

The 99th Monkey

(Tales of Westgate #3)

by J.D. MacLeod

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One

I officially took possession of The Addams Family House on January 1st, 1992, and I figure that's when everything changed. I want to remember every detail about those days, and the only way I will do that is if I write them down – I know me. [Or so I tell myself.]

Admittedly, it wasn't actually The Addams Family House. For one thing, it wasn't located at 0001 Cemetery Lane – it was at 88 Newman Street in the town of Westgate, Ontario. But when I first laid eyes on it, pulling my car up in front of it a couple of weeks before that official possession date, the first thing I thought of was The Addams Family House. I couldn't help it – the place was huge, old, dark and looming, with a profusion of towers and bay windows and things that cried out Ancestral Manse to someone with my limited education in the niceties of architecture.

I turned the car off and looked past Tony in the shotgun seat, thinking how peaceful the place looked with thick snow bright on the black roof, under the white sky. In fact, the whole neighbourhood seemed unnaturally quiet to me after a lifetime spent in Toronto. There was a black iron fence around the property, stark against the snow covering the yard – Tony and I were gonna have to trudge through it because the walkway wasn't shovelled. (Who was there to take care of that, after all?)

We got out, stretched our legs, looked around as our breaths billowed out white and blew away. A quiet, older, residential neighbourhood. It seemed to me that none of the other houses looked quite as imposing as Number 88, and I had a flash of feeling like I was moving up in the world, or more like about to become a big fish in a small pond.

Tony, ever the gent, held the gate open for me and I swushed through the snow toward the door. It was nice of him to come with me. I wasn't just grateful for the company on an hour-plus drive, but also for the navigating assist. Westgate wasn't all that far from home, and yet I had never been in this town before. Never had any reason to – there was nothing here. And now I had an opportunity to be part of it.

To be honest, I was almost surprised he had agreed to come, because we weren't like soulmates. However, I figured – rightly – that he was always up for an excuse to get out of the office for a while. And I'd put money on him recording it on his calendar as a business meeting, while I booked the

afternoon off as personal time like the dutiful employee I was. We were different in so many ways that I sometimes wondered if we were friends only inasmuch as circumstance had put us under the same roof eight hours a day. Does the whole concept of friends change once you finish school?

We reached the door and I found the key hidden right where the executor's lawyer told my lawyer it would be. I opened up and was greeted by what felt like a huge room, not gloomy but certainly dim. As we stomped the snow off our shoes on a mat just inside, Tony reached over and felt for a light switch, found it, and there was a dull click.

A big, intricate chandelier in the middle of the room awoke, and revealed a parlor with a few choice pieces of dark antique furniture, ornate wallpaper, and even a colossal fireplace. I realized that the hydro had not been turned off while the house was unoccupied. Wouldn't that normally happen? Who was paying for it?

Tony's low whistle of admiration diverted that train of thought. "Wow... and you inherited this furniture and everything along with the house?"

I saw the walls crowded with bookshelves, and the bookshelves themselves crowded with sprawls of loose papers. "Uhhh, yeah, yeah I did, apparently."

He ran a hand over a fat wing chair. "This is beautiful stuff. Bet it's worth a lot."

Suddenly I caught sight of something along the bottom of the walls that refused to fit in with the last-century atmosphere of the place. Long, white, electric heating radiators. I winced.

"Aw no!" I walked to the nearest rad and knelt by the control knob. "This place has electric heat!" That had to be why the hydro was still on – the house needed to be kept warm enough so that the pipes wouldn't freeze and burst. But only then did I notice that the room was comfortably warm, far more than it needed to be in order to protect the plumbing. A glance at the knob told me that the rad was turned up pretty high. "Do you have any idea how much the hydro must cost to heat a place this big?"

"Well, remember, you won't be paying rent like you are now. Or a mortgage. That's gotta balance it out, right?"

"I wish I could be so sure of that, Tony." I turned the rad down to what seemed like a bare-minimum level. If I did decide to keep this house rather than sell, I

foresaw winters of wearing multiple sweaters, even in the shower.

We continued the walkthrough, both of us looking for repairs that might need doing before possession, me turning down every rad I came to. Kitchen, dining room, study, and den on the main floor besides the parlor; three bedrooms and bathroom upstairs; laundry area and a couple of locked doors in the basement. I had to admit, everything looked in good shape, no complaints.

We went back up the basement stairs. Tony said, "This is all in such great shape. Man, I still can't believe he left you all this." The "he" in question was my late great-uncle Magnus McPhail, a relative I had never met, never heard my dad mention.... who had lived an hour away from me all my life without me ever knowing. Family was a strange and tenuous thing with the McPhails.

"I can't believe it either. My guess is he was a bit deranged. Mind you, the McPhails have never been noted bastions of rationality. Myself excepted, of course."

Tony took another look at the mess of papers filling the shelves in the front parlor on our way to the door, muttering something behind me about my great-uncle not having time to get his files in order. Then suddenly he said, "Hey, Mike, look."

I turned to see him remove a paperback book from a shelf and hold it up before me. He said, "Chalk up one more fan."

Even from that distance, I knew what every word on the cover of that book said. It was a cover I had gazed upon often enough that I should be ashamed. In the middle of a dark blue background was a yellow drawing of a cartoon atom with a smiley face for a nucleus. At the top, in white lettering, the title: ***It's Like This***. Just below that, the subtitle: *Science Made Painless*. And below the atom, the author's name: **Michael McPhail**.

I was a columnist at *The Daily Quotidian*, besides working in their Accounts department, and *It's Like This* was the name of my popular science column. The paper had managed to get it syndicated a few years back – a rare stroke of luck for a guy in his twenties, even rarer for a Canadian. And even though not that many other papers had picked it up so far, the syndicate seemed to like it, enough that last year they arranged to have a collection published. Which was the book Tony brandished now.

So my great-uncle knew more of me than I ever had of him. And was

apparently impressed enough to even want to buy a copy of his distant nephew's work. I admit, I found it a bit touching.

"I guess that explains how I made it onto his radar," I said as I fished in my pocket for the key. We locked up, I re-hid the key; then, as we trudged back to the car, Tony noticed a variety store further down the street and said he wanted to stop for cigarettes. It wasn't far, so we walked.

"Mike, you *gotta* keep this place! It's once-in-a-lifetime!"

I looked up at him, his thick, immaculately informal hair and Crooked Charming Grin®, and felt for a second like he was a real estate agent trying to get me to buy a property I already owned. I sighed and said, "I still dunno if I wanna *move*, Tony. I mean, it'd be commuting over an hour to work every day..."

"C'mon, you live out on the edge of town, your drive in *already* takes you nearly that long. And hey... your cost of living here would only be the property taxes, which have gotta be a lot lower than back home--"

"*Plus* the monster utility bills from that electric heat!"

"Even so!"

"I could also just sell this and buy a house in the city--"

"Not like *this* beauty! The money you got from selling this wouldn't buy you half as big or half as nice back home, and the taxes would bite you way harder. Look, you could afford to quit Accounts, just write the column, and pick up freelance writing gigs on the side! Didn't you always tell me your dream was to write full-time? Well, here it *is*, my man! This is your chance! In a goddamn *palace*, no less! *Take* it!"

"I dunno, I... I just never imagined myself living in *Westgate*, y'know?"

"So? Imagine it *now*."

"I *am*. I see myself cornered by guys in berets and earrings, waving crystals over my chakras and reciting bad poetry."

"Oh, so you're put off by Westgate's old-hippie reputation."

"I'm put off by living with *flakes*! I mean, the town's biggest business is the

Institute for Paranormal Studies, fer goshsakes! It's all macramé festivals and holistic dance conventions and, and..." I shuddered a bit and made a sound rather like *yish!*

"Bull," said Tony. "This is a nice neighbourhood."

By this time we reached Sano's Variety, one of those classic little corner stores in a converted brown brick house, where you knew that the store was run by a family that lived in a tiny apartment in the upstairs. Places like that were pleasant childhood memories for me, and I realized that, back home, such institutions were a dying breed, becoming harder and harder to find. The idea of living this close to one actually struck me as a point in favour of this town.

Whatever my reply to Tony was, was driven from my mind as we opened the door and I was greeted by the sight of The Most Beautiful Woman That Ever Existed.

She stood at the till, paying for I couldn't see what, and I stopped in my tracks. I suspect my jaw hung open, hopefully not too much. A vague recollection of Tony gently nudging past me so that the door could shut behind us, and me trying to assimilate what I saw. White-blond hair, straight, shoulder-length, shiny-clean. A thick white fur coat, proudly and flamboyantly fake. A profile, clear and strong and delicate, which would make any artist weep in frustration if they tried to capture it.

I know, we all know, that when we see displays of literal flawless perfection in places like the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, that such imagery is only possible with the use of an airbrush in the hands of a master. No one can really look like that – except that, in that moment, I knew that it was possible after all.

She turned and went past me out the door. I saw sapphire-blue eyes, pale relaxed lips that looked like they knew secrets, and she was gone. Out of the corner of my eye I caught the flutter of a small strip of white paper, which I got the impression she had dropped. A lady behind the counter asked us with deadpan courtesy if she could help us. Tony began to order his usual DuMauriers while I stooped to pick up that paper and then trotted outside, trying to catch the woman in white.

"Hey, miss!" I said as I jogged. "Uh, miss? Excuse me?"

She stopped, turned, and looked me directly in the eye, merely curious.

I handed her the slip. "Hi. You, uhh, dropped this in the store, I, uhh..."

She looked at it, smiled, looked at me again, and the smile grew. A genuine one, that showed in her eyes. Do I need to tell you her teeth were perfect? I will. Her teeth were perfect.

"Just a receipt," she said, "I'm not even sure for what. I don't really need --"

"Oh! Oh well then, sorry, I could just --"

"But thank you, anyway." Her eyes shone, and for a second I felt like she found me amusing. "For making the effort, I mean."

"Oh, sure, you're welcome."

She turned away again, singing "Bye-ee" as she resumed her walk up the street. I watched her go, positive that things were undulating with classy subtlety under that fur.

Finally I headed back into Sano's, pushing past Tony on his way out the door, and went to the counter. The lady there was short, with white streaks in her black hair, could've been anywhere from forty to sixty. Japanese descent, I was guessing from the name Sano. She looked like she had seen it all and was trying to decide if there was any of it that she wasn't tired of seeing yet.

"Pardon me, ma'am, who was that?"

A second's pause, then, "Sorry, I didn't notice. We get so many tall blonde goddesses in here."

"No, I, uh, I'm just... I just moved into the neighbourhood and trying to get to know my neighbours, is all."

"Ah. Well, Miss Anderson doesn't live around here, but she works not far up the street."

"Miss Anderson, you said?" Already I was looking to cling to that ray of hope.

"Mm... I don't *think* she's married. She always seems so *happy*." She put a hand on the counter and leaned. "And no, I *don't* know her birthday, but she has a pet armadillo and won the Intercontinental Belt last year. Anything else?"

Suitably chastened, I said, "No, thank you, uhh... Mrs. Sano, is it?"

She almost smiled. "Right the first time. Please come again, gentlemen. Welcome to the neighbourhood." Dead graciousness.

Tony was lighting up before we reached the sidewalk. I wasn't sure if he had even noticed that woman. "Did you see her?"

We walked back to the car. "The blonde? Yes, I saw her. Very pretty."

"*Very pretty*'?? She was a *goddess*! She – I – I'm flabbergasted! Look, do you see me flabbergasting here?"

He glanced down at me. "Yep. And I have seen you flabbergast before, Mike McPhail. I would call this a Category Five flabbergast."

The tip of his cigarette glowed brighter, and we walked on, me lost in thought, Tony likely lost in Tony... til we reached the car and I said, "Maybe. Maybe you're right. This *is* a really nice house."

We got in the car and he gave me a curious look as I started it up and went on. "And it's close to one of those old-fashioned corner stores, and then there's that cute restaurant we passed --"

"You never called it 'cute'."

We drove off and braced for the long trip back home. "And I *could* quit and write freelance full-time, you're right. Maybe I should."

"What about the berets and bad poems, and the hydro bills --"

"Bull. It's, it's a nice neighbourhood."

Two

In the week between Christmas and New Year's, I met with my lawyer to sign final paperwork and receive my final instructions. I liked Mr. Song; he was friendly and informal and had been willing to hold my hand all the way through my divorce, and I knew they weren't all like that. One thing he stressed during that meeting, something that seemed to puzzle him, was that one of the stipulations of Uncle Magnus's will was essentially "Don't contact Hydro – leave the hydro alone." His executor had received those instructions, and had been directed to instruct me in turn. It made me feel like something was up, besides the knobs on all the rads when I first saw the house.

A more pleasant meeting during that week was having my daughter Bonnie visit for my few days of the break. It was her last time staying with me in my old apartment, she was keenly aware of that fact, and she let me know that she wasn't entirely pleased about it. In her eight years plus, she had only ever known her mom's (formerly our) apartment, and then my little one out in the fringes for visitations. She had never stayed outside of Toronto in her life and the idea unsettled her.

I tried to reasssure her, stressing that all her toys and games and books would still be waiting for her. And now she would have her own room when she visited, instead of being forced to borrow my bed while I slept on the couch. And yes, it was a really big room, bigger than her room at home even. And yes, it had a big window. And yes, you could see big trees from that window. Eventually, she was willing to at least entertain the idea.

On January 2nd, I moved. No need to dwell on the ordeal – suffice to say that the process was longer, more exhausting, and more expensive than I was prepared for, but at least nothing was damaged in transit, as far as I was able to tell. By the time the door shut and I heard the distant rumble of their truck heading back to town, it was after six and thoroughly dark out.

For a moment I just stood, looked around me, and took in the strange silence. Then I made my way upstairs, deciding that my first order of business was to make the bed. The way I felt, I just wanted to go find food that I didn't need to prepare myself, come back here, and collapse for the night.

The room that I figured was the master bedroom sported an immense four-

poster bed, complete with canopy and curtains. I found the box containing the set of queen sheets I had bought specifically for this – yes, I measured the mattress when I was here before, I am that good – and wrestled with them until they were in place good enough to work, slung the duvet over those, and then went downstairs and out.

The closest place I could think of to eat – the *only* place I could think of to eat – was the "cute" little restaurant up the street. So that's where I walked, hoping they would still be open this late. I confess, I was also hoping that possibly Miss Anderson might stop in there after closing up her office which was somewhere nearby.

I reached the restaurant and found that they stayed open until ten every night [closed Sundays], so I was in luck. A sign over the door said *The WIEN*. The signage, the storefront, the decor inside, all looked like they had been well maintained but not updated since the Thirties. Frosted glass sconces on the walls, even – I couldn't remember the last time I had seen those! This place fit comfortably with the out-of-time feeling of my new/old house, and I was beginning to suspect that the last fifty years had never visited the town of Westgate.

Everyone – seated patrons, standing staff – turned to look my way when I came in. They looked long enough to satisfy themselves that they didn't know me, then long enough to be curious, and then short enough to be polite. No sign of the glowing blonde among them, though.

The place was about half-full, so it was easy enough to find a table. It felt like a seat-yourself kind of place: casual, friendly, not pricey. Suited me fine. I chose a spot in the front half, facing the door and windows so I could watch the lights outside.

After I spent a few seconds glancing at the pressed tin of the ceiling, I heard a "Hi" and was presented with a big dark leather gatefold menu. I turned my head. A short, round, black-maned young lady was setting a glass of water in front of me. "Can I get you anything to start?"

I looked at the banana clip straining on her head and realized her mane was uncommonly thick and impressive. "Uhh, I'll have a coffee. Uh, please."

Her smile squeezed her brown eyes into an elfin look. "Meanwhile, I'll try and figure out why you're here."

"Sorry?"

"Well, you're not one of our regulars, you're too late to be shopping, and too early to be a trendie, so I dunno."

She made the corners of my mouth lift a little. "I, uh, just moved into town today. Down at Number 88."

This seemed to delight her. "Oh! Great! Well, welcome to Westgate!"

"Thank you." She turned away and I opened the menu.

Suddenly I heard a bright new voice coming from near the ceiling. "Hi! Can I get you a coffee or something?"

I turned, and had to look up to see the young flagpole who stood at my side. He had short, neat, black hair, olive skin set off by his white shirt, and a bright smile that blazed such enthusiastic, aggressive friendliness that I could feel it on one cheek like a fireplace.

"Oh. Uh, that, uh, lady there already got me, thanks."

He looked over at the girl with the banana clip and made a sage nod. "Ah, Zoe. Yeah, she's really good." Then he looked down at me again and irradiated me with his teeth. "So! You're new here, eh?"

"Yep. 'Just moved into town today. Down at Number 88.'" It occurred to me I might be saying that a lot over the next while.

"Ah! A new local! Hope we see you here a lot." He extended a long, thin hand at the end of a long, very thin arm. "Name's Peter."

I paused for a heartbeat, then shook his hand. I guess people did that here? "Mike," I said, and gave what I hoped was a friendly but proper little nod. Suddenly I had an idea, given how amiable and chatty Peter seemed to be. "Say, Peter, umm... any chance you know a Miss Anderson around here? Real pretty blonde --"

"Oh, you mean Angel! Yeah, we all know her."

Angel?!

He went on. "She works just around the corner. Comes in for lunch sometimes. *Very nice lady.*"

"Her name is *Angel?!?*"

"Yeah." He absently rotated a shoulder. "I went to see her once, when I pulled my shoulder. She fixed it better'n new – she's really good."

"What, she's a doctor?"

"Massage therapist."

"Oh yeah?"

Peter's next remark was interrupted by Zoe excusing herself and setting my coffee down beside my water. He apologized and left, while she set down little dishes of creamers and sugar packets (none of which I used). "Decided what you want?"

"Actually, I haven't, um, really had a chance to look at the menu yet."

She pretended to scowl in Peter's direction, but couldn't disguise the kindness in every other part of her face. "Tsk! Was Peter bothering you? Well, you just say the word and I'll drag him back here so you can thrash him."

"Uh, no, thank you, really." I speed-read the menu, hoping for something to jump out at me. "Oh. The fish'n'chip special looks good, I'll, I'll go with that, okay?"

"Okay, great." She tucked my menu under her arm and went off.

I sipped the coffee and found it surprisingly delicious – as good as anything I could get back home. I knew that this alone was going to bring me back to The Wien on a regular basis, and I gave silent thanks to the Powers That Be.

Suddenly a boisterous voice behind me said, "I knew it! I *knew* it!"

I turned to face the first real Character I had met here so far. A gangly, sleepy-eyed guy of university age, I would guess, long stringy dark blonde hair, a red and black check lumberjack shirt, jeans torn off at the knee – yes, in January – thick socks and short boots. I noticed he also had a long, mustache-less, Dizzy Gillespie style goatee. And earrings. And suddenly I felt like the bad poetry had already found me, on my first day.

He had his arm outstretched and hand offered to me with firm confidence.

(Yes, it really did seem like handshaking was A Thing here.) "You're Michael McPhail, right?"

I felt my eyes get a bit bigger. "Uhh, yes?"

He gave a firm nod, hand still out. "*Knew it! The Michael McPhail! Author of **It's Like This!** The new Suzuki! The new Asimov! I recognized you from the back of your book!*"

Finally I dared to shake his hand, just so he could put it down. "You read my book?"

He pulled up one of the other chairs at my table, without any sense of what an invitation was. "Devoured it! Only reason I read *The Daily Quotidian* is for your column. Then when Peter told me you moved in down the street, I deduced. 'Must be Mr. McPhail's place,' I said. It all fits."

"Oh, did... did you know my great-uncle Magnus?"

"We exchanged a few pleasantries, yeah. Our shared passion for science, y'know." He glanced down at the table and for a second seemed to lose a watt or two of his upbeat. "An unusual dude, Mr. McPhail was. His passing is lamentable, no question."

Curiosity got the better of me. ".... sorry, you are --?"

He extended his hand again. "Frank." I retired the hand more quickly this time, acquiescing to the inevitable. "Friend 'n' neighbour. Denizen. All-round happenin' cat." He shifted in his chair. "One might assume you have yet to unpack, true?"

"True, yes..."

He stood to take his leave, with an enviable fluid grace. "Well, me 'n' the guys have to trundle right now, but tomorrow I'd be honoured to help you settle in, Mr. McPhail."

"Uhh, no, I'll be okay thanks --"

"Hey, it'd be a profound thrill, no problem."

"*Really*, that's not necess--"

He held up a didactic forefinger which silenced me. "Now now. Your stoicism is duly noted, but it displaces valuable energy." He turned and spoke behind himself as he walked to the door. "Later, Mr. McPhail. And don't worry, I know where you live."

I just stared after Frank as he was joined at the door by a few friends and they pushed out. I could overhear someone say "So it *is* him?" and Frank's "Of course, what'd I tell ya..." And I kept staring at the door after they were gone, as if that would help me make more sense of him.

Then Zoe set my food before me. "So, I saw you met Frank already." I looked up at her and just nodded. She made her squinty smile – this time I noticed dimples – and said, "Isn't he great?"

"That... may be a little soon for me to call, actually."

"Oh, I'll admit he might not be what everyone is used to... but you'd have to go a long way to find someone nicer than Frank." And with a benediction of "Enjoy!" she left me to my dining.

I walked back to the house with thoughts as well as food to digest. The meal was unpretentious but wonderfully satisfying, and I had to admit the welcome was, too. They didn't seem like the people I knew back home, but it was becoming okay that they weren't. This quiet new life might suit me just fine after all. I was at least curious to find out.

I had my misgivings about spending the night on a strange mattress, but it turned out to be better than my old bed, which I had brought but not set up yet. Of course, the house was filled with unfamiliar sounds that kept waking me. I tried to take it in stride and tune them out. Until I suddenly started wondering if Uncle Magnus had died in this bed. Irrelevant and irrational – I knew that. But it then took me about half an hour to get the house noises to stop sounding like ghosts so that I could finally drift off to sleep.

Three

A thumping in the darkness woke me. Three soft thumps.

I opened my eyes, waited. For a split-second I again wondered about ghosts. Then quiet. I closed them and tried to settle back down.

Three louder, steady thumps. Again, my eyes opened, quiet again, eyes closed. A breath.

Then what sounded like three muffled, rhythmic explosions, more whumms than thumps – and the little glass panes in my front door rattling. Apparently a SWAT team was trying to get into my front parlor.

I sat up and looked at the red LED numerals of my clock. 7:34. I had no plans to be awake before dawn but someone else had planned differently. I found my robe in the dark, belted it with half-asleep tuggings, and clumped down the stairs, slurring curses. Then fumbled the lock and peered out.

There, streetlit from behind, stood Frank. Wearing a beige coat with a fleece collar, open over an outfit much like yesterday's, and holding a plastic-wrapped package in one hand. He was listening to a Walkman cassette player, cranked so that I could hear a steady *krish-krish-krish* coming from the headphones.

Much louder than necessary, he said, "Morning, Mr. McPhail!"

I rubbed my eye. "Frank?! Wh.... what're you doing?!"

He called out "What?" I pointed at both my ears; then he called out "Oh!" and clicked the Walkman off. He pointed to the player and said, more quietly, "Sorry, Inch gave me Pearl Jam for Christmas. Almost as sublime as Nirvana." The word "Christmas", at least, was not gibberish.

"Frank, it's 7:30. Why --"

"Remember? I'm here to help you move in." He handed me the small package. "And – lest I be remiss – a housewarming present."

It was two donuts, on a little piece of cardboard, in clear wrap. Knowing how slow I sounded, I still said, "Donuts?"

"No no. *Donuts* are just donuts." He gestured at the package with splayed

fingers, as if bestowing a blessing upon it. "*These... are chocolate crullers.*"

I looked again, and yes, they were chocolate crullers. The label on the package even said as much. I pinched between my eyes and sighed. "Well, you're here now, I guess, uh... c'mon in and I'll go get dressed." As I slogged back upstairs, I heard him stomp the snow off his feet and remove his boots. In a moment he called up to me and asked if I wanted him to put on coffee; I called down yes thanks and realized that, yes, he could be worse.

When I made it to the kitchen, washed and dressed, I was greeted by a mug of black instant coffee and Frank eating the blessed chocolate crullers in all absent-minded innocence. His headphones were going *krish-krish-krish* again. He called out, "Made yours black, Mr. McPhail, dunno how you take it."

I reached for the mug with one hand and pointed to my ear with the other. A loud "oh" and a click as the Walkman was turned off. "Black is perfect," I said.

"For me as well!" He hoisted his own mug in salute. "While I was waiting for the kettle, I took the liberty of perusing your boxes of CDs. One never knows what truths might be unearthed by someone's tastes in music."

I sipped and watched him. "Find anything you like?"

"Truth be told, it looked to me like fields of jazz, where I never wander. The only name that rang a vague bell was Pat Metheny, and my guess would be that you own every note he ever committed to tape."

"Pretty near, yeah – Pat is my man." Another sip. "Sounds to me like whatever you're blasting in *there* is not jazz."

"Most astute. Perhaps in time we can show each other new paths."

I nodded. "Let's not rule that out, sure."

When we got around to unpacking, I was forced to admit that Frank's presence represented a genuine advantage. He helped open boxes, asked where things should go, put them where I said. I've had friends who couldn't do all three correctly and consistently – we made quick progress and the task felt lighter. And his company, while quirky, came to feel soothing in a strange way, as if he wrapped himself in a cloak of peace wherever he went. Nothing seemed to ruffle or nonplus him for long.

He lifted my set of pendulum balls out of one box. "Quite an impressive collection of gadgets and science toys here. Not unexpected."

I was shelving books out of a box. "Well, I do have a reputation to maintain."

As he carried an especially heavy box of books to another shelf, he added, "And you're much more the bibliophile than Mr. McPhail the Former. Also not unexpected."

I moved an untidy stack of papers off of one shelf to make more room for my books. "Yeah, he was apparently more devoted to creating an open-concept filing system --" and then one of the papers in my arms caught my eye. It was a newspaper clipping. Most of the papers in this pile were... but this one had my picture on it.

I put them down, looked through a few more... "Hey, these are my columns. He clipped them out and saved them."

Frank drifted closer to see. "As well as buying your book? An even avid-er fan than I."

I began to wonder what else I might find in this paper chaos, and told myself again that someday I would have sort through them all. Then I noticed Frank putting on his coat by the door, then his boots.

"Well, I crave your forgiveness, Mr. McPhail, but I gotta trundle. Got a rehearsal at eleven."

"Rehearsal?"

"Yup. I got a band."

"Oh yeah? What, metal or something?"

"Ohh, some call it 'alternative', some call it 'grunge', best two out of three falls wins, y'know?"

I stepped closer to see him out. "Well, uh, thank you, Frank, you were a really big help. I appreciate it."

Again he held his hand out. "Hey. I'm enlightened 'n' edified by the experience." Again I shook it. "And you're intensely welcome to check out our rehearsal if you wanna. Granted, we're not Pat Metheny, but still."

"Not today, I, I still got a lot to do."

He set the headphones snug over his hair again. "Doubtless. *À bientôt!*" And he turned and strolled down my walkway.

"Uh, Frank? Not so early if you drop by again, please?"

"We'll see." Then I heard a click and *krish-krish-krish*.

I went back and sat on the floor near the pile of column clippings, planning to sort them into a pile separate from other sorts of papers. Then I noticed that some of the columns had handwritten notes scrawled on them, between lines, in the margins... supportive little exclamations like "Yes!", "Nicely put!", "You tell 'em!" And for a moment I felt like he was coaching me from beyond, and I wished I had known him.

I wondered about him, what he was like. The name was probably what prompted me to imagine him as a ringer for Magnus Pyke, and I idly thought about how such a character would get along, or not, with the folks around here...

A longer commentary focused me back in the present: "Sorry, the Law of Conservation of Energy is an axiom. And any axiom is, ultimately, just an opinion."

I sat and blinked. I couldn't imagine how anyone with even a little education in physics could say such a thing, what he could possibly have meant by that. It kept me brooding for a long while, as I continued to try and put his papers in something approaching order.

Four

A few days later I decided to cede Angel Anderson the advantage of meeting on her home turf – I called to book an appointment with her for a massage. I had very little idea what to expect, but as long as she would be there, I was up for it.

I sat by the wall phone in the kitchen and riffled through Westgate's thin Yellow Pages section. "Martial Arts"... "Masonry"... "Massage Therapists – see Registered Massage Therapists" – okay – "Registered Massage Therapists". And the first one listed was A. Andersen. I made note of the spelling and dialed.

The person who answered giggled before saying, "Hello, uh, Westgate Health Network."

"Hi, um, c-could I book an appointment with Miss, Ms. Andersen, please."

"Are you a new client?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Okay-ee..... she has an opening tomorrow at two, but I'm supposed to ask you to come in fifteen minutes early to fill in the registration forms. Does that work for you?" It did. We discussed fees, she took my name, and gave me their address. That sounded like it would be just across the street and, yes, around the corner from The Wien, therefore not far. We hung up and I congratulated myself for taking a step outside my comfort zone.

The next day was bright and brisk, which in January means "pretty cold". A bit after 1:30, I was reading the street numbers on small business doors, counting my way up to my target of 7.

Which I found on the door of a wide old shop with a big window filled with a profusion of arcane and bizarre inexplicabilia, and a sign above that said:

The 99th Monkey
New Age Centre
Books – Health Food -- Professional

I stood, stared, felt my lungs droop. Here it was, my Westgate nightmare,

larger than my life, and they were expecting me to go in. This had to be a mistake. If there was any justice or natural law, this was a mistake.

I approached the door, the windows of which were crowded with small signs, as if many small businesses were jockeying for position. I saw that one of those signs did indeed read "Westgate Health Network" and displayed a list of practitioners. Beneath "Ajisawa, T. - Nutrition Consultant", it read "Andersen, A. - RMT". This was the place. I needed to go in here.

I stood for a second, took a breath. I wasn't afraid – nothing in this place would hurt me – but I was mightily affronted. I thought of those blue eyes, pushed the door open, and chimes tinkled.

What a riot of sights and scents that jumble of a store held up before me. Crystals, self-proclaimed elixirs, tiny pyramids. Racks of homeopathic vials. Weird soft music, that seemed to hover eternally in one spot, wafted from the PA system. I passed a long row of bookshelves, sure that I saw titles like ***Chakras in Cats*** and ***Taoist Cowboy Chi Leaders***... but maybe I didn't. I was just trying to find my way through the mystical mumbo jumbo to Angel's office.

A slim, pretty girl with long sandy hair walked up to me with a bright, understanding smile. "Hi, you look lost."

"Hi, I, I oughta be, I've never been in a place like this before."

"Well, everyone has to take a first step sometime, right?"

Her voice finally clicked with me. "I was talking with you on the phone yesterday! I called to book an appointment with Ms. Andersen."

"Oh yeah hi! Mr. McPhail, right? Yeah, I cover their phones sometimes." She pointed toward a back corner. "Angel's office is right back there, just past the incenses."

"Ah, thank you." I took a couple of steps, then stopped and turned back. "Excuse me, miss?" I sighed. "I promised myself I wasn't gonna ask this, but I *have* to... *Why* is this place called The 99th Monkey?"

Her grin took on a hint of mischief. "Because we're not the hundredth."

I stared at her. And stared at her a bit more. Then lowered my eyes, turned, and walked toward the back corner. "Okay. Thank you again."

I paused in the doorway and peeked in at an office that felt much like my house, all sober antique wood, warm and serene and not at all flaky. I knocked on the door frame and said hello.

Angel leaned her head and shoulder out of another doorway, greeting me with a smile even brighter than any I had seen on that December day. "Michael?"

I couldn't help smiling back. "Just Mike. Uh, please."

She brought the rest of her into the room, stepped to the desk, picked up a clipboard, brought it to me. An elastic held her hair back in a ponytail, she wore a pearl gray track suit and expensive-looking runners... and somehow managed to make the ensemble look subtle and inviting. "Before we begin, I'll need you to fill these out, okay?"

She invited me to sit as I wrote. Before she went back in the other room, she said, "We've met before."

"Briefly, once, yes." Then she was in the back room again.

The registration forms asked extensive questions about my lifestyle and medical history, and felt more like Serious Business than I had expected somehow. Where they asked what complaint or condition brought me there, I figured I could say "muscle tension" without it being too much of a lie.

When I finished, she took the board and led me into a dim room with walls covered in charts and diplomas, large lush plants in the corners, more of that hovering music gentle in the background... and, in the centre of the room, a long narrow table or bench, waist-high and six-ish feet long, covered with sheets and a blanket peeled back.

"You take your things off and lie in there, and I'll be back in a minute."

As she headed back out, I said, "Do I, uh..." She turned and looked. "Ev... everything?"

I think she was holding back a little smile. "You can leave your shorts on if you're really shy." Then she stepped out and closed the door completely.

It felt a little strange – but The Most Gorgeous Woman on Earth had just

given me permission to get naked, so I got naked. Piled all my things on a chair and slipped under the top sheet; then she tapped at the door and asked if I was ready. I was leaning back, propped on my elbows, my knees making a tent in the blanket. I said yes.

She slipped in and quickly shut the door again. "I need you on your tum for this part. See that donut pillow at the top? You poke your nose and face in that hole."

This was new. I rolled over and shifted my face into position where she instructed me. Then I felt her adjusting the sheet and blanket on me, smoothing them out, and then peeling them down a bit past my waist.

My guess was that the soft wet sounds I heard beside me were her oiling her hands. She said, "This is your first time, right?"

"Uh, yes." My voice sounded weirdly muffled to me by the odd pillow.

"Well, I would tell you I'll be gentle, except that it isn't true." And then her hands made broad, warm, gliding, slippery strokes down either side of my spine, starting at the nape of my neck and ending with curving finger strokes just at the point where it could no longer be called my back.

I took in a soft gasp of breath and I suspect that my eyes rolled back a little. This was a sensation rich and sensual and decadent in ways I had never quite experienced before, and one already worth what I was paying. Her hands moved back up, a bit farther apart, down again, spread wider still, then she covered my back with slow, firm, left to right strokes.

Then, just as I was feeling myself melt into the lower sheet, she dug something into my right shoulder blade. A knuckle? An elbow? A cattle prod? I couldn't tell, but yelped loud at whatever she had done.

"*What was that?!*" I wanted to lift my head and turn to glare at her, but wasn't sure if I was allowed.

"*That,*" she countered, with a note of flat pomposity, "is a lifetime of toxins accumulating in your tissues." She then rubbed the spot where the poison dart had hit me and the jangling agony subsided a bit. "And it's my job to push all that out of you."

"'Toxins'?"

"If that happens again, stop me there and just focus on your breath. Breathe through it and it'll pass, you'll see."

"What kind of 'toxins'? Wh-whaddaya mean?"

"Oh, all kinds." I felt muscles in my back which I never knew I had, scrunching and sighing under her strong fingers. "Not eating right, chemicals in the environment, there's all kinds of psychic and spiritual toxins, too--"

"Ow! Stop!" Another landmine in my back. She kept digging into that spot and encouraged me to deep-breathe through it... and, to my surprise, it actually did help.

I may have drifted off while she was working on my limbs; the next thing I remember was me lying on my back, her fingers on my face and head, which was deliciously relaxing with no hidden bombs. Much too soon, she told me to get dressed when I was ready to, and I heard the door shut. Only then did it actually register that she was no longer touching me.

For a second, I just lay there, feeling more peaceful than I could ever recall, strangely glowing inside, and somehow physically bigger all over. There was a dreaminess to the whole process of me standing, naked in a new place, drifting over to the chair with my clothes, and putting them back on. I felt as if I had somehow been transported to a distant, different world, and was not entirely sure that I was eager to leave it. I honestly hadn't expected this experience to affect me as profoundly and ethereally as it did. Once again, I had a feeling something was up.

Angel looked up from the ledger on her desk and smiled as I came out. "So! How was your maiden voyage?"

"Um, eye-opening. I, I could've *sworn* you didn't bring any *weapons* in there with you, but, uh..."

She giggled. "That will get better. You'll *live* for these sessions, eventually."

As I was settling the bill, I ventured into more personal areas. "I, uh, noticed on your diplomas that your name is 'Angel'."

"Uh-huh." She glanced sidelong at me. "Are you going to say 'it's appropriate' or some other sort of pick-up line about it?"

I shook my head, refusing to admit that she had caught my thoughts 100%

verbatim. "Just that I, uh, expected it to be short for 'Angela' or something. Y'know, it's, it's unusual, is all."

"Nope. Angel is my real full name. Daddy's idea." She then consulted her calendar to book my next appointment and we were done. Before I left, I asked if by any chance there was a back exit to the building, so I could be spared going through the store again. She grinned and sang, "Bye-ee."

It was only during my walk home, in the sharp-shadowed crispness of the low January sun, that it occurred to me: for an hour, my naked body was handled by The Most Gorgeous Woman on Earth, and the entire experience had not had the slightest hint of the erotic in it. I wondered if massage therapists were given special training to radiate their own secret anti-arousal vibes during their sessions.

And then it occurred to me that I was actually thinking about vibes.

Could Westgate be getting to me so soon?

Five

The downstairs room which I had designated as the study contained a massive oak desk, buried in more of my great-uncle's patented paper mess. For the first few weeks, I procrastinated and had my typewriter set up on the kitchen table. But eventually the day came when I was determined to remove everything from the desktop and the drawers and luxuriate in this beautiful workspace.

I repurposed one of the moving boxes into temporary storage for the sheaves on top of the desk, admired the grain of the newly revealed surface, and then explored the numerous drawers. Within which I found a jumble of small, identical hardcover books bound in padded brown faux-leather.

I opened the first one to discover that it was some sort of diary. A quick glance in the others confirmed that they were all notebooks. And I seemed to recall seeing a scattering of others in the papers in the front parlor, as well. If all of them were filled, then clearly Uncle Magnus had spent most of his time writing.

Then I saw that some pages contained charts, and columns of figures... and eventually determined that what I was seeing was logs of scientific experiments. Judging by these journals, he had been an amateur scientist – conducting experiments at home, recording the results, pondering their meaning, commenting on what he had read in other sources. All very methodical and deliberate, none of it correctly formatted. Outsider science, if you will.

I couldn't think of anyone else I knew who would be interested in seeing these, but I was deeply intrigued. To me, what I held represented a pure love of science that one rarely sees in this culture. I looked forward to finding out what was in these volumes, as my workload permitted. There could even be some unique ideas for my column in them. Kind of exciting, in a geeky way.

After dusk that same day, I was curled up in the wing chair in the parlor, bundled in a sweater and blanket, savouring Metheny on the stereo, and just starting to read the earliest-dated journal I could find. Then three loud whumms summoned me to the front door.

"Hi, Frank. Um, the doorbell works, did'ja know?"

"Oh?" He pressed it and we heard a pleasant *bing-bung*. He made a little snort-laugh. "Hey yeah! Q.E.D.!" Then he remembered his mission: "I'm meeting the crew to dine at The Wien and then rehearse. Your invitation to join us is tendered once again."

I decided why not. I had no plans that wouldn't keep, and was mildly curious about Frank's band. So I got ready and headed out with him down the street. Our clouds of breath glowed in the streetlights as we walked, and I told him about my uncle's journals. Frank allowed that it sounded familiar to him, the idea that his elderly neighbour was conducting home experiments.

I went on. "It's amazing. As far as I can see, when he retired he, he decided to teach himself physics from scratch, w-with books."

Frank nodded. "I believe it. He had an intense personality."

I sighed. "He must've been a fascinating guy."

"Indeed. As are we all."

Inside The Wien, Frank led me to a larger booth in the back corner, where a large young man waved and a small young woman glared. Frank waved a greeting to them both as we sat.

"Hail and well met. As we earlier proposed, you will note that I have successfully ensnared Mr. McPhail." He gestured in introduction. "Mr. McPhail, this is Dougie, and Inch. Mitch, true to form, will be the last to arrive."

Dougie shifted the elbows of his massive arms on the table, and, when he nodded, his shaggy brown hair fell into his eyes. "Hey." The tiny young lady glared even more forcefully at me, giving me a moment to take in her short, spiky bleached hair, huge crystalline eyes, and pouting-pretty doll features.

Then I spoke to her. "I-I-I'm sorry, did... do they call you '*Inch*'?"

"Yeah." Her voice had the sound of a cute little girl and the attitude of a belligerent drunk.

I couldn't help letting on how flustered I felt, trying to understand. "Well, I dunno... don't, don't you find that kind of, um, ins-- ... isn't... just because you're --"

"What is it?" she said, sounding like a dare. "Afraid all that political incorrectness'll damage my delicate little chromosomes?" I just blinked, and she went on, much louder. "'Inch' happens to be my *last name*, asshole! And my *first* is none of your goddamn fuckin' business, so *fuck off!*" And then she gave me the hugest, sweetest smile, and fluttered her long lashes at me.

I adjusted myself to the concept of sharing a table with Betty Boop from Hell, while Dougie simply said, "Let's order – where's Zoe?"

Just then the front door opened loudly and a fellow about the same age as my tablemates tromped in, out of breath. Thick black hair, Far Eastern features – I wondered if he might be related to Mrs. Sano down at the corner store. More likely in a town this size than in Toronto, I figured. Frank turned to see, then said, "Ah, the Mitchman cometh."

The newcomer panted, said, "Hey, guys," and flopped into a seat beside Frank.

Frank made introductions. "Mr. McPhail – Mitch." We nodded at each other. I said, "Mitch." He said, "Hey. I read your stuff – cool."

I saw Peter coming to our table, heard Inch muttering, "Fuckin' late *again*, Mitch!", and Mitch replied something that sounded like "Moga!"

Peter gave us his customary beam. "Hi, guys. Hiya, Mike."

Dougie said, "You still here, Pete?"

"Ten more minutes then I'm gone, but I can still take your orders first. Gettin' kinda nervous, eh?" Peter looked down at me and added, "Karaoke contest starts tonight."

I blinked up at him. "You do karaoke?"

Mitch said, "Yeah! Pete's really good, ain't he, Frank? You should see him sometime!"

Frank offered Peter his hand. "Well, break a leg, my lofty confrère."

Inch added, "Or a neck."

An hour or so later, I found myself along with the band – name of Vog – in an elderly loft space over a converted warehouse now filled with boutiques. The large echoing room was even colder than I kept my house, but comfortable enough even with our coats open. I sat on an abandoned workbench while the four of them raised a dense, bellowing sound that had the old windows rattling in a relentless rhythm. I wished I had thought to bring some cotton or something for my ears.

Frank stood at a mike stand held together with electrical tape, and he and Mitch both played battered generic guitars. Inch's bass guitar was nearly as long as she was. Dougie's drum set was sparse but well kept, and he coaxed a surprisingly meaty sound out of it. Together, even with small amps, they created a roar that reminded me of the thickness of old Black Sabbath, but with rawer edges and a more urgent passion.

At one point, Mitch stepped forward to solo, and I saw him flickering both hands in the sort of tapping that I gathered Van Halen or such people had made famous. And suddenly Frank stopped playing, held up one hand, and called out, "Stop stop stop."

The sudden silence rang, and Frank turned and said, "What're you doing, Mitch?" Mitch just blinked, and Frank slowly shook his head. "You're falling back into your old Van Halen habits, my man.

"This song is not your technoid, deedley-yeedley, stopwatch stuff. This is the sound of unarticulated *angst*, buddy! Vog music doesn't come from the *hands*, it comes from the *gut*. It's the unbidden wordless plea, the defiant outburst." He stepped closer to Mitch. "Just let it yell out of you, just go 'AAAA!!'"

Mitch's mouth twitched and he said, "Yaa."

Frank was getting into drill sergeant mode, quite unlike anything I had seen him from him so far. "*Do it! 'AAAA!!'*"

"Raaa!"

"Like you *mean* it, Sano!!"

Mitch roared! "AAAAAAA!!!"

"*Play it!!*"

And Mitch hoisted his guitar up from his hips and attacked it. Scraping the pick and his fingernails over the strings, scrubbing at them, hammering at them with his fists, clutching and stretching them up, shaking the guitar's entire body, his long hair thrashing around his face... the scream he raised had nothing like notes in it, but it gave me actual goosebumps. I stopped breathing, and felt something of the awe that you might if you were surprised by a tsunami suddenly appearing twenty feet in front of you.

Mitch's outburst ended with a raw, rumbling crunk, and we all just stared at him. Then I saw a corner of Frank's mouth twitch and he said, "Now *that* was *guitar*, sir."

Inch lifted the strap over her head and laid her bass down on the floor. "Can we take five, Vogner?"

"Colour them taken, Inch," he called back. Then he ambled over to my bench and plunked himself beside me with a little hop. "So! Feedback and comments, Mr. McPhail?"

"Whoa. Geez. Um. You..." I wriggled a fingertip in my ear. "You guys are, uh, certainly powerful. Loud. Um... so I, I take it you don't want Mitch to play too fast, is that it?"

Frank shifted, trying to get comfortable. "Not exactly. We don't want him to pursue technique as an end in itself, more like. That's a musical cul-de-sac. Bands like this are trying to put *heart* back into a rock music that's been suffocating itself on *science*. We want feeling! Expression!" He brushed a blond lock back from his eye. "When we do a song that cries out for a speedy solo, then Mitch is free to velocitize to his heart's content. As it happen, this wasn't it."

I felt a stirring of respect for this younger guy. "Boy, you, you take this very seriously, don't you, Frank?"

A nod. "Just so, Mr. McPhail. That whole 'worth doing, worth doing well' riff. This is my passion."

I digested that for a second, then thought to ask, "What did Inch call you, just then?"

"Vogner." He allowed himself a small, drowsy smile. "My last name is Wagner. This is their side-splitting attempt to lend me a spurious ethnicity. And hence the name Vog. Which was *their* idea, believe it or not."

"And, uh... what *is* Inch's first name, anyway?"

His smile widened and he held up a customary forefinger. "Now now. I'd be remiss if I thwarted her wishes that way."

I nodded, then asked, "Does she always talk that way?"

"What way?"

"Like.... a trucker to the Nth!"

He snort-laughed. "She *is* diverting, isn't she?"

I excused myself after a few more, similarly thunderous numbers, claiming that I was pushing a deadline, rather than admit that I was pushing my ears. But in the ringing silence of the walk home, I found myself thinking of Vog's energy and commitment, and how familiar it was, and how long it had been since I had heard that....

So when I arrived home, I found myself kneeling by the stereo, rummaging, pulling out the small box marked "Old Tapes", and slipping a cassette into the deck. Then pressing Play, turning the volume up much higher than my norm, and feeling the old, dearly familiar blast of the intro to "Blitzkrieg Bop".

I was too tired to pogo, but I did let myself nod my head vigorously and cry out "Yeah!" And for a while, I was fifteen, and for a while I could feel in the core of me that I would be fifteen forever.

Six

Barb's apartment, which had once been ours, stirred up such conflicted feelings in me that I tried not to stay there longer than I needed to. Picking up Bonnie for her first visitation in Westgate counted as need, certainly.

As Bonnie scurried around, picking up and packing last-minute items, Barb leaned on the wall by the door and called out to try and keep her on track. "D'ja pack your inhaler, Bunny?"

Pause. "No?"

"Go get it."

"Okay-ee-yee!" All flying brown hair and big fluffy slippers, Bonnie burst out of her room and down the hall into the bathroom.

Just the sight of her made me smile, and I sighed. "Lookit her go," I murmured. "Remember the first time we saw her run?"

Barb stood up away from the wall and closer to my shoulder. I saw her nod, smiling the same as me. "Yeah."

"Big smile, waving her arms in front of her, going 'Baa-baa-baaa!'"

Barb chuckled. "Yeah."

We looked at each other, still smiling. "She's great."

We kept looking at each other, deeper. "Uh-huh." And I realized that I had always loved her deep, lambent, hazel eyes. And suddenly she was twenty-one, and her hair was big and blonde and she never let the roots show...

Neither one of us started it – we just made a little kiss.

And all I could see was her eyes, and I remembered her in tight shiny outfits and how she lit up every dancefloor she stepped onto and how taut and torrid and alive her body was on those dancefloors and in the alleys behind the clubs and in my room and we were kissing a lot longer and a lot more on purpose and our arms were tight around each other and our bodies pressed.

She broke the kiss and made a soft, throaty giggle, watching me from under heavy eyes. "You want to," she said.

I let go and turned away, trying to leave her arms. "No."

She hugged herself behind me, arms still wrapped around, and slid one hand below my belt. "Yes you dooooooo....." Then she reached for my shoulders and turned me around to face her again. "Last time we did, you ended up movin' back in, so it couldn'ta been *that* bad."

"W-well yeah but, but, I moved *out* two weeks later, so it couldn'ta been that *good*, y'know?"

She let go and her smile went flat. "Oh. Oh yeah."

"I'm, I'm not putting Bunny through that agai--"

"All right, *leave* it! Just..." She turned away from me and held her upper arms. "... just leave it, Mike."

We stood quiet. Then Bonnie came out with a weekend bag and a plastic grocery bag, both packed full. She put on her coat and boots, then hugged and kissed Barb at the door. "Bye, mummy."

"Buh-bye, muppet. See you Sunday, okay?" Then she looked up at me and flatly told me to take care.

The highways to Westgate were bare and dry under the late afternoon sun, and the bright snowy fields made sunglasses a good idea. Bonnie asked if we were there yet.

"C'mon, Bunny, I told you it'd take an hour." I glanced at the clock in the dash. "About fifteen more minutes yet. It just *seems* long cuz you don't recognize the views. Pretty, isn't it?"

She looked out at the passing farms again. "I guess. It looks weird, though."

"You're just not used to wide open spaces," I said. Then it clicked for me. "Hey, I know this is the first time you've ever been somewhere that isn't big city – is this kinda scary or bothering you sorta, Bun?"

"Maybe a bit."

"Is that why you didn't want me to move out here?"

"Partly, I guess."

"Well, don't worry. Soon we'll be where it looks more like city – and just wait til you see the house!"

Even though Bonnie had never seen *The Addams Family*, she recognized the "spookiness" of the house, both outside and in, as soon as she saw it, and it delighted her. Her first words on entering the front parlor were, "I bet it's haunted!"

I said "Of course not" and didn't mention the noises I heard my first night. Then we took the grand tour and I was impressed with how well she took to every room – I remember turning up my nose at Old Stuff when I was her age. In the basement, which she declared was actually "the pyramid of King Tut", she tugged curiously at the locked doors.

"What's in here?"

"Dunno, still haven't found the keys. C'mon, Queen Tut, let's eat."

I decided to introduce her to The Wien, and the people who were the closest thing I had to friends here. Shortly after we sat, Zoe brought us menus and said, "Good evening, Mike. Who's your girlfriend?", at which Bonnie properly giggled.

"Zoe, this, at long last, is my daughter Bonnie. She's up to visit for the weekend."

"Great! Hiya, Bonnie." Bonnie flushed and said hi back. Zoe leaned in and spoke a bit lower, more conspiratorially. "Hey listen: is he buying dinner for you?"

"Uh-huh."

"So order something really big 'n' expensive, okay? Make him suffer! What do *you* care, right?" Bonnie found this funny enough to allow a genuine laugh. To me, Zoe went on: "Gosh, she's even cuter than her pictures. What a sweetheart."

"Tell me about it."

I settled Bonnie in for her first night, thankfully in a familiar bed. She was used to sleeping in mine back in my apartment, and I used my old bedroom furniture to set up one of the spare rooms as hers. It seemed to help.

She sat up with her pillow behind her, blankets pulled up to her neck. I perched on the side of the bed and said, "So?"

"So?"

"So what'd'ja think? About the house, Westgate, everything? D'ya like it?"

She nodded. "I guess so. I was scared it'd be all barns and stuff, but it's like a real city with houses and everything." She glanced to one side. "I like Zoe, she's funny."

"M-hm."

"And the house is old and dark and spooky and full of cool old stuff, so that's fun. It's kinda cold, though."

I could feel my mouth go crooked. "Yeah, sorry."

She looked at her knees for a second. "You kissed mummy today."

"Oh, you saw that, huh? Yeah, well..." She lifted her eyes to meet mine. "It was just to show her we're still friends. Is all."

She looked at her knees again. "Oh."

"Sorry, Bunny."

"What for?"

"Mm. Never mind. Time for you to get to sleep now, okay?"

She looked up at me again. "Don't go, daddy. Keep me company for a while, please?"

"Okay, sure." I leaned over to the lamp on the nightstand. "But I'm putting the light out, though."

She said "okay" and settled down into the bed as I clicked the room dark. Then I leaned down, kissed her head, and we wished each other good night. I watched the lights outside flicker as black branches waved across them in the wind, and heard her breathing get slower and deeper.

It seemed as if the lights faded away to complete blackness. And then, in the blackness, I felt hands hold my shoulders, and a voice behind me said, "You want to." The hands turned me around to face the voice, and I saw Angel, her face weirdly spotlit, blackness behind her, and I said, "Yes." We pulled together ferociously and kissed ravenously and she felt perfect and tasted perfect and smelled perfect, we moaned as my lips moved across her cheek to her neck and her clothes pulled open and away easily and she gasped and moaned louder as my kisses moved down her neck to her chest, my ears were filled with the thunder of my own heart and her fingers gripped deeper into me and my head snapped up with a sudden jolt and I was watching the flicker of the lights outside the window.

Seven

When I showed up for my first February appointment with Angel, no one was in the front office, so I sat for a moment. Then boredom got me up and wandering around, paying more attention to the items in the room, just to see what was there, reading the odd diploma, and so on. And I finally paid attention to a small, stand-up, page-a-month flip calendar on her desk. Today I noticed that every month also came with an immaculately shot photograph of a shirtless hunky guy à la Chippendales, and I thought about how long it had been since I tried doing a sit-up.

Later, on the table, I mentioned to her how I had been there a couple of times now and still knew next to nothing about her; I asked her to "tell me about herself", despite knowing how much I hate it when people ask *me* that.

She, however, seemed to find the question less burdensome than I do. She started off with a hum that suggested thinking, then, "Welllllll, let's seeeeee.... um, I'm a Pisces --"

"Sorry, when is that?"

"March. Fourth." I filed that datum away firmly, determined to write it down at my first opportunity. She went on: "I, uh, like hiking and swimming... this is my real hair colour..." (a small giggle) "...and I think the best thing about February is Jays spring training."

"Oh! You a Jays fan?"

"Yep. Going all the way this year."

The donut pillow wouldn't let me shake my head. "No they won't – they'll choke at the end, they always do." And suddenly I yelped at a cruel grinding knuckle in my back, the timing of which I found suspicious.

But she just said, "C'mon, breathe through it, you know how..." After a moment, she added, "Anyway, you can't write them off. Every season's a new beginning. You have to have hope." She rubbed at that spot more gently. "If you don't have hope, you don't have anything."

Waiting for me in my mailbox when I got back was a long-dreaded arrival – the first hydro bill of my residency here, addressed to "M. McPhail". As per instructions, I had not contacted Hydro about changing the name on this account, and now I at least saw why that wouldn't be necessary. I decided to go inside, get my coat off, and sit down before I opened it and faced the music.

I sat in the kitchen with a glass of water and carefully ripped the envelope open. Luckily I wasn't drinking that water when I saw the total on that bill, because I might have choked in shock – at how *low* the bill was! It was about one-quarter of what I was braced for!

For a few breaths I just stared and felt a bit dizzy. Then I examined the bill more closely, made sure I was reading the digits correctly... and read the itemized list of charges. Which was when I saw there were no electricity charges on this bill – it was all only for water.

Many municipalities in this part of Ontario obtain their electricity from the hydroelectric plants at Niagara Falls, which explains why electric power is commonly referred to as "hydro" around here. For reasons I have yet to investigate, the municipal electric companies in this region are also in charge of – and bill for – the local water and sewage systems as well. Payments for both electricity and water are combined onto one bill from the local hydro company. Which is why I was expecting to see both charges here.

But I didn't.

Hydro was not billing me for my electricity. Why?

An error or omission on their part seemed unlikely. I thought about it a while, and eventually decided that my great-uncle must have installed solar panels and gotten himself off that part of the grid. He seemed like enough of a science guy to be able to arrange something like that.

I let out a long breath and then grinned. This was a financial windfall I had not seen coming. I finished my glass of water, then stood up, feeling a bit lighter, and set off to crank up every heating rad in the house.

There was a day, a couple of weeks later, when I happened to go to The Wien for lunch. (I know I've made it sound like I ate every meal there. Not even remotely true, but nothing interesting happens when I eat at home

alone, and I'm ashamed to record the abysmal diet I choose when I prepare food for only myself.) Zoe had a coffee set in front of me almost before I sat down, and said, "Boy, you've turned into a real regular these last couple of months!"

By this time, we had reached a point of friendly banter, so I batted my eyelashes at her and said, "*Only* because I can't stay away from *you!*"

She waved her hand in front of her to stave off an attack of the vapours and emoted, "Ah yes, I *know!*" Then in her Zoe voice she said, "Soup's cream of potato today," knowing full well that I would choose it if they had it.

I said "Excellent," to confirm.

Then she almost moved to go place my order, but stopped herself and said, "I read your book."

I looked up at her. "Oh?"

She nodded. "Frank lent it to me. It's great! I had to go buy my own!"

"Wow. Gee, uh, thank you."

She paused again, then leaned in a little closer and said, "Hey listen: while it's quiet, can I ask you a really big favour?"

I blinked. "Me? I guess you can ask, sure."

"My little sister's coming in to town today to visit. We're going out tonight and I asked Peter to come with us."

"Uh-huh?" I said, not following yet.

"I'm..." She looked around quickly, then back at me. "He doesn't know it, but I'm sort of trying to fix him up with her."

"Oh?"

"See, Peter's never said or done anything... but he's usually around me like a puppy, and I worry about how he's feeling. I mean, he's as sweet as can be, but I'm a bit old for him, y'know?"

"Okay. I know he really *respects* you, but... huh."

"Anyway, I thought, you know, get them together, they might, *you* know, they're both great kids, they ought to really hit it off, I thought."

I blinked. "Sorry, I still don't see what, uhh..."

"Well, I need a fourth to go with us, so Peter won't feel conspicuous."

I needed to sit with that for a few seconds. "... you're asking me *out?!?*"

"Not like a *date!* It'll just be, like, a few friends going out and enjoying themselves." I had to smile a bit when I heard that she considered me a friend already. "Please, Mike? I don't want him to back out."

"Don't you ha—" I cut off my own objection. "Okay sure. Yeah. I mean, if it'll really help you out."

Zoe's shoulders relaxed and a little colour came back into her face. "Oh, it *will!* That's great! Thank you, Mike!"

"Hey, no problem. We can take my car if you want."

"Even better. You're saving our lives."

"That's all well and good – just don't forget my soup, though."

At 8:30 that night, I parked under the black iron balcony of Zoe's second-floor walk-up, got buzzed in at the ground floor, stood in the musty hallway of her building, and knocked. The door opened as wide as the chain would permit, and I saw her peeking. At least, I saw one eye, some fluffy blue robe, and some profusion of unclipped black hair. And then one corner of a smile as she said "Hi!" The door closed and the chain rattled. "C'mon in!"

I stepped onto a small worn mat on the linoleum floor as she closed the door. "I'm not running as late as I look, honest! Just make yourself at home for a sec, I'll be right out!" As she headed into a back room, she called back, "Like your sweater!"

"Oh! Uh, thank you." I was standing in a small kitchen, ornate cupboard doors, small table with metal-tube legs, mismatched chairs – the decor reminded me of my own when I was a student, and that of almost every other student I had ever known. A slightly larger living room waited opposite from

the doors which (I guessed) led to her bedroom and bathroom.

I was about to go check the living room out when I heard her say through the door, "I'm really glad Fliss came to visit. Sam's been away a few days and I'm already tired of being here by myself."

I looked back at her bedroom door. "Sam?" I stepped closer to the door to be sure she could hear me, cleared my throat, and said, "Ahhhh, who is Sam?"

"My roomie."

I thought for a moment. "Are, are you sure this is, is all right?"

Zoe poked her head out the door – her hair was brushed and shiny now, but still independent and untamed. "What?"

"I, I know we said this wasn't a date, but we *are* going out, and it looks, uh... are you sure Sam won't mind us, um... you know, *this*."

She watched my eyes with quiet seriousness. "Absolutely. Sam and I don't have that kind of relationship." Her door closed.

I turned and went into the living room. I had always told myself that I had no problem with things like open relationships, but that was always in theory. Now that I was confronted with the real possibility of one, I felt a sense of floating unreality similar to my first massage appointment. I tried to shrug.

I was pleased to see a bookshelf over the TV, and even more pleased to see my own book on it, just as she told me. Beside it were about five thickish paperbacks, all with the titles in a similar curvy typeface, all bearing the author name of Aurora Windermere. I pulled one of those out and glanced at the cover. The stormy drama of the painted scene, the glowering chiseled hero with his flouncy lacy shirt hanging open, huge puffy sleeves blowing in the gale along with his huge puffy hair, told me that these were historical romances. Fair enough, I supposed.

Beside the TV was a modest stereo and a milk crate full of vinyl albums. As I was about to stoop and check those out, I heard her say "Ta-da" from the kitchen. I turned and saw her, arms spread, palms toward me, wearing a snug simple black dress that fell to her knee. A fine gold chain for a necklace, another for an anklet, and glossy black shoes with timid heels. Her makeup was so subtle that it took me a while to be sure she was wearing any. "Didn't take too long, did I?"

"No, uh... wow. That's a nice dress. You look nice."

She dimpled. "Thank you."

I looked down at my dark V-neck sweater. "Maybe I'm not dressed enough."

"No no, you're fine. It's not formal. I just don't get an excuse to wear this too often."

"Well, you tell Sam he should take you out more."

"I just might do that." She nodded toward my hand and said, "Found my library, I see." I hadn't realized I was still holding the book.

"Yeah, gotta check it out... 'Aurora Windermere', huh?"

She nodded. "I'm one of very few, I'm sure, to own a complete set of her books. She's nowhere near a household name just yet."

"Ah. Historical romances, right? Not really my speed, sorry."

She came closer, reached past me, and pulled another romance off the shelf. "No jumping to conclusions, please – Windermere's are different. Here." She took the book from my hand and replaced it with the one she'd pulled. I saw the title: ***Arms of the Storm***. "This is one of my favourites. Check it out, okay?"

I looked at its spine, its back cover. "Well, thanks, but --"

"Please, try it. I'd really like to know what you think."

I sighed. "Okay, sure." I felt like I owed her – after all, she had read my book with no prompting from me. "Boy, you must really like her."

"I do. So I hope you will, too."

Finally it occurred to me that half of the foursome involved in Zoe's matchmaking plot was missing. "Hey, what about Peter and your sister?"

Her eyes got huge and bright. "Oh! She met us at work, and then when he went home to change, she went *with* him! They couldn't stop talking! It's already working out better than I planned..."

And so we picked up Peter and Fliss and drove to a small but clean local club called The Ambassador. Once ensconced inside, the two young'ns spent most of the time dancing, and Zoe and I spent most of the time talking and drinking. I felt a funny mix of odd and familiar about the place – Barb and I used to spend a lot of time in clubs because that was her element, but I think this was the first one I had been in since the divorce.

We watched Peter and Fliss dance, gabbing and laughing during the fast numbers, very comfortably slow-dancing the slow ones, and I agreed with Zoe that her plan was coming to fruition.

"You're right," I said. "Fliss is a great kid. And they're hitting it off like Fred 'n' Ginger." I raised my glass to her in salute. "By jove, Holmes, you've done it again."

"Thank you, Watson." She clinked my glass with hers. "So. I guess we can relax."

We both took a sip, and then I ventured, "Zoe... why'd you ask *me*? I mean, you must know lots of guys..."

A slow number started playing, and she stood and offered her hand. "Come dance with me and I'll tell you."

I was never a great dancer to begin with, and now I was rusty along with it. But I took her right hand in my left, placed my right hand high enough on her back to be safe, we left a space between us for the Holy Spirit, and randomly swayed to Sinatra. She seemed content enough with this.

Then she spoke. "I'm sure you can imagine that a town this size is not swarming with suitable men, okay?"

I raised an eyebrow. "This means I'm suitable?"

"It means you still have the benefit of the doubt." A pause for a couple of sways. "And at work, we don't get to talk very much. I thought it'd be a chance to get to know you better. After all, ya don't get to meet a real writer every day."

I glanced sidelong. "I suppose that's true."

A second slow song followed, so we continued swaying and talking.

"So whatever happened to *Mrs. McPhail*? Or shouldn't I ask?"

I let out a little sigh. "Barb's back in town. With Bonnie, of course. Um.... we married too fast, too young. After a year, it got to the point where we'd fight to break the monotony of arguing all the time. Been divorced what, six years now?"

"What's she like?"

I remembered kissing Barb at the door. "Very pretty. Still is, I guess. A lot of fun, but not very, um... I'll just say this: she always introduces herself as 'Barbi-With-No-E'." Zoe snickered. "Oh, and she wanted to spell Bonnie B-O-N-I-..."

And then Zoe said it with me in perfect unison: "with a little heart over the I!" We laughed in unison, too.

Zoe shook her head. "That's priceless."

"No way I was tolerating *that*," I muttered.

Eventually a time came when the four of us were together at our table, and I stood to excuse myself. "I hope you guys will forgive me, but I'm pushing a deadline, so I gotta go."

Peter immediately said "Aww!" in such a way that I was convinced it wasn't because he was losing his chauffeur.

I pulled out my wallet. "And I haven't forgotten that I'm your transportation, so here's cab fa--"

Peter reached out and tried to push my wallet down. "No no, Mike! I can handle that, don't worry. It's okay. You go if you need to, we'll be fine."

I nodded, but then Zoe stood and said "Actually... I have to work early tomorrow, so if I was smart, *I'd* go now, too."

Fliss looked up at her. "Are you sure, Zo?"

Zoe kissed the top of Fliss's head. "I'm sure, sprout. You have your key, right?"

And I'll make up Sam's bed for you." Then she looked up at Peter. "Just make sure she gets home in one piece, young man."

Bands of light and dark from the streetlights flowed over our faces as I drove Zoe home. She leaned her head back in the shotgun seat and grinned. "They *really* like each other."

"Mm-hm."

"Man, I am so good at this!"

"Yeah-yeah-yeah."

She snickered at me, then said, "And I think it's sweet how you bowed out to give them some alone time – that's why I followed your lead."

"Well, I really *did* have to get out of there." I could feel her turn to fix me with a look. "That music was too loud – I was getting a headache." I sighed. "I must be getting too old for this."

She said "Oh" and immediately followed it with a blown razzberry.

"I beg your pardon?"

She blew another one.

"That's what I thought you said."

Eight

March 2nd. My desk calendar entry for the day bore two entries:

- Angel 1pm
- Angel's BDAY on Wed!!!

In relation to the latter, I called the local florist to order a dozen roses, to be delivered on Wednesday. I gave the recipient's name, Angel Andersen, and was about to specify the address when the florist interrupted me: she already had that info at hand, since I was the sixth person that morning to place an order for that recipient.

Okay.

When I entered Angel's office that afternoon, I handed her a small, personally wrapped – meaning inexpertly wrapped – gift. She made a little coo intended to convey mild surprise, gave me a smile of high-watt cordiality, and immediately started tearing it open. "Well thank you, Mike. This is very sweet."

I actually shifted from one foot to the other. "I, I just figured I wouldn't, uh, y'know, see you again until after your, um, heh."

The wrapping came off to reveal a copy of my book. At the sight of it, she exclaimed, "Well!" She peeked inside the front cover and said, "Autographed, too! So I finally get to read this!" She looked at me with a warmer smile and said, "Thank you very much."

During my massage, I stayed awake enough to make an attempt at prying small talk. "So any big plans for your birthday?"

She continued her smooth, slick manipulations of my back. "Not lots. Lance is taking me out to dinner..."

"Lance'? Would I, I know him?"

"No. He's a friend of mine."

"You mean like a *friend* friend? A *serious* friend?"

"A friend." I had a blip of memory of the shirtless-hunk calendar on her desk and wanted to ask what this Lance looked like, but immediately chose not to.

"He came here a few times for a twisted leg, and we just got talking..."

"So... he was a, he was a patient of yours?"

"'Client', is what we call you folks."

"I thought you weren't allowed to, uh, to go out with patien-clients?"

"That's doctors. We *are* allowed to see our clients, but we usually avoid it. And Lance isn't my client anymore, anyway." She lifted my shoulder up for a second while she kneaded it. "The trouble with dating clients, usually... well, it's because we break society's taboo about touching people you don't know. Massage has a way of creating a... I dunno... a false sense of intimacy for some people, I guess. That makes relationships complicated and messy. We mostly find it easier to keep things on a professional level."

"But that's, that's your own personal decision."

"Well yes. Everything is, after all."

For me, that was enough information to allow hope to spring eternal.

A couple of weeks later, Bonnie stayed with me for part of March break, and she was already looking forward to at least one lunch at The Wien. I loved how she lit up when Zoe came to take our order. Zoe made it clear how pleased she was to see Bonnie again, when I suddenly had an uh-oh moment.

"What's wrong?" Zoe asked me.

"I just remembered, I still have a massage booked for this afternoon." She waited for me to explain. "I, I have to go cancel it. I can't leave Bonnie on her own --"

"Yes you can!" Bonnie burst in. "I'm big enough!"

"Quiet, please, Bunny --"

"Mike, what time is your appointment?"

"Uh, two."

"Well, *I* could keep Bonnie company. It's about an hour or so, right?"

"Yeah but --"

"So I have some time coming, I'm sure I can get it." She looked at Bonnie like they were about to share a secret. "We could go shopping and other fun stuff you can't do with those *men* around. It'll be great!"

I had to think for a moment. No matter how well you know someone, you have to stop and wonder when you consider entrusting them with your baby.

I looked at Bonnie. "Howzat sound to *you*, Bunny?"

She almost quivered with wide-eyed approval. "Yeah! Lemme go with Zoe please daddy please!"

I shrugged and gave Zoe a crooked little smile. "Thanks a million."

She gave me a more even smile back. "Hey. I owe you one. I'll go clear it with Gus while you guys decide what to order."

While Angel had me face down, she announced that she had finished my book and thanked me again for it. "I've started reading James Gleick now because of your chapter on chaos. Fascinating."

"Awright. So, did, did you like it?"

"For what it *is*, it's very good. Clear and interesting, and I feel a lot of love in your writing."

"Umm, what, whaddaya mean, 'for what it *is*'?"

"Well, face it, Mike: your work is locked into that narrow, rationalistic, Western-science mindset."

"It—" I was flabbergasting again. "It's a book *on science!*"

"Exactly." She let out a little sigh. "I just see *beyond* that, is all."

I focused on my breath, reminding myself to be polite. This wasn't some

blustering ignoramus trying to pick a fight with me, this was The Most Gorgeous Woman on Earth. "How --" I cleared my throat. "How do you mean?" I made a small gesture toward the store sitting just beyond her office. "You're into this, this New Age, uh... stuff?"

"No need to label me, is there?" I winced as she gripped into one of my calves. "But science isn't the whole picture – not in my experience."

"Oh? Then, uh, tell me about your experience."

"Well.... when I was little, I died on the operating table."

"... Huh."

"Got my tonsils out when I was seven. It was classic: floated up, saw my body and the doctor and nurses, saw the tunnel with a light at the end, everything."

"Hm."

"And when I was eleven, I saw a ghost."

"... Really."

"My Gramma Svendsen. She died when I was five. And this one night, I'll never forget, six years later, I woke up and she was standing at the foot of my bed."

"So, so did anything else happen?"

"Well, I stared. I remember I whispered, 'Gramma?' And she smiled and said, 'Look.' Then she held up a finger and said, 'Always look.' And then she was gone." When I didn't answer after a moment, Angel went on. "So, what does Mister Science make of *that*?"

"Well, uhh..." I had to clear my throat again. "I, uh, notice these things, um, happened when, when you were a kid."

Her voice went flat. "You think I imagined them."

"Well... well, children *do* have vivid imaginations, that's a fact. It *is* one possibility, y'know?"

I could almost hear her thinking, then: "Tell me: if I've never seen a rainbow,

and you tell me *you* saw one... am I supposed to think that you *imagined* it?"

"Now c'mon – people see rainbows *every day*."

"People see *ghosts* every day."

I sighed and sat with that for a while. More like lay face down with it for a while. Finally I said, "You are an interesting woman, Angel."

"So I've heard."

When I came out into the office, Bonnie and Zoe were already waiting there. Bonnie called out, "Daddy!"

"Hiya, Bun! 'D'ja have a good time?"

She bounced over to me. "Yeah! Lookit what --"

"Sorry, Bun, excuse me a second, please. Bonnie, this is Angel Andersen, my massage therapist – remember I told you about her? Angel, this is my daughter Bonnie."

Angel leaned forward a little. "Hello, Bonnie. How are you?"

Bonnie's eyes got big and her mouth got small, and finally she let out a quiet "hello". Then Angel straightened, she and Zoe exchanged a quick "hi", Angel reminded me of my next appointment in two weeks, and the three of us walked out into The 99th Monkey.

"Sorry, but I have to run," said Zoe. "Supposed to be back by now."

"Thanks again very much. How much do I --"

"Don't be a churl. I said I owe you one." She gave Bonnie's hair a gentle tousle and said, "See ya later, toots," and swerved through the aisles and out.

Bonnie called out, "Bye, Zoe!"

I could feel my brow go into quizzical mode as I looked down at her. "Toots?"

"Yeah so there!" She held up a small plastic bag she was gripping

tenaciously. "Look, Zoe bought me a P.M. Dawn tape!"

"She *what?* Bunny, did you ask her to buy this?"

"No I didn't! It's a just-because present! She said!"

I looked at the door and tisked. "I'm gonna have to defenestrate that young lady. She, she shouldn't spoil you like that."

"She was being nice, daddy. And then we got some juice and then we went shopping some more and then we met Sam."

"Sam? Zoe's *roomie* Sam?"

Bonnie nodded, then pointed to one side of the store. I looked and saw that willowy girl with the long hair, stocking a shelf. "There she is over there. She's nice."

"Oh." Then I remembered my conversation in Zoe's apartment. And it finally clicked that she had told Fliss something about making up "Sam's bed", and I went "*Oh!!*"

As I tucked Bonnie in that night, we had some quiet, settle-down-for-the-night chat. "It's mummy's birthday soon, Bunny. Can you give me any hints what she might like?"

"She said that if grandma gives us a VCR then she wants Mel Gipson movies."

I nodded. "Of course. Well, thanks, that's a good hint."

Bonnie looked at the window for a second. "Daddy?" She looked at me. "Does that Angel lady *always* look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like... like a *movie*. But she's *real*."

"You think she's pretty."

She nodded emphatically. "She's even beautifuller than mummy." Then she

whispered, "Don't tell mummy I said that, okay?"

"Deal."

"I never saw anyone that beautiful for real before."

It was my turn to look at the window. "Same here, Bunny."

"Look, daddy!"

I was typing in the study by the light of the next morning when I heard her in the doorway. I looked up and saw her holding a fist up, almost in triumph. Then she trotted to my side and thrust the fist near my nose.

"Daddy, look! I was exploring in the basement look!" She opened her hand flat. "Keys!"

There were two. Old, long, black... the kind that would fit into the classic old keyhole shape. Each had a small cardboard tag tied to it with string. One read "Utilities", the other "Workroom". And I remembered that the mystery doors in the basement had old locks with classic-shaped keyholes...

We carefully made our way down the worn basement steps into the comparative coolness. "Where did you find these, Bunny?"

"In that big box in the corner." I tried a key in the first door we came to, and then of course had to try the other. The lock was stiff and the door creaked, but opened. I hit the light switch. A small, bare, feeble incandescent bulb in the ceiling showed us a narrow little room, little bigger than a closet back in my old apartment, with an electric water heater tank, some pipes running along the back wall, and little else. I looked for something like a control panel or monitors for the house's solar panels, but didn't see them.

I tried to close the door without bothering to lock it, but the latch was cranky and the door kept drifting open until I locked it again. So be it. And now I knew that the other room was my uncle's workroom – or secret laboratory, if you prefer?

This lock was stiffer and the door was creakier. Even before I found the light switch and flicked it, I caught a faint smell in the room that I thought might be ozone. There were a few desk lamps in the room, as well as a bright ceiling

light, all triggered by the wall switch. I saw a small workbench, a big desk, chair, bookshelf, all of dark wood, all dusty. All but the workbench were scattered with papers, of course. And the bookshelf also held some more of those brown journals. Those caught my attention first.

Bonnie, however, approached the workbench and said, "What's *that*?"

I looked around quick and immediately said, "Stand back, Bun!" Just because I didn't know what "that" was. I came closer and reached out an arm to hold her away from it.

There was what appeared to be a rectangular copper plate, a bit smaller than an album cover, resting near one end of the workbench and strangely untarnished. From a hole in the stone wall came two cables, thick with black insulation and dust, that draped across to the bench; at their ends, the black was stripped away to reveal copper wiring that was soldered to the plate. The smell was a bit stronger over here. I also noticed one of the cables was spliced to some sort of antique control panel full of needle gauges that quivered and made no sense to me.

I had to admit to her that I didn't know what this thing was. But I did caution her: "I think this maybe has electricity in it so it isn't safe – you have to stay away from it and stay out of this room, got it?"

"Okay."

I swept her out of the room, flicked the lights off, and locked it again, determined to investigate it more fully later on when I was alone. "I *mean* it, Bunny! This could be really dangerous!"

"Okay-ee-yee!"

I stopped and held her shoulders. "And listen: I need this to be our secret, okay? Promise me you won't tell *anyone*. Especially mummy – I don't want her thinking that I'm letting you around dangerous stuff when you're here."

She nodded.

"Promise?"

She nodded harder. As we went back upstairs, she said, "What a cool house."

But, for my own peace of mind, I waited til she was busy in her room, then

stashed the keys in a bowl on a high kitchen cupboard where she couldn't see and couldn't reach.

Nine

Patches of the yards in my neighbourhood were peeking through and struggling to become green as the snow subsided. Spring was officially here and April was just getting underway, but those long dirtied ridges of snow along the boulevards at either side of the streets would be hanging on for a few weeks yet.

I found myself bleary at The Wien for breakfast one morning. Because Zoe happened to be working the early shift that day, there was a coffee set in front of me before a word was exchanged. Whereupon I murmured, "Bless you, effendi."

She went on to correctly identify this as another scrambled 'n' sausage morning for me, but didn't immediately move to place my order. She hovered a second, then said, "Have you read ***Arms of the Storm*** yet?"

I rubbed an eye. "...um..."

She slowly shook her head, but not unkindly, or so it seemed to me. "Mike, it's been over a month."

"Sorry. I've been working on a lotta proposals lately, lotta research. Reading for pleasure is --" But I stopped myself making excuses and took charge. "Tell you what: I promise I'll start it tonight, okay?"

There was a twinkle in her eye – as was so often the case. "Bless you, effendi."

That night, I sat propped up in my decadent four-poster, a curtain pulled back to let the reading light in, and was true to my word. I figured I'd try hard to make it up to her. And besides, how long could this take? Just light commercial fiction – give it half an hour a night, I should be through it in a week. I'd even try to remember relevant details so I could sound intelligent if she wanted to discuss it later.

And yet, within a couple of pages, I found myself sucked in and engrossed without even being aware it had happened – I was simply *there*, on board a privateer's ship, watching Captain Cedric harry the Spanish fleets and strike an uneasy truce with Margarita, the tempestuous stowaway *hidalga* he rescued from a shipwreck. I found myself turning each page impatiently, could feel my eyebrows and mouth reacting several times between each turn, there

were surprises and laughs and suspense...

I remember somewhere in there I nodded and Cedric's story morphed into me on board the ship, wearing overlarge boots and greatcoat and tricorne hat, locked in my cabin with Angel in a straining tight bodice and gigantic bell-shaped skirt stuffed full of lacy petticoats. Our eyes blazed at each other as we jostled verbally, every verb ending in "-eth". (I need to point out that the *Aurora Windermere* book contained no such clunky frivolities – those were all me.) But suddenly we were clawing passionately at each other, and I ripped that bodice, and the heaving storm waves lifted us and fed into the heavings of our own bodies and I awoke with a start.

But rather than take the hint and grab a bookmark, I returned to reading. And closed the back cover on the last page some time after three.

After supper that evening, I was buzzing Zoe's apartment from the ground floor entrance, *Arms of the Storm* in my hand. Even though the intercom speaker was terrible, I could still make out the hello as not Zoe's voice. Sam, obviously.

"Hi, it's Mike McPhail, I'm, uh, I'm returning Zoe's book?"

"C'mon up!" Buzz.

Sam wore her customary smile as she welcomed me in. My head gave a little bow as I said, "Hi, I understand *you're* the mysterious Sam."

"Oh, there's nothing mysterious about *me*, promise." She called back over her shoulder toward the bedroom: "You have a gentleman caller, Zo."

Zoe padded into the kitchen in a floor-length white flannel nightgown with little yellow flowers, looking relaxed but not like she had been asleep, at least. "Well hello. Y--" She spotted the book in my hand. "You're bringing it back?"

"Zoe, I stayed up all last night til I finished it!"

Her eyes and smile widened. "Really?"

I could feel myself break into a grin. "Really! It was the first time I ever literally couldn't put a novel down! And I slept in and almost missed today's deadline and I didn't mind!"

"I'm going to guess that you liked it, then?"

"I admit, I wasn't *expecting* to, but... I mean, it was well-written and smooth, and believable, I liked all the characters, they had depth, you, you could see why they'd love each other..." I lifted a hand by way of helpless explanation. "I guess I can't say 'all romance novels are crap' anymore."

"Well! This is great, Mike. What did you think of --"

"Zoe!" Sam butted in. I caught her looking at Zoe with a gently incredulous scowl, and she put a fist on one hip. "You didn't tell him, did you."

Then Sam looked at me and said, "Zoe is Aurora Windermere."

I looked at Zoe and could feel my mouth open. She stared at me a long moment, not smiling for once. She looked down at her fluffy slippers. "I wanted a..." Then she lifted her eyes back up to mine without lifting her face, speaking very softly. "I wanted an unbiased opinion."

I kept looking at her with a soft sense of wonder. "You got *that*, all right."

She stood up straighter and pushed her hair back from one shoulder. "Uh hey, why are we all just standing around, right? Come sit down, Mike, I'll make some coffee."

"Thank you, no." I placed the book on the kitchen table and then edged my way back to the door. "Only because I gotta get home and catch up on the sleep that *Aurora Windermere* cost me last night." I gave Zoe a smile and she finally gave me a relaxed one back. "Tell you what, though: how would *you* like to have coffee at *my* place tomorrow night? We can talk shop and do writer gab."

"Sure, that sounds great. 8:00 okay?"

"I'll pick you up then." I opened the door, then pointed a casually accusing finger at her. "*You....* are a *sneak*, lady."

She allowed herself her normal bright grin. "Is that good?"

I just shook my head and closed the door behind me. But I suspect she heard my chuckle as I went down the hall and headed downstairs.

Sometime after eight the next evening, she was curled up on my sofa, tucked into the end closest to my wing chair. A blanket draped over the back of the sofa, unused – no longer necessary, now that I wasn't afraid to heat the house properly. I had a fire going anyway, for the visuals rather than the warmth. She looked comfortable enough in snug black T-shirt and blue jeans.

One of Pat Metheny's more pensive albums provided a serene background, as she lifted a delicate wineglass (never before used) which I filled with a smooth but inexpensive white. "Thank you," she said when I was done. Before she sipped, she added, "I thought you invited me over for *coffee*."

"This *is* coffee in *France*." I poured my own and sank into my chair. "Besides, this is a kind-of-big-deal occasion for me. You're my first guest in this house – well, except for Bonnie and Frank... my first *formal* guest, let's say."

"Hmm. Maybe I should've dressed for the occasion." We both sipped.

I turned a little more toward her, gave her A Look, and got to my first point: "So.... 'ya don't get to meet a real writer every day,' huh?"

She had the grace to look a little sheepish. "I was always *going to* tell you. *After* you read my stuff." We sipped. "You were my first chance to get feedback from a real writer. I really wanted objective criticism. So I had to wait."

"Gee, Zoe, I... I'm not a *fiction* writer, y'know? Really wish I *was*, but.. I'm not really a better judge of that than anybody. I just know what I like."

She shook her head. "You're selling yourself short. Your writing isn't cold or stiff or dry. Find the right story and you could write great fiction, I know it."

I looked down into my glass. "Naa, I tried that."

"So did I. I wrote four books before I made one that I could live with. Keep trying, bud."

The conversation wandered within the general subject area of writing til I found myself asking her what had drawn her to historical romances. "Are you a hopeless romantic?" I asked.

She gave an eager smile. "No, I'm a *hopeful* romantic." And then I felt like she

was watching me expectantly. I just gave her a blank look, til she suggested, "*Romancing the Stone?*"

I had to just shrug and say sorry.

She handwaved and went on. "It's okay, um... I dunno, it's something I've thought about a lot. Romances are my chance to proclaim my theories about love and human nature and that whole ball o' wax. I hope you caught some of that when you were reading, I hope."

I hoisted my wine to her in salute. "So proclaim. What theories? I'd like to hear this."

"Okay, uhh..." She looked for words in her wineglass, then looked at me. "I believe that discovering yourself and discovering someone else are, like, linked processes – that there are things about yourself you can never know until someone brings them out." I nodded. "Uhh... I believe sex is all in your head --"

"Then you're doing it wrong!"

She gave me a crooked smile. "C'mon! I mean, you can't really be attracted to someone you don't like, or, maybe, don't respect. What you think about them really matters."

"Ya think so?"

"Don't *you*? I mean, what about, uhhh, Barb? She must've been attractive, right?"

I took a swallow of my wine, realized it was the last one, and reached to refill our glasses. While I did so, I sighed. "I was *so hot* for Barb that I – well, from this geriatric vantage point I can hardly believe it. Mind you, I was barely old enough to drink, even, I was just plain hot *period*. Still..."

"So what happened?"

I saw highlights from the fireplace in my wine. "A lot of stuff came out of her after we were married. Part of it, I'm sure, is, uhh... we, she was expecting when we did."

"Ah."

"I guess for me it started when she wouldn't quit smoking while she was pregnant. I mean, she didn't even really *try*. Man, we used to fight about that... then it was arguing about the name, fighting about money, bitching that she didn't get to go out enough--" I shook my head and silenced myself with my glass. "Sorry, I said I wouldn't go on about her anymore." A glance toward Zoe. "I mean, she should be here to defend herself, right?"

She didn't take her eyes from mine while she drank. "And what do you think of her now?"

"I... I think she's a basically nice person. I know she means well and she loves Bonnie.... but... but she can be really selfish."

And Zoe concluded, "And now she's not as attractive anymore." I felt caught out, and grinned reluctantly. "See, I distinguish between 'infatuation attraction' and 'True Love attraction'. And I think a lot of people nowadays don't." After a silent swallow from us both, she went on. "Anybody else? Since Barb, I mean."

I thought. "A few. Some pretty serious, I guess. None for very long, though." I thought some more. "I guess your theory kinda fits." She looked aside, and I said, "What about you?"

"Hmm?"

"*C'mon*, woman! I gave you my track record, I dished my dirt, what about *you*? Any Cedrics in your sordid past?"

She gave a soft chuckle. "Sorta like you. One big one, a few that didn't count... and *I* was old enough to know better, too." She sighed. "Still. At least you have something to show for yours."

"How do you mean?"

"Bonnie?"

"Oh! Duh! Of course, sorry. Yeah yeah, I'd do it all over again if it meant we still got to have our Bunny. I would, really."

"I bet you miss her."

I looked into the fireplace for I don't know how long, then leaned over to pick up the bottle. "Hey, we need topping up." To which Zoe simply agreed.

Ten

Mid-April was when spring truly took its first solid foothold: trees budded, lawns greened, tax forms flourished. My afternoon walk to The 99th Monkey on this day was damp but demanded no more from me than a light jacket, and the breeze smelled promising, lifting some of the weight of winter from me.

I was almost at the doorway to Angel's office when I heard a voice coming from it. A low, rich voice, an indoors voice yet with the power to carry – its tone sounded to me like "if Gary Owens surfed".

"You'll be there tonight, right?"

I could hear Angel's reply: "Wouldn't miss it, of course."

"Ever cool," said Surfer Owens, just as I reached the doorway and could see them standing by Angel's desk. Angel was not a short woman, but the brass-mulleted man standing close to her looked down at her, as you would a child. He was like the painting of an Aurora Windermere cover come to life, except his white shirt was partly done up. He was all tapering torso and massive arms that hung relaxed, but ready to bench-press an elephant on request. There was an easy confidence in his stance and his chiseled face, but no arrogance.

He turned his face toward me and his perfect smile, if anything, brightened more. Angel turned around to me, said, "Mike! Hi!" She extended a hand, inviting me to approach them.

I felt like I actually could see this guy growing taller as I got closer. "Lance, this is Mike McPhail, one of my newest clients. "Mike, this is my friend Lance Kendall."

Lance held out a ready hand the size of my head. "G'day, Mike!" There was so much kindness in his gray eyes, and so much genuine bonhomie in his immaculate grin, that I was forced to recognize the goodness in this man, and I hated that I couldn't hate him.

I shook hands and tried not to wince at the pressure. "Hi."

Angel volunteered, "Mike's a writer and fellow Jays fan, sort of."

Lance nodded. "Ever cool. Are *you* coming out tonight?"

"Suh, sorry, I, I dunno wh--"

"Lance is giving a talk tonight in our Conference Room. On mind-body connections."

"Oh yeah? So are you a, a doctor, a psychologist...?"

"I'm a model. But it's an area I think about a lot. *And* I've read some Castaneda!"

Angel deflected him. "So when are you going to read Marilyn Ferguson, Lance?" Ferguson was a name I didn't recognize, but Castaneda I had encountered and dismissed in university. Lance's talk sounded less professionally interesting than it had in the first instant.

"Sorry, Angel, I gotta run. See you tonight. Nice meeting you, Mike!"

"Bye-ee. And thanks again for lunch."

Once again my voice was muffled by the donut pillow. "So that was Lance."

"Uh-huh."

"Seems like, like quite a guy."

"Uh-huh."

I thought a moment, then: "Is there some reason he should seem familiar to me? Cuz I kinda got that impression..."

"You've probably seen some of his modelling work in ads, right? He's pretty in demand." She wiggled my shoulder blade with a flat hand. "Also he's Mister August in my desk calendar."

"...okay."

"He gave that to me. I wouldn't normally buy things like that for myself, but I thought it was sweet of him."

"I never met a model before."

"Yep, he does *that*, and he lectures on alternative medicine... and he works with Big Brother, and the Red Cross... oh, and he sails!"

"Over tall buildings in a single bound?"

No reply. (I wondered if she caught it.)

She worked in silence for a while, and I noticed again that, when she was using only one hand to work my tissues, she would rest the idle hand somewhere else on my body. As if she was touching me even when it wasn't necessary. And I could always feel such warmth and affection in the touch of that still hand, which convinced me that she must like me, at least some.

Near the end of the session, while she worked on my face and head, she asked me if I would read Marilyn Ferguson for her. Dreamy and not fully aware, I said sure, and got the feeling that she had to be thinking I was sweeter and more co-operative than that stubborn old Lance.

So I was almost surprised when, shortly after, in her office, she slid a thick hardcover from her bookshelf and handed me ***The Aquarian Conspiracy*** by Marilyn Ferguson. "That book changed my life," she said. "You read that and we'll have a lot to talk about."

I pushed down my vague misgivings. I could get through it. It was just a book. "Sure, I, I'll get it back to you right away." Not taking my eyes from the cover, I focused on my breath, then said, "Angel? You think we could, could maybe... talk about this, o-over dinner sometime, maybe?" Then I looked at her.

It seemed to me that she bit her lip. "Oh. Gee. Mike. I... I'm pretty busy most evenings, I honestly don't go out much. There's Sam's yoga meetings, and lectures, and classes to upgrade my --"

"Sure yeah, that's, that's..." I peeked inside the book.

"Maybe later? In the summer? Most of my classes let up then. Maybe."

"Oh! Yeah, of course."

She nodded. "Maybe then."

I couldn't decide if she was just trying to backpedal and let me down easier, or if I should just take what she said at face value. But I could still feel hope

springing eternal. And that evening I put aside my uncle's journals and started reading an introduction to New Age thought.

I would read the *phone book* if that woman asked me to. *And review it.*

On April 25th, I phoned Bonnie to wish her happy birthday. I sang "Happy Birthday To You" to her in my deliberately, spectacularly sour voice, as per tradition, and she giggled all the way through it, as per tradition.

"So are you bigger now that you're nine?"

"Yup! I am!"

"What did mummy get you?"

"I dunno yet, but we're going to a movie soon, I dunno what one. And after dinner I'm going to Gramma's cuz mummy's going out."

"She is? Where?"

"I dunno."

I was glad she couldn't see me scowl. Maybe this is just me, but I would make my kid's birthday a higher priority than that. Another reminder of the trouble Barb and I had seeing eye to eye about so many things. I reassured Bonnie that she would get my present when she visited next week, then we said our goodbyes and I love yous.

The sun was low and my study window faced the house's long shadow. My work was interrupted by three familiar whumms at the door. Frank of course stood there, sporting an extra shirt by way of jacket, and his krishing Walkman.

"Frank!" I exclaimed. "Where've you *been*? It's been *weeks*!"

As he stepped in, he bellowed, "I sequestered myself incommunicado-ly for finals!" I pointed at my ears, and he clicked. "All behind me now. Flushed my last one yesterday."

I gestured at the Walkman. "Is that Nirvana again?"

"A reasonable hypothesis but. Temple of the Dog. Got it for my birthday."

"Your bir-- wh-when was that?"

"February."

"Aw gee, I, I'm sorry I missed that--"

He shrugged easily. "You weren't to know, were you? Remiss of me not to drop the hint. Be that as it may, I found myself in the vicinity, on my way to the first Vog dinner-slash-rehearsal in yonks, how could I fail to invite you?"

"Meh, the rehearsal's out, Frank, sorry – I'm working on a piece for *Omni*."

"Cool."

"But, y'know, dinner does sound good. Lemme go get changed."

"You have my blessing."

While I was picking out a fresh shirt, I heard Frank calling up the stairs. "Mr. McPhail?!"

"Yeah?!"

"Can I borrow your stereo for a tick?!"

I blinked. "Yeah, sure!"

I did up a couple of buttons, then heard a roaring blast of ramalama guitar which I immediately recognized as "Cretin Hop". I felt my eyes big as I hurried downstairs.

Frank stood by the stereo, and the Old Tapes box, his face creased in a huge grin. He shouted over the cranked speakers. "A closet skeleton is rarely such a *loud* one, Mr. McPhail!"

I ran to the stereo and turned it down to what I considered conversational level. "Please, Frank, take pity on my neighbours, huh?"

He looked down at the box and raised an eyebrow. "I do *not* believe that

those are your daughter's tapes."

I smoothed my hair back. "Naw, they're, they're mine."

Frank looked mightily pleased with himself. "*Mr. McPhail is a punk! Who'd'a believed it? Who knows what lurks behind a well-manicured jazz facade?*"

"Enough with the 'facade' – I *love* jazz." I sighed. Then looked up from the box to catch Frank's eye. "But man, in high school, I.. I was a punk in all but mohawk. I listened to everything I could find. I... I *believed* it. You had to be there. It really felt like this was going to change everything, our values, our economy... it wasn't just like 'anything was possible', it was more like there was a new world already on its way."

Frank still smiled, shaking his head once in disbelief, and I went on: "But it never came. It all kinda faded into the background, and it was like rock forgot about it. Five years later, you would never know that punk ever happened... I guess I kinda gave up on rock for a while then, got into Pat and everything..." I looked at the box and sighed again. "I still love this stuff, though. I *do*."

"So why hide it behind your genteel dinner music?"

I thought. "Frank, there's not many things more pathetic than an old punk."

"Oh? I never got that memo."

"Y'know, you get out in the working world, you meet people who don't have a clue about – it, it just stops fitting into your life, I guess."

His face went serious. "Mr. McPhail, when you love something, you make room in your life for it. You don't throw it away." Then he brightened: "Hey, can I borrow some of these?"

I lit up like Gomez Addams. "Heck yeah!" Immediately I knelt at the box, scrabbling through it with a loud plastic clatter. "I mean, there'd be no Vog without this stuff – this is like you learning your roots!" I started pulling cassettes out, rhyiming off names I could tell he didn't recognize – The Saints, X-Ray Spex, *Pink Flag*, *Heartbreakers Live at Max's*, The Diodes – until finally Frank wondered aloud if he shouldn't just take the box. I gave him the box.

Frank insisted on detouring to Sano's Variety to pick up Mitch and ensure his relative timeliness. There was no one on duty at the counter when we went in, but I could hear loud voices coming from a room in back. I recognized Mitch's, but didn't recognize the violence in it – he bellowed, "So why the fuck should it be any fuckin' different *now?!?*"

A rapid, naggy screech replied in what sounded to me like it could be Japanese.

"Yeah yeah, fuck that! I'm outa here!" Mitch burst out into the store, tugging a jacket on and bustling past us. "Let's go, Frank! Fuck!" I glanced uneasily behind me as we went outside.

Frank was calmly urging Mitch to breathe, all of us making clouds of breathing in the cool of evening. Finally Frank coaxed: "And this time it's?"

Mitch growled. "Mama-san figures / hafta cover the store Saturday night cuz *she's* goin' out with the *girls!*"

I tried to calm things down with reason. My go-to. "It, ah... that's only til ten, right? You could still --"

"I had Saturday off, dammit!" Then Mitch waved his hands in front of himself, flustered. "I-I'm sorry, Mr. McPhail. I'm just --"

"Hey. Okay," I said.

"Mr. McPhail has a point, Mitch. Keep it in perspective, dwell in the zen of the now. And behold." He held the Old Tapes box out to Mitch. "Treasures from a time capsule."

Mitch's eyes widened when we got under a streetlight and he could see what was in the box. "Hey, where'd you get these?"

"Our worthy Mr. McPhail was a high school punk. These are his yearbooks."

Mitch grinned at me. "Cool! Hey, I can borrow 'em after Frank, right?"

"I guess, yeah, as long as you guys are really careful, okay? I mean, a lotta those things are outa print now."

Frank leaned in to have another look in the box. "Oh, my ears shall feast tonight. I would say it feels like my cocoon is about to open."

And, within myself, I had to agree that that's a wonderful feeling to have.

Eleven

I celebrated Bonnie's birthday with her when she visited on the first of May. We got into town late on the Friday night and were both tired, so we agreed to save the festivities themselves til Saturday afternoon. After lunch, I presented her with a tiny store-bought cake with one candle, I once again sang Happy Birthday abysmally for her, she blew the candle out and we each had a slice.

No sooner had she rested her fork on her crumb-strewn plate when she cried out, "Present now present now present now!"

I got up, saying, "Okay okay okay!", popped out, returned to the kitchen bearing a hardcover-sized package inexpertly wrapped by me. She eagerly tore off my inexpert paper to discover that it wasn't a hardcover – it was a VHS tape.

Her eyes and mouth grew round. "Oh! *Dalmatians!* Oh!" She leaned over to kiss my cheek with a loud mwah. "Thank you thank you, daddy!"

"You're welcome welcome."

She was about to poke a fingertip through the shrink wrap on the edge, and then her face went somber. "Oh."

"What's wrong, Bunny?"

She let out a little sigh. "What do I tell my *friends*? If I tell them I got *Dalmatians*, they'll say I'm a *baby!*"

My forehead crinkled. "I thought you *wanted* this."

"I *do!* It's the *best!* But... but my friends don't think it's the best cuz it's not cool!"

I leaned in and put an arm around her shoulders. "Gimme a minute to think, here." I kissed her hair and we just took a couple of breaths. "Okay, I got it." I lifted my face from her hair so I could see her eyes. "Tell 'em you got *Terminator*. You ever see *Terminator?*" She shook her head. "Yeah, I figured, actually. Yeah, tell 'em you got *Terminator*, and if you have to say anything else, say 'the skeleton was the best part'."

"'Skeleton'?"

"Yep. 'The skeleton was the best part', and after that just agree with everybody else."

She giggled. "Daddy!"

"And, and, if anyone asks to watch it with you, tell 'em I borrowed it! Yeah! And then they'll think *I'm* cool, too!"

"You're silly, daddy." Just then the front doorbell sounded.

Zoe stood there, cheeks a bit pink from the briskness of the day. I could see her work uniform under her opened jacket, but her hair was down from the banana clip, so my guess was she had just finished her shift. She had a small bag in one hand. "Did I hear correctly that there's a birthday girl in here?"

I gave a small bow of my head. "Why, yes, you heard correctly. Come this way, please." I took her jacket to hang, then escorted her to the kitchen.

Bonnie gave a little wriggle of excitement when she saw Zoe come in. "Zoe!"

Zoe smiled bigger. "Happy birthday, toots!" She walked over and handed the bag to Bonnie. "Here, I brought you just a teeny something --" (she whipped her head around to glare at me) "-- and yes, I *should* have."

The bag rattled and the paper on two small gifts ripped. "Kris Kross!" Bonnie gasped at her new cassette, then "Oh! And a necklace! It's beautiful! Thanks, Zoe!"

"You're welcome, toots. Happy birthday again."

I managed to see that the necklace at least was one of those garish department-store things clearly aimed at kids, with clunky dayglo beads, and I relaxed a little. Why did I have this urge to want to berate Zoe about overspending? She was a grown woman and surely knew her own budget better than I did. "Hey, um, stay and have some cake with us, why don'tcha?"

"I'd love to, McPhails, but..." She was already heading to the door. "I have a prior commitment. Date with Cedric." She gave me a fluid wink. "Sorry." We all said goodbyes and she headed out.

"Who's Cedric?"

I petted her head. "I'll tell you about him when you're even older."

A few days later, my next hydro bill arrived. And yes, once again, only water and sewage charges itemized, nothing about electricity. And once again I was pleased to be spending so much less than I had feared back in the winter.

But today I allowed myself to think further. I wanted to have a look at these solar panels – I was curious about how big they were, how many were needed to supply the house, where they were placed to catch the best overall angle of the sun throughout the days and the seasons. I liked to know these sorts of things.

I was thinking that now would be a good time to see them, with all the roofs clear of the snow – even the snow ridges from the street plows were gone by now... and suddenly I realized that I hadn't even wondered before: if the panels get covered by snow during the winter, then how do they even work? I mean, clearly they did, but I couldn't explain it to someone. I determined that I would do my research, and find out how that all worked – it would make a good column.

I went out – didn't bother with a jacket, I'd only be outside for a minute – and walked across my big squishy front yard, out to the fence so I'd be able to see the roof. I peered up, and could see the roof, and the chimney, but nothing else. So I slowly walked the perimeter of my yards, along all the fences, looking up at the house from every angle.

And finally came full circle. There were no solar panels anywhere on this property.

I returned Angel's book at our next appointment. And yes, I really did read all of it first. I braced myself for a bumpy road once she asked me about it, which happened almost before she put the first oil on my back.

To start with, I told her it was "enlightening reading". By which I meant *it was enlightening to discover that people could actually be this irrational*. And I said I "found it hard to put down". By which I meant *without throwing*. Finally, I told her that, in some parts of the book at least, the author put forward ideas that made me think, that at least made me get clear in my own mind about why I knew what I knew – it helped prevent me from getting intellectually lazy. By which I meant just what I said.

"I *do* have a few problems with that book, though," I admitted.

"And I was sure you would. Such as?"

"Well, for one, some of these writers she refers to are treating science like a, a *buffet!* They find some interesting, tasty science buzzwords and drop them onto their plate. They ignore the boring boiled vegetables, the exceptions and qualifications and limitations that stop science from being magic. You can't cozy up to science's sparkly bits and then handwave away the parts you don't like – true science is an organic whole."

"Uh-huh."

"*And!* And some of these folks, they just, they just *make up* answers to things!"

"How do you mean?"

"Like 'chakras' and 'energy centres' and 'meridians' – they throw these terms around like they're proven facts, but they give no evidence!"

"Now wait, what about something like acupuncture? There have been a lot of studies done..."

"Okay, yes, true, we have documentation about acupuncture and it seems to work. But just because it works, doesn't mean that the reason these other people *say* it works, meridians or whatever – that doesn't *prove* that meridians exist. It could work for some other completely different reason. Y'see?"

"I do."

"But this whole attitude of 'make up an answer, and if we like it, we keep it' – that's like going back to Aristotle!"

She slid an elbow up my spine, which felt way better than it sounds when you tell people. "I dunno. It seems to me that the only important thing is It Works, science or no."

"But *does* it work? I mean, does it work consistently? Repeatedly? Does it work in the lab? Is it reproducible? Not that I've heard, so far. And *that* stuff is truth."

"Actually, that stuff is *science*. And what you're telling me is science is truth. And *only* science is truth."

"Yes!"

"And I'm disagreeing."

We both fell quiet. Pretty sure I sighed.

Near the end of the session, when she was working on my head and my consciousness altered a little, I asked her, soft and mumbly, if she might have given any more thought to dinner with me someday.

She hummed, and I thought I caught a note of dawning recognition in that sound. "Y'know.... I *would* like to continue this conversation sometime, on, um, more neutral turf. How about we pencil in the end of June? A lot of my classes will be wrapped up by then."

That was almost enough to make me alert. "Mmm, great, yeah."

"Sure. Remind me closer to that time, okay?"

That evening, I was curled up in the parlor, reading one of the little brown journals, and ran across an entry that reminded me of some of my debate with Angel:

May 8, 1984

The fundamental mysteries of electric charge remain after centuries. We explain attraction and repulsion by like and opposite charges. But "charge" only has meaning in terms of attraction or repulsion. None of this tells us why.

I stopped reading when I heard the doorbell. Obviously it wasn't Frank, but who?

It was Mitch, bringing back my box of cassettes. He handed me the box and I invited him in.

"I made copies of some for me and some for Frank. Hope you don't mind."

"Nah, I'm cool. Your criminal misdeeds are safe with me."

He looked around to take in the room, much as I did on that December day. "Wow, Frank was right – he said your place is like between *The Addams Family* and *Leave It to Beaver*. Cool."

I shrugged, not really sure I understood what was Beavery about my life, but I could only see it from the inside. I knelt and tucked the box back under the stereo. "So how'd'ja like what rock 'n' roll was up to when you were in kindergarten?"

Mitch shuffled closer. "Oh yeah, tasty. Extremely cool. Reminds me of some of my indie albums." I felt him leaning over to me to look at my collection, and before I could ask him more, he burst out, "Hey cool! *Pat!* All of 'em! Even *Song X!*"

I stood up and stared at him. "You like Pat?"

"Hell yeah! I like *lotsa* different things!"

"Wow, cool."

"I still like grunge most, though. That's Frank's fault."

"Oh, he, he introduced you?"

Mitch said "Yeah," then sighed. "Man, he knows *so much!*"

"What, Frank is like your guru? Your Lamaze coach?"

Mitch snorted. "Yer a dick, Mr. McPhail. But naw, he... Frank's done a lot, he's lived a lot. He's really... *wise.*" He rubbed the back of his neck. "I never used to think about stuff much before. I just slacked 'n' partied 'n' got by. But Frank, he really makes ya think. Ya *notice* things. He's *inspiring*, y'know?"

"Oh yeah? So, what is it you think about now?"

He thought for a second, then snorted again. "I dunno. Life 'n' stuff, I guess. Oh, and Mama-san hates Frank, so that's even *more* cool."

"Aha. Well, Frank *is*, uh, quite a character." I looked at Mitch's eyes, just

below his wild hair. "But, y'know, so are *you*. I mean, you've got talent, Mitch, you've got a lot to offer. Don't sell yourself short. And just the other day I had someone telling *me* not to do that, too."

"Uh..." Mitch blinked a lot, then looked down at the floor in front of him, then beside him, as if he had lost something but was too tired to go hunting for it. When he looked at me again, his mouth was small and quiet. "Thanks, Mr. McPhail."

I pushed my hair back. "I, I gotta get you guys to call me 'Mike'. I'm not *that* much older than you, y'know? 'Mr. McPhail' makes me feel antediluvian!"

Mitch smiled. "Don't worry about it."

Twelve

The full warmth of May was upon us, and I gloried in the fact that I could walk to The Wien, not only without a jacket, but in short sleeves. This is the sort of weather we treasure and don't take for granted in this part of the world.

Zoe was on break, and spent it sitting at my table and joining me in a coffee. She leaned forward, excited, and said, "Hey listen, you'll never guess: Peter made it to the regional finals!"

"The what?"

"Finals! ... Karaoke!"

"What, is karaoke like a professional *sport* now? Are, are there karaoke *Olympics*?"

"Churl. Seriously, this is big stuff. First prize in the *national* finals is a trip to Hollywood."

My mug paused on its way to my mouth. "For *karaoke?! Really?!*"

She nodded. Then said, "Hey, wanna go?"

I looked blank. "Where?"

"Into town! To see Peter in the regionals, it'll be great!"

I considered it. Could be fun, who knew? "Anyone else going?"

"Sam is. And her paramour. And Fliss'll meet us there."

"Ah, so it's not like this is a *date*."

"Nope, just a few friends going out and enjoying themselves."

"And I assume we'd like to use my car?"

"That isn't why I asked you, but I wouldn't say no."

Zoe and I pushed our way through a surprisingly dense crowd in the

basement section of a club a little way from the Yonge Street strip. We both craned our necks, trying to see over and through people to catch a sign of Fliss. Finally Fliss must have spotted us, because she rose from her seat at our table and waved. I realized that, with a crowd this size, she was lucky to have been able to snag us a table with six chairs. She said hi to us, Zoe kissed her on the head and said, "Hey, sprout", and we all sat.

Fliss tilted her head. "Where's Sam and Whoozit?"

A corner of Zoe's mouth tugged. "Sam didn't feel like coming. Had a fight with Roger." She shook her head. "I dunno, that guy..."

"Where, uh, where's Pete?" I asked.

"In back, getting ready – this place actually has decent dressing rooms."

"Dressing rooms?" This was already sounding a lot more showbiz than anything I had ever been led to understand about karaoke. Then again, Zoe did say that this was a big deal. I needed to be prepared to adjust my expectations, I guess.

Zoe said, "Mike's never seen Peter sing before."

Fliss grinned at me. "Really? Wow! You're in for a real --" and just then she was cut off by the dimming of lights and the boom of an MC announcing the event.

What followed was a couple of hours of strange variety. Many types and styles of singers, a wide assortment of songs. Some people clearly just got up on stage in their street clothes and sang classic rock songs in plain honest voices. Others put thought and effort into costumes, which I would not have expected. I remember one lanky guy, resplendent in full-out Rhinestone Cowboy gear, moaning out a New Country song which I admit I didn't recognize but the crowd did.

Many of the singers were clearly professional-quality voices and garnered enthusiastic applause. One or two were frankly terrible, but they were so happy to simply be on stage, and had such a great time trying, that their joy was contagious and everyone listening enjoyed the performance – my guess is that their bizarre charisma is what got them as far as the regional finals.

One fellow I particularly remember did a number from *Phantom*, bellowing it out with a bombastic vibrato. And not only was he decked out in a tux and cape and half-mask, but he had assistants at the foot of the stage, operating coloured spotlights and a smoke machine. (I had forgotten how stinky those smoke machines are.) This struck me as a case of someone with 'more dollars than sense', but he earned a standing ovation, and he lapped up every drop of it.

And then the MC's voice boomed out from the wings again, saying, "Our next contestant comes to us from out in Westgate, Ontario – please put your hands together for the sultry stylings of *Petra!*"

The sound of applause layered over the music coming from the PA, and my eyebrows went up in surprised recognition of the song. It was a lush big band arrangement of a Duke Ellington classic, *I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart*. I was impressed that anyone else would know, let alone tackle, this gorgeous number.

Before I had time to dwell on the fact that there was another contestant here from Westgate, Petra came slinking out into a bright spotlight which set off dazzling stars in her sparkling, floor-length black gown. She was an astonishingly tall and slender woman, olive-skinned, moving with easy, sinuous grace to the mike stand. With all that going on, as well as the long black evening gloves and the lock of black hair falling down over one eye, she seemed to be aiming for a Gilda vibe – and nailing it, as far as I was concerned.

Just before she opened her mouth for the first line, she looked toward our table, her uncovered eye caught mine, and she gave me a lazy wink.

It was Peter.

It was Peter in drag.

I let a song go out of my heart – he hit that octave leap perfectly – *it was the sweetest melody...*

No, he *wasn't* in drag. 'Drag' is that garish, multi-hued, unconvincing Divine look. He was transformed into the torch singer, Petra. His voice was spectacular, and yet somehow he was also able to project it as a dusky, throaty, woman's voice, which only reinforced the illusion of his visuals.

Zoe elbowed me and spoke up over the sound. "I've never seen your mouth

hang open so wide."

I didn't turn to face her; I couldn't take my eyes off this performance. "You never *said!*"

"You never asked."

Petra finished her song and took a gentle bow during the musical outro. Claps and cheers rang through the club, and I wondered how many other people in the audience didn't realize. She exited stage left, then shortly re-emerged onto the club floor and took a seat with us.

I kept staring. Even this close up, the illusion was incredible. Was he this talented a makeup artist? Did he have a friend? He let out his breath in a gentle pant and said, "Hiya, guys. Oh hey, where's Sam?"

"She's sick," Fliss said.

"Aw! That's too bad. Still!" He sat back and made a hail-fellow-well-met gesture with a black-gloved arm. "I'm so glad you guys could make it, thank you for coming."

I was finally able to speak, so I said, "Uhh..."

He turned to look at me and beamed. It was still that familiar Peter beam, but somehow now it also belonged to Petra. "Aaa! You shoulda seen the look on your face, Mike! You're priceless!"

"Uhh..."

He pointed at me. "Aaa! Lookit 'im still! Ain't he great?!"

While they laughed, I muttered, "Well, you, you, you surprised me, okay? And-and you sing so much higher than your speaking voice! You sound kinda like Rosemary Clooney or something! How d'you *do* that?"

Peter shrugged. "I dunno. Just comes out."

The MC was already announcing the next singer, and I had to speak up over their intro music. "Well anyway, you were phenomenal! You're gonna win this thing!"

He grinned and his long fake eyelashes blinked. "Thank you, Mike."

But I was wrong. First prize went to the Phantom, and I dismissed the judges as being hoodwinked by big-budget glitz and deaf to true quality. I thought Peter had been robbed.

He told me to relax, waved a small envelope, and said, "Two hundred dollars for third place is not too shabby. Last year, I didn't even place in the regionals. I'm doing okay." I nodded, and he added, "But next year I'm gonna *smoke* the Phantom!" Then he turned to Fliss and said, "Hey, remember Vida, the girl who did 'Fernando'?" Fliss nodded. "She's throwing an after party for all of us at her place. Wanna go? They're nice people, really."

"Yeah okay!" As they stood, Fliss turned to her sister and said, "Now we're trusting you two to behave on your own, hear me?"

Zoe gave one little nod. "Yes, mom." And then they threaded their way through the remains of the crowd and off.

I turned to Zoe, picked up the dregs of my drink, and said, "That was one of the most bizarre experiences of my entire life."

"Then you must not have lived much. And here's me thinking you were a Big City Boy."

"Do, do *all* you people in Westgate live these secret Fellini lives?"

"Yep, pretty much."

We finished our drinks, then I said, "Whatcha wanna do now?"

"Well..." She looked to the side. "The dancefloor's still open for a while..."

"Of course of course. What was I thinking."

When we and the Holy Spirit started the first dance, I said, "But this still isn't a date?"

"Still not a date, right."

The highways back to Westgate were pretty quiet that late at night, relaxing, in their own simple way. Zoe tried to stretch in the shotgun seat, as much as the seatbelt would allow.

"That was fun," she said. "I gotta do that more often."

"Like I said: tell Sam to take you out more."

"Ha and ha."

A few lights went past, then I said, "I still can't get over Pete. *Man*, he was impressive. I wish *I* could do that."

She giggled. "What, sing in drag? C.K. Dexter McPhail, you have unsuspected depth!"

I gave her a quick glare, then watched the road. "I *meant*: just get up there and, and let it all go. Go for it, have fun, not care, y'know? I heard Peter and I... I felt so, so *bound up*, and... and *old*."

"I wish you'd get off this 'old' kick. You're only the same age as me. *I'm* not 'old'."

"Th-that's just it. *You're* not."

She tisked. "I dunno, you... you worry too much, I think. About locking yourself into this 'adult image' you have, and then complaining about it. Y'know, growing up means learning to let your childhood go... but *also* learning to recognize which parts of your childhood you can *keep*."

A sign flowed past us in my headlights. "Hm. If this was a *date*, I wonder if I'd stand a chance against you."

"Nope. I'd, uh... bring you to heel with my awesome debating prowess."

"No doubt, no doubt." We rumbled onward a bit, then I added, "Y'know, I don't think I've ever gone on so many not-dates with anybody."

"Aha. Then this is clear evidence that you have in fact not lived much."

"Maybe... Actually, I do have a real date coming up soonish. I, I'm kinda nervous about it."

"Mm? Who with?"

"Uh, with, uh, Angel."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I, I think she wants to talk books or... such..."

"Really."

"Y'know, it's, it's been ages since I was on a *date* date. I feel rusty, kinda."

"Oh, I... don't worry."

I glanced her way for a second. "You 'n' me, now, it's 'a couple of friends going out'. That's simple enough. But *her*... I don't really know her well enough to call it 'a couple of friends'." I looked to see if I could spot anything on the road ahead. "Nope: it's a *date*. Worse: it's a *first* date."

"Mhm."

"And y'know... sometimes I'm not even sure if she knows it? I mean, I... I feel like I could be a woman, or, or a *shoe*, and she'd still go out with me."

Her lips curved up. "Woops. Your secret's out, Mike – she knows you're a shoe." She looked away, out the window, then: "So why do y--" and just stopped.

"What?"

"Nothing." She watched the blackness outside for a while. "Actually, y'know, this, this is good." She nodded. "It is. I mean, I'm glad you've got someone to, to go out with. See, I'm getting into the final draft of my next Cedric book --"

"Oh yeah?!"

"Uh-huh, and, and they want it soon, so I'm gonna be real busy. Like, tonight was the last non-date I'll have time to go on for... for a while."

"Oh." I tried to be happy for her that her writing life was so fruitful. "Well. I mean. I'll... I'll still see you at The Wien, right?"

She turned to give me a tight smile. "Oh yeah of course! I'm not, like, cutting

you out of my life or anything! I..." Her eyes fell and her voice got lower. "I wouldn't do that. I just..." She looked away from me again. "I'm just gonna need a bit more space for a while."

"Oh of course." I glanced over to see if she was looking back at me yet. "I understand about deadlines."

She was still facing the window. "Yes, I'm sure you understand."

Thirteen

The noon sun was unusually hot and direct, even for June, as I came out of my front door and locked it. I noticed that it was time to hire Cyrus to come cut my lawn again, but that could wait until after my stroll down to Sano's to get milk.

Just as I reached the store's entrance, I heard Mitch's voice through the door: "*Awww?! Yer kidding!*"

When I opened, I could see Frank, Dougie, and Inch standing in front of the till, with Mitch looking frazzled and rueful behind it. Frank nodded slowly. "It's the straight poop, sir. Pearl Jam *and* Soundgarden *and* Ministry --"

"I can't go then!" Mitch's voice rang even at the back of the store where the dairy cooler was. "I gotta *work!* Mama-san'll be back in the Old Country for three weeks! *Shit!*"

Frank tried one slow wave of his hand to calm Mitch's energy. "Scant consolation though it may be, I too am forced to pass it by. Zero dinero."

I was approaching them to pay for my milk when Inch pointed her thumb back at me and said to Frank, "So borrow some from Poindexter here." Mitch snorted and said, "Good one, Moga."

"What's this all about?" I said.

Mitch's mouth went crooked. "Lollapalooza Two in August – the ultimate crunch-fest and we can't go!"

Inch said, "Well, maybe *I* could, but I'm fucked if I'm goin' *alone.*" Dougie just grunted.

Frank took Inch aside and tried to keep his voice down, but I could still overhear, "Inch, I am *not* hitting up Mr. Mc--"

But just then a flat voice called from the back room: "Mitsuhiro." Mrs. Sano strode into the store, her look as flat as her voice. "Your mongrel friends are obstructing business. Clear them out."

Affronted, Mitch turned and cried out, "Ma!"

She ignored him and her hands made shooining motions toward Mitch's

bandmates. "G'wan, mutts, out. I got real customers here. Go find a hydrant. Out out out."

Frank suppressed a smirk and turned to the door. "C'mon, Voggers, let's trundle", and he led Dougie and Inch out. I thought I heard Inch mutter something about being "a pussy". Mitch stomped out behind them, letting out a sound like a loud NNNNNN!!!

His mother, scowling, called out after him. "Mitsuhiro!" Then she shook her head.

Once the bell on the door hung still, she looked toward me. "Boys, huh? Were *you* like that at his age, Mr. McPhail?"

I cleared my throat. "A-actually, yes, I, I *was*. Sort of."

She went "Hmf."

When I paid for my milk and took it outside, I saw Vog leaning on the store's brick wall. Mitch was muttering, and as I came closer to them he pulled his shoulders up and seemed to be avoiding my gaze.

"Mr. McPhail," said Frank, "we're airing some new tunes out at rehearsal tonight. Care to join us? You've been remiss in your attendance lately, ya punk."

I looked at Mitch. "Sure, I'd be glad to. I'll come cheer you on."

Frank nodded. "Excellent."

The loft was stuffy from the June heat, even at night, and opening the windows was not advisable with the volume Vog produced, so we were obliged to resort to measures like fanning ourselves with old shingle and tile scraps that were still scattered in the far corners. I sat in what had now become My Spot on the workbench, my ears stuffed with cotton balls.

"Okay, cohorts," said their leader, "I wanna put 'On a Nerve' together with a solo and get it down solid tonight. Mitch, did you get the solo ready?"

Mitch fidgeted. "I, I still wasn't sure what you wanted, Frank. Can you give me some more idea?"

"Like I said, the rough idea is a fast, hot, psycho-freakout, but I mostly wanted to hear *your* ideas." Mitch didn't move. "C'mon, Mitch, you know how the chords go, we already got that part down."

"I dunno. I mean, it's *your* song, you know best--"

Frank rubbed his forehead. "Mitch, Mitch, Mitch. We've repeated this discussion *ad nauseam*. All I ask is that you get a feeling for the song. Then *create!* Create something that fits it. Give me something to react to." He glanced over at Inch and Dougie. "I want the whole band's input."

Looking back at Mitch again, he went on. "Like, have mercy, Sano, you can play rings around me! Am I supposed to teach you to make music here? Should I maybe *tape* a solo and you can *mime* to it onstage?"

I felt like I could hear Frank's drill sergeant coming back and I wondered if maybe I should excuse myself. Mitch looked uncomfortable, his face twisted. "Geez, Frank, c'mon."

"No no, I want *musicians* here, I want a serious group effort. Are you ever gonna *think* about this?!"

Mitch just glared at Frank, looking like he didn't know if he was hurt or angry.

"Are you just as useless as Mama-san says?!"

Suddenly Mitch burst into a near-scream: "*Fuck you, Frank!! Fuck youuu!!!*"

And then there was no sound but Mitch's breathing, no movement but Frank's blinking and the slight raise of his eyebrows. Then Frank let his shoulders drop and rubbed his forehead again. After a long moment, he spoke, his voice low. "Um, Mitch. Look. I, I apologize most profusely. I do. That was utterly remiss." Mitch looked away but leaned a little toward Frank. Frank cleared his throat and said, "Take five, Vog. I'm popping down for a beverage. Smoke 'em if ya got 'em."

He looked directly at Mitch and said, "And Mitch." Mitch finally turned his eyes back to Frank's. "Write us a song for next rehearsal. No – write *two*."

Mitch pushed his hair back away from his eyes. "Right."

Frank passed close by my seat on his way to the door, then said, quietly enough not to be overheard, "Wanna come?"

We walked down the quiet, echoey night street to a late-night variety store, and Frank let out a long sigh. "I have been trying to get him to do that for nearly a *year*."

I'm sure my eyes were open wide as I looked at him. "*Oh yeah?*"

He gave me a half-smile. "Just so. Mitch has been prostrating 'n' salaaming himself all around me ever since I met 'im." The echoes of a few footsteps. "Admittedly, I was flattered at first – I'm no more immune to fawning than the next man. But the mantle of guru is too heavy for me, Mr. McPhail. I'd rather have a *friend*, y'know?"

I nodded. "I guess so, yeah."

"And Mitch is good. He could really grow if he'd let himself. Course, when he *does*, he'll probably end up leaving Vog, but, uh... *c'est la vie*, right?"

"Chin up, Frank. I mean... ya never know, do ya?"

"True enough, sir. True enough."

An evening came in late June when I found myself in a car several levels up from mine, crawling through the streets of Toronto, with Angel at the wheel. She had actually made firm dinner plans and put them into action. All the time I'd spent fretting about whether it would happen, and now I could relax. Except that of course I couldn't.

Conversation on the highway into town had been sporadic, mostly cerebral, and gradually more relaxed. I noticed that she seemed a bit more tense now that we were in the city. I tried to lighten her mood with pleasantries.

"I love it when the days get long like this. Look: 8:45 and the sun's still out."

"Mhm. I'd enjoy it more if I didn't have to fight this traffic." She glanced at me quickly. "I'm sorry I was late, Mike, it was that last appoint--"

"Hey, no problem, you already explained. It's okay."

"Well, I hope it's okay with Jorge."

I blinked. "Horhay?"

"The maître d'. I like to think he and I have an understanding. But we're supposed to be there already. I sure hope he holds our table..."

Jorge bowed again. "Ms. Andersen, you know how it pains me to deny you anything. I held your table for over half-an-hour. And there was a party waiting here all that time."

Angel watched him evenly. "Now, Jorge, you knew I'd be here."

He steered us into a waiting area at the front of the restaurant, supplied with deeply upholstered couches. "I'm afraid I have others to think of as well. Please, have a drink here. On the house. We have a table opening up in ten minutes – a nice one. I'll squeeze you in."

She granted him a gentle smile. "You're too kind. Thank you, Jorge."

"Damn that Jorge."

Angel was poking at her salad with lazy petulance while she said that. I call it a salad, but it had some name I didn't recognize, filled with ingredients I didn't recognize but all were imported – this place offered something called New Globe Cuisine or somesuch to the executives who could afford it. I was eating the same thing: I couldn't read the menu, she offered to order for me, and I decided that, while the flavours were weird, I should be able to at least finish it.

She gazed directly into my eyes, willing me to focus on her, and went on. "He *knew* I was coming. If I don't phone to cancel, then I'm coming. He *knows* that. I'm a responsible person. I take charge of my life. Either I *call*, or I *come*. Right?"

I glanced down at the leaves and seeds on my dish. "Umm... it, uh, it sounds to me like, like he did the best he could. I mean, I mean, we *were* late --"

"Where'd that traffic *come* from, anyway, this time of night?"

"— and we only waited five minutes and got this table which seems nice enough to me. I, I don't see --"

"But it's not *my* table." She sighed, pushed her fork into some leaves. "Well, enough. It was his decision, to wait for us or not. He chose not to. We just have to accept that and live within it." She looked me in the eye and, with a little smile and a lofty tone, said, "Transcendence."

I gazed at her across the table. As I had dreamed of doing, so many times. Her white dress – simple, glossy, snug, strapless – made her look like a creature of light. A small string of pearls at her neck and unadorned white stilettos (under the tablecloth now, of course) were her only other adornment. She needed no help from any artifice – she was a vision of perfection in any situation, any environment. And she was my date for the evening. That still had yet to really sink in.

She took a delicate sip of water, then settled in to address me. "Remember I said you were getting me to think? I enjoy that – I can't remember the last time a man challenged me that way. So... I sat down to figure out how to explain just what I do believe."

I pursed my lips. "Hm. Okay. I, I'd like to, to hear this. What do you believe in? The crystal pyramids of Atlantis? UFO abductions?"

Her mouth went crooked – and yet still looked delicious. "Mike. C'maan."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Go ahead."

She made a little throat-clearing sound. "Okay, umm... I believe that we experience many things that science doesn't have a full explanation for."

"Such as?"

"Such as, uhh... dreaming? Hypnosis? Falling in love?"

I felt my eyebrows draw together. "Okay."

"I believe that if everyone was a better person, it'd be a better world."

"...all right."

"I believe that the only person you can *make* 'a better person' is *yourself*."

I nodded.

"I believe that if something works for you and makes you happy, and it doesn't hurt anybody – including yourself – then, what's it to anybody else?"

"Right."

She paused for a few heartbeats, then said, "That's it."

"Huh?"

"Well, there *are* some other things off to the side, like self-responsibility and karma and stuff... but what I mentioned is the core of my 'flaky New Age' belief system."

I sat. I digested. I ran back over the points she mentioned, and my eyes widened.

I looked up at her, feeling oddly helpless somehow, and said, "I.... can not object to *any* of that!"

Her grin became huge and relaxed and true, scrunching her eyes and nose, and she had never looked so beautiful before, and she said, "*I know!*" and then giggled at length, like she must have when she was a little girl in school. And my heart pounded.

I slowly shook my head, my eyes never leaving hers. "You.... you are... you are nobody's fool, are you. Wow."

She flushed. "Thank you."

"Angel!" -- it was Surfer Owens' voice!

Lance strode over to our table, wearing a dark blue suit whose jacket strained to contain him. Angel looked up at him and her eyes glittered. "Well *hello*, Lance! What a nice surprise!"

"Definitely! Ever cool! G'devening, Mike."

"I thought you were away on a shoot."

"Got back early." He gestured behind himself with his mullet. "Me 'n' my agent are wining 'n' dining some publishing mogul. Any luck and I'll go home with a deal to do book covers --"

She reached out and draped her smooth hand over his knuckles. "No luck, Lance – *make* it happen. *Will* it. Take charge."

He nodded. "Right on, gorgeous, will do."

"Will you be up my way for the seminars next month?"

"Tell you what." His eyes twinkled. I think his teeth did, too. "Make it a dinner date and I *promise* I'll come."

She nodded. "Done."

He backed away from us. "Better get back before Mr. Mogul overheats. See ya, Angel."

"Bye-ee."

He nodded at me as he turned. "Nice seeing you again, Mike."

I just squeaked out, "Uh-huh."

Angel just looked off in Lance's direction for a while, saying nothing. Then she turned to me and said, "What's wrong, Mike?"

"Nothing. Nothing, I... I, I was just, y'know, wondering how I'd, I'd look squeezed out between his fingers like Play-Doh."

She giggled and brushed her hair back from a shoulder. "Lance is *not* the jealous type. *And* he has nothing to be jealous *about*. I *told* you. He's not my 'steady fella' or anything. He's just a friend. He knows I have other friends." She smiled at me with more warmth. "I'd like to think that *we're* friends."

My heart gave a little lurch. "Well of course. Yeah."

Keeping her eyes on the road on the way back, Angel said to me, "You got kinda quiet there, toward the end. Anything wrong?"

"Hm? Ah, no, no, I just, uh... my, my head is hurting a little, is all?" Which was maybe a little true.

"Well, you should've said. I could've taken you home sooner."

"I didn't wanna spoil things. I mean, I waited so long for tonight --"

"But Mike, you, you don't have to be *noble* around me, all right?" She slid her car into the passing lane. "However, you bring things like this on yourself, you *know* that. You don't really eat right, you don't breathe right, you --"

"*Breathe*'?! Angel, I, I breathe, honest! Inhale *and* exhale, *both*! I got 'em down to a science!"

"Hmf. You *think* you do. You have to take charge, Mike. Of your health. Of your *life*." A semi's lights washed over us as it passed in the opposing lanes. "Reality is what *you build*. Your aura, positive or negative, draws things into your world."

"Oh, so I, so I suppose *you* never *get* headaches."

Somewhat airily, she replied, "I *don't*, as it happens... I simply don't *allow* them."

I glanced sidelong at her. "Okay." And I wondered if maybe I was missing out on something.

When she parked in front of my house to drop me off, we said the traditional thank you for a lovely times. Then when I sat a couple of heartbeats longer, saying nothing, she leaned over and gave me a quick peck on the lips, like she figured I was expecting it and it was the only way to get me to go. Efficient.

But it wasn't like that at all. I was just trying to make the evening last, eager for every second of her time I could get, not thinking about why.

Fourteen

The next morning, a Wien mug full of coffee was set in front of me, and a voice said, "Good morning, stranger," almost before I was aware that I had decided to have breakfast there today. I had not slept well.

I mumbled, "Nnn. Thank you." Rubbed my eyes, then looked up at Zoe. "Um, how's the book coming?"

"Oh. Good. Real good. Fine."

"Right on."

"So, how was your, um..." Zoe gave the back of her neck a little scratch. "Didn't you have, uh, dinner with Angel last night?"

"Oh. Yeah. It... it was... okay. Sorta."

Her eyes widened. "Wohhhhhh! That good?! And *I missed it!* 'Okay sorta' – wow!"

I held my forehead in one hand. "No-no-no, I... it was *nice*, I... I dunno, I guess I was, uh, expecting something different? Maybe?"

She seemed to relax a bit, everywhere. "You surprise me sometimes, you know that? You really do."

It was later that afternoon that I discovered the bomb in the little brown journals. I was snuggled into my wing chair, enjoying the not-too-warm breeze coming in the window, listening to some Thelonious Monk while I read. Here was the first entry that alerted me to the approach of something strange:

January 23, 1985

Joseph Newman's work on the conversion of gyroscopic electron spin into linear electron motion raises interesting questions. It's hard to find detailed objective information in this area. Time to roll up my sleeves?

I remembered that the Joseph Newman he referred to was a crank inventor in the seventies who essentially claimed to be able to conjure electricity out of nothing. It looked like Great-Uncle Magnus took this quack more seriously

than I or anyone else did, and I was actually mildly disappointed in him here.

Then there was an unusual gap of months until the next entry:

April 4, 1985

At last, I feel ready to permanently record the events of the last two months. Simply by soldering wires to a plate of copper, I have produced an electric current where none ought to exist.

And I stopped, and stared, and stared, and stared. I couldn't even make a sound.

There were many more entries involving experiments of wide and thorough permutations; he wrote a good summary in his entry for July 10th:

All attempts to duplicate my Copper Plate Generator continue to fail. Every attempt to use a different metallic element or compound produces nothing. Every attempt to use a different piece of copper produces nothing. Every time I move the apparatus more than 169 cm from the workroom, it ceases functioning.

I tucked my finger into the journal as a bookmark, went into the kitchen and got the key out of the cupboard. Then went down to the basement, opened the workroom, flicked on the lights, and sat at the workbench. And stared at the copper plate.

It didn't move. It didn't make a sound. I felt no heat rising from it (didn't dare touch it, though). There was just that ozone smell near it. It just sat there, being impossible.

Could this be a hoax? As far as I could tell, my uncle wasn't trying to get anyone else to believe any of this. Was he deluded? If so, it would be a delusion that compelled him consistently over years of writing and working. And that would still leave the question, what was providing electricity to this house? If not this thing here beside me, then what?

I had no way of knowing how long I sat and just looked at that metal plate. Or how much longer I sat continuing to read the journal and feeling the edges of my universe dissolve.

By the time I got hungry and went upstairs to get a sandwich, I was into the journal entries for the following year. I was curled in my chair again, reading this:

August 29, 1986

When I think of the months of ingenuity and effort it has taken to learn how to convert the CPG's output into household current, to hook it up safely to the house's wiring, to negotiate getting the house off of the official hydro grid, while the CPG itself is such a simple, tiny thing, albeit a monstrous thing.

The CPG is plainly impossible. There's no reason why it should work. There's no reason why it should stop if it's moved. It contradicts the most fundamental basic laws of science, which even Einstein and Hawking still respected.

Science experiments are supposed to be logically consistent and reproducible by any unbiased experimenter. In this respect, the CPG is more like the voodoo doll of an experiment, a strange, silly simulation.

And yet there is no denying the fact that this little accident of mine has been relentlessly producing electric current out of nothing at all, enough current to power an entire household easily, while visions of perpetual motion dance in my head!

By no stretch of the imagination can this device be called science. Nevertheless, it is truth.

I thought for a long time, then read on.

September 1, 1986

Dear Lord, what a hangover. Please kill me.

September 2, 1986

Spending a year working with the CPG didn't help. Spending two solid days stinking drunk didn't help. I cannot escape the monstrous, alien wrongness of this thing I have made, this little metal scrap that invalidates huge swaths of our entire system of knowledge.

And yet there is wonder here, and beauty, in that it opens up a universe of possibility far larger and grander than anything we have guessed. If this can happen, then what can't?

A few days after this, Zoe brought my plate of chicken parm to my table and I thought to ask her, "You busy tomorrow night?"

She stood still for a blink, then seemed to relax. "Maybe. Who wants to know?"

"I, I wasn't sure if you're, uh, still busy with your book, but, uh, there's a good singer in town tomorrow, thought you might enjoy her."

"Hmmm... I could extricate myself, I suppose. Who's singing?"

"Noreen Smith. Legendary jazz chanteuse from out west."

"Don't know the name, but... are you sure you want *me* to go?"

"Of course. Unless you know some *other* waitress-slash-novelist I'd *rather* go with." She gave me a crooked little grin. "C'mon, it'll be fun. Just a couple of friends going out for a good time. *You* know."

She blinked. "Okay, why not? Great."

Noreen was not as tall or glamorous as, let's say, Petra, but her voice and her timing were things of exquisite beauty. And the young guys accompanying her on piano and bass showed similarly impeccable taste and touch. They made a glorious sound. I was reminded yet again that not being professionals or famous said nothing about an artist's skill or talent or quality. Proud amateurism, in the true sense of "doing it for love", was part of the punk manifesto, after all.

Zoe applauded with me at the end of the classic trio's first set. "You were right, she's great," she said. "Are we staying for the next one?"

"Sure, if it's not too late for you."

She tried to gather up the threads of our conversation from before the music had started. "Now *what* were you saying before?"

"Um, you mean about *The Jetsons*?"

"Yeah! Are you serious?!" And she gave an incredulous little laugh.

"Well, remember that I was really little at the time... but yeah: that's what got me into science as a kid – *The Jetsons!*" She just giggled. "No no, think about it. They show you a world where everything's faster and cleaner and safer and more fun and, and *nicer*, all because of *technology*. That's what got me thinking about, about knowledge as, as a force for good, y'know?"

Her mouth went a bit crooked. "I never liked *The Jetsons*. **Or** *The Flintstones*. They annoyed me."

"Howcum?"

"Well hey: didn't you ever notice how all those cartoons had the same plots?"

"Uh... well, eventually yeah, I guess."

"That's just it! All they were was 'life in the fifties' in new clothes! Wilma *and* Jane and *all* the other women were just manipulative, irrational fifties housewife stereotypes! Those cartoons were *propaganda!* They said, 'Life has always *been* like this, it always *will* be, no matter *what!* And things are funny and cozy and, and *reassuring* this way, so why try to *change* anything?' As if life in the fifties was the law of gravity or something!"

I sipped my drink and blinked, owlshly I'm sure. "You got all *that* from *cartoons?*"

"Well c'mon, *you* got 'knowledge as a force for good', so why not."

I nodded. "Touché." I gently cleared my throat. "Anyway, that probably steered me to where I am today, writing about science. But..." I trailed off and watched my ice cubes.

"But what?"

I rubbed my temple, sighed, and muttered, "Geez, I *gotta* tell *somebody!*" And then I broke down and told Zoe about my great-uncle's discovery, and his miracle locked away in the basement of my house. I concluded with, "And he died never really understanding the thing. Meanwhile he, he's chucked this gigantic monkey wrench from beyond the grave into my entire belief system!"

Zoe spent maybe half a minute looking at me, looking at her drink, sipping,

then repeat in silence. Finally she said, "Well, I cannot think of any earthly reason why you'd lie to me about this, Mike. And I, I know you well enough to know that you're not crazy – overly." She gave me a half-sad little smile. "So I guess I gotta believe you, huh?"

I raised flustered hands before me. "But-but-but don't you see? Everything I know is *wrong!* I, I dunno what to *think* anymore! This --"

"Shhhhhhhhhh." She reached a hand out to my forearm and eased it back down to the table. "Relax, buddy." When she saw me breathing lighter, she continued. "You could learn things from your uncle – like how to accept things. Sounds like it took him years but, eventually, he got there. Seems to me that you're panicking a bit because you don't know how to explain this, *and* you're afraid you'll never be able to. Or, like you thought you had everything figured out, and then something happens that you never expected." She paused for a drink. "Well, that's life, Mike. You can hide from it, or just live it."

"But I, I've always tried to figure out my life, y'know? I mean, I always believed that 'the unexamined life is not worth living' and all that."

There was a glow in her brown eyes and her smile. "Well, I always believed that 'the un-lived life is not worth examining'."

I looked over and saw a few couples on the dancefloor, then back at Zoe. "Aren't you gonna ask me to dance?"

She thought, very briefly, then said, "All right." She stood up and held her hand out to me. "Wanna dance?"

I stood and took it. "Yeah okay."

Fifteen

In August, an air conditioner ran in the window of Angel's front office, but there was none within her massage room itself. (I forget why – she may have said something about it generating 'contrary vibrations' or such.) Fortunately, the combination of a ceiling fan and my own nakedness kept me from becoming uncomfortably warm.

I asked her if she remembered our dinner at the end of June.

"Uh-huh."

I paused to just dwell in the sensation of her rubbing out a small kink in my back, then said, "I've been thinking... about you saying 'science doesn't have all the answers' and all that? And, and, uh, I... I'm noticing it seems to be more true as time goes on, y'know?"

"Ho-ho!" Her hands stopped for a second. "Does this mean Mr. Left-Brain McPhail is *converting*?!"

I humphed. "I'm, I'm just admitting that.... things have started to look different since I came here. It's kinda hard to explain, there's lots of things, I... I'm noticing my body more, I'm noticing the environment more..."

"I told you when we started that massage affects *all* of you, and not just in ways you expect."

"That seems to be true." She moved down to my feet and I twitched when she hit a ticklish spot. "But y'know, I *still* have problems with *some* of this New Age stuff of yours."

"Oh, what is it *this* time?"

"Well... like there's so many different answers for things, and you're supposed to 'search' til you find the one that 'feels right'."

"So?"

"I... feelings are so unreliable, they change so much. Is *that* any way to determine *truth*? I mean, with science, answers are answers, it doesn't matter how you feel about them. It's an objective decision process."

"And 'objective' means 'better'?"

"It means 'more reliable'. To find the truth, you *have to* be objective."

"That's an *axiom*, Mike – and an axiom is really just an *opinion*."

I was quiet a long time. Finally I sighed and said, "Well, it still seems to me like people wandering around until someone tells 'em what they wanna hear. It's a philosophy that, that legitimizes wish fulfillment so people can sell books 'n' trinkets."

Angel was kneading one of my forearms by now. "Well, I can't deny that that *does* happen sometimes. But it doesn't mean *none* of them are sincere, does it?"

"Granted – but being sincere is not a guarantee of being right, either. But there's more: your whole idea of 'creating your own reality', 'personal responsibility', 'karma', 'drawing things to yourself' – I still can't buy it."

"Mm?"

"I mean, the, the *whole world* is *not* affected by how *I* feel or what *I* think!"

"That's how your world *seems* to you, because that's what you *believe*. You've built a reality that *feels* like it's *apart* from you. See?"

"Aw geez," I sighed. "If everyone built their own reality, d-don'tcha think they'd all be like *you*?! I mean, *look* at you! You're beautiful and bright, you're never sick, you have a job you like, you get to date fantasy hunks – don't you think most people would choose a reality like *yours* over the one they *have*? *If* they really had any choice?"

"Now how would I know what other people really want, Mike?"

"Aa, you're just waffling... and you tell me about karma – meaning basically that people deserve whatever happens to them, so they can learn from it, right?"

"It's not quite that simple, but..."

"So then what happens to charity? To, to altruism? Compassion? Why should you help someone in a jam if they *deserve* their jam, if they need to *learn* from it? You, you're serving, uh, destiny or whatever if you just let them suffer! Don't you think it--" I had a sudden flashback of Angel cursing out Jorge over

dinner. "Don't you think you run the risk of becoming insensitive to other people's problems?"

"Um, not necessarily. What if someone's karmic lesson is the experience of being *helped*? What if *your* karma is to be a *helper*? Y'know, it can work either way."

"Fine in theory, but, but how do you know which way?"

"We all have to figure out for ourselves how life works, right? That's just one part of it, right there."

I thought about that night in June again, how she had told me that I bring my problems on myself. "So you don't think this could make people unsympathetic?"

"I don't see it that way, no. Take Lance for an example. Look at all the charity work he does." Lance, oy. "Anyway, even though you're still arguing, I feel like you really are starting to open up a bit, and that's good.... Tell you what: do you feel ready to try an exercise? It's real simple, and it won't threaten your left-brain logical blindfold."

"You make it sound so appealing. What is it?"

"Breathing."

"Didn't I already tell you I got that down?"

"Deep breathing. Give your body the oxygen it needs to do a good job."

"That's *it*?"

"That's it. Take twenty minutes to just breathe deep, and focus on it."

"That's meditation, isn't it?"

"It's maybe like the first step. Try it. A lot of people find that some surprising things come up out of their minds when they do. Just let that happen, accept it. It's really good for you, and you don't have to buy anything or shave your head."

That night, the air conditioner in my parlor window was still running because the night had not cooled down much. I decided I would try this breathing, put on a very sedate Paul Desmond CD turned low, turned the lights out, thought about sitting on the floor in the lotus position. When I admitted to myself that I had never done a lotus position and wasn't exactly sure how it went anyway, I just sat in my wing chair. Then I closed my eyes, sat still, and breathed.

Deep in. Long out. Very slow. Focus on the breath. Simple but not easy.

My body settled into a slow rhythm. I wondered how many seconds each breath was taking. Forget that wondering. Focus on the breath.

I was remembering a book I had when I was six, a kids' book about optics, and then I learned how to set paper scraps on fire with a magnifying glass. No, focus on the breath.

I breathed. I breathed.

I remembered dancing with Zoe at the Noreen Smith gig, and she was again wearing that fine gold chain on her ankle. No, focus on the breath.

I breathed. I thought about the first time I got a kite to fly. No. I breathed.

And I must've kept breathing, but I stopped focusing on it at some point because I fell asleep somewhere in there and napped in the chair for an hour or two.

August 28th was the last weekday before my birthday on Sunday. The 30th was my thirtieth – and even though I knew it was just a number and didn't really matter, it felt monumental, no matter how often I told myself it wasn't. I thought about how, a year ago, I had no idea that I would ever end up in this town, living this life, and My Big Three Oh took on even more of an air of change and transition than it usually carries.

I spent the morning getting some queries and invoices drawn up and ready to get into the mail before the weekend. Then I decided to make an outing of it. I walked down to the post office to get my correspondence out and pick up some more stamps while I was at it. The music store was not far from there, and Pat had recently released a new album, so I made that my birthday present to myself. By then it was lunchtime, and The Wien was within eyeshot from where I was, so that became a no-brainer.

I felt kinda surfer, strutting in the door in my white T-shirt and cutoffs and shades – but not as surfer as Lance Kendall. Nope, I could never be as surfer as Lance.

When Zoe set my omelette in front of me, she noticed the little bag from the music store sitting by me. "Whatcha got?"

"Finally got the new Pat Metheny, oh yeah."

"Great. What's the occasion?"

"Uhh, *new Pat Metheny* occasion."

"Okay!" Her nose crinkled a second. "Hey listen: you busy Sunday?"

I swallowed. I *should've* been busy Sunday, being My Big Three Oh and all, but it hit me harder in that moment that I had no plans and nothing was happening that day. At all. "Actually, as it happens, I'm not, no. What's up?"

"Well, I got asked to do some revisions on that final draft, and I was kinda hoping you could help go over some parts of it with me that I'm not so sure about. We could have coffee and talk writer-stuff."

"Um, okay, sure. That sounds nice."

Her nose crinkled again. "Great."

Sunday morning, I woke up feeling different and yet the same. Bonnie phoned and sang Happy Birthday to me, much more sweetly and in tune than I did for her.

"Aw, thank you, Bunny."

"Hi, daddy! Mummy says you're The Big Three Oh now."

"Yep."

"That means you're thirty, right?"

"Yep."

"Is that why you retired to the country?"

I laughed. "What?!"

"Mummy said *that*, too."

"You listen to *me*, Bunny – thirty is not old. It's, it's just a number." And I suddenly realized that someone new was writing my lines.

Shortly after lunch, my doorbell sounded. I was surprised to find Zoe standing there. It was the first time I had ever seen so much of her limbs, what with her being dressed for the heat as she was. "I thought I was meeting you at *your* place in a bit?"

She nodded. "I know. I was just out for a walk, it's such a gorgeous day. Then I thought hey, I'll go get Mike, we can *walk* over to my place. You up for that?"

I was, because she was right about the gorgeousness of the day. At least Mother Nature wanted to celebrate my birthday. We headed down the street, taking it slow and easy in the heat. Then I noticed that she passed the turnoff which would take us to her apartment.

I gaped and pointed back at the turnoff and my lips flapped a little before she said, "Sorry, can I stop at work for a sec?"

"Uh yeah sure, uh, but wait, isn't it closed today?"

"It is. I have a key." As we reached the door and she readied the key, she explained. "I took my sweater to work yesterday, but it was so warm last night I forgot it." The door clacked open, and The Wien was surprisingly dim inside with blinds and curtains drawn, especially after the brilliance of the afternoon sun. "I wanna get it before I forget."

All in one instant, it clicked with me that the air conditioning was running, and the lights came on, and I heard a number of voices call "*Surprise!*", and then cheers and applause.

I know I gaped as I gazed around. The restaurant was decorated with a modest number of balloons and garlands and dangling fringey letters of coloured foil paper saying Happy Birthday. A table was loaded with a cake

and dishes and ice cream. All the Wien staff I knew were there – Zoe, Peter, Gus, Anna, and Effie... and all four members of Vog. And Sam was there. And even Mrs. Sano. I just stood immobile, still gaping, and Peter pointed at me and laughed and said, "Aaaa! Lookit 'im!"

At least in a restaurant, there was no trouble finding enough tables and chairs for that many people to sit and eat cake. I sat at one end of the gathering, feeling conspicuous and awkward and loving it. Over a mouthful of cake I said, "So c'mon, tell me: how did you guys know?"

Mitch piped up. "It was Zoe's idea. She thought of it ages ago."

Zoe grinned. "Well, I did get curious about when your birthday was, one day... but it wouldn't've happened without Frank."

I turned to Frank and raised my eyebrows in a question.

He waved an easy hand at me. "Nothing as epic as Zoe implies. I seemed to recall that, when your column debuted in the *The Daily Quotidian*, they ran a brief biography by way of introduction, including birthdate. I trundled to the campus library and spelunked my way through the back issues on microfiche. Lo and behold." A few of the others gave mild applause.

I blinked and looked around at each of them. "Wow, you... you guys went to all this trouble..."

Frank lifted an arm of proclamation and said, "My postsecondary research skills pay off at last, Mr. McPhail!" There were a couple of giggles.

I rubbed my eye. "Can, can I say this? All you guys... *no one* has ever done anything like this for me before. Really, I..." Then my mouth just moved silently a couple of times, and I lowered my face into one palm and I could feel myself blushing and I just said "Aw geez." To another round of cheers and applause.

Peter pushed a wrapped box, roughly basketball size, along the table toward me. "C'mon, Mike! Time to open your gifts!" Dougie added, "Yeah!"

I noticed the label on the paper as I tore it open. "'From the staff at The Wien' – aw thanks very m--" The box came open and I saw white mugs. So of course I exclaimed "Mugs!" I lifted one out and saw it had red lettering on the

side. "With my name on!"

Anna leaned closer and tried to turn the mug around in my hand. "Also the day of the week on!" I grinned. "We got six," she said, "we closed Sunday! You keep them *here*, yeah?"

I nodded at her. "You bet. Thanks, you guys, these are so cool."

Dougie elbowed Frank. "G'wan, Frank, us next! C'man!"

Frank handed me a small wrapped package the exact size and shape of a CD case, so of course I said, "I wonder what this could be."

"Now, as bands go, Vog is notoriously impecunious," said Frank, "but we all chipped in for this because we thought it *crucial* that you have it."

The paper tore away to reveal a CD of Nirvana's *Nevermind*. Dougie said, "Can't be a punk *without* it!"

I turned to Inch. "You *all* chipped in for this? Even *you*, Inch?" She told me to "fuck off", but with the most genuinely friendly smile I had ever seen on her. Mitch nudged her and said, "Ha! He gotcha, Moga!"

Frank said, "You now hold the key, Mr. McPhail." He blessed the CD with a gesture of splayed fingers. "Listen. Learn. And grow wise."

I looked around at all the band and nodded. "Thank you, guys, I, I feel *enlightened* now." They all nodded back.

I heard Zoe's voice nearby. "One more." She handed me a box a bit smaller than the one with the mugs. "A little extra, from me."

I tore it open, peeked in, and could feel myself grin. Dougie asked what it was. I reached in to take hold of one of the items and hold it up for everyone to see. "Folks," I said, and lifted out a book. "This is the complete works of Aurora Windermere." I peeked inside the front cover of the volume in my hand. "Signed by the author, no less." Mitch was reaching across for a better look and I handed it to him, then turned to Zoe. "Zoe knows that I'm a big Windermere fan."

She sparkled. "I was hoping you'd want your own set."

"Of course I do." I could feel her making my smile warmer. "You know what I

want better than / do, sometimes."

Sixteen

On the following Friday, I was on Angel's table once again for my first appointment of September. I had come to live for these sessions, just as she had promised at the first one. By now, there wasn't the same sense of weirdness being here, or the same vague, echoey, day-after aches like those first few times. The sensations were familiar now, as was the sense of ease in conversing with her.

"So Mike," she said, "how 'bout them Jays, huh?"

"What about 'em?"

"C'mon! They're *flying!* They can't miss!"

"I'm tellin' ya, they're gonna choke at the end. Just like last year, just like — yowch!" She hit another landmine in my back whose timing was suspicious.

"Breathe through it, mister, you know how." Then she soothed the spot with gentler rubs. "Speaking of breathing, how's your exercises going?"

"Good. I, I still fall asleep a lot, but, but I sleep *well*. And I feel, I dunno, a little calmer, maybe."

"Good. If you could remember to deep-breathe *all* the time, you'd feel two hundred percent better." She worked just above the waist for a few strokes, then: "I saw Peter a few days ago. He says they gave you a surprise party on the weekend."

I gave a little chuckle. "Yeah! Those guys are *so nice*..."

"Well, I'm sorry I missed it, nobody said anything to me. I never even knew it *was* your birthday, *you* never said anything, either."

I remembered that my birthdate was part of the information on those registration forms I first filled out for her, so she had it on file all along if she'd thought to look. Then I decided that was just being catty, and I resolved to be nice.

After the session, she pulled a small packet out of her desk drawer and said, "Anyway, I'm sorry this is late, but --" She leaned in to hand me the packet

and give me a quick peck on the cheek. " -- happy birthday."

"Thank you." I looked in my palm. It was more or less covered by a thick, clear-wrapped rectangle, pale brown and grainy-looking. "Um, what *is* this?"

"Halvah. Imported. The *good* stuff. Trust me, your tum will achieve *oneness* when you taste this!"

"That good, huh? Yeah, thank you."

"Y'know, Mike...." She shifted one of her sandals against the floor. "You never asked me out again since June. And I feel like we still have so much to talk about. It wasn't *that* bad, was it?"

"What?! Ohh, no no no, uh, of course not, I... I've just been, y'know, busy... you, you *wanna* go out with me again?"

"Well yes, I'd like to sometime. I don't know when I'm free offhand, but sometime soon, all right?"

I blinked. "Okay, sure."

"All ri--" and then she cut herself off, said, "Oh no", and made a soft grimace as she reached for the desk phone.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I just remembered I was supposed to call my chiropractor already." She started dialing the number from memory and tisked. "I told Sam to remind me – why didn't she?" She blew a stray strand of hair away from her eye.

I edged toward the aisles of The 99th Monkey. "I'll just, uh... I'll see you in two weeks."

She didn't look up. "Okay bye-ee."

On Monday morning, I was in my kitchen making a phone call. It was answered by a receptionist's voice I didn't recognize: "Good morning, *Daily Quotidian*."

"Hi, could I have the Features Editor, please?"

"Hold, please."

There was a brief pause, and then a voice I *did* recognize said, "Yee-ell-o."

"Howard?"

"Yo."

I waited a sec. "It's Mike."

"Ho! *Mike!* How are ya?"

"Uh, great."

"Heyyyyy, 's good ta *hear* ya, guy! How's life out in the boonies?"

"Real nice, Howard, you, you'd be surprised."

"So tell me: what's up that you'd waste good money talkin' ta *me*, hah?"

"Well, I, I've been out here eight months and I haven't heard from anybody. You're not even giving me any feedback on the *column*, y'know?"

"Well, what's ta say? It's *terrific!* It's *always* terrific, right? I always *pay* ya, don't I? Ha!"

"C'mon, you used to give me more than that..."

"Aww, you know, it, ehh, came up easier when we *saw* ya every day."

"You're my editor, Howard. I want you to tell me how I'm doing once in a while."

Howard heaved a long, heavy sigh. "Okay, eh... seriously, Mike, every week it's consistently good stuff, ya *don't* need me to tell ya *that*. Actually, eh... I'd say it's *better*. Yeah. Concentrating on it full-time has been good for ya, hah?"

"Heh. Thanks."

"Now, the last few have been gettin' a bit, eh, *wild*, y'know?"

"Wild?"

"You know: questioning the basics, interviewing people from that Institute out there, all that."

"Uh-huh?"

"But the readers *like* it! We're gettin' more mail now, and almost *all* of it is *positive*! So yer doin' terrific, guy!"

"Um, I'd, I'd like to see that mail..."

"Oh! Hey! Of course, sorry, I'll, uhh, I'll forward it on out to ya right away, yeah."

"Mm. Thank you."

"Anyway. Mike. It's been a slice, but I hafta run. I don't need ta tell *you* how busy I am, hah?"

"Uh, sure."

"Well hey, look: anytime you need anything, you call me, hah?"

"Um, yeah, right."

"Awright. See ya, Mike."

"Bye, Howard."

Vog's loft had cooled down somewhat from a few weeks back, but not a lot, so hand fans were still necessary. And, of course, so were cotton balls, at least for me. Now that I had finally had a chance to listen to Nirvana, I could easily pick out their influence on Frank's songs. And I even found his singing voice to be in a similar enough Cobain vein that Frank could be a credible front man for a cover band if he ever wanted to. But I could also hear where Vog were diverging from that sound, looking for their own way.

A good example of that was the song they were just finishing now: a stately epic, written by Mitch, it had what sounded to me like progressive-rock

touches – even a flute melody in the intro and outro, which really worked. (I wasn't all that surprised that Mitch could play it.) I nodded in approval as the last flute note ended the song – this band was not afraid to stretch, and I had seen them grow just over the last few months.

Mitch grinned as he lowered the flute, and Frank gave him a slow nod and an upraised thumb. "Intensely epic, Mitch. Bravo."

Mitch looked over at me on the bench. "What'd *you* think, Mr. McPhail?"

I spread my hands and just said, "I agree with Frank!"

Inch called over from the other end of their designated stage area: "Yeah, Mitch, that tune *really* doesn't bite."

Mitch nodded at her and said, "Thanks, Moga!"

"This represents a true expansion," said Frank. "See, Mitch? Your songs bring out a whole new facet of the Vog experience."

Mitch ran a hand through his hair and made an awkward half-smile. "Heh. I, uh, I brought another one, too."

Frank beckoned toward him. "Cool! Bestow it, Mitch, don't be shy."

Mitch pulled a folded piece of lined paper out of his pocket. "This one is more of a poppy Ramones thing – it's called 'Moga'." Inch snickered.

I saw Frank's shoulders fall and he quietly said, "What?"

"'Moga'. You know, my nickname for --"

Frank pushed hair back from his eyes. "No, wait. Wai-wai-wait. Yee – you wrote a song for *Inch?!?*"

"Well it's --"

"Whaddaya think you're *doing?!?* You can't do *that!!*" I saw everyone staring strangely at Frank, and realized that I was, too. "Whadda you guys think this band is *for?!?* A, a musical *personals column?!?*"

Inch looked worried. "Hey Vogner --"

"No! No no, this is no good! I mean, isn't it *obvious?!?*" They all just looked at him. "Y-you can't *do* this! Don't --" Then he turned and looked at me, and I saw a lost, frightened look in his eyes I had never seen before. "Doesn't anybody see my *point* here?!"

Another silence, that felt painfully long.

Suddenly Frank lunged for the door, huffing. "Take five! Hell, take a hundred!" And he slammed the door behind him, rattling the windows, and then there was crashing of his feet down the stairs. And the far-off slam of the downstairs door leading to the street.

Mitch and Dougie looked at each other, wide-eyed. Inch looked at the door. Then she went out, more serenely.

Mitch said, "Fuck."

Dougie said, "Amen."

I wandered over to the window overlooking the door. I could see Frank standing under a streetlight, leaning a shoulder on the pole, and Inch slowly approaching him.

Mitch said, "What's the *matter* with him?!"

Dougie said, "Hmf. I dunno."

It looked like Inch was trying to talk to Frank. I couldn't tell if he was talking to her or not, but he kept averting himself, like he didn't want her to see his face.

Behind me, I heard Mitch go on: "I, I mean, I didn't write it *for* Inch! She just, like, gave me the idea. It's, it's about the concept of being a moga, y'know?"

I nodded and said "Uh-huh", still watching Frank and Inch.

"It's about that whole high-energy fuck-you rebel vibe, y'know? I thought it was *totally* rock 'n' roll!"

Frank had his back turned away from my vantage point, but I could just barely make out Inch's face. It now seemed like she was listening to Frank.

"Like, he never gave me a chance to explain. That's so not like him! But maybe I should change the title?"

And suddenly her eyes widened and her mouth got very small, and she stood absolutely still.

Dougie said, "Naw, leave it, Mitch. You didn't do nothin' wrong – this is *Vogner's* problem, eh?"

And then she threw her arms around his neck and he wrapped his around her waist with frantic speed and desperate urgency and lifted her feet a few inches from the pavement, and their faces and bodies ground against each other and didn't move apart.

I, at least, hadn't seen that coming.

I turned away from the window and came closer to the band. I cleared my throat. "Uhh, I think Dougie's right, Mitch. I mean, Frank has some of his *own* personal junk he needs to work out, just like anybody else. Remember, he, he's just a normal guy. Might not *look* like it, but..."

Mitch snorted. "Yer a dick." And then we heard the door open, and we turned.

Inch came in, a little more flushed and disheveled than when she went down. I felt like I could see a new energy in her, but maybe I imagined it, and she tried to look bored and reassuring. "He'll be okay. He, ah, he says he hasn't been sleepin' too good in this fuckin' heat, y'know, he's kinda on edge. Uh, he, he said gettin' some air is helpin' him feel better, he'll be up in a minute. Awright?"

Dougie nodded. Mitch said, "Yeah sure. Thanks, Moga."

Inch slipped her bass strap over her head and onto her shoulder, and she was suggesting that Mitch start showing them their parts for his new song, while I quietly made my way out the door.

I heard crickets far in the distance. Frank was still leaning on the lightpost, but with his head higher than when I saw him there a few minutes ago. "Uh, you okay, Frank?"

He turned to me, his hair hanging over half his face. His eyes looked tired in the shadows from the streetlight, but he wore a tentative, quiet little smile. "Um, yeah. Indubitably okay." He looked up at the loft windows, and sighed. "I'm just, uh, undergoing a bizarre paradigm shift here, Mr. McPhail." I lifted my eyebrows a little and waited. "How can I.... it's like there's this whoppin'

great *anomaly* in my life, lurking in my reality, that's been following me around for yonks, and I never knew it was there til just now. Y'know?"

I nodded slowly. "Yeah, Frank, I think I do. The Great Hidden Truth. The monkey wrench in your belief system."

"Yes. That is it, sir."

"Well, uh, someone told me that if the anomaly is there, you just gotta learn to accept it."

His smile got a bit wider. "Yep. It's really there, Mr. McPhail, no question."

My mouth went crooked. "*When* are you guys gonna call me 'Mike'?"

"Ohhhhh, I dunno. Some day, maybe. We'll see." He sighed and stretched. "Well, better trundle up and tell Mitch that I've been *unconscionably* remiss." He glanced sidelong at me. "He's okay, isn't he?"

"*Oh* yeah. Yeah, he's cool. A bit worried about *you*, right now."

As Frank turned away to go back inside, he said, "He's a good guy, y'know?"

"Yeah, well... so are *you*, y'know?"

Frank didn't look back, but said, "Oh, pshaw. You'll turn my head."

Seventeen

Autumn was officially about a week away, but, as per the normal in this region, the weather was sure it was still summer. After my next appointment with Angel, I was wearing only T-shirt and cut-offs, prepared to go back outside in nothing more. When I re-entered the dizzying shelves of The 99th Monkey, I heard a voice call my name. I turned to it to see Sam, dressed similarly to myself, waving.

"Hey, Sam."

She sniffed near me. "Just finished a massage, huh?" Then she winked while I gave a nod. "I'm taking coffee break just now with Zoe – wanna come?"

"Sure, I got a minute."

We walked just a couple of doors down the street to a small coffee shop where Zoe was already defending a table. She raised her eyebrows in pleasant surprise. "Well hello, stranger! All freshly felt up by the blonde bombshell, are we?"

"C'mon, don't." Then Sam and I got coffees and rejoined Zoe.

"I was just teasing, sookie," said Zoe, patting my forearm. "I know better."

I asked her, "You ever tried massage?"

"Actually, I get freebies at home." We both looked at Sam, Zoe with a warm smile, me in mild surprise.

Sam gave me a wry look. "Ohh, I trained in it a *little bit*, is all. I know for a fact that Angel is much --" Then something outside the window caught her eye. "Speak of the devil."

I turned to see Angel walking down the other side of the street, in the company of a large confident man. Taller and more massive even than Lance he seemed, even from way over here. He exuded that whole nice-dark-suit, neat-dark-hair, athlete-à-la-GQ vibe while he opened the shotgun door of a glossy black Stingray to let Angel get in.

"Who's that?"

Sam watched them drive off. "With her? That's Dr. Uhhh... Dr. Tower. He's in

town for a guest lecture at the Institute tonight."

"Lecture? On *what* – 'Arnold Schwarzenegger's Worst Nightmare'?"

She allowed herself a small giggle. "He's a specialist in past-life regression."

"Hmf. He's like five past-guys rolled into one."

"Angel volunteered to show him around town while he's visiting."

I glanced back down the street in the direction they drove away. "Does she *always* escort these visiting mucka-mucks?"

"*Someone* generally does – *sometimes* it's her."

"Ah."

That night I was doing my breathing and focusing exercises again. I could see improvement by now. My mind wandered less far and less often, it seemed. And I stayed awake longer. Some day I hoped to be able to do a twenty-minute session and then open my eyes and go on with my day, as intended.

I breathed. And I breathed. I don't know for how long, and that's good.

But I must have drifted off, because I was aware of waking up. Lying on my belly, with my face in a donut pillow, the room darkened. Warm lubricated hands were sliding smoothly over my back, and I relaxed. I would often nod off and then come to in this position.

But this was different. In my first session with her I was aware of the mysterious anti-arousal vibe she gave off. And now, that vibe was not there. Her touch was lighter and far more erotic, and in seconds my body knew that. I squirmed a little under her touch, and her hands slid much farther down my backside than they had ever been, and slowly kneaded. Immediately I hardened and my heart pounded.

I swallowed and my breath came heavier. One of her hands slid farther down and under, and her fingertips trickled over me. I could feel my eyes close and roll back, and I let out a short moan. Then I realized that I heard heavy breathing above my back – woman's breathing. And then my name, whispered.

The hands moved over me with deeper yearning, and I would swear that I had never been this large or this hard, or felt this urgent, ever before in my life. My heartbeat was a roaring rush in my ears; yet above that, I heard her whisper my name again, and then whispering she asked me to turn over.

A flash of panic as I thought that she would see *that* if I did, and I knew that I wanted her to. The panting whisper again: "*Please, Mike, I need you...*"

With a short growl, I whipped myself over onto my back and reached up to grasp her upper arms. I opened my eyes and Zoe's face was just above mine, her wild black mane hanging over us, her eyes ablaze under heavy lids, her lips parted and relaxed. She panted, "Ohhh, *Mike --*"

And my head snapped upright and I really woke up, my breathing still ragged, my heart still racing, and looked around the dark parlor.

The calendar said that autumn was a few days under way, and the town finally agreed – there were fewer shorts and more light jackets in evidence among the shoppers and pedestrians downtown this afternoon. I was just leaving the post office to head home when I heard Frank call, "Mr. McPhail!"

I turned to see Frank jogging across the street toward me, dodging a slow car. "Salutations! Big news!", he bellowed, then thought to click his Walkman off.

My head tilted. "What?"

He held a forefinger up. "Events of great pith and moment. The times they are a-changin'."

"So *tell* me, then!"

"Comrade. Hear this. Vog. Has just booked. Its first *gig*."

I startled a bit. "*Really?! Wow! Congrat--*"

The finger wagged. "Ah-ah. *Not only* has Vog booked its first gig. *Not only* has Vog booked its first gig *at the King Eddie*."

"That's good?"

"That's good. *But*. Vog has booked its first gig at the King Eddie *opening* for *The Fist Buddies*."

I blinked as the news wafted over my head. "And *that's* good?"

"To put it mildly, sir. The Fist Buddies have been like God of the national underground scene for about seven years. The Fist Buddies are *It*. They are *The Man*. This is big like... like opening for The Stones only not boring, y'know?"

I gave a slow nod. "Um, okay. Well, that's excellent. Congratulations."

"Thank you. You *will* be there, I trust?"

"Wouldn't miss it. You hadda *ask*? C'man!"

Frank glanced at the ground, then snorted. "You shoulda seen the manager at the King Eddie. At first, I wasn't sure he intended to give our demo a fair shake. Til Inch intervened." Another snort and he shook his head slowly. "Ahh, to see a guy the size of a pickup truck, reduced to tapioca by such a miniscule tongue... and then I told him *she* was the '*good cop*'." He looked back up at me. "So now we're in showbiz."

"Yep, she's one formidable hellion, all right." I raised an eyebrow. "How're you two, uh, getting along these days?"

He tugged gently at a stray strand of his hair while his grin reluctantly widened. "Pretty primo."

I looked up and watched Angel's face as she massaged my arm. Her expression seemed like she wasn't seeing me at all. But then she suddenly broke the small silence with, "Are you doing anything on Sunday?"

My eyebrows moved closer together. "Not really, no?"

"I was thinking of going hiking – could be the last chance while the weather's still warm." Then she looked me in the eye as if she *could* see me. And that sapphire blue was still enough to make the bottom of my chest fall a little. "I thought maybe you'd like to come with me."

I had no memory of ever hiking in my life, and was sure that it would be obvious to her as soon as we started. But I was still at that stage where she asked so of course I agreed. "Sure."

She nodded, satisfied. "Good. Pack a lunch and all, and I'll pick you up at one."

Eighteen

We can't always count on early October to be warm in this part of the country, but this year we lucked out. The high sun was bright, and Angel's car kicked up dust from the hilly gravel road a few miles north of Westgate.

"Ooh look!" she cried out, gesturing ahead. "Some of the trees are already starting to turn."

"Mmhmm!" I nodded. "Another few weeks, it'll be gorgeous out here, I bet."

"It's always gorgeous out here." She gave me a sidelong glance and a self-satisfied smile. "That's why I picked this for my hiking place."

"Oh, you, uh, you *own* these hills?"

The smile became a dazzling grin. "I *feel* like I do. Ah, here's the tree where I always park."

After what felt to me like an hour, I was sure we both heard me breathing louder than she was, and she held back her pace for me while we trudged up a shallow incline.

I looked again at her backpack, half the size of her, and finally said out loud what I had been thinking all along: "You really need all that stuff just for an hour or two?"

She turned her face toward me. The sun was bright on her white baseball cap and on the ponytail sticking through the hole in the back. She still had her sunglasses on; I couldn't see what she was thinking. "Actually? I was gonna ask if that's all you brought."

"What?" I was in a hoodie and track pants, both gray but mismatched. And I carried a plastic grocery bag, which I held up. "I got lunch here like you said. I remembered sunscreen, even." I felt prepared. Heck, I even felt a little sporty.

I would've bet that she was blinking at me. "No raincoat?"

"It's not gonna rain today. They *said*."

"Famous last words." She shook her head. "And those shoes. Hope you don't regret wearing them."

I glanced down at my worn, beaten sneakers – I couldn't even remember what colour they were when I got them. "These are good comfy shoes." I didn't want to admit they were the best I could do. I didn't have heavy brown boots with miles of laces and wavy soles, like hers. "They're old friends."

She nodded. "Mm. *Very* old."

The shallow incline led down again and then up a larger hill. At the crest of that, we stopped. "Here we are. My little lookout."

I had not had the chance to take in a panorama like this in a long while. We both just stood and watched in silence. Now and then the breeze kicked up and ruffled our hair, and the sun's warmth was smooth. The music of birds, now and then the soft hum of an insect. The hill sloped down before us and spread into a series of gentle rollings and wanderings, leading to a low ridge on the horizon, where the green became more misty. A silver river wound past hillocks and groves a ways off from us. Nearer by, there were bright sprays of yellow and white flowers, thick bushes with dark shiny leaves. No matter which way I turned or how far I looked, I couldn't see any evidence of the existence of another human being.

When I lived in the city, I could pass by something like this and it wouldn't register. Today, I felt primed for it. For what seemed like minutes, I just stood, and just looked, and just took it in. I felt as if my chest could not contain myself. Finally I felt compelled to make an acknowledgment of some sort: I just said, very quietly, "Wow. This is really pretty."

The breeze carried some of Angel's delicate scent to me. "Uh-huh. It's... I mean, it's nothing really special like mountains or anything, but, but it *is* really special."

I heard her move, turned and saw that she was sitting in the wild grass, untying her boots. "C'mon, take your shoes off – nourish your feet!" She pulled off her boots, tugged her socks off and tucked them into the boots, then pressed her bare feet into the grass and flexed her toes. They were The Most Gorgeous Feet on Earth.

I followed her lead, shedding my sneakers and socks, and the grass felt surprisingly refreshing. I turned to her and said, "Y'know, I... I have never done something like this before."

She nodded once. "That's the problem nowadays. People don't make the time to stop and take this in. I know 'communing with nature' sounds too hippy-dippy for most people... but all this is *in us*. We need to connect with this to be complete."

She stopped for several seconds, watching the horizon. She whispered, "Listen to that." I listened. "The birds, the breeze, the water..." I nodded. "I could stay here forever." She sat and watched the far-off ridge. I sat and watched her.

She decided we would eat in that spot, so we did. And I understood some of the truth within the old saw about fresh air giving you an appetite – I wished I had packed another sandwich. I looked down while I chewed, then swallowed and said, "Being here reminds me of a column I did last month, about grass – did you see it?"

She thought. "Not sure."

I poked at a blade of grass near my lunch bag. "I look at this here, and think of all the veins and roots and cells in it, the water and minerals and biochemistry going on..." I gestured into the distance. "And then I look and see the zillions of them spreading out there, not to mention the trees, and, and animals..." I looked at her. "And this patch we can see is *nothing* compared to the whole world, and it's just – the world is so *full of life*, y'know?"

"Mhm."

"And yet all that life is just this, this filmy smudge on the surface of this big round rock, and the big round rock just gets swallowed up in the zillions of stars, and..." I sighed. "It all, it makes me feel like, like I'm part of something unbelievably *big*, and, and *amazing*."

"No, I never read that one." She removed her white hat, the ponytail sliding back in through the hole and falling to her shoulders. "I think I'd remember if I did." She took off her sunglasses, folded them and tucked them in a boot. "Y'know, you're really not so far away from us 'flakes' as you like to think."

I saw her eyes, that rich, impossible blue. "I, I'm going to assume you, you intended that as a compliment."

Her smile softened her eyes. Then she unzipped her hoodie – white, with a

pale pink line running down the outside of the sleeves – and lifted it off over her head. Her hair spilled back down onto her shoulders as the garment cleared her head, and I saw that under it she was wearing what looked like the top half of a white, one-piece bathing suit. Shamefully, helplessly, I stared. *The Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* was taking life barely a foot away from me.

"Excuse me, please," she said, then stood with casual grace and reached for the drawstring of her track pants – white, with a pale pink line running down the outside of the legs. "But this is probably my last chance this year to get some sun." The track pants dropped, to reveal the rest of the one-piece bathing suit and her impossible legs. Then she stepped out of the puddle of clothing and bent to rummage in her backpack. "I know tanning isn't politically correct anymore, sorry." She turned her face to me and grinned. "Call it my one vice."

I nodded absently, eyes still wide. "A, a vice you came prepared to indulge, apparently."

She pulled a rolled-up white bath sheet out of the pack and gently tossed it at me. "Could you spread that out, please?" Then she picked up a squeeze bottle and started smoothing sunscreen over her arms and face and neck.

I laid the makeshift blanket over the grass and she sat again, drawing her knees up. The curves of her were brilliant in the clear sun. She carefully slid sunscreen over her legs, and I got a sense of how her hands must have looked when she worked. "As long as you're careful, the sun can still nourish the body and soul."

Then she handed me the bottle. "Do my back, please?" She turned over, stretched out full length on her belly, and I saw how little was covered by the cut of this suit. She angled her elbows out so her hands were in line with her head, then she rested her cheek on her hands, facing away from me.

I squirted the sunscreen over-generously into my palm, with a sense of tables turning. I was about to handle Angel's body. Caress her skin. At length. How many times this year had I fantasized about just that? About more beyond that? My hands trembled a little, and I tried to be adult and tell myself to relax, this was no big deal.

I slid my slick hands down, just to either side of her spine, trying to mimic what she did with me in her work. She let out a long, long breath, then murmured, "Mmmmmm, thank you."

I focused on making sure that I did my job of protecting her from sunburn – and suddenly realized that this actually *wasn't* a big deal. I mean, her skin was flawless everywhere, of course, and she felt perfect, but a statue would feel just as perfect. There was no spark.

When I finished covering her skin, I stopped and wiped my hands on my old sweat pants, trying to digest this unexpected lack of fire. She thanked me and said, "Lying in the sun is the perfect way to 'be here now'. No regrets, no worries, just experience the moment, y'know?"

"Mhm."

"I mean, right here and right now are all we ever really have." She turned her head to rest the other cheek on her hands and look at me. "Why don't you join me? You could do with a bit more sun."

"Ehhhhh...." I was surprised by how awkward I felt. "No thanks I, I'm not really, uh, prepared."

Her eyelids half-closed, giving her a dreamy look. "Y'know, Mike, I'm really glad you came."

"You *are*?"

"Uh-huh. You're always so exciting to talk with."

"'Exciting'?"

"I think so. But I wasn't sure... I mean, you never..."

A light came on in my head, but the bulb was slow to warm up. "I'm sorry, did... did it bother you when I didn't keep asking you out?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say '*bother*'. But I wondered if maybe you didn't *like* me, or if I did something *wrong*, or..."

"I... well *of course* I *like* you, I mean, who *wouldn't*, y'know?" I turned away from her and poked at the grass. "I, I was just really busy. That's all."

I could hear the towel whisper as she shifted and moved on it. Then I felt a touch on my arm and looked down.

She was caressing my arm with her foot. Like playing footsie only / got the instructions mixed up.

I turned my head to look back at her. She was sitting up now, facing me, leaning back, her arms slanted behind her. One leg, one long smooth elegant divine leg, stretched over to me, and soft beautiful toes were slowly flexing and sliding on the very human skin of my arm.

"You know, Mike, I *do* find you *very* attractive."

I tried to form a question or reply, but my eyes were the only part of me willing to do so in that moment.

"You have such a grasp of things, such vision and, and depth! You're such a challenge. Intellectually, I mean."

I swallowed. She stretched her leg further, and I watched her calf gently sliding over my arm. Very slow. Very deliberate. Absolutely perfect.

"I mean, Lance, for example, is a good, a wonderful man, he's many things. But he isn't very bright."

I looked from my arm to her eyes. "But you still see him, though."

She blushed, looked at her breast, and made a soft giggle. "...well..."

And we both fell silent, for maybe a minute. And I remembered things she had said, and things she had done. And all I could think about was how little she knew about me, how little she seemed to know about herself – and how, after all this time, I still knew very little about her. And the things I *did* know? I thought about just how much I actually *liked* those things, after all.

I waited until she raised her eyes back up to meet mine, and then I said, "Why are you doing this?"

Her eyes opened wider, her mouth opened a little, and her leg lowered from me til her heel rested in the grass. And I realized that there had always been the look of an empress in her face, and suddenly that empress was, at least for the moment, gone. I almost didn't recognize her.

I turned my face away again and looked at the beautiful, unspoiled ridge on the horizon. "I think we should go. I mean, it's getting late."

I heard her stand and start gathering her things. Very quietly she said, "Um... yes, I, I guess you're right." She paused, then added, "Besides, I don't like the looks of *that*."

I turned and saw her, looking serious and tired, pointing to the west. I looked and saw a small cloud near the horizon – it must've been a hundred miles away, I would've guessed. "The looks of what?"

The wipers of Angel's car swiped back and forth tirelessly as the rain clattered on the windows and roof. The headlights of approaching cars reflected on the shiny highway, squiggles of white, bright under the pewter sky.

She had the hood of her raincoat pushed back off her head and she focused on the road. I patted at myself with the bath sheet she had graciously lent me, but I could still feel myself dripping onto the floormat.

She cleared her throat and said, "So, I guess every time we go out, we have a real quiet drive home." She flashed me a quick, weak smile and added, "Right?"

I slicked my wet hair back. "Uh, yeah – I mean, I'm sorry."

She sighed. "No, *I'm* sorry, Mike! I, I didn't mean to do anything to offend you, or, I dunno."

"You didn't. Don't worry about it."

She said, "But," groped for words, and didn't find them.

"No. No, Angel, look: I'm glad I came today. Honest."

She glanced at me from the corner of her eye. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I, I've been trying to get something straight in my head for a while now, and, and I think I finally did. And you helped."

"Well, I can't say that I understand how. It, it feels to me like things didn't go right." I got a sense that it was very unfamiliar, and uncomfortable, for her to say those words out loud.

I tried to give her a little smile of reassurance. "Well, they did. Trust the universe. I'm just, uh, I'm sorry I made it rain, okay?"

She blinked, and I thought I could see the hint of a smile in the corner of those perfect lips. "Sometimes," she said, "I simply cannot figure you out."

Nineteen

That very evening, I held Zoe's chair for her, helped her get seated, then sat across the tiny table from her. This was a simple, quiet little dinner club, fancy enough to have candles on the tables but not fancy enough to break my wallet. She was wearing the same Little Black Dress and fine gold chains she wore on our first not-date. And, just as I did on that first night, I thought she looked good.

I gave her a little smile and a little nod. "There now. Nice enough?"

"It's great." I loved how happy and relaxed she looked, and the candlelight bathed her in flattery she didn't need. "But gee, the way you just suddenly show up at the door in a suit and tie and say 'Get dressed', and dragged me out, it's, it's – "

"Like something out of a Windermere?"

She giggled. There were, of course, dimples. "Exactly."

I gestured vaguely around at the club. "I dunno, I, I just found out about this place, and I always try and check out new jazz clubs cuz they're so thin on the ground. And I figure if they're just starting out, they'll be more eager to please. *But* if it turns out the food is wretched, then I plead ignorance, okay?"

Emphatic nod. "Deal."

"And this band tonight is pretty good, eh? *Très* suave, y'know?"

"Well..." She looked around at the understated décor, the scattering of other patrons, listening to the subtle accompaniment of the piano trio. "It does all seem pretty nice so far."

"And, uhh..." I trailed off.

She leaned forward a little, shifting her mane into a slightly different disorder. "And?"

"And, uh, I remembered that we haven't really celebrated the completion of your new book yet."

"Fair enough." And just then the waiter came with our menus.

While we were eating, she leaned in again and peered at me. "Were you out in the sun today?"

"Uh." It occurred to me that I had not exercised enough diligence with my own sunscreen. "Yee-eah, as it happens, I, I was. I, uh... I was out for a while. *Hiking*, believe it or not." My tongue touched my lower lip for a second. "With, uh, Angel."

Her mouth fell a little. "Uh-huh?"

"She, she needed to talk to someone, she..." I glanced down at my cordon bleu. "She has some problems she needs to work out. She thought maybe I could help."

Zoe scowled. "Really. Hard to imagine her *having* problems."

I nodded. "You'd *think* so, wouldn't you? But no, she, she does. And..." I had some of my water. "I was willing to listen to her talk things out, but I didn't really have much to offer, myself. I, I told her she'd be better talking to a, a closer friend..." And here I fixed my eyes on Zoe's, as deeply and intently as I could, gazing into those rich brown depths with their candle stars. "Because what she and I have is basically a *professional* relationship."

She looked back at me, just as intense, just as still and unwavering. For a moment there was nothing but us and our eyes. And then her eyes opened rounder and her mouth relaxed, and there was an odd expression in her face – mild surprise, and a little confusion, and a little something that might have been reprieve. And finally she said, "Oh!"

Even though we hadn't quite finished eating, I stood and said, "Zoe?" She looked up at me and I extended my hand to her. "Would you dance with me, please?"

She smiled the most relaxed smile I had seen on her all evening, and said, "What a silly question, foolish mortal!" Then she accepted my offer.

We swayed on the dancefloor in our simple fashion. After a minute, she said, "I do like this band. They're good to dance to, too." A few more steps. "I never danced to jazz before. I never *heard* it much til I met you."

I nodded. "You're welcome." A few more steps. "I'm just sorry I don't dance as well as you."

She tisked. "Not this again."

"I'm sorry I --" and then I had to stop, still not sure what I needed to tell her.

She gave me a serious look. "What?"

I looked down at her. "I also wanted to take you here tonight to, to sorta make things up to you, I guess."

"I don't understand."

"That's good – I mean, that's okay. I, I feel like I've been a certified, double-distilled idiot all year... but not anymore."

"I still don't follow you. You haven't done --"

"It's okay it's okay, never mind. I'm babbling. Let's just 'dwell in the zen of the now', okay?"

"Ohhhkay, great."

The next number was even slower, and we stayed on the floor for it. We moved comfortably, and her subtle scent was a gentle blessing, and I had a moment of something that I can only call enlightenment but can't explain. All at once, the feeling of her in my arms was different. It hadn't changed, she didn't feel strange, but it all felt different. I moved my hand on her back, just a little lower, and now I was touching her differently. I found that we had moved a bit closer together – the Holy Spirit must've been feeling the pinch.

And I have to believe that Zoe felt something in that moment as well. It was subtle, like her back shifted to make my hand more comfortable in its new spot. I heard her let her breath out while we swayed. Then we both moved closer and suddenly there was no room at all for that Holy Spirit anymore. My arm tightened at her waist, her fingers flexed into my shoulder, she rested her cheek against me, and our swaying became a little more fluid. Then she moved her head back to look up at me.

"Mike?" Our eyes focused more firmly on each other's. "This *isn't* 'a couple of friends going out', *is it?*"

I gave a gentle shake of my head. "Not *just* that, no." And I leaned in and placed a short kiss on her inconceivably soft lips, lips that fit perfectly and felt like they had always known exactly what to do; then I pulled away before I

could fall into them.

The swaying of our dance grew gentler as we watched each other's eyes again. And then her hand on my shoulder reached around to my back and we kissed again, long and deep, and I fell in.

The room was dark when I woke up, and my pillow felt magical. I made a low mumble, gave myself a few seconds, and turned over. Even in the dimness before dawn, I was able to make out the fact that Zoe was smiling, as she reclined propped on one elbow and watched me. When she saw my eyes were open, her smile got bigger. "Hi."

"Hi." We both spoke very low, almost furtive – not that there was anyone to hide from, anyone who could overhear – more like there was a delicate spell in the air that we were afraid to break.

She reached out and brushed back one of my cowlicks – I'm not sure how she decided which one needed the help most. "How you feeling?"

I stretched over to her and kissed her. She acted like I didn't have morning breath. I didn't *need* to act, because she definitely did not have it. "I'm... I feel like I was never really alive until last night. And now." She made a long blink and breathed. "You been awake long?"

"Just a minute or so. I just wanted to watch you sleep."

"Beats most of what's on TV, I guess."

She leaned and kissed me. I reached an arm around her to pull her close. She giggled. "Please, no. I'll be late for work, I still gotta get home and change."

I still pulled her. "Call in sick."

"Can't do that to Anna and Gus."

"Mm, I guess not. Two minutes?"

"Now *that* I can do."

And she snuggled in tight, her head on my shoulder, my hand slowly

kneading her arm, one of her legs sliding on mine, our skin touching everywhere. She felt so wonderfully soft, she made my body feel hard by comparison. Which made me feel male, and I wasn't embarrassed about enjoying that feeling. The sensations of her put me at a loss for words. She just felt so, so good.

Finally, I said, "Can I tell you something?"

"Mhm."

"Now I know this is gonna sound like a line, but honest I swear to God – I had no idea it could be like that."

She raised her head to aim a dubious eyebrow at me.

"No really! I..." I slid a finger over her cheek and nudged her hair. "Before, for me, this has always been like a smorgasbord – I'd just turn off my mind and dig in, y'know? Like it was a break from my head. Like, my meditation." I touched the tip of her nose. "But *you*... I... I was *all there*, y'know? All my body and my mind and, and my *heart*, all with you and in you and, and there was nothing else, I.. it was never so *deep*, so, so *much*, I..." and then I faded out and stopped.

She kissed me, then laid her cheek on my heart and hugged me tight. I heard her whisper, "You are the sweetest man I have ever known."

I squeezed her and said, "Don't go."

She mumbled into my chest. "I gotta."

I sighed. "I hate this part."

"What?"

"So many times before, they go, or I go, and it's finally over, and, and you know it'll never happen again. I couldn't *stand* that with you."

She propped up on one hand to look me in the eye. "Now hey: this *will* happen again. I know I always tell you that we're not old, but we're not kids anymore, either. If I didn't wanna do this more than once – if I didn't think *you* wanted to do this more than once – I never woulda come here."

I nodded. "Gotcha."

"Now I'm --" She got sidetracked by my leaning in to start kissing over her neck. "I'm not saying it'll happen again *tonight* --" I kept kissing. "And I.... ah... I'm not saying it *won't* --" She gasped, then gathered up the resolve to reach round me and swat my backside. When I yelped, she pulled away. "Sorry, I *have to* start getting ready. I *have to*."

I sat up. "Okay, yeah... you can clean up *here*, though. And I'll drive you. Save you some time."

"Thank you. Yeah, the Drive of Shame beats the Walk of Shame any day."

I waited by the bathroom door till I heard the jingle of the shower curtain as Zoe got in and closed it again, then another few seconds to hear slick soap noises of her washing – telling me the water was now the right temperature – then I called out "Incoming!" and was behind her before she had a chance to finish her squeal.

"Mike c'mon! I gotta get ready!"

"No no, I'm helping! It'll be faster!"

She sighed and giggled as I made an honest effort to wash her back. I thought the highlights on her slicked-down hair and wet skin were definitely pretty.

She called out over the sound of the spray as body parts actually got washed. "Hope you're not mad that I made you wear, the, uh --"

"Naa, I'm not mad. You didn't 'make me', I woulda *anyway* – *I'm* not stupid."

"I mean, I *know* we didn't really *need* them --"

"Right."

"Like, I *know neither* of us --"

"Right." I kissed the back of her head. "Still."

"Still." She looked over her shoulder at me and she had those eyes. "Someday, though."

"Someday."

She glanced down me, turned and smiled. "Hmmm!"

"Peter tells me your birthday's coming up. Got plans?"

"Mhm. Me 'n' Sam are going out with some old friends."

"Any hints what you want for your birthday?"

She licked her lips and looked back up at my eyes. "I got it early."

We somehow managed to launch into a passionate embrace and also maintain our footing on the slick shower floor, kissing with low sounds under the steady hiss of the water. I moved a hand between us and slid it down her soft slippery belly.

She gasped. "Mike, we haven't got *time!*" But didn't push away.

And I wasn't intending to make her late. I murmured near her ear, "Don't worry, we'll do something else. It'll be quick, I promise."

My hand slid lower and circled. She gasped again and braced one hand on the wall of the shower, gripped my arm with the other. "Oh god – I, oh god... yeah, I, I think it *will* be..."

Twenty

I had to zip my jacket up to brave the winds of this gray morning in late October, even for a walk as short as popping down to Sano's Variety. Mr. Sano manned the till of the store this morning, an event rare but not unheard of. He was about the same height and indeterminate age as his wife, but every time I saw him, he always carried himself with an air of quiet peace about him. My guess is Mrs. Sano didn't rattle him the way she did her son.

"Good day, Mr. McPhail," he said, with a warm, even voice of flat pleasantry, and an expression to match.

"Hey, Mr. Sano," I said, just a touch out of breath, and turned down one aisle. Seconds later, I approached him with a jar of instant coffee in my hand, asking if they had this brand in ground instead. I was completely out at home but remained a bit fussy when I had the option.

He barely shook his head, looking unperturbed. "Sorry, not til Monday." This was Saturday – not promising. I might have to drive out to the supermarket.

Mitch slunk out of the back room. "Hey, Mr. McPhail." I nodded. "Hey, Frank 'n' Dougie are comin' over to watch the game tonight, wanna come?"

"Hm?" He had to be talking about Game Six of the World Series. The Jays had actually made it to the Series again this year *and* gave no sign of choking yet, either. Last time I saw Angel, I was properly contrite and she properly gloated, but I still expected them to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Mitch nudged his father. "Tell him it's okay, dad!"

Mr. Sano gave an easy shrug. "'Sokay wi--"

Mitch cut in with "We got a bigscreen, it'll be cool --"

"Reiji." Mrs. Sano's voice, calm but loud, cut through all others, and Mr. Sano slowly turned, unruffled. She stepped into the store. "No. These games are going on past midnight. Enough. And as for Mitsuhiro's wild frien—"

"Rumiko." Mr. Sano's voice, much quieter, somehow cut through everything. "After all these years, the Jays finally have a solid shot at winning the World Series. Are you telling me that I can't watch this in my own home?"

She glared at him. "It's gone on long enough, Reiji. No more. You want to see

it, go someplace else."

Mr. Sano looked at her for the space of a breath, then turned to me and said, "Excuse me, Mr. McPhail. Mitch, cover the till for a moment, please." He went into the back room and then I could hear footsteps going upstairs.

His wife gazed evenly at Mitch. "Mitsuhiro. Mr. McPhail is waiting to be served." She stood behind him as he started ringing in the instant coffee I didn't actually want.

I flapped my hands and went "No wait! Uh..." When I saw it was already rung in, I waved one hand and said, "Never mind, it's okay." I'd settle. While I paid, I hoped some idle small talk with Mitch would help calm the energy in the room. "I, uh, I've been going to the King Eddie to catch the games on *their* bigscreen."

"Ah cool."

I was just about to take my jar of instant and go, when Mr. Sano re-emerged from the back, carrying an overnight bag which he gently set at his wife's feet. "This is for you. If you don't want to hear the game, *you* can go someplace else." Mrs. Sano's eyes opened wider than I had ever seen, and Mitch was starting to grin. "Your mah-jongg friends, the Akiyoshi sisters. They're always inviting you over. Maybe you should call them, if you feel you need to."

Her mouth moved and her brow knit. "*Reiji!* In front of *customer--*"

Mr. Sano's face almost looked unkind. "*You started* this in front of customers, Rumiko. *I am finishing* it." He looked over at Mitch. "My son and I have waited fifteen years for this. And he will have it. *And* he will share it with his friends. And..." Mr. Sano looked at me and his eyes warmed. "And *I* will share it with my honoured guest."

Mrs. Sano's face was a confused jumble of emotions as she stood and quivered. Then she stomped into the back room and upstairs with a shrill rapid firehose of language.

The corners of Mr. Sano's mouth crept up a hair, if you looked carefully. He turned to look at Mitch, who was beaming like Peter. Mitch put a hand up for a high-five and said, "*All! Right! Dad!*" Mr. Sano granted him the high-five, loud and enthusiastic. "The Dad-Man! Mondo Daddo!"

Mr. Sano said "Shush" and then turned to me with a more decorous smile.

"Mr. McPhail, you *must* join us now. It's a point of honour."

With an awkward smile, I gave the Sanos a small bow. I felt like I couldn't refuse even if I had wanted to.

The Sanos' small apartment looked well lived-in and felt comfortable. None of the furnishings seemed particularly new, with the exception of the bigscreen, but the place felt well-kept. I got the feeling that this was a generally happy household in the long run, and also recognized that I had no rational reason to jump to that conclusion. I decided to hang onto that as an intuitive insight, and figured Angel would be pleased with me. Maybe even pat my head.

I sat in a snugly couch a few feet away from the TV, with Frank and Dougie to my right. To my left, Mr. Sano sat back in a worn recliner. He looked comfortable and content, but I still bet my wing chair was better. Beer cans and bowls of crunchy snacks sat in untidy profusion around the room, in easy reach. It really felt like the kind of place where you would Watch The Game With The Guys. I realized that I hadn't done anything like this in ages.

Mitch came in from the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn and wedged in between Dougie and Frank. "Move over, Dougie, ya lump."

"Ferget it." But he did move.

Frank cleared his throat. "Seems to me that *your* prognostication was that the Jays would be *toast* by now, Mr. McPhail."

I kept my eyes on the screen. "I, eh, decided to wait until all the facts are in, Frank. More scientific that way."

He nodded at me and lifted his can a few inches. "In beero veritas."

I leaned over to talk with Mr. Sano. "Y'know, this reminds me of when I was little, me 'n' my best friend would hunker down and watch the Stanley Cup. I, I forgot how much fun this can be. Thanks for inviting me."

He gave a small nod. "Technically, Mitch invited you – credit where it's due. But I was pleased to agree to the idea."

I looked around, then asked, a little nervously, "Where, uh, wh-where's Mrs. Sano?"

Rather airily, he said, "Out."

"Oh, uh --"

He waved a gentle hand in my direction. "Don't worry, she's not *really* mad – I *know* her." He chuckled. "She'll come home tomorrow and make like it was all *her* idea."

"She's... she's a very *strong* woman, isn't she?"

"*Ohhh* yeah!" He looked delighted while he said that. "When I met her, she was a meek little wallflower from the Old Country, and that's what I was looking for – she was a mail-order bride, did you know that?"

"No! Really?"

"Essentially. A stereotyped little cherry blossom, and 'pretty as the day is long', as they say." He took a swallow of his beer. "But after she was here a while, and it finally dawned on her that this isn't rural Japan, it was like she slipped her leash. She 'liberated' herself so fast I had to catch my breath."

"Gee."

"But y'know, when she *did*, she... she *grew*. I had no idea there was a woman of such fire and spirit in there. My boring, safe little life became... exciting. *She* became more beautiful every day. And *that's* when I truly fell in love."

I slowly shook my head. "Wow."

"I don't often get the chance to talk about this, Mr. McPhail. But people outside – *Mitch*, even – they see her and don't understand. I love to let her go and watch her fly. Even if I need to clean off the windshield once in a while. She *balances* me. We... we *fit*." He took another swallow. "And sometimes what we *really* want is not what we *think*."

I grinned. "Thanks, I'll, I'll remember that."

Suddenly the band raised a jumble of voices. "Hey it's starting!" "*Hey-ohhhhh!!*" "*Roof! Roof! Roof!*"

That game was a struggle that went on past midnight, into eleven innings, with epic reversals and dramas that could be made into a movie no one would believe. And at 12:50am, on Sunday, October 25th, history was made, and an exultant roar burst from the windows of the Sano apartment which must have disturbed the neighbours – and possibly even the ghosts up the block in Number 88.

Zoe and I came early to the King Edward Hotel, on Frank's recommendation – he was positive that The Fist Buddies were going to attract a sold-out crowd. We huddled near dozens of other keeners by the front entrance; the chill winds of late November carried a hint of snow, and our breaths billowed in it. In the glass cases on either side of the main doors, identical posters read:

TONIGHT

Hawking's Chair Records presents

THE FIST BUDDIES

with special guests

VOG

and

THE OUTCASTROS

Doors open 7:30

But the management took mercy on the shivering faithful and opened early.

As more and more patrons pushed into the low, dim tavern, we squeezed in with the members of Vog around a cramped table, bumping elbows with the neighbouring tables, straining to hear and be heard over the babble of the crowd. The bands were guaranteed their own tables – otherwise we likely could've been standing by the bar, despite trying to beat the rush. Vog at least were level-headed enough to know that this crowd had not come to see them.

Hardcore punk records blasted from the PA while bar staff helped The Outcastros set up their gear. I leaned in and called to Frank: "I've never seen you nervous before, Frank."

He flashed me a small, uneasy smile. "I prefer to think of it as adrenaline, Mr. McPhail. I'm focusing – trying to contain the rush."

"Well hey, don't worry: you guys worked really hard this year, you're great!" I turned to Zoe: "You ever hear them yet?" She shook her head. "They've gotten so much tighter over the summer --"

"Wup!" Dougie broke in. "Set's gonna start."

The Outcastros played, and received more-than-polite applause throughout, and at the end. But I expected Vog to go over bigger. (Biased? Could be.) On the darkened stage, they took down their equipment and the hardcore interval music blared up again.

Vog decided to wait at the table with us, rather than spend the break in their backstage dressing room, which Inch described as "fucking cramped and smells like shit". Frank stared at the stage, watching every step of the dismantling.

"Nice to know some things never change," I proclaimed to our table.

Zoe asked, "How's that?"

I went on: "Well, people don't always remember, but even back in the punk days, there were boring, pretentious bands *then, too.*" Inch cackled.

I whipped my head around to look at her with wide eyes. "I don't *believe* it! I made *Inch laugh!*"

"Fuck you," she said, but was still laughing as she said it.

Frank kept watching the stage as he said, "Cut 'em some slack, dudes, it's *their* first gig, too." Mitch humphed.

My head tilted. I said, "You *liked* 'em, Frank?"

"Nope. Not the point." Then one of the staff squeezed through to the table, to lead the band away to the wings of the stage where their gear waited. They were on in thirty.

We watched the vague shapes of them move in the darkness up there, plugging cords in, tuning, adjusting mike stands, and I was aware of fluttering in my chest. I felt like I knew a marvellous secret that these hundreds of other people were just about to learn.

Zoe leaned in closer to my ear and said, "*You* look almost as nervous as *they* did."

I turned to her and said, "Man, I am so... so *proud* of these guys, y'know?"

Just then, the house lights went down and the music faded from the PA to be replaced by the MC intoning into the blackness: "Okay, moshers, let's have a warm Eddie's welcome – for the first time anywhere, *Vog!*"

Zoe and I clapped fast and loud, and a scattering of other folks joined us with less energy – but we were almost immediately drowned out by a biting rhythm guitar chunking out a chord pattern, and a sudden yellow spotlight cast a glare on Frank's guitar. Even I recognized the song by now – they had decided to open with a cover of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit".

The sound picked up to a roar when the full band kicked in and more lights blazed. There were a few cheers, as well as some boos but even fewer. I could hear random comments behind and around me: "This tune is stale!" "No, they're doing it *really good!*" "Hey, that's *Mitch*, isn't it?" "Hey Joss! *Hey Joss!*"

Frank wasn't trying to imitate Cobain's voice any more than what happened naturally, but in this situation he pushed harder, got more strength and passion into his vocals than he did in the loft – and this moment was when I realized that Frank was one of the greatest vocalists in this style that I had ever heard. This was when he truly convinced me.

His voice and the guitars wailed on the long note of the finale, and then the audience erupted into cheers and whistles. A far more enthusiastic response than The Outcastros had gotten any time – I confess, I grinned, and it wasn't a nice grin.

Frank draped his hand over the mike stand and gazed out into the bright lights, facing the crowd. His hair was already damp and chaotic, but he looked as serenely zen as he did the first time we met. "Thank you," he said,

very close to the mike. "That was our concession to commerciality. You may now consider yourselves whipped into a frenzy." There were chuckles and a few full-on laughs, and it occurred to me that Frank had, by good fortune, actually found his crowd tonight.

Vog was slated for only a half-hour set, but they packed the mosh pit during their next song, and kept it that way to the end. That next number was one I now recognized as "On a Nerve", one of the first of their originals I had ever heard. A powerfully chugging, relentless beast of a tune, featuring a chill-inducing sonic tsunami from Mitch in the solo slot, and I couldn't help but be impressed that they could play this immediately after performing a Monster Hit Single and it didn't feel like a step down. I got the impression that a number of other people in the crowd felt it, too.

The moshers fell a bit subdued during the relative chill of Mitch's flute song "Ikiru", but pretty much everyone yelled with approval when it was finished – seemed like they loved the elements of surprise in this young band. They were nearing the end of their time when they launched into the infectious punk-pop of "Moga" – Mitch joined Frank near the mike for vocal harmonies (which they had tightened up into something truly tasty), and Frank looked like he loved playing that one most of all. The crowd nearly screamed after "Moga", and if Vog was ever given the chance to release a single, I knew what it had to be.

Frank was clearly out of breath, and clearly elated, as he leaned close to the mike again. "Hmm. A gentleman in back is giving me an unobtrusive 'last song' signal..." He swallowed and panted. "So for our closing number --"

Someone out in the darkness booed.

"Why thank you. Our closing number, is dedicated to a friend, who taught me, that if you dig deep enough, you'll discover your roots." He got his hands into position on his guitar, ready to begin. "It's from the first album by The Damned, and it's called 'Born to Kill'."

Shock and euphoria immediately battled for the right to light up my face. Frank started the song with a slashing chugging riff that maybe only I recognized, the others crashed in, and Frank delivered the lyrics in a crooning drawl that captured the original perfectly. I called out to Zoe, "I can't believe this!" and pulled her to her feet.

She said, "What?" but I was already pulling her to the stage.

"C'mon, we gotta pogo!" And we did, along with dozens of others, until the band reached the snazzy conclusion they had written in place of the fade-out on the record. Then Frank said a simple good night (simple for him), the spotlights went black, the band slipped away, and the crowd stamped and chanted for an encore. But the management dug in their heels about that, and the interval music came back up.

Zoe and I pushed and staggered through the throng back to our table, and I felt an adrenaline rush almost as if I myself had been performing. But then I spotted someone familiar standing by the bar, felt a sudden flash of pleasure that he had chosen to come, and brought Zoe over to meet a friend of mine.

Twenty-One

Late the next morning, I was down in the workroom, still working my way through the little brown journals. My great-uncle didn't spend the rest of his life raving about his CPG; he went on to investigate and run experiments on a number of other topics, remaining energetically curious right up to his last days. He managed to find a way to make peace and go onward. I was finding that spending time down here, sitting with the device, was helping me a bit to make my own peace with it. I figured I had to.

I heard three muffled whumms from upstairs. I opened the front door to see Frank's beige coat hanging open on him as he dared the elements. A folded newspaper dangled from the hand of one dangling arm, and his Walkman wasn't krishing. "Mr. McPhail, I'm confronting a mystery which I suspect only *you* can solve."

So I invited him in. "What's up, sir?"

He held the paper up, brandishing it. "Inch drew my attention to this morning's *Daily Quotidian*." He handed it to me. "Check it out."

I saw that it had already been opened to the Entertainment section, and I scanned the page, then burst into a smile. "Hey! A review of your gig! *Awright!*"

Frank watched me gravely. "By the *entertainment editor* himself, no less. Who is much too august a dude to cool his heels at a little gig in an out-of-town tavern." I gave Frank a look of mild innocence. "Mr. McPhail. Is this guy a friend of yours?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Well, Frank, I *know* him, yeah. And I *did* ask the paper to check out your gig."

He regarded me with wary skepticism. "Indeed."

"But I had to *lean* on 'im – he didn't owe me any favours! But I talked you guys up enough, telling him how fantastic you are... I guess I must've done a better job than I thought! I was only expecting him to send a stringer out, really, but he decided to come himself. *And* I had *zero* influence on whatever the paper decided to say about you guys, swear to God! I couldn't affect that even if I *wanted* to – once he was out here, it was totally up to Vog to sink or swim."

His gaze on me softened. "Yeah?"

I nodded. "I did *not buy* this review for you in any way shape or form, okay?" He smiled a bit, and I looked down to see what the review actually said.

Then a shamelessly fond grin spread over my face. "Aaaa! See?! He *loves* ya! Ha! -- Dig *this*: 'The Fist Buddies are the final word of the 80s underground. Vog are the first breath of a brave new world.'" I slowly shook my head. "Cheeee..." I looked up at Frank and could see him trying not to sparkle. "So you guys hear from any record labels yet?"

He tisked, but I could tell he was loving this. "Get real – after one gig? Even so..." He took back the paper and looked over the review again. "It must be said that this *is* an uncommonly auspicious first page for a scrapbook. How many bands snag an ego-boo of *this* caliber on their maiden voyage?" Then he looked up at me with shining eyes and blinked rapidly. "My... my *heart* is *full*, bud!"

I felt warm as I smiled at him. I had smiled so often this year. "Well, you guys deserve it. You really are good. I... I really believe in you, y'know?"

"In any event..." He rubbed one eye, slow and languid. "You certainly helped launch us in style. Thank you, Mr. McPhail."

"Frank." I waited til he raised an eyebrow, then I extended a hand, the same as he had done to me that first day we met. "C'mon. Please, I think it's time."

His smile was a bit shy as he shook my hand. "Thank you, Mike."

A few days before Christmas, my parlor sported festive decorations. Which for me simply meant that, next to the stereo, I had set up my bedraggled, foot-high artificial Christmas tree. A piteous thing I had picked up from a second-hand store back when I was in school, its half-dozen shiny balls held in place with twist ties – but it had stayed with me all these years, and it was My Tree, My Christmas. This year I had even splurged on a small string of pea-sized coloured lights which were now coiled haphazardly around it. Michael McPhail Christmas: minimal but affectionate.

Zoe and I were curled up together on the sofa in front of a gentle fire, exchanging gifts, and Nat King Cole's Christmas album played softly for us. Already this was inarguably my Best Christmas Ever.

Resting by my other side on the sofa was the copy of Carl Sagan's ***Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*** she gave me just a moment before. She tore the wrapping from the tiny present I now handed her, to reveal a jewellery store box. Inside was another golden anklet chain, but the links had a bit more of a braid with this one.

"Oh, it's cute!" She gave me a short sweet kiss. "Thank you, it's great."

I shrugged. "Just a little change for you once in a while, I thought."

She ran her fingers over it for a second, then gave me a sidelong glance and giggled. "You really get off on anklet chains, don't you?"

"Um, well, uhh... yeah. Dunno *why*, but I *do*. But..." I let myself fall into her eyes a bit. "I only really started noticing them when I saw them on *you*."

She kissed me again, longer and sweeter. "Merry Christmas, foolish mortal."

"Not yet, technically. What are you doing for the actual day?"

"Visiting my folks, pigging out... you?"

"Well, as it happens, this year is my turn to have Bunny --"

"Great! Remember to give her my present. And I hope I'm back in town before she has to leave."

"Will do. And then, after the smoke clears from the holiday rush, I, ah... I'm thinking about starting on writing a mystery."

Her eyes and mouth both opened wide in delight. "You mean a *novel*?!"

"*Wellllll!* You're the one always telling me I should write fiction, *so!*"

"No-no, it's *great!* *Do* it!" I could tell she was moving in for another kiss but it was interrupted by three whumms on the front door.

This time, Frank was there with Inch, the snowflakes in their hair blissfully ignored. Frank lifted a hand in easy salute. Inch's Christmas spirit was well camouflaged.

"Heya Frank, Inch! Merry Christmas! C'mon in."

"Yuletide felicitations right back, ya punk," Frank offered in blessing, "but we can't stop. On our way to the station. The Inch household have inexplicably invited me to share their festive hospitality."

"Oh!" I smiled at Inch. "That's real nice." She rolled her eyes away from mine and blew out a cloud of breath.

"But before we go." Frank handed me a small present, the exact same size and shape as my birthday present. "For you with best wishes from all the Voggers."

"Hey. Thank you, guys. Hang on a sec, I got yours somewhere --"

"No-no – when we're back in town, fair enough? Patience is one of my numerous virtues."

Inch was tugging him away by his arm. "We gotta run or we'll be stuck in the fuckin' train station for the holidays."

I waved them off. "Okay! See ya! Merry Christmas!"

Inch called back over her shoulder. "Fuck off."

I closed the door, turned and held the small package up for Zoe to see. "Lookit. Got a present from Vog."

"Hmm!" She instantly sized it up. "Think it could be a *CD*, maybe?"

"*Gee, I dunno!*" I removed the paper and saw the cover of *Incesticide*, the hot-off-the-presses newest Nirvana release. With a smile, I showed it to her. "Of course." She stood up, came over to me, slipped an arm around my waist, and took a closer look at it. Then we looked at each other. "Not exactly the sounds of the season," I mumbled.

She nudged my shoulder with her cheek. "Aaaa, go for it. It'll be fun."

We ejected Nat, slipped in my newest addition to my library, and pressed Play. Then we resumed our seats before the fire and gently headbanged, sometimes exchanging little squeezes and kisses. After a couple of songs came one that I would soon learn was titled "Been a Son". The first few notes instantly told me that this song, like a few of their previous ones, was in essence pure punk rock (of course I approved).

So I stood and extended my hand to Zoe. "Care to join me in a Christmas pogo, my dear?"