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1st Place, Secondary Division

2020 CFUW Writing Contest

### **A Walk Down Memory Lane**

*When did it all go wrong?*

As he walked down the sidewalk of the familiar neighbourhood, his mind kept returning to that one question. At the time he left, years ago, he was confident and excited to face the world head-on.

A far cry from the unemployed, destitute man he was now.

On his right, a tiny, tattered shop came into view. The once vibrant letters that spelt out 'CONVENIENCE STORE' were now faded, and the windows that once boasted colourful displays of comic books were now boarded up. Advertisements still plastered the door, abandoned along with the rest of the building. He dully scanned the posters before a six-year-old beer advertisement caught his eye.

Perhaps it was around Christmastime last year when things started to go downhill. He could remember now, a late-night holiday party at a bar with several friends from work. He could never hold his drink, but the sheer excitement of such an event and his desire to impress the girls had caused him to drink much more than he could handle. He couldn't remember exactly what he did, but the next morning he found himself in a hospital bed with a nasty headache, a black eye, and a notice of employment termination. Since then, there was barely anyone that was willing to give him a second chance.

He tore his eyes away from the posters and continued walking. On his left, an empty park came into view. The perennials had long deserted the field, and despite the cool summer evening, there was not a single person in sight. His gaze rested on the oak tree at the far end of the park. Although he couldn't see it from the sidewalk, he knew that the engravings of both of their initials would still be there.

Perhaps it was on Valentine's Day three years ago when things started to go wrong. He could still remember his excitement as he scurried home with a bouquet of the most beautiful roses he could find, and the jarring shock when he opened the door to find her with another man. Without a word, the roses fell to the floor and he fled the scene, taking refuge at a friend's house for the week. When he came back to pick up his belongings, his heart lurched as he realized how easily he had been replaced.

But maybe things were wrong even before that. Maybe all of his grievances were the result of that cool, summer evening—just like tonight—when he got on one knee underneath the tree and asked her to be his wife.

He resisted the urge to find the tree and continued walking. His chest tightened as he turned onto the street he grew up on. Everything was so, so familiar, and so, so painful. With every step he took, he felt himself shudder at the memory of that haunting day, fourteen years ago.

Perhaps it was then, on this very street, when everything went wrong. He could still remember the wailing sirens and flashing lights invading the chilly air, filling the otherwise serene winter morning with panic. His parents had told him the night before that he was to walk his younger sister to her friend's house the next morning, but a sleepless night of gaming had

tired him out and he murmured for her to walk by herself. And she did—for the last time. He could still remember his mother's sobs when they discovered she would never walk again; he could still remember his own fury when he discovered that his parents were going to use his college funds to pay for her medical bills.

He winced at the memory. That was the last time he had talked to his parents. They did end up paying for the majority of his education, but he never gave them more than a glare ever since.

He walked up the steps to his parents' house, preparing to knock. He paused; things had gone so badly for him, and there were hundreds, if not thousands, of people and events he could blame. But blame wasn't going to fix his grumbling stomach, nor would it dissolve the guilt keeping him up at night. He had to fix things himself, and this was the only way—to go back home.

Even before his fist made contact, the door flew open. A grey-haired woman stood there, blinking in open-mouthed shock.

“Mom,” he said, choking back a sob. “I’m sorry.”