

Seeing Beyond the Surface

Nothing—not even an often debilitating neurological condition with no known cure—is going to keep this nature-lover from enjoying life to the fullest **by Diya Thapar, Barrie, Ont.**

I was born twice: Once in India and then in Canada in 1998 when I arrived at Toronto's Pearson Airport with my brother, Manik. What struck me was the friendly staff at the airport, the limo that took me home, and Canada's Great Lakes, national parks and open spaces.

Breathing free from pollution, Toronto spelled new opportunities for me. I knew I would have to go through multiple medical appointments due to my fibrous dysplasia—the congenital condition I lived with, in which scarlike tissue overtakes and weakens healthy bones in the body. This was the reason Ma brought me to Canada, seeking more opportunity for treatments and therapies. The doctors here were so understanding, and I never once felt put down about my drooping eyelid—an unfortunate result of a surgery back home to remove a bony mass

from my optic nerve, and a source of dashed hopes about ever again seeing with both my eyes, even after trying the eye exercises the doctors had advised.

Canada meant opportunities: for growth, work, travel and a plethora of others I had not envisaged. I began to feel safe, live independently and create my world. My first instinct was to earn some money, even if it meant walking a dog—and this was the first job I got. Later, I found an evening job as an insurance agent and got a kick out of making contacts and money while still in school.

As I went along, I adapted: I got a boyfriend, wore modern spaghetti-strap dresses and replaced my “Good morning!” and “Hope you are fine!” greetings with “Hi!” and “How cool!” I was also affecting those around me with the cultural ways I had learned at the New Delhi convent I had

attended: offering to share my tiffin snack before I settled down to eat, stopping to let others pass and holding doors for students and teachers alike.

A New Zest for Life

Life changed. It became fun! Ma encouraged me to take part in winter sports—this made winter bearable. She also took me on trips to Eastern Canada, where I heard bagpipers, and to Quebec City, where we listened to music on the streets all night long. We also took a trip to Lake Huron on a boat that cruised from midland Ontario. And we often visited Niagara on the Lake to explore vineyards and eat at The Epicurean, a favourite restaurant.

What was yet more fun was helping Toronto politician Olivia Chow as part of the Youth Congress. There I met many people and, to my amazement, got to vol-



unteer with the Mayor of Toronto as an ambassador at WinterFest. This landed me a reference letter straight from the mayor's desk.

I was not aware of what was going on in my brain, how the mushy bones in my body were affecting my nerves as my condition advanced. It was a gradual progress—or should I call it *digress*. Instead, life revolved around school, work, home and nature. I enjoyed taking walks in the many parks of Toronto.

My grades were good, and I had a crush on my Earth Sciences professor. Curious to work in arts and culture, I volunteered with the Royal Ontario Museum. Ma suggested this would also be a good way to make me more confident, as I always wondered if people were looking at my shut eye, so I used heavy makeup on the other eye to distract their attention. One day at the ROM, when explaining to a group of visitors how diamonds are made—which I had learned from my prof—a woman came to me and lit my heart up when she said, “Though I wear diamonds, I never knew this till you told me.” I had made a difference!

Still, I would often reflect on



ON THE MARSH

*I stand bare
do I care?*

*bewildered at another's pity
for suffering for me is an offering*

*sameness is not my game
as love is true acceptance*

*I feel the hours fleet
and retreat deep into a silence
whose boundaries are unknown*

*when winds lash
no leaves stir
on my bare body*

*do I even take cognizance
of the ptosis that blinds cognition?*

*do I dare
to ask if life is fair?*

*questions such as these
open a Pandora's box—
a snare of destiny's lots*

*I wait
to watch the seasons go by
standing on soft ground
descending into time past, present and future
it breaks, as it makes me: “me”*

Diya Thapar

my life and family in India, as well as the food—and then head to Gerrard Street for a dosa. Strange how our preferences remain the same, even though our place and circumstances change.

Today, my job opportunities are still somewhat limited, and some still look at me askance; it is hard for people to accept difference; but I decided to love my shut eye as much as I did the open one. That awakening was my way of learning

resilience and acceptance, and making the most of my situation.

I also realized that how I feel and relate to people and nature is of greater importance. Even after moving to Barrie, nature has continued to be a source of comfort; the wilderness restores my spirit. In Canada's lakes, swimming is not just being in water, but being a part of the fluidity of consciousness. What a blessing to feel free, exploring waters, sitting on rocks and watching the docks.

Life is not all fun, but we can make it so by lightheartedness. I learned this in Canada—and its great outdoors. ■

From far left: Diya enjoying the docks in Georgian Bay, Ont.; whale-watching with Ma in Quebec; an outdoor study break in Toronto.