Preface

Ageing in a Faraway Land

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Ageing is something that concerns me daily. I ponder the brown spots on my hands and the tinsel growing in my hair. I am attuned to the increasing aches and pains as I approach sixty. On a recent trip to Turin, the jet lag lasted much longer than usual upon my return home to Montreal. I wonder how much of this is due to the fact that I am getting older.

In April, I had the pleasure of leading a writing workshop with students at the University of Turin. When I asked them to share the name of a person that they look up to, I was particularly struck by a quiet blond girl in the last row. "My 94-year-old grandfather," she said proudly. "He is the man I admire and respect the most." She went on to list the characteristics that make her grandfather an impressive role model.

Like that student, I am very aware of the contribution that the elderly have made to my generation and to my children's. I was born in Italy and raised in Canada, and I am particularly sensitive to the condition of retired immigrants. They left their homeland to pursue opportunities in a foreign country, whose hosts were not always welcoming. Those who left post-World War II Italy were mostly uneducated labourers. They emigrated from small rural towns where everyone knew each other and settled in big urban centres, where they were practically invisible. They made a comfortable living as simple construction workers or piece workers in clothing factories. They saved their pennies to buy that first house and to send their children to university. Now in their seventies, eighties or nineties, they wait for their (grand)children to visit. Old age is a time of rest

for them, but it is also a very lonely period. When the grandchildren were small, the grandparents played a vital role: they accompanied their grandchildren to and from school, helped them to do homework, and often made them dinner before the parents arrived to take them home. Many of the elderly who gave their time to the young ones are not getting the same in return.

Years ago I wrote the poem "Chi non viene" (2006), self-translated into French as "Ceux qui ne viennent pas," to honour my 90-year-old grandmother who spent her day waiting for visitors. And in my most recent collection, *The Pink House and Other Stories* (2018), the first and last of the fifteen stories act as bookends, an acknowledgement to the first generation immigrants who are now seniors in their adopted land. The first story, "Watching Them Laugh," is about the special relationship between a grandmother and her granddaughter and the laughter they share when they are together. In the last story, "The Motorcycle," an eighty-year-old man renews his motorcycle license. The man is hard of hearing, he walks very slowly, and he falls asleep in the waiting area. He may never ride the motorcycle again, but he is adamant about renewing his license just in case his granddaughter (who is in university) needs his help to learn to ride a motorcycle. He cannot let go of his need to be useful.

Elizabeth Cinello's short story "Food Companion Wanted" (2011) is an ode to the elderly: those who mistakenly think that they have no purpose in society. Two lonely seniors, Alberto and Nina, come together because of their love of food – the genuine staples of their Italian heritage. During a conversation on a park bench, their sense of uselessness is replaced by a mutual culinary communion. Away from Toronto's urban traffic, Nina and Alberto meet in a green space which recalls their country of origin. The meeting in the park is about negotiating an arrangement that would improve their present reality on both counts: Alberto "wants to eat again" for he has not had a good meal since his wife's passing. Nina wants to escape her daughter's ultra-urban household, where no one speaks to her, where she feels isolated and useless.

Twenty-five years ago, as a soon-to-be mother, I moved to a new home in St. Leonard (on the island of Montreal) – a well-to-do neighbourhood with many retired first-generation Italian immigrants. Back then, the bocce courts were always full. Summer evenings I pushed the stroller around the park and stopped to listen to the bocce players, men and women, who spoke

Italian or dialect as they excitedly discussed their performance or argued about the distance between the bocce. The last time I walked by the bocce court a few nights ago, the lights were on, but there was no one there. And yet, the weather was mild. There should have been players on the court. The truth is that many of them have passed away, and the others may be too old to play. Their decreased mobility is keeping them at home, thus reducing the likelihood of human interaction, and increasing their isolation and loneliness.

When I moved into my corner house in St. Leonard, there were two elderly couples living on either side. Each couple had three adult children, but I noted that they did not visit very often. My neighbours were proud to introduce their children whenever they did visit. They explained that their children had very busy lives, demanding jobs or they lived too far away.

Summers, these elderly neighbours watched my children play in our backyard. They came out to chat about how tall the children had grown or how well behaved they were. When my daughter played the flute on the balcony, the neighbours took their chairs to their own balconies to listen. Her practice sessions became mini-concerts. Then, about ten years ago, one couple sold their house and moved to a retirement home. And, from my kitchen window, I could see that the other neighbour kept the light on, day and night. She had been a widow for two years. She felt more comfortable with the lights on. She confessed that she had no reason for living after her husband died. She, too, sold the house and went to a seniors' residence.

Now, there is a young family living next door. I have watched the young couple have one, two and three children. Summers they play on the swings and the seesaw; they run around the yard under the watchful eye of a parent. Winters they build snowmen and high mountains of snow, then come sliding down.

When I am alone, I let go of the tears as I watch the little children play from my kitchen window. I miss those days with my own children. Watching the neighbours' children playing takes me back to my thirties. And yes, it is a reminder that I am ageing. That is what the tears are for: the passing of time, the inability to stop the speedy process, the inevitability of the life cycle. I am now the one watching the neighbours' children playing, and soon I will yearn for my own adult kids to come visit.

There is a special relationship between the young and the elderly. I see it in my own family: there is nothing that the grandchildren can do wrong in

the eyes of their grandparents … and vice versa. And yet they are at polar opposites. My grown children are open-minded and inclusive. Their immigrant grandparents are products of their generation with the customs, traditions and codes of behaviour that they took to Canada when they left Italy in the 1950s and 1960s. But hugs are universal.

They say that the last phase of life is similar to the first: as one reaches the end of life, there is a regression towards childhood. Some communities have seen the benefits of bringing seniors and children together. They have put preschools in nursing homes so that the elderly benefit from the presence of youth and the children learn to interact with the aged and the disabled. In an article titled "The Preschool Inside a Nursing Home," Tiffany R. Jansen writes that "Numerous studies have linked social interaction with decreased loneliness, delayed mental decline, lower blood pressure, and reduced risk of disease and death in elders. Socializing across generations has also been shown to increase the amount of smiling and conversation among older adults…".[1]

Jansen goes on to say that "kids who have early contact with older people are less likely to view them as incompetent – and simply exposing children to positive depictions of elders makes them less likely to exhibit ageism. These intergenerational interactions also enhance children's social and personal development." In Deventer, The Netherlands, university students are offered free lodging in a retirement home in exchange for keeping the elderly company for 30 hours per month. It is part of a project "aimed at warding off the negative effects of ageing."[2] And at the Université de Moncton, New Brunswick, a retirement complex with 65 residents was opened on the university campus.[3]

Through the Canadian Mental Health Association of Toronto, I have visited groups of seniors to speak about healing through writing and to engage them in literary activities. They are lonely. They need to talk. They

1 Cp. (https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/the-preschool-inside-a-nursing-home/424827/). Last Accessed May 28, 2018.

2 Cp. *PBS News Hour*, April 5, 2015, (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/dutch-retirement-home-offers-rent-free-housing-students-one-condition). Last accessed May 28, 2018. Web.

3 Cp. *Maclean's*, Feb. 10, 2018, (https://www.macleans.ca/education/seniors-universite-moncton/). Last accessed May 28, 2018. Web.

need to share their stories. Although I listen patiently for as long as I can, it is not enough. And when I am obliged to excuse myself in order to move on with the rest of my day, I always feel guilty about leaving them.

I would like to think that most of our senior citizens are leading a serene existence and that they smile as they reflect on their experiences, accomplishments and relationships. I would like to think that they have a strong sense of pride in the last phase of life, even though the decades have whizzed by, loved ones have passed away, and they've had to slow down due to physical deterioration. When I think of the elderly, I think of their vulnerability. But I also think of their wisdom and experience, and how much we could learn from them if we took the time to do so.

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