

# a titan bearing many a legitimate grievance

Reg Johanson

By New Year's Day I was back in Vancouver but my daughter was still visiting in Edmonton. Over Facebook Messenger I found the courage — suddenly I found it, I wasn't trying — to say what I couldn't at Christmas: "I felt like we didn't really connect in Alberta," I wrote, "and that you didn't really want to talk to me or spend time with me. Is that true?" I held my breath. She wrote back and said yeah, that's true. At the age of 19 she could finally write,

I don't feel comfortable around you for long periods of time. You have the same blood as me but I don't know you. It's not like after this trip we will be all peachy and it will be as though you were always there. No way. Spending 6 days together isn't going to make it all better. This is really stressful for me actually. This isn't easy. I look at you and I see the face of the dude who didn't want me. I don't care anymore but after all these years I can't just be normal and stuff. I was really mad at you for a long time and it's not just going to disappear. I didn't even want to come to Canada to get to know you or anything like that. I don't want that to be what this is based on.

I have to stop here. I want to rush past these words—I mean continue rushing past them, as I rushed past them when they were written—*Give me time to say it*, she wrote, *because I don't want to be mean and my nails are too long so I'm not as fast*—because she wrote so many other things besides that distracted me, that I felt needed responding to, needed answering, needed explaining, defending, apologizing for, denying, refuting, that I ran by these words, until I tripped over them just now. I was telling the story and something told me I should check the record, to make sure I was remembering the conversation accurately. I wasn't, I had made up another conversation that was quite different from the one we had. Or—the conversation we had, that is on record, was simultaneous with another one, that is unrecorded and much, much longer. The story I wanted to

tell — so that I can continue the story — the story continues, many days have passed, many more days, life has been lived, there have been developments that I would like to narrate — but just now in recounting it I can't move past this. When she wrote them it felt like the beginning, and I wanted to begin. Now we were getting somewhere. Now we were connecting. Hurry up let's get somewhere, let's get that connecting going. Let's, let us, do or go. Let us not stay here, with these words — even though it's not every Christmas that I receive such a gift, of speech such as this, that lifts us out of hell as the Greeks imagined it, where the dead repeat the same gestures for eternity (she wrote: *Can you be more personable? you seem so cold and offended right now... I know you are online but you can add more personality?* And that's what got me started). If we hadn't spent Christmas together we might still be stuck in our distinct modes of resentment. Her apparent indifference, that broke out into open contempt only in moments of exhaustion, when she was maybe surprised by anger and forgot for a second that she wasn't giving a fuck, then come stabbing out like a stiletto. My weak-ass guilty conscience, that made me pathetic and contemptible to both of us, the judgement of which I internalized until I wanted to kill myself. This mood is the thing I hate most about myself. It lifted only when I could very clearly feel <<*I don't like her*>>. I mean, it lifted when I could *accept* this thought. Then it relieved me. It cleared the air of moralism and sentimentality, that keep out the real feelings, out of which I had made awkward gestures, like sharing a meme, something like, Share This If You Are Just So Proud Of Your Wonderful Daughter, or some other such utter bullshit. It felt like the whole internet went WTF? She wrote: *I have no intentions of being a bitch — please don't take it that way. But I'm not going to sugar coat it either. I'm going to say exactly how I feel.* And none of this would have happened if it wasn't for Facebook. We could not have said what we said face to face. Facebook was the only platform for *these* ugly feelings. Our first conversations were on the telephone, starting when she was about 5. We talked on the phone most weekends until she was 10 or 11, when our talks became, for the first time, stilted and one-sided — me asking a lot of dull questions, withering a little more with each of her shorter and shorter answers. Which was a reversal of the situation in our earlier conversations, in which she did all the talking. So we didn't talk much for a few years, and then Facebook. About age 16 she popped up one day with a confession: she was in love with a boy — a white boy she'd met in the Christian private school her mother — who was the daughter of Muslim parents from Fiji — had sent her to, because she thought it was a good compromise between the state school's racism

and violence and the too-conservative Muslim school, where the girls wore hijab. She was sneaking around to hide this white boy from her mom, who she was certain would not accept the relationship. Also, she had become a Christian, just like her boyfriend and all her friends at school. Her mom would for sure not be accepting that. The situation was coming to a crisis. She had run away for 36 hours a few weeks previous. She was desperate and didn't know what to do or who to turn to, so she reached out to me. And for me, this was so rich. It was a plenitude. It gave me an opportunity to act responsibly, and I relished it. At this time in my life I was grateful for every opportunity to be good. So just for the record, in case her mother should hack our messages, I advised her to tell her mother everything, and then I sat back and enjoyed being her confidant. She swore me to secrecy and I accepted to be sworn. Because the other thing about it was that it was a repeat of the circumstances of the way her mother and I got together. She was living our story again, in so many of the particulars: a brown girl and a white boy, hiding from her parents, running away, seizing the long-awaited opportunity of each other to force the violent transformation of her life, and his, after which they would be free from all constraints! Even down to the religious conversion: she had become a Christian just as I had become a Muslim, though she claimed to be an actual believer, whereas I did it to help her mother's parents save face in their community after the scandal of our running-off. But her crisis passed. It all came out and her mother accepted her boyfriend and even the religious conversion, which did not last, as mine did not. She is still with her boyfriend. I'm not sure where he's at with religion, now. Nobody's asking him to convert, I do know that.