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## Reflections

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# Welcome to Canada!

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It was the summer of 1990 when I first visited Toronto, Ont, to interview for an international medical graduate position. Although people often say first impressions are biased, Canada was definitely love at first sight for me. Born and raised in Hong Kong, China, I had studied medicine in the United Kingdom and was now looking for postgraduate training in general surgery after graduation. My parents and older sister were already settled in Canada, and naturally I was encouraged to join them.

One morning my sister offered me a ride on her way to work downtown. She wore a pin-striped executive suit with clean athletic shoes. What an odd combination, I thought to myself, and laughed. She also held her own travel mug filled with home-brewed coffee as she headed down Yonge Street. Such a look would be ludicrous for a successful businesswoman where I was from; however, my doubt was dispelled in the following 10 minutes when I saw more professionals in similar attire. Going to work could really be that casual and enjoyable? *Fantastic!*

After I bid my sister goodbye, I spent the next 3 hours browsing the nearby shops before I would meet her again for lunch. As I walked on, something intriguing happened. Strangers greeted me with warm smiles as if they know me well. Did I know them? Not really. A sudden chill surged up my spine: Was the bagel crust from breakfast still lingering on my beard? Was my "Mr Grumpy" T-shirt inappropriate in this business area? I felt embarrassed at first and did not return the greetings, but the feeling of being rude soon took over and prompted me to reciprocate. And

it felt great! There I was greeting complete strangers like old friends! That would never happen in Hong Kong if I walked in a similar business area on any given morning. Oh, how I loved this country!

### Friendly lot

I spotted a bookshop across the road and decided to go buy a novel. Crossing Yonge Street was ever a challenge, especially for a visitor who was used to driving on the opposite side of the road. As I was reorientating myself at the curb of rushing traffic, an old lady stepped ahead of me, raised her arm, and pointed her index finger as she began to cross the 4-lane street. I was about to yell at her to stop when suddenly I saw the oncoming cars come to a full stop while the lady proceeded with a festinant gait. The crosswalk signal stared at me with a clear red palm. That was interesting, I thought. Some drivers even greeted the lady and told her not to rush. In Hong Kong, such a wanton pedestrian would have an 89% chance of being run over and an 11% chance of making it across the road alive, with raging horns and curses from drivers. I told myself that this country really respected the elderly, that's all. To prove my hypothesis, I imitated the gesture at the next median expecting to be ignored when—*holy moly!*—I parted the sea of traffic like Moses did with the Red Sea. Was I dreaming or was this just the way it was in Canada?

That day, I spent the entire lunchtime relating my awesome experience to my sister, who stared at me with a nonplussed complexion. "Welcome to Canada,"

she said, and indeed I bought souvenirs with the same slogan when I flew home the following week.

### Seventeen years later

I was not offered the international medical graduate post that time I visited Toronto. I later pursued family medicine training in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, fate had me return to Canada as a citizen and academic family physician in July 2007, and how my heart sank when I revisited Yonge Street. Not so much for the noise and dust from the never-ending road construction, but for the lack of greetings and friendly faces from strangers that once surrounded me 17 years ago. Maybe everyone was less friendly because of the humid weather. Maybe it was my unappealing shirt and tie.

Standing at the same spot on another Monday morning, I did not see any professionals wearing trainer shoes; I only saw a stream of expressionless faces and people who would walk into you with no remorse. That old bookshop where I bought my first Canadian novel was replaced with a posh café, with 2 teenagers sitting beside the door asking for spare change. Out of curiosity I approached them and asked why they ended up on the street. One teenager erupted with foul language and the other said he was on disability. I walked on by and found the intersection where I first learned the “magic” gesture at the crosswalk. Perhaps this would make my day, I thought. Facing the red palm crosswalk signal, I pointed my left index finger, but as I advanced my foot onto the road it nearly got crushed as a taxi drove past. Why did it not work anymore?

It was like déjà vu as I sat in the same restaurant having lunch with my sister, telling her what had happened in the past 3 hours. This time, however, the experience was described as awful instead of awesome. She sighed and told me that in many ways Toronto resembles New York City nowadays, from the never-bother-to-signal style of driving to shootings in the streets. As the conversation unfolded, my sister revealed that she had recently been diagnosed with hypertension and was considering early retirement.

With a heavy heart I drove back to Kingston, Ont. The audience on the radio debated the negativity of a recent television advertisement urging people to shake off the ugliness of Toronto and escape to Niagara Falls instead. Was it the urbanization that estranged people, or was it the Internet that took away our interpersonal awareness? My experience at the crosswalk so many years ago had been the golden example of Canadian courtesy that I related to countless people in Hong Kong.

As a Canadian, I felt a piece was missing in our way of living. As a physician, I wondered if a decline

in general well-being did contribute to the prevalence of chronic pain and claims for disability. Suddenly I remembered a recent request from a 19-year-old patient asking me to complete documents for permanent disability on grounds of depression. Is our country less tolerable to live in, or are people less tolerant of life in general? While struggling with my thoughts I unknowingly drove below the legal speed limit. The next thing I knew, a Mercedes coupe overtook me and sounded its tympanum-tearing horn, demonstrating a nice Doppler effect as it sped away.

“Welcome to Canada,” I said aloud, as I sipped my Tim Hortons coffee. 

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**Competing interests**  
None declared

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