

# Turning Eighteen ...

By Peter Meszaros

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*Stratford Central Secondary School*

A little over a year ago, my grandfather asked if I'd consider writing an article about my last year of high school. Thinking it would be fun to look back on 2020 — the year I turned eighteen — I readily agreed, not knowing what the future would bring.

I can safely say this past year has been a frustrating one. I'm not complaining — we've all had enough of that. But I will relate one or two anecdotes that stand out in my mind.

Early in January of 2020, I was out for dinner with my close friend Kieran. The '*Wuhan flu*' was in the news, and we wondered what would happen. I

remember saying I didn't think it'd be a big deal, as it seemed every few years there was some new 'flu-like' respiratory illness popping up somewhere in the world. It caused mayhem for a time — and then disappeared without a trace. Ours was a brief discussion, and we moved onto other more interesting topics. I wish I had been right in my initial prediction.

A month and a half later, while sitting in the school library, Kieran and I returned to the topic of the virus, this time with a different perspective.

There were rumours our school would be closed for four weeks (including March break) and we'd be studying online after the holiday. This made me *nervous*. Not for my safety, but for the uncertainties added to my life. I was a young lad planning on going to university, so I wanted to do well in my final year of school and enjoy myself.

As time went on, and four weeks turned into a month, then two months — and more, we began to understand our new reality. And we tried our best to cope.

Online learning was our only instruction and it persisted through to the end of June. There were no exams (a blessing from above), but the 'Senior Prom' was cancelled. While many of us didn't care for dancing, the 'Prom' was special. It was a chance for us to celebrate the completion of high school, have a fun night with our friends, and flex our fashion muscles —

so to speak.

Necessity is often the mother of invention. To provide our own celebration, we planned a '*Friend-Prom*' for the summer. All ten of us stayed home, avoiding all contact with others to allow the masks to come off, while checklist upon checklist of food, drinks and décor filled my computer screen.

We set up tents in a backyard so we could all sleep over. Then we partied and chatted the night away — eating, drinking and staying awake far longer than we thought possible.

I'll look back on this evening fondly. I enjoyed it far more than any traditional '*Senior Prom*'. We thought of the idea, planned it, executed it and enjoyed it. It was personal for us, and a hell of a lot of fun.



I have one more story that I'd like to share. Throughout the summer, my girlfriend Celeste was working two jobs due to irregular circumstances.

During the week she worked at the art gallery, designing an online arts camp. And on weekends she worked at a large retail store. Because of these jobs, it was difficult to get away on day trips or larger excursions — those that you'd expect of teenagers in normal times. So when both of us cleared our calendars for the first week of September — just before starting university — we decided to take a day trip to a beach.

When the day came, we had all sorts of things packed: Firewood, newspaper, matches — hotdogs for dinner, a pop-up tent for shelter from the sun, croissants from a local coffee shop (one which my granddad and I frequent whenever he's in town), and so much more.

The directions to the beach weren't complicated. All we had to do was drive in a straight line, west out of Stratford for 45 minutes and we'd be there. But things didn't turn out as planned.

This beach we visited required a small hike down a steep hill, made easier by several long paths parallel to the slope. After the trek down, we paused, and wondered: *Where is the beach?*

The water levels in Lake Huron were *very* high last year, and the water was a nasty opaque brown. Definitely not ideal. But with our spirits still high, I pulled out my phone to get directions to the next beach. Which also turned out to be a bust.

Beach after beach turned out to be a dud. We drove around for about 4 hours, increasingly hungry *and* irritated. In a last-ditch effort, Celeste remembered a beach she had visited with her family earlier in the summer. Even though it was a good distance away, we tried our luck. After yet another 30 minutes of driving, we arrived.

We frantically looked around for other cars, and thankfully only a few were present. We parked the car

and left to scout the area. It was *perfect* (by our greatly diminished standards).

There was an actual beach, and while the water was still a murky tan colour and awfully rough, we didn't care. With our pop-up tent, beach blanket and small campfire, we were content to sit down and enjoy the sun. The fresh air. It felt good to have finally made it.

I have fond memories of that day. It serves as a hopeful analogy to the lockdown that we've endured for so long. We might not know where we're going or when we'll get there — but one day we'll be able to have a coffee at Revels, with friends and family — without worrying about the death toll.

It may not have been the best year to graduate from high school, enter university, or to generate savings for the future. But my generation have learned to appreciate what we previously took for granted.

When we look back on this year — it will largely seem like a dream. I suspect we'll all feel a sense of appreciation for the mundane, as Canada slowly reopens and recovers.

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