

# HARTS

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Notes Towards Recovery

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## Review of 'Notes Towards a Recovery'

*"The story is interesting in terms of its narrative construct; a disrupted, disjointed collection of seemingly unconnected items, memories, projections and confession that culminate in a structured reveal of grief and loss. The notion of what might have been, what should have been, and what is, are neatly woven, with an assurance in the characterisation, and a depth of detail that signifies an assured authorial voice."*

*~Sonia Hendy-Isaac*

## Notes Towards Recovery

*Louise Ells*

I: Grace Anne

It was easy for me to choose you from the list of people who replied to my advertisement for this free sofa. Even before I read your email - so polite - I had decided. You have the same name as my daughter.

I suppose I'd assumed our Grace might take it off to university one day and we'd replace it with something more modern, but it's lasted well and I'm sure you'll enjoy many years with it.

It was the first piece of furniture my husband and I bought together when we moved into this house; the rest was an odd collection of handouts from our families and leftovers from our own student days. It was the most garish plaid (as you'll discover) but cut price, and so comfy: we took it home that same day. It's still as comfortable as ever and it's always been my favourite place to read.

We bought the silk in a little shop behind the Ottawa market where the salesman made us strong coffee and served us rose-flavoured sweets and it felt as if we'd left the country entirely. He charmed me into buying the silk even though I knew it wouldn't be heavy enough to withstand daily use. It didn't help that Milo designated this as his favourite napping spot, scratching himself a patch in the middle of the sofa each afternoon, or that we put it right under the big window where the sun faded the deep cayenne to a dusty coral.

Recovering the sofa was on my list of things to get round to one day but I never fell in love with a more practical fabric like canvas or twill. Perhaps you'll have better luck. If so, remember to pre-wash and iron the material, then measure the sofa. Measure it again, and then one more time and don't forget to allow for shrinkage and seams. Better to have too much and make it slightly loose, you can always tuck bits away. That's what I did, but then again I am an expert at covering up mistakes and hiding the worst of a mess.

## II: Community Church Quilting Bee

When I placed an ad in our local paper I saw your appeal for supplies to make quilts for people affected by the recent ice storm and wonder if this might meet your requirements.

It is a project I started the winter I was pregnant. My great grandmother made the original quilt and though it was badly damaged it had sentimental value and I thought I could recover it. I soon discovered it was going to be as much (more) work than starting a new one. All the sewing had to be done by hand rather than machine and I wasn't good at the chain stitch or binding. I hadn't realised how many loose seams and missing pieces there were and struggled to match the original fabric.

I had forgotten all about it until last week when I emptied the back cupboard at the top of my basement stairs. The real estate agent has told me that repainting the house will make the difference between sale and no sale. She was kind enough to suggest some colours - misty cloud, frosted breeze, iced eggshell. When I got to the hardware store I confused all the weathers and in any event they looked the same, so I settled on one called off white. But I digress, you don't care about all this. I emptied out the cupboard and when I reached for a bag above my head it burst open and I was showered by scraps.

I briefly considered starting afresh, thinking it could be good busy work to fill the evenings and make me feel productive. But when I looked through the pastel blues and yellows and pinks, all I felt was abandoned, unfinished. And then I read about the work you do, your recovery quilts for the homeless; I know you will be able to complete what I did not.

## III: Grant

I have given away the furniture and taken everything I want from the house. It didn't amount to much but know that I am not leaving you all the rest to be spiteful. You'll be able to sort through it quickly, dispassionately. You always were better than me at letting go.

I found a shoebox of stuff you might enjoy looking through; mementoes we collected that summer we drove down to Niagara Falls. Remember? We were so broke we stayed in that tacky hotel on the American side, with its magic tickle fingers bed and the leaky whirlpool bath shaped like a champagne saucer.

Our one extravagance was the day in Hamilton, visiting the Warplane Heritage Museum where you spent hours talking to that elderly vet who'd flown a Hawker Hurricane during the Battle of Britain. He'd crashed, he said, been shot down in the English Channel and managed to swim ashore. You weren't entirely sure you believed him, but I did.

He showed us a pocket manual put out by the Air Ministry and the Canadian Legion War Services that detailed emergency landing procedures and airplane recovery. It was only thin; I read it cover to cover while you listened to him reminisce. Then we toured the hangars with the Spitfire and the Firefly and the de Havilland and the aluminum Grumman plane with its wings that looked exactly like a canoe, and I tried to learn all their names because I wanted so much to share this interest of yours.

I quizzed you about that booklet, asked you if there was a companion to it with guidelines for saving the pilots. No, you said. You said it wasn't that a pilot's life was worth less than a Hurricane but there was sometimes a chance the plane would be found, could be repaired, or parts salvaged and re-used. There was never a chance for the pilot.

When the museum closed we pooled our change and treated ourselves to dinner at a sports bar. I don't remember but I assume we ordered a platter of buffalo wings with celery and blue cheese dip and a pitcher to share. We must have shared a second pitcher too; when

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you asked me what I dreamed of I told you: a child. But even I could never have imagined Grace's squinty left eye, her cowlick, her tiny fingers that grew into sticky hands always reaching for ours.

IV: to the next occupant, bed 2, ward B

This is for you, this Easter lily, for your empty bedside table. You've been allocated this bed, beside the window, at the end of the row, just as I was. You may not realise for a few days how lucky you are - but you can turn your face away from the other patients and that long, beige hallway with its locked door.

Outside there is a maple tree, the river. Spring is coming, soon you'll see the tiny red buds and then the bright green leaves. You'll hear a ruffle when the ice melts, smell the tannin in the water, the sap in the tree as it rises and falls. That's all you get - a view of a single maple and the sound of the spring run off. But you have the best view on this ward. Hold on to this thought.

I hope you won't be woken by howls of anguish, as I was. It took me hours to understand I was making that terrifying noise. Only twice before have I cried like that. The first time was the day my toddler and I found our missing cat in the middle of the street, not twelve yards from our front door. The muted mewling coming from a mess of rotting leaves confused me until I got close enough to see what the dark pile really was.

It was my wailing that frightened my husband outside, where he found me covering my daughter's eyes with one hand, and with the other trying to gather bones, fur, blood too stuck to the road to be moved. When he rang the vet she said it would take her an hour to reach us. I couldn't bear to watch, or listen to the pitiful whimpering Milo made as he died, breath by breath, but it was Grant who was brave enough to back our car down the driveway.

When he'd done what I couldn't, he hosed down the street, dug a grave in the back garden and we planted it with crocus bulbs. The late October sun softened the sharp edges of his face at first, but as the afternoon shadows lengthened and he drank his way into a forty-pounder of rye, that same sun aged him. I can still feel that light, weak and thin.

You will get well.

You'll never again buy pine-scented disinfectant and you may have nightmares about being locked on this ward, although recollections of your first days here will be vague. You'll have to experiment with various cocktails of drugs until one of them works, as much as it ever will, and you'll get tired of telling and retelling your story in talk therapy sessions until it feels like something that might once have happened to someone else. Your heart may never fully heal but, like a broken bone, it can mend, and that has to be good enough.

V: Dr. Joseph

You were honest from our first meeting, and I thank you for that. You said a marriage can survive the death of a child, but many do not. Some couples, you said, recover enough to cope with their loss and move on together. For months our friends assumed we had made it through the worst patch, were past the point of separation.

I did not forgive him. I do not forgive him. If he hadn't been tired, if he hadn't taken the shortcut past the river and skidded at the curve. If it hadn't been dark, been snowing so heavily-- If, if, if.

You tell me I am holding on to the anger because I can not bear to face the sorrow. You suggest that until I allow myself to feel sad, I'll never truly recover. You've encouraged

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me to start by writing an account of that evening, the facts that I remember and because you are my last hope, I will try.

## VI: Note to Self

You never know what you'll learn over the course of your life. Names of antique aircraft and Disney princesses, how to paint a wall and repair a quilt. I stood behind the build up of windswept slabs at the river's edge and through the squalls I watched the recovery operation. I learned that water absorbs the impact of the blast when dynamite is used to break a hole in the ice so the windows of a car, only feet below the surface, will not be blown out. Before the explosives there was a chainsaw, fishing augers, ice picks.

The divers wore dry suits and full face masks and were tethered to the shore by a harness that looked just like the one in Grace's booster seat. They used underwater flashlights, and I mapped their progress by the eerie blue glow.

The hydro poles were moved so the heavy duty crane could reach the water. I do not understand how ice thick enough to support that machinery couldn't support a car. When they finally got all the equipment organised it was so quick - only minutes until the car was being lifted out of the river and swung over onto the shore.

A local reporter shouted against the wind, asking a policeman was alcohol or speeding suspected, and was told no one was willing to speculate on the exact cause of the accident until the car had been analysed. Black ice, the blizzard, bad luck were all mentioned. That and - of course - the good news, the excellent news, that the driver had survived, swimming up to the surface as the car sank, inching himself over the ice to shore on his stomach, raising the alarm. He was suffering from severe hypothermia, but he was alive.

Do the details matter? It was minus thirty-seven plus windchill. The water temperature was thirty two point one eight. The marine diving unit reported visibility of five point six inches and an unexpectedly swift current. All these factors hampered the rescue efforts. I stood and watched for six hours before I understood that *rescue* referred only to the car, not to my baby, my Grace, belted into her seat in the back of the car with the child-proof doors.

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## Biography

**Louise Ells** grew up on the shores of the Ottawa River in northeastern Ontario and is now pursuing a Creative Writing PhD at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, where she also teaches. Her thesis comprises *Lacunae*, a collection of thematically linked short stories, and research examining Alice Munro's narrative strategies in *Dear Life*.