

**Young Writers Award
runner up
2016**

**Falls
by Chloë Reeson**

At my grandmother's wake, aunts and uncles kept passing me finger sandwiches and asking if I was going to die.

'Hitchhiking across Canada?' They said, 'Why? Is that safe?' Their eyes would drift to the urn on the mantelpiece behind me. I shrugged and smiled but every time one of them asked I felt like something broke off into my stomach, like I was an eroding cave. When I got on the plane to Vancouver I redirected this question to the teenager in the next seat. She tried to reassure me.

'Hitchhiking is fine,' she said, 'just don't get any buses. A couple of years ago, a guy went crazy on a greyhound and cut the head off another passenger, because he was listening to his iPod too loudly.'

'Far out,' I said.

'Everyone ran off the bus while he shook the head at them through the window and then he started to eat the guy's flesh.' She bit into a dry savoury muffin and I watched the crumbs fall into the latch of her seatbelt.

'So hitchhiking is safer than buses,' I said.

'I mean, I think they have stepped up security since then so I'm not saying that would necessarily happen to you but I am saying it definitely did happen once.'

I turned my head and faced forward again. On the screen in the headrest in front of me a small plane stuttered across vast blue pixels.

Before my grandmother died she told my mother to take us on a family holiday and scatter her ashes somewhere, she didn't particularly care where. At the wake, my mother decanted some of the ashes into a vial attached to a chain. We were standing in the kitchen. She had taken the urn off the mantelpiece and had now pushed it onto the counter amongst the various precarious stacks of dirty dishes—cake tins and some plates with half eaten frittata squished between them. She told me if I got the urge to scatter my grandmother's ashes somewhere while I was away that I should do so. She also tried to tell me that I wouldn't be alone if I had the vial with me. Her eyes were watery. I told her this made me very uncomfortable and could we please stop talking about it. I took the vial though and I declared it when I got to Canadian customs.

The official was wearing a dark blue uniform. He looked strong and his hair was neat. When I left from Brisbane airport the customs official was missing several teeth.

'I have my grandmother's ashes, uh, in this thing,' I said tugging at the chain and freeing the vial from my shirt like an old bath plug.

The customs official looked up and stared at me for a second. He reached out as if to touch the vial, thought better of it, picked up a stamp and brought it down again on the open page of my passport.

'We don't require a death certificate for such a small amount of human remains,' he said. 'Welcome to Canada,' and then he waved me through to baggage claim.

A few weeks later, I was due to meet my mother and little brother in New York. I had made it across Canada alive, but that felt like all I had done.

'Do you think it's dumb that I've done this alone? Do you think it's a dumb way to travel? Everyone my age seems to travel in groups.' I said this to my mother over Skype when we were finalising plans to meet.

I was sitting in the courtyard of a hostel in Toronto, puffer jacket zipped up over my mouth. I held the zipper between my lips. It was the middle of December. Little flakes of snow were getting caught in the wind.

‘Not at all,’ my mother said, ‘the only things not improved by flying solo are sex and drinking. And let’s face it, sometimes those are better done alone as well.’

No one was around but I wore headphones while we talked because some of the windows above me were open. I unzipped my jacket a little.

‘Your voice sounds strange,’ I said.

‘That happens when you go away. You forget what Australian accents sound like.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Canada is full of Australians. I just can’t remember the last time I had a proper conversation with someone.’

I rubbed my lips between my fingers.

‘Where did you get your headphones from?’ she said. ‘I want some like those, these little ones keep falling out of my ears.’

I put my head down on the wooden table.

‘I want this to be over and I want to be back at the start all at the same time,’ I said.

When I looked up, my mother was holding her headphone earbuds in each hand and staring into them like they were eyeballs. ‘Why don’t you two stay put,’ she said.

Later, I bowed my head under the weak hostel shower stream. The shower cubicle had a half pane of frosted glass that had misted up. My body was red from the hot water and I pressed myself against the cool glass. The seals around the sides of the shower had perished and the glass gave a little. I pulled away quickly. My breasts and belly button had made small impressions on the glass. A horrified little face looked back at me from the mist.

The next morning I got a train as far out of Toronto as possible and then I waited by the side of the road. Eventually, a matronly woman in a Jeep picked me up on her way to Buffalo. She said she'd give me a lift somewhere but she wouldn't take me across the border.

'Nothin' personal,' she said.

'That's okay,' I said. 'How about Niagara?'

She dropped me at the Greyhound station in Niagara Falls and I was so tired I finally gave up on hitchhiking and bought an overnight ticket to New York. I had a few hours to spare so I pushed my suitcase into one of the station's deep lockers and set out along the esplanade, against the flow of the river. Every few metres, I touched the locker key through the pocket of my jeans and then I touched the vial on my chest. They were reassuring lumps. In the cold, the Niagara River moved slowly and was the same green as a lucky stone my grandmother used to carry. When I was young and my parents were still together, we lived in Emerald. When she visited, my grandmother would take my little brother and me to the Chinese Restaurant in the middle of town. She marched us past all the tables with the fanned napkins, into the games room at the back. My brother was a baby then and she steadied him on one knee while I perched on the other. She pressed her small aventurine stone into my palm and then she wrapped her hand around mine and together we pulled the lever down on the poker machine. She said she liked Emerald because it was dated and our pokies still had levers. I was never allowed to tell my mother about these afternoons. My grandmother always bought me a spring roll afterwards so that when my mother asked how my day was I could tell her we had spring rolls at the Chinese restaurant and I wouldn't be lying.

When my grandmother died, I asked the cremator if we could put the aventurine stone in with her. He said he didn't know the melting point of a gemstone like that and so it was

probably best if I kept the stone for myself. While the man cremated my grandmother, we waited at the McDonalds down the road.

‘You know the oven at home,’ my brother said to my mother, ‘you know when you put it on self-clean?’

‘Yes,’ said my mother wiping off the condensation running down Ronald McDonald’s face on the side of her cup.

‘Well, sometimes I get hungry even though there’s nothing in the oven, just the smell of cooking makes me hungry.’

‘Jack...’

‘Do you think that guy gets hungry when he-’

‘What is wrong with you?’ I said and I threw the stone in my hand right at his head. He cried and the stone left a little round bruise on his forehead for a week.

‘People die from head knocks, you idiot,’ he said, while my mother held his face in her hands.

When my mother was young and went away to uni, my grandmother took her first overseas trip. She visited Niagara Falls. The crowds were so thick that she couldn’t get a place at the edge of the lookout so she climbed up onto a statue, warmed by the sun, and watched the falls from there. She said they were majestic. Afterwards, she went to the casino and won enough to buy herself lunch. In her house, on her bedside table she kept a collector’s card. It was from a pack called ‘Niagara Falls Daredevils’. The picture on hers was of an old woman in a big hat standing next to a barrel. The woman, Annie Edson Taylor, was a widow who secured herself an income by becoming the first Niagara Falls survivor. In 1901, she packed herself into a barrel and was set adrift, right over the edge. She was 63. According to my grandmother she had survived unharmed except for a cut on the top of her head. I always

wondered if that's why she was wearing the hat in the picture. Her income didn't last though because her manager ran away with her barrel and all of the money she earned from publicity was wasted on trying to track him down. She spent the rest of her life working odd jobs to support herself. I learned all this from googling her. On the card it just said that she was the original daredevil.

After a long, slow walk I finally reached the falls. In summer they would shine under blue skies, making the thunderous sound of their own applause before masses of tourists. In high winter, the falls would freeze and there would be something magic in that too. Today, they were stuck somewhere in between. The river was frozen but the falls still heaved. When the rushing water reached solid chunks of ice at the bottom, it slowed right down, easing into the river instead, like an old man getting into a hot bath.

I turned around and looked back at the town. Neon signs flashed lamely, and a dense grey colour hung over everything. There were some Christmas wreaths hung from streetlights but nothing overly festive. The town seemed to sag in the rain like it was made of cardboard. There was no one else around. For a long time, maybe an hour or so, I just sat against the railing. I touched my pocket. I touched my chest. I stared into the lag at the bottom of the falls, and my heart slowed down to match it.

On the walk back to the bus station, it got dark very quickly. I kept worrying I would miss my bus and walking faster and faster. In the end I was half an hour early. I got my suitcase out of the locker and when my bus did come I took a window seat. A girl sat down next to me and held a book in her lap. The only words I could see through her fingers were 'homosexuals' and 'sin'. She leant over the aisle to talk to her friend. The bus driver climbed aboard.

‘A lot of you have probably heard about the blizzard we’re gonna hit around Syracuse. A lot of you are probably wondering if I have experience driving through snow,’ he said. ‘Well, the answer to your question is yes. I have driven through snow.’ He paused and then added ‘About twenty years ago,’ and then he laughed.

‘Now, why would he say that?’ the girl said to her friend.

After my mother moved out my grandmother lived alone for the rest of her life. I was with her the night she died. She asked if she could brush my hair.

‘I’ll be so gentle,’ she said.

I climbed under the stiff covers of her hospital bed and stretched out alongside her. She rolled over and we faced each other. I handed her a comb and she ran it through my hair. Her hands were smooth like baby skin but the creases were deep. The comb tickled. I looked into her eyes as she watched the top of my head.

‘I feel like you should tell me something,’ I said.

‘What sort of something?’ she said.

‘Something important.’

She stopped brushing and pressed the comb against her lips in thought.

The bus moved slowly through the snow. For an hour or so, the girl next to me read her homophobic book, sighing loudly every now and again. When she put the book away, she turned over immediately and shut her eyes. After she had fallen asleep, the girl reached out, put her arms around me and rested her head on my shoulder. When my grandma died she had her head on my shoulder. Her hair was silky against my neck, like a cat had curled up there. Our legs were intertwined under the covers. I knew she was dying because her breathing changed. It wasn’t faster or slower, louder or quieter, it just felt different to be holding her

and I knew it had to do with breath. I wasn't certain she had gone until I looked at her fingertips on my stomach and blood had started to pool in them. I sat for a while longer and then I climbed out of the bed. I straightened her arms a little so it looked like she had just curled up on her side for a nap, and then I called the nurses. I wish it hadn't been me who was there. Not because it upset me or scared me to see her die. It didn't. Or, at least, not in the way you might expect. I looked down at the girl's book in the seat pocket. I looked at her arm across my body. Her fingers curled against the skin of my neck. Gently, I pulled the ashes out of my shirt. I unscrewed the top and I tipped my grandmother onto the girl's head. I turned to the window, my face reflected clearly in the glass. I pushed the girl off of me and she woke a little, apologised, and went back to sleep. Whenever she moved around some of the grey ash fell down onto her face. It was about seven more hours until we reached New York.