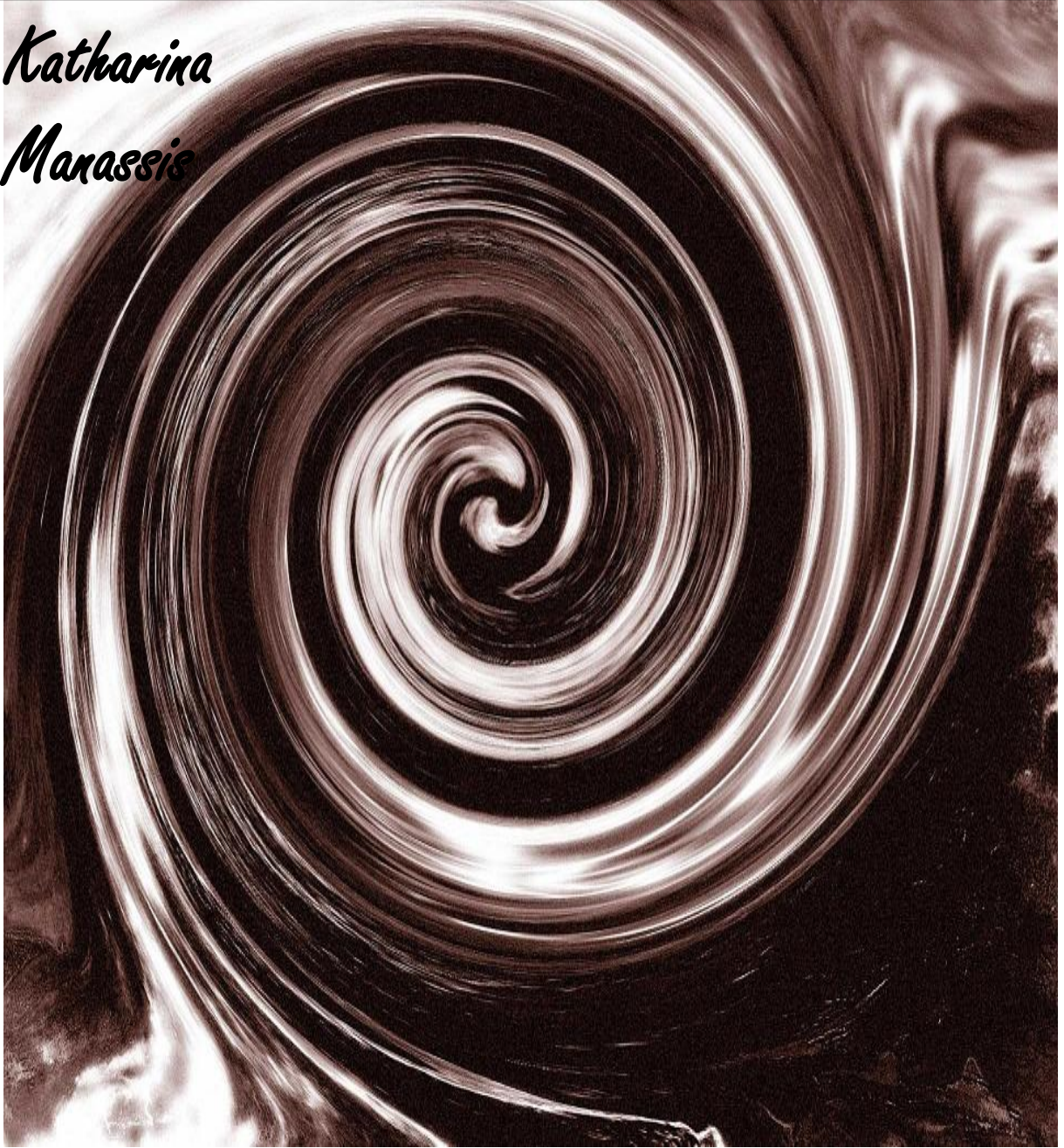


BITTERSWEET CHRONICLE

3rd Edition

Katharina

Marassis



About the Author

Katharina Manassis is a retired child psychiatrist, researcher, and Professor Emerita at the University of Toronto. She is best known for her non-fiction works related to mental health, including books for parents of anxious, depressed, or autistic youth and for mental health professionals treating these conditions. She is the proud mother of two competent, caring young adults.

In this volume, she draws upon her experiences as a parent, psychiatrist, and student of the human condition to create a series of poignant stories intended to engage the reader and provoke reflection. Several new stories are found in this updated, expanded edition. Mirroring reality, the stories do not offer easy answers but do provide glimpses of the struggle to remain humane in the face of challenges over the course of a lifetime.

Foreword

The title of this collection, “Bittersweet Chronicle”, refers to the nature of these stories, ordered by protagonist age. Like Jennifer, the protagonist in the second to last story in the book, I have always preferred bittersweet chocolate over milk. The combination of bitter and sweet has always seemed to me a perfect symbol for human experience. No matter how hard we try, hanging on to either bitterness or joy for very long is impossible. The passage of time ensures that we flow from one to the other and back again. The art of living is surfing that flow without despair. Moreover, whenever we look beyond ourselves we recognize that pure joy is not possible as long as others suffer; pure bitterness is not possible as long as there are acts of random kindness. As in a chocolate factory, the two are fused in the ocean of life.

The stories are largely fictional, but contain elements of autobiography. Most of the characters and events are linked somewhat to personal experience, sometimes loosely and at other times more closely. Where stories parallel my experiences closely, names and certain details have been altered to protect the dignity and privacy of the individuals involved.

The story order is not random, but represents the unfolding of life. Thus, it begins with stories about younger protagonists and progresses gradually to those about older protagonists. It is my hope that through such a chronicle we can learn from the perspectives of people of all generations.

Lastly, beyond entertaining the stories are designed to provoke thoughts: thoughts about what it means to be humane and inhumane; about dealing with confusion, resentment, regret, loss, and decisions about the future; about trying to control one’s destiny and the limits of that control; about relationships among family, strangers, and friends; about what we can learn from those who came

before; about gratitude for all that is best in humankind. Therefore, before moving from one story to the next, please allow a moment for thought. Ponder the life lessons the protagonists learn or fail to learn in the course of their experiences. Relate them to your own life if you wish. Most importantly, may you find meaning in what you read.

CONTENTS

1. Ocean	6
2. Making Friends	10
3. Student Council	15
4. Valley of the Shadow	19
5. Little Bastard	25
6. Twenty-two	34
7. Medical Care	39
8. Pizza Dinner	45
9. Mountain Dreams	49
10. Pursuing Knowledge	58
11. Morphine	67
12. Frisco	71
13. Customs	77
14. Beehives	81
15. One-armed Bandit	86
16. Sins of the Fatherland	92
17. Spain	100

18. Banana Death	106
19. Immigrants	109
20. Mirrors	114
21. Uncle Leo	121
22. After the Plague	127
23. Dahlia	132
24. Girls' Night	134
25. Train Buddies	140
26. Christmas Present	147
27. Alfred	151
28. Climbers	159
29. Flying	165
30. Photo Albums	174

Ocean

The ancestors of humankind emerged from the ocean millions of years ago, yet ocean memories never seem far from our consciousness. She first heard the rhythm of ocean waves in the womb, after conception on an island beach during an enjoyable vacation fling. She knew it was never supposed to be more than a fling. She was just an unfortunate by-product. Still, if the goddess Aphrodite could emerge from ocean foam, maybe she wasn't all that bad.

As an infant, she crossed a mighty ocean so her parents could reunite. A big-bearded priest chanted as they wed, and there was dancing afterwards. Everyone thought she was cute, swaying to the music in her parents' arms. It was the first time she met her father. He smelled of after-shave. He took her to the park and pushed her on a swing, back and forth, back and forth, endlessly. There was a calming rhythm to it, like a heartbeat, like a series of waves.

After her brother was born, he cried a lot. Then her mother cried a lot so her grandmother crossed the ocean to help. Her grandmother was clever and strong, except when someone was unfair. One day, a boy accused her of stealing his shovel in the sandbox. Her grandmother said he was lying, and he was, but the boy's mother threatened to call the police. They went home but her grandmother could not calm down so they never went to the sandbox again.

A little while later, her grandmother flew back over the ocean again, and everyone wanted to see her off at the airport. They all piled into a small car driven by her Dad's friend. He was making a left turn, and suddenly there was glass flying everywhere. It hurt her face, but her mother looked worse. The blood poured and she wasn't moving. She had to go to the hospital. Her grandmother was just bruised so she made her flight. She didn't find out about the accident until she was older. It explained some of her nightmares.

She, her mother, and her brother crossed the ocean next but that wasn't until she was six. Lots happened in the meantime. She went to kindergarten and the teacher accused her of making a mess with purple paint, which was not true. The teacher said to clean it up, but she said it wasn't fair because another kid had made the mess. She had to stand in the corner and cried and could not calm down. She thought about her grandmother.

Then there was the fire. Her mother left some hot oil on the stove and soon there were flames everywhere. Her mother told her to run as far away from the house as she could. She did as she was told, running about six blocks up the street before sitting down on the curb. Her brother got scooped up and carried to safety by a neighbor, but screamed whenever he heard a siren after that. After the fire trucks left, she walked back and everyone was relieved she was OK because they were worried that she had disappeared. Her father said they should have let the house burn for the insurance money.

A while later, there was her mother's operation. Her mother was in the hospital for over a week, and only grown-ups were allowed to visit. She waved to her mother from the street. The lady looking after them was mean and hit her brother when he wouldn't eat lunch. Her father had to take time off work to make sure that didn't happen again. Her father only hit for big things like stealing a chocolate bar from the store, and then he used a belt.

Then her father tried to open a restaurant with the friend who drove them to the airport. Too bad he wasn't a better businessman than he was a driver. Her father was a pretty good cook, but the location was far outside of town, so nobody came. Sometimes she and her brother visited and had frothy milkshakes. After a while, the restaurant closed. Her father went back to his hotel job but with less pay because he had lost his seniority.

That's when her mother decided to cross the ocean again. She and her brother had to go to the doctor and get shots first. Her mother told her not to mention it to her father. They took a train to the

coast and then went on a big ship. Their cabin was near the bottom, and she could see the ocean outside their porthole. There were big waves that made the ship sway, so lots of people threw up. She didn't get seasick. She got double portions at dinner because nobody else was eating. Then the Easter Bunny hid chocolates in their cabin. She asked her mother how the Easter Bunny could swim halfway across the ocean, and her mother admitted the chocolates were her doing. Soon she figured out her mother was Santa Claus too.

In Germany she and her brother went to a kindergarten run by an old lady with a big accordion. They had to walk behind her single file in time to the music. They had special leather lunch bags that always smelled like bananas. They lived in her grandmother's apartment on a big hill. One day, her mother took her to a school nearby so she could meet the principal and prove she spoke enough German to go there. Her mother also found a job in a factory for her father, but didn't tell him about that until he crossed the ocean to join them. Then, her parents argued loudly and her grandmother took her to another room to do puzzles. Her grandmother was really good at all sorts of puzzles, and encouraged her to try them too.

A few days later, they crossed the ocean again, but in a plane this time. They moved into a small house in the east end of the city. Her mother took her to school to meet the principal and prove she spoke enough English to go there. Her mother never tried to move the family again, and she was sad for many years. Sometimes, she was scared by how sad her mother got. Her mother had almost died in the accident, and she wondered if she could die from sadness now.

They crossed the ocean one more time when she was nine and her father tried to move the family to Greece. She loved swimming in the ocean there, but didn't love the people. Her Greek grandmother constantly tried to make her eat more than she was comfortable eating, and when her pet cat had kittens, her grandmother drowned them in the sea. She also didn't speak enough Greek to go to

school there and learn. Her relatives didn't think that mattered because she was "just a girl", but it did. After a while, she, her mother, and her brother all agreed it was time to go back to Canada.

More ocean visits and ocean crossings happened when she was older, but there were no big life decisions attached to them. That was a relief. The ocean would always be a reminder of the lives her parents left behind, but the family was finally settled in Toronto. She often walked by the lake, toes squishing in wet sand as the waves rolled in. They were smaller than the ocean's, but no less steady. As in her earliest days, she was able to tune in to their rhythm, to the heartbeat of her life.

Making Friends

It's bad when adults want to fix you. I learned that in Grade 2. I was out at recess minding my own business, flipping off the monkey bars trying not to land on Slow Eddie who always sat underneath eating the sawdust. I heard the choir practice "Ontariario" for the big centennial celebration. I was just about to go to the fence to watch squirrels.

My teacher came up to me and said I looked sad and lonely. I didn't feel sad and lonely, but she said that's how I looked and that had to change. Some of the other girls were skipping rope, and she told me to join them. I stood beside them and watched. They were skipping Double Dutch, which I never did before, but she pushed me in to join. I got whipped in the face by one rope and tripped over the other one. Everyone laughed and called me clumsy. My knee was bleeding so the teacher sent me to the nurse's office and explained what happened.

The nurse said I was too isolated. I didn't know what that meant, so I told her I wasn't, I just needed a Band-Aid for my knee. She nodded like adults do when they don't really believe you, and then put disinfectant on my knee which made it hurt more.

The next day she pointed at me in math class and made me follow her to her office. She asked me to tell her about my feelings. I said I felt nervous because I was missing math class and there was a test coming up. She didn't like that. She asked why it was hard to make friends. I said I didn't know. She asked if I had friends outside of school. I said I didn't think it was her business because my parents looked after me outside of school, and please could I get back to math class. She didn't like that either. She asked me if I knew my telephone number. Finally, a question I could answer! I gave it to her so she'd let me get back to math class.

A couple of days later, the nurse showed up at my house. I ran to the door, because I thought someone in my family was sick. When I asked who was sick, she said she just wanted to talk to my mother, so I should go out and play. I went outside, but swiped a glass from the kitchen first. I saw in a spy movie that if you put a glass against a wall, it lets you hear what's happening on the other side. The movie must have been wrong, because all I heard was mumbling. After a while, I saw the door open and my mother yelling at the nurse to get out. She left in a hurry. My mother said the nurse told her she was isolated too (maybe it's some disease?), and she should go bowling. My mother said she wouldn't because that's something only the proletariat did. I didn't know what a proletariat was but it sounded bad. Maybe it's those ladies who take money for doing dirty stuff with men, but I'm not sure. I was glad my mother wasn't going to be a proletariat.

The nurse didn't give up on trying to fix me. After talking to me and talking to my mother didn't work, she decided to sign me up for Brownies. The Brownies met at our school after class, so I didn't need a ride to get there. When I told my mother, she said the uniforms reminded her of the Hitler Youth. She grew up in Germany and they made her join the Hitler Youth, which she hated. She had to admit that camping trips were fun though, so she signed the permission slip for me to try Brownies.

One of our neighbors was leading the group, but it was so big they told us to make four smaller groups in different corners of the room. I didn't know the other girls, so I didn't know which group to join. The neighbor lady saw me standing alone in the middle of the room and brought me to one of the groups. All of the girls in the group had badges for different things, and one of them pointed at me and said "Look at her, she hasn't earned any yet." Then they all laughed. After a while, the neighbor lady came over and told us we were making a craft next time and everyone had to bring something from home. She told me I had to bring an empty bleach bottle and I better not forget. I was scared, because I knew I couldn't get a bleach bottle. My mother didn't have a washing machine, and bleach hurts your hands if you wash your clothes without using a machine. She never bought bleach, and I knew she didn't

have the money to buy some just so I could have an empty bottle for the craft. I was embarrassed to say anything, because the other girls would laugh again.

I pretended I had a stomach ache the next week when it was Brownie day, and the week after that too. By the third week, I really did have a stomach ache, and my mother talked to the nurse so she wouldn't make me go back.

Grade 3 was a bit better. The teacher liked me and said I was smart. When she saw I had no friends, she gave me a special job to do. She thought it would make other people like me better, but it didn't. They called me a teacher's pet and started bullying me. It wasn't the silly kind of bullying like I got from Dougie the Perv who used to dry hump girls in the parking lot till they figured out where to kick him. It was mean. The girls asked for cigarettes from an older kid and cornered me in the washroom. They made me smoke until I threw up, and then laughed. Still, it felt better to be called a teacher's pet than clumsy.

Grade 4 was great because I had a really boring French teacher. She wore fancy clothes and high heels and strutted around like an ostrich, and she always said the same things. Her favorite thing to say was "Oui, mes enfants." The girl beside me was bored too. She started drawing the ostrich lady, and it looked really funny. I gave the ostrich lady a cartoon bubble and made her say "We mess 'n fart." The girl broke out laughing and we couldn't rip up the drawing in time so we both got detention.

The girl and I became friends after that, and her name was Sylvie. Sylvie was tall and didn't get picked last for sports teams like I did, but I got better marks. We liked the same music, and she was the first person I ever invited for my birthday. I invited another girl she knew too, but that girl's parents never let her out much, so she didn't know the street numbers were all odd on one side and all even on the other. She couldn't find my house. It was sad, but I didn't mind. It was fun to have my birthday with just me and Sylvie. I finally had a friend!

Sylvie was still my friend in Grade 5. Our teacher was really strict that year and made me re-do my social studies projects if I colored outside the lines. I did that a lot because of my in-turning eye which was almost blind, so that was frustrating. Still, she was meaner to the boys. All the other teachers sent boys who couldn't behave to the vice principal. This teacher was meaner than the vice principal. I saw her throw one guy right into a wall. I felt sorry for him because he got dizzy and he got sent to the nurse, so she probably made him talk and called him isolated too.

I hung out with Sylvie at recess and we talked about class, but we didn't dare make jokes about this teacher. Sylvie came over to my house sometimes. She didn't say anything mean about how small it was and the fact we didn't have a lot of stuff. We just had fun talking and laughing and listening to music. I asked about going to her house but she said her parents didn't like having people over.

At the start of Grade 6, Sylvie started hanging out with some other people, which was sad. She got fat too, and started to cry when I offered her some of my carrot sticks so she'd have a healthier lunch. The teacher that year was old and kept crossing days off the calendar. The boys kissed the girls whenever she turned her head, and the girls screamed. Then the girls started throwing their training bras across the room. One of the boys started using them as slingshots to shoot stuff at the teacher. By the end of the year, they made the vice principal teach our class.

Sylvie didn't come back to school after Christmas that year. I asked if anyone knew where she moved to. Nobody did. Then in June I saw a bunch of girls holding a letter and whispering in a corner at recess. They didn't call me teacher's pet anymore, so I thought it was safe to ask what was going on.

"Bet you don't know what happened to your friend," one of them answered.

"No, I don't," I said honestly, "but I've been worried about her."

“See this picture?” she said, holding a small Polaroid of a baby in blue, “That’s her son. His Daddy and his Grand-daddy are the same man.” There was a chorus of “Ewww!” from the rest of the group.

I was stunned. I’d never heard of such a thing. I guess I didn’t know Sylvie as well as I thought.

I was really sad for a while, but then I tried to make a new friend in Junior High.

Student Council

An opportunistic pathogen is one that takes hold when the body is already weakened by another disease or condition: the bacterial pneumonia that sets in after a prolonged viral infection; the fungal disease that flourishes when cancer treatment suppresses the immune system.

Successful academics are like opportunistic pathogens. They see tragedies as research opportunities. Gen, a young psychology professor, was no exception. The news coverage of 9-11 had given her a chance to study vicarious trauma in children who witnessed it; the pandemic to study the effects of social isolation on development. Now there were protests about racism across the continent. There had to be a research question in there...she looked back on some of her own relevant experiences.

She hadn't always been Gen. Gertrude was her given name, but not one she had ever used in public. The dilapidated row-houses on her street were originally built for veterans returning from war. Many of their families still lived there. Gen's mother's family had been on the wrong side of the war. "The neighbors will hate you if they know you're German," her mother often reminded, though she did her utmost to keep the traditions of her homeland alive. She felt this was essential, "because the Canadians (meaning white Anglo-Saxons) have no culture." To keep their ethnicity hidden, the children were taught to avoid these uncouth, potentially hostile Canadians.

Her father took his criticism of "Canadians" a step further. "They lazy, take drugs, and make sex without marry" he concluded in his southern European pigeon English. He clearly feared his own children's morals being contaminated by these undesirables, and made it clear they were not to be befriended. "Black is worse...they sell the drugs too," he added. Only Asians and fellow Europeans were considered "OK" because, as everyone knew, they were hard workers and had fewer vices.

Predictably, Gen studied with the southern European and Asian contingent in high school. They were considered the ambitious, university-bound crowd, in contrast to the jocks, stoners, and popular kids. By sharing their expertise, Gen's group encouraged ambition and diligence in each other, as well as sharing the occasional set of stolen exam questions. Some took illicit stimulants to help them stay up late to study. Some covered for each other's whereabouts when visiting boyfriends or girlfriends in secret. No matter. In their parents' eyes, these were the "good kids."

As she avoided people from other crowds, Gen was considered aloof and treated accordingly. Therefore, she concluded that people from other crowds were hostile. As she had no friends outside her group, she continued to assume that her parents' biases about other groups were correct. The failings of people in her own group were justified as part of "playing the game" of getting ahead.

Ironically, it was exactly this desire to get ahead that eventually caused Gen to question her views. The school crest was a symbol of achievement coveted by many, including Gen. However, it could not be earned through academic success alone. Extracurricular activities were required too. As she was not particularly athletic or artistic, Gen ran for student council. Despite her snobby reputation, she became student council treasurer. It was rumored to be a boring accounting job, so nobody had run against her.

The student council office was a converted janitor's closet with peeling strips of paint. It barely fit a typewriter, photocopier, bulletin board, and vomit-colored leather couch that had seen better days. Still, it was a haven from the hallway catcalls ambitious kids like Gen endured, and she loved hanging out there. As a result, she crossed paths with other members of the council and got to know them. They came from every crowd.

There was Greg, the white Anglo-Saxon vice president who, true to Gen's stereotype, smoked weed at every opportunity and knew a dozen ways to hide the smell. Gen eventually found out that his

mother died of cancer years earlier, and he was being raised by his strict Scottish grandfather who never had a kind word to say. Greg dreaded going home each day, and his only solace was smoking up. Gen's suggestion that he would do better focusing on his school work just elicited a hollow laugh.

Then there was Brittany, also white, who was the social convener. Her social exploits included most members of the football team, and had recently resulted in an outbreak of gonorrhea there. She confided in Gen how her stepfather had sexually abused her from an early age. Her mother had eventually left him, but since then Brittany had no confidence in any of her abilities other than attracting boys. She was popular, but often felt completely alone. Gen listened to Brittany's story, which seemed to be the only helpful thing she could do.

Joe was the athletics representative to the council, rarely attended meetings, and was considered lazy by Gen's crowd. A lanky, African-Canadian basketballer, he was the main reason his school had won back-to-back championships in that sport. His training left little time for studying though, and he worried he would be barred from playing if he failed another course. He needed to play. There was no money for college, so his only hope of success lay in a basketball scholarship. Gen eventually agreed to lend him notes from classes he missed due to tournaments. She had never seen someone look so relieved.

Ming was the waifish council secretary. She worked very hard, consistent with Gen's Asian stereotype, but at a price. Anonymous poetry on suicidal themes began appearing on the bulletin board, and Gen had a strong suspicion it was Ming's work. When she finally confronted her, Ming blushed "If I don't get into engineering science, I am nothing. I am the only one in my family with this opportunity, and yet I seem to be wasting it." Her lip quivered, "I don't think I will even get an A in calculus. If I can't do that, I might as well be dead!" She wept. Gen convinced her to go to the guidance counselor, which seemed to help at the time. She later heard that Ming ended her life in her second year of university.

Finally, there was Costa the student council president. He had the distinction of belonging to both the university-bound and the popular groups. His swarthy good looks swayed the female vote, so he had easily won the election. Costa worried that the council would be disbanded if teachers learned of Greg's drug use. Making matters worse, Greg had used council funds to support his habit. Costa looked at Gen seriously "We need some creative accounting." As she realized what he meant, Gen countered "We don't have any additional expense receipts." "Well, maybe we took in a bit less from the last dance than we thought," Costa suggested, "Make it balance. I don't care how." She did, though she wasn't proud of it.

So many unique stories had emerged from that tiny, run-down office...and so many reasons for the teenage woes shared there, Gen mused. Greg, Brittany, Joe, Ming, and Costa had become her friends, regardless of their crowd or ethnic background.

She hadn't seen Brittany since the last high school reunion and wondered how she was doing. Maybe it was time to pick up the phone rather than designing another study.

Valley of the Shadow

Connie ambled towards the bridge as if in a trance. It was a twenty-minute walk from the hospital personnel department where she was working for the summer. The morning's events seemed surreal.

"Come in here, Connie. Close the door," Mrs. Severenson had ordered her summer receptionist. The older woman wore a tight, brown skirt suit and sported the short, feathery haircut women in business sometimes think they need in order to be taken seriously. Connie tried to mimic her attire, but did so awkwardly. She was overweight and hated the way skirts made her look.

"What did you say to Mr. Winters on the phone?" Mrs. Severenson started critically.

The girl shifted uncomfortably, "I told him you were out."

"And?" her boss demanded.

"Nothing," she confessed, "I figured he'd call back later."

"That's rude! You need to offer to help with the problem if I'm not around," came the angry reply. She was clearly embarrassed by her underling's faux pas.

"OK. I will. It won't happen again," Connie mumbled, ashamed.

"You bet it won't!" Mrs. Severenson continued, "What did you say to the accreditation team when they came by?"

"Nothing," Connie whispered.

The tongue-lashing continued, "Exactly! You represent this department and you're not even looking people in the eye. What's wrong with you?"

“I’m sorry...I’m shy and I haven’t been feeling well lately,” the girl explained, “I’ll work on it.” It was an understatement. She had been feeling worthless, exhausted, and depressed for almost a year now. She overate and sleep was barely possible. She isolated herself in her room, yet dreaded being there. The pictures on the wall often distorted into demonic images, and she rarely drifted off without nightmares.

“One more chance, that’s all!” warned the boss, “Any more of this nonsense and you’re gone.”

The exchange had left Connie feeling more anxious than she’d ever been in her life. She needed this job to earn money for her university tuition. Without it, she was sure she’d be relegated to the poverty and misery of her childhood home forever. A medical career offered the hope of lifting both her economic status and her self-worth, so that was her goal. She now regretted having shared this with the boss, who had seemed sympathetic to her plight in the beginning.

The phone rang. Connie answered with a tentative “Hello, Personnel here,” but was so soft-spoken she was almost inaudible.

The boss overheard and snatched the phone away. “I’m sorry, we’ll get back to you right away,” she said firmly but pleasantly, and hung up.

“That’s it,” Mrs. Severenson concluded, “How do you expect to get anywhere in life if you can’t even talk to people? Might as well write off that medical school pipedream of yours. Pack up your things!”

Connie was shaking, but did as she was told. She apologized one more time, and left.

She couldn’t go home to face her parents. They would probably blame her and point out the obvious...that without the money from the job, she had no future. Then, there would be another long night of fear and Satanic imagery in her room. Lately, she’d even heard the occasional evil laugh. She

had kept herself going by remembering awards she had won and funny shows she had watched, but the weight of Mrs. Severenson's words now overshadowed any successes or joys in her memory. Nothing in her past and nothing in her future was encouraging anymore, and the present was unbearable. There were no more tears to be cried; there was nothing else to be done. There was only the bridge.

It was a big, ugly concrete structure that blackened the valley with its shadow. It was well-known to be fatal. Cars whizzed by on the road that topped it, and there was the occasional rumble from a train that passed beneath them. She would need to get closer to the middle before jumping.

As she shuffled toward her execution, numbed by the hum of traffic, Connie's eyes were drawn to the valley. It was a lush, treed ravine with houses on either side. A meandering creek ran through it, and a jogging path paralleled the creek.

She had lived beside this valley since preschool. She had fun exploring different little paths, trying to guess what animals had left certain tracks, and climbing the crab-apple trees in the fall. She had even made apple jelly from what she collected one year. When she got older, the valley had been her refuge. She ran to the valley after her mother lost it when an album from her family overseas arrived with a crack in it. The poor former librarian saw it as the last, fragile vestige of her intellectual past. She ran to the valley after her father beat her brother senseless following a minor brush with the law. Family honor seemed to mean more than his son's life. She ran to the valley after she bloodied her brother's nose because he called her fat. Her parents had taken his side and then made her finish the potato pancakes on her plate. Whenever she felt like running away from home, Connie ran to the valley instead and returned when the dust had settled.

When did her valley of refuge turn dark? The first time, she thought, was when she was badly bullied. Some girls wouldn't stop making crank calls to her house telling her what a loser she was. She was eleven, and her solution had been to ride her bike down into the ravine aiming for a tree. She had

seen pumpkins smash when they were lobbed at trees on Halloween, and figured her head would do the same. She hit a sewer grate before reaching the tree though, and only got scrapes and bruises. The next year she had a teacher who took her under her wing, and the valley seemed green again.

Approaching the middle of the bridge, Connie felt a chill. She ran her hands across the rough surface of the concrete rail. It was grey as was the sidewalk, as was the road, as were the dust-covered trees near the bridge's ends. The air smelled of exhaust fumes. The sun was still high enough in the sky to cast shadows, but hers was invisible relative to that of the immense structure. The darkness was now directly before her and seemed to beckon from below. Did she really want to join it, becoming another spectre forever absorbed by the valley's shadow? Should she resist or pull away? There had been a time when she had escaped the shadow. It had been five years, but the memory now played in her mind like a movie she saw yesterday.

"Mind if I run with you for a bit?" a muscular young man in his twenties asked. He had blonde, stylish hair and a friendly smile.

"OK," Connie replied. She didn't mind the company, especially when it was good-looking.

He introduced himself as Damien, a college student and regular runner. "You're keeping a pretty good pace. Do you run here often?" he asked.

"Couple of times a week," Connie replied.

He seemed interested in her. "What college do you go to?" he wondered.

"I'm still in high school," she admitted, flattered that he thought she was older.

He saw her positive reaction, "You're kidding. I would have pegged you for a sophomore." They ran a few minutes longer. He was a pace or two behind her, and cast a tall shadow over her path.

He started a new conversation, "Do you know what the word horny means?"

Her stomach dropped. "No," she lied. She knew darn well what it meant, and to stay away from guys who said it. She would have to play it cool.

"Well, you make me horny. Do you want me to show you?" he asked suggestively.

She would have to distract him from this subject, "No, not really. Look at that! There's a mallard in the creek. Beautiful colours!" "How could I have been so naïve?" she thought to herself.

He ignored her comment about the duck. "Let's take a minute in the bushes over there and I'll show you."

She would have to stall until she could figure a way out of this situation. "Can you give me a definition of the word first?" she requested. If she could just get to a less steep part of the ravine, she could run out of the park and away from him.

He made some comments about men having needs, and how ready and womanly she looked. She noticed the outline of a knife in his pocket. She prayed.

She tried playing dumb, "I really don't understand. What do you mean?"

He got frustrated, "Look, I'm done talking. Let's go!" He tried to grab her.

She ducked away.

"Now!" he yelled, brandishing the knife.

Her eyes darted about for an escape route. There! She spotted a gap in the bushes.

She dove through the thorny mess, regained her footing, and scrambled uphill, climbing faster than she ever had in her life. She didn't look back until she'd hopped the fence to a private yard at the top. Damien stood at the base of the hill laughing.

She never told anyone about the incident. She had escaped unharmed, so it was unlikely the police would have believed her. Her parents probably would have blamed her. Still, she felt guilty whenever she heard a news story about someone being raped. Afterwards, she didn't leave the house for several months, but eventually recovered from her "mysterious illness" and returned to school. Five years later, she had the odd habit of crossing the road if a young man approached on the sidewalk, but otherwise behaved normally. Damien's voice still played like a tape recording in her nightmares though.

That thought brought her back to the present. Would Mrs. Severenson's voice join Damien's in her tortured nights? Would today's failure become a source of guilt and self-recrimination too? At least back then she had escaped with her life; now her future seemed snuffed. She didn't just feel frightened and ashamed this time, she felt useless and utterly hopeless. The shadow beckoned again.

She already had one leg across the concrete railing of the bridge. She was very close to being released from all of this. She feared the abyss but welcomed it too. Maybe some people weren't meant to continue with life. Funny, she thought for a split second. All those cars on the bridge and not one driver is concerned with where I'm perched. Oh well. She started to lean forward.

"You don't deserve this. Play hooky instead." She was startled. It was a voice clear as day, but no person was attached to it. It didn't seem evil, just the opposite. It was authoritative but kind, giving her permission to let go of her horrible plan.

Listening to the voice, she felt strangely calm and reassured. She knew immediately what it meant. People who played hooky pretended to go to work or to school but did something else instead. For at least a little while, playing hooky would offer an alternative to jumping.

Connie walked off the bridge and away from the shadowy valley. She headed for the library where she spent the next few days in the psychology section, starting to figure things out.

Little Bastard

“Take more, take more!” the old woman urged, pushing a steaming casserole dish towards her eldest son, George. She smiled broadly but, like many grandmothers in the town, had taken to wearing widows’ black. It was slimming, and her hour-glass figure had taken on more of an apple shape of late. Regardless, the old lady still haggled with the best of them in the market and continued to bake enormous meals in the communal oven. Her children all lived abroad now. When they came to visit, it was a special treat, especially when they brought along a grandchild or two.

“Eleni, put it in the cooler for me, would you?” George asked his daughter, who willingly obliged. She liked to be helpful to her parents, even if it wasn’t always appreciated. A shy, tomboyish teen, she had been voted “most studious” by her high school graduating class. Eleni had won a scholarship that year, so there was no need for her to get a summer job. Proud of her accomplishment, George had offered to take her along on this trip to his homeland. He liked to reward his children when they brought honor to the family name.

Looking over Eleni’s shoulder, Bridget contorted her face into a painful expression. “You know we can’t eat that oily stuff, George. Eleni and I both got sick last time, remember? Now I suppose you expect us to drag it to the beach!” She scowled at her husband. With her sharp eyes and Slavic cheekbones, Bridget would have been a striking woman if not for the deep bags under her eyes, brimming with disappointment. This was not her homeland, and she did not relish spending weeks with her husband’s relatives and their unintelligible whispers.

“Never mind. It’s good moussaka,” George grumbled. He had long ago given up debating with his clever, acid-tongued wife, but could still defy her wishes when it mattered to him.

“Eleni, tell your father how we feel,” Bridget ordered.

Eleni shifted uncomfortably and started to stammer “It...it is a bit much Papa.” George slumped. “But it’s always very tasty,” she quickly added.

Bridget gave her an icy stare, “Don’t ask me for help when your stomach acts up.”

“Maybe we could take half and save the rest for later,” Eleni offered, “Yiayia, would that be OK?”

The old woman shook her head, amused by the familiar family drama. “Of course, sweetie,” she said, handing Eleni a smaller container. She whispered in Greek, thinking only her son understood, “You have a nice girl there, George. Too bad she’s still under her mother’s thumb.” Eleni caught every word.

The moussaka matter appeared to be settled, but Eleni squirmed. Her compromise solution didn’t seem to satisfy anyone, and siding with one parent against the other seemed wrong too. Confused and irritated, she decided to stay silent on the walk to the beach.

Relieved to be outside, Eleni grabbed one handle of the cooler as her sandals slapped on the cobblestones of the old town. Her father took the other handle, beads of sweat quickly collecting on his forehead under the slicked-back, Lawrence Welk hairstyle that was popular in his youth. He had been handsome once, handsome enough that his silhouette on the diving tower could attract a stunning blonde like Bridget. Sadly, years of waiting on tables through the night to earn tips from drunken businessmen had taken their toll. He was paunchy and cynical.

The streets were so narrow, it hardly seemed appropriate to call them streets. They were mere alleys that separated the white stone walls of the old homes. Overwhelming clusters of purple bougainvillea cascaded out of several gardens, breaking the monotony of the walls. Eleni breathed in

the fragrance, which distracted her from the weight of the cooler. She remembered it filling her nose the first time she came to Greece ten years earlier...

Coming in from a walk through the flower-filled streets, the little girl had noticed that Yiayia's calico cat was missing. She wondered what had happened to it.

"Babies," Yiayia responded with a knowing smile.

"Where?" Eleni asked.

Her grandmother shrugged, "They go into corners or closets."

The hunt for the kittens was on! Eleni explored every corner and crevasse in the old house, finally climbing into the linen closet. Way at the back, she spotted the litter. There were orange and white ones like their mother, which were probably female, and others that were black, black and white, and grey. She counted six altogether. Excited, she wanted to show Yiayia her discovery, but knew not to disturb the protective mother cat. On her knees, Eleni started gingerly backing out of the closet. Two harsh voices stopped her.

"We're not staying here," Bridget said firmly, "Everybody looks at me like I'm some sort of tramp, just because she was born before we got married. And there's nothing to do on this boring rock in the winter!"

"Well we're not going to your country either," George replied, "so it's back to Canada."

Bridget was sarcastic, "Great...back to the tundra where you work all day and all night! Sometimes I wish I'd just put her up for adoption or taken a drive to Holland to end the pregnancy." She choked back tears. "Now, I'm stuck...I went from Mozart to motherhood in the wilderness with you!"

“Quiet! My mother will hear,” shushed George, and motioned towards the door. The voices, now muffled, continued to spar outside.

Eleni crept out of the closet, disturbed by this new information about her past. She was a bright nine-year-old, and knew the “she” her mother had referred to. It was incredible to think her mother had not really wanted to keep her, and perhaps never meant for her to live at all. On the other hand, it also seemed to clarify something. Since her mother considered it a burden to raise Eleni, she expected her, in return, to provide emotional comfort when depressed and consistent agreement with her opinions. Eleni was there when her mother locked herself in the bathroom and said she wanted to die, and there when she needed someone to defend her musical tastes against the popular norm. She was always there. It was an unspoken bargain that was only now becoming clear to Eleni. Shaken, she was no longer as excited about finding the kittens. She decided to visit them again the next day.

In the morning, the kittens were gone. She asked Yiayia where they went.

“Oh,” she grumbled, “You know there were too many to feed. I put them in the sea, poor little bastards.”

Eleni cried. She cried for the kittens, for herself, and for the caring family that never existed. She resolved to make herself useful. Nobody was going to drown her if she became difficult to feed!

She squinted in the blinding sunlight and felt the cooler’s weight again. It wasn’t far to the beach, but the argument had delayed the family’s start. Eleni knew her mother would complain of sunburn soon, and was thankful that she had her father’s olive complexion. Still, she knew some acknowledgment of sunburn would be expected, whether or not her skin felt irritated. Finally, the sight of the blue Aegean came to her rescue, pre-empting an uncomfortable discussion.

The sand was hot and lumpy with small pebbles, but the family found a spot in the shade for the beach blanket and cooler. Eleni eagerly stripped down to her swimsuit. She could see the diving tower in the bay, and couldn't wait to try it. As she had been reminiscing though, Eleni had lost track of her parents' conversation. Now, it came back into stark focus.

"You two start swimming. I'll catch up after I talk to the realtor," George suggested.

"You're still planning on buying a vacation home here?" Bridget asked, "How often do you think we'd end up using it? We can't afford a trip to Greece every year, and I'm certainly not planning to retire in some backward island village."

"Then I'll travel here on my own," George fumed, gritting his teeth.

"What a waste of money!" Bridget continued "I'm sure Eleni would prefer to have some help with a down payment when she gets a place of her own in Canada. Wouldn't you, dear?"

"That's a long way off, Mom," Eleni tried to deflect, "I still have to get my degree first...and who knows what will happen then."

"Here I am looking out for your future, and you can't take my side just once?" her mother hissed.

"It's not a matter of taking sides, Mom. I just think dragging me into this won't solve the problem," Eleni countered logically.

"You ungrateful little brat! You never support me, after all I've given up for you," Bridget seethed, grasping for words. "Go on then. Join your father in his pipedream."

"I'm going swimming. See you later," was Eleni's curt response. She hated being put in the middle of her parents' fights, and hated her mother playing the martyr and conveniently forgetting the times she had looked after her.

"I can take care of my daughter and have a vacation home. I make good money at work," George added weakly.

Eleni sloshed through the first few feet of water, then dove into the surf. She carved through the waves with an aggressive, adrenaline-fueled front crawl. It felt good to take out her anger and hurt on the sea. She was tired of acquiescing to her mother's wishes, tired of agreeing with her, and tired of lying to spare her feelings.

And where was her father in all this? Preoccupied with proving his worth by making money, he was hardly ever around. When he was, he was often asleep. He really only paid attention to her on report card day, when he could brag to the neighbors about his successful daughter. That's all the Greek men seemed to do in their east end Toronto community: compare their children's successes and compare the size of their home-grown tomatoes. The unsuccessful offspring, or those who besmirched the family name in some way, were beaten senseless behind closed doors.

The diving tower loomed, but most of its occupants were young men in tiny Speedos. They whistled and jeered at the only two women she could see. Eleni decided not to join them.

She continued swimming, now having slowed to a leisurely breast stroke. Her anger was gradually replaced with sadness. She remembered the years of desperately trying to make herself useful in order to feel she belonged: doing school assignments for her peers...only to have them call her a brown-noser; organizing and packing boxes with her Dad in preparation for a move...only to have him forget to tell her the date and find a closed door when she came home one day; reading her mother the bible stories she loved and imagining herself as the prodigal returning to a hero's welcome...only to be

shunned for weeks when she decided to pursue a different course of study than the one her mother had imagined. Did she have a real home to return to? Had she ever?

The taste of salt-water in her mouth brought Eleni back to reality. She was starting to tire, and the turquoise waters near the beach were far behind her. The sea was navy blue, almost black where she swam. It was definitely time to turn back.

She treaded water for a minute to catch her breath, then started towards shore. The waves seemed bigger and more menacing than before though, and for every stroke forward she seemed to be pushed back two. She persevered. She swallowed more water. She started to thrash about and pound the surface with the hardest flutter kick she could muster. There was no progress.

She was getting alarmed. Should she tread water again, or would that result in the waves just driving her further out to sea? Was there someone who could help? There were no boats nearby, and yelling for help to the little dots on the beach was pointless. What was the solution? How could she have been foolish enough to get into this mess? So many people had worse families, families who starved and abused them. Why did she have to overreact to hers? What a stupid way to die!

Eleni panicked. Her arms were like rubber. Her legs started to cramp. She filled her lungs with air and tried to keep her mouth out of the water, even as the rest of her body was sinking. She couldn't stay afloat anymore. She gasped one more time and held her breath.

Then she felt it, not right at the surface but just below. At first she thought it was an animal, a big fish or maybe a porpoise. It was firm and pushed against her thighs. She went limp, exhausted. A few seconds later, her head bobbed to the surface and she breathed. She was being held by a current that carried her along. It didn't matter where it took her. She had no choice but to go along for the ride.

“So, this is how it ends,” she thought and became strangely calm. There was no fight left, only return to the sea from where her antediluvian ancestors had emerged. She prayed...not to survive but to drown without too much pain. Time seemed to stop.

Eventually, Eleni heard a rhythmic, rushing sound. It must have been there for a while, but she had been too focused on her likely demise to notice. It was getting louder. The water beneath her was no longer black, and shore seemed closer. She didn't recognize any landmarks though. There was no diving tower, nor the colorful specks of beach umbrellas. No matter...land was unreachable anyways. The current was moving her parallel to shore and she was too weak to escape it. Looking further ahead though, its trajectory seemed to lead towards a rocky peninsula. That was where the rushing sound was coming from.

The rocks looked slippery, but she would try to grab on. She counted the waves until she was there. Two more, one more...and she flung her arms forward. The undertow's grip nearly pried her loose, but she hung on. A second wave threw her onto the barren promontory, releasing her from the sea.

Eleni landed hard and had a jagged cut on her shin, but she was alive. She got up, scrambled off the rocks, and sauntered back along shore in the direction of the public beach. A trickle of blood ran down her leg. Overwhelmed with relief and gratitude, she wept. The Universe had welcomed her back. For the first time in a decade, she was certain she was meant to live.

Her parents looked very small, still arguing as she approached them. Her mother noticed her first. “Where have you been? You're late for lunch.”

“I hurt my leg swimming,” Eleni mumbled.

Bridget looked appalled. "Goodness, what a mess you are. I suppose we'll have to stop at the drug store to get bandages. What a fine end to the day."

George passed Eleni the moussaka.

Twenty-Two

The elevator was playing the theme from the movie “Love Story”, and she was old enough to remember that sappy yarn about a fatal illness which rendered the sufferer more beautiful with every scene. The film drew a sentimental conclusion about love making no apologies. Her life experience suggested the opposite.

At twenty-two, she shared a hotel room with her mother while traveling in Europe. It was her last summer between college semesters, a final opportunity for a family trip before facing the working world. The rooms in the old inn were tiny, baroque cubicles with peeling wallpaper. They lacked air conditioning. Her mother’s impeccably coiffed hair became frizzy in the oppressive heat. Sleep was impossible, so mother and daughter got to talking about the past.

After sharing a few fond, nostalgic memories, she took a deep breath and decided to broach an issue which had bothered her for years. “Mom, it really hurt me that you turned away whenever I refused to agree with you. It made me feel like I wasn’t allowed to be my own person; like you wanted a mirror rather than a daughter.”

Her mother’s response struck like a thunderbolt. “You ungrateful brat! After all I sacrificed to bring you into this world and raise you, after giving up my homeland, my culture, and my freedom to become your devoted mother, you have the gall to say that? You should be thankful I kept you at all!” Her mother’s outburst was followed by silence. She apologized for upsetting her mother. There was no apology in return; only more silence.

The silence lasted for three days. At that point, old wiring sparked a small electrical fire at the hotel. Her mother panicked, as did her mother’s relatives in the adjacent room. They needed her help. She was the only one fluent enough in the local language to explain the problem to the concierge: a

grim, stout woman with bad teeth who despised foreigners. The concierge grumbled, grabbed an appropriate extinguisher, and quelled the flames with ease. It obviously wasn't her first experience with this sort of thing. She tried to blame her guests for the problem, then moved them to an even smaller room. Neither her mother nor her relatives thanked her for alerting their reluctant rescuer.

The heat wave broke, and her mother's hair returned to its usual neatly sculpted shape. They traveled on to the next destination, checked into a different hotel, and life continued as if nothing untoward had happened. She resolved never to show vulnerability to her mother again. She couldn't risk it. They had remained cordial but distant ever since.

She reached the ground floor and the thick, chrome doors opened. A tear moistened her cheek as she stepped into the cold November air, heading for the subway. She knew it had nothing to do with the elevator music. It was late afternoon but the street was already dark. She winced as she limped down the long staircase to the platform. An old knee injury was acting up.

The scream of metal on metal announced her train's arrival. She stepped aboard and grabbed a pole. There were never any free seats on rush hour trains, and ever since most offices became "scent free" the scent of the train was a pungent body odour. She was traveling all the way to the east end. The first free seat went to a passenger many months pregnant. To her surprise, the second was offered to her by a waifish, brown-skinned young woman. She obviously looked older than she thought she did! Nevertheless, a seat was a seat so she smiled and thanked her subway angel.

Enveloped by the black, comforting tunnel, she reflected on how often she had said "sorry" to her own twenty-two-year-old. He was a tall, strapping, boyish-looking young man. She had been a solo parent since he was six, widowed in her forties. One of the last challenges she faced with her late husband was the boy's diagnosis: autism with severe learning disabilities. Her husband had shrugged "We always knew he had problems." She had wept bitterly.

She wondered if there was anything she could have done to prevent his condition, and said a mental “I’m sorry.” There were so many more after that...

When she couldn’t comfort him with his favorite cereal after his father died. “I’m sorry.”

When his best friend’s mother thought his disability made him a bad influence and so cut off all contact with her son. “I’m sorry.”

When she enrolled him in school after school to find one where he could learn, disrupting any tentative friendships in the process. “I’m sorry.”

When she couldn’t get a doctor to prescribe medications for his daily seizures for weeks because of waitlists. “I’m sorry.”

When she didn’t realize for a whole semester that his high school hadn’t enrolled him in any credit-bearing courses which would allow him to graduate. “I’m sorry.”

When he woke up with stomach aches for weeks before she realized he was being bullied on the bus. “I’m sorry.”

When she cancelled his tutoring sessions after the tutor made a pass at her. “I’m sorry.”

When her network of friends wasn’t enough to find him an entry level job. “I’m sorry.”

When she frightened him by scolding the people who rejected his application to a job training program, based on a group exercise that unfairly targeted his autism. “I’m sorry.”

When she couldn’t protect him from abusive employers who had him do unpaid restaurant work for a year, or humiliated him for weeks just to get hiring incentives. “I’m sorry.”

When she shouted at him for obeying people who told him to merely drop off his resume after she had gone out of her way to arrange an interview with a prospective employer. “I’m sorry.”

When her own anxiety made her a really bad driving instructor. "I'm sorry."

At last, she reached the end of the line and was released from the smelly train. Her knee hurt again on the stairs, but climbing them seemed less difficult than descending. As the turnstile snapped briskly behind her, she thought about an interaction with her son that morning.

He had been trying to finish an online training course he needed to do for his meager, one-shift-per-week job. He spent almost as much time doing these infernal online trainings as he did doing actual, paid work. One of the quiz questions asked him to choose the correct 7 of 9 responses. He was trying various combinations without success. "Oh for Pete's sake!" she exclaimed, impatiently. "Let me try!" She jotted down the question, viewed the training video which contained the correct answers, and then filled them in.

He was furious. "No, no, no! I want to do it myself! It's my course, not yours. Let me finish it myself next time!"

She was not in an understanding mood. "Here I'm running late for work, and I take a few minutes more to help you out with something that you clearly can't do yourself, and this is the thanks I get? After everything I've done to try and help you? How about some appreciation!" She heard her mother's voice in her head the moment she said it. She didn't use the term "ungrateful brat", but the sentiment was the same. She lowered her head in shame.

"It's done. Just leave me alone," he replied. She left to catch her train.

Returning home, she stood beneath a street lamp, persistently jiggling her key in the tricky front door lock. Finally, it opened and the cat meowed loudly for food. She fed him. Her son was engrossed in a game on his phone. She cleared her throat.

"Can we talk for a minute, honey?"

“OK, Mom,” he replied, looking at the floor.

“I’m sorry I got frustrated with your online course this morning. I didn’t mean to take over and yell,” she offered.

He made a request. “Just let me do it myself next time, even if it takes some time.”

“I’ll do that, honey,” she agreed.

“I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to upset you,” he volunteered.

“It’s fine. I’ll wait for you to ask for help next time.” She got on her tip-toes to kiss his face.

“What would you like for dinner?”

He gave her a bear hug and mumbled “Spaghetti”.

Medical Care

As a medical student in the 1980's, I was looking forward to showing what I had learned on a mid-term exam. My clinical rotations in internal medicine had been rather disheartening, but I had read about all the relevant esoteric diseases in textbooks. I knew about rare neurological conditions where people ignored half their body, Kawasaki's disease of the heart (a strange inflammation of the coronary arteries affecting small children), and pheochromocytoma (an uncommon tumor of the adrenal glands).

In real life, neurology, cardiology, and oncology were considerably less fascinating. Neurology seemed to be a specialty of incurable diseases. Unlike other organs, the brain didn't regenerate much when damaged, so once a piece died, it was dead for good. Perhaps to avoid feeling helpless, neurologists seemed to delight in playing a medical version of "Where's Waldo" called "Where's the lesion?" One insisted I call him at midnight when a stroke victim's brain scan came back, just to confirm that he had guessed correctly. He was giddy with excitement when he found out he had, until I asked the dumb question, "What can we do to treat this?" The answer, of course, was nothing.

Cardiology patients were mostly old people near death. Although there were many interesting cardiac conditions in the books, we usually treated heart failure. It required a small squirt of intravenous digoxin and a big squirt of a diuretic drug. A good student knew how to get the balance just right. Too much digoxin and your patient's heart would stop; too much diuretic and the patient looked like a prune and developed multi-organ failure. If you confessed your errors to the staff cardiologist, the typical response was "Well, they were almost ninety anyways," and the family was told that everything humanly possible was done to save their loved one.

Oncology was the worst. The student was responsible for doing blood tests to determine the next course of chemotherapy the cancer patient needed. Unfortunately, chemotherapy destroys veins

so my job was to extract blood from tiny or non-existent veins from people who were often already in excruciating pain from their cancer. Multiple stabs were usually required. No matter how many times I apologized or tried to explain that the staff oncologist was the one ordering the tests, everyone soon regarded me as the cancer ward's sadist.

I was pretty good at predicting exam questions based on lectures, but there were no lectures attached to these rotations. As it was an oral exam, I assumed we had to read as much as possible in the areas we had seen and then relate this information to a patient. Wrong assumption.

Within minutes of meeting the fiftyish gentleman with puffy features I was told to examine, I realized his problems had nothing to do with neurology, cardiology, or cancer. He was in hospital to switch from one form of dialysis to another. He knew his kidneys had been failing for a decade, but had no idea why. He took several medications, but couldn't tell me what they were because his wife kept track of them. He was not able to provide any other medical information, so I asked a few questions about his family and lifestyle, unsure if they would relate to his problem as I knew almost nothing about nephrology (the study of the kidneys). I did a general physical examination, noting high blood pressure but no other findings, as I didn't know exactly what I was looking for. I anxiously awaited the examiner.

Sharp, brisk footsteps echoed in the hall. The footsteps belonged to a short, moustached man sporting a spotless lab coat, starched light blue dress shirt, and monogrammed clipboard. A polished, top quality stethoscope gleamed on his chest alongside his nametag: "Dr. Jurin, Nephrology." His attire was certainly more impressive than his stature.

"Present your case," he ordered, without introduction. I did my best to describe the history and physical examination of the patient I had just assessed. Jurin wrote on his clipboard but was clearly not impressed.

“Did you check for Chvostek’s sign?” he asked. I couldn’t recall what Chvostek’s sign was, and certainly hadn’t remembered to check for it. Jurin demonstrated the task I had missed. “Why is this important?” he pressed.

“I think it has something to do with calcium,” I volunteered.

“Well of course it does!” he exclaimed in a strident tenor, “It obviously shows hypocalcemia, but why is that relevant in this case?”

“Uh...it might relate to his dialysis?” I wondered.

Jurin looked disgusted, “Classic sign of renal failure.” He continued “Based on the history and examination, what form of glomerulonephritis does this man probably have?” I had no idea. Subsequent questions were fired in my direction like missiles, targeting every aspect of my ignorance and incompetence in the field of nephrology.

When I protested that I had not yet done my nephrology rotation, he replied “It’s mid-term and you are expected to have a working knowledge of internal medicine. You have demonstrated a working knowledge of nothing.” He stopped writing on the clipboard.

Having never before failed an exam, I wasn’t sure what happened next. I asked if I could do a make-up exam. “That’s dangerous!” he hissed, “I once bent the rules for a student like you and she ended up killing a patient.”

I asked what he suggested I do next. “Take that up with the dean’s office,” was his curt reply, and he was gone. The sound of his gosestep gradually faded.

Rarely have I felt such an intense combination of rage and humiliation. Being examined about the details of a field that I had never worked in was patently unfair, and yet Jurin had made the failure

seem entirely my fault. His shrill interrogation reverberated in my brain for days afterwards. I alternated between fits of weeping and fantasies of slashing his tires.

Moreover, I knew the nephrology Nazi wasn't the only jerk in medicine. The lesion-guessing neurologist, covering up cardiologist, and bloodthirsty oncologist had not been great role models either. I had seen them all inflict more suffering than they had relieved. I wondered whether my choice of medicine as a career had been a mistake. On the other hand, giving up on my degree so close to completing it seemed a shame. Medical degrees can lead to research, administrative positions, medical journalism...all sorts of things. Maybe I could still find an honorable use for mine.

Eventually, I went to the dean's office, fully expecting that I would have to justify my continued presence at the medical school to the top brass. Instead, I met a bespectacled administrative official. "This happens a lot," he said laconically. "You'll do some remedial work at the hospital across town for the rest of the rotation. Then you're sure to pass the final." I was relieved, though my dramatic career crisis suddenly seemed like a very ordinary problem.

The remedial work consisted of joining a chief resident on evening rounds daily, where he or she would impart the knowledge and skills I was thought to lack. With travel time, it meant an extra three hours per day of hospital work beyond what my peers were doing. Book-learning would have to be done afterwards. It was a gruelling penance, but the only way to finish my degree.

Several addicts were shooting up in the alleyway beside the hospital where I was assigned for remedial work. "Hey, girlie!" one of them waved at me. I smiled politely and walked past, trying not to trip over the one sprawled across the main entrance. Inside, there was a strong smell of disinfectant and paint peeled from the walls. There were few windows or hallway lights, so people seemed to huddle near the nursing stations. It felt like I had walked into a fallout shelter rather than a medical ward.

I asked for the chief medical resident. "Oh, Patrick! He's a sweetheart," the nurses reassured.

A tall, bearded, bear of a man covered in blood and other bodily fluids approached the station. “You’re my remedial student?” he confirmed in a booming baritone, looming over me. I nodded timidly and extended my palm, expecting it to be crushed. Instead, an enormous warm hand enveloped mine like an oven mitt. “Welcome aboard,” he smiled.

The official at the dean’s office had emphasized that I needed to see patients in my weak areas. “I’ve been told I have gaps in nephrology,” I started.

“Don’t we all!” laughed Patrick. “Not to worry. The folks we see here have all their organs damaged more or less. You’ll see everything.”

We entered the first patient’s room. Patrick started, “Artie I’ve brought you another rising star.” He said this in an encouraging tone without a hint of sarcasm. “What do you notice about Artie?” he asked me.

Artie was gaunt and showed all the ravages of decades of alcoholism. “He looks jaundiced,” I answered, trying to focus on something obvious to which the patient would not take offense.

“Didn’t I tell you she knew her stuff?” Patrick beamed, “Yes, Artie has jaundice and fluid in his belly and a bleed in his esophagus. All from too much hooch. But Artie knows his horses. How did we do with that daily double?” he asked surreptitiously.

Artie winked. “Long odds, but they came through. Sure you don’t want to connect with my bookie?”

“One winner on this floor is enough!” laughed Patrick. “Now keep doing what the nurses tell you and soon you’ll get out to the track for real.”

Patrick did most of the necessary physical examination while Artie was talking horses. He also showed me how to judge the amount of fluid in the belly, and when it needed to be drained.

The next patient, Sam, had pancreatitis and shared Patrick's love of jazz. He was examined while discussing the merits of various trumpeters. Patrick praised me for knowing the symptoms of pancreatitis, then briefly explained how to treat it.

He followed this pattern every time: asking me a simple question that built confidence and reassured the patient I was legitimate, discussing an interest he shared with the patient during physical examination, and teaching me briefly afterwards. No wonder the nurses thought he was a sweetheart! I made one other observation: other doctors I'd met had a habit of referring to patients by their diseases...the lymphoma, the right hemiplegia, and so on. Patrick called each of them by name.

There was a niggling question in my mind though, and after a few days I got up the nerve to ask it. "Patrick, I notice you never talk to patients about why they keep drinking or using drugs. Won't that be important in the long run?"

Patrick's expression clouded. "What are the chances that someone like Artie will ever quit drinking? If I talk about that, he feels like a failure and gives up. If I talk horses, he gets hopeful about seeing the track again and hangs in there."

"But aren't you curious about his story, and what got him to this point?" I wondered.

"It's not our job to find out the story," Patrick said, "It's our job to help him deal with the story, whatever it is."

"And if he can't deal with it?" I persisted.

"Then we make sure he doesn't die alone," he said warmly.

After my remedial work, I passed the final exam with ease and decided not to give up on clinical medicine after all.

Pizza Dinner

“If only I could get away from this drudgery and finally do something meaningful!” Alice groaned to herself.

She had spent a year being criticized for her lack of manual dexterity starting intravenous drips, her difficulty hearing subtle heart murmurs, and her lack of depth perception which resulted in cutting sutures either too long or too short when assisting in surgery. Unlike many of her peers, she preferred eliciting people’s stories and understanding their emotional struggles. Psychiatry seemed a natural fit. Unfortunately, the opportunity to pursue this specialty was still a year away. Before that loomed the compulsory “Rotating Internship”: twelve more months of practicing medical skills she would never use and being compared unfavorably to those who feverishly vied for opportunities to insert big needles into people’s spines and intubate the non-breathing.

After another exhausting evening in the operating room holding a retractor (the only thing the surgeons would let her do these days), she longed for a few hours rest in the dingy room she rented across the street. Her shoulders hurt from the uncomfortable posture she had kept for several hours, and her eyes burned from the glare of the operative lights. She plodded slowly. Boisterous laughter and the smell of hot food stopped her in her tracks. This wasn’t the stale, hallway muffins found outside meeting rooms that she typically scavenged when there was no time to eat. This scent of Italian herbs and cheesy goodness had to mean...

“Come in and have a slice!” Reba called out. She grinned broadly as she waved to Alice. She remembered what it was like to be a lowly medical student at the bottom of the hospital pecking order. Not that she was that high up herself. As an intern, she was only one year older and one rank higher

than Alice. Still, interns earned a bit of money for their ninety-hour work weeks whereas medical students paid for the privilege, so that allowed Reba to treat them to pizza once in a while.

“Are you sure?” Alice asked shyly. She never knew if a kind offer was genuine or some sort of cruel test of her ability to follow hospital protocols. She was pretty sure they weren’t supposed to be eating in the surgical waiting room.

“We have plenty,” Reba reassured, “and there’s no fretting families, so the O.R.’s must be quiet.” Her surgical scrubs looked like they had been permanently glued to her body, and her hands and wrists looked like red gloves. Repeated pre-operative washing did that. A short, silent feeding frenzy followed before conversation resumed.

“So, how did Napoleon treat you today?” Reba started.

“You mean Dr. Rothman?” Alice clarified.

“Of course! Who else has an ego twice as big as himself?” Reba chuckled.

“He showed us how to run the bowel,” Alice reported, “and I asked questions like I was interested. He enjoys teaching, so he wasn’t as nasty as usual. He might even give me a decent practical mark, despite my suture-cutting problem.” She knew she had to ingratiate herself to the local alpha male if she was going to get through the year.

“That’s one thing I don’t miss,” Reba chimed in, “always having to worry about grades. I love that everything is pass-fail in internship. You don’t have to waste time sucking up, so you can actually do stuff and learn.”

“Do you have any tips for internal medicine?” asked Austin, another young medical student eager to succeed. The pockets of his lab coat bulged with clinical manuals. “How do you keep all those diagnostic possibilities straight?”

“Not so complicated. It’s mostly old people diseases,” Reba replied nonchalantly between bites. “Old people get congestive heart failure or pneumonia or both, and they can’t give you a history because they’re demented. So...if they don’t have a fever and they’re breathing funny, it’s probably heart failure so you do D & D: digoxin and diuretics. If there’s fever, they need an antibiotic too. Once in a while they go unresponsive, and some I.V. dextrose usually fixes that. Do those things, and they won’t die on your watch. Then your resident can show off with a fancy differential diagnosis in the morning and everybody’s happy.”

Austin nodded knowingly, obviously relieved.

“Is that your only goal...to not have them die on your watch?” Alice challenged. It sounded like a rather cynical approach to healing.

Reba put down her slice, “What’s wrong with that? It keeps me out of trouble and pays the bills. Besides, if you’re ninety-three and can’t recognize your own kids and some hot-shot doctor tells you the name of a rare disease that might prevent you from seeing ninety-four, does that really matter? If they don’t die on my watch, at least they have a chance of someday getting out of this hell-hole and dying with people who care about them.”

“OK, I guess that makes sense,” Alice conceded. “But someday I want to do something that makes more of a difference in people’s lives.”

Reba shook her head, “Everybody wants to be a hero. Just do the best you can with what’s in front of you and act like a decent human being. Be proud of that. Someday will take care of itself.”

Alice wondered, “Isn’t there anyone you admire or want to be like in the future?”

“Sure,” Reba thought for a moment. “I admire the receptionist who gave everyone on call New Years’ a slice of her homemade Jamaican rum cake; the nurse who gave me a Gravol when I was totally

grossed out and couldn't let the higher ups see me vomit; the social worker who stopped an overwhelmed young Mom from leaving the E.R. when her doctor said there was nothing physically wrong with her..."

Her reverie was interrupted by the loudspeaker announcing "Dr. Rothman to O.R. 2 Stat! Dr. Rothman to O.R. 2 Stat! Dr. Rothman to O.R. 2 Stat!" It was the familiar triple repetition that was done whenever the message was urgent.

Reba's pager went off, and loud, brisk footsteps approached. She quickly packed away the empty pizza box as Dr. Rothman came around the corner. "Go home!" she mouthed to Alice and Austin.

"What's the emergency?" Austin wondered.

"Ruptured ectopic pregnancy!" Napoleon announced, looking past the waiting room as he headed to the preoperative scrub area.

"I'm in!" Austin shouted like a shrill puppy wanting to be noticed. Whether he was worried about his grades or was bucking for a surgical residency or both wasn't clear. It didn't matter.

"It'll be a bloodbath," Reba mumbled sadly. "He didn't see you. Get out of here while you can."

Alice nodded thankfully, and hurried into the night.

Mountain Dreams

“Look. I can almost touch the clouds!” she laughed, waving her ski poles. She grinned with anticipation, and her light brown bob peeked out pertly from beneath a colorful tuque. Her feet easily found the track-set grooves of the trail. The top of the mountain was shaped like a bowl, allowing for high-altitude cross-country skiing as well as downhill. Its snow sparkled in the sun like a treasure-trove of diamonds. Conditions were perfect.

It was Meri’s first time in the mountains. She had arrived on the bus with her boyfriend Jake a few hours earlier. Jake had planned the trip. He was older than Meri, tall with graying sideburns and a unique set of creases around his eyes when he smiled. He loved introducing her to new experiences: from waterskiing to exotic foods to novel sexual positions. Meri didn’t mind. The new adventures were a welcome distraction from her responsibilities as a medical resident. She had been dating Jake for almost a year, and they had recently moved in together.

Meri beckoned Jake, “Come on! Let’s not waste the daylight.”

“Stick to the trail,” he cautioned, “It’s easy to get lost out here.”

“Catch me if you can!” she teased, and was off.

The first half hour was exhilarating. The trail rolled gently around the crater rim, and she was able to glide quickly on the hard-packed snow. She had to stay focused to avoid a spill, but loved this sort of challenge. She attacked it with the same determination she applied to her medical studies. She was learning to act the part of being a doctor, confident in rounds and realistically reassuring with patients, but she didn’t quite feel it yet. Poverty and family problems had given her more than the

average dose of self-doubt. She had recently trimmed her hair to make herself look older and more credible.

Jake had been her cheerleader and mentor this past year, helping her make light of critical superiors, hospital politics, and other daily stress. He had a chivalrous side too, often bringing her gifts or helping her succeed at his own expense. It didn't matter if he was overcompensating for not protecting his mother from his abusive father, or if he was just a genuinely nice guy: it felt good to be treated well for a change.

After a while, Meri noticed that the tracks had become unclear on the hilly parts of the trail. At one point, they disappeared altogether. Looking back, she realized Jake was no longer behind her. She called him, but there was no response. Looking up, she saw the top of the bowl, but it was distant and no longer to her right. She must have skied over it and onto the other side. Getting back up there would be a difficult climb, and the sunlight was starting to fade.

Undaunted, Meri decided to look for a way down to the chalet. She knew it was on the east side of the mountain, so it made sense to ski away from the sun. It would not be an easy descent on her narrow cross-country skis, but she thought there were bound to be some slopes she could manage. After several harrowing attempts at snowplowing down a rather steep gradient, Meri eventually reached a road for supply trucks. "Roads are gentle and lead back to civilization," she reassured herself. She relaxed as she slowly worked her way down the mountain. Sure enough, the road led back to the chalet. She was pleased with her accomplishment.

Jake ran towards her, red-faced and breathless. "Where have you been? I thought you were caught in the avalanche!" he shouted.

"What avalanche?" she asked, perplexed, "I lost the trail and came back on the supply..."

“I had to tell them how to identify your body!” he interrupted, “Comma-shaped birthmark on the left calf...my God, you could have been killed!”

“I, I’m sorry,” she stammered, “I had no idea.”

A paramedic rushed past with a stretcher, and Meri glimpsed the blackened fingers of one of the avalanche victims.

Meri’s satisfaction at making it down the mountain evaporated as she realized the fate she had narrowly avoided, and how worried Jake had been. She also had to admit he was right: it really was easy to lose the trail up there. She should have been more careful. It wasn’t the first time she had upset him though, and she knew he would forgive her. Tired from the long trek to the chalet, she decided to take a nap before dinner.

“Please welcome Dr. Meredith Pall,” a voice announced, “Here to present her ground-breaking research on reversing the effects of hypothermia and frostbite.” There was thunderous applause. Meri wore a Persian blue pantsuit with shoulder pads just large enough to exude confidence but not so big as to suggest aggression. She stepped up to the microphone, checked her laser pointer, and delivered a flawless performance. The questions afterward were easy, merely highlighting her expertise. She beamed.

Still wearing her power suit, Meri found herself in the gift shop. She could see the mountains looming over the hotel outside the window, clouds obscuring the craggy peaks. The shop was filled with maple confections, maple leaf t-shirts, postcards with red-coated policemen on horseback, and other gaudy Canadiana. In the corner, she brushed up against a soft fur hat that might suit Jake: he would look like a cute Cossack in it. It would be a peace offering after leaving him to look after their toddler for the week.

“How much?” she asked the saleslady behind the counter. The wrinkled forehead suggested a woman around sixty, but she still had the sharp eyes and agile movements of youth. She wore a beaded top, “like a throw-back to the sixties”, Meri thought.

“This is a medium,” the old lady explained, “If the gentleman is tall, he might need a large.”

“OK, please get me the large,” Meri urged, looking at her watch.

“I’m afraid we’re out of those in this style,” the old lady replied, “Would you like to see a different style?”

“No. It will probably be fine. Ring up this one,” Meri concluded. She wasn’t really sure it would fit, but then Jake was never very appreciative of presents anyways. He showered her with gifts and helpful suggestions, but ignored her efforts when she tried to reciprocate. “It’s the thought that counts,” she reassured herself, thinking about the hat. She pushed a bill across the counter.

“As you wish,” the old lady nodded.

Jake now had salt-and-pepper hair. She saw a flash of disappointment in his eyes, and woke up.

The hotel dining room was decorated with antlers and rustic wooden furniture, reminiscent of a hunting lodge. Wild game complemented the traditional haute cuisine menu.

“Bison tartare looks good,” Jake suggested.

“I wouldn’t mind trying the venison,” said Meri.

“Flavorful,” opined Jake, “I think you’ll like it as long as they don’t overcook it.”

Jake was quiet as they waited for their meal. Meri noticed the background music consisted of old movie themes. She tried to lighten the mood by playing “name that tune,” as Jake often liked games of trivia.

“Dr. Zhivago!” she announced. “Maybe that was too easy. Can you guess this one?”

“Moon River,” Jake mumbled.

“Ah but what was the movie?” she prodded.

“I don’t really care,” he answered.

Meri was getting concerned. “I know I screwed up when I lost the trail and worried you half to death today. I’m really sorry...how many times can I say it?”

“It’s not you,” he confessed. “Gary is transferring me to the Oshawa office, so we’ll have to move.”

The idea shocked Meri. “Oshawa? That’s miles from downtown. Turn it down. It’s not worth whatever money he’s offering you.”

“It’s not a promotion. I told him his roll-out plan had no hope in hell of working. Guess I pissed him off.”

“Jake, you can’t be so blunt with people in authority. You need to butter them up sometimes. Maybe if you talk to him again, he’ll see how valuable you are to the Toronto office,” she suggested.

“Authority, huh! What did authority ever do for me? I’m not going to bullshit him. If he can’t handle the honest truth, that’s his problem.”

“But I can’t move, Jake” Meri pleaded “I’m on call every third night and I need to be within 10 minutes of the hospital. I would need to get a separate apartment. And here I thought we were planning a future together!” She was near tears.

“So, I’ll commute,” Jake said gruffly, “Lots of people do that.”

“You’ll be gone most of the day and I’ll hardly see you...and what about your hockey practices?”

Meri worried.

“Sports aren’t everything, and we need the money. We’ll manage. Let’s move on,” Jake ordered, clearly uncomfortable with how emotional she was getting. He was relieved that their food was arriving.

Meri resumed naming movie themes to appease him. Her venison seemed dry and chewy. They went to bed in silence.

The gondola door opened and Meri stepped in. As it shut, she passed by a photo booth and felt annoyed. It was the usual scam...your picture got taken on the way up and on the way down, and you couldn’t leave the premises without being shown the results and urged to buy at least one. She forced a tense smile.

The view from the top was spectacular. Maybe it was the rarefied mountain air, but everything seemed brighter and more sharply defined than usual. Rays of sunlight broke the clouds, showing a panorama of snow, forest, and turquoise lakes. There was music too: not a schmaltzy movie score but an adagio with incising, poignant strings and a pummelling tympani rhythm, all bound together by a soaring orchestral theme. It was an assault on the senses, yet oddly calming.

She wondered aloud where Jake was, and felt a profound sense of sadness and guilt. He’d neglected his health commuting and trying to help her get established, with devastating results. His bloated body lay in a hospital bed, unable to speak or move. He was expressionless. She couldn’t even see the creases around his eyes any more. Instead, they showed the angry redness of infection. Her hand moved almost involuntarily to the electrical plug on the wall.

Gasping for air, Meri was back in the mountains again. The music returned, and she felt warm. A wide, gentle sunbeam reflected off a distant lake. His spirit seemed to follow it to an opening between the clouds. She felt relieved, knowing he was free and well.

Sobs wracked her body as the gondola descended. The obligatory picture captured them perfectly. She dreaded facing the attendant at the booth.

"It's the altitude, dear. It heightens the emotions," said the old woman sympathetically. She wore capris and a fashionable top, but otherwise resembled the ex-hippie from Meri's other dream. "I imagine you'd rather I print up this one," she said, pointing to the picture with the forced smile.

"No, that one," Meri replied, pointing to the image of herself weeping. "It's more honest."

"As you wish," the old woman said kindly.

The following morning, Jake and Meri decided to explore the town. After buying a few souvenirs, they discovered a trail that promised a short hike to the local hot springs. The hike was longer than expected, but neither of them had bathed in natural springs before so they persevered. The pool was split into an indoor and an outdoor part, allowing for the unique experience of bathing in subtropical heat and then diving under a barrier to the outside where hair quickly turned into icicles in the winter air. Meri laughed as she shook her light brown spikes.

Back at the hotel, they made love playfully and energetically, the way young couples do when they're not thinking about anything in particular. The events of the night before no longer seemed so important.

Afterwards, Meri mused "I wonder what sort of parents we would make."

"You took your pill, didn't you?" Jake worried.

“Of course. I’m just thinking hypothetically, after my residency when things are more settled,” she reassured.

“You scared me for a minute,” Jake chuckled, “I think the heat from the springs is catching up to me. Let’s get some rest.”

Meri snuggled into his chest, and soon fell asleep.

Stretching before her was a vast mountain meadow dotted with bunches of yellow glacier lilies. Beside her, stunted, tenacious larch trees clung to a rocky slope forming the boundary between forest and alpine tundra. She felt chilly despite the bright sunlight.

Two figures with backpacks approached. The first was a tall young man. His boyish haircut and lopsided smile suggested he wasn’t quite as clever as the average twenty-something, and he had an awkward excitability that marked him as different. Despite his youth, he already showed small creases around his eyes that seemed strangely familiar. Behind him hiked a sure-footed older woman in a broad-brimmed hat. She directed him toward the base of the slope, and started unpacking conifer saplings carefully wrapped in bundles to protect the roots. He started digging. The old woman noticed Meri and smiled.

Meri shook her head, “You again?”

“I do get around,” she smirked.

“What are you doing here?” Meri wondered.

“Planting trees. The mountains really need them or the meadows will erode away.”

“Who’s that?” she asked, gesturing toward the young man.

“My son. He needs me too, and probably always will. Autistic, you know. Happens sometimes with older fathers. Wonderful boy though.”

“Have you always looked after the mountains?” Meri asked, surprising herself as she usually wasn’t this nosy.

“Heavens no!” the old woman exclaimed, “I used to be a famous scientist. Got invited to do big keynote talks and everything. Really ambitious. Then my husband died, my colleagues got jealous and nasty, and I had a hard time raising this guy on my own. All the stuff I’d achieved didn’t matter so much. I quit the rat-race and came here.” She straightened up and continued, “Now, I look after things, and I look after him. I’m where I was meant to be.”

“Sounds like a hard life though,” Meri sympathized, “Would you do the same things again if you knew back then what you know now?”

The old woman looked at her tenderly and said only three words, “As you wish.”

She turned away, and on her lower left leg Meri spotted a small, comma-shaped birthmark.

Pursuing Knowledge

Walking into the waiting area, she noticed a brownish-grey sofa of indeterminate age. Its pattern was designed to minimize the appearance of stains. Above it hung an abstract print of angular geometric shapes. The receptionist's area was impeccably organized and ringed by a wall of uniform beige cabinets categorizing various projects and people. She wondered if her file was in one of the cabinets too. The room seemed designed to give the appearance of being welcoming, but felt oddly sterile.

"Have a seat," beckoned the receptionist, not looking up. "Shirley Cartwright" was inscribed on her name plate. She was a full-bosomed, smartly dressed woman, too young to retire but old enough that she no longer needed to impress people. She was fiercely loyal to her boss and knew everything about him, from the names of his friends and enemies on the hospital hierarchy to where he kept the cigars that weren't allowed within ten feet of the building.

Once she stopped typing, Mrs. Cartwright looked at her new charge sympathetically. Lilly was a slim, attractive young woman of mixed African and Asian heritage. Her neatly pressed lab coat and tense posture suggested she was one of those keen, wide-eyed students who still believed she could make a difference in the world through science.

Although intimidated by her surroundings, Lilly felt excited. Professor Bason had an international reputation for his research, and was almost as renowned for his ability to foster student success. Early onset psychosis was his field, and Lilly was delighted to have a chance to work with him. She had a genuine interest in the treatment of serious mental illnesses, spurred by an unfortunate family history. Her brother was schizophrenic, and had been in and out of institutions since his teens. He was currently homeless, and she had lost touch with him. Lilly also tended to use challenging work as an

anchor when her personal life went adrift, and currently it was drifting. A recent break-up and her mother's precarious health made her crave a positive focus for her energies.

The professor emerged from his office. He wore sandals and had the wiry frame of a distance runner. Most people noticed his face first though: his bushy gray eyebrows loomed over piercing black eyes. "Did you finish the letter of recommendation for Devon?" he asked.

"For the university across town?" Mrs. Cartwright clarified.

"Yes."

"It's done," she responded, "Though I was a bit surprised by all the positives. You were so frustrated with him last week. Change of heart?"

"No. Just need to make sure he becomes someone else's problem," he grumbled. Signing the document, he motioned to Lilly to step into his office.

It was a shrine to the famous academic. The walls were lined with diplomas and neuroscience journals in which the professor had undoubtedly been published. A few classic textbooks in hardcover stood out, many of which he had edited. On the desk was a coffee mug with a famous Einstein quote, some papers, and a plastic model of the brain to illustrate key teaching points. The fissures on the model's surface were caked in dust, obscuring some of its features.

Bason looked at her quizzically, "Where have you been? Everyone else started Monday."

She explained, "I...I attended the hospital orientation days. They're mandatory for students."

"So, you spent three days learning about fire drills and footwear policy and why we can only have chairs with five legs, not four. How enlightening! You could have at least shown your face so I could give you something useful to read." He noticed she had started to tremble and relented, "Oh well,

you're here now. Let's get started." He directed her to a chair and assumed a comfortable position behind his desk, leaning back with his hands behind his head.

"It's Lilly, isn't it?" She nodded. "Well, Lilly, Masters Students are only here a year so their projects need to be quick and cheap. We typically have you use existing data," he began.

"Excuse me professor, but I was hoping to work with patients as part of my research. I'm really interested in this population," Lilly volunteered.

"Like I said, you don't have the time or the money," he reiterated, sighing.

"Maybe I could apply to the hospital foundation for funds. I wouldn't need much..." she suggested.

"Foundation!" he interrupted, "That's a laugh. Easier getting blood from a stone. The Foundation's goal is to hire more fundraisers and administrators so they can continuously expand the Foundation. Hardly any of the money goes to actual research. Besides, how long do you think it would take to get a study with human subjects through research ethics?"

"I don't know," she confessed.

"Longer than you'll be here," Bason assured her, "You'll use existing data and apply to ethics for a chart review. That will come through in a few months."

"OK," Lilly agree, trying not to look too dejected, "What sort of data will I be working with?"

He elaborated, "We included a depression screen with our questionnaires a while back. You'll take a look at how that relates to psychotic symptoms. Even if all you show is it's depressing to be psychotic, that's publishable. If you have some other hypotheses, that's great. We can discuss them next time."

“But I’m interested in the neuroscience of psychosis and how to treat it,” she protested.

Bason was getting irritated, but tried to be patient. “There’s no existing data on that...and don’t get me started on the problems with treatment studies. Devon will show you how to score the forms and set up the spreadsheet. Oh...and remember to download and fill in that ethics application ASAP.”

“Shouldn’t we get the ethics approval first and then start working with the data?” Lilly asked, sensing she might be pushing her luck.

Bason rolled his eyes, “Do you want to finish this year or not? Lesson one: Learn to multitask!” He was annoyed by her naiveté, but most students lacked either the brains or the guts to ask so many pertinent questions. Lilly didn’t. He liked that. “Welcome aboard,” he added in a friendly tone.

Lilly was disappointed with her assigned project, but reassured herself “It’s just the first day. Things will get better with time.”

The next week, Mrs. Cartwright announced, “He’s in there with Dr. Gregory. Shouldn’t be too long.”

“Dr. Gregory?” Lilly asked, “I haven’t heard of him before.”

“That’s because he was away last year. Got himself into trouble for faking results in one of his drug trials,” came the explanation.

“And now he’s back?” Lilly wondered.

“Yes,” Mrs. Cartwright continued, “Can’t do drug trials any more though. They made him head of the Ethics Board instead.”

Bason shouted from inside his office, “Hey, Lilly! Come say hello to Dr. Gregory. He had a good suggestion for your proposal.”

Gregory was a wan, bespectacled man who greeted her with, "A real pleasure," giving her an overly enthusiastic handshake. His hand was limp and moist, creating the sensation of clutching a slippery fish. He turned to one side dramatically, "Have to be on my way, Tom."

"No problem, have a good one!" waved Bason. As the eyebrows turned, Lilly saw that one of the occipital lobes had fallen off his model of the brain.

"So, apparently Ethics likes to see some description of what will be done for subjects who endorse suicidal ideation on your depression measure. Make sure to include that," ordered Bason.

Lilly pointed out, "But Professor Bason, they filled out the questionnaire months ago, and we don't have contact information for many of them."

"So contact the referring doctors. They're responsible for them anyways," Bason suggested.

Lilly worried, "That would be dozens of doctors, and I have all this coursework to finish. This week..."

He interrupted her, "So don't contact them and say you did. It's up to you how you manage your time. The main thing is you get ethics out of the way. Got it?" She nodded slowly. "Now, is Devon helping you with the spreadsheet or is he slacking as usual?"

"He showed me how to set it up yesterday, and I think I understand," she responded.

"Good. Start crunching numbers," Bason continued, "If nothing comes out significant, think up some more hypotheses and crunch some more. You need at least one result at .05 significance or better to publish."

"But shouldn't I write up the results for my initial hypotheses?" Lilly objected, "Writing the hypotheses to fit the data doesn't seem right."

Bason frowned, “You don’t have the luxury of being right at your stage of development. Get a tenured position. Then you can take the high road.”

The meeting was over. She knew that further objections would only irritate Bason. She had assumed that people who indicated they were suicidal would have been interviewed at the time they participated in the research, but evidently not. “What if one of them actually harmed themselves?” she worried. She had to phone them, or at least their doctors, even if that meant finishing the coursework at night. Maybe they could still be referred for further treatment. Bending the rules of research for the sake of publication didn’t sit right either, and Dr. Gregory seemed more like an actor than an ethicist. Still, she needed this degree to secure a good job and look after her mother, and it could eventually lead to work that was relevant to her brother. She owed it to them to finish. She remembered how her mother had raised two kids on her own, sang in the church choir, and always had a kind word to say to Lilly no matter how difficult the circumstances. She couldn’t abandon her.

Lilly tossed and turned that night, but the next morning resolved to do it all: coursework, phoning the doctors, and running her analyses according to multiple hypotheses. After several exhausting months, Lilly eventually felt she was adapting to her program and to Bason’s acerbic style. She even struck up a friendship with the much-maligned Devon, before he was transferred across town.

“He’s in a good mood today,” announced Mrs. Cartwright one morning, “Must have had some clever idea for beating the system. These days, that’s usually why.”

“Was he different before?” Lilly wondered.

“Oh yes. He was really idealistic about his work once. Kind of like you,” she recalled.

Surprised, Lilly asked “What happened?”

Mrs. Cartwright looked glum, “He took a stand when they told him to add people to the author list on a big paper...people who hadn’t really contributed anything but were owed favors. They cut off his funding. He nearly lost the lab. He caved after a while, but he’s been different ever since.”

Bason was finishing a telephone call, but motioned for Lilly to come into the office. She noticed for the first time that the plastic brain model was not entirely accurate: the temporal lobes only had two gyri instead of three. She thought about Mrs. Cartwright’s revelation. Who would have thought that her professor could be so vulnerable?

He interrupted her reverie, “I must say, Lilly. These analyses you emailed me are right on the money. Just eliminate a few outliers and we’ll have a terrific little paper.”

“But how do I justify doing that?” Lilly asked, “They’re all very similar subjects.”

Bason grinned, “Easy. Say their psychosis affected the validity of their responses on the questionnaire.”

“And then you think we’ll get more significant results?”

“I know we will,” he beamed, “I re-ran everything last night and did a nice introduction and discussion based on that. Just fill in the methods and we’re good to go.”

Lilly was incredulous, “You wrote most of my paper for me?”

“Not for you...for the Austin prize: best paper by a Masters level student. They like to award it to minorities, and it’s a bonus that you’re female. You’re bound to win,” he explained cheerfully.

She had never taken credit for someone else’s work, and was determined not to start now. “But it’s not my work,” she stated as forcefully as she could.

“You play along, you get a nice award, and I get a teaching award for helping you succeed. That boosts my chances of promotion next year. Everybody wins! Oh...and you’ll accept your award at the conference next month in Ottawa,” he announced trying to conclude the discussion.

“I can’t go, Professor Bason,” she said emphatically, “I know this may sound unprofessional, but I need to stay with my mother. She’s very ill.” Lilly was near tears.

“Sorry to hear that,” he replied in a gentler tone, “What’s her diagnosis, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Breast cancer. She’s recovering from surgery and waiting for radiation treatment, but I’m not sure she’ll get it in time. It’s a three-month waitlist. I can’t go anywhere...and furthermore I am not putting my name on a paper that you wrote! I can’t postpone my values until I get tenure.” Her voice cracked, and despite her best efforts she couldn’t help but cry.

The eyebrows dropped like window blinds. “Alright, alright. This is obviously really upsetting. Go home and get some rest,” he urged, clearly disappointed and uncomfortable with her display of emotion.

Lilly went home but didn’t rest. Refusing to take credit for someone else’s work and looking after her mother was the right thing to do, and she was insulted that Bason suggested her race and gender would bias the judges in favor of awarding her the prize. On the other hand, if Bason decided to transfer her across town before the year ended she risked not getting her degree, which would jeopardize her career and her ability to help at home in the long run. Nevertheless, she’d been feeling increasingly uncomfortable with all of Bason’s ethical compromises. Selling her soul for a prize reminded her of a cousin who ended up on the streets selling her body. Bason was her professor, but he was not going to be her pimp! She finally relaxed and fell asleep.

The next day, Lilly received a text message ordering her to come to Bason's office. Mrs. Cartwright had stepped away from her desk so she stood outside anxiously, hesitant about disturbing the professor.

"Lilly, come in," he invited. He smiled broadly, and the brain model on his desk looked newly polished. "I thought about our meeting yesterday. There's a radiation oncologist I know, Dr. Davis, who owes me a favor. I have his card here. If you call his office, he can fit in your mother next week."

"I...I don't know what to say," stammered Lilly, overwhelmed with relief.

"Thank you will do," he suggested, and pushed the card across the desk. As she picked it up, his smile vanished and his dark eyes locked directly onto hers. "Pack some sweaters, Lilly. Ottawa's cold this time of year."

Morphine

“What’s the B.P.?”

“90 on 65...low end but OK,” I heard the voices say. They seemed distant, coming through the white mist I started to perceive. Then I realized it wasn’t mist at all, but light shining through my eyelids from above. There was a steady beep by my left ear.

My eyes fluttered and I mumbled “When is it starting?”

“Honey, the surgery’s over!” the matronly nurse at my bedside explained, “You’re in recovery.”

“What happened?” I asked, pushing up on my elbows.

A smiling face ringed by curls appeared, “Doctor will explain later. Lie back. You’ll be here for a while.”

Dizzy, I did as I was told. I remembered counting backwards, and then waking up, but nothing in between. It wasn’t like sleeping, where you recall some dream time, even if it’s a bit vague. There was absolutely nothing between the counting and the white mist. My first general anesthesia had obviously worked very well.

I wondered what procedure had been done. I was pretty sure this had been my second miscarriage. The heavy cramping and the amount of blood was the same as the first time. I was obviously prone to them. The first time was an unusually stressful day. I had a court hearing to attend about an involuntary patient. My testimony was clear but the opposing lawyer made me feel like a foolish little girl. Then, I had to run across town for an important meeting before learning the outcome. After the meeting, the bleeding started. By the time I got to the emergency department, they concluded

that the miscarriage was complete so nothing further had to be done. This time, there was no unusual stress. It just happened. Nine weeks gestation, just like the first time.

Unfortunately, the tall, brusque gynecologist in the emergency department didn't believe me. He thought the ultrasound looked odd and wanted me to consent to major surgery for a possible tubal pregnancy. I argued that I did not want my abdomen cut open unless he was sure, and asked if he could check if there had been a pregnancy in the uterus first. He countered that doing so was risky because I might be bleeding internally. I argued that my hemoglobin level was fine so he had time to do a dilatation and curettage (D&C) and find out if it had been a uterine pregnancy. "Doctors are the worst patients," he concluded, but agreed to write up a consent form for "D&C, possible laparotomy." I signed.

I hoped it had just been a D& C. I felt crampy but not terribly so, and couldn't feel anything that seemed like a large cut, but I still had some anesthesia in my system so couldn't be entirely sure.

"Having any pain?" the nurse enquired. Her nametag read 'Sally', and she spoke in a confident, experienced tone.

"Just some cramping," I responded.

"Here, let's get you comfortable," Sally reassured, and proceeded to inject a syringe of clear fluid into my intravenous line. When I asked what it was, she explained "Morphine. Should help you relax and stop the cramping." I thanked her.

The cramps were numbed away quickly. I felt relaxed but not groggy. I looked around the room, saw nurses walking back and forth, spotted a couple of other patients with monitors, and looked at my monitors. I had been around hospitals, including recovery rooms, for almost a decade now since starting medical school. Still, it all seemed fascinating, beautifully vivid, and brand new to me. I noticed the rhythm of my pulse monitor seemed to be matching that of the patient next to me apart from a half-

second delay, kind of like they were singing a round. I was tempted to chime in “Row, row, row your boat...” but thought better of it.

I wasn't just euphoric, I was timeless. My worries about my health, my job, my family...all worries didn't exist. The need to achieve didn't either. Gone was the constant barrage of thoughts and plans that had accompanied me since childhood “If only I could do this, then life would be OK!” I needed nothing except the scenery that unfolded before me. I was content to be a witness to reality, without having to participate in it.

I overheard two young, cheerful nurses by the next bed talking about clues to a crossword puzzle. I volunteered some answers and they smiled. I was pleased they were able to finish the puzzle, but not proud. Neither pride nor shame existed. The part of my mind that evaluated me, often passing harsh judgments on me, was gone. I was no longer aware of my performance. I was no longer aware of me. I was just there, and there was marvellous.

Later, I realized it was a state I had experienced briefly at other times in my life. When skiing down a challenging slope and focusing totally on the movement needed to make the next turn, I felt like that. When smiling at a paradox in my philosophy course, I moved beyond me as well. When totally absorbed by the light streaming through a stained-glass window, I dissolved too.

At that time though, I recalled none of these. There was no past, nor any future. I simply observed all that I could in that moment, with no need to attend to the observer. I was free from me. Free to just be. I was at one with everything, and it with me. I just was.

I had obviously been given a generous dose of morphine, so my self-less state lasted for quite a while, longer than I had ever experienced before. When I was deemed ready to leave the recovery room, it finally started to dissipate. Still, I was pretty nonchalant when the gynecologist confirmed they

had done a D&C, and sheepishly admitted I was right about the miscarriage. It didn't seem to matter very much. To be safe, I was kept in the hospital overnight for observation before being discharged.

As I pulled my clothes on the next morning, I knew I had a choice to make. After a lifetime of anxiety, depression, and constant self-criticism that nothing seemed to alleviate, I had found the cure. Moreover, I worked in a profession where I could access that cure easier than most. Sure, I might be able to occasionally reach a similar state after years of daily meditation...but this drug was so much easier and more certain. However, I also knew the cure would kill me if I became addicted to it and, after what I had experienced, even one more dose might be enough to do that. Also, what use would I be to anyone else if I spent all day in a state of timeless, self-less bliss? To make a positive difference, I would have to rejoin a temporal world of flawed, self-conscious people including myself. I had to decide then and there.

I never took morphine again.

Frisco

“What do you mean, you don’t have our tickets? Check again!” Cynthia was irate. She had purchased two tickets for a combination City tour and Alcatraz tour hours earlier, and now the latter seemed to have fallen through.

“Sorry, not there,” replied the attendant.

“Come on,” said her friend Amanda softly, “The tour company obviously screwed up. I’m sure we can find something else to do for the rest of the day.” Amanda preferred adapting to the unexpected rather than making waves socially. Her friend’s more “in your face” style made her cringe.

“We paid for an Alcatraz tour, and I’m not leaving until we get one. What are you going to do about this?” Cynthia demanded.

“Just a moment. I’ll talk to my manager,” the attendant replied. He was a sad-looking, pimply-faced teen who was clearly intimidated by his confrontational customer.

“Terribly sorry about the mix-up,” the manager acknowledged, “But the 3:30 tour is sold out. We could get you on the evening tour,” he suggested.

Cynthia glared, “We paid for the 3:30 tour!”

A long line was forming at the wicket, and the manager was eager to move on. “I tell you what. We can get you ladies on the evening tour for half price, OK?” After getting back half their money, Cynthia reluctantly agreed.

Amanda was surprised, “Wow! Half price tickets. I’m impressed!”

“They owed us at least that much,” Cynthia said matter-of-factly, “You just have to be firm.”

Cynthia and Amanda were colleagues working in the same lab in Toronto, honored to be asked to present at an international conference in San Francisco. The presentation that morning had gone well, and they had decided to skip the rest of the conference day in favor of some sightseeing. The City tour had been enjoyable, with the steep, flower-covered curves of Lombard Street a particular highlight. Amanda had also been struck by the peace and splendor of Grace Cathedral. Cynthia thought a cable car ride should have been included in the tour, but still had fun.

The two young women were strikingly different in appearance as well as personality. When Cynthia entered a room, people took notice. Sporting a shock of crimson hair, she never went out without her stilettos and flawless make-up, regardless of the occasion. Amanda was convinced that she even took out the garbage in stilettos and flawless make-up. Cynthia felt entitled to the finer things in life. She often sent food back at restaurants when it wasn't to her liking and haggled about prices at the boutiques where she shopped. Because of her imposing manner, people often acquiesced to her wishes. Cynthia got what she wanted.

Amanda dressed more casually, preferring slacks, sweaters, and comfortable shoes. She tried to be diplomatic when others disagreed, and was happy not to draw attention to herself in a group. Amanda preferred focusing on her work rather than arguing about its merits, so didn't always get the recognition she deserved. Sometimes she resented this; sometimes she realized it was an inevitable result of her unassertive style.

Despite their differences, or perhaps because of them, Cynthia and Amanda worked well together. With some free time before the evening tour, each decided to pursue her own interests. Cynthia headed for the cable cars; Amanda went back to the cathedral.

Approaching the church entrance, she looked up at the towers on either side. They seemed like massive pillars holding up the heavens over the bustling action below. Inside, she stepped out of the city

noise and experienced the warm embrace of silence. She breathed deeply, bowed her head, and began a reverent walk through the labyrinth that covered much of the floor. Labyrinths are an ancient form of meditation, designed to emulate a pilgrimage as the walker releases cares and becomes open to spiritual insight while approaching the centre, then responds to that insight on the return journey. Amanda had almost completed her journey, when a cheerful voice interrupted her contemplation.

“You missed a great ride,” Cynthia informed her. The cable cars had obviously made an impression.

“I’ve enjoyed the peace and quiet here,” Amanda replied.

“OK. Figure out the maze and then we’ll head to the ferry,” Cynthia suggested.

“It’s not a maze,” Amanda corrected her, “It’s a labyrinth, so there’s only one path to follow.”

“Boring!” her friend concluded.

“Not at all,” Amanda explained, “Because there’s nothing to figure out, it makes you focus on the process of walking: the journey rather than the destination. Very serene.”

Cynthia shook her head, “I wouldn’t let a maze *make* me do anything, but to each her own...Oops! If we wait much longer, we’ll miss the boat. Let’s go!” They headed for the ferry terminal.

Clouds gathered as they left the cathedral, and by the time they reached the docks it was raining hard. There was a short debate among the ferry workers on whether or not the tour should be cancelled. The boat’s captain eventually concluded “the Bay’s choppy, but nothing I haven’t seen before,” and they decided to go ahead. Given the rain, passengers were encouraged to squeeze into the cabin rather than standing on deck. Cynthia and Amanda walked down into the dark, crowded belly of the boat.

Whitecaps covered the Bay by the time they left the docks, and roiling waves tossed the small vessel about like a matchbox. Amanda had grown up in the Maritimes and adapted readily to the water's motion. Cynthia and many other passengers became violently ill.

Everyone was relieved when the boat finally spit them onto the beach below Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary. The prison loomed like an old, haunted fortress above them, complete with lightning bolts and black, eye-like windows. The rain pelted down, and the only way to the prison was a march uphill in ankle-deep mud. Several men joked about having the "real prisoner experience" that night. Cynthia soon had to carry her stilettos to keep up.

Inside, the tourists donned headphones that explained the history of "The Rock" as they surveyed the prison. The inmates lived in primitive conditions with a bed, blanket, desk, washbasin and toilet in each cell. Nothing else was provided.

Something about the grim, spooky surroundings and the storm outside allowed people to relate to the plight of the prisoners. Amanda imagined their difficult journey: the monotony of eating, sleeping, working on some menial task, and then doing it all over again the next day with no end in sight and no hope of escape. It was like a labyrinth of horrors. How would she cope in that position? Perhaps she would write her memoirs (if allowed a pen) or try to find meaning in the menial with her fellow prisoners. She smiled as she thought about Cynthia: she would have driven any prison guard crazy! In real life, Cynthia was back in stilettos and headed for the gift shop. She argued about the price of the warm, Alcatraz sweatshirt she wanted, and (as usual) got it at a bargain.

They headed back to the boat. The return journey was less turbulent, but still "choppy" as the captain euphemistically put it. Cynthia's face was green again by the time they docked.

"Are you feeling OK?" Amanda asked, concerned about her friend.

"I've been better," she replied, "Let's get a cab."

A man who was obviously local chimed in, "Lady, on a Saturday night in the rain, there are no cabs to be had here."

"Not even an Uber?" Cynthia wondered.

"Nope," he replied with certainty.

Cynthia suggested, "Let's go to a bar and wait out the rain there."

Amanda was worried about going to a bar by the docks in a foreign country with no idea whom they would encounter. "Are you sure that's safe in this part of town? People might think we're uh...working girls." She was trying to be delicate.

Cynthia was adamant, "Who cares what they think. We've been drowning all evening. Let's warm up!"

Amanda countered, "It's not that far back to the hotel, and we can dry off once we're there."

"I'm not spending one more minute out here. You go ahead," was Cynthia's final statement, and Amanda knew better than to argue with it.

"Sure you'll be alright?" she asked.

Cynthia said "Just go!"

Amanda started the trek back to the hotel, which was farther than she had thought and mostly uphill. The first few minutes she plodded along, stepping into doorways occasionally to avoid getting even wetter than she was. Then, she seemed to get her second wind. She had a spring in her step, her strides lengthened, and she started taking any steps she encountered two at a time. She noticed a

couple of ambulances whizzing by, but thought nothing of it. Lots of people have trouble driving in the rain and get into fender-benders. Soaked to the skin, she felt relieved to arrive back at the hotel.

“You’re here!” Cynthia shouted, greeting her.

“Yes, I made it back,” Amanda grinned, “But how did you get here ahead of me?”

“I got a ride back,” Cynthia explained, “But thank goodness you’re OK! I thought you got caught up in that shooting.”

“What shooting?” Amanda wondered.

Cynthia explained that a few minutes after Amanda left her there had been an announcement about a gang-related shooting in the area between the docks and the hotel. Several innocent passers-by had been killed.

Amanda was stunned by the news. “You know, I walked really fast at one point for no particular reason. That’s probably how I avoided it. Isn’t that weird?”

Cynthia’s next words seemed out of character but made perfect sense to Amanda. “Guess it wasn’t your time yet.”

Customs

“Bienvenue au Canada” droned the loudspeaker. We walked through vast, echoing hallways that never seemed to end. It had been well past sunset when we landed, but the airport was bathed in perpetually bright light that was giving me a headache. Everyone else seemed to know where they were going and was hurrying to get there. I kept looking for signs to help me shepherd my small family through the final mandatory procedures before our cab ride home.

My sabbatical from work had been a really nice opportunity to travel overseas with the children. We were returning from Europe that Sunday night, jetlagged and tired after almost twenty-four hours in transit. I had one preschooler and one toddler in tow. The preschooler plodded along obediently, the toddler lay on the floor and then had to be carried.

Meanwhile, I was also trying to keep track of our passports, boarding passes (in case anyone questioned where we were coming from), doctors' notes about our medications (in case anyone thought we were smuggling drugs), and my husband's death certificate (so I could prove I was widowed and not kidnapping my own children). I've always been an anxious traveler.

Oh yes...and there was also the customs declaration form. I had filled it out on the plane but my preschooler had spilled apple juice all over it and I couldn't get another one as the flight was completely full and they didn't have extras. I borrowed a clothes-peg from the lady in front of me and clipped the form to the upholstery so it was suspended over an air vent. It dried, and I was able to re-enter the customs information.

Now, I was dragging my children and my forms toward the baggage hall. This airport seemed to hold the world record for the number of baggage carousels in a single location. Finding the right one was

almost as difficult as spotting our luggage. Fortunately, carousels spin and small children find that entertaining. Both of mine were amused, and ran around following the suitcases as I swore to myself that I would never again buy a black one. Everyone seemed to have a black one, and of exactly the same size as mine.

Finally, our set of bags was complete, and we wandered towards our next stop: the customs hall. Most places at the airport have long line-ups, but the customs hall is different: it has about twenty long line-ups. On a Sunday evening, they are longer than usual. My toddler was cranky and hungry. He had slept through the meal on the plane, and I was glad I had saved him a sandwich from the flight. He started eating it as we neared the front of the line.

There was now only one woman who stood between me and the taxi ride to my bed: the customs officer. She had angular features and her uniform looked too tight. Her hair was tied back in a severe bun. She greeted me with a monotone "Hello, bonjour."

I said "Hello," forced a smile, and volunteered our passports.

Her face gave away no trace of emotion. She looked like she would be equally comfortable styling my hair or disembowelling me. "Anything to declare?"

"Just a few souvenirs," I confessed.

"Show me," she ordered.

I put down my toddler to sit on the floor as I rummaged through our bags and dutifully pulled out the toys and t-shirts we had bought. Thankfully, he was content with his sandwich so didn't get fussy.

She handed back the items. As I finished repacking them, I asked her if we could go.

She glared at me sternly and asked, "Are you importing any meat or meat products?"

"No," I replied, puzzled by her tone.

"What's that?" she inquired, pointing an accusing finger at the half-eaten sandwich protruding from my child's mouth.

"It's just some food from the plane. He was asleep when they came around with it, so I saved it for him," I explained.

"No meat or meat products may be imported," she lectured, "You've lied on your declaration!"

"I...I didn't lie," I protested, "It's from an Air Canada flight, so I'm sure it's Canadian meat." Surely she would understand this reasoning.

"It's still a meat product you didn't declare," she said emphatically.

Evidently my logic was not persuasive. Perhaps appealing to empathy would work better. "Look, I know you're really busy, and I don't mean to give you a hard time, but he's a hungry, tired little kid. He's not doing any harm."

She was adamant, "Meat products are banned. You should have seen that when you filled out the declaration."

I didn't like being "shoulded," especially after my clever form-drying experiment on the plane. Perhaps I could negotiate, "Please, just give him a minute to finish it over here, and then we'll walk past you. That way we're not importing anything banned."

Unfortunately, she was not in a bargaining mood. She reached down, grabbed the sandwich from my son's mouth, and hurled it into the garbage bin beside her. "It's banned, and there is a penalty for lying on your declaration," she concluded.

The boy started screaming at the top of his lungs. People stared at me as though I were a child abuser. I tried to maintain my composure as I comforted him, but the mother lion inside me was starting to roar. This woman's insistence on following the letter of the law was cruel and ridiculous. Maybe I should give her a taste of her own medicine, but how? A wicked thought crossed my mind.

"Excuse me, but is it only meat that's banned, or also products that might contain meat," I asked.

"All meat products. Weren't you listening?" she asked rhetorically.

She was responding just as I predicted, so I continued, "Well then, I guess I'll have to pay the penalty. I have another product that might contain meat that I failed to declare."

"Where is it?" she naively asked.

I looked at her sincerely, tapped my purse, and said "Right here." Opening it, I removed a plastic bag, unzipped it, and gently lifted out a large, heavy diaper, fragrant with toddler excrement. I deposited it calmly into her outstretched hand.

For a single second her face contorted with utter, horrified disgust before assuming its usual shape. She waved us past in the direction of the taxi stand.

Beehives

Aida took a break from weeding her flower garden. Her broad, floppy sunhat was coming in handy, and she soon removed her cardigan. Standing in a t-shirt, jeans and bulky gloves, she watched a half dozen bees. They hummed and flitted from plant to plant, pollinating them so they could multiply and collecting nectar which would be concentrated into sweet honey.

“Bees seem very nice,” Aida thought, “That is, they seem nice until they organize. Organized bees consist of workers who slavishly perform repetitive tasks, drones who eat triple the food of workers but do nothing except mate, and a queen who bosses them all around.”

Experience had taught her that people were similar. They seemed very nice until they organized. Sometimes they organized into pyramids, making it obvious who was at the top and who was trodden below. Sometimes they claimed to be egalitarian, but allowed vast differences between those in the inner circle of influence and those on the margins. Once people got to the inner circle, they became preoccupied with staying there even if they claimed to be sharing their good fortune with the “worker bees.” Politicians became election-focused, professional organizations with extracting mandatory dues from their members, volunteer organizations with passing the torch from one generation of founding families to the next.

Aida was sure that the members of her church were different though. After all, Jesus reached out to those on the margins and even took pleasure in exalting the meek and putting the powerful in their places. People of faith would surely follow His example.

The telephone interrupted her reverie. Aida sprinted into the house as fast as her sandals would allow, catching it on the last ring before it could go to voicemail.

“Hi! It’s Ellie from the nominating team,” came a chipper voice.

Aida still wasn’t used to the term “team” to describe the standing committees of the church. It seemed like a euphemism, like the members were pretending to be playing baseball rather than sitting in stuffy meeting rooms. Still, she knew Ellie was a lifelong, respected parishioner whose grandparents helped build the church, and she did have a pleasant telephone manner. “How are you?” she responded, with as much sincerity as she could muster while catching her breath.

“Fine, in this lovely weather. How’s the garden coming long?” Ellie never got straight to the point. She sold real estate for a living and would create at least five minutes of small-talk before telling Aida what she really wanted. They must teach that skill in salesmanship school. Annoyed, Aida played along even though she realized she had forgotten to close the screen door so a couple of bees had gotten in and were buzzing around disoriented. Oh well, at least she wasn’t allergic to them.

The sales pitch was shifting from small talk to the buttering up phase. “You know we were all so impressed with those guest speakers you invited, Aida. They were perfect for our group. You clearly have a knack for reading people. That’s a great skill when you’re dealing with church personnel...”

The purpose of the call was starting to dawn on Aida. Ellie obviously wanted her to join the Ministry & Personnel Team (or “M&P” as everyone referred to it). She didn’t relish the thought, as a much-beloved long-term minister had recently been replaced with one who had the social finesse of a house brick, resulting in two staff threatening to quit. Besides, who would lead the flourishing education committee she currently chaired and had spent countless hours developing? Becoming a minor player on a team that was constantly putting out interpersonal fires seemed like a demotion, not to mention a pain in the derriere. What had she done to deserve this? She pondered these questions as Ellie, predictably, launched into a glowing description of the joys of working on M&P.

Aida thought back to when she first joined the church. She got a broad smile and firm handshake at the door, but avoided coffee hour for a while because everyone there was reminiscing about childhood memories of Sunday School and church picnics...events she had never attended. She focused on the services instead, mouthing the words to the hymns until she became familiar with the melodies, following the crowd who seemed to know when to stand and when to sit, and encouraging her own children to get downstairs with the Sunday School teacher during the sermon. She was raised being told what to believe, whether it made sense or not, to avoid eternal damnation. Here, she was asked questions about faith instead, and challenged to apply the answers to her life. As an educated, sometimes skeptical believer, she welcomed the difference.

Within a month, Aida was asked to join a church committee. As someone with young children, Christian Education seemed a logical fit. Eager to contribute with her newly-found faith, Aida jumped at the chance to teach Sunday School, eventually organizing the roster of teachers as well. Her fellow congregants noticed, and promoted her to chair of the committee. In her new role, Aida noticed that there were few educational events for adults outside of services, so started organizing those too. Soon, there was a thriving book club, theology circle with the minister, regular forum for guest speakers, and spiritual practices group. She made new friends too, and began having coffee regularly with several women from church. Aida was hopeful that she was gradually being included in the inner circle of valued church members and leaders.

Still, there were always inside jokes she didn't get, decisions that were made without her input, and a small, select group of members that seemed to hold power regardless of who the official leaders were. Ellie was part of that select group and, after a decade of energetic volunteering, Aida was not.

"So, what do you think? Your ideas could make a real difference in this transition between ministers, and get our new staff team off on the right foot!" Ellie bubbled.

“From what I heard, they’re already limping a bit,” Aida challenged gently, “and the new fellow isn’t too fond of compromise.” She waved off a bee.

“That’s just growing pains. As someone who has seen several ministers come and go, I can tell you that they’re all a bit rough around the edges the first year. You’re very diplomatic, which I’m sure would help him mellow” Ellie replied, trying to compliment Aida again while simultaneously giving her a subtle jab for being less experienced in church matters than she was.

Aida was still concerned. “What would happen to Christian Education though? I’ve put a lot of thought and energy into developing our adult education as well as the Sunday school. Can you connect me with the new chair to make sure those programs continue?”

“Oh, you have a strong team there. We’ll probably choose someone from within that group, and if not then they’ll surely bring the new person up to speed. No worries,” Ellie reassured.

Aida winced, stung by one of the disoriented bees. “But can I at least talk to the new person?”

Ellie sighed, “Sorry, but the names need to stay confidential until the annual congregational meeting. That’s always been the policy. After that, feel free to reach out to them.” She quickly returned to her pitch, “I do think you’ve done a terrific job on that team, Aida, but think about the time it’s taken away from your young family. M&P isn’t nearly such a heavy commitment, and the kids might appreciate having you around more.”

“I’ll think about it,” Aida concluded. She hated being quoted policy and she hated guilt trips even more, no matter how smooth Ellie’s presentation had been up to that point. She put a cold compress soaked in vinegar on the sting. It wasn’t her first. She slept on her decision, then turned down the job.

At the annual meeting, the new leader of Christian Education was announced. It was a woman who had been raised in the church but rarely attended services and was not a member of the team. She

didn't return Aida's telephone calls. None of Aida's adult education events continued. A couple were reinvented several years later by long-time members of the congregation. They won awards for these "new" initiatives. After refusing to join M&P, Aida was relegated to the sidelines. She was just a worker bee after all.

One-Armed Bandit

She looked at her P.T.A. friend one more time as they walked into the hotel lobby. Sue was the secretary: carefully writing minutes of meetings, removing names from any comments that seemed harsh or controversial. She was tall and naturally slim with neatly coiffed auburn hair that hadn't changed in years. No yo-yo diets or trendy gels or streaks for Sue...everything about her said common sense and reliability. She was perfect for what Jill had in mind, or so she hoped.

The revolving doors sucked them into a sweaty vortex of activity. Neon burned the eyes and obscured any boundary between day and night. The jarring clank of machines shattered the air, like hammers striking an anvil in a giant forge. It was crowded. There were always more people arriving, though there never seemed to be anyone leaving. The air-conditioning was running full throttle, but the excited mass of humanity kept the temperature up. The lobby was hardly cooler than the desert air outside.

Jill had borrowed her daughter's black leggings and denim jacket for the adventure. She was pretty but not stunning, and had recently started dying her hair to cover the grey. She wore sunglasses to avoid recognition. You never knew who you might run into...a colleague of Bill's, a school teacher perhaps... and Jill wasn't good at spontaneous excuses. The pounding beat of the latest hit lent a bounce to her step, and she became optimistic again. Disco had been dead for a decade now, but this was still good dance music.

As she and Sue approached the slots, they spotted several wan, dishevelled women who appeared to no longer sleep, their arms fused with those of the machines. Jill scoffed, "How silly. They think they can find a hot machine or some sort of technique for pulling the handle. Look at that one...actually smacking the side!"

"I feel kind of sorry for them," countered Sue, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Of course. Like I told you, it'll work," reassured Jill.

"Just because your last name is Murphy, and Murphy's Law?" Sue wondered.

"No," Jill explained, "Look at the evidence: as soon as I put a deposit in for my second-choice program, I got accepted to my first choice; as soon as I stopped applying for jobs, one fell into my lap. I even met Bill that way. I stopped all the speed dating and singles ads, and next day I bumped into him on a harbor cruise I took just for fun."

Sue wasn't convinced. "Those things could have come from hard work. You studied to get into that top program, you got your name out there by applying for lots of jobs, and you met Bill because well... you knew what you were looking for after dating so many guys you didn't like. Playing the slots is different. No hard work involved, just luck."

"Nonsense. If I play down to my last coin, the next one played will be a winner...and you're gonna play it! You're not getting cold feet, are you?" worried Jill.

Sue tried to discourage her once more. "I just hate to see you lose all that money. What will Bill say?"

"After we split the jackpot, he'll never know," Jill said with certainty, "And don't even think about telling him...I'll tell Jeff it was all your idea." She hated to threaten her friend, but these were desperate times. Besides, she wanted to make sure Sue was committed to splitting the winnings. She knew her only from the P.T.A., so there was a nagging doubt in Jill's mind about how trustworthy she really was. A little more enthusiasm for her plan would have been nice too, but as her mother had often said "you can't have everything."

Jill walked resolutely to the first available machine. It seemed to beckon her. There was an inviting glint from the last pull: two diamonds had come up as well as some cherries. She ran her hand

across the hard, satiny smooth plastic cover. The handle was bigger than she had imagined, and seemed to salute her. It fit perfectly into her palm. She felt a tingle down her spine, and started.

The first spin yielded a lemon, a lemon, and...a dollar sign. No problem. She knew she wouldn't win right away. She continued and got a free spin on the next try. She was encouraged and kept going. No further lucky breaks, but that was expected. She was waiting to get to the end of her coins.

"Come on, Jill. These things are rigged so the house always wins. Let's walk away," Sue suggested, losing patience.

"I told you...the coin after my last one will win" Jill said through gritted teeth. She was getting irritated with sensible Sue and her neatly coiffed hair. As she continued with the monotonous task, her mind started to wander.

How had she gotten into this mess? She had grown up the third of four children: neither the baby nor one of the older ones. She was good at team sports, but was never made captain. She was well-liked but not the most popular. She got good grades but not good enough for scholarships. She longed to stand out. Her parents, however, were contented people: content to raise their children, content to go to church, and content to pay their bills. Any possibilities beyond that never occurred to them. Just thinking about them made Jill want to scream.

From the time they met, Bill said she "looked amazing" and was a "real catch". He made her feel like a million dollars. He was a shy young man whose stutter had limited his experience with women, but to Jill he was perfect. Bill was doing well in banking. He worked long hours though, and had lately spent more time on home repairs than on her when he was around.

They lived in a modest house: not the biggest on the street but not the smallest either. There was enough room for the children's friends to sleep over, but not for lavish entertaining. It was clean and tidy, with family photos and art projects decorating the walls from when the children were younger. An Ottoman covered the biggest carpet stain, and daily cooking odors were well-masked by air

freshener. She had prided herself in being a great Mom, but now that the children were more independent, they considered her more of a chauffeur.

It had started innocently enough...the occasional game of cards with friends, including some small bets "to make it interesting" and pass the time as she waited for Bill to come home. She had a knack for poker though, and started playing more competitively. The stakes went up, and she decimated her bank account. In an effort to win back what she had lost, she blew the children's education fund. She was too ashamed to tell Bill, and a little afraid. He had always been devoted to her, but this could really impact their marriage. He had earned most of the money that used to be in the fund. Was there a chance he might be upset enough to leave her? She had to find a way to replace her losses.

After she spent a few days thinking on it, the situation became more urgent. Bill announced, "Tom was pretty generous with the Christmas bonus. The kids are getting a little old for D-Disney though. Maybe we could put it in the college fund. Sound OK?" He still had that adorable stutter sometimes.

"Sure, honey," Jill replied, "Good idea."

"By the way," Bill continued, "What's the grand t-total in there now?"

"I...I'm not sure. I haven't checked lately," she replied nervously. This was exactly the question she had dreaded.

"That's OK. No rush," Bill said, trying to calm her, "Just let me know when you have a chance."

His kindness made her feel even guiltier than before. How could she set this right? That night she thought of Murphy's Law and hatched her plan.

Thinking about the need to report a dollar figure to Bill brought Jill's focus back to the task at hand. The machine had lost its seductive allure. It was now a grim task-master. Her leggings were starting to feel sticky in the hot room, and she became flushed from repeatedly working the handle. Still, she knew she couldn't stop.

Finally, she reached the bottom of her purse. The last coin produced two sevens and an orange. No surprise.

“OK. It’s time, Sue. This is gonna be the winner!” she proclaimed.

“It’s just a machine, Jill. It can’t pay out just because you think it’s time” she protested feebly.

“Are you going to keep our deal or not?” she asked, trying to apply pressure. She feared Sue might back out at the crucial moment or, worse yet, win and abscond with the money. After all, what did she really know about this woman? She was married to Jeff the car dealer, organized a bake sale to raise funds for their daughters’ community service trip to Nicaragua, and was adept at writing inoffensive minutes. That was about it. Jill felt foolish. How could she have put her life savings in the hands of this virtual stranger?

After a few seconds that seemed like an hour, Sue responded, “OK. Let’s get this over with.” She inserted her coin and pulled the handle.

The unthinkable happened: the machine produced three different symbols of fruit. No jackpot, nothing. The banana in the middle seemed to be sneering at Jill.

She felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. Her pulse was throbbing in her ears. This couldn’t be right. Was there another coin left in her purse or pocket that she hadn’t played? No. Did Sue not pull the handle all the way? She had watched her though, and there was nothing unusual about her actions. Maybe the free spin had thrown off when the winner was supposed to occur?

Jill caught her breath and instructed Sue. “Try again. One more should do it!”

Sue backed away, “No, Jill. It’s over. I’m sorry.”

Jill explained her theory about the free spin, the fact that they must be really close to a winner, and that one more coin wouldn’t bankrupt Sue and might enrich them both. Sue didn’t take the bait. She closed her purse and turned toward the doors.

Reluctantly, Jill dragged herself behind her. "Gotta bring a friend who's not so skeptical," she muttered as they walked away.

Sins of the Fatherland

“Nazi!” “Nazi pig!” “Sieg Heil!” taunted the boys.

“Where’s your poppy? Can’t show respect to the soldiers who whipped your ass?” shouted the ringleader as he gave her a shove.

Gertie shivered in the bone-chilling November air. She was used to schoolyard bullies, but they were always worse on this day: Remembrance Day. She got a second, harder push from another boy and ran to the teacher on yard duty, prompting gales of vicious laughter.

Mrs. Heron looked annoyed. “Leave her alone,” she ordered the boys. “You really should wear a poppy,” she admonished Gertie in a tone that was equally harsh. She fumbled in her pocket, then roughly stuck one to the girl’s chest. Gertie’s coat was thin and tattered. The pin cut through it like butter and pierced her skin. She didn’t dare cry. Thankfully, recess was almost over.

The classroom was warm, but she could feel people staring daggers at her during the obligatory minute of silence at 11a.m. Later, as the class recited multiplication facts, a feeling of dread overcame her: How would she explain her bloodstained blouse at home? Her mother had strictly forbidden poppies, and would surely punish her if she found out Gertie had worn one.

She could still hear the lecture in her head, “We do not wear symbols of war designed to glorify the Allies. They parade around with their medals and marching bands, so proud of what they did. They bombed hospitals is what they did! They killed children! I saw the broken bodies myself when I wasn’t much older than you, and haven’t had a good night’s sleep since. The local authorities responded by sending all of us kids to families in East Prussia where the bombing was less. Those families hated us and stole our ration cards. We starved. In the end we had to butcher our pets to survive. But that was

nothing compared to what came next. My father, my rock, the most honorable and caring man you could ever meet...he was gravely ill when I got sent away. When I came back, he was dead. Nobody had told me or sent for me because it was too dangerous. He was just gone! That's what the Allies did: they took away a little girl's chance to say goodbye to her dying father. Now, we're supposed to celebrate that? Don't let me ever, EVER catch you wearing one of those ungodly red flowers!"

"Six times seven is...Gertie? Gertie?"

"Oh sorry, Miss, it's forty-two" she stammered.

"Somebody needs to get to bed earlier," the teacher chided her.

"Nosebleed," Gertie thought to herself, "That's the answer. I'll tell her I had a nosebleed."

Her mother bought the excuse. She grumbled about the cost of detergent, but didn't press the issue further. Relieved, Gertie ate supper and promptly got ready for bed.

It was still early, so there was time for some work on a jigsaw puzzle with Oma. They both loved puzzles, and her grandmother always admired how clever she was, even if Oma fit in more pieces.

Tucking her in, the old lady looked worried, "So, who gave you that ahem...nosebleed?"

Gertie confessed what had happened.

"Ouch!" exclaimed her grandmother, "Do you need a bandage?"

She shook her head, "It's not so bad." She was quiet for a moment, then wondered, "Why didn't you send for my Mom when her father died? Was it really too dangerous?"

"That's a long story," Oma said sadly, "And you will learn all about it one day, I promise, but not today. Sleep well, Schaezchen." She kissed her forehead, and turned out the light.

She hated her name, so her friends called her G.T. As far as they knew, her parents were Scandinavian. Despite growing up in rags, G.T. had avoided student loans by winning scholarships. She was completing her degree next year, so her mother suggested celebrating her last summer of freedom by accompanying her to Europe. By 'Europe' her mother meant Germany, which G.T. despised, but her uncle had proposed adding a road trip through France. She imagined the lights of Paris, the beaches of the French Riviera...how could she say no?

G.T. found herself squeezed into a Volkswagen for two weeks with three hefty, sweaty middle-aged Germans. It soon became obvious that the route through France was determined months before her arrival. Stops were made at several famous French castles and Cathedrals (boring!), and at the Louvre but nowhere else in Paris. The Riviera was deemed too far south, as they had to get back to Germany within a fortnight. Moreover, G.T. clearly had a job on this trip: her high school French was the group's only means of communication. She asked directions when they got lost, explained a plumbing problem in their room to a rather surly concierge, and procured laxatives at the pharmacy for all.

Near the end of a particularly tiring day, G.T. decided to curl up in the smelly beetle. She preferred napping in the car to visiting yet another cathedral, even though it occurred to her that she could probably use a few prayers to get through this trip. Her aunt and uncle came back from the church as she was waking; her mother had stayed behind at the gift shop. The relatives chatted in German, assuming she was either asleep or unable to understand. She was neither.

"Helga seems to be enjoying herself," her uncle piped up, "Probably a nice change to see some real history here. I hear in Canada they consider any artifact over a hundred years ancient." He laughed condescendingly.

“Yeah, she does feel isolated in that cultural wasteland over there with her plebeian husband,” his wife agreed, frowning. “At least the daughter is getting a chance to study and make something of herself though.”

“Don’t feel too guilty, honey,” he went on, “After all it was your mother who decided to hive off money from her widow’s pension for your studies and not for hers. Otherwise, she could have gone to university too and met a handsome, successful young man like me.” He smirked and bowed with a flourish.

A sly look came over his wife’s face. “There was some influence on that decision.”

“Oh?” Her husband was intrigued.

“Let’s just say every family has some things they want to keep hidden in the closet. For my mother, it could have cost her a pension, so we agreed: I kept my mouth shut, and she funded my education. There wasn’t enough money to fund Helga’s too.”

“I always liked your devious side” her husband sneered, stroking her cheek.

“And you are still my handsome, successful young man 30 years and 30 kilos later,” his wife laughed.

They kissed.

G.T. cleared her throat and rolled over to avoid exposure to any further disgusting hanky-panky. Her mother returned from the gift shop.

When Gertrude heard of her grandmother's passing, she wept. She hadn't seen her Oma in years, but still had warm childhood memories of her. She wrote to her often, even though she probably didn't understand much in the last couple of years as her mind began to fade.

Like Oma, Gertrude found herself widowed at a young age, raising a couple of children on her own. Though conscious, her husband had been severely debilitated by a stroke. Life as an invalid would have been horrible for such a fiercely independent man, and the cost of a chronic care facility would have bankrupted the family, leaving their children with a bleak future. She had pulled the plug. She loved him but was ultimately a pragmatist: she had sacrificed his life for the sake of the next generation.

Now, a year later, she was heading to another funeral. Her mother had a terrible fear of flying so Gertrude bought her plenty of drinks on the plane. She was used to managing her mother's many fears and nightmares. It had been her job since childhood. As the old lady napped, she wondered about something her uncle had said. "You're named in the Will. You have to come with your mother to Germany." What could her grandmother be leaving her? She assumed her mother and aunt would each get half the estate. Maybe it was just a small memento. That would be nice.

They took a cab straight from the airport to the church. To say it was austere was an understatement. The walls were barren and whitewashed apart from a large wooden cross. Pictures of saints were considered idolatry in this tradition. How different from those gilded, ornate French cathedrals! The minister was suspended in a pulpit high up on the wall, imperiously presiding over his flock. He was stern but charitable in his description of Gertrude's grandmother, though he made her sound like a rather humorless paragon of Christian living.

At the end of the service, Gertrude's uncle pulled her aside in a separate room together with her mother and aunt. He was the executor of her grandmother's Will, and had elected to read it promptly. He breathed heavily, as his increasing obesity was obviously affecting his health.

As expected, the bulk of the estate was divided between Helga and her sister, though with an apologetic comment from Oma. She explained that although one daughter had received more money during her lifetime, she had tried to make up for this by assisting the other more with her children (Gertrude and her siblings), so the estate was still divided in half. There was also a legacy contribution to the church.

Gertrude inherited a large envelope with the cryptic explanation “to keep a promise I made long ago” and the instruction that she was only permitted to open it in private. She was desperate to peek, but privacy was not an option just then.

First, she was expected to go to her relatives’ home where there was much drinking and sausage. Happy or sad, every German occasion seemed to be accompanied by drinking and sausage. Her mother hadn’t even had a chance to sober up from the plane. Probably just as well. It was easier to let her escape into a cheerful haze than to listen to Helga vent her decidedly mixed feelings about the mother the minister had just eulogized so positively.

Gertrude was eager to escape the throng of tipsy mourners but didn’t want to be rude. She decided to feign a migraine. It wasn’t far from the truth as she was jetlagged and her ears were bothering her from the air pressure changes during flight. Unfortunately, the house was standing room only so it was impossible to find a quiet room to lie down. Finally, her aunt grudgingly handed her a futon and pointed to a narrow staircase. “Up there,” she ordered.

Gertrude climbed into a bare, musty attic. Alone at last! It was dark under the rafters, but the aging roof allowed a single shaft of light to enter. Diving beneath it, she tore open the envelope. It contained a letter, a note, and a broach.

The letter was from her Oma:

“Dear Gertrude: You were always my smartest grandchild, and have grown into a very fine young woman. I have cherished your letters. I wish you every success and happiness.

Though it may be a bit late, I want to answer your question about why your mother missed the death of her father (your grandfather), which you asked me many years ago. I had to keep this story from becoming public both to save the family embarrassment and to save myself from penury. Forgive me this secrecy, as I know it has hurt many, most especially your mother.

As you may have heard, your grandfather was a senior official with the German railway. He was very precise and organized, so his job was scheduling trains. When your mother was sent to East Prussia, he had just become ill, but he did not die from his illness. He continued working. He became unhappy with his work and, in February 1945, your aunt found his body in the basement one day. Beside it was the note now in your possession. Think carefully about who, if anyone, to share it with. For some, it would be of little consequence; for others it might do harm. Use your best judgment. Given the circumstances and the need for secrecy, I thought it best not to involve your mother at the time. She was so young. I don't know if this was right or wrong.

In addition, I am leaving you a broach with your grandfather's favorite flower: Edelweiss. Wear it in memory of us both. Hopefully, it won't sting you the way that poppy did. With love...”

Gertrude sniffled and turned to the note. It was neatly hand-written on old, yellowing paper in well-formed letters which were clearly not her grandmother's.

“Darling, forgive me. Without knowing it, I have done terrible things. I have learned that our neighbors who disappeared and many, many others were taken on the trains I routed to Poland. There they were killed: whole trains full of people were killed. To continue this work is unconscionable. To refuse would result in death and disgrace. Everything we own would be seized, leaving you and the children destitute. Ask Dr. Hermann to do the death certificate. He has agreed to indicate my illness

caused it. Never reveal the truth, or you will lose your widow's pension. I'm so sorry, but it has to be this way. Sometimes a life must be sacrificed for the sake of the next generation. All my love..."

The words shook her to the core, but she understood her grandfather's reasoning all too well. There was no point telling her mother. Helga needed an untarnished memory of her father.

As her children grew, they started asking questions about the small white brooch Gertrude wore every November. She told them as much as she thought they were ready to hear, with emphasis on the destructive effects of war. She did not stop them from wearing poppies.

Spain

“They don’t actually kill the bull, do they?” asked a middle-aged American tourist in a dismayed Southern drawl. Her companions on the bus groaned. Their stop at the Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas would have to be extended as she and her sister returned their tickets for the evening’s event.

Professor Herforth stroked his well-trimmed beard with irritation. Now they would be arriving late at the Prado Museum, the highlight of Madrid’s city tour. There was a visiting Picasso exhibition he was yearning to see. The two sisters, Thelma and Selma, had already delayed the start of the trip because they “forgot to tinkle.” Now they were running the tour even further behind schedule. Some people were so ill-prepared!

Quentin Herforth was a visiting professor of archaeology at the University of Madrid. It was quite an honor for a relatively young academic, and he came well-prepared. In addition to honing and rehearsing his university presentations, he had learned some key phrases in Spanish before the trip, packed clothing according to weather predictions, and booked tickets to the attractions he was most interested in seeing during his free time. As predicted, the weather was hot that day so he had donned a cotton shirt, shorts, and prescription sunglasses.

The museum and its surrounding gardens were a green oasis in the oppressive heat. The tourists sat in the shade sipping water as their guide procured tickets to the exhibition. Selma had forgotten her hat, and was starting to sweat into her badly permed hair. Quentin mused to himself that she looked like she was wearing sauerkraut on her head. Thelma’s ample form was sheltered by an enormous sunhat. Both sisters wore flowery dresses reminiscent of shower curtains.

Finally, the tour-guide returned and announced that their late arrival meant they only had 15 minutes in the special exhibition, but they could take their time exploring the rest of the gallery. Quentin fumed, and cut to the head of the line for the Picassos.

They were definitely worth the wait. Quentin's irritation was replaced by delight, as he lost himself in the works of the master. He was particularly drawn to an abstract portrait of a woman.

The sisters arrived behind him. "Don't really look like no lady to me...except if she's been in a bad accident," commented Thelma. Selma let out a raucous laugh that echoed through the gallery. Similar comments about the adjacent paintings followed. A few minutes later, the tour guide shuffled everyone out of the exhibition.

Quentin was disappointed, but resolved to find another time to appreciate the art on his own and, hopefully, in silence. He started looking forward to the next day's tour of Avila and Segovia. The well-preserved medieval town of Avila and the Roman aqueduct at Segovia piqued his archaeological interest. He had also done some reading about Theresa of Avila, and kept a well-worn bookmark in his wallet displaying her famous prayer "Nada te turbe" (let nothing disturb you). There were some special celebrations planned in Avila, as the town was celebrating the 500th anniversary of her birth that year.

The bus was late leaving Madrid the next morning. The driver explained that some tourists had missed their bus to Toledo, so had changed their tickets to the Avila/Segovia tour and would be arriving shortly. Quentin was snoozing, when he heard a familiar Southern drawl.

"We made it!" announced Selma, as she plopped down in the seat beside him. "Pardon my movin' your backpack."

Quentin was stunned. How could this happen? Were these women magnetically drawn to him? He fingered his bookmark, trying to calm himself. He suspected he would need the patience of a saint

that day. Thelma and Selma sat across from each other on the bus. They conversed about a variety of inane topics, thankfully never staying on one for very long. Quentin was happy to be ignored.

The aqueduct at Segovia was spectacular. Rows of massive, concrete arches were stacked on top of each other to funnel water across the valley by gravity alone. Quentin found the mechanics fascinating, and was amazed to see the structure almost entirely preserved after two millennia. Thelma and Selma took selfies in front of “the big bridge.”

A hearty lunch of Rabo de Toro stew was served in a nearby restaurant. “Good beef!” Thelma remarked. Quentin didn’t bother telling her she was consuming bull’s tail, possibly from one of the animals she had not wanted to see killed the night before.

The tour headed west towards Avila, which was about an hour’s drive. Once again, the ladies were hopping from topic to topic, like frogs using lily pads to cross a pond, Quentin thought. He looked out the window at the countryside. Clumps of cottony white dotted the rolling hills. Sheep farming was obviously popular. A herd occasionally crossed the road, and Quentin marvelled at the shepherds’ ability to keep them out of harm’s way.

Just then, a young boy drove his flock across from the left. One of his charges was not cooperating and he stopped for just a second. Brakes squealed. Passengers screamed. Everything went dark for Quentin.

He felt the sun on his face and could hear groaning. Quentin started seeing some light as he gradually regained consciousness. He was facing toward a window but couldn’t reach it. He reassured himself that he could still move all his limbs. He remembered traveling in the bus and assumed it had crashed. If so, he needed to get out quickly in case it caught fire. But how?

A sturdy leg booted through the window, breaking a large hole in it. "You can get through there, Slim. I'm gonna give you a boost!" a determined Southern voice told him.

He was pushed through the broken window with barely a scratch, and found himself safely outside the bus. "Thanks!" he shouted to his rescuer.

"Never mind thanks. Smash the rest o' the glass so me and Thelma can get out," Selma ordered. He did as he was told, and soon the three of them were out. All were bruised but not seriously hurt.

Many of the other passengers had not fared so well. The front of the bus had hit a pole and crumpled as it swerved to avoid the boy. Anyone near the front was seriously injured. The boy had escaped; the uncooperative sheep had not and lay in a bloody heap on the road.

"Anybody have a cell to call for help?" Quentin asked. He had been too stingy to buy an overseas plan for his own phone, thinking he could manage for a short time without it.

"Right here," Thelma volunteered, "Do they have 9-1-1 here?"

"It's 1-1-2 in Spain," Quentin clarified.

"Well, aint you clever," she remarked, and dialed the number. The response from the other end came in rapid Spanish. "What'd she say?" Thelma asked.

Quentin reached for the phone. "Let me give it a try." He pleaded with the Spanish operator to slow down, "Mas despacio, por favor," and then continued with his rudimentary Spanish. He eventually communicated that there was a bus accident west of Segovia, and they needed help.

Reassured that help was on its way, he looked back at the bus. Thelma and Selma had pulled several other passengers out through the broken window, but many were in bad shape. He remembered the three "B's" from first aid training that was mandatory at his university: breathing, bleeding, and

broken bones in that order. Thankfully, everyone seemed to be breathing and he had a first aid kit in his backpack with bandages for bleeding.

He started helping an old woman whose arm was oozing. "Can you put some pressure on this to stop the bleeding?" he asked Selma.

"Sure, Slim," she agreed, "Those two over there need help next." Evidently, Selma had already triaged the people in front of her, and was able to direct Quentin accordingly. "I work in a hospital," she shrugged.

"Damn! I need a tourniquet for this," Quentin exclaimed, as he found a wound with a spurting artery, "Either one of you have a wrap or shawl?"

"In my purse," Thelma answered, clutching a handbag that looked like it could hold a kitchen sink.

"Let's have it here," he demanded.

"Hold on a second, Slim. You might be used to sleeping with the polar bears, but we're from Arkansas, and I need somethin' for the cold nights," she protested. Quentin realized she had seen his backpack, adorned with a small Canadian flag, and concluded he was from the land of polar bears. Nevertheless, he needed her help and tried to appeal to her sense of empathy.

"He's bleeding out, and I don't have anything else," he pleaded.

"Alright, alright," she relented, "Use this." Her colorful shawl was perfect. Thelma also had a good supply of snacks in her bag, and readily shared them as she helped calm the other passengers.

With most of the intense bleeding staunched, Selma directed his attention to other injuries. "Look at this leg!" she exclaimed. Quentin could hardly bear to look. Jagged bone ends were protruding

through the skin. "Guess you could use this for a splint," she added, offering her selfie stick. Then she turned to some of the less injured passengers "What are you standing around for? Get the rest of those folks out o' the bus!" They readily complied.

Everyone continued working together removing people from the bus, comforting the wounded, and using whatever was at hand to treat injuries. After about half an hour, the paramedics and police finally arrived.

The seriously injured were transported to hospital; the other tourists were checked at the scene and asked to give statements to the police. After Quentin had given his, he pulled two business cards from his wallet. He gave one to the officer in case he had more questions and needed to contact him. He gave the other card to Selma and Thelma, thanking them and inviting them to visit him "If you're ever up in Toronto."

"Fancy name, Quentin," Selma smiled, and added, "We make a good team, Slim."

It was evening by the time Quentin got back to his hotel in Madrid. He watched the festivities from Avila on the television in his room. He nursed his bruises, reflected on the day, and relaxed.

To this day, he looks forward to his annual Christmas card from Arkansas.

Banana Death

Banana death starts with those black dots on the peel, gradually coalescing as the flesh beneath them ferments. Then, they give off that slightly sweet odor which tells you they are browning and about to liquefy, becoming more pungent as the pulp gradually rots completely.

My parents did not die like bananas. They still had strong bodies to sustain them, even as their inner lives were slowly drained by dementia. Only a few life-long interests remained: his was the determination not to be ripped off; hers was critiquing the local opera.

Leaving their house, I drove to a company event: the coronation for my successor. Ken was a good-natured simpleton, well-loved by his subordinates. He was comfortable in pubs and welfare offices alike, with boundless energy to serve. I was a hard-assed intellectual: a Ratzinger to his Bergoglio. Navigating some heavy traffic, I had time to think about our differences.

I hadn't been the best manager, but not the worst. I kept projects on time and on budget, even if it meant ruffling a few feathers. I was not politically smart, but knew enough to keep my mouth shut when the higher ups complained and show compassion when tragedy struck a colleague. Still, I wasn't much fun at the pub. I was too focused for that kind of frivolity.

Renata was Ken's mother. She exuded warmth and saw her life, for the most part, as a fortunate result of her own choices. She had recently joined a choir, and shared her stories of the war without resentment about being on the losing side. She was proud of her gregarious son, though realizing he was sometimes foolish. She showed interest in my background, as it bore some similarity to her son's, or perhaps just because she was genuinely interested in people.

Oscar was Ken's father. He took in every stray dog in the county, and even the occasional stray foster child. Yet, he always seemed to have more than enough time for his own children too. He worked

hard, and showed them how to do the same, but he also played and played forgivingly. If a neighbor's girl ate from his raspberry bushes, he pretended not to see. If a neighbor's boy kicked a ball into his yard, he brought it back without complaint, even if its trajectory had damaged a plant or a window. The smile he got in return was enough compensation.

Few people shared as little as Ken and I did. Ken grew up with Renata and Oscar; I grew up with parents who blamed others for their miseries, and were only proud of their children when they could take credit for their achievements. Instead of taking in strays, they sued neighbors for not leashing their dogs; instead of returning lost balls, they cut them to pieces "to teach kids a lesson."

Yet I couldn't help but wonder about our contrasting memories. It was easy to dismiss people who said vaguely positive things about the past as being in denial, but Ken had so many vivid, cherished recollections. Were his experiences really so much better, or did he just have a talent for focusing on the good times, like a photographer who focuses his lens on a beautiful flower in the foreground, allowing the background to become fuzzy? Had I had just trained my eyes on the unsavory aspects of the background, missing the flowers? Had my perception of the beautiful and joyful atrophied from lack of use? Or had my insecurities taught me to be on the lookout for problems and risks, even if it meant sacrificing the rest of the landscape?

There was no denying though, that some differences existed in the present, suggesting they were more than just biased recall. Nowadays, Oscar and Renata volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and were much-loved elders in their church. Nowadays, my parents' conversations converged on a single topic: how alone they were because nobody reached out to them. Of course, they didn't do any reaching themselves, and anyone who tried to approach was criticized.

I pulled into my parking spot. That day, I was handing over the reins to Ken. He was unsure if he could handle the responsibility; I was certain he could. People would lend him a hand before he even asked. People ignored my emails deliberately no matter what the phrasing.

My parents' number flashed. "Hello," I said in a saccharine tone.

"Something's wrong with your Dad's pacemaker!" came the frightened, quavering reply.

"Just call the paramedics. I'm sure it will be fine," I reassured. Perhaps the bananas were starting to spot after all, I thought to myself.

"Come quickly, please!" she implored.

"Like I said, 9-1-1. I'm across town and they'll solve the problem much faster." I hung up. Ken needed my public vote of confidence. It was the best way to ensure a successful future for the company. The family drama could wait.

Renata hugged her golden boy as he took the microphone. I would always be his evil twin.

Immigrants

We walked single file into the perpetual, dull lamplight. I showed my identification, then took my place on the conveyor belt of overnight patients. The clinic growled with the mechanical muttering of instructions.

“Dress!” ordered a short, business-like woman in surgical scrubs as she dropped a hospital gown on the bed, “Then fill this.” She handed me a clipboard with a set of questionnaires.

“Excuse me Ms. ...” I started, but the font on her nametag was too small to read without my glasses. She turned and was gone. I would have to find the bathroom myself.

Changing and checking off multiple choice answers was easy enough, and a loud flush across the hall announced the toilet location, but I was still uneasy. Years of sedentary overwork and fast food had caught up with my body. I was hypertensive and needed this test to rule out sleep apnea as a cause. The monosyllabic, nameless woman was my technician: my guardian and jailer for the night. How could I get on her good side? I had never been adept at small talk, and was sure some other patient had already exhaustively discussed the weather and the fortunes of the local hockey team. Maybe something would occur to me later. I changed into my drafty hospital gown.

She returned. “Come” she motioned, and I followed. I sat in what looked like a dentist’s chair in a dingy, closet-sized room, but was relieved to see no drills or other potentially painful instruments nearby. She untangled a large mass of wires and started tearing small pieces from a roll of tape. Finally the nametag was clear: it read ‘Sohaila’, but without a last name.

Glancing at my questionnaires, Sohaila asked, “You doctor?”

“Yes,” I replied. I tried to meet her eyes, but she was still perusing the forms.

“Me too, in old country,” she said sadly. “I am here two years now but very hard to get licence in Canada.”

“I’ve heard that,” I sympathized, “It’s especially hard in our province. I had a trainee who was in your position and ended up going out East,” I offered, “It seems to be easier there.” I meant to use her name, but somehow it seemed disrespectful to address a fellow physician I hardly knew by her first name.

My own parents had professional training that was not recognized in Canada, forcing them to work for minimum wage. I had grown up on mostly potatoes and ground beef, and still sometimes felt the effects of frostbite in my toes from the years when I couldn’t get new boots until the government child subsidy cheque arrived. I often questioned the wisdom of regulations that put intelligent people in this position, wasting their training and talents.

“I can’t move east,” she replied grimly as she started to apply the tape and wires to my head, “Husband works here and kids in high school here. You’re lucky you grew up in Canada! What kind of doctor are you?”

“I’m a child psychiatrist,” I answered.

“You know how to treat depression, depression in teenager?” she asked.

“Yes there are medications and therapies that can be helpful in teen depression” I obliged, not sure how much detail she would appreciate.

“My daughter’s sixteen and depressed for two years now. You talk!” she insisted. She stepped away deliberately, leaving the wires dangling from my left temple, and returned a moment later with a slim, surly-looking adolescent who averted her gaze.

“Aasma, you talk to doctor!” she ordered.

Looking down at my awkwardly draped body and half-wired head, Aasma seemed to smirk briefly, but then returned to her previous defiant expression. She crossed her arms.

A flood of thoughts washed through my mind, most of them not very therapeutic. How could Sohaila expect me, a vulnerable patient, to provide her with this professional service free of charge? Had she never taken a course on professional boundaries? Did she enjoy abusing her power and taking advantage of me this way, or did she just not know any better? And what would happen if I refused? Would she purposely tear out my hair as she applied the electrodes, or do something worse to me in the middle of the night? I had a disabled child at home who depended on me, and I needed to get through this test in one piece.

Then, I looked back at Aasma. She clearly didn't relish the prospect of our conversation either. She had been torn away from her friends in the old country and forced to start over in high school here. She probably lost a year or two as a result of not speaking English. Her classmates probably regarded her with suspicion, as she had the bad luck of coming from a place reputed to breed terrorists. She almost certainly resented her parents for moving her here, and maybe resented her new homeland even more. My father had once tried to move us to back to the island where he grew up, and I often thought that I would have run away or worse if forced to live in that backward, misogynistic culture. Also like me, Aasma had to put up with unhappy parents who couldn't practice their professions in Canada. Coming to work with Sohaila at night was probably the only mother-daughter time she got.

I started the conversation by asking Aasma if she had found anything that lifted her mood. She mentioned some friends that made her feel better. I encouraged spending time with them. She promptly texted one on her phone, until her mother took it away. I asked about therapy. She had tried it a couple of times, but when asked to challenge her negative thoughts she saw this as confirmation that the therapist believed the problems were "all in her head", and that she had no real reasons to be

unhappy. She had quit after a few sessions each time. I asked about antidepressant medication. Her parents had vetoed it, and she wasn't keen to try it either. I asked about her life at school. She was doing quite well and coyly commented "Maybe I'll do your job one day."

"What she should do?" her mother interjected impatiently. Unfortunately, the two options with the best evidence, medication and psychotherapy, were both problematic for Aasma. The answer wasn't obvious.

"There's some evidence for regular aerobic exercise," I volunteered.

"See, Aasma. I told you to go to gym, no?" Sohaila pressed.

Aasma frowned, miserably looking down at her feet.

"It's not just helpful for depressed teens," I added, trying to sound encouraging. "We can all benefit from physical activity. Have you ever thought of going with her?"

Sohaila didn't reply. She had finished applying the electrodes, and deftly lifted up the wriggling mass of wires now connected to my scalp. "Come," she beckoned and brought me back to the room where I would sleep.

"Good idea...exercise with Aasma together," she said softly as she turned out the light.

It took a while to fall asleep. The bed was hard and I wasn't used to offering psychiatric advice under duress late in the evening. I also wondered if there was more to be discussed beyond my rather simplistic exercise suggestion...but what? At least I was certain I had appeased Sohaila enough to be safe in my bed though. I eventually drifted off.

As the door swung open and light stung my eyes, I woke up with a couple of additional thoughts about Sohaila and Aasma. I asked for them at the desk after dressing. Behind the counter stood a middle-aged, moustached man with a scar on his cheek, collating packages of forms.

“New shift,” he replied with a thick accent, barely looking up. “Go home.”

I did as I was told, silently wishing the mother and daughter well.

Mirrors

Lake Vista Manor promised “gentle breezes and panoramic sunsets over (what else) the lake.” Its location on a rocky peninsula ensured these features, and also ensured that the demented had only one direction to go when wandering off, making them easy to catch and return to the premises. Most were not itching to leave Lake Vista though. With its generous rooms, exercise classes, varied social events, on-site pub (for those who had a doctor’s note permitting alcohol), and on-site movie theatre with nightly Hollywood classics, the place clearly catered to its wealthy senior residents.

Rick’s father had hated moving there but couldn’t manage at home after losing his licence. He might have managed if his children had been more attentive, and reminded them of this fact at every opportunity. Frank was getting unsteady on his feet, but he insisted on a close shave and freshly pressed shirt every morning “to look respectable.” Nobody was going to treat him like an invalid!

Rick dreaded his monthly visits with his father, but ignoring the old man in his final years didn’t seem right either. He followed the winding driveway to the parking lot and started backing in. A dull “thud” told him his bumper had encountered a tree. He swore, but the dent was minor. Rick had a bad habit of not checking his mirrors. Now he would have to visit his mechanic this week, on top of all his other chores. Rick wished he could run off his irritation instead of visiting with Frank. He used to be an athlete, but noticed with disgust that he now had to suck in his gut to squeeze out from behind the steering wheel. He ran a hand over his buzz-cut to steel himself, and got out of the car.

Rick neared the patio which Lake Vista advertised as “a pleasant, shady place to sit and reconnect with loved ones.” It was monitored by cameras, probably to make sure family members didn’t strangle each other, thought Rick. He resented being on display for the Manor owners like some sort of mannequin in a store window. The painted patterns on the cement suggested the patio doubled as a

venue for shuffleboard competitions. Rick was thinking that even an inane sport like shuffleboard would have been preferable to this visit.

Ron, another regular visitor, was already on the patio. He waved a friendly hello. Ron was balding and soft-spoken. He always wore soft cardigans. Everything about him seemed soft. Ron adjusted his Dad's wheelchair brake for stability and then leaned him forward ever so gently to wrap a shawl around his shoulders.

Owen smiled, "Warm." He was frail and didn't say more than one or two words at a time any more, but there was a twinkle in his eye whenever his son visited.

"Where's Frank?" Rick asked. Ron shrugged.

"Right here," Frank's aide replied, "He was arguing about getting into the wheelchair again." The aide was a burly man well over six feet. It was hard to imagine anyone arguing with him, but Rick knew his father could be stubborn.

"Where have you been?" asked Frank plaintively. "Everyone's kids come to visit more often than mine. I knew that would happen when you dumped me here."

"I had to help Zach with his job hunt again, and it's tax time at work," Rick explained.

"I can do taxes," Owen volunteered.

"You can help with mine," suggested Ron. Owen had been at the top of the financial world once and, even if he could hardly read anymore, Ron knew he needed to feel useful. He tried to give his father that dignity whenever possible.

"Now there's a son who involves his Dad in his life," remarked Frank.

“I’d involve you more too if you ever showed an ounce of kindness,” Rick said defensively. “The last time I brought the family, you tore a strip off Melissa for disrespecting you. She was crying for an hour...all because you’re deaf and you misunderstood her.” Rick was protective of his children. If there was any chance that they could suffer at Frank’s hands as he had, they would grow up without seeing their grandfather.

“Can you at least bring me a drink? Is that too much to ask?” needed Frank.

“Sure.” Rick was glad to have a moment away as he fetched some lemonade from inside the building.

Frank spat it out. “Not this piss!” he exclaimed, “Scotch!”

Rick tried to be patient. “Your doctor says it’s damaged your liver and you can’t handle it any more, Dad. Try the lemonade.”

“What does he know?” retorted Frank. “Besides, I’m not the booze-hound. Who keeps getting into bar fights, eh?”

Rick fumed at the accusation. He had been in exactly two altercations in a bar, both after upsetting visits with Frank. “Well, aint that the pot calling the kettle black! Who needed twenty-five stitches to fix his face after driving drunk?” he asked rhetorically.

“Oh, that’s low, really low,” Frank growled, “You know that only happened once after your mother died. I’ve always held my liquor, before and since.”

Rick relented, “If you say so. Let’s get some air.”

He hoped that rolling his father away from the patio would distract him, and Rick was always more relaxed when he didn’t feel monitored by whatever authorities lurked behind the cameras at Lake

Vista. There was a path they would follow that led to a lookout over the lake. The scenery was pretty, and it was gentle enough that the wheelchair moved easily.

Rick thought back as he plodded along. He remembered his Dad taking him to the park on weekends and pushing him on the swing when he was little. Frank liked being outdoors, and seemed to enjoy playing with his son. When did that change?

His expression clouded as he recalled the first time it got bad. They were in the house of mirrors at the fair. His Dad was getting an award from the mayor later that afternoon, but had some time to kill beforehand. Rick was having fun fooling his father with the mirrors. Every time Frank thought he had found his son, he was somewhere else. "Cut it out! It's getting late," Frank called, but being able to outsmart his Dad was just too enjoyable to give up. Frank called again and again. Finally, he found Rick but he was now late for his big presentation, and the mayor was gone. He smacked Rick on the side of the head, hard enough to make his ears ring. "Think you can make your old man look like an idiot, eh?" he screamed, and smacked him again. Rick didn't remember much after that, but Frank never let him forget how his boyish prank had deprived him of "The most important honor of my life."

The next time was when Rick was caught printing a swear word on the wall at school. "Am I raising a filthy gutter-rat?" his father yelled, "Now your principal thinks we're white trash!" He grabbed Rick's leg as he tried to scramble away up the stairs and pulled him back down. His chin hit every step along the way.

The worst was when Rick got caught shoplifting a chocolate bar. He still had marks from the welts he got on his back that time.

Anything that embarrassed Frank provoked his rage. Rick learned to only approach his father when he had good news to share. His father's expectations prodded his achievements, but also taught him that (in Frank's eyes) he had little value without them.

Rick's mother had told him once of her husband's difficult past. He grew up in poverty and, even though he was bright, there was no money for college. Frank tried to work his way up in a company, but could only go so far with his limited education. Adding insult to injury, his older brother was a successful entrepreneur. Frank was often compared unfavorably to him. He was determined to make sure his children did better. It was a sad story, but Rick saw it as a poor excuse for the beatings and humiliation.

His thoughts were interrupted by the view from the lookout. It was magnificent. The lake stretched for miles in all directions below the cliff, and sunshine glistened on the water. There were turtles as old as the trees peacefully warming themselves on rocks. They looked almost dead from a distance, but the sun seemed to revive them and every few seconds one would lift its head and push into the water. What a nice way to age, thought Rick. Then he noticed the loons interrupting their smooth, serene swim to dive down deep for fish. They looked graceful as they killed their prey.

"Push me closer," ordered Frank, "I can't see."

Rick objected, "The sign says it's dangerous to go beyond this point."

"Signs are for sissies. Push!" Frank insisted. Rick obeyed, and Frank relaxed "That's better."

"Pretty view," Rick suggested.

"Not after you've seen it a hundred times," Frank complained.

"It's peaceful out here though" Rick tried, calmly.

Frank would have none of it. "I guess if peace is your priority. Me, I'd rather do an honest day's work than loaf around feeling peaceful. Which reminds me, how come that son of yours isn't working yet. Inherited your laziness?"

Rick gritted his teeth as, once again, he tried to justify his actions. "He has a disability, Dad, so it's hard finding someone who'll hire him, and I'm working harder than ever at the company." Rick couldn't help but feel ashamed of his son's struggles, even though logic told him it was not his fault.

"You're not a C.E.O. yet like that Ron fellow though, eh?" Frank prodded.

"Ron came from money and knows how to network with the guys on the Board. I don't have those connections." In truth, Rick hated the idea of ingratiating himself to the guys at the top. They didn't deserve it, and he didn't want to become one of them.

"Pfft...connections! Elbow grease is what you're missing," was Frank's opinion. He softly muttered, "What a schmuck," but Rick's hearing was excellent.

He was furious. Every critical, demeaning comment his father had hurled his way seemed to reverberate in his ears. Every abusive tirade that had stolen his childhood appeared fresh. His own inability to accept a child who was not an achiever in the eyes of the world was on Frank too. Some of Frank's attitudes had obviously rubbed off. How was that going to change when he had to reopen the old wounds every month? His father's cold, accusing eyes reminded him of the fish in the lake.

The wheelchair was perched right at the edge of a drop of at least fifty feet. He shifted his hands so they were under the back handles. Frank wasn't very heavy any more. It wouldn't take much to tip him over into the abyss. It would look like an unfortunate accident. There were no cameras out here to witness the deed. Heck, Frank had even asked to be pushed closer to the edge. Was that Rick's fault? That grating, needling voice would finally be silenced, and Rick could refocus on the people he loved. He took a deep breath.

As he gripped the handles, he noticed a slight vibration. Rick stopped. Frank was shivering. He was about to kill a pathetic, shivering old man. He felt ashamed and released his grip.

He stated matter-of-factly, "Let's head back. It's getting cold."

"Don't suppose you brought a shawl?" his father asked.

Rick awkwardly draped his own jacket over his father's shoulders. "I'll walk fast," he reassured.

They followed the path back to Lake Vista in silence.

Frank sensed that the visit was nearing its end. "Whatever happened to the boy I loved who knew how to make me proud?" he asked wistfully.

"You never loved him, Dad. You loved his report cards and the initials he got behind his name."

Rick cleared his throat to avoid getting emotional. "That's just not me anymore."

"Well, you're still the only kid who comes to visit. Guess that's something," Frank conceded.

Rick rolled Frank's chair beside Owen's on the patio. Owen was sleeping. Rick waved to the camera so they would send out his father's aide. He gave Frank a couple of firm pats on the shoulder. "See you next month, Dad."

He started heading toward the car to drive to his usual post-visit bar, but thought better of it. Determined not to drink, he looped around the building to the washroom. Unlike most public washrooms, it was pristine. They even provided free lotion and aftershave.

Rick was glad to see he was alone. He splashed water on his face several times, trying to rinse away the enormity of what he had almost done. He looked at himself carefully in the well-cleaned bathroom mirror. He looked older than he remembered. The scars from his fights at the bar were showing on his forehead and left cheek. Funny, he thought to himself, that's where his father had scars from his accident.

Uncle Leo

Sophia knew her uncle Leo only by reputation and had heard his health was failing, so she was surprised when a package arrived from him. The postman had her sign for it, so it obviously had significant value.

Within was a small icon, a depiction of baby Jesus in his mother's arms, inlaid in silver on a wooden plaque. It was traditional, indented to allow the owner to kiss the image as a symbol of contact with the Divine. It seemed an odd gift for an internationally known academic who was not particularly close to her Greek Orthodox roots. Sophia felt a certain nostalgia as she held the icon though, remembering a childhood summer on the island with her cousins. Was this a thank you for helping to look after his sons that year?

She could still hear the shrill voices in her head.

"Leo was always your favorite. Now I'm supposed to look after his kids too?" yelled her father, red-faced and fuming in the heat. After saving for years to afford this family vacation to his homeland, he was not going to have it ruined by being forced to babysit for his more accomplished older sibling.

"Leo helped look after you when you were little. Don't you remember?" her grandmother countered, "Your no-good father was always either depressed or off gambling, so Leo helped me raise you guys even though he was hardly more than a child himself. You should be grateful!"

"Grateful for being bossed around by my arrogant brother...that's rich! Let his wife look after the boys," he argued back, hurt.

“Keep your voice down!” his mother shushed, “You know she needs to look after the little one. Leo won’t admit it, but she’s definitely not normal. Four years old and can’t say a word, screaming whenever her mother leaves the room. She has something wrong in the head. Just let the boys tag along with your kids for a few days. Your brother will be back from his business trip soon.”

“I could go to the movies with them,” Sophia volunteered, “I’ve wanted to see the open-air theatre anyways, and it might be fun for all of us kids.”

“And how do you plan to get there?” asked her father, condescendingly. “You’re too young to ride the bus by yourself, let alone keep track of a bunch of rowdy boys. I’ll obviously have to take you. Another evening ruined!”

She lowered her gaze, ashamed that she hadn’t thought through her suggestion. She followed her father to the bus stop, making sure the boys went single file facing traffic on the busy street. She brought along some water (boys were always thirsty) and a barf bag for cousin Costa who had a nervous stomach.

Helping out came naturally, as she, like her uncle, had a parent who struggled with mental health problems. It was her mother, though, who was depressed rather than her father. Her father was just preoccupied with work, forever trying to outshine his older brother. Sophia looked after the emotional challenges at home, trying to keep her siblings from behaving in ways that made her mother feel worse.

The bus was rickety and toppled back and forth over the cobblestones, so predictably Costa got sick. She distracted him by pointing to the animals. The bus was like a petting zoo: locals coming back from market carried their un-sold chickens, and lambs wandered freely in the aisle. The smell was zoo-like too, but thankfully the theatre wasn’t far.

Inside, the stone walls were covered in posters of Hollywood stars popular in Canada many years ago but obviously still revered on the island. A large film projector loomed over the back row of seats and a two-story screen had been hoisted just ahead of the front row. The missing ceiling accounted for the “open-air” nature of the theatre. The building was actually a ruin hundreds of years old, one of many dating back to an order of knights in the 14th century. The theatre’s blend of ancient and modern elements seemed odd but interesting.

She couldn’t recall the movie they saw, but still remembered the constellations above. Growing up in a big city, she hardly saw them at home because of all the lights. Here, they glowed pristinely against the inky black sky. She and her eldest cousin compared their favorites. The names differed by country, but fascination with the stars seemed a universal bond. Even Maria might have enjoyed it.

Re-examining her little treasure, Sophia shook her head. It couldn’t be a thank you for her help that long-ago summer. Her father was too determined to play the victim to have mentioned her contribution to his brother. There had to be another reason for the gift.

Sophia made herself some tea and relaxed in her study. As her hands warmed, steam spiralled up from the cup forming a wispy question mark. It occurred to her that she had corresponded with her uncle once, decades earlier. Rifling through an old desk drawer, she smiled, pleased to find his letter. Sophia had received the letter when she was a young medical student, more familiar with anatomy and histology than any useful treatments for disease. She re-read it now:

“Dear Sophia: You probably don’t remember me, as I only saw you face to face as a baby, but I hear wonderful things about you. Your father says you will soon be a doctor. Congratulations!

I am hopeful that your knowledge, or maybe your connections in the medical world, can be of help to my family. I'm not sure how much you know of my daughter (your cousin) Maria. She's a sweet girl but her development has always been slow. Recently, a specialist in Athens diagnosed her with autism. Unfortunately, there are no good treatments for this condition in Greece. The specialist told me there may be better, experimental treatments in America which could help her.

Are you aware of these treatments? Do you have any colleagues who know about this area and could help? As you have undoubtedly heard, my business ventures have been very successful, so I can pay whatever the cost. I could even accompany her to North America for treatment for a few weeks if that is best. Poor Maria is isolating herself and falling further and further behind. My wife and I constantly argue about what to do for her, and we are both at our wit's end. We would be most grateful for anything you can suggest.

Wishing you much success and happiness. Sincerely..."

With a heavy heart, she remembered her response. The only experimental treatment she had found when researching the topic was intensive behavior modification therapy. It took many months or even years, not just a few weeks. It wasn't feasible unless her uncle emigrated, and that would have torn his family and his business apart. She had confirmed her findings with the local expert in the field. She asked if he would communicate with her uncle about how to best support his daughter. He agreed.

Her uncle thanked her for the contact, but was bitterly disappointed. They did not correspond further. His reaction made it unlikely that he sent the gift out of gratitude for what little she had offered. The motivation behind the sacred plaque from the dying man was still a mystery.

The letter, however, spurred some further thoughts. Looking back, Sophia couldn't blame her uncle for being upset and staying in Greece. Her son was also autistic, and she had not even been able to move to a neighboring town for special schooling for similar reasons to her uncle's. As a result, she spent years advocating (or more accurately fighting) for his education with the local authorities. In addition, despite her professional pride in delivering only well-researched, peer reviewed treatments and disdain for any that were based on flimsy, anecdotal evidence, she treated her son with whatever she could find that entailed little risk. She tried experimental diets, experimental supplements, experimental computer programs, and even experimental drugs as well as various therapies which were now no longer considered experimental.

Nevertheless, her son fell further and further behind his peer group. He only learned tasks Sophia rehearsed with him dozens of times. As a result, personal grooming, public transit, and basic transactions at the store were eventually within his repertoire, but by then his peers were already *designing* grooming products, transit systems, and programs for financial transactions. He also had some social contact and knew basic rules of behavior for friendships and relating to authority figures, but nobody would hire him despite heroic efforts on her part. He would never live independently. A generation after Maria, there was still no cure and little hope of self-sufficiency for all but the highest functioning people with his diagnosis.

Despite being more knowledgeable than her uncle, having a stellar professional reputation, and having access to every expert and every new development in the field, Sophia felt utterly helpless. She had tried almost every intervention that was currently deemed safe, yet the impact had been minimal. This must have been what her uncle felt. This was the desperation that oozed from his letter. She reached back miserably to the icon.

As she gripped the plaque, her fingers sensed an uneven area in the wood. Curious, Sophia turned it over. On the back, inscribed in neat Cyrillic script were two words. She searched for a translation. Her computer did not fail: "Take comfort" was the English meaning.

Suddenly, she understood. This was not a gift of gratitude, but one of care. Her uncle knew of her son's condition and how it must be affecting her, much as his daughter's autism had affected him. Ultimately, he had found comfort in his faith. He sent the icon as an encouraging message from one parent of an autistic child to another: take comfort, and perhaps have faith. For when your child has an incurable condition, sometimes the best you can do is pray.

Sophia nodded, and released a stream of tears too long held back.

After the Plague

"I hear you've debugged your prototype!" Clovis smiled, with that ruddy, dentured smile which disarmed his opponents and detracted from his bad toupee.

The conversation was seared in Kilian's mind. "Yes," he explained, "we found that by adding an adrenaline sensor to the subcutaneous temperature probe, we could factor in the level of arousal."

"I'd like to know her level of arousal," Clovis chuckled crudely, leering at his shapely female press secretary. Kilian grimaced at the vulgarity, and was thankful his mask obscured the expression. He had been tempted to remove it to ease communication, but the biting smell of disinfectant had dissuaded him. Besides, Clovis had a habit of shaking hands with every visiting dignitary, so the risk of exposure was high.

Kilian continued, "This way, the vasoconstriction caused by high adrenaline states won't result in falsely low readings. The smartphone alarm was amplified too, as per your request, so that everyone in the vicinity is warned."

"Bottom line, the thing works now, so we can start implanting it to tell who's good to go back to work. Economy gets back on track, and yours truly conquers the ballot box once more. Brilliant!" Clovis concluded, his jowls jiggling with delight.

"We did have one more question before rolling out," Alexa chimed in. She was Kilian's well-dressed, ambitious young graduate student, and had majored in psychology before joining his physiology lab. "Would you like to keep the adrenaline readings on file in addition to the temperatures? They might be useful to people trying to control their anxiety by providing a biofeedback tool. We could study..."

“Sorry to interrupt, but if adrenaline readings were made public that could result in abuses. People with mental health problems, or just anyone getting a bit angry could be unfairly labeled,” Kilian worried.

“My security detail might appreciate knowing about angry people in a crowd,” Clovis considered, “Keep the readings and let your protégé do her study. She seems like a smart cookie.” He winked at Alexa as they left the sanitized office. Kilian felt an unusual urgency to wash his hands.

There were few things he regretted more than conceding that argument.

A year later, the temperature monitoring system had succeeded beyond all expectations. As predicted, it allowed most businesses to reopen safely long before there was a cure or vaccine for the plague. As predicted, Clovis was re-elected.

Additional jobs were created in the police force, needed to respond to temperature- or adrenaline-related alarms. They promptly arrested and shuttled the culprits to protective isolation units. Construction of the units created further employment. There was still some debate as to when their inhabitants were safe for community release, though most agreed that two weeks was fine for the feverish ones but high adrenaline individuals needed further study and containment.

Public gatherings arousing strong emotions ceased. Dissent with government policies vanished. Newscasts praised the new levels of safety and harmony in the land.

Kilian was horrified by the results of his invention. He installed soundproofing insulation in his basement. He and his son, Dustin, often set off adrenaline alarms, and he needed to keep the neighbors from hearing them. There was a special police line to report such events, with generous incentives for informants.

“Try some meditation,” his wife Reena volunteered, a lithe yoga instructor who seemed perpetually calm. “With practice, you’ll be calmer and more rational. Besides, we can’t afford to spend more money on your paranoid renovation projects.”

“Am I paranoid for not wanting our son ripped away from us?” he fumed, and promptly set off his alarm. He dove down the stairs in the nick of time.

Reena joined him. “See what I mean? We need to solve our problems, not fight. I know it must be frustrating to see your invention used this way and your graduate student promoted ahead of you, but that’s the new reality. We can’t be selfish. This is what’s best for the community.”

Just then he spotted his son, cowering in the corner. “What happened to you?” he asked, alarmed. The boy’s face was bruised and his knees were bloody.

“Tyler pushed me,” Dustin replied, “When I yelled at him to stop, my alarm went off and he punched me. The teacher came over and said I was lying because his alarm didn’t go.”

He hugged the frail boy, “At least she didn’t report you,” he encouraged. “It will be OK. Just try to avoid that guy.”

“I don’t understand,” Reena frowned, “Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

“Of course,” Kilian sighed, “Psychopaths can brutalize others without breaking a sweat. The system doesn’t account for that.”

Reena scowled, “Our son is in real danger from that bully, and you couldn’t predict that?”

“I tried to warn them,” Kilian feebly responded. Reena’s alarm went off, and the family huddled together to muffle the sound.

Rather than teaching Dustin how to defend himself from Tyler, Kilian decided on a less overtly aggressive and therefore safer approach. Anticipating the bully would steal Dustin's lunch, he spiked his sandwich with a generous dollop of hot sauce. Tyler screamed in pain, triggering his alarm and a stern teacher warning about involving the police in any future incidents. Dustin was not bullied further. His parents reinforced the soundproofing in their basement.

When the vaccine became widely available, some argued that the temperature and adrenaline probes were not needed anymore and were unnecessarily intrusive. However, the majority felt the increased peace and prosperity of the community outweighed any drawbacks, so the probes remained mandatory.

"How have you been?" wondered Alexa when she saw her former mentor for the first time in months.

"Basking in the warm glow of your success," Kilian replied sarcastically.

"Ah...I see you're using one of my re-education strategies," she smiled knowingly. Her rise to the upper echelons of government had been meteoric, and she was now the "Minister of Community Integration." She had also been promoted at the university after publishing a series of peer-reviewed papers in high impact journals. Research ethics boards had been disbanded in order to "fast track" cures for the plague, clearing the way for her studies. She had studied the nature of individuals prone to frequent high-adrenaline states and methods for suppressing their volatile nature. A few had perished in the process or remained institutionalized, but most were now placid, cooperative citizens ready to re-join their communities.

"Indeed," Kilian admitted, "I hear Clovis' wife is one of your students too. You'd think she'd be used to his infidelities by now, but I guess making his mistress a minister was a bit much for her." He couldn't resist a personal jab after how she had perverted his invention.

“Careful,” she warned, “Rumor has it your boy’s alarm went off at school once. Hate to see him land in our juvenile unit.”

Kilian bowed, “Understood, madam minister,” and walked away, breathing deeply to avoid an alarm. He stepped behind a nearby bush and vomited.

Dahlia

I am crafting an email to the head of my son's employment program, lamenting the ignorance and abusiveness of the facilitators. I describe how their methods are ineffectual and destructive to someone with autism and a learning disability. I vehemently advocate for reform and better understanding of his condition. I am on the third page, and copying every relevant authority figure, all the way to the top. The facilitators blame my son's behavior, I blame their ignorance, and the outcome will probably not help anyone. Still, I feel compelled to write.

A memory distracts me. Like an old vinyl album pulled from a stack in the darkest recesses of my brain, it finds its turntable and begins to play.

I hear the "splat, splat, splat" of my feet in the slush. I am rushing across dingy downtown streets in the wet, late-winter snow of 1993. I am panting, but late for a presentation at the hospital where I work. I've just left a Review Board Hearing at another facility concerning a strapping young teen who skips school and regularly puts his fist through the drywall at home. Deemed a danger to others after threatening his mother with a knife, he is contesting his detention.

His mother Dahlia, an articulate, detail-oriented woman, testifies on his behalf, arguing that he is a sweet boy whose frequent violent outbursts are due to being misdiagnosed and mistreated by the mental health system. She has left several disparaging voicemail messages for me, as the failure to detect his high-functioning autism was mine, although the condition didn't exist in the diagnostic manual when I first saw him. Her parting shot is a flippant "See you at your College hearing!" Evidently, she is lodging a complaint with my professional licencing body. This will result in six months of hellish interrogation, even if I am eventually cleared.

The College threat, my upcoming presentation, and the lateness of the hour all compete for space in my addled brain, but the College complaint is scariest. My lungs hurt and my belly starts to cramp. I am nine weeks pregnant. I slow down to catch my breath and the cramping stops.

My eyes adjust to the dim foyer as I leave daylight behind. I apologize profusely, sloshing into the meeting room, and put on my professional mask. My introductory cartoon slide garners a laugh. I'm off to a good start.

With the presentation done and discussed, I finally have a chance to use the bathroom. My pants are damp but I assume that's from the snow. Dropping them, I realize it's blood. It gushes into the toilet bowl. I go to the Emergency Department but it's too late. I have miscarried. Dahlia has cost me my firstborn child.

I lift the needle and try to shove the album back where it belongs, but am left with a nagging thought. I re-read my letter. The phrasing sounds so familiar...but why? I hear those long-ago voicemails. I gasp. I am becoming Dahlia.

Girls' Night

"Hey, handsome!" called Desi, motioning the waiter to their table. She enjoyed flirting, and sometimes more, though her bold lipstick and pencilled brows gave her a fierce rather than feminine look.

The waiter was a tall, dignified man, no longer young but kept agile by his work. Though affable with customers, he spoke only at their invitation. "May I help you?" he asked.

"Can you do strawberry daiquiris?" she wondered. It was an unusual request for an Indian restaurant, but the three friends used to drink them all the time in their college days.

"Yes, there is a full bar," he replied and departed to put in the order.

The restaurant overlooked a sprawling campus where they had bonded over strong coffee and tough exams, toiling together towards undergraduate science degrees. Inside, the rumble of conversation was noticeable, but not loud enough to force anyone to shout. Besides the usual pictures of Agra and Bollywood stars, a gallery of family photos from decades past adorned the walls, making it a perfect place for indulging in a bit of nostalgia. Warm, complex aromas wafted over the seating area from the kitchen. There was a nice variety of dishes, with enough vegetarian options to accommodate health-conscious women of a certain age.

"It's great to see you guys again," Angela started, breaking the awkward silence. She liked putting people at ease and was the only hugger in the group. She wore a short-sleeved print dress, pretty but not flashy, and sensible in the heat. "What's everyone been up to?"

"Did well on the last round of grant applications," Kate piped up, "I should finally be able to get my clinical trial off the ground." She undid her pony tail, as she had come to this event straight from the

lab. A dedicated researcher, Kate was also raising a couple of children on her own. The juggling demanded all of her organizational skills.

“That’s great!” Angela encouraged, “It must be rewarding knowing the impact you’re having with your research.”

“Either that, or you’re just relieved you can’t screw up anybody’s treatment ‘cause it’s all randomly assigned,” teased Desi.

“Oh, Desi, you haven’t changed” Kate chuckled half-heartedly. There was always a kernel of truth to Desi’s caustic wit. Ever since she inadvertently broke off her doll’s leg in Kindergarten and thought it was dead, Kate had struggled with an intense fear of harming others. “What about you? What’s new in the world of big pharma?” she deflected.

“Had to deal with some protests about our U.S. suppliers,” Desi reported, “But no disaster...we’re still well in the black.” Desi, or more formally Desdemona, had risen rapidly through the ranks of her company and was now second in command there.

“What were they protesting?” wondered Angela.

“Some people protest everything American these days,” Desi complained, “Just because of that immigration mess with families getting separated at the Mexican border. Has nothing to do with our company of course, but they still think we should boycott our suppliers. Go figure.”

Anger welled up inside Kate as she listened to the discussion of separated families. Where was it coming from? A memory answered her question.

Kate recalled how her children had been separated from their father when he was on his deathbed in the hospital during the SARS epidemic. It had been months since any new cases were identified, but family members were still treated like disease-ridden vermin if they tried to visit loved

ones. She and her children had walked into the hospital lobby innocently, and were immediately barked at to sanitize their hands. There was a pungent odor of disinfectant. The air was thick with paranoia, and nobody answered questions: they only asked them. She felt like her family had walked into a top-secret weapons facility rather than a hospital.

They were confronted by masked officials who interviewed each family member in turn from behind a wicket and stamped their application for entry, indicating if they were approved or not. She had been approved. Her eight- and six-year-old children had not, forcing them to wait in the lobby without her as she boarded the elevator to the ICU. She was glad her eight-year-old was responsible enough to risk it.

Then there was the three-day power-out halfway through the ordeal. The staff wouldn't tell her on the phone if they had a back-up generator to keep her ventilator-dependent husband alive. Instead, they told her it was confidential information and she would have to drive to the hospital so they could verify her identity: nearly impossible with no working traffic lights and no functioning gas stations. By contrast, the allowed visitors for each patient were prominently posted in all the waiting areas, so confidentiality rules were obviously enforced selectively.

When the visitor restrictions were finally eased, a month had gone by and the children no longer recognized the frail, immobile figure in the bed that used to be their father. She had thought about questioning the rules, but knew that those who did so were considered socially irresponsible pariahs and, worse yet, often banished from the hospital entirely by the wicket-people.

"Pardon me, are you ready to order?" the waiter interrupted her reverie.

"Oh sure," Kate responded, "The chana masala, saag paneer, and some naan please...all medium spiced...and can you ask the chef for low sodium?" The waiter nodded and left. Indian food had always

been one of Jerry's favorites. Desi and Angela had already ordered, and invited her back to the conversation.

"We were just remembering the conferences we travelled to together," Angela volunteered, "I liked the hotel in San Antonio by the river, remember?"

"Sure do," Kate snickered, "You and I picked up some pointers on our research methods, and Desi picked up a cowboy!"

Desi shot back, "Yeah, and what about the one in Vancouver where you forgot your breast pump and wailed about exploding boobs!" Everyone was in stitches remembering it.

When the laughter settled, Kate reflected "It's amazing how we've stayed in touch over the years...and through some pretty tough times."

"Yeah, we were always good at giving each other advice. Not that anyone ever followed it!" Desi remarked.

They went on to recall different dilemmas where each had sought counsel from the others. Angela had wanted more children, but her husband was opposed. Her friends had urged skipping a pill and claiming it was by accident. Angela was too honest to do that, and adjusted to her small family by doing charity work when not busy at home. Desi had conspired with a colleague to get her supervisor in trouble so she could get his job, and wondered if there was a more effective way of doing this. Her friends had urged her not to "play chess with people's lives" as this would alienate her from co-workers in the long run. She got the supervisor in trouble anyways, got promoted, and shrugged "So what if everyone thinks I'm a bitch. I make my own hours now and I've got a corner office with a mini-bar!"

Before long, the waiter returned with their steaming, beautifully presented meals. His long, elegant fingers almost encircled each dish as he deftly placed it on the table. Water glasses stood

nearby, but a second round of drinks was ordered too. Nobody spoke as they consumed their savory fare.

As she enjoyed her food, Kate's mind wandered back to the dilemma she had shared with the group. Jerry, her intelligent, ruggedly handsome husband had been suddenly hospitalized and left paralyzed, unable to speak. A month went by, and his prognosis became increasingly bleak. She wondered about the wisdom of continuing life support.

Kate remembered the discussion with Desi and Angela as if it was yesterday. The words were etched into her brain, replaying in her dreams and occasionally in waking life too. Angela had encouraged her to not give up on Jerry's recovery prematurely. "Miracles happen sometimes," was her optimistic view. She was also hopeful that Jerry might get to a point where he could communicate and express his wishes. After all, the tests still showed a normal brainwave pattern, so he was still able to think and was probably aware of his situation. She cautioned Kate not to act rashly and risk being left with regrets. She had tried to give her a hug, but Kate was not in a hugging mood.

Raising a pencilled brow, Desi had scoffed that attempting to read the mind of someone who could barely blink was futile, and would probably result in projecting one's own wishes onto the person. She pointed out how hard Kate had fought to escape the poverty of her youth, and how that poverty would be inflicted upon her again, and the children too, if she had an invalid husband in an expensive long-term care facility. After all, the intensivist had said his heart was strong so he could survive for years. Jerry's life insurance, on the other hand, could give the family a "fresh start." Her final words were "Don't wait too long, or the choice will be taken away from you."

Angela's final words were, "Do this and it will haunt you to the grave, Kate...maybe beyond." Desi shook her head and mumbled about how some people turned everything into a Greek tragedy.

“Bet you’re thinking about your hubby again,” she guessed, bringing Kate back to the present.

Kate nodded and admitted Desi was right.

Angela worried, “I know I said some pretty dramatic stuff back then, but honestly, are you still affected by what happened? Is that why you never remarried?”

“Not sure,” Kate replied, “Sometimes I wonder if that’s why I’m so protective of my disabled son though. He reminds me of his Dad and I worry about hurting him without meaning to.”

Angela nodded sympathetically.

Desi was getting uncomfortable with the glum mood. “Well, can’t change the past guys. Here’s to no regrets!” she urged, proposing a final toast.

Kate raised her glass slowly. Her friends faded from view.

“Anything else?” the attentive waiter enquired.

“One more daiquiri, Arush,” she said, looking up at the now-hazy view of his dark silhouette.

“Home is better,” he gently suggested, “May I call a cab, Dr. Ross?”

“Sounds good,” Kate replied, “Thanks.”

“Table for one same time next week?” he asked.

“You know me so well, Arush,” she smiled weakly.

Train Buddies

The train was already idling at the station when Carrie arrived. She took the steps two at a time so she'd have a second to look for Yvette before taking a seat. Her eye caught a friendly wave from a trim, casually dressed woman in the usual spot, and she sat down across from her buddy. The two commuters lived only one stop apart and often chatted on the way to work. Their children were a common topic of conversation.

Yvette worked as a translator for a national news network, ensuring that coverage was provided in both official languages. Her day was full of deadlines and last-minute assignments that were completed in the nick of time. Carrie thought it must be very hectic work, but Yvette loved it. Energetic and decisive, she accentuated her words with quick hand gestures. Talking to Yvette tended to pep up the over-tired Carrie, a baggy-eyed single parent with a demanding career.

"You just made it!" Yvette declared.

"Daycare had forms to sign and then parking..." Carrie started to moan.

"Oh, I know," Yvette interrupted, "Even worse at my stop! How are the girls?"

"Good," Carrie reported, "Amy still needs some physical therapy for her leg, but she's coming along. How about Alex?"

Yvette looked worried, "Got suspended again."

"Oh no!" Carrie sympathized.

Yvette shook her head, "Yeah. Swore at the principal and had weed in his locker. Terri's home with him today. We can't leave him on his own anymore."

“Did you try that support group I mentioned?” Carrie wondered.

“The tough love bunch? Sure...Tres bien I thought, but Terri wouldn't have it. She thinks he needs encouragement and therapy for his self-esteem.” Yvette rolled her eyes, “I swear sometimes I fight more with her about him than I do with Alex himself.”

Carrie nodded, understanding completely. She and her husband used to have the same issues with child discipline, but with Carrie advocating the more nurturing approach and Mike the stricter one. “Funny,” she thought to herself, “parenting differences seem to cause problems regardless of gender or orientation.” She thought of one more suggestion for Yvette, “Can you get someone to take him for a few days so you guys can get a break?”

She shook her head, “No. Too big for grand-mere to handle and no respite service would take him.” She made a jabbing motion, “You know the other day he threatened me with a switchblade?”

Carrie looked alarmed, “Woe! Those things are dangerous. Watch yourself...call the cops if you need to.”

The suggestion was met with a fly-swatting motion, “No way Terri would go for that.”

“How about E.R.?” Carrie persisted.

Yvette looked resigned, “He's gone before. They always send him home. Let's hope he grows out of this. What about those vacation plans I told you to make?”

Carrie wasn't happy with this conclusion, but didn't know what else to suggest. True, she worked in mental health with adolescents, but there seemed to be an unwritten contract between commuters: sympathize but don't interfere. After all, these relationships were limited to the train and could end as suddenly as they started if somebody's schedule changed. She talked a bit more with

Yvette about vacation plans before wishing her a good day. Still, she had an uneasy feeling as they reached her friend's stop.

As the train pulled away, Carrie looked back on her commuting years. When Mike was alive, he drove them both downtown and dropped her off, but downtown driving petrified Carrie. Ironic, she thought, for an anxiety expert to have such fear.

She started using the train when Mike died. With its cushioned seats and smooth ride, it was a more pleasant way to travel than the smelly, rattling subway. The higher priced tickets also meant that its patrons were solidly middle class and rarely reeked of liquor. You couldn't always count on reliable service though, especially in the winter when there were frequent delays due to frozen switches or malfunctioning doors.

At first, Carrie brought her laptop on the train, thinking she would work during the trip. She loaded a bootleg copy of her overpriced statistics software onto the machine so she could run analyses for her research projects on route. She learned to take the slow train so she could get a seat as the express was a sweaty, standing room only affair. The "no talking zone" was upstairs so that's where you went to avoid distractions.

Unfortunately, distractions still abounded. She noticed graffiti on the station wall: "I (scrawled heart shape) U". It was obviously an "I love you" message. She had the strangest feeling that it was coming from her dearly departed Mike. The steady clatter of the rails sometimes lulled her into a nap. She dreamed about Mike. She thought maybe meditation would be easier than trying to concentrate on statistics. It wasn't. Memories flooded in.

Eventually, she started overhearing some conversations from the "talking zone" below. There were a few men who talked sports, but most discussions related to people's family or work problems. They reminded her of the soap operas she used to watch back when she was not yet a single parent and

therefore had some free time. She started envying an older woman who got on at the same stop and often talked loudly about her mean boss and her ill health. The woman had a distinguished-looking male commuter buddy, Pavel, who was a very patient listener even though it was obvious that most of the ailments described were psychosomatic. Maybe there were others like Pavel down there. It had been so long since Carrie had had a conversation that was related neither to work nor to childish cartoons! She decided to switch to the talking zone.

Yvette became her buddy after she had a coughing fit on the train, causing everyone on the lower level to turn away for fear of contracting germs. Carrie was the only one who didn't and offered her a cough drop instead. They struck up a conversation easily after that, and had been buddies ever since. She hoped her buddy was OK as the train screeched into the final station.

Pavel began commuting when he moved to the suburbs. He needed more room for his growing family, but as a small businessman he couldn't afford the housing prices in the city. Once he became well-established, he was connected to his community in the suburbs and reluctant to move. He continued commuting, and it became a way of life.

Originally, Pavel had trained as a social worker. Then, he inherited the family business from his father and felt a duty to continue it. He missed helping people with their problems though. His wife was independent enough to rarely need his help, so he enjoyed the opportunity to advise and support his train buddy. He couldn't understand people who preferred their electronic devices in the "no talking zone" to real human contact. He read the newspaper headlines when he first got on the train, but always looked forward to the stop where Shirley joined him.

Shirley was an administrative assistant who walked with a slight limp. She had an insensitive boss who often belittled her, but couldn't afford to quit or retire. Recently divorced, she struggled

financially and was often ill, probably from dealing with stress. She reminded Pavel of his sister who suffered from mild cerebral palsy and had often turned to him for emotional support. He and Shirley started talking after she forgot her cellphone one day. She borrowed his to call her boss and tell him she was running late.

Pavel greeted her warmly, "Happy Thursday! How's it going?"

"Can't talk much. Voice is going," she replied in a soft, croaking tone. She had a purple silk scarf wrapped around her throat.

"What does your doctor say?" he wondered.

"Says there's nothing wrong. Just take some lozenges," she complained, "Lozenges for Pete's sake! Like I'm a little kid with a sore throat. For all I know I could have a tumor on my voice-box. Pain pills he gave me aren't working either."

"You should get a second opinion," Pavel advised.

She sighed, "Who has time? Richard says I'm over the limit for my sick days and need to make up the hours, and I had to take the old yellow clunker to the shop again. The mechanic called it a 'Vintage Oldsmobile'. Yeah right! Eddie was supposed to pay spousal support and instead he stuck me with this lemon...literally!" She laughed half-heartedly and Pavel joined in.

"It's great you can still laugh, with everything you're going through," he encouraged.

"That's not the half of it," she continued, "My landlord won't fix the hot water until I get caught up on the rent. I have to take ice cold showers now! How can I pay him if the insurance keeps rejecting my disability claim?" She started tearing up and her voice cracked again. "Last night he even threatened to evict me! Then this morning I woke up like this." She fingered the scarf on her throat.

She sounded desperate. Pavel was getting worried, "That's an awful jam, but don't give up. Eddie owes you the money. Get your lawyer to put some pressure on him." Shirley nodded, but he could tell she wasn't hopeful. Pavel knew he had the means to help her and would have done it for a relative or a church friend. Train buddies were different though...it felt like he would be crossing a line. He tried to encourage her one more time before their trip concluded.

Friday morning was grey and overcast. Neither Yvette nor Shirley boarded the train. Carrie pulled out a crossword puzzle. Pavel read the paper more thoroughly than usual, but the news was pretty grim. The front-page stories were international: another famine in Africa, another war in the Middle East. "Thank God I live in Canada," he thought to himself. There was a troubling headline on the second page 'Translator killed: Teen son arrested.' He shook his head, thankful that his own children were happy, successful adults now. Eventually, he got bored and looked out the window as the train followed the lakeshore. Chunky cumulus clouds hung over the horizon like giant rocks about to fall. The water foamed and heaved beneath them.

The train was more crowded than usual on Monday because the previous one had been cancelled due to mechanical problems. The seat across from Pavel was empty though, and a breathless, tired-looking woman squeezed into it. He didn't know her name but recognized her as a regular commuter who often sat across the aisle with an animated French woman.

"Excuse me," she said, and then added "It's Pavel, isn't it?"

"Yes," he smiled. She introduced herself. "What happened to your friend?" he wondered.

"Don't know," she replied, still panting, "New shift I guess."

He realized she needed time to compose herself. "Relax. Catch your breath first."

She nodded, "Had to run for it all the way from the far lot. Garage was closed with police tape. Some guy said they found a body in there last night."

"Creepy!" he exclaimed, "Do they know what happened?"

She shook her head, "Took a quick look but all I saw was this big, old-fashioned type car...weird, canary-yellow sort of color."

Pavel nodded. His face became ashen.

Christmas Present

“Who gave me the Mozart CD?” came the old woman’s plaintive cry. Marta seemed excited by the gift, though severe arthritis and poorly fitting dentures limited her ability to express enthusiasm.

“I did,” her daughter responded, “It’s choral works, so I thought it might bring back some memories.” As a college professor, she thought it might be a cognitively stimulating as well as sentimental gift, and her mother could use all the cognitive stimulation she could get these days.

“Yes, yes. You know I sang with a choir for eleven years? We traveled all over Europe. We even won second place in a competition in Spain. That was before I met your father and lost everything. We sang many of these pieces. I was one of the best sopranos!”

She smiled, pleased. Marta had recounted the traveling choir story many times before, but she was encouraged by the lucid description. With her mother’s dementia, these moments were becoming increasingly rare.

Whether consciously intended or not, the gift also helped to temper the pain evoked by one of her own childhood Christmas memories.

Newly emigrated from Europe, her family was desperately poor. The small, dingy, barracks-like structure they called home didn’t even allow for she and her brother to sleep in separate rooms. The basement was a mouldy mess apart from a rattling gas furnace and a washtub for scrubbing clothes. Washers and dryers were a luxury they couldn’t afford.

Every year, they celebrated Christmas Eve in the German tradition. Her relatives sent care packages from overseas. They contained hand-me-down clothes from her cousins which resulted in ridicule at school if you were lucky. If you weren’t so lucky, they resulted in being called a Nazi. The packages also contained some sweets and a classical music vinyl LP for her mother. Of all the aspects of

her homeland Marta missed, music was the dearest. She played German carols throughout Advent, ignored whatever inappropriate gift her husband bought her, and looked forward to playing that LP more than any other event of the year.

One year, the LP arrived broken. She shuddered recalling Marta's reaction. Her mother wailed inconsolably. She went on and on about how even this small vestige of her German culture had been ripped away from her. Her daughter tried to distract her, reassure her, and otherwise do whatever a nine-year-old can do for a parent who is losing it, but without success. She feared for her mother's life, as it was not the first time her depression had resulted in extreme behavior. She still remembered the carol playing in the background. To this day, she experienced intense nausea every time she heard it.

She was glad her brother and his family played the usual boring, secular Christmas fare on their stereo. It would help her survive the family gathering, and nowadays surviving the holidays was the best she could hope for. The suburban surroundings were pleasant enough, and her son seemed to be having a good time with his cousins. All were modern, millennial twenty-somethings who shared similar goals and interests. They chatted, texted, and laughed.

"Who gave me the Mozart CD?" came the old woman's plaintive cry again.

"I did," she responded with a worried look. It had been barely five minutes since the last time the question was asked.

"Well, it has the Requiem," Marta commented, "Good to play at my funeral."

Her brother refilled their mother's wine glass as she sipped miserably on her Perrier. She usually got through these occasions by escaping into a pleasant delirium of alcohol and bad jokes, but today she had to drive her parents back home so that was not an option.

The cousins giggled surreptitiously. As dessert was served, they reminisced about the massive bowls of pudding Oma (Marta) used to make, accompanied by big jars of applesauce. Another chimed in about the German spaghetti sauce. It was made with bay leaves and cloves, as Oma had never seen a recipe for Italian spaghetti sauce, but had become a family favorite. They seemed oblivious to the fact that Marta was sitting at the other end of the table. They didn't seem to connect the vibrant, opinionated force of nature they remembered with the balding, drooling ninety-year-old of the present.

Ever the academic, she wondered what this meant about the self. Her mother was clearly still a somewhat sentient human being, but was she the same self she was so long ago or had that been lost? When others talk about you in the past tense even though you are in the room, are you still the same person? She had recalled a similar reaction when her son was confronted by his father's debilitating stroke, and it had signalled the beginning of the end of his life.

Now, thinking about her mother of puddings and sauces, other Christmases came to mind. The Christmases of her twenties and thirties were always accompanied by the booming tympani of the opening chorus in Bach's Christmas Oratorio. If any music ever expressed pure joy, that was it!

Marta had returned to work and could now afford her own LPs, as well as a well-tuned piano and a fancy fur coat so she could hold her head high at the opera. She denied ever having had a mental health problem in her younger years, and certainly did not acknowledge any help from her children in getting through those difficult times. Instead, she saw herself as a beacon of European culture and civility for the family to follow, especially at Christmas time.

Never having understood his wife's depression or pining for her homeland, her father took credit for the family fortunes. These had allowed a move into a big bright, open-concept dwelling with high ceilings and plenty of room for the tall tree with real candles her mother insisted upon. Filled water buckets stood nearby to mitigate the obvious fire hazard, but Marta was clearly in her element.

The evening began with her poetic composition for the season. It was in German, of course, and had been forced into rhyming couplets but had few other redeeming qualities. Regardless, it was a fitting introduction to the Christmas gospel according to Luke which was recited obediently by her offspring. Next came carols by the piano, which she played with some difficulty, her fingers made less agile by years of handwashing clothes with harsh detergents. Then came the meal with the enormous puddings the cousins recalled, and finally an exchange of gifts which had to be completed before the candles' wax was consumed and the flames started igniting the tree. The Oratorio would come to a glorious end with trumpets resounding at full volume. Tree doused and bellies filled, the guests dispersed into the holy night.

As Marta's health had declined over the years, Christmas arrangements were made either at her house or her brother's. This relieved her mother from the burden of cooking, and relieved other family members from the fear of Salmonella poisoning, as Marta had cooked the meal days ahead of time during the last few years she hosted. Still, the event clearly sprang from her mother's spirit and traditions.

She was jolted out of her reverie by a loud question.

"Who gave me the Mozart CD?" came the old woman's plaintive cry.

"I did," she said softly, her voice cracking. She could no longer suppress the tears. She gently pushed her mother's walker up to her chair. "Let's go home now."

Alfred

Angry Al was nobody's favorite neighbor. His growl and twitchy eyebrow were legendary. Most people reacted to loud teen parties by telling the kids to turn down the music; Al called the police. Most people asked their fellow residents to trim back their trees; Al lopped off overhanging branches at the property line. Curious children were dragged home by the ear; door to door salesmen reduced to tears. Even the Jehovah's Witnesses feared him. The only positive thing people said about Al was that his driveway was impeccable. In the bitterest cold, his nose running and forming snotsicles on his face, Al shovelled like a machine. He overlapped his strokes precisely, resulting in highly efficient snow clearance with not a crumb left behind.

What the neighbors didn't see was the part of Al's life that fueled his anger. Cleaning his driveway was one of the few situations where Al felt valued and in control. Elsewhere, he felt put upon. Al worked in the design and manufacture of electrical equipment. His diligence and meticulous attention to detail resulted in top quality products as long as people didn't interfere with his work by insisting on "pointless paperwork". Unfortunately, his boss favored employees who prioritized the required forms and pleasant, ingratiating interactions with clients. Raymond, a balding, moustached middle manager, had been around the company long enough to know how important these "soft skills" were. He rarely praised Al. Even though he claimed to be fair, Raymond clearly favored Lena, a soft-spoken recent graduate with long, dark lashes and a disarming smile that cooled the ire of any disgruntled client.

Despite his problems gaining respect at work, Al had done well for himself. He lived in a wealthy suburb on a street lined with mature trees and lots measured in acres rather than frontage. Nearby was parkland with a stream where Al walked his dog to decompress from the day. He planned to fish for trout there when he retired.

Then, his father died and his walk-out basement became a granny flat for his ailing mother. Bess was a cantankerous old woman with badly dyed curls which looked blue in the sunlight. She had a shuffling gait but still moved around quite well for a woman of her age, except when Al was around. She insisted he bring her water, food, her glasses, her dentures, and anything else more than arm's length away. She demanded his help when she got up from a chair, and applied her cane to his backside if he protested. What irked Al most though were her constant claims that he was an ungrateful and neglectful son. She reminded him often of all she had suffered while raising him. She also claimed to have looked after his dog faithfully for years...when in truth she had minded him only during a few of Al's brief business trips. Recently, she complained that the dog got more of Al's attention than she did...though the opposite was true and Al desperately needed the respite from her offered by dog-walking.

It had not been a good week for Al. Lena had neglected a project on a tight deadline so Al stepped in and finished it. Filling out her progress report, Lena noted "project completed successfully and on time," not bothering to mention Al's contribution. Much to Al's chagrin, Raymond promoted her in response. When Al protested, Raymond pointed out that, unlike Lena, he was behind on filling out progress reports on his work.

The next day, Al's mother wanted jewellery from her safety deposit box and had lost the key. Al asked the bank teller for help, and was met with a cold, nasal "Do you have Power of Attorney for your mother?"

He indicated he did.

"Where is it?" the well-dressed, ear-ringed young man demanded.

"In the safety deposit box," Al reported.

"I can't open the box until you show it to me," was the curt reply.

Al's face started to twitch. He tried patiently explaining the impossibility of producing the document without opening the box, but to no avail. The teller wouldn't budge, and he offered no helpful suggestions.

An hour later, Al brought his mother to the bank in person to request the box she opened. The teller took the fact that Bess lost her key as evidence that she was no longer competent to manage her affairs, and therefore a Power of Attorney was needed to open the box. Exasperated, Al swore at him. After calling his supervisor, the teller had Al escorted out of the bank. Tired of listening to the subsequent comments about what an unhelpful son he was, Al dropped off his mother at her sister's place.

Despite Al's reputation, the local paperboy was bold enough to try collecting his fee that evening. Kenny was a freckle-faced imp with dirty blonde hair whose father impressed upon him to "Never take No for an answer." The street was already dark and the sky had started spewing something between rain and ice pellets, but Kenny knocked on the door loudly and repeatedly until it opened.

"Don't you see that?" Al barked, pointing to a 'No Soliciting' sign in big, bold type.

"Yeah, but you owe me fifteen dollars, sir" Kenny replied firmly.

"What for?" Al demanded.

"Local paper," Kenny responded.

"I never ordered any papers," Al growled, "And you whip them at my vegetables too. I should report you!"

Kenny explained, "Paper's automatic till you call and cancel. Fifteen dollars, mister."

Al's eye was starting to twitch, "For damaging my property? Get out of here."

As Al started to turn away from the door, Kenny put his foot on the threshold to keep it open. "Soon as you pay me."

Al was incensed at the rudeness and the invasion of his privacy. "You trespassing little brat!" He lunged at Kenny across the porch, but the boy jumped down the stairs and escaped. Al's foot came down on the top step which was newly covered in a thin sheet of ice. He slipped, instinctively stretching out his arms...

He wasn't sure how long he had been unconscious, but it must have been several minutes judging by the puddle of freezing rain collecting on his chest. His right arm was throbbing and a high-pitched note was piercing his ears. Everything spun when he tried to sit up. He lost consciousness again. Wakening a second time, he realized nobody could see or hear him from the street, not that they would be too eager to help him anyways. If he wanted to avoid dying of exposure, he would have to get himself inside. Somehow, using his functional left arm and what little strength he had in his legs, Al dragged himself step by step towards the door, careful not to prop himself on ice and fall again. The door was still ajar thanks to Kenny's threshold stunt, so he slid himself inside and lay down, exhausted.

The dog nuzzled his face, keeping him awake. Al's next thought was calling an ambulance. The phone was in his right-hand pocket so he had to reach across with his left arm to retrieve it. He was about to press 9-1-1 when he stopped, remembering a horrible experience at the local hospital after he cut his hand. The stitches had been so poorly done that the entire wound reopened when they were removed. He had to get to the better hospital downtown, but no ambulance would drive that far. He thought of calling a cab, but he was soaking wet, unable to stand, and sporting a misshapen right arm. What cabbie would take him? He would have to recuperate a bit and then get changed before calling. Meantime, he would follow the head injury routine hospitals usually prescribed: waking himself with an alarm every two hours.

Fred woke to the rushing sound of the surf and the shrill cry of seagulls. His skin was baked a darker hue than usual, and sandals cushioned his feet from the sand. A cool breeze tousled his hair, making the heat bearable. A vast, turquoise bay stretched before him. As he turned around, a round-bellied islander with a gap in his teeth greeted him. "Story hour!" he exclaimed and pulled him towards an open-air bar. Much to his surprise, Fred told an interesting and very amusing story to the locals, earning a pint of Vailima beer in return.

The loud horn of a ship in distress interrupted the party as Al's alarm went off. He awoke but was still too dizzy to get up.

Back on the island, Fred admired the sunrise as he carefully untangled and mended a fishing net. His friends appreciated his precision and attention to detail. They usually brought him a nice snapper or a generous piece of tuna for his efforts. As they hauled the net into a small boat, Fred saw stranded cruise ship passengers shivering on the beach.

They were a bedraggled bunch but he soon recognized the blue-haired old woman, the long-lashed younger one, and the man whose moustache comprised most of his hair. He welcomed them and indicated it would be a while before another ship could get past the reefs offshore. He cautioned them about being honest, fair, and respectful of local customs to avoid getting banished, which could be deadly during monsoon season.

They scoffed that they would just phone or email for help. To their dismay, the island was too remote for cell service or internet access. The young woman batted her lashes and tried to sweet-talk one of the locals, but she didn't speak his language. He misunderstood and threw water in her face, assuming she had sand in her eyes. Her comrades fared no better.

The sea churned as a powerful wind swept through the island. Monsoon season seemed to be starting sooner than expected! A sudden gust blew the thatched roof off a nearby hut, sending it flying into a coconut palm.

It made a loud, clattering sound as Al's alarm rang for the second time. He sat up, but the room began to spin so he returned to a horizontal position on the floor.

The waters were calm again, though rainclouds loomed and the beach was getting dark. A small motorboat stood ready to ferry a handful of passengers back to a ship anchored in the distance. Everyone was clamoring to get in. Fred warned that it was not safe to travel yet, but the North Americans were eager to leave their primitive surroundings behind.

"Women and children first!" squeaked the blue-haired lady.

"I paid for a first-class ticket, so according to policy I should go on the first shuttle," the long-lashed woman announced, sounding more strident than usual.

"Me too," whined a familiar-looking, ear-ringed young man who had just pushed his way through the crowd. Only the moustached man stayed silent.

The shuttle left with the bank teller, the two women, and a couple of lawyers who had also argued their way aboard. Lightning flared brightly, showing a mountain of water swallowing the tiny craft and sending its occupants to the ocean floor.

Thunder cracked a moment later, as Al's alarm woke him a third time. He could sit up now, but was nauseated when he tried to stand. He didn't think he could retrieve his clothes from the closet yet, so lay down one more time.

The beach was deserted apart from Fred and Raymond.

“Thanks for the warning,” Raymond said solemnly. He added, “Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“I used to work for you,” Fred explained, “But you kept promoting dishonest, politically correct types ahead of me even though I was more productive, so I quit. Here on the island, they value honesty and a job well done...Oh, and it helps if you can spin a good yarn too!” he chuckled.

A glimmer of recognition crossed Raymond’s face. “I remember now...You were kind of rough around the edges but your work was top notch. I didn’t know you were so unhappy. I’m sorry, Al.”

Fred straightened and extended his hand, “Apology accepted, but please call me by my full name: Alfred.”

Alfred awoke and switched off his alarm. He was no longer dizzy, and now noticed that his coat was lying across a chair beside him. He pulled on one sleeve, draping the rest over his throbbing arm. After closing a couple of buttons, he thought he looked presentable enough for a cabbie to drive him to the hospital. Once there, his arm was set in a cast and started healing. His head was scanned thoroughly but pronounced “merely concussed,” and he was sent home with instructions on how to recover.

Alfred often thought about the South Seas, but ultimately remained in his home. He spoke to Raymond about feeling unfairly treated and elicited an apology, and also a new bonus system linked to productivity. He avoided interacting with Lena, who eventually got her just desserts. With a couple of assertive phone calls, he got his mother moved to the top of the list for a spot in a local nursing home.

As his energy was no longer sapped by negative interactions, Alfred found he had more to give. He volunteered with a literacy program at the local library and found he actually had a knack for reading

and telling stories. He no longer growled or twitched, not even with Kenny. He happily shared the produce from his garden with his neighbors...that is, as long as they used his full name.

Climbers

Pandemics punish planners, and the professor was a planner. She had a book launch, two trips (one business and one pleasure), and a course to teach prepared in detail, ready to go for that spring. All had been wiped out in the name of social distancing, and it was her job to communicate the bad news to everyone concerned. She was now spending as much time working on obtaining and providing refunds as she would have spent on the events themselves. Meaningful work had turned into a series of aggravating chores. Aggravation interfered with sleep, as the bags under her eyes confirmed.

The platitudes mouthed by the government didn't help either. It seemed like they were doling out money hand over fist, and yet neither she nor her developmentally disabled son qualified for anything. His annual income was three hundred dollars short of the threshold amount for emergency relief. Meanwhile, the gym and the park where he used to release his excess energy were closed. He paced like a caged tiger at home. She walked on eggshells to avoid upsetting him. Respite care had also been cancelled in the name of social distancing.

She tried to play board games, bake cookies, and decorate jars which contained post-its with activities to pursue when the curtain lifted, but nothing replaced the outdoors. The bags under her eyes deepened. Finally, she decided to risk it: an early morning walk in a conservation area not far from home, where they could bypass the blocked parking lot on foot.

Mother and son soon relaxed as crisp, cool air filled their lungs. Early rays of sunlight crossed the horizon, caressing the lake's grey waves. His lanky frame cast long shadows on the grass, and he quickly outpaced her. They were alone on the path. Not even the dog-walkers were out yet. Part-way along the trail, a bridge had been blocked off. They scrambled downhill to a rocky beach. The sun glistening on the water and the sound of a stream rushing over rocks as it met the lake were magical. They skimmed stones and enjoyed the peace.

Turning around, she spotted an old tree. Wide, sprawling branches emanated from a knee-high trunk, scooping gently upwards toward the sky. It was a perfect climbing tree. Even a young child could shinny from that low trunk up the sloped limbs, and then find multiple footholds for getting higher. At eight or nine, you couldn't have stopped her from scaling it. Her childhood trees eventually became the goals of a young woman, but it made little difference. She still felt most alive when reaching upward.

"Look at that branch sticking out over the river. Bet you could make it all the way to the top of that one," she challenged.

"No thanks," he replied, "Let's play Marco Polo!"

She reluctantly agreed. It was a vocal version of hide and seek he had enjoyed since he was a boy. He promptly scurried behind the tree, emerging later with a mischievous grin.

Playfulness was not her strong suit. She had always preferred teaching her children, whether about academics or useful life skills. She was also an organizer, often setting up playdates and other enjoyable activities. When they actually happened though, she stayed on the sidelines doing work-related reading or catching up on emails. There was always more to do and prepare for, and she rarely lived in the moment. It didn't matter anymore whether it was due to a childhood marked by many responsibilities at an early age, or having to play both mother and father roles with her children when her husband died, or genetic predisposition. It was the only way she knew how to live.

"Let's wrap it up!" she ordered, "the COVID police are coming."

"Shhh..." he mouthed, suppressing his next 'Marco Polo' and hiding under the bridge. She joined him, waiting for them to finish their rounds. Rule-breakers were in for hefty fines and public humiliation. She didn't normally flaunt such rules. She knew some of the distancing measures were needed, but preventing people from accessing a wide, well-kept trail where it was easy to stay apart, while cramming them together in crowded parking lots as they waited to enter the supermarket, simply didn't make sense.

The rules also reminded her of a previous viral epidemic, SARS, where the emphasis was on restricting access to hospitals. That epidemic coincided with her husband's final illness, and back then the rules almost kept the children from seeing their dying father. She had to beg and plead with a series of security personnel and administrators until they were allowed just one visit before the end, and was sternly admonished for doing so. This occurred almost three months after the last new SARS case had been reported. Then as now, minimally qualified people were granted extraordinary powers to inflict misery on their fellow human beings, and neighbors were encouraged to snitch on neighbors. Then as now, the rules didn't make sense, and her family suffered as a result.

There was something else about this tree she viewed from their hiding spot. At first, she couldn't put her finger on it, and then it became clear: the last pleasant memory she had of her husband before his hospitalization. Sitting in the shade of a very similar ancient being, they shared an affectionate moment during their last family outing. They had fought at the hardware store the day before: he wanted her to choose blinds for the cottage they were building; she wanted to feed her whining children some lunch. Sometimes he could be even more goal-oriented than she was, and he didn't appreciate having his efforts thwarted. He conceded the argument but was silent for hours afterwards.

Under the tree, they talked and made amends. They imagined how much fun the children and their friends would have at the cottage, and watched their daughter proudly demonstrating her new skills riding a two-wheeler. They talked about an upcoming election, and their consensus that the candidates had better not raise taxes on hard-working, upwardly mobile people like themselves to provide handouts to the indigent. Ironically, her son could have used one of those handouts right now. They reflected on how far they had come together: from depressing, working poor backgrounds to successful careers and, for the most part, independence from their respective family baggage. They

started to rebuild some of the mutual respect which had been eroded over the years by commuting at different hours to juggle family and career responsibilities.

“Marco...Polo” came the children’s shouts. Her husband told them to gather around and started into a detailed description of the oriental exploits of the famed Italian. They just wanted to get back to the game. She didn’t take the children’s side this time. He eventually relented and hugged her as they continued to play.

The next day, a blood vessel exploded in his brain, and her world exploded along with it. She never quite overcame the trauma of the next six, surreal weeks where he hovered between life and death. Maybe it was unfair to blame the SARS rules for all that.

The COVID police finally went back up the road. Thankfully, the drive-through was still open at the local doughnut shop, drawing them out of the park.

She and her son crawled out from under the bridge and started walking back toward home. The sun was rising higher, and their shadows shrank. The way back seemed long and slow.

Seventeen years had gone by since the last epidemic, and since she became a single parent. She had gone from an idyllic “millionaire’s family” to one forever marked by her decision to end his life support, by her beautiful boy being diagnosed with a lifelong disability, by the need to help grieving children even as she barely coped herself. Some days she looked and sounded more like a guilt-ridden Lady Macbeth than a lauded academic. Nevertheless, she had children to raise so there was no choice but to go on.

Her work was both a curse and a blessing. The pressures often overwhelmed, but it gave her purpose, somewhere to go every day, and the means to support her family. The people willing to help were a pleasant surprise. She never thought of herself as belonging to a community, yet friends, neighbors, and colleagues alike reached out, offering emotional and tangible support. Later, many of the colleagues got competitive again: envying her success, ingratiating themselves with superiors to

undermine her, and generally playing politics. The friends and neighbors remained though, and multiplied after she joined a church. She began focusing less on success and more on meaningful work and meaningful relationships.

There was also a growing sense that the Universe had forgiven her, even before she could forgive herself. The first snowfall that winter started one day as she walked from the train station to work. The flakes melting on her forehead seemed like a second baptism. His medical record, which she insisted on reading, contained descriptions by the social worker who had spoken to her. Incredibly, they depicted her as strong and reasonable, and were devoid of blame. In 2008 she went back to the mountains where they had honeymooned. As she took in a panoramic view, a sunbeam struck a distant lake. Following the sunbeam with her eyes, she had a profound sense that he was where he was meant to be, and he was well.

As they reached the end of the park trail, she saw a grove of newly planted saplings.

“Will they grow as big as Dad’s?” her son wondered. They had planted a red oak sapling by the church in his memory a year after his passing. It had done well, and was now a sturdy tree.

“Probably not, or they would have spaced them further apart,” she replied, “but we can come back and check more often once this virus situation is over.”

“Once they grow up, we won’t have to walk as far to play,” he added optimistically. She smiled and nodded agreement.

The years since SARS had been tough, but she had to admit that they eventually gave her a new and gentler perspective on life. She still enjoyed climbing toward goals but, like the pandemic curve, her trajectory was starting to flatten. She was less narrowly focused on the top, and more aware of those climbing alongside, and of realms beyond the next goal. She had experienced regret for those injured or, more often, allowed to slip away during her ascent. She had experienced joy at others’ successes and good fortune. Even supporting her son’s development had become less of a long-term project and more

of an exercise in being present with him and appreciating his gifts. She remembered the tree by the bridge, grateful for its shade, for the memories it inspired, and for the gleeful expression on her son's face after hiding behind it. These now seemed to matter more than climbing it.

Flying

“Now, go to your happy place!” ordered the pale young woman in sensible shoes. It was a truly inane instruction for a group of terminally ill patients suffering chronic pain. “What do you see, hear, smell, or taste there?” the voice chirped on, convinced that her guided meditation was helping them. The hospice had hired her a month earlier after complaints about a lack of mental health services.

“You forgot ‘who do you feel up’?” wisecracked Larry whose liver cancer had turned him the color of an amber traffic light.

“Imagine people who love and cherish you, or maybe religious figures or angels” the naïve young therapist continued.

Jennifer tried to comply, but she hadn’t experienced much cherishing in her abusive past and angels just reminded her of how close she was to the end. Amy, her daughter, was the only person who fit the bill. She had moved away when an engineering position came up out of town, which was just as well since Jennifer didn’t want her to see the progressive horrors of her disease. The tumor had already eaten away almost half her face, and what was left was badly discolored from radiation treatments.

Nevertheless, Amy came to visit later that day. She was a petite brunette, smartly dressed with a habit of looking people straight in the eye as she spoke. Working mostly with men, she was often quite direct but had a genuinely caring side as well.

Amy immediately noticed the over-sized windows and extra-fluffy upholstery in the hospice. It seemed like the owners were overcompensating for the grim nature of their work. Her mother also complained that the music was boring, “trying to lull us to sleep before our time.” The mood was not entirely negative though. Many residents found a certain relief in knowing they were offered only

comfort care, after being subjected to new, often experimental treatments with unpredictable side effects at the hospital. Slow decline was psychologically easier to manage, and the nurses really did try to ease their suffering. The residents settled into the low-intensity living that happens when people are waiting: waiting for their flight at the airport, waiting for the bank to open, or just generally waiting. Although difficult for the impatient, it sometimes allowed for deeper human connections as there were few preoccupying tasks that needed to be done.

Amy was glad her mother had made some friends recently, but still thought the lack of activity must be frustrating for a lifelong doer like her mother. Her mother's appearance told her the cancer had progressed, but she tried not to look upset. She approached her, "Hey, Mom. How are they treating you here?"

"Nursing care is good, but that so-called therapist seems barely out of diapers," Jennifer chuckled.

Amy laughed at her mother's quip, "I'm sure she's trying. Seriously though, I had an idea that might be fun for you."

"Oh?" Jennifer was intrigued.

Amy continued, "You know I've been working on that drone project?" Her mother nodded. "Well, we have a prototype that has a top-notch video camera, a long range, and can even carry small packages. I was thinking we could pick a few places you'd really like to see and have the drone film them for you. We could watch the footage together once a week when I visit...kind of like your own special movie. What do you think?"

Jennifer was skeptical, "I don't know. Wouldn't that be expensive?"

"Don't worry. I get a company discount," Amy reassured.

“Mm...what would the other patients think?” her mother wondered.

“You could invite them to the screenings if you like,” Amy suggested, “Or keep things private and say it’s because of me. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“Interesting...can I give it some thought?” she asked.

“Of course. Let me know next week.” Amy didn’t want to pressure her mother, but she hoped the idea might appeal to her and make her final days a bit more enjoyable.

Jennifer appreciated her daughter’s gesture. It was so thoughtful to use her expertise to try and make the hospice stay less monotonous. Seeing things from the drone’s point of view would be like flying, something she had dreamed about since childhood. It was also a favorite fantasy later on in life when she felt trapped in difficult job situations and in her abusive marriage. Amy had been the only good thing to come out of that fiasco, she thought to herself. Still, seeing the drone fly to places she could never hope to visit might be sad. She had also had her fill of business travel when she rose in the company ranks, and had been content staying close to home since the cancer ended her career.

Surprisingly, the infantile therapist prompted her to think of a good idea a few days later. During the guided meditation, she changed the wording slightly from “people who love and cherish you” to “people who have helped or inspired you.” Jennifer could easily think of several that fit the latter description, and couldn’t wait to share her idea with Amy.

She was almost giddy on the day of the visit, even though cancer-related nerve damage had recently caused skin to hang like a curtain over what used to be her cheek. “I thought about your drone idea,” she started excitedly.

“And?” Amy prompted.

“I think seeing places I can’t ever visit would be kind of a downer, but I had another idea,” Jennifer announced, “You mentioned it can carry small packages. Would a box of bittersweet Belgian chocolates with a card attached work?”

“I think so...what are you getting at?” Amy wondered.

Jennifer explained her plan. “I’d like to say thank you to some people who changed my life for the better, but without bringing them to this depressing place. If they got a thank you card and chocolates by drone, that would be something special...and with the video camera I would even get to see their reactions. Now *that* would be fun!”

Amy liked the idea. She spent a few minutes going over logistics with her mother. They agreed on the size of the chocolate box that would work best, and the cards would simply say “You changed my life. Thank you! Jennifer.” To contain costs, they would limit the drone to four excursions, so Jennifer picked her top four inspiring subjects. Coincidentally, each lived in a different direction from the hospice and none were too remote for the drone to reach. Each would have to be notified that a special delivery was coming to ensure they remained at home, and then the drone would start filming upon approaching the property and stop after successful delivery. Amy agreed to begin by contacting a woman who lived just east of the hospice.

The following week she returned, noticing that the tumor’s growth had now closed her mother’s left eye. “How do you know the woman we’re watching today?” she asked her mother.

“She’s my former supervisor and mentor at work. My colleagues were giving me a hard time, and I still remember Sarah’s words, ‘Respect yourself. Don’t let them treat you that way.’ She made me feel I deserved better, and I learned to insist on it” Jennifer reported.

Amy was impressed. "Quite a role model! She must be getting on though...let's see how she's doing."

As the drone flew towards the vibrant colors of sunrise, the ground below was barely visible. It was almost on top of her bungalow before Jennifer's supervisor came into view. She sported a shock of white hair, and looked quite fit despite losing a couple of inches to a hunched back. She stood in a garden of lovingly tended flower beds, an older English gentleman leaning on a cane beside her.

"The nerve of some people. Making me wait around for some special delivery," Sarah croaked, "As if I have nothing else to do!"

"Now, now dear. It should be here any minute," her husband reassured.

"What's that? A coffee can with propellers?" she asked with irritation, pointing at the drone.

"It's a delivery drone! And look, a box of chocolates attached." He showed her the gift and card.

"They can't thank me in person? Need some newfangled machine to do it?" she complained. Putting on her reading glasses, she started to peruse the card. "Oh, it's Jennifer," Sarah softened, starting to calm down. "Well, it is a sweet gesture after all these years. Bet she sent the gizmo 'cause she's jet-setting around the world somewhere. I always knew she'd succeed!" She smiled with pride. She shrank from view, eventually reduced to a dot of white hair as the drone began its trip back.

"Oops! A bit more annoyed than you'd hoped for I guess," was Amy's comment.

"Never mind," mused Jennifer contentedly, "She gave me the benefit of the doubt in the end, and that's what counts. I've tried to do the same with people."

The following week, Amy had some difficulty locating the person to the south her mother wanted to reach but she persevered. Her mother looked at her anxiously with her one good eye. "So,

were you able to get to Charles? He was such a distinguished professor, but my nurse told me you had trouble finding him.”

“He wasn’t at his old address,” Amy explained, “but we tracked him down eventually.”

Jennifer relaxed, “You know if it wasn’t for Charles, I never would have finished my thesis. ‘Don’t give up. You’ve got this!’ I don’t know how many times he said that until it sank in. He had a wonderful, warm way of inspiring confidence. Was he at another university?”

“No,” Amy confessed, “Actually...we found him at a drug rehabilitation centre. You’ll see.”

The drone approached a drab concrete building with small windows. It hovered in front of a window that was partially open to let in the fresh air, but not open enough to allow for escape. The room behind it was sparsely furnished and looked more like a jail cell than living quarters. A stack of books in the corner attested to the occupant’s academic past. As he rose from his chair, a gaunt, unshaven man in rumpled pants came into view. It was hard for Jennifer to recognize her old professor.

“Hey Charlie. There’s a package for you!” an orderly said cheerfully, “That thing outside your window dropped it off.”

Charles put the chocolates on his bedside table, and read the card aloud. “Wow! You changed my life?” He was incredulous. Tears came to his eyes, “And I thought it all amounted to nothing.” He stood a little straighter as the drone left his window behind.

Amy sighed. “Must be disappointing to see how he’s deteriorated.”

Jennifer shook her head, “I’m just glad I was able to give him back a little bit of what he gave me.”

The following week Jennifer's speech started to slur as the cancer twisted her tongue, but Amy still understood her without difficulty. "So today it's Colleen, right?" she asked.

"Yes," Jennifer explained, "My old college roommate. She knew me so well. I was panicking about an exam and she reassured me 'It's just stress. You'll handle it and be back to your usual self.' She made it sound like my anxiety was just a temporary glitch and that I was normally a calm and competent person. I believed her, and came through the exam with flying colours."

Smoke clouded the camera lens from a briskly burning barbecue of ribs and corn. A plump woman in shorts and a sun hat appeared on the screen, accompanied by an enormous black Lab who came bounding towards the drone. He barked fiercely, but stopped at Colleen's command.

"Look, Rex. Interesting contraption...and with a gift attached!" she remarked, pleasantly surprised. She started to read, "Jennifer...Jennifer who? Doesn't ring any bells. Wonder how she knows me." She was puzzled, but concluded, "Oh well, not gonna turn down good chocolate!"

Rex eyed the box, clearly hoping she would share. The pair faded from view as the sun set behind them.

Amy reacted, "How sad. She didn't even remember you."

Jennifer was not upset, "That's OK. Makes me think there are probably people out there whose lives I changed without remembering. Probably true for you too, maybe for everyone...you never know what you contribute." She grinned philosophically.

By the following visit Jennifer was quite weak and spoke slowly and deliberately so she could be understood. Despite her enjoyment of the past few weeks, she was clearly succumbing to the disease.

Amy looked shaky as she entered the room. "I had to retrieve the footage from a trash can outside his house."

“Jack’s house?” Jennifer wondered, “What happened? Jack helped me through the toughest time...”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s a different person now,” her daughter interrupted, “How do you know this guy?”

“Remember when I accidentally hit that teenage girl who was jaywalking, and I stopped but couldn’t save her? The guilt nearly killed me. I kept hearing her screams in my nightmares. Jack brought me back. He told me, ‘You did what any reasonable person would do. Some things just happen.’ Those words were my anchor.”

“I don’t know if you want to see this one,” Amy cautioned, but her mother nodded that she did.

The drone flew north towards a dilapidated shack that was surrounded by cars in various states of disrepair. From a distance, they looked like ants swarming around a sandwich. The owner was a muscular, square-jawed man who was chewing tobacco. He had a number of tattoos on his arms that continued under his sweat-stained t-shirt.

“What have we here?” He inspected the drone and grabbed the gift. Spitting out the tobacco, he stuffed a handful of chocolates into his mouth. He discarded the card without looking at it.

“I bet you’ll fetch a pretty penny,” he sneered, looking at the drone after wolfing down the rest of the chocolates. The videotape cut out abruptly.

“What happened to your drone?” Jennifer worried.

“It’s gone,” Amy replied, but she wanted to reassure her mother. “There are a couple of other prototypes so it’s not unique, and I reported the theft right away so they won’t fire me. Just got a reprimand and they docked me some pay.” She reflected, “Still, it’s hard to believe your friend would be so selfish.”

“I know,” Jennifer said thoughtfully, “but he had his selfish moments in the past too...and some very gentle ones. Maybe caring words aren’t always part of the person...more like God talking through that person for a little while. Doesn’t make the words mean any less.” She paused. “I’d like to think that’s the God I’m joining soon.”

She looked tenderly at Amy one more time, then breathed her final breath.

Photo Albums

“Why do you still print out all your pictures and put them in albums? That’s so old-fashioned!” Sunny exclaimed. As a technologically savvy millennial, she sometimes found the older generation’s practices amusing. She exuded confidence, and was one of the few girls in her class whose corrective glasses made her look smart rather than nerdy.

“I know I’ll look over them more if I have an album to hold onto,” her bespectacled grandmother Sophie explained, “and I always worry about losing them in a computer crash if I don’t.” Sophie didn’t care how her glasses looked as long as they let her read and keep her car on the road at night.

“You’d still lose them if your house burned down,” the younger woman challenged.

“Yes, but I’ve experienced more computer crashes than house fires in my lifetime...and these pictures do span a lifetime,” the older one concluded sentimentally.

“Can I take a look at your albums?” Sunny wondered, curious now about their contents.

“Make you a deal,” Sophie offered, “I’ll let you look through one album after you tell me what you learned in class today.”

Sunny agreed. She didn’t mind explaining her course work to her grandmother, as it was a good way to consolidate it in her own mind, and Sophie was an interested listener. She was also grateful to her grandmother for the chance to stay with her overnight every Thursday. It saved her a long train ride back to the suburbs after her evening class. Her parents had come up with the idea, hoping to keep her safe from whatever dangers might lurk on public transit at night, but Sophie had readily agreed. She lived alone and enjoyed Sunny’s company.

The pair settled in front of the fireplace in Sophie's living room. Shelves overflowing with non-fiction books spoke to her academic past, and her curio cabinet featured exotic mementos from a host of trips abroad. The prominent mantelpiece, however, was reserved for portraits of her children and grandchildren.

Sunny was majoring in psychology, and her evening course was an introduction to psychotherapy. The current unit focused on cognitive approaches. "We learned about helping clients with assertive rather than aggressive approaches to conflict," she began. "Being calm but persistent, focusing on the problem rather than the person, using 'I feel' statements so the other person is less defensive, walking away if the discussion becomes too heated, and channeling anger into activities that promote fairness and justice were some of the strategies." She then proceeded to describe each in more detail.

Sophie listened attentively, and asked Sunny for some examples to make the material come to life. Sunny appreciated the chance to apply her knowledge, but it was getting late so she reminded Sophie about their deal.

"Here...pick one at random," Sophie nodded, spreading out the albums before her.

Sunny chose one with a flowery cover. "That's from the early years of my marriage to your grandfather," Sophie volunteered.

Sunny leafed through the pages of wedding photos, pet dogs, and eventually babies. She stopped at a particularly happy scene of her grandparents and a well-dressed man, all smiling broadly in front of a modest bungalow. "Who's this?" she wondered, not recognizing the man.

"That's Ed Hood, our mortgage broker," Sophie replied, "He helped us get our first house. Ed knew all those assertiveness tricks you talked about and then some. He used to be a reporter who

exposed corruption at city hall. He was obsessed with standing up for the little guy. They even nicknamed him Robin Hood!”

“What made him change careers?” Sunny wondered.

Sophie sighed, “He got so focused on getting justice for others that he lost track of his personal life. One morning, he found a note from his wife telling him that she’d run off with a municipal politician...one of those politicians he’d been writing about in his anti-corruption campaign. Ed never quite recovered from that betrayal, but he once told me it was a good eye-opener. He was much happier helping people finance their homes than fighting city hall.”

“What happened to all his anger about corruption though?” Sunny wondered.

“Don’t know,” Sophie admitted, “I guess it wasn’t so important once he found something more satisfying to do.” She yawned, “Let’s get some sleep.”

The following week, Sunny arrived a few minutes later than usual at her grandmother’s house. “I stayed to ask my prof a few questions after class,” she explained.

“No problem. I hope you got some clear answers,” Sophie replied, “May I ask what the topic was? Come take your coat off and tell me about it.”

“Using realistic thinking to reduce anxiety,” Sunny replied. She continued, “When people are anxious, they get focused on the future, overestimating the risks of scary things happening and underestimating their own abilities. To help, you find evidence of how low the risks are of the things they worry about and show them things that are more likely to happen. You also look for evidence that they can prevent or handle the situation they fear, since they’ve often dealt with similar problems in the past.”

“Sounds complicated. I imagine just thinking less about the future might help too!” Sophie chuckled.

“That’s just what I was discussing with my prof,” Sunny chimed in, “and he said that meditation which keeps people focused on the present is helpful in many cases.”

Her grandmother nodded, “I think you’ve earned another album.” Once again, Sunny picked a photo album at random. This one had a falcon emblazoned on the cover.

“That was our high school sports mascot,” her grandmother volunteered, “we were the Fenway Falcons.” Sunny marvelled at the yellowing snapshots of Sophie as a teenager, playing the trumpet, goofing around with her friends, and holding a championship trophy for volleyball.

“Who’s this?” Sunny wondered, noticing a short, blonde girl who appeared in multiple photographs with Sophie.

“That’s Clara,” her grandmother smiled, “She was like a little sister to me. We were the same age, but she was so shy and nervous I always ended up introducing her. We were together in the band, in volleyball, in most of our classes...almost everywhere. We even went to the same college. She was smart too...landed a nice executive job. Only problem was, she needed to travel for work and had a terrible fear of flying. She tackled it though, and from what she said it must have been with someone a lot like your prof. Same ideas about evidence and risks and such. I was so proud when she finally overcame her fear!”

“Do you still stay in touch?” Sunny wondered, “I’d love to meet her.”

“Unfortunately, that won’t be possible,” her grandmother said sadly, “She died in a car crash on the way to the airport.” She paused for a moment. “Often, it’s the things you don’t worry about that get you. That’s why I don’t bother worrying, and I’m thankful every time I survive another day.”

“I’m so sorry you lost your friend,” Sunny sympathized. “But...can I ask...,” she stammered, “where does that leave realistic thinking?”

“Reality is pretty random,” her grandmother replied, “but good people hang onto what matters despite the randomness. You look chilly. Have some cocoa.” Sunny sipped the warm sweetness, but didn’t sleep much that night.

The following week, Sunny burst into the living room, agitated, “The mid-term exam is coming up. I really need to study for it!”

“Exams are never fatal,” her grandmother replied mischievously, “Oops! I’m afraid I just did some of that realistic thinking we talked about last week.”

Sunny appreciated her attempt to lighten the mood, “Maybe we should do the usual routine. I’m sure I’ll be calmer afterwards.”

“I’ll start the cocoa,” Sophie agreed, “Tell me about your class.”

Sunny reported, “We talked about helping people with low mood. They assume the worst of themselves, other people, and life in general. Again, most of the strategies had to do with realistic thinking, but also with the old idea that you need to see the glass half full rather than half empty.” She went on to describe some examples her professor had used to illustrate these points.

“With that thorough explanation, I’m sure you’ll do fine on your exam,” her grandmother encouraged. She served the cocoa and had Sunny choose an album.

The geometric patterns on the album of the day gave it a modern look. Sure enough, it was one of Sophie’s more recent collections of photos. Natural wonders from different parts of the world were captured during Sophie’s many hiking trips. Conferences where she was asked to speak had provided further opportunities to travel, and further pictures.

Sunny stopped at a picture of her grandmother with her youngest son who was developmentally delayed and had lived at home until recently. They were splashing in the waves and seemed genuinely happy. “Uncle Jack?” she guessed. Sophie nodded. “Where was this taken?” Sunny wondered, not recognizing the scenery.

“It’s a little beach under the bridge where the creek meets the lake,” Sophie explained, “most people crossing the bridge don’t even realize it’s there, but we found a path down to it and Jack just loved it. Beautiful, sunny day and it was our first chance to get fresh air after quarantine, so we enjoyed it even more. All the struggles we had that year...his disability diagnosis, getting laid off from his job, me losing most of my retirement savings in the market, the trips I had to cancel, your aunt’s poor health...they all vanished in that moment. It certainly wasn’t a half-full year, far from it! But the smile on his face that morning seemed to make up for all of it.”

“Just curious,” Sunny asked, “What would you say to someone in that situation whose mood was low?”

Her grandmother thought for a moment, “I would tell them to hang onto the great moments, no matter how rare they are. Savour them, commit them to memory, and revisit them when needed...use a photo album to collect them if it helps. Treat the other experiences like post-its: read their message or learn their lesson, then throw them in the recycling bin. Don’t add them up or collect them. They’re not worth it.” She paused. “Oh, and one more thing: remember that you are a collectible too, just like those great moments. There is something special only you can contribute to this world. Never treat yourself like a post-it.”

“That’s wise,” Sunny commented, “but now what I’m studying for the exam seems kind of meaningless.”

“Exams are not about meaning, my dear,” the old academic sighed, “they’re about figuring out what your prof wants to hear. Memorize that. You’ll have lots of time to figure out what’s meaningful later.”

Sunny took her advice and passed the exam with flying colours.