My memories are out there.”

“Well, Mom, we’re making new memories in here, too.”

I bring my attention back to the table, to those present. I mustn’t let my mind go off too far, to my son Kent, who is somewhere close by but as unavailable to me as if he lived on the moon.

We talk about Sally’s new life, how much we will miss her, how proud we are of her. Michael and I have had

some wine, and he is effusive and sentimental.

“Excuse me, Mom and Dad, I just have to give Kent a call. I promised I’d let him know when I got here.” Desperate longing washes over me. Somewhere, at the other end of a phone, is my son.

I watch Sally walk across the restaurant. Michael says, “Debbie, this trip is about Sally. Try not to let that other stuff get in the way.” He twirls his water glass slowly, making circles on the tablecloth. “I can’t believe how much I’m going to miss her,” he says.

“Then have a heart. My son is out there, less than five

military included a transfer to another base. When David developed cold feet at the last minute and broke up with me, I was half-packed with no job. I had convinced myself that my period was late due to emotional distress over my cancelled wedding. There was no way I could be pregnant. That’s when Michael, a high school friend, re-entered my life. We fell in love, and it seemed natural that when his summer training in Nova Scotia ended and he returned to military college in St. Jean, Quebec, I should move to Montreal, the closest city.

I am fitful and anxious throughout the night. Up early,

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minutes away, and I’m not entitled to see or speak to him. It may be hard for us to let go of Sally and Bryan, but I actually had to give one child away.” My voice escalates with anguish.

“He was a baby. That’s different.”

“Not to me. This is where I carried him. I had no idea I’d be so overwhelmed.”

Sally returns after a brief hello with Kent and we settle back into dinner and lighter conversation. I search her face for some hint or clue but there is none. I let him go again, release him, recognize that my desperate need to connect with my son, cannot be satisfied.

After dinner we drive Sally back to residence, and say our goodnights. Michael and I are spending the night at the Ritz Carlton, one of the hotels offering a discount for McGill students and their families. I have chosen the Ritz for other reasons.

In 1972, when I spent my first and only winter in Montreal, I learned quickly how cold and snowy it could be. The wind blew right through me. I’d been fortunate to find work as a secretary, days after my arrival. Part of my daily commute included a walk past the Ritz. In those days, the dining room window jutted out onto the sidewalk, so that passers-by could see the hotel patrons having a leisurely coffee or intimate breakfast. Young, cold, and pregnant, I would fantasize as I walked past the diners about what it might be like to be warm and comfortable on the other side of the window. I vowed to stay at the Ritz once in my lifetime; but I knew, long before Michael and I checked in, that the cost of getting there had been too high.

David and I were to be married on September 9, 1972, having dated for five years. In early August, I had given up my job teaching at a business college in preparation for our wedding. We knew that David’s career in the

I rouse my husband. As it is a warm, sunny day, breakfast is served at Le Jardin du Ritz. Tucked in back of the hotel, the dining area wraps around a duck pond with a bridge, and a manicured garden. We sit, Michael and I, in this halcyon setting, and talk kindly to one another about the plans for the day, including a visit to my old apartment. It has been a long hard year for us.

On April 27, 1996, after ten years of active searching, I had a one-day reunion with my son, Kent, in Whistler, B.C. I’d placed him for adoption 23 years earlier in Montreal. Overcome with thoughts and feelings about our meeting, Kent wasn’t sure what kind of relationship was possible between us. His final words to me were, “I’ll get back to you. Don’t worry. I won’t keep you hanging.” That was 16 months ago and I still haven’t heard from him directly. I learned from others of his move back to Montreal. Sally, determined to have a relationship with her older brother, eventually located Kent and arranged their recent meeting. He was open to the connection with Sally, but I still await his verdict. My outpouring of grief and despair, which followed the initial joy of seeing my son for the first time in my life, was well beyond what Michael or I could have imagined.

I am haunted by the affection Michael showed my baby during my pregnancy. I remember him waking me on a snowy winter night in 1973. Large flakes fell gently outside my bay window. I was seven months pregnant and Michael was studying late. He woke me to ask if I wanted to dance. And so we did, naked in the light from the streetlamps and the glow from the snow. A sensuous slow waltz, just the three of us. My body remembers being in love, being a lover. It remembers weekends spent in bed, reading while Michael studied, pinching pennies to go out for a meal. It remembers laughter and tenderness.

At 19, I wasn’t old enough, sure of myself enough to

be angry with Michael, to know what it would cost me, and him. We only discussed it once. Two months after my arrival in Montreal, I came back from a medical appointment, where I had confirmed that I was sixteen weeks pregnant. Devastated by the news, I outlined for Michael the options the doctor had recommended. (Keep the baby, though he didn't know how; public or private adoption. He could help me with private adoption.) I waited for Michael to respond. "This has to be your decision Deb. I can't help you there. I do know that I love you and I can accept your situation, but I know I wouldn't be able to accept another man's child."

It took several minutes for me to respond. I was ashamed of my pregnancy and terrified Michael would leave me. I knew at 19 years old that I simply could not provide for a baby on my own. And I was grateful that Michael was willing to stay and continue to love me. The way seemed clear, but I felt detached, as if moving and talking through a fog. And so, in that one irrevocable moment, the course of all our lives was altered forever. The unexpressed anger has simmered though, just below the surface of our relationship, for 25 years

Breakfast complete, we return to Sally's residence. She answers our knock, blow-dryer in hand.

"How was your first night?" I ask.

"Great. I sat up talking 'till two in the morning, and slept like a log. By the way," she adds, matter-of-factly, "I just finished talking to Kent." Sally knew how I hungered for any news of Kent and I appreciated that she shared her precious updates without my having to ask. "He's gone golfing for the day with his dad, but he asked me to call him tonight at seven. We might get together for a drink, and see his place. He lives on Mountain."

"Mountain Street?" I can hardly breathe. "I can't believe this. He lives only one street away from where I lived when I carried him."

Running out of hours to the day, we divide up the necessary errands and go our separate ways. Now is my moment. I find the Museum of Fine Art and the stone church on the corner. The hill seems so much easier to climb at 44 than it was at 19. I don't know if I'm in better physical shape, or if it's simply easier when I'm not anaemic and pregnant.

I glance up to the end of the street where a concrete set of stairs climbs the mountain to the street above, Pine. I am reminded that in the eight months I lived here, I never climbed them. Today I will, but first I stop in front of #3680, a three-storey brownstone, with bay windows. I locate the two windows on the second floor that were mine.

Although a business now, I enter and tell the receptionist my story and ask her if I might see the rooms I had rented. She is accommodating, touched by the fact that I've brought my daughter to McGill, so many years after I lived there. As I climb the stairs, the remembered warmth of the red-gold wood radiating up the winding

staircase to my apartment envelops me. I conjure up the area just outside my apartment door where the pay phone was. Unable to afford a telephone of my own, I had stood in the hallway every weeknight before bed, talking with Michael. Patiently, but with longing, I waited for the weekends when he joined me in the city.

I thank the new owners, and drift out of the building in a dream state. I continue up the street and climb the stairs to Pine. Remembering that Kent's adoptive mother lived at 1100 Pine Avenue, I approach the top stair and glance at the building on my left. And then I see it, 1100, looking down into what was my former backyard. All these years of searching, trying to find my son, and oh my God, he and his adoptive mother and I, have all at some point lived within steps of one another.

Stunned by the revelation, I stumble down the stairs. I knew that coming to Montreal would be sad and painful for me, but I didn't expect to confront the spirit of the 19-year-old I once was. Her cheerful optimism and resilience amaze me. I can feel how much she loved Michael; I can also feel the communion she felt with her baby. This is where their relationship existed, if only for a while. I start to cry now, my first tears of the trip. I shake my head, and say, "You stupid, stupid girl. You had it all, for one brief moment.... And you gave it all away. I'm angry with this teenager, not ready to own her as part of myself. I see her as the enemy, the one who engineered the loss; and myself as the one who must now pay.

As the afternoon draws to a close the three of us reunite for our final meal together before Michael and I go home. We stroll along the downtown streets, the realities—past, present, and future—jumbled within me as we search for a suitable spot for our supper. We settle on an outdoor patio with young people and loud music. We order and wait quietly, each of us avoiding the fact that for the first time in our lives together, we will be going in separate directions.

Sally looks over at me, her eyes filling up, and says: "You're not really leaving today, are you?"

I look beseechingly at Michael.

"You'll be fine, Deb," he says.

I pick at my salad. Michael asks Sally what she will miss about home.

"Meal times."

"That's interesting," he says, "what about them?"

"I don't know. Conversation. Mom's cooking." I'm quiet, wishing this tortuous goodbye would end.

After dinner we walk slowly back to residence. We come to our jeep; the moment has arrived. Michael goes first, giving Sally a big hug, and a final "I love you." He is weeping openly.

My turn beckons. I wrap my arms around Sally, and we hug each other for a long time. I whisper in her ear, "You're the best. You're so beautiful, and I love you".

I climb into the jeep and watch Sally until she disappears from view. I'm full of emotion and numb at the same

time. I know that unlike Michael, who can grieve in the moment, my loss of Sally will grow slowly, each day her lilted spirit fails to cross our threshold.

As Michael and I drive through the dark night, we talk about Sally. The heartwrencher for him was the little musical bear, the one given to Sally when she was two. The bear hung around her bedpost and at night we would pull the chain and soft music would play. As we settled Sally into her room we found it in one of the boxes.

“Why would she bring that?” Michael asks.

I look at Michael and feel deep sorrow that Kent could not be part of our life and family, and that I hadn't been strong enough to keep him.

I think of our daughter, left behind to start her new life in Montreal. I think of my other child, left behind there so many years ago. I realize the journey of life is a continual process of letting go, and that I can do it in fear or with grace, possibly even courage. I have much work to do.

Debbie Rolfe is a writer who lives in Toronto with her husband and family.

RITA CRAIG

From A to C

I disposed of almost everyone
From A to C the other day
I was short of filing space
So I decided to go through my chemo files
I threw away the files of all the people
I'd sent to palliative care units
Those that the computer told me
Had died in my own hospital
And those who just seemed to
Disappear

But when I got to C
I lost my stomach for the whole thing
I stopped - and never returned to this task
Even when I moved to another job

Rita Wilder Craig is a social worker currently working in inpatient mental health in an acute care community hospital in metropolitan Toronto. She has been writing "narratives of social work" for a number of years. She received her social work education at both York University and the University of Toronto.

ADELE GRAF

Greek island legacy

my grandmother returns to me each spring, reborn
as the season wakes –
I find her where wildflowers bloom, even on the
high path
atop the bastioned walls of Rhodes, amidst

airy Queen Anne's Lace, swaying on slim
stems
bunches of perky vermilion poppies
daisies, fields of them, their yellow spilling onto
petalled whites

once these flowers took her back to the meadows
of her youth
now they remind me of my sun-filled youth
with her –
she enfolded me as these walls unfold this
town

till alone one night she faded at her season's
end, then
bequeathed her presence in this wealth of wild
array
whose blossoms bow to welcome her again

today she stays near me, holding sunlight in
her eyes
as Queen Anne's Lace holds light within its wide
white cluster
her smile, like polished poppies, gladdens

this ancient path generations have worn
smooth–
even now, our fingers touch as she helps me braid
a daisy chain
for my own granddaughter's hair

After working as a government writer, Adele Graf is happy to be writing poetry and short fiction for herself. Adele's poems have been published in Bywords Quarterly Journal and in several anthologies. Adele lives in Ottawa, where she devotes her time to writing, singing, her family and her cats.