PATTI EDGAR

ASCENDING IN A HOTEL CONFERENCE ROOM

WE SIT FACING THE REPRESENTATIVE—a tanned, middle-aged man with a goatee who radiates new-age confidence in a suit and tie. His sandy hair hovers at a length between corporate clone and grunge. Our first task: introduce yourself to the person you're most attracted to in the room.

"Be deeply aware of your reactions to the unexpected," he says, leaning into the podium. "Take stock of how you follow through on the instructions. Remember, this is your first step in a journey towards winning in life."

I'm sixteen years old, and the strangers in the stuffy hotel meeting room are all adults. I remain very still, avoiding eye contact as others shift in their seats or tentatively stand. Earlier, I'd noticed a man in a leather jacket with long hair, pacing in the back as if he wasn't sure whether to commit to "winning in life," and I thought *that guy belongs in a MuchMusic video*. I glance over, but he's already in conversation with a blonde woman. I remind myself to tune into my reactions. I feel my face flushing. An older man comes up to me and tells me that my hair reminds him of his daughter. I'm polite because I don't want him to be embarrassed, but I need to find someone closer to my own age—someone safe.

Then I notice someone sitting alone. His name tag says "Brad," and he looks relieved when I come over to say hello. He turns out to be a computer programming student whose girlfriend recently dumped him. We sit next to each other in silence, our first task completed, as the Representative returns to the podium and begins to talk about the subjective construction of experience. He's lost me, but I remember that he told us to be deeply aware of our reactions to his instructions. I sought safety, and now I had Brad, who seems deflated and depressed for someone old enough to live on his own and drink at a pub.

The course is run by a west coast training corporation. My parents enrolled me after it changed their lives. Technically, it changed all our lives. And on the first day of my journey towards winning, it is no longer much of a mystery to me as to how.

The concept of gathering paying customers into a large room for days at a time with the promise of personal growth seems to have peaked in popularity in the 1990s, when I was enrolled. Researchers even had a term for the phenomenon: Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT). It sprung out of the counter-culture concept of "self-actualization" as a cure for neurosis, but eventually hippy garb was dropped in favour of business attire to appeal to professionals interested in the self-help trend. According to University of Connecticut researchers, these for-profit endeavours operate outside of the mental health community and offer similar approaches: didactic presentations, demonstrations, structured exercises, and "dialogues between members of the audience and the group leader."

"In general, LGATs espouse the idea that people are capable of changing their own lives, not so much by modifying their external circumstances but by changing the way they interpret them," the researchers explained. "Often, LGATs focus on philosophical themes of personal responsibility, integrity, and commitment."

My mom took the course first, encouraged by two artists who shared her studio. Their wives had taken it, and their friends had taken it, as one of the teachings is to surround yourself with people who have obtained a similar "shift" so they can support you in your new goals. Asking friends and family to take the course avoids putting you in the uncomfortable position of shunning them for not having the tools they need to support you. My mom then asked my dad to enrol, and soon everyone they knew was a graduate.

My course runs Thursday and Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday. Mom drives me back and forth to the hotel. At school following my first night, I tell my friends the experience is totally eye-opening and making me much more self-aware. I also mention how expensive it is, secretly pleased because my parents spending money on me has me feeling noticed again. I shock my friends with the details of my first task. They seem skeptical, but I'm hopeful that the Representative embodies a fresh wisdom. I can change my life not by collecting recycling for Earth Club, like a naïve teenager hoping to create a better world, but by changing the way I *interpret* what happens around me.

The Friday night of my journey towards self-change is spent in a larger, carpeted hotel conference room—a very adult space to me. At one side of the room there is a buffet that includes options for vegetarians, which seems very modern, especially as I'm thinking about becoming one. We are divided into small groups, each with a former graduate volunteering as our Team Leader. Brad is in my group, along with a recently divorced salesman and an older woman in a ballooning pink and purple dress who tells us she has cancer, and we are instructed to play the Testing Game. The game pairs teams together, who must create a nearly impossible puzzlelike task for the other team to solve. Laid bare are human reactions: assertiveness, cheating, withdrawal, outbursts, peacemaking, frustrated tears. I just observe, leaving the decision-making to the adults. Afterwards, I'm handed a homework sheet and told not to speak to anyone while I fill it out. "What are the attitudes, behaviours, and emotional responses that were effective and ineffective during the game? Comparing it to life, what are you allowing to be most important to you?"

At home that night, I go through my mom's file folders and sneak a peek at the sheet she filled out when she took the course. She concluded that she wants to "win" at relationships.

As LGATs grew in popularity, so did headlines and lawsuits, prompting accusations of mass exploitation and fears that participants, especially those with mental health problems, could come out of a course in a worse state. Curious, the University of Connecticut researchers set up a long-term study of participants in a LGAT called the Forum. They were overwhelmingly white, a little more likely to identify as female, and comfortable financially. While the Forum marketed itself to the "already successful, the already healthy, the already accomplished," the surveys revealed that "participants were significantly more distressed than peer and normative samples of community residents and had a higher level of impact of recent negative life events." In other words, someone who had a recent upheaval in their life, like a divorce, a job loss, or a move to a new city, might turn to a large group experience for support.

A few weeks after my dad took the course, he surprised me by inviting me to spend an afternoon with him. After playing a round of mini golf, he took me for a short walk and awkwardly announced that he and my mother were separating. I felt shocked, as they had never fought or even raised their

voices at each other, which were supposed to be the telltale signs of an unhappy marriage. I also felt betrayed, as I realized that our game of mini golf had been a ruse to tell me something unpleasant rather than a genuine attempt to spend time doing something with me that I enjoyed.

It also foreshadowed what was to come: forced Friday nights with a father who lived in a basement suite by the highway and couldn't think of anyplace to take his kids besides the busy mall next to my junior high. At home, my mother faded away. She popped pills filled with green powder and dated a divorced dad she'd met on the course. They celebrated a month-long relationship milestone with a colon cleanse. The daughter of a family friend moved into the home I shared with my mom and little brother. Rather than pay rent, she cooked dinner and did laundry, holding our household together by its seams and creases. My parents told me I needed to learn how to communicate instead of tearing up, screaming, and stomping away like a teenager. By taking the course, I would learn how to fill the empty space left behind by my parents' silences.

On Saturday morning our goal in the hotel conference room is to discover our "intrinsic ability to create wins." Our Team Leader has a blonde pixie haircut and talks in a calm voice. We do trust exercises, where people fall backward and the other group members catch them. We applaud when others share. We set some "win" goals for ourselves. I want to go to university but only in a vague sort of way, like how I want a pair of reddish Doc Martens. We draw a large plus sign on a piece of paper and put a lot of dots on it in response to a series of questions. It's supposed to help you find out what kind of personality you have. I realize my mom is a "promoter" because she starts a lot of things and never finishes them. My father is clearly a "controller" because everything must be done his way. I decide I'm an "analyzer."

Our chairs once again in a circle, our Team Leader asks: "Are you winning in life? Are you in the process of creating what you are certain is most important to you? Because when you are, you feel better about yourself, and you feel better about other people in your life."

I try to imagine my parents as individuals creating what is most important to them. They both have new partners and live in new homes. My dad has bought a business that he's overhauling, and my mom has started teaching. In creating what is most important to them, where do they see their two

children? Are we at the heart of this new creation or in the way of it?

In the late afternoon our Team Leader talks about taking accountability for everything that happens in our lives rather than seeking to blame others. "I attract to me everything that occurs," she explains. "This is my choice—to be used by me and only for me."

I struggle with this, especially when the woman with cancer in the billowing dress starts to cry.

The Team Leader runs a hand through her short blonde hair. "This isn't about assigning blame. It's about claiming your own experience of the situation, taking personal accountability."

Our little group shifts into uncomfortable silence.

The concept of accountability was also at the core of Erhard Seminars Training (EST), which seems to have been the model for dozens of LGATs that sprung up after it. The idea is that the *real* world we inhabit is a subjective world we create for ourselves. Stanford researchers who studied LGATs explain that a trainee is told they are "the 'source' of his or her subjective experiences and must assume absolute responsibility for the experience of everything that occurs in his or her world. Although trainees might not have caused their misfortune in a consensual sense, they remain totally responsible for their experience of them and therefore the realities in which they live."

After learning about the concept, EST followers would participate in an exercise that had people acting out socially inappropriate scenarios to make the point that "their embarrassment results from their own construction of the experience rather than an external source."

As Saturday wraps up, I'm still hopeful about the course, even though the graduates in my life do not offer much anecdotal evidence of positive results. My mom's boyfriend, Alan, is a mailman she met during the course, who now lives with us. I find him pathetic and petty. Nothing about him radiates winning. Recently, we got into a fight about whether I could watch TV in their bedroom. He chased me through the house, screaming at me to respect him while kicking me in the butt. My twelve-year-old brother, slouched into the sofa watching TV, stared, wide-eyed, as we raced past him. Alan had me pinned against a wall at the top of the basement stairs when the tenant who lived down there, responding to the noise, showed up and yelled at him to stop. That night, my mom—speaking through the bedroom door

that I had barricaded by leaning against it and leveraging my feet against the opposite wall—asked me if I thought I had overreacted to the situation. I laughed.

Heather is a fellow graduate, who once waltzed in our living room to Van Morrison's *Moondance* during a dinner party. Very slim and pale, with the bluest eyes, she had a toddler I used to watch for two dollars an hour in her tiny apartment. I'd wash her dishes, examine her diet pills, and listen to Meatloaf's *Bat Out of Hell* on her record player. She had two indistinguishable boyfriends, who didn't seem to know about each other. In less than a year she married one of them and moved away, her winning life pursued and my only babysitting job over.

My father met his first post-separation girlfriend, Deb, during his course. A petite, ashen-haired, weight-lifting elementary school teacher, Deb had been his Team Leader, having previously sat through a course with my mom, learning intimate details of their troubled relationship. I learned about the relationship when my dad called us to say he wouldn't be able to call or visit us for a month because he was taking Deb to Spain.

She rekindled a passion for skiing in him, so that Christmas break he drove us all to the mountains for a ski trip. We stayed in a dumpy Tudor-themed motel, half under renovation, and my dad skied with Deb on the black diamond runs, leaving my brother and me, new to skiing, on the bunny hills. On New Year's Eve we ate in a restaurant with white tablecloths and shimmery tea lights, but by the time we left, Deb was shouting at me in the parking lot, calling me a bitch for something snide I had said over dinner. That night, my father left my brother and me in the motel room with the TV on, promising he would be back at midnight to celebrate. As midnight got closer, my brother started to cry. I grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the room, moving through the passageways and elevators, through the crowded bar full of people screaming, laughing, and holding up drinks, looking for our dad. The next afternoon my brother wanted to stay, but I took the bus home alone, sitting next to a man with a pentagram tattooed on his forearm, who told me it was an ancient and misunderstood symbol and asked if he could have my phone number.

On Sunday in the hotel conference room we are taught the "rules for resolution," which are supposed to help me communicate with my parents and finally reach them. Here's what I learn: I must obtain permission to

enter a negotiation, I must tell the truth, I must listen, I must stick with the real issue at hand with clarity of purpose, I must not issue ultimatums to get my way, I must find a solution that includes a win for each of us, and I must commit to our agreement.

I visualize an octagon-shaped window. That window defines my dad's new place—the house he has built near the ferry terminal. As the home was under construction, I admired the window, which was in my future bedroom. That room represented my physical place in his new creation, and my brother's room was nearby, connected by a bathroom. Then my dad shacked up with a younger woman, whom he'd hired to paint the house, and he told me over the phone that her five-year-old son had moved into the room with the octagon window. My younger brother would keep the adjoining room, but I'd get the guest room a floor down. There was no negotiation; he hadn't followed the "rules for resolution." Later, I overheard my mother's friend say, "The course didn't teach your ex to be an ass. It just taught him how to be a *winning* ass."

It's almost over. One of the Team Leaders dims the lights, and we stand in a circle, holding hands, while silently committing to our journey towards "winning in life." The tanned, confident Representative from the first evening is suddenly part of the circle, holding our hands.

"We are here for you in your commitment to winning," he says. "My goal is to provide support and encouragement for you to internalize your new learning and to surround yourself with others who want to win. Let's continue this journey together."

We are to return one week later for our "completion ceremony," where we will each get a computer-printed certificate. Before we leave, we are handed a sheet of instructions that includes the suggestion to bring friends and family to the ceremony. They will get a free introductory session in another room, while we share the results of our first post-course week. In the meantime, we are encouraged to call each other to share our "wins." We are reminded that when we break commitments we risk the loss of self-esteem, our energy lowers, and we become mired in confusion. We are encouraged to keep taking courses from the corporation and to volunteer to be a Team Leader. There are stages to pass. This levelling up is not unlike my little brother playing *Sonic the Hedgehog* on his Sega Genesis.

The chance to continue to be part of a social community through vol-

unteering and paying for more courses is a hallmark of LGATs. Participants usually end their training on a euphoric high. But, as the Stanford researchers noted, while LAGTs seem to have "highly satisfied customers," Americans also self-reported feeling better after a weekend away playing volleyball or ballroom dancing.

Curious about the long-term impacts of these courses on participants, the University of Connecticut researchers used their surveys to measure a list of potential outcomes, such as self-esteem, physical health, social functioning, and life satisfaction. They concluded that "claims about far-reaching positive or negative psychological effects of participation in LGATs such as the Forum may be exaggerated." That is where the academic research ended—participants had willingly parted with their time and money but were not measurably harmed. However, the courses continued to gain momentum for a few more years, making headlines as a quirky or controversial trend. As North America rolled into a new millennium, some LGATs rebranded themselves as corporate training organizations, bringing concepts like "conflict resolution" and "personal accountability" into the boardroom.

Back in my hotel conference room, a Team Leader raises the lights, and we are told that it's time to say goodbye. Soon we will be released into the hallway, where the people who signed us up for the course will be waiting. While everyone else is hugging, and Brad is laughing and swapping numbers with a pretty brunette who goes to his university, I am nibbling on a room-temperature vegetarian bagel sandwich in a far corner. A realization about my subjective experience of the situation: I'm comfortable being alone, especially with this crowd. There is a shared feeling of elation and fulfilment in the room, but I know that it's only temporary and that loneliness and upheaval await them. When I leave the room, I will pretend that I've learned a lot to please my parents and to not feel embarrassed when my friends ask, especially because I bragged to them about the expense. I won't go to the "completion ceremony." I won't call anyone to tell them about my "wins."

A Team Leader finally opens the double doors. Standing in a clump are the former graduates who encouraged us to sign up, all clutching bouquets. I don't see my dad, but my mother is waiting for me with a bunch of red carnations she probably picked up at the supermarket. I realize that if I try harder at school and get into university next year, I will no longer need to live with either parent. My dad doesn't like paying alimony to my mom, and my mom's boyfriend doesn't want me around. It would be a win-win-win.