

## Portfolio 2 | Familiar Essay

WRIT 1700B

Length: 5-6+ double-spaced pages (no more than 2000 words), excluding works cited

### Instructions:

- Compose a full *familiar essay* as per the requirements above. For this paper, your audience is “well-informed layperson,” Imagine writing for *The Globe and Mail* or *The New York Times* and their readership. Consult course models in matters of style.
- For this assignment, you are required to use at least two published sources (essays, novels, short stories, poems, and so on, as per 2.2), one scene (2.1), and include a *Beginning* and *Ending* for your essay. Your paper must show *movement* between sources and ample *thought- reflection*. You may include a third source and/or close off your narrative with a second (short) scene that acts as a resolution for your *Journey*.
- Don’t forget your *epigraph*!
- Essays of this type do not ordinarily call for a “Works Cited” list; citation is normally done within the text, without parenthetical documentation. For this essay, omit the parenthetical documentation within the text; write in your sources. But include a “Works Cited” list at the end of your essay.
- Include an epigraph that helps illustrate your *Idea* or your solution.
- Bring one copy of your draft to your tutorial on the day your draft is due.
- Please review “Housekeeping” in the Syllabus for formatting requirements.

### Please Note:

- You are not locked into a final scene or source until the portfolio is due. You may change your mind about your subject or source at any time. All Portfolio assignments must be completed once and included with your final submission.
- Remember the structure of *the Journey* and incorporate it into your work. Do you return and reintegrate (show evidence of growth and new understanding)? Remember, *the Journey* can be physical, spiritual, or both. Show us yours! Don’t forget the *moment of change*!
- Remember, if your *Journey* has not been completed, then this is not a good experience to discuss. Avoid traumatic, personal events, in favour of positive learning experiences. Avoid literally naming your paper “How I Learned to Be Awesome!” but that is the general idea. If you got to University, you *are* a success story. Tell us about it!
- Overall, your purpose in this paper is to use an example, experience, or moment from your life that illustrates a moment of growth or understanding for you. **Communicate this wisdom** to your audience using your *scene*, sources and *Idea* developed in prior assignments.

“Although Bereft of You”

*Maybe you are searching among the branches for what only appears in the roots.*

— Rumi

Grief and I are detached from one another. Like a couple on the brink of separation, we acknowledge one another but refuse to let the other in, the privilege of doing so long since gone. This is, of course, something I tell myself as I realize I have yet to feel much of anything, let alone the anticipated effusive sadness, since I learned the news. As damp, monochromatic landscapes blur past my view, it suddenly feels rightfully apt that the world around me should be in such a state of decay. It’s nonsensical, yet oddly comforting, as if I could say it is because my grandma had died today. That she was more important than just another iota in an endless expanse of them and that the universe had wanted to acknowledge so. But that was bullshit. Death is as common as life and one person passing means nothing but to those who cared for them. It’s a hard notion to come to terms with, especially in regard to someone you loved so deeply, so I turn the volume knob up higher and higher, only stopping when my eardrums start to pound in revolt.

An old farmhouse flashes in my peripheral, something I would’ve seen thousands of times by now, yet somehow has become foreign and unrecognizable in a way that makes my jaw clench until my teeth creak. I know this route—this place—like I know the warmth of my grandma’s arms around me in a hug only grandmothers can give. Or so I had thought.

As the highway winds around a bend, splitting from the 401 into the 402, my heart hardens to stone. It sits heavy in my chest, taking up more room than could ever be humanly possible, forcing my lungs to constrict until I’m breathless and shaky. This divergence in the

road has always been the signal that I'm truly headed to my home away from home, but now I'm not so sure.

So, I keep driving, forcing myself to sing along to whatever song blasts its way through my speakers. I've suddenly never been so grateful to do this trek alone. Wherever this placid verisimilitude I'm exuding came from, I don't know, but I think I'm upholding it well. My fellow mid-day drivers—should they happen to glance through the grime covered windows of my run-down car—would never guess the truth, something that makes me sit a little straighter and lessen the white-knuckle grip I have on the wheel.

It's not long before a city distance sign pierces through the blanket of fog in my mind, reminding me that I'll be with my grandpa soon. It takes me a moment to realize that my whole being is vibrating now, like I'm only one of the very molecules that I'm made of. Reality is too close now; I swear I can see the whites of its eyes. My veins burn in terror with this knowledge, like crashing head-on into someone and knowing I can't stop it. Suddenly, the car's too small, the air too thin. I know I can't do this. I don't know why I thought I could. If I just stay on the highway, if I miss my exit, I can continue on right to the Bluewater Bridge and beyond. I can pretend this isn't my new life. I've never wanted anything more desperately.

Then, I look over.

I've always believed in signs, that there was more to this universe than meets the eye—something it liked to remind us all of at one point or another. But faith is vastly different than firsthand experience. I could say I understood what it was like but going through it—to truly know what it meant and how it felt—I had to encounter it myself. I had to feel it, maybe deeper than I've ever felt anything before. Which is how, when my eye felt inexplicably drawn to the license plate of another car, I knew, without any doubt, what it truly was: a sign.

ITSALLOK.

I'd never felt anything like it. The supposed entropy of the universe stopping, seemingly eager to help me remember that this isn't as meaningless as it all appears. That maybe the iota does carry importance because it contributes to the whole, no matter how infinite it is. My grandma's life had meaning. And if one life has meaning, don't they all?

Then, as if the confirmation of her validity in a universe so vast broke something in me, my grief rushed to the surface, pushing its way through the fissures in my façade. So, I cried. I cried for my mom, for not being able to be with her own mother in her last moments. I cried for the pain my grandpa had to go through in losing his wife of over 65 years so slowly and all at once. And I cried for the simple fact that she had died, and that the world had taken her from us. From *me*. The love I had held for her—that we all held for her—had been cruelly amputated in the blink of an uncaring eye. I suddenly felt like the titular character of the TV show “Fleabag”. As she speaks to her best friend about her mother's death, she reveals what's been eating at her: “I don't know what to do with it... With all the love I have for her. I don't know where to put it now.” What did one do with something so intrinsic and boundless that no longer had a place to go? How could I reconcile then, that the individual was important if the ones left behind were made to feel inconsequential in their grief? Did we have no place? Was it only in death a person carried weight?

Through my blurred vision and hitching breaths, my mind flashes to one of my favourite books: “Testament of Youth”, a memoir by writer and activist Vera Brittain, a woman who, arguably, understood loss better than most. Having lived through both World Wars—the first of which stole her fiancé, Roland, and brother, Edward—she knew the true toll death left on the

living. In her poem “Perhaps—”, about the passing of Roland, she spoke on the loss of joy and how one day, it could return, though not for everything:

But, though kind Time may many joys renew,  
 There is one greatest joy I shall not know  
 Again, because my heart for loss of You  
 Was broken, long ago.

Throughout this piece, Brittain muses of perhaps one day finding delight in things that Roland’s death has tainted. All except one. She won’t know the type of love she felt for Roland again because the loss of him has poisoned her heart to it for good. The words resonate deeply despite our differing circumstances and relationships. Would I be able to find joy in love again? Or would this loss sour me to it, making me afraid to feel something so pure and bright in fear of the horrific pain it could bring, as so starkly highlighted in Brittain’s poem? The extremes of the emotion were exhilarating and terrifying, like looking over the edge of a skyscraper, knowing you could freefall with one easy mistake. But was it worth it?

It had to be. If the iota, the particle, the speck—or whatever you wanted to it call it—mattered, then experiencing and feeling love for them must too. Or, maybe, it was the love itself that created the importance. What we—my family and I—felt for her, the impact she had on our lives, that was what gave her true meaning in the universe—in our universe. She was destined to become a ripple effect of imparted wisdoms, ideas, actions, and quirks that touched the furthest corners and generations to come until its source was muddled and lost, just as what is destined for the rest of us. Seeing that license plate then was more than a sign that she mattered. It was also a sign to remember what she had left with me to pass on.

But would I be able to take on such a momentous task? I've never been Panglossian. I couldn't pretend I was, especially not now. The rapid drumming of my heartbeat in my ears and the drying tears made that clear that I was scared of not only the responsibility but having to acknowledge the naked truth in the first place. It was this though that reminded me of what lay theologian and noted author C.S. Lewis said in his book "A Grief Observed" on how he felt over the death of his beloved wife, Joy:

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing. At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting.

Lewis had become overwhelmed by the pervasive cognitive and physical symptoms his grief had forced upon him, making it clear that the body is just as affected as the mind is. It is therefore all encompassing, colouring—or rather, desaturating—the world in which one lives. Truly inescapable. It's interesting then that Lewis claims to not have been afraid. This is where I feel a disconnect because I was. I was terrified. This was unknown territory for me. I'd never lost someone I'd been this close with before. The symptoms hadn't fully hit me yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time before I too was like Lewis, the gnawing depression and ennui having burrowed deep enough that I had no choice but to give in and let it take over. It was a fate I couldn't bear the thought of, so how could I live through it, especially when I knew I was responsible for making sure I did my part in carrying on my grandma's legacy? Was I now Atlas forced to carry the celestial globe upon my shoulders, burdened with forever remembering how I ended up in such a situation with no way out?

My fear may have been a natural symptom of forced, unwanted change, but the universe had bestowed upon me a gift I couldn't ignore. I may have felt weighed down by all the sign contained, but that didn't devalue it. In fact, it highlighted its importance. Therefore, it wasn't a burden, but a blessing to understand that the opportunity to pass on a piece of someone held so dear, so they may live on forever, is true tribute to their being and their impact. I couldn't get it wrong then, despite my grief and my fear, because I had known her and loved her. The things she'd taught me were entwined in my being, whether I had realized it or not. Which meant that she did matter, because we all do, despite the vastness of the universe, despite the pain the ones left behind have to sift through. She mattered to me, and that's all I needed.

Grief and I are detached from one another, or so I tell myself. In truth, we are all married to it—connected to it—because it is an intrinsic part of being human. It means that what we felt is and was real. The love we all held especially so, even if it hurts to think of. It means that every life is worth something to someone and their world and isn't that all that matters? In the end, it's hard to say whether we create meaning and significance for a life, or if it's inherent in some unknown grand scheme, but suddenly it doesn't seem to matter so much anymore. So, I continue to make my way to my grandpa and my new world, the sun peeking out from behind cotton candy clouds, knowing that—as if I had all my life—it's all OK.

### Works Cited

Brittain, Vera. ““When the Vision Dies...’.” *Testament of Youth*, Virago Press, 2014, p. 213.

“Episode 4.” *Fleabag*, season 2, episode 4, BBC.

Lewis, C.S. “Chapter 1.” *A Grief Observed*, Faber and Faber, 1961, p. 1.