

**On the Verge Writing Contest 2019, Second-Place Non-Fiction Winner
By Kiley Verbowski**

She Remembers Tomorrow

On January 7, 2019, my Baba turned 101.

The last two decades of her life have been an improbable blessing. At 79 years old, her first husband had been dead for years, and she opted to finally have surgery for her painful varicose veins. After many post-surgery complications, she contracted necrotizing fasciitis, commonly known as flesh-eating disease. She collapsed into a pool of her own blood on the hospital bathroom floor after it ate through her left femoral artery. She woke up a few days later with a stump instead of a leg – the only way to curb the spread of disease through the rest of her body.

I met her shortly after, when my parents laid my newborn head on her chest in the recovery ward. We loved each other before either of us learned to walk.

After that comes a string of memories: Manitoban mosquito summers, Manitoban blizzard winters, Ukrainian-style Easters, prairie farmer Thanksgivings. No matter when my family arrived, Baba would be planted in her wheelchair, translucent and veiny hands folded in her lap or stuffing a Kleenex up her sleeve, waiting for us behind the steeple-shaped front window of her retirement home.

On a more recent visit, Baba apologized for her memory loss. On the phone, it's enough for her to know that the voice on the other end is someone that loves her. In person, she becomes frustrated.

I was sitting across from her, rubbing her century-old hands with my thumbs when she tried to explain.

"My memory," she said, sucking in her bottom lip like my grandpa, my dad, and I all do when we're thinking hard, "sometimes it goes backwards, sometimes forwards."

I was baffled. How could memory possibly reach forwards? After all this time, was Baba finally revealing her power of clairvoyance? I didn't think so. I assume that she can only see into the future the way the rest of us can – with a bit of intuition and our best guess. But what education would her best guess be based on?

Like many prairie kids in the 1920's, Baba's immigrant father pulled her out of school halfway through elementary to help on the farm. I know she's taken the train across most of Canada, and was an influential figure among Rossburn, Manitoba's 550 residents, but I wouldn't call her a cosmopolite.

As far as I know, my great-grandmother has never experienced the internet for herself. She always had the company of other old ladies in her retirement home, but when was the last time she held a newspaper, or discussed current events? It's frivolous to say that the world has

gone through enormous changes in her lifetime, never mind the last two decades that she has potentially missed altogether. So are Baba's future-facing memories based on an informed-as-possible-small-prairie-town-in-the-1980's worldview? 1970's? When did Baba stop learning something new every day? I suppose I mean, when did Baba exit the world that she still occupies?

I wonder what the last election was that Baba voted in. When was the last time she made a decision that influenced someone else's future? No one's looking for her opinion these days, not even about when to move from her retirement home to a care home. Her daughter made that final decision for her three years ago, against Baba's wishes.

But the truth is, until Baba's ability to make choices ceases completely, she is still determining other people's futures. During a visit a few summers ago, she was feeling well enough to shop in the next town over. She didn't like anything she saw in the lady's fashion boutique, but felt well enough to keep driving to the Wal-Mart in Brandon. There, she bought three new tops. Maybe that choice contributed to the boutique's eventual closure. Maybe her Wal-Mart purchases aided in furthering social, economic, and ecological inequalities in a far away country. I think that as long as we're alive, we make decisions that determine the future every day. Due to instant media coverage, the individual has the opportunity and obligation to make more informed decisions than ever. In that way, I believe that I have the ability to make even more apt future predictions than my Baba ever could in her life. But what weighs more: a millennial's short experience, or 101 years of wisdom?

Maybe instead, what Baba meant about forward-moving memories is something much sadder.

Many of her roommates in the care home suffer from dementia, unlike Baba, and some can't move or eat on their own. Baba knows that tomorrow will probably be exactly like today. Besides a visit from a family member, or a surprise phone call, her routine is set. Her future, except the potentially painful or frightening last few moments that I hope she will be spared from, will probably mirror her present, and recent past, almost exactly.

I think that for everyone besides Baba, and those in her situation, this is a romanticized view of the future that is entirely radical. Thinking that tomorrow will look like the past is an impossible ideology that, for example, has fuelled a characteristically Albertan belief in perpetual prosperity. Although the boom and bust cycle is as inevitable in my home province as anywhere else in our engrained global capitalist system, there is a denial that our economic values need reconsideration. By promoting the propulsion of a single resource economy in Canada with pipeline proposals, we take no lesson from the recent past. By ignoring Indigenous land sovereignty we take no lesson from colonialist Canada's past. By ignoring the glaring neon signs of climate change, we are refusing to take lesson from the present.

The only way that we can make informed decisions about our future is to begin with the assumption that tomorrow cannot, and will not, look like today. Whether we try to mirror today's conditions or not, almost all of us live in less isolated situations than my Baba. Our decisions have already, and will continue to ripple forwards.

Maybe still, there is a third possible explanation.

Before we took her out shopping that day, Baba wheeled over to her bathroom sink, flicked on the brakes to her wheelchair, and hoisted herself up on the counter. She reached into the mirror's cupboard and pulled out a small bottle of CoverGirl concealer. After all this time, Baba still has an acute sense of self. When I watch her comb through her last few curls, or carefully choose what top to wear with her long skirt, I get a glimpse of the Dora Verbowski I never knew.

Other family members talk about her wit and vitality. My dad and her played golf in her 70's, after her second husband passed away. I like to imagine that occasionally Baba's inner 70-year-old stretches her arms and gets the urge to hit the green. I also like to imagine that every once in a while Baba gets to sit outside on a beautiful spring day with her 30-year-old nose and smell the flowers that bloomed the year her third child was born.

For almost all of summer 2018, my seven-year-old self inhabited my body. It was a strange summer. It all started when I fell off my bike, hard. I launched forwards into the frame, immediately bruising my pelvic bone. It was an intimate and rare and violating pain, but I still had to bike myself home, sobbing uphill.

Admittedly, working full time with small children may have influenced my emotional age in those months. Tears burst out of me with hiccups that day, and again a few weeks later when my parents told me they were separating. I gave myself a stomachache with peaches, and watched cartoons at every meal.

I carried on my duties of a 21-year-old citizen of the world, but all while acknowledging the constant presence of my seven-year-old self. I put her to bed early, and indulged her whims, mostly to do with swimming with my clothes on.

I am grateful that I didn't experience those events when I was actually seven. Instead, I could inhabit the tender space of my seven-year-old when I needed to react, and the adult rationality of my 21-year-old self when it was time to heal. All along, I could assure my seven-year-old self that things would be okay, because they already are, see? She could have never imagined my twenties, but now I have the experience and intuition to imagine my 28-year-old self holding both of us, saying, "I'm so proud of you."

I can't quite stretch my imagination all the way into my 101st year. All I know for certain is that the world will be a significantly different place, and Baba will have long since departed

from it. By then, I'm sure no one will be relying on my opinions anymore, so all I can hope is that I make some damn good decisions before then.