

# FRANCES WHITTING



**“It turns out tomorrow didn’t turn out like any one of us imagined”**

**O**ne decade and three years after we first looped an enormous backpack over his small shoulders, my son is about to finish high school.

So too are the thousands of other graduates in this most unusual Class of 2021; the one where many of them have not stepped inside their school grounds for months. The one where their hats remain stuffed somewhere at the bottom of long-abandoned school bags.

It’s been a long time since some of these kids – and they are still at the very edge of being kids – have breathed in the scent of the schoolyard; the eau de cologne of handballs hitting brick walls, sandwiches sweating in lunchboxes, dusty ovals and choccy milk breath.

And for those who have been able to go to school, classroom whispers have been caught behind masks, and crumpled notes tossed between social distances.

When this crop of graduates remembers its days of the old school yard, it won’t look like mine or yours did.

It will look like lessons through a computer screen, and schoolmates’ faces like the opening credits of *The Brady Bunch*.

It will look like wearing your uniform on top, and your tracksuit pants below.

It will look like the school formal is off, then on, then off again, and your parents taking photos of your navy suits and shiny dresses anyway. At least, that’s how it will look for the lucky and loved ones. For some kids, it will look like

darkened rooms, bowed heads, and scarlet cuts on arms and legs. Not all kids have hearts and minds that can bear such heavy lifting.

And yet, here they all are, this class of 2021, almost at the end. I look at my son’s friends – perpetually standing in front of my fridge with the door open – and I marvel at their loose-limbed appetite for life. I look at my friend’s daughter about to graduate, after a year flecked with a few of those cuts on her arms and legs, and I think how remarkable you are. All of you.

How funny. How strong. How brave. How great, and how much I will miss these days, strange as they have been.

Because I can still see a little boy with snowy hair under a maroon school hat, his giant backpack threatening to tip him over like a marooned loggerhead

turtle. I see the packed lunches, the ham sandwiches and the sultana boxes, the tuckshop deals and the Zooper Doopers.

I see the school concerts and the sports days, the Book Week costumes and the soccer matches.

I see the bruised knees and the broken arm the day before the summer holidays. I see Hairy Maclary, and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *Ranger’s Apprentice* and the *Wimpy Kid*. And I see my son’s head turn towards me at the gate, on that very first day, his hand raised towards tomorrow.

It turns out tomorrow didn’t turn out like any one of us imagined. But despite Covid, lockdowns and lockouts and padlocks wrapped around school gates, you all turned up – or turned on your computers at home – and did it anyway.

Bravo, Class of 2021. Bravo.

