

INCONGRUOUSNESS

-a collection of short stories

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INCONGRUOUSNESS (Stories Dec. 28, 2014 to)

1. Animus Revertendi

The porcelain cup with its cheery yellow and pink floral pattern winks at her. She feels reassured.

There is a knock at the door. "Miss Samuels! Miss Samuels! It's the manager."

She turns her head toward the door, slightly startled. Was it the door talking to her again? She steps closer to hear it better.

"Miss Samuels. It's Frank. I found your cat outside again."

She starts to comprehend. That janitor has her cat again. He is always meddling, in her opinion.

A note on her door reads that the apartment complex manager's name is Franck. "Frank? Is that Frank?"

"Yes, it is, Miss Samuels. Your cat got out again."

She is at the door undoing the chain and the deadbolt. She wants to get her dear creature out of that person's clutches immediately.

"Ah, Jinx. You're a clever minx, Jinx," she says as soon as the door is opened wide enough for her to spot the little furry imp that is held against the chest of the man. She never forgets the names of her pets. "Come here."

She reaches to take the cat away from the manager. "Did you leave the window open again, Miss? Did you forget about closing the door? I know, they're cagey, both your cats. Try to be more careful or they'll get into worse trouble one day."

"Oh, Jinx knows how to push open the screen, now, and she's big enough to pull open the door farther if it is only left open a crack. Cagey, you say, but they don't like cages. No, they don't."

"Let's hope they stay safe, and you as well," says Frank as he steps back and turns down the hallway.

"Thank you, Frank. Don't worry," she replies. Muttering to herself as she turns closing the door with one hand behind her, "I'll take care of them as good as they'll take care of me. No

worries. No worries at all.”

Jinx leaps out of her hold onto the floor and his companion, Miss Marple, named so because of her plumpness and grayish long fur, steps cautiously out from behind the quilted arm chair. She mews with trepidation. Jinx responds by walking past and rubbing his side against hers as if to reassure her.

“You’re good kids, you are. I don’t blame you,” says the old lady. “Just pay attention. People sometimes don’t care or don’t open their eyes to see.” She nods at conceding this fact of life.

“Now, how about a little treat,” she adds, whereupon a cupboard is opened with a subtle creak. It is enough for the pets to notice, so they eagerly make rapid steps towards the inviting cupboard door, as if it were beckoning them. The rustle of cellophane and swish of light cardboard follows, announcing the appearance of fish flavoured catnip. It is brought down by a wizened old hand to their head level, and licked up swiftly to disappear faster than it had manifested itself.

“Ho-ho. You always like those!”

Smacking their lips, the cats cry for more, but the package is closed, plastic rewrapped and cupboard door shut softly but firmly. “That’s enough for now. You don’t want to get fat.”

The two feline animals flop around the floor then head to the sunny spot on the carpet by the wall where they curl up beside each other for a nap. Soon, they are motionless except for the steady quick rise of the breathing torsos.

In the sunlight, Miss Samuels notices a gathering layer of dust. “My, my. Dusty again? It’s an endless chore.” She crosses the room to pick up the duster hanging at the end of the counter and take it back toward the shelves of books and knick-knacks.

“There-there. I’ll get rid of that stuff.” The shelves and the objects they support seem to smile back at her as she wipes them lightly with the duster. Actually, she enjoys the task, for it allows her to hold and admire each pretty treasure. She takes her time caring for them. They gleam back at her in appreciation.

Miss Samuels has lived in this apartment for twenty years, her and her deceased husband’s pension paying the rent. She does not remember much at this point, but she remembers his passing. She awoke to him lying calmly beside her. He would not wake up, she recalls, so she attempted to rouse him. He felt very cold to the touch. That is a strong memory. She knows that she moved into this apartment two years after his death, when her children suggested that life would be easier and more comfortable in a smaller place. She passively accepted her fate. As long as she could take along some of her treasures and the memories they safeguarded since she could not remember very well any more, she was content. One of her daughters lives not too far away, she recollects, though she cannot remember her visiting. There are nice shops nearby, and a pleasant green park to walk in. It is fine, she reminds herself.

The telephone beeps at her. She comes out of her reverie. Who could it be, she wonders? She is cautious for there are always strangers calling her. She wants to get rid of that telephone but has not—she cannot recall why not.

Nervously, she picks up the receiver. “Hello?” she says tentatively. “Hello, Mom,” is the reply. The speaker phone is always left on, but the handle feels good. It must be a habit to lift it. She does not recognize the voice, though it says “Mom.” She never recognizes them. “Yes. *Who* is it?”

“It’s your daughter, Valerie. How are you doing today, Mom?”

“Valerie? Oh, yes. Valerie—you’re my daughter. How are you, dear?”

“I’m great, Mom. I’m at work today. I just thought I’d give you a quick call.”

“Thank you. It’s quiet here today. I think the cats got out again. I’m not sure. Not to worry. They always return. The people here spot them, it seems.

“Yes, I know. Keep an eye on them.”

“On who?”

“Your pets. Jinx and Miss Marple. Keep an eye on them.”

“Well, for Pete’s sake. What are they going to do? Where are they going to go? Anyway, they’re sleeping now.”

“Good. Okay, Mom. I’ve got to get back to work. I’ll see you on Tuesday.”

“Tomorrow. I don’t know...”

“Tomorrow is Saturday, Mom.”

“Saturday? Saturday is good. It’s good for you, right? Can you come and visit on Saturday?”

“No, Mom. Your helper visits you on Saturdays. I’ll call you again on Sunday.”

Miss Samuels wakes up early as usual at around 5:30 and the cats are already hungry as usual. She could just leave the feed out for them, but she thinks they might eat too much. Anyway, she likes dishing out the food for them.

A big calendar hangs on the wall above the calendar. Saturday is circled in red. The numbers of the days before it are crossed out. “Is it Saturday?” wonders the woman. “I wonder what is so special about today?”

For herself, she makes tea. Next, she fumbles for the cereal box. It is kept out on the counter. The cats are never interested in it. Nothing much is inside the upper cupboards because it is too hard to access nowadays. There is a small carton of milk on the inside of the fridge door. She knows because she can easily see the fridge and it is always there when she opens the fridge. It somehow makes its way back to its place in the fridge after she uses it, for it is always there.

The phone beeps. "What's that?" she wonders. "Oh, it must be that telephone." This time, she just presses a button. The thing keeps beeping, so she tries another button.

The telephone speaks at her. "Hello, Miss Samuels. This is Jeanie, your house cleaner. I'll be there in an hour."

"Jeanie. Oh, I don't think I need a cleaner. The house looks good. Thanks anyway."

"But your daughter wants me to visit, anyway. I'm a friend of your daughter, Valerie."

"Oh, yes. Valerie, my daughter. Okay. I'd like a visit. Would you like tea?"

"Sure, Ma'am. I'd like some tea. See you very soon." The phone stops talking. It hums, so she fumbles around and hits a button that makes it quiet.

The old woman looks around. She wonders if she was supposed to remember something special today. She makes her way slowly across the floor to the refrigerator. Something there catches her eye. It is a bright orange paper stuck on the upper door of the fridge. It seems to wave at her. She squints to read it in the grey light of a rainy day that hovers outside her kitchenette window. It says, "Jeanie comes on Saturday to help you." Perhaps it is already Saturday, thinks the woman.

She has forgotten about it but sits sipping her morning tea on the sofa across from the cooking area when the doorbell chimes a warning. She jumps a little in her seat and puts the teacup down on the coffee table. ("Why is it a coffee table when lots of people drink tea," she always wonders.)

"Who's there?" she calls out warily.

"It is Jeanie, your daughter's friend. Can I come in? I thought you might need a hand."

Curious, and enchanted by the young sweet voice, the woman steps toward the door. "Who?"

"Jeanie. I help you on Saturdays."

"Is it Saturday, already?"

"Yes, Ma'am. It is Saturday. It is my day to visit you. Can you open the door?"

“Well, all right.”

Door unlatched, it opens up and reveals a short brownish girl with long shiny hair standing there. “I’m Jeanie. Here.” The girl holds up an i.d. card and presents a note that is signed, “Valerie.”

Valerie is her daughter. This must be something that Valerie wanted. She gives into the visit.

Jeanie has a bag full of food and household things. “This is for you. Valerie asked me to get them for you.” There are bananas and grapes, packages of this and that, slices of meat, sliced bread, juice and more.

“That’s a lot of stuff. I don’t know if I have enough money with me today...”

“That’s all right, Ma’am. It has been prepaid.”

“Prepaid? That’s marvelous.”

“Yes. How about if I make a hot meal for lunch, Ma’am? I can cook pretty good.”

“A hot meal sounds lovely, but don’t they bring something to the door sometimes?”

“Not today, Ma’m. That’s only Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I’ll cook some stuff and leave most of it and some salad in containers for you.”

“Oh, if you don’t mind. That’d be great.”

Miss Samuels plunks herself down on the sofa to observe the proceedings with avid interest. The girl chirps at her about this and that, most of which she does not fathom. There are words like “baby” and “sister” and “job” and movies. Whatever she is saying, it is pleasant to hear and the girl’s movements are fascinating. She is so quick!

Her visitor prepares a most agreeable lunch and tidies up well. While more food is cooking on the stove, she rounds up some laundry and takes it downstairs to launder it.

“Wasn’t there someone here?” wonders Miss Samuel presently. She smells food and notices the pot on the stove. “Oh, no! I’ve left something on the stove. Oh! I don’t know what to do.”

She is standing over the pot, hand on the controls of the stove, when Jeanie re-enters the room. “That’s okay, Miss Samuels. I’m cooking some dinner for you to have later. I’ll take care of it.”

“Oh.” She is confused about the presence of this pleasant but unfamiliar person in her suite. She is aware that something has slipped her mind yet again and nods to feign awareness.

She sits down and resumes her gaze at the surprise spectacle taking place before her.

On Sundays, nobody comes by. Her daughter pays her visits on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the late afternoons, though she calls nearly every day. Jeanie is there for a few hours every Saturday. The manager knocks on the door and steps in for a quick greeting now and then. That is her life, though Miss Samuels does not know it. She lives comfortably and happily in the present, permanently (well, for the “long term,” as it is said). It goes like that for years.

Valerie thinks that things continue to go well without major mishaps, and her mother always protests when she suggests relocation. Everyone is used to this routine. Her mother is comfortable. Valerie supposes that she is better off in surroundings that have become familiar, and worries that location would be too stressful for her mom and everyone in her life.

Miss Samuel likes her place. She is at home surrounded by all her little friends. She does not need the TV much. The appliances blink at her. The crockery grins and chatters back at her. The telephone and kettle bleat and hum, respectively. The sun peeps through at times, and sweeps to take over the room at others. Her pets frolic or sleep, laugh or murmur as per their mood. She does not feel alone at all.

One week, however, the rhythm is interrupted. Things get out of step.

It starts when there is bad weather. Miss Samuels and her pets are protected and well supplied inside. One Friday, though, the hot meal does not arrive. She was supposed to remember something about that? What was it? Didn't that janitor guy say something?

She finds something to eat ready and waiting in the fridge and the cupboards, so she does not worry. The orange note tells her that things are in order. A bright pink one refers to a “Jeanie” and informs her that this “Jeanie” is on a holiday. “Betty” is to be there on Saturday. The note is dated, but the date means nothing to her.

She is supposed to cross out the days on the calendar but that system no longer works as soon as she skips a day on the calendar. She is lost and outside time. She never recalls whether the phone or doorbell has rung or whether someone has spoken to her recently. She feels happy; that's all she knows. She enjoys reaching back into the back of her mind to see images of her childhood, school, early married life, and motherhood. She always likes reminiscing. That is enough to fill the days for her.

Betty never shows up. Miss Samuels does not know the difference.

Miss Samuels gets up from the couch that evening when she feels it might be time for bed. She trips over Jinx and falls onto the coffee table, then rolls onto the floor. Something must have broken, for it hurts a lot. She lies there, confused. She flails about, reaching forward to grasp at something. The coffee table falls on her. It seems heavy. She tries to crawl, sideways on her good hip trying to push herself along the floor. It occurs to her that she does not have anywhere to go.

She does not know what to do. Above her beyond her line of vision on the end table and glued to the phone, as well as a lamp, the door, the fridge and a kitchen cupboard door are the numbers "9-1-1". She knows there is a phone around here somewhere, but it is not within sight.

Her immobility slows down her metabolism and therefore the blood flow. The blood gathers here and there in her legs and at her groin. Her determined heart keeps pumping. After a few hours, then a day, and a half, it gets feeble. While the woman is unconscious, a clot reaches her lung and she can no longer breathe. The heart stops.

On Tuesday, an alarmed woman of around 40 years bursts through the front door of the apartment building where the manager meets her. She knows that the meal did not arrive on Friday as planned because of a storm. She is aware that there was a problem with the substitute domestic worker. Valerie was able to reach Jeanie, who assured her that there would be plenty of extra food available. Valerie's second husband had kept the homecare worker preoccupied all weekend, so that she did not even make a call during that time. She feels extremely guilty and perturbed. Her mother did not answer the phone yesterday. The new volunteer delivery person said there was no answer when he tried to drop off the hot meal yesterday, a Monday, but Valerie believes the guy must have been an incompetent. Everything has been going smoothly. There have been hitches before, she recalls, so there must not be anything serious to worry about.

Valerie and the building manager open the door and are horrified. The cats, coated in blood, are frolicking about the body of her mother who lies flat on the back beside the coffee table with flesh torn from her middle and chewed guts exposed.

END

2.WISHES

She was a born optimist who learned to be skeptical early in life. She was skeptical of people and their words. For one thing, she was too well aware of her parents' weaknesses and failings, and those of their parents. For another, the world had turned out to be colder and meaner than she had anticipated.

She did not ask for much. She had a university degree, though not stellar, and an employment history, as criss-crossy and zigzaggy as it be. She worked hard and tried to live a safe life so as to avoid hazards and minimize calamity. Right now, she only wished for a steady job where she was welcome and treated fairly from which she could derive a reliable income. With that matter taken care of, she could finally get on with her life.

Violet sits on the bus preoccupied with these thoughts. It is a familiar chant in her brain that sounds off a mixed jingle of reassurance, hope, doubt, wariness and temperance. She walks a fine line to her current job every day. She keeps enthusiasm well in check, for there have

been too many disappointments already.

Just in time, Violet perceives her present location. The bell has already been rung. She darts up and out of the bus, hand bag over her shoulder and coat open.

There is a just a short walk to the office where she has been an administrative assistant for nearly three months. The probationary period is almost over. She is trying to hang on.

She deserves better, she knows, but her doubts and hesitations during her senior student years and right after graduation had held her back. She had blown a few unique and interesting opportunities with a future-the airlines, the convention center, the nonprofit society and insurance firms had all offered her careers. She did not know what she wanted back then. She did not know who she was.

Now, passed the age of 30, she still does not know that. The brashness and vanity of youth have faded somewhat, so now she just wants to settle into a regular life so that she can get a handle on everything. Struggling month to month does not allow her the chance to get her bearings and make some real choices. She cannot be choosy at the moment

It is good to have somewhere to go every day, and a well defined role to play. It is good to have a schedule and duties. It is good to belong somewhere and be acknowledged at least a little by some people.

Violet arrives at the government office ten minutes early. Others, who begin a half hour earlier, bear friendly smiles and say, "Good morning, Vi." She lets herself feel she belongs. It is going well.

The "human resources" manager passes by her along the hall and says, "Hi!" She always sounds chipper and bright. Violet feels too wary of this person to be lead on by this false friendliness. She does not seem quite human to Violet. She can never feel comfortable and natural around this sharp-nosed woman. She is a shadow of big management and does not seem quite real. She has power. She controls the files and is the harbinger of personnel evaluations. She has a say in the hiring and firing. She is often the messenger of bad news.

This notorious woman spoils the atmosphere that would be pleasant otherwise. She has noticed other staff shrink back, or avert contact with her. Some who are bolder suddenly shift gears so that their voices sound uncharacteristically brittle as they bring up odd topics like plans for decorating, weekend escapades and favorite pricey restaurants, signals of middle class rights and privilege. It is creepy, thinks Violet.

Out of the blue, the personnel manager calls to Violet, turning on her heel. "Oh, Violet."

Expecting to be mostly ignored, Violet stops and stiffens, wondering what is up, but tries to sound calm and cordial. "Yes, Trudy?" (Everyone is told to use first names.)

"I noticed that your birthday is coming up."

“Oh, yes, it is.”

“We always honour birthdays, around here.”

“Really?”

“Why, yes. We have a break and have some cake. We won’t forget your cake, Vi.”

“Thanks, Trudy.”

“Have a great morning. You’re looking great, by the way.”

Somewhat disconcerted, Violet continues on her way. She removes her coat and hangs it up in the closet. She straightens her skirt and jacket at the mirror before entering the kitchen to grab a cup of bad coffee.

What should she make of this exchange in the hallway? She is not totally trusting, but thinks that this cannot be trickery. Being treated like one of the regular staff is a good sign. Her optimism takes hold.

Glancing at the clock in the kitchenette, Valerie notices she has one minute to spare so she rushes to her desk behind the padded room divider, punching in the “on” button of her computer as soon as she gets there. Her mind turns the stack of files in the tray on her right and the day planner on her left.

Violet works her way through the files, day after day. She reads, checks, inputs data, initials forms, and makes and prints out reports. She attends meetings on quotas, targets, and procedural updates. She reads the office news letter and weekly memos.

Glad to have steady work with pay, Violet feels a sense of accomplishment at the end of each day. She constantly checks the calendar, reminding herself of the passing of the number of days required to complete her probationary period. She strives to get things done in a timely fashion, though not too fast. There is a delicate line between efficiency and showing off to the coworkers, as it antagonizes regular staff when a newbie seems to outdo them. She works on maintaining a casual and friendly rapport with staff, while dumbing down her language with them and occasionally feigning a careful measure of ignorance. She does not speak much—just enough to remind others of her presence and demonstrate control over her position, as lowly as it is. She hides her true feelings and thoughts for the most part. That is playing it safe, keeping an even keel on a steady course without making waves. The end of the probationary period soon lies in sight.

Finally, it is the final week of her probation. It happens to be the same week of her birthday. Co-workers wink and hint of the acknowledgement of her birthday that is to take place on the Thursday of that week.

Violet finds herself relaxing. She is so close to the finish line of this stage of the job and she feels comfortable. Those around her appear to be signaling acceptance and approval. She believes she has been doing everything right.

Violet therefore sleeps better at night. She also allows herself to start making plans, considering that this job will continue and so the paycheques. She starts smiling to herself, trying to correct her expression when she realizes it. She still does not want to appear over confident.

The day of the birthday ritual arrives. As expected, a message turns up in her email account instructing everyone to go to the kitchenette at the coffee break time, 10:30. Violet knows it that the reason for the gathering is to celebrate her. She feels happy to be appreciated like this.

Promptly at 10:30, Violet rises from her desk and makes her way to the coffee area, as do the others around her, murmuring and grinning a little in anticipation of this little reward from the employer.

Violet is the only one with a birthday this particular week, and so the only one whose birthday is being celebrated. She is thus the star of the little show, the focus of the attention for the next 10 minutes.

When she gets to the kitchenette, trying to act nonchalantly on a routine trip to the coffee maker, the staff who arrived before her turn to greet her with a chorus of, "Happy birthday, Vi!"

Violet smiles widely and replies simply with, "Thank you, everyone. This is great."

Suddenly, the lights in the windowless room are switched off and someone appears from around another corner bearing a candlelit cake. The cake is set down on one of the tables. It has white creamy frosting and fruit on top. The words, "Happy birthday to Vi" have been written in chocolate around the fruit.

Vi feels obligated to utter some noise in response, so she let's out a mild, "Wow." The people around her begin the traditional song. She stands there nodding and smiling during the song.

"You know what to do, now," someone says. Violet bends down before the cake, closes her eyes to fake an indication of wishing, and blows out the ten candles on the cake. "There," she declares after the last flame has been extinguished. Everyone around her claps.

Then someone, one of the co-workers in her section who sits nearest to her, proffers a small wrapped package. "Oh!" says Violet. "I did not expect a gift."

"Come on, open it."

"We always do that."

"It's nothing much." The last voice is that of Trudy.

Violet proceeds to untie the bow, then tackle the tape. "You're so careful!" remarks someone. "I just rip it open."

Violet does not like to tear into a prettily wrapped package. She is in the habit of being careful to preserve nice wrapping and ribbons when she can.

Within a few seconds, a box is revealed. It is easy slide her finger into the slot so as to lift open up the tab, then the whole box lid. Set in some shredded packing paper is a ceramic mug. It is two-toned green glazed clay mug, with gradated black on the bottom. "Well, this is very nice," states Violet, dutifully. "Thanks everyone."

"It's our pleasure," announces Trudy. "We're happy to have you with us."

Time is up and the chatter begins today down as every reluctantly turns, remaining cakes enfolded in napkins in palms, and cups of coffee in alternate hands. Signs are heard. It is back to the routine.

For her part, Violet fumbles to get the new mug under her arm, so as to take her office cup filled with coffee and a piece of cake and try to carry it all the few steps back to her desk, but Trudy intervenes. "Oh, Vi. Let me help you with that. Say, why don't you just use your new mug? Isn't it nice. Josephine picked that out."

"Oh, really? That was nice of her. She has good taste."

"Yes. Here." Trudy takes the plain office issued cup out of Violet's hand and sets it down on the counter. Then she removes the present from under Violet's arm and rinses out in the sink. The coffee from the old cup is transferred into the new mug. "There. That'll be easier to handle."

"Yes, you're right. Thanks."

"Happy birthday, Vi."

Violet turns to leave the kitchenette and head back to her desk. Trudy calls after her. "Could you come and see me just before 4:30? I want a word with you. It'll just take a minute."

Four-thirty is quitting time. "Okay. See you at 4:25," answers Violet. She could not answer otherwise.

"Good."

Violet is curious about the meeting. With her probationary period ending, it is probably about that. Violet does not worry, for she is confident that a good evaluation is forthcoming.

She believes that her time will be extended. She believes that there will be good news. She is bound to be made permanent. There is no reason to reject her that she can see.

Josephine, having witnessed Trudy's request to Violet for a brief meeting, looks at Violet as she passes by and gives Violet the thumbs up. Violet passes by, with a quick glance but does not show any other reaction.

The rest of the day passes as usual. On her lunch break, Violet skips out to get a simple sandwich from the convenience store and returns to the office to consume it. Though she often brings a bag lunch, she did not on this day, but she still wants to eat at her desk. That's the best way to get return to her duties on time after lunch time.

Precisely at 4:24, as indicated on the computer system, Violet puts aside the file she's been scrutinizing, logs out of the network, and switches off the computer. She gets up to arrive at Trudy's office exactly at 4:25.

"You wanted to see me, Trudy?"

"Oh, yes, Vi. Did you enjoy your cake?"

"Yes, it was light but tasty."

"Yes. Phil's Bakery always does a good job....So, Violet. Your three months will be up tomorrow.

"Yes, I remember."

"On behalf of the firm, I'd like to thank you for all your hard work so far. You're a great employee."

"Thank you."

"Unfortunately, management has decided not to extend the position. It's been a pleasure to have you. There is just no full-time position at this time." Trudy pauses, with a sly look up at Violet standing before her.

Violet is taken aback. "Oh. I see. So my last day is tomorrow, then?"

"That's okay, Vi. Take the day off. You'll get paid for Friday. We'll mail you your pay."

"Uh. Okay." Violet blinks, somewhat stunned by the news.

"All right, Vi. There's no need for me to keep you any longer." (Violent notes the double entendre in that choice of words.) "Be sure to take your mug home, now. Take care."

There is that false friendliness again. Violet wonders how she could have been so foolish as

she turns and goes back to her desk. She keeps her head down a bit, and does her best to maintain a composed countenance until she can exit the building.

Josephine faces Violet for a moment as she is leaving her work station. She can read her co-worker's face. With a sigh, she speaks. "Didn't you know? You're position is temporary, permanently temporary. They only bring in an extra person to take care of a backlog about three times a year. They never really mean it when they tell you you could be a full timer. They'll bring in someone else in a few weeks."

With what she hopes is an expressionless face, Violet looks at Josephine without replying. She appreciates Josephine explaining the situation to her, though she would have appreciated it more had she been informed of the intention a few weeks ago. She has been duped, and feels that her co-workers have been complicit. No-one tipped her earlier, though they easily could have.

Violet leaves the mug and the used napkin with the remaining icing and crumbs on the desk and kicks over the trash can under the desk. She reaches over the slide a few of the stacked files until they fall off the edge of the desk.

With a spiteful grimace, she turns to retrieve her coat. A security guard, slightly shame-faced and averting his eyes from the scene at Violet's (former) desk, is ready to escort her away. "Good luck," he whispers. "Remember, it's them, not you."

END

3.SYNCHRONICITY

When I got home, I decided to try watching a little TV in order to relax or divert my mind from the activities of the day and sleep, even though it was already nearly eleven at night. I flipped through the channels, dissatisfied with what I found, until I came to the French language station, TV5 Monde. There was a documentary about the life of Napoleon Bonaparte, with testimony a descendant, Charles Bonaparte, and interviews with historians and other experts. It struck me as a coincidence because the topic of Napoleon Bonaparte had come up out of the blue earlier in the evening, when I was out with my boyfriend at a bar. We wanted to try going to a new place. Across from my boyfriend, who faced me and the wall behind me, was a framed art piece featuring Napoleon posed atop a horse. Hm. He remarked on the piece, so I remembered it.

I eventually got to sleep. Just before slumber overtook me, my mind with its usual self purging or spastic process in which all kinds of seemingly random images and ideas flow through rapidly. In a more anxious state, weird and ugly or negative thoughts fly around and race through. It usually takes more time to fall asleep in that kind of state. Other times, the images and ideas are neutral or pleasant. The ideas can make no sense; the images disconnected and irrelevant. My experience is of the latter kind this night. This time, an image and fractioned memory of exchanges with an acquaintance of mine comes to the fore and lingers. I am awake enough to be aware how odd it was that such memories should appear in my mind's eye at that moment.

In the morning, I go about my normal routine, which is to tidy my bed, wash my face, make coffee and then turn on the computer. While the water is heating up, I get into my social media and email accounts. Strangely, I notice a posting that has been replied to by this same long lost acquaintance of my “twilight” mental activity the night before. “That’s weird,” I say to myself.

I have time to look at more postings. Oddly, the name of an actor mentioned rarely in the media these days comes up three times. He has been out of the mainstream media ever since his hit series ended three years ago. I wonder why his name has come up at this time, because there is no indication of a reason, like an award, a conflict, a new movie or a death.

I then complete the morning routine, downing the coffee along with vitamin and mineral tablets before getting around to eating breakfast. I regret that there is no fresh fruit for breakfast. I must leave soon to get to my first class of the day, so I do my face and dress right after eating the bowl of cereal. In short order, I am ready to take off. Remembering to pack a lunch today, I again regret that I have no fresh fruit. I give up the idea of taking a lunch to work.

It is time to read the gas meter and write down the reading for the gas company employee because she is due to pay a visit to the apartment building today. I remember that just as I am about to put on my shoes, so I dash back inside to read the meter. Seeing the number on the meter, I pause briefly. There is something significant about that number, but I cannot remember what. Shoes on, meter reading written on the sticker outside my apartment door, I can take off

Coffee as well as cold air makes my nose drip slightly in the morning. Outside I wish that I had remembered to take some tissue along. No matter. When I get to the corner, a couple of church women are handing out packets of facial tissue as well as brochures. I gratefully take a packet of tissue, though I decline the offer of the propaganda.

After I get to my office, I settle into a day’s work. My coat is hung up, my computer on, and day planner open. Unexpectedly, a colleague drops by on a quick social call. She bears fresh fruit and offers me some. I gladly take the dried figs and single kiwi.

In the first class, I greet the students. Since I arrive early, there is time for some chit-chat before starting into the lesson. I engage in an exchange with one of the eager students sitting in the front row.

“Do you know the actor, Steve Carell?” asks one young man.

“Oh, yes. A comic actor. How do you know him?”

“I saw an episode of ‘The Office’ yesterday. I was just doing a random search. I tried watching it. It was hard to understand, but funny. Do you know that show?”

“Yes, I used to watch a few episodes.” This is quite a coincidence because Steve Carell is the name of the actor that appeared in the social network postings in the morning. I liked that show and this comic actor.

Between classes, I get a phone call. My handbag buzzes against my hip before I notice the particular melody of the mobile phone. I manage to juggle the books and water bottle in my hands and get the phone out of the purse. The call is from a colleague who asks me to stand in for her in a couple of weeks. The hours seem to work, I say. “I know,” replies the colleague. I checked your timetable before I called you. So you wanna take it?” I say, “Sure.” Actually, I am happy for the extra work. Just yesterday I had been grumbling to myself that I did not have much overtime work because I was looking for extra pay. This subbing job will help me.

I feel a little sleepy-eyed but there is not time to go get some tea or coffee. I move on to my next class in a room on the opposite side of the building. I arrive there with a few minutes to spare.

A student ambushes me at the doorway. “Teacher, could you check this?” He holds out a can of coffee. “Not if it is an assignment or homework,” I reply. “Oh, no. No, it is for a contest. Can you check my English?” “It’s really a contest?” The young person explains the situation and I am satisfied that it is truthful. I bring him into the room to set things down and scan over his paper. I notice that number there in the text, the same one I read on my gas meter that morning. I make just a couple of changes to the writing and hand it back. “It looks fine. Good work. Good luck.” The student thanks me and, as is the custom, offers me the drink again to signal gratitude. “Here, teacher.” I accept the coffee beverage with pleasure. It is just what I wanted.

It is my lunch break following that second class. I decide to take lunch in the staff cafeteria even though none of my friends can accompany me at that hour. I want to save my bag lunch for my evening meal since I have an evening class and the options for dinner on campus are worse than what you can find at lunch. Anyway, I recall that I have just enough money for a campus lunch. I count the coins. I have 60 won. (Sixty-two is that number that keeps coming up today.) I need to get to withdraw more cash soon. I do not mind sitting alone for a quick lunch, so I hope that the menu is good and put my supplies back in the office before I go to the cafeteria. I have to exit this building and cross over to the next to the west.

On the way there in the courtyard, I encounter a colleague with whom I am chummy. I have not seen him for awhile. “How are you these days? Long time no see,” I say. “Yeah,” he replies. “Where are you headed? Have you had lunch yet?” “No, I was just heading to the staff cafeteria. Why? Do you have time to eat with me?” “Sure,” he says. “Actually, I wanted to ask you something.” We proceed up the concrete steps and in through the building to the cafeteria. My companion steps ahead and gets to the ticket dispenser ahead of me as we exit the elevator. “Let me treat you, today. I want to pick your brains.” That is fine with me—I get company for lunch after all, and I get to hang on to the few bills in my wallet for a few more hours.

We have a great discussion. In an effort to assist a friend, he wants my opinion on an employment situation. I do the best I can. He has to rush off for a one o'clock class, though, so we cut the conversation short. "I'll email you with more," he calls as he departs.

I have a spare period. Everything is prepared for the rest of the day and the next day, so I can enjoy some free time. Sitting down at my office computer, I open up the Youtube site. As usual, Youtube remembers some things I have seen before on various Youtube "channels" and offers a selection of other videos I might enjoy. Today, there is a film with Steve Carell among the selections. I feel compelled to click on it.

I am interrupted by a knock on my door. Through the veiled glass, I can make out Rose on the other side. I wave her in and call out an invitation to enter. Movie paused, I turn and offer Rose a seat. "Oh, I can't stay. I have a meeting in a few minutes. I just wanted to give you this." She holds out a tenner. "What's that for?" I ask, surprised. "I owe you. Remember when we went shopping together and I didn't have enough cash. Sorry I haven't paid you back sooner." I had forgotten all about the debt. "Oh, right. Now I remember. Thanks." Rose adds that she does not have coins, so that she cannot repay the remaining 60 won then leaves with a "see you later."

I watch the entire movie because my afternoon class does not start until three o'clock. I have time to putter around before I must leave to go teach it.

The afternoon class transpires without any remarkable incident. Once again, I go back to my office. I climb the stairs up the three flights to my office's floor. Inside the office, I set some water to boil in the electric kettle for tea. The dinner period is from five until seven o'clock, and my three-hour evening class begins at six. After checking messages, the tea is brewed so I sit back to sip it. I am not at all hungry, but I wonder what the choices might be for dinner. I do not know why, but an unusual craving for potato and leek soup arises. I have not thought of potato and leek soup for years, and I have not eaten it for a longer time. I turn my mind to a review of the lesson plan for the evening and the next morning, then open up a word game to while away another 30 minutes.

Finally, I start to get hungry and it is a decent hour for an evening meal: 5:30 p.m. I put on my jacket, grab my handbag, and make a beeline for the student cafeteria. I must exit this building and cross the courtyard to a building to the east.

I cannot believe my eyes when they behold potato soup on the menu. The menu changes every day, according to what is in stock and what suits the cooks, I suppose, so the fact that something new is offered today is not what I find uncanny. It is that the new thing happens to be potato soup. Okay, it is not exactly potato leek soup, but it is a potato soup with some other leafy contents. I check with the cashier to confirm its existence, and eagerly make my order. It turns out to be excellent soup, and very satisfying to me. I am very pleased, especially considering that the dinners in this place are sometimes pretty lousy. I really lucked out today, I feel.

Colin is supposed to call me this evening. He knows my schedule, and I have clarified reminded him, besides. The plan is for him to call right at eight, at the conclusion of my night class, and just before he must go out to meet buddies for beer. We are supposed to discuss out next date. I really want to leave it for the following Saturday, but he has been wanting to get together on Wednesday night. I am reluctant to hand him the "I just need a little more space this week" line. It could send off the wrong signals. It is just that I am the type of person who enjoys good doses of solitude but is sociable all the same. I am feeling that I need to pull back and catch up with myself this week. At this point, I would really like time at the spa or reading mid-week. However, I have to carry through with what has already been negotiated and agreement I have already made.

I leave my mobile device out to make sure that I do not miss the call. He calls after my class, at 20h02. "Hey, sweetie," is my answer. "Hey, babe. How's your day goin'?" "Pretty good. Yeah, everything is going right today." "You don't say. Good for you." "You seeing your buddies tonight?" "Yeah. Yep. Steve and Barry. We're going to the Hollow Tree. Remember that place?" "Oh, yeah. I do. I'm sure you'll have a good time there. Don't they have a live band?" "That's right. I think we went there together once, to meet Barry and his girl." "Yeah."

Colin abandons the small talk. "Say, I wanted to run something by you, hon." "What's that?" "Well, I know we talked about Wednesday, and you agreed to see me on Wednesday, but something's come up. Would you mind putting it off until the weekend?" "What's going on?" "Oh, Marten wants to meet to talk about a proposal and some new clients. It is hard to say no. I hope you understand." "Yeah, no problem. I can just catch up with my reading or something. No worries." "Are you sure? Sorry to shift gears like this after I made you promise to see me. I hope I haven't upset your plans." "No, sweetheart. I could use a little extra time to myself, just to center myself, you understand." "Yeah, I do. I know what you mean. That's super. You're terrific, you know? I'll make it up to you this coming weekend,... if you catch my drift..." "Ooh, I'll look forward to that." "K. I'll call on Thursday." "Good. Let me know how the business meeting went then." "Will do. Love you." "Love you too."

I get my wish. I will relish the free time on Wednesday evening, and a full night's sleep by myself. It will help me regenerate and get balanced.

It is time to pack it up and head home. I want a long shower and there is some tidying to do. I do not mind the tidying, since it helps me relax and recover my ground before I go to bed. Maybe I will watch a little TV in bed.

I feel really well connected today, though. There is not much balancing to do. It has been an ordinary but good day. Have you ever had a day when everything went your way? It happens, even though it might only be little things that flow together, so maybe more it happens more often than you believe.

END

Jess is one of my hiking buddies. Well, she used to be one. She has not gone on a mountain hike or even a forest walk for a couple of years.

I asked Jess why she would no longer join our group on these beautiful and fulfilling excursions any more. First, she just said that she had had an accident on the trail but would not elaborate. I was curious, because I knew about the injury she'd had and how someone had rescued her. I could not figure out why she was so traumatized or spooked that she would not even go for a short walk in the woods. Finally, one evening, after a couple of glasses of wine when it was near midnight, she told me this story.

Jess' Story

You know I like nature. I like to walk around in the woods, surrounded by soil, rocks and leaves. It is refreshing to be there where the air is fresher. I can breathe better.

I can forget the daily preoccupations. I can empty my head. Alone, it is meditative. With other humans, it is a harmonious time talking or not talking. In such places, time and daily business of life seem suspended.

I know the dangerous areas. My body tells me when I am out of my depth. If I feel insecure, I turn around. Best to have faith in my instinct. I do not want to be in a situation I cannot handle.

Locally, on known and well marked trails at the lower levels, I feel confident on my own. Anyway, I normally just go where I have been lead before so that the territory I cover alone is familiar. I have bearings. I have an established time frame. I know the distance. There is never any problem, even if I trip and strain an ankle or tumble and get scraped. I am only shaken briefly, mostly from the surprise of the accident. I wear good footwear and cover myself up, though I will allow myself to wear shorts in the hot weather on easy hikes.

Yes, with this attitude and approach to being in the woods or on the hills, I am free to relax and enjoy the scenery. I do not go into real wilderness on my own. I have only gone to national parks on well maintained trails with experienced people for day hikes. I have rarely been in true wilderness.

There are a couple of times, though, when I took a break from driving on a solo road trip to get out and stretch my legs for a couple of hours in isolated and uninhabited areas. I guess I was in an adventurous mood on those occasions.

Once I was travelling through the Cathedral Mountains in British Columbia on the way back to Vancouver when I had an urge to cut into a logging road and follow it along a river. I was hoping to find a convenient trail for an hour's hike. I kept on, looking for a turn off or a trail head. This was not actually a managed park area. It was merely protected "crown" land. It was mid-summer on a partly sunny day. I was feeling good. I saw the "road" ahead of me turn up a slope and I pursued it, as difficult as it was for the little four-cylinder commuter

vehicle I was driving. Patiently, I let the car take its sweet time. I began to feel a little unnerved. This location was very remote. There was no sign of other ongoing human activity. I was only too aware of my inexperience in the wilderness and lack of knowledge of the outdoors beyond simple campsite tenting and day hiking on tamed terrain. I stopped the car, telling myself that I should take a moment to enjoy the fresh air and scenery. There was not much of a view from this spot, however. I walked ahead along the logging road. It was far too quiet for my liking. I did not even hear or see a single bird. I gulped. I soon lost my nerve and turned around to seek the safety of the car. I got in, restarted the motor and turned the thing around to make the easy downhill flight from the scene.

There was another time—maybe on that same trip—when I was coming in the opposite direction away from Vancouver and on the Hope to Princeton Highway on the Manning Park section. I was just on a five-day jaunt, intending to visit people in the Okanagan Valley. I had time to spare on this short budget holiday.

It was the morning of my first day of this summer road trip and the weather seemed fine. I got the whim to turn into a parking area and investigate hiking trails. There were only a couple other cars in the lot. I parked and got out to go look at the large dark brown sign with the trails map cut into it and painted white and green. Near the sign was the start of a trail that went around through a low lying marsh then zigzagged up a gentle slope into the craggy peaks. I looked up. The distance of this particular trail was written on the map: about five kilometers, I think it said. Easy. I was fit and the weather looked like it would hold out, although I could tell that there had been a little rain over night. I decided to go for it. I got my hat and locked up the car. While I usually go hiking equipped with water bottle, snacks, an extra layer of clothes, sunscreen, and all that, I had nothing to carry this time. I did not even take water. I knew that the trails in this park would be well marked and groomed, so I felt safe. I planned to turn around when I felt insecure. Still no sign of anyone else on this site, I began the hike alone. It was strangely quiet. The trail started out as a board walk across the flat but soggy wooded area. After about twenty or thirty minutes, the ascent began. About ten minutes up the clear but somewhat rocky pathway, I saw the first sign of bears. There were clear foot prints right on the path. As crusts had formed, I figured the animal had passed a few hours earlier, probably the day before. I remained alert, but kept on. I had no bells or whistles with me. I just thought I'd start hollering if I caught sight of a bear near the trail, and hope for the best. Further up the path, there was bear dung. I figured it was from the same animal and was left a few hours earlier. I was not very worried about an encounter with a bear. The trail was open, out of the trees, so I had a clear sight of my surroundings and would see any large animal if it were out in the open. I pressed on. After about an hour and a half of climbing, I was into the craggy slopes, picking my way through rocks but stopping here and there to admire the fantastic view of high mountain peaks that seemed to go on indefinitely like a gigantic ocean frozen during a storm. I checked the sky. Dark clouds covered the peaks across the valley from my mountain. I climbed on. I started to smell the stench of mountain goats, and indeed spotted goat hair on the edges of rocks where, I guess, they had been rubbing. Their smell lingered in the air, so I believed they had hung around this particular spot for awhile, possibly sleeping over night, but I did not think they were close by. I climbed farther and stopped at an outcropping to gaze at my terrifyingly beautiful surroundings one last time. The sky was filling and getting darker. I

knew the weather could change awfully fast. I turned around and made quick descent. That was the only time I had ever gone up into mountain terrain to such an altitude alone. I felt glad that I had accomplished the hike alone, but on edge with the full knowledge of my complete ignorance as a recreational city-dude part-time hiker. Any one of a number of situations could have transpired up there. I was probably just lucky.

That day, I just needed to get out for awhile and take in nature so as to release some energy through a strenuous climb and set my mind free for a little while. I had no big ambition. I have no agenda other than that. I was not seeking an adventure or a challenge to my normal abilities or fears. No- I just wanted to get some satisfying exercise outdoors, to go stretch my legs.

I decided to take the car and get out of town. I went up the Fraser Valley until I arrived to Golden Ears Provincial Park. Remember hiking there? Anyway, it was a fine day. I was feeling good. It was a week day, and I saw few other cars. You know that I like hiking when the trails are not busy. I had a day pack complete with all the necessities and safety precautions, so I thought, "What the hell. I'll pick a trail and head up and see how it is. I can always turn around." Did I mention I was by myself. Yeah, you know I would not normally go out in the wilderness alone. I just had the urge and felt quite confident, so I caved into my spontaneous inclination and took off.

It was a totally beautiful afternoon. I remembered this particular trail. I think we had taken it a couple of times before. It was well groomed and nicely graded—not so difficult, though a little steep and rocky or rooty in certain places. I just took my time. I took a few pictures along the way. I felt entirely at ease and safe, though there was no sign of any other human nearby.

Yeah, I heard the usual rustles of the bushes and saw typical signs of wildlife, like the remains of a kill off to the side of the trail, rub marks on trees, and various footprints. My food was very well wrapped and sealed in my backpack. I could simply drop the pack if need be, regardless. I had a whistle and some mace, but I did not think I would need it at all on this day. I got decent photos of deer, chipmunks and woodpeckers. The atmosphere seemed very hospital. I was encouraged so I kept carrying on.

Maybe halfway up, there was a bit of an open outcropping with a good view of the valley. Though it was not quite noon at that point, I was getting hungry and this place looked like a perfect place for a break. I removed my backpack, brushed off a large flat rock, sat down on it and took out my lunch. Better to get rid of the food early, anyway.

I lingered there for a while. It felt exhilarating to be there. I took shots of the valley.

Then I noticed clouds gathering in the distance. I thought that I was good for at least another three hours. As I had started up the trailhead somewhere around nine-thirty, I felt I would be good for another hour at the higher levels. The sky above me was still clear and very blue. This late spring weather was fairly warm at a temperature somewhere in the mid-60's Fahrenheit. I made a mental note to begin the descent by one o'clock to be on the safe side.

I left the crumbs and apple core on the ground right there, sealed the containers back up, and double wrapped them in clean plastic bags. Then I stashed the lunch containers and bags inside my folded rain jacket deep inside the little rucksack. Actually, it was a relief to have consumed the food.

By noon, I was moving up the trail once more, back in the dense forest but sticking to the well marked and cared for path. It was somewhat dark. I could not see much of the sky.

The forest felt so good and the forest sounds soothing. I kept on at a slow and steady pace. More than an hour passed. I realized it when I reached a clearing where the sky was exposed. Out in the open, it was still a little dark because grey clouds had gathered above me.

I checked my watch which read 1:45. I knew I was pushing my luck, so I resigned myself to cutting short the hike and turning around to return to the car. I sped up my pace so as to get down the mountain quickly.

I guessed it was my imagination when I heard some wailing and whooping in the background. I hoped I would not encounter wolves or bears up here alone. I tried to go faster.

Around one bend, there was a small fallen tree across the path. I successfully jumped over it, but my boot landed on a root. It twisted, and I tumbled maybe three meters down the trail until I hit some rocks.

After some of the shock had passed about half a minute later, I checked my body for damage. I had managed to keep my head up and avoid slamming it against some object. My backside was okay because of the protection of my backpack and fleece vest. I thought there might be minor scrapes under the clothing covering one of my arms and perhaps my legs, considering the way I had rolled over stones and hit the bigger rocks just off the path. Then I realized that my left foot was hurting. Shaking but managing to push myself up only to fall back down when a searing jolt of pain shot up my leg from my right ankle. It seemed to be seriously injured.

Well, that was just fine and dandy, I thought. I reached for my cell phone. I'd left it turned off to conserve power, so it was working. Unfortunately, though, it still was out of range of any tower, apparently, because I could not make a call. You can imagine how I swore to myself and started to feel upset. What was I going to do? How was I going to get out of there?

I thought I might just rest and hope that the pain would subside after a little while. I removed my jacket, had a few sips of water and then put on my rain jacket. I propped myself up against one larger rock, and raised the injured foot up on another rock, placing the pack under it so as to make a cushion. I started to feel tiny drops of rain and prayed that the bad weather would hold off.

Sitting there after some twenty minutes began to feel spooky. I began to hear weird things like sticks banging against trunks, chatter and barking. I was sure I was imagining it but it was

hard to fight off the fear.

I closed my eyes and tried to think of positive things. I brought up a recollection of my Caribbean holiday. Remember when I went there with Scot in 2007? It was an incredibly beautiful time in all respects. The memories comforted me. I dozed off.

(I had heard versions of Jess' story before. Nothing about what she was telling me now about what had transpired was unfamiliar. She had just added detail. I expected her to start into the rescue. She had told us that some guy had come upon her and helped her down the trail far enough for her cell phone to function. Then the guy had disappeared. The paramedics could not contact the person. She had never heard from him before, she said. I leaned forward, eager to hear more about her hero. I saw and heard Jess gulp during a long pause.)

When I came to—when I came to—I—well, I heard some mumbling and what seemed like growling. I looked up. (Pause.) There was this big hairy man-beast just a few feet from me. Behind him, a few meters away lurking in the shadows of trees were two others just like him, except that one was taller and seemed to have breasts while the third was small, maybe up to her hip in height. I froze, confused. Then I noticed my teeth chattering. I thought I was staring into the eyes of a Sasquatch. There was a family of Sasquatches right there! I was helpless in front of this giant. The biggest one must have been around nine feet tall and he was very muscular with very broad shoulders and thick legs. The middle of his face was bare of fur but the rest of him was completely covered in dark brown fur. The other two were just like that. He was upright on two legs and his hands and feet seemed like normal human hands and feet, though bigger, broader. His face appeared to be part apelike and part human. As he stood looking at me, he curled his lips, showing large human type teeth—no fangs as I heard these things might have. God, I was scared. I had no idea what to do in this situation. He could so easily overpower me. I thought about trying the whistle that hung from my neck, but I thought it might enrage him or scare him and cause him to harm me. My mace can was in the bag under my foot, which I could not reach easily or quickly enough to make any self-defense. I was completely at his mercy.

(I was stunned. I saw tears come to Jess' face. Her voice got shaky. Then she paused and she looked at me as if pleading. I told her I believed her. Her emotion was too real and I had no reason to suspect that she would lie about something like this. Frankly, I did not know how to respond. I had heard of Sasquatch tales before. There were enough sightings to make it credible that people were seeing something in the mountain forests. Jess managed to resume her story.)

The male and the female seemed to be communicating with each other. There was some chatter and woofing between them, he making noises with his head turned to her a couple of times. I just hoped they saw that I posed no threat.

Then the most amazing thing happened. I have never heard of any incident like this. I was petrified as he approached in a couple of long easy strides. He picked me up!

I have never smelled anything as horrible as that before. He really stunk far worse than a skunk. His fur was coarse and matted. There were bugs on him. His breath was awful, too. He sort of sighed and growled a little. He moved down the slope in steady and even great bounds. Jeez, he moved powerfully and fast! I had no idea what was going on. I was terrified into near paralysis. I did not dare try to utter anything. The only thing that gave me hope was that he was going down the mountain and generally following the direction of the trail, though he did not heed the trail at all. He easily maneuvered around, between and over obstacles like it was all very familiar to him. I heard barks and whistles and growls behind me. I thought his family was following us. Within a very short time, he came to a stop by the trail. There, he set me down on a mossy area. Immediately, and with a bark that was louder than a few dogs barking at the same time, he turned his back on me and proceeded back up the mountain. I looked his way and saw the female placing my backpack beside a tree!

I was completely irked and stunned such that I remained motionless for a long time, maybe nearly an hour. I realized that it was raining steadily. I knew I needed to get out of there before I was overexposed or caught a nasty cold. Judging that I might be about 30 minutes from the parking lot at the trail head, I tried the cell one more time.

I took the device out of my pocket, thanking God that it was still there. I flipped it open and punched in 9-1-1. There was an answer: "9-1-1. What's your emergency?" I really didn't know what to say at first. "Hello? What's your emergency?"

I managed to make a reply. "I'm hurt. I'm on the trail. I can't walk. No-one's around."

"Where are you?"

"Golden Ears Park, maybe 30 minutes up from the lower west side parking lot. Trail B."

"You're alone."

"Yes. Now I'm alone."

"There was someone there at the time of the accident?"

"No. I fell. I was hurrying down too fast because the rain had started."

"You shouldn't hike in the mountain alone."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"We're sending someone there to fetch you. Stay on the line. Tell me what happened."

"Okay."

"Do you have a jacket? What about water? Have you eaten?"

“Yes, I’m wearing a good rain jacket. I had lunch about three hours ago, I guess. Yes, I have water.”

“Have some water now.”

“All right.”

“Tell me more details. What exactly happened? How long ago?”

“I was enjoying a good climb when I noticed the weather turning foul. I checked my watch, so I know it was 1:45 when I turned back. I was in a hurry to beat the rain. I guess I was going too fast when I rounded a corner and suddenly had to jump over a fallen tree trunk. I landed on an exposed root then tripped on some sharp stones and fell over onto some rocks.”

“You’re hurt badly?”

“I might have broken my ankle. I couldn’t walk.”

“You fell right where you are now?”

“Well, no. I managed to get down the hill farther.”

“Why didn’t you call right away?”

“I was too far up. I was out of range. The cell wouldn’t function.”

“I see. So you crawled until you got exhausted?”

“No.”

“How did you get down the side of the mountain, then?”

“Uh—well, this stranger came along. He carried me down until he reached this spot.”

“Can I speak to this guy?”

“Sorry. He took off. He just left me here.”

“He left you? What’s his name?”

“Yeah. Oh, I didn’t get a name.”

“No name or contact information?”

“No, I guess I was a bit too shaken up to ask. I didn’t think of it. He’s gone now.”

“Give me a description.”

“You want me to describe the guy?”

“Yes. What did you rescuer look like? And, did he tell you anything about himself?”

“Uh—no. I don’t know who he was?”

“Well, what did he look like? What age, color of hair, height, and so on?”

I was at a loss as to what to say. Then I made up a description of a non-existing person. I figured no-one would believe the Sasquatch story. I figured they might want to examine my head if I said that.

“Did you hit your head?”

“No, no. I managed to avoid that.”

“You’re sure?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Were you assaulted?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that happened. I was alone when I fell. I was rescued. The guy helped me down quite a ways, then simply took off. I suppose he had his reasons.”

“The ambulance is at the parking lot now. They’ll meet you shortly. Hang on.”

“Okay. Thank you all.”

I repeated that story over and over. It was all true except for the description of the “guy” who saved me. I was not going to even hint of some intervention by a big ape in the forest. No way.

It’s all behind me, except for the memory. That’s as clear as ever. I can’t forget that experience. It was wonderful and absolutely terrifying at the same time. That’s why I don’t want to go into any forest or up any mountain again.

What Jess told me that quiet evening in the pub was totally unexpected. She never mentioned it again, and neither did I. I was perturbed and annoyed at first, then bewildered. I had to believe her, as incredible as her story sounded.

I still go hiking, but never alone. I take no chances. Once in a while, when I am up in the mountains or on a wooded trail, some sound catches my ear. I wonder what is out there. I think about the mystery of the legendary Sasquatch. I have to believe the legend. I think it’s

out there. I don't want to run into one, but I'm curious in spite of myself.
END

5.GONE

Craig and I used to be lovers. Somehow, that relationship never worked out. It was perpetually out of synch; there simply was no common track. He was zigging while I was zagging. It just was not in the stars, as some might put it.

We had known each other through work. We had jobs at the same non-profit organization developing campaigns and making a website and pamphlets. We were still students in our senior years, attending different colleges but studying the same subject: communications. The job was a good gig for undergrads. We were lucky in that respect.

Not long after graduating, we were both "single," meaning without intimate partners, so we started hanging out. We used to have the best conversations on global capitalism, geopolitics, the media, inequality, corporate irresponsibility, and all kinds of meaty subjects. Craig gravitated further left than I did, but we felt free to be honest during our discussions and comfortable to disagree if we actually disagreed.

He was quite personable too. He would tell me anecdotes about his paternal grandparents with whom he spent a lot of time with as a youth up in Prince Rupert where they owned a fishing tackle and boat rental place. He loved his folks, and they seemed mostly pretty decent. He had a good rapport with his brother and sister, too.

Craig had a great sense of humour, actually. We so much had fun. We gradually gathered a few mutual friends around us, people from work and elsewhere who crossed paths with us one way or another. We could joke around and be silly. We only drank sometimes and moderately, and occasionally smoked weed. There was true chemistry, where our minds met and danced.

We had our favourite spots all around the Lower Mainland. Of course, there were the cafes and small local restaurants we loved from Point Grey to New Westminster where we used to sit for hours without ordering much. We would even buzz over to Squamish or up to Hope, sometimes throwing bikes in the back of his SUV or taking along a fishing line. There were a few select places that would feature live bands some of the time, and we became fans of a couple of them. We also used to belong to a fan club of a couple of varsity sports teams, lacrosse and volleyball. Both of us enjoying a little exercise, we used to get together for a racquetball or badminton game or go bowling. We would sometimes wander aimlessly for miles and miles along shoreline trails. Yeah, we had some truly great times together.

We mistook the kind of love we had for something else, I guess when nature caught up with us and each of us had been feeling lonely. One time, when he came over to my place on the north east side to crash after a late night out like he did from time to time, we found ourselves in a tight embrace. We stopped ourselves, though, for the time being.

By that time, we had been started taking trips around the province. We went in groups over to Tofino for whale watching, or up to Penticton for the sun or snow, depending on the season and the money situation. We had the most amazing time with our buddies at a dude ranch near 100 Mile House one September weekend. Then there was the three day run out to the Alberta Badlands with an overnight party at Banff in the middle of winter. That was memorable, and how could I ever forget the impromptu six-hour road trip to Mount St. Helen's only to encounter a thick fog and make a decision to return. We stopped at Bellingham and crossed the border somewhere around five the next day. What a hoot!

Well, one time we were booked to go farther and fly to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico but our friends jammed out at the last minute—not sure why. We thought, “Damn it. Let’s go anyway!” That is exactly what we did. Sharing the same room, temptation met us and lured us in. One thing lead to another, as they say. Our bodies betrayed us. A fling had soon begun.

Like I said, it was a mistake so it did not last. What we had was not romance. It was deep down camaraderie. Too bad you cannot have both, generally speaking. (Is there anyone out there who does??)

What a danged shame. Craig was such a terrific guy, and pretty good looking. He was fit and close to my age. We knew each other's families and they got along. Actually, my Mom sometimes used to ask me why we were not a couple. I just said that I did not know; we were great friends and good at being friends, so why risk a great thing? Sometimes I want to howl at the universe for all its incongruities. Why can there not be the perfect guy? — someone a woman can really talk to about anything, feel ready to share anything and who is also sexually desired and in tune?

I guess we were spending so much time with each other that we were not working on searching for appropriate new partners. Come to think of it, that was one subject we both avoided broaching when we were together as friends. That is asking for trouble!

Anyway, we realized it was not going to work after about six months and decided to throw in the towel. It was a little sad. We made a complete break for about three months, then started correspondence. Gradually, the old friendship was re-liberated. We remained friends ever since then—well, until that day. There had to be some changes, of course. We had to make the perimeters clear such as the number of hours a week we could spend together, and how late we could be up along together. We had to set up some rules, too, like what kind of places and activities were not suited to “buddies”. We regrouped and thus were fortunate enough to salvage the friendship while we began dating other people.

Yet, time took its toll, of course. Our careers started taking precedent. Craig moved to Victoria where he worked as a government consultant. I landed a solid job at a nonprofit in Coquitlam, where I did not really want to live but could not afford to refuse the position, so I moved to the other side of it in the Fraser Valley. The house prices were attractive, at least. It was quite a different lifestyle there in Mission, but pleasant and interesting in its own way. My boyfriend at the time moved in with me. I was settling down.

I guess Craig got more serious while clinging to some aspects of his youthful self of his 20s. I knew he had always been active on this and that important cause, either to do with environmentalism or the anti-war movement. He got more outspoken and was known for his anti-imperialist perspective, admired by the anarchists and social democrats alike. Among some determined and persistent activists on the Island, he produced literature for certain groups and even took part in organizing events. He was involved in “people’s actions” on open pit mining, the tar sands and climate change. I remember telling him one time, on the phone, I think, to be careful. If his political opponents did not like him enough, and thought he was a problem, they could harass him and make his life uncomfortable.

Craig quit the government consultancy at the behest of environmentalists. He accepted a job with a high profile environmental organization. He often was the spokesperson, and he wrote a lot.

I used to get updates regularly, but we met less and less often in person. When Carols and I visited Victoria or Nanaimo, we would usually manage to pay him a visit. He was with Jocelyn by then. When he went to the mainland and I could get some time, we used meet at some old haunt in the city. I remember that we went back to some locations of the Blenz café chain, like the one on Robson or the one in the South Granville area, or the one in Yaletown.

Apparently, Craig used to have *rendez-vous* with fellow activists at some such places where they would hang around plotting for hours. He’d be just wrapping up a meeting when I arrived, or someone would interrupt Craig and I, thus ending our conversation. It seemed he was really in the thick of things. His activity seemed to be intensifying around the time that the actions against the plans for building more pipelines were heating up, though he never communicated with me about that particular domain of activity. That topic and the tar sands was in the media almost daily, in those days. In fact, a community paper wrote a profile on Craig and his concerns. Was it...No, not you guys.

The last time I saw him, he had a meeting right here at this Yaletown Blenz café. That’s what he said. He asked me to meet him here at this specific spot ahead of some meeting with someone. No, he did not say who. He said that he had had an email message from one of his contacts in one of the groups. They were in the middle of planning an action, he explained, and there was some new propaganda to produce. I got here around ten after three, ten minutes late. He had arrived on time, right at three. He said someone was coming to see him at four, hinting that he would like me to leave by four. I said, “Okay.” We talked. We ordered coffees but did not drink them because neither of us drink coffee that late in the day. We just wanted to purchase our right to sit here so that’s what we did. He talked about his girlfriend, life on Vancouver Island, their new apartment, and so on and so on, without mentioning anything about his ongoing projects, I mean his activism stuff. I knew not to raise the subject myself. We had a tacit understanding that he would tell me what he wanted and it was up to him to bring up a hot topic in that vein. I left it alone.

“You don’t know why he had a meeting here that day? I mean, what the meeting was about? You don’t know what he was supposed to discuss with this -associate?”

“No, I really don’t.”

“Really?”

“Really. You know, I was just a bystander in these causes. I attended major rallies and protest pickets, signed petitions, forwarded emails and wrote letters in mass campaigns. I was never that involved. I acted in conscience and followed current events, talked with people in general, but I never played any significant part as an organizer. I think you already know that by now, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. But maybe he told you something, or suggested something?”

“No. I just knew his work at the time was about mining. He had gotten into a shareholder’s meeting recently, and written some letters on behalf of the group. There was a major campaign going involving this one corporation registered on the Vancouver stock exchange. I think you know all that. You researched that, right?”

“Yes. I did. I’m looking for details. The paper wants to review the story for the anniversary of Craig’s—that terrible day.”

“Well, you asked about our relationship, and I am happy to speak about that. I’m proud to talk about it publicly. You can quote that.”

“All right. Tell me more about the day he disappeared. Where exactly were you in the conversation? What exactly was happening in the conversation?”

“I’d been telling him that my partner and I, that’s Carlos, had been talking about tying the knot, making it permanent. That is, I told Craig that I was thinking of getting married and starting to have kids within a couple of years. He was really pleased for me. Such an incredible guy! We got into that topic, and lost track of the time. ‘Oops,’ he said, ‘Time to shift gears. Sorry. Gotta carry on, now.’ I noticed that no-one had arrived and remarked on that. He answered that the arrangement was for him to be in the parking lot at four, and that the meeting would take place privately in a vehicle. Apparently, there was some suspicion about being observed inside these corporate owned chain restaurants, so their arrangements for secret meetings were changing.”

“Secret, you said?”

“Yes. Well, I knew that they—he and his associates—wanted to be discrete. There was monitoring by the police and, so they thought, the corporations or at least their friends or ‘agents’.”

“Agents?”

“I suppose he meant people acting for or on behalf of the companies.” I take a couple of

breaths. This is all so painful and emotional. It is hard to talk. “So we broke off our conversation. I said I’d just go and wash my hands in the washroom. He said he needed to go to the toilet, so we got up with our stuff and walked toward the cans together. You can see, right over there, that the washrooms are clearly marked and that the ladies’ are right across from the gents’ up that little hallway. I just gave my hands a quick scrub and tried to dry them for a few seconds under the drier. I couldn’t have been in there for more than two minutes, if that long. It should have taken him a bit more time to pee, wash and leave. I should have seen him in the café around the same time or a half-minute or so later, but I never saw him again.”

I can’t speak. “Here. Let me get you more water.” My head is bowed and I am shaking a bit. I take the water gratefully. At least the dryness of my mouth is remedied for the moment.

It has been three years less a week since I last saw Craig. Nobody has seen him since. It turns out that I was the last person to see him. The activist he was supposed to meet here that day waited but never saw Craig. He was reported missing by his family and co-workers three days later. No trace of him has ever been found. There was no further activity by him on any system—phones, email accounts, bank cards and all that. Nothing. No witnesses reported seeing him after that. His girlfriend says she has never seen him since they parted earlier that day and he took the ferry as a foot passenger for Tsawwassen. He was just gone.

“We hear you’ve been asked to speak at the tribute next week. I you going ahead with that?”

“Wh—Yes. His family’s asked me to speak, me and a few others.”

“The authorities still suspect you.”

“I’m not a suspect. I am a person of interest. So is that guy he was supposed to meet here in the parking lot, plus a couple of others who saw him that day. His girlfriend is said to be implicated in the disappearance.”

“I did not say you were A suspect. I said they suspected you. They have interrogated you a lot, over and over. That woman too, as well as that activist. You know his girlfriend quite well, I suppose?”

“Not that well. We’ve gotten to know each other better because—because of this situation.”

“Do you think she knows anything?”

“I doubt it. Why wouldn’t they run off together, he actually wanted to find a new life? Anyway, she constantly and consistently denies it. She seems to be just as distraught as his family, and I, about him not being around anymore.”

“Police say it’s common that individuals wish to leave it all behind, and some manage to make arrangements to do it successfully.”

“Yes, I know, but it seems out of character. Craig was no coward. Anyway, the police have been lame. They go on about how it is not a crime for someone to want to get away and escape, to change their course of life. They dragged their heels for so long. Now the case is going cold.”

“What are you going to say at the tribute?”

“I’ll say it there and then.”

“Can’t you give us a bit of a preview?”

“I can repeat that he was a wonderful person, and a seriously committed to improving society. He wanted social justice—that is more fairness and less social and economic inequality in general. In particular, he was concerned about safeguarding the environment and using natural resources conservatively and in sustainable ways. Those are honourable positions. It is a credit to him that he stood for those aims. He was a role model to us who are inactive. He fought hard for others. He did not have to.” I feel the tears well up uncontrollably as they always do when I defend Craig.

The tribute is a grand affair, relatively speaking. A hall on the East Side is used and it is packed with some 500 people. Representatives of mining corporations turn up as well as police officers, reporters and gawkers. The corporations announce they are raising their award for information on the whereabouts of Craig, and are paying the salary of the private detective team that the family originally hired two years ago.

Little progress transpired after that. Leads lead to dead ends. There are no updates still. Craig is just gone
END

6.LOSING

The taxi driver is kind enough to carry a couple of boxes into the apartment. Kara and her son are loaded up with bags as they enter their new semi-furnished home in the suburbs. She feels hopeful that turning this fresh page of her life will bring better things.

Upon returning to the taxi to pay the driver and collect the remaining odds and ends, Kara and her boy encounter a curious onlooker. After a moment, this elderly woman offers a “hi” as a greeting then looks the apparently blond late 20-something in jeans and a T-shirt and her eight-year-old hooded progeny up and down. “Is that all you possess?” she asks with a shake of the head.

“Oh, I got rid of a lot of old stuff. I wanna reboot, you know?”

“Reboot.”

“I want to make a new start, that is.”

“I see. Trouble can follow you, wherever you go. Take it from me.”

Kara does not voice a reply. Instead, she feigns a closed smile and prods Tyler, her son, to move on and enter the apartment. They go in and she pushes the door closed behind them.

They leave most of the belongings unpacked for the moment while they exit to shop for a few food items at a grocer one block away. “Maybe you’re new around here?” inquires the middle aged grocer who looks to be Mediterranean in origin as he packs two paper bags with the purchases. He is cautious about making conversation and does not make eye contact.

“Yep, that’s right.”

“You from another state?”

Kara simply nods without divulging any facts.

“Take care. Maybe I’ll see you.”

“Probably. Obviously, we living around here now.”

As they return, she perceives a guy peering out the window at them, and a couple standing in on the lawn in front of the low rise building stop talking, and turn to stare. “Hey, there,” says one of them.

Kara looks up briefly and just replies with “hi.”

Kara is intentionally unfriendly beyond common cordiality. Life has been unkind to her and now she is a runaway from a bad relationship. Not being able to get a legal restraining order, she is especially afraid for her safety and the security of her boy.

Orphaned, Kara was brought up by a foster parent as of age thirteen. Mona, the foster mother, was always cool with her foster daughter, embittered by a rough divorce. She retained custody because of her good income from alimony and employment as a retail clerk and had a history as an adequate mother but did not have any other children to support at home these days. Kara felt that she was probably more interested in getting supplementary did not particularly like girls, but was rather one of those women wounded by misfortune who took out their frustration and pain on other females instead of facing the real enemy, the patriarchal order. She seemed to resent the attention and successes of other women, and thus found it hard to express affection or approval towards Kara. Well, that is how Kara interpreted the situation. She is not communicating with Mona. She has not even told her where she and Tyler have gone.

Mona always criticized Kara when problems with Kara’s partner cropped up. She blamed

Kara for inciting anger in him after one of his violent episodes, and never voiced support for Kara even when Kara took herself to the hospital following one such incident. Kara feels all alone with little protection.

No, Kara is not interested in making friends at this point. She is only interested in earning a livelihood for the sake of Tyler's welfare and establishing some peace and stability in her life.

She does have a couple of good friends whom she met in high school. However, Kara is worried for their safety as well as Tyler's and her own, so she has not told them her whereabouts and her plans. She only met them briefly to tell them that she was going away that night and say "goodbye." She wishes she could talk to them for they are her sole source of support, aside from government authorities and counselors whose job it is to "show empathy" but say no to requests for assistance at every opportunity. That is how Kara sees things, from her experience.

Kara does not feel she has the energy to fight all the time. She cannot struggle to scrape together a living and fight her ex, her former foster mother, the system and the attacks on her reputation. It is too much. She is instead trying to escape and get a grip on her life.

In Kara's present state of mind, she feels that she has been persecuted all along. There was a social stigma against single parents, and she thought that most people had viewed her in a very negative light because she was of a single parent family and because she and her mother of the day were poor.

Actually, though, her father was widowed when Kara was just three. Her biological mother had died suddenly in a car accident while driving alone on a busy highway. Kara never learned much about that accident, because her father never spoke about it. He tried to hide his pain but it showed in his heavy drinking. For all the havoc her father wreaked, Kara made an effort to recall that he had been shocked and pained by his wife's death. Perhaps he blamed himself, like some people say can happen to a survivor. They talk about "survivor guilt," too. Who knows? Not Kara.

Anyway, his father took up with someone new after a couple of years, a woman not well educated but who appeared to be bright and kind to Kara. The girl was well cared for in many respects, despite her father's drinking, because Lou (Louisa-May) paid her a lot of attention, even attending parent-teacher meetings and other school activities in place of her father and sending her to piano and skating lessons. Her father managed to hang onto jobs as a mechanic, at least enough to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. For her part, Lou worked part-time in the evenings as an emergency services responder. Alone with Kara at home on the nights when Lou had to work the late shift, her father slipped into bouts of drinking. When she was eight, Kara remembers, she found him in tears a couple of times. Mostly, he seemed distracted. Lou used to tell her that Kara reminded the man of his wife, and asked her to understand. Kara began to feel guilty and blame herself for her father's poor behavior. Yet, he tried to be responsible and, Kara guessed, Lou was no doubt a great comfort and source of some happiness for the sad man. However, the relationship did not last, and Lou left when Kara was ten. Lou kept in touch, sent gifts and visited but she

explained to Kara that it was difficult to see her after she and her father had split up. Kara would still like to talk to Lou now, but thinks it might be risky.

Kara's father was her sole provider and parent after Lou left. He had intermittent girl friends but remained troubled. He did not talk to Kara much, except for occasionally asking her about her day and her homework. He offered to help her with homework sometimes. Kara began to take over the housework, preparing some meals, doing the laundry, dusting and vacuuming the bungalow, and so on. Eventually, her dad found it hard keeping a job, and ended up with a bad reputation. When she was thirteen, probably when he thought Kara was old enough, he walked away. He thus came to be known as a dead-beat and a drunk, adding to the agony of the gossip and causing more frowns that Kara had to endure at school.

While teachers offered encouragement to other kids around her, they generally rolled their eyes and neglected her. She was put in the classes of poor under achievers who were not expected to "succeed." Kara felt the intense shame and suffered from the negative notoriety. She withdrew from school activities by high school, when it counted the most, and did only what was required. She showed up, attended classes, did what school work was necessary, but kept basically quiet.

She was forced into the company of other social rejects, and that's how she acquired a couple of close friends. She told them about the nasty foster mother. Together, they used to make jokes about their foster parents. They even drew pictures of them and threw things at the pictures one day. Meanwhile, her foster mother's derision about Kara only increased because of Kara's apathy and she did not tolerate her friends well. That is why Kara rarely invited them over. She got in trouble for getting home for dinner late, and sneaking out in the evenings to go hang out with these two friends.

Mona tried to rein her in, but another problem cropped up: enter Simon. Simon was a year older and an attractive muscular drop-out who liked to flirt with and impress the female high school students by hanging out with some of the high school boys sometimes. They were his customers who bought cannabis from him. Simon was not a big time dealer. He had a full time job at a factory and just took in a little extra income from the illicit trade off the job. He liked to brag to the school kids that he was already making money. He told them that school was a prison, and that he relished his freedom outside the school system where he could be his own man.

Simon's talk influenced Kara. She saw him as an ally who understood the unfairness and prejudices of the school system. She started thinking about dropping out and he encouraged her, though Mona would not let her. When she turned 17, however, Kara ran off with Simon.

The authorities tracked them down when Simon was caught stealing. Moving away had disrupted his job and his side-trade, so that he found himself short of cash for awhile. The police questioned them then merely issued Simon a warning. They were of age and could live together and independently. They gave them information on community and employment services, then informed the foster program. Kara grinned when she realized

that Mona had been cut off. The last time she saw her was when she had to attend the meeting to sign the papers. She was free.

She gained more freedom after Simon left. She had a happy time until she got pregnant and that scared him. He was too young and restless. He took off one night after a fight. The law tracked him down after a while and made demands for child support, which he coughed up once in a while, and reluctantly. Kara never saw him again after that night he abandoned her.

At that point, she was 18 and too old for child services. She had to turn to welfare, and endure more social stigma as a single parent herself. They gave her counseling and medical support through her pregnancy. She was on housing support and got food stamps and some money for groceries, baby care items and clothing. It was not enough so she tried to sell Avon products from her apartment on the side, which put her social assistance money in jeopardy. She had to be very discreet about the Avon job. It was good in that she got to meet some other people, but it drew little extra income, so it probably did not matter with respect to her social security entitlements.

Tyler gave her joy, though. She introduced him to Mona, who would babysit and bring in extra supplies. Kara had to give her credit for that, despite the fact that Mona would criticize and admonish her regularly. Kara's two friends would visit. They had graduated and one was already married, but they remained loyal to Kara, thankfully.

By the time Tyler was five, Kara's resilience was wearing thin. She had too little love and too few resources to resist Adam when he came along, even though she knew it would probably not work out for long. He was a customer at the store where she was working part-time at that point. She was still very pretty and slim. He was funny and charming. He appeared respectful and said he admired her for raising her boy on her own. He expressed sympathy for the tragedies and difficulties in her life, and shared some of his own sorrows with her. He had his own business in the building industry, producing and selling some kind of piping. He had a nice car and apartment. He drew her into his web. They eventually moved in together in a small house. He did not want her to work. She no longer qualified for social assistance, and Simon was sending in regular payments. She was a stay-at-home mom and content like that for the time being. She had enough free time and was rid of enough worries to work on obtaining her high school diploma. Kara hoped that she had a home again at long last, but Adam always avoided the subject of marriage.

In another phase of economic downturn, the building trades lost business. Adam had trouble keeping up with his and soon owed money, which he tried to hide from Kara but the problem grew too big to conceal. Adam became more anxious and frustrated. That is when his temper started to flare.

Here she was today after having escaped Adam's ire and control. She was determined to set her life on a new course on her own terms, out of the clutches of government and men.

She and Tyler used aliases. She had to use their social security numbers and real names on formal records, but people in her life came to use their aliases. She did not get a telephone,

listed or unlisted. Rather, she got a laptop and used aliases over email, *etcetera*, but avoided social media networks. She began taking courses online, though. Meanwhile, she worked in a gift shop, eventually being awarded a commission on significant sales then progressing to the position of assistant manager. As her life evolved, so did her personality. Kara allowed herself to gradually feel at ease, and acquired some new friendships. She began to feel confident. She started swimming lessons, and allowed herself the enjoyment of having coffee or a meal with fellow swimmers, customers and her son's friends' parents once in a while. She explained that she was saving for Tyler's education, and had a slim entertainment budget, rather than divulging her secret. She and Tyler often got invited to birthday parties, the cinema, and short day excursions. She avoided the dating scene, though, telling people that she had to put Tyler first. Tyler, once he turned 10, began to advise her to "go out." She was still afraid, though. Eventually, her social circle began learning about her situation as a woman having fled a violent partner, and sympathized, signaling understanding and vowing to help to protect her. She felt supported for the first time in a long time.

Her new friends set her up with Jim. She was ambushed. He was a lovely handsome guy, a career man in education who had married late and been divorced already. He had a daughter who lived with him. Kara lost her reserve in his presence. She really like him, so she started going out with him three to five times a month. He often came over accompanied by his daughter, and she brought Simon to spend time with him from time to time. Things were looking up.

People missed her when she failed to turn up to work one day, and missed a lunch date. Tyler, who routinely caught the school bus before Kara left for work, wondered where she was when she wasn't home by six. Without a phone, he had faith that something come up, and patiently went about preparing dinner, as he often did. Usually, she would leave word with the school or a neighbour, or leave a note on the fridge for him. Checking his email, he saw there were no recent emails from her. Knowing her password, he checked and found no activity since the day before. By eight o'clock, phone and address book in hand, he knocked on the neighbour's door to use her phone.

At the urgings of her friends and associates, the police began an investigation and put a call out for information. Her real name surfaced in the news. They tried to contact her father, only to find that he had died of cancer by then. Tracing her history, Mona and Lou found out about her disappearance and joined in the search.

Though foul play was long suspected, it was many years before her remains, clothing and a few personal affects were discovered lying in a creek bed in a neighbouring state. Some kids had brought home some jewelry and a bone found near the creek, which the parents turned into the police. Examiners figured she had been stabbed a few times but determined that the stabbings would not have killed her. Noting evidence of strangulation, the figured that she had died by drowning, probably having been strangled first and left with her head submerged in the water. Adam remained on the top of the list of "persons of interests" but it was a couple of years before he became a suspect, and a few more years for the case to build and a court to convict him of murder.

END

7.GERARD

Gerard is a scientist who works for NASA. He lives and works at the Great Lakes Science Center in Ohio. He is a microbiologist researching life in outer space with the panspermia theory team.

Gerard is a quiet man in his late 30's. His co-workers do not know much about him. They know that he came to work at the Center six years ago. They are told that his doctoral and post-doctoral dissertations were on studies of micro-organisms found in remnants of meteorites. He is actually an immigrant whose mother was Austrian and father was Slovakian, though he allegedly was raised in Turkey then studied in France, Japan and Germany before he came to the United States to do his post-doctoral project, according to his employee profile. The profile reads that he is consequently a polyglot. Also, it says his parents (now deceased) were scientists; his father is said to have been an astrophysicist and his mother an archaeologist who were living in Europe before their deaths. Gerard sometimes confirms this information and may add that he is an only child. To his colleagues, he is too much of a "brain."

The exotic biography prompts some observers to wonder whether he is actually involved in or connected to some secret service. "You know these quiet genius types. It could be he's either up to no good or is some kind of spy," comments one co-worker or another from time to time. "Spies keep to themselves a lot. They can't be very social, in a lot of cases," offers one person replying. "Yeah, they tend to be shrouded in mystery," states another. The rumours and gossip crop up, but Gerard is the sort of person who does not attract a lot of attention. Rarely does anyone bother to look and voiced comments are sparse. In fact, any time he is absent from work, his absence usually goes unnoticed.

Gerard's appearance is rather bland. He has dull medium brown hair, is of medium height with unremarkable grey-blue eyes, pale but clear complexion, and a correct but average looking face. His movements are quiet. He wears soft soled brown faux-suede shoes and plain brown or grey short-sleeved shirts with no-press brown or charcoal grey pants. Somehow, he never seems to get creased. His straight hair, combed to the side and kept short just above the ear, always appears smooth and constantly groomed. His face is always clean shaven. He is seen sometimes wearing thin black rimmed glasses, and sometimes without, if he is noticed at all.

Gerard arrives to work precisely at ten before the hour every morning. He performs his duties meticulously and in a timely fashion. He does the routine lab tests and paperwork, and completes the necessary correspondence.

Actually, Gerard finds that he often has free time. Whenever he has the chance, he gets up to no good. He likes to hack into email accounts and websites. He has the habit of pretending to be the email account or website owner and sending messages with their identities. Also, he enjoys a little creative writing, deliberately falsifying scientific information that travels through these channels, and on his paper and digital reports—not just among

competing scientific teams and projects, but among the staff at the Great Lakes Space Center. He creates online pages and forums to spread spam and false or misleading information meant to confuse or stymie other research projects. He tries to wreck the work on the panspermia theory. He uses the identities of others to send and receive messages from secret correspondence. He even joins video games where avatars can communicate directly with each other to convey messages to his network or read those coming from it. He is very clever at this secret communication and sabotage.

His communications report on the work of the Center and that of other projects in the field of space research, particularly regarding the question of life in space. His partners (conspirators is a term that can be used here) in the secret society share this interest. They want to get updates on what scientists are thinking and saying. They want to know the latest. They also conspire to hatch up counter postulates and float conflicting and diverting ideas.

One day, Gerard is caught in the act of internet hacking. A quality control team at the Ohio Center has noticed something fishy. There have been complaints and investigations point to him as a source. His computers at home and in the lab are confiscated for examination. He is interrogated. Finally, evidence of his wrongdoings, at least of mischief, forms the bases of formal charges and Gerard is let go and told to show up in court.

Instead of going to court, Gerard fakes his own death. He encounters an unemployed microbiologist that fits his own general description and age. At a café, he listens patiently to the man's sad story. He was orphaned, and raised by a distant relative who died two years ago, abandoned by a wife who fled with his child incognito in fear of his out-of-control drinking that had often turned violent. The man eventually cleaned himself up, he said, and has been trying to land a real job. He confides in Gerard that he has been taking "survivor" jobs, usually using false names and falsifying his resume so that employers would not learn of his criminal history and addiction issues. "In fact, my name's not really Paul," he eventually tells Gerard with a weak grin.

"This is a perfect candidate," Gerard tells himself, pleased that he has been lucky enough to come upon a victim so easily this time around. On one such encounter at a coffee shop, he injects a drug into his coffee after the gets up to go flirt with the server. When is "Paul", having returned to his seat and sipped some coffee, starts slumping in his seat and drooling, Gerard tells the server that he will take his "friend" to the hospital.

Gerard takes the wheel of the man's sedan after donning gloves in the darkness of the unlit parking lot. He drives off, registering the man at a hospital emergency ward with Gerard's own name and i.d. as the patient, but leading the guy away shortly thereafter, telling the hospital staff that he seems to be better and that, anyway, his family wants him to report to a different hospital in another town. At a hospital in a neighboring town, Gerard fills out the registration forms then stuffs them in the guy's hands and leaves him alone at the reception to wait. The busy staff do not clue in. The man gradually recovers there and tries to tell the woman taking the information that he was at a café when he suddenly felt sick. He turns around to thank his companion who took him to the hospital but does not see him. The receptionist never noticed Gerard and cannot give him a clue. The man checks out of that

hospital. He cannot find his car outside. Confused, he calls a cab, and pays with some bills from his wallet, not noticing that he has someone else's wallet in his hands.

Gerard shows up at this man's house a day later with the pretext of checking on him. "How are you making out?" "Oh, whatever that was has passed. Say, wanna come in for some tea or whatever? There's juice..." Gerard says that he only can stay for a few minutes. The man expresses gratitude for his assistance on the previous day. He asks Gerard if he knows where his car is. At the first opportunity, Gerard slips the guy a drug laced mickey. "God, this tea is strong. Next time, I won't have it black," he comments. He then slides off the chair. Gerard takes him to the hospital out of town, fills in the papers for him, displaying a doctored driver's license that indicates it has expired, and referring to a medical plan number whose file exposes his past excesses and criminal behavior, but in Gerard's old name. He explains that this is a former drunk who seems to have fallen off the wagon again, and leaves.

Gerard makes a phone call to check on this man, "Paul." The man is upset and confused about what has been happening. "I swear I have not touched a drop of booze in three years. Really!" Gerard offers to take let Paul stay with him at his house so that he can be monitored and get immediate assistance if needed. The man, lonely and in need of friendship, is happy to take Gerard up on this offer.

At home, Gerard injects him with a fatal drug and leaves him lying in his own pyjamas in his own bed after burning his finger tips with acid and rearranging his hair. He writes a suicide note and signs it, "Gerard" putting it under the pillow. Gerard is busy all night switching photos and personal effects between the houses, and combing Paul's place for all traces of his life story especially his laptop and wiping the whole place down thoroughly. He knows Paul's house is rented. Gerard packs up some things, destroys some stuff in both homes and deposits it in a landfill in a neighboring county. Before dawn, he is ready to move to the other side of the country taking Paul's car, mobile phone and i.d. Gerard has emptied his own bank accounts and collected most of his cash and other valuable items from the vaults to take with him until he can find a new way to store them. Paul, who is penniless and without property, has nothing much to brag about in the bank, so Gerard leaves it alone. The record will show (for a few months, at least) that Gerard died after committing suicide and that Paul, totally unconnected with the Gerard scenario, has done what he has done before and pulled up stakes to move on to some unknown destination.

After a couple of weeks, the real Gerard has assumed a third identity, one harvested from his society's crop of identities cultivated over the years from the seeds of persons deceased long ago and nurtured until they have matured and borne social security numbers, savings accounts, university transcripts, driver's licenses and passports. Now he is an expert researching new species, and exploring the possibility that discoveries of new DNA may show hybridization between Earth species and alien ones. He works at a private institute in California, and is deeply involved in debates about the mysterious ancient people known as the Olmec, questions that challenge the conventional evolutionists' assumptions about the coexistence of non-homeo sapiens with other hominids and dinosaurs in prehistoric times (that simultaneously challenge the pace of geological activity over the ages along with freezing and flooding, migration and population, and many other subjects), and alternative

ideas about the construction of ancient monuments and ancient scientific knowledge. His current i.d. states that he is 41 years of age and a doctoral graduate from MIT.

It does not take long before he is up to his old monkey business, hacking systems and fudging data.

One spring, this regenerated Gerard, now known as George, gets consent to take a short professional development leave. He is supposed to attend a conference in Nevada. At the venue in Nevada, he arrives to sign the registry, collect his conference package and certificate of attendance, but proceeds down into the third underground floor where his secret society is holding a parallel meeting there.

He wears a tag bearing his original name, something he rarely reveals and displays in company. It is Jeraterik. He greets some colleagues, noticing some familiar faces. There is some time for mingling and enjoying appetizers and drinks, which is rarely fitted into conference schedules. This particular time, it is an occasion for some celebration.

The program is predictable: welcome speeches, guest speakers, reports and assessments, and decision making. However, the theme fosters some excitement. It is "Celebrate our Achievement, and Initiate the Next Stage." There will be some awards today, too, and Jeraterik is slated to be a recipient.

The members stick to their respective groups. Gerard stays among the hybrids. The clones and cyborgs keep to themselves in respective sections. Only a couple of guest speakers and their entourages and some observers are bona fide Anukis. They must wear special protective gear.

Security guards block outsiders. Some of the hotel staff have been stunned or hypnotized so as to immobilize and disorient them for security purposes.

In a common language that is not English or any other human tongue, the first invited Anuki addresses the congregation in a robust husky and somewhat low voice. "Welcome, and most heart-felt congratulations! You have reached the targets for infiltration, research and influence. We are now in a position to take the next steps."

Applause and many "hoorahs" are sounded. (Well, it is the Anuki word for "hoorah".)

A high-ranking hybrid female steps forward to present the Earth Secretariat's report. He starts with the history beginning with the early observations and foraging, followed by some early naïve attempts at contact and cooperation, then the period of conflicts with other intergalactic contenders with some interest in Earth and its abundant resources. After that period, there was a hiatus when troubles and politics at home and in the satellite colonies, which resulted in a civil war, which made the Anuki homeland and settlements vulnerable to opportunistic aggressors. When Anuki expeditions returned to Earth, they found different conditions that could not be penetrated in the old ways. They then set about a series of scientific investigations. The investigations involved abductions and experimentations.

The Anuki speaker takes the podium to remark upon the historical advances made in the explorations and investigations of the Earth. Amid more bouts of applause, he appraises the growing accumulation of detailed scientific findings and points out that a lot of the information is now being used for other explorations and problem-solving in the Anuki territories.

“Finally, we were able to begin infiltration. We have achieved so much since the start of this phase! Hybridization has occurred so that we have a population of human-Anuki hybrids in strategic locations playing strategic roles according to our plans. They are in the top echelons of the national governments and corporations. They are various privileged and highly skilled scientific specialists, media specialists, administrators, and military and business leaders. We are grateful for your commitment and hard work. Many of you merit special recognition.”

“Here! Here” is called out. More audience members cheer and clap.

Another Anuki leader appears on the stage to give out the awards. Soon, the name Jeraterik Eketarias is read out. “You have displayed outstanding courage and dedication in your work for our great cause. You have made great sacrifices and carried out heroic acts. We wish you would accept the Purple Sun medal. It is the least we can do in return for you.”

There is a standing ovation as Jeraterik Eketarias accepts the medal. He bows to the crowd and raises a hand making the secret sign of their society, which ignites a thunderous chorus of cheers.

END

8. THE PESSIMIST

David is a pessimist. He frowns a lot. He does not expect much good from people and life in general.

David works in an office for an insurance business. He sees a lot of people fork out a lot of money out of fear of misfortune. He hears about a lot of clients who meet with misfortune. Pessimism is good for one kind of business, at least, he often remarks to colleagues sardonically. “And doctors and undertakers, to boot,” is the normal cool reply if anyone ever answers. Generally, though, David’s voiced observation brings out creased foreheads, signs and downward gazes around him. He finds those responses satisfying in that they seem to affirm the truth as David perceives it.

David spreads the anti-love around wherever he goes. Clouds gather over the faces of those around him, and moods swing low.

Being pessimistic is one way to create order out of chaos and mystery, believes David. It is easier to take the position of a pessimist and give into gloom and doom than to struggle to search for the positive, he thinks. Trying to find logic from the perspective of optimism would take greater effort, so he firmly believes. “How can problems and tragedies be

rationalized?" he wonders. One would be hard pressed to see the good in so many of life's catastrophes as well as human failings, hardships and criminal doings. Therefore, David is committed to pessimism. It makes plain sense, to him because he considers that humans and their lives are mostly bad.

Why waste emotions and hope that things will work out well, or that humans will change themselves and things around them for the better? Why invest intellectually and emotionally in the belief that life will improve when little sign of it happening seems to appear. These are questions that dog David on a daily basis. He thinks it is draining to believe positively only to face more disappointments and tragedy. He has tried it for a few hours here and there, without favourable result. "Why then bother hoping? Why bother being good and trying to bring about good, if people and life do not respond or distort and exploit any benevolence to sour and spoil them?" he asks himself and others. To him, people are inherently and mostly self-serving, lazy, dull-minded, greedy and wrong, so he does not care.

David has given up on happiness as much as he has given up on humanity. He just wants to survive and enjoy a few comforts before he dies. Death will be the end, he considers. It will be all over when he dies. He will just be dust, in the end. His passing will be largely unnoticed, and lead nowhere, he thinks. His speck of a life will not stand out in the universe, of that he is certain. Why be so foolish as to believe otherwise?

David thinks most people are foolish and deluded. They are silly to strive for happiness, he thinks. People who look happy may revel in a short-lived and self-deluded euphoria which is soon after quashed or undermined by the negative. They eat to be happy, but the food poisons and kills them. They seek love only to be insulted or duped in return, as a rule. They seek fortune and fail, or gain illness and enemies. "How foolish!" muses David nearly every day.

The experience of joy is probably an effect of the body's chemistry, anyway, so David imagines. Science is learning about it. Certain ideas and physical sensations set off chemical processes and reactions, creating an illusion of well-being, probably. Feelings of love are just the body fooling and betraying one's best judgment, and lead to fundamentally bad partnerships, profound disappointments, anxiety, infections and pain, to his way of thinking.

David has been divorced twice. He never sees his son. He lives alone. His parents have both passed away. He never hears from his sister and nieces. He does not really have friends. There are just one lunch buddy and a couple of neighbors to hang around griping and bitching with.

David rarely travels, other than to take the short business trips around the country his job requires from time to time. Yes, he went abroad on two honeymoons: Greece one time and Hong Kong another. Those trips were all right for the sex and free time but travel was generally uncomfortable and inconvenient. Personal belongings got stolen, he and his wife got lost a few times, and the food and exhibits were not always enjoyable. They could not always communicate well and get what they wanted. They spent too much of his money, too, he thinks. Also, there were a couple of camping trips with his boy. Their camper broke down

one time and it poured heavily another. He just went through with the camping because he had heard it was the correct thing to do when a man has a son. However, he decided a long time ago that travel is too much trouble and therefore not worth the money, effort and time. He would rather stay put.

David likes routine. It is safer that way, he figures. Regardless, it is more convenient.

The more David dwells on his doubts for the future and mankind, and the more he anticipates problems and disappointments, the more he needs to cling to his routine and his set identity as a pessimist. The chaos, uncertainty and inevitable unhappiness and discomforts of life tend to crowd him and grind him down unless he keeps up a galvanized defense.

David has been experiencing an acidic stomach, frequent indigestion, bouts of excessive flatulence, anxiety attacks, insomnia, thinning hair, weight fluctuations, psoriasis, periodic fevers, intermittent constipation, headaches, and inexplicable fatigue at times. He looks older than his age of 44. Healthcare and fitness are not priorities for him, though. Beyond taking a multivitamin tablet daily, with an extra dose of vitamin C during the cold months, he sees little point in working hard on his appearance and health. He buys fresh fruit and vegetables and refrains from going overboard with the meat. He does not smoke and drinks modestly. He tries to keep himself and his place very clean. He owns a stationary cycling machine and uses it sometimes, and does take walks. That is as much effort as David is willing to make at health and fitness. He believes that it is best to “accept the hand that nature has dealt” and not fight a lack of good looks.

Actually, he started out a handsome young man with warm brown eyes, thick wavy chestnut hair and a nice build, which attracted his first wife. Yet, David does not look back at the past much.

Once, though, when he was collecting his belongings so as to move out of his home for the third time since leaving his family’s home for college, he came across his high school year book and some photo albums. He was a little startled to see his name under some photos of the good looking smiling boy. Caught off guard, he asked himself there had not been some mistake with the labeling and placement of the photos.

“Well, of course, youth shines,” he reminds himself. “It is new. That does not last forever, though. We all age and our looks change. That was then and this is now.” He glances up at a mirror in for support.

Of course, a sedentary job in an office environment does not help. His complexion has paled, grey hairs and lines have started to appear, and he has developed a paunch. Seated in the vicinity of this unappealing grouchy underwriter who only ever seems cheery when turning down claimants, the women usually ask to be resituated at least, but would prefer to be reassigned. The men except for his one partner in pessimism have learned to keep small talk to a minimum and chosen to avoid him. Whenever bristles have chafed too much, one of them has asked to be reassigned or transferred, too.

He has been working for this firm in the same office for fifteen years. "It is best to stay in one place and build your salary and savings, rather than risk it by switching in mid-careers," answers David to anyone who happens to ask if he has ever considered doing something different.

Yes, David does not like change. He certainly does not like changing. "Why get your hopes up? You might be able to change your motions or redecorate but life will defeat you, anyway. You cannot change people and life." He balks at the simplest adjustments. When new policies and procedures come down the pipes from the bosses above, he grumbles and spits resentment. He also hates it when something breaks down and needs replacing.

Over time, the negativity that he himself engenders continues to eat away at David's soul and body. When the employer enforces a requirement to get an annual check-up one year—also necessary to satisfy the requirements of the company's free life insurance that employees enjoy--the physician bears a warning for David. (He is a new young hotshot.) "You've gained weight and your blood pressure's climbing. Oh, and I see you getting varicose veins. You should take better care of yourself."

"Huh? Aw, I hadn't noticed. It's not all that bad, is it? I mean, I'm middle aged and I'm a white collar guy..."

"You don't have to let yourself go. It says here you walk and use a stationary bike. Is that so? How often?"

"Um. Well, I walk part way to work and I walk around the city to do my errands and all that on the weekends. I get on the bike sometimes, like in the evening while watching TV and on a rainy weekend."

"Really. How long do you walk for? How long do you cycle?"

"I'm sure I walk around at least 30 minutes on Saturdays. Probably more. On the bike? I guess I do 15 or 20 minutes on it, usually."

"But you don't usually ride it. And 30 minutes of walking one day a week is not enough. You ought to do at least that every day, the walk or bike. As for your blood pressure, I'd say you are developing high blood pressure. You need to bring it down. Exercise is good for that. You under stress at work?"

"Not really. They do checks, and watch the pennies but I have a good track record. No problem there."

"Something else bothering you?"

"Uh..."

“How’s your love life?”

“What? Oh, I’m not seeing anyone. You know, I have been divorced twice. I’m taking a break.”

“I think it’s been a terribly long break. You’re still a young guy. Take care of yourself, lose a few pounds and find a woman. I’m not ordering you to get married. A relationship would be healthy, is all.”

“Mm.”

“What do you do for fun?”

“Fun? Hey, I work long hours. There’s enough to do. I hang out with a couple of friends, go out to a movie or a meal sometimes.”

“You should find a hobby or some club or other. That will help you to relax and stay balanced.”

“Balanced? You’re saying I need balance? But my life is all about balance—”

“Not from what I can see here. You need more of a social life. You need exercise and recreation. How about getting a dog?”

“No, dogs. No, thanks.”

“Then think of something you would like. Okay. That’s all. Time’s up. I’ve patients waiting.

“The nurse has a pamphlet for you. It says to cut down on salt and sugar. I’d take that advice if I were you.

“By the way, the nurse will set up an appointment with a cardio vascular specialist to look into your blood pressure and venal condition. There are new treatments. In the meantime, raise your legs for about twenty minutes every evening after work. Get on the bike every day for 30 minutes. Watch what you eat. Time to go now.”

David is irked by this exchange. Yeah, he knows his stomach is bulging and he wished his skin looked a bit better. Varicose veins? In the restroom, he pulls up his pant legs. Sure enough, he notices bluish-purple bulges on his lower legs. Well, sitting with his legs up for awhile will be nice and he’s sure he can manage a 30 minute routine on the bike. He has plenty of time for it. Actually, he does have too much time. Maybe the doctor is right. He should find a hobby, he reflects. As for an involvement with a woman, he does not want it. He likes his tidy life and does not want a woman invading it and messing it up.

David manages to adapt to most of the doctor’s recommendations. Very aware that he could die anytime, he nonetheless concurs that freshening up his habits and appearance is

worthwhile for the sake of coping with existence. Getting on his bike every day becomes part of his routine. His meals include green salads and fruit more often. He takes to listening to a fine selection of classical music with legs raised with the lights turned down low after his exercise and shower every evening. Avoiding unsettling reading, television programs and films just before bedtime, he watches innocuous nature or technology programs instead late in the evening, often with a glass of warm milk or herbal tea. All that is not so hard, he realizes.

David soon discovers he is looking and feeling better. His waist shrinks and he sleeps more soundly.

Subsequently, David searches for an appropriate hobby. He consults his buddies. "What should I do?" he asks them. "Any ideas for me?"

"Heh. I guess it won't be golf or swimming, eh?" says Ed with a slight grin. The other two chuckle a little.

"Hm. Ya like makin' stuff?" It's Al.

"What like cooking, or electronics or furniture?" asks David.

"Whatever," is the curt reply.

There's a pause and Ed starts tapping the table with the tip of his index finger, as he tends to do.

"Well, what d'you guys do in your spare time? You got hobbies?" asks David with real interest.

"Uh, I do puzzles sometimes," says Al, and goes on to release further disclosure. "I used to make model boats. Got too many boats at home now, and can't do anything with 'em, so I quit that. We've got a computer at home, but I'm on it too much at work already, so I don't want to use it when I get home. It's just convenient to have it, sometimes, and Sue enjoys fiddling around with it."

"I see. Yeah—no, I don't want to do computer stuff at home, either. What about you, Ed?"

"Me? I used to play the guitar, but it started to annoy the wife. Guess I'm not that good and I don't sing. We had a dog we trained for a while, and even entered him in a local show or two. We used to like that. We don't have the dog anymore. Patsy enjoys her sewing group nowadays. She makes stuff for the house and her folks and friends. Let's see. These days, I like documentaries on history, and I've been getting some books on history and biographies."

"Hm. I don't think I want a hobby that requires thinking so much. I mean, sometimes I get into a good informative book or film and it's okay, but I don't want to do that all the time."

The conversation lags again. They order more beverages, and Ed resumes his table tapping.

"I like cooking. I mean, I enjoy making my meals at home after work and on the weekend," confesses David.

"Nothing wrong with cooking. Lotsa men do it. Cooking's okay. What do you want to cook? Like, gourmet food?"

"Nah, just ordinary stuff. Healthy stuff, though. Doctor's orders. Some desserts, too, I guess, once in a while. Yeah, that'd be okay. ...Wonder what else I might like to make?"

"I heard a lota guys are into Lego, these days," offers Ed.

Al perks up a bit. "Yeah, that's right. If it's not computer or video games, it's Lego. You just order the stuff or find it at a store, and it comes with plans and you can make all sorts of stuff."

"Lego. Hm. Yeah, that sounds all right. Not too difficult. That might be fun," replies David, enunciating the word "fun" carefully like it was a foreign word.

"There are clubs, too, you know," adds Al. "Lego clubs that—"

"Wait. Hold on, there. I didn't say anything about a club."

"You just go online and---"

"No, I don't think so."

"Didn't you doctor emphasize getting a social life?"

"Yeah, you're right. He did."

"How about you starting your own club, then?"

"What? With whom?"

"Well, if it's just a couple of times a month, I'd do Lego building with ya."

"Oh. You would? That'd be okay. Yeah, why not? Start my own thing. What do you say, Ed?"

"Uh, I suppose. Yeah, it'd be nice to get outta the house sometimes. You mean, visit you, have a beer and what not?"

"Sure."

"All right."

When David goes to his appointment for the six-month follow-up, the doctor is pleased to hear David's improved physical condition and his update about his new hobbies and social club. "What do you know? Maybe there is hope for you, after all," he jokes pleasantly.

After his appointment that same day, David makes his way to a department store where he wants to pick up some herbs and condiments on the food floor, then go up to look at the latest Lego kits. He has to cross the center of town by bus, then walk about three blocks. David has become used to this sort of outing. It used to be a rare thing for him to venture downtown, but now he goes a few times a month. He still wears his sturdy walking boots and rain jacket, just in case, and walks cautiously with shoulders a bit hunched and eyes averted, but he is no longer so grim looking. A scowl is hardly ever seen on his face, these days.

David finds that going out is still full of challenges. He encounters incompetency and faulty planning everywhere. The city is full of hazards, each one waiting to devour him, he thinks. However, he is readier to meet those challenges. He starts to feel slightly more confident, and even gets to feeling cheery. He is seen smiling at a person here and there.

On this particular day, David trips on someone's dangling coat belt while on the escalator, but he saves his footing and manages to kick the belt end away from the seam of the escalator steps as it rises to the top of the stairway. He simply scoops up the end of the belt and hands it to the ("dimwitted") person ahead of him without a word and carries on. Subsequent to that incident, he is browsing through cookbooks, when he is accused of looking at the book too long by a tall thin young security guard who forces him to purchase the book. It is a good book, anyway, and he did let it absorb him to intensely, so he does not mind buying it. However, it is the security guard who takes the book to the counter, David following, and drops the thing on a customer's foot when he fumbles the pass to the assistant cashier. The surprised customer turns around and meets David's face while the security guard says loudly, "You should be more careful," and narrows his eyes at David in an exaggerated fashion. David shrugs and says nothing. In a separate incident, he narrowly avoids being scalded when someone in the food court unthinkingly spins abruptly around, arm extended and hand bearing a hot take-out cup of coffee. David's preparedness and quick footing prevents an unfortunate accident. There were some five close calls in all that day.

A cloth bag full of a new purchase of Lego products and food over his shoulder and tucked under his arm for more security, David is standing at the bus stop waiting to get on the bus that will take him to back to his neighbourhood, when a young women with a very young infant approaches the bus shelter. David steps back to let her under the shelter and out of the wind. When her bus stops, she is struggling to get in line and reach for her bus card with the infant strapped to her chest and a couple of bags in one hand, free hand in her pocket. She does not realize that she has dropped her bus card on the sidewalk. David notices. He usually hangs back and lets some other "fool" step forward to offer help, but this time is different. David does something he has not done since he was a teenager. He is the one who steps forward to offer assistance.

“You dropped your card, Ma’am,” he says, his voice somewhat raspy.

“What?”

“Here.” David bends down and picks up the card for her.

“Oh, thank you,” she replies with a bounce so as to adjust the weight of the baby on her small frame, and tug at a shoulder strap with the hand that has just received the misplaced card. She turns to file into the bus, but a couple of kids squeeze in front of her.

David steps up to the bus to clear the way. “Uh, woman with baby here. Let her through, won’t you?” He actually steps up into the bus just above the sill and motions people to keep a mother’s seat free. Getting back out, he is jostled twice, the second time by the woman hurrying to get herself, the infant and her belongings onto the bus, so that he slips his grip on his shopping bag a bit. He pushes away from the queue to stand back. He is too late noticing that his bus has rolled up behind this one that the woman and baby have boarded and is already departing. He makes a couple of rapid paces forward as the bus is passing, raising an arm to wave, but it is too late. It is at that point that a couple of items fall out of his shopping bag.

Now, he is frowning his familiar frown. A tin rolls out onto the asphalt. Aroused by frustration and annoyance, he hurriedly and negligently follows it. A speeding car flattens him.

His Lego club friends, of which there are now five, cannot figure out how this man they thought they had come to know as overly cautious could have wound up being hit by a car during the course of a normal outing to do some errands in the city. They are still puzzled to this day. The police had no explanation, for no witness had come forward.

They post a brief obituary. In it, they remark that “this was a man who had yet to reach his full potential.”

END

INCONGRUOUSNESS- additions in August, 2015 to the original issue of May 23, 2015

9.Housecleaning

She rounds the corner tentatively and surveys the scene that seems to have become frozen in time: two of her brothers sit, mouths open while her mother lays on the couch clutching a paperback romance novel, oblivious to all else. It is scary to her, the daughter. There ought to be talk, movement, a glance or some sign of life.

Sometimes the existence in this place feels like the shadows where death lies taut waiting to snatch them. It might just shut down. Their bodies might dissipate and turn into some vapor to float out and be absorbed by the pollution of decay and dust of the winds of time. She

even has dreams when she dreams she is awakened while laying in bed when some ominous force pulls her against her will out of her bed and along the floor out towards who knows what. It is scary, this life but mostly it feels sad when she wants to feel happy. It feels morose when life beyond the house (she never calls it "home") beckons.

This young budding woman of 14 shudders. The scene is always disturbing and she must look away. She steps back and retreats in some vague hope of finding refuge from the oppressive and forlorn silence. There is nowhere else go outside of school except into her own mind, not that it is very fertile ground for it is starving. There has been nothing much to feed it, though she craves knowledge, light, love and life. Some days she just tries to push her mind to create some feeling and some light inside her, but often she just gets a headache. She wants to read, and walks miles to the city library to get books until she has read everything in the section for her age group and the librarian tells her she is not allowed to read other things. Same goes for the school librarian, whenever the young teen reaches for the over-age fourteen material. Well, a lot of these books are not as interesting as their celebration heralds. Like the pop songs she used to strain to hear to drink in all the allegedly important content, the experience is just as disappointing and baffling. Anyway, she thinks she thinks too much, in fact. Also, she has seen enough of human weakness and failure that she feels afraid to learn more of some aspects of life. She wants to live—to feel something. Yelling and protesting or arguing for the sake of excitement seems to be her only resort open, it appears sometimes. She causes a brief moment of panic and a response of consternation, but nothing much else. They soon crawl away and back into their caverns of silence and futility.

She can feel a pulse at school. There are things to do, and faces that open their mouths and release words of acknowledgement and some praise, though mostly blandness except when the opportunities to scorn, scoff and criticize present themselves to others, mostly girls and women, who resent her for her appearance or the rumours about her. She believes that she somehow gets less of the the latter than some students probably get, and that may be because her modus operandi is to get along and be polite, stifling her own anger and critical voice, withholding her true responses for the sake of getting by and getting along. The teachers—they are generally a hopeless and mindless lot, in her opinion. For one thing, they do not actually teach. Rather, they manage classrooms and attendance lists and ratings. They mostly frown at her if they pay her any attention at all. They not actually show much control, for they mostly give way to the mouthiest students and parents, and we know who they usually are: the richer ones of course, the ones with dentists and doctors and lawyers or petty community leaders as fathers. The teachers look away, or allow her to receive a benign smile once in a while, when they are not saying, "That's good, but..." No, it is her peers, the ones she hangs out with at lunch time or plays sports with or visits in their homes (on rare occasions) who have something positive to say, like "You're smart," "You could be a beauty queen," or "You know how to speak to the teachers." We all want some advice, some tips on what we should do in life, and how navigate life, but it all seems to be a game wherein we must guess and figure it out on our own. It is like their tests and procedures. They could just explain, give examples and methods, coach us and, you know, lead and really teach us skills and useful information, and let us discuss things. The young teen comes to the conclusion that the adults, despite their assigned roles and titles, have not figured out much and are

just muddling through. Her parents are further evidence of that, for they seem bewildered and unequipped for life, and waiting for someone to instruct them, waiting, year after year, waiting...Yet, the required school life activities make her feel alive. She does any sport they let her do just feel herself move. She just wants to run, use her body, feel the wind and her pounding heart to let her know that she still is alive, and has not slipped away into the other side only to observe life proceed without her.

At age 14, she is already dedicated to self-directed learning. She figures she will have to get a real education, and it would be best to start now instead of merely passing the time until graduation. She believes she is on her own, and that basically every human is to one degree or another, and that she will need to learn how to defend, support and make decisions for herself, so she is alert to any clue at her disposal to guide her way.

For her, the street is not an option. She feels too vulnerable and ill-equipped. She wants to graduate, rather than leave school early. She does not want to run away from home, for that does not seem like a viable option. Anyway, it is not really that she has anything she needs to escape from. Rather, she needs to bring things into her life, into her home that fill it with life. In any case, she possesses some kind of insight, some understanding of the workings of the world and what kinds of people and situations are out there, an awareness that some of her peers marvel at. She does not know how she came to such "understanding", which feel like hunches, so she prefers to call it her intuition, not realizing that intuition is a form of intelligence. Not there have not been clues. Though not fully cognisant of it yet, she has a foggy notion about mental illness that she has gotten from association with certain relatives and certain school mates with certain relatives. That is a real danger, and she feels that she is a candidate to be one of those minds that slip into an abyss, so she is determined to avoid that by all means. Also, she has observed strange men in the woods on her trips to and from school since grade five. While her chums appeared to be oblivious, she knew that the guy with his pants down standing at the gate to the park path should be avoided. On another occasion, she observed a boy with an odd smile on his face walking out of the brush with a man lurking in the trees behind him, and knew that someone could be lurking around some trees or a dark corner and want to grab her one day. She preferred to be cautious. She has heard of knife fights around town that end up bloody, and sometimes deadly. She knows there is a drug trade growing in and around her junior secondary school, and that it was a trap to be evaded. She knows that girls and woman can be used, abused and traded. She knows enough by now, and does not need to discover more details about such goings on herself, thank you very much. No, as sad and as boring as it was, the best thing was to keep to the straight and narrow, stay the course of a basically conventional life for now until she could find some security for herself. She is committed to going along with the program until she thinks she is strong enough to take to her own path in life.

What to do, then? Though there is not much to the art department, and she has hardly had any encouragement about art, she spends a lot of time sketching, so that she gets better and better at it. (After all, no one has encouraged her much about anything, and she has been evaluated as ordinary and middle-of-the-road without talent but most likely to marry soon after high school.) She sketches everything, the teapot, the telephone, and moving on to plants and the dog. She really likes doing faces, though. She fills pages of her sketch pad. At

the house, no one remarks on this activity.

She opts for a drama class, although there is no drama to act in. The lessons are about body movement and control—doing the tree, playing dead, imagining and so on. Her grade is supposed to be part of a collaboration with grade 10, but it is only the grade tenners who are given parts to play. We are to observe, take note and learn from them. Yeah.

She is so desperate that she joins a local church choir. She loves singing, though a lot of the Christian hymns get her down. No one comments on her ability or shows gratitude for participating. She hangs in there, for she likes the sensation of singing, even if she does not believe in the words that she is supposed to sing. She has enough faith in music. Also, it is a safe enough place to go in the evening and on weekends. (Eventually, she will join a school choir, which acts as the chorus for a school musical, and the director will praise her voice but say she is too quiet, without trying to draw her out or instruct her how to project her voice. It is all so lame.)

By this time, there is an ancient piano in the house. It has been abandoned by a relative. Her father refuses to get it tuned, and there is inadequate space for it in the basement where it is stored. Her mother remains neutral about the matter, but then she remains neutral about nearly everything. She finds enough voice to get a piano teacher, mostly out of the relative's insistence (her grandmother, the previous owner of the piano) and he is a nice university student who comes once a week and remains steadfastly polite about the state of the piano, never hinting to her mother that it should be tuned, to her knowledge. He's not a bad teacher, and he is encouraging. He chooses pieces suited to her personality and ability, and is playing some parts of concertos after only a few months. Her mother seems totally dumbfounded when she tells her daughter that the teacher said she had some musicality. (It was just like the time when her aunt told her mother that her niece was strikingly beautiful.) The girl tells the teacher that she just wants to learn for pleasure.

Although she most certainly does not want to be involved in any sort of secretarial work, she takes speed typing, which she decides is one of the few useful skills that schools offer these days. It is a skill in demand, that may help her survive. (It turns out that it does, later on.) She elects to take other subjects that may help her in the future: languages and "home economics." She already has a knack for learning French, much unlike most other students and is rewarded by pleased French teachers time and again. She takes the cooking class, not because she dreams of finding refuge in a marriage; she enjoys it and knows she will always have to feed herself. (It's true, she did all her life. Friends and neighbours came to marvel at her ability to whip up home meals, though the family members continued to refrain from dishing out compliments in return.) She learned some basics, and gained a repertoire of survival skills and nutritional knowledge (such as it was in that day and age—the five food groups, and all ad nauseum...).

In science class, she got interested in plants. She does an impressive little experiment in nurturing a plant.

As she knows she will need money, she wants to start earning it as soon as possible. She has already taken up babysitting (much to the relief of her stingy father, who would prefer to

give his very hard earned money to strangers and wager it on dubious causes than use it to see help his family thrive). By the summer after her fourteenth birthday, she accepts a job. Her mother takes credit for the accomplishment, and does not seem to worry that her beautiful curvey daughter is exposed to the elements of a lumberyard and hardware store.

At the house, though, there is not much to do. The boys take over the TV and she usually can not watch something she liked, not that she wants to waste a lot of time in front of the noise box. She reads, but there is never enough to read. (She used to spend time reading dictionaries and pages in the encyclopedia, even her mothers' discarded cheap paperbacks, in her desperate desire to learn. By 16, she resorts to reading the New Testament of the King James Bible, things get so bad.) She takes scraps from her mothers' futile and abandoned sewing projects, and cuts them into shapes to be glued onto boxes and colored glass bottles, but that cannot amuse her much these days. She would sing along to the radio, if she ever got to select a station or play a record when her mother or her brothers were not, but she found most songs to be silly or completely irrelevant. She used to bring a friend from school over once in a while, but that had gotten way to embarrassing. The house can be deadly boring at times.

That is why her fourteenth year becomes her housekeeping year. She takes to scrubbing, pressing, sorting, sweeping, folding and vacuuming the place. After all, nobody else is doing it. It needs to be done. She can be useful, even if no-one appreciates it. It empowers her, gives her an occupation and role at home, for herself, anyway. It keeps her active and it keeps her from brooding. She endures her mother's scorn and the ridicule from her father and brothers who label her "little mother." She endures the disapproving looks and shaking of the heads of her neighbours who see her hanging up something to dry on the veranda, or sweeping the stairs, or shaking out a dustmop. She does not care what others think. It is worth it to be in action. It is a defense against the duldrums of this family's shipwrecked life. It is resistance to the passivity and ineptitude. She does not want to be swallowed up in neglect and debris. She does not want to be part of the backsliding. She wants to pick up the dust balls, sweep up the trash, iron out the wrinkles, and place things neatly in drawers and on shelves where they belong. It is better to at least maintain some order, stick to some ritual and routine, than to let everything slide. She is on the side of tidiness and cleanliness and not on the side of slovenly lassitude that leaves things jumbled and rumpled, scattered with no conscious care and placement. She is not going to let Them turn Her into That.

END

10.THE ENTITLED WOMAN

I got to know her while I was in second year of university and our global issues course TA tossed us together into the small discussion group. We spent about three months talking about poverty, funding of education, migration, health care systems, and so on. We never became friends exactly, though. For one thing, she leaned right and I leaned left. Our different class backgrounds played into that division, I suppose; her father lead a medium sized manufacturing firm and mine was an unemployed technician turned small time contractor. She was always cordial and even friendly a lot of the time, for she would always listen well, wait her turn, signal respect for other opinions, and avoid disdain for someone

whose opinions she totally disagreed with. We actually had some great discussions, and that's mainly why I remember that particular class.

The other reason is because of what eventually happened to Cynthia. That's her name, this person I met in a class way back then.

Like I said, Cynthia did not seem all that bad socially. She even came across as a shy person in the beginning of our acquaintance. She would give others a chance before sizing them up. She actually read about the subjects for which she had strong opinions, too. She had a decent though not stellar GPA, as far as I recall. She was pretty sure about her views when she had them. She was not verbose but she was quite articulate. She expressed firm self-confidence in herself and her outlook. If she had an opinion, she stood by it all the way. She took that ticket called entitlement to an opinion, and made the most of it. She knew what she knew once she knew it and had it figured out, and was not open to further persuasion once her opinions had formed.

Cynthia always seemed to assume she was beautiful. She shrugged off compliments with a nod and looked away like she was bored. She confided in me and other female classmates that she was well enough endowed to set her sights high, and dismiss many admirers. Well, she was a pretty and well-groomed woman who took care of her skin and figure. Perhaps she thought that she was entitled to compliments and admiring suitors. She was punctual as well as polite. Like I said, she came from a fairly well-off and respected family. Her old man had even enjoyed a stint on the City Council. She had been taught good manners and hygiene, and probably had been taught debating skills at home, and she had the money to groom and dress nicely, and the privilege to travel and get familiar with fine art.

I seem to remember that her father paid for her education. Yes, she told some of us one day when there was some griping about student loans and grants. She never bragged. She just informed us matter-of-factly and crisply about her situation and the causes and conditions of the world. She even told us she was entitled to a good standard of living, the way some young women feel they are ladies who should not have to sweat or get dirty, for whom those willing to sweat and get dirty should run around to assist them and do the sweaty and dirty things for them. I wondered if she had dreamt it or actually believed the myth that she was truly a goddess born on Mount Cynthus who was due high respect and a royal treatment. Cynthia expected to be given a good standard of living, and rise above the unpleasantness and petty problems that most people seem to have to deal with. Either her father could easily afford it, or he strained to keep up appearances, for she enjoyed a comfortable well furnished apartment in a nice part of town, including a gym and spa membership, and a major department store credit card. I know because she used to like to host study sessions there, and pay for the take-out food, which we traded for her privilege of showing off and overpowering us socially.

Cynthia would not tolerate a boyfriend who came from any less fortune than hers, and would not buy into her expectations for herself. She found one who was convinced, and so performed his duties reliably and happily for this would-be princess. He was a smart, clean shaven nice guy excelling in geology who was supposed to enter into the mining industry.

After all, his uncle had made a promise and a company had sponsored him, even to the point of supporting his try-outs for the squash team. Juggling classrooms, difficult parents and girlfriend, and keeping up with his commitments to the team as well as his good impression on Cynthia's parents, he would deprive himself of sleep, cash and meals in order to fulfill his role for Cynthia, picking her up here and there, helping her with her essays, taking her out to suitably good restaurants and shows, et cetera according to her schedule and demands such as the demand to be fashionable vegan and alcohol free.

Cynthia seemed to keep an orderly and clean soul, too. She had the kind of personality that liked to organize things and ideas and emotions into nice neat compartments. That is how she made decisions about the world. Labels suited her. Convenience and expediency guided her. The simple theology of her Church provided guidelines and easy explanations and solutions. The conservative line on crime and punishment suited her schemata, as did the conservative line on refugees, the homeless, public housing, single parenthood, and many other social concerns, not to mention environmentalism and medicine. I do not know how or why people like that are drawn to the social sciences. Maybe it is because the ones who do not excel at math must go into the soft subjects. Not that Cynthia lacked empathy or understanding about suffering; rather, it was just easier for her than most others to make declarations and condemnations, and generally stick to the status quo. She did study and was knowledgeable about the things she studied. We cannot say that it was of ignorance that she tended not to support the displaced, exploited and oppressed, and failed to appreciate the contradictions and complex conditions of the judicial, education, political and other systems of modern industrial monopoly-capitalist societies. Cynthia seemed to prefer blanket statements and showed little mercy.

Perhaps that is why and how she made it into management. Come to think of it, it may have been her intention. While other students were worrying about the unemployment rate and whether there were enough good jobs to be had after graduation, Cynthia knew she could step smoothly into her father's company, and that's what she eventually did, after a year of travel and a couple of flings, of course. I think she wound up with a Communications major and started out in the marketing department. She learned the ropes with ample coaching and privilege, and worked hard, working her way into a corporate executive position and the typical lifestyle that went hand-in-hand with such a position.

I know about her career because I ran into her a few years after graduation. In fact, I ended up doing some work for the company, which put me in contact with her.

I was a social and environmental standards consultant working for a non-profit organization often contracted by the government. Actually, I had no specific training for environmental assessment, as I specialized in social issues and policy, but they trained me and wanted the agency to work in that capacity. I just had to study the state environmental definitions of terms and policy. Anyway, companies were interested in the incentives offered by the state, which were tax breaks, grants and awards. Companies had financial and publicity interests in complying. One day I was assigned to meet the management in Cynthia's company.

First, we went out to celebrate the reunion. We met for drinks and dinner. We were sitting in

the lounge of the steak and seafood joint catching up.

“You seem the same,” she told me.

“I don’t know,” I answered, “but things are going well.”

“Do you enjoy your work?”

“Yes, generally, but it comes and goes.”

“I see. Do you want to start your own organization?”

“I think about it. Maybe...Actually, you seem a little changed—more worldly, I guess.”

“Well, I hope so. Are you really saying I’ve got the creases on my face to prove it? You’re looking good. Taking care of yourself, I suppose.”

I noticed a few lines of wear, but I denied it, of course. We were being as polite as usual. Neither did I express curiosity about the large diamond on her finger.

“I know, you don’t have to point it out. I work hard. There are issues, naturally, from time to time. Actually, I worry about my father. Sometimes his decisions are not as sound as they used to be, I’m afraid.

At work the next day, we got down to business. I presented an outline of the policies and guidelines, and made some recommendations at a management meeting.

Cynthia was there. From her perspective, company image was the central issue. “We want to be known as a green business,” she asserted. Then she said that the executive team were sincere. She showed me some memos about energy conservation and some figures to show the company’s estimated energy savings since energy saving practices had been initiated. Also, there were plans to install solar panels, she announced. Furthermore, the company was investigating digitalized timers as well as plumbing devices to conserve water and power consumption, and the e-newsletter had an article about a contest among employees to come up with energy saving and waste prevention ideas. Another executive chimed in with a plea for the government to take notice of this achievement and award the company accordingly, especially so that there would be funds for the solar panels and faucets. Cynthia bolstered the claim in saying that the advertising agency had prepared an environmental protection message to be woven into the company’s advertisements in the future. A new pamphlet was displayed on the meeting table. When I talked about suppliers, they produced a list of new greener suppliers they said they were contacting.

I left the meeting and filed a report. Some months later, the office notified them that a grant was forthcoming, and that the company name earned the right to be named on the list of energy efficient businesses in the region.

The following year, I went back for a follow-up meeting. We still had not received the

required report about how the government funds had been used to make the business more environmentally responsible. There was an accountability check system, and I had a small role to play as the principal contact.

“Could you show me what changes have been made?” For instance, did you buy the solar panels or digitally controlled water faucets? The replies were defensive. There had been problems with the contractor and arguments with the finance officer concerning the costs of installation and maintenance. “Well, then, how did you use the funds in the end?”

“Oh, purchasing plans have been stalled, but we have been successful in implementing the internal policies on energy, paper and water usage in the offices and plant.” Data was flashed at me, showing the reduced hours of indoor lighting as well as water meter readings and estimates of paper recycling quantities.

“That is very good,” I said. “Congratulations on reducing electricity, water and paper. On behalf of the government—you know I am acting on behalf of the state in my role as consultant here—we would like to be enlightened on the use of the state funding for environmental efficiency. When can we have the report?”

They hummed and hawed. I called my supervisor in the government bureau who suggested a new final deadline. I relayed the warning and gave the new deadline. I got, “fines” and “no problems” and the like.

I did not see Cynthia on that occasion. She was on some business trip, so her secretary reported. She emailed me to invite me to join her at a café a week later. I agreed to the meeting, but I stayed away from any business conversation.

“How’s it going?” she inquired. She looked thin and had dark circles under her eyes. I told her that I was taking a creative writing course. “Oh, you’ve got a new hobby? That’s great.”

“So do you have a hobby?”

“Me. No, no time. I just go to yoga classes and I like jazz.”

We continued the small talk and suddenly she mentioned that her condo was on the market. “Are you going for something bigger and better?”

“No, not yet. Actually, I’m going to live with my dad for awhile. I’m the only child, and, you know, he’s single these days. I think he needs a hand and would like the company, though he says he’s fine.”

“I see.”

Time passed and we did not get a report. Someone called their bank, and we learned informally that the company was in debt. An official contacted the company to ask for clarification and offer to make some special arrangement, but the replies were rather vague.

Knowing I had a personal contact, I was pushed to call and try to find out more. Cynthia called me back after two messages. "Frankly," she confided, "the market has changed and we're not selling as well as before. My dad is too stuck in his ways to change. I'm sorry."

Apparently, the government environmental funds had been put towards regular operational expenses. I guess the real motive for saving energy and water was to find funds to pay off some bills. Anyway, the company lost the government's energy efficiency seal, which they tried to contest but failed. An order for repayment of the grant was sent, but the company was soon declared bankrupt.

I never saw Cynthia in person again. I had only one more correspondence after that episode. Her father got cancer on top of the court notices. I was invited to the funeral. It was a smaller ceremony than the family had probably wanted, I imagine, but I realized that he had been unable to keep up with the life insurance payments. I overheard some relative telling guests that his house had just been sold, but a lot of the proceeds were garnished to creditors and medical payments-to both Cynthia and her dad. Cynthia was absent from the funeral because she was confined in a substance abuse rehabilitation program. No trace of her fiance was to be heard or seen.

There was a news article that stood out in my mind. It appeared a few months following her father's funeral. Cynthia had been arrested for theft. The article said she had fallen off the wagon and was so badly off that she was stealing to support her habit.

I suppose that this entitled woman is entitled to a few more things in life now. She's likely entitled to a lawyer and a fair trial, a medical and psychological assessment, medical care, consideration for state security, and such.

END

11.THE CAREER WOMAN

I got to know Elaine when I was assigned to write a piece on her for the village paper. That was when I was just starting out as a journalist after graduation, which was in the nineties. A community center was holding a celebration and tribute for Elaine upon her retirement from community service as a director of a homecare service for the elderly run out of the center for decades. Elaine had earned a name for herself as a dedicated professional and outspoken advocate, so the paper thought her retirement and the retirement party newsworthy. I did not care particularly, not being from the area and my major having been political science, but it was my job, so I went to investigate.

Bearing a credential, I did not need an invitation, so I was let into the hall at the community center in time for the speeches. They gave me dinner, too. I ate quiche and salad off to the side of the head table in a reserved area. Few other members of the press were there, though; I sat next to a radio journalist while community TV video-recorded the proceedings nearby.

Between mouthfuls, I reviewed my notes of my internet search and phonecalls, including a phonecall interview with the woman of the hour herself. Some 30 years prior, Elaine had started out as a new Canadian working as a homecare worker herself for several years before

being invited to join the administration once she had finally obtained a college diploma by tedious part-time online and night school study. She certainly sounded like a deserving and honourable citizen.

I was interrupted by the radio guy asking me, "What's going to be your angle?"

I said I did not know yet, that I was still thinking of it. "Maybe helper to senior becomes senior," I suggested, rather glibly.

Actually, the editor had told me what angle to take, as usual. (We in the media compete and might dig but do not reveal what we know and think to the competition, as a rule, except when there is an MOU or at least a quiet collegial agreement to share, given the trend to reduce staff and cut overhead these days.) It was simple: dedicated service worker and outstanding member of the community is recognized. I was allowed 350 words on the subject.

By the next day, I had enough for a feature because of how much I ended up learning about Elaine. I am working on one now.

On a screen behind the head table were images of Elaine taken intermittently over the years as the MC recited a biographical account. There was Elaine with various clients at different ages, then her at the graduation ceremony, followed by shots of her at a desk and attending various administrative and community events. These shots led to pictures of her family and pets before news photos sprang up and took over. The biography worked its way to her status as a social policy critic and friend to seniors always working hard to improve the lives of seniors and help out their families.

There were toasts, of course. Finally, the honoured woman got to give a scripted speech. I opened my notepad, though I had been promised a copy of the audio file. Writing and observing the reading let me check out the body language and reactions in the room. There were a lot of smiling admirers and supporters among the something like 500 people in attendance, that is for sure.

"Here we are, the day has come," began Elaine without looking at her script. "We've had a few good kicks at the can, haven't we?" (Cheers.) "Together, maybe we've actually been useful." (Cheers again.) "I guess I could have done more, but I did what I thought I should at the time as much as I thought I could get away with, and, hey, we got to kick some butt!" (More cheers.)

Elaine pauses and checks her script on the podium before her. "Looking after the disabled and elderly in their homes is challenging and hard work. It's been a long time since I actually did that work, but I try to remember it. Let's keep supporting our deserving homecare workers in this province! We need them and they need you!" (A lot of yeahs are heard.)

"It's been fun and rewarding, but I guess I should step down before I need those workers to help me out." (Laughter.) "Well, we improved the working conditions, not without some

struggle, and I got into a more privileged lifestyle once I entered management, beginning with the district coordinator's position that I got thanks to Monica, the wonderful and special lady who retired and asked me to step up to the plate. Thank you, Monica, wherever you are in the universe now! (Cheers.) You were a generous and wise mentor. I'd also like to thank the kind clients and their family members and friends who not only put in good words for me, but also stuck their neck out in the public arena to support our services, society, its members, and our advocated positions. And I'd like to thank the office teams who first showed me the ropes and without whom I could not have carried out my jobs." (A "we love you, Elaine," and some "here, here's" are sounded.)

"Let me give a note of thanks to the politicians who listened to me and those that didn't and thereby made me want to push harder—" (Laughter.) "Really, I am grateful to the elected representatives who did listen, and the critics for their role in helping to popularize our positions, but especially those who picked up the ball and initiated some legal and policy changes we called for over the years. Here's to you!" She picks up a wine glass and tips it towards the far wall of the room, avoiding eye contact with any particular politician present, and the crowd echoed the line, "Here's to you!"

I should probably express some gratitude to our local and regional media for their part in reporting our thoughts, creating some room for debate, and reporting on the conditions to which we addressed our recommendations, and still do!" This time, Elaine gazes towards us in the designated media space and says, "Here's to you!" A few voices in the hall chime in with "here, here".

"Well, I suppose I'll have more free time than I'm used to, so be sure that I won't shut up." (Yeas.) Have no fear—or maybe certain others out there should be fearful. (Laughter.) After all, I'm a senior myself, and actually have been for about 10 years already. That's authenticity in action." ("Yes, it is!" Hoorays.) I have taken some time off now and then, though not much. I travelled to Mexico and Italy and Thailand. I don't know if I feel like traveling. We'll see. I'll take time out and size things up and then see what I want to do. Maybe I'll find some project and make myself useful in some new way. Don't forget me, for I won't forget you. Thank you, everybody. Do keep in touch. See you around." (Huge extended applause with whistles and yelps.)

This woman definitely was a popular "personality" some distance beyond her professional arena and local community. It was an impressive event and she made an impressive speech. I was getting more motivated to interview her.

An aide took my card and note requesting an interview that evening "behind the scenes." Someone beckoned me through a door within a few minutes. Elaine was standing before me, enclosed in a huddle.

"You're the person from the Village Bugle, I take it?" I nodded. "Listen, I do want to have a conversation with you. Let's make it later, or tomorrow. Gosh, so many people want to speak with me tonight. I'll do what I can as soon as I can. I promise." I shrugged. It was a pretty good reply.

I went home a little after midnight after I had interviewed colleagues and community leaders to get more background. Maybe I would get the okay for more than one article. I was not exactly disappointed that the star of the show had not met with me for the one-on-one that evening. I just hoped and prayed that I would within the next couple of days so that the piece would make the next available issue as the editor wanted. I rehearsed an explanation for the editor to give him in the morning then soon drifted off to sleep. Was I ever surprised when the phone woke me up and it was Elaine calling herself. "How about that interview?" I thought she was a little tipsy.

"Now?"

"Yeah. I don't know about you, but I'm not going to sleep tonight. It's been too exciting. Here's your chance to catch me in the moment. Why don't you come over?"

"Now? It's five o'clock."

"That's right. Perfect time, in the peaceful twilight of breaking dawn. We can sit out on the patio. I'll put the coffee on, if you need it." She gave the address. Bleary-eyed, I struggled to scribble it down.

I just splashed my face, ran a comb through my hair and threw on some jeans. Then I grabbed my notepad and the recorder along with my bag and was out the door in a jiffy. She lived in a condo about three kilometers from my place.

I pulled up to her building and saw that all the lights were on in her ground floor apartment, including the patio lanterns off the side of the building. There she was in a lavish peacock blue silk kimono with embossings of yellow flowers, pink geisha girls and green pine trees. As I approached the front door, Elaine called out as she swayed grandly, "I'll press the button to let you in."

Condo number one made a strong impression on the visitor; there were plush salmon colored wall-to-wall carpets, prints and sketches hanging on the walls, and thinly stemmed polished cherry wood accent furnishings accompanying a hefty plum colored velveteen covered sectional sofa that started on the other side of the sliding patio doors and turned along the far wall, concluding where a healthy fig tree grew in a multicolored porcelain Chinese pot. The cooking area and dining table with a granite topped chef's island in between opened up to the sitting area. Elaine evidently had style.

Eying my cell phone in my hand, Elaine gave me permission to take photos. "Go ahead," she called out with a nod from half way through the patio door. Everything was just thoroughly cleaned in case the party came here. It didn't, though a couple of friends were here until about three, I think it was. Welcome—What was your name? Come out here, if you want. Join me in a glass of champagne. It's free, compliments of the organization. It's pretty tasty. I've already had a couple of glasses of it."

“Thanks. It’s Robin, Robin Sanderson. Well, I’ll have a taste if you’re having some. Still celebrating, I see. Looks like you’re really enjoying myself.”

“Oh, yes, I am. I’m free,” declared Elaine waving an arm theatrically. “Right. I am a little under the influence, but I didn’t start until after one this morning. I did not wish to drink during the formal thing, but it’s a different matter in my home, and on such a day.”

“Congratulations, by the way,” I said as I sat down on a plastic ribbon woven patio chair seat. Elaine nodded and proceeded to pour me a glass. “Nice place.”

“Yes, it took a while to get it to this point. My salary’s been pretty good in recent years. You can look that up, because it is public info published in the annual report.”

“Okay,” I answered, a bit distracted. I was looking around for more clues to this woman’s life and had spotted a photo of young woman. “Is your husband not celebrating with you?” Of course, such a man was noticeably absent from the ceremony and the hearth.

“We divorced some years ago. Here you go. Drink up. Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

“His name is in the bio provided with the program. He was a lawyer who started his own NGO. That’s a photo of a daughter over there on the end table. She graduated in geography and lives in Trinidad working for a Canadian engineering firm and they’ve been on some project with a strict deadline in Venezuela lately. I talk to her all the time and she’ll try to take a break and visit me next month, she said. She’s a good daughter, but she likes her career as much as I liked mine.”

“She sounds very different from you.”

“That’s for sure. Of course, she had a very different start in life. This is a working gig, for you, right? Notepad and recorder ready? Ah, I see you’re already on the job. Atta girl! After the war, my parents immigrated from Europe. They were solid working class and did what they could for me and my brother. However, they struggled. We moved around the country. When we were teens, they split up and my mom took me while my father got my brother. We saw each other, but my father and brother perished in a car accident outside Prince George. Oh, that was so long ago. My mother got work in the Lower Mainland at a cannery, then she had to work in a dry cleaning shop for a while after the cannery closed down. She learned stenography and typing in her few hours of free time and got employed doing assisting a shipping firm in the office, but she said she found signs of corruption as she got more into bookkeeping, so she quit and started working at the head office of a shoe store chain. She was happy there, and soon met a man at a sales meeting. She made sure I did not quit high school like I wanted, but I worked part-time in a grocery store. We could not afford college fees, but I studied to have some employable skills. I wanted to get into hospitality, so I worked as a chambermaid while I studied part-time. That hotel and others did not hire me. My mom said it was because of my background, so I had better set my sights on something

more attainable. That was when I began working in homecare services. I actually was doing it part-time, because that's how you started out, and I was working as an assistant manager in a hardware store four days a week, any way. The hardware store got bought out and the staff let loose, so I asked for more homecare hours. I did the live-in work and surved sofas on weekends for about five years. I had boyfriends, but I couldn't impress the kind of man I wanted. I just played around and hoped that things would work out better, eventually. I finished a business course on the side, and that's when Monica mentioned she was planing to retire in a coupel of years and told me I could be a candidate to take over if I started helping out in the head office."

I was nodding and hm-hmming and scribbling as fast as I could. "So it must have been the eighties when you first started working in homecare service?"

"Correct."

"And around the end of the eighties, you started in the office? Like, as a coordinator, I imagine?"

"Yep. I set schedules, contacted the workers. I also helped plan the training seminars for the workers—the community center let us book people to talk on diseases, aging and nutrition and such once a month. I assisted with recruitment, too. I had a hand in promotions after the organization took over the territory of a private outfit that went belly up, and the province had a bigger budget to share. I was learning the ropes and knew Monica's role of manager pretty well by the time she announced her retirement. She had taught me and groomed me well. The organization paid for management courses for me, upon Monica's recommendation. They had to post the job and have an alternative incase the board members had objections or I changed my mind, but the board members had been won over through the efforts of Monica and her allies, and I did not change my mind. It was the best opportunity I had up until them. There. The rest is all documented so I don't need to rehash the rest of my story. Let's drink up some more. How about a little breakfast to cushion the drink?"

"No, I—"

Elaine grabbed my glass from the patio table and poured another drink for me, then scooted into the cooking area and began rummaging about the cupboards and refridgerator. I scratchd my head and tried to think up some questions. It all sounded smooth and well rehearsed. Well, I guess she had shared her story a million times before, and certainly must have done so frequently of late.

Elaine sacheted across the indoor sitting area with a plate of sliced multigrain bread, jam and fruit samples as I tried to drum up a challenging question. She sat down on the sofa so I went in, slipped off my coat and sat down on a nearby section, tossing the coat on the back of the seat. I decided to look for signs of something juicier. "Tell me more about what it was look to be a homecare worker, in your experience."

“There were a lot of characters,” answered Elaine as she shoved the plate along the glass top of the coffee table, “both among the workers and the clients. That’s for sure. One woman resented the help so much that she often struck us with her cane and swore at us. Another would sit sobbing. Some were passive because of their dementia. They’d just sit there and it was hard to get them to talk or go for a walk or listen to music, whatever. Then there were the ones who always complained, like we never worked hard enough for them. We weren’t supposed to do heavy tasks like washing windows or cupboards. Another complained we were loose and irresponsible every time we took time off due to us, I mean during live-in jobs. We weren’t supposed to work in evenings except with special instructions like for assisting the disabled bathe and get to bed, or to be there in emergencies. We were supposed to have personal time and we were allowed to go out after the work was done, during designated hours. Naturally, we were pressed to do chores and stay in all the time. It wasn’t fair.

“Well, there were some nice ones, but most made us feel bad. Situations made us behave badly in response. I remember one gal, she was incredible. What a character! It was this rugby player who used to commute by bike all over the Lower Mainland and up the valley. I remember her telling me how she would be riding out to Chilliwack late at night when she was supposed to be sleeping over at the client’s house because she wanted to do some hard partying, or score or sell. Yeah, she was keen on making money on the side. She liked to daring things and she prodded us or dared us to do likewise. She started this thing of collecting souvenirs from clients’ homes. She was stealing stuff, she said, rationalizing that the client was too old, didn’t care and wouldn’t have any more use for the stuff. She was taking things she thought she could use at first, then it escalated to stealing luxury items she could carry out just for the sake of stealing and getting away with it. She started this practice of collecting trophies of what she called “our career achievements” —meaning souvenirs of the houses and people we looked after as part of our rightful remuneration. Hah! Now, let me clear, it was just done at the richer homes, the ones in Point Grey, Shaughnessy and West Van.” She was lounging back in the corner of the seat, grinning from ear to ear.

I was on the edge of my seat now. “Did you steal stuff too?” I knew the alcohol was loosening up her tongue, and I only wanted to take advantage. She invited me; it was a real interview, and on the record.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. See that cabinet with all the odd ornaments. I could still name almost every person to whom they used to belong. Then there is some stuff in boxes down in my locker. Like, there was this pompous and haughty woman who bragged about her precious items. They had complete collections of literary works. One was a complete set of the Greek classics all bound and printed exactly alike by the same company. Not only was I curious and interested in *The Odyssey*, personally, but I didn’t like her and I wanted to break up a set just to spite the bitch. I took *The Odyssey* and never returned it. It was a good read, by the way.”

My mouth was hanging open. “Go on.”

“We all sold some stuff, sometimes right from the threshold of the home while we were on shift! Can you imagine?” She was laughing. I wasn’t. “We would meet at a bar or café now

and then (not everyone drank) to compare notes and brag about our booty and sales. But more money was to be had selling dope on the side. That rugby playing cyclist started it. She had a source. Not everyone participated in the trade, but a lot of us did. Just pot, and occasionally a little hashish. We did not considerate it harmful. Ha-ha. We even used a little on the job. Right there. Ha-ha-ha.”

“You were in a drug ring? A ring of homecare workers?”

“That’s right. Listen, in the old days, nearly everybody was using and even trading at least a little.

“If you say so.”

“Anyway, it was all foolish. Yes. It was a kind of futile rebellion, I guess. Perhaps the efforts I made later in my career are redeeming enough. I organized for change with education, campaigning and lobbying. I hope everyone sees that. Do what you will. Think the Village Bugle can handle it?”

“You really want me to report what you’ve told me tonight? I don’t know.” It probably was too much for the Bugle.

“Hey, it’s how life was. The law can’t touch me because too much time has passed and you don’t really have evidence, regardless. My reputation speaks for itself. No-one can take away my achievements. The celebration of my career tonight was real. There are good reasons for I and many others to feel good about the positive changes and the good work done, for seniors, the disabled and the workers.”

She was sounding reasonable at this point. “I think I’ll complete the assignment of reporting on your retirement and tribute. The rest, your after hours confessions might be best presented as an independent contribution to a bigger publication. I’ll talk to my editor, if you back me up—about a feature for the national press, I mean.”

“Yes, certainly. Go for it, Robin. You have my sincerest wishes that your reporting brings you greater success as a journalist.” Elaine stood up. “What time is it? God, now I’m feeling it. Time for a nap, I think. Any more questions, and you can reach me later today, okay? Please take yourself off, now. Don’t worry about tidying. I can do it later. I have skills, right?” She winked and moved across the room towards what was likely her bedroom door. “Bye, Robin. Have a great day.”

END

12.AWAY

“I’ll just be away for a week,” she tells her live-in lover. “It’s no big deal. I already explained.”

“Yeah. All of a sudden, some relative contacts you and makes this unusual request. You never talk to relatives, and, as far as I know, they have not contacted you before.”

“Basically, but, like I told you before, there have been a few Christmas cards exchanged and some form letter mailouts over email.” She sighs. “You’re just not used to me being away overnight.”

“No, I’m not. We’ve been together two years —“

“Living together 18 months.”

“Right. You’re counting, so I guess you need a break.”

“You know that’s not how it is, not what I’m saying.”

“Time to loosen the leash, eh?”

“Ben, you know I have a life that has existed longer than I’ve known you. I do have an origin, a family, even though I haven’t been communicating with them much, except for my little sis.”

“I thought you wanted to be together, have a life together.”

“I do. There’s no contradiction. Relax. Anyway, you’ve been away before, for work and to see that friend in Regina.”

“Yeah. Are you complaining, now? I explained. It couldn’t be helped.”

“Okay. And, so in my case—“

“It doesn’t sound as important as my case.”

“No, not to you. Try to understand.”

He does not answer. Instead, he turns away and exits the kitchen stepping out the door into the backyard. He likes to play at yard work when he is pouting. He is silently accepting under duress, as is his way when things do not go as he prefers.

Chelsea shakes her head and finishes tidying up the dishes before going to the bedroom to finish the packing. Her aunt lives in a rural community, so she only needs simple casual clothes. She places a pair of clean jeans and a pair of dress slacks in the case, then chooses some tops.

Her sister calls. “Is he still grumbling about your leaving?”

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

“Chels, I’ve been holding back something, some information. Maybe I should say it to you in

person.”

“Very mysterious! What kind of information?”

“It’s gossip—something a friend of Jeremy’s mentioned. It might not be 100% true, but it is a bit unsettling so I think you should know.”

“Can’t it wait until I return? The bus leaves in a couple of hours.”

“It thought your trip might be the best time to digest this news.”

“Spill it. Come on.”

“This friend of Jeremy’s told Jer that the friend that Ben went to see was an old flame from his college days.”

“Oh, third-hand intel passed around a bar. Very solid evidence.”

“Yeah, it was at a bar when Jer was out as usual with his coworkers last Thursday. The rat knows one of the co-workers and Ben’s name came up and he said he’d heard that Ben had gone to see someone he used to run around with because she had emailed him with some excuse.”

“Okay, gossip thread duly noted. Thanks for the posting.”

“You’re welcome. Think about it before you get in any deeper.”

“I live with him.”

“You know what I mean—before you make any deeper commitment about the future.”

Chelsea pauses, then replies, “K, sis. I appreciate your signalling the alert. Like I said, it’s noted. I promise I’ll reflect, but I am sure it’s nothing. He is entitled to have a past and talk to old friends.”

“As are you.”

“Yes, as I am. I know he has to adjust to that. He’s been single a long time, Cal.”

There is no reply.

“No, I am not making up excuses for him. We’ll sort it out, the two of us, without your mediation, okay? Gotta go. Still packing.”

“Safe trip. Hope there is a little fun to be had for you.”

“Me too. Bye.”

“Give me a call when you get there.”

“All right. Bye-bye.”

“Your sister again?”

Chelsea jumps slightly.

“Jeremy must be one pushover. She oughta loosen her corset and make him a man.”

“Ben.”

On the bus, Chelsea reviews the letter from her aunt, her mother’s older sister, Penelope. She writes that she wants to pass some articles to her because they are linked to her mother. Chelsea thinks back to when she last saw Aunt Penny. It must have been at her mother’s funeral reception some six years ago. She had not said much, but then both she and Chelsea were naturally upset and preoccupied at the time. Aunt Penny only said she would get in touch with Chelsea later, which she had not done in six years.

Funerals are the wrong time for the survivors to be obligated to be polite and attentive hosts, thinks Chelsea. They actually need private time and space to grieve, rather than put up a public face. It is really an unfair situation and the experience has made her want to avoid funerals and plan something really simple for her own passing.

“Who wants to remember those times, too?” Chelsea asks herself. Remembering only reopens the grief. “I can’t blame Auntie for wanting to suppress the memory and the memories of her sister by avoiding her niece,” she reflects.

It takes pretty much a day to travel by bus from Winnipeg to Edmonton. The road is quite icy in patches and there have already been some snow falls though it is still early November. Chelsea manages to nap halfway through, but wakes up for the dinner break. She calls to let her Aunt know she is on her way as scheduled. “A-okay,” is the sparse reply. It will be dark and frosty when Chelsea arrives, but her Aunt reminds her that a cab will be waiting for her at the bus station. She has even sent the cab number with a photo of the driver by text, for the sake of security. Her aunt was always a thoughtful and thorough planner, her mom had always said.

She arrives and her aunt opens the door briskly and promptly as Chelsea makes it to the landing with a bag in each hand and a small day pack on her back. The room behind Aunt Penny is dimly lit but Chelsea can make out the pale lined face framed with grey hair above the pale pink housecoat as her Aunt motions her to proceed upstairs with a hand. “It’s on the right—your mom’s old room, in fact. If you’re not hungry right now, let’s put aside the greeting until the morning, shall we? This is late for me.”

“I’m fine. That’s alright. I have a book.”

“There’s water and some biscuits by the bed, in case. I could put some tea on...?”

“No tea just before bed, thanks. The water’s fine for now.”

“Good night, then.”

“Good night, Auntie Pen. It’s good to see you.”

“Hah. I’ll look better in the morning. I promise.”

The old woman seems curt. Chelsea considers that someone who had spent decades as a surgical nurse had probably seen some pretty harsh things that might harden one’s outlook. She also knows that the loss of her baby over thirty years ago and her husband’s death some 15 years ago had likely caused her to toughen up.

Chelsea scans the bedroom she enters—it is a lost world of her mother’s where she had slept from childhood through to her graduation with a teacher’s certificate. She knew that her aunt kept the room for guests, but she had preserved some of the past. There was the homemade patch quilt, and vintage four poster bed and compatible chair situated nearby. The walls had been redecorated with an innocuous flower print relieved by some stripes in places (not a pattern to Chelsea’s liking at all), but there was the familiar brass bedside lamp and the old hooked rug, faded but still strong. Pictures of her mother as a bright looking happy child and complacent pretty teen sit framed on the newish dresser.

The atmosphere was simultaneously comforting yet disconcerting. Chelsea dons her nightwear, gets into the soft bed and tries to read so as to distract herself and let herself get drowsy. Memories and itchy thoughts try to break through for a few hours, so that she gets little sleep that first night in this house.

“I bought coffee just for you. Bet you want some now. I never sleep much traveling,” remarks Aunt Pen at the breakfast table.

“That was very considerate. You remembered. And, yeah, I didn’t sleep so well last night and the night before last.”

“Lotsa memories percolating up, no doubt. Comes with the territory, I’m afraid.”

“I realize that. I tried to prepare myself.”

“Still—“

“You live with it all the time so I guess you’re used to it.”

“You can’t escape your past, so no use trying. In fact, that’s sorta why I wanted to speak to

you, one-on-one without disruptions here.”

“Promise made to mom?”

“No, actually. It’s my own notion. I’m 70 now and who knows what shape I’ll be in within a few years. When your stepdad called out of the blue three months ago to give me an update on the family, I decided it was time to reach out to you. I appreciate you complying with the request. Better to get to make this trip before winter, too.”

“I see, I see. You say Jim spoke to you? What do you mean by ‘update’?”

“Just how and what everyone’s doing. I learned you had settled in with somebody. It made me want to discuss your mom a bit with you.”

“You’ve definitely got me intrigued. It’s a little scary, at the same time.”

“Sure. You can stay a whole week?”

“Yup. Ben doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like me being away at all, but I thought it was important, for me and for you.”

“Good thinking.” Her aunt faces her across the table with a poker face. She stirs to serve up the scrambled eggs. “Well, then, since you’ll be here a few days, no need to hurry. Let’s eat up while the food’s still and get reacquainted today. I’ll show you around the village this afternoon. I still drive in the daylight. Got that Volkswagon Golf still. Can you imagine?”

The first couple of days are pleasant. Chelsea learns more about her Aunt’s work and how she has been living in recent years. Penelope learns more about Chelsea’s work and her partner in return. The conversation remains on safe territory until the third day.

“I wish I’d had time to talk more with you around the time of the funeral, but, God, was it a difficult time. I suppose it was to you. And I don’t blame you if you wanted to avoid me to avoid the past.”

“Hon, I already told you. There is no use trying to avoid the past. Not that we need to roll around in it, either. It was more because of the tension between me and your stepfather, and my own grieving which has taken some time to heal. Plus, you can see now that it is not an easy thing to go from here to Winnipeg by road. My pension’s small, but, no, it would have been worth the trip regardless. I guess I did not know what to say until now, and it appears that the time is ripe.”

“I get it. Are you on better terms with Jim now?”

“I can honestly say, ‘yes.’”

They are walking along the river pathway. They stroll for nearly 10 more minutes before

Penelope speaks again.

“Here it is. Your dad and mom did not have an ideal relationship.”

“That’s not new to me. I remember them fighting, but they sorted it out and stayed together.”

“Until you and your sister were adults, that is. They separated before he got sick, remember?”

“Yes.”

“Your mom and I used to talk about that relationship. I feel I should reveal something about it to you.”

“Ah.What?”

“Let’s sit down here.”

“It’s because of Jim’s description of this Ben that I thought I should speak my mind. I can see history repeating itself, so I wanted to give you some extra food for thought, before you cement that relationship with Ben into something more permanent.”

“We’re together and taking time to build the relationship.”

“You’re committed to him, but how much is he committed to you?”

“Just before I came here, Callie told me that Jeremy had heard something about Ben through the grapevine. He said that he had seen an old flame on an overnight trip a few months back. He told me it was ‘just a friend’ from his school days. He hadn’t let on that it was a female friend. Still, I see no harm, even if they did get cosy. Maybe they had to resolve old feelings, tie things up. I intend to talk to him.”

“Hear what you’re saying? You’ve made a commitment, but you’re pretty relaxed about the possibility of him revisiting a lover from the past. Yet, he seems suspicious of your comings and goings, from what you say.”

“I’m just giving him the benefit of the doubt, until I talk to him. I’m sure it was an honest affair—I mean an honest exchange.”

“Chelsea, your mom confided in me that she no longer loved your dad long before they split up. She wanted you and your sister to grow up more before they did. Now, I know you loved your dad. He was a good father, and so you should have. I’m saying that he and your mother did not have such a good relationship because the love had run out, and that they kept it together for appearances’ sake even though people knew that they both had friends with benefits on the side. They made an arrangement, and vowed to postpone the official break

up. Put yourself in her shoes, now. What kind of life do you think that was?"

Chelsea had always thought that her Aunt Penelope, despite her natural cheeriness in an earlier era, had been edgy around her father because of her own misfortune of losing a baby daughter and not being able to have more children. She was beginning to see her past in a new light, however.

"And you're saying all this to me because...?"

"Your mom would not have wanted you to make a similar mistake. She would want you to choose wisely and be happy."

"Fair enough." Chelsea rises to walk some more and take in this news. Then her cellphone rings. It's Ben. "Ben, Aunt Penny and I are in the middle of something at the moment. Can I call you back later today?"

Penelope can detect that Ben is protesting and asking questions. She raises an eyebrow. "He does not accept being told to wait by you very well. He seems suspicious, too. Not good signs."

"Okay, you're right. I have been thinking that we just need to get to know each other better and establish more trust."

"Yet you're basically living as husband and wife and have been for quite some time. Have you put your cart before your horse? Aren't couples supposed to feel trust then live together?"

"You don't know him."

"No, but I'm learning a lot. I see some red flags, Chelsea. So does Jim, and your little sister, by the way."

"You're all conspiring to talk me out of this relationship?"

"We are concerned for you. We want the best for you, as I said your mom would want too. I want to do what your mom would want."

Chelsea turns back to walk to the parking lot and sits in silence while Penelope starts up the car's motor and takes them back to the house. After dinner, they sit in the living room watching a comical film on TV before the older woman excuses herself to retire for the night. The coffee is brewing when Chelsea makes it downstairs in the morning. Her aunt has expected her to need an extra cup this morning.

"It's difficult to take in, I know. Let it settle in your mind and process the information before you say much more," advises Aunt Penny without bothering with a morning greeting. Wrapped in a knit throw and her cardigan, Chelsea takes a mug of coffee out to the front

steps. She decides she needs some space away from her Aunt for the moment, and asks to borrow her car.

“Yes, dear, as long as you’ve a current license. Going far?”

“I thought I might go to town and shop.”

“There are some nice specialty shops there these days. Enjoy.”

Chelsea has in mind a gift for Ben to show him her loyalty, to show him she has been keeping him in mind. She hesitates once she is in a men’s clothing boutique, though. “Who am I kidding? This is time for me. Anyway, he’d just scorn a gift,” she realizes.

Instead, Chelsea browses through women’s wear and other shops. She chooses a blouse for the officem and picks up some fine fabric with which to make an ensemble for the blouse herself. Then she finds herself attracted to an art supply store, and winds up purchasing sketching and painting materials.

It is late in the afternoon by the time she returns to her Aunt’s abode. “Have fun? Want to show me what you bought?” Penelope peers at the openings in the bags and the name of the shops printed on them. She gazes at Chelsea, a little smugness peeping through the mask of feigned indifference. Suddenly, she says to Chelsea, “Come. There are some things I’ve been meaning to show you.”

Downstairs in the semi-finished heated basement, there are some pieces of furniture and boxes arranged in a corner. “I put these aside for you. Some of these things belonged to your mother and some are mine.”

Penelope uncovers an electric sewing machine, circa 1985 and apparently in good working order. Your mom said that you took home ec in school and liked making clothes for awhile. “Planning on giving it another go? If so, you can have this machine, and there are some old but fine quality remnants and notions, if you want. Since you’ve been to an art store today, I hope you don’t mind me saying that your mom always wanted you to do something more with your art degree. Here is my cousin’s old easel and some canvases and frames. They’re yours if you want. I believe there’s a sketch pad and some water colours here, too. They are probably in okay condition.”

At the mention of her degree in fine arts, Chelsea feels defensive. “I got into insurance because there was a good opportunity round the time I was buying the house. With the responsibility of a mortgage, then living with Ben when he was changing jobs...” Her voice trails off.

“Your house is in your name, and you’re principally responsible for the payments? I see.” Penelope looks through some more items to appear focused on another topic rather have Chelsea know that she has picked on her sense of shame at that moment. “Now there are some pieces of furniture I no longer need, and some of your mom’s and dad’s books and

knick-knacks. Have a look through it all and think about what you want. If you want some items, I'll arrange to have a truck deliver them to your home. Really, it is not at all a charitable gesture. You can see for yourself that these are unused items. Besides, to tell you the truth, I've been thinking about selling this place."

Chelsea makes a list of the available items and says she will think over the offer. Chelsea makes dinner with some groceries bought fresh that same day. While preparing the meal, her aunt sets the table. Chelsea queries, "You said you want to sell your house?"

"I'll have to pack it in sooner or later. This place will be too much for me to look after soon enough. The market value has come back up, so it might be a good time to sell within the next 12 months. Frankly, Chels, I wanted to ask you something first before I put it on the market. It is yours if you want it—it is due as your inheritance. I do not need money from a sale. My name is on a waiting list on a place in the next town over where the rent is low and location is suitably convenient. I intend to keep my independence and liberate myself somewhat from housekeeping and yard chores. Anyway, we could look at the option of selling it later as long as I am alive, if need be."

Chelsea is standing, boiled potato held up on the end of a fork in one hand, the other hand on her upper chest and mouth agape. "I never even thought of it."

"You're a decent person, Chelsea. It would rightfully go to you through inheritance. We'd have to ask your sister next, if you refuse the offer. Take your time and think about it. Let me know by the New Year."

"I don't know. My work and all is in Winnipeg these days."

"I know, dear, but it is my duty to ask you, and your sister if it is appropriate."

"She's married and settled outside Winnipeg, as you know—"

"Quite, but, like I say, she must be kept in the loop and aware of her options."

"Yes, yes. Well, I'll think over your offer. No point in rushing to a decision on matters such as this."

"Indeed. In the meantime, you're welcome here anytime. Mmm. That is smelling and looking good. Can we eat yet?"

The next day, Chelsea decides to depart early and use the remaining time to pay a visit to her stepfather, who lives in Red Deer, on the way back to Winnipeg. "From what you've told me, I feel I need to talk to him now, Auntie."

"I understand, Chelsea. Do keep in touch and come back any time." Chelsea calls Ben to briefly update him on her change of plans. She simply hangs up the call when he fusses and shoots out questions. "See you when I get home in about three days."

Chelsea calls Jim who is pleased with her suggested visit. "I'll be around. Just doing my hobbies and tending to the dogs and this place these days. You say tonight. No problem. Just don't expect five-star service."

"Ha. Three or even two-star service would be adequate, I assure you. See you around 6 p.m. or so? I have to double-check the schedule and exchange my return ticket."

"Fine. Just call and let me know if there is a delay or change."

"He really is a nice and engaging person," thinks Chelsea.

He is there waiting at the station when she arrives. He takes her for a quick dinner and promises hot cocoa in front of the fire at his place. "It's good to see you, pal."

"Yeah, likewise. I thought you deserved a little one-on-one time too. I've been learning things and I want to say that you've been a great stepfather, role-model and solid shoulder to lean on over the years. I really appreciate it. I know that you truly loved mom, and I am grateful for you looking after her, and us."

Jim's eyes get a little watery, and he does not know how to respond right away because this declaration is even more unexpected than the visit. "I-I don't know what to say. Thank-you for saying this, Chels. It means a lot." They get up to leave the restaurant and they hug each other. "You've become a fine woman, dear."

Chelsea stays at Jim's for a couple of days. They go horseback riding and he introduces her to some friends. She enjoys his company. He can be amusing and very interesting, she decides. Chelsea puts herself on a bus headed for Winnipeg. On a pit stop in Regina, though, she has an epiphany. She calls Callie. "Cal, I'm going to stay away longer. Could you do me a favour and get into my place and grab some more of my things? Just make some excuse—I burnt a sweater, or you want to borrow my clothes, or I lost my bag. Whatever. I'm going back to Auntie Pen's. When am I coming home? I think I am. I don't know when I'll be back in Winnipeg. Look, I'll explain more later. I'm not sure what I'm doing right now, but I'm doing it."

She calls her Aunt. "As I said, Chels, you are welcome back any time. I guess you're giving some thought to keeping this house. Good for you!"

"Yeah, I've got some thoughts. I don't quite know what to do with them all yet, but I'll figure it out."

END