

# Outraged on Your Behalf

BY CARLEIGH BAKER

It's Wednesday. The office has AC, and a hanging string of beads plant that cascades to the floor. There are deadlines, but you're scrolling. Ready for anything. "Photoshop," somebody posts in the comments section below a photo of Bob Dylan goosing Jack Kerouac. Undergraduate poets will argue about it for days. In Myanmar, an aerobics instructor named Khing Hnin Wai records a workout in the capital city and accidentally captures the first few moments of a military coup. She never breaks stride while black armoured vehicles roll in behind her. For three days, the video was everywhere. Today, you find it on YouTube.

"Fake," Trickdiddle93 posts, "Look at the shadows behind her." This post gets 700 upvotes and a hearty discussion on the cost of motion capture. Han Htet Ko identifies himself as Myanmarese and assures the comment section that this is real and Khing Hnin Wai records a fitness show every day in this location. Until the coup, that is. He gets no upvotes. In minutes, the comment is lost in a landslide of speculation on how, exactly, green screens work.

The actual truth of the story isn't important to the scrolldaddys — as you call them. It's the opportunity to argue endlessly in search of the One Truth, whatever sounds the best to the majority. An exercise that requires so many takes they deserve a biological group name. An embarrassment of takes, maybe, though the on-the-nose-ness of it leaves you dissatisfied.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DEREK VON ESSEN

“No,” you say out loud, to break the spell. Reading the comments section only frustrates things. The woman in the adjoining cubicle cocks an ear in your direction but you ignore her.

You need to revolutionize the system, change the game. Which game is still unclear because they all need changing. You type, We need to do something about, and pause. After a while, you find a tweet about workplace equity that seems juicy and read what others are saying about it, until the #Fire-Season hashtag takes over your feed. Pictures of that apocalyptic sunrise no digital camera ever gets right — a maraschino cherry in a shot of dishwasher.

The photos are coming from all across the province and south into the States. California, where it burns so hard every summer

Mom says it’s a wonder there’s any celebrities left. But it’s your province burning hard this year. Lightning strikes. Careless smokers. In the last eight hours, a fire at Tetley Creek has jumped the highway and burned through seventy hectares in the direction of your hometown. The regional district map is dotted with cartoonish markers that look like flame emojis.

It’s lunch time, so you stick a burrito in the staff room microwave and text your parents, Everything okay out there?

Packing up just in case, is the reply. You run a mental inventory of all your stuff that’s still at their condo — in boxes under the stairs. Old papers from university and stuffed animals. Christmas decorations. Things you’d meant to take with you to the city but there was never enough room. Then

you remember the sleeping bag, too bulky for anything other than car camping. Fleece-lined with a cowboy print right out of the fifties. The musty hug of that sleeping bag fills the staff room and sinks you into a chair until a co-worker huffs about needing the microwave. A text, Can you pack the sleeping bag? is left in your drafts.

At five o'clock you buy a pack of cigarettes and smoke two in the alley before getting in the car to drive home. On the way over the bridge people are taking pictures of the pristine inlet before smoke season sets in.

On Thursday morning, the text arrives: Evacuating – on our way.

You text back: Like a vacation! But they don't respond.

When you were a kid, your teacher parents got summers off but no pay, so vacations were done on the cheap. You crossed the border and camped down the us coastline. They always insisted on leaving before dawn. It was cooler and the roads were empty. They made a bed for you in the backseat of the station wagon and put a Capri Sun juice in the cupholder. Under the sleeping bag, your view was of the street lights they passed on the way out of town, and when those disappeared, the trip officially started. Every time new lights split across the car roof like a laser, the possibility of a pit stop presented itself, but Dad only stopped when Mom wanted a coffee. When the sun rose you knew the campground was getting close. Usually you arrived before the people camping in your site had left, so you and your parents sat in a booth at an *ИОП*, eating slowly – pancakes with pineapple and bananas and tiger butter. The parents drinking cup

after cup of coffee, watching the parking lot fill up with locals.

This nostalgia is too indulgent for the office. A finger in the string of beads plant reveals dry soil so you consider pouring a glass of water into it but the tag says "drought resistant." You drink the water instead.

"My parents are being evacuated," you say to the woman in the cubicle.

She shakes her head slowly. "I'm so sorry."

Her empathy is fake but the words feel good.

At five o'clock you leave the office and are faced with that same sun from the internet, and the smell of smoke. The closest fires are three hundred kilometres away. Your parents will have travelled two hundred kilometres by now, and will be arriving at the door around seven. The provincial State of Emergency should have allowed you to take off early but they don't work that way. It gives the government power to seize personal property, restrict travel, or enter into any building or land without a warrant. And that's about it.

Your car does not have AC so you sweat like overnight cheese, cataloguing clean sheets and towels and trying to remember the last time you dusted the guest room.

"It won't matter," you say out loud, but it will matter, they need to see an adult in an adult's home. Adults dust the guest room.

After Washington, your camping tour hit Northern Oregon. Peterman's campground had a cement pool with no shallow end, so you had to wear water wings. A sign on the chain link fence said "Welcome to our ool, notice there's no "P" in it." You spent a lot of time wondering what would happen if you peed in there and then one day you found

out. Nothing. A first brush with the honour system.

Your parents had their honeymoon at this campsite when they were young hippies. They eloped, drove down the coast, and picked the first place that had a vacancy. Dad likes to tell the story of how they pitched their tent right on beach that night, against campground rules. The tide came in and they woke to the ocean at their feet. Since then, Mom prefers to lounge poolside. At Peterman's, teenagers dared each other to jump off the high dive and grandmothers pulled on rubber swim caps before easing themselves onto an air mattress. The smell of chlorine and cut grass at the outdoor pool in Vancouver always brings Peterman's back to you in first person point of view — the particular angle that those stupid water wings held you at, just below the deck, forward, and down so if you weren't kicking hard all you could do was count the Band-Aids collecting at the bottom drain.

At home, your pet bunny is flopped in front of the box fan, sleeping with his eyes open. It's a thing some prey animals do to look less like a target. Your parents had to leave their cat at home, a home that could burn to the ground in hours. Kneeling in front of the comatose bunny, you finally dip your toes in the potential for disaster this whole situation presents and have a cry. The bunny, startled to life, runs under the couch.

"Sorry," you say, "Sorry." Adults don't cry when there's work to be done.

At seven o'clock, the text arrives while you're folding towels. Be right down, you reply. When the elevator doors open on the first floor the people standing there look

more like bunnies than parents — eyes open, but asleep. Then Mom comes to life.

"The traffic was terrible," she says.

"I'm sorry." You reach for her bag but she loops it around her shoulder.

There's a lot to navigate: underground parking, hastily packed luggage, mom's walker.

She huffs at the elevator doors, "honestly, who designs these?" On your floor, she points out that the hallways smell like Hamburger Helper. Dad greets passing neighbours taking their dogs out, saying things like "Hello, fun seekers!" They come from a town where everyone knows each other. They taught everyone's kids. Hundreds of messages are already on their shared Facebook page from old students, offering well wishes and help. You feel smug to be the one actually delivering. All those years of sharing their attention.

When everyone's inside and the door's closed you finally hug, inhaling the same smells you've known for forty-four years, tinged with smoke. They show you where the falling ash burned holes in their jackets. Mom spends a little while eyeing the sparse decor you've managed to piece together over the last year, making suggestions you nod at vigorously but ignore. You do not share a design aesthetic with these people, but you did pull out the baskets she crochets and sends every few months and fill them with beach rocks and tea lights.

Once everyone's settled, the news goes on. Just like at their house. But this time cameras are pointed the forest you used to escape into to drink stolen beer and smoke cigarettes in high school. The fairgrounds that hosted a country music festival so big the town population tripled every July long

# The truth of the story, you remind yourself, doesn't matter.

weekend. You always claimed not to like country music, but the year Johnny Cash played you and a friend tried to sneak onto the grounds through a hole in the fence. It was too dark, and you never found the hole, but you could hear the man in black clearly from the hillside so you just set up a blanket and lay under the stars and listened.

You serve sparkling water and tea and digestive cookies. Pepto Bismol for Dad. You tell Mom she can smoke on the porch, and hope the neighbours won't mind. If there was any fear about making conversation (and there always is) the news alleviates it. While they heckle Ian Hanomansing you pick up your phone and order Chinese food. Pull out bowls and soy sauce packets and unused chopsticks from past sushi orders and set them up on the coffee table. When the food arrives you eat with the patio door shut and the fans on, watching the sun scroll out of sight. Dad suggests you put on the ball game to take your minds off things. While they heckle Buck Martinez, the bunny settles on Mom's lap — she's always had a way with animals. When their eyelids start to droop you put them to bed, making sure there's an extra blanket even though it's way too hot for that.

"Remember when we used to tuck you in at night?" Dad says. He loves to tell the story about how you used to say "Don't forget me,"

as if they might wake up in the morning as strangers.

"I remember," you say.

This is the first time they've been at your home since you moved to the city. After they've gone to bed you put some ice in a glass, pour bourbon over it, and tweet "My parents' house burnt down, fuck the climate crisis." In that moment, you are angry enough for it to feel like the truth. The like count rises steadily, each new heart bringing a surge of satisfaction. Finally, a game to change.

In the morning, you wake to coffee, doughnuts, and the morning news. Dad's already been to Tim Hortons.

"How's it looking?" You ask.

"Big rain last night," he says.

Mom, straight backed, snuffles a little. "What a relief."

They seem so much more delicate than the last time you saw them — Christmas two years ago. They'd had the place painted and replaced all the furniture with new stuff from the Brick, so it was barely recognizable. But Dad had read *Emmett Otter's Jugband Christmas* and Mom had sworn that this was the last year they'd bother decorating, the two family traditions. Somehow now they look less distinct in person than your memories.

"I'll make eggs," you say, just as work calls.

Your boss is beside herself. "Jesus, I saw the news. You need the day off?"

It takes a moment to understand she's talking about your tweet. "Oh, okay, thanks."

"Were your parents insured? Sorry, that's personal. I'm just so angry this happened."

"Thank you."

"We've all just sat around and let it happen, you know?"

"Fires?"

"Everything. Let me know if you need Monday off too."

You hang up, cheeks flushed, and check Twitter. The tweet has two thousand likes, seventy retweets, and a hundred comments. Drought! Government cuts! Record smashing heat! So many people paying attention. There are twenty new messages in your inbox and fifteen new text messages from friends. I'm so sorry, they say. I'm so angry.

The truth of the story, you remind yourself, doesn't matter.

Northern California marked a halfway point for summer — after two weeks at the Trinity Center Campgrounds Of America all that was left was to retrace steps. A more adventurous family might have cut inland into Nevada on the way back, or even Utah and up through Idaho, crossing the border in the Kootenays. But your parents chose sameness, the return to each campsite like a homecoming. The last summer your family drove the coastline was still a decade before fires made camping too dangerous. That year the lake at Trinity KOA changed. Driving down the steep hill into the site, you could see it was a mint green. A billboard at the entrance warned about rinsing off power boats before launching them, to reduce the spread of Eurasian Water Milfoil. But it was too late, the invasive plant had completely taken over. Wading in for a swim meant slog-

ging through feathery tentacles that wrapped around your calves. Even at ten years old, you were savvy enough to know nothing threatening lived in the lake, but as soon as the bottom was obscured it was hard to be sure. Masks and snorkels were discarded in favour of an air mattress, so you could float above the vegetal darkness, wondering what lay hidden in the swirl. Mom refused to go in at all, sitting at the campsite all day with her feet in a bucket of water.

Some afternoons you and the campground kids rode bikes around and scavenged for treats. Your mom kept Twizzlers in the tent, but everyone knew the families with RVs had popsicles and Revellos in the freezer. Once a source was secured you dropped the bikes and ran to get in the receiving line. That last summer at the Trinity Centre KOA, the same summer the lake turned green, running at top speed for an RV popsicle, you slipped.

The fire pit was only smouldering a little, but your hand went in up to the wrist. It happened in that slowed motion of childhood accidents. There was no pain, only the certainty that you were in trouble. In a flash, somebody's mom had you over her shoulder and into the RV. She turned on cold water for the bad hand and put a popsicle in the good one. While you stood there, disembodied, awed by the splendour of a stranger's RV, she sent the campground kids to locate your parents. And then that woman came in and looked at your hand and told you it was going to be okay. Hugged you until your own mother arrived. She was red-faced and shouting, the way she always was when you were clumsy, and only as an adult do you understand that fear looks like that sometimes. »