

FIRST PERSON

A PEACEFUL SURRENDER



ILLUSTRATION BY MARY KIRKPATRICK

Having multiple sclerosis has taught me some hard yet valuable lessons about resilience and accepting my fate, but that doesn't mean I have to give up hoping for a cure, Sheri Astorino writes

As I was slipping out of my wheelchair one day gracefully you know, I shouted: "Back off universe, not today! I will not call the paramedics today." I rejected every self-help book I'd purchased over the years that told me to accept my fate and gave the universe the finger. I was tired, I was done, but I mustered the strength to pull myself back on the chair, and I reflected.

My sister and my mother say I have great resolve like my father. They say I never give up and so therefore I'm a "never-giver-upper," gooly but true. But when I look in the mirror, I see how multiple sclerosis has aged me. But still, at 55, I believe there is hope.

For 10 years or so I've been chasing a cure. I keep trying because I figure if I could walk once, I will walk again. I will train my body to remember how to walk, and if no one believes in me, I will believe in me. That is why I rail against the universe, I'm going rogue.

I don't know if all this self-help crap is working, but I keep doing it. I hate it when I tell people "my body is healing, my body is getting stronger," and they look at me with a forlorn expression. They buy into the notion that there is no cure for MS because that's what the doctors say. Why can't they just play along?

A lyric from the song *Hands*, by Jewel, has always resonated with me: "I won't be made useless/I won't be idled with despair/I will gather my self around my faith/for light does the darkness most fear." Despair is the operative word: It's so big, so daunting, so dangerous. If we give in to our despair, we are ruined.

Once I was scrambling to a doctor's appointment on one of the hottest days of the year. A hydraulic lift moves my scooter into the back of my vehicle, but it was difficult to manoeuvre and I was buckling under the heat in the parking lot. A woman came to help me with the lift. I thanked her and said, "I'm sorry, I'm having a bit of a day." She told me she knew how I felt, and put her hand to her chest. She had her breast removed a week ago.

As my mother says, "It's not so bad, it couldn't be worse."

I have had people pick me up off the floor, pick me up off the road, zip up my jacket and pull up my pants. I have gone to the door with my pants around my knees and had to sign for a parcel. So am I meant to learn something from this?

I do not want to own this disease. It is horrible

and debilitating and it makes you feel humiliated all the time. I guess I've learned how to feel humbled and how to accept a lot of help. I've also learned I have to be resilient. You don't learn to bounce back unless you've been given a real challenge. You don't know how strong you are unless you're dangling from a rope and need to drag yourself back up. I want to design a T-shirt with a little wheelchair teetering on a cliff and underneath the image: "This is my Everest."

Sometimes, people can float through life, playing it safe, staying between the lines. That could be a great way to live and die but that doesn't happen to everyone. Sometimes, life brings extreme challenges that we didn't ask for. That's why I read self-help books and toss and turn at three in the morning and say, "Why me, what did I do to deserve this?"

So, lately, I've been listening to one of my self-help gurus, Eckhart Tolle. He says "surrender to the present moment." I immediately think that might be my tattoo. I start looking at my wrist and forearm to see where it might fit. "Surrender" is one of my favourite words and almost impossible to understand. It actually might be the ticket to end my suffering, to end my affliction, to stop the voices in my head.

And therein lies the problem. I have to stop chasing a potential cure, I have to surrender to what is. I hate it when the universe is right. Thank you universe and I'm sorry for flipping you the bird earlier.

So why have I changed my tune so rapidly, why am I thanking the universe now? Without this affliction, I wouldn't know about resilience, I wouldn't know about the kindness of strangers.

Once, I fell off my scooter at the end of my driveway and landed mostly on the road. I saw a car coming toward me and was able to lift my body partly off the ground and stretch out my hand to wave. The car stopped and, without hesitation, a mother and her grown son came toward me. He lifted me off the ground and onto my scooter, just like he was my brother or son, he lifted me. This is what we all need to do, we need to lift each other up.

This is why I'm here, this is my lot in life, the universe is teaching me valuable lessons, and I surrender. At least until I get jazzed for my next miracle cure.

Sheri Astorino lives in Barrie, Ont.

Listen to this: Fun, drama, wit and deep thoughts about all things music

JOHN DOYLE

OPINION



TELEVISION

Today's theme is music. As long-suffering readers will be aware, this column likes music of all varieties. So, curiosity got the better of this column when a news release arrived stating this: "Five women, sick of their repetitive lives and boring book club, find freedom by forming a punk band."

Band Ladies (streaming online at Highball.TV) starts with exactly that. The women "on the cusp of middle-age" are doing their book club thing, most of them not having completed the book, so they get rotten drunk and start performing as though they are a band. They're not. But soon enough they are. Three chords and an attitude is all it takes, as every punk rocker knows.

The series is a wicked delight, ideal for a light binge of short episodes, with a lot of ribald humour and some mildly angry drama. Several of those involved have appeared on *Baroness von Sketch Show* episodes and *Band Ladies* has a similar kind of raucy vibe.

Created by Molly Flood, Kate Fenton and Dana Puddicombe, with Fenton and Puddicombe in leading roles, the series pulls off the tricky task of being about women finding a role outside what's preordained for them, and being very funny about bourgeois pretensions. Puddicombe, in particular, is having a whale of a time as a very rich, very sarcastic and purring cougar. Personally, I'd watch Puddicombe do that role all day long and beyond.

Fenton has the more conventional role of put-upon, home-maker Marnie, stuck with the kids and a dull husband. She's the one who really needs to scream punk songs. Lisa Michelle Cornelius plays Chloe, a corporate lawyer who gets in serious trouble and decides to throw in her lot with the band. Vicky Kim plays Cindy, who has always wanted to be a musician but tells so many lies about herself to everybody. The character Stephanie (Kristen Rasmussen) is described "the lovesick take," which is accurate because she can't break up with her artist girlfriend Lauren (Natasha Negovanis from the cult-hit web series *Garmilla*).

There's a lot of fun with the snobbery of the art world. They form a band, get gigs, go on the road, squabble and are eternally at the point of breaking up. Such is the standard story of rock music but *Band Ladies* serves it up with an added side of fiendish wit.

The *Eddy* (Netflix) beggars easy description. The understated eight-part series is on the surface about Elliot Udo (André Holland), owner of a Paris jazz club that's barely functioning. Once famous jazz, Elliot hasn't played since the death of his son, but he's obsessively directing the house band led by singer Maja (Joanna Küllig), who is also his occasional girlfriend. Often, it seems, not much is happening, but each character is hiding something, not necessarily dramatic, and the creation and performing of music that comes from those hidden emotional forces is what the series is really about. It takes three episodes before it really finds its groove, and then it soars.

Finally, this column continues with a "stay-at-home-period-daily-streaming pick." Today's pick is *Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes* (Amazon Prime Video), in keeping with today's theme. A documentary made in 2010, this is no lightweight celebratory production. It's a serious-minded search for what influenced Cohen, from religion to poetry to other songwriters. As such, it doesn't aim to reach an easy conclusion. Everything, from Cohen's youthful adoration of Ray Charles to the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, to the American Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, to Hank Williams, and then Bob Dylan, arises. It seems he hoarded countless inspirations in his head and something of his own came from that. A lot of time is spent with Judy Collins, who talks about the difficulties and pleasures of covering and recording Cohen's songs.

First Person is a daily personal piece submitted by readers

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TODAY'S SUDOKU SOLUTION

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TODAY'S KENKEN SOLUTION

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