



THE VERY BEST SUBURB

A Collection of Short Stories by Renee Lehen



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Preface

Welcome to Elmington, the very best suburb in the Greater Toronto Area. I'm Gladys Hill of Hill Realty, Elmington's premier real estate brokerage. You can see most of Elmington from the offices of Hill Realty. Before we hit the streets, I'll give you the bird's eye view of the city.

This window faces south toward Lake Ontario. Do you see the tops of masts? Rows of pennants and flags? They mark the harbour at the mouth of the Copper River, the focal point of the city. The Elmington Club sits on the west bank. It has a marina, tennis courts, pools, and an excellent restaurant. Gary and I are members and we'd be happy to sponsor you.

Across the harbour is the Copper River Marina, municipally owned, fewer amenities. Every summer the yacht clubs co-host the Golden Mast Regatta and competition is stiff.

Now follow the Lake Ontario shoreline to the west. See where the land rises to a bluff? That's Windsor Heights, Elmington's Bridle Path, or Westmount, if you will. The private schools, Applegate and St. Hilda's, poke through trees. Elmington's a fantastic city to raise kids.

The blocks of towers off to the east? That's East Elmington. We don't get many listings there. It's mostly post-industrial brown fields, rental units, some public housing that city council was guilted into approving in the 80s, and strip plaza retail—pay day loan sharks, pawn shops, and second-hand stores. The area's overdue for gentrification but the old factories are single storey, utilitarian monstrosities and no one's figured out how to tart them up as lofts.

If you're attracted to condo living, there are some spacious flats within a few blocks of Hill Realty, right here in downtown Elmington. Oodles of gracious Victorian charm mere steps from high-end bistros, cafes, and boutiques.

Now let's look through the north windows. That's Elmington General Hospital, with the tracks running east-west behind it. A half hour on the train and you hop off at Union Station, an easy walk to Bay Street. If you're germophobic like yours truly and avoid transit, the Queen's Highway takes you to downtown Toronto. Elmington is known as "the GTA's master

bedroom” because it offers a quality lifestyle to the suburban commuter. But don’t take my word for it. Look north!

Beautiful, isn’t it? Verdant, rolling hills, the Copper River Golf and Country Club, newer subdivisions like Glen Forest and Elm Hollow set among bucolic farmers’ fields.

Now let’s hop in the Mercedes so you can see Elmington at street level and I’ll tell you some stories as we drive around. After twenty-five years in the business, I have a few juicy tales bouncing around in my cranium. We’ll begin in East Elmington and work up from there.

The Curious Marriage of Nigel Woodburn

Nigel Woodburn couldn't recall the exact moment he realized he was a cuckold. The scales had fallen slowly from his eyes, as if he were sharpening the focus on a telescope, or clearing the ice from a windshield, squirt and swipe, squirt and swipe, though the signs of his wife's infidelity had flashed in neon. They lived together in a contrived contentment, Nigel pretending he didn't know and Grace pretending she didn't know that he knew. He couldn't go on like this now.

Nigel arrived at the East Elmington Public Library at quarter past eight, forty-five minutes prior to opening, when he would unlock the oak doors at the top of the broad stone stairs. Nigel always arrived a half hour before the other staff. He cherished the spacious quiet, the vanilla smell of paper and paste and old wood, and the order. Soon patrons would spill noisily through the doors holding clandestine throw-away coffee mugs under their jackets, pulling mucousy children behind them, and marking the floor with muddy footwear.

As on every other weekday morning, Nigel entered the granite building by the staff entrance, changed from his New Balance walkers to his loafers, hung up his overcoat, clipped his name tag onto the left pocket of his shirt, and put his stacked Tupperware lunch into the staff fridge. Then, whistling some half-remembered show tune, he playfully swung his lanyard of keys and strolled to the after-hours book return. Apart from rare occasions when he'd find a Doritos wrapper, or worse, Nigel relished the daily slice-of-Christmas moment when he unlocked the back of the receptacle box to discover what'd tumbled in over night. "Who could ask for anything more?" hummed Nigel.

He pulled the door open, leaving the keys hanging from the lock. Then, he pushed a metal basket against the bottom edge of the box with his right knee and carefully scooped DVDs, CDs, magazines, picture books, novels in paper and hard cover—a representation of all the Elmington Public Library system featured on its shelves—into the basket. Last in was a dog-eared *Penthouse* magazine.

Strange, thought Nigel. The library didn't subscribe to *Penthouse*. Someone must've mixed up his own magazine with the library's.

Nigel locked the returns door and heaved the basket back to the circulation desk. As he checked in materials, he'd review the borrowers' names and try to figure out who might've misplaced a filthy porno rag. *His*. Nigel was confident that he was using the correct possessive pronoun, under the circumstances. The publication of such periodicals was a blemish on the collective character of the male sex, and he'd have a word with the magazine's owner about basic decency if he could track him down.

Nigel glanced at the clock that hung next to the portrait of King Charles. It was 8:25. Plenty of time to search for clues, before the other staff arrived. He noted that the magazine was on the bottom of the pile, which meant it was first into the slot after 8:00 pm the previous evening, when the library closed for the night.

Nigel set the magazine on the desk blotter and looked at the cover. February 2003. An old issue, but what would that matter to men who "read" such things. A blond woman with full, luridly painted lips, her long hair covering her bare breasts, leered at him from the cover. Nigel felt a warm swelling inside his pants. He had to pull his eyes away to search for more clues inside the magazine. As he turned over the cover page, he noticed a pink paper clip pinned at the top. Inside was a Post-it note. Interesting, thought Nigel. Adhesive and clip, like a belt and suspenders. Someone didn't want to lose the note which read, "Turn to the 'Penthouse Pet' in the centrefold." Nigel did as commanded.

Pictured in a two-page spread was the blonde, as naked as Eve in the garden, her long limbs sprawled provocatively. Taped over the girl's face was a cut-out, passport-style photo of Grace. Nigel felt sick to his stomach. Scrawled in black marker was a taunt. "The mole on the inside of your wife's thigh turns me on!" And oddly, perhaps intentionally, the dot on the exclamation point landed exactly on the top of the inner thigh of the Penthouse girl where Grace was marked with a real mole.

Nigel abruptly closed the magazine and buried it under a stack of old files in the bottom drawer of the desk. He didn't want to share this unsettling discovery with an early-bird colleague. He turned to the basket and quickly searched for suspicious men among the borrowers as he checked the returns through the computer:

Dorothy Checketts: a boxed set of DVDs of the 'Midsomer Murders'

Gabrielle Tam: *Careers for Humanities Grads*, *What Colour is Your Parachute*, and three how-to books on resume writing

Harold Pincher: three CDs—‘Waltzes and Polkas’, ‘Let’s Celebrate with Strauss’ and ‘Wagner Unwound’

Olivia Eastley: several paperbacks from the “Babysitter Club” series

Madison Holman: two how-to books on knitting baby clothes, *Yoga for the Expectant Woman* in hard cover, and an array of magazines on parenting, crafting, and cookery

Alvin Wheeler: two westerns by Louis L’Amour and a *Dummies’ Guide* to estate planning.

And that was it...a lighter than usual haul, and nary a miscreant among these patrons.

Nigel remembered a recent staff meeting he’d attended. The oily maintenance fellow, Carsten, reported that repairs to the CCTV monitoring system would cost several hundred dollars. The librarians agreed to defer repairs in favour of acquiring materials. Afterall, they’d argued, what was the point of monitoring a building with bare shelves? Carsten shook his head and said they’d “rue the decision to neglect basic security.” His words were prophetic.

On the other hand, Carsten knew the CCTV system was down, and Nigel wouldn’t put it past the man to read pornography—or steal another man’s bride. Nigel’s chest puffed at the thought of defending Grace’s honour, however dubious it might be. His obsession with uncovering the identity of his wife’s secret lover began—for real—at 8:42.

At 8:43, Margot pushed through the staff door and bumped her way to the circulation desk, her glasses foggy from leaving a cold November morning for the always-August, twenty-three degrees of the library interior. Nigel muttered an impatient “good morning” to his colleague.

Margot was punctual and she adored books, but she was otherwise unsuited for her duties. First, she was sloppy when the task at hand required accuracy. Just yesterday, Nigel found a children's book on aviation in the adult's section, courtesy of—you guessed it—Margot. Furthermore, she deserted the circulation desk whenever a patron approached her with a research query she found even passingly interesting.

And her wardrobe! Today she wore a tweed blazer over a burgundy cable-knit sweater over a plaid men's shirt with a canary-yellow infinity scarf encircling the whole pile of rags. Nigel knew that Margot wouldn't deign to use the hook provided for outdoor clothing at the staff entrance. No, no, no. All morning, she'd discard items on chairbacks and desktops until she was down to the plaid shirt with its sleeves rumpled up to her elbows. Her unkempt appearance reflected her organizational skills and tested Nigel's tolerance for diversity. Worst of all? Margot didn't seem to care.

"Good morning, Nigel," said Margot. She wiped her glasses on the hem of her shirt which now protruded from under the waistband of the sweater. "Who's up for 'Tales for Tots' this morning?"

"It's your turn, Margot. If you refer to the schedule..." Nigel gestured toward a photocopied calendar page pinned to the bulletin board with "Margot" highlighted in mauve on all four Thursdays.

"Cool," said Margot. "It's windy outside and the kids like making animal noises. I think I'll start with *Farmer Brown Goes Round and Round*."

"A stimulating choice," said Nigel. He expected an excessive rise in decibel level from the children's area by 10:05. "Perhaps something a little more...umm...sedate after *Farmer Brown*? Something soothing?"

"Wise," replied Margot. "I'll read the brats an article on tax preparation or contract law. That'll tranquilize them." She shook her head and sat on the desk, another annoying habit.

Nigel set aside his irritation and asked, nonchalantly, "Have you found any...umm...unusual materials in the returns lately? Anything...perhaps...unsuitable?"

Margot leaned forward and stared over her glasses. "Such as what?"

“Well...umm...something smutty perhaps. Something that shouldn’t be in the library.”

“If you ask me, Nigel, the library needs more smut. Romances fly off the shelves and, let me tell you, they aren’t your granny’s Harlequins these days. If we want to serve our customers, we should have a whole section of erotica.”

Customers. Nigel shrugged the word away. Terminology such as ‘customers’ and ‘users’ commercialized the library and diminished the institution’s noble goal of elevating the literary sensibilities of the citizens of Elmington.

“Let’s revisit that idea at our next acquisitions meeting,” said Nigel. “I’m asking about items that belong in someone’s private collection.”

“Whose?”

“Never mind, Margot. By your answers, I’m given to believe that you, as usual, have no pertinent information to present.”

“I suppose not.” Margot turned to the IT technician who was hanging up his Gore-Tex parka. “Morning Colin. Nigel is wondering if we’ve seen anything untoward in the library. Anything pornographic.”

Colin sucked air through his teeth and gazed at the ceiling for a moment. “Well, as a matter of fact, I have.”

“Do tell,” said Margot.

“I caught old Harold Pincher watching porn on the computer a week ago Monday. I told him to take his fascination to the computer in the study area...to be discreet.”

“And?” asked Margot.

“And he did,” replied Colin. “It was hetero, straight up, man on woman, boring sex in the missionary position. Harmless but not something a mother wants to explain to a preschooler in the library. The end.”

Nigel was flustered. Harold Pincher? With Grace? Now Nigel’s main suspect was 85 years old, plus or minus a year, and travelled by taxi because he’d relinquished his licence. Colin

should've reported this incident post-haste, but Nigel decided to ignore his colleague's negligence. "Thank-you for the information, Colin," said Nigel.

"No probs," said Colin.

"You're welcome," corrected Nigel. He looked at the clock. It was almost nine.

Nigel crossed the threshold of the front door of his home at approximately five pm. Usually he looked forward to slipping on his carpet slippers, perhaps changing into jeans and pullover, and relaxing with a beverage. His workday had passed unremarkably, but he was wound up like a Timex wristwatch, tic, tic, tic, and unwinding would be impossible.

As he pushed a hanger into the sleeves of his overcoat, Nigel was comforted, briefly, by the smell of roasting meat wafting from the kitchen down the wall-papered corridor to his nostrils.

"Nigel? You're home?" Grace's voice broke Nigel's brief reprieve.

He decided against replying. It was a husband's prerogative to be silent if he wished.

"Nigel? Oh, there you are." Grace stood in the doorway to the kitchen, a paring knife glinting in her right hand.

Nigel nodded.

"TGIT, Nigel."

Nigel raised a curious brow as Grace stepped toward him.

"Thank God It's Thursday." She kissed his stone-cold cheek. "Do you want a glass of wine to celebrate?"

Nigel shrugged a non-committal yes and took note of the music issuing from the radio. "Ride of the Valkyries." Harold Pincher had returned "Wagner Unwound." A coincidence? Nigel thought not. He had to behave naturally if he hoped to discover the truth, so he broke his silence. "You usually listen to the news when you cook."

"Well the news is all about that mass shooting yesterday and I can't bear it, so I switched to Radio 2." Grace poured Nigel a glass of red wine and passed it to him.

"And you chose Wagner over The Tragically Hip or some other rock and roll music?"

"I suppose I'm growing up. Becoming more cultured like you. Adulting."

Nigel disliked Grace's penchant for turning nouns into verbs. She was too old for that cutesy linguistic affectation. Hiding his irritation, he asked, "Why Wagner? Why not jazz, or country?"

"Country? Are you off your rocker, Nigel? What's the matter? You're acting weird."

"I'm not acting weirdly. I'm surprised you enjoy the same music as old men do, that's all." Nigel sipped his wine and observed Grace's reaction.

"What?" Grace looked perplexed, but Nigel thought she might be faking.

"Old men. Elderly, white octogenarians. Do you find them interesting? Or sexy?" asked Nigel. "Some women do. Hugh Hefner attracted a harem of young women. And Harold Pincher has a roguish sense of style. He wears a fedora."

"Nigel, I don't know why you're asking these crazy questions, but I assure you, I don't dig old dudes. And I'm pretty sure the Bunnies munched the grass at the Playboy mansion because Hugh paid them to do it." Grace set her wine glass on the counter and put her arms around Nigel's neck. "You're all the man I want, and all the man I can handle."

Nigel retreated to his usual pretense of contented husband-hood. He'd prepare thoroughly before questioning Grace again. He kissed his wife on the forehead and asked about supper.

On Friday morning, Nigel's heart beat like a metronome dialled up to a nervous *allegro* as he walked to the after-hours receptacle. However, Nigel's trepidation soon gave way to relief. The returns were wholly uncontroversial and dull: two issues of *Conde Nast Traveler*; three tea cozy mysteries by M.C. Beaton; a stray bookmark with a rust-coloured tassel for the Capricorn reader; an assortment of children's picture books; *Veganism for Leather Lovers*; and a collection of short stories by Alice Munro, the most pornographic finding of the lot in

Nigel's estimation. He decided that Thursday had been an anomaly...a day to box up and forget.

Tranquility prevailed until midday when Nigel witnessed an event that was at once prosaic and alarming. A female patron approached the circulation desk with a complaint about a computer monitor, a fussy piece of equipment that preferred to relay information upside-down despite Colin's frequent ministrations. Nigel summoned Colin with a brisk tap on the bell at the IT workstation, and Colin arrived and received the complaint, repeated in detail.

"Acting up again, is it?" Colin asked with earnest, empathetic concern. "Thank-you for letting me know. I hope you found another computer."

The patron told Colin she had.

"Good, good. I'll fix that monitor as soon as I can," Colin said gravely.

Then, Colin opened a drawer and removed a pad of post-it notes, took a Sharpie from the pen holder, and scribbled, "Out of order!"

Nigel's marrow turned to ice. "That note." He pointed with his index finger at the coloured pad.

"Yes, I'll fix the naughty beast after lunch. For now, I want people to stay off that monitor or we'll be hearing about it constantly."

"But you wrote in marker and used an exclamation point when none was required."

"Oh, for God's sake, Nigel. Your micromanaging is out of control."

Nigel had to admit he sounded ridiculous. Yet Colin's writing resembled the writing on the note in the magazine. Both messages were masculine, blocky, and sure handed. He'd compare the two samples later, when the coast was clear.

"Fair enough, Colin," said Nigel, his tone conciliatory. "Why don't you take your break now, and I'll go when Margot's back."

“Alright, Nigel,” agreed Colin. He walked to the catalogue computers and, with a redundant, inch-long piece of tape, affixed the note to the troublesome monitor. Belt and suspenders—*again*.

Alas, Nigel had no chance to compare the notes due to heavy patron traffic by the circulation desk over the lunch hour. Colin adjusted the monitor during Nigel’s break, and presumably disposed of the “out of order” sign. Nigel checked every garbage can for a crumpled, yellow post-it note but found none which was most irregular.

Margot and Colin accepted Nigel’s offer to leave at 4:30 pm, permitting Nigel to wait alone for the evening librarian, the habitually tardy Bianca. He removed the *Penthouse* magazine from the bottom drawer and put it in the inside pocket of his overcoat, pausing in the task to peek at the note concealed under page one. The handwriting was similar, but not the same as Colin’s. Perhaps Colin disguised his style when he scrawled the damning words implicating Grace in the sordid act of adultery. Nigel needed more clues before he could confront his wife.

It was Nigel’s turn to work solo on Saturday morning, a dreary November day. A persistent sleet pelted Elmington, weather that would chase people from the parks and streets into the armchairs of the library as soon as Nigel unlocked the doors.

He opened the after-hours receptacle and found a hard-covered *National Geographic* atlas, three romance novels, a glorified comic book titled *Watchmen*, and several soft-covered European travel guides, likely returned by a single patron who’d exceeded borrowing limits. *Margot!* Smoke led to fire, and a violation of policy led to Margot every time. Nigel imagined her at the circulation desk, laughing and asking the patron about his or her itinerary. If there were four books about Provence on the desk, she’d suggest a fifth, as if she were urging canapes on a guest at a cocktail party. Incurable!

Nigel breathed his irritation away. He needn’t ruminate about Margot’s flagrant disregard for rules on a perfectly ordered Saturday. What’s more, the inclement weather had

dampened the exuberance of the Friday-night vandals and the receptacle was devoid of garbage. Nigel swept his arm through the box to confirm it was empty and pulled out a pamphlet.

What a pamphlet it was. On its face was a photograph of four partially clothed adults holding hands—two women, two men, four hues of the dermatological rainbow. Below the photo, a caption in inflammatory red lettering asked, impertinently, “Friend, is polyamory the answer?”

“The answer to what?” Nigel asked back. Then, he saw the paperclip. Pink as before, inviting him to open the pamphlet. Inside, a post-it note covered the top of one of three panels of clumsily typeset paragraphs on the merits of multiple-partner romance. Rendered in a blocky, masculine hand with black marker was the message, “Information for Nigel Woodburn”.

Nigel blushed. Although his red face suggested otherwise, Nigel was no hothouse tomato. He was a well-educated, open-minded man and well aware of societal fads. Why would anyone want to give him an instructive pamphlet on polyamory?

Nigel lugged his basket to the circulation desk and hid the pamphlet in his overcoat pocket. He decided to investigate the borrowing patterns of certain persons of interest. He had thirty minutes till opening. He logged into the computer.

A five second foray into Colin’s digital record revealed a single download onto a Kobo e-reader on December 23rd, the mark of a semi-literate IT professional personalizing a gift for his mother. Colin’s borrowing history was otherwise blank.

Carsten had borrowed books on vintage motorcycles and sports cars, several Jack Reacher novels, and every classic rock CD in the library’s collection, an unremarkable history congruent with Nigel’s expectations of a middle-aged maintenance worker. Nigel didn’t bother checking Harold Pincher’s history. In retrospect, the odds of Harold seducing Grace were remote.

Nigel locked his fingers together and stretched his arms over his head to reset his brain. There were more ways than one to skin a cat, or snoop. Perhaps he’d approached the

problem backward. He typed 'polyamory' into the query field of the catalogue. Ten items appeared: six books; three e-books; and one large print book. Nigel clicked on *More Than Two: An Ethical Guide to Polyamory*. The item was checked-out, on loan to Sylvia Johnson. Nigel gasped. The next name on the list was Grace Woodburn.

Nigel dove into Grace's borrowing history as fast as his finger could click the mouse. *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships* and *The Polyamorists Next Door* and *Redefining our Relationships*—all three had been borrowed in October by Grace Angelica Woodburn, his bride, his true love, his soulmate. She must've known he'd find the list. Grace's borrowing history was a cry for help, a drowning sex addict's plea for a life-preserver. Nigel could think of no other explanation for Grace's interest in books on polyamory. Worse, someone sinister, someone who meant to steal Grace, was tossing her a line.

Nigel looked at the clock. 8:50. He pressed numbers into the phone, urgently, authoritatively. Bianca answered on the fourth ring with a groggy "Hello?"

"Hello, Bianca? It's Nigel," he said. "I've been called to an emergency...a member of my family. I must leave the library as soon as possible."

Bianca agreed to receive the baton within the hour. He'd open the great oak doors and gather books and puppets for the story-time volunteer, and then, as soon as Bianca arrived, he'd rescue Grace from her terrible loneliness as wife of a duty-bound head librarian who worked every third weekend.

Nigel bounded up the walkway, unlocked the front door, burst into the hall, and tripped over a pair of Blundstones. Nigel examined the scuffed boots from floor level. They looked familiar, but they weren't Grace's. He picked himself up and stood, still as a hunter listening at forest's edge. The bungalow was silent. Or was it?

Nigel heard a giggle, high-pitched, muffled under blankets, a sound from boyhood, from the time his sister held a slumber party. Again, the house was silent. Nigel walked through the living room toward the master bedroom. He heard another giggle.

A weak light flooded the carpet from the east window of the bedroom. Nigel deduced the door was open. He rounded the jamb and crept across the hooked rug beside the bed. Tendrils of auburn hair spilled over the pillow. Grace was hidden under the duvet, her form oddly large and lumpy. The giggle rose to laughter.

A voice, husky with mirth, said, "Hello, Nigel. Care to join us?" A familiar hand decorated with chipped blue nail polish and silver rings and bangles emerged and pushed the duvet down.

"Margot?"

"Present," said Margot.

"Grace!"

"Also present," said Margot.

The two women were locked in an embrace that was not at all sisterly and not at all chaste. Immediately Nigel felt disconnected from planet earth. His mind raced of its own volition toward a strange, unworldly destination. As a librarian, he was accustomed to finding answers, using language, specifically English, and although he wasn't sure if any language would be helpful, he had no other tool at hand for cleaving onto reality.

"You're lovers?" Nigel asked.

"Correct," replied Margot.

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer it if Grace answered the questions," said Nigel.

Margot nodded, and Grace said, "Okay. Yes, Nigel, as you can see, we're having sex."

Nigel was shocked by the indelicacy of Grace's reply. "How long have you been...umm... dating?" he asked.

"Since last summer," replied Grace.

"Did you know about the *Penthouse* magazine, Grace?"

"Yes. It was Margot's idea. She thought it was playful. She said it'd get you excited. Intrigued."

“Get your motor running,” sang Margot.

“Be quiet, Margot,” scolded Nigel. Exercising authority was invigorating. “And the pamphlet?”

“That was my idea,” said Grace. “But the post-it notes...that was pure Margot. She’s so creative.”

Nigel paused his interrogation and surveyed the matrimonial bedroom, now sullied with another woman’s woollen knitwear, denim, and intimate apparel. Tears pooled in his eyes.

“Nigel?” Grace swung her legs over the side of the bed and took his hand. “Nigel? Is it so awful as that?”

Nigel didn’t answer. He turned from Grace, leaned over the dresser, and regarded his sad face in the mirror. It was the face of a man betrayed, but not at all bad-looking. In fact, Nigel thought himself rather handsome in his misery. Intelligent of brow, and brave of jaw.

“Nigel? Would you consider a new arrangement? In our household?”

Nigel squared his shoulders. “I don’t know, Grace. I’m going for a walk. And Margot? Please be gone by the time I’m back. Grace and I have matters to discuss. As husband and wife.”

The scales had fallen from Nigel’s eyes and he was taking charge.

This story was originally published by Nordic Press in the anthology Murder! Mystery! Mayhem! in 2022.

The Education of Nanny Faith

Astrid

Gavin and I have found the right girl to look after our two-year-old twins, Skye and Raine. The nanny's name is Faith, a reassuringly frumpy name with a fortifying dose of moral fibre that suits her to a T. I won't dare ask the poor dear about her middle name. Maybe Charity?

Speaking of charity, that is exactly the reason we hired her. I'm totally overwhelmed by my responsibility as leader of "Yes We Can", a support group for new mommies that I run at the library. I'm also organizing a charity tennis tournament, all proceeds to Elmington's first canine hospice. Last week, I nearly collapsed from anxious exhaustion. I was driving the Lincoln Navigator home from a board meeting at the Elmington Club with Skye and Raine buckled into their car seats. Skye started wailing so I reached back to give her a sippy cup and I drove into a hydro pole. The three of us were fine physically. Skye drank her carrot juice and Raine pointed at the lights of the police cruiser and said, "Pretty," but emotionally, I was a wreck.

As the tow truck pulled up, the police officer informed me that he saw no reason beyond recklessness for the Lincoln Navigator to have knocked out power to a whole condo tower and that I would likely be charged with dangerous and distracted driving. I started bawling my eyes out. I was inconsolable. The tow truck driver called Gavin on my cell for me. Fortunately, Gavin wasn't in surgery. He took the twins and me home, gave me two Ativan, and then and there, we decided to hire a nanny.

Even in my distress, I had the presence of mind to think of Faith, crawling on the floor with the little monsters at the club's daycare service. We phoned her and she came by after her shift. I knew they were paying her minimum wage, so Gavin and I offered her a spoonful of sugar on top of her usual oatmeal pay cheque and she accepted immediately.

She's perfect. A young Nanny McPhee, in wire-rim glasses, a pilled-up T shirt, and old lady jeans. Modern orthodontics missed her. Go ahead, call me paranoid but I'm actually a realist. Gavin is a cosmetic surgeon and beautiful women are his bread and butter, but he won't

violate professional boundaries. On the other hand, there's no official decree, other than the oath we swore before God, to keep his paws off the nanny. Faith is no temptation to Gavin.

Besides, the twins adore Faith. And she showed us photocopies of her first aid and CPR certificates plus two letters of recommendation from former employers. Done deal.

A year and a half ago, I weaned the girls and got my body back. Today is Faith's first day at 26 Balmoral Court and Elmington is getting me back.

Faith

I've climbed the winding, freshly paved road of privilege into the rarified air of Windsor Heights and parked my bicycle on the flagstone driveway of 26 Balmoral Court. I press the button to activate the chimes of Big Ben, barely audible through the heavy double doors. Yesterday I met Daniel, my study collaborator, and he agreed to a minor alteration in our research methodology. Observing the subjects in their home will be helpful for my PhD thesis and I can use the coin to supplement my grant. Yes—"coin." I've adopted the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the community on Elmington's eastern flank. That's where I live so I might as well fit in there and disguise my identity and intentions here. It will be a pleasant change to conduct field work poolside instead of in the basement childcare centre of the Elmington Club.

Daniel and I are exploring the phenomena of gratitude, empathy, and entitlement. How, and at what age, do these traits manifest within groups of children of the lowest and highest social strata? We flipped a quarter. Now Daniel toils in a subsidized daycare centre in East Elmington and today I begin work as a Windsor Heights nanny.

I'm not a governess because Astrid and Gavin aren't nobles or royals. This is earnestly egalitarian Canada after all. Neither am I a babysitter though the job description is identical to that of nanny. Daniel claims the employer's income determines the employee's title, but it's more complicated than that. Oh, I think I hear clicky heels on tile. As they say in the lab, "Show time."

Astrid

Do you know how to spell “freedom”? N-A-N-N-Y or F-A-I-T-H. Either way, you only need five letters. Skye and Raine call her “Nanny Fate” because they can’t make the “th” sound yet. It’s so cute. Every morning, Faith crouches down in the foyer and the twins run into her arms, blond pigtailed bobbing. “Read a story!” they command, or “Let’s play horsy. Nanny Fate horsy!” She asks them to say “please” but they’re so excited they forget, and they have the cutest little fits if she doesn’t get down on all fours then and there.

I reassured Faith that their manners will develop in step with their exuberant personalities. Bright children require more patience than average children because their neurons are forming networks of greater complexity. If you prune too early with too many rigid rules, the branches and twigs won’t be optimized. Faith nodded, but by her blank expression I could see that I’ll have to educate her on certain aspects of toddler care.

This week I’ve had ample time to plan a discussion on how breastfeeding melts cellulite for “Yes We Can”, fill swag bags for the tennis tournament, *and* take some “me time”—gym, massage, pedicure, and lunch with Pamela and Phoebe at the club. When I come home each afternoon, the twins are tuckered from playing with Faith, and they’re content to watch a video or play quietly.

Faith

I keep my notebook close at hand to record data and jot fieldnotes. Astrid is flattered that I find her childrearing practices so fascinating, and she’s eager to impart her wisdom for my notes. To wit, always feed your toddler organic, whole foods so proper eating habits become ingrained. This is sound advice. Second, engage your toddler in enriching activities so he or she can be admitted to Abbey Ridge Montessori, the gateway to Applegate and St. Hilda’s and venerable colleges such as Trinity. Again, I can’t disagree with that.

Third, honour your child’s desires for toys and treats because these small people have an innate capacity for knowing what they need. As plants draw water from the soil and gather light with outstretched leaves, children demand the things that help them reach their full

potential. A robotic toy for the future electronics executive. An iPad for a budding thought leader. A doll house for tomorrow's real estate mogul. I think this is dubious advice, but I'm frightfully middle class and I have only a master's degree in psychology with a post-grad certificate in play therapy. What do I know?

At thirty-two months Skye and Raine are in a critical stage of early childhood for exploring and expressing feelings of empathy, a fundamental component of gratitude. They learn most from people with whom they are closest, namely Astrid and Gavin. However, Astrid's volunteerism is self-aggrandizing, and she exhibits indifference toward the pool boy and the housekeeper by speaking to them without making eye contact. Yesterday, while dropping the twins and me off at Lakeside Park, she honked her horn at an elderly woman who was pulling a bundle buggy across the road and then she whined about a peloton of cyclists who were riding single file in the bike lane. And Gavin? He leaves the house before the girls wake and returns after they're tucked in for the night.

I'm trying to discern what lessons Skye and Raine are absorbing from their parents, but it isn't empathy let alone gratitude. They may believe that other people exist to be ridden.

Astrid

I've had to lay down the law with Faith. Pamela's four-year-old, Maxwell, had a play date with the twins while Pamela and I shopped for gowns for the summer gala. Maxwell is an articulate boy for his age, though behind in motor skills, and he told Pamela the most outlandish story after they left our home.

Apparently, Faith made the children tidy the playroom before they were allowed to have their snack. Maxwell was weak with hunger, but she insisted that every Duplo block be returned to its bin and every doll tucked into its crib before she served the fruit and cheese slices. To add insult to injury, Raine threw herself on the floor and screamed, but Faith ignored her. The poor tiny dear must have been famished.

Faith's actions border on abuse. She neglected Raine's need for comfort and she treated our young guest with contempt. Pamela trusted that Maxwell would have fun with the girls

but instead he was pressed into the role of housekeeper. How will the twins learn to be gracious hostesses with Faith as a role model?

I had a talk with Faith about these incidents and she wrote everything down in her notebook. I don't think anything like this will happen again.

Faith

A small but potentially disastrous wrinkle has arisen. The university's ethics committee has demanded new documents, signed by Astrid and Gavin, granting me permission to observe the girls in their home. I argued that I obtained consent at the Elmington Club daycare, but the committee is standing firm. I'm up against self-satisfied academic justice leaguers who suppress unorthodoxy on principle and dusty old profs who doze on their flabby buttocks till they're pensionable. They are unmoveable. Worse, Daniel blames me for this fiasco and he's not answering my emails or texts.

Astrid will freak if I reveal my hand. Even if she doesn't, she's sufficiently self-aware to change her behaviour and scuttle my field work. The classic Hawthorne effect. At best, I'll have crappy data. At worst, I'll hand over my keys to 26 Balmoral Court.

I need a Plan B.

Astrid

Well, well, well...we have a sly vixen in our gilded coop and it's none other than the nanny. Faith was super attentive to the girls today. She even stuck around after their supper to help them into their pyjamas and read them stories. After the twins settled, Faith tiptoed down the stairs and skulked into the kitchen as I was extracting the cork from a bottle of prosecco. I sensed she wanted a favour. She was lucky Gavin wasn't home or she couldn't have exploited the Achilles tendon of my character, my kind generosity.

It turns out that Faith is rather more than she suggested. First impressions deceived. It's true Faith shares an apartment in East Elmington and rides a rusty CCM and wears "quote-unquote" fashions from the centre aisles of Loblaws, but it's a façade and I suspected it all

along. She cloaked her precise elocution in slang from the hood, but she wasn't fooling me with the homely, simple-minded caregiver act.

The truth fluttered out in the form of leaves of documents for Gavin and me to sign. Right under our noses, Faith has been conducting ground-breaking research on wealthy children such as Skye and Raine, research on what makes them tick, what makes them special, and why they outshine children from less fortunate backgrounds. Faith is actually a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, and she's learning how elite children such as our darling twins capitalize on their innate gifts to rise above their peers.

I was angry about her humble nanny performance for about two minutes, and then I realized that Skye and Raine, at age two and a half, are already contributing to the advancement of science with Faith's assistance. The Atwell family is actually helping humanity by working with one of the most prestigious universities in the country.

I signed the consent forms on the spot and I'll have Gavin do the same. Faith looks relieved that her secret is out.

Faith

Do you think my former academic superior in the psychology department, the notorious, infamous, spectacularly wealthy Jordan Peterson, makes more money as a professor or as a bestselling author?

Gavin is reluctant to sign the documents and Daniel still won't communicate with me, but I couldn't care less. I'm tired of kissing the ass of my tenured advisor, eating macaroni and cheese, and applying for bursaries. I'm running across the bridge to the dark side. Jealous, self-righteous hounds bearing the pointy standards of academic integrity nip at my heels, and the heady aroma of fame and fortune billows in great clouds before me.

Last Saturday, I attended my cousin's wedding and at supper, seated to my right, was an editor from a major publishing house. I poured and flattered my way into a tentative book deal with the working title, *Rich Kids Get Ahead: Ten Rules for Raising Self-Made Millionaires*. Lest you chide me that snagging a book deal out of the misty blue is impossible—that you

can't pitch an idea to a drunk editor, snap your fingers, and reel in a lucrative contract with a hefty advance—let me tell you that I did just that, figuratively. I banged off a chapter outlining Astrid's ridiculous advice and emailed it to him the next day. Though blurry of eye, he saw dollar signs in the prose, an airy, delectable, highly marketable word souffle seasoned with inspiration and aspiration.

Astrid and I will meet with her lawyer, Brad Holman, later today to review the contract. We'll be co-authors, a classic brawn and brains team and perfect complements in this endeavour. I'm the fingers on the keyboard and Astrid is the talk show circuit mouthpiece with the camera-friendly face. I have the credentials and intellectual gravitas; Astrid is a mommy influencer who practises *The Rules*. Done deal.

Asleep with the Smiths

At 05:16, Liza Nicholl pointed her flashlight at her patient, Reginald Smith. She expected to find the 87-year-old snoring, chest rising and falling at approximately fifteen respirations per minute. However, Reginald Smith was still. His blankets lay over his body like fresh fallen snow on a log. Reginald Smith was dead.

Liza shook Reginald's shoulder and yelled in his ear, "Mr. Smith? Mr. Smith?" She pressed her fingers into the pleats of the old man's neck but felt no carotid pulse. She aimed the flashlight into his eyes. The orbs, now tearless behind parted, crusted lids, shined in an icy stare. She rocked her knuckles on Reginald's sternum, but he was beyond the reach of pain.

Liza logged into the bedside computer and opened the chart of "Smith, Reginald A." She confirmed what she already knew—that her patient was a DNR, that there was no cause to fuss. Then Liza shut off the IV and disconnected the tubing from the saline lock in Reginald's forearm. As a formality, she placed her stethoscope on Reginald's birdcage chest and listened for a full minute but all she heard was blood rushing in the vessels of her own ears. She glanced at her watch, 05:18, and recorded the time of her pronouncement of death in Reginald's chart.

Liza smoothed the blankets over the corpse and left the room, closing the door behind her. She returned to the nurses' station to notify Reginald's physician and next of kin. As she tapped on the keyboard to access contact information, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Liza? Your fellow in room 24? The sickle cell crisis?" Jean Claude's tone was urgent.

"Yes? Raymond Smith. What about him?" Liza's eyes remained fixed her on the monitor.

"He's in severe pain. Ten out of ten. Whimpering like a hound hit by a Hummer."

"I'll just deal with this..." Liza knew the living took priority over the dead, but she preferred to finish one task before starting another.

"Liza, he needs something *now*."

“Okay, Jean Claude. Jeez. I gave him hydromorphone an hour ago. Four milligrams. But if you say he’s still in pain—”

“He is.” Jean Claude sat next to Liza and pecked on a laptop with his index fingers. “Well, at least he has a fresh fentanyl patch. It says here you changed it at 22:00.”

“What?” asked Liza. Phone receiver propped on shoulder, she turned to Jean Claude, her brows folded into a frown.

“His patch. It’s new but it hasn’t had much effect.”

At once Liza’s heart thumped and a tidal wave of sickness swept through her abdomen. She turned back to the monitor and replaced the receiver on its cradle. Liza took a deep breath to marshal her emotions and hoped she managed to sound matter of fact. “Okay. If it’s as bad as that, I’d better assess him, Jean Claude. Thanks.”

Liza rushed to the room of Reginald Smith, the corpse, and pulled his gown away from his neck. There it was. Glossy under the glow of her flashlight, plain as a postage stamp on a letter, a 50-microgram fentanyl patch meant for the man writhing in bed, two rooms away. The wife of Reginald Smith had boasted that her husband had never taken anything stronger than Tylenol for his rheumatism, that he hadn’t spent a single night in hospital until his stroke. Liza imagined the fentanyl seeping through Reginald’s skin and into his bloodstream, his breath slowing, his sleep deepening until he’d never resurface again.

She peeled the patch from the chest of the body in room 28, concealed it in a vinyl glove and crammed it into her pocket, and hurried to room 24. Raymond Smith was curled in a quivering ball, his back turned to the door.

“Raymond?”

The stocky man was focusing on riding out waves of pain, not answering to his name like a prize poodle.

“Raymond?” Liza’s voice was honey sweet. “I’m changing your patch. Left shoulder, correct?” She lifted the sleeve of his hospital gown. Raymond’s tired, old patch was labelled with the date four days prior. Liza peeled away the impotent patch and replaced it with the

barely used patch, high on Raymond's chest. "This isn't sticking well, so I'm reinforcing it with tape," said Liza.

"Suit yourself," Raymond muttered into his pillow.

Liza went to the medication room, disposed of the spent fentanyl patch in the lock box, and backdated her documentation to 22:00 the previous day to match the time of administration. Then, rehearsing her spiel, she returned to the nurses' station.

Liza made the easy call first. "Hello, Dr. Goldberg? It's Liza Nicholl, RN on 3B medicine. I'm calling to report the death of your patient, Reginald Arthur Smith.... Yes, 87-year-old, left-sided stroke... Yes, that's the patient... Correct. DNR...at 05:18... No, not yet... I'll call his next of kin... I agree. It was unexpected... Coroner's case?... Okay, I'll leave all lines in place... Right... Thank-you, Dr. Goldberg."

Liza's mind charged like a wasp-stung bull. A coroner's case. Holy-Mary-Mother-of-God. The coroner would only read the charts and sign off, wouldn't he? If he performed an autopsy, he'd find the fentanyl in Smith's blood. They'd know it was her. She'd lose her licence, maybe even go to jail. Liza checked the time. 05:32. Day shift would arrive in an hour. She couldn't afford to worry yet.

Next call. "Mrs. Smith? I apologize for waking you. This is Liza Nicholl, the nurse looking after your husband at Elmington General... I'm sorry to tell you that Mr. Smith has passed away... Yes, 87 years is a long life... Yes, he left us peacefully... He was a kind man... No, that's true. He couldn't speak but his eyes were kind... I'm very sorry... No, no need to hurry... The coroner will review the care Mr. Smith received because he passed away unexpectedly... You knew his time was up?... Yes, he's with Jesus now... Alright... You take care too... You're welcome, Mrs. Smith."

Liza hung up the phone, swivelled her chair, and checked to see if Jean Claude or her other colleagues could've observed her taking the patch from one Smith and applying it on the other. Unlikely. The beds were hidden in shadows, at least fifty paces down the corridor. Tiny mercies such as these might save her skin. She'd comb Reginald Smith's hair and wipe his face in preparation for Mrs. Smith's arrival. She'd find a heat pack to ease Raymond Smith's

bone pain. But first, she had two 06:00 IV antibiotics to infuse for patients Rodriguez and Nishigawa.

Liza lay on her memory foam mattress, black-out drapes drawn against a winter sun, bedroom door closed to her tabby, Duchess. Usually Liza fell into a five-hour coma after a night shift, but today the sandman was on strike. She examined her error in a repeating loop, as if she were being forced to watch a horror movie, strapped into a chair, unable to look away. She couldn't unplug the projector in her head.

Right patient, right drug, right dose, right route, right time. This was the Noble Five-Fold Path of medication administration, recited as a mantra by semester one novices until it was second nature. Last night, she'd delivered a high-stakes medication to the wrong patient. She'd flunked Nursing 101. She'd killed her patient. Though her actions weren't murder, they were grossly negligent. And then she'd covered up her mistake.

But didn't the hospital bear some responsibility? The manager of patient flow usually placed people with the same surname on different units, yet there were two R. Smiths, both male, convalescing as neighbours. Worse, the evening charge nurse, Kendra, assigned both R. Smiths to her. Kendra said, "This is Jean Claude's fourth night in a row, and he's too tired to change assignments and take the admission, so you'll have two R. Smiths on your roster. Be sure to highlight their charts and give them name alert bands. You'll need to pay careful attention." And Liza didn't.

At 21:55, when Reginald moaned and rubbed his joints with his able hand, Liza opened the wrong medication record and saw that the fentanyl patch was due for change. When she didn't find an old patch on Reginald's crepe-paper skin, she assumed it was lost in the bedclothes and she marked it as "not found" in Raymond Smith's chart. She forgot about Mrs. Smith's pride in the brevity of her husband's medication list. That he'd been healthy until the stroke ravaged his left hemisphere. Liza blew through every stop sign and red light in her haste to complete tasks. She could blame the administration and Kendra and God, but the buck stopped with one Liza Nicholl and she knew it.

She flopped onto her front and rationalized. Perhaps Reginald was better off in the morgue. His wife had accepted the news of his abrupt demise with equanimity. His advanced age made rehabilitation improbable. Hadn't Mrs. Smith said, "He'll be happier in heaven?" And sure, Raymond Smith endured one uncomfortable night, but by shift change he was settling. Didn't everything turn out for the better? No, God damn it. She'd bumped off Reginald Smith as surely as if she'd held a pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger. And now the coroner would investigate.

Liza abandoned the error loop for an even scarier film, a speculative piece of work that began with an autopsy and a toxicology panel revealing fentanyl in Reginald Smith's blood and concluded with her in a prison cell. She'd survive humiliating media coverage, but she didn't know if she could handle the profound disappointment of her family. She had a moral duty to confess, yet the time for confession was when she'd discovered her mistake, not after she'd covered it up and told Mrs. Smith that her husband had slipped away peacefully in the night.

No, she wouldn't confess.

Liza simmered in a stew of panic and shame. She sensed mockery in the smiles of her colleagues. She felt unworthy of her uniform and name tag. She performed her duties stoically, methodically, robotically. Liza dwelled in this bleak, self-constructed hell for several days until Mary Beth, the manager of general medicine, summoned Liza to her office.

"Have a seat, Liza. I'll bet your feet could use a rest," said Mary Beth, peering over her reading glasses.

"Thank-you." The word vibrated with fear. Liza sat.

"You've been with us for six months now."

Liza nodded.

"Do you have any concerns, any difficulties that you'd care to share with me?"

"No, Mary Beth. I'm happy on general medicine, and I'm learning a lot."

“Good, good,” said Mary Beth. “Some people, umm, encounter rough *patches* when they’re new to a unit.”

Don’t take the bait, Liza told herself.

“Umm. I have a minor matter to clear up. Do you remember Raymond Smith? Fifty-two years old. Sickle cell?” asked Mary Beth.

Liza’s heart galloped. She managed a slow, “Yes.”

“On February 9th, you documented that you couldn’t find Raymond Smith’s old fentanyl patch, but the pharmacist found a used patch in the lock-box with matching documentation for its disposal.”

“That’s correct. I couldn’t find the patch at first and I charted that, but I found the patch a few minutes later.”

“Okay. Could you write up a note explaining the discrepancy? That should satisfy pharmacy.”

“Of course. I’ll do it this morning,” said Liza.

“There’s one more thing.” Mary Beth drummed her pen on her desk. “Do you remember Reginald Smith? The coroner’s case. You pronounced his death on that same shift.”

“Yes, I remember Mr. Smith,” said Liza. The room spun like a Tilt-a-Whirl.

“Well, in the course of his inquiries, Dr. Simms met Mrs. Smith in room 28 and they had quite a chat. Liza, are you okay?”

“Yes. I haven’t been sleeping well, but I’m fine, Mary Beth.” Liza barely choked out the words.

“If you say so. Anyway, Dr. Simms didn’t find anything in the course of Mr. Smith’s hospitalization to warrant investigation. It’s Mrs. Smith I want to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” A blush of colour rose in Liza’s cheeks.

“She’s very grateful for the care her husband received, and she’d like to nominate you for the Nightingale award. She sent us this thank-you card. Why don’t you read it, then post it on the bulletin board in the lounge?”

Liza accepted a powder-pink envelope from Mary Beth. “Thank-you.”

“No. Thank-you, Liza and well done. Now go and get yourself a coffee. You look as if you need a kick of caffeine.”

This story was originally published by Madhouse Books in the anthology Dark Secrets in 2022.

Debbie of the House of Wertzel

Everyone at Dairy Queen agreed. The similarities between Lady Diana Spencer and Debbie Smythe were uncanny. Both nineteen-year-olds were tall blondes. Both were dating older guys named Charles—well, Chuck in Debbie’s case—same diff—and both were fond of kids. Debbie always gave the small ones an extra swirl of soft serve. If Diana wore the DQ uniform, wouldn’t she do *exactly* the same thing? Debbie had even cross-stitched “D.S.” onto her pillowcases, a noble monogram for her Zellers bed linen.

Debbie worked late on Tuesday, the 28th of July, 1981, but she woke before her alarm clock beeped on Wednesday morning. The glorious sun that shone on Diana in London, England would shine on Debbie in Elmington, Ontario in a couple of hours. Debbie crossed the shag carpet in bare feet, warmed up the TV, turned the knob to Channel 13, and settled into the Lay-Z-Boy to celebrate the marriage of her spirit sister several time zones away.

Diana was radiant. She wore a creamy, Dream Whip dress and tiara for the nuptials at St. Paul’s Cathedral. Her engagement ring, now paired with a sensible, wifely band, was a sapphire and diamond combo. Debbie had seen similar rings in the Consumer’s Distributing catalogue. Luckily for Chuck, Debbie had a November birthday and her birthstone was topaz, an economical gem compared to September’s sapphire.

Debbie knew that once Chuck had saved up, he’d propose, and she’d escape the irritations of living with younger brothers. Last Saturday, as she and Chuck reclined in the leather seats of his Camaro at the drive-in, he’d hinted that he needed a girl to do the books for his plumbing business knowing full well that Debbie had gotten rock-solid Bs in bookkeeping, typing, and Pittman short-hand. Debbie punched his shoulder and giggled. Chuck was as coy as

Charles. The dress would be tricky, but St. Paul’s Lutheran had availability for spring and the Legion was nearby for the reception.

The Royal Couple waved from the balcony, faces yellow from a faulty TV picture tube. Despite Diana's jaundiced smile, Debbie thought her spirit sister looked like the happiest bride in the world.

Baby William was born on the first day of summer, 1982. CHYM Radio broadcast the tidings at the top and bottom of every hour. Now a newly wed like Diana, Debbie was working part-time at Wertzels Plumbing, part-time at Dairy Queen, and full-time at baking a baby—Chuck's joke. As she ladled hot fudge sauce onto a Peanut Buster Parfait, the new prince's name tumbled over and over in Debbie's skull like a pair of coveralls in a dryer. William. William Windsor. Would William Wertzels work? Jeez. The name was a tongue twister...a school yard taunt. If Debbie had a boy, he'd have to be Billy.

Debbie never minded if her hairdresser ran behind. Debbie could leaf through the salon's collection of *People* magazines knowing that Billy and Henrietta were enjoying grandma time while she caught up with news of Diana like two busy moms commiserating over husbands and fashion. There was a sweet pic of Diana with her boys seated at a piano. Diana wore a flouncy blouse and a pleated skirt low on her hips and her hair was blow-dried into a feathery helmet. Debbie's hair had darkened since she'd had the kids, but Sandi could duplicate the style and colour.

William and Harry were probably already learning "Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge." Billy and Henny fought over the Fisher Price xylophone, and Debbie believed in teaching the "Do-Re-Mis" with their ABCs. In ten years, the four of them could form a band—William and Billy on guitar, Harry on drums because gingers are eccentric, and Henny on vocals and tambourine. They could call themselves the "Windsor-Wertzels Band", or maybe "Double W".

The Windsor family smiled at Debbie from the collection of framed photos on the piano. Coincidentally, two diagonal galleries of Smythes and Wertzels hung in rows in her own home, a split level. The younger generation climbed the stairs from the living room to the second-floor bedrooms, oldest to youngest. The elders descended to the basement rec room ending in a daguerreotype of an uncle in a top hat above the bottom stair.

Debbie marked the magazine page with a nail file so she could show Sandi the style she wanted, and then she found Diana in the “Best Dressed” feature.

Debbie started several comforting letters to Diana, but she always crumpled them up and threw them in the garbage because she couldn’t express her concern in a way that made any sense. “Dear Diana,” then “Im sorry Charles is being such a jerk!!” or “your so much prettier and nicer then Camilla. What is he thinking???”

Diana would understand Debbie’s trouble with words. Diana had failed her O-levels twice, but she was an A+ pupil in the school of life. And wasn’t she receiving an education now!

As Debbie told her mom, she could relate. At the end of most days, Chuck sauntered into the Wertzel Plumbing office bragging about how he’d helped the city’s lonely housewives with a little, well-lubricated “pipe fitting.” Debbie didn’t buy it. Chuck’s sense of humour had always been off colour, and anyway, what kind of woman would open her legs for a man with a nicotine smile, a barcode comb-over, and plunging butt cleavage?

Across the pond, Charles fantasized—*out loud*—about turning himself into a feminine hygiene product for Camilla. So embarrassing. Poor Diana wasn’t close to her mom and she had no one to confide in.

Debbie’s mom advised her to focus on the kids. That way, if you split, you’d likely get full custody and, longer term, they’d come to your home each Christmas. Debbie took the advice to heart. She only wished she could share it in a proper letter to help her spirit sister in her hour of need.

On August 31st, 1997, Debbie awoke to the news that Diana had died. Debbie remembered Diana’s wedding day, a sun-drenched summer day of innocent promise, and she drew the drapes to block the disingenuous sun. Then she wept. Debbie felt a part of herself, a sensitive bit of vital organ, had been cut away for burial with Diana.

When Billy and Henny descended the stairs for their Honey Nut Cheerios, Debbie hugged them close and told them she loved them. Fourteen-year-old Billy stood stiff as an ironing

board, arms clenched to his side like metal levers. Twelve-year-old Henny reciprocated her mother's embrace, perhaps understanding that withholding affection would only make Debbie needier.

After the kids put their dirty dishes in the sink, Debbie sent them to buy a newspaper at Seven-Eleven. Then, she sat vigil in front of CNN and CBC News World. Her spirit sister who'd helped her choose clothes at Smart Set, who'd taught her to wield her smile as a stealth psychic weapon...she was gone. But her sons were alive. William and Harry, teen and tween. They'd miss their mom too.

Billy and Henny had eaten popsicles for lunch. Debbie dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex and planned supper.

Harry was too old to spank, but the Good Lord only knew the tongue-lashing Diana would've delivered after her second born turned up on the front page of the *Sun* in a Nazi get-up like a filthy drunk penny. Debbie shoved her *Hello!* magazine into the top drawer, rested her elbows on the desk, and rubbed her temples. Well, Harry was only twenty-one. Besides, his father had welcomed an evil stepmother into the family last spring and William set an impossible standard. Who could blame Harry for rebelling?

The Wertzels' Plumbing phone seldom rang since Billy insisted Chuck buy company Blackberries. Now Chuck and Billy scheduled their own service calls and emailed estimates and invoices directly to customers. Debbie updated the accounts on the spreadsheet, then Googled "Prince William."

The internet buzzed with the news that William was planning a military career. Debbie adored a man in uniform, and at a trim six foot two, the prince would be dapper in navy serge. Her heart burst with maternal pride on behalf of her spirit sister.

Debbie glanced at her watch. Nearly half past eleven and time to drive home to wake Henny for her business admin class at Everest College. If Debbie and Chuck hoped to retire some day, they'd need someone in the office to help Billy run Wertzels' Plumbing. Dr. Phil said

second children were often late bloomers. Still, Debbie blamed Henny and Harry for her dark gray eye luggage.

Charlotte Elizabeth Diana was born in the morning of the 2nd of May, 2015, under the sign of Taurus, like Henny. Debbie smiled knowingly at the BBC news announcer on her iPod. Charlotte would be as stubborn as an ox.

Debbie posted her congratulations to William, Kate, and big brother George on Facebook, garnering twenty-three likes and five loves by morning's end. Then, Debbie drove to Bonnie Togs to buy a pink pinafore with white blouse and bloomers in the six to nine-month size, a Winnie-the-Pooh stuffie, and a card. Charlotte would be a fast grower with such tall parents. She'd need the room.

Debbie wrote in the card, "For Baby Charlotte, as beautiful as her Grandma Diana. Much love from your Great Auntie in Canada," packaged Charlotte's gift, and mailed it express.

Debbie checked into a room overlooking the parking lot at the Holiday Inn Express in Windsor, England on May 17th, 2018. She didn't care about the dismal view. She'd be attending the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, if not inside St. George's Chapel, then close enough to hear wedding bells. On behalf of Diana, she'd bear witness to this happiest of occasions.

Debbie booked her ticket the very day the couple had announced their wedding date. Chuck declined to accompany her on account of his back. Forty years of bending over toilets and drains had pulverized his discs into sandpaper donuts and he was unfit for trans-Atlantic travel. Debbie was secretly relieved he hadn't joined her. He'd be out of place. She switched on the TV to BBC News to acclimatize.

Then, she hoisted her suitcase onto the luggage frame, unzipped it, and laid out her wedding clothes, a tasteful aunt-of-the-groom ensemble: a pillbox hat decorated with tiny bows and a chiffon, A-line dress, both in apricot, with white leather clutch, pumps, and pearls. Tomorrow would be hair and manicure day.

Debbie's heels sank into the well-hydrated lawn beside the Long Walk. Even with her five am arrival, she had to jockey for a good view behind the double row of metal barriers and shoulder to shoulder security personnel. Many well-wishers were dressed in beach attire. Others had donned outlandish costumes such as T-shirts with slogans and Union Jack hats. Debbie remembered Diana's openness and tried not to judge.

Rivulets of perspiration trickled down Debbie's back even though it was scarcely 20 degrees. Under a relentless sun, Debbie cast her mind over the previous thirty-seven years. In 1981, Diana and she were shy teenagers, toiling in dead end jobs, swept off their feet by confident men. Fairy tale weddings led to the humiliations of marriage and the emotional rough and tumble of childrearing. Wouldn't Diana be proud of Harry? The carrot-topped brat had grown into a decent man, though Debbie couldn't abide his bottle-brush whiskers. And Meghan was a fine bride, though far too experienced for a white dress.

A fanfare of horns, the clompity-clomp of hooves, and the roar of crowds preceded the bridal carriage. Debbie suddenly felt woozy. Her eyes pooled with tears and her heart galloped. At last, Debbie would connect with her spirit sister's son, another human being who'd loved Diana as much as she had.

The carriage passed at the speed of a clipped trot. Debbie glimpsed a bearded red head in profile and a black sleeve. The hand at the end of the sleeve waved from the carriage and the people behind the barriers cheered. A young woman lifted her halter and jiggled like an exotic dancer. A bottle blond woman with contrasting roots, far too old to behave like a groupie, screamed "I love you Harry!" Union Jacks flapped like demented tropical birds.

As the carriage drew up the gravel path, an unfamiliar sensation washed over Debbie. She longed to be home in Elmington, drinking beer on the deck with Chuck, savouring the first warm days of an Ontario spring. They could have the kids over for the season's first barbecue. Billy and his partner Anthony, and Henny and Kyle, expecting their first. A contented family.

In an instant, Debbie needed to break free from the double-railed animal pen. If she stayed another second, Debbie was certain she'd melt into a puddle and the alien grass of Windsor Castle would swallow her.

Flying with Lady Luck

Steve McCann swirled his whisky, drank, and plunked the empty glass on its coaster. He leaned over the bar and shook the hand of a younger man dressed in the smart casual uniform of the business traveller.

Steve spoke with intentional gruffness. "Tony, I'm glad we met. Having solar imbedded in the siding of new units would be a game changer. Here's my card. Ping me next time you're in the area and I'll show you around Elmington. We'll talk."

"Will do, Steve," said Tony.

Steve checked his Rolex and raised his brows in mock horror. "Gotta run." He swung his leather bag over his shoulder and walked toward the gate. The announcement for his flight crackled over head. "Last on, first off," he murmured. Rushing was for the one-trip-a-year vacationer whom he regarded with contemptuous pity.

The navy suited woman at the counter scanned his boarding pass. "Stephen McCann?"

"Yes," confirmed Steve. "Bound for Chicago."

"Of course," said the woman. "I'm sure you can appreciate that bookings are subject to change. If you will be so kind as to wait a moment, I'll double check your seat assignment."

"Row three, aisle seat, B." Steve stabbed the boarding pass with a soft, thick finger. "It says right here."

"I'm aware of what it says, sir, but the seat is now occupied by a passenger on our preferred list. We may have to seat you in economy."

"But I'm preferred," said Steve. "I'm a frequent flyer. I confirmed that seat yesterday."

"Please, sir. I must ask you to lower your voice."

"There must be an error."

“Not an error. An unusual situation has arisen. The forward seats are overbooked but we have a seat in economy, or if you wish, we can accommodate you in prestige class on our next flight in three hours.”

“I don’t wish either option.” Steve inched toward the woman. “I want *my* seat on *my* flight.”

“Sir?” The woman waved a taloned hand at the air travellers’ code of conduct, posted behind the desk.

Steve shrugged. He’d been presented with a clear choice, the woman did not write the rules, and he was acting like a dickhead. He had to be in Chicago for drinks and dinner that evening. He took a deep breath and plastered on a smile. “Where in economy is this blessed seat that will convey me to Chicago for the price of prestige class?”

The woman frowned into a screen on the desk beside her. “It’s located toward the rear of the plane,” said the woman. “We’ve already awarded you bonus miles and we’ll refund your credit card for the full price of your ticket.”

The outcome was inevitable. He’d occupy a centre seat within whiffing distance of the lavatories but at least it was a short flight. “Okay,” he agreed. He accepted a new boarding pass, said, “Thanks for your help” with all the insincerity he could muster, brushed past the woman, and entered the gangway.

Steve shuffled sideways down the aisle, lifting his bag to avoid concussing seated passengers. He hadn’t flown economy in over a decade. If anything, conditions were even more inhumane than he remembered. The seats were as densely packed as cages for battery hens. The tray tables, though tiny would press into the guts of the generously proportioned. At just under six feet and just over two-thirty, Steve would consume every inch of his measly allotment and then some. Every seat was taken so finding his would be a cinch. Probably between a whiny kid with sticky hands and snotty nostrils—kids liked the window—and an obese grandmother who’d insist on sharing her wallet portrait gallery with him.

Bingo on the grandmother. She sat immobile like a statue of late reign Queen Victoria, in the aisle seat, two rows up from the toilets, flesh spilling into centre seat territory. Being

chivalrous, he'd concede the battle for the arm rest. He couldn't see who was in the window seat...maybe no one?

Steve proceeded toward his row with hope lifting his heart. Was he homing in on an oasis or a mirage? A double seat to himself would mitigate the humiliation of being forced to fly cattle-class.

Steve smiled and nodded to the aisle lady, wordlessly informing her that she'd have to shift her bulk. He peered over the seat tops toward the window. Though the seat wasn't empty, suddenly Steve no longer dreaded wedging himself into the row for he gazed upon the shapely back of a woman who was rummaging in a rucksack at her feet. A glossy black ponytail bobbed on her shoulder, and Steve imagined himself nuzzling the nape of her slender neck. She wore a tight T-shirt—no bumps to suggest a bra strap—but he wouldn't stare.

"You want in, love?" Soft words at odds with the Scottish, pack-a-day growl issuing from Queen Victoria's mouth.

"Yes, thanks, but I'll stow my bag first," replied Steve.

"Ach, don't bother yourself, love. The bin's packed. You'll have to keep your bag with you."

"Right. Thanks," said Steve.

The woman pushed herself up with freckled hands and squeezed into the aisle. Steve side stepped into the seat between crone and maiden and stuffed his bag under the seat before him.

The young woman sat up and bestowed a quick, polite smile upon her new row mate, then turned to the window.

She's acknowledged me, thought Steve. And she's not that young after all, likely over thirty, yet still gorgeous, no wedding ring. And she's not wearing earbuds or wielding her cell as an anti-conversation shield. He had an opening gambit for situations like this. Namely, talk to the crone to establish oneself as nonthreatening and decent, sprinkle conversation with self-deprecating humour and amusing anecdotes, reel in beautiful fish.

Steve had an hour and a half to turn his luck. He was a shrewd businessman who gambled on real estate, and, like most gamblers, he was superstitious. Meeting Tony in the prestige lounge? Good omen. Being forced into economy? Bad omen. Being seated on port side? Good omen. Now he'd determine his destiny in Chicago. If he could get the dark-haired woman's cell number, he'd convince the Chicago group to help finance Elmwood Estates, a high-end subdivision he planned to build on a struggling golf course on Elmington's northern frontier. He'd test his luck and his powers of persuasion on the woman prior to the facing the real deal at the Four Seasons.

The flight attendant announced the plane's imminent take-off and Steve buckled his seat belt. He'd relax during the safety spiel, no rush. Eagerness was for boy scouts. A boy scout might always be prepared, but he'd never get a slice of cherry pie.

As the plane climbed through the clouds, Steve asked, "Was that a Glaswegian accent I heard?"

The older woman laughed. "You're close, love. I'm from Stirling."

"The town with the castle. Beautiful place, and friendly like you. You even call me 'love'."

The woman's face glowed pink under her freckles. "Aye. Because I don't know your name."

"Steve. Steve McCann."

He stuck out his hand and the woman shook it like a maraca.

"I'm Maureen."

"Maureen," Steve repeated. "And what brings you to North America?"

"Well, I've lived in Toronto for years, Steve. Since 1986. I married a Canadian. Now I'm going to visit my grandchildren in Chicago. Our son takes after his mum and married outside his nationality, an American lass. My daughter-in-law claimed she didn't like our winters, so..."

"How is Chicago an improvement on Toronto's climate?"

"Exactly," said Maureen. "Not a lick of sense in it. And the grandkids are so far away."

"I'll bet they have freckles like you," said Steve.

Maureen pulled her phone from her purse and scrolled through photos. "Stella does. There she is. Only five and she can already swim in the deep end. And that's her younger brother, Brandon. Three years old, learning his alphabet. Kids these days are so smart."

"And they're cute. They take after you, Maureen."

"Ach, Steve. Flattery will get you miles with me. You're buttering me up for the aisle seat."

"No, no. It's true," protested Steve.

"Kids of your own, love?"

"No, I haven't been so blessed, unfortunately." He slumped his shoulders and continued in low tones to convey regret. "I'm married to my career. Commercial and residential real estate. I do have three nephews though. My sister has trusted me to be their godfather and I take my responsibility very seriously."

"It sounds like you'll make a great father one day," said Maureen.

"I hope so," Steve said wistfully. He sensed the young woman shifting in her seat, relaxing, her defences easing. He'd make a move soon, but not too soon. He stretched his arms as if making himself comfortable and flashed his Rolex. Was she a dog lover? She looked like a dog lover.

"Maureen, did I see a Jack Russell terrier when you were showing me your photos?" he asked with feigned interest.

Lady Luck stacked Steve's hand with a spell of turbulence over southern Lake Huron. As the plane bounced over the clouds, he arranged his face in an expression of brave concern. "Maureen, are you okay?"

"Aye, Steve," said Maureen. "I'm fine, but I admit, the rough stuff makes me nervous."

"It's always bumpy over the lake. We should be past it soon." Steve turned to the other woman. "Are you okay...umm..."

"Angela. Yeah, I'm okay. They were calling for thunderstorms, so I suppose we can expect some turbulence."

Steve could tell by Angela's accent that she was Canadian too. Her voice was high-pitched and soft, like a little girl's. Best start with a familiar topic. "Do you know the forecast for Chicago?"

"Thunderstorms, then clearing over night," replied Angela.

"I hope that won't affect your plans in Chicago."

"No, I don't think so. My sister's picking me up at the airport, and we'll likely have a quiet evening at her condo. She's coming off a night shift, so she'll be tired."

"A night shift," Steve repeated with an air of awe.

"Yeah. We're both nurses," said Angela.

"An honourable profession. Where do you work, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Elmington General, ICU."

"Wow, that's a tough job." Steve's eyes met Angela's with admiration. "It's a small world. I'm from Elmington. Graduate of Sacred Heart Secondary, class of '98. But you're too young for us to have crossed paths. I was a shy kid anyway."

"I was at Elmington Central, but only a couple years after you," said Angela.

"We didn't meet then. My loss." Steve spotted the refreshment trolley rolling down the aisle with flight attendants fore and aft. "I could use a drink after that rough patch. Maureen, Angela? Will you join me? My treat."

Maureen shook her head. "None for me, thanks Steve. You're very kind, but I've a weak bladder. I never drink on a flight. You know...the lavatories."

"Say no more, Maureen. I won't press you. You'll have one with me, won't you, Angela?"

"Why not? I'm on holiday," Angela nodded. "But you don't need to pay."

"No, I insist. My treat. They bumped me from prestige class, and I'm money ahead...and I have you two for company."

"Well, okay." The pitch of Angela's voice rose to the upper stratosphere.

"Let's be naughty. A wine or a beer?" asked Steve.

“Wine,” said Angela. “White wine. Thank-you, Steve.”

“A young woman who knows her mind. I like that.”

Angela giggled. She’d be an easier conquest than Steve had guessed.

The plane banked into a wide, descending spiral as they finished their wine. He had ample time to play for the touchdown—or, more aptly, to score on an empty net. Steve put Angela’s plastic glass in his own and passed them to the flight attendant who was collecting garbage.

“I wish we could have another, Angela. It’s been fun sharing this sardine tin with you.”

“The time went fast,” she agreed.

“Do you have plans in Chicago?”

“Yeah. Sightseeing with Caroline. Maybe we’ll hang out on Navy Pier tomorrow, or take a boat cruise, see the skyline. I’m flying home on Sunday, so we haven’t much time.”

“Have you ever seen Elmington from the water? Or the Toronto skyline?”

“No, I haven’t,” admitted Angela. “Except for a ferry ride to Toronto Island when I was a kid.”

“Well you should,” enthused Steve. “It’s every bit as gorgeous as Chicago, especially at sunset with the sun sinking behind the buildings. I know—”

“Know what?” Angela twisted the end of her ponytail.

“I can take you. You and your friends. I have a sailboat at the Copper River Yacht Club. A thirty-footer.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Steve.” Angela looked down, and then sideways, coyly, girlishly.

“It’d be fun,” Steve continued. “The boat hasn’t been out of the marina yet this season. You’d give me a good reason to put some wind in her sails.”

“Well—”

“I’ll text you when we’re both back in Elmington,” said Steve. “If you just give me your number—”

Angela leaned forward and unzipped her rucksack. "I'll have to write it down for you. I lost my cell last night, and I haven't had time to replace it. I'm totally analogue today, unfortunately." Angela withdrew a notepad and pen from her bag, jotted down her name and a number, tore the paper off the pad, and gave it to Steve.

Steve noted the loopy, childish writing, the smiley face after the final "a" of Angela and a number with one of the region's newer area codes. He tucked the piece of paper into his shirt pocket. "Thanks, Angela. Is next week too soon?"

"Next week will be perfect," said Angela. "What's the name of your boat?"

"Lucky Duck."

"What a clever name," laughed Angela.

The fasten seatbelt signs lit up, and Angela, Steve, and Maureen prepared for landing.

Steve swaggered through O'Hare toward the taxi stand, leather bag swinging, his mood buoyant. He had a good feeling about the Elmwood Estates deal. He'd challenged fortune, and came out with a talisman, a charm for success thanks to his skillful stickhandling. He'd keep Angela's number in his breast pocket and discard the paper scrap only after the Chicago group signed on the dotted line.

Steve wasn't sure whether to believe Angela's claim that she'd lost her cell. Maybe she hadn't even given him her real number. That didn't matter. Her weird Tweety Bird voice would drive any man insane, unless he were profoundly deaf. She'd given him what he needed, and he had no intention of calling her. He'd achieved his objective and summoned Lady Luck to his side.

Now Steve had to do was find a cab with an odd number on its licence plate.

The Suburban Ladies' Book Club

Part One: Marta

I'm the Stepford wife for tonight's literary salon. My guests would think of Nicole Kidman, not Ira Levin, if they heard me say that and they'd punch my shoulder and giggle. Joanne, Kate, and Amy read, but they aren't well read, if you know what I mean. Last time, Amy forced us to "treasure" *Eat, Pray, Love* and in January we waded through the treacle of *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

I'm as nervous as...umm...a suicide bomber on a Greyhound. No, that's an awful simile. Let's go with Samson in a barber shop. A book club is a social gathering, not really a literary event, and I'm a social cripple. I suffer the infirmity of finding people alarming so I've invited my old friend Polly into our little circle. Polly's my sturdy human crutch. My therapy mutt. She's "powdering her nose" at the moment.

I'll get Polly to rub the spots off these wine glasses. I knew I'd be stressed so I've laid in enough merlot to pickle F. Scott Fitzgerald in an amphora jar.

I'm wrapping sliced jicama with prosciutto. The ladies love to eat food they can't pronounce. Let me tell you about my guests.

Joanne lives next door. That's her husband's Ford Escalade in the driveway. She drives a humble Lexus. They're melting the glaciers, one fill-up at a time. When the price of gas goes up on a long weekend, I wonder how they keep their son in private school, but love finds a way. Joanne's Pampered Chef business probably covers the cost of the boy's pencils. Don't let her corner you with a sales pitch. Next thing, she'll be in your kitchen wrapping Pillsbury crescent dough around wieners to demonstrate the stoneware baking sheet. Give her ten minutes more and she'll talk you into mortgaging your house for kitchen gadgets.

Kate? It's short for Katarina. Her mother thought the name suited a ballerina, but Kate doesn't dance. She's a gym teacher and she's bossy. No matter how poorly written the book, she prepares with notes and bookmarks and discussion prompts. I'll keep her goblet full to pacify her pedantic urges. Last fall she inflicted *Fifty Shades of Grey* on us and I can't forgive

her for it. She adores talking about sex and that horrible book was her trojan horse. I think she was testing the waters for her real passion, lesbian erotica. Watch out girls!

And last there's Amy. Sweeter than candy on a stick. She has three children with occupational names. I want to say Cooper. Or Tailor? Or Sawyer or maybe Lawyer? Amy's my yoga instructor. My therapist avoids "pharmaceutical modalities" for treating neurotic tendencies and he suggested yoga. Amy says my form in corpse-pose is the best she's seen. I'm a natural at death.

Now, a quick zap in the micro-wave. Melted brie reminds me of dick wad, but the ladies lap it up. These crackers should be equal to the job. They're like hard tack, forgotten in the Shackleton galley. I bought them at the farmers' market for seven dollars a box. All local ingredients, even the anise seed. It says so on the box and we all know you can't question anything in print.

Oh no. That's the doorbell.

Joanne

Thank God tonight's meeting is next door and I don't have to drive. I need a drink, and not a careful splash in the bottom of a prissy glass. I'm talking *to the brim of a fishbowl*. I'm counting on Marta to keep up with me. Of all people, she should understand. The homely creature gulps wine like a toddler drinking milk. I caught her wiping her chin on her sleeve at Amy's. I doubt Marta knows that a swish of club soda would lift the stain, but I didn't want to tell her and embarrass her when she's trying so hard.

Marta doesn't really fit in. Last September, she moved into Betsy's house after Betsy and her husband relocated to London. He's in insurance. Well, book club lost dear, funny Betsy and absorbed dour Marta. Of course I invited Marta. She's attends Amy's yoga class and she's my neighbour, so I was backed into a corner.

But the books she chooses! The first was a Margaret Atwood novel, a freaking five-hundred-page brick that no one finished. This time she chose *The Great Gatsby*. Even though it's short, I could only manage two chapters. It's all booze, booze, booze and it made me

thirsty. I saw the movie, the Leonardo DiCaprio one, so I'm ready for Kate's tiresome questions.

I had a tense meeting at Liam's school today so now I'm going to let my hair down. Liam's tuition is overdue, and he was caught vaping behind St. Dunstan's Chapel. The headmaster has asked that Greg and I reflect on whether Liam is suited to Applegate. "Wouldn't the lad thrive in a 'hands-on' environment...learning to use tools and whatnot?" asked the old turtle. As if Liam's a lab chimp for anthropologists.

I'll likely find the answer to the headmaster's question in the dregs of my third glass.

What is that on Marta's door? Holy shit. It's a wreath made from coat hangers and safety pins. Wait till Amy sees that.

Kate

I don't know why I'm loyal to this book club. Amy and Joanne are old friends but honestly, they stifle me. It's as if I'm about to attend a drunken Sunday school class in Marta's living room. *Tuesdays with Morrie* took the cake. Mitch Albom could well have plagiarized the title, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and called his book, *Pablum for the Soul*. Or *Morrie's Home Truths Sweetened with Corn Syrup*.

When I challenged my friends' sexual oppression with *Fifty Shades*, I felt as if I were teaching girls in junior high about periods and intercourse and pregnancy. Joanne snickered and showed us a picture on her iPhone of a cinema with huge dildos built into the seats and *Fifty Shades* on the screen. So childish. Then Amy laughed so hard that I swear she left a urine stain on my suede couch. And Marta? Stoney silence followed by mild criticism of the book's literary quality.

Those three prudes missed the point. True, *Fifty Shades* is misogynistic garbage but it's also about breaching boundaries. Our little club occupies the mental territory of a rural county with a church on every corner. I'm trying to open their minds, but I despair. *The Great Gatsby* gives me something to work with. I spoke with Cynthia Twiss, the Head of English,

and she suggested a few talking points. If the conversation disappoints, at least the food will be good. Marta's a decent cook.

I'll park on the street, behind that SUV, so Amy doesn't box me in. I'll probably be the first to leave because I have to coach senior girls' volleyball in the morning.

Amy

Isn't this a blessedly warm evening for March? I love a brisk walk. I can have a second glass of wine because I'm not driving and I've been good all day. I ran this morning after I walked Cooper, Mason, and Piper to school, and I haven't eaten any carbs. Not even honey in my rosehip tea. I vow that if I cheat even a smidge tonight, I'll go to Cross Fit *and* run tomorrow.

I hate to be a sourpuss but "The Great Gatsby" wasn't one of Leonardo DiCaprio's better movies. I liked him in "Titanic" and "Inception" a lot more. I read *The Great Gatsby* in high school, so it won't be a lie when I say I finished it. Maybe Kate will put a gold star on my reading chart. Oh, that's catty. I shouldn't have said that.

I've known Kate since university and I confess, she scares me. She talks about "gilded cages" and "rigid sex roles" and "gender fluidity" which gets me thinking about bodily fluids. Yuck. When she climbs on her soapbox, I wonder if she's actually criticizing Joanne and me for being mommies and wives and not...well...putting a career ahead of family. I'm a yoga instructor, you know. A teacher just like she is.

Marta attended my beginner's class at the Y yesterday. I'm so proud of her. She told me she let herself go after her divorce and she's quite flabby now, but I'm helping her get back on track. I'm planning to surprise her with a Lululemon gift certificate at the end of the spring session. I'll say, "Congratulations, Marta! You've earned the right to wear spandex!" I believe in motivating my students, not tearing them down by mentioning their muffin tops and saddle bags.

Joanne used to do yoga, but now she's busy launching her business and volunteering at Liam's school. When it's my turn to host again, I think I'll make the evening a combo

Pampered Chef party and book club discussion. I want to be supportive. I need to think of a good book though. *Eat, Pray, Love* will be hard to top.

Goodness. What is that on Marta's door?

Polly

I'm the therapy mutt, butler, and Marta's longest serving friend and I mean that exactly as it sounds. In junior high, the Fates sentenced me to a lifetime of tending to Marta's fragile sanity and here I am, answering the door and hanging coats. There's madness in Marta's method, a crazy idealism that transforms friends into foes, that turns ploughshares into swords. I present Exhibit A: this book club.

The hostess chooses the book, and Marta leapt from the gate with *Alias Grace* last November. The suburban matrons, Amy and Joanne, didn't see their class-consciousness, their hypocrisy, their privilege, mirrored in the novel because they didn't read it. Kate recognized herself, wrongly, in the character of salt-o-the-earth Mary Whitney, victim of patriarchy, passion, and primitive gynecology. The evening was a bust. Marta unconsciously sought to provoke, to sabotage the club, but she failed because the combatants came to the arena unarmed.

The Great Gatsby ups the ante. It's short and easy to read. It's been adapted for cinema starring heart-throbs Robert Redford and Leonardo DiCaprio—take your pick—and most of us studied it in high school. Everyone knows the story. If Marta pulls this off, won't Zelda be proud of her husband...wherever they are.

Hark! What bell through yonder doorway sounds? I believe that Amy has arrived.

Part Two: Polly

The club began with a half hour of ceremonial banter, a cacophony of female voices from Joanne's near-tenor to Amy's soprano sing-song. *I love that wreath on your door... It's one of a kind... You walked? That's why you're so fit... Red or white?... What a gorgeous sweater... perfect for March... At Winners?... Oh, Marta, this brie is amazing with the cranberry jelly...*

Homemade... Yes, Liam's enjoying Applegate... definitely worth the tuition... Piper can do a cartwheel? That's a cute photo... She's upside down... Kate, are those new glasses? They suit you... Bifocals?... We're all getting older... except Amy! Laugh.

Now we form a pentagon in the living room. Amy kneels by the coffee table on a shag mat, Kate and Joanne sit on either end of a couch as if side-saddle on a teeter-totter, I compulsively rock in a rocker, and Marta presides over all from an armchair. I have no convenient place to set my wine glass and I plot to steal Marta's chair when she replenishes the snacks.

Kate, task-oriented and over-prepared, waves a paperback feathered with post-its. "Shall we begin with the green light?"

"That's a go," says Joanne, already two thirds through her first glass.

"Why a green light on the pier?" Kate continues. "And at East Egg, of all places. Why not a lighthouse? Or a bonfire? What is Fitzgerald alluding to?"

"Well, green is the colour of American money, and perhaps it symbolizes the American Dream," replies Marta. "So close Gatsby can see it, but he can't touch it. He has money but he doesn't have status and he never will. It's a mirage."

"That's an answer from *Spark Notes*," declares Kate.

"Green is a pretty colour," adds Amy.

"Now you're getting somewhere. Pretty like a daisy. Isn't the light a goal, almost unattainable? Like Daisy's clitoris?" Kate takes a triumphant bite from a celery stick.

"Daisy had better see her OB-GYN," snickers Joanne. "If her lady bits have turned green."

Kate sighs as if she's tutoring a remedial class. "It's symbolic. Like East Egg. Come on. Can't you see it? East Egg is Daisy's right ovary. Her pelvic region is territory on Gatsby's war map. He's strategizing his conquest. His sexual conquest. He wants to possess Daisy."

Marta rearranges the crackers and asks, "Well then, why not a lighthouse? That seems more evocative than a green light."

"If Daisy were a man, say 'David', and Gatsby were gay, then a lighthouse, an architectural phallus, would make sense. But the green light is small yet powerful. It's definitely a clitoris."

Joanne refills her glass from a bottle of merlot that Marta thoughtfully placed on the coffee table and toasts the air. “Well Leonardo can have my East Egg and West Egg and green light any night of the week...the whole kit and kaboodle.”

“Joanne!” laughs Amy. “You say the funniest things. What if Greg heard you?”

“Girls’ night out, baby. What happens at Marta’s stays at Marta’s!” Joanne and Amy clink glasses and gulp. “I propose we debate who’s the most beddable Gatsby, DiCaprio or Redford,” suggests Joanne.

“Well, Robert Redford hasn’t aged well,” answers Amy. “He was a redhead, and his skin is badly sun damaged. It looks like blotchy shoe leather. I’d have to go with DiCaprio. What do you think, Polly?”

I appreciate Amy’s attempt to draw me into the conversation. I swallow an olive, then reply, “I’m not sure. I think Toby Maguire’s ‘Nick Carraway’ is the most compelling character. Nick writes what he observes, but despite his claim, he isn’t honest. And I’m afraid the Nick I imagine when I read the novel isn’t the Nick I see in the film adaptations. The original Nick is deeper, more layered, than the cinema Nick.”

Marta shuffles off to the kitchen to fetch some shrimp from the oven. I can tell she’s eager to steer the conversation from sex to class conflict.

Kate states that the surname, “Carraway”, is suggestive of seed and spermatozoa, a moniker for a man who swims in dark places and bores into the lives of other people.

Joanne deadpans that Kate has a fertile imagination. Touché.

Amy

I’m definitely having that second glass even though I’m tipsy. And Marta’s jumbo shrimp. They’re keto so I’m allowed to eat two, guilt-free, and I’ll still be under-budget.

I admire the way Joanne lightens the conversation with clever jokes. She doesn’t let Kate make every book be about feminism and genitals. I don’t even like caraway seeds but for sure I won’t eat them now. Kate has finished her spritzer and has switched to chardonnay, like

me. At least we have that in common. She's rifling through her paperback, searching for quotes to back up her comment on Nick, but Polly has taken the floor.

Polly's nice but she frightens me. She speaks in grand sentences and I feel like I'm in over my head. To me *The Great Gatsby* is about glamour. You know—cocktails and flappers—and the best part of the book is imagining the parties. Maybe I'll say that if anyone asks my opinion.

Kate

Polly says, "I think geography frames context in this novel. Wasn't the valley of ashes between Long Island and New York City depressing? Fitzgerald portrayed the landscape as a no-man's-land, desolate, as a place that lacks hope. No green flash of money there." Obviously, she thinks the novel is about economic inequality, and she's connecting the absence of greenery with poverty. She's supporting Marta's facile opinion on the green light.

Marta's teeth look like purple jellybeans. She raises her glass to Polly and says, "Good point, comrade. It's almost as if Fitzgerald time-travelled ninety years forward. If you squint, Long Island and New York become the great coastal civilizations of the United States, Atlantica and Pacifica if you will, and the valley of ashes morphs into the fly-over states, the declining continental interior."

Joanne laughs. She's drunk and doesn't see where Polly and Marta are headed. Amy looks like a scared bunny, eyes darting between predators and carrot tops. She's not their prey. She's not bright enough to be fun for Marta and Polly. Amy's gaze returns to the brie, jelly, and crackers. *Sister*, I want to scream, *Stop staring at the food as if it's the dick of Adonis. Just dig in!*

I take corrective action with an apropos passage. "Listen to this description of the picture on the billboard in the valley of ashes. 'The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic— their retinas are one yard high.' I think Fitzgerald should have written 'pupils', not 'retinas.' Anyway, my point is that these are the eyes of a voyeur. A peeping tom. The irises are blue. It's as if the eyes are filming a pornographic, blue movie, observing the escapades

of the adulterers. The valley of ashes is a sexually depraved place...or at least that's what Fitzgerald wants the reader to believe. America didn't have open marriages and polyamory in 1922."

"And we don't now either," slurs Joanne.

"But the US does have a wealthy class who wipe their feet on the under-class, and legions of social-climbers, like Gatsby, who falsely believe that the born-wealthy will accept them," says Marta. "That hasn't changed, and it's similar here in Canada." Marta winks at Polly.

Polly accepts the relay baton. "Owl-eyes recognizes Gatsby's pathetic craving for approval, his masterful artifice. Unread books line the shelf of Gatsby's library. Gatsby wants people to believe he's a man of taste, but Gatsby is a tool."

"How so?" asks Joanne. "Isn't he bettering himself? Pulling himself up from his humble beginning in the rural mid-west? Going after the woman he loves?"

"If bettering himself is buying friendship and things he doesn't need," answers Polly.

Marta wipes her lips with her sleeve and says, "He drives a Rolls-Royce. If Fitzgerald wrote the novel today, Gatsby would own a gigantic SUV and he'd live in a McMansion with a triple car garage and a bathroom for every bedroom." Marta wields this comment like a pointy stick. She knows that Joanne and Greg recently renovated so Liam has his own en suite.

I nudge a plate of surprisingly delicious, bacon-wrapped vegetable matter toward the ravenous Amy. "Marta's onto something here," I admit aloud. "The nouveaux riches try to buy the friendship of an indifferent, old-moneyed class, but they're apt to bankrupt themselves in the process, morally and practically. And their consumerism rapes the land. The valley of ashes could symbolize an earth ravaged by mindless spenders and sex fiends. The Rockefellers and Bronfmans of 1922, the Koch brothers today, and the brainwashed people who admire them from halfway up the ladder like so many people in this suburb. The valley of ashes could be the rust belt, a back-water place of abandoned buildings and despair. Neoliberalism's collateral damage. Trump-land. A place populated with philistines such as Myrtle and George Wilson."

Everyone gulps and chews for a moment.

"On another note," I add, "Doesn't Owl-Eyes remind you of a certain psychiatrist? Dr. Sigmund Freud."

Joanne

I'm not too inebriated to recognize when I'm being baited, but, courtesy of the wine, I have my fighting arm, my conversational right hook, tied behind my back. "Let's leave Kate's Freudian mumbo-jumbo aside for a sec," I say. "Gatsby is a hero. If he lived in Elmington, he'd put his kid in private school and he'd hustle sales because he believes in himself and in the American dream. He wouldn't buy into the mindset of champagne socialists who want to tear down people whose stars are rising." I appeal to Amy for support, but her eyes are closed and she's masticating, her expression rapturous.

"But why does he bother?" asks Marta. "Why does he pursue a woman who is too self-absorbed to love him back? Why does he stuff his library with books he'll never read?

Why throw parties for people who don't even know him, let alone like him? Wouldn't he be happier if he were duck hunting in North Dakota?"

Amy's eyes flutter open and she swallows hard. The poor dear doesn't understand that Marta's questions are rhetorical. "Marta. I don't know how anyone could take pleasure in killing," she protests. "At least with the parties, people are dressing up, and having fun, and networking. Our relationships are what make us happy and bring us success. Gatsby is reaching out to others."

Kate responds. "But Daisy treated Gatsby like a sex toy, then used him to cover-up her criminal behaviour. And Tom instigated Gatsby's murder. Aside from Nick, all of Jay Gatsby's friends are fake."

"Like my friends?" Immediately I'm horrified that I've uttered these three maudlin words. I drink my wine to keep from crying.

Kate replies, "We're not fake; we're honest. It's the Chanel-suited parent committee at Applegate and the designer-wear Barbies playing tennis at the Elmington Club you should wonder about."

Somehow, I don't feel better. I feel exhausted.

Marta

Boo hoo. Just as our salon is becoming interesting, Polly pulls an olive branch from under the rocking chair and presents it to Joanne. "You're no Jay Gatsby," she says softly.

"No, that's true. Because I'm not successful. We can't afford Liam's tuition or the fees for the Elmington Club, and if things don't turn around with Greg's consulting business, the Escalade will be repossessed. So no, I'm no Jay Gatsby. Ironically, my fakery is genuine." Joanne's words are slushy.

Amy looks puzzled, but she reaches across the table and squeezes Joanne's hand anyway.

Joanne dabs her left eye with a cocktail napkin, as if extracting a dust mote, and says, "Thanks, Amy." She takes back her hand and refills her glass.

I'm fascinated by Joanne's defence of Gatsby, her contention that he's worthy of admiration rather than contemptuous pity. I prod. "Sure, Gatsby is materially successful, but he's an utter failure in the pursuit of happiness. He's living the quintessential unexamined life. If he had any self-respect, he wouldn't chase Daisy Buchanan or squander his Dom Perignon on shallow one-percenters and their groupies. Have we learned nothing as a society from F. Scott Fitzgerald's parable?"

"Like what?" asks Amy.

Polly sighs, as if tiring of the conversation, but she answers anyway. "Fitzgerald is warning his readers that when you buy into the materialistic values of the wealthy, when you seek to join their rarified ranks, you're a novice playing their game and they have home court advantage. Whatever you call it— 'upward mobility' or 'climbing the corporate ladder' or 'being accepted into the club'—you've been subsumed by a heartless, soulless culture and you won't know that the people you wish to emulate are empty shells in human form till it's too late."

"Oh, really." Joanne accidentally snorts. "So, we should just be content with their leftovers. I'd rather be a Jay Gatsby than a George Wilson, stuck in his miserable garage."

"Then you've been duped because they're two sides of the same sort of person," I say.

"We've all been duped," says Polly.

I don't agree, but she's building a love bridge and I won't destroy it.

Polly continues. "Americans have normalized their dysfunctional status fetish by placing it on a pedestal and calling it 'the American Dream'. We call it 'upward mobility'. Ellen DeGeneres used to throw cars and cash at her audience, and viewers loved her, but wasn't she buying affection and ratings? Wassen't she a twenty-first century, female Gatsby?"

"People in other places have aspirations too," protests Kate.

"But they don't kiss the hem of the garment of mammon as enthusiastically as North Americans do," I counter. Then I say in a tone of flat, Orwellian Newspeak, "In the United States of Utopia, net worth equals self-worth."

The wine has unbridled Polly's tongue and it gallops. "Sure, Marta. In Elmington, even smug socialists like you try to buy respect, Gatsby-style." She smiles at the others. "Note the absence of Ritz crackers and Cheez Whiz on the canape platter. Do you think we'd step through Marta's foreboding front door if she didn't ply us with luxury food and drink?"

Polly's mockery amuses me, but the others laugh nervously, afraid I'll take offence.

Amy breaks the tension in her endearing way. "I'd rather attend book club at Marta's bungalow than a party at a mansion in West Egg any night. These dumplings are amazing!"

"Thank-you, Amy." I blush in spite of myself.

Everyone chats about food and recipes and new restaurants until Kate catches my eye and taps her watch and I nod back. Kate announces that the April novel will be *Tampa* by Alissa Nutting. She searches through her canvas bag, extracts a pink-covered book, and holds it up for all to see.

Amy says, "Cute! A buttonhole."

"Exactly, Amy," says Kate. "Book club is a Rorschach test and *Tampa* is an inkblot that we'll each interpret differently. I already have my opinions and I look forward to hearing yours."

This time next month, I hope I feel the same way.

Crab Apple Winter

The bell tolled on the overhead pager for the second time in a week. The staff lined up on either side of the front door and a dark suited man pushed a gurney draped in a gaudy quilt out to a hearse which, incidentally, was blocking the fire route. Not that it mattered, thought Keith Ross. A mass immolation in Copper River Lodge might please the Gods. Keith observed the honour guard from his low vantage, a wheelchair parked beside a television featuring Judge Judy silently haranguing a litigant.

Body dispatched, the orderly lines collapsed, and the workers hurried back to their regular duties.

"Excuse me, Sandra. Excuse me." Keith caught the attention of a broom pusher. "Who was that? Under the quilt?"

"It was Doris Auber, bless her. So sad, isn't it?"

"How so? The ancient parrot lost her feathers years ago."

"I suppose so. But still, we'll all miss her." Sandra rested her chin on the broom handle and affected a sorrowful expression.

"I won't," said Keith. "She lived well past her 'best-by' date. When anyone asked her a question, she slobbered and replied in gibberish."

"Keith!"

"Sandra!"

Sandra shrugged her shoulders and backed away from Keith and his dangerous opinions. She was raised never to speak ill of the dead, and she extended this courtesy to the elderly living with dementia. If Jesus didn't punish those who violated this principle, karma surely would.

"Just a minute," said Keith. "Could you help me with the remote? TSN please. My fingers are as useless as bratwurst sausages."

Muttering to herself, Sandra changed the channel and unmuted the volume. She didn't realize that Keith's hearing aids had caught and amplified the words, "cocktail wieners."

Keith chuckled.

After the baseball game, Thor, an elfin care worker, pushed Keith's wheelchair to the table Keith shared with two other residents, Rita Campbell and Hank De Jong. Steam billowed from the servery, humidifying the room in a cloying odour of tomato and overcooked beef. Keith read the menu posted by the door: Tortellini.

Hank returned Keith's greeting with a nod, then a cough. He expectorated into a serviette. Rita stared blankly at the array of plastic utensils and sippy cups before her.

"Could you open a window, Thor? It feels like a Turkish bath in here," said Keith. "If we don't clear the air, Hank'll cough up a lung.

"Certainly, Professor Ross." Thor slid the window open a scant two inches.

"That's 'Keith' to you, young man. And that window isn't open yet."

"I'm sorry, Professor Keith. The ministry inspectors visited and had maintenance fix the windows for the safety of all. That's as far as it'll open."

Keith was momentarily struck dumb by the absurdity of the ministry directive. Copper River Lodge was a single level building ringed by an Elizabethan ruff of flower beds. A defenestration would end gently on soft earth higher than the floor.

Keith rubbed the stubble on his chin and said, "Well I guess you'll have to use your hammer, Thor, and smash the window open."

"What? A hammer?" Thor looked sorry the old philosophy professor was becoming addled.

"You are Odin's son, aren't you?" Keith winked.

Thor slapped his thigh theatrically. "My hammer. Of course. I do enjoy woodworking. You're funny, Professor Keith. But my dad's name is Eric."

Thor trotted off to ferry more residents to supper. Hank coughed again and Keith regarded him through narrowed eyes, wondering if his tablemate would be the next resident to exit the building, toes up. Before Keith could ask after his health, Lori, a dietary aide, plunked lipped bowls in front of them.

"It's pasta," she explained. "Eye-talian. I think the noodles are meant to look like turtles. 'Tortellini' sounds like 'turtle' or 'tortoise', don't you think?" Lori shovelled the mushy noodles into Rita's mouth with a pink spoon.

"It's definitely gummable," said Keith.

"Dentures not required," agreed Hank.

Wednesday's Italian themed menu included dessert, Ferraro Roche flavoured gelato scooped from a cardboard box.

"With a meal as grand as this, why would anyone bother with Tuscany?" Keith asked rhetorically.

"I'd rather have mother's slagroomtaart," said Hank.

"I'm sure it tastes better than it sounds," said Keith.

"There's nothing better," said Hank. "It's sponge cake layered with cream and fruit. I could've lived on that alone during strawberry season. Of course, it was just for special."

Keith and Hank reminisced about food as they scraped the last of their gelato from the bottom of their bowls.

Keith gazed through the barely open window. The crab apple trees cast twisted shadows across the lawn. Except for a week or two in May, the trees looked terminally ill, almost dead. Now their gnarled branches were silhouetted in the mellow September dusk.

"I think I'll tell my son to plant a crab apple tree over my grave," said Keith.

"Sounds nice," said Hank. "A crab apple is compact, and beautiful when it blossoms in spring, though the apples make a mess."

"Timothy can make jelly from fruit nourished by my bones."

Hank laughed. "Death on your mind, Keith?"

"Always, Hank."

"Me too."

Keith shifted his focus to Hank. "I envy Doris Auber," he said.

"What? You want Lori to tie a bib around your neck and feed you too?"

"I won't deign to answer that, Hank. I'm serious. Apologies to the great poets, but I'm ready to go gentle into that good night. My life is no longer wild or precious."

"I'd miss you, Keith, but I understand. I, of all people, know exactly what you mean."

Keith sat on the toilet with a plastic cord draped over his knees. He'd pulled the cord to summon help several minutes ago but no one had come and now the seat was digging an oval trench into the back of his thighs and buttocks. At last Thor appeared in the doorway, apologetic, mercifully poker-faced.

"I'm sorry, Professor Ross. I was in the laundry and I didn't hear your bell and—"

"Well, Thor, you've arrived in the nick of time to rescue me from this suffocating, self-generated miasma. Another minute and you'd have discovered me *in extremis*."

"Oh, it's not so bad in here." Thor pushed a button to silence the call bell. "I just imagine I'm in a field of lavender and nothing bothers me." He donned a pair of vinyl gloves and efficiently assisted Keith with clean-up and transfer to his wheelchair. "Shall I scrub your dentures?" asked Thor.

Keith twisted his face into a mask of disgust. "Not with those hands."

"Of course not," Thor laughed as he discarded the gloves.

"Actually, I'm not sleepy yet," said Keith. "I think I'll sit in my La-Z-Boy and listen to a podcast. Could you help me with my iPad?"

“Absolutely.” Thor lifted Keith by his waistband and pivoted him into his recliner. “Are you comfie, Professor Ross?”

“Yes, thank-you. Sufficiently comfie. I just need my teddy.”

“I didn’t know you had—”

“I don’t. Have a teddy, that is.”

“Oh. You’re joking again.”

A pager vibrated and flashed through the loose woven fabric of Thor’s patch pocket.

“Sounds like I’m needed elsewhere,” said Thor, “But I’ll set up your iPad first. What do you want to listen to, Professor Ross?”

“Please type ‘assisted suicide’ into YouTube. I can steer the ship from there.”

“What?”

“You heard me. ‘Assisted suicide’.” Keith enunciated each syllable as if he were conducting a spelling bee.

“Alright, Professor Ross.” Thor crouched, peered through the lenses of Keith’s glasses, and grasped his liver-spotted hand. “But first, I must ask: Are you depressed? I know we’ve had a difficult week—”

“No, no. Copper River Lodge is my big, fat, juicy clam...or oyster. Whichever bivalve suits the place. I’m just curious and I’m doing some research.” Keith snatched his hand back and tucked it under his leg.

“Whew. That’s a relief. I never know what to say to depressed people.” Thor thumbed on the iPad, then handed it back. “Here you go, Professor Ross.”

“Thank-you. But for the love of the thunder-god of the northern heavens, please address me by my first name.”

“Oh! You mean ‘Thor’.”

“No, that’s your name. I’m Keith.”

Keith lay in the twilight of dawn, thinking. The websites called it “Medical Assistance in Dying. MAID.” Ordinarily, Keith disliked jargon, especially acronyms, but he thought these four capital letters were apt. MAID could tidy up a life. Pull order from the chaos in the last station on the journey to death. A rock song Timothy used to listen to decades ago wormed in his head. “May-yay-yay-yaid. A man needs a maid...” The male singer’s voice had been high-pitched, mournful. A man needs a MAID. My anthem, thought Keith.

An ache deep in his right hip disturbed his ruminations. He couldn’t roll over because his spine was as rigid as a two by four, yet he had to reposition himself somehow. Keith fumbled for the bed control and knocked it off the bedrail. “You’re of no use down there, on the floor,” he scolded.

Suddenly the room lit up like an interrogation cell. The registered nurse strode in with a plastic shot glass of pills and a Dixie cup. “Good morning, Keith. I have your medication.” She retrieved the control from the floor and raised the head of the bed.

“Easy does it, Flora.” Keith winced as sandpaper joints bent involuntarily. “Dry wood is liable to snap.”

“Open,” Flora commanded.

Keith opened his mouth like a hatchling and Flora dumped the pills onto his tongue, then poked the straw into his mouth.

“That’ll ease your discomfort,” she said.

Keith swallowed hard and cleared his throat. “Discomfort. Ha! I’m suffering like Job. Do you think Job endured mere ‘discomfort’ at the whims of a heartless, wagering deity?”

“You’re in pain like Job,” Flora echoed.

“Yes.” Keith sounded sharper than he’d intended.

“Well, you’ve had your medication. Would a heating pad help? On your hip?”

“No, no. The drugs will kick in shortly and the wheels on this rusty Model T will turn by breakfast. I’d like to have a word with Dr. Eastley though. When she’s in next.”

“You’re in luck. She’ll be doing rounds today. I’ll put you on the list.”

"Thank-you, Flora" said Keith. "Now if you'd kindly bring me a urinal...before we find ourselves discussing the prophet Noah."

Keith sat in the library with the *Globe and Mail* spread on the table before him. He squinted through a magnifying glass positioned in a frame over an article about an elderly couple who had died holding hands in their bed. They'd "flown away" with matching IVs in their arms. *They flew away...* Keith wondered if the fantasy offered comfort as they approached their intentional, communal obliteration.

He felt a tap on his shoulder.

"That's a fascinating case." Catherine Eastley hovered over Keith and skimmed the article.

"Indeed," said Keith. "And it relates to the reason I requested a consultation with you."

"I see. Well then, we'd better find a quiet place to chat. Would it be presumptuous to suggest your room, Keith?"

"Not at all, Catherine, but you have to drive."

Catherine positioned Keith's wheelchair across from an armchair in his room, sat down, and waited for Keith to open the conversation.

"What's your opinion on MAID?" asked Keith.

"You mean medical assistance in dying?"

"Yes."

Catherine foresaw Keith's request, but she wouldn't be cornered into promises judging by her stony expression. "I think it's an ethically sound, compassionate option for patients who are suffering at end of life," she said flatly.

"So, you'd support a patient who decided to seek euthanasia?"

"Yes, Keith, without reservation. Provided they met certain sensible criteria for eligibility."

"Then, not without reservation," Keith challenged.

“There are legal guidelines to determine who qualifies for MAID.” Catherine fished her cell phone from her canvas shoulder bag, tapped in a query, then read aloud: “The patient must be capable of making healthcare decisions; have a grievous and irremediable medical condition; and natural death must be reasonably foreseeable.”

“Okay,” said Keith. “I believe I tick those boxes. Capable? Check. Grievous medical condition? Well, take a gander. I’m twisted up with arthritis like a dry dishrag. I have congestive heart failure. I leak embarrassing bodily fluids irremediably, therefore check. And everyday I foresee my death which is both natural and reasonable at eighty-five. Again, check.”

Catherine leaned back and crossed her legs. “Let’s set aside the question of whether you qualify for MAID for a moment, Keith. I want to hear why you would consider pursuing an assisted death in the first place.”

“Two words. ‘I’m old’.”

“Okay, you’re old.”

Catherine’s reflection of his words followed by her silence annoyed him yet provoked him to elaborate. “And I’m in a state of advanced, terminal, stage four, metastatic decrepitude. You can diagnose me at a glance.”

Catherine nodded slowly.

Keith continued. “My life’s work is behind me. Regression to pablum and diapering lie ahead. To channel Monty Hall, which would *you* choose, Catherine? Behind door number one is a booby prize, a goat, if you will. We open door number one to reveal the former physician and triathlete, Dr. Eastley, now deaf, blind, demented, chair-bound, and incontinent in her dotage. And then there’s door number two, a black door marked with a skeletal, robed figure holding a scythe. Perhaps there’s a prize behind door number two. No one in the audience knows. Not even Monty Hall knows. Wouldn’t you gamble on door number two?”

“Okay. You’ve laid out your logic, Keith. But usually there’s a third door in ‘Let’s Make a Deal’, isn’t there? The choice needn’t be binary,” said Catherine.

“Of course, it is,” replied Keith. “It’s ‘to be or not to be.’ Life versus death.”

“And I’m suggesting wait and see. How has your mood been?”

“I’m not depressed, and I’m insulted that you’d jump to that line of questioning. My request is rational and life-affirming. Why ruin a wonderful, eighty-five-year trip with a sojourn in a flea-bag motel at the end? I want off the bus now.”

“You’re unhappy at Copper River Lodge.”

“No, that’s not it at all. This place is nice, and the people are friendly. I speak metaphorically. It’s my senescence that’s flea ridden. This is why society needs the humanities. So we can communicate beyond ham-fisted assessment tools and questionnaires.”

“Alright. For now, I accept your claim that you’re not depressed. Have you discussed your feelings with Timothy?”

“No. He’s in Dubai for a few months and I don’t want to pester. When I’ve made the arrangements, I’ll contact him.”

“Isn’t that putting the cart before the horse? He’d want to be part of this...umm...” Catherine waved her hand to find a suitable word. “Exploration.”

“Perhaps he would. But it’s not his mortality we’re exploring so his opinion isn’t relevant.”

“Fair enough. But what is relevant is that we proceed with care. Keith, I’ll be honest. I don’t think you even qualify for MAID.”

Keith looked down at his gnarled hands, then through the window at the crab apple trees. Tears, unbidden and unwelcome, pooled in his eyes. He hadn’t wanted to reveal his emotional fragility to Catherine. Now his predicament was obvious to both of them. Keith couldn’t control what he ate and when he defecated, yet he’d naively thought that the Supreme Court of Canada had granted him the power to decide when he’d die. He was wrong.

Catherine passed Keith a Kleenex. He mashed the tissue against his eyes and nose, cleared his throat, and straightened his posture, preparing himself to hear the reasons why she’d deny him what he believed to be his ultimate right.

“Keith, no one would judge the timing of your death as reasonably foreseeable. You’re eighty-five, and you could live another decade,” said Catherine.

“Not without modern healthcare. My continued existence is unnatural. I rely on medication and the everyday heroism of the Lodge staff,” countered Keith.

“And you’re not suffering. You told me the hydromorphone was effective for your hip pain and you have no other discomfort.”

“Ah, Catherine. I’m disappointed but not surprised that you have the blinkered perspective of the empiricist. My suffering is existential. I have a deep, psychic pain for which there is no remedy but death.”

Catherine tented her fingers and frowned. Keith’s plea hung in the limbo between them. Finally she said, “I acknowledge that you are suffering, Keith. There may be a route to your stated wish. However, as your doctor, I’m duty-bound to treat your existential pain before we even consider MAID. I’d like to start you on a mild antidepressant—”

“Absolutely not,” Keith interrupted. “All I have left is my brain and I won’t take anything that will diminish my capacity to think.”

“But—”

Keith raised his hand like a stop sign. “Save your counsel, Catherine. They all have side effects.”

“Then, at a minimum, I’ll refer you to Dr. Nam. He’s a psychologist who specializes in geriatric cases.”

“As a geriatric case, I consent to the referral with the caveat that we revisit my request—soon.”

“Six months?” asked Catherine.

“Half it,” replied Keith.

“Deal. Three months,” agreed Catherine.

Keith woke with the familiar ache in his hip. He tried to lift his right hand to adjust the bed, but it lay there, inert, insubordinate to his command. He cursed, yet the only sound that issued from his mouth was a gurgling “arrgh.” At once, Keith knew he’d suffered a stroke. He stared at the stippled lunar landscape of the dawn-lit ceiling and tested his cognition.

Alpha, beta, gamma; unus, duo, tres; Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto; three squared is nine; Timothy Michael was born on July 23rd in 1957 at 10:45 am; *Ergo cogito, ergo sum...* A chilling deduction under the circumstances *mais, merci quand même, Descartes*.

Keith could think. He could blink his eyes...sort of. He could raise his left arm like a south-pawed Nazi and wiggle the toes on his left foot. He tried to speak again. “Arrgh.” He sounded like a creature under attack in a 50s B-grade monster movie.

His mind revisited the conversation with Catherine Eastley a few days prior. “All I have left is my brain,” he’d declared—wrongly. He’d had a mouth too. The apparatus of speech in proper working order. Now his mouth was no longer in the service of his brain and communication would be reduced to “yes-no” answers about bodily functions and inanities. *Are you thirsty, Keith? Arrgh... Do you think the Leafs will make the play-offs, Professor Ross? Arrgh.* His chief pleasure was conversation, the mind-mouth dyad. Verbosity had been his vice. Tears streamed from his eyes.

Keith thought about the Stoics, those limoncello-from-lemons philosophers of ancient Rome. He’d turned to the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius when Jane died in the car crash, when manuscripts were rejected, when he’d struck his head on the bottom of the mid-life dating pool. WWED. What would Epictetus do if he awoke with the communication skills of a gerbil?

Keith communicated with nods and shakes of his head, a nonverbal conversational system lacking the gray zone in which he used to frolic. Bereft of nuance, of digressions and discursions and subordinate clauses, he modified yes and no by the physical vigour of his replies to Timothy’s questions.

Flora stood at the bedside proffering a spoonful of crushed pills and pudding, an appalling swirl of grainy, white bitterness and gooey, butterscotch sweetness.

“Will you take your medication, Dad?” asked Timothy.

Keith shook his head.

Flora waved the spoon in front of Keith’s face. “You need your blood thinners and blood pressure medicine, Keith. If you don’t take your meds you could have another stroke.”

Precisely, thought Keith. Perhaps even a fatal stroke. He shook his head again.

“It’s okay, Flora. You tried. Just leave the medication here and I’ll give it to him,” said Timothy.

“Thanks. I’ll check back in a few minutes.” Flora pivoted on the heel of her sneaker and hurried from the room.

“You heard what she said,” Timothy scolded.

Keith searched Timothy’s eyes for connection. He nodded slowly.

“But still you won’t take your pills.”

Keith shook his head.

“I get the feeling that you want to die. Is that it? You want to die?”

Keith nodded.

Timothy sat in silence for a moment. Keith imagined gears and sprockets, tiny mechanical parts, turning in Timothy’s head. He’d inherited his mother’s spare, thoroughly premeditated patterns of speech. At last, he leaned forward and spoke.

“Catherine told me you’re depressed. I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you, Dad. I’ve been an absent son.”

Keith shook his head. He wanted to say, *Filial piety is a ridiculous virtue. You have no reason to apologize. You’re a civil engineer, not a companion dog. And I’m not depressed. I’m old.* He searched Timothy’s eyes for understanding.

“Not depressed?” asked Timothy.

Head shake.

“But you want to die?”

Head nod.

“Do you want Chloe and Isabel to come?”

Keith shook his head. He’d bid them farewell and told them he loved them in August just before they’d returned to university. Disrupting their studies in the thick of the autumn semester seemed self-indulgent, selfish...frankly embarrassing. Keith preferred they remember their grandfather as a man of wit, not as a messy sack of bones.

“Okay.” Timothy tapped the spoon on the rim of the garbage bin splattering a glob of medicated pudding over the liner. “No medication. No granddaughters.” Timothy sighed heavily. “I don’t know how to help you, Dad.”

Keith’s eyes widened. *You’re a problem-solver by trade, Timothy, and this is a simple problem to solve. Hold a pillow over my face. Push my wheelchair over a cliff. Park your car in an airtight garage with me in it and run the engine with a brick on the accelerator.*

“I’ll ask Catherine to meet with us.”

Keith rolled his eyes.

“Come on, Dad. Don’t roll your eyes at me. Jeez, you remind me of the girls when they were thirteen. That’s it, old man. I’m not driving you to the mall now...not with that attitude.”

A grin spread over half of Keith’s face.

“How’s you father?” The voice from the hall was gruff and faintly accented.

“Why don’t you ask him, Hank? I need to make some calls so you can take this chair. I’ll be back in an hour,” answered Timothy.

Catherine Eastley and Timothy sat on opposite sides of Keith’s bed lobbing sentences over the inert man between them. Keith tried to participate in the discussion, but he couldn’t

break in and now he lay supine, as powerless as a gagged prisoner in leg-irons and handcuffs awaiting a verdict.

"We don't know how much function your father will regain, Timothy. The stroke is still fresh and he may improve. Until the therapists tell me otherwise, I think we should continue with aggressive physio and speech therapy. Changing the treatment plan is premature at this juncture," said Catherine.

"In your judgement, what is Dad's prognosis? What can he expect in terms of recovery?" asked Timothy.

"That's difficult to say."

"Is it, really?" probed Timothy. "Dad had the stroke on September 23rd. Now it's late October. According to Flora, his condition hasn't changed one iota. He still can't move on his right side. He can't talk. He sleeps about twenty hours a day. Aren't you telling us to hope for a miracle?"

"No, I wouldn't say that, Timothy. Drowsiness is normal after a CVA because the brain heals during sleep. Your father's still in the early stages of his recovery."

Timothy looked into Keith's eyes, then back to Catherine, compelled by his father's silent urging to at least kick the ball forward. "Yesterday, Dad told me he wants to die. Years ago, he said he wouldn't want to go on if he were severely compromised...senile or disabled."

Catherine pursed her lips, and Timothy interpreted her silence as a reluctance to cede control to her patient. Timothy pushed on. "I think it's time to honour Dad's wishes."

"You mean a medically assisted death?"

"Exactly."

"Well, in principle I agree with a patient's right to decide how he wishes to die," said Catherine. "However, I'm not convinced that your father has the capacity to make such a decision...cognitively speaking."

"What?" Timothy blushed with frustration.

"The stroke muddies the waters, Timothy. I need to know that your father is not being coerced in any way. And that he understands what MAID is. I can't determine whether your father is competent enough to be eligible for an assisted death." Catherine glanced at her watch to signal their meeting was ending.

"But you know he's competent. Look at him, Catherine," pleaded Timothy. "Dad, do you understand what we're saying?"

Keith nodded.

"Do you want to live?"

Keith shook his head.

"Do you want to die?"

Keith nodded.

"Do you want a medically assisted death?"

Keith nodded again.

"See?" said Timothy. "He's clear and unequivocal in telling us what he wants."

"And how long did the two of you rehearse this skit? Keith must make the request of his own volition, not at your instigation. Right now, he needs your support to recover and I suggest that is where you place your energy. Help your father with his therapy, Timothy. Feed him nourishing food. Offer him emotional support. Take him for a stroll in the garden."

"A stroll in the garden? Listen, Catherine. He asked me to carry out his wishes. Believe me, I don't want to lose him. But this isn't about me...or you. It's what Dad wants."

Catherine stood and donned her blazer. "We need to be one hundred percent certain about a decision like this. MAID isn't reversible. First, we aim for recovery."

"And if that's futile?" Timothy ignored her condescension.

Catherine's padded shoulders rose to her studded earlobes. "We'll see."

Keith sat by the window, looking out over the late autumn garden. Only a few shrivelled apples clung to the branches of the crab apple trees. Most of the fruit had fallen in the November wind, littering the lawn, offering flesh to squirrels and worms. Soon the decaying apples would be buried under snow.

Timothy entered the room, set his overstuffed carry-on bag on the floor, and perched himself on a stool by Keith's side. "I've been trying to supervise from here, Dad, but the project is stalled. I have to fly back to Dubai this afternoon. I'll be back for Christmas. We'll all be back. Chloe and Isabel will be home too."

Keith nodded. Timothy's promise was the butterscotch pudding that made the bitterness of parting easier to swallow.

Timothy grasped his father's gnarled left hand and Keith returned his grip with all the strength he could muster. "You do your exercises. Cooperate with the staff. Take your pills," said Timothy.

Keith nodded, though they both knew the gesture was a lie.

"I love you, Dad."

Keith nodded again and tears spilled from his eyes. *I love you too, Timothy. I'm a fortunate man to have you as my son.*

Timothy hugged Keith, slung his bag over his shoulder, and left the room.

Keith looked through the window, past the trees, to the parking lot, watching for Timothy. A moment later, he saw him cross the parking lot in a few athletic strides, swing his bag into the back seat of his rental, and drive off with a jack rabbit jolt. He still does that, thought Keith. How many times did Jane and I harangue him? Haste makes waste.

"Good morning, Professor Ross." Thor entered the room, extending a plastic cup with a straw toward Keith. "I have your morning snack. A chocolate milk shake."

Keith clamped his lips and shook his head.

"It looks pretty tasty. I think you should try it," Thor urged in sing-song.

Keith shook his head again.

“Okay. I’m putting it here, where you can reach it. In case you change your mind,” said Thor.

My decision is final, Keith vowed. He wouldn’t eat or drink again.

Bride of the Century

Sitting cross-legged on her bed, Sylvia Johnson held a bottle of nail polish labelled “Chantilly Pink” in her graceful hand. She unscrewed the lid, withdrew the tiny brush, sniffed fumes of promise, then recapped the bottle and sorted through the plastic basket. The colours ranged from deep “Midnight Plum” to pale, iridescent “Pearl Necklace” and she had to choose the perfect hue. Afterall, she’d only be a bride once. She lined up her favourites on her chenille bedspread and considered yet still her eyes were drawn to Chantilly Pink. Wasn’t this the most romantic of colours?

Sylvia looked into the mirror above her dresser, smiled at her reflection, and said aloud, triumphantly, “Love is a mosaic and I’ve found another tile for my masterpiece.”

Sylvia was clever that way. Her brain generated proverbs and aphorisms and quotable quotes as if inspired by Apollo, the god of poetry himself. She considered her free-ranging mind her most attractive feature, after her crowning glory and hourglass figure. Most of the sand was in the top of the glass. Wow—another unexpected quip out of thin air! Wasn’t Jonathan lucky she’d chosen him.

She put the bottles back in the basket, stood at the foot of her bed facing the mirror, and stripped to her underwire bra and boy shorts. Sylvia suspected that men were suckers for a cute face, but it was the generous curve of the female hip that really gave them a rise and left them panting and Jonathan was no exception. She curled her toes into the shag mat and turned east and west, appraising her form over her shoulders.

“Not bad,” Sylvia congratulated her reflection. “You have the body you deserve, and Jonathan deserves the best too.”

Sylvia performed a few brisk lunges to limber up for her high intensity toning routine, a regular, before-bed ritual in the lead-up to her Big Day. The mortification of her flesh was a crucial preparation for the altar and her rebirth as Mrs. Jonathan Poirier.

Sylvia worked as a receptionist at Carling and Jones, a stuffy law firm tucked into a fading art deco building on a dead-end street in downtown Elmington. The old partners buttered their stale bread by managing the legal affairs of a few clients dating back to the elder Trudeau era. Aggressively litigious in the decade of whisky-soaked lunches, desk top ash trays, and mini-skirted secretaries, now Carling and Jones coasted on comfortable incomes from legacy planning and disposition of estates. The firm wasn't busy and the phone seldom interrupted Sylvia as she leafed through magazines and scrolled through websites, planning her wedding.

As the minutes dripped toward four o'clock, Sylvia perused the head wear in *Today's Bride*. Tiaras, fascinators, crowns, pill boxes...the choices were overwhelming. A wide brimmed sunhat of twisted rattan and daisies graced a model's blond head. Looks like furniture, thought Sylvia. A vase of flowers on a wicker table. Another model wore a disc-shaped object resembling a flying-saucer—or a pot lid. Anyway, fascinators were for guests, not brides, and the crowns were too Disney princess.

Sylvia decided on a tiara, a classy enhancement for her face and hair, not a confusing distraction. Jonathan would love the silver tiara, the one bedazzled with fleurs-de-lis. She opened her cellphone and ordered it.

The grandfather clock in the lobby tolled four brassy notes. If she hurried, she could drop by the florist before her fitting with the seamstress at 4:45.

Sylvia stood on a wooden stool in her stilettos while the seamstress, Mrs. DiAngelo, poked pins through the hem of her gown.

"I'll make it slightly shorter in front, so you walk gracefully, like a queen," said Mrs. DiAngelo. "Have you decided on the bodice?"

"Well, the neckline is scalloped, and the skirt is sequined and full, so I suppose it should be simple," replied Sylvia.

"Yes, I agree. We won't hide your figure under fussy details. So, we'll leave the bodice as is?"

"I think so."

"Stand straight," commanded Mrs. DiAngelo.

Sylvia pulled her shoulders back.

"That's better. If you slouch, the dress will come out too short and it won't be my fault."

"Yes, Mrs. DiAngelo. Sorry." Sylvia felt as if she were in grade nine home economics class, not a client paying top dollar for a once-in-a-lifetime gown.

Mrs. DiAngelo struggled to her feet and scrutinized the fall of the silk flounces. "Raise your hands over your head, please."

Sylvia did as she was told.

"Yes, I think it's lying good." Mrs. DiAngelo raised a pudgy hand to assist Sylvia from the stool.

Feet firmly on the pine floor, Sylvia turned for Mrs. DiAngelo to unfasten the zipper. "When can you have it ready?"

"Final fitting next week. Mind the pins, Sylvia. We don't want any tears in the fabric."

Sylvia tried to get as much sleep as she could in the lead-up to the wedding, but insomnia rattled her brain and shadowed her eyes. Each night, she flopped this way and that, like a sunfish on a dock. She tried to relax but that was precisely the trouble. Relaxing wasn't something one could attempt with any hope of success. It just happened, like falling in love.

Sylvia's circled back to—who else? Jonathan. Clean-cut, broad-shouldered, standing tall and proud in his formal uniform. She hadn't shown him any swatches or designs or catalogue photos. She wanted her appearance to be a surprise.

Then, Sylvia thought of her mother's prematurely wrinkled face screwed up in a frown and enwreathed in a toxic cloud of Du Maurier smoke, her chapped lips puckered for an intake of nicotine or an expulsion of vitriol. Mother tried to talk Sylvia out of the nuptials and said she wouldn't attend the wedding let alone assist with preparation. She didn't "approve".
Good riddance, Mommy Dearest.

And Sylvia thought of the many tasks ahead. Jonathan's social circle was all-encompassing, and he'd arranged the venues, catering, and photographer, but Sylvia still had plenty on her plate. Her mind wandered to procedure. Wax or manicure first? Would she bathe after having her hair done—being very cautious to keep her head above the bubbles—or forgo basic ablutions prior to donning her gown? Could she gargle with Scope after she'd applied her make-up? Surely there was an order of operations for a bride on her special day. Sylvia's eyelids drooped and at last, she slept.

Mr. Carling had asked Sylvia to make a Facebook page for the Rotary golf tournament, but she was too jittery to manage this simple task. She clicked through Getty Images of loudly dressed foursomes, but she couldn't settle on a banner photo. Besides, the mouse kept pulling her back, compulsively, to her own social media feed.

Sylvia's Facebook and Instagram accounts documented her evolving love for Jonathan Poirier. Four years ago, they'd snapped a selfie together under a blooming cherry bough on their first date. Jonathan took the photo while Sylvia joked that he had arms as long as a selfie stick. She flushed with pleasure at the memory of those arms encircling her that afternoon.

Sylvia scrolled through photos of events and vacations and restaurant meals...the photographic evidence of a whirlwind romance followed by the reliable trade winds of deepening affection. She wouldn't share anything online with Jonathan today. She wouldn't break the spell of their perfect love with imperfect words. All that could be said had been said, and Jonathan knew how she felt.

"How's the Facebook coming along?" Mr. Carling's kindly growl startled Sylvia.

"Almost finished, Mr. Carling."

"Excellent. When you're done, you can go. Take the rest of the afternoon off. I understand we won't be seeing you tomorrow. Our heartiest congratulations, Sylvia." Mr. Carling set a long, cream coloured envelope on Sylvia's keyboard. His mouth widened into a dazzling, Polydent chuckle. "For Mrs. Poirier."

“Thank-you.” Sylvia’s reply was composed, her posture demure, but inside she felt like a washing machine on perpetual spin.

Sylvia stepped from the blinding light of a June afternoon into the inky stillness of the narthex of St. Patrick’s Church. Silently, she walked across the navy carpet and stood behind the carved walnut door. It was slightly ajar, revealing the glory of a nave festooned in bunting and flowers and bathed in the kaleidoscope glow of stained glass. Sylvia was hidden in shadow, but she could see and feel the happy anticipation of the guests seated in the pews. A palpable, pulsating joy swirled through the church and through the chambers of Sylvia’s heart.

She would be unforgettable. Her silver tiara glittered atop masses of brunette waves. Her gracefully arched brows framed luxuriantly lashed, hazel eyes. Sylvia’s porcelain skin contrasted with her pert, “Strawberry Daiquiri” lips. Her ivory gown enrobed her like a wrapper on a candy—an enticement of silk and sequin and lace concealing the fleshy delight of her body. In her right hand, she held a bouquet of pink roses on a background of babies’ breath and bridal wreath. A simple engagement ring echoing the tiara’s fleurs-de-lis motif adorned her left ring finger. Sylvia kept still as a doe, alert for her cue.

Had she missed it? She’d waited for the summons from Father Paul, but it didn’t reach her ears. Surely it was past time to shoot her arrow through Jonathan’s heart, once and for all.

Sylvia glided silently, through the doorway, up the centre aisle, between the families and well-wishers crowded into port and starboard pews. Sylvia heard gasps. How had she missed Father Paul’s appeal for objections to this...this farce? Jonathan didn’t love that woman. He loved Sylvia.

Jonathan turned from the woman and faced Sylvia. His face was contorted in an inscrutable mask of emotion. Sylvia was bewildered. He didn’t seem happy to see her. He looked angry, as if he’d unwrapped a gift and discovered a lump of dried shit under the pretty

paper. This wasn't the plan. Still, she approached him in measured, graceful steps, her perfect appearance a substitute for all she couldn't say.

"What is she doing here?" hissed the woman.

"I have no idea," said Jonathan. He clasped the woman's hand.

In the front pew, a matronly woman stood and sidled up to Sylvia. Good, thought Sylvia. The woman looked like a sausage in her coral tube dress. The contrast between them would enhance the effect of "Hot and Not."

"Honey?" said hotdog lady. "Honey? Jonathan's not marrying you. He's marrying Julia. You have to leave." Her tone was sweet, but the words spilled onto Sylvia like battery acid. She shook the woman's clammy hand off her elbow.

"Jonathan. Do you remember giving me this?" Sylvia waved her left hand. "Do you remember our promise?"

"We broke up two years ago. It's over Sylvia." Jonathan spoke over urgent whispers and the rustling of serge and nylon as people shifted and gawked.

"It's not over. We agreed to give each other space. To take a break. You never asked for your ring back. We didn't break up." Sylvia was semiconsciously aware of movement around her, of female bodies surrounding her, of being boxed in. "I love you, Jonathan," she pleaded.

"I don't love you," said Jonathan. "I love Julia, and I'm marrying her. Please go."

Please. Jonathan's stiff politeness catalyzed the sting of his words. Sylvia waved at the woman. "I can't believe this. Look at her, Jonathan. Even though she's at least twenty pounds overweight, she's flat chested. She wears her veil and gown like draperies." Sylvia was dismayed to sound so shrill, yet she ploughed on. "I can't see her hair, but judging by her complexion, it's probably mousy. Be honest, Jonathan. You can't say that you prefer her to me."

Jeers of derisive objection echoed through the nave. Jonathan glared and shook his head and turned back to the woman. The triad at the altar—the love of Sylvia's life, the woman, and Father Paul—were fixed in a gruesomely surreal tableau representing Sylvia's darkest nightmare. Several greedy hands, gloved and bare, clutched at Sylvia.

“Come on, honey. You’ve said your piece. Let’s go.” It was hotdog lady again. Sylvia couldn’t bear to hear the woman’s voice.

Sylvia screamed and screamed as loudly as she could. She stamped her heels into the carpet, thrashed her arms to escape the women, and threw her bouquet at Jonathan. Why couldn’t he see that she was a much better catch than that awful woman who mistakenly occupied her place at the altar?

Oscar crouched near the baptismal font. His video camera recorded this once-in-a-lifetime event from its perch on an unobtrusive metal tripod. Moments earlier, Oscar was craving a cigarette, wondering if he should spike another notch into the end of his belt to relieve the pressure on his expanding gut, and speculating on the probable length of Father Paul’s homily.

Now Oscar forgot his desire for nicotine and roomier pants. Wowser! What a ceremony this was. And the camera was rolling.

In every human drama there were winners and losers and you never knew who was who. Not right off the bat anyway. That morning, Oscar tried to switch assignments with his partner who was now en route to the Goldberg wedding at the Elmington Club and a fat wad of cash. Given the opportunity, Oscar wouldn’t trade places with him now.

Oscar could practically taste TikTok fame, a damn rich dish that would go down easy. For a sliver of a second, he thought of the humiliated wannabe bride and her broken heart. It would mend and maybe she’d find love through Oscar’s TikTok. Some men didn’t mind a bit of crazy if it came in a nice package. Oscar might even share a cut of the revenue with her.

Yup. Fortune turned on a dime. There were winners and losers and it was too soon for anyone to count the chickens until they came home to roost.

Last Call

The skinny, old lady didn't understand that smoking wasn't allowed in Elmington General. Decades of habit ruled her. Josie had to complete her charting, but she couldn't leave the woman for more than a minute before she was rummaging through other patients' bedside tables and overnight bags looking for cigarettes. Josie guided the woman into the nurses' station to keep her out of mischief.

"This chair is comfortable, Noreen. And here's a drink for you," said Josie.

"A rye and ginger?" She wheedled like a hungry toddler.

"Yes," lied Josie. Noreen wouldn't know that it was only ginger ale. Her brain had shrunk like an over-used sponge from decades of hard drinking. She didn't even realize she was incontinent of stool. Medically induced diarrhea purged her body of toxins that her cirrhotic liver couldn't clear. Breaking under the endless task of diapering her mother, Noreen's daughter had dropped her off at ER the previous day. Now Noreen was marooned in the medical ward until she could be placed in a nursing home.

Noreen took a sip from the Dixie cup and smiled conspiratorially. "You know what would go good with this? A cigarette." Noreen plunked the cup on the Formica desktop and rose from the chair. Josie had stuck a nicotine patch on Noreen's shoulder, but that only blunted Noreen's craving.

"Why don't you have your drink first," said Josie.

"Okay." Noreen sat and raised her glass. "Cheers!"

Josie logged into the computer.

"You know what would go well with this?" Noreen repeated. "A cigarette."

Josie peered into Noreen's cloudy, grey eyes. "Yes, but we don't have any here."

Noreen stood again. "I'll find us some."

Josie spotted a box of white straws on a med cart. "That's okay, Noreen. You relax. I think I can get you one." Josie went to the cart, withdrew a straw, and snipped off three inches with

a pair of bandage scissors. She returned to Noreen and presented her with the straw. "A cigarette."

"Thanks," said Noreen as she patted her hospital gown for a lighter.

"I have a lighter," said Josie.

Noreen sat down and held the straw to her lips. Josie flicked an imaginary lighter and held it to the straw. Noreen inhaled through the straw, then pulled it from her mouth, frowning. "This cigarette smokes funny."

"Yeah," said Josie. "But it goes well with rye and ginger."

Noreen shrugged and enjoyed her imaginary vices long enough for Josie to enter the morning's assessments into the computer.

Three hours later, Josie flopped onto a broken geri-chair in the breakroom. She pulled the lever to recline and closed her eyes. Her temples throbbed with each heartbeat and her eyeballs felt as if they'd been dipped in acid. She'd go straight home to sleep after her shift. Two other nurses entered the breakroom, deep in conversation. Josie pretended to nap.

"A grand mal in the bathroom. When he regained consciousness, he was speaking gibberish so the doc's ordered IV thiamine for the encephalopathy and Valium. The alkies always lie about their drinking on the admission assessment. I suppose it's the shame."

"As they say, double whatever a man tells you he drinks—"

"And triple it for the ladies."

"I have an alcoholic on my assignment too. Just fifty-three and already has end stage cirrhosis. The admitting diagnosis was pancreatitis though she told me, 'food poisoning.' More like ethanol poisoning for the last thirty years. Now her pancreas is settling but she probably needs a liver transplant. Her bilirubin was through the roof. Spent the night on the commode, and she's cleaned out now. Food poisoning? Right. She's in total denial. Social work is coming to discuss addictions treatment."

"So sad, isn't it?"

“What’s sad about it? They did it to themselves and they’re costing the system millions. It’s pathetic.”

“I suppose.”

“If anything, we should be angry. Someone needs to tell them straight. ‘You did this to yourself. You made the crappy bed and soiled the sheets and it’s yours to lie in.’ I have no compassion for people like that.”

“Still. Makes you wonder doesn’t it?”

“About what?”

“Well...you know...the glass or two with supper. My encounter with the punch bowl at the Christmas party.”

“Ah, Liza, that was all in good fun. No one ends up in 3B from a drink in the pub or an occasional heavy night. You were hammered, but no harm done.”

“I asked the chief of staff to dance the lambada with me. Now I hide whenever I spot him in the hall. Jean-Claude calls me ‘Grinder’.”

“Well tell Jean-Claude to shut the fuck up. That’s water under the bridge. Or rum—”

“You get my point.”

“You don’t have a problem. Sure, we all like a tipple from time to time, but we show up here and deal with all the vomit and shit the hardcore drinkers hurl at us. You aren’t like them at all.”

Bile bubbled in Josie’s throat. She had to sit up, but she felt as if the chair was spinning on a turntable at 78 rpm and, besides, she didn’t care to interact with her colleagues at the moment. She’d rest a minute longer before doing blood glucose checks and facing Noreen’s antics. After work, she’d go by the liquor store one last time and then she’d definitely quit. She just had to get through the next couple shifts and her cousin’s bridal shower on Sunday. Josie vowed that she’d definitely go teetotal after that.

The Contessa

Every Wednesday, Discreet n' Neat Janitorial assigned Connie to 14 Balmoral Court, a faux-Tudor, half timbered extravagance decorated interiorly in Sun King-inspired French Provincial. Connie figured the house was technically a mansion because it had five bedrooms with a bathroom each plus a number of chambers and great rooms, and she had the whole workday to clean it. Not that she ever needed to clean it. The house reminded her of a grand hotel with no guests—extravagant, immaculate, and impersonal.

Connie pressed the combination into the lockbox to obtain the key for the side door. She let herself in and placed her bucket of supplies by the entry way. No one was ever home. Perhaps the owners ran out of money before they'd moved in. Perhaps the house was a poker chip in a money laundering scheme. Connie had read of such things in the *Toronto Sun*. Whatever its history, Connie could imagine herself living in such grandeur as this. She left her shoes on the marble tiled floor, walked down a plushy carpeted hallway, entered the TV room, and flicked on the home theatre system. From the low vantage of a velvet chaise longue, Connie clicked to HGTV.

For eight hours every Wednesday, Connie embodied the spirit of her legal Christian name, Contessa Maria Theresa, a name of decadent rhyme. She wasn't a Constance like everybody thought. Orphaned at the age of five, Connie didn't know the inspiration behind her regal name. Aunt Edna, the irritable, tightly coiled woman who raised her, claimed her sister-in-law was addicted to romance novels and that Connie was likely named after a fictional heroine who submitted to relations with Fabio for pages and pages in a dog-eared paperback. Whatever. Being the namesake of a literary figure...well...that was special, yet Connie wondered if, *perhaps and maybe*, her name meant much, much more. This possibility consoled her whenever, for official purposes, she had to state her surname. Wertzel. It was a name redolent of boiled cabbage and potatoes.

Despite her stupid surname, Connie was no dummy. She'd spotted the CCTV cameras focused on the mansion's exterior doors, and though she'd searched, she'd found none anywhere else in the house. Connie governed herself accordingly. At 8:00 am she entered

and at 4:00 pm she left, and for the duration of the workday, she was lady of the manor, collecting \$18.36 for each hour of her presence, a generous wage by service sector standards. The day's pay came to \$148.88 minus deductions. Not bad for swanning about 14 Balmoral, taking rest in the master bedroom, lunch on the walnut table in the dining room, and a bowel movement on a toilet equipped with a Japanese-engineered seat warmer and bidet feature.

Contessa Maria Theresa could get used to this lifestyle.

A few minutes after 4:00 pm, the Discreet n' Neat company car picked Connie up and drove her to company headquarters. Then, after a half-hour bus ride to East Elmdale and a seventeen-minute walk to the Elm Haven Apartments, Connie unlocked the door of the two-bedroom unit she shared with Aunt Edna.

Two years prior, Aunt Edna quit smoking when she was put on oxygen for her COPD. The passage of time had done nothing to diminish the odour of wet ashtray and the grayish yellow streaks on the walls. An oxygen concentrator hissed and pumped in the living room, and Connie had only to follow its plastic tubing to determine her aunt's whereabouts. Aunt Edna was in the bathroom, but Connie knew she'd return to the living room because one of her aunt's favourite shows, "Hoarders – Buried Alive!", blared from the TV on the hutch.

The apartment wasn't dirty, but it wasn't exactly clean either, a consequence of Connie being too tired, and Aunt Edna too infirm, to give the place a proper scrubbing. Weren't the cobbler's children barefoot? Wasn't the carpenter's house falling down? Apartment 303 reflected the realities of Connie's livelihood.

Connie slipped out of her runners and went to the bedroom to change from her Discreet n' Neat uniform into a sweatshirt and track pants. Then, she went to the kitchen, put her Tupperware in the sink, and peered into the fridge to consider supper. A quart of milk, a few stalks of limp celery, the book ends of a bread loaf curling in a plastic bag, seven eggs, a stack of Kraft cheese singles, and a hodge podge of condiments including a recently opened bottle of salsa. Connie would shop later. She could make a passable omelette and the salsa would add flare. Nourishing and easy.

"I thought I heard you!"

Connie's toes curled at the sound of Aunt Edna's back-of-the-hall Bingo voice, its decibel level only slightly diminished by its bearer's limited lung capacity.

"I told you this morning. We need groceries, Connie, but I can't justify paying Foodland to deliver when you've got sturdy arms and legs."

Connie turned. "I'll make us an omelette, Aunt Edna."

"That'll do. But you'd better go shopping after supper or I'll be marooned here tomorrow with nothing to sustain me but a bottle of ketchup." Aunt Edna leaned on the door jamb to catch her breath.

"Okay." Connie pushed aside the Tupperware and Aunt Edna's tea mugs and washed her hands in the sink.

"If you'll excuse me, Connie. Commercial's almost over. They're cleaning out the house of a washed-up rock singer." Wheeze. "I hope they're careful." Wheeze. "There's probably a fortune in memorabilia amongst all the trash."

Omelettes made for fast cooking and eating. Scarcely a half hour later, Aunt Edna pushed a toasted crust around her plate to mop up the furrows of egg and salsa that her fork had missed.

"Should I get the mail while I'm out for groceries?" asked Connie.

"It's okay Connie. I got Franklin to get it after he fixed the leak in the shower."

"Anything for me?"

"Just a letter from Everest College asking if you want a new career as a medical secretary or some such."

"You read my mail?"

"No, I'm clairvoyant. I can guess these things," Aunt Edna deadpanned. She gestured to the folding tray table next to her La-Z-Boy. "See for yourself."

Connie stacked the dishes and carried them to the kitchen counter, then gathered the pile of mail from the tray table and returned to her chair. She sorted. Flyers and coupons for Giant Tiger and Dominoes Pizza—recycling pile. Ditto the form letter from Everest College. Wait. Here was something interesting. A grey envelope, torn open on its left edge, a row of cancelled foreign stamps in its upper right corner. It was addressed to “Mrs. Edna Jean Wertzel.”

Before Connie could ask, Aunt Edna rasped, “That one’s a laugh. Claims I’m an heiress. Go on and read it if you want some entertainment.”

“You sure?”

“Go ahead, Connie. Funniest thing I’ve read in a while. Then you can toss it in the recycling bin with the rest of the nonsense.” Aunt Edna hoisted herself up and returned to the La-Z-Boy. “Soon time for the evening news,” she wheezed.

Connie barely heard her aunt’s words as she pulled a single piece of A4 paper, folded in three, from the envelope. The paper was the same sophisticated gray as the envelope.

She unfolded the letter and read:

Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez Esq.
 Director
 Sanchez and Associates, Law Office
 36 Arc de Teatra
 Barcelona, Spain

Dear Mrs. Wertzel,

I do hope this letter finds you well. Alas, the same cannot be said for my late client, Josef Davide Matthias von Wertzel, who crash landed his Cessna in the Pyrenees on the 19th of March of this year and, unfortunately, succumbed to his injuries. To be clear, the pitiable Josef Davide Matthias von Wertzel is deceased.

Just prior to his tragic accident, Mr. von Wertzel and I had commenced deliberations for the purposes of draughting his Last Will & Testament, but we had not completed the process. Indeed, Mr. von Wertzel passed away Intestate.

It is left to me to undertake the complicated process of disposing of Mr. von Wertzel's considerable fortune. This is not a simple task. Mr. von Wertzel never married and he had no children, although he spoke of a Great Uncle who had emigrated to Canada during the Spanish Civil War. I believe that you, Mrs. Wertzel, as his Cousin, are Mr. von Wertzel's closest and sole surviving Relative.

Therefore, it is with bittersweet sentiments that I wish to inform you that you are eligible to inherit Mr. von Wertzel's estate beginning with his Swiss bank account, currently held at the Zurich Cantonal Bank in the amount of 145 000 000 (one hundred, forty-five million) Euros. Please allow me to forestall any suspicions or concerns. I have conducted thorough research and my claims are entirely legitimate. I sincerely believe that you are Mr. Josef Davide Matthias von Wertzel's only heir/heirress.

To collect what is rightfully yours, you must contact me post haste. Please send your banking details, including the name of your Financial Institution, Transit Number, and Account Number by fax to my Office of Law at 00-34-9822236. I will also require a copy of the front page of your Passport, or, at the very least, your Birth Certificate and Driver's Licence. Time is limited, because, under the Law of Spain, I have only three months from my client's time of death to commence this transaction or the entirety of Mr. von Wertzel's Estate will be absorbed by the Spanish Federal Government.

I look forward to connecting with you soon and concluding this sad business. Please allow me to entertain your concerns by email at acsanchez@gmail.com.

Your ever-faithful Servant in Law,

Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez

Connie read the letter three times. Everything clicked into place. Her mother and father must've known the truth. They must have meant to tell her when she was old enough to understand but never got the chance. She was far more than Connie Wertzel, cleaning associate at Discreet n' Neat Janitorial Services. Indeed, her true identity was Contessa Maria Theresa von Wertzel.

It explained so much. The way her skin turned from ivory to bronze with a light touch of sun, as one would expect of a Spanish noble. Her love of burritos and sangria. Her compulsion to dance whenever she heard the macarena. Her attraction to ornate architecture. Since her teen years, she figured her name was Italian or Austrian. Now she knew the truth.

As Connie refolded the letter, Aunt Edna's voice pierced her eardrums. "The proper place for that is the recycling bin."

"Yes, Aunt Edna."

"Then why aren't you putting it with the flyers?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's kind of interesting, I suppose. The flowery language and everything. Well, I'd better go to Foodland. I'll take the recycling to the dumpster on my way."

Aunt Edna wheezed her approval, and Connie put the envelope into a plastic bag with some aluminum cans, the egg carton and salsa jar, and the flyers. Connie pushed her feet into her Sketcher knockoffs, stuck her wallet and keys into the pouch of her sweatshirt, and left the apartment. In the stairwell, she tucked the letter from Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez, Esq. into her pouch as well.

Connie gazed at the moon shadows on the peaks and craters of the ceiling plaster. She had four homes to clean on Thursdays and she had to sleep, but her mind sizzled as she contrasted her current reality with dazzling possibility.

First, she took stock. Connie hated her job. She could wipe porcelain till it gleamed, but no one would thank her for blistering her fingers in her sweat filled, latex gloves. Lately she'd lost pride in her work, merely grazing surfaces with her duster and vacuuming around heavy furniture when she could get away with it. Tomorrow, she'd drag herself to a downtown condo occupied by an incontinent pug and its fussy mistress, back to Balmoral Court to the plastic surgeon's house, and up to north Elmington in the afternoon. No one would notice her let alone thank her for her effort.

Then she'd return to her pigeonhole in the Elm Haven dovecote. It wasn't fair. Fourteen Balmoral stood empty while she and Aunt Edna breathed each other's air and trampled on each other's nerve endings. Why not trade up? If you were stuck in a cesspool and God threw you a life ring, would you dismiss it as a scam or would you grab hold of it?

Connie imagined giving her notice to Herb at Discreet n' Neat on the very day Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez transferred the fortune from the Swiss account into her and Aunt Edna's

joint account at RBC. Then, she and Aunt Edna would buy new outfits at Cora Couture, dine at the Keg, take a taxi home, and scroll through the real estate listings. They'd have to bring a full oxygen tank.

Connie had only to convince her aunt, Mrs. Edna Jean *von* Wertzel, to grasp that life ring and let God pull them to their destiny.

Connie made marmalade glazed pork chops with mashed potatoes for Thursday's supper, one of Aunt Edna's favourite meals. During the bus ride home, Connie had rehearsed the words that she hoped would convince Aunt Edna to secure their inheritance. "Jeopardy" would begin in less than ten minutes and the old lady never missed it. The time to broach the subject had arrived, yet Connie hesitated.

Aunt Edna jammed her spoon into her dessert, butterscotch Jell-O with banana slices, and regarded her niece through narrowed eyes. "We're eating like royalty tonight, Connie. I appreciate a good meal, but I feel like I'm eating it alone. You're so quiet."

"Just tired, I guess."

Aunt Edna deposited a glob of pudding into her mouth.

"Aunt Edna, do you ever wonder if this is all we'll ever have? This apartment? Living hand to mouth on my measly wages and your pension?"

Aunt Edna shrugged and chewed.

"Like maybe we could do better...a house with a ramp to a garden so you could go outside... a car to get around."

"Connie, I'm seventy-two and not long for this world. All I want is the TV and three squares a day." Aunt Edna coughed and lifted her hand to signal she had more to say. "I told you. Put a little aside each pay cheque. Fifty dollars into a TFSA. In a few years, it'll add up, enough for a car, and when I'm gone, you'll have all this."

Connie glanced at the stained, harvest gold living room ensemble, scuffed coffee table, and plastic vase of dusty, artificial roses. She sighed.

“What?” squawked Aunt Edna. “You think you deserve better? Let me tell you—”

“No, no,” Connie interrupted her aunt’s usual boring lecture on third world poverty. “I just don’t want to clean up rich people’s messes for the rest of my life. Today I had to remove dog puke from a Persian carpet. The dog owner actually stood over me like a slave master and pointed at splatter spots with her cane.”

Aunt Edna frowned. Her mouth was full of pudding.

“I think we’re better than that. You’re smart, Aunt Edna. You get the answers on ‘Wheel of Fortune’ with only a couple of consonants. You always dress nice when we go out. We both have decent style sense. It’s as if we were meant to be rich but we ended up poor.”

“If it weren’t for your parents’ accident, things would’ve turned out different. We’ve been over that time and again. Any way, poor is relative.”

“And we’re relatively poor,” argued Connie. “If Mom and Dad were alive, I could ask them about our Spanish family...since you won’t discuss it.”

“Our Spanish family? The Wertzels are Pennsylvania Dutch. Salt of the earth.” Aunt Edna wheezed.

Connie straightened her back and adopted a haughty tone. “Nooo...I’m Contessa Maria Theresa von Wertzel. Europe’s nobles intermarried...Germans with Spaniards. You’ve got to admit, that lawyer’s letter puts the pieces together.”

“‘Von’? You’re kidding, Connie. That letter was a crock of S.H.I.T. Don’t tell me you’ve kept it.”

“I have, Aunt Edna. I’ve read over the letter several times and I can’t see why it wouldn’t be true. I even googled our late cousin’s name. Josef Davide Matthias von Wertzel really did die in a plane crash in the Pyrenees. It seems the von Wertzels’ are prone to devastating accidents.”

“A fool and her money are soon parted.”

"I think we should keep our minds open to the possibilities. Maybe I should email Senor Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez on your behalf and get more details." Connie was proud of how the Spanish syllables rolled naturally from her tongue.

Aunt Edna set her spoon down and gripped Connie's hand. "You'll do no such thing, Connie. If you open the door to a fraudster even a crack, he'll wedge his toe in the gap and worm his way into your life. He'll manipulate you until you have nothing."

"Let's at least suss out the situation."

"Oh, don't be thick, Connie. Tear up that letter and flush it down the toilet. Now. Before you wash the dishes. This conversation is over."

Connie let Aunt Edna have the last word. Connie didn't care. She stacked the dirty dishes and carried them to the kitchen counter. As she squirted Dawn detergent into the sink, she heard the theme music of "Jeopardy." Soon Aunt Edna would blast the answers to the clues like a nail gun. How could someone so smart be so stupid? Poverty was for dummies, for people too meek to take reasonable chances. Why couldn't Aunt Edna understand this?

By 10:30, Connie heard Aunt Edna snoring over the ever-present racket of her oxygen concentrator. Connie sank into the couch and opened her laptop to continue her Internet sleuthing. She had to admit, Aunt Edna's warning deserved consideration. She vowed to be super vigilant.

Connie googled "Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez" and found several well-dressed men with variations of that name in Barcelona. According to Google street view, the office address belonged to an opulent building in central Barcelona. She marked the letter with a bingo dabber—check on the cousin, check on the lawyer, and check on the office address.

Still, didn't fools rush in where the wise feared to tread? Connie continued her research. She Googled the Zurich Cantonal Bank and confirmed its address in Switzerland. Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez was honest about the war too. Wikipedia informed its readers that Spain suffered four years of bitter conflict, from 1936 to 1939. During the war, the country's royals and nobles endured unimaginable hostility. Nobles like the von Wertzels. Connie imagined

her ancestor, perhaps her great grandfather, taking refuge on a steamer bound for Canada, then living in reduced circumstances, maybe even in a slum. Wouldn't he be thrilled to know that the family fortune would remain in the hands of the von Wertzel family? She dabbed two more orange check marks on the letter. Everything checked out.

For a few moments, Connie closed her eyes and savoured the warm glow of the bright future before her. Then, she clicked into Outlook and composed a message for Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez.

Dear Senor Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez,

Yes, your letter found my aunt, Mrs. Edna Jean Wertzel and I, Ms. Contessa Maria Theresa von Wertzel, very well. How are you?

I am writing about your letter with the sad news about our cousin, Josef Davide Matthias von Wertzel. We are very sorry we never met him, but he must have been a very wonderful man!! I hope he didn't suffer in the plain crash!!!

My Aunt Edna is very elderly and very sick, and she does not have a passport. I handle all her affairs. If I send you my information, could you deposit the inheritance in our joint account?? Technically it would be the same thing in the end when all is said and done.

I am your ever-faithful servant too,

Contessa

P.S. We don't have a fax machine. Could I take a photo of my passport with my phone and send it to you by email instead? That would be easier.

Satisfied with her message, Connie pressed "send" and went to bed.

Connie woke early and checked her inbox before confronting the demands of Friday, the busiest day in the cleaning business. Her heart thumped when she saw his name. Senor

Alejandra Cervantes Sanchez, Esq. had answered Connie's message. Her fingers quivered on the mouse as she opened and read his message.

Dear Miss Contessa Maria Theresa von Wertzell,

Thank-you for kindly replying to my letter promptly. Please allow me to tell you with utter sincerity that you have the name of a Princess. I am sure that you yourself are as beautiful as your name.

I am sorry to hear that your Aunt Edna Jean is in poor health. As you both share a bank account, there should be no difficulty in you acting on behalf of your Aunt with regard to the matter of Mr. von Wertzell's Estate. Indeed, we are very fortunate to live in the Age of the Internet because using email is easier than faxing and we can conclude matters with greater expedience.

To begin, please photograph your passport, driver licence, debit and credit card and send all to me to this email account. I am sure you appreciate that, although I trust you absolutely, as a legal professional, I must practice due diligence and confirm your identity before we proceed into Next Steps.

I remain your ever-faithful Servant in Law,

Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez

Connie checked the time. 6:42. She'd skip breakfast. She opened the top drawer of her dresser and shovelled through socks, underwear, and stockings until she found her passport. Thank goodness it was still valid. As she snapped a photo of the first page, she scrutinized her photo with dismay. The image had warped and widened when it was pressed under plastic and she looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger wearing a Dolly Parton wig. Her driver's licence photo was only marginally better. "So much for the beautiful princess," she muttered.

Connie had just enough time to upload the photos of her ID and send them off before she donned her uniform and raced for the bus. Hurriedly, she typed:

Hello Senor Sanchez,

I'm sending you the documents you asked for. All you need to do is click on the files and you can see them. Please let me know if there is any other information you need for Next Steps.

Thank-you,

Contessa

Connie bit her lip nervously. Alejandro wasn't her friend, but she couldn't help feeling that he understood her situation. Surely her refinement, vivaciousness, and cleverness shone through in her words. Or did they? Before she pressed send, she added:

P.S. Doesn't everyone look funny in their ID photos?!?! I barely recognize myself on my drivers licence and passport. LOL. 😊 My forehead and jaw are actually normal size in real life.

Connie closed her laptop, cursing her acquiescence to Aunt Edna's ruthless thrift. Apartment 303 had wi-fi, but Connie's cell didn't have data and she had no idea if she'd find any hotspots to check her email in the course of the day's toil. The hours would pass tediously now that she'd set the wheels of destiny in motion.

When she returned home, Connie offered a perfunctory greeting to Aunt Edna and went straight to her room to check her e-mail. She wasn't disappointed for there, in her inbox, was the second message from Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez. She read:

Dear Contessa,

I hope I may address you in this familiar way. Please address me as Alejandro. As our business shall take a week or two, we might as well treat each other as friends. I

received the photos of your documents and I see that you are not only beautiful, but you are modest. Androgynous features are fashionable, and you bear a stunning resemblance to the Hollywood actress, Jennifer Anniston.

You asked about Next Steps. The Zurich Cantonal Bank requires payment of a service fee of 250 (two hundred, fifty) Euros to unlock your late relative's account. In addition, the Spanish Department of Finance extracts a fee of 75 (seventy-five) Euros for all international business transactions, and my retainer is 200 (two hundred) Euros. Before we can proceed, I must prevail upon you to deposit these monies into the trust account of Sanchez and Associates Law Office. Of course, you will more than recoup these fees upon the receipt of your inheritance, and it is then, and only then, that I will present you with my humble bill.

Please deposit the sum of 325 (three hundred, twenty-five) Euros by electronic transfer into ING Bank in the name of Sanchez and Associates, transit 968, account 43-882-111 and we will proceed forthwith. You and your Aunt will receive your legacy within a month.

Your friend and faithful Servant in Law,

Alejandro

For a moment, Connie was crestfallen. She didn't know exactly how much 325 Euros came out to in Canadian dollars, but it sounded like a lot. She decided to shower away her frustration with the day's grime, then prepare a comforting spaghetti supper. As she adjusted the water temperature, she imagined Alejandro, hunched at his desk on a Friday evening, given the time change, trying his utmost to resolve his client's affairs. It wasn't his fault the Swiss bank charged that ridiculous fee. It wasn't his fault the Spanish government kept tabs on international transactions. And his retainer seemed reasonable. Everyone knew that legal services were expensive with the most competent lawyers charging more.

As Connie lathered shampoo into her hair, she thought of the saying, “You have to spend money to make money.” Richard Branson and Elon Musk wouldn’t let a little hurdle block the road to profit. Contessa Maria Theresa wouldn’t either.

Wrapped in a towel, wet hair pasted to her neck, Connie returned to her laptop. Three hundred, twenty-five Euros equalled 484.09 CDN\$. Roughly one week’s pay. Would she work for free for one week to rescue herself from a lifetime of vacuum lugging? Of course. Connie dashed off an email:

Dear Alejandro,

This is your friend in Canada. Of course you can call me Contessa!!!

I hope I’m catching you before you leave your office for the weekend. I don’t have the money now, but I get paid on Thursday next week and I’ll make the deposit then.

It’s so funny! People often tell me I look like Jennifer Aniston!! But my eyes are brown, not blue. What do you look like?? I imagine you as a young Antonio Banderas!

Adios amigo,

Contessa

As Connie clicked “send,” Aunt Edna’s voice lifted the hair on Connie’s damp forearms. “Connie! Connie, I need you right now!”

Connie rushed to the living room.

“Oh, there you are. You needn’t go traipsing around the apartment naked,” said Aunt Edna.

“But—”

“No buts. Make yourself decent and then you can change the batteries in the remote. The channel’s stuck on Dr. Oz and the shyster’s boring me to tears. Recommending wheat grass smoothies. As if folks want to drink liquefied cattle fodder.”

“Batteries? Okay, Aunt Edna.”

“By the way, what’s for supper?”

“Spaghetti.” It was an economical meal that Connie would soon replace with seafood linguini or tortellini and pesto in the weekly round.

Ironically, now that she was inches away from wealth, Connie found her idle Wednesday at 14 Balmoral Court excruciatingly dull. Sure, the TV screen was huge, but it showed the same boring programs as her and Aunt Edna’s TV. And after you’d washed and blow dried your ass on the fancy toilet a few times, the novelty wore off.

Connie had the unsettling feeling that some invisible barrier would prevent her from passing into the realm of millionaires. She was semi-aware of her belief that the things she wanted most were precisely the things she couldn’t have. She tried to counteract this feeling by turning her back on the house, and by proxy the life it represented, by criticizing the decorator’s choices.

For instance, the chandeliers in the front foyer. Sure, one was tasteful, but three? Wasn’t less actually more? And Connie would never have a gas fire with fake logs like the one in the den. So tacky. The whole place was decorated in royal blue with gold accents and all the bedrooms were furnished alike. Where was the fun in that? She told herself that even if she had the money, she wouldn’t want a home like 14 Balmoral. Yet, deep in her soul, Connie loved the house.

Tomorrow was payday. She’d been emailing back and forth with Alejandro all week. What a complicated man he was—sometimes chivalrous, even flirtatious, other times impatient to “kick the football forward.” Tomorrow she would do just that.

That evening Connie did something that she hadn’t done since she’d skipped school at fifteen. She lied to Aunt Edna. Over fish sticks and broccoli florets, Connie casually broached the subject of money.

“Aunt Edna, I got the weirdest call from Herb’s executive assistant today.”

“Oh?”

"Apparently Herb is having trouble making pay roll this week. He'll issue our pay cheques next week." Connie pushed a broccoli shrub around her plate with her fork.

"That's strange. Discreet n' Neat keeps you girls busy so the money should be rolling in," said Aunt Edna. "Do you think we should worry about your job?"

"Not yet," replied Connie. "I think Herb will pull through. The assistant said the situation is temporary."

"Is that so?" Aunt Edna chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "Temporary. Well, we'll see. In my experience, a company that can't make payroll is headed for the dump. There must be some reason for this. A bad investment? A secret gambling addiction?"

"Maybe the investment. I can't picture Herb in a casino. He carries his wallet in his front pocket. He's not the gambling type. Now you, on the other hand—"

"Me?" wheezed Aunt Edna.

"Bingo is gambling," said Connie.

"Bingo is entertainment. I set a limit of twenty dollars...never more...and that turns out cheaper than a night at the movies."

"Uh huh." Connie smiled indulgently.

"Anyway, we have enough in the kitty to survive next week. My CPP came through yesterday. Still, keep your ear to the door for gossip, Connie. Better be prepared for trouble at Discreet n' Neat Janitorial."

"You're so wise, Aunt Edna."

"First you tease me. Now you flatter me. You're acting strange tonight, Connie." Aunt Edna pushed her plate away. "Fish sticks are always a let-down. We'll have to do better for your birthday next Sunday."

"Swiss Chalet?" asked Connie. If all went well, she'd be serenaded by the wait staff at the Keg instead.

"Swiss Chalet it shall be," Aunt Edna agreed.

After work on Thursday, Connie took her biweekly pay cheque to the bank and cashed it at the teller's wicket. Then she arranged the transfer in the full amount Alejandro had requested.

When the teller arched her brow, Connie murmured something about travel arrangements. After signing various slips of paper, Connie rushed through the sliding doors and onto the sidewalk.

What had she done? She should've told Aunt Edna the truth. No, Aunt Edna would've stopped her and, anyway, she'd be over-joyed when their bank account ballooned. Suddenly the street swirled like a kaleidoscope. She had to keep her cool. She steadied herself on a lamp post, and then she ducked into Tim Horton's for the free wi-fi. As quickly as she could, she logged into her email on her cell and thumb typed:

Hello Alejandro!

I have transferred the money to you. The bank said to be patient because the European banks are closed now. I don't want to be pushy, but could you let me know when you get the money? And also, when the Zurich Cantonal Bank has unfrozen the account? My poor Aunt Edna will be very pleased.

Gracias!!

Contessa

Connie pressed send and sat back in the molded plastic chair. She didn't know that Alejandro wouldn't reply to this message, or any of the many messages she sent, for a whole week.

The following Thursday, as her wounded heart leaked vital energy and the fear of being cheated haunted her every waking second, she opened her laptop and, at last, found a reply from Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez.

My Dearest Contessa,

I am sorry from the deepest depths of my Soul that I did not email you sooner. My dear Mother was ill with a touch of Ebola, but now she is out of hospital and in the clear and at last I can attend to urgent legal matters such as the disposition of the Estate of your late Cousin.

Thank-you for sending me the money I requested. ING Bank says your payment has arrived. However, they insist that I must have proof that you are the sender before they release the funds. They request to compare your PIN and Online Banking Password to the one they have on the international banking record. Please send these to me at your earliest convenience, ASAP.

May I express my gratitude for your efficiency in these matters? You are a very special woman, my Dearest Contessa!

Your ever-faithful Servant in Law,

Alejandro

Connie replied immediately.

Dear Alejandro,

I am so sorry to hear about your mother. I wish her a speedy recovery!!! She is lucky to have a son like you to look after her.

My PIN is 1999 (My mother was a huge Prince fan!) and my password is Glorianna37 (My mom's name and her age when she died). Keep me posted on everything, Amigo!

Contessa

After that, Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez went radio silent.

Over the next ten days, Connie checked her email and bank account at every opportunity, desperate for news of the inheritance. However, the online statement for the joint chequing account didn't budge. Connie sent flirtatious emails, then business-like emails, and finally rage-filled emails to Alejandro, but no reply graced her inbox.

On Sunday morning, the day of her twenty-eighth birthday, Connie sent a message to Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez that bounced back. The electronic message announcing the non-existence of Alejandro's account punched right through her screen and hit her squarely on the nose, such was its effect. Tears pooled in her eyes and she was knocked into a well of despair almost as deep as when her parents had died.

After soaking her pillow with tears, Connie washed and dried her face and applied make-up to conceal the signs of her distress from Aunt Edna. She wouldn't betray her shame of being tricked out of an entire pay cheque and believing in the friendship of a thief. Not ever.

The waitress seated Aunt Edna and Connie in a quiet booth. Aunt Edna's oxygen tank was tucked in its stroller under the table, and menus lay before them on the laminate tabletop still damp from wiping.

"Quarter chicken dinner? Or ribs? Or both?" asked Aunt Edna.

"Quarter chicken dinner. I suppose I'll have white meat," replied Connie.

"What's the matter? It's your birthday but you're braying like Eeyore."

"Nothing's the matter."

"Oh really. Let's see if we can cheer you up." Aunt Edna rummaged through her purse and pushed a present the size of a matchbox across the table. "I planned to give you this after the cake, but you might as well open it now."

Connie sighed. "Thanks Aunt Edna." She pulled the tape away from the edges of the paper.

"Just tear it, Connie," said Aunt Edna. "We needn't save that bit of gift wrap."

Connie did as she was bid. She removed the lid from the box and found a shiny, red, dinky car nestled in blue tissue paper. Connie briefly forgot her misery as she peered quizzically at her aunt.

"Can't you figure it out?" wheezed Aunt Edna.

"Um, a toy?"

“The toy car is standing in for the real car, a 2015 Hyundai Accent, which is sitting in our parking spot this very minute at the Elm Haven Apartments. Franklin fetched it for me from the dealership in the afternoon.” Wheeze. “Mind, it still needs to be properly registered.” Wheeze. “And you’ll need to brush up on your driving skills with Franklin before you hit the roads on your own.”

Connie felt sick. She didn’t deserve this gift after all her deception and foolishness. She’d have to come clean. She wouldn’t sit in that car till she confessed to Aunt Edna. “Thank-you,” she choked.

“Well, I had a GIC mature and—”

Connie started to sob.

“You don’t look happy,” said Aunt Edna.

“I am, Aunt Edna. It’s just—”

“Just what? You should have a car to get around. To go out in the evening and see your friends.” Wheeze. “It’ll save you loads of time getting to and from work. I called Herb and he said he’d pay mileage if you drove yourself from job to job.”

“You spoke to Herb?” Connie squeaked through her sobs.

“Yup. We had a nice conversation. He’s a decent boss, that Herb. Discreet n’ Neat is doing fine under his management.”

Connie wished there was a lever she could pull to open a trap door and disappear. The conversation was moving in unexpected directions.

“You look like you have something to tell me,” said Aunt Edna.

“Umm...”

“Go on.”

“Oh, Aunt Edna. I’ve been so stupid.”

“Tell me about it.”

"That letter...about the inheritance...from Alejandro Cervantes Sanchez." Connie's face turned white. "I answered it. And I sent him money and sent him photos of my documents."

"And gave him your password."

"Yes. And gave him my password. Wait. You knew?"

"Not everything, but enough," replied Aunt Edna. "I knew you were up to something. You were behaving strange so I made inquiries." The waitress approached. Aunt Edna waved her away. "All week long you've been mooning around like a lovesick teenager on death row. I figured I'd let you twist in the wind for a while. Teach you a lesson."

Connie stared at her menu, though she didn't read it.

"By the way, there's another gift in the box. Under the tissue," wheezed Aunt Edna.

Silently, Connie lifted the tissue and found a pristine, silver-embossed, blue bank card. Again, she looked up at Aunt Edna.

Aunt Edna spoke quietly. "I couldn't do anything about the money transfer, Connie, so you've lost a week's wages, and maybe that's money well-lost as it's taught you a lesson."

Connie nodded.

Aunt Edna coughed, then continued. "When Lynette called me from the bank about the transfer, I had her freeze the account and open a new one. You could see the old account, but you couldn't take."

Connie lifted the new bank card from the box and turned it in her hands. "Then this is my new bank card? For the new account?"

"Yes. You can go to RBC after work tomorrow and register a brand-new PIN and password."

"I don't know what to say," said Connie.

"Just say 'I'm sorry, Aunt Edna. And thank-you.'"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Edna. And thank-you," repeated Connie.

"Also, I'm proud to be a hard-working, sensible, salt of the earth Wertzel'," said Aunt Edna.

As Connie repeated the sentence, she realized it was 95 percent true.

The Trials of Job

Jesse Lord lifted his creation by his tail and set him in an isolation tank. Lilith Le Monde, a fellow PhD candidate, knelt in front of the tank and peered through the glass at the rat.

“Hello T-90227,” said Lilith.

“I’ve called him ‘Job’, though of course, Professor Wang insists I use his numeric code in all reports,” said Jesse. “CRISPR was surprisingly easy to get the hang of. Job’s father was already bred to endure toxins and other environmental challenges. I altered the DNA in his sperm to enhance his off-springs’ immune systems as well. Then I used in-vitro. Job was the only viable embryo but I’m confident more will take on the next round. Job can withstand a myriad of pathogens.”

“For instance?”

“You know...viruses, prion diseases, bacterial invasions including virulent strains of strep.” Jesse crouched next to Lilith and spoke to the rat. “You’re one remarkable buck, aren’t you Mr. Job? So smart. So strong. You’ll be the progenitor of a brand-new, genetically enhanced strain of *Rattus norvegicus domesticus*. I’ll introduce you to all the best females.”

Job was bewildered by the emptiness of the tank and the pairs of human eyes staring at him through the glass. He’d only reached sexual maturity two months prior, and he’d already mated with a glossy doe named Brenda who bore him ten pups, seven males and three females. Their cage was crowded but happy, and Job enjoyed hiding kernels of corn in the aspen shavings to lure the pups off Brenda’s teats and teach them how to forage. Was ever a rat as content as he? Job believed this highly unlikely and his heart burst with gratitude to Jesse whom Job worshipped as a doting, yet powerful, cage-cleaning, feed-providing abstraction.

Lilith reached over the wall and stroked Job’s back with her index finger. Job squeaked in a bewilderment of fear and pleasure.

“What are your plans for him now?” asked Lilith. “Brenda isn’t genetically enhanced, so Job’s pups aren’t super rats like their daddy. You’ll need some modified females.”

“That’s true, Lilith. I have to hone my technique to produce more Jobs and Jobettes and, naturally, I’ll have to test their vigor and resistance over several generations before I release a line that’s useful for research. I want my claims to be bulletproof.”

“And Job? He and the pups are occupying valuable real estate in this cramped lab. Wang will insist that their continued existence have some imminent utility.”

“I’m rather fond of Job and Brenda,” replied Jesse. “And the psych department may want the pups when they’re bigger. In a couple of years, when I introduce the hardiest strain at an appropriate conference, I’d like to have Job with me...as a mascot.”

Lilith pulled Job’s ear inducing a pained shriek from the rodent. Jesse had only treated him with kindness, and Job was confused by Lilith’s aggression.

“A mascot,” repeated Lilith. “Don’t let Wang hear you say that. You’ll get the lecture on ‘attachment to animals as perversion’. If you want to keep Job around—”

“I do.”

“Oh, never mind. My idea isn’t sound.”

“Say it, Lilith. I’m listening.”

“Wang prefers to see us work collaboratively and I’m curious about your rat. Give Job to me for testing. I’ll take care of Brenda and the pups as well. Besides, you’re too tenderhearted to test your creation systematically and dispassionately. The rat is cute and good-natured, but I doubt he’ll live up to your claims.”

“Lilith, you’re right about me but wrong about Job. Throw any stressor at him and he’ll bounce back with a faithful ratty smile, won’t you, Mr. Job?”

“Come on, Jesse. Environmental extremes, toxic substances, *and* pathogens?”

“Yes, Lilith. All of it. I tell you, he’s a superior rat. A rat above reproach in every way.”

Lilith curled Job’s tail around her finger. Job was too frightened to squeak let alone move.

Lilith turned to face Jesse. “Shall we wager? I’ll expose Job to heat, cold, the LD 50 of all the toxins in the lab, and whatever pathogens I can muster, and we’ll see how your little creation copes.”

“Okay. You have one month. But you mustn’t kill him,” said Jesse.

“I won’t. But if he approaches death’s door, you’ll be my lab slave for an entire semester,” said Lilith.

“And if he doesn’t, which he won’t, then you’ll be mine,” agreed Jesse.

“Deal.” Lilith extended her hand.

“Deal,” echoed Jesse as he shook to seal the bet. Then Jesse gently petted Job’s head. “Good luck, Job. Do your creator proud, dear rat.”

Although Job was an exceptional rodent, he did not understand human language nor dread his future.

Lilith prioritized safety and experimental integrity over Job’s need for social interaction. Although gregarious by nature, Job was isolated in a small tank to prevent spread of infection. As a highly robust individual, he might not sicken from pathogens, but theoretically he could carry and disseminate them.

Job watched helplessly through the glass as Lilith dropped each of his pups into a container labelled, “Live Feed for Herpetology.” Although he couldn’t read the words, he instinctively knew he wouldn’t see his sons and daughters again. He witnessed Brenda’s silent screams and frantic pacing and he collapsed into his wood shavings in his separate but shared sorrow.

The next day, Job awoke, grieving his loss but grateful for his cozy home and nutritious kibble. Lilith began testing Job physically.

First, she set the thermostat in Job’s tank to fluctuate between minus twenty and plus forty Celsius. As Job shivered in the cold and panted in the heat, he thought of desert rats like Brenda’s relatives in Arizona who lived their whole lives in such extremes and he rationalized that, at least for parts of the day, the temperature suited him. As Job dislodged ice from his waterspout with his incisors, the figure of impending doom shadowed him from the window light. Lilith had returned.

She put a strawberry into his bowl. Job chastised himself for his suspiciousness and tucked into the delicacy. The strawberry was laced with warfarin, readily metabolized by Job's liver. Over the week, Job consumed a cornucopia of fruit poisoned by strychnine, herbicides and pesticides, and a laundry list of dry-cleaning chemicals. Each evening, he pawed his belly and blamed his dyspepsia on his gluttony. However, he didn't ulcerate internally, vomit, or dirty himself.

Lilith upped the ante. When she neglected to replace Job's soiled bedding with fresh, fragrant shavings, Job pushed the mess into a pile in the southeast corner of the tank and redistributed the remaining shavings with his snout. When she allowed Job's water bottle to run dry, he squealed a cheery but futile reminder to her to refill it. However Lilith treated Job, he bore his burdens with good humour in the faith that Jesse would return.

One morning, Lilith appeared in a yellow haz-mat suit. Job didn't recognize her under the visor and mask until she muttered, "Let's see what happens now." Her voice chilled his marrow. Job cowered in a corner because he had no toys to shelter him. Resistance was futile. A solution of toxoplasmosis, virulent streptococci, and hantavirus entered Job's bloodstream via a 23-gauge needle jabbed clumsily into his biceps femoris. As Lilith depressed the plunger on the syringe, Job heard her sing-song, "You can cough now, T-90227."

Job remained silently stoic. His hip ached and a day later he developed a sore throat, but he maintained his daily routine of exercise, housekeeping, and napping. He often dreamed of Jesse combing his coat, or of frolicking with Brenda and the pups. Job also had nightmares of Lilith zapping him with an electric prod. Still, Job hoped for better days. Afterall, he was a blameless rat, wasn't he? Jesse wouldn't abandon him, would he?

Lilith turned the page on the calendar hanging on the bulletin board above the computers. She had to admit, Job was a remarkable rat. With irritation, she imagined scrubbing cages for Jesse, sterilizing his instruments, and serving him coffee for three long months. On the other hand, winning would be sweet. Lilith decided to bend the parameters of the wager in her favour.

For three days, she mixed prednisone into Job's feed to depress his immune system. Then, on a Saturday night when no other human was in the lab, she dropped Ethel into Job's tank.

Job had never met a doe like Ethel. She was grey, scrawny, and irritable from festering herpes lesions which covered her face, paws, and genitals. Despite her infirmity, she was entering estrous and eager to mate.

After Lilith left the lab, Ethel turned away from Job and lifted her rump. "Might as well have a go and get it over with," she squeaked.

Job squeezed around Ethel to address her snout to snout. "Don't you want to play? Maybe frolic in the shavings together?"

"It's kind of close in here, umm—"

"Job."

"Job. And your tank ain't exactly clean for rolling about. Might as well get down to business," said Ethel. "Get'er done."

Job foresaw the inevitability of the encounter. He was a buck. She was a doe. He was lonely...and her scent made him horny. "How may I address you?" asked Job.

"By me name. It's Ethel."

"Ethel." Job swallowed hard and glanced across the room. Brenda was asleep. "Okay, Ethel. You're on."

"Nope. You are," she croaked.

Job realized the strange sound he'd heard was Ethel's laugh. Job maneuvered behind Ethel, mounted her, and before the session ended seconds later, Job was infected with three strains of herpes.

The next morning, Lilith removed Ethel from the tank and Job was alone again. Worse, his skin tingled and itched. Two days later, painful sores burst through Job's fur and his hair stuck in clumps with oozing pus. Prostrate from scratching and rubbing, Job berated himself. "I should have resisted Ethel's charms," he muttered.

After crying into his bedding for an entire afternoon, Job settled into a philosophical torpor. "Why do I suffer?" he asked rhetorically. He answered the question anyway. "Because I was born a rat and my fate rests in the mercy of men. And Lilith." Exhausted by his

predicament, Job called out to Jesse to release him from his torment, but it was Lilith who hovered over the tank.

Just as Job was about to throw himself onto his back in surrender, Jesse consulted the calendar. "Lilith, do you realize that it's exactly one month since I gave you custody of Job?"

"Not quite," replied Lilith. "We wagered on July 10th, but I didn't commence the trials until the 11th. I still have another day." Lilith was certain she could push Job to the threshold between life and death if she could have just a few more hours.

"Job has suffered enough," countered Jesse. "He's been a faithful, blameless rat, and besides, I have some modified eggs I need to fertilize...with Job's help."

Lilith considered the starkly real possibility that, in twenty-four hours, she could be laundering Jesse's lab coats and fetching his lunches. N-90227 was nearly indestructible and she was running out of time. Lilith hedged. "Okay, Jesse, but the bet is off. I won't be your lab slave and you won't be mine if you take him back now. Deal?"

"Deal," agreed Jesse. He shook Lilith's hand. "And you have to agree that Job is a remarkable rat."

"I agree," said Lilith.

Job was too tired to wiggle when Jesse picked him up by his tail and placed him in a large, new tank with fresh shavings, a full water bottle, and a bowl brimming with nutritious kibble.

A month later, after Job's lesions healed, Jesse reunited Job and Brenda, surrogate mother to seven male and three female pups whom she raised as her own. And after a comfortable, blessed life with Brenda and being featured at a bio-tech conference, Job would die being old and full of his days.

Bless This Home

Madison smoothed the vinyl decal over the matrimonial headboard and read its message aloud, "Family is what happens when two people fall in love." She knew Brad felt the same way about children as she. Yesterday, he'd swatted her bottom and said, "Three more sleeps till we can make a baby, Maddy."

Madison's virginity was as snugly secure as the clasp on the silver heart that hung over her sternum, an itsy-bitsy photo of Mr. Bradley James Holman, LL.B. concealed within it. She grasped the heart in her palm, proud that she'd earned the honour of wearing a white gown. "True love waits," she murmured. "But not much longer," she giggled.

The cleaning lady had let Madison into Brad's house. And why not? Madison Chelsea Holman would be the mistress of the 4,000 square foot, fully detached house with two-car garage in only two days. The décor cried for womanly touches and she wanted to surprise her fiancé.

"Wash your cares away!" graced the utility room in Bookman Old Style. "Family is where life begins and love never ends," beamed from the living room wall in Palace Script. She'd pasted "Meals and memories are made here!" on the kitchen back splash and "You're never fully dressed without a smile!" on the mirror over the twin sinks in the en suite bathroom. These little reminders would set the tone for their singular life as Mr. and Mrs. Bradley Holman.

Madison lay on the bed and looked up. At the bridal shower, Aunt Joyce took Madison's arm and predicted that her niece would memorize every bump and crack in the bedroom ceiling before the year was out. Aunt Joyce even suggested a quote to stick onto the plaster. "This too shall pass." Aunt Joyce said the darndest things.

Madison leaned over the toilet. Another wave of nausea squeezed bile into her throat. She spotted a log sheathed in toilet paper, floating in the bowl. Golly. Before she could flush,

yellow sludge spewed from her mouth and covered the turd. Madison wiped her chin with her terry cloth sleeve and pushed the handle. She didn't want to pressure Brad, but this forgetting to flush had to stop. In six months, they'd have a baby. He needed to learn some bathroom manners. Daddies should be role models for goodness' sake.

Madison rinsed with Scope and frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She could do with an attitude adjustment. She turned her frown upside down, pivoted to the side, and tightened the belt of her bathrobe. Was she showing yet? Then, she tilted her head and smiled coquettishly, as if charming Brad at a candlelight supper. Madison was an understanding wife and Brad was a successful lawyer who couldn't attend to every little task. Why, he'd left for work before she was even awake.

Still, a gentle nudge wouldn't hurt. She'd scrape "You're never fully dressed without a smile" from the mirror and apply "Bathroom rules: wash, brush, floss, flush!" to the glass in authoritative Century Schoolbook font.

Madison pushed her feet into slippers and padded into the den. Better to let her tummy settle before attempting breakfast. She opened her laptop. There was Cassidy's four-month-old ragga-muffin swatting a mobile on Facebook. Maybe Etsy would have some ideas for the nursery. Sure enough. "Twinkle, twinkle little star. Do you know how loved you are?" sang to Madison in a childish, alphabet block script. Perfect for over the crib.

And she had to replace the decal in the dining room. Yesterday, Aunt Joyce came for lunch and saluted Nazi-style to "Gather, Eat, Laugh, Bond!" with a hearty "Yes, ma'am." Perhaps the slogan was a teensy-weensy bit bossy. Madison clicked on "Dinner's better when we eat together," to add it to her shopping cart. The message was a cute enticement to a husband who often worked late.

Madison's left breast was as hard as a milk-filled coconut, but Tyson preferred the right. Madison pulled Tyson's face toward her dribbling left nipple, but he wouldn't latch. Instead he screamed, lips taut as elastic bands, gums and tongue quivering. She glanced at the nursery clock. She was still in her bathrobe and it was almost three pm. Beside the clock, a slogan exhorted her in Lucida to "Enjoy the little things!"

"You betcha," said Madison through clenched teeth. She gave in, dangled her right nipple into Tyson's hungry mouth and thought about what she'd make for supper.

Madison didn't know if Brad would eat with her because when she'd asked him about his plans, he'd replied cryptically, reading a verse from Corinthians from the plaque in the hallway. "Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs," he'd drawled.

Her hubby was a mystery and, alas, she was no Nancy Drew. Tears welled, then spilled over Madison's cheeks. Cradling Tyson in her right arm, Madison went to the kitchen and leaned against the island. She looked at the stainless-steel fridge.

Wouldn't it be dandy if there was a casserole or even a salad inside it? Instead of wilted lettuce, a half jar of mayo topped with a beige skin, and a dried-up chicken carcass meant to be boiled into broth?

The magnet on the fridge door jeered, "This kitchen is seasoned with love."

I suppose I could eat the appliances...since they're seasoned and all, she thought bitterly.

The doorbell rang. Madison wouldn't bother answering it. Probably some short-sleeved, tie wearing boys sharing the Good News. Once upon a time, hadn't Brad himself told lonely housewives about Jesus?

The doorbell rang again. Madison carried Tyson, still nursing, to the front door and peaked through the spy hole. It was Aunt Joyce!

"For God's sake, Maddy," Aunt Joyce hollered. "My arms are too busy to open the bloody drawbridge myself."

Madison opened the door and Aunt Joyce stumbled onto the tile with a box of pizza and a six-pack of beer.

"I brought an inspirational quote to put on your fridge," said Aunt Joyce. After she unburdened herself, she stuck a "www.Meals2Go.com" magnet over "This kitchen is seasoned with love."

"There. That's better," said Aunt Joyce.

Madison pushed the squeegee over the plastic facing of the vinyl decal. She wouldn't have any bubbles spoiling "A father holds his son's hand for a while, and his heart forever!" in Rockwell font. Now every time Brad lit the gas fireplace, he'd glance above the mantle and think of Tyson. Was it Madison's imagination, or had Brad's golf clubs stayed in the garage a smidge longer since she'd hung "Together we make a family" above the shelf of sports equipment?

Aunt Joyce snickered when she saw "The laundry room - loads of fun!!" on the utility room door, but look who was divorced? Madison wouldn't become a sour Debbie Downer like her aunt. A dab of cheerleading was mortar in a marriage.

Madison set the squeegee on the card table and, ever-so-carefully, pulled the plastic from the vinyl transfer. The words were perfectly level.

She looked down at Tyson and Aunt Joyce, playing cross-legged on the floor together. "What do you think, Aunt Joyce?"

"I think the writing's on the wall," Aunt Joyce replied.

Madison's eye caught a flash of orange on the powder blue paint. She'd have to keep the crayons in the kitchen where she could supervise Tyson more closely. Hold on—that wasn't toddler scribbling. The orange lines formed, "Bradley is an asshole" in a steady cursive.

"Aunt Joyce," Madison gasped. "For goodness sake!"

"Tyson wrote it. He's as clever as his daddy," said Aunt Joyce.

Madison glared.

"You know how much Brad loves domestic propaganda, Maddy. I did it for him."

"I'm not sure what makes me crosser. Those hateful words, or that you wrote on our wall," said Madison.

"Our wall? It's Brad's wall, kiddo."

Madison scooped Tyson from the floor and stared at the graffiti.

"I had no choice," continued Aunt Joyce.

"What?" choked Madison.

"I wanted to use the alphabet magnets on the fridge for my slogan, but I ran out of As."

Madison rubbed her temple with her free hand. Aunt Joyce was right. The writing was all over the wall. Madison just couldn't make sense of it. She didn't know how to reach her husband.

Madison awoke to Brad's snores, the flesh of his throat anaesthetized and flabby from the booze he'd consumed at the Chamber of Commerce dinner. She gazed at her husband's face, dimly illuminated by the nightlight she always left on in case Tyson woke with a fever or a nightmare. Brad was flat on his back, his mouth slackly open. A rivulet of drool wandered down his cheek. Madison wouldn't nudge him to turn over. Bradley James Holman needed his sleep. He'd only gotten home at 3:00 am and he'd be a Grumpy Gary in the morning as it was.

Three-fifteen. Hydro rates were cheap in off-peak hours. Madison decided to start a load of laundry, then read the book Aunt Joyce had lent her. She descended hesitantly down the stairs using her toes to detect pieces of Lego, tiny vehicles, and the weaponized appendages of Transformers. She tip-toed into the laundry room and flicked on the light. Brad's rumpled, sweat-stained shirts lay in a heap in front of the washer. Their yellowed collars and armpit stains demanded prewashing and bleach.

Madison kept the laundry supplies in a cupboard over the washer, out of reach of Tyson. She released the safety latch and opened the door. At once, Madison glimpsed her own startled face staring back at her.

"Heavens!" she gasped as she jumped back. "A mirror. Who would've—"

Madison didn't finish her question. In an instant, she knew who. The "who" was Aunt Joyce. The mirror was framed in wood with "VERY IMPORTANT PERSON" stencilled in glitter. Golly. "Very important person," whispered Madison. "Aunt Joyce means me. I'm the very important person."

Madison shook her head and smiled. Aunt Joyce had come over the previous evening to babysit and stayed to keep Madison company when Brad had called to tell her he was running late. That he'd attend the dinner alone to save time from extra driving. As she hung up the phone, Madison swallowed her disappointment, but Aunt Joyce had been relentless.

She'd stuck out her chin, gestured like a salesman, and mimicked Brad's drawl. "My house, my SUV, my golf clubs, and my wife. Madison is a dependable appliance, but eventually I'll trade her for a newer model."

Madison protested Aunt Joyce's mischaracterization in no uncertain terms, but she didn't object when Aunt Joyce ordered Chinese, settled Tyson to bed, and poured generous snifters of Brad's best single malt scotch.

"Very important person." Madison repeated the phrase several times.

She looked at the pile of shirts and sighed. They could wait. Aunt Joyce had given her a novel and she wanted to read it. She curled up in Brad's Barcalounger and opened the front cover to find a message, "Pay Attention!" in Aunt Joyce's angular hand. Then, in the deep of the night, Madison started reading *A Handmaid's Tale*.

Preacher Tom

Tom Schafer stared at his computer screen, wishing for the Holy Spirit, a sudden insight, some remnant of divine inspiration—anything at all—to animate his fingers and compose his sermon, but Jesus didn't take the wheel and hadn't for several months. Tom tried to dislodge his boulder-sized writer's block by thinking up titles. *When Faith Isn't Enough?* The congregation would hate that theme. He'd spent the last twenty-three years at St. Paul's Lutheran claiming that faith was *all* anyone ever needed. *Listening to the Quiet Voice of God.* Trite. And never mind "quiet", it was the utter absence of God that got him. *Are You There, God? It's Me, Tom.* Instantly Tom saw himself dressed in a schoolgirl uniform—blouse, kilt, and knee socks. Nope. Ridiculous.

He went to the fridge and got a beer. Liquid encouragement. He'd promised Leah he'd save the six-pack for a Saturday night barbecue, but desperate times called for desperate measures. He wrenched off the bottlecap and it flew over the counter hitting the backsplash with a cheery ping.

"Wooden Nickel." The name on the label implied fakery yet the craft ale was crisp, mildly bitter, and rich. Tom could taste it before he even brought the bottle to his lips. He'd have just one, to loosen up.

He went back to the den, sat at the desk, and stared at the blank Word document on the screen. Come on. Think. Create. What would Jesus do? Jesus wouldn't have googled "atheist pastor" but perhaps His forty-day foray in the desert suggested He was a fellow procrastinator. Tom decided to cruise the internet while he drank his beer, then he'd write the sermon, before Leah returned. He clicked on "The Clergy Project." A panel of faces smiled at Tom. These were clergy who'd emerged from their closets and proclaimed their nonbelief in the existence of God.

"Cheers!" Tom raised his bottle to the crowd on the screen and took a swig. He felt like Ebenezer Scrooge in the company of the second ghost, observing the Yule-tide party. Tom could touch the faces on the monitor, but he didn't know how to escape his fetters and join them. One thing he did know. He'd need another beer to write a passable sermon.

Second bottle at hand, Tom typed a tentative sentence. "Don't take any wooden nickels." Tom remembered his grandfather offering that advice as he pressed a shiny quarter into Tom's palm each Sunday, decades ago. Tom knew what the saying meant, but he googled it anyway. "Don't be cheated by accepting tokens in place of real money." At last, Tom had a nugget of folk wisdom, a point of departure, for the sermon.

The handle of the screen door rattled. Tom tucked the bottle behind the computer screen and erased his browser history with a few deft, thoroughly practised clicks. Then he typed. Tom's zealous typing, his ecstatic, spirit-filled toil, was the human equivalent of the peacock's tail, each keystroke a feather announcing his fitness as a dutiful husband and pastor.

He felt laser beams of anger burning his back.

"How was book club?" Tom asked, eyes on the screen. "Did Anne Lamott ignite the conversational fires?"

"Anne Lamott did just fine." Leah sounded like a disapproving Sunday school teacher.

Tom swivelled his chair around to face his wife who held two bottle caps in her outstretched hand. Busted. Busted by his unconscious neglect of the evidence. He'd known better than to leave the caps on the counter but pretending to be a good boy for Leah was exhausting.

"You told me you'd leave them for Saturday."

Tom retrieved the bottle from behind the computer screen and held it on his knee defiantly. "And I changed my mind. I'll buy more for the barbecue. This is not a problem, Leah."

"Oh, but it is. You aren't a little boy stealing cookies, Tom. You're a grown man with no self-control when it comes to booze. Honestly, I'm tempted to serve lemonade on Saturday. If you can't manage to keep your hands off the sauce for a measly two days, we shouldn't have it in the house at all."

"What a great idea. Just capital. Pastor Schafer and his wife and helpmeet Leah pouring lemonade for the temperance picnic. Stunts like that kill the fun."

"Whose fun? Penny and Stuart are sensible and the Holmans don't drink."

Tom answered Leah's rhetorical question by guzzling his ale.

"I thought so. That's swell, Tom. Take all the wooden nickels you want."

"Yup. Fake currency. That's what I trade in," said Tom. "Hey, Leah, this bottle's almost empty. Would you get me another?"

Leah glared. A few years ago, she would've laughed or thrown a pillow at him, but he knew the joke would crash before he uttered the words.

"I'm going upstairs to pray for you. Remember that? Prayer? Why don't you try it sometime?" She turned away.

Tom shook his head and pushed his chair around to face his computer again. "Nope. I won't pray," he muttered. He preferred to preach his own words, but he was too tired to write a sermon now. He clicked on a bookmarked link to a website featuring stock sermons for Lutheran pastors and entered "apology, contrition" in the query field. The wooden nickel-imposter theme could wait.

Despite the throbbing ache behind his eyes, Tom stood on the sunny side of the threshold of St. Paul's Lutheran, connecting with congregants as they departed from the gloom of the narthex into a bright June day.

"Thank-you, Pastor Tom. That was a lovely service."

"You're welcome, Joyce." Eye contact, wide smile.

"Tom, I enjoyed your sermon. I don't think Sam ever apologized to me in fifty years of marriage. Leah is a lucky woman."

"Well, I like to think so, Peggy," chuckled Tom.

"Greetings, Pastor Tom. Enjoy this blessed day!"

"You too, Bruce."

"Good morning, Tom. You delivered a thought-provoking sermon, as always."

"I'm glad you liked it, Gail. It's good to see you back. I hope you took lots of photos in Iceland."

"I did. I'm showing them at women's Bible study on Wednesday. Just drop in."

"I will!" Tom patted Gail on the shoulder as a send off and turned to the woman behind her.

"Hello, Tom. I hope you don't mind. I recorded the service so Frank can hear it."

"I don't mind at all, Becky. I'm glad you could come this morning. How's Frank?"

"Improving. But he needs to keep clear of crowds till his white cell count goes up. You'll pray for him?"

"Of course, Becky. Can he have visitors yet?"

And on it went. After forty-seven more handshakes and hugs, Tom dragged himself back inside, retreated to a pew in the shadow of the balcony, and rubbed his temples. Same bad channel every bloody Sunday. Lord smite my miserable, hungover ass, thought Tom. And while you're at it, smite the do-gooder who donated tambourines for the choir. That racket was the moldy cherry on the hot shit sundae. He closed his eyes and draped his clasped hands over the back of the next pew to fend off conversation with stragglers.

A queasy wave of guilt swept over him. These people, this flock of struggling sheep...they were good people. They didn't deserve to be deceived by a Godless phony spewing masticated baloney Jesus pap. He cringed at the inanity of his words. *Let go and let God... With God, all things are possible... When you can't stand up, kneel!* Worst were the lies he told Leah. Tom knew she was horrified by his drinking, by his pathetic, scatter-shot rebellions. He also knew that she'd stand by her man, The Functional Alcoholic, but atheism would cross the line. If she knew the real Tom, there'd be no arms-to-cling-to. She'd fold those arms over her chest like armour, and he, goat among the sheep, would be cast into the wilderness.

Sour coffee sludge gurgled up from Tom's belly and burned his tongue. For a few minutes, raw, physical torment quashed Tom's existential distress. He urgently needed a Sunday fry up. Bacon, eggs over easy, fried potatoes for vitamin C—a poultice for his booze-scalded stomach. It was time to meet Leah in the basement "Jesus Loves Me Kid Zone." He'd find her

seated on a tiny plastic chair, cutting loaves and fishes from felt, twisting pipe cleaners into little married animal couples for a popsicle stick ark, performing miracles with craft supplies for next week.

Tom murmured “amen,” a deceitful demonstration of piety for anyone lingering in church, then opened his eyes. To his relief, he discovered he was alone.

Tom and Leah ate their brunch in brittle formality, avoiding any breach of conversational etiquette that would tip their cold war into battle. They passed the rest of the day separately, Tom cleaning the grill and mowing the lawn in the mid-afternoon heat as penance for his folly, Sabbath be damned, and Leah retreating to the den to Skype with Matthew, then announce on Facebook that his rowing team would be attending a regatta in New York state, *praise the Lord*.

At last, as a milky blob of a moon rose over the spruces, Tom brushed his teeth and climbed into bed beside Leah. She was reading. Books were her panacea for boredom, anxiety, self-doubt, and insomnia. Although Leah made the same claim about prayer, Tom knew that a well-written novel trumped conversation with God for all that ailed her, though she’d never admit it.

“Is it good?” asked Tom. He wiggled an arm between the top sheet and Leah’s waist, and she shifted into the curl of his body. *Détente*.

“Yes, I think so. I’m pretty sure the vicar did it. He has an antique pistol collection and he was carrying on with the maid. A hypocritical clergyman is ripe for blackmail. Low-hanging fruit.”

“Indeed.” Tom kissed Leah’s neck, lightly. “I’m sorry about last night, Leah. I got carried away—again.”

“I’d like to say, ‘apology accepted,’ but this keeps happening, Tom, and it’s worse since Matthew left for university.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Leah marked her book and turned over to face him. “Never mind sorry. Your apologies, that appalling sermon, those are mealy-mouthed, marshmallow words. I need more from you, Tom. What’s going on?”

“I’m lost, Leah. The needle on my compass is spinning and I’m disoriented.”

“Okay. So, you drink to find your bearings?”

“No. Obviously that’s silly. I feel like I’m losing my connection with God. That I’m running a sham outfit and I’m a swindler peddling a faith that rests on sandy, shifting ground.”

“But you’re not, Tom. If you were up there at the pulpit pressing the palm of your hand into sick people’s foreheads or flashing a 1-800 number on a TV screen to sell miracles or threatening vulnerable people with hell fire, I’d have my doubts. But you’re a hardworking Lutheran pastor. You have a good, solid faith founded in the values of Jesus, in human dignity. Surely you, of all people, have a reliable bearing.”

“I don’t know, Leah.” Tom brushed a lock of hair from her face. “Do you even like being a pastor’s wife? I mean, you’re smart, you’re an effective communicator. We could do something else.”

“Tom, I love being a pastor’s wife. When I met you all those years ago at university, at the retreat, I knew you were the one. Fortunately, you were attracted to my God-given charms too.” Leah kissed Tom lightly, on his nose. “We’ve made a great team. The congregation is growing as the neighborhood turns over. We had nineteen kids at Sunday school today. We have the friendship and respect of decent people. Matthew is thriving at Western. I can’t imagine a better life than the one we have now.”

“Except that it isn’t perfect, is it?”

“No. Because of your drinking.”

“But it’s not just the drinking. I’m trying to fill a huge gap in my morale and a keg isn’t enough to fill it.”

“Tom, alcohol won’t fill it. It doesn’t fill holes, Jesus does. What would you say to a man with a drinking problem who came to your office for help?”

"We'd discuss it, discuss how it hurts his family, his job, and his health. I'd suggest a visit to his doctor and AA or whatever therapy his insurance could afford, and ask him to not drink, just for today, and to check in again tomorrow," replied Tom.

"And you'd pray together," added Leah.

"I suppose." The words were hesitant, but Leah didn't seem to notice.

"Then follow your own advice, Tom. Pray with all your heart. And reach out to a colleague. Why don't you call Pastor Derek at Trinity? He's our age and he's kind."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" Leah sat up, and threw herself back on the bed, facing away from Tom. "Good-night, Tom."

Negotiations failed. He was the USSR again. Godless and thirsty.

Tom opened the metal door a scant foot and peered into the hospital room. Frank lay supine, his head poking out from a pile of blankets, his skin as translucent and yellow as the sunshine that flooded the room. Becky slouched in a chair by Frank's side, silhouetted by the window, her head tipped back and mouth agape, snoring raggedly. At the head of the bed, an IV pole festooned with bags and disconnected tubing stood sentry, the equipment as powerless as a ceremonial Beefeater. Even Tom, with his grade school knowledge of the human interior, could tell the treatment plan had changed and hope for cure had given way to the practicalities of comfort.

Tom tip-toed to the white board that hung on the wall at Frank's feet. He started to write a note—*You were sleeping peacefully so I didn't wake*— Suddenly, Becky snorted and shot up, stock straight in her chair. Attentive to Frank even in sleep, she'd sensed a change in the room, and she was instantly alert.

"Pastor Tom! My goodness. Am I glad to see you." Becky stood and stretched her arms wide for a hug.

Her chest was pillow-soft, and Tom's arms couldn't reach to encircle her roundness. Month after grinding month of cafeteria food, car trips and waiting rooms, and twenty-four-hour caregiving were stealing her health.

Becky seized Tom's wrist and led him from the room. "I don't want to disturb Frank. As you know, he's very poorly and Doctor Eastley doesn't expect him to recover. Frank's at peace with it all. He just wants to be comfortable. Joyce and Gail are coming by this afternoon. I don't like to leave him alone. He panics if he wakes and no one's nearby."

"Do you want me to sit with him, Becky?"

"Could you, Tom? For half an hour so I can get some air and make a few phone calls?"

"Of course. Don't rush."

"My cell number is on the whiteboard if anything happens. Half an hour, that's all I need. And Tom? Will you pray for him?"

"That's why I'm here."

Tom returned to the room and took Becky's still warm seat, hoping to keep vigil without rousing Frank. He read the instructions on how to arrange TV service at least a dozen times and compulsively checked the clock that hung above the white board. To Tom's dismay, while the second hand circled the clock face at the usual slow-counting speed, the minute hand dawdled...eighteen minutes...nineteen minutes...tic...tic...tic...

Frank stirred. His eyes fluttered open, then narrowed, regarding Tom as if he were a stranger, perhaps an intruder.

"It's okay, Frank. It's me, Tom. Becky stepped out for a few minutes, but she'll be back soon."

A light of recognition flickered in Frank's jaundiced eyes and he smiled weakly. "Pastor Tom," he whispered. A knobby hand emerged from the covers, reaching, and Tom extended his own hand over the blankets to meet Frank's grasp.

"Do you want a drink? Some ice water?"

Frank shook his head.

“Are you comfortable? Do you want to sit up?”

Frank shook his head again, then closed his eyes. A minute passed, and Tom assumed Frank had fallen asleep. Tom withdrew his hand. A tactical error. Frank opened his eyes immediately.

“How can I help you, Frank?”

“Pray.” A single phlegm-gurgled word, then more clearly, gruffly, “Pray for me.”

“Frank, I’ll start with the Lord’s Prayer, if that’s alright with you,” said Tom. Unconventional, but Frank was in no position to question. “Our Father, who art in heaven...” Tom recited the words he’d memorized by rote as a boy. As he droned, “Deliver us from evil,” Frank descended into sleep again, his breath shallow and regular.

“Amen.” Tom consulted the clock, then mumbled a short prayer of petition to the scuffed, beige wall, in case Frank still heard him.

Becky quietly entered the room.

“You’re early,” he whispered.

“I couldn’t stay away. It’s me he wants, and he doesn’t have much time. Thank-you for coming, Tom,” said Becky.

Tom hugged Becky again, and with a brief good-bye, exited the room, closing the door gently behind him. He wondered if she noticed that he hadn’t offered to pray with her. Probably. Praying was rudimentary to his role and he was withholding basic spiritual sustenance from a member of his flock. Becky wouldn’t understand that he had no soul-food to offer.

As Tom boarded the elevator, he thought of the hospital staff—the cooks and lab techs, the doctors and nurses, and the UPS courier who hastily joined him—worker bees buzzing with purpose, contributing to the well-being of humankind with nary a self-serving prayer passing their lips. On the next floor, a middle-aged woman pushed a cart of cleaning supplies onto the elevator, and jealousy consumed him. Her work was everything his wasn’t—concrete, essential, visible, clearly bounded—with no imaginary sky-boss. His situation was untenable. Tom had to act.

Tom sat across from Matthew in a campus café. There were few customers during the summer semester, and they shared a table by a wide-open window, an occasional breeze lifting their serviettes and scattering the crumbly remains of croissants. Tom asked about essays and sports and Matthew's opinions on politics, smothering the matter of importance, his Issue, under small talk. It wasn't a cocktail party. He had to tell him.

Gay sons and daughters took leaps into the rarified air of truth despite having no idea how they'd land—if they'd be received into the warm embrace of their Christian parents or if they'd slam into rejection. Now the tables were turned, and it was a father who sought his son's benediction. Tom fidgeted with his cutlery. He had to plunge ahead or he'd go on living a corrosive, soul-rusting lie.

Matthew gazed fleetingly at his phone. He disliked being late for classes. It was now or never.

"Matthew, have you ever carried a secret so heavy that you had to unburden yourself, yet so dark that you felt you couldn't? A secret that would change everything in its telling?"

Matthew's young eyes searched his father's face for the meaning in the words.

"I'm having a crisis of faith," said Tom.

Matthew was briefly silent. "Well, that's normal for most mere mortals, isn't it, Dad?"

Tom nodded.

"Remember when I was fourteen, and I told you I wasn't sure if I believed in God? I thought God should give people tangible proof of His existence. Mom was upset with you, but you let me take a break from church on the condition that I spend time alone at the lakeside, in the cedar woods, instead of going to services on Sunday mornings."

"Yes, I remember that."

"And you told me that God and I would find each other there if I opened myself to His presence."

"Yes, and I recall you came back to church a couple months later, but I never knew if it was because God reached out to you, or if the addition of the Tindall sisters to the congregation lured you back," Tom laughed nervously.

"I wasn't sure either. Probably the girls," Matthew laughed too and shrugged, then he continued, voice solemn. "I felt lonely and small on those solo Sunday mornings, as if I was a tiny, insignificant creature in a fantastic, grand creation, and for me, that was sufficient proof of God. Lake Ontario was proof of God."

"I get that, Matthew. That's how I've propped up my shaky faith all these years. Lake Ontario is cold, deep, ominous...the forest is benevolent, generous, and beautiful. Those are powerful qualities, but are they proof of God? Or are they just 'is', like this 'is' an empty coffee cup or that 'is' a pigeon? Have I been ignoring the mundane yet applying some self-invented, conjured up meaning to wondrous things like the lake or a father's love for his son, and calling it 'God'?"

Matthew shook his head but didn't speak.

"I've been asking myself, why would I need God as an intermediary between me and the universe? I'm circling around the conclusion that life is simpler, that making sense of the world is easier, without God."

"Circling or certain?" asked Matthew.

"I can't be certain, but I doubt that God exists," replied Tom. "In fact, the very idea of God is diminishing and inhumane to me now. I suppose I'm an atheist." Tom deliberately chose the provocative, brutal, unequivocal "A" word over "free-thinker" or "humanist" or some other euphemism. He needed to be clear.

"Have you prayed, Dad?"

"Of course," replied Tom, hiding his irritation with the question. "I prayed for years but, more and more, I felt embarrassed by it. Over the winter, I came to realize that I was talking to myself."

“Prayer is one-way communication for me too,” admitted Matthew. “Yet I still have a sense of something bigger, something divine, when I’m alone, riding my bike or rowing across the water.”

“Matthew, I’m not asking you to abandon your faith. I’m telling you that I’m abandoning mine because I want you to know what’s been happening... if I’ve been acting weird or will act weird...so you know what’s going on.”

“Okay. Does Mom know?”

“No, not yet. You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“I guess I’m honoured.”

“You don’t have to be, Matthew. It’s not compulsory.”

“No, no. I am, Dad. I can see that it was difficult for you to tell me this. What are you going to do now? I mean, with your job?” He waved toward the window and the lawn beyond. “And your life? What about Mom?”

“I don’t know. I expect some turbulence,” said Tom. He lowered his voice to radio host depth. “Stay tuned for the next chapter of ‘The Adventures of the Atheist Pastor’.”

According to Phyllis, Trinity’s secretary, Derek Steinman kept his door open to all in need and that is how Tom found it on Wednesday morning, the following week.

“Tom. Good to see you!” Derek’s voice was an affable, preach-perfect baritone.

“Hello, Derek. Thanks for making time for me this morning,” said Tom.

“Oh, I wasn’t up to much. And when Leah phoned, well—”

“I don’t know what Leah told you,” said Tom.

“First things first. Have a seat, Tom. That armchair’s comfortable. Can I get you a coffee? Maybe an iced tea?”

“No, no, thanks. I had a late breakfast.”

Derek shut the door and took the left cushion of a battered love seat, likely a cast-off from the Steinman home. After relieving Tom's obvious nervousness with talk of family news and vacation plans, Derek said, "Why don't you tell me why you think you're here, Tom. Why Leah arranged this meeting?"

"Ostensibly because I drink too much," Tom answered.

"Ostensibly," echoed Derek.

"Yes," said Tom.

Derek didn't speak. He sat motionless, arms draped to his sides, and maintained a generous silence, and Tom felt himself twisting in the wind.

"It's true. I'm a trout. I'm drinking too much," Tom continued. "But it's a symptom; it's not the problem."

"Hm hmm," said Derek.

"Addictions counselling 1-0-1. Getting to the heart of the matter. Why do people drink? What is hurting? What is missing?" added Tom.

"And today, the question is why does *Tom* drink," said Derek.

"Yes. Therein lies the issue."

"You've been thinking about this. Ruminating."

"I have, Derek, but you won't like the answer."

Derek turned his hands over, palms up, as a gesture of non-judgemental reception. "I'm all ears and no mouth, Tom. You may speak freely."

"I'm no longer a believer. I've lost my faith. Now I'm floundering around, unmoored as it were, grasping for something to hold onto. I can't talk to Leah. I can't talk to my friends because I'm also their pastor. The easiest thing to grab hold of is a bottle."

Derek nodded, and Tom's troubles tumbled out in a stream of angst.

"I'm a fake. A fraud. I stand up every Sunday and spout things I don't believe. I recite useless prayers over the sick and distraught. The sick person feels better, but I feel hollow.

At first, I begged God to give me a sign that He knew I was struggling. Nothing happened, not because He wasn't listening, but because He doesn't exist. I might as well have prayed to Leah's Cuisinart dough mixer."

"Okay," said Derek. "To clarify, which is the bigger problem, losing your faith, or living a lie?"

"The lie." Tom answered without hesitation. "Losing God sucks. I feel like I've lost an old buddy, but I can fill that gap with philosophy, with curiosity about the natural universe, with the 'Discovery Channel'. But my marriage, my career, and my identity? That's another matter."

"It's a predicament," Derek agreed.

"What do I do?"

"Well, normally I'd suggest prayer, but I risk insulting you with that idea. You haven't come to your conclusions on a whim."

"No, I haven't."

"And you aren't going to change your mind."

"No. That's non-negotiable," said Tom.

"Yet, it seems to me that you need help with your alcoholism, if Leah is accurate in how much she estimated you're drinking."

"Agreed," said Tom. "But I don't think I can tackle that until I figure out how to deal with the other."

"Your professed atheism."

"Yeah. I'll probably drink less if I can regain some integrity. I just don't know how to move forward."

Frowning, Derek formed a steeple with the index fingers of his clasped hands and pressed it to his lips. At last, he spoke. "If you were a member of my congregation, or my brother, and you told me you'd lost your faith, I'd counsel you to take a break from church and come back when you're ready. The arms of the church are always open for the prodigal son. But as a

pastor, you can't do that. The bar is set higher. Your congregation depends on a leader who is committed heart and soul to the work of Jesus."

"You're saying I should resign."

"Yes, Tom. For the sake of St. Paul's and for your own sake too."

"This might mean the end of my marriage."

"It could, but Leah loves you, Tom. That's why she called me about your drinking."

"Ah, but is it Tom, the man, or Tom, the man-of-God she loves?"

"Either way, you can't go on as you are. Your back is against the wall. Jesus would throw you a rope, but you won't take it. You have to be honest with yourself and the people you love."

Tom looked down at his sandaled feet and took a deep breath. "You're right, Derek. I've known it for months, but hearing you say it back to me makes it real. I have to come clean."

"And you need to quit drinking. Alcohol is a lousy replacement for God."

"You can't replace something that doesn't exist."

"You know what I mean." Derek rose and took a card from his desk drawer. "Here's a number for a therapist you can call. She's very helpful with addiction issues and she's not too expensive."

"Thank-you, Derek."

Derek extended his arms and embraced Tom in a loose hug. "I'll be praying for you," he said.

Tom stood at the pulpit, hands gripping its edges like the gunwales of a pitching boat. He looked down at his notes, too queasy and dizzy to cast his eyes over the congregation. He'd waited till mid-July, when attendance would be low, till the Sunday before Leah's and his vacation. As in June, when he'd delivered a vague apology before the flock, he'd asked Leah to remain in her pew for the sermon, to cede control of the children's program to Amanda—

just for this week. Tom knew his actions were cowardly, but he only had enough courage for one confession. Leah would receive the news like everyone else, as if a neutron bomb had detonated over the nave.

To Tom's left, Gail stood at the lectern and read a passage from the Bible, the Gospel-truth, her words precise. "May God bless the reading of His Word." The clipped, final "d" was Tom's cue. Gail smiled at the congregation, and then at him, and returned to her pew.

Tom cleared his throat and turned his papers over. He looked up, over the congregation, a couple dozen refugees from the summer heat clustered in the pews. Leah was seated in the second row near the aisle. Show time.

"When I was a boy, my grandfather used to say to me, 'Don't take any wooden nickels.' It was sound, common-sense advice with a face-value meaning and a deeper meaning.

"In the olden days, within the lifetime of the oldest members of the St. Paul's community, some merchants issued wooden tokens that could be exchanged for goods at their stores. Wooden nickels were distributed in commemoration of the World's Fair in Chicago in 1933. Lately, wooden nickels are popular again, as prizes for geo-cachers, and as souvenirs. The foil covered wooden coins are shiny and pretty, but they aren't the real thing.

"Grandpa was warning me not to accept counterfeit money, but also to avoid the fakes, the fraudsters, and the charlatans. He was telling me that you can't believe everything you hear. It's good advice. But there's a catch.

"What if the fake is so well-rendered that you can't tell the difference? What if a goat manages to grow a fleecy, white coat of wool? Has he turned into a sheep? Suppose that goat rehearsed his bleating and he grazed with the flock and he practiced so hard at being a sheep that he actually believed that he was a sheep. So far, so good. The sheep have accepted him into their fold. No harm done. But he's not content. He's a brazen billy goat, so he even goes so far as to make himself head ram. Now there's trouble.

"Deep down, he knows he's a goat. He's the wooden nickel that his grandfather warned him about. I think you see where I'm going here. I'm talking about myself.

"I won't quote scripture. I won't speak of Jesus. That would be disingenuous. I speak about myself.

"Over the years my faith has risen and ebbed, but it was always there, in tandem with doubt. I held onto faith when it was easy, like when Matthew was born, and when it was hard, through the shadows of loss and disappointment, and in humdrum, every day boredom. However, over the winter, my doubt overcame my faith. There was no precipitating event. Nothing happened. I just realized that I didn't believe in God anymore. To me, the idea of God was just that. An idea. An illusion.

"I cloaked myself in shiny tin foil and went on preaching and praying and being your pastor and Leah's Christian husband. For months I've been a living, breathing wooden nickel. For this I am profoundly sorry.

"As you know, Leah and I were planning to be away for the next three Sundays. I won't be back in the pulpit again now that I've come out as an atheist. I thank you for trusting me, for allowing me to serve as your pastor, for being my friends. I am deeply, deeply sorry."

Tom shuffled his papers together and folded them in half.

For a moment, silence reigned, and then the organist played a fast-tempo, full-volume "Jesus Loves Me", abandoning the adult hymn that'd been printed in the order of service. Tom felt as if he was surfacing from a trance, as if he was seeing the faces of the congregation for the first time after returning from a long journey. The faces were familiar yet changed, some scowling, some turned in intense conversation, some tracked with tears. Bruce stared angrily, rose from his pew, and strode out. Joyce and Peggy flanked Leah, arms around her shoulders, concern etched in their profiles.

Tom looked at Leah and their eyes met. She could have an atheist husband or she could have a divorce. Hurt and rage radiated from the pew to the pulpit. It was obvious that Leah had already made her choice.

Algebraic Calculations

Naomi Nishigawa picked at her black nail polish, willing the bell to signal the end of math class, hoping that Mr. Lundquist would run out of time before he could return their tests. She could see the tops of the papers protruding from his satchel like a fanned-out Halloween decoration. Flashes of red ink indicated that he'd marked them, that he'd evaluated her rudimentary understanding of quadratic equations. Naomi's parent's decision on whether their daughter had need of a tutor depended on the mark on the test paper concealed in Mr. Lundquist's satchel like a ticking bomb. Ten to three.

Hurry bell, Naomi pleaded silently.

"And we find that X equals 4. Any questions?" asked Mr. Lundquist as he turned from the board to gaze over twenty-five sullen faces.

Please, God. Somebody. Ask a question, prayed Naomi.

Mr. Lundquist looked up at the clock. "Oh right! Your tests. They're marked. If I return them today, you have to bring them to class tomorrow so we can review the trouble spots. Maybe we should—"

"Now, please. Today!"

Clarissa Drummond. It figured. Under her desk, Naomi stabbed her right thigh with a pencil straight through her kilt to distract herself from her dread.

"Alright, Ms. Drummond. If the suspense is torture for you. Very well." Mr. Lundquist hoisted his satchel onto his desktop and withdrew the ream. "Please come forward alphabetically. Abad...Anderson...Baird..." And on through Drummond to Nishigawa, midway through the alphabet.

Naomi stood and crossed three rows of desks as if she were traversing a suspension bridge of fraying hemp swinging over molten lava. Mr. Lundquist flashed Naomi a reassuring smile as she accepted her paper, a big, ambiguous 71/100 and a B minus scrawled on its top along with a smiley face. In Mr. Lundquist's world, a B minus for an emo, steampunk, double bass player with a shaky grasp of numbers was cause for applause. In the Nishigawa household,

it would spark high-pressure interrogation and the threat of cancellation of Netflix in favour of remedial Kumon. Her mother might even cry. Still, B minus was in the gray zone, maybe a stay of execution, and Naomi was relieved.

“Williams...Wong.” All the papers were returned. Murmurs of comparison, the rustle of notebooks, the shuffle of texts shoved into knapsacks...these soothing noises filled the classroom.

From under her jagged black bangs, Naomi watched Clarissa Drummond approach Mr. Lundquist’s desk, an ingratiating smirk pasted on her smarmy face. Clarissa brandished her test paper like a sacred text, her forehead wrinkled up in self-serving, earnest inquiry. Clarissa had the brownest nose in Sacred Heart Secondary School and Naomi wouldn’t have been one bit surprised to see her pull a round, shiny, McIntosh apple right out of her ass and present it to Mr. Lundquist.

“Yes, Ms. Drummond?” said Mr. Lundquist as he put his calculator into his satchel. Naomi realized he was eager for the bell to ring too.

“Umm, Mr. Lundquist? I checked and double checked your addition, and I think I should have 92/100. Not 97.”

“You added up the marks?”

“Yes sir,” said Clarissa, rocking gleefully onto her toes.

“And you think I gave you too high a mark?”

“Yes, Mr. Lundquist.” Clarissa closed her eyes, preparing for praise and benediction and a 97 as reward for her honesty... maybe even a bonus mark for a 98.

“May I see your paper?” asked Mr. Lundquist, pushing aside his satchel. Reverentially Clarissa handed it to him. He squinted at his red scrawl and muttered numbers, mentally weighing Clarissa’s claim. “By golly you’re right, Ms. Drummond! You should have a 92,” said Mr. Lundquist, peering up at Clarissa.

Naomi groaned involuntarily at Clarissa’s display of gratuitous integrity. The room was silent. The moment was reserved for Clarissa’s reward.

“Let me find my red pen and correct that,” said Mr. Lundquist.

Clarissa looked confused.

Mr. Lundquist crossed out the ‘97’ and wrote ‘92’. “Thank-you for pointing out my error, Ms. Drummond. Happy now?” he asked as he handed Clarissa her test.

“Yup,” said Naomi, more loudly than she’d intended.

Clarissa slunk back to her desk, her shoulders ten centimetres lower by Naomi’s reckoning. Naomi couldn’t fight her feelings. She was developing a very uncool crush on Mr. Lundquist.

Do You Need a Bag?

Dawn was a store fixture, a solidly built, German engineered, human appliance who adhered to Foodland's policy and procedure manual without fear or favour. Regular customers who wanted efficient service sans chit-chat chose Dawn's register. She wasn't a morning person, but they were down a cashier, and she'd agreed to start at eight am, when Foodland unlocked the sliders and welcomed humanity.

Dawn thought the store's mission statement, "We are a family nurturing families," was corporate gibberish. A literalist, she couldn't imagine calling Jeff, the assistant manager, "Dad," or Cyndi, the new cashier who needed a smoke break every five minutes, "cousin," let alone "sister." Dawn completed transactions; she didn't "nurture." In truth, she disliked most customers, though she concealed her judgement within her formidable bosom, under her maximally tight, wash and wear uniform. Each shift, she stashed petty annoyances in an imaginary repository, a "library of despair," indexed by type, as a scientist might categorize disease or crime.

At 8:05, Dawn inserted her cash tray into the till and greeted her first customer, a woman in a power suit who gulped coffee from a reusable travel mug while placing an enormous plastic platter of crudités onto the conveyor. Dawn identified the woman as a classic Type 3, an environmentally conscious hypocrite who was too precious to use a throw-away cup but thought nothing of idling in a drive-thru, gases spewing from the rear-end of a pedestrian-menacing SUV. The woman would likely speed aggressively to her "position" as "chair" of a non-profit, a self-righteous place where raw vegetables were considered a treat.

"That'll be 12.85 please," said Dawn.

The woman flashed her debit card, waited for Dawn to activate the machine, and tapped. At least she hadn't asked for a bag. Still, that massive plastic platter to avoid the inconvenience of a vegetable peeler...

The next customer was a Type 4, an alcoholic in a porous housewife disguise—a kitchen drinker. With a parkinsonian tremor, the woman placed onions, ground beef, a six pack of

cider, a slab of cheddar, and two bottles of merlot on the belt. She probably bought a few groceries at a different store each day to camouflage her bottle purchases within the routine shopping.

Dawn spoke robotically. "Do you need bags?"

"Bags?"

Dawn peered without mercy at the bloodshot eyes. "Yes. Bags."

"Oh no, I have a couple." The woman unzipped her purse and rummaged. "I'm sorry. I'm scatter-brained this morning. I have some friends coming over, and I have a hundred and one things to do."

Friends indeed, thought Dawn. *Me, myself and I* more like it. She scanned and set the woman's items on the metal platform.

"That'll be 37.65," she said as she helped the woman with her items.

The woman handed her two crisp twenties, accepted her change, and rushed away. She didn't want her receipt. It was criminal evidence.

Dawn checked through a couple of benign customers before the shopping cart of the first Type 1, Class B of the day rolled up, namely, a parent with brats. The kids stood in the cart clutching Lunchables and plastic bottles of lurid-coloured sports drinks—blue for the boy and chartreuse for the girl. The boy brazenly grabbed a pack of Juicy Fruit gum, and the father was too cowed by his son to demand its return to the rack.

"Can I have a pack too?" whined the girl.

"Yes, Olivia," said her father. "Just hurry up and give the lady your lunches so you're not late for school. Joshua? Come on, only one pack."

"I'll share the other pack," said the boy.

Dawn looked at the father, and he nodded his consent to the boy's ridiculous demand. She thanked the gods for not burdening her with children. However, if she'd been so unfortunate, she wouldn't ferry them around the store in a royal chariot or let them eat garbage.

After she rang the trio through, Dawn reorganized the gum rack. The volume of Type 1s peaked in late morning and late afternoon, and she'd see plenty more of their kind before her shift ended.

A moment later, another Type 3 plunked his basket on the belt, too entitled to transfer the items himself. Kosher sea salt, facial scrub *pour les hommes*, little packets of imported cheese, and asparagus. As she scanned each item, rancid gall shot into Dawn's throat. All the salt in the world was sea salt, she wanted to scold. Stick the words "kosher" or "sea" on plain salt and dandies like him would pay double for NaCl. And facial scrub...oatmeal paste with a squirt of fragrance for 12.95 not to mention imported cheese at 2.00 a bite—in the middle of dairy country. Ditto the Peruvian-grown asparagus. It was September, and the pretentious jerk had his pick of locally-grown lettuce, green beans, and broccoli.

The Type 3 asked, "Do you take Amex?"

"Yes, we do," Dawn was sorry to say. "Do you need a bag?"

"Yes, three please. I believe it best to separate the cheese and toiletries from the other groceries."

Dawn was glad to see the hipster's corduroy back, but alas, a Type 2 took his place, an infamous coupon clipper named Alice.

"Good morning, Dawn," said Alice as she set a dozen cans of Campbell's soup, three tubes of Colgate Total, and five tubs of Becel on the conveyor. "Can you believe it? I have coupons for all of this." She handed a wad of creased clippings to Dawn.

Dawn stuck her reading glasses on the end of her nose and examined the bits of greasy paper. "I can honour the coupons for the toothpaste and the margarine, but these soup coupons expired on June 30th, Alice. The soup will be full price."

"Well I won't take them then. That's highway robbery. You'll have to put them aside."

Dawn stiffened at the command of Alice, doyenne of bingo halls and lotto kiosks. The woman was always looking for a free ride, and now she was issuing orders like a drill sergeant.

“Oh, and I’ll need a rain cheque on the Uncle Ben’s rice. It’s in your flyer as ‘three for seven dollars’ but you’re all out. You’ll have to have a word with your manager. I’m inconvenienced at Foodland a lot lately.”

Dawn glanced at the growing line. “Alright Alice. I’ll call Jeff to the courtesy desk, and you can request a rain cheque and lodge your complaint with him. That’ll be 11.60 for the other items. Do you need a bag?”

“Nope. Not since you started charging for them. I got my own.” Alice tapped her card, bagged her items, and stalked off to the courtesy desk.

Dawn summoned the manager to the desk over the intercom. Foodland didn’t pay her enough to deal with freeloaders like Alice.

Dawn hurriedly checked through a Type 1, Class A, a parent with a squalling infant. Why, oh why did young mothers insist on shopping with tired, hungry, cranky babies? Dawn wondered. As the woman pressed her PIN into the card reader, Dawn scrutinized the customer’s bedazzled talons. Germ traps. No wonder the baby’s crying. He’s probably ill and contagious, thought Dawn. A glance at the baby’s snotty nose confirmed her suspicion.

She rubbed sanitizer on her hands, and greeted a combo Type 3-4, a stylishly coiffed, size 0 female with surgically tightened skin and tottery stilettos. The woman put a 1.5 litre bottle of organic pinot noir and a gallon of premium cookie dough ice cream on the conveyor. Pricey poison, thought Dawn. She’d probably book an extra session with her personal trainer after this binge. The woman requested a double bag for her heavy, empty calories without looking at her. Dawn returned the woman’s indifference by nodding to the next customer.

At last, her work screen announced it was 11:30 EDT. Dawn shifted on her end-of-morning feet and bid a curt “Have a nice day” to her final irritation of the morning, an animal loving Type 5 wearing cat-motif earrings who’d purchased a basket full of educational cat toys, several cans of Fancy Feast, and organic treats for the “pampered feline.” Dawn set the plastic barrier on her conveyor belt to inform customers that “Another cashier would be happy to serve you,” and she locked her till. Jeff had permitted Dawn to consolidate her breaks, so she had time to drive her ailing Focus to the garage.

Dawn turned the key in the ignition prompting the engine icon to light up on the dash. The car bumped and thumped over the seven blocks to Atkins' Autopro, Dawn parked, checked the mileage, and entered the office.

According to the patch on his coveralls, the man behind the counter was "Mike".

"Yes?" he said as he scribbled on a multi-copy invoice.

"Umm, Hello. I have the 2007 Ford Focus. I called yesterday...about a knocking sound? The engine light is on." Dawn wondered if Mike was a service technician or a mechanic and how the jobs differed.

Mike frowned. "Yes. You're awful late. It's almost noon. We might not get'er done today. Klein, right?" He turned to a bulletin board pinned with slips of paper.

"That's right. Dawn Klein."

"Mileage?"

"289,454 kilometres." Dawn was proud that she'd remembered to check the odometer.

Mike whistled and wrote down the number. "She's been around the block a few times. A knocking noise?"

"Yes, and some grinding. I can't nail it down, but I think it's louder when I speed up or slow down."

"You think." Mike mocked with air quotes. "Well I guess I'll have to listen myself."

"And could you change the oil? I have this coupon that you sent out last Christmas—"

"Lady, that coupon expired at the end of February."

"Oh. Okay," said Dawn. "Umm, Mike. Is there any chance you'd have a loaner I could use? Since you can't get my car fixed today?"

"Did I say we couldn't get her done? No, I did not," scolded Mike. "I said we *might* not get her done. You're being pushy, but I'll do my best."

Dawn took a step back from the unexpected hostility. "Thank-you," she said. "Forget the loaner. Maybe I could get a ride back to work? I'm due back at 12:15. At the Foodland on King and Water. Please?"

Mike sighed. "Yeah, Bob'll take you. He's a retired guy, and kinda slow at the wheel and he's out on a call, so it'll be a while. Have a seat."

"Thanks again." Dawn sat obediently, and peered up at Mike, hoping to make a human connection. Hoping to transmit an understanding that she and her Focus survived on cashier's wages and they were worthy of mercy when Mike added up the invoice.

They didn't connect. When Dawn looked into Mike's oily black pupils, she saw condemnation. In his antifreeze irises, she saw judgement. She recognized her reflection. To Mike, Dawn was a penny-pinching, demanding inconvenience who drove a boring jalopy. She knew he wouldn't cheat her, but there'd be no break on the price.

Do Unto Others

Dr. Adam Kohler dwelled in darkness in a glass-walled room. The ICU at Elmington General Hospital was both his work address and temporary residential address. Temporary until his wife and colleagues decided what to do with him. *Not temporary enough*, thought Adam. He wanted to die.

A week earlier, on a fine July Saturday, Adam donned his scuba gear and dove to a ruined tug, scarcely fifteen metres under water, not far from the Copper River pier. At the time, no one knew the cause of Adam's precipitous loss of consciousness, not even his dive buddy. It could have been an embolism. A faulty regulator. A heart attack or perhaps an aneurysm.

When they pulled him from the lake, Adam's limbs hung like seaweed from his rubbery body. His skin was the colour of paraffin. The good doctor's toes curled over the edge of life, above the abyss of annihilation. At the very moment the grim reaper lifted his hand to push Adam's back, other hands sliced Adam's wetsuit from his body and pushed on his sternum.

Help came too late to save Adam's life but too soon to free him from it. Now he was trapped at the border. "Locked in." He could smell, hear, feel, and think but he couldn't *do*. In essence, Adam was a bag of meat, absorbing IV fluids and whispered conversations, issuing urine and silent wishes. He longed for the reaper's friendly nudge, but a twenty-four-hour guard of physicians, nurses, therapists, and family stood sentry. Even when he was briefly alone, unblinking monitors kept watch over his motionless body.

Adam's life shrank to a singularity of sensation. His world was damp wash cloths raising goose flesh and taut nipples. The rhythmic tightening and ebbing of the blood pressure cuff on his withering bicep. The pull of a catheter on bladder and penis. The sting of IVs pumping electrolyte mixtures and antibiotics into his blood stream. The suctioning of his tracheostomy with a thin plastic tube that cut like a dagger in his throat.

Invisible straps bound his limbs to the bed and muzzled his mouth. The pony-tailed nurses who used to laugh deferentially at Adam's jokes and act on his orders—*stat*—had morphed

into his torturers. Worst of all, Adam heard the words of pity, of gossip, of plans made without his input. *I can hear, God damn you*, he screamed, but no one heard him.

"Your assessment?" Adam recognized the clipped words of Donna Wong, his taciturn colleague.

"No change, Dr. Wong." The nurse's reply was high pitched, elfin...it was Angela. "GSC five. Desatted at 06:45, but Carrie suctioned a wad of phlegm and he's been vital signs stable since. Blood-tinged urine. Output was 1265 ccs at shift change and urinalysis was clear other than the blood...afebrile...so probably just irritation from transfer to radiology yesterday."

Adam imagined Donna nodding earnestly. "I'll get neurology in again. Any change, page me."

"Yes, Dr. Wong. We won't let him go. Lord knows Dr. Kohler could summon life from a stone. He was the most aggressive doc in the ICU. He never gave up on any of his patients, no matter how dire their condition."

"And we won't give up on him," agreed Donna.

Adam silently pleaded. *No! Please give up. Let me go.* Donna and Angela stepped out of the room. Adam felt the reaper's gaze and tried to connect with the presence, but he was too slow. Adam's wife entered the room, kissed Adam's cheek, and took his hand.

"Adam. It's me, Melissa. Squeeze my hand if you hear me."

Adam heard her, but even if he could operate his fingers, he wouldn't have obeyed her. He didn't want to bolster false hope. At best, by Thanksgiving, she'd push her husband around in a wheelchair like a giant pumpkin in a cart and wipe drool from his chin. *No.* At best, he'd die, and she'd mourn and start over.

"Come on, Adam. I know you can hear me. We all love you. I love you. You'll get better. You're a fighter but you've got to try."

How many times had he said the same sort of thing to families of comatose patients? *He's a fighter. She has a strong will. We're doing everything we can. Miracles happen in the ICU...*

“How about a blink? For God’s sake Adam. Just a blink?” Melissa’s voice was hoarse. Adam knew she was crying. Then on cue, “The transplant team asked me about organ donation. Those vultures. I told them to fuck off. If you don’t want to be spare parts, you’ll have to work with us.”

Melissa always cried and pleaded and then resorted to scare tactics when Adam didn’t do her bidding. Now he was unreachable. For once, she couldn’t manipulate him like a piece of origami paper. She blew her nose and cleared her throat. Adam heard her rummaging in her Louis Vuitton bag and leafing through papers.

“I know you’re bored just lying there, so I’ve decided to read to you till you can read yourself,” she said. “*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean-Dominique Bauby. It’s inspirational.”

To Oprah. Adam freed his mind to roam, a galloping stallion on a prairie of memories, as Melissa read to him in a steady drone, her voice like wind in the grass. Then, quite suddenly, she snapped the book shut.

“Two chapters is enough, don’t you think Adam? You’ll be having your physio soon, so I’ll take Turbo for a walk and come back in the afternoon.” She kissed him and left.

Adam wasn’t supposed to hear rounds, but the conference room door was wedged open by a plastic straw that had lodged in its hinge. The voices of his colleagues carried across the corridor and reverberated in his eardrums.

“Your update, Donna?” asked the chief of staff.

“Adam’s condition is essentially unchanged from last week. He’s breathing on his own through the trach tube. Respiriology capped it last week, but with no ability to swallow or cough, his risk of choking is too high to discontinue it. He’s tolerating feeds by G-tube. He’s had no improvement nor deterioration in two months,” said Donna.

The neurologist spoke next. “I can confirm that. By all objective measures, Adam is in a persistent vegetative state with a poor prognosis for return to normal cognition and physical function.”

"Allied health?" asked the chief.

"Weight is stable on Jevity 1.5 feeds. He tends to constipation, so we've added lactulose twice daily," said the dietician. "Mike?"

The physiotherapist said, "His limbs are developing contractures which is not unexpected given his neurological status and immobility. We're using heat, massage, and range of motion exercises and teaching his wife, Melissa, to assume responsibility for some of his therapy."

"Adam's breathing is stable as well," reported the respiratory therapist. "We'll try to discontinue his tracheostomy again as is his wife's wish, but he's a full code and it's handy for resuscitation. Nursing?"

"I've nothing to add," said Angela. "We try to elicit a response from him during care, but our efforts have not been successful."

"Right," said the chief. "I regret to say that Adam's recovery is stalled. I think we should plan for transfer to the chronic care unit and make a change in his code status from 'Full' to 'Do Not Resuscitate'."

"That'll be a hard sell. His wife will think we're giving up on him," said Angela.

"I think we should also consider what Adam would want," added Donna.

"His patients were full code well after the rest of us would've declared them DNR," said the neurologist. "If we recall his actions as a clinician, we can guess his wishes. I think we must maintain his code status as is and continue to manage him aggressively. It's what he'd want."

"Remember what he used to say?" said Mike. "Winners never quit, and quitters never win."

"And saving lives was winning for him," continued the chief. "Okay, guys. You know we can't keep him in an ICU bed forever, but we'll defer a decision for now. Full code, no holds barred, and I'll have a word with his wife. We'll revisit Adam's care plan next week. Who's next?"

Adam shut out the voices and descended into his own private hell, an imaginary cocktail party of people whose lives he'd saved in defiance of plain horse sense.

“Sometimes a body don’t want to eat. I was tuckered out. Ain’t no harm in that. You kept me from Jesus,” said a frail nonagenarian. Adam remembered telling Angela to place an NG tube through the lady’s nostril into her stomach to feed her, and then ordering wrist restraints when the old lady tried to pull out the tube.

“If I were a lame old mule, I would’ve been shot. It would’ve been a kindness,” said an elderly farmer with end stage kidney disease whom Adam resuscitated and placed on dialysis.

“Not every death is a fucking tragedy. You broke my ribs performing CPR so I wouldn’t die under your care,” complained a middle-aged lawyer. “I had stage 4 pancreatic cancer for Christ’s sake. What in hell’s name were you thinking?”

The voices echoed in Adam’s skull in the lengthy intervals between bouts of care. Adam settled into an alternating pattern of physical and mental torment. Pressure on boney prominences. Itches he couldn’t scratch. Nausea from the vigorous flushing of his G-tube. The dull ache in his rectum from stool he couldn’t pass followed by the humiliation of an enema, and always, always, the choking sensation of the tracheostomy. At least his physical suffering was a distraction from all those voices.

The reaper included Adam on his daily rounds of the hospital, scythe unsheathed, but he couldn’t execute thanks to the TLC and superior medical care shown Dr Adam Kohler. At last, after several weeks, the reaper saw his chance.

Melissa entered the room and seated herself in the plastic chair at Adam’s side. Her eyes were maps of criss-crossing highways. Melissa snatched a budget tissue from a cardboard box and wiped her nose. Mindful of the peril of germs, she squirted her hands with sanitizer and took Adam’s curled hand in hers. After several false starts, she blurted out her message.

“Adam. Adam my love. Turbo has died. He took sick last night. He seemed draggy on his walk and he was off his kibble. Then, at supper he had a seizure. I took him to the vet, and she kept him overnight, but when I went to collect him this morning, the vet told me it was

best for Turbo that we put him down. He had a brain tumour. So, umm...she suggested euthanasia and I gave my consent.”

Adam was motionless, but his heart pounded in rabid jealousy.

“It was peaceful,” said Melissa. “I held Turbo in my arms and the vet administered the injection and it was all over in a couple of minutes. He didn’t even whimper, bless his soul.”

Melissa squeezed Adam’s hand. “I’m sorry. This is the last thing you want to hear because you’ve got to keep your strength up, but I thought you should know about Turbo. Our special Turbo.”

Deep within Adam’s chest, his heart wailed with the injustice at an erratic 184 beats per minute. *Turbo, you lucky beagle!*

The reaper approached Adam’s bed, scythe ready, while Melissa stroked Adam’s arm. Sweat beaded on Adam’s forehead and his ribcage pushed and pulled air through his trach like a bellows. His lips turned gun steel blue.

“Adam? Adam!” Melissa screamed.

Angela and Donna hurried into the room with the crash cart and commenced advanced life support. The slump shouldered reaper wrapped his scythe, tucked it under his robe, and strode off to oncology.

Dr Adam Kohler would live another day.

Love and Justice in the Age of Aquarius

Nobody in Agape Ecovillage knew that Taya was born in Elmington, Ontario and that she'd been named Emily Ann Twiss by a dentist and an English teacher who hadn't the foggiest idea of how to raise a Pisces child with a soul as deep as the lake. Of how to prepare the girl for her heart journey. The ancestors erred in selecting a sperm issuer who drove a beige Camry and watched golf videos on Youtube. They compounded the mistake by placing the girl in the womb of a woman who attended aqua fit at the Y and cooked with Campbell's soup and ground beef. Taya kept her false start, her larval beginning twenty-three years prior, a secret.

A shaman sacrificed Emily Ann Twiss and birthed Taya to the heartbeat of drums and the breath of cedar smoke under a full moon at a music festival in British Columbia. The name the girl was destined to claim, her name everlasting, spilled from her lips as she opened her newborn eyes. "Taya." Two balanced syllables impregnated with unfathomable meaning. The next day, Taya presented the flesh over her left ovary to a tattoo artist who marked her emergence from Emily's chrysalis with ink and a butterfly stencil. The universe rejoiced.

For one perfect summer, the inhabitants of Agape Ecovillage lived in harmony with the land. Kamika tended the garden and brewed nourishing drinks from fruit and grain. Jacob fished and raised chickens, collecting eggs and culling young roosters from the flock for the kitchen. Lynx accepted the gifts of the land and prepared wholesome meals. Willow wove and stitched and mended garments of stunning beauty. Sundog wielded his carpentry tools in the tradition of the minor prophet, Jesus. And Taya? Taya ministered to the unified spirits of Agape Ecovillage. Taya was a healer of souls, a setter of bones, a poultice applier, and a soothsayer.

As shadows lengthened and crickets sang lullabies to coax summer to sleep, Taya consulted the ancestors, the soul-beings who predicted the path of the wheel of time. Alas, a lunar eclipse portended peril. Worse, whenever Taya drank tea, the dregs clumped in the bottom of the cup in violent tangles of leaf and stem.

A tiny kernel of Emily Ann Twiss still throbbed in Taya's chest. It was a middle-class kernel, a remnant of the suburban compulsion to save money in a mutual fund and get a flu shot every fall. The kernel cried, "Be careful. You're too happy. Pride cometh before the fall. There is calm before a storm."

Taya dismissed these signs and intuitions.

On the Tuesday after Labour Day, as legions of young women returned to their desks, Taya gathered medicinal herbs in the margin between Agape and a service road. As she stooped at a cluster of pineapple plant, a black Dodge Ram stopped in a billow of dust and its passenger window slid open.

"Are you Kamika Thomas?" called a gravel pit voice.

"No," replied Taya.

"How about Emily Twiss?"

Taya's eyes darted left and right. No one else was around. "Yes," she replied, "but my name is Taya now."

"Well then. I have a letter for you, 'Taya'." He mimicked her name in falsetto and made air quotes with his sausage fingers. Aviator glasses shielded his eyes. "Please set your basket and knife on the ground and approach the vehicle."

Taya accepted a manila envelope, and the truck spun its wheels in the gravel, turned around, and sped away. Taya examined the envelope. It bore no addressee or sender.

After retrieving the knife from her basket, she sliced the envelope at its glued flap and extracted a document stapled to a photocopy of a topographical map. The document was an eviction notice, identified as such in heavy, capitalized letters at the top the page, underscored with a line. Taya's eyes darted over the print. *Crown land, timber lease, logging, illegal occupancy, vacate within 60 days, trespassing, prosecution.* Agape Ecovillage and its inhabitants were not named, yet Taya intuitively understood that the government and the forestry company who planned to ravage paradise knew each of their identities down to the smallest chicken.

Taya slipped the papers back in the envelope and returned to the cabin. Agape needed a plan.

The villagers took supper on the cabin porch. A dry August had suppressed the menace of mosquitoes and the porch faced west, drinking in sunlight till after seven. As Lynx filled the clay cups with berry wine and Jacob burped contently, Taya pulled the eviction notice from the pocket of her skirt. She unfolded the document and placed it on the sawhorse table.

"I'm sorry," Taya said softly as her five friends stared at the stern words before them. "Two men in a truck drove up the service road and handed it to me this afternoon. I would've told you sooner, but Lynx prepared a delicious casserole, and everyone was so happy."

"That's okay, Taya," Jacob patted Taya's arm. "Didn't you warn us? When we saw the lunar eclipse? It's not your fault. You predict the future; you don't make it."

"Jacob's right," said Willow. "You're not to blame. Now we need to understand the threat and respond accordingly. Agape cannot be destroyed if we strategize and we stick together. We have two months."

"Sixty days," corrected Sundog. "Technically, that's less than two months because—"

"Ape-ricot, app-ricot. Whatever." Willow's eyes stared darts at Sundog. "Sixty days to save Agape from rape by neo-liberal pillagers."

Taya didn't know why Willow spat the words, "neo" and "liberal". If memory served, "neo" meant "new" and "liberal" was the opposite of Republican or Conservative so how could that be bad? Taya placed the map delineating the Pacific Forestry Product's lease beside the eviction notice. "I outlined Agape's territory in green highlighter. We're smack dab in the centre of the logging lease," said Taya.

The villagers drank their wine in pensive silence.

At last, Kamika spoke. "We'll stay here. 'Agape' means 'love' and love prevails. Rumi said, 'Find the sweetness in your own heart, then you may find the sweetness in every heart.'"

“Even in a CEO’s coal-black heart? And what if he doesn’t find the sweetness in yours?” challenged Willow. “Kamika, I’m all for love, but we must be practical. Loving kindness won’t stop greedy capitalists from destroying Agape.”

Sundog, eager to regain Willow’s favour and his place on her futon, agreed. “We need more than love. We need information. Don’t we have homesteaders’ rights? Isn’t there an appeals process? Maybe the Natives have a land claim?”

“Look around you, Sundog,” said Jacob. “Do you see any lawyers in our midst? Any money to pay a lawyer? I think Kamika’s made an excellent point. Karma will carry us. We’re experts in love, not legal combat. We give love and we receive love in turn. If we show the loggers how to live in community with the land, they’ll thank us in gratitude. I propose we build a ‘love blockade’.”

Willow snorted.

“That’s a beautiful idea but it’s naïve, Jacob,” replied Sundog. “We’ll be flattened by bulldozers before you can wave a daisy.”

Daisy’s weren’t in season. Maybe an aster, thought Taya.

Lynx rolled a longer-than-usual joint to restore equilibrium. As the joint circled the table, hand to mouth to hand, each villager spoke.

Taya exhaled acrid smoke and said, “There are storm clouds gathering before us. We must rely on each other in the coming hurricane.”

Jacob nodded. “Indeed, Taya.” He took a drag and continued, “I suppose Sundog is right. We can’t afford to be naïve. I’ll hitch a ride to the library in Gold Valley and use their computer to gather information. But please, let’s all of us remember that we are Agape, with each other and with outsiders, even plunderers.” He passed the joint to Willow.

Willow took a puff and said, “I’ll join the library mission. I realize you all dislike the word ‘enemy’ but even our saintly Jacob keeps the foxes out of the chicken coop, and he wouldn’t hesitate to kill a weasel to save his precious Rhode Island Reds. We must know our enemy and prepare.”

The dwindling joint went to Kamika next. "Enemy is a powerfully negative label. Whatever we do, we must do with love. I love all of you. That is all I have to say."

"Thank-you, Kamika. And you have our love," said Sundog. He drew on the joint, exhaled, and spoke deep and low, as if hoping to sound wise. "I too will go to the library. And I have a textbook on nonviolent protest that we can use to inform our opposition to the eviction notice. Let us also prepare to blockade the service road *if it comes to that*."

Lynx accepted the joint from Sundog and, ever spare with words, said, "I think a love-blockade would be fun." Taya never tired of Lynx's Australian accent and she wished he'd speak more. As often happens, the quiet voice carried the day.

Taya foresaw the inevitable clash, the thunderclap of opposing fronts, that would tear Agape Ecovillage asunder. The planets idled in the heavens while Jacob, Willow, and Sundog dithered in the library. The villagers found no legal remedy for the eviction order. Kamika observed Lynx whittling spears, fashioning slingshots from saplings, and weighing river rocks in his hand. Taya counselled Kamika to honour Lynx's masculine urge to protect the community, yet Taya worried too. Lynx was toughening his knuckles for a fight.

On October 31st, the villagers celebrated Samhain, annihilating reason with libations and herbs and sex. Taya peered into the bonfire and had a premonition of Agape disintegrating in the flames. Lynx took Taya's hands and whirled her in a frantic circle while Sundog drummed a bodhran. Surely this night was a celebration, not a pre-emptive wake.

On November 1st, Lynx whistled as he fried a hearty breakfast while the others massaged their temples and drank an infusion of willow bark and mint. Four days until Agape's date with destiny. Four days to fortify the shack and build a barricade on the service road.

Kamika painted "May peace prevail in the forest" on a sheet and hung it between two tent poles. Jacob and Sundog lugged sawhorses and lumber to the road. Willow organized a rotating sentry, two villagers per eight-hour watch. Kamika festooned Jacob and Sundog's aggressive barricade with a banner, "Agape = Love". Lynx cached food, water, and makeshift weaponry in the ditch under branches and leaves. Taya meditated.

The villagers endured November 5th in tense boredom. Ditto November 6th, 7th and 8th. Then, on November 9th, as Taya and Lynx relaxed on lawn chairs in front of the barricade, they heard the faint thunder-roll of an approaching vehicle. Taya spotted the black pick-up first and ran to the cabin to warn the others. A speechless Lynx stared after Taya, beating a forlorn tattoo on the bodhran. All had agreed, no matter what, to stand their ground. The bodhran was supposed to summon collective resistance, not send a hysterical girl howling and running around the cabin like a rabid animal.

What Lynx didn't understand was that Taya's terror was existential. Months before, the flourishes of ink on the signature lines of a timber lease had determined Agape Ecovillage's fate and they'd lose their home. But Lynx and the others would not lose their identity. Taya would. The black pick-up was a chariot for the murderers who would kill Taya and resurrect the suburban zombie, Emily Ann Twiss. Taya's sense of self would be ripped away.

Taya hid.

Taya pressed herself into a dried mud gully behind a fallen pine and watched and listened. She was too far away to hear reasonable voices but close enough to catch shouting.

Jacob, Sundog, and Willow faced two men in a direct stand-off. Kamika stood behind the blockade like a lunch lady taking orders, brows furrowed as if she'd caught someone stealing ketchup. Lynx knelt beside the ditch, piling sticks in a tidy stack. Kamika turned toward Lynx and he raised a finger to his lips.

The verbal combat was escalating, and no one was breaking away. Taya caught snatches of aggressive legalese, then profanity. *Ample time to vacate... Fucking rutting hippie moose... Greedy corporate assholes... Go to Hell... Cocksuckers and whores playing house... Earth rapists...* Now Lynx crouched behind the barricade with a spear in his hand. Kamika started wailing. One of the men poked his finger at her and yelled, "Shut the fuck up, bitch."

Lynx jumped from behind the barricade and waved his spear. The men were quick for their bulk and they retreated in fast strides to the cab of the truck, windows up, engine rumbling like a tank. One of the men held a cell phone to his ear. The other man smoked a

cigarette, exhaling grey swirls at the windshield. Sundog, Willow, Kamika, Jacob, and Lynx retreated to the lea of the barricade and huddled together. The opposing parties were locked in a stalemate with the barricade demarking the no man's land between them.

A moment later, Lynx broke away from the group and began stocking the stronghold behind the barricade from his armory in the ditch. Within five minutes, Sundog, Willow, and Jacob were helping him. Kamika collapsed into a lawn chair, her shoulders heaving.

And then the RCMP arrived.

On November 12th, Taya joined Kamika at a wrought-iron table in the Morningside Café in Gold Valley to celebrate Kamika's freedom. The RCMP had released Kamika without charge the previous day, but were keeping Sundog, Willow, Jacob, and Lynx in the district lock-up on charges of trespassing, uttering threats, assault, and resisting arrest. The haughty legal aid lawyer, Peter Brooks, informed Kamika that bail would be posted, but the judge wouldn't accept a flock of chickens in lieu of money as surety.

Between sips of chai, Kamika updated Taya on the status of their friends.

"It's horrible in there, Taya. They took mug shots, and fingerprinted us, and took our clothes. They even picked through Willow's dreadlocks looking for God knows what. A file? A vial of cyanide? It was ridiculous. We weren't allowed to speak to each other. I think Sundog, Jacob, and Lynx are in solitary confinement."

"How do you know?" asked Taya.

"A hunch. You're not the only one with second sense, you know." Kamika's voice was unusually aggressive. "The food is all processed, Kraft dinner, mushy canned peas...I'm worried Jacob's colitis will flare. And it's freezing at night. I had one thin, scratchy, wool blanket. When I asked for another, the guard told me to imagine I was screwing the boys. He said that'd keep me warm."

"At least you only had to endure two nights." Taya blew onto her tisane to cool it.

"Right. Two nights that you didn't."

“Kamika, if you want me to apologize for having the wisdom to truly live Agape values and avoid a confrontation with the cops, then sorry. I freed the chickens and hitchhiked here as quickly as I could. I don’t see why you’re angry with me.”

Kamika sighed. “I’m not angry, Taya. I’m disappointed. We were supposed to stick together, one community, all in.”

Taya took a tentative sip from her cup and let the comment pass.

“I suppose you’re more help on the outside so maybe it’s better that you cut and ran.”

“Cut and ran? Kamika—”

“Okay. Hid. Whatever.”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t see you brawling with the others. Didn’t you curl up like a pill bug in the lawn chair? Cowering?”

Kamika bit an edge of biscotti, chewed three times, and swallowed hard. “Okay. Whatever, Taya. Let’s not argue. We have to figure out how to spring the others from jail.”

“Well, what exactly did the legal aid lawyer say?”

“Mr. Brooks? He told me he expected that Sundog, Willow, and Jacob would be released on their own recognizance, though it’s possible they’d need to put up a deposit because they’re not from Gold Valley.”

“And Lynx?”

“Lynx is from Brisbane. As an Aussie, he’ll definitely need to pay a deposit and Mr. Brooks said it’ll be thousands of dollars. It looks like Lynx will be stuck behind bars for a while.”

Hot tears flooded Taya’s eyes. She hadn’t realized the depth of her fondness for Lynx until this moment.

Kamika gripped Taya’s hand briefly then gave her a serviette. “He’s strong, Taya. He’ll be okay until we can scrape the money together.”

Taya dabbed her eyes. “How? At most we have a couple hundred dollars among us.”

“Jacob’s family might help us. His older sister’s a lawyer and they’re all well off.”

"But Jacob hasn't spoken to them in over a year, Kamika."

"That's true. When I suggested that he introduce me to them, he dodged. They don't get along, but this is an emergency."

"What about your family?" asked Taya.

"You know it's just my mom and me. She'd loan us money in a heartbeat but she's a daycare worker and she's a skinny paycheck away from needing the food bank. I couldn't ask her."

"Sundog?"

Kamika cocked her head and looked at Taya quizzically.

"I know," said Taya. "I'm just thinking about each of us, one by one. Sundog can't ask his foster parents. He hates them, so that's out. What about Willow?"

"Willow? Her family would help, but she won't ask them. She thinks the whole judicial system is corrupt and she'd rather see Lynx suffer in prison than play the game by establishment rules."

Taya and Kamika sipped in silence and gazed through the window at the bustling main street. Taya longed for the peace of Agape. For the chatter of chickadees instead of the noise of vehicle traffic. The laughter of friends instead of the looks of condemnation from the upright citizens of Gold Valley. If her friends and she had bent like pine instead of standing rigidly like oak, if they'd decamped and relocated instead of digging in, they'd still be together.

"I wish we could have a do-over," said Kamika.

"Me too," said Taya. "Agape Ecovillage is the only family I have, and I'll do anything to keep us together." *Anything but resurrect Emily Ann Twiss*, thought Taya.

Taya and Lynx clasped hands across a cold metal table. Taya peered into Lynx's hazel eyes. They shone like the eyes of a cornered animal. Lynx spoke little but he didn't need to speak. Taya could read his soul as plainly as an ingredient list on a cereal box. Lynx was frustrated and, worse, he was afraid.

"We'll raise the deposit soon, Lynx. Sundog is delivering flyers. He earns about twenty cents a house, and that doesn't sound like much, but he's fast. Jacob's been granted permission to go back to Calgary until the court date. He might be able to convince his parents to bail you out."

Lynx looked down at their knitted hands and spoke softly. "What about Kamika?"

"Umm, well, she wasn't charged with anything, so she didn't need to stick around. She boarded a greyhound yesterday, headed for Surrey. By now she'll be at her mom's place. Kamika promised she'll come back."

Lynx shook his head, rejecting the notion.

"And Willow is looking into other options. She's been emailing Amnesty International, the BC Civil Liberties Association, and the Council of Canadians from the library. If people know about your case—"

"They'll help me pack my rucksack and drive me to the airport for the next Qantas flight."

"No, Lynx, they'll take up your case. Our cause. You're a hero, unjustly charged because you stood up to an evil logging company and the RCMP."

"Even if that were true, I'm still trapped in here. With my accent every bloke who wants to test his fists glares at me, looking for trouble. And I attract faggots too. Either way, I've a target on my ass." Tears glistened in Lynx's eyes. "Taya, I'm counting on you. You've got to get me out of here."

Taya fought her own tears.

"Please, Taya. Help me," pleaded Lynx.

Taya sat on a park bench, kicking pebbles with her battered Doc Martins. She knew what she had to do. She felt as if she was keeping vigil at her own execution, savouring her last moments of being until she crushed out her life like a cigarette. The weak November sun was low in the sky. In Ontario, the dentist and the English teacher would be finishing supper and

clearing the dishes before “Hockey Night in Canada” alleviated the dullness of their lives and their rec room.

At last, Taya walked to Garden Variety and huddled into the pay phone shelter beside the entrance. She pushed two quarters into the slot and dialed “0”. Taya dissolved as the girl placed her collect call. The English teacher answered and accepted the charges. “Hello?”

“Hello, Mom?”

“Emily? Princess? Is that you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh thank-god. Emily, are you okay? Where are you? —Mike—It’s Emily! She’s on the phone! Emily, are you still there?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m fine.”

“We’ve been so worried. Oh, thank God you’re okay. Where are you, Princess?”

“I’m in BC. In Gold Valley. About two hundred kilometers from Kelowna.”

“As I recall that’s a gorgeous part of the country.”

“It is. Mom. Umm, I’m in a bit of trouble.”

“Oh? But you’re not hurt or anything—”

“No, I’m fine. But I have a friend who’s in a jam and I’m wondering, could you loan me some money?”

“Emily, you know we’re here for you. Dad and I will fly out as soon as we can. Right now, I just want to hug you and see that you’re alright. Could you meet us in Kelowna? I could email you a bus ticket.”

“Okay, Mom. Listen. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner.”

“Water under the bridge, Princess. Everything’s fine. Now tell me about your friend.”

“His name is Lynx.”

“Lynx? Isn’t that a cool name!”

A Time for Every Purpose

George Wagner stood beyond the veil, a cachectic presence nourished by fury. No one could see him, there, upon the plush, blood-red carpet, between Pastor Steinman and the casket. Few had bothered to come anyway. George counted. There were six mourners: the director of Copper River Lodge, Home for the Aged, face frozen in an inscrutable mask; the addled Miss Rita Campbell and her minder from the adult daycare program; the lawyers, Carling & Jones, barrister & solicitor, perched in the back pew like a pair of gay penguins; and the nurse, what was her name...swathed in gray and brown tones, seated off to the side. George shrugged away the disappointing attendance and raised a column of dust motes in the pale light.

He had to admit, he'd looked distinguished at the visitation—handsome even—for a man of eighty-eight. His face was relaxed and ruddy, as if he was dozing after a boozy business lunch in the bed of a lady friend with a fetish for satin frippery. Credit the undertaker, young Jim at Olsen's Funeral Home. Jim had a gift with embalming fluid and cosmetics. Surely Jim's eyes were sharp enough to notice the clues when he'd wrestled the knobby limbs into the navy pinstripe with waistcoat? The dusky bruising about the nose and mouth where the pillow had been pressed? The scratch from the unsteady needle before it pierced George's concave abdomen?

Now Jim stood sentry at the entrance, holding an embarrassing number of cards printed with the particulars of George's life and death. So many cards, so few takers. He could package the cards with sticks of gum and sell them for a dime each. George waved but Jim was occupied by funeral procedure and he didn't see a thing. Blinded by the mundane. A folly of youth, thought George.

Perhaps the pastor might raise the alarm. George shifted back and forth on diaphanous legs as Pastor Steinman brayed about sinners and the Kingdom of Heaven and a soul redeemed by a timely donation to the Trinity Lutheran stained-glass restoration fund. *What about my champion filly, Miss Moola? My land deals. My Cadillacs for Christ's sake,* wondered

George. He decided the pastor was too thick to receive psychic messages besides imaginary memos from Jesus. He scanned the pews.

The director sat stiffly like one of those robot dolls from Japan—helmet-haired, dressed in a stewardess get-up. George knew her kind. He could cuddle up and throw a chilly arm around her square shoulders, but she'd sense nothing apart from an unease that she'd summarily dismiss. She was present for the same reason as the pastor—business. George's filthy lucre had paid for the Lodge's new ceiling lifts. Showing up to the funeral completed the transaction.

The organist shuffled through leaves of hymns while the pastor prattled, "In my Father's house are many mansions..." Time was dwindling. What about his old flame, Rita Campbell? George floated over to her pew, sat by her side, and kissed her on the cheek.

Miss Campbell squawked like a startled blue jay. "George! My Georgy!"

"That's right, you old bird. It's Georgy," he replied straight into her ear. "You have to tell them. The night nurse got me. She called me a selfish bastard who deserved to burn in hell."

"It's okay to be upset, Miss Campbell." The minder patted her charge's arm. "George was a special friend."

"Georgy! Georgy!" Miss Campbell mutilated her Kleenex.

"You need a nice cup of tea," the minder soothed. "Shall we ask Jimmy Olsen? He's right at the back."

The minder steered Miss Campbell into the narthex and Jim followed closing the heavy oak door behind them. George re-assessed his strategy. Rita Campbell knew he was there, but Alzheimer's had stolen her mind and vocabulary. He needed a capable advocate. Maybe the lawyers?

Carling and Jones had taken many a fight to the mat on his behalf and profited by it. If they wouldn't miss the man, they'd surely miss the client. George drifted to the back pew and hovered by the partners. John Carling's face was inscrutable, granite-still, like a presidential visage at Mount Rushmore. George couldn't read the man—never could—but Carling's dispassion had worked in their favour during real estate negotiations.

Stanford Jones was hunched over a hymnal. He'd marked the pages of the funeral selections with tiny donation envelopes and now he was reading the Table of Contents. He always was the paper shuffler...pointing out details from reams of documents to Carling, the spokesman.

George placed icy hands on the back of the lawyers' necks and gripped as hard as he could.

"Drafty in these old buildings," muttered Carling. He shrugged his jacket over his neck.

Jones glanced sideways at his partner and signalled with a subtle lift of his brow that Carling's observation of the obvious was unwelcome. Jones turned his attention back to the hymnal.

George placed a liver-spotted hand over the open page. Jones adjusted the half-moon glasses perched on his bulbous nose, cleared his throat, and kept reading.

"Oh Christ, I'm invisible," said George. He shrieked as loudly as he could, provoking caws from the crows roosting in the spruces outside the windows, yet the partners didn't flinch.

Jones cleared his throat again.

Hold on, thought George. That throat clearing! Jones always did that when he was nervous. Maybe he was getting through.

Jones turned to the final hymn and hummed a few bars. George's skinny, transparent shoulders slumped. The throat clearing was only preparation for singing. Joyful noisemaking.

"Amen," the pastor intoned.

Rather too quickly, the pastor's eyes popped open, and he nodded to Jim, back in his station at the rear of the nave with a posse of suited, young men, the pallbearers for hire. The organist's hands spidered across the keyboard for the final hymn, *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*. George vibrated with urgency. When the music ended, they'd bear his corpse to the hearse for transfer to the cemetery and committal to the earth and no one would ever know the truth.

Maybe there was just enough time for a Hail Mary pass to the beige nurse, a middle-aged woman who was so nondescript that he couldn't remember her name.

Flora Lang tried to sit still in the middle pew. Her back ached and her end-of-shift feet pinched in her dress shoes. She'd hurried home from the Lodge, searched her closet, and changed from her uniform into a respectably churchy outfit that she now regretted. As she fidgeted, she wondered why she'd worn nylon stockings and, for that matter, why she'd bothered to attend the funeral of a man as utterly unlikable as George Wagner. Why not let a sleeping pit bull lie?

Flora listened with morbid fascination as Pastor Steinman struggled to find something positive to say about the deceased. In the end, the old man's good deeds came down to a few cheques he'd written at the end of his life. As the pastor droned a prayer for the Souls of Sinners, Flora reflected on her last encounter with George Wagner, late of Copper River Lodge, a cadaverous octogenarian fueled by outrage over imaginary slights and petty grudges.

In her mind's eye, she saw George reclining in his La-Z-Boy chair, scowling at the commodity reports spread across his lap. She'd brought him his pills with a Dixie cup of Ensure.

George stiffened as she entered the room. He cocked his billiard ball head, spoiling for a fight. Peering over his magnifying glass, he poked a newsprint smudged finger at Flora. "I hope for your sake that's strawberry flavour."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wagner. It's vanilla. We've run out of strawberry." She recoiled as if she'd thrown a grenade.

The admission provoked a rant of several minutes' duration. At last, Flora backed through the door promising to pass on George's complaints to the non-profit board, the director of care, and the kitchen manager, relieved that she had no need to enter his room for the remainder of the shift. When she returned to work the following morning, she found George's chart on the nurses' station counter, a death certificate clipped to its cover.

Time of Death: 04:35

Cause of Death: *Cardiac arrest secondary to multiple organ failure and malnutrition.*

Signature of Practitioner: *Catherine Eastley, MD*

At once, a technicolour swirl of emotion engulfed Flora. On one hand, she felt lightly giddy, as if a dreadful yoke had been lifted from her shoulders. On the other hand, she felt uneasy about George's abrupt departure and ashamed for feeling unburdened. As a veteran RN she could often predict when patients would die with uncanny accuracy, yet she hadn't recognized any signs of impending doom in George. She'd lost the plot.

The shift change had seemed routine. Flora counted the narcotic stocks with her colleague, Annie Le Blanc. Percocet, morphine, fentanyl, benzos...all in order. Annie reported that her shift had been uneventful save George's passing. She'd found him tucked under his quilt, cold as a mannequin, on the early morning round.

Pastor Steinman's booming baritone pulled Flora to attention. "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven..."

Never mind the Byrds, thought Flora. Ecclesiastes is a rapper's song.

"A time to kill, and a time to heal..."

Kill? There's a firm endorsement for murder. Jeez.

"A time to love, and a time to hate..."

Why did the pastor choose these verses? Why not the 23rd Psalm?

Flora pulled a Bible from the rack before her and sank into the powerful poetry as Pastor Steinman geared up for a rambling prayer.

"A time to mourn, and a time to dance..." *Indeed.* "A time to keep silence, and a time to speak..." *That's true. But which? I'm glad he's dead. There - I said it. But it wasn't his time,* thought Flora. *George was still hating with lively conviction.*

As the opening chords for the final hymn issued from the pipes, Flora felt a chill on her left side. She set the Bible on the pew and turned. The windows were closed. As she buttoned her blazer, the pages riffled in a gusty whisper to *Matthew 19.*

Flora's eye caught the passage, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Ironic given who rests in the coffin, Flora mused. Another chill, icier still, gripped Flora's exposed skin—face, neck, and hands—and the leaves of the Bible flapped to the *Book of Luke* and the description of “Anna the Prophetess.” *Anna... Annie...*

Flora looked up. The mourners were standing, and the casket was bobbing down the aisle, held aloft by six clean cut boys. Hurriedly, Flora rose and joined mid-song, “Our shelter from the stormy past, and our eternal home...”

Annie... Eye of a needle... Rich man... Something wasn't right. Suddenly Flora remembered. The insulin wasn't right. At supper, the vial of Novo Rapid contained 160 units. At breakfast, there were only sixty. One hundred units of insulin disappeared overnight from a vial that was only needed at mealtime. Enough to put a Clydesdale in a coma.

Flora had intended to go home after the funeral. Instead, she followed the hearse to the municipal cemetery, oblivious of the transparent passenger riding shotgun. Flora fretted and deliberated during the entirety of the graveside service. As the mourners returned to the comfort of their vehicles, she knew what she had to do. Her final duty as George Wagner's nurse began with a tug on the funeral director's sleeve.

“That was a lovely service, Jim. I'm sure George would've appreciated your thoughtfulness,” said Flora.

No, I wouldn't. The service was appalling, thought George. *I hated it*. He scowled and swept over the lawn, menacing the squirrels.

“You're kind, Ms. Lang,” answered Jim. “Thank-you for coming.”

“Um...Jim, I attended the funeral because I have concerns about the circumstances of George's death. I'll be driving to the police station from here.”

Jim gasped.

“Could you guard the grave until the police arrive? And inform the groundskeepers that the casket must not be buried? I believe the coroner will conduct an autopsy.”

Jim's fleshy cheeks blanched to milk white. "Of course, Ms. Lang." He leaned on the hood of the hearse for support. "I'll stay right here."

Falling leaves danced about the laughing apparition. George rubbed his hands together with glee. Mission accomplished.

At once, a bitter wind rose from the north and frightened the squirrels into their nests, yet only George understood the words it carried. "It is time to pluck up that which is planted, Mortal Sinner. You delivered your message, and now we must go."

"But there will be a murder charge," George protested. "A humiliating trial. A tortuously dull imprisonment with a smattering of abuse. I want to see justice done."

"You will see justice done," the voice echoed in the bare limbs of the trees. "On the 13th of November, in the Year of Our Lord, 2057, when your killer joins you in Hell."

"But that's decades away."

"And I assure you, it will feel like centuries," cackled the spirit.

The Elmington Writers' Guild

Gladys Hill sat on the edge of her folding chair and peered shyly at the other members of the Elmington Writers' Guild which met in the East Elmington Public Library on Tuesday evenings. Though she wore an aggressive houndstooth business suit and square toed pumps, Gladys's comportment conveyed a bashful anxiety, as if she was a debutante on a first date. She willed herself to straighten her back, and then she cleared her throat and read the title of her poem,

"Ode to Elmington."

She paused and looked at each member of the guild, feeling as if she might suffocate from nervousness. She'd chastise herself later if she chickened out. With a quaver in her alto voice, she continued:

Under homes and streets and soccer fields

Beats the heart of Elmington, well-concealed

Cars and trucks run through arteries

Diners nosh in eateries

Rain falls like tears on pavement gray

And into the river, it flows away

To a lake true-blue and very cold

Holding secrets, yet untold

This suburb is my true-love fair

There's no place better anywhere!!

Gladys folded the leaf of paper gripped in her clammy hands. "That's it. The first stanza."

For an excruciating moment, silence prevailed. Nigel Woodburn, the de facto leader of the circle, stared at a protruding nail in the hardwood floor, likely making a mental note to follow

up with the maintenance department. Marta Lang shifted from one ample buttock to the other in her chair. Jonquil Morningstar, forehead knit in a frown, scribbled furiously in her Moleskine notebook with a fountain pen. Tom Schafer smiled blandly at Gladys. She couldn't interpret his expression. As a realtor, she was an expert face reader but, Tom, an atheist pastor, had hidden his thoughts and feelings from his congregation and family for years and he was utterly inscrutable. Amy Stein, posture perfect in Lululemon yoga wear, met Gladys's eyes, smiled broadly, and raised her hand in an enthusiastic motion that drew Nigel's eye away from the nail.

"This is a writers' circle, not a grade three reading group, Amy. You don't need to raise your hand to comment," Nigel said irritably.

"Oh...okay. I didn't want to interrupt anyone, so—"

Nigel frowned. Gladys nodded eagerly at Amy.

"Anyway," continued Amy, "What I want to say is, like, I think it's a really good poem, Gladys. Elmington is a nice place to live."

"Thank-you," replied Gladys. She valued Amy's opinion less than the opinions of the others, but she craved humane feedback and she was grateful to Amy for opening the critique. Lest the oppressive silence descend again, Gladys asked, "What do you think of the dynamics of the poem, Amy?"

"Umm...I'm not sure I know what you mean by 'dynamics', Gladys. In my yoga book, I have dynamic poses and—"

"We're talking about Gladys's poem right now," said Nigel.

"Yes, of course Nigel. I'm sorry." Amy slumped in her chair.

Jonquil took up the torch. "Gladys, your love of Elmington shines through in the words. And your rhyming couplets are lyrical, old-fashioned, like a young woman expressing love for her sweetheart—whether gay, straight, trans, two-spirit, or queer—through song. That exuberant yet innocent idolization is refreshing. But—"

There was always a "but," thought Gladys.

"Apart from not sharing your affection for this self-satisfied, privileged suburb, I think your use of the word 'nosh' may be antisemitic. At the very least, you're appropriating Yiddish slang to describe people, predominantly Anglo protestants, eating in restaurants. That could be construed as insensitive at best. I would venture that you may be committing an act of cultural theft. As artists we bear responsibility to marginalized communities when we wield our craftsperson's tools, and to be explicit here, by tools I mean words, of course."

Marta sighed heavily and gazed at the ceiling.

Amy raised her hand, then tucked it under her leg. "Can I just say something here? I'm Jewish on my father's side and I think 'nosh' is a cool word. Besides which Gladys can't write 'eat in eateries.' That would sound dumb. And I have one more comment? About eateries?"

"Go ahead, Amy," said Gladys.

"Umm...eateries? That word doesn't actually rhyme with arteries."

"Yes. I struggled with that part," admitted Gladys.

"It's a half rhyme," said Nigel. "But that's a minor technicality. I find the overall tone of the piece to be naïve, as if from the keyboard of an enthusiastic elementary school poetess. You leap from description, to hinting at secrets concealed, and finally, to a trite declaration of love. As a reader, I'm dizzyed by your kaleidoscope of angles and I'm curious, albeit only mildly: what theme or emotion will you carry into the next stanza? What motif?"

"Well, thank-you for the feedback, Nigel. I'm trying to describe Elmington, hint at its secrets, and yes, declare my love for this city. But if you think that's juvenile—"

"I do."

Tom quickly broke in. "Naïve primitivism is also a tool in the craftsman's chest, to borrow Jonquil's metaphor. Perhaps Gladys is a literary Grandma Moses."

"Craftsperson," muttered Jonquil.

Tom glanced at his copy of the poem, then recited the first three lines and added, "The imagery is corporeal. Houses, streets, soccer fields...these things evoke organs and tissue and skin. And Gladys has developed a cardiac theme with a beating heart in the second line and

arteries in the third. The fourth line is gastric and the fifth ophthalmic. Elmington is visceral, something to adore, even worship, on a physical level.”

“Thanks, Tom,” said Gladys. “Do you think it’s too obvious? I don’t want to swing a literary sledgehammer or anything.”

“Certainly not. Though you lose the theme in the lake. Perhaps the stanza struggles and ‘drowns’ there.” He used his index fingers to form quotation marks.

“Like Ophelia or the Lady of Shallot,” said Jonquil.

“To me Elmington is male,” said Gladys.

“A typical assumption of the sis-gender, heterosexual, conventionally middle class, white woman you are,” said Jonquil.

“Hey, it’s my poem,” said Gladys. “And I’m all of those things you accuse me of yet so much more.”

“I’m not being critical, Gladys. I’m merely pointing out that you’re alienating my community with insensitive language. Ignore this advice at your peril. If you read this at a poetry slam, you’ll likely face hostility from the audience. Queer millennials consume more poetry than any other demographic.”

“Point taken, Jonquil,” Gladys shrugged. Jonquil probably made up her assertion about young poetry enthusiasts, but she was outmatched by Jonquil’s stridency. She turned to Marta. “What do you think?”

“Oh. Umm...” Blinking, Marta roused from a daydream and swiftly unfolded her copy of the poem. “It’s a stanza with ten lines.”

“Yes,” said Gladys and Jonquil in unison.

“Umm...an even number. Five rhyming couplets forming a ten-line verse. A decastich,” said Marta.

Nigel googled “decastich” on his cell to confirm the meaning of the unfamiliar term. He disliked being bettered by Marta’s vocabulary.

"Perhaps your poem is enslaved by the tyranny of rhyme," continued Marta. "Have you experimented with other forms? You could try tanka or haiku...to compose with the training wheels of structure while you liberate yourself from rigid rhyming patterns."

"I could try that," said Gladys. "But what do you think of the poem itself. The imagery and what not?"

"*This suburb is my true-love fair,*" read Marta. "That line amuses me, Gladys. It's sincere, earnest, and playful."

Bells sounded to the tune of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" from Nigel's cell. "Time," declared Nigel. "I agree with Marta. Bring your poem reworked in tanka and haiku next time, Gladys, and we'll pick it up from there."

Gladys nodded and thanked the group, relieved she'd survived her first critique without bursting into tears and ripping her poem to shreds in a conniption of humiliation. She didn't care that Nigel had so obviously called "time" prematurely. She'd follow up with Marta later.

"Tom, you're next," said Nigel. "If memory serves, this chapter of your memoir places you in the midst of an existential crisis exacerbated by raging alcoholism and pathological dishonesty, correct?"

"Well, yes, Nigel, though perhaps that's a rather blunt characterization." Tom extracted a sheaf of papers from his satchel, kept a leaf for himself, and gave the rest to Amy to distribute round the circle. "I've rewritten this paragraph repeatedly, and I welcome everyone's feedback." Tom balanced his reading glasses on his nose. "Let's see..."

I lay as utterly helpless as a newborn lamb on a frigid iceberg of linoleum after making my acquaintance yet again with an entire twenty-sixer of Jack Daniels, a mellow, unjudgmental drinking pal in stark contrast to the uncompromising, angry, disappointed God who had turned his cold, stiff back to me. Wife loomed over me, the paralyzed, hopeless, helpless figure on the kitchen floor and she kicked me as a mother ewe might punish a naughty lamb she tired of suckling. I shivered and froze in a vile puddle of amber vomit and prayed to God, the Father, for deliverance, though I no longer believed in Him. Wife raged and kicked and brayed. She accused

me of betraying her for the whiskey, of liquid adultery, and she prophesied that we were destined for a bitter annulment - at death - when she would float through St. Peter's gates of shimmering angel-stone to her heavenly reward for her decades of suffering and I would dwell in the separate, desperate domicile of the debauched, a cauldron wrought in the foundry of Hell, bubbling with brimstone and bile. To death do us part indeed.

Tom placed his copy of the paragraph facedown on his knee, removed his reading glasses, and with an invitational gesture, asked, "What do you think?"

Jonquil pounced immediately in sing-song. "I think someone has mommy issues."

"And daddy issues," Gladys whispered to herself.

"I didn't hear you, Gladys." Tom's voice was even and confident.

My goodness...he was actually proud of his florid prose, Gladys realized. Well, he was gentle with his critique of her work, so she'd return the favour. "There's a lot of interesting Christian imagery in this paragraph, Tom. It's gothic, fascinatingly harrowing, if you want to know."

"I do."

"And I'm hearing three themes with a fourth theme glaringly absent. First, your anger at God, whose existence you deny, though ironically, he seems very real to you in this piece. A father whom you fear and revere. Second, there's your wife, a maternal figure with whom you also seem angry. Alcohol has taken the role of a friend. A friend who's a bad influence. You come across as a recalcitrant teenager. There's no apology, no contrition, for your drunkenness."

"That will come in subsequent paragraphs," said Tom.

"But his wife kicked him," protested Amy. "She abused Tom when he was sick and helpless on the kitchen floor." Amy cast sympathetic eyes on Tom and laid her hand on his forearm. "I hope you weren't badly hurt."

Nigel made a disapproving, clucking noise. “For God’s sake, Amy. Tom doesn’t deserve your sympathy. He doesn’t even have the balls to use his wife’s name in this piece. Tom calls her ‘wife’. Not ‘Leah’, and certainly not ‘my beloved’. Instead he uses a single syllable word expressed with vicious, condescending disdain. ‘Wife’. If I were in her shoes, I’d kick him too. The pointier the toe, the better.”

“Wait a minute, Nigel,” said Jonquil. “Are you advocating violence? The rules of the EWG prohibit that. This is a safe zone, and however self-pitying and self-indulgent, Tom should be free to speak his truth.”

“*His* truth, Jonquil?” squawked Nigel. “Okay, I take back my condonement of spousal abuse, but let’s get one thing straight. There is not a ‘his’ truth or a ‘her’ truth or even a ‘their’ truth. There is only *the* truth. Truth is an absolute and no one owns it. The possessive articles must never attach themselves like barnacles to the word ‘truth’. Am I permitted to say that Tom comes across as a jerk in this paragraph?” Nigel looked directly at Tom. “I would never use Grace in that way.”

“Here, here,” murmured Marta.

“What’s that, Marta?” asked Tom. “Are you piling on?”

“No. I’m uncomfortable with your use of the word ‘braying’ in the context of your wife’s understandable outrage. That verb is suggestive of livestock. Specifically, a jennet rather than a ewe.”

Nigel swiftly googled “jennet”.

“Anything else?” asked Tom.

“Yes. You’ve used many adjectives and adverbs, two similes, and several metaphors.”

“But does it work, Marta?”

“Do you put cranberry sauce, gravy, ketchup, and barbecue sauce on your turkey? If so, then perhaps your story is dressed to your liking.”

“Are you telling me it’s overwrought?”

"To me it is. But that's a matter of taste, isn't it? Some people enjoy their literature in shades of purple ink. I'd pare it back though. You're a capable writer and you'll know how to tighten the writing on your next draft."

"Okay, Marta. Fair enough. And what of the content?"

"I'm glad I'm not your wife."

Amy raised her hand. Before Nigel could scold her, Gladys said, "I think Amy would like to offer feedback."

"Yes, Amy?" prompted Tom.

"Umm, I don't think Hell is a real place. We make Hell for ourselves by our own bad habits. Like smoking or drinking pop or alcohol."

"I agree," replied Tom.

"And I think you should get help for your drinking. Yoga is fantastic for teaching people that their bodies are temples...or churches...or cathedrals..."

"Or basilicas... or mosques..." added Jonquil.

Marta and Gladys silenced Jonquil with head shakes.

"I appreciate your compassion, Amy," said Tom. "I'm six months sober, but from a spiritual standpoint, I'm curious about eastern religions, including your yoga practice."

"Okay," interrupted Nigel. "The karmic lovefest can wait until after we've heard from Jonquil."

Tom winked meekly at Amy, then turned to the other members of the circle. "Thank-you all for your frank, honest feedback. Your analysis is therapeutic and helpful for me, a humble sinner on his healing and writing journey." He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and Amy offered him a tie-dyed handkerchief from her book bag.

Jonquil ignored Tom's theatrics. She stood, shifted her feet into an athletic stance, and took the floor.

“You should have received my spoken word piece by email. We have one planet, and our gratuitous wasting of paper is killing her in a murder of a million cuts. If you’ve neglected to read my piece, you’re about to encounter my poetic truth in its intended, raw form. It’s called ‘Homo-Rapper Unwrapped’ and I wrote it in response to an injustice I faced during a meeting at the Office of Academic Integrity in which I was falsely accused of plagiarism. I stand in proud womanhood, to channel power.”

Jonquil closed her eyes, balled her silver ringed hands into fists, and recited:

You wrap my words in a cloak of modesty

Accuse lil ole me of intellectual dishonesty

Smothering my ideas, othering and anothering

If I dare to utter My truth in My way,

You wash my pen with soapsuds and throw my future away.

I ain’t a weaponizing, womanizing, demonizing man.

I’m a liberated, woman-loving les-bi-an.

So I’ll speak My truth, My way, cuck socker

And you can stick your tenure up your hairy, dark locker.

Marta discarded her customary reserve and clapped her hands, and Gladys and Amy followed suit.

Jonquil bowed and took her seat. “Well?”

“Well?” said Marta. “It’s powerful, Jonquil. I love it.”

“Gladys?” asked Jonquil.

“I second Marta’s comments. The verse captures your liberation and rage. Well done.”

“Thank-you,” said Jonquil. “I’m curious about the sis male reaction. Tom? Nigel?”

Tom looked from Jonquil to Amy and with an unctuous smirk said, “Ladies first. Amy? Your thoughts?”

“Oh, umm,” stammered Amy. “It rhymes nicely, like a rap song. It’s like Snoop Dogg’s music...if he were at university instead of in a black ghetto.” Amy’s face reddened. “Is ‘cuck socker’ a word?”

“No, it’s not. I made that up.”

“Oh. I see,” Amy said primly. She turned to Tom. “Your turn. Or Nigel’s.”

“Go ahead, Nigel,” said Tom.

“What? Oh, okay. Very well. I don’t have much to say, Jonquil. Leaving aside the issues of guilt, innocence, plagiarism, and tenure, I think your allegation of cultural appropriation directed at Gladys and her indelicate use of the word ‘nosh’ rings hollow at this juncture. Amy unwittingly hit the proverbial nail on the head when she mentioned the name, ‘Snoop Dogg’.”

“What are you insinuating, Nigel?” Jonquil spat the words.

“Nothing. I’m stating clearly that you can hardly accuse Gladys of cultural appropriation when you adopt the style and the idiom of an African American rapper. But I digress. Actually, I think you’re a competent spoken word artist. The line, ‘wash my pen with soapsuds’ is brilliant and evokes the spectre of academic authority exerting punishment on outspoken, maverick scholars. As a writer, I applaud your advocacy for free speech.”

“Gee, Nigel. Thanks.” Jonquil laughed with surprise. “Tom?”

“Who me? A lowly ‘weaponizing, womanizing, demonizing man’?” asked Tom.

“If that’s how you think of yourself,” replied Jonquil.

“No, that’s what you think of me—and all men. And I’m insulted. You have an agenda in this piece, namely ‘woman good, man bad’ and ‘poor me who wasn’t granted tenure because I screwed up my footnotes’.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“Whatever.”

Nigel broke in. "Please stick to literary criticism, Tom. Jonquil doesn't have to tell us what happened in a confidential meeting. Being denied tenure is a nasty blow."

"Fine," said Tom flatly. "I'll criticize. This 'poem' is the work of a man-hater."

"Air quotes again," said Jonquil. "That's so dismissive. You'd never denigrate Nigel's work in that way. And for the record, I don't hate all men. Just patriarchal, holier than thou men who don't take responsibility for themselves and their treatment of women."

Tom shrugged. "Well that 'ain't' me. Jonquil, *bonne chance* at the poetry slam. I'm sure the audience of hysterical snowflakes will relate to your 'struggle'."

"So that's it, Tom. I understand your problem now. My piece has diverted some of the group's empathy and oxygen from your alcohol-soaked, pity-party of a memoir," said Jonquil.

Tom's mouth gawped in protest, but the opening strains of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" interrupted him.

"Time's up for Jonquil's poem," said Nigel as he swiped the front of his cell. "Marta?"

"I'm sorry, everyone. I procrastinated and binged on various and sundry Netflix series this week, in search of inspiration I suppose. I don't have anything for you tonight."

"Alas, I'm in the same vessel," confessed Nigel. "But I'll take this time to remind everyone to enter the Elmington Literary Contest, sponsored by the library and Bushel Basket Publishing. You may submit manuscripts of poetry, short stories, and creative nonfiction to Ralph at Centurion Bookstore on King Street before November first. Hilda Sturgeon, senior editor at Bushel Basket, will judge the contest, and if it passes muster, publish the winning entry. It's a longshot, but, as the great Wayne Gretzky said, 'You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take.' I encourage all members of the EWG to enter. Any other announcements?"

Amy slowly raised her hand.

"Amy?" Nigel said with a hint of exasperation.

"Umm, like I haven't had my turn yet."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Amy," said Nigel. "Please begin."

"Well, my agent and editor told me to keep my project away from prying eyes, so actually I'm not allowed to share my writing tonight either."

"Your agent?" Jonquil's voice rose with incredulity. "Your editor?"

"Yes, Jonquil. I've signed a deal with HarperCollins for *Yoga Top to Bottom*. So far, they've only paid the advance, but it's enough money that I'm teaching classes for the love of my students now...instead of worrying about the mortgage."

"That's wonderful news." Tom's voice broke with an adolescent squeak.

"Thank-you, Tom. Gratitude." Amy bowed to the circle with her hands clasped as if in prayer.

"I'll miss all of you. Even you Nigel."

"Miss us? Are you leaving us?" asked Marta.

"For a while. My book tour debuts with the 'Marilyn Denis Show' this Thursday. The talk show circuit won't leave much time for me to help you all with your writing. Now that I'm an author."

"Author," repeated Gladys.

"As a published author, I believe in opening doors for other writers. But, as my agent and editor say to people all the time, you have to be good enough first."

"We'll work on that, Amy." Nigel's voice roiled in waves of jealousy. "After all, that's what the Elmington Writers' Guild is all about."

Farewell

Well, dear passenger, I took the Guild's advice, rolled up my sleeves, and turned out a pretty decent verse, if I do say so myself. I bid you adieu with a poem in tanka by yours truly, Gladys Hill:

Boring suburb? No!

Behind facades and veneers

Lurk Elmington's lusts

And stories are hidden once more.

THE END