

## **Green Beans and Aliens**

By Joanne Feenstra

The challenge of the two day writing intensive is to write about something small, or as a second choice, write about the butterfly effect. I want to do one of those, or both of them together, write something different from the usual, something explosive, burst out of my cocoon, explore the far reaches of outer space, some creative fiction bit. Or write a long poem, like *Beowulf*. Instead, I acquiesce to the Overlord of my brain, writing as always, about the Gordian Knot that is my relationship with my mother.

Write about something small or the butterfly effect. While I want to write a space opera, my mind jumps to the same-old, same-old, but quite strangely, to a specific moment in time, a moment when my mother and I prepared a winter's worth of green beans for the freezer. Maybe that moment because I still have my own stash of dried beans that I hoarded three years ago, during the tensions of Covid and this morning, I pulled some out to make hummus. The rest of the beans, black, kidney, garbanzo, pinto, and the black and red lentils hunker down in the bottom pull out drawer in the kitchen: I get rid of them a bit at a time in black bean burritos, chilli or bean soup. Maybe I think about that moment about the green beans because there are Borlotti beans cropping up in my own yard. Maybe that moment about the beans came up because I will end up writing about my mother, regardless of what I want, and any moment I remember spending with her is a place to start.

In 1968, on a summer day, we dug into a pail of green beans she had harvested. I am twelve. It is hot on the back deck. My mother then was as old as my daughter is now, thirty six.

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“It was Mary-Anne’s parent’s wedding anniversary last weekend,” I say. “How come you never celebrate yours?”

Mom says nothing while she uses the kitchen paring knife to cut off the top of a long, fat green bean, a bean so large that nine giant pods were clearly visible beneath the green skin. This will be a tough one, I think, she’ll boil it for half an hour. She cuts off the bit of stem that is still attached, the stem that nurtured this particular green bean for a too-long time. Mom says nothing while she holds the knife and tears the string, as tough as sinew, off the bean’s side. Her mouth tightens as she snaps the bean in half.

It is hot on the covered wooden deck of the three story house. I think she doesn’t need to grow green beans but she also doesn’t look like she’s enjoying herself. We are not a poor family but for her, a freezer full of large chewy green beans must be more satisfying than fewer, softer, fresher ones, or even more satisfying than going to the store and buying green beans, the frozen ones, like the ones my friends have at their family dinners. She had a weekly menu and home grown frozen green beans are on it, on Tuesdays.

I’ve seen her wedding pictures, her and Dad, tucked away in photo albums under their bed. They looked happy. I persist. “When’s your wedding anniversary anyways?” I ask. She looks up at me, her mouth pursing while she snaps another long green bean.

“June,” she says. “June 17.”

With twelve year old panache, I still remember I did this on purpose to make my point obvious, I put down my handful of green beans and the paring knife so I can use my fingers to count. June, July, August, September, October, November. One, two, three, four, five, six. I’m the oldest. My birthday is early December. Seven. Now, I’m 12. I know nothing for certain about how long it takes to make a baby but I have a suspicion that it was longer than six or seven

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months. I can not be direct with her so I ask a question. “Doesn’t it take nine months to have a baby?”

There are many babies in our extended family. I am one of the oldest cousins. We live in Abbotsford where Dad and his two brothers and a brother-in-law own a tractor dealership. Every family except ours has three kids, even Dad’s oldest sister whose husband is a dairy farmer. I’m the oldest of four siblings; there are 16 grandchildren when my grandparents came to visit from Friesland, where the tallest, and blondest Dutch people live.

Mom is short, dark and swarthy. She has a sheaf of black Mediterranean moustache growing on her upper lip. There are a lot of family parties and family gatherings at Christmas and New Year’s, and Thanksgiving, and birthdays and anniversaries. These are all my Dad’s relatives. Dad’s siblings and their spouses would have known about the quick marriage but it was never mentioned, even in jest, and my parents never celebrated their wedding anniversary for as long as they lived.

In 1968, there are wars going on, like now, but then in Korea and North Vietnam. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy are assassinated, medal winners Tommie Smith and John Carlos lift black-gloved fists at the Summer Olympics, white Captain Kirk kisses black Lieutenant Uhura on screen, Apollo Eight makes it around the back side of the moon and Hyperkinetic Reaction of Childhood is mentioned for the first time in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a label for people displaying an excessively short attention span, hyperactivity, and restlessness.

Maybe in 1968, Mom was hoarding in case of catastrophe reaching into the enclave, like I did during Covid. Maybe she had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder exacerbated by another disorder I now believe we had in common. She could have had PTSD from her life in Holland,

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when the Second World War started. She would have been eight. My grandson was eight three years ago and I imagine him, living in the suburbs, on a small farm, in that war.

The soldiers were down the road living in the school. “A bunch of nice guys,” Mom told me once. They’d trade cigarettes for meat and fruit and everyone smoked. “Even I did,” she said, “when I was eight.” She smirked. “Everyone smoked.” It was kind of funny, imagining my uber straightlaced mom smoking. I imagine my grandson smoking at eight years old. Mom told me her friend, and her friend’s family, were taken by the soldiers, and she never saw her friend again. “They were Jewish.” Mom was eight. Imagine my eight year old grandson. Imagine myself.

While 1968 happened in the outside world, my siblings, my cousins and I attend a private Christian school, where classes are tiny, and undereducated teachers teach. People who can not afford tuition could apply for subsidies but their children do not fit in very well. We are all middle class Dutch, each and every one of us. All my friends have Dutch last names. We attend church, twice on Sunday, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day, Easter, Good Friday and Catechism class on Tuesday nights. If the regular minister is not available, we hear prake lezen, written sermons, read out loud in Dutch by a church elder.

We all fit together. Except we did not, our family does not. There are five of these Christian Dutch immigrant churches in Abbotsford and my mom chose to attend the one the rest of Dad’s family did not attend. Dad immigrated with his siblings. Mom immigrated alone. Mom calls the parents of my friends ‘stupid farmer’s’ and won’t let my friends over for sleepovers. There are more things that are weird, too many. Our branch of the extended family operates like Keill Randor in *Galactic Warlord*, piloting alone through the outer reaches of the Inhabited Galaxy. Our branch of the family is on some intergalactic journey.

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“Yes.” Yes, it takes nine months to make a baby. She picks a handful of green beans out of the bin. Snap, snap, snap. Off go their heads. “Yes.” I watch her purse her mouth. “Well.”

I reach into the bucket, take out a small handful of green beans and snap off the stems. I am only half as fast as her. If these beans had been left to dry and placed in safe, quiet storage over the winter, they would be the embryos of the next generation but we destroy them now instead.

My thirty six year old daughter, as old now as my mom was then, is a nurturer. She nurtures her child, her farm, chickens, dogs, her four step-siblings and when she has time and energy, me. She’s a farmer, with a vegetable farm with actual customers and she works so hard and she makes money. She pickles, cans and dehydrates food and saves seeds. Of course she grows beans, tender young beans that are delicious to eat and saves the big seeds for the next spring planting. In the fall and winter and into early spring, she takes courses at the nearby college. We live close to each other so we see each other often. Two early springs ago, on a phone call, she says “Mom, maybe this is what’s wrong.”

She was born in 1987. In 1987, I do not marry or even live with the father of my daughter, Margaret Thatcher is elected for the third time, Aretha Franklin is the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Liberace and Andy Warhol die and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders changes the name of Hyperkinetic Disorder in Children to Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder.

“What! What’s wrong?” My mind jumps around like fireworks, death, dying, someone is maimed. “What?”

“Maybe you have ADHD. It’s in my textbook. Listen.”

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She read me the symptoms and I spend the next week hyperfocusing on ADHD. I cry.. I'm a 65 year old female with the textbook issues of a 9 year old hyperactive boy. A jumping bean. These symptoms define me, they are me. I can't sleep. From what I read, I'm not just maybe ADHD, marginal or on the borderline or halfway there; I am all the way in. For a week, I read everything there is on the computer and walk and eat too much. My entire working career, I worked with people with disabilities; now, I am them. I'm ashamed that this makes me devastated. I normalised them for themselves, but I never wanted to be them. It takes me some long days to let that sink in and a week or two later, I tell my daughter, I think she's right. I'm a jumping bean.

A month after that, I agree with the doctor's three page form that I am neurologically hampered. The polite way to say it is atypical, I am neurologically atypical. There is an actual label to the reason I can't focus on one thing for a long period of time unless it's the thing my brain decides to focus on. There is ADD or ADHD. I'm ADHD, both distracted and hyperactive. ADHD is why I'm always marginally depressed or so thrilled or so worried or so anxious or so exuberant or so miserable or so loud or so quiet. I'm always so something. ADHD seems to be a matter of either exaggerating or minimising, of operating at high speed or no speed, of hyperfocus or non-focus. In the two day writing workshop, I sit in a room down the hallway so I can talk aloud to myself, get up and down, go to the bathroom, or walk outside. I sit in a room down the hallway because it drives me crazy when other people talk aloud to themselves, move their chairs or cough. Or breath.

ADHD is not a matter of want, like telling a fellow with a broken leg to get up and walk; for god's sake, I'm not Jesus. It's a matter of *can't*. I can't. But there is no cast to remove. I won't get *better*.

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But I do *want*. In April, after the medical doctor agrees with my self-diagnosis, I have a week's worth of a psychostimulant unchanged since 1955, a year before I was born, securely tucked in my purse. I am on my way to Vancouver with my friend Mary. A month before, she said, "Let's go to the coast to see a Valerie June concert." That's a ten hour drive from here, one way, but if you have ADHD, you say, "Great idea" before you find out who the singer is or think about how you're going to get there.

I said, "Great idea."

Then I quickly add, "I'll take my car," because I once went with Mary somewhere in her car and she didn't know how to turn on the headlights and we drove about 30 kilometres per hour below the speed limit. When I pick her up, she has her knitting with her. She looks at me with her honest and beautiful face and says, "Martin always drives when we go to Vancouver."

"No problem," I say. With one dose of medication,, at the level prescribed for my peers, nine year old hyperactive boys, I drive for five hours, clear headed and alert. We pull into a fast food restaurant in Princeton. We go to the bathroom, order some food, and sit outside. I eat my fries and take my coffee for a short walk where I also take one more pill. I sneak it in, it's a secret, me and my ADHD. Five hours later, we arrive at my sister's place in Vancouver where I have a rational conversation, a glass of wine, dinner and fell asleep.

I keep this up for the whole weekend. I never crash, I never get angry, the noise level is never too much. I am level, calm and bright. I do not eat too much. I do feel like I am a bit too straightened out, too calm, too not-tired but I enjoy this break from my overly emotional life. I drive the ten hours home. When I look over at Mary, she is asleep. She wakes and tells me she is exhausted.

Over the next few days, I moderate my intake of the psychostimulant. Now the

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housework is getting done and I'm not frustrated, angry, or impetuous. My doctor asks me if I am sleeping enough. "Yes," I say. "The medication doesn't seem to bother my sleeping." This is how normal people feel, is it? I like this feeling. I'm so level.

I ask my doctor for another week's prescription, then two more. We are both so happy this is working. The days pass into autumn and I do another MA level course. My husband notices the difference in me. I am not as easily flummoxed when the propane stove runs out of propane. I do not lose my keys as often. I am not mortally wounded when my daughter is too busy to talk to me.

I read words and understand them. An ADHD brain will start a paragraph and then jump to the end of it; in my previous life, I read the same words three or four times and used highlighters, arrows, and wrote in textbooks in order to stay on track. Now, I only read words once. There are a lot of 17 letter German words in this course. I get an "A" on my first papers and later an excellent mark for the whole course. I am smart. I never knew that. I never knew that before.

When I am not in school, I take the dogs and walk up the hill and sit on the rock I usually sit on, three and a half kilometres one way, easier on drugs than slogging up the hill while my Overlord brain is consumed with thinking about how difficult it is to walk up this hill. Winter comes and I still walk up the hill, even in the snow. I stick to a task. I take a plastic bag to sit on. I sit on that rock, look over the lake, and think about how I can kill myself. I realise I have been doing this for a week. Or more.

"This medication doesn't work," I tell my doctor.

We're on Zoom and I watch her shake her head. "It works for most of my people," she says.



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But I know better, of course, because I'm ADHD and I hyper focus on ADHD medication. I know all the brands of medications available in BC. I think I know about the side effects. I tell her I'm feeling depressed for no reason that I know of, it must be the meds, but I do not tell her the part about killing myself because who knows what kind of intervention that would trigger. I don't want to seem crazy.

"Can we try something else?" She gives me a prescription for a short term stimulant medication. After a week, my mouth twitches. Not that you can see it but I start to purse my lips all the time. Parts of my personal anatomy where I've had external surgery become painful and itchy beyond belief. I use anti-itching cream and quit drinking coffee. The itching and twitching persist for a month. I quit those meds. A year later, my mouth still twitches and the doctor finds lesions where I had my surgery and now we have to watch for cancer.

The last medication we try is a non-stimulant. It helps me concentrate in a quasi-linear fashion, something I'm not used to in my non-drugged life, and I'm calm, maybe not able to drive the ten hours to Vancouver, but now I don't care if it takes eight or fifteen hours to get there. At home, I paint a seascape and use only three colours, white, blue and a bit of grey to highlight a few clouds. I don't like this painting but everyone else does. "It's calm and peaceful," they say. It's boring beyond belief and I can't believe I painted it. I sell it later in trade for lumber; it's the first money I've made from art. It's more socially acceptable than the multicoloured abstracts I have stashed upstairs in my office. I don't find this fun. But I don't feel crazy. I am calm. So that's the price I pay, I think.

In the local community band, I play bells, a xylophone made of metal. On the non-stimulant medications, we ADHD'ers call them non-stims, stims and non-stims, that's the lingo, on the non-stims then, just as with the stims, I follow the because my sight reading has improved,

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I am not morose and frustrated if the conductor goes ten minutes past 8:30. I used to go home and say, "I hate band." I never say that now. On non-stims, I say nothing.

However, after a few months, I quit those meds because the same kind of thing happens. I don't want to actively kill myself but now I am so passive that one Thursday evening, at band practice, I found I do not have the energy to put my instrument up on the music stand. I take the chair in front of me, turn it around and put the bells on the chair instead. I do not stand up to play. I can not see the conductor and I do not care. I quit those meds.

A week later, I easily put my fifty pound instrument on the stand.. I quietly tell the 45 year old male conductor I have ADHD but I'm not medicated and he nods. The next week, he tells the whole band he has ADHD and from the back row, I nod back at him. I'm a 67 year old pudgy white female with a lot of curly grey hair who has played bells for three years. He's a thin, brilliant 45 year old male musician with a new crop of dreadlocks. He's my bro.

In the spring, in the psychologist's office where I am trying to get an official diagnosis from an official shrink, she says "Did you ever have birth trauma?"

I say "No," because I have said "No" to a lot of her previous questions that I suspect relate more to bipolar disorder and autism and I am looking out of the window at the lake just beyond the front of the yard. Then I shout. "Yes, wait. I did." She wants me to tell her about it. "Four days stuck in the birth canal," I say. "The doctors told my parents I was dead and to prepare for the worst. They couldn't find a pulse." Their first child, the six month baby, a still birth. The psychologist tells me that's another marker for ADHD, not for the parent but for the child.

The psychologist wants to know about other trauma. I tell her. You can't see these

traumas, no black eyes or such like. No one beat me. In this writing intensive, I do not want to write about this again. So, I imagine how I'd talk about this on a podium in front of educators who want to know about ADHD but who are not expecting to hear how a sixty-seven year old still has not moved past their privileged white childhood. I would have to say something suave and unrevealing, something like well, ahem, I read that undiagnosed ADHD people, as adults, because of thwarted emotions, lack of social support and isolation, sometimes turn narcissistic and make the rest of their lives about how they look to others. They might use their children as fodder to give themselves social status and when their children fail, there is always a price to be paid. By the child. When I release myself from my own narcissistic fantasy of my own brilliant speech, I wonder how different are my mom and I? How different am I from my mom?

She blurted and yelled, as did I, at her husband and children. As I do. She was unable to process noise in the house, as am I. As I still can not. She never spent time in the kitchen with her children, as I also did not. She had lots of rules in the house, as did I, as do I because rules of operations are how ADHD people stay sane, how they don't fly out of control. She was so angry, as was I. As I am.

I remember the first time we had chilli with ground beef on a Wednesday. Dad hated it and Mom cried. Maybe she wanted to be impetuous and creative and Dad wanted potatoes. Maybe in 1968, in the church, in our family, she had to obey her husband in all things. Well, not maybe. She did. Those were the rules. She liked most rules, not just the ones she imposed. I remember Mom saying, after women were allowed to vote in the church, she had to vote the same way that Dad did or she would just wipe out his vote. Maybe she tried her best to believe all that junk. Maybe she had ADHD and thought she had to live in that world of Overseers, but always felt like an alien. That might have been what made her so angry.

During the Second World War, the Dutch schools were closed because the invading soldiers lived in them. When they reopened, Oma kept Mom home to do the housework while her younger sister and six brothers went back to school. “I hated my mom,” Mom said. “She made me her slave.” I shudder about how that sounds, how I have said the same thing. I’m 67 and she’s long gone. I’ve said dreadful things about her, none of them untrue.

I hope I raised my daughter, not well, but better than I was raised, and I think my daughter is raising her son, not perfectly, but I hope better than she was raised. If then, like a maths equation, if then, maybe my mother raised me better than she was raised. If she had ADHD, with all its undiagnosed emotional dysfunction, undiagnosed learning disabilities and lack of impulse control, feelings of dejection and unmanageable energy levels, less ability to comprehend written language although we can read the words, an inability to process numbers even though we can see them clearly on the page, unless we are also dyslexic, which we are, who was she really?

After she immigrated, not long after, only eighteen years later, she had it all, the big house, the financially successful husband who was loved by those outside his own house. In 1968, we looked like a family from the Good Housekeeping magazine, but those inside our small world circle of 600 Dutch folk, they knew our family was a bit different. We lived with Kiell on the alien planet Moros. But they didn’t know why we lived there. I suspect Mom did not know why either.

The same summer I am diagnosed with ADHD, a friend gives me about thirty Borlotti beans, “Best thing since sliced bread,” she says. I don’t know what Borlotti beans are; I only know green beans. My friend grows them on poles that she says her husband put up, 12 feet tall. “Easy,” she says. “The pods turn bright red in the fall, when they’re dry and ready for winter

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storage or you can eat them when they're green. Use them in bean soup."

Another friend says, "When they're young and tender you can just boil them or eat them in a stir fry."

Then they both say together, "And they're so delicious."

I give them a try. I plant them and quickly the leggy vines grow up and over the six foot poles I scrounge off the beach. Then, I don't water them or even watch them. Of course I don't. In the fall, the bright red pods catch my eye and I pick small malnourished bean seeds and put them in two very small, because there were only a few that survived my malfeasance, glass jars.

I tell myself that next spring I will plant these beans again and water and fertilise them. I will plant them on taller poles and the vines will look amazing in the fall, bright red spots growing up tall poles along the side of the house. I will have more beans, even enough to eat.

In the spring, I open one jar, with thirty tiny beans, and plant them around the yard, not on twelve foot poles, because, well, really, seriously? I plant them against tall board fences and along the back of the wire fence. I remember then I am already mad at myself because I will not want to pull all those dead vines off the fences when winter comes.

I open the other jar, with its thirty tiny beans. And bugs. Right then, I do not know what kind of bugs they were but later I looked them up; they might have been ticks. If I had been calmer, I could have drowned them with rubbing alcohol or gin or in the toilet, but then I just scream and throw the bugs and the beans out into the side yard where I have a garden bed of dirt, compost, dead plant stems, roots that I don't know what to do with, and an old rhubarb plant that annoys me because I can't kill it and it won't die on its own.

The bug infested Borlotti beans grow there, even without nurture and care and water. Those Borlotti beans do not have any poles but they support each other; they form a bushy

heaving membrane of green vines and leaves and many many bean pods. I watch as they wilt, as those infested Borlotti beans die and dry in the hot summer sun. I never water them.

In the past month, this autumn, with a bit of rain, new Borlotti beans sprouts grow, already a foot high, already entangled with each other because there is still no support system. They survive, going and growing, nurtured, not nurtured, neglected, suffering from the dysfunctional gardener's inattention. Winter is coming. I wonder how they will fare.

ADHD is the reason that one year I canned peaches, pickles, relish, plums and jams and now I have dozens of empty canning jars with new lids in unopened boxes tucked into the eaves. It's the reason I yell at my husband so often. In 1968, whipped poor old Jock, a horse we had, with a chain. I'm so so sorry.

At the end of the first day of the two day writing workshop, Anne, the facilitator, asks a skill testing question. If we answer it correctly, we win a book on writing. She says, "Who can name a novel that made you cry?" I know she's been fairly clear on the protocol of raising our hands to answer questions because it's confusing when we all talk at once.

*Educated* by Tara Westover made me cry. I shout out "*Educated!*", as if I'm happy I can relate to this tale of paranoia and isolation. She hands me the book I've won. *The Emotional Craft of Fiction. How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface*, by Donald Maass. My heart plummets. I don't want this book. I don't want to write more about the story beneath the surface. I don't want to craft emotions. I want to write stories like Douglas Hill's, where, while Keill Randon is slowly dying of radiation poisoning, he embarks on missions to avenge the destruction of his home, the planet Moros. I want to write *Galactic Warlord*.

Then, Anne hesitates. She turns to me from the front of the room. "But *Educated* isn't a novel," she says. "It's a memoir." In that moment, I'm grateful I was wrong. It's a good reason

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not to explore crafting emotions, it is not the right book for me, it's karma that I give it back, this book unfairly won by my shouting and even shouting the wrong answer. I thrust the book back at her. "You can have it back, if you want. Re-gift it." She shakes her head and moves on to the next one.

Driving home that evening, alone in the car for 45 minutes, I turn on the radio. CBC is boring so I turn on commercial radio to keep my shame at bay. I feel the shame like a mosquito bite, not quite gone but not quite hurting. Why did I blurt out? Why can't I raise my hand? I'm a 9 year old boy. For the rest of the night, I work on not beating myself up. It was the ADHD Overlord. I'm exhausted thinking about going back to the writing intensive the next day, to sleep without fretting, to not hang my head in shame at my blurting and then blurting out the wrong answer. But because I now know I am neuro-atypical, I can forgive myself. I am the first one at the workshop the next morning. I tell her I'm sorry I blurted. "I have ADHD," I said, not because I'm comfortable with it, but just because it's true. I have ADHD.

And now, I sit and write in a room separate from the rest of the people attending the writing intensive. I write from the now dead planet in the outer galaxy, from the planet Moros. I tell myself I will accept evidence and assistance, as Keill said to the Overseers. If I ever write it, which now you must know, may or may not happen, I could write a story about meeting my mom in our alien world where she lived her whole life by herself. I would tell her about my daughter, how wise she is, how smart, how she nurtures me, even though that's backwards of how it's supposed to be.

Mom and I would fly a spaceship and take painting classes together. We would push a button and decide whether or not we wanted to eat beans. We would fight off the evil Overlord because I would tell her what I learned about us, I would tell her about me, her born too early

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daughter, who I really am, me and my ADHD. We'd grab onto the sword and slice through the Gordian Knot together. She would be with me because I am her. I am my mom.