

# Micro-Memoirs

Written by Marty Chan, Souvankham Thammavongsa,  
Jeff Miller, and Kashfia Rahman



## Tip

**first-person narrative:** a story written from the perspective of a character in the story as he or she experiences it

## Before

A micro-memoir is a snippet of memory from an author's life. Examine the illustration and title for each selection and predict what memory the author will focus on.

## During

As you read, consider whether your predictions about the focus of the memoir were correct or incorrect and why.

## Hair Out of Place

### By Marty Chan

Professional liar and Facebook friend slut Marty Chan has been writing to piss off his parents, who wanted him to be an engineer. He's the creator of the international hit fringe play *The Bone House*, and he won a Sterling Award for his play *Mom, Dad, I'm Living with a White Girl*. Marty currently lives in Edmonton with his wife.

Teen heartthrobs are the zits of life. Not only do they spring out of nowhere, but once they show up, people can't stop looking at them. The celebrity acne that infected my teen years was Shaun Cassidy, a heartthrob from the 1980s. A pop star, Shaun had a boyish grin and golden wavy locks that made every high-school girl giggle with glee and every teenage boy grind his teeth with jealousy.

While I hated Shaun, I also wanted to know the secret to his popularity. One day, when I was in Grade 12, a stray rumour about a concert stop had

every girl planning an overnight camp-out to score tickets to his show. I couldn't even convince a girl to let me do her homework.

I decided his secret weapon had to be his feathered hair. Mine was straight, greasy, and black, which was okay for a guy who played Dungeons and Dragons on Saturday nights, but for a heartthrob wannabe, my hair was a dirty bomb. If only I knew that Shaun's golden locks were like the search for Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction: a big fuss over nothing.

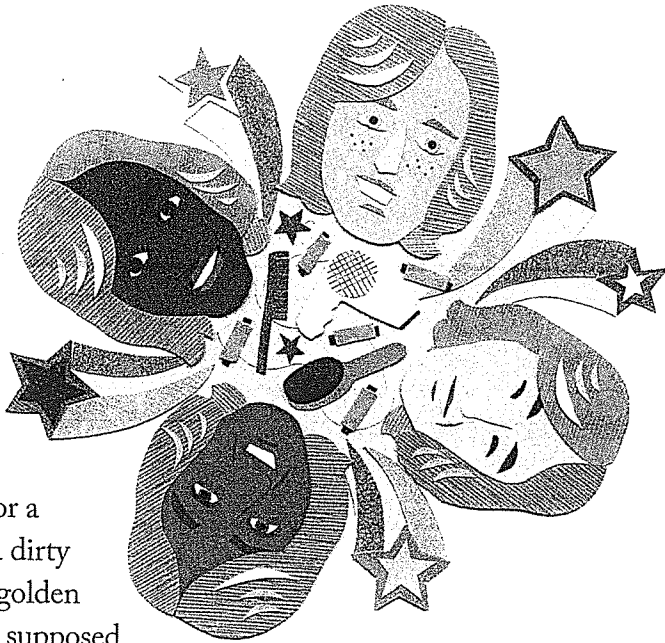
I wasn't the only one who wanted to look like Shaun. A few of the guys who mocked him weeks earlier began to show up at school with their version of his hair. One guy looked like he had attacked his bangs with his sister's hair curler and lost. Another feathered his hair out instead of back, so it looked like he head-butted a crow in mid-flight. If I didn't do something quick, I'd be the odd man out, like the last guy picked to play basketball.

So I marched to the town's hair salon, asked the chain-smoking hairdresser to give me the Shaun Cassidy look, plopped down in the red vinyl chair, and left my fate in her leathery hands. I couldn't wait for her to work her magic.

Unfortunately, the gap between what I wanted and what she delivered was wider than the Grand Canyon. When I gazed in the mirror, the truth—the horrible truth—dawned on me. A Chinese boy with a perm is the spitting image of his mom.

### What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

*I wrote this piece because it's cheaper than confessing my life's humiliations to a therapist. Like almost every other teen of my day, I fell for a pop star's marketing campaign. I tried to pass on my wisdom to my kid brother, fifteen years younger than me, but he too went for a perm when he was a teenager. I hope this piece convinces others to avoid doing stupid things to their hair in the name of chasing a trend that will die out in a year or two.*



# Knife

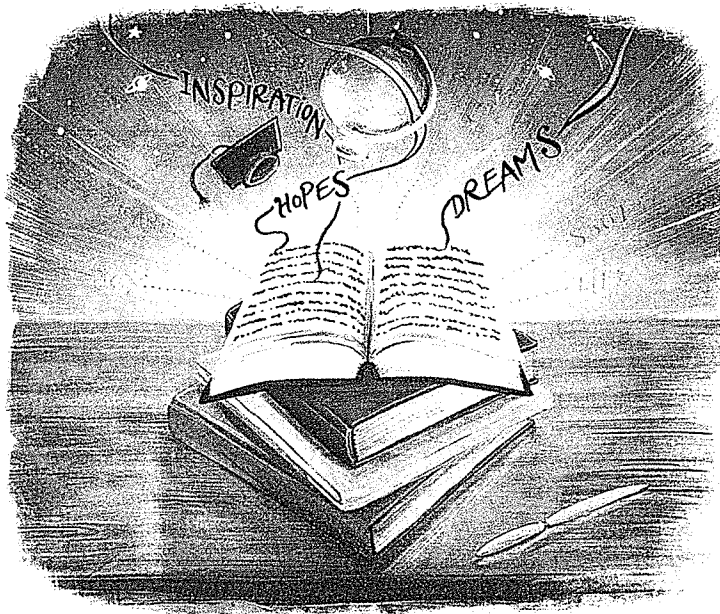
## Written by Souvankham Thammavongsa

Souvankham Thammavongsa had written two books of poetry, *Small Arguments* and *Found*, by the time she was thirty. Her first collection, *Small Arguments*, was described as having “beautiful jeweler’s-eye lyrics” and won the Relit Award for poetry. Her second book, *Found*, became a short film that screened at film festivals worldwide, such as the Toronto International Film Festival.

I can’t remember the name of the first book I took home to practise reading, but it was about a family who used simple tools to survive. An eggshell cupped water, leaves created shelter, and a rock was shaped into a knife. I had trouble with the word *knife* when I first saw it. I didn’t know what it meant, but it appeared several times in the story.

So I took the book to my father, and showed him the word on the page. He said it was pronounced *kab-nife*. The next day, I read this word the way my father had read it, *kab-nife*, in front of my class. The other kids laughed at me.

I asked my teacher why it was silent if it was at the beginning of the word. I could understand *b* or *e* being silent inside a word, but not at the beginning, the very first letter.



When I went home that night, I never corrected my father. I didn’t tell him the kids laughed at me, either. I was too afraid he would feel embarrassed, the way I had been.

He already felt badly because he couldn’t make the *r* sound right when he said *rice*. At a restaurant a couple of days earlier, a waiter had



laughed at him and said, “We don’t serve *lice* in this restaurant.” He didn’t need to know there was another thing he didn’t get right.

My father couldn’t help me then, but I realized that I could help him. If I learned to read, and read well, I might be able to keep that laughter from reaching him, from reaching any of us. I knew what a life without reading would look and feel like—and I knew I could change that for myself.

As soon as I learned to read, I knew I also wanted to make those words on the page. I wanted to make something that allowed thoughts, dreams, and hopes to be created from mere letters. I wanted to make those things for someone: for my father and those like him. More importantly, for myself. Once I learned how letters and words worked, I knew how I wanted to be in the world. I knew what I could create then would not be silent in the world like a mere letter.

### What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

*I wrote this piece because I hope to reach future writers out there who feel just like I did when I was young. I grew up in a home without books, into a language that wasn’t mine. This was not an environment that encouraged a love of literature, but somehow I did come to love literature and language. More than anything in the world, I wanted to be a poet ... and now I am one. It is a great feeling to do what I thought I couldn’t do, what I felt I didn’t belong doing. I hope other people’s experiences might allow them to relate to “Knife” and encourage them to work hard despite difficulties. I hope they can see that a person of value came from a place no one expected.*

## TO DINOSAUR PROVINCIAL PARK

### Written by Jeff Miller

Jeff Miller grew up in Ottawa and now lives Montreal. He started writing and publishing the zine *Ghost Pine* when he was sixteen years old. His first book, *Ghost Pine: All Stories True*, was published in 2010. He has given readings at punk shows and bookstores across North America.

The first time I crossed the Prairies, I was nine years old. My father had a habit, or rather a capacity, to drive heroic distances on our summer vacations. Eighteen-hour stretches would melt away in a haze of exhaust and hourly news updates on the CBC.

All he needed was a catnap here and there to refresh himself. Mid-day, he would pull into a rest stop, lower the minivan's beige bucket seat to a forty-five-degree angle, rest his aviators on the dashboard, and drift off to sleep with his feet firmly planted beside the brake and gas pedals.

My mother headed instinctively towards the johnny-on-the-spot, with its blue plastic skin nearly disappearing in the cobalt Alberta sky. My brother and I wandered aimlessly down farm-access roads. The gravel crunched under the soles of our sneakers and our tanned legs interrupted the trajectories of confused grasshoppers.

"There's so much space out here," I remember saying, as my bowl-cut blew in the breeze.

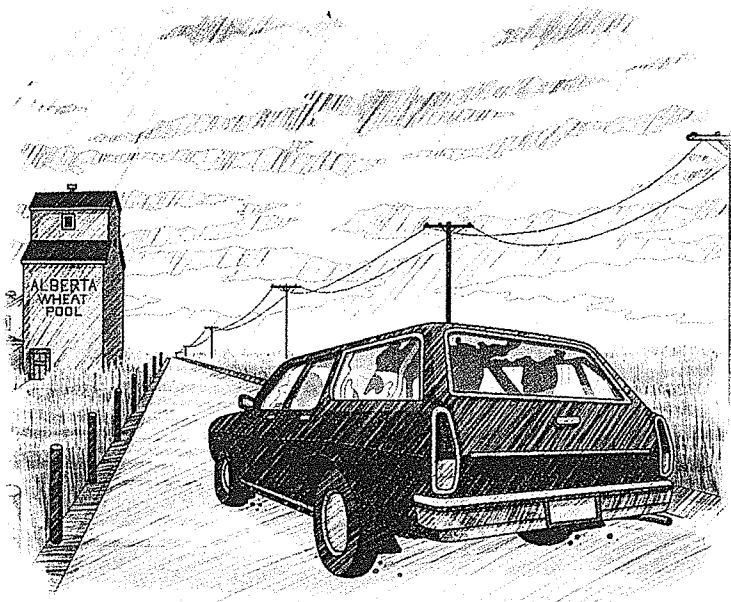
My brother, four years older, nodded sagely, then elevated my thought to a higher plateau. "If the Prairies are this big, can you imagine how big space is? It's infinite!"

I shuddered as I pondered his current obsession with outer space. The interest had already led to many sleepless nights for me, as most of our before-bed conversations concerned the logistics of reported alien abductions and UFO sightings.

The road intersected a stretch of rail and I hopped up on it. It led straight to the town's wooden grain elevator, emblazoned with the logo of the

Alberta Wheat Pool, an iconic golden stalk. A whispering ocean of grain stretched to the horizon in every direction. We ambled along the rails until an invisible tether tugged us back to the car.

Ten minutes later, my father was content to press forward again, driving the limit, and being passed by everything on the road. Sure, we had radio and



spine-cracked Archie comics, but nothing could compete with the simple joy of watching the roadside passing outside the window.

The blue tint of the glass made me feel like I was inside an aquarium. The odd cloud cast its shadow over the fields. I fell asleep with my head bouncing lightly against the rattling pane.

### What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

I wrote this story after coming home from a big trip across North America, riding Greyhound buses and sleeping on my friends' couches. When I sat down to write the story of my adventure I instead found myself writing about travelling with my family when I was a kid. Travelling and writing are similar in that you often end up in places you never expected when you first set out. And that is exactly what makes them both so much fun.

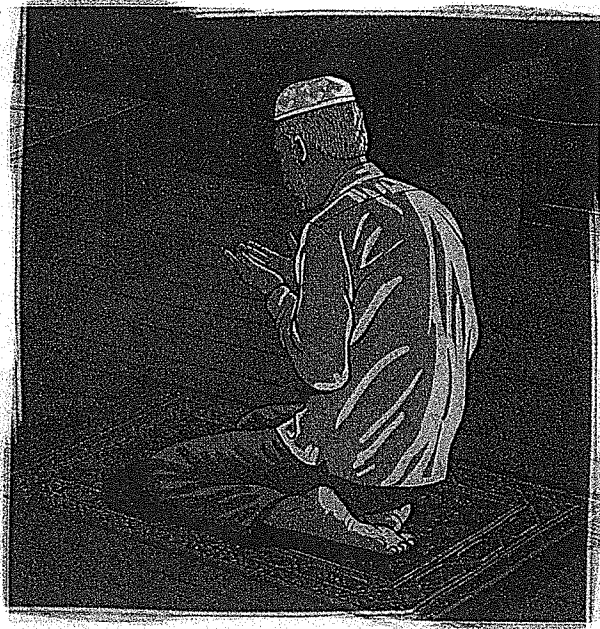
# Abbu

## Written by Kashfia Rahman

Kashfia Rahman has spent her entire life doodling and scribbling in the margins of her notebook, which eventually turned into a Bachelor of Fine Arts. She's lived in Bangladesh, the United States, and Canada. She's addicted to reading—anything from Chuck Palahniuk to cereal boxes—and is thankful for the existence of writing workshops, and the wonderful people who run them.

I can hear my father's voice as he prays, very late at night, after we are all in bed. I don't realize my *abbu* can sing until I heard him recite the *suras* so beautifully; it's as if Allah himself has put the melody and cadences into his voice. He is soft in these moments. His voice is gentle as it rises and falls.

I can hear my father, but I can't really see him. In my mind's eye, his image blurs and shifts, never letting me catch it. He has been away for so much of my life that I don't understand what he is to me.



*Abbu* spends years working overseas. Each time my mother tells my brother and me that he's coming home to visit, I don't know what to feel. I want to be overjoyed, but I don't know how. We can be a family again, except that we aren't.

Suddenly, my father is back for good. Everyone speaks in lowered voices and tiptoes around carefully. No matter how hard we try, we always do the wrong thing. With *Abbu* home, I can no longer be my mother's right hand. I give up authority and

autonomy and am forced to be a child, even though I haven't felt like one since I was six years old.

*Abbu's* temper colours my memories. Whenever I ask my mother why he barely speaks to us, she says, "That's just the way your father is." It's not a good enough answer, and I grow increasingly angry. Despite desperately wanting us to be a family, I pretend that he and I are invisible to each other. I want a father who will be more than the unsmiling stranger sitting across the dinner table every night.

But as I lie in bed listening to *Abbu* pray, I can recognize the marks of frailty and struggle in his voice. I wonder if *Abbu* feels as lonely as I do. I begin to slowly unclench the knot of resentment, hostility, and anger that I carry with me everywhere. In the dark, I can finally be a daughter who loves her father.



## What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

*I have realized that I can only write about what I know. I write from a place of truth, of events and people that are so close to my heart. Writing this piece forced me to confront my memories. I wasn't prepared for the struggle I went through to accept the past and then step back from it. It is so easy to pretend that everything has always been fine in your life and that certain events didn't hurt you. I made peace with my father long ago, but not with the girl I was.*

### After

- 1. Reading for Meaning** These authors reveal their personalities based on a brief incident in their lives. Choose one author and list the personality characteristics that you infer based on the memoir. Include support from the text for each characteristic.
- 2. Viewing and Representing** Were your predictions about the topic of the memoirs correct? What purpose do the illustrations serve in this selection?
- 3. Understanding Form and Style** What impact does first-person narration (the use of *I*) used in these micro-memoirs have on you as the reader?
- 4. Student Voice** If you could read anyone's memoir (whether it currently exists or not) whose would you choose? What would you hope to gain from reading it?
- 5. Critical Literacy** Choose a memoir from this selection and explain what the author wants us to believe about him or her.
- 6. Metacognition** How can focusing on your own memories, thoughts, and feelings help you become a better writer?

### Beyond

**Student Voice** Some teen and young adult writers are using memoirs as a vehicle for social change and action in their societies. Research a few of these authors (e.g., Mariatu Kamara, Marina Nemat, Ishmael Beah, Nujood Ali) on the Internet to learn their stories. Do you think memoirs are an effective way to bring about social action or change? Give your opinion in an oral presentation or a blog entry and use screen captures or other images to support your view.