

# fedpress

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*Nothing*  
is  
*impossible*

the word itself says

*'I'm Possible'!*



Audrey Hepburn

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# CENTRELINK, HOW LONG IS

**By Jennifer Pont**

*How long is too long for Centrelink to make a decision about an application for Pension Education Supplement (PES)? Unfortunately, Centrelink gave me rather a long time to think about it. At the time I started writing this in January, it had been more than six months, two pieces of snail mail, four phone calls (including an official complaint), and one online message worth of wondering.*

*There's nothing new in the lament that Centrelink takes longer than expected to process applications. In 2016 tripleJ Hack reported that students were "freakin' out" about the four-month processing time for Youth Allowance or AusStudy payments. This was well outside the expected 28 days. I admit, and Centrelink certainly maintains, that my situation is not as high a priority as full-time students whose only means of support is their payment. However, Centrelink says the reason for the supplement is the extra costs associated with study so, by taking this long to assess my claim, I have been worse off.*

*At times, my Centrelink experience has been trying, but they have followed their own procedures, or investigated when they didn't, and things got sorted. While increasingly understaffed and pedestrian, they have been ultimately accountable. Again, I'd done all the correct things, so I was*

*alarmed that I still hadn't been notified of their decision.*

**Roll back to late June, 2017.**

*I contacted Centrelink about my part-time study at TAFE because I'm obligated to update them about how many hours I spend away from my caring role. The customer service person had understood my situation and told me I could apply for a PES and that I'd receive an application pack in the mail. This supplement is \$31.20 per fortnight for part-time students like me, already receiving certain other payments such as Newstart Allowance or Carer Payment. This was welcome news and gave me warm and fuzzy feelings about the government's recognition of people with extra loads. I had my bits and pieces ready by the time I received a reminder letter prompting me to submit my application. The snail mail lag meant it was just a few days till the deadline. I followed the prompt to upload the application on July 12 and waited the expected six weeks for Australia Post to deliver a result. Then I waited a bit longer so I wouldn't seem impatient.*

*On September 5, I sent an online message, asking about the status of my application. This was me avoiding the phone queue. A few days later I had a crisis of confidence*

# TOO LONG?

*in the online message system and called Centrelink. I was told that my application and my online message were both visible. I waited on the phone while the customer service person went through my application. I could hear her checking things off. She confirmed it was all correct but also explained that, although it was taking longer than usual, she couldn't "upgrade it to urgent" status because I was already receiving a payment. Basically, although the supplement recognises extra costs of study, I wasn't at risk of starving.*

*I spent \$70 on books. This might have filled my car with petrol. I also paid up-front course fees of \$323 (concession applied). That might pay a winter energy bill. There were also sundries like printing and parking. And, if you meet the tough criteria to receive a payment, these extra study costs might*

*leave you a little peckish here and there, even if not quite starving. I wasn't given any guarantees during that call but I hung up thinking that it wouldn't be much longer.*

*On October 2, I called again. This person also checked through my application. Again, it was explained to me that it couldn't be "pushed through" but she was leaving a note in my record that I'd called. She also recommended that I submit a complaint and gave me the phone number.*

*I waited until October 27 to call the complaints number. A very understanding person offered insight into the "pool of allocation" process, whereby my application could pop up on a screen in any state. She also repeated the familiar refrain of how no prioritising action could be taken because I didn't qualify under hardship. I pictured*

my application going down the list as other prioritised claims leapfrogged over mine, on a national scale.

As numbers of applicants swell and the number of staff shrink, was it possible that my application would never be the next one? That's just a question I mused on to fill in time while I waited. I also mused on how others, the ones who are urgent, were getting along with their waiting. Is there something seriously wrong at Centrelink?

I hung up on my conversation with the complaints person, holding her comforting words that I wouldn't have to call again close to my bosom. Then, as 2018 bloomed, those words were rather wilted from all my clutching. Centrelink, is 180 days of waiting for an answer too long?

### **Fast forward to March 7, 2018.**

I'd like to tell you that the moral of this story is that patience is a virtue and that persistence will pay off, but my tale has turned out more like a Greek tragedy.

On February 3, I received an email from <customer.comments@humanservices>. I'd suggest that "comments" is their name for complaints. It thanked me for taking the time to provide "feedback" and said "We're sorry for the frustration you experienced with your claim." It then advised that my request had been sent to the responsible business area (was it not already there?) and that I should allow "10 business days for an outcome." If I still needed an update it recommended that I call them "using the phone numbers listed on our website." I was thanked for helping them to improve their service and told my complaint had been formally recorded and closed. It was signed "Escalated Complaints Team."

By the way, did you know that Centrelink offices no longer accept any paperwork such as claim support evidence? It must

be uploaded. This contradicts their online claim system, which states that "taking it in person" is their preferred method. Although staff will acknowledge this, it does not make them relent, even if you've made a trip to town solely to delivery it. But please also note; you still do have to go there to prove your identity with original documents.

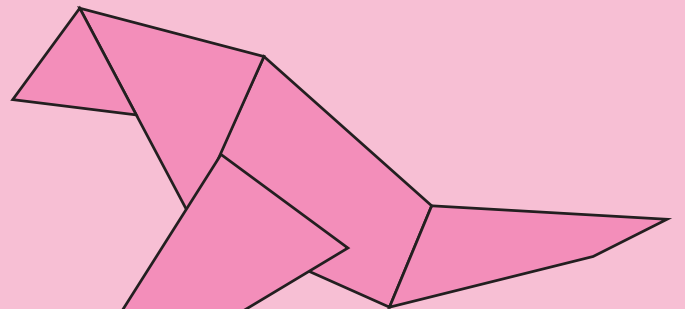
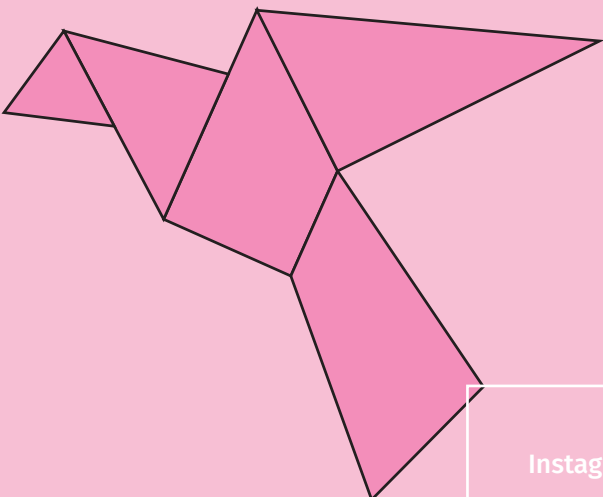
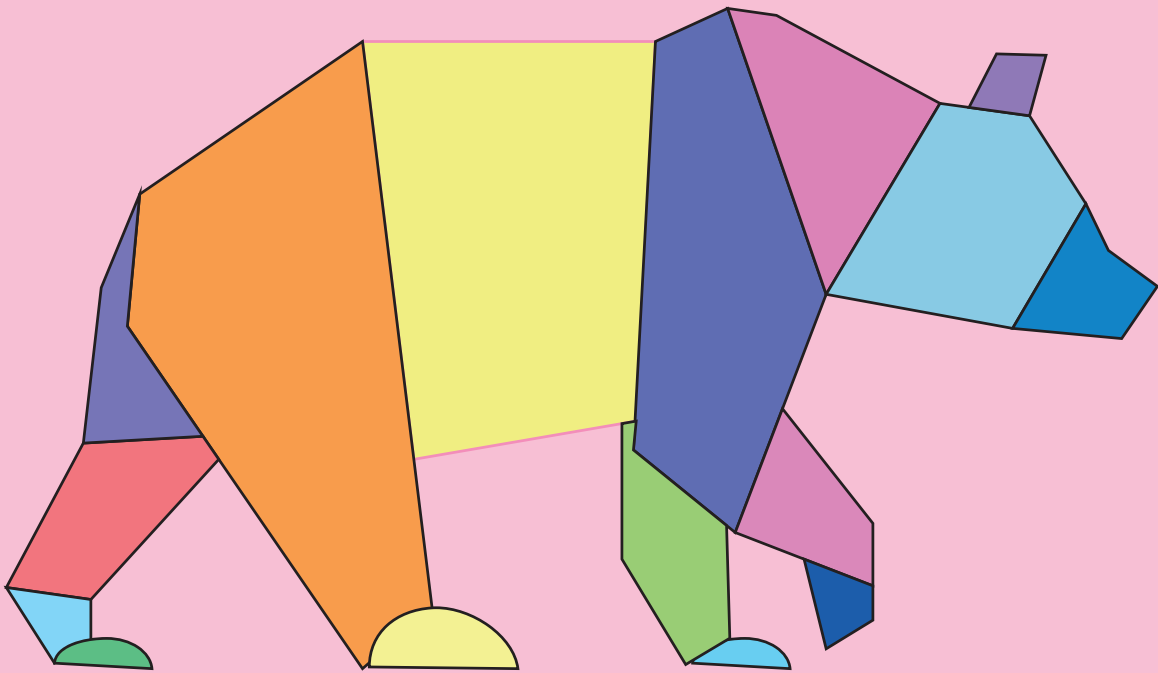
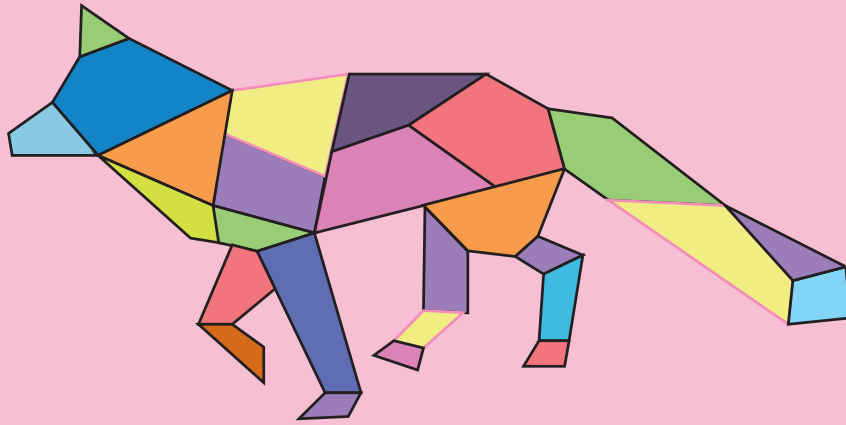
With TAFE resuming, and an invoice received, I could really use any entitlement from last year to help with this year's fees. However, today, after calling again, waiting thirty-five minutes on hold and fifty-eight minutes in total on the phone, I was told my claim would be processed today but it "would be a rejection." My answer on the last page about previous education is an automatic disqualification. That answer has been there through at least two check-throughs by staff and 237 days of waiting. When I queried why I couldn't have been put out of my misery sooner, the consultant told me that staff "can't know everything" and that "I now know this about this type of claim." My feedback about the set-out of the claim form had been noted and she told me to "have a nice day."

Really, I'm on board with limited resources going where the greatest need is. I just think that Centrelink, their forms, their online instructions and the training of their undoubtedly overstretched staff, has not kept up with changes to their rules, and I suspect that this is causing suffering to more people than just me.

I wish everyone luck with their claims. I'll leave the complaints number here in case anyone would like to make "a complaint, suggestion or compliment". The number is 1800 132 468. I'm sure they're really hanging out for a compliment.

If you're experiencing financial distress, FedUni's Financial Support team can assist with budgeting, information and referrals to other services. Eligible students can access student loans, emergency aid & student grants through Scholarships, Bursaries & Grants.

For more information visit [federation.edu.au/financial-support](http://federation.edu.au/financial-support) and [federation.edu.au/scholarships](http://federation.edu.au/scholarships)



Bryleigh Geurts  
Instagram: @queen\_bryleigh

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# Sleepover

ZZZ



By Laura J. Wilson - Part One

ZZZ

Jake couldn't believe his luck. Everyone knew that Ben and James were the ringleaders of their little group. Most people assumed that he and Pete just tagged along, that they were lucky to be in the splash zone for Ben and James's insane brand of genius.

feet once a few months back, caught up in an argument with James and ever since Ben had been trying to get a repeat foot-rub.

'You say that, but it's Sunday tomorrow,' Jake said.

And they were geniuses, Jake never doubted that. Sure, Ben was kept back a year, James was failing English and they were all four of them in detention more Friday afternoons than they had free, but they were magnificent. And now, Ben was staying with him for almost a whole week. James was off skiing with his family, and Pete was a boarder, so he'd gone home for the holidays. Ben was pretending like he might have stayed with Jake even if James was available, and that was fine. Jake was happy to pretend to believe that.

'What's special about Sunday?' Ben asked.

'Sunday is laze about and eat day, and I don't care what you bribe me with, I'm not leaving the house, I'm not getting out of my trackies, and I'm certainly not exercising.'

'When have you ever exercised?' Ben said.

'We spent half of today at the skate park and the other half you dragged me around the junkyard and made me carry things!' Jake said.

Their first two days were exhausting. Jake had little control over Ben at the best of times, but he was feeling so lucky that he hadn't said 'no' once.

'That's not exercise,' Ben said dismissively.

And, as tough as Ben pretended to be, with his leather jacket and his hair that hung down to his shoulders, he had the enthusiasm of a puppy that's just heard the word 'walk'.

'I don't think I've ever seen you tired,' Jake said.

'I slept less than a metre away from you just last night,' Ben said.

'I'm never eating again,' Ben declared, flopping on Jake's bed.

He propped his head up under his hands so he could meet Jake's eyes.

Jake sat down and arranged the pillows so he could lean against the wire frame at Ben's feet. Ben wiggled his toes hopefully. Jake had idly started massaging Ben's

'Yeah, but you're the same as ever, you talk and rush around getting ready and then the second your head hits the pillow, you're asleep. I don't think I've ever even seen you yawn, except when you're winding Mrs Lewis up.'

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'I don't see the point in yawning,' Ben said, but he said it with a cheeky smile, so Jake was pretty sure he was having him on.

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Jake looked at Ben's bare feet again, wondering if he dared to touch them.



Ben was a very physical person, despite or maybe to spite his cold, formal family.

He used his whole body when he spoke and didn't have an inside voice.

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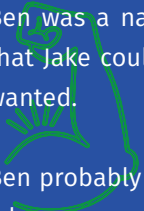
He draped over Jake whenever they sat still and seemed to think that tackles were the best way to display affection. It had long since stopped making Jake's heart race.

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It was just the way Ben was. Of course, just because Ben was a naturally affectionate person didn't mean that Jake could just play with Ben's feet whenever he wanted.

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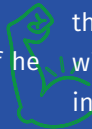
Ben probably wouldn't see anything wrong with it. But Jake was careful not to treat Ben any different from the others. And he certainly wasn't going to ever touch Pete's feet.



'So, what is there to do in the house then, if we're not allowed to leave?' Ben asked.

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Jake suddenly realised he had been staring absently at Ben's feet for an extended period of time and willed himself not to blush. Both he and his father blushed at the drop of a hat, which meant that he couldn't get away with anything. It was a mystery as to why he kept being invited along to break rules with the others anyway, when every time they got dragged into Mrs Lewis's office she would ask them if they did it and if they had, Jake's cheeks were an obvious beacon of guilt.

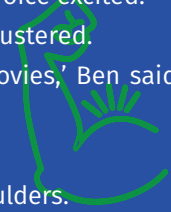


'Ah, there's board games and books? My dad has all the James Bond movies ...'

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Ben scrambled up so that he was sitting on his toes and leaning towards Jake.

'Bond, James Bond?' he asked, his voice excited. 'Yes?' Jake said, trying not to look flustered. 'I haven't seen any James Bond movies,' Ben said. He had a loopy grin on his face.



Jake sat up and grabbed Ben's shoulders. 'You seriously haven't?' he asked. In his house, James Bond was holy. Ben shook his head, suddenly serious.

ZZZZZ

'That's unacceptable, we're not waiting until tomorrow, we need to start now.' Jake leapt up with uncharacteristic speed and dragged Ben down the hall to his dad's study. 'Dad! Ben hasn't seen Bond before!' Jake's dad didn't answer, having not heard anything due to his head being firmly in his book. The boys burst

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into his office and Ben hovered behind Jake, his fingers light on Jake's shoulders. For some reason, Ben got all flustered and nervous with Jake's dad, despite him never being flustered and despite Jake's dad being a quiet, owl-like kind of man. As far as Jake knew, they had only exchanged a few words, but maybe that was the problem; Ben rarely had trouble talking to anyone.

two dozen DVDs. He also had most of them on VHS, though obviously not the newer ones. 'I know you'll want to start him on Goldfinger, but I really do think chronological is best. When do you go home? Because this is about 50 hours of movie wonder, young man, and I really must insist you see them all if you're to keep associating with my son.'

'Why are you two not out raving or something, elsewhere?' Trevor asked, looking over his reading glasses in that way he had like he had forgotten there was a world outside his book.

'Yes, sir!' Ben said, before wincing. Ben didn't even call their headmaster 'sir', despite associating more with Mr Hobb more than the average student. Ben heaved the trunk up to chest height. Trevor and Jake shared a baffled look before Ben staggered back to Jake's room, his breath impressively even.

'Dad, would I ever go to a rave?' Jake asked. 'Do they even still do raves?' Ben stopped trying to read the back of Trevor's book without entering the room properly and clasped Jake on both cheeks.

'How's he going to put that down?' Trevor asked, sounding rather curious. Jake gave his dad a look of alarm and rushed to catch up, just making it through the door as Ben dropped the trunk gracelessly on the camp bed that had been set up for him to sleep on. Jake groaned as Ben gave him an easy grin.

'It is now my life's ambition to see you at a rave,' he said solemnly.

Jake struggled to look appropriately horrified while his stomach performed loop-de-loops. Apparently no amount of bear hugs and casual touches could have desensitised him to this.

'We could have carried that together,' Jake said.

'I may have panicked.'

'Benjamin hasn't seen any Bond movies,' Jake blurted, feeling both relieved and saddened when Ben dropped his face to look somewhat sheepishly at Trevor.

'Right.' Trevor stalked to the corner of his office and dragged the heavy old-school trunk that housed the



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# Darkness

She lays in her bed, unable to move. The weight of her fears restrains her. She struggles to breathe deeply, calm herself from the war that she constantly fights.

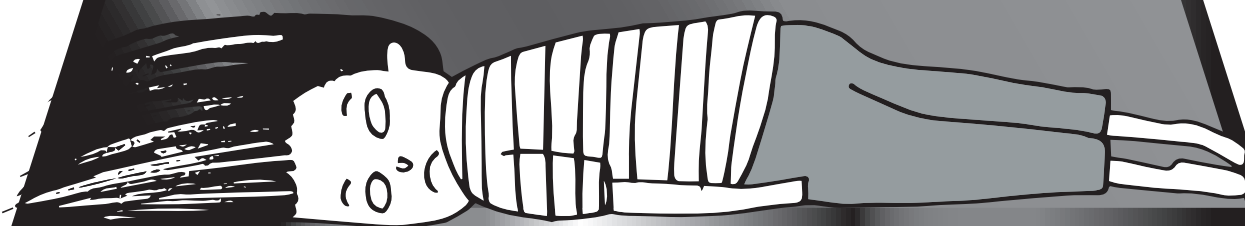
Her room is dark, but that's how she likes it. The curtains are drawn tightly shut and the small sliver of light from the door barely penetrates the darkness she has created.

The room is musky. A rancid combination of stale air and unwashed skin. Sweat beads along her forehead, although Winter has hit like lightning overnight.

If she can get out of bed, she will be fine. If she can move her arms, she can move her legs and then she will be in motion. She will be able to shake off the worries and thoughts she has let overpower her.

She has done this several times a day for a week; and it hasn't made a difference. She closes her eyes and relishes the darkness, letting it welcome her back like an old friend.

By Jordyn Presley



# AT WAR WITH CHANGE

BY LAURA BENNEY

**Belt out the trumpet line; an exultant melody.  
Dance under the streamers; red, white and blue.  
A choir of triumphant thrums through the rafters.  
I didn't die. Miraculous, isn't it?**

*But perhaps I should start at the beginning.*

*You see, I always thought Change and I were friends. I'll admit, there were no slumber parties, late night calls or secret languages. Perhaps I should have known? Change was a girl. The kind of girl who wore her hair different every day of the week. We kept it friendly, went out for brunch every few months; had conversations laced with small talk and zucchini muffins. I waded into her embrace like you'd wade into a kiddie pool; no fear, just the slight uncomfortable feeling of being judged.*

*The summer after I finished high school, we had a falling out. People break up with their high school sweethearts in the search of fresh meat, don't they? Friends who shared your lunch drift to the corners of your life, then slip through the cracks and float away. It doesn't seem all that strange then, that Change sucker punched me in the gut one day and snarled in no uncertain terms that we were over. So be it.*

*But then, we went to war. Change bought her six-inch pistol. Her baton and her hatchet. Beat me until I was black and blue; came in out of nowhere like a swirling storm of red, spewing over the horizon with ghostly, rumbling speed.*

*We wrap ourselves with armour and call it familiarity. Mine was six inches thick and bolted. Piece by piece Change dragged it away, prising against my fragile flesh, drawing blood.*

*First, it was the nauseating smell of chlorine setting fire to the pool-hall air. A shriek of delighted greeting. A friend. I crouched on the pool grate, leaning forward eagerly. Passing pleasantries with someone I thought I'd known. She shifted, but I pressed on while the water swirled and pulled as if it wanted to get away too.*


*"I'll see you around, I'm sure."*

*There's a silence you could break, if you only had a sledge hammer. "Well. I'm moving to Melbourne, so..."*

*"Oh. Haha. Yeah. Well."*

*Next, it was the email. So plain and unadorned; I hadn't been expecting it so early. It was the announcement of all that I'd waited for and nothing I'd truly prepared for. Until that moment, I'd walked in a dream. Living in a fantasy, so tailored, it could be sold in H&M. When you enter reality from that; doesn't it seem so pale? Doesn't it seem so ordinary? Like contrasting the glossy travel photo with the gaze of mortal eyes. Going to university had never seemed a big deal to me, it was just the next step. But perhaps, I realised, it wasn't so simple.*

*When I'm stressed, I dream. The kiss of change made me restless amid my sheets, sweating against my racing mind. The weeks leading up to that daunting first day were filled with faceless images and fragmented*



narratives that left nothing on my skin but a bitter, unforgettable feeling: Shoulders taugt, muscles pinched and nerves stretched tight on the drying rack. Can't stand up. Can't sit down. Can't be still. Can't stop.

Perfectionism is a curse; intolerance of disorder is a worse one. Assignments flung themselves around my waking mind, dancing a waltz with 'I bet I'll eat lunch alone' and silently courting, 'What if I say something wrong?' My heart wound itself up into a flurry over punctuating references. The clockwork key pushed harder and harder, cracking against the gears as due dates, class times, the sprawling map of campus each pinned themselves to the never-ending list.

The Homes and Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale assigns 'stress points' to life events associated with change. The more 'stress points' one accumulates, the more likely they'll experience illness as a result of their stress. From the more amusing assumption that 'Christmas' contributes twelve stress points, this scale, I've realised, gleans its relevance in the lives of students, in particular.

Whether positive or negative, the bodily tension triggered by change can be more than you'd expect. Take this list, for example, drawn from Homes and Rahe's research (1967):

- 'Change in financial state' = '38 stress points.'
- 'Change to a different line of work' = '36 stress points.'
- 'Beginning or ending school' = '26 stress points.'
- 'Outstanding personal achievement' = '28 stress points.'
- 'Revision of personal habits' = '24 stress points.'

- 'Change in work hours or conditions' = '20 stress points.'
- 'Change in residence' = '20 stress points.'
- 'Change in social activities' = '18 stress points.'
- 'A moderate loan or mortgage' = '17 stress points.'
- 'Change in sleeping habits' = '16 stress points.'

The typical transition period for any student thus equates to a total of 243 stress points, and indicates a moderate or half/half chance of experiencing stress related illness.

The purpose of this article isn't to be bleak, however, I take a chance to confront those 'stress points' and challenge their power. You see, I quietened my disorder with a diary and a good lashing of coloured highlighters. I sat in my friend's university residence and realised that unlike the small, matchbox room our worlds were growing. Not into a messy tangle of fishing wire that you pick until your fingers bleed, but rather like a climbing vine, with more ripe buds blooming every day. I reconciled my comfort with my daring and suddenly, I wanted Change to come back. She could bring her six-inch pistol. She could bring her hatchet and her baton for all I cared.

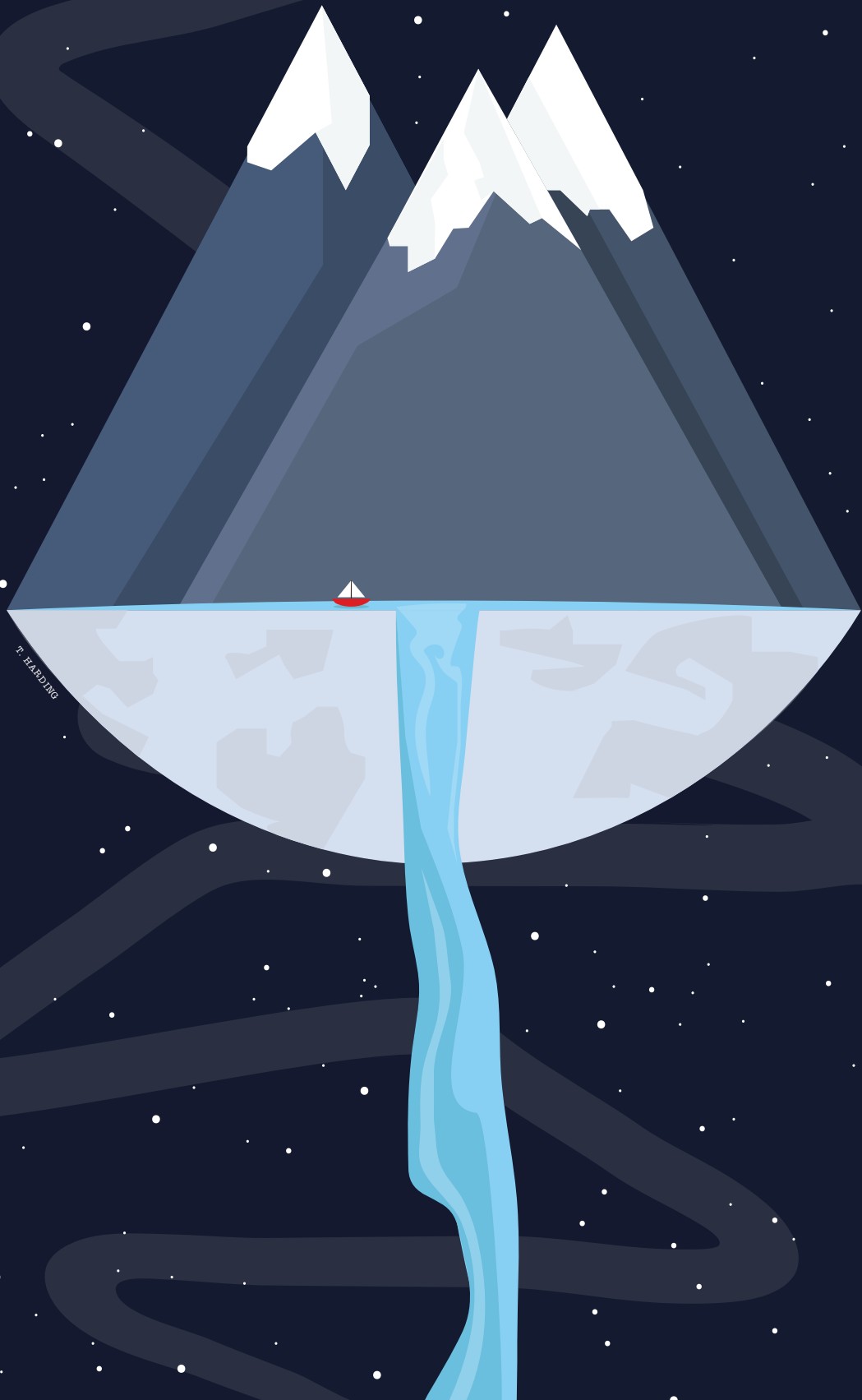
We are all clay figures, sitting in the river of change. If we fight, the current will wash us away but if we press on, the trickle moulds and shapes us into something beautiful. I wanted Change to wash over me. I was ready.

"How did it go?" The satisfying fragments of a first day drifted on the wind behind me.

"Mum, I didn't even die!"

Holmes, & Rahe. (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11(2), 213-218.

• Tom Harding  
Instagram: @strange\_case\_of



T. HARDING



# I AM A LONELY DICTIONARY

I am a lonely dictionary,  
I wasn't like this before.  
Before that mean, old, nasty  
internet  
Came running through my door.

Now I am not chosen,  
Rarely taken off the shelf.  
Because the internet stole my  
lovers,  
So I sit here by myself.

*I am a lonely dictionary,  
My pages do not open.  
For the internet stole the spotlight,  
Now my spirit is surely broken.*

No one cares for me,  
And I guess that is okay.

Because the internet stole all my  
friends, And now I sit here alone,  
dreaming of a better day.

Soon my printed pages will stick,  
Especially in Winter.  
But that doesn't seem to bother  
them,  
Because the internet is quicker.

So, pull me off the shelf  
Every now and then,  
Because I am still as trusty  
As the good old paper and pen.

I am a lonely dictionary  
So enemies beware,  
The internet is ruining the chances  
Of a beautiful love-affair.



*Emma-Lee Winters*



# Anne with an E

## and the Scope of Adaptations

I THINK IT'S safe to assume that we've all heard of the red-head orphan of *Green Gables* in some form. Even if you haven't read the book, there's a high chance that you have seen some incarnation of Anne's antics at some point. It's commonplace when a book has been beloved for over a century. However, beloved books always come with devoted fans who are prepared to tear filmmakers to shreds (figuratively of course), if they feel the adaptation has strayed from the source material. Yet to do so stifles any opportunity for filmmakers to do anything creative. For me, as tempting as it is to want a faithful adaptation, I do like to see what kind of changes are made.

There are two crucial cues that hint at the new tone being pursued in the open credits of *Anne with an E*. Firstly, the audience is treated to a montage of whimsical illustrations that show off the dreaminess of Anne's personality. However, rather than a vibrant colour palette that you would expect to accompany Anne's cheery tale, the illustrations bloom into shades of grey and brown. This hints that we shouldn't expect reliving those warm fuzzy feelings the books induced. Instead, the audience is bombarded with a much darker, grittier interpretation. Many hard hitting themes such as child abuse and suicide are introduced into the plot. Whilst the quiet domestic shenanigans readers cherish, like the raspberry cordial, have made their way into the show, they have been reduced to brief moments of respite between dramatic rescues and traumatic flashbacks that you would expect in an action blockbuster.

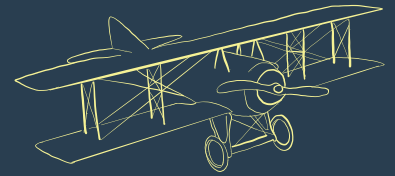
Accompanying these dark opening credits is a little folk tune that offers the audience its second cue, particularly in the line 'you are ahead by a century'. Well, you can't get more obvious than that. Now, I doubt anyone would accuse the Anne

books as being backwards in its treatment of women. But the filmmakers have taken the opportunity to create a vessel for spreading the virtue of feminism. Hence, the audience now sees oddities like Marilla being invited to a feminist book club or Anne being encouraged to learn housekeeping instead of going back to school. Those who have read the books will know that this is quite out of step for the encoring community of Avonlea, who take pride in all their scholars, regardless of their gender. Yet the creators have chosen to place Anne in a more rigid patriarchal society.

Many would argue that such deviations from the sweetness and sentimentality of the original books are abominations. That adding in textbook Hollywood plots or slathering characters with progressive ideals cheapens the story. Because in doing so, readers can no longer melt into the warmth of Anne's world where things are much brighter and simpler. But I prefer to look at how such changes can reveal a lot about what the filmmakers' value. To see how present perceptions alter the lens through which the series is produced. The filmmakers are showing that we no longer live in a world where we can feel safe at home. That horror prowls around every corner. The only way to combat it is through spreading the ideals of equality and to smother any ignorance. Is it better than the beloved classic? I don't know, but it sure is different. I've barely scratched the surface of what can be unpacked in *Anne with an E*. So, if you can feel that twinge of curiosity pulling at the back of your mind, go and watch it for yourself.

By Lisa Tops





The *most*  
*difficult* thing is the  
*decision* to *act*,  
the rest is *merely*  
*tenacity*



Amelia Earhart

# DON'T

# ASSUME

## KATE EDNEY

I HAVE BEEN visiting this law firm for the last five years, it has gotten to the point it takes me ten minutes just to reach my father's office. I can't wander through the sea of desks without being yanked aside for a quick hug or a friendly catch-up conversation.

Today, the routine remained, yet the feeling was different. The sensation that I was being watched was undeniable, nothing like when someone in the supermarket gives you an up and down, but as if someone was totally checking me out... Inching my gaze slightly to my right, I caught a glimpse of a brunette woman I had never seen before in my peripheral vision. I was flooded with the instant urge to twirl my long blonde ponytail between my fingers and bite my bottom lip... Caught off guard by my own flirtatious thoughts, I picked up the pace to Dad's office, barging in, slamming the door and flopping on the couch like sack of spuds.

'Everything okay hon?' Dad queried as he looked up from his desk, a slightly puzzled look on his face.

'Yeah...' I started slowly.

He has never been good at emotions or expressing them, sometimes I think he asks if I'm okay because that what a "Dad" should do.

Detecting my hesitation, he prodded further, 'Boy troubles? Remember I know people! If he hurt you...'

'Dad! Stop!' I interrupted amidst a laugh. 'It's nothing... I promise.'

I hate lying to him, but not even I know what's going on with me. Craving a change in topic, I flipped the questions back on him. That is one thing you can always rely on with my dad, his passion for talking about himself and his work... 'On my way in, I saw someone I hadn't seen before. I didn't realise you were hiring?'

'Yes! Ryley is fantastic Abby, so intelligent! You know, there isn't much of an age difference between you two...' he said suggestively.

'Oh my god! Dad! Please tell me you aren't trying to set me up?' I begged.

His expression shifted to one I recognised all too well, the look he gives me when he feels sorry for me.

'Well you're twenty-three and you haven't had someone in your life in quite a while and, I... I just don't want you to be alone. Plus, I think Ryley is interested in you. Well from the conversations we have been having, I get that impression.'

I take a breath to extinguish the rage fire that was bubbling inside me.

'Firstly, talking to your employees about dating your daughter? Classy. Secondly, I really appreciate that you care so much Dad, but I honestly don't think I need dating advice from my twice divorced father.'

That was a low blow, even for me. Taken aback, he began fiddling with his pen.

'I am actually super busy at the moment Ab,' he said, his voice shaky, 'maybe we can talk about this later?'

Taking the hint, I tossed him an "I'm sorry" glance and headed out the door, feeling so guilty about my dynamite temper getting the better of me.

Waiting for the elevator, I was overwhelmed by that same sensation I had walking into the office earlier; it's her again. My heart started beating as though it were trying to escape my ribcage.

Who is this woman? I thought to myself, whilst making the conscious decision not to look back. I rapped aggressively on the 'down' button...

A sultry, husky voice behind me whispered, 'I don't think that makes it go any faster honey...'

My breath caught in my throat, before I had the chance to even conjure a response, my thoughts were interrupted by the piercing "DING" of the elevator arriving. As I pressed the "ground" button the doors inched closed 'only 24 floors to go'.

Once inside, I positioned myself as close to the doors as possible – ready to escape instantly. She was standing behind me, close enough that I could smell the sweet, no doubt expensive, perfume she was wearing. A hand slowly grazed my lower waist catching me off guard. Closing my eyes, I drew a deep breath in through my nose in a feeble attempt to slow my heart down, worried she might be able to hear it thumping like a gorilla thudding it's chest. Her breath was warm on the back of my neck... Almost seamlessly, she turned me around and backed me into the corner. This gave me a chance to really look at her, and my God, was she beautiful.

Standing around 5'11" she stood slightly taller than me, her face almost angelic. Her eyes, so

brown they appeared black, it was as if she was looking into my soul. Her hand still resting on my waist, she reached her other hand up to rest ever so lightly on my face, slowly dragging her thumb across my bottom lip whilst biting her own.

I jerked back and pushed away from her, 'What are you doing? I'm not... gay!'

Even as I said it, I knew I was lying to her and myself. Amidst the heat of the moment, all I could find myself thinking was:

How the hell am I going to tell Dad?

As if she really could read my mind, she said 'You know he will be okay with it, right? You are his daughter, he loves you, no matter what.'

'You don't know him like I do' I replied.

'Actually I know him quite well, he is a great listener...' as she said this, she took a card from the inside pocket of her blazer, leant forward slowly kissed my cheek and slid the card into the back pocket of my tight jeans, her hand lingering just a second longer than it probably should have. The elevator dinged again and the doors opened on the ground floor.

'I'll see you soon Ab.' she said winking.

Then she was gone.

I got into the car and remembered the card in my pocket. I pulled it out to find the firm's logo was vividly printed on one side. I flipped the card over, only to read:

"Ryley Henderson – Attorney."

'Well, shit...' I whispered to myself.

# THE VIPER'S HUNT

**She lingered in the back of the throne room, shadows embracing her like an old friend, as the nobles and their advisors squabbled around her. Her bright yellow eyes scanned the dim room from beneath her hood as she searched for her prey. Her lips curled into a feral smile revealing sharp pointed teeth when she found him. He was a portly man with too tight clothing, too much jewellery and not enough hair. Twisting the silver band wrapped around her finger, she followed him out of the room and into the dark deserted halls surrounding it. The only sources of light were torches and the occasional flash of lightning from beyond the stone walls. Her blood sang with the excitement of the hunt and the anticipation of its end. She followed him along the winding hall, slowing to a stop just before a small garden when her target met with two of her master's most trusted guards. They were speaking in hushed, angry whispers and gesturing wildly.**

Why were they here? Did her master not trust her to complete her task? Shame and rage bubbled up from the pit of her stomach and she couldn't stop the hiss that escaped her as she watched the two guards drag her would-be victim away from the garden and, more importantly, away from her. They were stealing her kill.

The guards froze when they heard her and whirled in place like spinning tops trying to find her. She held her breath and stayed as still as stone while the guards finished their frenzied search and moved out of sight. Flicking her forked tongue to scent the air, she tracked the trio across the palace and to the stables. The guards weren't stealing her kill it seemed, but helping it escape its fate. She watched in amusement as the guards tried to heave the plump noble onto a horse. They managed to get one of his feet into a stirrup before they had to stop and pant for breath.

She crept along the stable floor and unlatched the doors to the pens as the guards tried to lift her mark again. When she was safely hidden in the furthest corner from them, she flashed her serpentine eyes at the nearest horse just as a flash of lightning washed over the stables. The ensuing chaos was glorious. The noble's horse bucked and threw him to the ground. The guards had enough sense and time to dodge the incoming stampede of panicked animals, but her prey did not. She watched in pure glee as he was trampled, the sounds of choked screams and bones snapping being carried by the wind for all to hear. When the stampede finally ended, the guards were still frozen in their position beside the stable doors. Seizing the opportunity, raising a small, razor-sharp dagger, she attacked.

Time seemed to slow as she, moving with inhuman speed, dragged the narrow blade across one of the guard's upper thighs, severing the artery that lay there. He crumpled to the ground, grasping at the wound with shaking hands, trying in vain to stop the torrent of blood. His companion lunged at her, sword raised, face twisted with rage. She slapped him in the face as he swiped at her and danced away from his attacks. Black tendrils began to flow across his face as they fought. He stumbled, sweat dripping into his eyes, and collapsed next to his now dead comrade. Twisting her ring back to its original position, she stalked over to the guard's prone form.

"Why were you helping this man?" She rasped, voice hoarse from disuse.

"O-orders...from...t-the...Queen." The guard seized, eyes rolling into the back of his head, and foamed at the mouth. Like a puppet with its strings cut, he slumped onto the floor, eyes staring unseeingly up at the ceiling. She stared at the bodies with a deranged smile as the familiar white-hot burn of the hunt settled into a radiating warmth of satisfaction. She raided the bodies of the guards and pocketed all the small weapons or trinkets she found before moving on to the noble, or what was left of him. Her hands squelched as she searched for the letter her master wanted. When she pulled it from his body it was nearly illegible, the paper soaked in blood.

Hearing alarm bells blare and more guards clank towards her position, she stashed the letter in her robes and melted into the darkness again, heading to her master's room. Once she arrived, she slipped passed the patrolling guards and entered, waiting for her master. It was dark in here, just like the rest of the castle was at this time of night. Only the flashes of lightning illuminated the heavy, wooden furniture and intricately woven tapestries hanging from the walls. She paced the opulent room as she fumed. How dare the Queen, beloved wife of her master, conspire against him like that. She should be punished for her disloyalty. Fear fought its way into her mind as she thought of all the ways the Queen would escape punishment. No one would take the word of a Guild Assassin over a Queen's.

The heavy doors creaked open and her master strode in holding a candle in one hand and his crown in the other.

"You have it?" He asked as he sat at the large oak desk pushed to one side of the room.

"Yes." She croaked. She handed the letter to her master, hoping that it could prove what she had to report and waited for him to dismiss her like usual, but he didn't. Instead he read the letter in front of her, his face twisting further and further into a frown the more he read. She could taste the acidic pangs of rage and betrayal rolling off him in waves. Only years of training stopped her from sagging in relief as she realised that the letter would speak for itself. Her master turned to stare at one of the tapestries.

"Thank you for this, Veela. You may go."

"Of course." She bowed her head but hesitated at the door. Her master had sounded cold and distant, like her, and it worried her. Shaking her head, she squashed that feeling down and disappeared into the shadows.



**The next morning, she smirked with pride from her hiding place amongst the gargoyles as the Queen was sentenced to death for treason. No-one crosses her master and lives.**

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