

CANADIAN SHORTS II

A Collection of Short Stories
featuring established and
emerging Canadian authors.



FOREWORD

This collection of short stories by Canadian authors showcases some of the amazing talent Canada has to offer and I am delighted to be included. While everyone deals with the overwhelming difficulties of Covid-19, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the first responders. My special thanks go to those unseen, and often unmentioned, emergency dispatchers who start the response process.

As a paramedic in emergency medical services (EMS) in Alberta, I was privileged to work with first responders throughout my career. I found that, in this emotionally demanding field, they are consistently kind, considerate and dedicated professionals with a deep desire to help people. Later in my career, as Communications Manager, I developed a specific kinship to the often overlooked *first*, first responders: the emergency dispatchers who answer your 911 call.

Emergency dispatchers are exposed to many traumatic events in the daily scope of their jobs. This psychological burden can build and affect all aspects of a person's life. It can become overwhelming without help.

Very few people understand the difficulties dispatchers encounter. I wrote *The Weight of Lives* as an example of how the job can overpower and overwhelm. It's about understanding when you need to seek assistance before it's too late, as well as a glimpse into the mind of those who are always there to help.

Thank you for reading.

Stacey O'Sullivan, M.A., B.A., Paramedic-retired

MAGICAL REALISM

UPSTREAM

by J. McMullin

I'm not sure why James and I needed to steal that pack of Du Mauriers from Smith's Convenience. Maybe because Jesse Owens was one of my heroes, and the former Olympian smoked a pack a day. Maybe to prove that we could handle the real world, which for half-Japanese kids in the redneck central of Oscarville, Alberta, was a tall ask. Maybe we were just kids.

We rode our bicycles behind the old carwash next to the Jensen's corn fields and broke out the contraband. James struggled with the lighter while I practiced holding a stick between two fingers and sucking on the filter, like my dad used to do before he left.

"How long 'til we sound like Clint Eastwood?" I asked. My aunt had let me watch *For a Few Dollars More* last weekend after the funeral and kotsuage, where I'd cried and run out of the temple.

"Probably five months. Six tops," said James. The lighter caught, and I lit up for the first time and inhaled.

The smoke hit my lungs hard and I started hacking.

James whooped, "You're bad! You're a bad dude!"

I grinned. There was something flickering through the corners of my vision. The world felt shifted, like I wasn't quite in the same place anymore. I thought I might puke.

The flickering at the edge of my vision was stronger. There was something silvery, unnatural, moving through Jensen's corn field. I thought I saw a giant koi leaping above the tassels. I thought I heard someone calling my name, "Davey? Davey!" I was transfixed.

The koi came closer and closer towards me. "Davey, it's me. It's your Grandma Mei. I'm here to take care of you."

"Baachan?" I asked. The cigarette, unnoticed, burned down until it singed my hand. I yelped and threw it onto the ground. The koi disappeared instantly.

"Dave. You snapped out of it yet?" asked James.

"Sorry. Just thought I heard my grandma," I said.

"Must be tough. I think it's normal, kind of, to hear that stuff. With her dying, I mean." James stumbled a bit on the last part.

"Yeah," I said, and threw away the Du Mauriers.

I saw her again, and again. When the team would share a cigarette after track. When James found out no one in Oscarville cared about the Tobacco Restraint Act and we smoked ourselves sick on the three packs our combined allowances got us. When Mom went into the home, and I found a shriveled, hand-rolled smoke in her dresser.

But by the time I went to college, I knew three things:

First, my grandma's ghost took the form of a koi fish.

Second, she only appeared when I smoked.

And third, that old lady could be a severe pain in the ass.

It was 1972 when she drove us apart. The Okinawa government gave back Japan, our southern neighbour's troops came home from Vietnam, and I was in the

agronomy program at the U of A with plans to get my MBA and work as an agribusiness consultant.

I spent most of my time losing poker hands, running in the river valley, and thinking about April Leavitt. When she handed me a pack of Pall Malls at a party and said I'd look like James Shigeta if I smoked, I fell in love. Not too many girls knew an Asian actor.

I decided to smoke the pack in my room the next day rather than going to Econ. I sank into my bed and watched the smoke spiral up toward the ceiling.

"You should clean up this room. What a horrid mess," came a familiar voice, and Grandma's spirit swam casually through the door, silvery and dismissive.

"You should knock, Baachan," I replied. "The room's fine. No health inspections scheduled last time I checked.

"I never would have spoken to my grandmother that way," sniffed Grandma.

"Well, can't say I have to repeat your mistakes," I said. Her fins drooped a little, and I relented. "But if you're here for more than nagging, I do have a question for you."

"Go ahead, my impertinent grandson," said Grandma as she floated over my desk.

"Why are you a fish?" I asked. "Every ghost in every movie I've ever seen is a person. This fish thing, it's weird."

"We spirits choose our form," she said. "I always liked koi. Symbols of perseverance. It seemed appropriate after what we'd been through in this country."

"Okay," I said. "I kinda like it. So, besides the lecture on cleaning, what brings you by?"

"You need your grandma to tell you when to do

something sensible. The girl you're seeing, oh, April I think is her name?" she asked, but not really. "She's not good for you. I can see it."

"I read carefully, Baachan," I said.

"It's true! I can! Let me show you," Grandma said, and came towards me.

"No. Absolutely not. You can explain what you mean, or you can move on. I'm not getting on board with this," I said. I could have said a lot more, but Grandma was Grandma, and she deserved some respect.

She pushed on when she saw I wasn't impressed. "And you know we can't trust these whites. How long is it going to be before they put us in internment camps again?" The koi shuddered. "I can still remember the inside of the cabin freezing."

"I'm half-white, Grandma," I said, and crossed my arms. *Respect*, I told myself. *Respect*.

"Another reason you should find a nice Japanese girl! Your mother's mistake shouldn't be yours. What if you end up just like her? Remember how your worthless father left your mother with nothing but you and debt?" said Grandma. "You don't want that."

My attempt to hold back broke when she mentioned Mom, and I lifted my voice. "World War II was a long time ago, Baachan. I know you won't get over the past, but I'm not going to let it hold me back. I'm not Mom, and April's not Dad."

"I don't need the help of some mystical flying fish," I said, "and I don't need the help of a racist old woman that should go back to being dead." I stubbed the cigarette out on my desk in a long, ashy scar. Grandma vanished

instantly, like she always did when the embers went out.

I smoked on and off through the next decade.

Quit with April when she got pregnant with our daughter.

Started again once I was travelling more for work as a way to pass the lonely hotel evenings.

Quit when April told me I was risking our little girl's health, and that I was always so irresponsible.

Started when April told me she wanted a divorce. Started drinking too, which wasn't hard when my work was in the country where there was nothing to do but drink.

Throughout it all, I'd catch silver flashes at the edge of my vision when I was smoking, but Grandma didn't come to talk to me again until the worst night of my life.

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