

The Spencer Creek Trilogy



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

The Essence of The Spencer Creek Trilogy

This is a three part work comprised of connected novellas, inspired in part by the Salterton and Deptford trilogies of Robertson Davies. They are centered around the rhythms of a town near the Head of the Lake in Ontario, Canada. The actual town of Dundas, Ontario was the inspiration for these works, but the depicted town and its characters are only facsimiles of the actual town and its citizens.

The work is near-term futuristic, and the novellas roll out in reverse chronological order. One main motivation for the work was to depict a town and its rhythms as it might become in a sustainable future. The other main motivation of the work was to create a tableau upon which the spiritual development of the characters, individually and collectively, could be unfurled. Any reference to a spiritual or religious aspect of life was done with respect and humility, and with the underlying assertion that life is inherently a spiritual journey.

A bibliography of supporting material is offered at the end of the trilogy.

The illustrations at the frontispiece of each chapter were put into to break up the sea of text, to provide some greater sense of a subset of the characters, and because they were simply fun to create.

Any factual errors or grammatical flaws are due to my shortcomings. Any inspiration or knowledge gained from this material can be attributed to the intricate workings of The Divine.

BWB, Dundas, Ontario

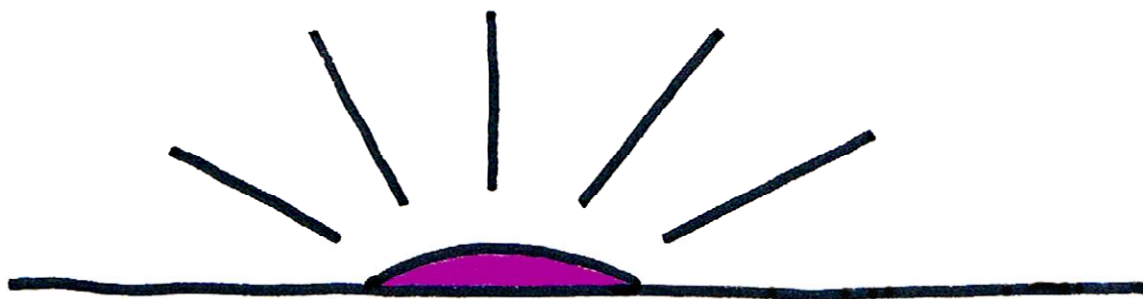
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First Light

Written and illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

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for Rashne, Jasmine, Cyrus and Rocky

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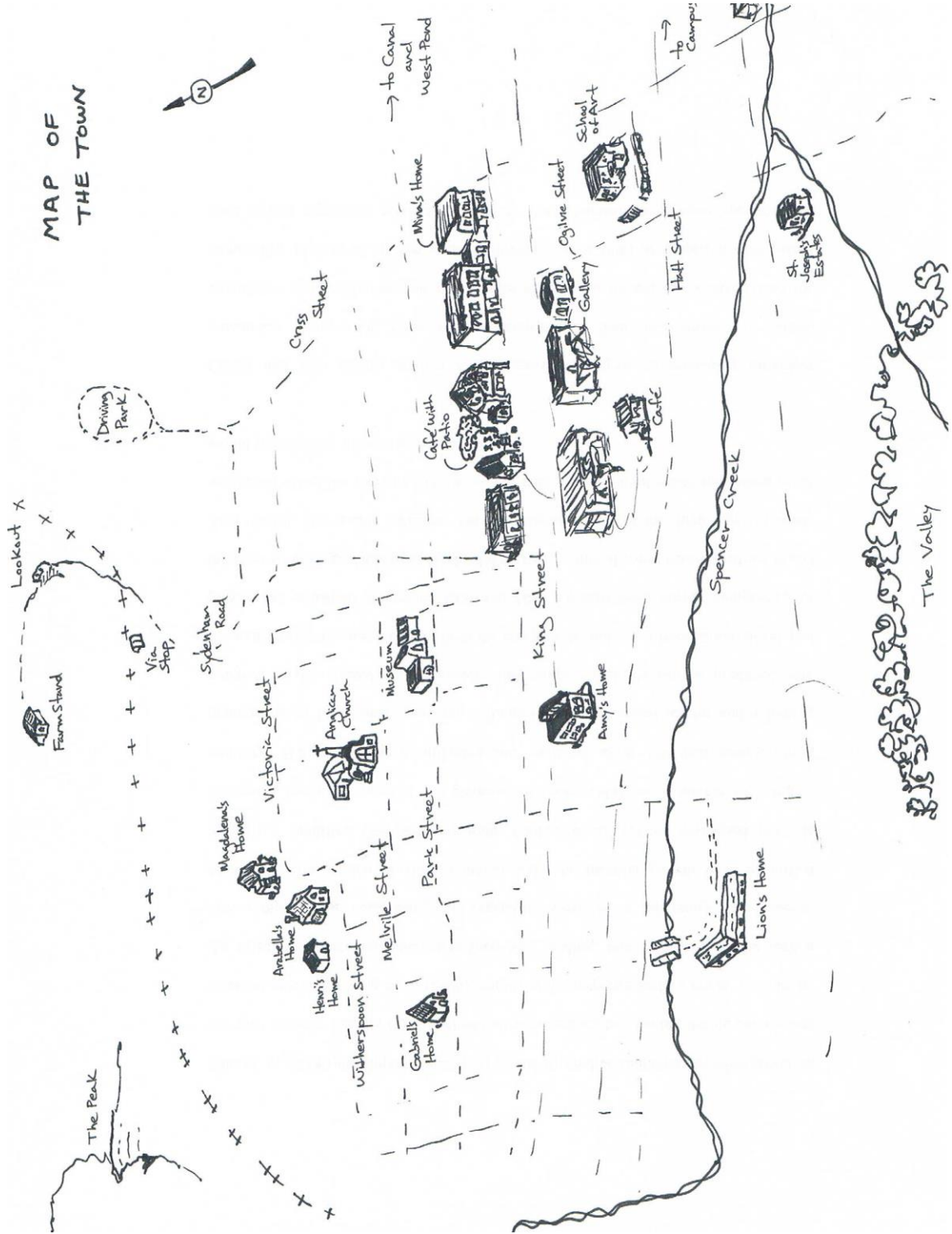
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List of Characters (in order of appearance)

Gabriel Dunlop is a man of substance, conservative in temperament, but liberal in his worldview. Salt of the earth, dedicated community builder and one who has a defined fondness for homemade pies. He has been married to the same woman for 37 years, is affluent in an understated way, and embodies the frugal tendencies of a person raised by Depression-era parents. As the world changes quickly, he knows in his heart he will have to give up much of the past and share leadership duties with folks who are perhaps a bit outside his comfort zone.

Mina Patel spends her days in a quiet way, the sounds of CBC One interlacing with the clatter emanating from the tearoom kitchen across the alley from her small flat. Still showing evidence of the beauty that would slow traffic in her younger days, she takes long walks around the nearby Driving Park in all manner of weather, never fully admitting how much she misses her dear husband these past seven years. Mina embodies the Now, and projects Love to all and sundry who cross her path, particularly the Scrabble Club folks at the Carnegie Gallery. She believes deeply in good intentions, and even more deeply in detachment from the resulting outcomes.

Kurt Winslow is an untenured assistant professor at the local university, balancing large classes of bright-eyed young folk with the ever-present task of writing a manuscript that will lead to some form of modest acclaim. He lives mainly in his head, but there are fleeting moments shared with his common-law partner and their daughter in which he glimpses a broader understanding of life. Perhaps, under the right circumstances, his heart may become as important as his mind as a navigational tool for reaching the end with minimal regrets.

Magdalena McDermott breathes life into everything she touches, and is the quintessential old soul in a young body. Bikram yoga and long-distance running, along with collage art and web graphics, fill her days perhaps a bit too fully. With no shortage of potential suitors, she is increasingly choosy, much to the dismay of a tradition-bound mother and a bevy of well-meaning aunties.

Arabella Duke is quick to smile, and is arguably the most connected of the town's citizenry. Expansive in spirit and good humour, there isn't a volunteer activity around that has not felt her sure touch. Arabella comes from old money and remains single after a failed first marriage lost to the mists of time. She can see the big view on things, and is able to hold all solitudes with equal parts of grace and mirth.

Henri LaMontagne is a somewhat abrasive neighbour, with a flat stomach and equally chiseled chin. He is the most competitive member of a lackluster slow-pitch team, and writes many letters to the editor in a combative but common sense tone. Henri always has one antenna up for the possibility of an enduring love, but the coffee shop ladies feel he will need to learn to yield more graciously to life before Cupid would even think of lifting his bow.

Stephen Tucker is a family man who puts first things first. He runs a building restoration business that breathes new life into neglected homes and abandoned factories. Stephen wears the same suit each week to the Tuesday evening Freemasons meeting, held on the second floor of a former brewery that he helped restore into a collection of artist lofts. In his own quiet way, he can see rebirth in death and intrinsically knows of the Spirit that infuses all matter.

Amy Wu is seventeen and wants the world to change. She doesn't smoke, drink, or do drugs, but she is a serious rebel in her own mind. Amy does one hundred pushups every morning, just enough homework to get the high grades her expectant parents demand, and upholds her carnivore diet. She reads anarchist literature from the local library, but finds it depressing. Amy wants real change, a world with meaning, but the way forward is far from clear.

Barbara Oreille is unconventional in pretty much every way. She doesn't own a car, grows winter greens in a cold frame greenhouse, and loves to stand by Spencer Creek to hear the messages emanating from its currents. Barbara is a healer by vocation, but not in the pharmaceutical or surgical sense. She works wonders by looking people deep into their eyes to see their true essence, and laying her hands on sore joints and creaky muscles to allow the Light to enter.

Rick Denton has an easy way with people, and never seems in a hurry. He doesn't have any close friends, yet pretty much everyone in town feels they know him. Rick likes to live life in the shadows, nuzzling at the underbelly of a town that looks squeaky clean on the surface. He holds a secret, and in his mind he holds it for the right reasons. His gift of the gab has gotten him out of a few tight spots in the past, but it is uncertain if his luck will hold.

Patricia Amiel lives in a ramshackle stone house near the edge of town, with sufficient property to keep a number of beehives. Early retirement from teaching has suited her well, allowing her sufficient time for her animals and her knitting. Patricia's real work is connecting to Gaia, hearing the Earth's songs and poems, and helping others to enjoy these beautiful gifts.

Prelude

Five Years From Present Time

Some felt that significant change was imminent. They held this knowledge gently; it was understood but rarely expressed. Soon, however, it would be their time to speak.

The majority still groused about the jumpy weather or the upward trend in gas prices. For them, holding a job and getting one's family through another supper hour were primary concerns. Life was just comfortable enough that they did not entertain the idea of change.

Old even by Southern Ontario standards, the town was hugged on three sides by the Niagara Escarpment, boasting beautiful open space in close proximity to urban areas. This auspicious setting would become important as the full connection between each individual and the Earth unfolded and became part of daily life.

The town shaped its people, and the people nudged and molded their town. Many of its former rhythms would be released gracefully, and some less so. The transition would be gradual for some, and painfully abrupt for others. But as the flow of the cosmos pulsed through the landscape, its rising tide raising all boats, it became clear to all that this would be a time like no other.

Part I: Holding Two Solitudes

Cloudy, With Sunny Breaks



Gabriel Dunlop stood in the front doorway of his home, leaning against the frame while waiting for his dog, Strider, to do his business in the unrelenting drizzle of a mid-Spring day. Gabriel didn't have much planned that afternoon, like most afternoons since he had taken early retirement. He would sit with his canine friend, perhaps re-read the morning paper, and contemplate Life's Big Questions. He suspected he was waiting, but he was not entirely sure what he was waiting for. But wait he would, and think, until it became clear.

At one time in his life he had shown great promise. He had risen quickly in his line of work, was active as a volunteer in a number of community initiatives, and had been an engaged and affectionate father to his three children. His marriage still had some spark to it, and he and his wife enjoyed good health and temperament. But something had apparently shifted, and he was having a devil of a time figuring out if it was within him, or in everything else around him.

His work had been important to him, it had framed his days and weeks throughout the years, but now he often wondered if it had meant much at all. The concept of work had changed substantially in recent years, particularly so since the Earth Changes had come on thick and fast. A lot of the old jobs had

fallen off the map or just gradually withered away. People didn't seem to commute much anymore, with the price of gas and the deteriorating condition of the major highways. If someone did need to go into Toronto for work or an appointment, they would most likely scale the Sydenham hill and flag down a VIA Rail train barreling east from London.

But as is often the case in life, when certain things fall away, others creep in to replace them. Since the burst of earthquakes that had nigh on hobbled the global economy, Gabriel had observed there were many more local handymen who were good with tools and could be counted on to put anything right around the house. These folks were usually quite flexible on price, always wanted to be paid in cash, and if work was slow, they would take partial payment in surplus squash from his garden or a bounty of mulberries from his driveway tree. Gabriel tried to do a lot of things on his own, partially to trim costs but also to enjoy the inner pleasure of a job accomplished on one's own abode. But with affordable compensation rates and pleasant neighbours willing and eager to work, he hired them to stimulate the local economy and also help himself as the birthday cake candle count made its gradual ascent.

His reveries were interrupted by familiar footfalls over the front door threshold.

"Gabriel?" his wife Mary called, "how are you, my darling?" She had wisely kept her counseling practice in play, seeing clients three days a week in an old stone building on York Road.

"Fine, Peaches, or as fine as the weather might permit," Gabriel answered. He often referred to his better half with a fond fruit reference, but over the last few years he had settled on that firm but sweet delicacy of the Niagara fruit lands.

"What did you accomplish today, my dear?" she asked. This was the point in the conversation where things seemed to bog down.

"Not a whole lot. I took Strider for a wee stroll, read the paper, had some lentil soup, went back to the paper, and, well, I spent the rest of the time doing some thinking." Embarrassing as it was, it was an accurate summary of his day.

"Thinking is fine, Gabriel, but it only goes so far. What about getting together with some of your friends? Why don't you do something in the community like you used to?" Her last sentence incubated a quiet sort of dread in the marrow of his bones. He had been active in community projects for most of his life, but had found it increasingly difficult to summon the drive to join anything at the

moment. He had always been a leader, but that had most certainly changed. Yet he hadn't become a follower, because he didn't have a clue about what to follow.

"Mary, I'll set an intention to get working on something soon," he heard himself say. This statement had floated out from a deep space within him, but it made a lot of sense, as over the years he had learnt time and again that setting the intention was more than half the battle. Once that was done, things took on a life of their own: help would show up unexpectedly, a cheque would arrive in the mail, or a message on a billboard would provide the perfect inspiration for the task at hand.

Gabriel knew intuitively that more changes would be coming. He couldn't yet see what they might entail, or how he might help in the process, but subtle hints would come to him in his nighttime dreams and daytime reveries. He would set the intention to be of use and to listen to all of his senses, and this would hopefully show him the way.

In the meantime, he vowed to go downtown more often for a cup of coffee, partially to appease Mary and partially to bump into the people he knew would prove important to him in the future.

"I'll get started on dinner, and we can talk more about this later," Mary said with an amalgam of resignation and impending hunger.

The phone in the kitchen rang and Mary got to it by the third ring. "If this is a telemarketer calling at suppertime, I'm afraid of what I might say... yes, yes, hold on just a second. Gabriel, it's for you."

Full Moon Rising



The days would start slowly, with morning ablutions and hot tea with lemon. She liked the sounds of Metro Morning, as they reminded her of those days long back when she ran a masala shop on Gerrard Street East as a middle-aged new Canadian. Toronto had been home for some time, but they moved to this small town when their son was doing a residency in the medical school and had never left. Their son, a doctor, went on to follow the lucre trail to Texas but they had stayed, feeling safe and welcome in Canada.

It had been difficult when her beloved Pathan had left this earthly plane on that windswept November evening. The shock of the event still had teeth, even after all these years. She had taken care of herself, still with glowing skin and silky hair and trim of figure, but she had no interest in widowers looking for a cook and maid. She found a small flat on the second floor of an 1860's stone building, off an alley just steps from downtown, and took life one day at a time.

Mina stepped out at mid-morning, and took her regular perambulation around the Driving Park, a historic green space just north of downtown. Not too fast, not too slow, but in just the right Goldilocks tempo that allowed her to fully observe her neighbourhood. She didn't know the majority of the families living in the houses she passed, but she developed story lines in her mind based on the contents of their recycling boxes and the tidiness level of their front porches. A good number seemed to know her, many calling out to her by name, and she would respond to all with a uniform greeting. "Hello, dear, it's good to see you," she would say, her words accompanied with direct eye contact and a warm smile. This treatment seemed to have a pleasing effect on people of all ages, particularly on the younger ones.

Weather didn't seem to affect her, though her preference was for the warm, sun-kissed days of Spring and Summer when the old town looked its best, with lovely gardens and trees framing the varied architecture from across the last two centuries. But in Winter chill or Fall drizzle she would also do her walking constitutional, layering herself in warm gear and drawing from a wide array of colourful and funky headwear.

After her walk she began preparations for her one real meal of the day. By habit she would always prepare rice and dal, with whatever vegetable she had on the side, overcooked and spiced in the ways of the subcontinent. She chuckled at times when some of the people in the Scrabble Club would complain about the difficulties of cooking for one, but she could empathize to a degree. For her, cooking alone wasn't as difficult as eating alone, and Mina wished for the day that people in her community would come together to share food and company.

But for now she cooked and ate alone, and invariably napped each day for an

extended period of time. This was necessary, for she slept in fitful bursts throughout the night, particularly so when moonlight spilled silently into the sleeping area of her living room. Mina loved the Moon, and would gaze sweetly at its waxing and waning, sending back waves of appreciation for its great beauty and untold mystery. She believed the Moon communicated right back, glowing and throbbing as only a Great Mother Goddess could do.

After her nap she would rise and do a number of yoga poses, holding each one until the Inner Voice told her to move on. Once her muscles were stretched and her spine elongated, she would sit in meditation for as long as she needed. She lived most of her life in a meditative manner, savouring the Now and enjoying all aspects of the experience at hand. But the afternoon sitting was like a meditation within a meditation, where she would go deeply inward and communicate with the part of herself that was truly common to all living things. This communication is what sustained her, and even though she led an outwardly quiet life, she knew that she provided some kind of subtle support for all the drama and frenzy that spun around her in the world.

Mina rose from her daily meditation and took tea with milk, two digestive biscuits, and a piece of fruit. This was all her metabolism and budget would allow for: one good meal at lunch and a tea around 4 o'clock. After tea, she would read her beloved books and listen to classical music on CDs, all borrowed from the nearby public library. She would wait for a call from her doctor son. Some days it would come, other days it would not. Some days it was rushed and some days it was meaningful. Mina would have appreciated more contact and perhaps closer physical proximity to her grown child, but she had reconciled herself to the way it was. Her life was simple, but she believed it to be meaningful. She rose each day with a knowing that it would be a happy day full of blessings. There were brief moments of disappointment and regret here and there, but in general her morning affirmations consistently yielded positive fruit. Soon she would find that her approach to life would serve well many folks in her adopted small town.

Hermes, a Penny For Your Thoughts?



Kurt Winslow stood in the coffee kiosk lineup and waited patiently. A few people walked by and nodded. One even said “hey Kurt,” but he was far too busy ruminating for the greeting to register. Kurt was thinking about his manuscript, the book that would tie everything together in his scattered academic background and give him a great job for the rest of his working life. But this thing wasn’t being birthed easily, and he spent every hour of the day and a reasonable chunk of the nighttime hours thinking about it. Or obsessing about it, as his partner liked to joke. They lived in a modest three-level townhouse near Mac’s Milk, and she did thesis editing for ESL grad students and took their daughter back and forth to school. When supper was done (for which Kurt was often late), and their daughter had toddled off to bed, Amanda wanted to connect in a meaningful way. But Kurt needed time to think, about both his ideas and his writing, which had invariably not gone so well. This book thing was becoming a significant obstacle to domestic bliss.

“What can I get for you today?” chirped the petite barista.

“Medium with double sugar, please,” responded Kurt, handing her his coins

with an absent smile. He stared at the menu list and wondered where his beans were grown and how many people had hoisted them from the field to this end-of-the-line brewing point. The barista handed him his coffee.

“Thank you very much,” he muttered, dropping nineteen cents in the tip bowl. When Kurt wasn’t thinking about the book, he thought about food. He’d read many books on how food shaped society, and he was both shocked and delighted at how the grow-local movement had taken off. The doomsdayers had predicted major food shortages, but fortunately they were far off the mark. Urbanites had seemingly sprouted green thumbs after the grinding cycle of floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes that shook the global economy. Trophy lawns were quickly converted to garden plots, rooftops sported a range of planters, and local markets sprung up everywhere. There was no question food had become more expensive, but people tended to shop more often and buy less at any given time, so wastage decreased substantially.

Even more exciting to Kurt were the cultural shifts that were going on. Young people were lining up to become urban farmers, neighbours were sharing surplus food, and small manufacturing operations were starting up for lightweight gardening tool production and cold-frame greenhouse construction. The backyard chicken coop craze had steamrolled along, and a number of people were even keeping livestock on larger plots at the urban fringe. Kurt and Amanda had their entire backyard in vegetable production, magnified with vertical trellises. They were eating better than ever before, and so were most of their neighbours.

Kurt spent the rest of the afternoon working on some notes to support the next chapter of his book, punctuated only by a fifty-minute lecture to three hundred history majors. Most of them brought laptops to class, not so much for taking notes as for keeping current on Facebook. Kurt did his best with a lecture he had given several times before, and a few folks charitably laughed at his interspersed humour. Later, when the shadows lengthened in his L-shaped office, he realized he was late again for supper. Kurt jumped on the bicycle that he used for his twelve-minute commute and dashed homeward.

As he came across the threshold he could feel the chill in the air, and realized it was Tuesday. Tuesdays were Amanda’s Scrabble nights.

“Sorry, honey, I got wrapped up in things,” he explained feebly as he walked through the front door.

“That’s alright, Kurt,” Amanda said in a tone that spoke volumes. “Your supper is in the oven, Katie and I are done eating, and if I rush I can still get to the Carnegie on time.” She shut the door with a certain emphasis, and Kurt walked into the living room where his little girl was watching television.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hi, Katie."

"You're sweaty, Daddy."

"I know. I just rushed home because I was late."

"That's what Mommy said too, that you were *very* late, but she still loves you."

Kurt chuckled and winced at the same time. He always felt better when he saw his little angel. Katie had wispy hair like spun gold and was a tiny little thing, perhaps tinier than she should be at seven. She had big blue eyes that took everything in and exuded nothing but love. When Katie was born, back when Kurt was in grad school, he wondered if she might be the reincarnation of Gandhi. Or the original Lassie. Or a mix thereof. But when he held her those first few nights he knew she was a very special being who had been sent to him and Amanda, to bring them closer and teach them what is important in life. When Kurt was with Katie, like he was at this moment, his mind stopped racing to the next thought and things slowed down. He felt connected to his dear daughter in all ways, but most significant was their heart-to-heart connection.

Kurt hugged Katie and asked if she wanted some double chocolate ice cream, her particular favourite.

"Yes, please, and I want to be read to."

"Sure Katie, what do you want me to read?"

"Goodnight Moon. Daddy, I want to hear Goodnight Moon."

Certain things never change. This was the book he read every night to Katie, but some things just never get old.



A Meeting of the Minds

The phone call for Gabriel was from one of his old service club

buddies, asking if he might like to sit for a coffee in town the next day. They agreed to meet at the café on King Street.

The next morning, when things were shaping up just like other mornings of the last few weeks, Gabriel remembered the invitation and slipped on his corduroy jacket. On his way into town, he sauntered past a range of late nineteenth century homes, not one identical to the other, and all in reasonably good shape. He had a sharp observational eye, much like Robertson Davies' alter ego, Samuel Marchbanks. Unlike Marchbanks, Gabriel kept his thoughts to himself. Ever since the start of *The Changes*, he had noticed more and more solar panels and micro wind turbines showing up on his neighbours' homes. Utility prices had gone up sharply and he was amazed at how quickly thrifty Canadians had responded. He hadn't seen a new car in a while, and it seemed to him that a lot more bicycles were wending their way down local streets. Employment opportunities were initially scarce, particularly for young people. He'd watched as grown children moved back to their family homes, filling attics and basements to get free rent and three square meals without being totally underfoot of their once-empty-nest parents. But he also saw more of these young folk working as urban farmers or bike mechanics or solar technology repair technicians. Things were righting themselves nicely.

Around the time that Gabriel was making his way down Park Street, Kurt ran down his townhouse steps and quickly jumped onto his bicycle. He had a lecture to give in an hour, and had just realized that a number of Katie's books and DVDs were overdue at the library. He'd slung them all into a wrinkled Metro bag and balanced this on his right handlebar as he cycled into town. He felt that twinge that all coffee drinkers know well, and thought he might stop in at the place located just a block from the library, and avoid the lineup at the campus java joint.

Around this time, when Gabriel had turned onto King Street, Mina slipped down the back stairs from her apartment. She typically drank tea at home, but yesterday had received a birthday cheque from her son. With the intent to stimulate the local economy and perhaps bump into some of her Scrabble Club friends, she cut down the alley with a light but sure step.

The three people—Gabriel, Mina and Kurt—did not directly know one another. There were perhaps two or less degrees of separation between them, as is common in small towns, but this was going to change very quickly and very soon. The puzzle pieces of the universe slip into place mysteriously but precisely, and the trio's unscripted rendezvous had many implications for the future.

Gabriel was less than half a block from the coffee shop, and he gazed ahead, admiring its signage and the quality of the masonry on the older building.

Kurt cycled past Cross Street and coasted between a stopped bus and a large truck. His bag of library holdings swayed precariously, and he saw even more traffic ahead. He made the decision to ride on the sidewalk, taking the curb cut at the Ogilvie traffic light, and saw no pedestrians between him and the coffee shop. He was riding perhaps too quickly, certainly too quickly to read the sandwich board heralding the merits of a basil and thyme exfoliation treatment at the boutique spa, but it was enough to set him thinking about Amanda's upcoming birthday and an appropriate non-consumptive gift.

Chewing gum and walking at the same time has been a challenge for many stereotypical athletes, but riding a bicycle while contemplating spousal birthday gifts has been the downfall of many a young academic. Mina popped out of the alley with a certain buoyancy, but Kurt did not see her until it was far too late.

What he did finally see was the back of a petite, elderly Indian woman as he hit his brakes and swerved left simultaneously. The bag popped off the handlebar, and beautifully illustrated editions of Piggy Bank Gonzalez and Each Peach Pear Plum went skittering under a parked car. Kurt's bike stayed planted in place, with the back wheel elevating a foot in the air. He catapulted over the handlebars and projected forward into the chest and arms of a very surprised Gabriel Dunlop. Gabriel had hesitated just a second before, looking to see if his coffee friend was perhaps coming up King Street, and then had stepped into the perfect spot to absorb most of Kurt's kinetic energy. Half a second later his knees buckled and he was sitting on the sidewalk holding Kurt in his lap, with neither the worse for wear.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," sputtered Kurt, "my mind was drifting and I was just about to plough into the lady."

"Quite alright, young man, I've played enough sports in my day to have taken much worse! Although at my age I'm glad you weren't going any faster."

Mina glided over and put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Are you two gentlemen alright? I hope this accident wasn't due to my part."

"Not at all, not in the least," replied Kurt, "I'm in a bit of a rush, doing a few errands before work, and I must admit my mind was elsewhere."

"Your mind was elsewhere, so where was it?" asked Mina. "I shouldn't lecture you, as you went out of your way to avoid hitting me, but if this gentleman had not been here to catch you the situation could have been quite serious."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, I *really* am," Kurt said. He had gone to graduate school

in the States but was a true blue Canadian. In keeping with his countrymen, he always apologized profusely even when he wasn't at fault. Furthermore, at times when he was truly to blame, he would go even further out of his way to self-assign guilt.

"Well, first off, one shouldn't be riding on the sidewalk, particularly on King Street," offered Gabriel, who had gotten his breath back and thought he should at least say something sensible.

"But if you had been mindful, we surely could have shared the sidewalk without incident, no?" Mina suggested. Her voice rang clear and sharp from her tiny frame.

"Well, I was in an awful rush, and I thought I needed a coffee. I'm due at work soon, and I have to stop off at the library, and something outside one of the shops caught and kept my attention," Kurt explained, sticking to the facts. He had a gnawing feeling he would be late for his lecture.

"All well and good, but might I humbly suggest that if you had been mindful, all of this might have been avoided," Mina said. "Do you know what being mindful is?"

"Yes I do, at least in philosophical terms," Kurt confirmed. His undergraduate degree had been in philosophy.

"I mean in practical terms. Mindful while walking, while cooking, while doing the dishes, while talking with a neighbour, while sipping tea. Mindfulness suggests a focus, a complete absorption in the task at hand, enjoying the journey while not anticipating the destination." Mina spoke with authority, as one who savours each step and sip along the way.

"I'm an overworked professor with a young child," Kurt sighed. "I'm the first to admit I'm not as mindful as I'd like to be."

"Your condition cries out for even a higher degree of mindfulness," Mina said. She looked carefully at Kurt's face and smiled. "I just realized I know you. You're Amanda's husband! I play Scrabble with Amanda at the Carnegie and we met a year ago in the Driving Park. My name is Mina." She shook hands with Kurt and then with Gabriel, who was considering slipping away to meet his friend for coffee. Somehow, something had held him in his tracks.

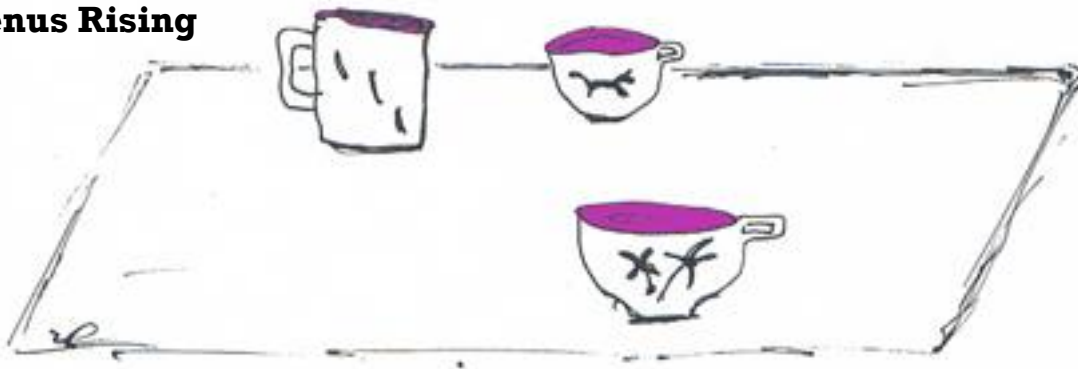
"Okay, Dr. Kurt," Mina said, "mindfulness is not just an abstract concept, it can be learned and cultivated. I will teach you what I know, and we will start this Saturday afternoon. Come to my flat, just opposite the rear delivery door of the tearoom at 3 o'clock. I will be there with one of my dear young friends,

who I get together with habitually on Saturdays.” Mina turned to Gabriel. “Since the universe has involved you in our situation, it seems to me that you should also come along. Any objections?”

It might have been the twinkle in Mina’s eyes, it may have been the too many rainy days whiled away at home, or it might have been retirement unrolling itself in a path of great certainty and considerable ennui. Whatever it was, Gabriel felt he stood at some kind of crossroads.

His mouth opened. “I’ll be there,” he said, not sure if he had responded or if some sort of inner voice had taken over. “With bells on!” he added, with a flourish that he claimed as his own.

Venus Rising



A few days rolled by, and life built upon itself in the incremental way of our existence. Saturday afternoon is time off for most wage slaves, but busy enough with shopping and errands for those who still followed the 9 to 5, Monday to Friday rhythms. The walk along King Street was animated in a pleasant way for the two gentlemen coming from opposite directions. Kurt greeted Gabriel in a warm but self-conscious manner and they strolled together down the alleyway to Mina’s stairway. They repeatedly consulted their watches to ensure a punctual, but not early, arrival.

Gabriel knocked, and Mina opened the door slowly, unveiling a tidy space with minimalist furniture. Four wooden chairs were set up in a quadrant fashion on a lovely Oriental rug. Sitting on one of the chairs was a woman.

“I would like you to meet my young friend, Magdalena,” Mina said, clutching the elbows of Kurt and Gabriel with a gentle touch and nudging them forward.

“Magdalena McDermott,” said the young lady in a confident tone, and offered her hand. The handshake was firm and warm, and she looked both of the

gentlemen square in the eye. Gabriel was of a generation where women shook hands in a limp-wristed fashion, if at all, and the introduction threw him a bit off kilter. A few beads of sweat appeared on his expansive brow.

Kurt was quite close to Magdalena in terms of chronological age, and he had plenty of contact with professional women who would pulverize one's hand if only to partially correct centuries of male domination. Still, he too was feeling a bit off his mark. Magdalena was attractive in an understated way. Her figure was firm and lithe and she would certainly catch many a single man's lingering gaze, but there was something more primal that was affecting the two men that afternoon. Kurt sensed a deep femininity that stepped outside conventional bounds, coupled with a grace that buttressed her every word and action.

"I have told Magdalena the story of our little encounter the other day outside the coffee shop," Mina said. Her voice was calm and quiet, with no hint of scolding. "She and I get together every Saturday afternoon, to sit and meditate, and then to share some tea. Occasionally we ask people to join us, who either wish to meditate or who may be in need of more mindfulness in their lives. So here we are."

"Have either of you ever learned to meditate?" Magdalena asked in a neutral tone.

"I've tried to do it in large group sessions on a number of occasions, but I seem to fall asleep," Kurt replied.

"I've always thought of it as an Eastern practice, and perhaps inconsistent with what we do at church," Gabriel said sheepishly, blushing a light shade of pink. He was starting to wonder why he had been invited.

"Fair enough," said Magdalena. "We're going to set that all aside and I will show you the basics of meditation practice. It is from the East, but only because that is where many early human civilizations started. It came to the West largely because of the Beatles' trip to India. The four lads from Liverpool met up with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, learned to meditate, and George Harrison famously stated he had no further need for drugs! The Maharishi brought it commercially to the States with the Transcendental Meditation craze of the 70s, and now we pretty much see an article once a month in the Spec extolling the health and relaxation benefits of meditation. It doesn't hurt that yoga has caught on like wildfire, as meditation is simply one of the branches of the overall science of yoga."

"I meditate twice a day, every day," Mina said, jumping into the flow seamlessly. "In fact, I eat only two meals a day, and consider meditation as

important as the taking of food.” She paused to let this take effect, as she knew how important the consumption of a square meal was to the average red-blooded Canadian male. “In essence, food for the body comes through eating, and food for the soul comes through meditation. So, do you ever go a day without eating? No. Equally, you should never go a day without meditation.”

“I do pray,” Gabriel said. He relayed this quickly, as it was something he hadn’t said out loud before. “Wouldn’t that have the same effect?”

“Gabriel, prayer is a beautiful thing,” Mina said, “but think of all of this as a conversation with the Divine. Prayer, then, is you talking to the Divine. But to have an effective conversation, the flow has to go two ways. Think of meditation as the Divine talking to you.”

“Why don’t we sit down and give it a try,” Magdalena said. She was nothing short of practical, and had learned from experience that some people could talk about meditation all day but never get down to the actual doing. “Let’s each take a seat. Each of the wooden chairs that Mina set out have a modest cushion to sit on. Perfect chairs, not too comfortable, and not too austere.

“Sit quietly with your eyes closed, hands held together in your lap. Take a few deep breaths and slowly scan your body from head to toe, looking for any areas where you feel tension. Forehead, jaw and stomach are the ones to often watch out for. Wherever you feel tension, consciously relax that area, and move on.

“I’m going to talk for another few moments, and then we’ll be quiet for about 20 minutes. Your eyes are closed but use your internal vision to focus on the point between your two eyebrows. This is what the mystics call the third eye. When you see the Bollywood starlets with jewelry or makeup adorning this area, with what they call a *tili*, it is a symbol of one’s third eye. Some say we have a vestigial sight organ in and around this area, but in any case, this is where we gently focus. Today we will follow a Vipassana practice where we mentally focus on our breath going in and our breath going out. There’s not much else to it. We stay relaxed and focus on the breath in, and the breath out. For meditation novices, this may seem too simple, but honestly that’s all we have to do. When a thought arises, simply tell the thought you are occupied and you will get back to it shortly. Your ego will keep sending you thoughts, since it won’t like this meditation thing you are trying. Your ego wants to be the center of attention, and is delighted when you jump right onto the thought it created, and then onto a second follow-up thought, and a third, and so on. The quicker the jumping, the better for the ego, as it loves this so-called monkey mind that is constantly busy, but always with something else than the matter at hand.”

“And the matter at hand is your meditation,” Mina added. “So when a thought comes up, and it inevitably will, you excuse yourself from it and go back to the breath. This may happen over and over, but you simply keep returning to your breath going in and out. Think of it as if you were having a conversation with the Governor-General, and various people are walking by and trying to distract you. You nod at them, smile, and tell them you will be back to them after you have finished your very important conversation. You keep on in a focused way with the Governor-General. After a while, the passersby will simply stop trying to interrupt you, and you will go deeper and deeper in conversation. This is what happens in meditation. Thoughts disappear and you go deeper and deeper in your connection with the Divine.”

Magdalena let Mina’s words sit for a moment, then spoke, “So to recap before we plunge in: relax, gently focus on your third eye, focus on your breath going in and out, and gently excuse thoughts or noises. And with that, we go on our inward journey. And as we do for any physical journey, we also ask for protection on this inward journey.”

The room went quiet. Both women quickly settled into a meditative state, the result of many years of regular practice. Kurt and Gabriel fidgeted a bit in their own respective ways, but after a few minutes they appeared to settle into a reasonable form of calmness and stillness.

A clock ticked in the kitchen. Birdsong came in through a small crack in the living room window. The fridge motor whirled on, then off. A car door slammed on Cross Street. In other ways, time stood still.

Mina stirred first, then Magdalena. Mina looked around the room with half-opened eyes, and sensed a connection between the three others present. Not a physical connection, but an energetic linkage. It was subtle, but it was perceptible to her well-trained senses.

“Stretch your bodies, and come back fully into the physical realm,” Magdalena instructed, her yoga training coming to the fore. “Mina made tea ahead of time, so pour yourself a cup and return to your seat for post-meditation reflection.” The tea was poured into a collection of one-of-a-kind mugs, and everyone returned quietly to their chairs.

“Kurt, you were the one that seemed to be most in need of mindfulness. Share your thoughts on what went on,” Mina said. She had a knack for cutting to the chase.

“Well, I started thinking about work, then came back to my breath, and then I heard some street noise, but came back to my breath. I went back to work,

breath, then thought about my wife, more breath, but then after a point I settled on the breath and then after a few minutes, I lost track of my breath but no thoughts came in to fill the gap. I was just kind of there, until I heard Magdalena calling us back.”

“That’s fantastic, Kurt,” Mina said. “How about you, Gabriel?”

“Well, I too got settled in, and I thought a lot about my dog and a little bit about how I miss my work, but then it became quiet and almost dream-like. A couple of thoughts came and nudged me, but they didn’t seem like my thoughts, almost more like a group thought. Something about what a great place we all live in here, and how we need to work together and come together to make it even more special. And then I heard Magdalena’s voice.”

“How do you gentlemen *feel*?” Mina said, drawing out the last word.

“I must say I do feel different,” Kurt started, and then paused. “A bit like I might feel after a two hour Sunday afternoon nap, not exactly the same as that, but close. And somehow I’m enjoying this tea more than I might normally, and I just noticed the beautiful weavings on those tapestries on the wall.”

“I’m not sure that I feel the effects now, but the experience itself was quite wonderful. I will definitely try on my own,” Gabriel said shyly, “and perhaps together again with this fine group, if that would be possible.”

“Definitely,” Mina confirmed, and looked over at Magdalena. “Shall we perhaps alternate venues on successive Saturdays, to gain experience meditating in different environments? It will cut down on my vacuuming and tidying chores. Magdalena has the most amazing duo of cats, I think both of you will enjoy meeting them. Until next week.”

Esperanto Is Not the Only Common Language

A week rolled by, perhaps quicker than most, although it seemed to many that time was going by quickly. Magdalena lived on the second floor of a modest brick home, long ago converted to contain multiple living spaces. From her deck, which led to an external wooden stairwell into the back garden, she and her two cats had quite stunning views of the escarpment that circled the town.



Mina made her way on foot, admiring different gardens from her normal perambulation route. Kurt wheeled over on his bicycle, taking a few moments extra to find the new location and to show tangible evidence of his marginally increasing mindfulness. Absent today was Gabriel, not far away as the crow flies, but tied to his home due to constraints imposed by his mobile dog groomer. These days you could get an individual to come to your house for a variety of services, and if they were popular or particularly effective, you had to adjust your schedule to fit theirs. Gabriel had arranged for his dog groomer to come and give Strider his quarterly trim, and then would ask him to check the wiring of the solar cooker that they had recently installed on the east wall of their home. Gabriel had found out that the young man was as good with shears as he was with a soldering iron, and figured he would come out ahead in consolidating the tasks from both a time and pocketbook perspective. Sadly, he would miss out on this week's meditation and the opportunity to meet Magdalena's cats.

Kurt locked his bike to one of the watering stubs used by the urban farmers on the nearby food avenue, and stood at the foot of Magdalena's sidewalk, waiting for Mina. She came up and gave him a light hug, and stood back to give him a good once-over. Kurt was now one of Mina's projects, and they both knew it.

"How are you dear Kurt?"

"Doing very well, Mina. How about yourself?"

"Almost as good as the weather. How goes your meditation practice?"

"Academics are creatures of habit. I am happy to report that I've sat every day and observed my breath. With varying results, I might add, but not for lack of trying."

"Excellent, Kurt. Shall we go up to see Magdalena?"

They came in through the kitchen. Kurt sniffed at a medley of spices and noted the tidiness of the room. Magdalena was putting the finishing touches on a large cauldron of ginger tea, and greeted them both with an over-the-shoulder smile and flip of her hair.

"Good folks, good afternoon. I've made tea for après-meditation, and thought we might go into the living room and get down to our non-business."

Four chairs were set up in the living room, as Gabriel had just called to pass on his regrets. Magdalena's two Persian cats, a black charmer named Nubia and a taupe-coloured kitten called Lorax, snuggled together on one of the

chairs.

Magdalena introduced both of the cats to Kurt by name, as if they were children, he thought. The three of them sat down, got comfortable, and within a few seconds were focusing on their breath. A clock was ticking somewhere, and the fridge hummed on and off. Someone in the unit downstairs ran a hair dryer for thirty seconds or so. Nubia rolled over and Lorax licked his paws.

At the end of thirty minutes, the three stirred gently and arrived back from their inward journey. Magdalena stole away and returned with three mugs of steaming ginger tea.

"Kurt, tell Magdalena of your burgeoning meditation practice," Mina prompted.

"Well," Kurt said, blushing faintly. Magdalena threw him off a bit, but he assured himself that she daunted most men, and steeled himself before responding. "I've been able to sit every day, largely due to Mina's analogy of meditation being akin to spiritual food consumption. Some days I go deep, other days I skim along the top of the pond. I find I'm more centered, and can keep my train of thought going smoothly in lecture. Things seem better at home. I'm getting back for dinner on time, mainly because I can focus on my work and get things done before it's time to roll home."

"Excellent, Kurt. I must say this is very impressive," Magdalena declared bemusedly, confusing the devil out of Kurt. "Nubia also says she finds your progress very noteworthy."

"Nubia?" Kurt repeated, perplexed.

"Nubia," Magdalena said again. "The elegant charcoal-coloured charmer, seated on the chair to your left."

"I thought that's what you meant, or who you meant," Kurt stammered, "but what in the heck do you mean by that?"

"What I mean is that Nubia told me she is impressed by your advances on the meditation front."

"How did she tell you that?" Kurt chuckled. Both Mina and Magdalena stared at him, deadpan.

"I communicate with both of my cats," Magdalena explained. "I speak to them, yes, but we communicate with each other directly through thought-forms. I think something, they get it, then they think something back, and I

understand what it is. Lorax is a kitten, so like a child he wobbles at times, but generally he's pretty good."

"Do you mean this goes beyond meows and purrs?"

"Absolutely, Kurt," Mina said. "Magdalena is suggesting something on an energetic level, communication without words, through the ether, so to speak. Animal communication is big in some circles, but just talk to any pet owner and most will tell you they know what Rover or Fifi is thinking."

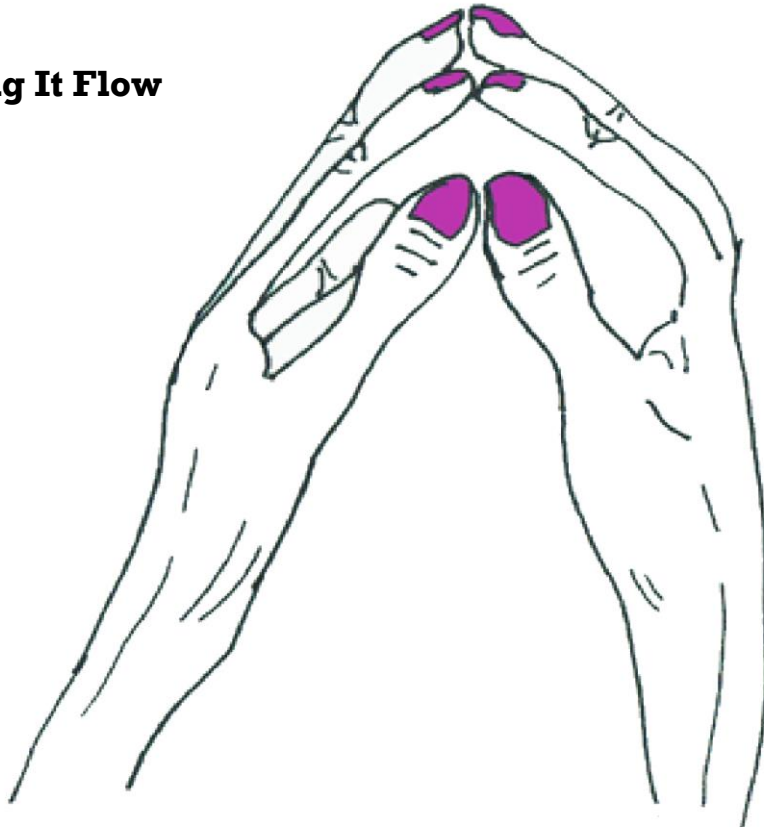
"I'll have to take this concept and sit with it a bit," Kurt replied respectfully.

"If Magdalena and I and others can communicate with animals, Kurt, then you can too. Perhaps this is something we can practice with you, along with our meditation."

Nubia jumped from her chair into Kurt's lap. Both women chuckled. "What is she saying?" Kurt asked.

Magdalena paused for effect. "That she finds you awfully cute."

Letting It Flow



Two Saturdays later they congregated once again at Magdalena's. This time Mina was absent. For months she had been planning to see an exhibit of Ming

vases at the Royal Ontario Museum with a friend from Toronto, and today was the only day free on both of their respective calendars. She'd mounted Sydenham Hill and caught the 9:16 VIA Rail train to Union Station. Since The Changes, many people retired their cars or just drove them less, and other options had emerged beyond walking and cycling. Today, Kurt's bicycle had a flat tire. He thought of walking over to Magdalena's, but one of the new jitney taxis rolled down his street at an opportune moment and he jumped in. The driver noted Magdalena's address and mentally re-optimized his route so the ever-changing assemblage of passengers could get to their destinations with a minimum of backtracking and inefficiency. Kurt put a toonie in the fare box, a retired ashtray hanging with chicken wire from the back of the front seat console, and off they went.

Kurt found Gabriel waiting at the base of Magdalena's steps. They climbed up together, sharing a joke about failing eyesight, both realizing they had a growing connection. At the door Magdalena smiled at them, wisps of hair falling from a loose bun. The familiar pot of ginger tea simmered on the stove.

"Gentlemen, advance to the living room. I've got the chairs set up for our meditation. After that, we'll have some tea, and if you have time I would like to share some Reiki with you. Meditation is the perfect prelude to Reiki."

"I'm not sure I know what Reiki is," Gabriel said apologetically.

"Nor I," Kurt confirmed jauntily.

"If you'd like to experience it, we'll get you on the table later," Magdalena said. Their meditation time passed, quite sweetly in fact, and was followed by a cup of strong ginger tea made palatable by some excellent local raw honey.

"OK, gents, who is to receive Reiki first?" Magdalena pointed to a table set up by the living room window.

"Age before beauty, Gabriel," Kurt said, extending his hand towards the table, smiling a mischievous grin.

"Excellent, Kurt. You've just pulled the short straw," Magdalena said firmly.

"Alright then, lads. Reiki is a spiritual healing tradition from Japan, developed over a century ago by Mikao Usui, a Buddhist monk. He was on a quest to learn how Jesus and Buddha healed with their hands. His searching culminated in a meditation session in which he divinely received Reiki, along with the knowledge of how to pass it on to others."

"Hey, I needed some of this a couple of weeks back when I spilled off my bike

outside the coffee shop. How might one pick this up?" Kurt asked, taking a huge draught of his ginger tea, having sat up from the prone position.

"Well, you need to take a class, taught over four days, which includes a sacred ceremony to connect you with the Reiki. I took my class with my good friend, Barbara. 'Rei' means Universal, and 'ki' means Life Force Energy. You become a conduit for this beautiful healing energy, which you can give to yourself, pets, plants and other people. Reiki is beautifully simple, there's no 'doing.' Reiki comes from the Divine, so it is an intelligent, all-knowing energy, and it knows how to bring your body and mind to balance."

"OK, I'm as ready as I'll ever be," Kurt said. He took one last pull of tea and lay back down on the table.

"I'll just do fifteen minutes for each of you," Magdalena said, "focusing mainly on your eyes, the back of your head, and your chest. Whoever is not on the table can play with the cats. Reiki is a sacred process, done mostly in silence unless emotions come up that need to be expressed. If we gab about the latest movie we can miss some subtle messages the energy brings to us. Afterwards we can share anything we want to share."

So fifteen minutes went by, with Magdalena shifting her hands twice. Once Kurt was through, she silently motioned to Gabriel to get up on the table. Another fifteen minutes went by, and then they sat together and spoke.

"Any impressions to share, gentlemen?" Magdalena asked.

"Your hands became very warm," Gabriel said, blushing, "and I felt like I went to sleep."

"Your breathing changed, Gabriel," Magdalena confirmed. "It seemed to me more like an altered state than a sleep state. When I took my hands off your chest, did you come back to normal without any grogginess?"

"Yes, I felt very clear, quite unlike when I get up from an afternoon nap!"

"And what about you, Kurt?" Magdalena asked.

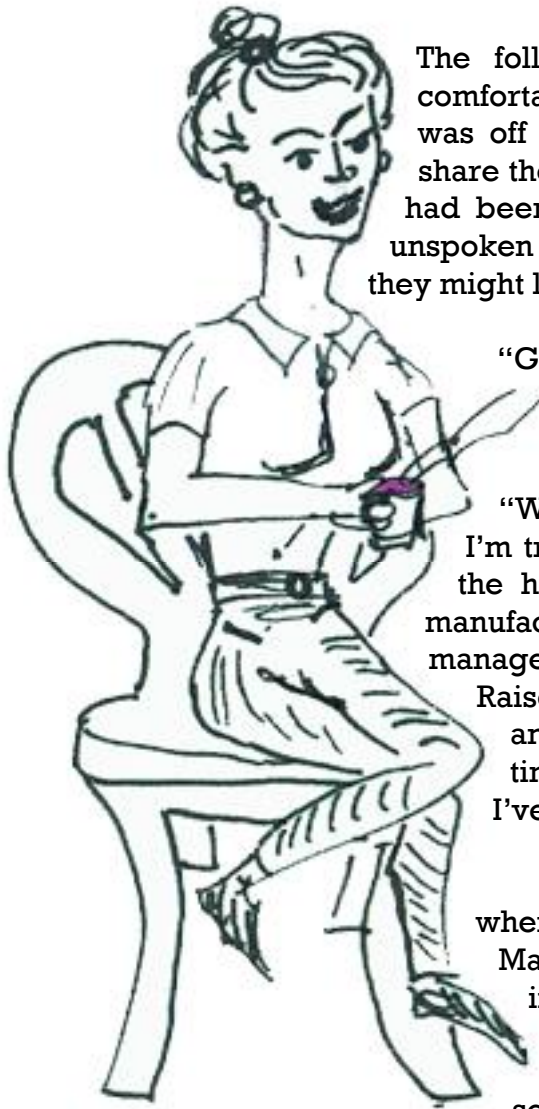
"I liked it a lot," Kurt said. "Very relaxing, and some deep insights came to me about my book, and, well, about other things."

"Such as?" Magdalena pressed. She had a knack for not letting things pass.

"It came to me that what we are doing is very important, and I felt the oneness of everything. And it occurred to me that I must get in touch with your friend

Barbara.”

The Middle Way



The following Saturday found Gabriel and Magdalena comfortably seated inside Mina’s cosy living room. Kurt was off at a conference in Kingston. The trio decided to share their thoughts before starting into meditation, as they had been meeting weekly for a month and each had the unspoken feeling that they didn’t know each other as fully as they might like.

“Gabriel, tell us both a bit about yourself and then tell us something about what you are feeling,” Mina requested in her usual disarming manner.

“Well,” Gabriel said, “let’s see. I’m retired now, and I’m trying to stay active, but I might be kicking around the house more than I should. I used to work in the manufacturing sector, in human resources, and at one time managed a large staff. All good folks, for the most part. Raised three kids, who generally stayed on the straight and narrow. I’m married to my best friend. At one time I did a lot in town, service clubs mainly. Overall, I’ve had a pretty good run.”

“Thanks, Gabriel, that helps me know you and where you’ve been. But what about the feeling part?” Magdalena said, smiling softly and looking square into his eyes.

“Oh boy,” Gabriel paused. “Feeling? I have to tell you honestly, this was the kind of moment I secretly dreaded when I signed on for these meditation meetings. Ladies, I’m old school, a bit of a Frank Sinatra man’s man. I don’t do ‘feelings’ all that well, if at all.” Tiny drops of perspiration were lining up on Gabriel’s wide brow, like ducks on a pond.

“Oh, Gabriel,” Mina said, “do I have to remind you that I am a number of years your senior? That takes away the generational argument, no? And the last time I checked the calendar it was quite a piece into the twenty-first century, so surely we’re beyond playing the stony male gender card?” This last statement from Mina could have been construed as mean-spirited, but again her smile came as a welcome emollient.

“Okay. Feeling. Perhaps I’ll just let go in a stream of consciousness, no

hesitation and no feedback, for the present moment,” Gabriel suggested.

“Sometimes I feel helpless. When I see images of the tornado destruction I just want to bury my head in the sand and pretend it’s not really happening. Or I sit there and soak it all in and do the I-feel-their-pain thing and end up immobilized for the day and feeling guilty about all that I have. I find much of the time I am coming across angry people, or perhaps frustrated people. Folks being grumpy in a checkout line, cutting people off in traffic, others venting endlessly about politicians and corruption. Whew, I’m done!”

“Excellent, Gabriel, now we’re cooking!” Mina said gleefully.

“Could I give you some feedback?” Magdalena said gently, almost deferentially.

“Sure, what can hurt?” Gabriel said, sounding like a new man.

“In respect to your first topic, the dilemma we all face when encountering media images of natural or man-made disasters. Goodness knows we’ve seen a lot over the past few years, and they just seem to ante up in frequency and intensity. One end of the spectrum is as you said, to turn our heads and deny that it’s going on. The other end of the spectrum is to take on the pain, let our hearts bleed, and become one with the victims. Anybody who is empathetic like I am has to really guard against this reaction taking root.”

“So what should a person do?” Gabriel asked.

“Well, as the Buddhists say, the middle way is optimal. In this case, we acknowledge what has happened and we send a prayer of blessing to all those affected. One little nuance here: we also include ourselves, for as an observer we have also been affected to some degree. A quiet moment of blessing to all involved, and then we let it go and move on in life. Bad stuff happens, we acknowledge it, and move on. If you are inclined to send a cheque to the Red Cross, by all means, but the blessing and moving on is just as important or perhaps even more so.”

“Thank you, Magdalena, that does help,” Gabriel said. “A lot, actually.”

“And some feedback on the second part, if I may?” Mina offered, jumping in faster than a July lightning bolt.

“Mina, it would be my greatest delight,” Gabriel said, always a quick study.

“It reminded me of a DVD I once took out from the library, of a wonderful talk by Gregg Braden on the Seven Essene Mirrors. The Essenes were a mystical

sect living in the desert, before and around the time of Christ. Think Dead Sea Scrolls and you can peg them closely. This group put a lot of stock in interpersonal relationships, and theorized there were a number of 'mirrors' that come into play as we deal with people. The first mirror is meant to suggest that if we come across a lot of angry and frustrated people, they are merely reflecting back on us our own anger and frustration. So what you harbor inside, you see in others. This may not be true in all cases, as the other mirrors work in complex and subtle ways, but it's a good starting point for self-analysis. So Gabriel, the first Essene mirror asks you to consider if you hold anger and frustration in yourself. I don't want a response, as we need to get down to our meditation, but it's something I suggest you consider. Contemplate it a bit in a quieter moment, perhaps meditate on it, and if something tangible is revealed you can proceed to modify some perceptions and let the anger or frustration go."

"You two have helped me more than you might know. Thank you," said Gabriel.

"Things come to you when you are ready to work on them. The teacher arrives when the student is ready. So you can tell your wife you have gone back to school, with one young teacher and one very old one," Mina said, her eyes twinkling.

"My early training does not allow me to discuss the age of a lady," Gabriel said primly, but with an equal amount of eye twinkle.

"Okay you two," said Magdalena, "down to the business of centering ourselves. Just one note for next week: my neighbour Arabella has expressed an interest in meeting some new people. I've suggested an early potluck dinner next Saturday, to be held two doors down at Arabella's place. She will be inviting another neighbour, and has asked for home-cooked dishes. All local food, naturally?"

With that the room went quiet, punctuated by the sounds of a warm afternoon slipping under the windowsill of Mina's flat.

Stirring the Pot

Gabriel, Mina and Kurt stood at the front of Magdalena's stairs with pots and platters of food in hand. She came out onto her patio carrying an open pot of steaming chili, with a wooden serving spoon twisting from side to side as she skipped down the stairs.

"Good afternoon, my dear friends!"

"The lengths some people will go to avoid using a piece of aluminum foil," Kurt said in his drollest tone.

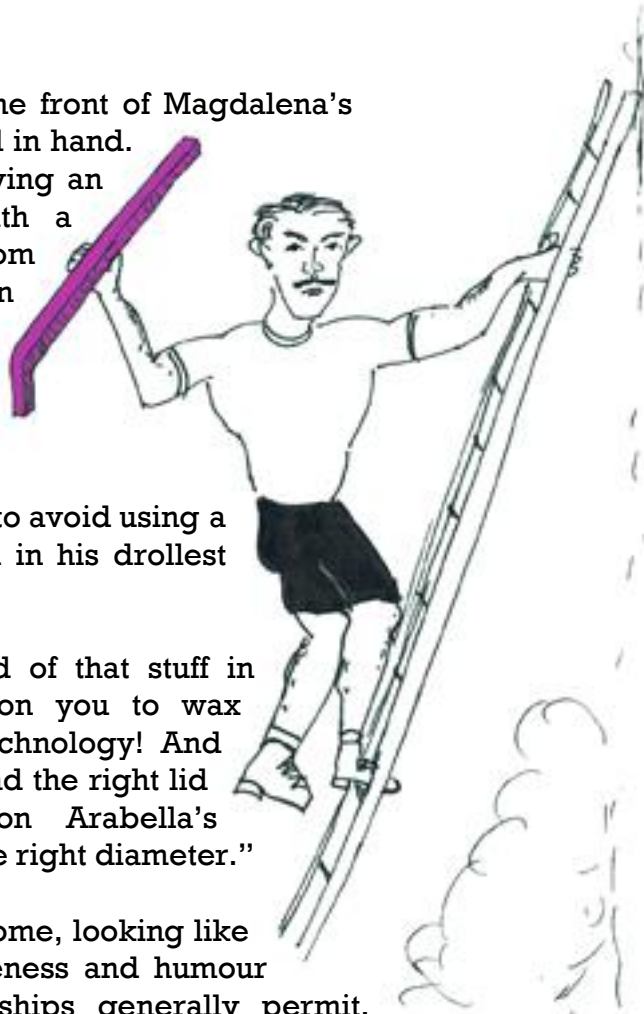
"What's that, Kurt? Haven't heard of that stuff in years, but I can always count on you to wax nostalgically over 20th century technology! And for your information, I could not find the right lid anywhere, but am counting on Arabella's expansive kitchen to furnish just the right diameter."

They walked along to Arabella's home, looking like two couples, but with more politeness and humour than established marital relationships generally permit. Arabella had her front door open before they could raise the ornate brass clapper, and gave her neighbour Magdalena a warm and hearty hug, chili pot and all. She immediately went to the other three and spoke to them in turn, making them feel at home.

"Gabriel, nice to see you again, do you remember when we sat together on the architectural conservation committee some twenty years back? How is your dear wife?"

"Mina, I am delighted to formally meet you, Magdalena has spoken so highly of you. I remember your son from the time when I did medical school interviews, and I was very happy to learn soon after that you and your husband decided to make our town your home."

"And as for you Kurt, we have not had the chance until now to meet, but I am old friends with Cornelius McGillicuddy of your department, and he spoke very highly of you when I bumped into him on King Street this week!"



“Cornelius has been a real mentor to me,” Kurt said happily, “and encouraged me to move to town when I was looking for a place to live with my family.” He shook Arabella’s scented hand in a lingering way, admiring her lustrous hair and understated but very expensive jewelry.

“Please come in, welcome to my abode. It’s much too big for me, but I just can’t bear the thought of moving. Come to the kitchen with your pots and we’ll set up the feast on the table, and we will eat *en terrasse*. And I will need to introduce you to Henri, my neighbour, who kindly offered to prop up my downspout after last night’s heavy winds.”

Arabella put her hand to her mouth and said *sotto voce* to Magdalena, “If I was twenty years younger and forty pounds lighter I might have a more-than-neighbourly interest in *cher* Henri, but I won’t stand in your way, sweet Maggie!”

Magdalena rolled her eyes and in lieu of a response admired Arabella’s lovely Persian carpets and stunning Peruvian artwork in the living room off to the side of the main entryway.

“Place your dishes wherever you think is best, assuming we will start at the left and finish with my apple crisp dish on the right. I just love potlucks. One of these days we will all bring dessert and it will be an indulgent but amazing meal!” The patio door opened and in strode a young man. He didn’t smile, and greeted everyone by grunting his own name. His voice held a definite Gallic twist, which he coupled with a firm handshake. His unflinching demeanour varied only for Magdalena: he held her hand for an extra moment, nodded his head, and arched his right eyebrow. Magdalena had seen Henri around here and there, but in this close proximity she felt a definite unease towards this suave and self-assured chap. This might not be the easiest of social affairs, she thought.

“All right folks, the table outdoors is set for six with cutlery and glasses. Wine and water are already out in carafes. Grab a plate and let’s enjoy our collective contributions. Henri has brought a beautiful slab of goat cheese with truffles to start us off, Kurt has crafted an attractive looking spinach salad with dried cranberries and Cavena Nuda grains, Mina’s aloo bhaji looks amazing, Gabriel’s roast chicken and yam dish will stick to our ribs, Magdalena’s vegan chili will have some real zippiness to it, and in my apple crisp I have snuck some of my own rhubarb. So no chance of all desserts this time, but an incredible feast awaits us! Let’s load up while everything is at its perfect temperature, and we can converse at the table.”

The next few minutes went by with good-natured banter, some clucking over the fineness of the various dishes, and Henri’s subtle ogling of Magdalena’s

lithe figure. She waited for him to seat himself, then took a chair at the other side of the table, opposite end.

After filling their glasses with wine and water, the diners went about the agreeable task of eating the spread of local food that had been hand prepared and set before them. At this point in the proceedings, a decision had to be made about conversation format. They could converse in three groups of two, two groups of three, or one full group of six. Arabella had thought this out ahead of time, having many years of practice.

“Good folks, since there are six of us, I suggest we direct and shape our conversation as one unified group,” she instructed. “In this way we can all hear what each person has to say, and if any of us are a bit shy, we will all get the opportunity to share our thoughts. I’m going to ask you to think of a starting point for the conversation, or a transition topic for later on, and we can go from topic to topic. What’s at the top of your minds, anyone?”

“There are too many old people in this town,” Henri said without a second of hesitation, “and they want folks like me to subsidize their care and all the services they demand.” He took a large dollop of Mina’s dish and looked defiantly at the rest of the group, chewing slowly.

Gabriel cleared his throat and spoke. “My mother is in her mid-90s and she’s living in a home here in town. She worked hard all her life, raising a family, and doing war work as a young woman. I think society owes it to her to make her last years comfortable.”

“For this specific case I would not argue,” Henri conceded, “but it’s dated thinking in general. There’s a huge number of people now in their mid-70s, born too late to have done any war work. They were raised in the expansionist 1950s, got low cost university degrees in the 1960s, had their choice of well-paying jobs. They bought nice houses at low prices, got high interest rates for their investing years, and now they want all kinds of medical care and assisted living on the public purse? To make it worse, they didn’t take good care of themselves, so the support costs are considerable. Throw in the fact that there are too many seniors and not enough young wage earners, and the situation becomes bleaker and bleaker.”

“Henri, I am in the age bracket that you speak of,” Mina said, cracking one of her trademark smiles. “While I may wince at your brusqueness, I do largely agree with you. I live by myself, simply. I walk every day, meditate and do yoga. I don’t take pills of any kind. But not all people are as fortunate.”

“This stage of life is still a bit down the road for me,” Arabella said, her tone conciliatory. “If I need care I would want to pay fully for it, and probably

could. But others may not have the means to do so. So, Henri, if we had a system that was more socialist in nature, where those who could would pay more fully, and those who could not would get subsidized, would that be more palatable?"

"Sure, but a lot of sacred cows would have to get slaughtered. The overuse of expensive testing and surgeries under universal health care would have to go, along with seniors discounts for a range of goods and services. We should have discounts for people under 40, given their debt loads and low numbers. But none of this would ever fly politically, as the seniors get out to vote and any innovative candidate espousing these views would be dead on arrival."

"Okay, but let's go back to the senior housing piece of the puzzle," Kurt said. He always liked to take a debate back to its roots. "Some people need a bit of help with cooking and cleaning, they're lonely in their own homes, and all we've had up until now are old age homes or high-end assisted living options. But remember that gracious old home in New Orleans in the movie Benjamin Button, where a bunch of unrelated older folks lived together and were taken care of? I've read these are popping up here and there in town, where social entrepreneurs are converting bigger homes into multiple bedroom seniors' homes, with lots of common space and efficient staff to take care of people on a cost-effective basis. So no public subsidy, but affordable for almost everyone."

"On a more macro scale," Magdalena said, "I was recently reading of a place called The Fellowship Community in New York, which is developed on the principles of Rudolf Steiner. He's the German philosopher and mystic who came up with Waldorf Schools and biodynamic farming, everything done with an emphasis on the spiritual aspects of life. So this community contains people of all ages but its focus is on elder care. This is the kind of place where I would like to grow old, a place where the elderly, children, and everyone in-between is working and learning collectively, serving each other's needs and doing it all with a light footprint on the Earth."

Arabella brought out the apple-rhubarb crisp with great aplomb. Orders for decaffeinated coffee and herbal tea were taken, and conversation inevitably wrapped itself up. Everyone had noted that Henri was opinionated, but they also saw the truth in his strong convictions. It was evident that things needed to change; the ways of the past had to give way to a new model of living. For now they held two solitudes, one of the past and one of the near present. In their subconscious and unconscious minds, most of them knew they would soon have to relinquish the solitude of the past, and replace it with a new paradigm of being that was still not quite fully formed or clearly defined.



Good, Good, Good, Good Vibrations

The group met the following Saturday for meditation. The weekly meeting and practice felt habitual for all of them. Gabriel broke away this week, as his daughter had suggested a family weekend in cottage country. He liked the family time but had grown increasingly disenchanted with the long trip by car to sit in nature that was not much different than the land just a short hike from town. Perhaps this would be the last year for this kind of thing. He felt this might be the last year for many things.

Mina, Kurt and Magdalena settled into their routine of meditation, followed by some *chai* and conversation.

“So, Magdalena, what do you have to share with Kurt and me?” asked Mina.

“Well, I’ve been excited all week after finishing a book on energy medicine,” Magdalena chirped.

“That’s not a term I’m familiar with, but many of my students get through their exam periods on a diet of Red Bull,” Kurt said. He had a knack for sounding serious when he was trying to get a rise out of a person. Having a sense of humour in academia is a serious liability, one best kept subtly masked at all times.

“No,” responded Magdalena, “I’m not talking about Hippocrates bearing a tray of energy drinks! The term refers to a series of healing modalities that are based on the assumption that we are masses of vibrating energy, and if we can tap into the knowledge that’s been around for millennia, we can heal ourselves without pharmaceuticals and all the heavy infrastructure we see in our hospitals.”

“Tell us more, dear,” Mina said. Her eyes were still closed, as if she were still lingering in meditation.

“Okay, so we’ve talked about Reiki before. Go to any town these days and you’ll find a number of people hanging out their shingle, offering Reiki. Things like homeopathy, acupuncture, reflexology, and lymphatic drainage, all tied back to the notion that we are just vibrating energy.”

“Magdalena, I feel better already,” said Kurt. “But if I were to go home and discuss this with my wife, how do I tell her how it works in principle?”

“I’ll break it down to its basics. The fundamental assumption is that we are energized by the Divine. This loving energy comes into us through our third eye and flows down through the body through energy pathways called meridians. Energy is focused around several centres in the body. Yogis call these centres *chakras*, which are vortex-like and spin around and around. We have seven major chakras, each associated with key body organs, and scores of minor chakras. They vary in their size and speed of spinning, and all of this affects our moods and our overall well-being. We can get blocks in the meridians from stress or a physical impact or our thoughts, and we can throw off our chakras in the same way. Energy medicine just brings things back to balance.”

“Okay, I guess, but a big part of me thinks this is ridiculous!” Kurt said. “Then again, I suppose that’s what I thought about meditation at the start, and now I’m a convert. So who am I to say?”

“Kurt, you are in fact already practicing energy medicine with your daily meditation. Once you sit and go inward, you quiet your mind and check your

ego at the door, and the Divine Light enters you and gently balances things in many subtle ways,” Magdalena offered, grinning.

“Well, you know,” mused Kurt, “I have been sleeping better and my writing is flowing really well. Amanda and I seem to be getting on each other’s nerves less, so maybe I am gradually getting into alignment.”

“No question of that, Kurt,” Mina said encouragingly. Her eyes were still closed, and her voice was soft.

“But on an assistant professor’s salary, I don’t have a lot of resources for acupuncture or reflexology sessions. Is there anything I can do at home?”

“Well, one easy thing you can do are mudras,” Magdalena said, her hands already up in front of her, demonstrating to Kurt. “Mudras are an ancient yogic tradition, where various hand positions are assumed to achieve balance across the body and the hemispheres of the brain. Think of it as connecting the circuits between the two sides of the body.”

“Show me,” Kurt said, on the edge of his chair, hands ready.

“Sure,” said Magdalena, “here are a few of my favourites. The witness mudra is where you join all fingers to their counterparts on the other hand, thumb to thumb, index to index, and so on. Hold your hands in front of you, and maintain this position for a minute. It’s a great way to stabilize your breath if you ever find yourself in a tizzy.” Kurt moved his fingers into position.

“The next one is the invocation mudra. Bring your hands together as if you’re praying, holding them over your heart. This one’s great for reducing anxiety, or quelling any fears that arise.” Kurt scrunched up his face in mock agony, then switched over to a quasi-angelic visage as he moved his hands over his heart.

“The last one for today is the lotus flower mudra. Here you bring together your little fingers, your thumbs, and the bottom of your hands. The middle three fingers splay out one each side, with the resultant shape being like an open lotus flower. We do this when we want to fully integrate body, mind and spirit. Just imagine the flower receiving all the gifts flowing in from above!”

Near the end of the impromptu mudra orientation session, Kurt looked over at Mina and something made his jaw drop slightly. She was sitting calmly, eyes closed, but he could have sworn she was glowing. Ever so softly, but glowing nonetheless. Magdalena saw it too and they both gazed in her direction, transfixed. Mina’s face had the character of a full moon on a beautiful June evening, a mead moon, as described by English farmers of years gone by.

White in colour, translucent in nature, gentle in energy.

When the motor in the fridge in the kitchen nearby clicked on, Mina returned to normal. She opened her eyes and looked at the younger two, smiling. They dropped their gaze quickly, mildly embarrassed, and left unspoken their collective thought of what had just transpired.

First Interlude

The crystalline structures within the Earth's crust had changed to a higher vibration. Many other aspects of nature had aligned to this new, desirable configuration. The energies of transformation and transition would take care of the rest, in an unfolding process set by distant rhythms.

Part II: Letting Go

John Lennon Had It Right



Summer arrived. The days grew longer and the plants in the gardens started to bear their edible delights. School had let out, and the children of the town were enjoying the greater freedom and battling the curious boredom that came with Summer rhythms. The parks and tot-lots were full from mid-morning until dusk, populated with children and teenagers and grownups, talking and playing. The changing times and increased fuel prices had altered the structure of play a few years back. Organized sports were definitely on the wane, and the idea of a rep team that would have to travel a long way to get a game in was a definite thing of the past. Kids played with other kids over a range of ages and within a few blocks of home. Parents strolled over to watch and pitched in to keep things orderly and safe. It seemed to most that kids should be outside and playing, not inside in front of a screen as in decades gone by. This had evolved organically, partly out of concerns about childhood fitness levels and partly due to the fact that most families were just getting by financially with galloping power costs.

One lovely Summer evening Kurt invited Magdalena to join him and Amanda to watch Katie play some pickup soccer at the Cove in the Driving Park. This was the first time he had done this kind of thing, and it was a signal that he considered Magdalena to be a true friend. Their interactions over the weeks of meditating together had been fun-filled and meaningful, and he thought Amanda would also enjoy spending some time with Magdalena.

The three of them sat off to the edge of the Cove, cheering Katie on. They nibbled on the date squares that Amanda had baked and sipped herbal tea in small china mugs.

“So,” Amanda addressed Magdalena, “Kurt tells me you are into a lot of different things, like hands-on healing and mental communication with your cats.” She tried to keep her tone neutral.

“Well, I live pretty simply and can get by on the modest sums that my yoga teaching and web graphics business generate. Having only fifteen hours a week of paid work leaves me lots of time to explore things of real interest,” Magdalena said, pulling off a good-sized chunk of date square. She chewed it reflectively.

“That sounds uncommonly good to me,” Kurt said, after a small jot of silence. “I know I was lucky to land my academic post, but most days it’s a bit of a grind. I look up at my senior colleagues and I see most of them working hard, under a lot of stress, and it really makes me wonder.”

“But you’ve changed a lot lately, Kurt, and we all like where it’s trending. You seem to be getting your work done, and you rarely come home late anymore, and there seems to be more of you for both me and Katie,” Amanda said, her

eyes glistening slightly. "And I think the thanks for this rightly needs to be extended to you, Magdalena, and our sweet friend, Mina, who I absolutely adore."

"Mina is a local treasure," Magdalena said, "and she does more for the town than I can even hint at, just with her presence."

"I had heard of Mina from Amanda. Did you know she plays a pretty mean game of Scrabble?" Kurt joked. "I'd never had the chance to meet her, until I almost pressed her suit with my bicycle outside the coffee shop. She can say the most outrageous things to people and get away with it, because of that smile she flashes after every sentence she utters. When I grow up I want to be like Mina."

"Kurt, you'll look very fetching in a sari," Amanda said drolly.

"Or even better in a pair of mustard-coloured Punjabi pants!" Magdalena giggled.

"All right," Kurt sighed, "but you know what I mean. When I hang around with Mina she exudes a sense of the deeper things in life. I find myself pondering a lot of fundamental questions."

"Pray tell, my dear life companion, what have you been keeping from me?" Amanda asked, shooting a sideways smirk at Magdalena.

"Well, okay, since I am in what Mina might call a safe space, with my partner and my meditation pal, we can really talk. How about beginning with a question like, 'what is my real purpose here?'" Kurt suggested, his eyebrows lifting high.

"Listen, we'll be here all night on a topic like that," Amanda chuckled.

"I don't know about that, I might suggest the deeper and more fundamental questions are best answered in a simple and straightforward way," Magdalena said excitedly. This conversation was much better than she'd anticipated.

"Okay, smarty pants, we're all ears," Kurt said, flashing what he hoped was a Mina-like grin.

"The true purpose of each individual here is to show love, in every action and deed," Magdalena said confidently. "You might think this is a tall order, but if we attuned ourselves to this ideal, the world would quickly become a different place. You remember that old Cat Stevens song, Peace Train? 'Peace train

sounding louder, ride on the peace train!' The essence of peace is love, mutual love to all of our human brothers and sisters, love for all of nature, love for our diversity and our differences. If we all went into a love consciousness, there would be no need for standing armies in any country, and can you imagine what we could do with all of the resources we would free up? We have been facing one global disaster after another, and the costs of helping out the affected people plus the costs of maintaining the old military-industrial complex is driving us to utter bankruptcy! We have to let go of the old ways of thinking, and a love paradigm will kick-start it all." By the end of her monologue, Magdalena's eyes were sparkling brightly.

"Whew, just for a moment there I felt you were channeling Henri LaMontagne!" Kurt snorted mildly.

"That guy knows very little about love," Magdalena laughed, blushing slightly.

Amanda, sensing something juicy, blurted out, "Who is Henri?"

"Henri lives a few doors down from sweet Magdalena here, and it is clear he has noticed her obvious charms. He's a sharp looking guy, he seems pretty darn fit to my eye, and has something to say for himself."

"I would call him a boor," Magdalena said firmly.

"I don't know him from Adam, but I am trying to reconcile your perspectives with the previously stated love consciousness," Amanda said, smiling thinly.

"Hey, I'm far from perfect, and my ideals can break down in the hurly burly of life," Magdalena said, almost pouting.

"Back to a philosophical perspective, if I buy your love paradigm, is this grounded in any kind of theoretical framework?" Kurt asked, steering the conversation away from potentially rocky shoals.

"Again, complex questions are best addressed with simple answers. What meditation has shown us is that we are in essence spiritual beings. If our source is the Divine, and many cultural and religious traditions equate the Divine with an all-pervasive loving energy, then we will be in full alignment with our Source if we immerse ourselves in Divine Love. With that immersion, every one of our thoughts, words and deeds will be based on Love. No ifs, ands or buts, all we need is Love," Magdalena said, looking at both of them with great affection.

And at this moment of resolution, a trio of men walked down the roadway on

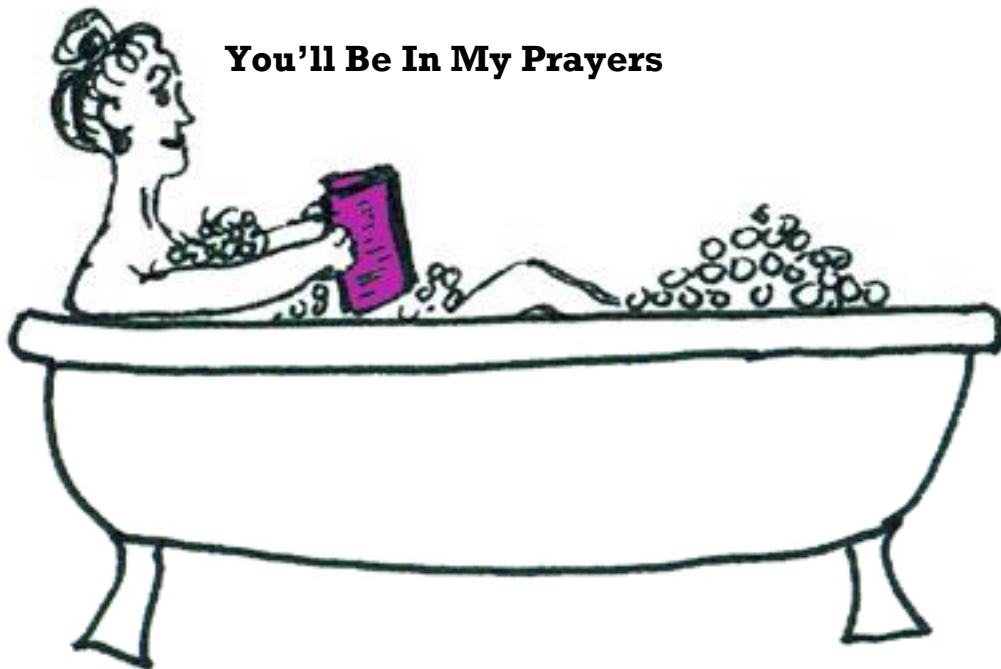
the perimeter of the Cove, all wearing baseball uniforms. The middle one was speaking in an animated manner to his teammates, but he slowed perceptibly when he saw Kurt, Amanda and Magdalena. Especially Magdalena. It was Henri LaMontagne, making his way to the ball diamond at the north end of the park.

“Hey, Henri, how’s it going?” Kurt said, waving in his best jock-like manner.

“*Bon soir*, friends, I hope all goes well,” Henri said, his eyes fixed on Magdalena.

Magdalena shifted her body and faced the soccer pitch teeming with little girls. And yet, as the snubbed Henri strutted down the roadway, she stole a lingering glance at his muscular posterior tightly sheathed in his ball uniform.

None of this was lost on Kurt and Amanda, who shared a secret smile.



Two evenings later, a pounding knock was delivered to Magdalena’s screen door. She was up to her neck in an oatmeal and juniper bath that filled her old claw foot tub. Before the knock, Magdalena had settled into a very relaxed state, well deserved after a particularly rousing session of bikram yoga. She’d cracked open an old book on Tibetan chanting, and for a few moments life had receded substantially. But then the knock came, causing her to sit upright and set her book aside. Living on the second floor of a house with a rear access stairway, she rarely got calls from canvassers or other unexpected visitors. She thought she might just duck down quietly in the tub and the

knocker would go away. Unfortunately, her heavy wooden door was swung wide open and the bathroom door was ajar, so she would have to take great pains to be quiet. More knocking, then a minute or so of silence, then another bout of loud knocking. Magdalena was in a bit of a pickle. She'd invested too much time into the pretense of not being there and couldn't really get out of the bath and take a peek between the door and the frame to see who was doing the pounding. She was up to her neck in dilute oatmeal, but it was thick enough that she would need a good rinsing down before she went anywhere.

Then things picked up speed. She heard the screen door open and heavy footsteps on the mat.

"Who's there?" Magdalena called out angrily.

"*C'est Henri*," a voice floated in, sounding embarrassed.

"Henri?" Magdalena yelled shrilly.

"Yes, it's me, and I, or we, need your help."

"Okay mister," she commanded, "turn right around and go out the door and down the stairs. Wait on the deck below and I will come down in a few moments, I am indisposed at present."

Henri knew by her tone to turn around post-haste and do exactly as instructed.

After sloughing off the thin oatmeal coating and pinning up her hair, Magdalena trotted down the stairs in jeans and a plaid shirt. Henri had on a black muscle shirt, and with his build Magdalena was reminded of Brando in a Streetcar Named Desire.

"So," she said, "you have the habit of walking into people's homes?"

"Magdalena, I am sorry, be sure of that," Henri said, "but I didn't get a response to my knocking, and I thought maybe I would leave you a note on your kitchen table. The door was open."

"Never mind, I drifted off in the tub," Magdalena said. "What's going on?"

"It's Arabella," Henri explained. "She just called me and asked me to run and get you, since you have decided to live life without a phone. How do the gentlemen callers ever get through to you? It appears that Arabella fell in her garden."

“Well, let’s go to her straightaway,” Magdalena said, ignoring his question.

They found Arabella lying on a divan in her solarium, with one leg propped up awkwardly on an overstuffed magenta felt pillow.

“I’m dreadfully sorry about disturbing you both,” she said. “I was out in the garden watering, and was walking back to the house when I slipped on the wet stone walkway. In a flash I was *derriere* over teakettle and I twisted my leg horribly as I went down. And all of this with sensible shoes on! So I dragged myself back into the kitchen and called Henri, asking him to find you, dear Maggie. My old friend Barbara is out of town for a few days, otherwise I wouldn’t have bothered you!”

“Arabella, I would be happy to help in any way. How about some homeopathic help? I always carry Arnica with me for emergencies such as this. Henri, please boil a pot of water for any kind of herbal tea you can find, and I’ll give Arabella Reiki on that left leg of hers.”

“What a dear,” Arabella cooed, “you know how much I love to receive Reiki. If you don’t mind I will also ask Henri to rummage around the top right drawer of my scroll top desk and find the pure silver mandala I picked up in Mexico ten years back? The mandala is quite heavy, and is purported to have healing properties when placed on one’s body.”

Henri took himself away, first putting on water for tea and then padding off to the den. He returned five minutes later, with a perplexed look on his face. “I know what the mandala looks like, but I can’t find it,” he said. “I went through every drawer in the desk.”

“Upper right,” Arabella repeated. “I always return things to their proper place. Be a dear and go look again. Men sometimes simply miss things when they are right under their noses.”

Henri pursed his lips and retreated once more. He pulled out the upper right drawer and dumped the contents on the desktop. No mandala in sight.

“I regret to report, the mandala is not there,” Henri said. He had always admired its design, and often thought it must be worth a lot of money, given its considerable weight.

“Oh dear, that’s the second thing in a week that I can’t seem to locate,” Arabella moaned. “I hope I’m not starting to slip memory-wise. And now this fall!”

“Just accept the Reiki, and we can find the mandala later,” Magdalena said

soothingly.

A half hour went by, punctuated only by the audible marking of linear time by Arabella's grandfather clock. Arabella seemed to fall asleep, but her body twitched and roiled at irregular intervals. Henri sat in a soft upholstered chair, quietly sipping his tea, watching the two women across the room. Magdalena noticed his gaze from time to time, but was subtly impressed that such a loud and aggressive person could actually sit still and be quiet for a considerable period of time.

Arabella stirred a bit, and Magdalena asked her to lay quiet for another minute.

"Arabella," she said, "I also want to pray for your leg to be healed, with what I call an intentional prayer."

"By all means, honey, pray away," Arabella said, smiling.

"I ask Father-Mother God, if it be for the highest good, to bring complete healing to dear Arabella's left leg. May it be fully healed so that she is free to achieve her life's purpose. And I thank you deeply for this healing, thank you for helping this to occur."

"Shouldn't one perhaps ask for this to occur, and then thank the Big Guy when it has happened?" Henri asked curiously.

"No, the Big Guy, or Big Gal, doesn't work in a time-influenced environment like we do, the Source works out of time. So the most effective prayer is to thank the Divine as if it has already happened," Magdalena said, smiling softly. She gave Arabella a gentle sideways hug.

A moment later, Arabella tested the leg and was able to move with some ease to the other side of the solarium. "Perhaps some lingering stiffness," she said, "but nothing a good night's sleep won't put right. I can't thank you both enough."

Henri walked Magdalena back to the foot of her stairs. The evening's experience had noticeably softened him.

"Magdalena," he said, "I find this difficult to say, but we've been bumping into each other a lot lately, and I was wondering if we might be able to have coffee sometime?"

"Oh," said Magdalena. "I'm not sure."

"I'm sorry, perhaps you have a boyfriend?"

"No, not at present. But I'm not sure we're compatible."

"But that's the whole point of sharing some coffee and conversation, to see if we might be compatible!"

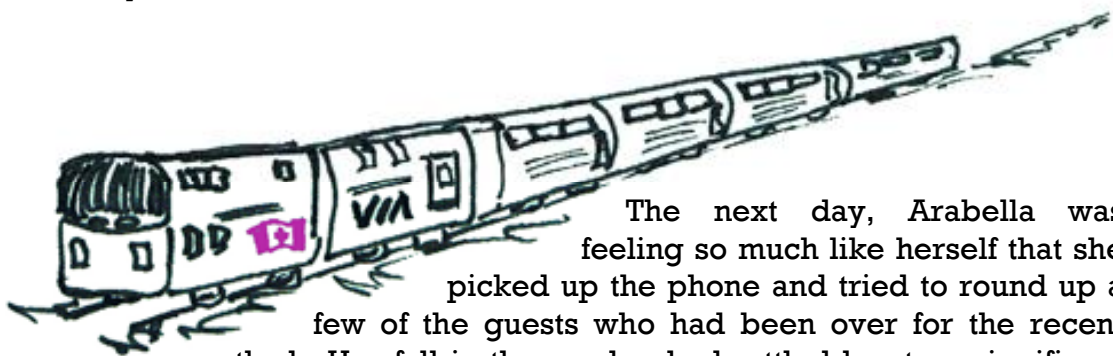
"I find I'm pretty busy," she said, weakening. Henri sensed it.

"Too busy for a coffee?" he asked. "Come on, no strings, we have a coffee and a chat, and if that's that, then that's that." Henri beamed.

Something stirred between them, not in a material sense, but the two of them both felt it nonetheless.

"All right, Henri. Why not have a cup of coffee together? Next Monday afternoon?"

You Only Go Around Once



The next day, Arabella was feeling so much like herself that she picked up the phone and tried to round up a few of the guests who had been over for the recent potluck. Her fall in the garden had rattled her to a significant degree, causing her to reflect over her breakfast that something had been gnawing at her these past few months. Having a few trusted friends and neighbours over might help, even if only to air her thoughts.

Magdalena and Mina were traveling into the big city by train, Mina for another culturally-oriented day trip and Magdalena for a three day yoga conference. The train service was becoming increasingly popular for all kinds of people, given higher fuel prices, and the fact that VIA Rail had simultaneously increased service and dropped their hefty fares. This allowed for both short and intermediate-length trips, all within the shifting bounds of affordability. The walk up Sydenham Hill was taxing to some, but the cab companies were offering a coupon system for multiple trips.

Kurt was tied up with committee work at the university, so it was down to Gabriel and Henri, who both agreed to a mid-morning tea in the solarium.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming on such short notice," Arabella said. She had always enjoyed the company of men.

"My pleasure, and if the truth be known, I was just whiling away the morning at home," Gabriel said, smiling wanly.

"Any time, dear Arabella, and I am pleased to see you in the pink once again," Henri said.

"All right, down to brass tacks," Arabella said. "As Gabriel knows, I have devoted considerable time over the years to many volunteer activities within our fine town. I still have some energy left for this kind of thing, but am a bit perplexed as to what to do next. The things I used to do have lost their appeal, and nothing else has emerged. I have dreams, visions, and reveries of a very different world than the one we currently live in. Some of these seem to come from the past, some from the future, others a bit of past, future, and present. I hoped for a conversation that might shed some light on where to start."

"I know of what you speak, Arabella, at least in general terms," Gabriel said quietly. "I too did many volunteer assignments, and also feel that I have more arrows in my quiver. But life seems to confound me. So many things have changed in our world, particularly so over the last fifteen years, but at times it appears that we are trying to live our lives in the same ways we used to. When you look outside our little bubble, it appears daunting. Regular employment is a thing of the past, prices are always rising, and it's just one tragedy after another. I suppose I don't have to go on. It seems to me that we need massive changes in how we live, how we share resources, how we even look at each other as humans. But I don't see leadership emerging on these fronts. It's just more of the same, putting band-aids on things. We need new leaders, and soon."

"But isn't life really just the way it has always been?" Henri said dreamily. "Some shelter, some good food, some friends and family? Human needs have always boiled down to the basics."

"Fair point, Henri," Arabella said, "but I think that Gabriel is saying that even meeting the basic needs of our burgeoning global population is an intractable challenge. The war machine of the last fifty years has driven all western economies into the ground. And as we try to get back on our feet, we face a steady barrage of earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, wildfires, and rising ocean levels that mean we may never get caught up fiscally or physically!"

"Okay, no disagreement from me on these points," Henri said. "We need change, which means letting go of many things from the past and embracing

new ways of doing things now and in the future. You mentioned leadership, new leadership. Leaders, in my view, will emerge when we collectively decide what we need to do. So how do we figure it out?"

"I suppose that's why I've called you two chaps in," Arabella said.

"Well, you mentioned your dreams and reveries," Henri mused. "When you talk about reshaping the future, we often say, 'let's dream.' We all remember Martin Luther King's speech, no? So Arabella, tell Gabriel and me of your dreams."

"Well, Henri, if you put it that way," Arabella said coquettishly, batting her eyelashes.

"C'mon, Arabella, spin it out for us," Henri said.

"Okay, where do I start? These dreams seem to have two distinct flavours. The first group would appear to be dated, from times gone by. For example, Gabriel, I had a dream a couple of nights back where you and I were feverishly working, it seemed like on a farm in and around a stable, and I got the sense it was several centuries ago in Europe. France, perhaps. But in any case, Gabriel, we were working hard to get things done under what seemed like very trying conditions."

Gabriel looked pensive, but did not speak.

"The second group of dreams are built around a recurring theme. The time period seems to be the present or perhaps the near-future. There's always a mob of people present, and all are working together on some kind of collective project, such as picking corn or building a wall or plugging a hole in a dyke. I'm not sure who all these people are, though some of them feel vaguely familiar. The funny thing is they don't seem human. More like angels perhaps, in human form nonetheless, or people made of crystal rather than flesh and bone. A bit spooky in the retelling, but I definitely feel comfortable while the dream is unfolding. And there seems to be cobwebs, or some kind of gossamer-like tendrils, connecting everyone. But they don't tangle up, they just seem to reform when the people move about."

"Do you mind if I give you my thoughts on these?" Henri asked. He was never at a loss for words. "One, you seem to be a worker, a hard worker, in all your dreams. Perhaps this is an indicator that we have a lot of work to do, which I suspect resonates with all of us. Two, the crowd in the second category of dreams seems to me to symbolize a different kind of human. Given the challenges facing our world, perhaps this suggests we all have to raise our game to make it out the other side. I'm not sure about the wispy gossamer

strings, but perhaps they are your psyche's way of representing a greater connection with each other?" Henri paused to take a pull of his tea. "Now the first dream example, this seems to my ear to be a classic capturing of a past-life experience."

"You mean where I had another life, in a previous incarnation?"

"Exactly," Henri confirmed. "The spirit within Arabella today might have lived in bucolic bliss in medieval rural France, with the spirit within Gabriel today as your husband." Both Henri and Arabella glanced at Gabriel, who was blushing. "Classic reincarnation, held as sacrosanct by Buddhists and Hindus alike, and believed in by perhaps thirty per cent of current day North Americans."

"Not something on my radar, I'm afraid to say. I've always subscribed to the 'you only go around once' philosophy," Gabriel said. He had lost most of the colour in his cheeks and was able to respond in a droll manner.

"Ah, fair enough, but what if? It might account for that familiar *déjà vu* feeling we all get, or explain how child prodigies at age three bang out a Chopin sonata without blinking. The literature is full of some amazing stories that lead back to reincarnation as a very plausible explanation," Henri said, arching both eyebrows.

"I sit somewhere in the middle of this, but my question is, with all the people in the world, how is it that I live down the street from a person who may have been my husband five hundred years ago in France?" Arabella asked, winking at Gabriel, who wasn't sure how to read the gesture.

"Ah, that's easy," Henri declared. "If you buy into reincarnation as a possibility, then it's a short hop to the concept of soul groups. These are groupings of souls who have been together in one period, then come back around at the same time and place in another period, and so on. We either like each other's company, or we have unfinished business to resolve from the previous go-rounds. And the neat thing is that the interrelationships can change. In this life you are a friend and neighbour to Gabriel, in France you were his wife, and perhaps in an earlier life you were a brother. Or you were a domineering boss, or a nurse who saved his life. Multiply this across all the significant people in your life against a range of past lives and you have a matrix of possibilities that would drive a Hollywood casting director wild."

"Alright, my head is spinning," Arabella said. "Perhaps this is enough for today."

"Me too, and yes ma'am," Gabriel said with a distant look to him, similar to

the times he first meditated and experienced Reiki.

“Henri, you have given me lots to think about regarding my dreams and what might be important to work on, so thank you.” Arabella said. “And Gabriel, I’ll remind you we lined up a time for tea with Mina for tomorrow morning. You’ll excuse me if I sound like a nagging spouse, then again this may be fitting, given Henri’s perspectives on my first dream!”

A Wrinkle In Time



Friday morning came quickly, with another opportunity for dreams and their underlying messages to be assimilated. Gabriel stood on the sidewalk outside Arabella’s house until the appointed hour, and then he saw Mina stepping surely and swiftly down the street. They went to the door together, exchanging murmured pleasantries.

“Mina, Gabriel, always good to see you my dear friends, do come in,” Arabella said. They went into the solarium, where cups and a pot of tea had been set out beside homemade cookies.

“Sit down, have some tea and one of my hempseed and quinoa delights,” she said. “More savoury than sweet, but who needs empty calories? Mina, Gabriel and I had tea with Henri yesterday, and had an interesting conversation about dreams and reincarnation. I had started it all off with a question about where to go from here, and what might be fruitful work along the journey. Good intent, but we quickly veered away to more interesting things, as our conversations tend to do.”

“I am sorry I missed it, but I simply had to see the Cubism exhibition at the AGO,” Mina explained. “Magdalena was going in and I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to go along with someone for at least half the trip. I haven’t been feeling entirely myself as of late, so I thought a sweet travel companion would be a good thing. I’ve been contemplating higher dimensionalities these days as I come out of my meditations, and the Cubists’ work spun some lasting images for me.”

“How wonderful, Mina,” Arabella said. “Alright, to business, my friends. Today I wanted to talk to you about time. Something that we never seem to have enough of, something that seems very fleeting.”

"I spent the better part of my career fussing about time management, because if my staff managed their time well, everything else seemed to take care of itself," Gabriel said knowingly.

"Not to be a show stopper, but this could be a short conversation. Time doesn't exist," Mina said plainly.

"Now, Mina, we're old friends, but I have to challenge you on this one!" Arabella said. "Look at my old grandfather clock, with the second hand around the top of the clock. We wait just a bit, and the second hand advances by five seconds. It is now later than before, time has passed, and we're all just a bit older. Pity, that?" She smiled and grimaced simultaneously.

"Arabella, I'm talking about in the big picture," Mina explained. "Of course in our day-to-day lives, time exists as a measure of accounting. We all get 168 hours each week to spend, prince or pauper. It's a decent way to keep track of things, and where we need to be, but it has run amok. Time now controls us, we have become slaves to the clock, and time is money. But if our true essence is spiritual and the yogis all tell us there is no time in spiritual realms, then time is just a messy accounting system until we evolve to the point where we have no need for it and the whole notion will simply drop away." She paused. "We are closer to that than you might think." She savoured one of the hempseed concoctions, wearing an expression that indicated Arabella could have been more generous with her maple syrup.

"I heard a tape once of this chap from Vancouver, and he was basically saying the same thing," Gabriel offered. "What time is it? The time is always Now. Not certain I fully understood it then, but it seems clearer now." Gabriel also liked his cookies sweeter, but an innate courtesy suppressed his grimace.

"Even in our present world, time is a funny thing," Mina said. "You know how school children get bored during the Summer, and they complain of time dragging on? Then you go chat with a busy soccer Mom, and she will tell you the Summer has flown by. Even for the same person, some days expand and others tumble by. But most people have the feeling that time is going by more quickly, and this is tied to changes in our Earth and changes in ourselves." Mina seemed to watch them both at the same time.

"I can certainly agree with you on that point, dear Mina," Arabella conceded. "As I age, I have the distinct feeling that a year goes by in half the time it used to back in my twenties. I know it's my perception, but I sometimes wonder what will happen near the end of my life, will a year go by even quicker?"

"While we're on the subject of time, I must bring up the notion of time travel,

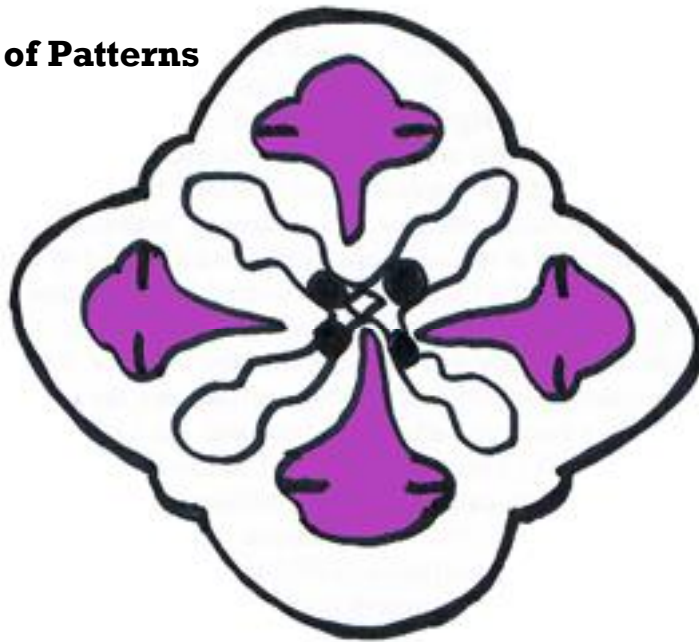
which has always fascinated me and directed much of my adolescent reading,” Gabriel said, revealing his secret love for science fiction.

“Stephen Hawking, a pretty reliable source, has suggested that time travel is possible, but difficult,” Mina said. “You need to find a wormhole, move into it and go back or forth in time. Lots of movies and books have been written about this, and I too am fascinated by it. But it seems to come with risks. What if we went back in time and affected nature or a relationship, and this significantly altered the future? You yourself may not exist as a result! If you returned in the wormhole, you may not have yourself to return to! There are many complexities to this, I’m afraid,” Mina said knowledgeably.

“Well, I have to say my head is spinning again!” Arabella said. “I know I brought the subject up, but let’s stop for now and just enjoy our tea. I am going to muse on all of this and will certainly have questions for you, Mina. Over time, if I daresay.”

As Arabella spoke to Mina, the light shifted in the solarium and Gabriel could have sworn that both women looked different. Brighter and lighter, he would think later. Then the clouds shifted in the sky outside, and things returned to normalcy, at least for the time being. Assuming that the concept of time was still relevant.

A Language of Patterns



The power went out around four in the afternoon on a very hot and humid day.

The cause was uncertain, but the good citizens of the town were accustomed to this sort of event. There had been disruptions to the grid here and there over the past fifteen years, for a variety of reasons. The big one, the one against which all other events were measured, happened four years ago when the grid went down for five months straight due to a massive solar flare that rolled over the Earth in early Spring. Not only was the grid immobilized, but the global telecommunications system also shut down. The ensuing disruptions were catastrophic in places. The delivery of goods, provision of services and the tic-tac-toe of local and global economies were primed by electricity, the Internet and cell phones. When these services were all knocked down like so many bowling pins, many sensible people questioned why the systems were set up in the way they were, and considered what needed to be done differently. So in this small town, people began to change the ways they lived and how they related to one another.

As had happened many times in the past, when the power went out, people came out of their homes and workplaces and stood around in knots on the street. In most cases they congregated under street-side trees that the city had doggedly planted over the last ten years. There was still over five hours of daylight left, but it was going to be a night of cold food and warm sleeping quarters. There was no way to get news from the television or radio, but the Internet was still accessible and the early news that came out from sweatily-held smartphones was that the outage was affecting most of eastern North America and might last for the better part of a week.

Most people cancelled their plans for the evening and retreated to their homes to see what should be eaten first out of their dim fridges, and to perhaps sit in their yard thinking cool thoughts.

Gabriel had been reading a book on his deck, his favourite Summer pastime. He was somewhat unaware of the outage, but part of his consciousness registered that the pump in his backyard water feature had just gone silent. This made the ambient birdsong all the sweeter.

Mina had already sat for her afternoon tea, and was immersed in an hour-long meditation. The clock in her kitchen went quiet, but meditation always took her into a space where time stands still.

Kurt had been sitting in his compact university office, working on his book. His study light flickered, and his computer screen went blank soon after. He and his colleagues left the building quickly, quietly happy to be liberated. Kurt cycled home, taking time to enjoy the foliage and noticing the low water level in Spencer Creek.

Magdalena and Henri had been doing yoga on mats on Magdalena's deck.

Henri was in good shape but he wasn't a practiced yogi. Their coffee date had gone surprisingly well and Magdalena had happily attended one of his slow pitch baseball games. They were both starting to realize that they actually enjoyed each other's company, although there was a sense that Henri was going out of his way to exhibit good behavior.

Arabella had been preparing for a small dinner party, and a yam soufflé had just gone into the oven before its console light shut off and Keith Jarrett's piano playing was silenced abruptly. Today had been full of challenges, starting with the search for her good silverware, which always resided in the chest under the long oriental ottoman in her living room. After two hours of sweaty investigation, punctuated by the reading of a passel of birthday cards she had set aside a week earlier, the silverware was still nowhere to be seen.

Across town in the old hydro building, which was being gussied up as a renewable energy technology demonstration centre, power saws and nailers came grinding to a halt. The project manager, one Mr. Stephen Tucker, had been consulting blueprints on a dusty sawhorse. He let out a big sigh, as he had been through many grid failures on earlier projects. The five-month downtime and ensuing reliance on hand tools had eroded his bottom line but he'd noticed how more thoughtfully his men worked when they had to do everything by hand. He picked up his phone and called his old friend Gabriel Dunlop, as they might have some work to do in the morning if the grid stayed down.

Amy Wu's parents had gone to Toronto for a few days' visit with friends, and had left their teenager to take care of the condo in their absence. Written instructions sat on the counter, lots of cooked food was piled in the fridge. Amy was halfway through devouring a large stack of books, interspersed with associated research on the Internet. Every hour she would take a break and bang out ten pushups on the tile floor. She liked being alone, but then the lights and the computer went off and she felt isolated. Amy looked up and down King Street from the balcony and saw groups of people forming on the sidewalks. She suddenly felt hungry and dove into a large bowl of cold Mongolian beef.

Barbara Oreille sat on the banks of the Spencer Creek, just outside of the Lions Club Homes. This was her favourite spot, and she loved the little bridge that afforded pleasant views of the water in both directions. Today, as on most days, she listened to the melodies arising from the moving waters. She was unaware of what time the grid had gone down, as the sunlight and the creek and the birdsong went on untrammelled. A few seniors came out, as their TV watching had been interrupted, but she continued to hear the messages from the creek, undisturbed and unabated.

As the evening wore on, the sun went down and the stars came out, even more brilliantly in the absence of streetlights. People went off to their beds by candlelight, a romantic situation for some and a bother for others. Sleep came to most, but not the deep sleep they remembered from their childhoods. Sleep had become fragmented for many, with worries about the range of uncertainties pressing downward and fracturing even the sturdiest of constitutions. Tonight was no different. People dreamt bothered images of hot bedrooms and empty grocery shelves, mirroring current and possibly continuing realities. The arrival of dawn with its coolish dews was welcomed by most.

By eight o'clock, Gabriel and Stephen had set up shop in the rear parking lot of the Anglican Church on Melville Street. The key thing to worry about during a Summer grid failure is keeping your fridge cool, so expensive food won't spoil. They'd convinced the church to invest in an industrial-strength icemaker, which ground out two-kilogram blocks of ice that were stored in sawdust in an insulated part of the church basement. In previous grid failures, a team of volunteers carried the blocks up to a hopefully orderly queue of people, who would pay a dollar each and scurry the ice back to a waiting pan on the top shelf of their fridge. With prudent fridge door opening, the block might last for two to three days and the coolness would spill all the way down to the vegetable crispers at the bottom. The church had enough ice to satisfy a thousand families, all of whom hoped the grid would pop back up soon. Some other organizations had followed suit, and most homes in town were covered.

Mina was first in line, and a few folks behind stood Kurt with his bicycle. Henri, Magdalena and Arabella came soon after. Gabriel smiled at all and sundry while he passed over the blocks, and Stephen collected the loonies. About three more people behind were Barbara and Amy, who had been whiling away the time looking at the geometric configurations holding the stained glass of the ecclesiastical windows.

"I've never been to this church," Amy said, "but like check out the beautiful shape of those tear drops in the windows."

"That is a *Pescis Vesica*," Barbara explained, "a wonderful example of Sacred Geometry." She looked at Amy deeply, with a hint of a smile.

"I suffer through geometry," Amy said. "What is sacred geometry?"

"It's a way of acknowledging that the Higher Force, from which we come, is into patterns in a big way. Patterns that unfold over and over, in mathematical regularity. In nature, in us, and in the world around us. So the church window is designed and built to reflect this, to remind us that the Universe is beautiful and orderly, perhaps as a metaphor for our own lives? Nothing is random, all

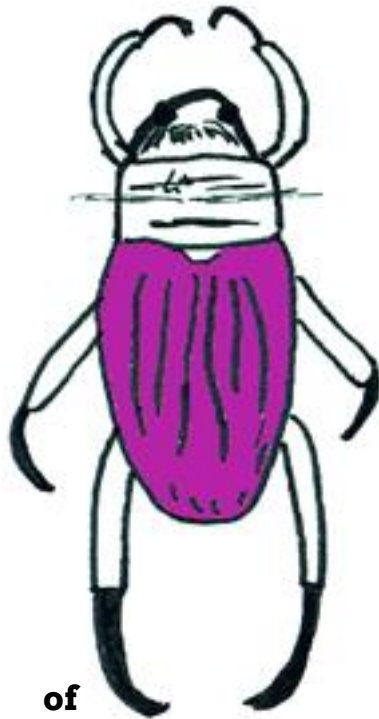
is beautiful and for a purpose," Barbara said dreamily. Amy started to wonder what she had gotten herself into.

Kurt hung around to chat, not noticing the slow drip of his ice brick. Magdalena called out to him and took him to meet Barbara.

"Barbara," she said, "I want you to meet a new friend of mine, Kurt." He extended his hand with great gusto, cold and clammy as it was. Barbara looked deep into his eyes and a subtle look of recognition came to her face. "Kurt, it is a pleasure to connect with you," she said.

"Barbara, it is my distinct pleasure," Kurt said. He felt that he had just jumped into a very deep pond of water when he had made eye contact with Barbara.

"Ok, you two," Magdalena said, "I just wanted to make the connection. Now Kurt, you'll have to get going if you want to get that block home so it can do some good for your fridge and food. Go!"



Dreaming of Scarab Beetles

A full day had come and gone, and still no electricity. People had learned from experience that if the outage was going to be short-term, it would come

on again within half a day or so. When it went beyond a day, either in the height of Summer or the depth of Winter, people started to get worried. There were at least two times in the collective memory that the power had been out for the better part of two weeks, and of course there was the five-month hiatus that rewrote all the rules. Folks gathered in bunches, under trees to stay cool, and asked about each other's families with furrowed brows. Some homes had been fully outfitted with photovoltaic panels and micro wind turbines, which generated enough juice to keep the fridge running and some minor heating of food off of the storage batteries. A few people had bicycles or hand treadles set up to harness human muscle power into batteries, but this barely kept the fridge cool. Most homes were unequipped, and the ongoing economic challenges meant they would stay this way. Gabriel and Stephen hoped to have enough ice bricks to last another day, at which time most perishable food would be consumed. A lot of folks had become vegetarians during the five-month downtime, and this cut down considerably on the need for ongoing refrigeration.

Arabella had previously invited a number of her friends over for after-dinner dessert. She had checked at several places and no cakes were available, so she opted instead for biscotti and tap water suffused with lemon slices. A knock at the door brought Mina and Kurt into a warm foyer, followed a moment later by Henri and Magdalena. Arabella noticed some energy sparking between these two, but couldn't say conclusively. Henri did seem to be smirking more than grimacing.

"Dear friends, do take a seat, and don't mind the mugginess of the room," Arabella said, mopping her brow with a cloth napkin.

"Not to worry, Arabella, this is what houses should feel like in the Summer," Magdalena assured her. She was used to hot and sweaty conditions from her bikram yoga practice.

"Take a glass of lemon water, at least the taps are running freely," Arabella said.

"Thank God for the backup generators down at the water treatment plant. Remember during the five month siege, lots of cities had generator malfunctions, and drinking water supply and firefighting capacity went to zero!" Henri said, wearing a grimace.

"Some of the big cities in India were the hardest hit," Mina lamented. "Overpopulation and massive urbanization, all existing without reliable water. What tragedies ensued."

"It was also grim here for a lot of places outside the big cities. For settlements

that rely on groundwater, many have to pump from significant depths. First Nations communities were hit particularly hard,” Kurt said. He had professional and personal interests in the aboriginal rights area.

“Alright, enough!” Arabella called out. “I know we’re all a bit on edge since we don’t know how long this one will last, but let’s lighten up and have fun. Life is short, and it’s later than we think.” She knew she was forcing things a bit, but the mood was too somber for her taste.

“So what is life all about?” Magdalena said, forever cutting to the chase.

“Good food, community, and... love?” Arabella said softly.

“Observing beauty in everything we see,” Mina declared, smiling again.

“Expanding our minds and our hearts,” Kurt said carefully.

“Hey, I’ll take a big heart over a sculpted mind, any day!” Magdalena said, grinning.

“They might come in the same package, with a bit of luck,” Henri said, looking directly at Magdalena as he spoke. She blushed a very fetching shade of pink.

Arabella ignored this. “So perhaps we’re all correct, say these are all just dimensions of a life well lived?”

“But I wonder sometimes if many of us are trapped in our past, trapped by our minds,” Magdalena pondered. “Like now, we just wait until the power comes back on. But what if it never returns, ever? What would life be like then? I think we need to let go of the past, of our preconceptions, to embrace what we truly could become.” Her eyes were open wide.

“If we let go of what we have, we need to be able to grab onto something else,” Arabella said. She had been a circus gymnast for a brief time in her halcyon days.

“But which something else?” Kurt asked. “There are a lot of options.”

“We all have our best path, our spiritual ideal, and clues are being given to us all the time,” Mina said with certainty.

“Clues?” Henri inquired.

“Yes, Henri, clues,” Mina said. “You dream of being in a big city, Gotham-

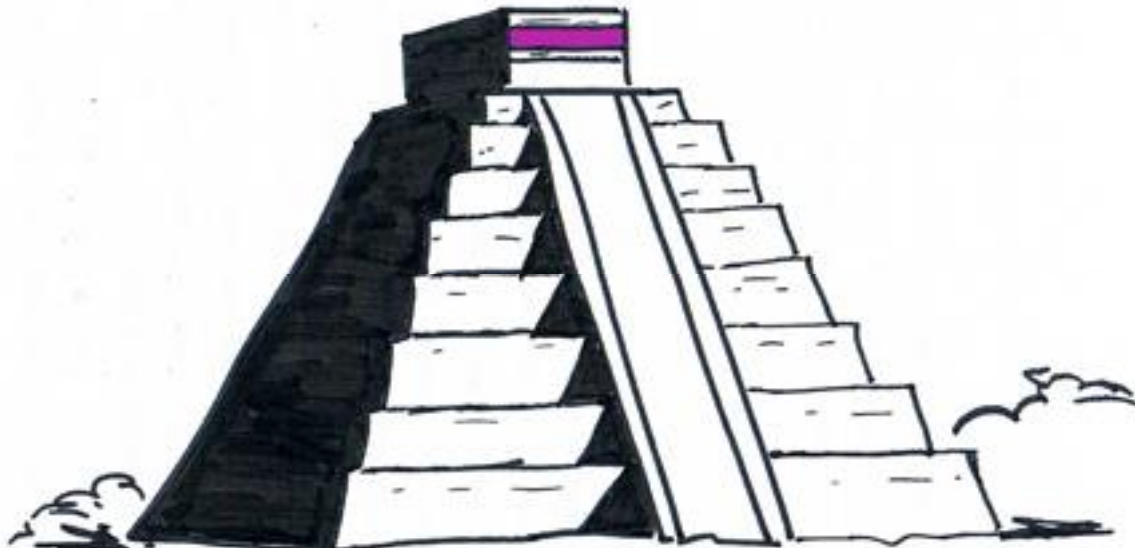
like. The next day at breakfast you see a travel ad, touting seat sales to New York City. Someone at work tells you of the great long weekend they just had in Greenwich Village. You could ignore all of this, but if you are observant, you might take the hint and reserve one of those seat sale flights. And in New York there will be a person or event or experience that will change your life immensely." She looked to be speaking from deep experience.

"But what if these are just coincidences?" Henri protested mildly.

"Coincidences, but more like what Carl Jung called meaningful coincidences, or synchronicity. He had a client who dreamt of golden scarab beetles, and during one of her sessions, a large scarab beetle beat its wings against the window of the therapy room. It was a species of beetle never seen in Zurich, hundreds of miles outside its normal habitation zone. The scarab beetle was symbolically significant for her psychological healing, so the Divine brought it up from Italy to central Switzerland. What seems unconnected to our rational eyes is all meshed and linked together in some unseen fabric. As the fabric unfolds, seemingly disparate things come together to give us the message that we need to live fully," Mina said, taking a dignified sip of her lemon water.

"So this evening's gathering is synchronous, either mildly or strongly," Magdalena declared. "And it's up to us to make sense of what we have learned. For the remainder of our time tonight, I suggest we sit in a circle and meditate on synchronicity itself!" Chuckles ensued with Magdalena's suggestion, and for the next fifteen minutes not one person thought about electricity, or the lack thereof.

Turning the Calendar



Two evenings later the power had not yet returned. It had flickered on and off, twelve hours back, giving temporary hope. But it had stayed off, and more people were wondering if this might be another lengthy outage. Most perishable food had been eaten, and the majority of households were starting in on their larders of canned foods, supplemented by fresh fruits and greens grown locally and harvested by hand. People were coping well enough.

Along with the many things that had shifted incrementally over the past five years, so too had entertainment. People did not have the money they once had, so entertainment options had changed and become decidedly more localized. Theatre troupes expanded, buskers played on strategic corners of King Street while residents strolled in the evenings, and old-fashioned events such as Punch-and-Judy shows appeared at makeshift stages in the Driving Park. On any given night at one of the church halls, or the Carnegie Gallery or at the Museum, some speaker or entertainer was in attendance in front of a good-sized audience.

On this particular evening, at the local Historical Museum, a presentation had been planned by Stephen Tucker of the local Masonic Lodge. The event went ahead as planned, done in candlelight and without computerized projection of graphics. The topic of the evening related to Mayan civilization, with a particular emphasis on the Mayan Calendar. Kurt arrived early, as the Maya civilization had been an abiding interest since his undergraduate days. Magdalena, Henri and Arabella came together in a loosely knotted trio, with Arabella waving to a number of friends in the crowd.

Stephen Tucker was introduced as a local businessman and an elder of the Masonic lodge. Many people knew him as the chap who sold them their block of ice to keep their fridge cool, but for tonight he was a Mayan expert, who spoke without notes, and held the audience firmly in the grasp of his broad hand.

He took the time to paint a thorough backdrop of the civilization, focusing on geographical and anthropological details, with a few titillating bits relating to human sacrifice and sexual mores. Navigating to more stable ground, he explained the workings of the Mayan calendar and its implications for living today.

"The Maya spent most of their resources building their temples, as a tangible way of elevating themselves closer to the Divine," Stephen explained. He had a subtle, dramatic flair and his voice was well modulated, along with pacing that allowed the audience to keep up and absorb the many kernels of information. "As Jared Diamond has so capably portrayed in his book *Collapse*, the associated construction practices were very energy-intensive, which necessitated continual timbering to provide fuel, which in turn left a lot

of exposed soil. Add some jumpy climate patterns with lots of rain, and much of that soil ran off into the watercourses. The agricultural capacity of the soils was diminished to the point that the Maya couldn't feed their population. This is a familiar pattern over the centuries the world over, precipitating the fall of many once-successful civilizations." He took a sip of tepid tap water. "The temples were tremendous places to observe the heavens, and a large body of astronomical knowledge was fine-tuned by this civilization. In a related capacity, they also became skilled timekeepers and calendar generators. One outfall of this was the Mayan calendar, which marked the passing of time in a cyclic fashion. The time horizon unfolded over seven 'days' and six 'nights,' with each phase connected to a stage in the germination and flowering of a plant. A 'day' was a period of growth, and a 'night' was a period of resting. On the outer wheel of the calendar, each time unit represented approximately four hundred years in actual time. As the sequence spiraled into the second section, each time unit was approximately twenty years in actual time. For the third section, each unit was approximately one year in actuality, and as the sequence spiraled into the final section, each time unit was approximately twenty days in actual time. Each 'day' or 'night' took on qualities that were associated with the particular point in the cycle, and these were experienced similarly in each section. For example, the 'fifth night' was always particularly challenging. On the third section of the calendar, this was the year when the US economy started its descent, many of you will recall this from 2008 as the sub-prime crisis or the Wall Street bailout period." Murmurs rippled through the crowd, as this was the period when many in the audience had seen their mutual funds take a substantial wallop.

"But the fifth night in the previous section of the calendar spanned the period 1932-1952, a time which contained the rise of fascism, World War II, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima. Grim times, without doubt," Stephen said, pausing for effect. He looked out at the audience. He had been speaking for the better part of an hour, and he sensed that enough was enough. So with a sideways glance at his moderator, he thanked the crowd for their kind attention and stated he would be pleased to entertain questions or comments.

There was a pause of a few seconds, just long enough for the crowd to wonder if there would be no questions that particular evening. Then a tall, middle-aged man in the middle of the room raised his hand.

"A few years ago, there was a lot of talk about 2012 and the Mayan calendar and the end of the world," he said. "Some folks were scared, most were amused, and movies were made and books were written. But it's now well past that and we're still here. What is your take on a calendar that ran out of pages a number of years back?"

Stephen let the question sink in before responding. "You are most correct that

the Mayan Calendar stopped at the Winter Solstice of 2012. And we are still here. But perhaps the ancient Mayan astronomers and mystics could see forward in time to when things would change drastically. Not perhaps in the outside world, but inside of us. How we perceive each other and ourselves. We all know many things have changed over the last ten or twenty years, and many of us lead very different lives than we used to. As one paradigm shifts to another, there is a momentum and carry-through of the old before the new is fully taken up. So perhaps we have been holding both the old and the new, and we are now letting go of the old. Some of us may have already let go, and others will take a bit longer. But if the Maya were right, the die is cast, and we will all ultimately let go of the old. Perhaps 2012 was the point where a critical mass of us, or perhaps the Earth we live on, shifted significantly. Let's at least stay open to the possibility. You've been a great audience."

Stay In Flow



Magdalena and Henri stood outside on the steps of the Museum, taking in the gentle night air and murmuring pleasantries to one another. To a casual passerby on Park Street, they looked very much like a happy young couple. They were not yet a couple, however, for that issue lay in the hands of the romance elves that guide and prod that kind of thing to some form of resolution.

They were waiting for Arabella, who came out in a vivacious manner with Stephen Tucker in tow. Arabella had known Stephen for almost as long as she had known Gabriel, and had convinced him he needed some hydration after his talk.

"C'mon you two, join us for a beverage at the coffee shop," Arabella instructed. "I think they extended their summer closing hours due to the grid stoppage, since people just need to get out of the house." Arabella mopped

her brow daintily.

“Sounds good, we had no real plans beyond walking you home, Arabella,” Magdalena responded, “and this will allow us to ask questions we were too timid to raise in there.” She gave Stephen a broad grin.

They cut down a side street to King Street and marveled at the throngs of people out on the sidewalks. “Hey, we need the grid to fall silent more often, if we want increased community interaction,” Henri noted, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips simultaneously. “People love to hide at home when the juice is flowing.”

The patio of the café was surprisingly under-utilized, only half full with a range of ages and group sizes. They ordered local cherry juice, cooled with an electrode system powered by solar panels that also fed the café’s fish smoking unit. They sat at a table, wedged beside another where a young Asian girl sat. She nursed her glass of juice and stared down at her book, trying to avoid eye contact. She was reading a copy of Eckhart Tolle’s “The Power of Now.” Magdalena had read every book and listened to every CD from the jokester Tolle, the Eckmeister as she lovingly referred to him. She whispered into Henri’s ear that she thought it was great to see a teenager reading Tolle.

Henri, never subtle, called out to the young lady, “*Pardon moi, mademoiselle*. We have just come from a stimulating talk on the Mayan calendar, delivered by this esteemed gentleman, and we find ourselves beside a keen student of Eckhart Tolle. We would love the pleasure of your company at our table.” His speech was accompanied by sweeping theatrical gestures, not enough to upend juice glasses, but nearly so.

Amy looked up nervously. “Thanks,” she said, “but I’m busy reading.” Her eyes clamped back down on her book.

Henri was beguilingly persistent. “Pardon my manners, I am Henri LaMontagne, and it would be a great delight to share our table and some conversation.” He smiled beatifically. Amy was weakening, but normally didn’t sidle up to strangers in cafes. She had recognized his name as the author of many a good rant letter to the editor, and had secretly admired the guts of the writer and his unpopular stands against societal norms.

“Okay, I guess, but I need to go soon,” she said. Henri smiled in a gloating manner and stood up formally, offering Amy his chair. Introductions were made all around, and the conversation came to the standstill that Amy had secretly dreaded, but only for a few seconds.

"I was delighted when I saw you reading Tolle! Can you tell us what impresses you most from his teachings?" Magdalena asked. She had a knack for reviving conversations.

"Well, I've seen him on YouTube, and he's hilarious, without trying to be hilarious. He's got this neat voice, with a cool accent, and everything he says seems to make so much sense to me," Amy responded with a half-smile.

"I must say, I have never heard of this chap," Arabella said, sounding disappointed in herself.

"He was a big hit on Oprah a while back, when she still had her show. Basic stuff, about living spiritually, but powerful nonetheless," Stephen said. He thought he'd had enough of speaking for the evening, but couldn't resist the temptation to weigh in.

"So, what makes so much sense?" Magdalena asked Amy, cocking her head sideways and looking at her as one might look at a kid sister.

"Well, for one thing, that we think too much," Amy responded. "Most people are just grinding away in their heads all the time, their monkey minds are in overdrive! Eckhart suggests simply turning your mind off, avoiding thinking, and just being. Try it for a moment, and when you do, you actually start seeing things around you and how beautiful they are."

They all sat quietly. They heard the sounds of King Street, the whisper of the evening wind through the patio's mammoth tree, and savoured the tantalizing smell of gourmet coffee beans wafting outward from the shop.

"And another cool thing," Amy continued, "is how he relates to our concept of time. Eckhart says that time is a mental construct and really doesn't exist. So there is no past, there will be no future. There is only the Now. What time is it? Now. Wait a few heartbeats. What time is it? Still Now. I know it sounds crazy, but if we shifted our minds and adopted this as our way of being, many things in society would change for the good."

"In full agreement here, soul sister," Henri said, offering up his fist for a bump.

"Well, now that we have concluded that there really is nothing such as time, I am loathe to say I have to get home to my wife, who will suggest to me that the hour is late!" Stephen announced. "But I have enjoyed this post-presentation chat, and wish you all a pleasant night's sleep." He sprang up and waved as he strolled to the street.

The three neighbours walked Amy up King Street to her condo building, insisting that they would keep an eye out for her in future Nows. Arabella and Henri turned on Church Street, with Magdalena in the middle. The three laughed at witty nothings and linked arms. At one point, Arabella turned to Magdalena and thought that her younger friend looked translucent, almost glowing. A block later, Henri leaned toward his new *petite amie* and was startled to see light emanating from her profile. He blinked twice, but the effect held steady. Henri craned his neck to look at Arabella, who appeared normal in the twilight. When he looked back at Magdalena, who too was now normal, she dug an elbow into his ribs and said, "Keep your distance, Romeo."

Lineups for Lululemon



Twenty-four more hours came and went, and still no power. The sun rose early these days, and set late, with plenty of heat and humidity in between. Folks became adept at shuttering their houses, sleeping in basements and outdoor tents, and finding shady spots under densely canopied trees to while away the hours. Not much conventional work was accomplished, but people pitched in to haul water and help weed at urban farming stations. Homes and restaurants with gas stoves became booming spots for people looking for a cooked meal. Many opened tins, ate dry goods from their pantries, and hoped for good news to flow.

Another thing that had changed over the last few years was the bathing and laundry schedule for most people. In the old days, long daily showers had been the norm, with lots of soap and expensive shampoo rolling down the pipes. Now, punctuated showers were the rage. A thirty-second wetdown was followed by vigorous soaping under a turned-off showerhead, followed by another minute or so of strategic rinsing. The amount of water used was often cut down by an order of magnitude, and shampoo made an appearance perhaps weekly for most. These measures had two-pronged cost and resource savings benefits, and made for more time in morning schedules. Some adventurous folk took to showering in their backyard, later in the day, after a coil of garden hose sitting in the sun provided free hot water. This was not for the faint of heart, and required either patient or non-inquisitive neighbours.

The other change was in the laundering of clothes, where the former one-use-and-in-the-hamper policy was replaced with multiple wearings of shirts and shorts until stony glares or kind hints led to sartorial turnover.

That evening, Henri shed the light clothing he'd been wearing back when the grid was still flowing, and went into his backyard to grab a quick shower from his looped garden hose. Henri didn't give a tinker's damn which of his neighbours might be out in their yards or dining near their adjacent windows. He was a man of enviable physique and had a distinctly European take on public nudity. Arabella had invited a few folks over for some yoga in her solarium—Stephen Tucker, Gabriel Dunlop, Barbara Oreille and young Amy who they had met at the coffee shop—and was getting the room arranged when she heard Henri's back door slam and saw him striding purposefully for his outdoor shower. She discreetly hid behind some curtains and slyly took in the view. Nothing lascivious she would have said, if pressed, more of an appreciation of the male physique. When Henri had finished and became presentable, she called out to him and invited him to the yoga session. Henri replied that he would be there *tout suite*.

A few moments later, the budding yogis straggled in and took a spot on a mat in the solarium. Yoga wasn't Stephen's thing, but he had come on Arabella's insistence that it would be good for his blood pressure. Barbara sat in full lotus position and gazed off meaningfully into the garden. Amy looked nervous but also pleased to be invited. Her parents were still out of town and she was getting bored out of her skull.

"Dear friends, please make yourself comfortable. Henri will be joining us once he is fully dried off. Gabriel said he may come later in the proceedings. I am delighted you have come over on this hot and muggy evening for some hopefully cooling yoga. Magdalena has taught me a little bit of this amazing way of living, and with the zeal of a convert, I am sharing what I know with anyone who will listen! Ah, here's Henri, nice to have you, and I believe everyone knows everyone? I usually start off my yoga sessions with a few hearty pounds on a brass Tibetan bowl, which emanates a most beautiful and calming sound. But I can't find the blessed thing! I have looked off and on all day, but to no avail. This is the third thing I can't find over the past month. First my Mexican mandala, then some very nice silverware, and now my singing bowl," Arabella said, pouting.

"Arabella, I don't mean to arouse suspicions, but did you read the article in last week's paper about a rash of missing valuables?" Henri asked. "Generally from higher end homes in the old part of town and a few from Pill Hill off Governor's Road. No signs of entry, typically from homes with security systems, and only for objects with considerable value."

"I read that piece with interest," Amy piped up. "I was intrigued that whoever is breaking in seems to know what they are doing, doesn't take too much, and covers their tracks. It's certainly not teenagers, as the liquor has stayed intact and there's been no vandalism."

"Well, Arabella, you may wish to file a report with the police and start locking your doors," Stephen said. "Ask Henri and your other neighbours to keep an eye out."

"And perhaps take on a certain level of detachment to whatever is missing," Barbara suggested. "Who knows, it may pop up in an unexpected corner of the house."

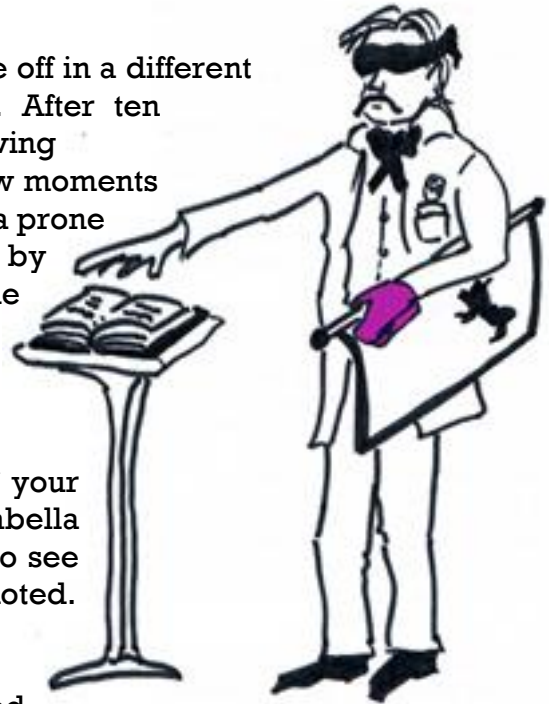
"Alright, enough of things material, on to yoga!" Arabella exclaimed. "Dear friends, yoga is a five thousand year old science, birthed in the East and has come to the West by storm over the last twenty years. Dare I say Lululemon? But it's much, much more than stretchy pants and expensive retreats. It's really a complete way of living. The *hatha* branch of the yoga tree gets most of the attention, with its downward dog and warrior poses. We'll get to that presently. The *hatha* poses are just a way of stretching and calming the body, so that more important work can be done. Then there is *raj* yoga, which is in essence a series of meditation modalities, where we communicate with the Divine and reconnect with our true spiritual essence. Then there is breath work, which can both calm or excite, but always reminds us of the primal nature of breath and the process of living. Another part of yoga relates to sound, where *mantras* are chanted over and over to achieve a range of effects and to elevate consciousness. In some quarters you hear a lot about *kundalini* yoga, where the emphasis is on the *chakra* energy centres of the body. And there are many other aspects of yoga that focus on nuances that are very important to a masterful existence, things like intention, discrimination, focus and concentration."

"Okay," Arabella instructed, surveying her students. "Let's do a series of poses, holding each for as long as is comfortable." The Hero, Goddess, Sun Salute, Locus, Cobra and Child poses ensued in a seamless array.

"And now for my favourite, *savasana*, the corpse pose, where we lie in complete relaxation. It's really a form of body meditation, allowing the body to sink into the mat and letting our minds connect with the Divine Source." The room went quiet.

Eyes Wide Shut

The room stayed very quiet. Many of them were off in a different world, and Stephen was taking a short nap. After ten minutes, Henri rose and stole away home, having remembered a chore that had to be done. A few moments later Gabriel let himself in quietly, and took up a prone position on the yoga mat recently vacated by Henri. He was not a yoga buff but he knew of the corpse pose, and the idea of stretching out after a long and hot day had considerable appeal.



“So friends, when you are ready, come out of your reverie and sit comfortably on your mat,” Arabella said. “I saw Henri slip out and I am delighted to see that Gabriel has arrived, which I had not noted. Gabriel, I suspect you may not know Amy?”

Gabriel, who was sitting beside Amy, extended his hand for a surprisingly firm handshake from such a petite young lady. “Not by name,” he confirmed, “but I do remember you, *mademoiselle*, from the ice block line at the church.”

“Thanks again for that, it allowed me to work through a big dish of Mongolian beef that would have definitely been thrown out otherwise,” Amy said, grinning shyly. She caught herself thinking that she liked hanging out with these older people more than friends her age.

“Perhaps your firm handshake is tied to a hearty diet of beef?” Gabriel said jokingly.

“Alright folks, time for some post-yoga reflection,” Arabella suggested. “Anything that came to you during *shivasana* that you would like to share?” She had completely forgotten about her singing bowl.

“I have to admit, I took the liberty of a wee nap, where I dreamt I was trapped, cold and shivering, on a massive ice floe. A pleasant enough nightmare, given the heat we’ve been having!” Stephen said with a big mock shiver.

“A lot of things came to me,” Barbara said in a low voice.

“Pray tell, my dear,” Arabella urged, leaning in Barbara’s direction.

“Alright, here goes. I felt very relaxed, pliable, after the stretches. As soon as

I lay on the mat, I closed my eyes. But after I closed my eyes, I could still very much see. I had a vision of me lying down on the mat, then I went a bit higher and could see all of us lying on our mats, and then I projected through the roof of the solarium and could see Arabella's fine garden and the backyards of her neighbours."

"Hold on, Barbara," Stephen requested. He liked to be methodical. "You mean you were seeing these things in your imagination, since your eyes were closed?"

"No," she answered patiently. "I know it's subtle, but I saw them with my consciousness. You don't need your eyes or your vision to see."

"No?" asked Gabriel, who had long been an avid digester of carrots and sweet potatoes to maintain his own vision.

"No, definitely not," Barbara said. "To illustrate, let's all try an experiment. Everyone close your eyes. Now think of your Mom. Can you see her? Can you see minute details of her face? Of course you can, we all can. But your eyes were closed, so you all have the capacity to see without your eyes." This was followed by a reflective silence.

"This reminds me of a Fringe Festival performance I saw a number of years back," Gabriel said, scratching his chin reflectively. "The performer, a young chap by the name of Nick Wallace, did a rendition of a century-past exhibition by a certain Signor Falconi. Falconi taped coins over his eyes and blindfolded himself and 'saw' all manner of things through the fingertips of his right hand. He was a sensation in Europe in his day, and Nick Wallace proved to be pretty flawless himself. I didn't know what to make of it myself, at the time, but now you've got me thinking."

"What Falconi did, and thousands before and after him, was hone his ability to do what is called remote viewing," Barbara explained. "In essence, we all have the ability to see things near or far without our physical vision. It could be close by, or halfway around the world. It is purported that the KGB and the CIA have been funding this kind of work for years, for nefarious cloak-and-dagger activities. And some suggest you can remotely view the future, so it's not just seeing across distance, but also across time." She paused to let her words sink in.

"You mean I can learn to take a peek into the future?" Amy asked. She was definitely glad her parents had decided to stay in the city.

"With a few caveats, yes. Peering across distance is relatively easy. But once you try to look into the future, you have to realize things will get fuzzy. This is

because we shape the future with our decisions of today, and our thoughts of today. So, at best, you have to squint your 'eyes' a bit and pick out the most probable future," Barbara said, smiling encouragingly at Amy.

"Have you ever done this?" Amy spoke quickly, excitedly.

"Absolutely," she said, "and after I saw the gardens I went up, up, up above the Earth and through, through, through to a future time." She spoke with the nonchalance of someone describing the best driving route to Toronto.

"So what did you see, dear Barbara?" Arabella asked. She was pleased, as this was by far the best yoga session she had hosted to date.

"Well, with the caveats I have already mentioned in tow, two things stood out. One, the Earth was a very lush and green place. I won't comment on displaced coastlines, but what remained looked very beautiful indeed. Two, when I looked down at a community, pretty much all I could see were points of light moving around. These points of light were connected to one another in a glowing, gossamer-like filament network. It was a bit like streetlights you see when you descend into a city in a plane at night, but imagine a fluid network of streetlights, all connected with one another. It sounds strange, I know, but that's what kept coming to me, over and over."

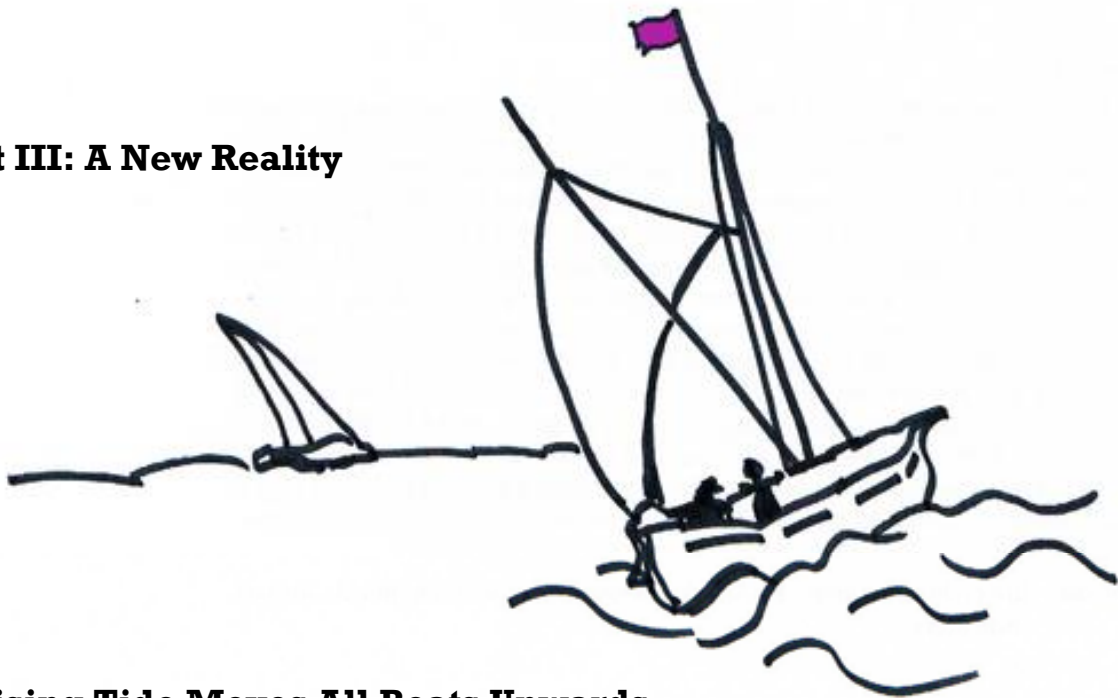
"It sounds absolutely amazing," Amy whispered.

"I just know I'm going to have some wild dreams tonight," Gabriel said with a mixture of amusement and resignation.

Second Interlude

Domestic animals stirred; Strider, Nubia and Lorax at the forefront. They were moved by the subtle songs of their wilder kin. Their role as teachers and healers of their human friends would now take on an even more prominent role, nudging forward the quantum jump they all knew was inevitable.

Part III: A New Reality



A Rising Tide Moves All Boats Upwards

Overnight, the grid roared back to life and people awoke to flashing numbers on their bedside radios and kitchen ovens. Power had been out for five days, and it had been hot throughout, but tempers had stayed in check and everyone had helped one another in myriad ways. Plans were already in place for another day without power, and the men's church group Gabriel and Stephen were part of had planned an old-fashioned wood-fire barbecue on the banks of Spencer Creek. It would be set up by the Lions Club Homes on Mill Street, primarily for the senior residents of the complex but also for anyone else in the neighbourhood who needed a square meal. Instead of canceling, they trundled over the wood and supplies in a couple of wheelbarrows and started to set up for cooking. Fresh meat would be delivered by the butcher shop van in under an hour, and gas oven-baked buns would be picked up by the urban farming collective and delivered along with freshly picked greens and tomatoes. All of this would have happened without the grid being back up, evidence of the community resilience that had been built up over the past few years. Something like today's event offered a

great meal at an affordable price to seniors. Under the projected circumstances, the quantity ordered was tightly controlled, as the organizers had expected no way to safely store leftovers. When food ran out, it ran out, but organizers seemed to be magicians in selecting the right amount for a particular event.

Gabriel and Stephen set up shop before the butcher's van rolled in. Across the lawn, under some trees and beside the creek, sat Barbara and Amy. This was Barbara's special spot, and she had invited Amy along to listen to the songs emanating from the creek and to practice remote viewing. They were unlikely friends, but sat quietly together very comfortably and spent most of the time in silence and with their eyes closed.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this, and it's pretty cool," Amy said after a time.

"I've been doing it for years, and I've tried to get more people to join me with little success, so I'm delighted that you think it has value," Barbara responded warmly.

"Absolutely, and it's a lot of fun! Why do you think it hasn't caught on in the mainstream?" Amy asked, curious.

"Well, there's no easy answer for that," Barbara responded. "Some people are still very materialistic, and are very much tied to the I'm-just-a-body paradigm. Others are trapped in their heads, snarled up in all manner of intellectual pursuits. Fine, but incomplete, in my view. Many people see their life through some sort of spiritual lens, and they explore this in a variety of ways. Some do it through religion, others through individual modalities such as prayer and meditation, some through art or music, and some of us do 'woo woo' stuff." Small crinkly lines appeared by Barbara's eyes as she smiled.

"'Woo woo' stuff, you know my last name is Wu, so you'd better be careful!" Amy joked.

"'Woo woo' stuff being the time-honoured phrase for anything considered 'out there.' The yard markers are constantly changing. Yoga used to be out there, and now everyone is doing it. Reiki was the same, and now it's pretty mainstream. But remote viewing and many other things are still past the line," Barbara explained, stretching her legs.

"Why do you think that is?" Amy asked, quick with her questions, a classic student.

"First off, even by our own admission, things like remote viewing seem

fantastical at first blush. Then you try it, and it gets you thinking about what you truly are. We are not our bodies, we are not our brains. We are part of Spirit, plugged in, and when we realize this, we operate within the same rules as Spirit, so the laws of physics do not apply. To zip around the world in a few seconds, or go backward and forward in time, it starts to make sense. But we don't do this with our bodies or with our minds. We do it with our consciousness. And a lot of people have big problems getting their heads wrapped around this, since it has nothing to do with their heads!" Barbara said, grinning at her own joke.

"Okay, so I'm big on societal change. And I go bananas because change is so slow. But every now and then, something just roars in, like this local food thing, and we all pick it up quickly. Is this tied to consciousness?" Amy inquired.

"I believe it is, but closer to what might be called the collective consciousness. Carl Jung came up with this term, and he was quite the remote viewer, if you read his journals. So Jung's thought was that there is a collective thought field that is beyond our individual bodies and minds that we all tap into. It's tied back to the Spirit concept that I just mentioned, but he nuanced it with collective cultural memory and other details that only a Zurich psychoanalyst would hang his hat on. In practice, if something neat comes into the collective and has momentum and the right timing, it quickly infiltrates a critical mass of humanity and can shape where we go as a society." Barbara caught sight of Mina Patel, approaching them along the bank of creek. To her eye, Mina looked luminous. "Mina, it's good to see you," Barbara called out to her old friend. "Do you know Amy Wu?"

"I do now, it's nice to see you my dear," Mina said, clasping Amy's hand tenderly.

"How are you, dear Mina?" Barbara asked, her fondness unmasked.

"First rate, and how are you dear Barbara?"

"I haven't seen you in a while, and something seems different," Barbara said, her gaze direct. Something about Mina had definitely changed.

"I have been meditating more and more," Mina told them, "and hardly sleeping, so I meditate through the night. But I rarely feel tired, funnily enough. Lately, people on the street have been shooting me funny looks! So dear Barbara, if I keep meditating and immersing myself in the Oneness, will I inevitably become Light?"

Barbara and Amy stared at Mina, and then gave each other a sideways glance.

As Pure As the Driven Snow



Across the way, at the barbecue area, Kurt rolled up on his bike. Stephen had business to attend to, restoring the old hydro building on Olympic Drive, and Gabriel had asked Kurt to help with cleanup and disassembly. The two had become quite close since that day Kurt had catapulted over his handlebars outside the coffee shop, mainly through their meditation interactions and now through some shared community service. Kurt particularly liked the latter practice as it was completely different than his academic pursuits, and he used the opportunities to chat with Gabriel and learn more about the town.

They were packed up and ready to go when they spotted Mina hovering by the edge of the creek with Barbara and Amy. Something seemed slightly amiss, so with a raised eyebrow between them, they sauntered over to say hello. As they came closer to the trio, they caught shards of urgent murmuring and arrived to find the two looking deeply at Mina.

“Hello Mina, Barbara, Amy,” Gabriel said, “I trust all is well.” He issued a warm half-smile.

“Dear Gabriel, so very nice to see you,” Mina said calmly. “You’ve been cooking up a storm for the seniors, bless you.” She looked deep into his eyes, radiating a light from the very core of her being.

Gabriel and Kurt were struck by Mina’s appearance. Both men had spent considerable time with her over the past few months, doing deep inner work and being in presence with one another. They both felt they knew Mina well, and they both knew something had changed in a significant way.

“Mina has told us that meditation is now her main focus.” Barbara said carefully.

“Dear Mina, we’ve become good friends, so I feel I can be candid,” Gabriel said. “One must be balanced in life, so perhaps you are just not feeling yourself, and hopefully this will soon pass.” He smiled reassuringly.

“But I am comprehending that life is just a way back to the Light,” Mina explained, “and I have never felt better, except for my blessed days in India as a child!”

“You know, this is intriguing,” Kurt mused, remembering some nuggets from long-ago research. “There are mystical accounts from a lot of cultures where yogis and shamans step away from a conventional living paradigm and immerse themselves in some kind inward space for months or years.” He looked directly at Mina. “To my eye, you have always had such beautiful skin. But today, I would say you are positively glowing.”

All four looked at Mina in a very direct way, and she looked back at them just as directly.

“You know, this unfolding situation reminds me of the teachings of White Eagle,” Barbara said. “He’s a former First Nations chieftain who communicated psychically from the other side to a woman in England by the name of Grace Cooke. His words comprise a beautiful set of teachings, in which he prepares the reader for the changes that are coming to our world. White Eagle underlines the importance of meditation for getting in alignment with Source. He also mentions that some or all of us will change our bodies so significantly that we will become beings of Light. Imagine a purity of existence like a beam of sunlight.” She reached out and held Mina’s hand. The scene was as still as a dramatic tableau, the only movement and sounds being the off-stage roil of the creek and small birds chirping their melodic songs.

And then, as quickly as the sun slips across the morning horizon, the others saw Barbara take on the beautiful glow that was in Mina. Gabriel noticed it first and stiffened a bit, followed by Amy who shyly averted her gaze, and then by Kurt whose attention had been diverted by the rushing watercourse. Eventually, all three of them simply stared at the two women, joined by a clasped hand but connected in a way that was deeper than words would allow.

And at that point a hybrid truck clattered over the Creighton Street Bridge, bringing them all back to some form of reality.

"I think I have to go home and lay down," Gabriel said quietly.

"I think I'm going to have to lie down, but right here by the creek," Kurt said, dropping to the ground.

"I'm going home, to practice some more remote viewing," Amy said, smiling goofily.

Barbara and Mina strolled along the edge of the Spencer, communicating without words, both glowing like moonlight on a bed of soft snow.

Perfect In Every Way



The next day was a Saturday, and while the loosely knit meditation group had

hit the scheduling doldrums of a hot Canadian Summer, Magdalena had been able to coerce the entire original group, plus Barbara, to a combined exercise/yoga/meditation session in the loft of the art school in town. The plan was to limber up their bodies and then sit for half an hour in meditation.

The collective exercise portion was fairly common these days, since people had largely given up their gym memberships due to cost but still needed exercise in their schedules. Rather than work out alone at home, many people came together in parks, church basements, and funeral home halls to stretch and puff. Fitness levels were higher, due to increased walking and cycling, not to mention better eating habits from all the locally grown food. Still, to get in some cardio or a deeper stretch seemed easier with company, so today's preamble fit well into the broader trend.

Magdalena was there first to set up the mats and music. Kurt and Gabriel came in next, boisterous and outfitted in garish exercise clothing obtained from the Charity Bible Store. Barbara and Mina came in a few moments later, quietly and purposefully. They sat cross-legged on a mat and smiled at everyone. The other folk looked shyly back at them, with stolen glances, since both women still had the glowing countenances that they exhibited yesterday beside the creek. Magdalena broke the awkward silence. "Mina, Barbara, how nice to see you both."

"It's always a pleasure to see you, dear Magdalena. I can tell the change that has come to Barbara and me is evident to you. We're still very much your old friends, but different somehow," Mina said, pausing to smile reflectively.

"You both look lovely, but decidedly different," Magdalena said pensively. "You have a glow about you, more than your usual selves. You both are feeling well, I trust?"

"This has been Mina's situation for some time now," Barbara explained. "It came to me here and there over the last few months, but yesterday afternoon it settled in to stay. The outfall is that I have been getting a lot of strange stares from people on the street." She smiled grimly.

"Alright folks, we can talk about this later," Magdalena called out. "Down to business! First off, let's limber up, and then do some old-school burpees and jumping jacks. Gabriel, make sure Kurt doesn't slack off." The next ten minutes became a guided whirl of movement, amiable joking and elevated heart rates.

"I'll now guide you through some yoga poses that we'll hold for up to sixty seconds each, really letting the muscles stretch and going deeper within as we find our true centre." She was in her glory, loving the fluidity of the

movements and the company of these amazing people.

On the fourth posture, after holding downward dog for a good forty seconds, Kurt's lower back went into spasm. He groaned and rolled on his side. Within seconds Gabriel and Magdalena were there, encouraging him to relax and take deep breaths.

"Every so often this lower back goes out on me," Kurt muttered. "I swear it's the curse of every academic who sits on his duff all day! Folks, don't worry about me, just carry on. Perhaps I'll limp over to the side here and die a slow death. But I may make a considerable ruckus in the process." Kurt was in pain, but he couldn't resist making a joke.

"Kurt, just take a deep breath and I'll talk you through some principles from Christian Science that I've learned over the years," Magdalena said soothingly. Kurt made no signs of protest. "The founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, was a wonderful woman who used the principles from early Christianity to achieve healing."

"Hey, my Mom would be all over this," Kurt said, nodding. "She used to tell me the story about the woman in the Bible who touched the hem of the Master's robe and was healed." Kurt's mother had grown up in a small village in Ontario, in a very traditional household.

"So the premise is pretty simple," Magdalena explained. "The Divine is completely good and loving, no ifs, ands or buts. The Divine is our Father and our Mother, who like any parent wants their child to be perfectly healthy and whole. We connect to this pure loving Essence that brings us health when we realize it is only Good, and we are a reflection of that Good. When we dwell on the phrase, 'Perfect God, perfect man,' we get our minds in order and our hearts in sync with this beautiful loving Force and some amazing healing can happen." Magdalena was cutting to the core of things. Gabriel listened on, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"So Kurt, just pause and connect with your heart to that Source you communicate with when you meditate. Hold that connection deeply and steadfastly."

The room went quiet. Mina and Barbara had their eyes closed, holding the understanding of perfection in all those present. It could have been a moment later, or perhaps an hour, but at some downstream point they stepped back into time and Kurt sat up quickly.

"My goodness, my spasm is gone. Completely gone!" Kurt exclaimed.

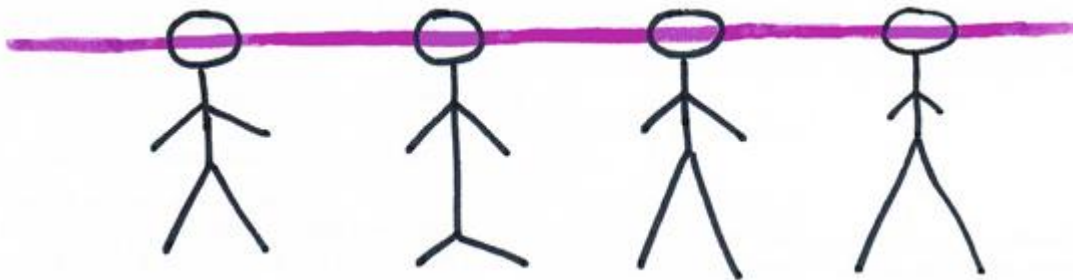
“What was your impression from all this, dear Kurt?” Mina called out in a stage whisper.

“Well, I felt my heart expand and I felt a very loving connection to something much greater than myself,” Kurt said, “and I got the sense I need to start living more from my heart, less from my head. But you’ve been hinting at this for a while, Mina, so I suppose I’m a slow student who has finally come around to the lesson.” He smiled ruefully.

At that moment, they all stopped and looked at Magdalena, who was still hovering near Kurt. The light in the loft was variable, so after they all blinked, they could see it clearly: Magdalena’s sweet visage had taken on the same luminosity and clarity emanating from both Mina and Barbara.

To balance this effect, she saucily stuck out her tongue at all of them.

Pinky and the Global Brain



The following day was a Sunday. The meditation group came together to purchase a range of field vegetables and have a canning bee in Magdalena’s kitchen. This was becoming a relatively common occurrence amongst neighbours and friends, dividing labour while having fun, with the end product keeping people well nourished through increasingly extended winters. They congregated in the expansive churchyard at Sydenham and Melville and made their way up the Escarpment with a slew of cloth bags and roller carts. Gabriel and Kurt and Mina led the procession, with Magdalena and Henri forming the caboose, their hands joined. Their romance had evolved, and they no longer hid the tell-tale marks of its existence. Up front, Kurt bit his lip, holding back any potentially snide remarks. He was happily married, or relatively so, but he’d always had the slightest crush on the winsome Magdalena. Kurt was fair-minded enough to be happy for her, but he had always thought of Henri as a bit of a rascally ne’er-do-well. Gabriel and Mina, in their own predictable ways, completely ignored the signs of tenderness between the two. Mina resolved to have a happy word with Magdalena’s mother and two aunts about the situation, but in the most discreet way.

They proceeded up Sydenham Road, pausing for a breath at the railway

overpass and again at the topmost lookout. The town nestled in the valley looked beautiful in all seasons, but was particularly stunning in the late Summer with its full foliage. They made their way the last half-mile to the farm store at the corner of Fallsvie Road, directly opposite the Miamica family farm. Fields that once grew corn and grapes were now converted to intensive vegetable production, as they were close enough to town that the legions of urban farmers could scale the hill for tending and harvesting and still scamper away for an evening at home.

The five of them went into the covered mini-barn and marveled at the wide array of carrots, zucchini, peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, chard, kale, kohlrabi, sorrel, and peas. After some good-natured bantering on preferences and nutrient ratios, they assembled their plunder and approached the checkout counter. Once clear of their financial commitments, they spent the next five minutes packing the produce up in the most transportable configuration and the convoy went down the hill. Magdalena and Mina led the troop, both women carrying good-sized backpacks. Henri, Gabriel and Kurt each commandeered a roller cart, staying on the asphalt as traffic was light. The group paused at the lookout, taking time to rest before the steep ascent awaiting them. They passed around a snack that Kurt had brought to share.

"There's really no place like this town," Kurt said with the enthusiasm of a new and enamoured suitor.

"Lived here all my life and I agree completely," Gabriel said, solemnly smiling at Kurt.

"I've moved around, studied here and there, and consider myself to be a bit of an urbanist," Kurt went on, "but to have such a neat 19th century town, right beside a good-sized city, and only an hour away from a large international city that has everything in it you might need, now that is uncommon. And then factor in all the amazing green space and working landscapes in near-proximity, and it's easy to conclude we are very lucky indeed!" He stood in full lecture mode, eyebrows raised, making deft hand gestures.

"You gentlemen are thinking alike, have you ever considered your minds might be joined?" Mina suggested.

"Hey, I have grown to love this gentleman since the moment I fell into his arms!" Kurt laughed. "But joined brains? That may be going too far." He playfully elbowed Gabriel in the ribs, who in turn offered his best mock grimace.

"No, your brains are the soft grey matter in each of your skulls, and these are

distinct masses of flesh. But I said joined minds, that which relates to something deeper and not physically-based,” Mina explained patiently.

“Ah, I see what Mina is driving at,” Magdalena chimed in. “I remember reading a book by Lynne McTaggart called *The Field*. Really interesting stuff, and based on the notion that there is an energy field that connects us all and connects us across time. One could view this as a joined mind, if you will.” Magdalena sat pensively, trying to tap into that energy field which connected this group perched high on top of Sydenham Hill.

“This also reminds me a bit of the morphic field work done by Rupert Sheldrake back in the day,” Henri said. “Very similar way of viewing things, that a field of energy connects all sentient beings on Earth. He used this to explain all manner of neat phenomena like dogs finding their masters halfway across Europe and psychic parrots in Manhattan condos. Really neat stuff, and yet it drove his critics wild.” He suppressed a snort and grinned slyly at Magdalena.

“You were mentioning Christian Science yesterday,” Mina said, glancing at Magdalena, “but this also reminds me of their concept of God connecting us all through Mind, distinct from what they call our mortal minds or what I might call our egos. So when we meditate we get in sync with Mind, and once we do that, watch out! There would be no limit on what we could achieve.” She looked impassively from person to person.

“Right off the bat, this reminded me of a video I saw twenty years back called *The Global Brain*. The narrator, Peter Russell, was basically saying the same sorts of things, but he had the idea that we humans had to reach a critical mass in population before our minds began thinking as one,” Gabriel said wistfully. “So I’ll try an experiment. I’m going to go quiet and visualize my mind joined with the other four minds here, and then going outward I’ll envision we’re all joined to Source. Bear with me for a bit.”

Birds flew overhead, a car rolled past, and a train rattled along below. They were quiet, all eyes closed. A moment went by, or perhaps it was much longer. When they opened their eyes, it was evident to all that Gabriel had now joined the ranks of Mina, Barbara and Magdalena, glowing translucently and smiling broadly. Kurt and Henri regarded the three of them, and then shot each other a quizzical look.



Going By the Book

Mid-week, as the Summer spun along towards its inevitable end, a number of people sat for a glass of watermelon lemonade on the patio of the coffee shop. The events of the last few months had forged alliances and friendships that would not have normally budded. At one table in a leaf-shadowed corner sat Henri and Magdalena, in earnest conversation with Mina. In another shady corner sat Stephen, Amy and Barbara, along with Barbara's long-

time friend, Patricia Amiel. Patricia had been a teacher, and was entertaining her table with stories of how formal education had changed over her long career. In between the two tables, sitting in bright sunshine, was a fellow named Rick Denton. Rick said good morning to everyone whose path he crossed, but rarely went beyond that. Today he sat with a large brown duffel bag beneath his feet, and had the announcements section of the local paper flattened out on the table before him. Pen in hand, he would studiously make notes and frequently look up as if checking to see if someone was looking at him. No drink was on his table, but he would issue a stream of light banter to every member of the wait staff that walked by, giving the ongoing impression he was waiting for someone to join him before he would order. But no one came.

Back at the table with the foursome, Patricia was smiling kindly at Amy, who had just finished a lengthy diatribe about the ineffectiveness of her high school education.

"I don't disagree with you, Amy. The system is still far from perfect," Patricia admitted. "But the changes over the last five years have been a huge step in the right direction." She looked at Barbara and Stephen, hoping for some support.

"You know, ten or twenty years ago, they were labeling every other kid with ADD or ADHD, and pumping them full of meds," Stephen said. "Now they're getting kids with ants in their pants out in nature half the day, and the positive results are tangible. Particularly for boys, as sexist as it may sound, but several hours in the Spencer Gorge climbing over rocks and swinging from trees does wonders for a person's focus. And you couple that with the funding for more practical training in the development of green technologies, you

actually get young folks who are able to work hard on something that makes a difference. We've hired a few for my restoration business, and they're real crackerjack workers."

"All right, I'll concede on those points, but there seems to be a lot of kids who sit in class, sleepy and unmotivated," Amy said crossly.

"We are a bit behind what some of the American and European systems have fully adopted," Patricia said. "In a lot of cases, schools are starting at 10AM and going proportionately later. We all know teenagers should not be up before 9! Many of them are reviving the old-time morning school assembly, but now they might kick off the day with standing yoga positions, guided meditation or chanting. Powerful stuff, and fun." Patricia's eyes crinkled, and Stephen wondered if she might have left teaching prematurely.

"When you mention meditation, it brings to mind the wonderful work done by David Lynch down in the States," Barbara added. "You know, the movie director chap? So the David Lynch Foundation funds folks to go in and show kids how to do Transcendental Meditation. Guess what happens? Test scores go way up and school violence goes way down. With peace in the corridors, you can actually get down to learning." Barbara cocked her head sideways and looked at Amy.

"All good stuff, for sure, but what about the really cool stuff, like remote viewing?" Amy asked. "The first I heard of it was this Summer, and not from one of my teachers." Amy smiled at the others, her eyes darting towards Barbara.

"It reminds me of the old Mark twain quote: 'I never let my schooling get in the way of my formal education'," Barbara said sagely, "but you know there's one thing that may never get formally taught, as it could put librarians and teachers out of business!" Barbara's voice went very low, almost conspiratorial in tone.

"Pray tell, Barbara dear," Stephen said with equal measure of affection and curiosity.

"Accessing the Akashic Records," Barbara said, drawing one finger up to her lips.

"What are the Akashic Records?" Amy asked eagerly. Her face had the same look as when she had first heard of remote viewing.

"The idea is rooted in Eastern tradition, where the notion is that all knowledge, all information and all events from all lives are recorded in some

medium," Barbara told her. "Those who know how to access these records can 'read' any line from any manuscript, know what happened in history on any particular day, or what you ate for breakfast last August 13th. There are techniques out there to hone your abilities to access this timeless repository of information, through guided meditations or going into the quiet space within yourself and directing your consciousness towards the Akasha." Barbara's eyes were dreamy, and she glowed even more brightly than before.

"Barbara, just when I think I've heard of everything, you push me a little bit further," Stephen said, chuckling.

"How is all of this written down?" Amy interjected.

"It's not so much written as it is recorded in a cosmic energy medium," Barbara said matter-of-factly. "You can think of it as a large library filled with books, or compact discs or whatever. You just plug into it and the information flows to you. Perhaps the greatest example of a person who was highly skilled at this was Edgar Cayce, 'America's sleeping prophet'. Mr. Cayce would stretch out on a divan, go into a deep connection with Spirit, and would speak out information from the Akasha to a waiting stenographer. The help he extended to people, for physical healing and for understanding their life situations, was truly amazing." She looked at Amy as though she'd just explained where the nearest bus stop was.

"Okay, I'm going to start practicing this in addition to my remote viewing," Amy said eagerly. "I bet my parents will be happy, this can only make my grades even higher!"

As Amy spoke, the clouds covered the sun and Henri stood up to go inside. He passed by Rick Denton, slowed down, and then retraced his steps back to Rick's table. Something had caught Henri's attention and it made his blood boil.

Into the Deepest Recesses of Sherwood Forest



Henri stood over the patio table, glaring down at Rick as he read his newspaper. Rick didn't look up. Henri cleared his throat in a most guttural way. Rick looked up and then sideways, showing a tiny flicker of fear.

"Can I help you, friend?" Rick asked. His voice was low and measured, sandpapered down over a lifetime of staying below the radar.

"I need some answers, some straight answers," Henri said. His voice was equally low, but it had the energy of a pounce-ready feline.

"Well, sure, you tell me your questions and I'll give you some answers," Rick said, relaxing, shooting Henri a smooth smile.

"As I said, I want the truth, the straight truth," Henri said, grimacing. "I was stepping inside to the men's room, and as I walked past your table, I saw your bag below. I looked into the bag, as the zipper was partially open, and I saw something that I think belongs to my neighbour."

“Well, let me tell you, I just came from a little shopping at the Bible Store, and perhaps I did pick up something your neighbour donated to them. This happens all the time. One man’s junk is another man’s treasure,” Rick said in a syrupy tone. Three beads of perspiration popped out on his brow.

“Oh, are you referring to this?” Henri asked, deftly reaching into the duffel bag and pulling out a handful of heavy and exquisite silverware. He sat down beside Rick, pulling up his chair uncomfortably close. “My friend and neighbour, Arabella Duke, has old family silverware with a beautifully etched ‘D’ on the handles. I have never seen pieces like this anywhere outside of her formal dining room. Are you trying to tell me that she would take heirlooms of this quality to the Bible Store?”

“Listen, friend, all kinds of people do all kinds of things with their excess belongings,” Rick responded. “Or maybe it came from another family with a name starting with ‘D.’ Who knows? Who cares?” He was sitting on the edge of his chair, resolved that his bluff might hold water. But he hadn’t counted on running up against someone as dogged as Henri.

“Okay, so let’s see what else you got at the Bible Store. Pull it all out and put it on the table and then I’ll walk away,” Henri challenged.

“Pal, let me tell you, nobody asks you to empty your duffel bag in a café,” Rick said firmly. “I’m asking you to cease and desist, toodle on and be a good fellow.” His eyes shifted sideways again, as if to judge the ease of access to the street exit of the patio.

Henri had taken matters in hand over that split second of eye shifting, grabbing the handles of the duffel bag and setting it squarely on the top of the table. Under Rick’s fuming gaze, he unzipped the bag fully and unpacked its contents: Ten knives, all with the emblazoned Duke family ‘D.’ Under them he found several pocket watches, followed by four stunning gold necklaces, a pearl choker, and a cased collector’s edition of Robertson Davies’ Deptford Trilogy.

At that moment, Magdalena came over, sensing Henri might need moral support.

“Gentlemen,” she said, “are you setting up for some kind of high-end garage sale?”

“I was stepping away to the facilities,” Henri said quickly, “and thought I saw some of Arabella’s silverware in this guy’s bag. I doubled back and confronted him, and he made up some cockamamie story about shopping at the Bible Store! And then I emptied out the bag, and it looks like a blend

between Holt Renfrew and the Antique Roadshow! Given the stories of all the thefts in town, I think we're all going to walk across the street to the cop shop."

"Just give me a chance to explain, to shed a bit of light on my motivations," Rick said this quietly, aware they were in a very public place. "I've lived in town a long time. I know who is doing well, and on the other hand, I know who needs help. Ever since The Changes, and all the economic troubles that have ensued, even more people need a helping hand. I just happen to know how to get past a security alarm. I take only good stuff that is portable, and I leave quietly without a trace. Every week I slide into the city with the spoils and visit a few guys I know who have connections to pawnshops in places like Buffalo and Pittsburgh. I roll back into town with a wad of bills. I live pretty darn simply, so most of the revenue goes into an anonymous cash donation to the food bank, or a hundred bucks in an envelope under the door to families I know who need a hand." Rick looked at them defiantly. "And I want you to know I sleep well at night. The folks I take stuff from have way more than they will ever need. The folks I help often live in the same neighbourhood. Steal from the rich, give to the poor. I loved reading Robin Hood when I was a kid."

"But it's against the law, man, and the lady you pilfered from has been traumatized more than once," Henri said. "I think we need to go see the fuzz."

"Henri, perhaps there's a middle-way solution," Magdalena said solemnly. "Rick, let's say we get this silverware back to our friend Arabella, perhaps even without her direct knowledge. We'll take the other goods to the station as found objects, and they'll make their way back to their rightful owners. We suggest to you in the strongest terms that the break-and-enters have to stop immediately, and that you consider volunteering with the service clubs to solicit donations to the food bank. What do you think of this solution?"

"It sounds fair all 'round, but I want you to know that my intentions were always honourable," Rick said, his face taking on a pious sheen.

"I swear, if I ever see you around Arabella's house I will thrash you within an inch of your life!" Henri spit, wagging his finger menacingly under Rick's nose.

The threat hardly registered as Rick lightly stepped away to the street exit, leaving the pilfered goods and his trademark duffel bag without so much as a backward glance. He knew Magdalena's compromise solution had been a true blessing, and he resolved to take himself away for a few weeks in Sauble Beach to let the air clear and chart a new course.

Magdalena and Henri walked back to their table with Mina, who had been

joined by Amy in their absence. They gave a whispered account of what had just transpired, punctuated with copious questioning by the inquisitive Amy.

"I have observed Rick many times on my daily walks. He would often be on Cross Street and would almost always have his duffel bag. I suppose I could have unraveled the puzzle before now," Mina said, smiling ruefully.

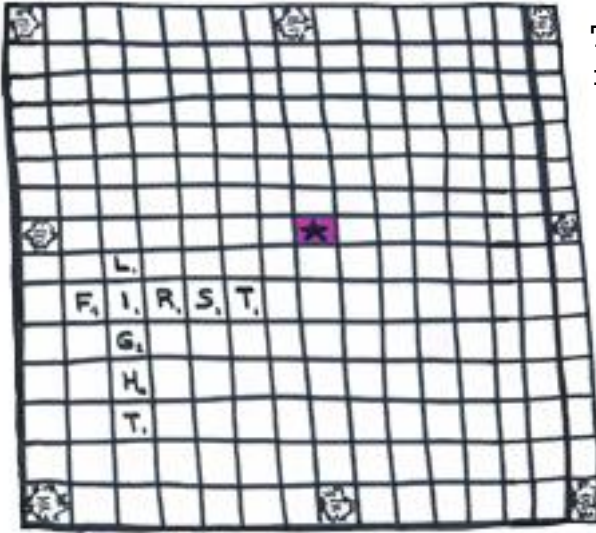
"Why would someone break the law so they could help poor folks?" Amy asked in a slow and ponderous manner.

"I think most things in life come down to a person's level of consciousness," Magdalena offered. "This is affectionately known as LOC, as taught by David Hawkins, a very wise fellow and spiritual master. Hawkins puts all emotions and mindsets on a consciousness scale, which he measures with a technique called applied kinesiology." Magdalena had read just about everything written by Hawkins, the leprechaun sage of Sedona, Arizona.

"Hawkins would say Rick's actions were controlled by his ego, which is fixed largely in some emotional zone," Mina said. She had been the one to pass along Hawkins' work to Magdalena. "The lower zones are characterized by negative emotions: hate, envy and fear. The higher zones are exemplified by courage, love and acceptance, all positive emotions. We hover around some level, plus or minus. So let's say Rick was focused on social equity. He then figures out a way to smooth out disparities to some degree, and then it becomes habitual. If he did extensive spiritual work he might raise himself up to see the error of his ways. But this might take quite a bit of work and quite a bit of time. So Henri comes along and upsets the apple cart, and Maggie comes in with a graceful solution. And with a bit of reflection, his LOC could rise up a bit, and he can still help the food bank."

During this explanation, Henri had grown very quiet and looked deeply at the translucent Mina. Amy also felt a strong connection to her older friend, and felt a strong energetic movement across all her senses. She looked at Henri, who flickered a bit and then glowed with the most beautiful light she had ever seen. And in turn, Magdalena looked at Amy, and saw the same suffused peace emanating from her face. All four sat quietly at their table, looking at one another and basking in their communal light. A dog trotted down the sidewalk and turned his head toward the patio table, attracted by the stillness and its inherent power.

At a Loss for Words



The following day, the calendar had rolled into September, even though Labour Day was yet to come. Families with school-aged children were attempting an early start on settling into routines, but most folks wanted to hang on to the last bit of Summer. The Scrabble Club had its usual weekly gathering at the Carnegie Gallery on Tuesday evenings, but had shifted this week to a Thursday as it was Open Night, when members would invite guests to attend in the hopes they might

become regular members. This annual event had been implemented for the past couple of years, after a slip in regular attendance rates.

Kurt's wife, Amanda, had prevailed upon him to bring his newfound friends out to Open Night. She had continued to notice the difference in Kurt since he had taken up his meditation practice, and was delighted at how much more available he was for herself and for Katie. He would sit with a cup of tea and keenly listen to the details of her day, her aspirations and her fears. She very much hoped this would continue and that some of Kurt's friends would join the club, bringing their energy to the weekly wordsmithing.

With all of the entertainment and activities going on now in town, the Gallery's main floor was designated for these more special events. The Scrabble folks plied their craft in the renovated basement space, and on this night had set up twelve tables in anticipation of a good turnout.

Kurt came in with Arabella and Henri, and Barbara and Patricia arrived together a moment later. Magdalena had passed on her regrets just before the supper hour: a rush job for a graphics design firm had bubbled up suddenly. As Kurt looked around the room, nodding to people he vaguely recognized, he noticed that Mina was curiously absent.

The club director, an affable older gentleman, welcomed the ten guests and asked who had considerable experience playing Scrabble. With an experienced eye and a nod towards his inner guide, he paired up guests and members in matches relative to their projected word-building prowess, and suggested that winners would play winners and losers would play losers in subsequent rounds.

A hush descended over the room, punctuated intermittently by quiet murmurings and a few suppressed chuckles. All went smoothly until the first turnover of partners. Henri had lost the initial round to a leathery-skinned gentleman who smiled easily, showing off a wide range of silver fillings. The director then guided him to a table where a middle-aged lady sat, pouting. Scrabble players are fiercely competitive and often are poor losers, and this woman had just lost a very close game to one of the guests. It might have been Henri's swagger, or his recently acquired glowing countenance, but something seriously set her off.

"Mr. Director, I will not play with this man," she announced unflinchingly.

The kindly director was soon there, at his best tut-tutting self. "Oh Jean," he soothed, "what seems to be the problem? You lost your game, Henri here also lost his game, and you'll now engage each other in an amicable way."

"You don't have to explain the rules of group play to me, Wilf. I just will not interact with this man. Why, look at him! He's glowing for pity's sake! He's got whatever it is in a bad way, almost as bad as Mina! I told her to stay away from Scrabble nights until she gets some colour back in her cheeks. Jiminy, it's like being around a ghost, or worse! And I'm wondering if this condition isn't contagious. Why, I walked down King Street this afternoon and I counted a dozen or more, just in a block or less. If we don't put our foot down and tell them to stay at home, behind closed doors, until they get better, well, who knows what might happen? We might all wind up looking like this freak!" Jean yelled, rudely pointing a finger in Henri's direction.

"Now hold on, Jean, this is one of our guests," Wilf sputtered.

Henri put his index finger to his lips. "Folks, stop the chatter, go quiet and listen to my heart," he requested, putting a hand to his chest. "I don't need to play any more Scrabble tonight, but I can't walk away from this teachable moment." He directed his gaze towards the woman, who was pulsing in shades of deep pink. "The people you see on the street, who frighten and repulse you, are your human brothers and sisters. For a variety of reasons, and through a multitude of possible preparations, they have become aware of their true essence." Henri paused for effect. "Their true essence is of the Divine, and as a symbol of that, they now emanate Light. This is a natural progression of our human race, the evolution into Homo Spiritus. It has been foretold over many centuries, and many millennia. So get used to it my friend, because on one point you are most correct. This process is highly 'contagious,' so be prepared, as one day soon it will happen to you." And with that, Henri dramatically marched out the door.

Kurt and Arabella had been within easy earshot, and followed Henri to the

sidewalk on Artists' Way. "Congratulations, old man, you really gave her something to think about," Kurt said. "Mina would be so proud of you." He thumped Henri on his expansive shoulders.



"Henri, I've admired and adored you over the years, but never as much as I do just now," Arabella said affectionately. "Superb presence of mind, and delivered so coolly!"

"You're too kind, dear friends," Henri said. "As I've learned over the last few months, the old adage 'The stars call the tune, but you decide how to dance' always rings true. The Fates put Jean and her temper tantrum in my path, and it was up to me to decide how to dance around her. I could have done a fiery tango right up her back, but a smile and a waltz to her side probably yielded better results." He embraced his two friends. The sound of traffic from King Street hushed, and for an indeterminate interval they all stepped out of time. As they turned to walk home, an observer from one of the balconies of the Grafton condos saw the trio of incandescent individuals float effortlessly into the night.

Go With the Flow

It was the Saturday morning of the long weekend, the last one of the Summer, the most bittersweet time of the year. Long weekends were a vestige of the past. A tremendous number of people now had no regular work due to the economic uncertainty, and the others seemed to be working all the time just to keep their heads above water. For both camps, an extended weekend had limited appeal, but traditions die hard. On this day Stephen Tucker enlisted a motley crew to assist him on a task he had been pecking away at for the better part of a year: the divining of the grid of energy lines, or ley lines, that ran through the valley town. Stephen had been perfecting the art of divination for some time, but needed help on his sojourns into the woods to carry equipment and record the resultant data.

On this morning he recruited Arabella, Mina and Magdalena, who arrived in a hovering and glowing assembly, whispering little jokes to each other as they walked. They waited on the western edge of the grocery parking lot by the slowly moving Spencer Creek. A few moments later a sleepy-eyed Amy jogged up to them in a Parkside T-shirt that had been cut away to display impressive triceps.

"Sorry for being late. I set my alarm a bit too snugly to the time of departure.

And just when I was ready to scoot, I felt a little pang of hunger. The idea of traipsing through the valley motivated me to stop and rustle up a granola bar, and here I am!”

“All right ladies, there are some bags to carry, a clipboard for jotting down data, and a GPS unit to read off our coordinate information,” Stephen said. “I suggest we follow the trace behind St. Joseph’s Estates and pick up the Coldwater Creek trail in Warren Park all the way out to the train station. From there it will be a short segment on the Rail Trail, just past Sulphur Springs Road. I’ve been steadily mapping most of the valley over the past twelve months but there’s a sweet piece between the Rail Trail and the old Griffin House we need to fill in. Lots of neat hemlock forest stands, and meadows succeeding back to forest. We’re going to have a great day, so let’s get rolling.” Stephen’s broad face beamed.

They walked purposefully, enjoying birdsong and cricket serenades. Around the hummocky hills east of the train station, Amy turned to Stephen. “What exactly are we going to be doing today?” she asked.

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask, Little Grasshopper,” Stephen said. “We are going to use my trusty old divining rod to take methodical measurements of Earth Energy. You folks will help me collect the relevant data, and then I will go home and plot it up on a detailed map. What comes out is a depiction of what are called ley lines.” He grinned.

“Ley lines,” Amy repeated slowly. Her mind raced off to a dozen related questions.

“Or energy grid lines, or synchronic path lines,” Stephen continued. “All the same concept, related to the hypothesis that there is a web of interconnected energy lines pulsating through the Earth. Akin to a network of streams, creeks and rivers, smaller ley lines flow into intermediate ley lines that feed into major flow ley lines. Just like mapping all the tributaries in a watershed, we can map all the ley lines in a particular portion of this beautiful Earth. Or think of it like body meridians in an energy medicine context, but here it’s on the body of the Earth Goddess, Gaia.”

“Cool. I get it. But why map it?” Amy asked.

Magdalena had been eavesdropping and couldn’t resist the temptation to jump in. “There’s a belief system that the ley lines, particularly the major ones, are amazing sources of healing power,” she explained. “So if we know where they are, we can sit or lie there on the Earth in that flow and receive great healing. The Ancients used to observe that animals would go to certain spots in the forest to birth their young or to die. So the four-leggeds are aware

of something special going on.”

“Stephen, tell Amy about that dreamy guy from Italy,” Arabella chimed in.

“Ah yes, Signor Falco. He was a tremendously gifted psychic, artist and visionary out of the Torino region. He birthed a wonderful ecovillage movement called Damanhur. But I digress. When he was a young man, Falco walked all over the Earth, ‘seeing’ ley line activity with his mental vision. He mapped it, and found that a number of major synchronic lines intersected just north of his hometown. This is where he sited Damanhur, and their Temples of Humankind are alone worth the trip to Italy. He believes that Gaia is connected to the greater cosmos, just like we are as individuals. Helpful insights and healing enter from above and flow through the lines, so if you are near or on top of a major line, great wisdom and high levels of spiritual evolution can be experienced. His mapping of North America is pretty broad-brushed, but it has been my contention over the years that we have a major ley line running through the valley in which we stand. That’s what our work today will shed some light on. Alright, here’s where we plunge in.”

For the next several hours, Stephen walked intuitively through the woods with his divining rod held lightly out in front of him. When the rod bent, he would call out the degree of movement to Arabella the note taker, then Amy would call out the GPS coordinates. Mina and Magdalena would hover about, tuning into the energy with their mind’s eye. When they felt something significant, or if they thought something might have been missed, they would coo out a gentle suggestion to Stephen, who was in his element and working up a tremendous sweat.

Arabella brought up the delicate issue of the Scrabble Club with Mina.

“Yes, I have stepped away from the Club voluntarily, for a short while,” Mina said. “I do not enjoy being hounded or harassed. This notion of becoming a body of Light has been with us for millennia, and has expressed itself many times. So it has happened to me, and has happened to a number of my dear friends. We are children of the Divine, made in his or her image. When we get our thoughts in order and iron out the errors in our thinking, we start to look like the Divine. Pure Light! The others will eventually see us as benign, and appreciate the Light we bring to the Earth. I think we need this even more in these challenging times.”

“Ladies, not to interrupt, but I feel we have stumbled onto a major line,” Stephen declared excitedly. “Yes, indeed!” Before Magdalena and Mina could nod their assent, Stephen and his divining rod both became the colour of cascading sunlight on a glorious late Summer afternoon.

Someone's Watching Over You



The next day offered up a lazy Sunday afternoon with considerable warmth and a chance of rain. It still seemed very much like Summer, but the rapid shortening of the evenings convinced most that a change of season was imminent. Stephen had arranged another grouping of people to get together and go out in nature, not for ley line divination, but for a walking meditation to The Peak, one of the town's most special and sacred spots. He asked his old friend Gabriel, who in turn encouraged Kurt to come along. Kurt was at loose ends as his wife and daughter had taken the train to Kingston to spend the holiday weekend with a passel of cousins that Kurt could either take or leave, so he was happy for the company. Stephen also asked Barbara to join them. She was getting together with Patricia, so they both jumped in with considerable enthusiasm.

The most centralized meeting point was outside Gabriel's house on Park Street. The group walked over to Witherspoon Park and sat on benches that afforded very nice views of the Peak. Kurt had always loved Witherspoon Park, thinking of it as a throwback to the 1950s, where kids would come out of their homes after a quickly eaten supper and play all manner of games until the darkening shadows summoned them home for well-earned slumber. Kids played there throughout the day, and often groups of children with a caregiver would come to the park to swing or play on the slides. More home-based childcare businesses were being set up and the park offered a nice

locale for some outdoor play activity.

“Okay folks, I’m sure you know where we’re off to today, that beautiful rock ledge overlooking this great town of ours,” Stephen said, pointing to the Peak. “This will be a walking meditation, so we will walk in silence and keep our minds focused on the experience in a full and complete way. Take the time to observe the little things in nature: the small caterpillar curling under a leaf, dew drops on a flower blossom, mushrooms growing out of a decaying log. The forest will be alive with the essence that flows through us. This will be a time for connection and an opportunity for awe.”

“Must we maintain silence?” Kurt asked.

“Highly recommended, Kurt, old boy,” Stephen said, “but it’s not necessary to be rigid about things. Let’s say our meandering will be largely in silence, punctuated by times when Spirit moves us to speak. A bit like a Quakers’ meeting, no?” He had sampled virtually every house of worship in the city.

They climbed up a series of switchbacks dotted with young trees and crossed over the active rail line. From there they scrambled up to the trail running above the rail line, then took the spur trail angling steeply up the Escarpment. Occasionally they stopped to allow their breath to return to their bodies, taking the opportunity to admire the increasingly panoramic views of the town below. They all had the glowing presence that had become more common over the last few weeks, save Patricia. At the top of the Escarpment edge they made their way slowly through a thick pine forest, treading a steady and sure trajectory towards the Peak.

In the quiet of the forest, where the needles underfoot yielded a soft carpet for their thoughtful walking, Barbara stopped abruptly and put up her right hand.

“Folks, pardon my interruption of your reverie, but I am moved to make an observation,” she said. “Just now, in the quiet of the forest, I felt a very strong presence floating along beside us.”

“What was it, Barbara?” Gabriel asked, genuinely curious.

“Difficult to say definitely, but in general terms, an angel or guide,” she replied. “Wispyly formed in a physical sense, but observable and strong. Friendly, happy to be among us.”

“Six months ago I would have rolled my eyes, but now I’m more open to these possibilities,” Kurt said thoughtfully. “Any ideas about what it was trying to do, or what it had to say?”

“What I got was that she was perhaps a spirit resident of this pine forest and when we entered with such open hearts and good intentions, she rushed over to greet us.”

“My wife has suggested I consider becoming a Wal-Mart greeter, as a way to get out of the house,” Gabriel said, placing his tongue firmly in his cheek.

Barbara ignored this. “She could be a member of a whole troupe of angels who loiter around the Peak, helping people in a number of mysterious ways,” she suggested. “Let’s walk on and see what we might see.”

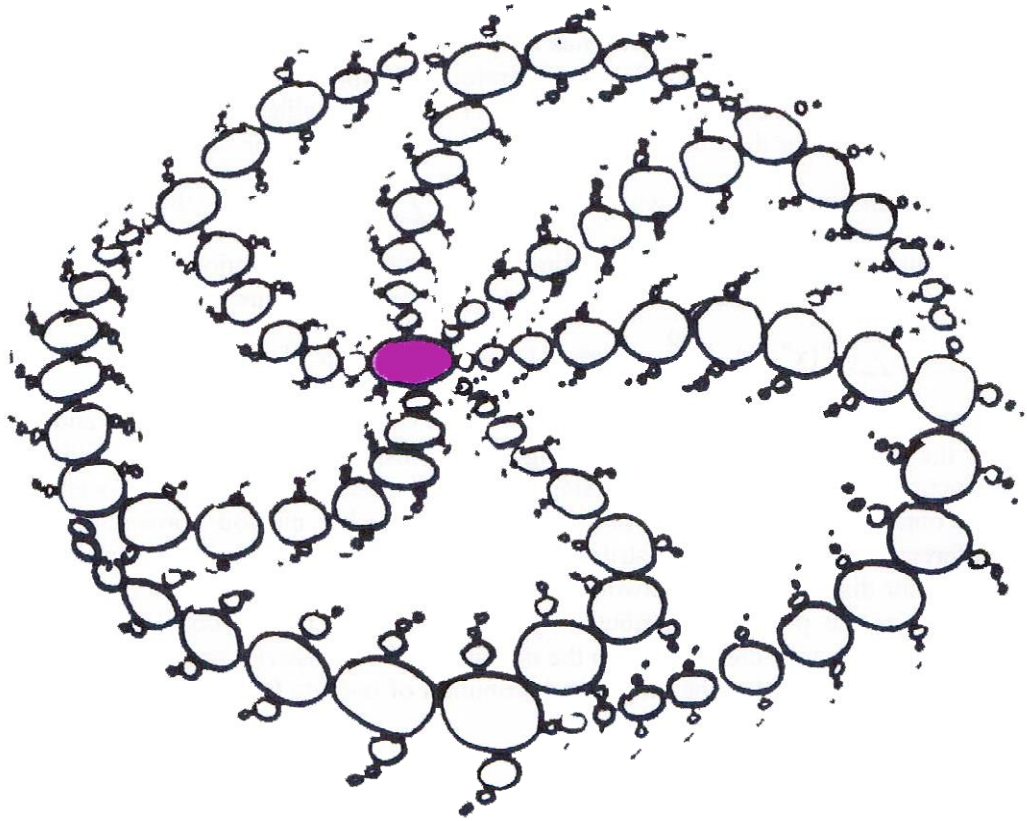
They traversed the last half-kilometre of the forest, made a curving turn to the left, and came out into the open sky that takes every visitor’s breath away. The entire town was laid out before them, with miniature houses and wee ribbons of roadways and tufts of trees.

“What do you experience here, Barbara, relative to what you felt back in the forest?” Gabriel asked expectantly.

“Well, I see all kinds of shimmering things hovering around us,” she reported. “They say we all have a number of Spirit guides floating around and beside us, helping out where they can with near-misses on the road and whispering ideas of the best things to say in ticklish situations. Fanciful perhaps, but the Divine enlists a lot of helpers to get us through a day. I believe these entities can stay in etheric form, or they have the capacity to materialize physically and help us out directly. There are so many stories of wonderful but slightly off-grid characters helping out in crucial situations and then disappearing in a poof! Remember Clarence the Angel in ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’, earning his wings? Or they materialize in an animal form and help us or guide us in a significant way. The methods and workings of the angelic realm are a mystery to us, but very present in most of our lives.”

At that point, three large red-tailed hawks flew directly overhead. They circled and swooped by the group, and then circled again. They floated over Patricia’s head and one by one ascended a hundred metres above the Peak. All members of the walking meditation group called out in unison, and all glowed with the same sweet Light.

All Together Now



It was very early morning on the last holiday of the Summer, so early that it was still fully night. Gabriel sat upright in bed, as if summoned by some internal bell. He knew in his heart that today would be a very special day. He knew where he had to go and that he needed to be direct and quick. Gabriel woke Mary, who seemed to anticipate his touch, and they made their way downstairs. In the dim light they could see Strider waiting by the door with his leash firmly clasped in his mouth. This would be the kind of day where all family members would need to be present.

The three of them walked together for a block or more, and saw a trio of people waiting expectantly at the corner of Market and Park. Henri was in the middle, with Magdalena and Arabella each holding one of his arms and one of Magdalena's cats. They grinned goofily, but wordlessly, and all continued eastward on Park Street. At the corner of Albert and Park they noticed Amy half-hiding behind a telephone pole. She joined in the entourage. Mina, along with Stephen and his wife, melded in from opposite sides of the road as Park straddled over Cross Street. Up to this point, Gabriel had been leading the convoy, but he slid back into the middle of the pack and Amy effortlessly took over. The events of the past few months had shown Gabriel that leadership

needs would take care of themselves and he could just go along with the flow.

At Park and York they came abreast of Kurt, who was uncharacteristically without his bicycle, yet inexplicably wearing his cycling helmet. He and his family joined the throng without fanfare. They collectively wound their way past the section of the Mac's Milk parking lot that had been converted into an urban farming transshipment facility.

The sky brightened slightly as they made their way down King Street East. Barbara and Patricia were waiting outside The Beer Store loading dock near East Street, and they joined the group moving eastward to the beautiful marshland of Cootes Paradise. Over the course of their journey, knots of people joined in here and there and the size of the group grew considerably. As they came up to the flat area by the Desjardins Canal, Henri looked behind him and was astonished at what he saw. Muslim graduate students from the Cotton Mill apartments walked alongside Orthodox Jewish families from homes off of Governors Road. Seniors from St. Joseph's Estates mingled with wee ones and their parents. The multitude cut across religious lines, age differences and socioeconomic conditions. Henri murmured to Arabella that he thought perhaps the entire town was out on this very special pre-morning. She whispered back that she had observed that absolutely all in tow were glowing with that special light they had come to know over the last little while. Henri did a double take when he spied Jean from the Scrabble Club a few rows back. She managed to blush a bright red through her newfound incandescence when Henri gave her a sly wink.

The thousands-strong multitude gently eased their way across the open space of the Eco-Park that laid north of the West Pond, and they all stopped short at the large expanse of reed grasses waving in front of them. The sky was the colour of translucent indigo marble, pregnant with possibility.

"What's that up ahead?" someone asked.

No response was given, and time seemed to stand still.

"I don't know, but I'll try to find out," Amy responded loudly. She ran forty steps to her left and mounted the metal stairway of an old observation platform. On her heels was Barbara, and they were up at the top of the structure in seconds flat.

"It looks like patterned artwork, comprised of lots of circles in some kind of spiral pattern. It's absolutely beautiful," Amy reported, awestruck.

"My friends, it's a crop circle, celestial art woven right into our beautiful marsh grasses," Barbara said in a reverential tone. "I've made a study of them

over the years, and this one looks like a smaller version of the Milk Hill Galaxy spiral that was formed in Wiltshire in the UK, in 2001. A stunning formation to be sure."

The assemblage of people methodically moving forward and stepping into the formed circles interrupted Barbara's announcement. Larger groups filled in the larger circles, mid-sized groups occupied the smaller circles, and individuals stood alone in the smallest nodes. The crowd moved silently, purposefully, and felt the inherent energy emanating from the speech-robbing formation. Once situated, they all turned their gaze eastward, where cresting over the horizon and the ambient vegetation were the first tendrils of sunlight on that Labour Day morning. Their faces were lit by this illumination, which melded with their internal light to create a collective glow of significant proportion.

Up on the viewing platform, Barbara put her arm around Amy. "What a blessing to be here, and at first light," Barbara whispered, her eyes sparkling at her young friend and protégé. Amy looked down at the assemblage, squinted her eyes, then shook her head.

"Barbara, look down," she said, "it appears your remote viewing future vision is 20/20, or better!" As the Sun inched imperceptibly higher, individuals in the formation below developed an energy filament connection to the others, in a pattern that rivaled the configuration that had been formed in the matrix of marsh grasses.

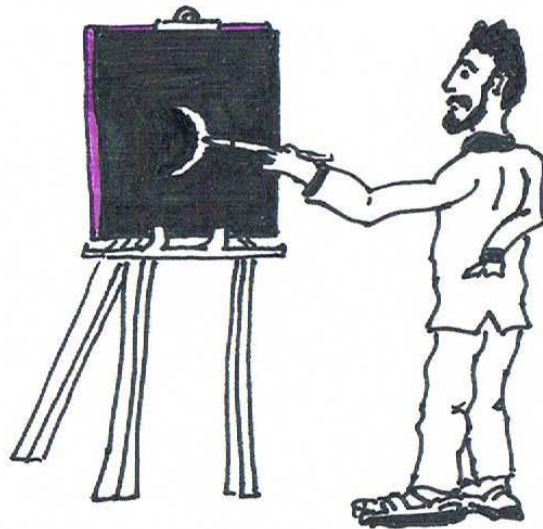
A large blue heron flew over the West Pond, looking for an early breakfast. A mockingbird saucily trilled out a half dozen calls from a willow tree on the periphery of the assemblage. A young deer drank gently from the water's edge, the Sun lighting its auburn fur. It was a day like most others, but something both subtle and profound had changed for all.

Postlude

The shift happened at precisely the same point in time in other towns and cities across the country and around the globe. From now on, all needs would be met with grace and equity, and the old systems and ways would disappear without a trace. Illusions lost, Paradise restored.

As above, so below.

In the Penumbra of the Crescent Venus



Written and illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

for Rashné, Jasmine, Cyrus, Rocky and Buddy

Definitions:

Penumbra: 1) a fringe region of half shadow resulting from the partial obstruction of light by an opaque object; 2) the point or area in which light and shade blend (*used for painting terminology*) [*taken from the World English Dictionary*]

Venus: 1) second planet from the Sun, which displays phases like those of the Moon; 2) Roman goddess of love and beauty.

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List of characters (in order of appearance)

Alphonse Neumann is a portrait painter, much better known in the galleries of Hazelton Lanes than in the small town where he resides and keeps a low profile. The term bachelor is an old-fashioned moniker, but would rest easily on the shoulders of this gentle and introspective artist. His frequent reveries give him plenty of ideas on what he might change in his life, but deep down he subtly feels that change may not necessarily be for the good.

Magdalena McDermott breathes life into everything she touches, and is the quintessential old soul in a young-looking, twenty-something body. Bikram yoga and long-distance running, along with collage art and web graphics, fill her days perhaps a bit too fully. Her romantic life is curiously quiet, but an independent spirit and a too-firm grip for initial handshakes may be reasonable explanations for this current state of affairs.

Norm Tryon reminds a casual observer of one of those garage sale candleholders that just might clean up nicely with sufficient quantities of pewter cleaner. Prairie-born, he is well marinated in the teachings of Kant and Schopenhauer. He sits on street corners and wears once-prime shirts with considerably frayed collars. He has the gift of the gab, with a dark wit, and it just seems plausible that he might soon emerge from the cocoon he has spun from the torments of his mind.

Tomasina Skye is a woman of indeterminate age, whose friends can legitimately claim she looks a bit younger each time they cross her path. She has lived in The Town for only a short time, but has travelled sufficiently to fully appreciate its charms. She lives alone, in an old converted brewery, and stays open to the possibility of change in every dimension of her life.

Stephen Tucker is a family man who puts first things first. He runs a building restoration business that takes on neglected homes and abandoned factories and breathes new life into them. Stephen is involved in making his community a better place to be, but sometimes overlooks things that are directly below his feet.

Patricia Amiel lives in a ramshackle stone house near the edge of town, with sufficient property to keep a number of beehives. Life as a teacher has suited her well, although looming retirement has motivated her to explore how to keep her dance card full. Patricia's real work is connecting to Gaia, hearing

the Earth's songs and poems, and helping others to enjoy these beautiful gifts.

Arabella Duke is quick to smile, and is arguably the most connected of the town's citizenry. Expansive in her spirit and her good humour, there isn't a volunteer activity around that has not felt her sure touch. Arabella comes from old money and she has stayed single after a mists-of-time failed first marriage. She is able to see the big view on things, and can hold all solitudes with equal parts of grace and mirth.

Henri LaMontagne is a somewhat abrasive neighbour, with a flat stomach and equally chiseled chin. He is the most competitive member of a lackluster slow-pitch team, and writes many letters to the editor in a combative but common sense tone. Henri has many wounds that have been puttied over during the course of life, but his feet of clay seem ripe for exposure and some degree of erosion.

Mina Patel spends her days in a quiet way, the sounds of CBC One interlacing with the clatter emanating from the tearoom kitchen across the alley from her small flat. Still showing evidence of the beauty that would slow traffic in earlier days, she takes long walks around the Driving Park in all manner of weather, and never fully admits how much she misses her dear husband. Mina embodies the Now, and projects Love to all and sundry who cross her path, but it is clear she has no interest in political correctness nor the preservation of sacred cows.

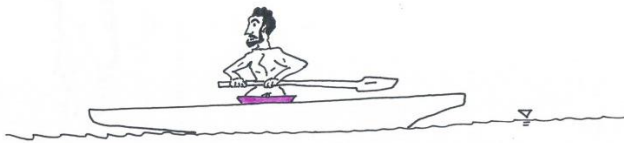
Barbara Oreille does not own a car, grows winter greens in a cold frame greenhouse, and loves to stand by Spencer Creek to hear the messages emanating from its currents. Barbara is a healer by vocation, but not in the pharmaceutical or surgical sense. She works wonders by looking people deep into their eyes to see their true essence, and lays her hands on sore joints and creaky muscles to allow the Light to enter.

Gabriel Dunlop is a man of substance, conservative in temperament, but liberal in his worldview. Salt of the earth, dedicated community builder and one who has a defined fondness for homemade pies. Married to the same woman for 37 years, affluent in an understated way and with the frugal tendencies of a person with Depression-era parents. At the end of a very solid professional career, he intermittently takes stock on what he might do next, beyond learning to play the harmonica and dabbling in *tai chi*.

Three Years From Present Time

Part I: Impending Change

Red Sky at Night, Sailors' Delight



There was a lot of work to do, and he would rise early and get at things on a regular basis. The best part of the day was early morning, in his view, which was consistent with his Pop's motto of 'the day is half over by 8 AM'. Luckily, he lived alone, so a 5:00 AM start on cleaning brushes or stretching canvasses would not upset a late-sleeping spouse. But the neighbors on both sides in this postwar suburb were not exactly early-rising compatriots, so he had evolved to carry out his first few hours on tasks in his basement studio. He would put opera on relatively low, do some tasks, and intersperse these with swipes at the newspaper's Sudoku puzzle. At least that came in early, delivered by an

East Indian gentleman who jogged from house to house and kept his car idling at mid-block. He had given up on the news part of the Spectator, as it seemed to be nothing but glum stories from around the globe. Lots of climate-related material, plus bits and pieces of economic unrest from here and there. So Sudoku it was, plus a quick read of the back page of the sports section that had interesting details of Premier League matchups and WNBA contests. Why these held his interest he wasn't entirely sure, but it connected him to a world outside his art and his studio and his front and backyard gardens.

Alphonse was in the sweet spot of his middle years, which had given him good health and the seasoned perspective not to take this for granted. He had gone back to Europe for a fine arts degree, to Hamburg, where he had been born. He had returned afterwards to live with his parents for just a little while, until he found his sea legs and establish some regular clients for commissioned portraits and landscapes. But his parents fell in rapid succession, at too early an age. So the modest house became his to manage, with no solid prospects of a young lady to share it with. So he painted, and he kept the house tidy in the Germanic fashion, and he lovingly tended his flower and vegetable gardens. He sold his art through an agent, picked up on demand by Purolator at his side door. And he lived simply, very simply as a bachelor and as a man of the Earth. He belonged to no organizations or clubs, and would take long walks into the nature preserve just east of his subdivision.

"Alphonse, it's Oma." His grandmother, his Mom's mom, called most nights just after the supper hour. She lived in an apartment in East York, and had been widowed around the same time as losing her only daughter.

"Oma, how was your day?" There were days when this was his only real human contact, and he often wondered what would happen when she departed. "Oh, pretty much the same, y'know? I got out and played some bridge and had tea with a friend afterwards."

"Bridge, you're going to have to teach me the rules again this Christmas. They say it's great for the memory, keeping track of all the cards played and the suits and all..."

"I will be happy to do that, Alphy, but it's a game for older folks. You're still a young man. Perhaps take some time away from the painting and the daydreaming, and find a nice girl. Someone solid, physically and mentally. Maybe even a bit younger than you, and you might find yourself with some little ones before it's too late!"

He rang off from this conversation in a bit of a tizzy. Oma hadn't brought up marriage plans in a while, and it was something he didn't really want to

entertain. His life was full, he lived simply but was still very occupied. The idea of a spouse and children, along with more responsibilities and pressures, was not appealing. Perhaps he was a family man in an alternate universe, but not in this one if he had his way.

His other real love was to take his kayak down to the Canal, carrying it over his head the few blocks to the lay-in facility by the new Gateway conservation area. He would softly paddle along the banks of the historic man-made waterway, looking out for interesting birdlife and observing the umber and mauve streaks in the western sky as he paddled back to his starting point. Since he rose so early, he also retired early after some yoga stretches and a cup of chamomile tea. He would lay in *shivasana* at the end, and do a formal day review each evening. This was something he had learned from an old book by Vera Alder, where the ancients recommended mental replaying of the past day right before going off to sleep. For things that had gone well, a reinforcement of what had led to that and a re-visualization to cement this for the future. For things that had not gone as well, a reflection of why this had occurred and a revisioning of the situation turning out in a more positive way. Just like revisionist history, he would think to himself, but it seemed to have the capacity to sandpaper down the rough edges of life and mentally correct patterns and processes that needed improvement.

Then with images of his recent kayak sojourn taking him deeper into the zone of dreams and deep sleep, the evening birdsong and ambient neighbourhood sounds diminished in a predictable and welcome way.

One Step At A Time



Magdalena stepped out onto her back stoop and slowly took in the panorama of flowering trees that splayed across her neighbors' yards and gently undulated down the Escarpment slope. Forsythia in a glowing yellow, magnolias hanging in due to some recently cooler weather, crabapple blossoms arranging themselves in pink haloes of light and early lilacs in

Babylonesque hanging arrangements. She had often wondered if the town might be a modern representation of Eden, and days like this only confirmed her quietly held views. She picked up her yoga mat and slowly walked down the steps and out onto the street. Today she was in plenty of time, and the walk to the old Hydro building on Park Street was going to be more mobile meditation than functional perambulation. Footstep on the ground, reflection of the joy and fun in her movement, footstep on the ground, smiling at a cat hiding under a hedge. This continued effortlessly, peacefully, as the blocks rolled by. The outward journey progressed, while the inward focus was on Love. This awareness of what she was, or what she was a part of, had come to her at an early age and had served her well in the undulating rhythms of life.

Magdalena's destination this afternoon had been coaxed into new life a few years back by the restoration company led by Stephen Tucker. What used to be a vehicle and equipment maintenance depot was now a restaurant serving locally grown food with a side terrace that had jaw-dropping views of the Dundas Peak, and an adjoining wellness center that specialized in alternative therapies and a range of body/consciousness modalities. And in the evenings, a large fraction of the space morphed into a bistro/club that neighbors could walk to for a drink or dessert and some dancing to local bands.

Magdalena would soon be dropping her yoga mat on to a parquet floor, and spending an hour lying in *shivasana*. The so-called corpse pose, a favourite of all, was the perfect platform for a yoganidra session. Magdalena did yoganidra for a minimal drop-in fee two or three times week at the new center. She would pop in a yoganidra CD, and the assembled group would lie still for the hour and mentally direct their attention inward according to the ancient algorithm described by the speaker on the disc. Often referred to as yogic sleep, the conscious mental movement through the body and the developed awareness of the stillness and silence within the heart chakra typically led to some profound experiences within the members of the group.

"My goodness, I can hardly peel myself off the mat." A wispy lady in her early 60s, in a smart magenta sweatsuit, looked up giraffe-like while her body continued to lay flat.

"Ah, if only I could sleep like this at night, think of what I could get accomplished in the day!" A middle-aged man with a robust girth smiled broadly.

"Ernie, you're not supposed to fall asleep, you're supposed to stay mentally awake and follow through all the steps to get the full effect." A lady who looked a lot like Ernie gave him a playful kick to his right calf.

"Patsy, I know, I know, I'm trying really hard, but a few minutes in and I am gone... like beyond Pluto! But I'm telling you, my subconscious must be following along because when I come out I feel as if I have been sleeping for twelve hours or more."

Magdalena chimed in diplomatically. "There may be increased payback to following along on each step, but it is clear your strategy yields great benefits, Ernie. I find that I also zone out for certain periods, but it's more of an altered state than sleep *per se*. One trick to wring the most out of the experience is to repeat mentally each sentence or phrase that you hear, and that keeps you mentally alert. The feeling of deep stillness and silence is palpable, no matter how you get there."

An older gentleman sat on his mat, sipping from his water bottle and looking reflectively at Magdalena. "Young lady, we all owe you a great debt. By coming here on a regular basis, I have made some great strides over the last few months. As the tape says, I have set the intention to return to the great stillness and silence within me, and it has really spilled over into many facets of my life."

"Do you want to share any wisdom gleaned from yoganidra?" Magdalena flashed him a toothy, winsome smile.

"To cut to the chase, the deep stillness and silence that we experience from the heart center is the first layer of the Kingdom within." He stopped for half a second, but Ernie jumped in to fill the void.

"The Kingdom? What do you mean by that, pal?"

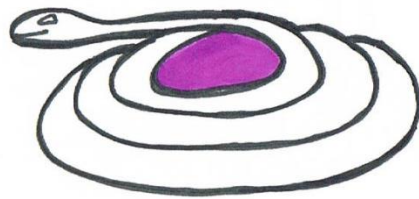
"The Kingdom within is All That Is, God, the Divine, Allah, Yahweh, The Big Guy, The Big Gal, Universal Life Force Energy, The Void, Big Mind, Big Heart or a million other labels we have put on that which we really are, what we all really are, where we came from and where we will all ultimately end up." All of this was said at whipsaw speed, finished with a disarming grin and up-arching of the eyebrows.

"Hey, like I have a real problem with the G-word man, but I am definitely into Universal Life Force Energy. Non-threatening you know, and never used in any Sunday school class. Cosmic, even." Ernie smiled lopsidedly.

"Whatever you want to call it, this yoganidra meditation is a sure-fire way to get in touch with that which is within us and with that which connects all of us, so thank you Magdalena." The elderly gent was already folding up his mat, as if after having touched the Kingdom within he wanted to get home and do some gardening.

Magdalena strolled home in an even more present way than she had come. The birdsong serenaded her, with one particular sweet call following her the length of Park Street. Her thoughts turned to dinner, where she would be hosting a number of friends and neighbours for some simple food and great conversation. A few years ago, they had all realized that many of them were cooking for one, and it was getting tedious and lonely. So they took the potluck concept and put it in a framework, where hosting duties were shared and a loose bit of planning was carried out so that cost and preparation time were spread across the group. So now they came together on an every-other-day basis, to share in a collective dining format. Much better food was being enjoyed, and friendships were being struck or strengthened. But some things don't change, as the hostess of even a potluck knows, that the floor still needs to be swept and the powder room freshened. Since this was her night, she skipped up the stairs to mop her kitchen floor and set out some dishes.

The Coiled Serpent Rises



He might just go off the deep end if he spent another afternoon on the porch of the halfway house on Park Street. It was a motley crew of folks who lived there, and they were pleasant enough in small bursts of time. But there was too much time, and not enough to do, and he knew he would have to take matters into his own hands.

Norm was a tall man and a big man, with bear-like hands and a grizzled jaw. He had been a philosophy professor once upon a time, but too many hours at work had caused his marriage to fail and he started to take his comfort in liquid form. That was the beginning of the end. He lost his job and his house, and eventually landed in this group home. They were all given a modest allowance for basic amenities, and he had started to supplement this a bit by sitting outside one of the banks and discreetly asking passersby for loose change in a measured undertone infused with equal parts of mirth and malice. The Town was not a natural environment for successful panhandling, but he nabbed a few loonies an hour to somewhat make it worth the effort and the mild embarrassment.

But today he felt the overpowering urge to walk. No real purpose, no distinct

agenda, just to walk. A kind lady three doors down had two somewhat sluggish German Shepherds, and they had been volunteered to anyone at the group home who needed some informal canine therapy. So Norm rounded up one of his solid walking sticks and went over and got the two dogs leashed. They started out a bit out of rhythm, but once they had cleared King Street and headed towards the Yellow Diamond Trail behind the abandoned Hatt Street car wash, they settled into an easy resonance of soft footfalls.

Norm loved dogs, and he loved nature. When they crossed over the bridge he stopped on the other side to allow him and his two friends to see the rushing water and soak up the music emanating from its burbling depths. Norm walked westward on the trail very slowly, stopping at most major trees and enjoying the full spectrum of sights and sounds. There was life buzzing everywhere, in the undergrass and in the trees and in the wondrous sky overhead. Now he knew why he needed to get away, if only for a little bit of time. This immersion into nature, less than ten minutes from his home, washed layer upon layer of frustration from his inner being. The two dogs were witnesses to this transformation, or perhaps they were much more. They padded along, waiting patiently, nudging and healing their newfound friend. Any dog lover knows how they can penetrate one's soul, and these two elders knew their craft as teachers and healers of the human psyche.

They climbed slowly up a grade and crossed Creighton with a wide break in traffic. They all slumped down near a shady bench in the Lions' Homes area, and took a short nap that cleared their minds and calmed their heart rates. After a while there was an unholy row emanating from a nearby tulip tree. A male and female cardinal were dive-bombing a robust blue jay, with copious fluttering of wings and near-nips from the three beaks. Things would settle down for a short while, and then pick up again with even greater intensity. Perhaps some threat to a nest, but eventually it was resolved and the jay flew away, with the remaining cardinals communicating with each other in a series of terse sound snippets.

Norm and the shepherds strolled further westward, into that part of the Yellow Diamond Trail that most closely resembles deeper recesses of the Dundas Valley. Through breaks in the trees Norm could spy the unassuming Christian Science Society building on Mill Street, and every so often he would be rewarded with a breathtaking image of the majestic Dundas Peak. The creek kept rolling by, and in its energy Norm could see images that were beyond the physical world. Some might call them Little People, or faeries or gnomes, but Norm liked to think of them as nature spirits. Some of these were coy and would scuttle to hide when they felt Norm's gaze, others would linger and give him a smile and would send a loving thought his way. On this particular day, in the deepest part of the woods, time seemed to stand still. A sweeping pattern of nature spirits encircled Norm and he felt something give way deep

inside. For just a moment or two he ceased to worry, he dropped his resentments, and he didn't associate to any degree with The Story of Norm. And in that time he saw things before him as connected-- the water, the trees, the birds, the dogs, even the wind and the birdsong. He felt strongly that some wonderful and transforming alchemy had been performed right there in the middle of a Spring afternoon. And he knew he would never be quite the same.

So as he walked back home, on a long loop down Melville Street to admire the handsome homes, he reflected on what had just happened. For sure, his life was pretty much the same. He was still Norm Tryon, going home to a dinner of corned beef and boiled cabbage, and some petty arguments over the distribution of ice for the beverages. But he himself had changed in a distinct and deep way, and he committed to himself that he would get things back on track in his life. He may still live in a halfway house, but by gum, he could start living life again in a very full way.

Laughing all the way



Alphonse had strolled into town to buy some ginko bilboa tablets from the health food store, along with his weekly purchase of wild-caught Pacific salmon and brown rice noodles. He had been working on a half-scale portrait of a Bay street financier for most of the morning. The chap was a decent looking fellow, but too busy to arrange for any kind of sitting, so his wife had assembled a few recent head shots and sent them to Alphonse along with his commission down-payment. He generally disliked working solely from photographs, as he felt he could not capture the essence of the person. But the commission fee was too generous, and he felt that he may need a new roof on his bungalow soon, so practical considerations usurped artistic preferences. But he still wasn't happy about it so he lingered at the bulletin board at the foot of the foyer stairs at the health food store and methodically looked at all the postings. Vitamin therapy...Reiki... crystal bowl healing...a spaghetti dinner at the United Church...a petition to bring back the long-form census...none of this had significant direct appeal to Alphonse to intrigue him sufficiently to make note of it. Laughter yoga...wait a minute, now that sounded interesting.

He had done a bit of moksha yoga a while back when it was the craze, but had tired of the heat and had gone on to other pursuits. But laughter and yoga, hmm, that might have promise. He hadn't had a good belly laugh in a dog's age, and it might allow for the meeting of some interesting people. Not necessarily romantically-oriented, although his Oma would be delighted if this were the case. And it was running today, at noon, which was 15 minutes from now at the old doctor's office behind the museum on Park Street. If he strolled circuitously, he would arrive just on time, which was preferable for a first visit and with some uncertainty in the social composition.

At or about the same time, Norm made another pitch for spare change from his bench beside the bank on the southeast corner of Sydenham and King. The result was unrewarding, but Norm hardly cared. Ever since his walking meditation alongside Spencer Creek, something had shifted in him in a profound way. He had not been as irritable as he normally might have been at breakfast, and he was just enjoying his day. As he reflected on this, his eye spotted a wrinkled poster on a nearby telephone pole, held in place by a modest swath of cellophane tape. Laughter yoga, at noon, on a date that he thought just might be today. So he pushed off the bench, gauged the time by the position of the sun, and figured he had just enough gap for a deliberate stroll over to, and up, Park Street.

The two men arrived at the old medical office at approximately the same time, nodding to each other in an offhand way and giving each other the slight impression that they were here for matters more serious than laughter yoga. Norm insisted that he hold the door for Alphonse, and they walked inside to encounter a young woman with her hands on her hips and a big smile on her countenance.

"Gentlemen, my name's Magdalena." Smile breaking into a semi-goofy grin, with the extension of a delicate but strong hand.

"Alphonse, how do you do, Miss?" European, Magdalena surmised.

"Er, Norm Tryon, and the pleasure is all mine." Needs some soap, but sweet in an off-hand way, Magdalena thought.

"So we're all here for laughter yoga, which I run once a week as a service to the community here in the old doctor's office behind the Museum. Lots of healing has gone on here over the years, and we'll continue this with what we are going to do today. I have not seen either of you chaps out before, so a quick primer before we plunge in. Laughter yoga comes to us from Mumbai, where a Dr. Kataria first assembled folks in a city park and did some stretching followed by the stimulation of group laughter. You know how great it feels to have a belly laugh? Well, these early adopters would lean back and

let it rip and ended up feeling great afterwards. Turns out the body doesn't know the difference between induced or real laughter, and all kinds of wonderful physical and emotional benefits come from laughing. It looks like we'll have a small group today, so by the end we'll feel pretty close to one another.

"What do we talk about with each other, to stimulate laughter?" Alphonse looked almost worried, and was starting to wonder why he hadn't gone straight home to his emerging portrait.

"Alphonse, you look like a pretty funny guy, and could probably unleash a string of veritable rib-ticklers, but you're off the hook on that count." Magdalena gave him a faux punch to his right bicep. "No, we will follow a couple of tried-and-true modalities that should get us pretty uproarious in a short time. So we'll stand an arm's length away from one another, and really make the attempt to look at each other deeply. And as we do this, we'll move our arms and swing our torsos around and really act as if we are fun-loving children... that's it Norm, that's fantastic. Come on Alphonse, we're all friends here, pretend you are four years old and are hanging out with some friends." Magdalena had the fleeting thought this might be one of those days where breaking the ice would be a challenge.

"Okay, so keep that up, and we'll take our index fingers and wag them at each other, but instead of scolding each other we'll just laugh". Plenty of exaggerated finger wagging erupted with boisterous laughter from Magdalena and Norm, along with a measured response from Alphonse. "Okay, now we're simmering, so let's take our hands behind our ears and think of ourselves as lions, who laugh instead of roar." The sights and sounds of this feline stage started to break down Alphonse's defences, and when Norm jumped up on a wooden desk lined with surgical instruments and roared while throwing his head way back, Alphonse became a convert to laughter yoga. He brayed at Magdalena, went up to Norm and stuck his tongue out and grunted uproariously, and then started to laugh in undulating waves. Magdalena was delighted by this transition, and started to do bunny hops while barking out staccato laughing noises. Norm was on his back on the desk, kicking his legs in an upside-down unicycle fashion and veritably snorting with laughter. Luckily, no one passed by on Albert Street, as Magdalena had left the door open.

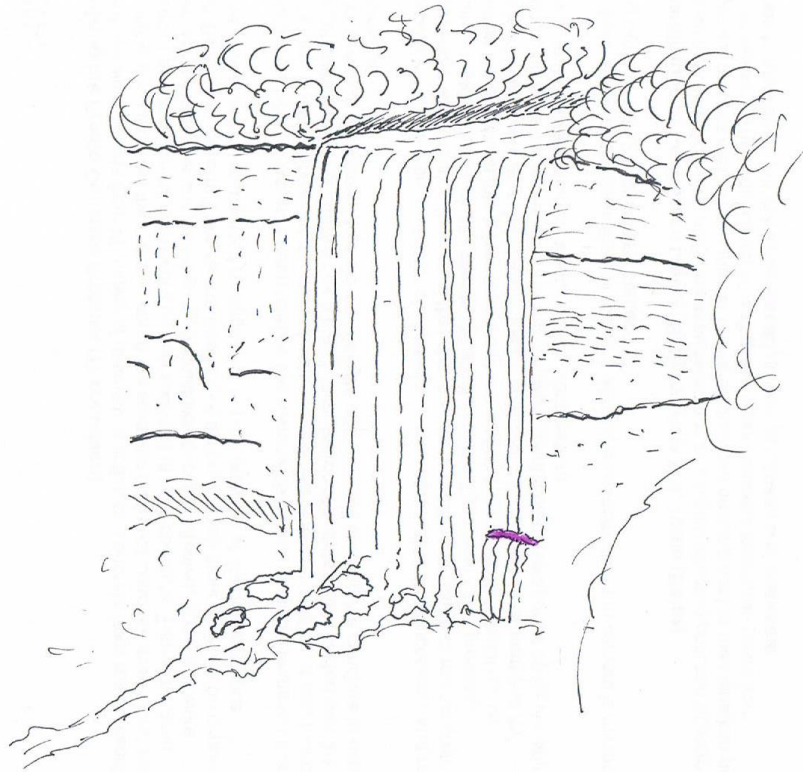
Twenty minutes later, the trio was fully played out and sat in a circle on an old braided rug. They all felt great, and looked at each other as old friends. "Well, what we lacked in numbers we certainly made up for in intensity." Magdalena smiled at the other two. "Any observations to share before we go on to the rest of our day?"

"I have been having some amazing things happen to me of late, and today was no exception. In the middle of all that, I felt part of me leave my body and hover about ten feet up in the air." Norm gestured theatrically. "I could look down and see myself rolling around on the floor, having a whale of a time. Reminded me of Dannion Brinkley's account from one of my favorite old videos, *Life After Life*. But he was seeing this as part of a near-death experience, complete with life review and the actual feeling of all the impacts he had had on people through his actions. As for me, I knew I wasn't checking out, but I certainly wasn't in my body fully. And all through laughter....amazing!" He smiled broadly at Magdalena.

"Well, rising consciousness can cause a lot of things to happen, Norm, so keep your hat on! What about you Alphonse?"

"Well, I was reluctant at first, but something clicked in after a bit, and I have to say I really let go. Haven't had that much fun since, well, since I was a kid." He looked at Magdalena in a focused and pensive way. "I think I'll be coming back, and perhaps to anything else you organize along these lines. I realized, while I was howling with laughter, that I really need to get out more." And with one last hearty chuckle they spilled out to fully enjoy the resplendent afternoon.

H-Two-Oh



A few days rolled by, and it came to the point on the calendar where Magdalena had previously arranged a hike with one of her new-found friends. Tomasina Skye was a lady of indeterminate age, who came intermittently to Magdalena's laughter yoga sessions and faithfully to her hatha yoga sessions in the art school loft. Tomasina had short salt-and-pepper hair, leathery skin, and a muscular body that she kept in shape with daily sets of chin-ups and planks on the carpet of the living room in a small house not far from Magdalena's. They enjoyed each other's company and Magdalena particularly enjoyed how Tomasina seemed to effortlessly balance her feminine and masculine polarities.

On a whim, Magdalena called Alphonse as she had collected his number after the laughter yoga session, to see if he might like to join them on the hike. Alphonse had been staring at the portrait of the Bay Street baron for over an hour, hoping for some kind of inspiration to emerge. The phone ringing was a welcome distraction, even moreso as it was someone different than the usual Oma. So he was very happy to slip on a light jacket and his old Expos cap and amble uptown. He took King Street to maximize interest, and he was surprised to see Norm sitting on a bench by the bank corner. Poor Norm was halfway into his can-you-spare-any-change spiel before he recognized Alphonse, and they both had a good laugh. Alphonse took the liberty to extend the hike

invitation to Norm, and before long they were at the base of the stairs leading to Magdalena's second floor unit.

Magdalena glided down the stairs and gave them both a warm hug. Laughter yoga can certainly break down barriers, but both men were surprised and pleased at the same time. "Norm, I didn't get your contact details, but it's no coincidence that Alphonse was able to cross paths and invite you along, and on such a beautiful day! I want to introduce you to my friend, Ms. Tomasina Skye."

Tomasina had descended the stairs and extended her hand for a firm handshake. She liked the cut of Alphonse's jib immediately, notwithstanding her minute observation that he needed a neck trim and a new baseball cap. But there was something about Norm she couldn't put her finger on. His haberdashery was ill-kempt, and his hair looked very shampoo-challenged, but there were elements of his demeanour and spirit that more than balanced all that out. He has the air of fallen nobility, she thought, before Magdalena's voice brought her out of her observational reveries.

"Alright, dear folks, I thought we might stroll up today into the Spencer Gorge. Suggest we take the middle tier trail right off the CN tracks, so that we have views upward to the ridge trail and downward to the ever-gorgeous Spencer Creek. We'll stop at the confluence of Spencer and Logie's Creek, that's the one that falls over the Escarpment as Tew's Falls, and stay there and hang out in the very special energy of that beautiful spot."

So they sauntered up Witherspoon, and wove their way over to King Street by the now-bustling Dundas District Lofts building. Just after the bridge they took a set of stairs up to the old train station area, with the stairs having been put in recently to serve the growing number of eco-tourists to the area. They crossed the tracks at the safe crossing zone, making small talk as they came up to the trailhead into the Gorge. As soon as they got under the tree canopy and spied the rushing creek below, the conversation stopped and the group went forward in a sort of quiet awe.

After twenty minutes of easy hiking, stepping around the odd wet spot or fallen tree, they took the down-sloping trail to the confluence of the two creeks and each nabbed a comfortable sitting rock within easy earshot of one another.

"Can you imagine a more beautiful place, within thirty minutes on foot from the downtown core?" Magdalena had missed her calling as a marketing manager for the local Chamber of Commerce.

"One of my neighbors comes in here virtually every day, and I can see why."

Tomasina's eyes flitted to the large talus slope rocks dotting the creek's landscape.

"I'm over on the other side of town, where the Spencer is calmer and much slower. I am in nature there almost every day, often in my kayak, but I have to make it a point to get up here more often." Alphonse nodded his head appreciatively.

"Well, I can safely say that this is my first time into this beautiful area, but it won't be my last." Norm flashed evidence of teeth that had regularly seen a dentist on a nine-month benefit plan frequency at one point in his life, but not recently. "You know, confluences of creeks and rivers are considered sacred places by many faiths and cultures. I had a student once, a Jain fellow, who told me his parents would always go to a confluence of rivers and pray special prayers." Norm's eyes lit up, either from the image of the sacred confluence or the association with a pleasant recollection from happier days.

"I'm certainly all over that kind of thing." There were a lot of things that intrigued Magdalena. "Where we pray and give thanks is important, and our thoughts and prayers affect the place and space that we offer them up in. Reminds me of the Japanese fellow, Masaru Emoto, who hypothesized that sending out loving thoughts and words actually changes the crystalline structure of water. Send out love, and the microscope shows water crystals arranging themselves in the most beautiful of configurations. Send out hate, and the images look all jangly and ragged."

"I think I saw that guy once on TV, and was kind of intrigued." Alphonse looked pensive. "But they went on to say that the scientific critics debunked him, calling his work pseudoscience."

"Well, all I can say is that sometimes science plays catch-up to reality. And reality is multidimensional and very complex." Magdalena's eyes sparkled. "They say we're made up of 70% water. So take a friend and tell them repeatedly they are amazing, that they are beautiful. Guess what, they start to act and feel differently. So in us and outside of us, I'm hanging onto Emoto's idea that our thoughts can change water and all other compounds, in a positive way."

"Amen, sister. In the short time I have known you I have found you to be both lovely and inspiring. And did any of us think to bring along a snack?" Norm arched one eyebrow skyward.

When the Moon's In the Sky



Norm had eaten a late lunch in the kitchen of the halfway house, which meant that he had the place largely to himself but that he had a sink full of dishes to load into the industrially-sized dishwasher. The rule of the house was to soak all dishes and the caboose end of the dining chain would take care of them. He didn't mind at all, as domestic chores gave him something constructive to do and often took his mind back to earlier days. He had lived in a nice suburban home in Etobicoke, had taken the bus every day to the Royal York subway station, and had thoroughly enjoyed the grass cutting and snow shovelling that accompanied home ownership. So small things such as dish cleaning took him back to questionably happier times.

He finished after a time, filled his water bottle and put on a wide-brimmed sombrero that he favoured on sunny days. Grabbing a carved walking stick with totem-like representations at even intervals along its length, he padded over to his favourite bench and gently eased into asking passersby for spare change. Norm often wondered why he kept doing this, as his needs were modest and he often gave away most of his proceeds to other poor souls in the halfway house who were hooked on cigarettes and coffee. His ponderings led to some partial conclusions. He definitely liked connecting with people, even in this very brief way. He enjoyed guessing who would actually cough up a quarter or a loonie, and had a complicated ranking system based on shoe cleanliness, ethnicity, age and the color coordination of the wardrobe. Norm knew what he was doing was borderline, particularly in this town of hidden affluence and old-school values. But that was part of the appeal, because Norm had definitely been part of the Establishment at one point in his life, and now that this had changed he did not mind ruffling a few feathers.

Today was a perfect day to be outside, and the afternoon sun spilled generously along the North side of King Street. Norm liked to sit on the

shadow side in the afternoon, with occasional forays over into the sun to get warmed up or approach someone he saw coming who was a very good bet for a micro-loan. That was the term he used for his activity, borrowed from the successful Grameen Bank in Dhaka. When he had told a stranger early on that he was a panhandler he got a disapproving frown, so now it was that he was in the micro-loan sector, which never failed to bring forward a vague smile and a comforting nod of the head.

This afternoon was also very busy in the core of the town, with platoons of bikes rushing by and forming loose peloton groupings to ascend and descend the Escarpment on Sydenham. This was all part of a concerted effort to make the community into a Bike Town, and by all measures it had been an unprecedented success. Many people now used bikes to run errands and to commute reasonable distances to work. School-kid cycling had exploded, with cycling school buses going down the street before and after school, with one parent riding up front and another parent riding in the back to corral any errant young riders. Seniors were cycling more, largely due to the steep gas prices but also to get some exercise and fresh air. And the serious cyclists, those with the spandex shorts and nobby shoes, seemed to be everywhere. Training in groups, having coffee together, going for jet-like solo rides, they had positively taken over the town. So after a few hours of watching pods of cyclists floating by and snagging a few good micro-loans, Norm spied two familiar figures walking down King Street on the sunny side. He toyed with the idea of looking away and perhaps evading their gaze, but he certainly underestimated Magdalena's sharp eyes.

"Yoo hoo, Norm, wait right there and we'll come over after the light has changed". Magdalena accompanied this with a big wave and a nudge to the ribs of Tomasina, her strolling partner.

Norm felt conflicted. He had really taken to Magdalena, but was wary of Tomasina. Something about her seemed off to his eye, and she reminded him more than a bit of his former wife.

"So how's it going, laughter yoga buddy?" This was accompanied with a sideways hug, as it appeared to Magdalena that Norm may have foregone a shower this morning.

"Fair to middling, more to middling." A wry smile accompanied this halfhearted muttering.

"What are you up to Norm?" Magdalena flashed all of her brilliant teeth on this utterance.

“Well, I’m outside a bank, and doing some research into the micro-loan industry.” Norm hadn’t lost his professorial nonchalance completely.

“Micro-loans, I’ve heard of that somewhere.” Tomasina looked puzzled, and appeared to be poised to ask follow-up questions. Magdalena knew what was going on, and steered the conversation to other topics. “Norm, we are sashaying down to the newly renovated Carnegie Gallery for an art opening. Some neat paintings of celestial objects, and I think you might like to see them. Want to give company to two ladies?” Norm looked kindly at Magdalena, and then let his eyes float to Tomasina where he settled into a more steely demeanor. Something about Magdalena intrigued him, opened him up, and this had been a particularly incredible week. “Why not, as an executive of the micro-loan industry, I think I can call the shots on my schedule. And I haven’t been to an art opening in years!

They strolled down King Street to the gallery, remarking how bustling the commercial district had become since more people had started shopping close to home. They mounted the steps to the main floor, and noted the beautiful sweep of light diffusing into the space, and this effect had only been enhanced by careful design decisions taken in the recent gallery renovation.

The paintings were beautifully mounted, the work of an artist who had grown up as a child in town but who had moved on to do her work in a rural studio near a hamlet just outside of town. Mainly acrylics, with some chalk pastels, and all depicting various heavenly bodies and their connection to the Earth. Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn were definitely featured, but the major emphasis seemed to be on the connections between the Earth and the Moon and the Sun. The compositions were unusual, and worked extremely well with the colours and geometries employed.

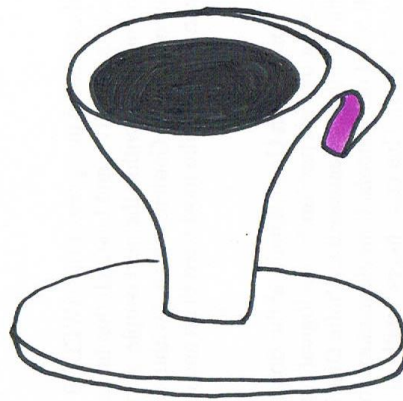
“Norm, what do you think of the work?” Magdalena said this with her eyes resting on a piece that seemed to literally glow.

“I have to say that these pieces just hit me smack between the eyes. They are beautiful pieces of art, but more importantly they show how the Earth and its inhabitants are connected to these surrounding entities. We think of the Moon as a big rock, but it’s a magnet that influences our tides, plant growth and reproductive biology! And don’t get me started on the Sun! Sure we rely on it for that wonderful sunshine, but most people don’t know the half of how its cycles affect the rhythms of our world and its cultures. Almost a century ago, a young Belarusian by the name of Chizhevsky got laughed out of the conference hall by suggesting all upheavals in history were tied to sun cycles. I have read his work over the years, and most of the stuff emanating from it, and I tell you the guy was onto something!”

Tomasina had been quiet for a long time, but Norm's excitement caused her to weigh in. "It also reminds me of Rudolph Steiner's work, based on his super-sensible sight. He could see arcs of light and energy coming in from various planets to the body of a person eating a vegetable or a fruit, with the combination of planetary influences being dependent on what was being eaten. I agree with you Norm, the universe is an amazing place, and we largely put on our blinkers to the wonders going on around us." She smiled at Norm and he blushed a light shade of pink.

"Okay you two, who wants to grab a quick and affordable bite somewhere?" Magdelana beamed at both of them. "Something that will give us a shot of energy from Jupiter and Venus, perhaps?"

My Plans are Pretty Fluid



A few days later, Norm was hanging out on his favorite bench, at this point bathed in mid-morning sunshine. Ever since his walking meditation and laughter yoga revelations, he was much less interested in putting the touch on passersby for some loose change. He had even entertained fleeting thoughts of giving up this micro-loan charade for good, cleaning up a bit and looking for some kind of real work. But then the demons in his head would start their familiar refrain, and he would set that all aside for another day. But no matter how hard the fallen angels would saw away, he couldn't quite lose the feeling that things were starting to shape up for the better.

Off to his left and across the street away, he spied Tomasina walking slowly and taking the opportunity here and there to do some window shopping. *Leche les vitrines*, Norm snorted under his breath, with a mixture of disdain

and gallows humor. He spoke to himself a fair bit, with some of the best conversations he would have in any given day being done speaking out loud to an imaginary witness. To his eye, it looked like Tomasina was buying some time, perhaps early for an appointment or a rendezvous. She had on some tight-fitting yoga pants that showed off her slim hips to a fine effect, and a loose-fitting Mexican blouse that didn't quite mask the fact that she was well endowed at the three-quarter mark. Norm realized after a moment that he had been leering a bit, and gave himself a guttural tongue lashing. He had found this woman to be close to repulsive on first meeting, and now here he was ogling her. Better to use his new-found focus and get back to the task of trying to figure out where she might be going off to. When she became obscured by parked cars and increasing distance, he decided to follow Colombo-style down his side of the street and keep an eye on how things progressed. About a block down he saw her come abreast of the coffee shop on the north side of King Street. At that very moment he saw that artist fellow from laughter yoga bound along the sidewalk towards Tomasina, and saw her offer up an engaging embrace before they popped into the shop.

Now this was all very intriguing to Norm, and a bit perplexing also. Truth be told, he wouldn't mind sharing a coffee with these folks and perhaps some interesting conversation. But there was an unwritten rule that folks from the halfway house didn't patronize the finer establishments in town. Coffee prices were quite a bit higher than Tim's and comfort levels on both sides were enhanced. But something drew him to cross the street at the light and double back to the shop. He looked in the window without staring intently, hoping perhaps to see them in the front third of the establishment and catch their eye. He went up and back three times, trying not to blow his cover of a nonchalant *flaneur*, someone who was out on the street observing architectural and societal details to satisfy their creative soul. But on the fourth loop, he heard a familiar voice call out from behind the rusted metal baffles flanking the patio of the coffee shop.

"Norm, what are you doing? I've seen you march up and down four times in as many minutes." Tomasina's voice was largely playful, with the slightest hint of an edge.

"Uh, not much, I think they're roasting beans and I thought I'd catch a few whiffs." Norm composed himself and smiled vacantly.

"Well...rather than smell coffee from afar, why don't you step into the patio here and actually drink a cup? I'm sitting here with Alphy and you are free to join us." All said with a terse smile but a welcoming tone.

"Um, well, I usually go to Tim's, and, I, well, I'm a bit short on funds this

morning." All of this was emitted with a slight stammer, and with colour rising to his cheeks.

"Come in and sit down, I'll be happy to stand you a coffee. We'll just flag down one of the wait staff and they'll bring it right out to you."

"Most obliged, Tomasina." Alphonse stood formally and shook hands curtly with Norm. "It's nice to see you Alphonse, or should I call you Alphy?" Alphonse blushed at this without answering, and both men sat down awkwardly, following Tomasina's lead.

"I usually meet at this time slot with Magdalena, but she had a rush job to do, so I called Alphy as a more-than-adequate substitution." Tomasina raised her eyebrows playfully.

"Well, you see, I'm working on this portrait at home. A wealthy man, who can easily cover the commission freight, but too busy to sit for me. So I try to capture him from photos, but I find this increasingly difficult. We all give off a vibe, an energy that an artist can pick up and weave into the work. But it's a rare photograph that can capture that vibe. So an escape from the tedium of drawing lines was much appreciated." Alphonse smiled flatly.

"I talk a lot with Magdalena about vibes, about the energy we all give off and bring to every activity we are involved with." Tomasina spoke with her hands, bringing both men into the conversation. "Our talks eventually come around to the work of David Hawkins, who explains everything in terms of level of consciousness. LOC, our favourite acronym. Why does the good Samaritan jump off his bike to help out someone who has fallen? LOC. Why does a ne'er-do-well smoke and drink and shoot us dirty looks? LOC. And it goes beyond the individual to the collective. Why do some places seem upbeat and positive? Group LOC. Why do other places seem down and depressed? Group LOC. Not popular or politically correct, but it's a concept that explains a lot of things, in my view."

"Listen, my friends, I happen to live at the present moment in a halfway house. I don't put this up on a billboard for all to know, but it's my current situation. I see some pretty grim stuff on a daily basis, and some pretty heartfelt stuff also. But I would agree, LOC explains most if not all of what I see going on around me. And it also applies to people going by us on the street, some who look down on us, and some who give us a wave and a cheery hello and connect with us as their rightful neighbors."

"I am an artist, and I look at the world as an artist. And when I view art I see this concept in play. Many artists are tortured, and they make art that can torture us! But colleagues who are centered and who you would say have a

high LOC, now that is usually fertile ground for art that will touch your soul.”
Alphonse looked dreamy, reflective.

“I actually knew of Hawkins’ work way back when, a bunch of lectures on a disk when I was near the end of my academic career.” Norm saw the slight rise in the eyebrows of his coffee friends. “Two things he said really stuck into my palate. One, there is no need for planning. If you leave the future in the hands of God, you don’t need to fret or plan. You get up in the morning when you get up, and you do the things that you want to do that day. Now I know some people would think you would just goof around all day but it doesn’t work out that way. We like to do our work, to do things that are productive and have meaning. But good ol’ Hawkins just tells us to stop worrying about it, and just flow with the universe. And all that time you save from not having to plan or fret, you can use for fun stuff. So he really helped me back then, even though I was doing things that were less than positive for my physical and mental health. And the second thing, kind of related, was not to worry about food. We spend so much time worrying about what will be for supper, what to buy, is the expiry date on this okay? Hawkins asks us just to float along, and when it’s time to eat, food will appear. Something will just show up, or we will feel like opening the fridge and making up whatever we find. But just stay fluid, and all will be taken care of.” And at that point, a waitress came out bearing a plate of wonderfully poached eggs and spinach on homemade biscuits, served Benedict style with a light hollandaise sauce. This had been ordered by someone at the rear of the patio, but Norm smiled sweetly and waved softly at the waitress, so she broke stride and slid the plate erroneously right in front of his delighted eyes.

“Just putting theory into practice!” Norm grinned, tucked a serviette into his collar, and started inhaling the steaming eggs. Tomasina would be on the hook for more than a brewed coffee.

In the Mists of Time



Magdalena and Tomasina strolled down Melville Street, taking in the bounty of the front yard flower gardens and admiring the architecture of the homes. No cookie-cutter suburban dwellings here, all one-of-a-kind abodes that reflected the individuality of present and past owners. They meandered down the hill on Cross Street and bore left on Park Street, making their way toward Alphonse's home near the sewage treatment plant. They had never been to his home before, and he had rather formally invited both for iced tea after he had bumped into the two of them yesterday on King Street. It had gone unspoken between the two ladies, but an inner unveiling of their hidden thoughts would suggest that each of them wondered if there might be the potential for some kind of romance with the subtly aloof artist. Magdalena was perhaps twenty years younger than Alphonse, but open-minded enough to explore the possibility for perhaps more than just a glass of iced tea. Tomasina was at least twenty years the other side of *Herr* Neumann, but had stayed lithe with Magdalena's yoga classes and really didn't believe in the concept of physical age. Neither woman had the sense the other might have similar amorous interests, and looked on the company of each other as a suitable insulation while assessing future prospects. If complications might arise later, they were not on anyone's mind this evening.

The two cut through the Mac's Milk parking lot, largely unused and calling out for an alternate and positive use. Reaching the intersection of King Street East and East Street, they pulled up and reflected on the best way forward while enjoying the bagpipe music coming from the pipe and drum corps practice in Centennial Park. Moving on with the skirl of the pipes, they cut across the

diagonal path of a little-used park abutting the sewage treatment plant, and walked along while checking street signs. All around them were older suburban homes, largely built for returning WW II veterans. These homes had modest original footprints, but many of them had recently been retrofitted to allow for a second living unit on the property. This might have been a garage conversion, or the building of an addition and reconfiguring of the original house plan to produce two viable living units. More and more people were able to then age in place without moving out of their neighborhood, and the changes achieved intensification while creating two parties to share in covering the mortgage and tax bills. Lots of children were out playing on the street and lawns, with parents and older folk watching from the porches.

They stood outside a smaller cottage, painted rather funkily and having the entire front yard converted to vegetables and edible flowers. No doorbell was present, but a healthy whap of a big brass knocker brought Alphonse to the door, wiping his fingers with a soiled rag.

“Dear friends, do come in and make yourself at home.” Two hugs were issued, largely at the unspoken insistence of the two women, with no more than a hint of awkwardness.

“I had my dinner, a bit of a ploughman’s lunch actually, made up the iced tea, and then went back to my easel. Time often stands still while I am painting, so your knocker pull brought me back to the real world.”

Oooh, I would love to see your work.” Magdalena batted her eyelashes.

“Hmmm, not usually my policy until the piece is done and framed.” Alphonse grimaced, with just the slightest leavening of a smile.

“No critiquing, just a look, from two ardent art aficionados.” Tomasina said this as if it was a *fait d’accompli*.

“Well, with all of those conditions in place, how could I say no?” He led them into the living room, which had an easel and stool set up, all illuminated with some very high-tech track lighting. The portrait was three quarters complete, showing a regal man with very good hair and eyes as cold as glacier meltwater. The background had all manner of curious iconic symbols, from a Tree of Life to what looked like a corporate logo. The piece was dark, but very impressive. It was immediately apparent to the two women that Alphonse was not a paint-by-number amateur.

“So ladies, enough of art, and now to our iced tea. I suggest we have a quick glass, and then steal out for a perambulation while we have some natural light, and then we can come back for a well-deserved second glass? There you go,

Magdalena. Tomasina, cheers, hope that I haven't over-iced? My habitual evening outing is either to the canal for a quick kayak glide, or over to Volunteer Marsh for some wildlife viewing. Do you know it? It has been recently restored to its full glory, and while it is small, it is a real jewel. There is so much bird life, and the sights and sounds are really therapeutic. With all the turbulence that seems to be going on around the world, I have started to wonder why I watch the news or read the paper. My parents used to say the same thing of course when they were alive, but the roller-coaster nature of society seems to have anted up considerably. So places like the Desjardins Canal and Volunteer Marsh help me to hang in there and not melt down in a puddle of despair and lament!"

They ducked out the side door and took a pathway through the backyard that opened out onto an easement to the side of the public works building. Some kids were playing baseball at Martino Park, with no lights on, even though dusk was gathering. An access road spun right, then left, and they were soon at the western edge of the marsh.

"Suggest we walk around the marsh clock-wise, and in silence. Better to hear the birds and not scare them with our prattling. If anyone sees anything particularly noteworthy, just stop and point it out. Let's walk slowly and purposefully. OK, here we go."

They walked softly, looking up at the trees and through to the water. All around them was bird life, and the air was filled with beautiful songs that seemed to escalate as each moment ticked off towards nightfall. They saw a Blandings turtle push off from a log, and a bevy of frogs lent their best base offerings to the mix. The trio stopped, went on, and stopped again.

After their first round of the marsh, the light shifted perceptibly and what appeared to be mist floated over the surface of the water. And out of this mist, moving along the edge of the marsh, came shapes of tall men and women. The definition level for these beings undulated, but it became clear that they were carrying sacks of corn and hoisting rough-edged tools over their shoulders.

"Don't look at their eyes." Alphonse hissed this out, breaking the silence.

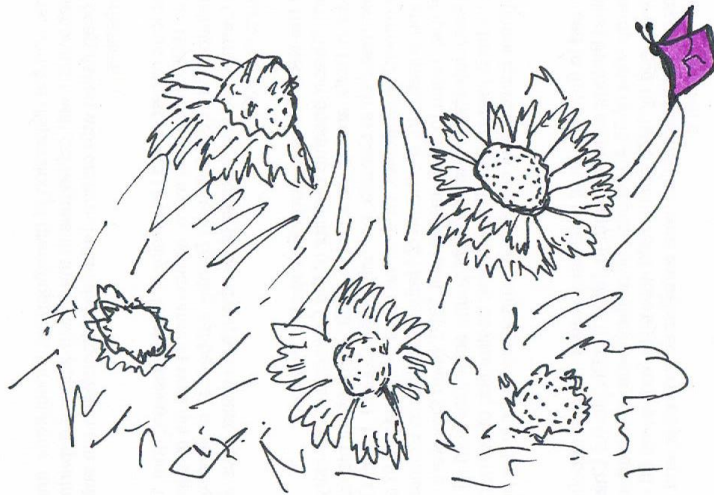
"Who are they?" Magdalena's voice was filled with suspense, and wonder.

"They are The Ancestors.... I see them from time to time down here and over in the EcoPark. I have a shaman friend who has told me to stand in reverence when I see them, but never to look them directly in the eye, as apparently this wouldn't be good for me nor good for the work they are doing here." Alphonse's voice level rose a bit with his excitement.

"This reminds me of stuff I have heard about in Hawaii, where current-time *kahunas* see their former-time counterparts coming down from the volcano, bearing torches of fire." Tomasina's eyes were ablaze.

"Makes sense to me, as this was important land for First Nations peoples from way back. Perhaps this is why the land has been protected all these years, from their intentions projected across time?"

A Life Well Lived



An evening or two later, Magdalena cycled over to Alphonse's home, to have a quick cup of tea before heading over to the butterfly garden on the eastern side of Centennial Park. They had seen a poster downtown about volunteers needed for weeding and clearing at the garden, and thought they might like to pitch in. Magdalena was of the belief the more the merrier, so she had mentioned it to Tomasina, who needed to hang around home a bit until the biodynamic gardening specialist had dropped off some special mixtures for her vegetable garden. So it was left that she would stroll over when she was free, and would perhaps pop into Norm's place on Park Street to finagle him into participating. Norm wasn't in the habit of having lady callers to the halfway house, that was clear to Tomasina, but she would do what she could to coerce in a gentle way. She had the feeling that Norm was a bit of a diamond in the rough, and that a good soaking in a tub and a decent haircut would go a long way to setting him straight. So mentally she had taken him on as a project, with an uncertain flow path and completion date.

So Magdalena and Alphonse arrived at the Butterfly Garden, with well-oiled

hoes slung over their shoulders, from Alphonse's Dad's toolshed. They were greeted at the coniferous trees on the northern edge by a tall man with a firm handshake, wearing bright orange coveralls.

"Stephen Tucker's my name, good of you to come out."

"Stephen, you seem familiar....this is my friend, Alphonse." Magdalena smiled in an off-hand way. As the two men were shaking hands, a lady in her mid-50s came out trundling a wheelbarrow. Stephen pointed in her direction and they exchanged smiles. "This lady is Patricia, one of our regular Garden volunteers. I count on her for the heavy lifting around here!" Stephen put his hands on his lower back and offered up a wry smile.

"Friends, nice to have you!" Getting right down to business, Patricia grabbed the elbows of Magdalena and Alphonse and set them up with a sizable area for weeding. Everyone settled into their tasks as if they had been working as a well-coordinated group for a considerable passage of calendar time. After half an hour or so, their collective work brought them to a common point in the center of the garden.

"There are so many beautiful flowers here, I find this place to be amazing." Magdalena gushed and looked over at Stephen and Patricia.

"It is true, after a hard day on the construction front, I find some time here to be very therapeutic." Stephen's eyes had a dreamy cast to them.

"It reminds me of that movie, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*. The one *sensei* says 'to contemplate a flower for a lifetime, now that is a life well lived'. He sounded sincere at the time, and as I see some of these beauties, it makes a lot of sense." Alphonse was an artist, first and foremost, and got much of his creative inspiration from the natural world.

"Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, had the phrase 'The floral apostles are hieroglyphics of the Divine'." Patricia let this one sink in. "I just love the idea that flowers are emissaries of the Light, and give us messages in some type of sweet code. When you look at the shape of a flower, its colour and patterning, its perfume, its texture, you can almost see it as an enfolded message. That's why I love coming down here to work, it seems like I take away far more than I put in."

"Well, since we're taking a break from work, and addressing some ideas from a higher source, allow me to weigh in on a few things that I've been contemplating recently." Stephen was a born teacher, and loved the chance to hold forth. "So as times get murkier and more challenging for all of us, one starts to contemplate Life's Bigger Questions. As companies and institutions

tumble down, we wonder what we can hold onto. Is there an ethical standard to hold dear, a way of living that will suit us well and perhaps be a model for others?"

Everyone sat still and waited quietly. Seeing no response to his rhetorical question, Stephen plunged on.

"For the last decade or more, the fundamentalist Christians have been talking about the return of their prophet. Some think that He may already be here, perhaps to be unveiled to us in due course. So if I give up my early training and broaden my perspectives, I look at everyone I come across as the potential Buddha, the potential Zarathustra, the potential Christ. And if I treat all with love and respect, I am certainly adopting the principles of these enlightened teachers and prophets. But life is challenging, and the returning prophet might be cloaked in a garment that is not befitting of his station, just to provide us with an extra challenge. So, friends, have you ever contemplated who among us is the Christ?"

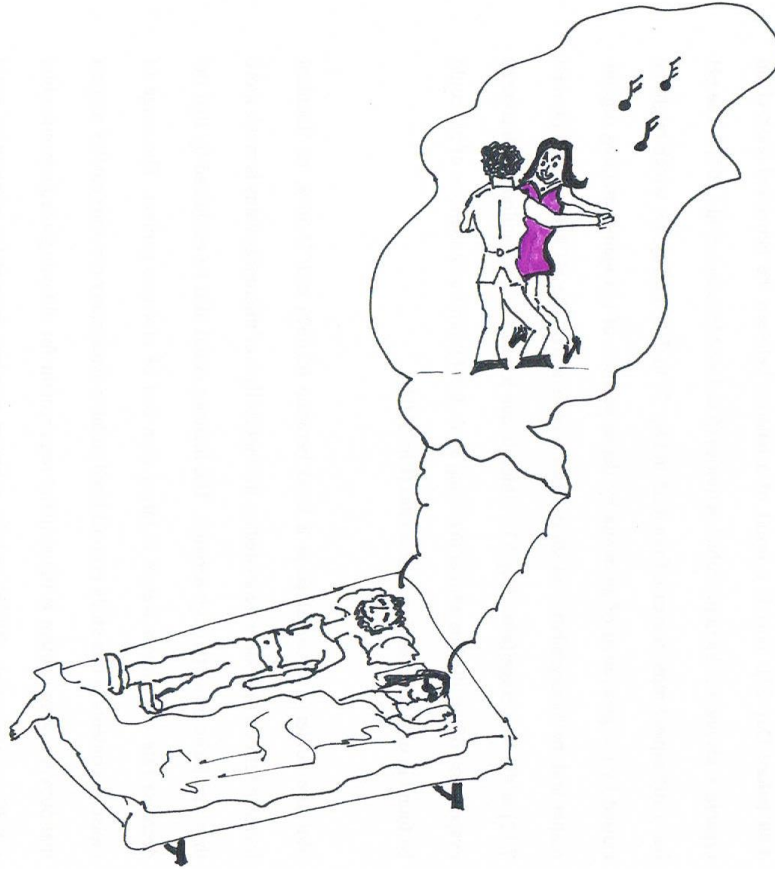
At that point a loud crash occurred, and Norm dropped a metal bucket containing hand tools after tripping over an errant hoe. He hit the ground hard and rose up, with the help of a trailing Tomasina, covered in wet soil and weed residue.

"Norm Tryon's the name, micro-finance is the game." Norm extended a moist and soiled mitt of a hand to Stephen and Patricia. He spat out a clod of soil that had gotten wedged between his teeth.

"Norm, it's a pleasure to meet you, and I'm glad you have come prepared to work." Stephen's eyes connected warmly and purposefully with Norm's. "Take direction from Patricia here, who will work with you on one of the nicest areas of the garden. And for the rest of us, let's clean up what we have already started, as we will be losing most of our light in half an hour or so."

The work party went to their assigned tasks, thinking hard.

Navigating the Dream Time



Magdalena came out onto her back stoop, looking up at the afternoon sun and attempting to guess the time by its position in the sky. She plucked some basil out of a container pot and ran back into her kitchen to wash it and then put it in a bit of oil and vinegar to suffuse its flavors into tonight's salad dressing. With that done, she checked the actual time on her stove clock and realized she should start to make her way over to Tomasina's, having been invited for a late afternoon tea.

She walked down the common driveway and turned right onto Witherspoon. After a few blocks she cut diagonally through Witherspoon Park, deviating eastward just enough to afford a nice view of the Dundas Peak. The park was buzzing with children, moreso than normal for a typical afterschool time zone. Something seemed a bit unusual, so she pulled up on a bench for a look. Each child seemed to have a young adult counterpart, who was helping facilitate some individual playtime activity with each of the children. The young adults were all wearing maroon-colored shirts with a McMaster logo on them, and Magdalena suspected this was another example of all the community engagement and outreach that had recently galvanized the university. Then she realized that the young ones were not chattering away as some children

might, but seemed to be very quiet and focused, steadfastly working on a range of activities that included pattern matching and number puzzles. The helpers were giving continual support and encouragement and seemed to have real affection for their young charges. After a few more moments of observation, it became obvious to Magdalena that these special kids were autistic. She didn't know a lot about this, but she had read that autistic children have some very special capacities. She thought she could see them communicating with each other and their helpers in very subtle ways, and admired the focus they brought to their respective tasks. Giving the large group a knowing nod and a big smile, she turned towards Tomasina's house on the corner of Wellington and Melville.

Her footsteps on the stairs were light yet energetic, and when she hit the landing she saw that the inside door was open and she could see right through the glass storm door into the living room. There were some glare and reflections from the garden, but she could have sworn she saw Norm sitting on the couch, with his arms wrapped tightly around Tomasina's midriff. Again, viewing conditions were far from perfect, but she could have sworn Norm's mouth was locked onto Tomasina's left ear. But all of this was observed in a microsecond, and sheer momentum had her quickly knocking on the glass of the door, with a muffled 'come in' being emitted from inside. When she popped the door and stepped in on the mat she saw Tomasina standing up and smoothing out her silk blouse and Norm looking nonchalantly towards the direction of the kitchen.

"Hello you two, I didn't know that Norm would be joining us for tea?" Magdalena said this in a very even tone, inconsistent with the ambient awkwardness.

"Well, it was just serendipity, I saw Norm sitting on a bench over at the park, and yoo-hooed over to him, and he came right over." Tomasina seemed a bit flushed and gave Norm a flustered smile.

"And Tomasina told me she was suffering a bit from some ear irritation, so I was just giving it a close look." Norm pursed his lips and looked in the direction of Tomasina.

"Well, I wouldn't want to disrupt anything important like that, I could always come back for tea another time." Magdalena seemed earnest enough.

"Nonsense, darling, I already have the tea made and some biscuits just came out of the oven. Let me bring it all in straight away." Tomasina strode towards the kitchen, hitching up her yoga pants over her slim hips to the slightest degree.

"So Norm, might you return soon for another rousing bout of laughter yoga?"

"Without question, that was one of my best days in recent memory. I liked that Alphonse guy too, it was neat in a way to experience life as a howler monkey with you two fine folks, but I wonder what fun it must be with a larger group."

Tomasina glided back, bearing a tray with mugs, teapot and a plate of steaming biscuits. "Norm was asking me about my dreams, and I was just getting into some details when you arrived."

"Ah, dreams, how Jungian of you, Norm!" Magdalena gave him a sly smile.

"You know, I used to read all of Carl Jung's writings back in my working days, and there was a time when I used to go to a Jungian analyst. And I would be invited to the odd high table at Massey College when Rob Davies was Master there, and all he wanted to do was talk about Jung! So guilty as charged." Norm seemed different to Magdalena's eye, and he definitely had cleaned up a bit since she had first met him at laughter yoga.

"So I was telling Norm that a lot of my dreams seem to center around men or around dangerous situations. Perhaps the two are connected? I don't have a man in my life at present, but I must have romantic dreams close to half my nights. I'm not a young woman anymore, although I would somewhat immodestly describe myself as being in pretty good shape. So I have to tell you, some of these dreams can get pretty steamy. I wouldn't say that the men are recognizable. But some of these dream paramours seem pretty young, and virile, I might add!" Tomasina let a good chuckle from Magdalena and a lewd grunt from Norm flow past her before continuing. "But the other cohort of dreams seems to be where I am really at risk, either up high on a crumbly precipice, or in a greased industrial chute full of sharp bibs and bobs, or running from a pack of snarling dogs. Some of these are lucid dreams, and when I get in really deep trouble I literally wake myself up. But even with that, my heart is pounding and I can't get back to sleep for a while."

"Dreams are significant, that is certain." Magdalena took on a professorial tone. "Our consciousness flies out of us while we sleep, going to other realms, all connected back to our sleeping bodies by that wee silver cord. Most mystics tell us that dreams give us warnings, or perhaps remembrances, things to contemplate so that we can get our lives in line with our spiritual ideals. But the trick is in the interpretation, as the dreamscape is so different from that of our day-to-day world."

"I often dream, but rarely remember my dreams." Norm's voice had a distant tone.

“When I go to sleep, after doing a day review, I ask that my upcoming dreams be recorded energetically in my throat chakra, the seat of memory. Upon rising, I mentally ask that the dreams be unspun from my throat, and I write down the key bits in a dream journal. Seems to work like a charm.” Magdalena smiled knowingly.

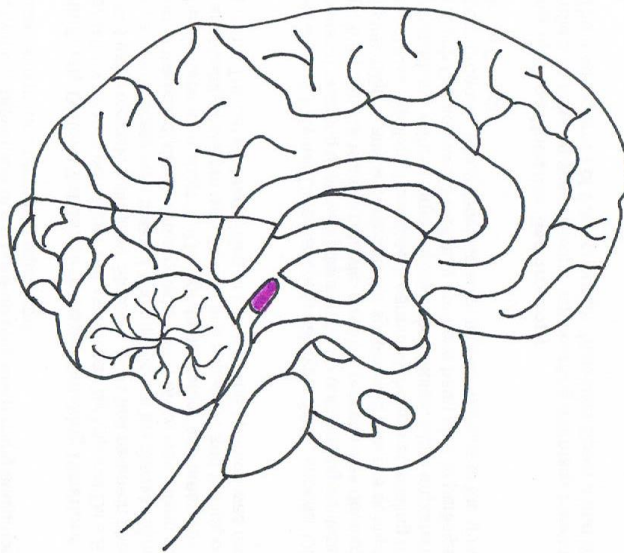
“Some of my dreams I’m not sure I’d want to write down, as they would make a sailor blush! So who knows? I may end up soon with a gentleman in my life, or it may just be wishful thinking.” Tomasina let out a muted sigh.

“Be careful of what you wish for, m’dear.” And with that, Norm leaned over and caressed Tomasina’s left ear.

Magdalena took a big bite of a biscuit and wondered how she might gracefully extract herself from this situation.

Part II: Crisis or Challenge?

Third Eye Blind



Stephen set out the folding chairs methodically, making sure that all elements were fully extended and giving each setup a bit of flex from his considerable frame to ensure no problems upon use. The space was the old pickle factory on Mill Street, in the approximate heart of the industrial area of the town that was off of most people’s radar. Even moreso after the last few years, as a few

places had shuttered operations due to the outfall from continuing economic uncertainties. So Stephen had leased this space for a song from its owner, a Masonic Lodge friend, and he used it primarily as storage space for power equipment used by his building restoration folks. It was partially empty most of the time as the equipment floated from job to job, so Stephen had taken to holding meditation and chanting classes on Monday and Thursday evenings in the leftover space. Attendance was a tad jumpy, as it was a bit out of the way, but word-of-mouth and an increasing tendency to utilize shoe leather usually resulted in a dozen or more participants.

But today would be a quieter day, as it was nigh on the appointed hour of 6:30, and not a soul had come through the doors to join Stephen. He fussed about a bit, shifting chairs one way and then back to their original position. And then a moment later, an older couple quietly strolled through the massive warehouse door. They were arm in arm, and looked as pleased as punch. Stephen squinted at them in semi-recognition, and then realized it was Norm and Tomasina from the work party evening at the Butterfly Garden. He had mentioned the days of his classes in passing to Tomasina, and here they were, smiling broadly at him.

"Folks, good of you to come, you have your choice of seats."

"Nice to be here, Stephen, we have been looking forward to this." Tomasina's eyes sparkled, with just a hint of a nervous sideways glance in Norm's direction.

"*Guruji*, I am putty in your capable hands." Norm sat down with a dramatic flourish, with Stephen thinking that the somewhat scruffy gentleman had cleaned up a bit since their last encounter.

"Okay folks, I usually start out with a short segment that varies from meeting to meeting, and then use the rest of the hour for quiet meditation practice." Seeing two nodding heads, Stephen pressed on. "So for tonight I wanted to focus on something deep within our brains, our pineal gland. This is one of our endocrine glands, and is often referred to as our third eye, with some thinking that it is a vestigial sight organ."

"Cyclops is alive and well!" Norm mashed one eye shut and used the other to ogle Tomasina, who slapped his arm and looked away, tittering. Stephen felt like he was in the company of amorous adolescents.

"Descartes spent a lot of time on the pineal gland, calling it the seat of the soul. So it's hidden away, a bit of mystery attached to it, but something pretty significant from a consciousness perspective." He had his students' attention once again. "So a lot of people have tried to do pineal gland stimulation. This

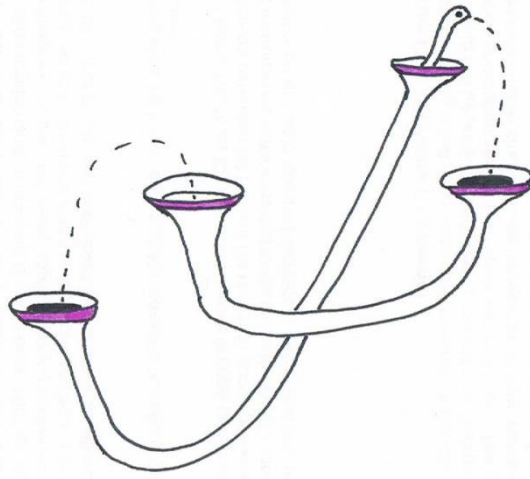
is done with the thought that the more active and stimulated this gland is, the higher the level of consciousness of the individual.”

“How does one stimulate something deep within your head? Impossible to get at physically, so would you rely on good nutrition and some brain chemicals? I used to love the runner’s high I would get from the endorphins flowing through me, back when I used to run seriously.” Tomasina’s face showed a mix of nostalgia and pleasure.

“All of these things would perhaps play a role. But I am thinking more about energetic or vibrational influences. Not the magnetic helmets you can read about on the Web, which seem a bit wacky to me or perhaps even dangerous. In some respects this whole area is one to proceed into with caution. You will hear of people listening to audio files with binaural beats, where the frequency going into one ear is different than the frequency going into the other ear through a set of stereo headphones. Or aggressive kundalini yoga techniques, without the supervision of a skilled and compassionate yoga teacher. Too much is done too quickly, and the individual can be negatively affected. So tonight we will do one of the most gentle ways to stimulate the seat of our souls. It’s dead simple. We’ll sit quietly with our eyes closed, our attention focused on the third eye area just above our eyebrows in the center of our foreheads. We will chant ‘Om’, which is Hindi for ‘I am’. ‘Om’, over and over. With whatever cadence we desire, and whatever volume. And while we do this we will mentally visualize our third eye awakening, coming into resonance with the cosmos above us.” Stephen paused for effect. “We’ll chant for five minutes or so, and then we’ll flow immediately into our meditation. Any questions before we start?” Two light-lipped smiles and sideways shakes of the head greeted his gaze.

The sounds of ‘Oooooooooommmmmmmmmmm’ filled the cavernous space, bouncing off table saws and power nailers. Stephen’s contribution was a deep sonorous bass element, going strong to the end and stopping abruptly. Tomasina’s sounds were higher-pitched and melodic, and Norm’s were lower and guttural in a quasi Buddhist monk style. These all wove together into a glorious and elevating mosaic, that spilled out onto a Mill Street that was completely deserted. The sound waves flowed down and through the neighborhood, raising its collective energy in a subtle and profound way. And at some point, after a number of minutes, the sounds stopped and three pineal glands with higher frequencies joined each other in a collective meditation modality.

Back to the Future



Stephen and Patricia carried a number of hand tools to the edge of the vegetable gardens. A couple of hoes, a number of rakes, and one good shovel. They split their time evenly between the flowers and shrubs of the Butterfly Garden and the vegetables and herbs of the community gardens behind the arena on Olympic Drive. On a summer's evening they were gardening almost every night, typically walking over to get some exercise and to watch the bird life flying over and around the gardens that were perched on top of the Gateway to Cootes Paradise. Stephen's wife was a bit of a Bingo fanatic, and was out most nights also but doing something that held no interest for him. So as long as he was home by nightfall, domestic bliss reigned in the Tucker household, even if he was spending most of his non-work waking hours in the company of another woman. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, or so he was wont to remind himself.

The two had commandeered three good-sized beds for a wide range of vegetable growing. The byproducts were not for their households, but for the local food bank that had significant pressures on it due to the jumpy economy. They harvested almost every night and put the pickings in a tiny shed, that was cleaned out every morning by a volunteer driving the food bank's solar powered van. They had put out a call for volunteers to help with the weeding and harvesting, but many nights they did it all by themselves. Stephen's dreams were to expand and add a large open-air pen for chickens and a few goats, for free range eggs and a bit of goat milk. Old-fashioned in one way, but consistent with a number of progressive homeowners who were converting their in-town backyards into small scale farms. This expansion would have to wait until more volunteers showed up on a regular basis.

So they got down to some hoeing of weeds and leveling of soil with the rakes, interspersed with methodical watering from a leaky hose kept together by copious quantities of duct tape. After some time, they heard some light and quick footsteps coming from the direction of the arena.

"Hallo, do you folks need some help?" Tomasina flashed a smile to accompany a friendly wave.

"We never refuse a good offer... Tomasina, if I didn't know better, I might think you are following me around! First the butterfly garden, then meditation and chanting in the pickle factory, and now the community garden. If I let my ego surface for air, I might even feel flattered!' This last sentence was delivered dead-pan, with a simultaneous wink and a left-leaning waggle of the head.

"Oh Stephen, I suspect a fine-looking man like you has a lady in his life, or might this be your wife?" Tomasina smiled at Patricia.

"I should be so lucky, but no, Stephen and I have just been good friends since Grade 10." Patricia's smile lines were evident.

"So yes, we are weeding, raking and doing some picking. We always appreciate an extra set of hands, so let's press on." The next fifteen minutes or so went by in a steady flow of concentrated work, punctuated only by the odd wisp of conversation.

"You know, when I work with the earth, it feels really good." Tomasina looked at the other two in a dream-like manner. "Like time has stood still, or I have gone back in time, or perhaps stepped out of time. If it didn't feel so good, it would almost be confusing."

"Well, time is a tricky thing. Many believe it to be merely an accounting system for this three-dimensional world we live in, and once we evolve to a higher-dimensional reality then time-keeping will become a thing of the past." Stephen leaned on his hoe reflectively.

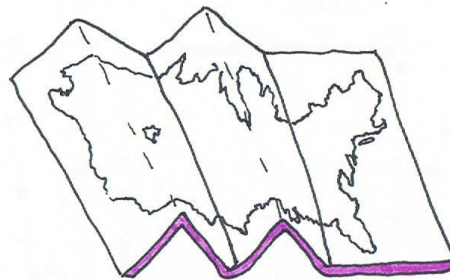
"The notion of time has fascinated me for decades. If time doesn't really exist, then everything that has gone on and will go on, may be just 'there' in some energy matrix. I remember as a kid watching A Christmas Carol on TV, and Scrooge would go back and be able to see himself as a young man in Christmas Past, and then zip forward and view his grave in a Christmas Future. I remember thinking, is this just make-believe for a movie or might it capture something more profound?" Patricia smiled wanly.

"Listen, time travel is a well-worn shoe in the movie industry, and the skeptics would just argue this is another special effect." Stephen grimaced pensively. "There have been stories out of Italy about time travel. The spiritual eco-community of Damanhur had its time cabins, that they maintained could be used to travel back in time. Some neat and thrilling stories about this, but they have soft-pedaled this of late and focused more on community and environmental sustainability. Tales of time travel can stretch the perception of credibility a bit!"

"But someone as mainstream as Stephen Hawking has written openly about time travel, or at least its possibility." Tomasina countered tentatively. "Of course he is a physicist and a mathematician, and he quickly lays out so many conditions and limiting assumptions that you start to wonder if he is speaking for or against the concept. But his description of wormholes, warped space-time volumes, that can be leapt into to transform yourself quickly to another time, really left me fascinated. So on a warm sunny day after a beautiful meditation or reverie, I get the distinct feeling I may have gone to some other time. Backwards perhaps, forwards perhaps, but some shift. So maybe Scrooge had a wormhole sitting right below his counting-house near the London wharves?"

"Ladies, I love this kind of conversation more than you can imagine. But the waning light in the sky tells me I need to get these vegetables over to the shed, and then skedaddle home or my name will be mud with the lady I call my wife!"

What a Coincidence!



Alphonse pulled out a fibrous mat of creeping charlie from one of the flower beds of the Butterfly Garden. It was rooted snugly and he felt a certain sense of satisfaction when it came out, fuzzy root and all, in one reluctant burst. He had often wondered what made a weed a weed, while other things were called flowers. One thing undesirable, the other coveted and protected. This

plant had tenaciously hung onto life, had valiantly tried to expand its coverage, and now it was bound for the compost heap. He observed its fine-grained leaf structure and the coiling pattern of its stems. Lots of inherent beauty there, but he had cut that short with his well-intentioned gardening. Alphonse extrapolated this in his mind to people, as he moved along to another section of the flower bed. Some people lived reasonably good lives but they had plenty of shadow elements mixed into their repertoire. Often these were masked or blunted to some degree, to stay under the radar of an observant society. His own Dad had been a largely admirable man, hard-working and generally kind to all. But a taste for wine often went unfettered, particularly during the winter months, and he could become brooding and offensive. What wounds was he covering with his penchant for the grape, and did this make him less of a father than the church deacon down the street who could never tell his kids that he loved them? Alphonse pondered these things while he continued to work. Life could be tough, and people reacted to the challenges in different ways. And things could be darker for some than others, even under comparable circumstances.

He heard murmured voices, good-natured in tone, coming from the other side of some dense shrubs. Stephen had been working at one end of the garden and Patricia had started at the other end. Hearing their banter made Alphonse wish he could have enticed Magdalena to join him at the garden this evening. He wasn't much of a ladies' man, and he realized that there was a considerable gap in their ages, but there was something in her that made him feel young again. He wasn't sure if it would ever come to any kind of fruition, and if it ever came down to a situation where he would have to say or do something meaningful or profound, he wasn't sure he would have the courage to step up. But a working evening in the gardens seemed safe enough to suggest, but a previous engagement on her schedule book had prevented this testing of the waters.

"So how are things going, Alphonse old boy?" Stephen cinched up his work trousers while emitting an affable grin.

"Can't complain...I'm a decent gardener already at my home, but it's nice to work on something for the collective good."

"More than fair, but I meant beyond the gardening. How are things flowing for you in the stream of life?"

"Well, you know, pretty fair, or at least nothing to complain about. I get to call my own shots in terms of schedule, I have a number of people always wanting to commission a portrait, and I seem to live well on very little money. This may be due to the fact I live on my own, in a house inherited from my folks. So I

only paint here and there, just enough to keep a wee nest egg intact. I love this town, so life is good."

"Okay, I've been eavesdropping, I admit it." Patricia set down her hoe and splayed onto the grass. "Most people can't seem to do what you are doing, they just go from paycheque to paycheque and are under the gun all the time. Or even if they are comfortable, they run hard all the time just to keep it that way. So you're pretty darn lucky, I hope you realize!" Patricia smiled ruefully.

"I know, and I am generally grateful for my life. But I am an artist. We don't just look at the surface, we are wont to plumb a bit deeper and see the tensions in our existence. I see the beauty in nature, feel awed by a sunset, by the loveliness of a flower. But I'm also a bit empathetic, and feel the pain of those around me. The bored meter reader walking up and down my street, the depressed teenager who is unsure about school or his girlfriend, the young lady who serves me coffee and isn't quite sure how she is going to get out of a minimum wage existence. And even more personally, will I just keep painting portraits of tending-to-corpulence businessmen living in Tudor mansions in South Forest Hill? What will life be like as I get older and creakier, celebrating another Christmas alone after my Oma has passed away? Maybe that's the crux of it, feeling the impending loneliness of old age. I know it's a ways off, but I can plug into it in the continuum of time and it feels pretty real." Alphonse's face was pinched, drawn.

"Well, I'm no Dr. Phil, but I'll give you my two cents for what they're worth." Stephen paused for effect. "To my eye you are a youngish middle-aged chap who is in fine form and fettle. Your future is what you will make of it, by your decisions between now and then. Life is continuously unfolding, in a beautiful and mysterious way. You help this unfolding to occur, with your thoughts and actions, along with those around you and connected to you in myriad ways. Every day you create the nest you will lie in, with how you think and how you make the umpteen decisions that are made in any given day. But the trick is to stay above the fray, and watch out for the patterns that are emerging. Things will come to you-- inspirations, phone calls, messages on billboards, snatches of words overheard on the street. When something seems like a coincidence, then it most definitely is not so. Hold tight to these coincidences, these synchronicities, for these are guideposts to what you need to do. Life is an amalgam of light and shadow, but the goal is to embrace the Light. And in the end, you will have lived a life well lived!"

From the direction of Patricia, a low snore undulated towards the two men. Stephen's capacity for going on a bit too long had just claimed another victim.

Any Plans for the Weekend?



Patricia gave a good yank to the vacuum hose, and kept pulling up grit from the rear floor panels of the compact car. All four doors were open, and a bucket of sudsy water rested precariously on the sloping roof. Today was her day off from teaching, having gone to a four-fifths schedule in anticipation of upcoming retirement. She could have run errands, or put her feet up, but she had decided to do as many volunteer things as possible to see what might intrigue her when retirement did hit home. So the car share facility located in the parking lot of the United Church got a couple of hours of her time each Friday, cleaning up returned cars before they got checked out for a spate of weekend uses. More and more people were questioning the high costs and environmental impacts of owning their own vehicle, and the car share program had seen tremendous success from its inception. The town's fleet had gone from a single vehicle to its current level of four, and projected demand levels were threatening to increase it yet again. For now, a portion of the church lot was perfectly sized, and cars were almost always gone for the Sunday morning parishioner parking needs.

Alphonse arrived a bit earlier than his slated pickup time, and cast a querulous look towards the vacuuming woman whose posterior was prominently elevated. Once he had determined it was indeed Patricia, he cooed out a greeting and got busy with a bucket and sponge as directed by her. He had volunteered a few times at the Butterfly Garden and they were comfortable work buddies.

"You know, I just love the fact that I can largely get by without a car but when I need one, it's only a short walk away!" Alphonse seemed to locomote mainly by foot or kayak.

"Same for me, that's why I am happy to volunteer for the Car Share folks. Keeps costs down too, if most of the operational work is done by volunteers. Where are you heading?"

"Hogtown, to see my Oma. Special birthday today. We'll go out to a nice Bavarian restaurant, share some stories. She's really all the family I have." Alphonse looked pensive.

"We really need four or six shared cars in every church lot in town, and then we'd make a dent in the problem. Many people still drive everywhere, and on hot days these buggies throw a lot of heat! If you don't own a car, you automatically walk more and take the jitney more. Special trips like yours make sense, assuming your Oma lives in the 'burbs."

"Deep enough, Leaside. And I'm trip chaining, as I'm going to double back home and pick up the finished portrait of my Bay Street baron so I can drop it off at his home. It may sound immodest, but I think he'll be happy. Or his wife will be, at least!"

"Nice, so this jalopy is just about ready to take off. So how do you get more people to ditch their cars?" Patricia was a teacher, but really more of an activist at heart.

"Do you know the song, The Great Awakening? Done by a Christian rock band called Leeland. I listen to a lot of different music while I paint and conceptualize. So it goes something like this... 'one man wakes, awakens another. Second one wakes his next-door brother. Three awake can rouse a town'... Okay, so now we're talking. But how does it get started in the first place? Well, according to Leeland 'one man wakes with dawn in his eye, surely then it multiplies'. So a few of us get Light in our eyes, on car sharing or food security or green energy or whatever, and then it ripples out and takes over. All the more with Facebook, Twitter and Reddit to facilitate the

diffusion.” Alphonse stood with a dripping sponge in his hands, temporarily forgetting that he needed to be on the road shortly.

“You hoo, what are you folks up to?” Tomasina had been strolling down Park Street and had just spied two of her newly found friends.

“You know, working at the car wash, yeah!” Alphonse flashed a crooked smile.

Patricia was more business-like. “I’ve been volunteering here for Car Share for some time, and Alphonse is going to wheel this gleaming specimen up to see his grandma for her birthday!”

“What are you up to, Tomasina?” Alphonse was just being polite.

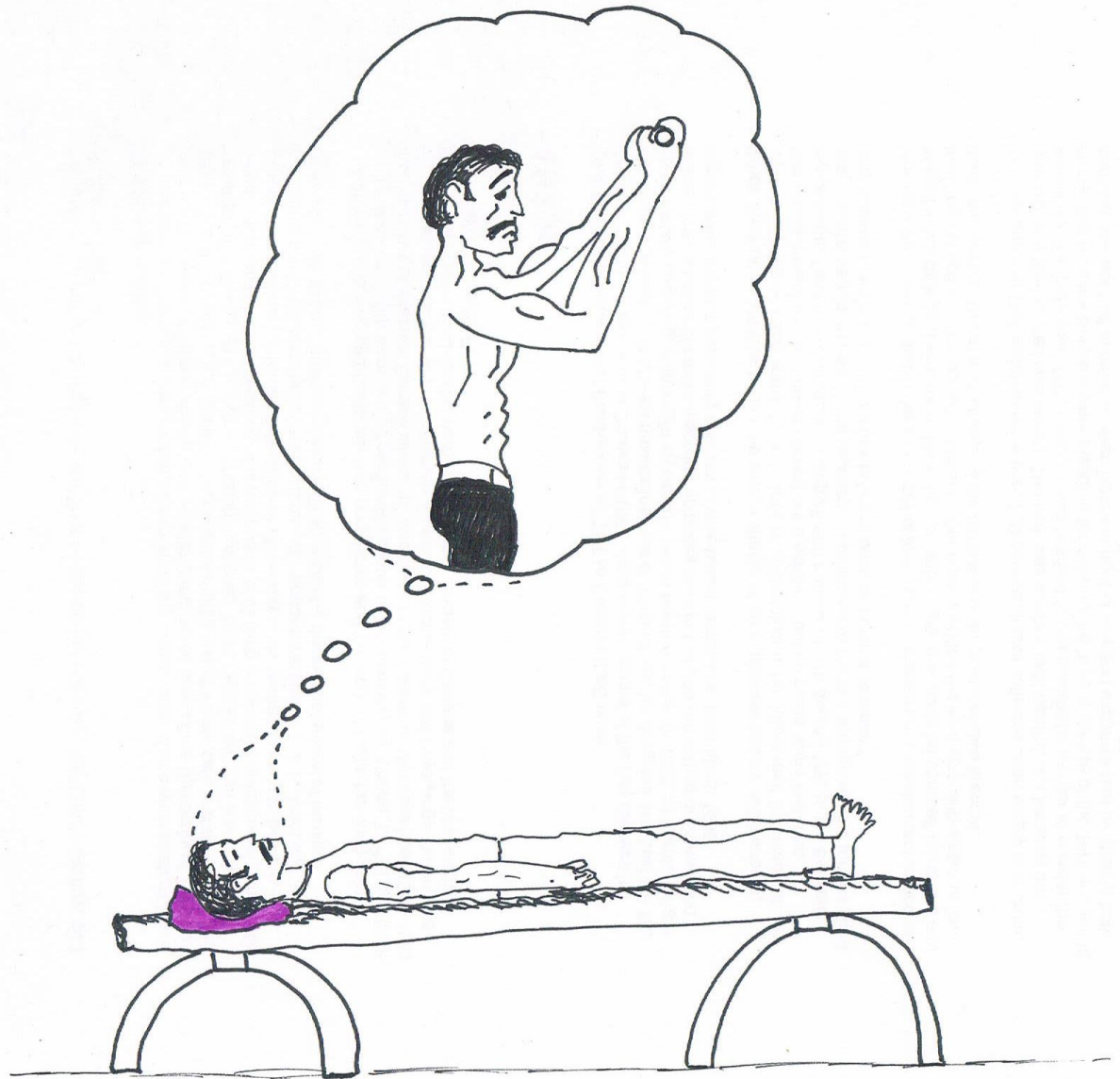
“Well I’m walking down Park Street, enjoying the day and reveling in some amazing birdsong. I vaguely looked out for Norm on the porch up the street, but he wasn’t there, so I took it as a sign to keep on going. So now I’m talking to you. And after that depends on many factors. I may feel a bit peckish and stroll down the alley to the *cucina* to get a grilled eggplant *panini*. Or if we talk at length, one of you might invite me home for supper. Or an asteroid might hit the Earth! I’m open to all possibilities!”

Patricia’s voice took on a frosty tone. “I admire your spontaneity, but working folks like us have schedules, things to do, people to meet. I am chock a block with my volunteer activities also, and have to keep a house in good order. But it’s nice to know someone can relax!”

“I do chores every day, and also do some volunteering. My workdays are thankfully behind me. But whatever I do, I do with a certain looseness in terms of scheduling and sequence. A button will get sewn back on my sweater, a geranium will get re-potted, but perhaps tomorrow and not today. In essence, I don’t make any concrete plans, not for today and certainly not for the future. This frees me up greatly, and allows me to do what I am meant to do. What the universe puts in front of me, I embrace. I never have to turn away an invitation to come over for tea, or rush past a neighbor, because I am late for an engagement. No planning means no previous engagements!” This was all said matter-of-factly, almost beguilingly.

“I have to say, as an artist and a free spirit, I know what you are saying and I envy you to bits.” Alphonse grinned and then clenched his lower jaw tightly. “But due to previous plans, with my dear grandmother, I am going to have to jump into this chariot and leave in a cloud of dust! *A la prochaine!*”

You're As Young As You Feel



It was a warmish summer night, the kind where it had been very hot during the day but once the sun had dipped below the tree line it became a very pleasant environment to be out and about in. No need for a jacket or sweater, unless an overzealous hand had been applied to the thermostat of an air conditioning unit. A good-sized crowd lingered on the lawn outside the newly expanded and renovated Historical Museum on Park Street. They were waiting for a talk to commence in the lower level auditorium. Alphonse and Magdalena came from different directions, and awkwardly shook hands and strolled in together. They spied Norm and Tomasina standing under a tree, and went over in a storm of muttered pleasantries. Stephen and Patricia stood together in an opposite corner of the yard, munching on peanut butter sandwiches that Patricia had assembled

before they had done a quick watering regimen over at the community garden plots. Momentarily, the doors flew open and the assemblage filed in with the polite demeanour of southern Ontario folks.

“Alright, friends and neighbors, find a good seat and we will soon get underway.” The mistress of ceremonies was Arabella Duke, a vivaciously charming woman who was poise personified. She was dressed in a loose and vibrantly coloured Moroccan robe, augmented with a trio of stunning necklaces that seemed to make her glow. Arabella had been a looker in her day, and was still very much a presence that would turn heads for a variety of reasons.

“Friends, my name is Arabella Duke, and I am charged with organizing a schedule of talks sponsored by the Desjardins Club. Our speaker tonight, is my dear friend and next-door neighbor, *Monsieur* Henri LaMontagne. Henri is a sociologist by training and a committed community activist. We are delighted to have him take our stage this evening, and I ask you to welcome him in the traditional manner.” Polite applause slowly wafted from the group, while a fit and muscular man in his thirties bounded up to the podium. He had on a Pierre Cardin dress shirt with short sleeves that was just slightly undersized, showing off his physique to even greater effect.

“*Bon soir a tout le monde*, I am Henri LaMontagne. I had the privilege to move to this town a few years back, and I am very happy to speak to you this evening. Your attendance is a sign of your kindness, as I was deliberately vague in my titling of this talk. You may recall, it was ‘Timeless Health’. What, you may ask, justifiably, do I mean by this?” And as speakers often do, Henri went off on a long-winded setting of the stage for his talk, interspersed with personal anecdotes and various witticisms. He spoke without notes, nor audiovisuals of any kind. This was old-school, which might have been acceptable a century back but perhaps not for the clientele of this time. So some people fidgeted, some dozed, and some developed mental laundry lists or five year plans. But throughout, a petite lady in orange Punjabi pants sat in the middle of the crowd, fully absorbing every word. And when it came time for questions, her hand was the first to shoot up.

“Thank you sir, for a broadly ranging and captivating talk.” Mina Patel paused, and a few audience members who had just come out of slumber gave a sideways snicker. “But I have one bone to pick with you. Your main thesis was that we can count on continuing good health, if we adopt the right mental framework. And you spoke at length about the importance of thinking correctly, with lots of great examples of people over time who have been able to do this. But I am big on practicalities, and I would have liked to hear more about how you actually do this. In your own case, how do you achieve this?” She sat back with a smile, expectantly.

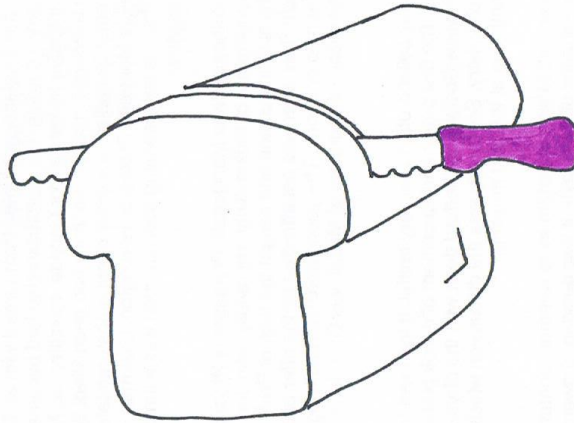
“Thank you, madame, for your kind words. Fair enough, I will share with you my deepest secrets. First off, I eat smart. Most of my food is local and organic, and always in season. Secondly, lots of water every day, with no coffee or tea or juice. Never drink your caloric intake. Some type of rigorous exercise every day, along with yoga and contemplative exercises. But all of this is pretty standard, I concede. So where I really do my innovative work on timeless health is when I sleep.” Henri stopped to let this sink in, and wryly noted out of the corner of his eye that at least two audience members continued to softly snore in the rear left corner of the room.

“While you sleep?” Stephen was a great believer that every presenter needed a straight-man in the audience.

“Yes, *monsieur*, while I sleep. I set an intention before I go to bed that I will be aware that I am dreaming when I dream. And once I go into the dream state, I am fully aware that it is a dream. A lucid dream is always the goal. So I know that I cannot be harmed by whatever comes to me, as it is a dream. But with practice, this is where it can get interesting. Because I can gain control over anything in my dream, say extinguish a fire with my bare hands or lift a heavy car over my head. We have all done things like this in our dreams, but I can consciously do them and get very skilled and confident.” Mina looked intently at Henri. “So then I can turn to my body while I am dreaming. And I do what is called dream yoga. I can focus energy to my muscles and see them grow bigger. I can focus vitality to my organs and view my body as vibrant and ageless. I can visualize myself with a full head of hair, and while I am at it, visualize it as dark and lustrous. There is a former bodybuilder, Frank Zane, who is a big believer in dream yoga. He suggests we can bring in energy from the cosmos during our dreams, transform our dream bodies, and because of the connection between our dream bodies and our real bodies, we can actually change our physical bodies. Practiced every night, it's like water on a rock, over time you can polish any rough surface. So, my friends, the fountain of youth can be accessed while you sleep.”

With comic effect, Stephen stood up and looked at his watch. “And with that in hand, I now have to go home to bed!”

A Well Stocked Larder



Patricia and Stephen were both perched on paint-dappled wooden stepladders, three steps off the ground. Their heads were well camouflaged by the foliage of the russet apple tree, with only their legs fully showing down the open lane of the tree nursery. The tree nursery had been created a few years back as an annex to the community gardens, on the parcel of land just east of Volunteer Marsh. This area had been proposed as a parking lot a while back, and then as a self-storage facility, but now it was home to a wide range of fruit and nut trees. As the trees matured, they were relocated out to designated spots on the public right-of-way and new trees took their place in the nursery. So for this evening, some apple picking was on the agenda before they headed over to water at the main community garden off of Olympic Drive.

Stephen heard approaching voices and looked out through the foliage to see Magdalena, Tomasina and Norm coming down the laneway. Norm was holding forth, waving his arms hither and thither, and the two women were glumly shaking their heads.

"Yo there, good man Stephen and fair lady Patricia. We are aliens from afar who have come yet again to proffer a hand of assistance, however modest?" Norm smiled broadly.

"Well we're just picking the remaining russets and then we'll go across the road to the vegetable gardens. If you don't mind waiting, we have lots to do there that could use your able assistance." Stephen said this while continuing to pick, in the best tradition of an experienced farmer.

"We'll fill you in on what's been happening in town, this afternoon. Norm's been trying to cheer us up, but it looks kinda grim." Tomasina's mouth formed a straight line, extended at the two corners.

"Pray tell, Stephen and I have been working away here since noon, and haven't gone near downtown at all...what's been going on?" Patricia's eyes were expectant.

"Norm, you go ahead and give some background, and then I'll chip in." Tomasina said this affectionately, with just the slightest hint of deference.

"Okay, well, I've been sitting out this week as normal, on the south-east bank corner, my favorite spot since it offers shade in the hot afternoons. I speak to the odd person, but hear a lot of conversations. Not eavesdropping *per se*, more along the lines of getting the pulse of the community. Some interesting stuff I might add..."

"Norm, focus and get to the point." Tomasina's voice had a modicum of nervous edge to it.

"Okay, right. So for the last few days I have heard a lot of people grumbling. They had been shopping and supplies were diminished. Not like normal, but spotty or even downright empty shelves. Mainly bread, rolls, or at least that's what I was hearing. So then I hear some guy say he found some bread in the stores and he bought up twenty loaves for his freezer. With the jumpy supply, he said he wasn't taking any chances. Then a few minutes later I hear that they are now limiting sales to five loaves per family and things were getting a bit pushy around the bread section." Norm pursed his lips before moving on.

Magdalena jumped in. "So my neighbor tells me she hears that bread prices have skyrocketed in the city over the last few days. I walked by the bakery this morning and saw a hand-written sign that said eight dollars per loaf, and it had been crossed out and rewritten as ten! And when I went looking for flour so I could bake myself, the bins were empty. Turned over empty!" A cloud had passed over Magdalena's habitually sunny disposition.

"Ah, this is starting to make some sense, when one connects the dots from news stories of the past few weeks." Stephen scratched his chin reflectively. "I had heard on CNN that they had experienced a troubling increase in the fungus that leads to stem rust in Kansas and Iowa, and it was spreading as far north as Saskatchewan. Our climate has been wonky for twenty years or more, and the conditions for fungal growth have been ramping up. This results in a Biblical-type plague, where a whole field of wheat turns into a blackened mass of rot, unusable for downstream products."

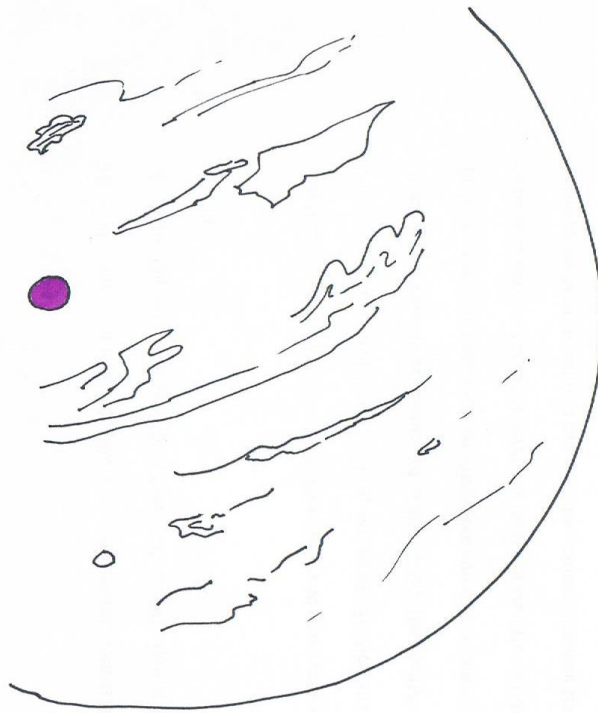
"And on top of that, there have been two major *derecho* events in the Midwest over the last few weeks!" Patricia was a schoolteacher through and through,

and always kept up with current events. "You know, like the one that went through from Chicago to DC in June of 2012, a wall of wind that flattened pretty much everything in its path? Well, these latest ones have been particularly horrific, wiping out grain elevators and railway terminals that are important components of the infrastructure to get the wheat to downstream mills and bread plants. So between the two factors of stem rust and wild winds, the available supply of wheat has gone down like a rock. Things could get grim."

"Now let me cut that off right at the pass." Magdalena was firm but kind. "I know we need grains for our energy, but making a run on the bakery won't help anybody! You can do all kinds of things with potato flour, or rice flour or quinoa. Let's pack up these apples and walk back to my place for some lentil soup and potato salad, and we can put our heads together to see how we can help folks get through this."

"Lead on Magdalena, this might take all the charm, energy and perseverance we can collectively muster." Tomasina looked from person to person. "And a bit of prayer wouldn't hurt one little bit."

Our Daily Bread



The lineup for the bakery went out the doors of the old post office, up the street to McMurray and over to Hatt and wrapping back around down Foundry almost to King. People were generally polite with one another, as they were Canadians after all. But underneath the grim smiles was a certain tension, that might just produce uncertain consequences if the conditions were right. They had all heard the news this morning that foodstuffs other than bread were also getting scarce in many of the big cities. No real basis for this shift, but the collective wisdom was that people were hoarding. A lot of folks still had freezers down in the basement, even though rolling electricity blackouts and the Big Blank of a few years back showed that these could be more of a liability than a help. But old habits die hard, and the thought of a large repository of food was very comforting to many. The bakery was a popular favourite for a good cross-section of the town, and had done well in its move to the beautiful stone building that had previously housed parcel clerks and stamp dispensers.

The normal opening time was 7 AM, but people had started to arrive just past five. It was now 8:20, and the lights were still off. Muttered rumors suggested that movement had been observed inside, and that news had spread around

the length of the queue in a matter of minutes. But no baking smells wafted out from under the door, and the handwritten sign proclaiming \$10 loaves was hanging on a precarious angle from a single piece of scotch tape.

Norm and Tomasina stood together near the first corner, hopeful that the line would move and that their patience would be paid off with an overpriced loaf. Stephen and Patricia were essentially behind the other two, separated by a petite Indian lady who sat on a folding chair, wrapped in a swath of blue silk from an old *sari*. Mina's eyes were closed, and she proceeded on with her meditating, oblivious to the growing tension around her.

"Ho ho there, Stephen old boy, what do you have in that wooden box?" Norm pointed to a beat-up container on a wheeled rig, that was covered loosely with some rough burlap.

"My little secret, Norm, but one I'll gladly share with a fellow urban farmer like you..." Stephen lifted the burlap with an exaggerated vaudevillian leer. "Patricia and I brought along some newly picked apples from the tree nursery and a range of vegetables from the community garden. Didn't anticipate this huge lineup of customers, but our thought was that perhaps fruit and produce for barter might get us closer to some bread than just mere money."

"Clever thinking, Stephen, but you might want to cover up those goods as quick as you can. A few hungry people could decide they like the looks of your wares, on the most unfavourable of barter terms." Tomasina cast a nervous sideways glance.

"I have no interest in your fruits nor your vegetables." Mina said this softly, with her eyes closed.

"I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to infer...." Tomasina sputtered and blushed.

"No hurt feelings in the least, I just wanted to assure you that I am no threat to your victuals." Mina's eyes opened slowly, and she extended a warm smile to the two couples.

"But you're here for some bread, I bet!" Norm had seen Mina countless times on King Street, as he sat outside the bank.

"No, I eat only brown rice for my starch. Bread is actually not that good for your health, too many refinements in the flour and I won't even begin to discuss the impacts of the yeasts. No, I came here to sit in the queue and bring Light to the situation. I do this more and more these days, but this current period demands even more attention."

"I very much appreciate what you're doing, but how do you know where to go and when to do what you are doing?" Tomasina asked this as a small child would, softly and without guile.

"The Light instructs me. While I sit in meditation, thought impulses come to me and I recall them when I come out of my sitting. Not my thoughts, these are things that come in from Big Mind. And I feel stuff coming in from the various planets, that I make use of, from Venus and Jupiter in particular."

Ah, Venus has always fascinated me!" Stephen perked up immediately. "You know it has a very dense atmosphere, with very high CO₂ and nitrogen levels. This blanket absorbs significant quantities of electromagnetic radiation from the Sun, acting like a mighty-mite body guard for those of us spinning around here on Earth!"

"I'm referring to things beyond the physical, kind sir. The Australian aboriginals get up very early to observe the rising of Venus, and they believe that there is a rope of light that connects it to Earth, through which they can communicate with ancestors who have passed on. And some of my friends who study theosophy contend that Venus is much more highly advanced than our Earth, and has sent emissaries to us to guide us out of our problems. Perhaps these are who I hear messages from?" Mina's voice was innocent, but firm.

"Hmm, and what of Jupiter? Such a large planet, can you imagine what sort of Gaia-like energy enfolds this Amazonian planet?" Norm was warming to this thread of conversation. "Rudolph Steiner thought that Jupiter was very significant to us, and may even be a model for our own evolution at a spiritual level. And all those moons!"

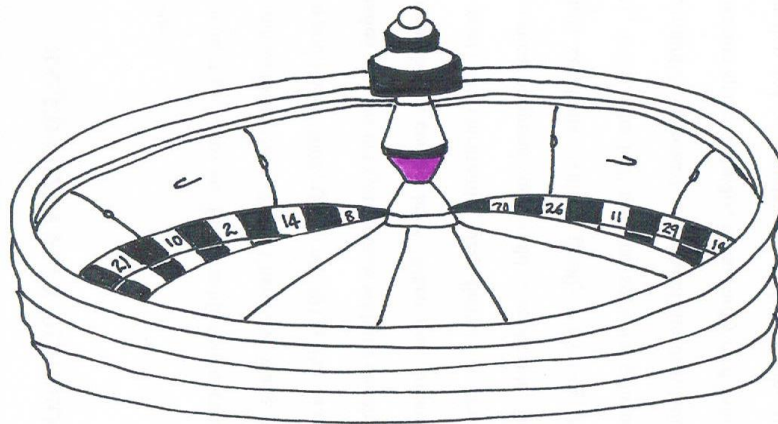
"I feel a link to every one of those moons." Mina said this with her eyes closed. "Subtle energies emanate from each one of them, and..."

The rest was drowned out by an excited pulse of sound by the people queued up near the bakery entrance. The owner had stuck her head out the door, and was trying to make herself heard. "We only had ingredients for twenty loaves, and I've cut them all in half, so that makes forty half loaves." A clamour went through the assemblage, then things became quiet. "I would like to sell these by lottery, and will go down the line and pass out tickets. And to clarify the terms, ten dollars a half loaf and cash only."

Someone yelled out "I need a full loaf!" Another said, or perhaps ten at the same time "So do I!" And with that the front of the line surged, and the owner ducked her head inside and locked the door. A few people fell, and a few

more fell on top of them. A number of burly young men, perhaps harbouring previous resentments, started to punch their queue neighbors and people turning to flee the scene. The wail of a siren in the distance seemed to whip things into an even greater frenzy. It was evident that the little bread there was would not be distributed by lottery, if at all.

It's Not Just in Monte Carlo



Around a dozen bicycles were locked up at any given time at the compound outside the Firehall near Memorial Square. Some would come in and some would go out, with turnover at a pretty good clip. This was a new *velo libre* site, where you could get a bicycle to run around town and do errands and then drop it back for the next person to use. These had been sweeping through big cities a few years back, but this was one of the first ones around in a town. As gas prices inched up steadily, more and more people wanted to either leave their car at home or do without it completely. And some folks did not want to worry about bike repair, so this facility and its roving bike mechanic were the perfect solution to their transportation needs.

Stephen and Patricia rolled in on a pair of silver-coloured bicycles, with their rear panniers bulging with produce freshly picked at the community gardens. They used to trundle some of the harvestings in the back of Stephen's company van, but the combination of escalating fuel prices and his desire to whittle a few pounds off his waistline had caused a shift to velo transport.

Right on their heels were Tomasina and Mina, who had just returned from an extended roll into Westdale. They had become friends recently, and gave each other company for two separate tasks. Mina's mission had been to pick up a video documenting the works of Anish Kapoor from the Westdale Library, and she had been so eager to see it that she simply did not want to wait for the public library's inter-branch transport system to bring it into town.

Tomasina's goal had not come to any fruition. She wanted to drop by the bakery in Westdale, directly adjacent to the library, to see if bread supplies were possibly returning to normal. Cleaned-out shelves and disenchanted bakery staff were her only findings, but with no mobs of unruly customers in sight.

"Hello, fine ladies, happy to see you out and about on the bicycle fleet!" Stephen's cheeks glowed pink.

"My early days in India were largely spent on two wheels." Mina's eyes had that soft off-focus cast that comes with fond reminiscence. "There was a time in mid-life when I did not have the opportunity to bicycle, but I have to say this new system is a godsend!"

"Any chance that you would like the pick of our crop?" Patricia had the practiced air of a market merchant. "We've got fresh corn, carrots, cucumbers, kale and arugula all locally grown and organic at prices that will make you stand up and crow!"

"I'll take some of everything." Tomasina was in her element. "Just tumble it all into my cloth bag here and tell me what is a fair sum for the aggregate. I had hoped to find a loaf of bread or some buns to fill the bag but your veggies may be a healthier choice!"

"I'll take some kale and some carrots, not a whole lot as my appetite is modest. But they will go well with my *dal* over the next few days." Mina gave Patricia a broad smile. "In fact, I'm going to drift home right now and put some lentils on low to simmer while I watch this video I just borrowed from the library. I love art videos, so this should be amazing."

"What aspect does it cover?" Stephen was always curious, eager to pick up some more knowledge, particularly if it related to art or culture.

"Ah, kind sir, it is a visual feast of the works of the sculptor Anish Kapoor." Mina savoured the name on her tongue.

"My, my, what an amazing artist he is." Patricia stopped her vegetable sorting and levelled her gaze on Mina. "I remember going to Chicago and visiting Millennium Park. Right on the western edge lies a giant bean-shaped aluminum sculpture, called Cloud Gate. It is simply stunning! People congregate around it day and night. It beautifully reflects the iconic buildings of downtown Chicago, and has a wonderful space underneath where a person can stand and the urban noise seems to just melt away."

"I know Cloud Gate, and it is a wondrous example of how Anish Kapoor

handles curved surfaces so dexterously, and how he incorporates the emergence of the void into his work.” Mina spoke softly. “As Christopher Alexander has so aptly stated, the inclusion of the void into our art and architecture reminds us strongly of the deep and silent space within us all. Spirituality put into practice, as a creative expression.”

“So do you think that creativity is an important element of a spiritual path?” Stephen looked at Mina, as an earnest straight-man would align with his partner comedian.

Mina knew how baseball was played, and when a lob pitch had been offered up to her. “Absolutely, my dear friend. I believe spiritual evolution, which is ongoing in us all, to be greatly complemented by the creative impulse that is prevalent in humanity. Vera Adler calls this process ‘epigenesis’, and I believe it to drive most of what we do. When creativity does not come into play, that’s when things can spiral down and stagnation can occur.”

At this point in the discussion the conversation stopped. Mina had put out an idea for them to contemplate, and individual and collective thought forms swirled around the assembled group. But on the periphery of their collective vision, Henri stepped out of a back door at the rear of a commercial building. He looked disheveled, and his manner was mildly furtive. Henri had the look of a man who had not seen sunlight for several days, and with some of that time lacking sufficient nourishment. It appeared as if he wanted to step away quickly, and that he did not want to be seen. Henri was a man of considerable strength, both in physique and character, but these capacities seemed clouded at present. So when Stephen looked in his direction, followed by Mina’s level gaze, Henri turned his head and walked towards the bank corner. A few brows furrowed back at the *velo libre* station, and Henri walked quickly home for a bath and some much-needed introspection.

A Furry Son



Arabella puttered around in her living room, arranging chairs just so and setting out a plate or two of snacks. She was preparing for another one of her salon evenings, that she had been organizing for the last few months to bring together friends and neighbours for discussion on a wide range of topics. The bread crisis had evolved sharply, and had emerged as a general food crisis because of continued hoarding. There would be a reasonable supply of food in stores and shops, but a sizable fraction of the population continued to be unreasonable and bought up everything in sight as soon as it was put out on shelves. So Arabella's foray into the downtown for snack materials had yielded only modest results. She placed the digestive biscuits and stewed prunes in as attractive a pattern as she could muster on an engraved silver platter.

The knocker sounded twice over the next fifteen minutes, and Stephen and Patricia were the first to pad down the dimly lit hallway littered with expensive art, followed by Mina dressed in a mauve-coloured *sari*. Arabella arranged her salons in a serendipitous way. She would only invite folks one day in advance, and would invite every third or fourth person she came across on the day of invitation. If she was out and about for a considerable period this could amount to quite a lot of invitees, and if it was more of an at-home day it might then be limited to neighbours and passersby. In any case, the number attending and the composition of people varied greatly from one salon to another.

"Well, dear friends, it's time to start and I'm very happy that you have decided to come here this evening and share your thoughts. We may have at least one other person join us a bit later, but let's get things underway. I have taken a page from the classical French tradition, where people from a wide range of backgrounds come together and discuss matters of mutual interest. In the past it could have been about poetry, or an emerging *genre d'art*, but we do not provide constraints on the topics considered in this modern day *salon*. So what things are most on your mind, *ce soir*?"

"I suppose we should stay away from obvious topics, such as the food crisis that is staring us down at this time?" Stephen had large beads of sweat popping out on his brow and grimaced as he ejected his words.

"We can discuss the empty shelves in the grocery store, and all of their ramifications, if you would like." Arabella said this in a soothing tone, but her eyes had taken on a worried cast.

"I'm not sure if it's fruitful, Stephen. It's just that we're very upset. Someone came in the dark of night and grabbed every fruit, cob and bean that was present in the community gardens. Much of the material wasn't even close to ripe, but they took it anyway. Just stripped it. And these plots have been largely tended by working families and seniors, folks who need the food. Especially at this desperate time. So now it's no food in the stores, and no food now or in the future from the gardens. Anyways, I just had to get that off my chest." Patricia drubbed her chin into a tanned fist.

"I would like to share some thoughts from a different source, that may have some relevance to this topic." Mina sat serenely, looking from one to the other.

"The floor is yours, dear Mina." Arabella made a grand sweeping gesture. A few seconds of silence went by, punctuated by the ticking of a grandfather clock housed in the north-west corner of the living room. "I spend considerable hours a day in meditation. Much Light flows in during this time, and many inspirations come to me from Source while I sit quietly. But sometimes the frequency changes slightly, as if I am dialing into another station on the FM band. I get messages that can span a wide spectrum of topics. Lately it has been more of a conversation with friends from another realm. Some might call these extraterrestrial in nature, so why not wear the shoe if it fits? They are most assuredly not of this Earth." Mina paused for effect. "They have been sending me sweet reassurances that, despite the current grimness, everything will be well. All is well, all is perfect."

"Ma'am, I am dealing with a lot of hungry folks right now, and I can tell you that it's far from perfect." A few more beads of sweat had emerged onto Stephen's forehead.

"Challenges, yes, but perfectly posed for what we need to learn and what we need to change. My higher frequency friends tell me that the Divine will provide for all our needs. But they have specifically stated that the way we grow food needs to change. Too much mechanization, too much transport. Far too many people eating meat, for which a huge portion of arable land is needed to grow the input crops for animal feed. They ask us to look at all animals as brothers, as beautiful sentient beings. How could one eat their brother? And before you write me off as a flake, consider how many of us

have a dog or cat living with us? And we love them to bits, even consider them as one of our family. The thought of eating these doggies or kitties would be preposterous, no? But how are the cattle, pigs, chickens, lambs, bison and deer of the meat industry any different than our domesticated four-legged family members? So what I am being told is change what we eat, and there will be plenty of food to go around! Not popular I know, but certainly food for thought!" Mina crossed her arms with just a hint of a swagger.

Now Stephen, Patricia and Arabella were all meat eaters, and they accepted this barrage from Mina like a flurry of punches from an aggressive heavyweight pugilist. But before they could respond in any way, they all heard a creak from a hallway floorboard. A man stood near the living room entrance, but far enough back that his face was in shadow. Arabella knew the silhouette to be Henri, her next-door neighbor and friend.

"I apologize for interrupting, Arabella but I am somewhat...er, desperate. If I could borrow another hundred dollars in cash, I will pay you back...very soon."

"Oh *cher* Henri, we are just in the middle of a salon discussion. Might you be able to join us, and we can discuss this afterwards?" Arabella patted down her hair in a nervous fashion.

"I have to go out, and I need money now." Henri stepped forward half a step so that his face was lit from the living room chandelier, unveiling a tortured look. He stepped back into the shadow.

"Henri, this is somewhat difficult to broach, but you have borrowed a tidy sum from me of late, with none of the promised returns. I'm afraid I'll have to say no at present." Arabella smoothed her skirt around her hips, feigning indifference.

"I need the money, or I wouldn't be interrupting you." Face terse, half in light and half in shadow.

"For what purpose, sir?" Stephen's jaw was firm.

"It's none of your business, *monsieur*. I remember you from my recent talk, but I am afraid I have not made your acquaintance. What is your name?"

"Stephen Tucker." This was said in a clipped tone.

"Tucker...Tucker, are you the husband of Margaret Tucker?" Henri said this wincingly.

"Yes, Margaret's my wife of 38 years." Stephen's tone lightened, as he was unaware of what was to come.

"Well sir, if you must know, I need the hundred bucks so I can go and have a drink and gamble a bit downtown. This is all below the radar, see, the place serves cheap drinks as it doesn't have a license and the gambling is also under the table. The guy who runs it has a legit business up front and we drink and gamble in the back out of the limelight, know what I mean?" This all tumbled out of Henri at a meteoric pace.

"Oh, Henri, you've been gambling away my money. And I don't have as much cash these days, as I have taken a shellacking in the market." Arabella pouted, not unattractively.

I'll return the money soon, I promise. I've just had an unlucky streak. I know I don't seem like the gambling type, or the kind of guy who would have a drink in a speakeasy. But times have been tough lately, and I have felt the pull of some very dark demons. If I can't borrow money from you, Arabella, then I'll have to hit up some guys who sit at the back tables. They have flashy smiles and shiny cufflinks, but something tells me you don't want to owe these guys a thing. I'm trying to spill more sunshine on my shadow side, but it's gradual, y'know." It was clear Henri wasn't making this up.

"But tell me, why did you ask me about Margaret?" This was said in a very frosty way by Stephen.

"Oh, I'd rather not say." Henri was evasive and coy.

"Out with it!" Stephen bellowed.

"Margaret's been gambling with me, almost every night over the last little while, and drinking quite a bit. She's a great lady, looks like she'd be more at home at a church supper than in a speakeasy. But she's not much of a gambler, and she's in way over her head. And I know she has borrowed money from the shiny cufflink guys, and I have to say I don't like the way they look at her. If you know what I mean?" Henri's voice had an apologetic tone.

Stephen sat in his chair, deflated and stunned, with two stewed prunes on a plate balanced precariously on his knee. He had a lot more to worry about than a ransacked community garden.

A Libretto For All



After the events of the previous evening, Arabella moped around the house all day tidying and doing other chores that really weren't pressing but gave her something to take her mind off things. She was very worried about Henri, and wasn't quite sure what to do about it. At one point, after he moved in next door and started doing brisk calisthenics in a tight red Speedo in his backyard, she had wondered if there might be a chance of romance. There was something about him that stirred some deep feelings inside her, and she realized that he reminded her of the ex-husband that she had lived with for 18 months directly after grad school. That had not ended well, so perhaps there was no point in starting up something similar that had dubious chances of succeeding. Every now and then she would reconsider her position, and then quickly convince herself that Henri and his hard body would be interested in a much younger and more nubile companion, not someone ten years older and whose hips were telegraphing her love of Belgian chocolate. But she was certainly worried about his admissions of gambling and drinking, all done quite recklessly in an unlicensed establishment. So she would peer out her side curtains from time to time, hoping to catch him and bend his ear in a supportive way. After an hour or so of regular checking, she saw him in the side yard with a watering can, standing over a bed of perennials.

"Good afternoon, dear sir, how do your flowers grow?" This was said cooingly and with copious amounts of eyelid fluttering.

"Dear Arabella, I have to apologize for my indiscretion of last evening, and for any embarrassment it may have caused." The stance of a hangdog was perfected.

“Oh, not to worry at all! Say, do you have near-term plans? I have Mina dropping by momentarily, and we had planned a hike on such a lovely day. Perhaps the back trail behind the golf course, through to the McCormick’s area, to see some wildflowers and some amazing vistas?”

“I’ll grab a hat and meet you out front in a jiffy.” Henri looked relieved.

As synchronicity and good planning would have it, Mina strolled up to the front of Arabella’s home at the very second Arabella and Henri came out their front doors. Mina was wearing a Tilley hat sent to her for her birthday by her son, and a broad smile. They made their way up Witherspoon and over to King Street, and mounted the hill that would take them to the entrance to the golf course. They then walked up and down a series of modest hills, with intermittent streams and marshy ground evident at the lowest points along the route. At the point where the Bruce Trail bisects the arcing McCormick Trail, they came upon a man and woman bending over to inspect a delicate wildflower growing just off-trail.

“Patricia, Alphonse, how nice to come across you. And what a wonderful flower to behold.” Mina took off her Tilley hat and squatted down alongside the two.

“So Mr. Tucker does not subscribe to wildflower admiration tours?” Henri said this lightheartedly, but with a certain leavening of malice.

“Stephen had things to set right at home, Monsieur LaMontagne. Surely you would be the first to understand.” All said matter-of-factly, and showing signs of Patricia’s role as the high school’s debate team advisor.

Arabella stepped forward in a conciliatory way. “And what a beautiful day for a hike, we are blessed in so many ways!”

“We haven’t formally met, *madame*, but I appreciate your optimistic spirit. Alphonse Neumann is my name. I work with Patricia and Stephen, from time to time, in the gardens. We tried to stand in line for some fresh produce at a few stores in town, but things had run out and the queues got very ugly very quickly. So we stole away and decided we needed a balm for our spirits. A long walk in nature heals most things rapidly.”

“Oh my, I have a well-stocked pantry in many aspects, but in other areas my supplies are really starting to dwindle down. But based on what you’ve told me, I don’t really want to venture downtown! What hooligans! Just because things become a little daunting, many feel they can just act like thugs!” Arabella’s brow had a significant furrow running through it.

"We reap what we sow." Mina said this with closed eyes.

"Pardon me, Mina?" Patricia was still smarting from the clearout of the community gardens.

We reap what we sow. What you saw this afternoon was the perfect output of what these folks have been taught and allowed to think over their lifetimes." Eyes closed, but said with a smile.

"Far from perfect, in my view." Patricia was quick to respond, with Arabella nodding vigorously.

Dear friend, I'm not saying what happened was perfect, but it was a perfect output given all of the input conditions." Mina paused while the others lightly steamed. "You are a teacher, correct? So how much do we tell our young people how to revere the Earth? How much training have we given them in low-impact food production? Have we told him that all humans are brothers and sisters, and what we give to them we in essence give to ourselves? Not much, not much, and no! Instead we raise folks to be brutally competitive, to always be looking out for number one. So when food supplies wobble because of our environmental atrocities, then everyone grabs what they can and much more than they need. Harvesting a community garden of its unripe gifts is beyond a me-first philosophy, it is simply ignorance fueled by desperation! But it was a perfectly logical manifestation, given the inputs." Mina pursed her lips and tilted her head sideways.

"I'll try not to take that personally, given that I am a teacher." Patricia smiled, but with just a glint of teeth.

"I don't think Mina is trying to single out education, it's just everything in society. How we consume, how we look at each other, how we help the unfortunate, and on and on. We've made the bed in a certain way, and now we have to lie in it." Alphonse communicated this in a rueful tone.

"But there's hope. As Vera Alder said in her book on a fifth-dimensional world, the conditions create the manifestation that we see. A window on a cloudy day will have a fern-like frost pattern on it. A window on a sunny day will have a rose-like frost pattern on its surface. But she maintains all the patterns are there, and with the given conditions, one then emerges. But if the conditions change, another pattern that is already there emerges. So we will see what we are currently seeing until we change the conditions. But the good news is that the good output is already there! The Divine is the Father/Mother of us all, and has set up this neat game of life for us to eventually be in a very good space. We all started in a very good space, and our end state is

assuredly a very good space!” Mina let the others catch up before plunging on. “So we will stay where we are, until we just simply grow tired of the old ways, and we will collectively and quickly change the inputs. One of my favorite sayings is ‘suffer while you can’! Because when we wake up, we won't need to suffer any longer. And you won't see any more fisticuffs in grocery store lineups, or even lineups for that matter!”

Alphonse chimed in. “On that note, I have a suggestion for you all. Let’s walk the McCormick loop, and then you're invited back to my place for supper. I have a large supply of sauerkraut, beernuts and frozen pumpernickel rolls that I would be happy to share. And if you have time after that, we can stroll over to the amphitheater at the Veldhuis conservation area. Tonight they have a wonderful opera singer, and the beautiful sound will flow up and down the Desjardins Canal!” And with that the group crested the hill near the horse paddock, giving them an enviable view of the town in the foreground and the city in the far background, and perhaps a vision of a new way of looking at this world of illusory shadow and unbridled light.

Part III: A Resolution, Partially Illuminated

Great Minds Think Alike



Magdalena walked around and around her kitchen, waiting for inspiration to come to her for a creative way to draw a gnome for a lawn maintenance company's website. It would come to her eventually, but she had scuppered her first ten attempts and was feeling frustrated. A tad peckish, she popped a few raisins and two cashews into her mouth and chewed reflectively. She saw a cobweb above the fridge which she dispatched quickly with a flick of a broom and then went on to wash two mugs and a cereal bowl that were mouldering in the kitchen sink. Still feeling no artistic inspiration, she lay down on her living room couch and started to give Reiki to her eyes. The universal life force energy always provided the answers she needed along with a few surprises.

Alphonse sat in front of his easel and sighed. A new commission had come his way, but it was for a corpulent banker with no hair and a very nondescript countenance. This one would take some focus and elbow grease. His mind turned to trivial things, such as the salt content of his Pop's sauerkraut recipe. Then on to the opera, from a replaying of the recent production in his mind to the golden-haired prima donna who had sung the majority of the pieces. Alphonse was not a virgin, but his recent track record put him firmly in the celibate-artist-but-not-by-choice category. His next mental image had the soprano scaling the same piece without the benefit of her evening gown, and Alphonse could not help admiring his mental concept of her considerable assets. And it went from this to the considerably more lithe Magdalena doing a yoga class in a skintight bodysuit. This all happened in a mental tumble that ran pell-mell ahead of Alphonse, and he thought he had better lie down on his flowered brocade chesterfield and get his thoughts back to the doughy banker.

Arabella sat in her solarium, with her feet in a warmish chamomile and Hawaiian rock salt footbath, nursing a smoothie made of local berries and fresh biodynamic kefir. The food shortage had actually been a blessing of sorts, as she had voluntarily gone to a two-thirds plate helping and found that her pants were starting to feel looser already. She closed her eyes, and visualized Henri doing push-ups and sit-ups in front of her while she sat in a low-slung chaise lounge, all the while wearing a magenta bikini that showed off her figure to considerable effect. The fantasy of wearing a bikini in public snapped her back into a grim reality, and she quickly towed off her feet and laid down, hoping for pleasant but more realistic daydreams.

Henri woke up, confused and disoriented. He slumped back on the bed and tried to remember what day it was. It wasn't so much the gambling that was throwing him off his mark, it was the associated drinking. He was the type of person to take good care of his body, and the speakeasy liquor was no tonic to his physique. It made him mentally fuzzy, and he was starting to put on a bit of weight around his middle. Henri knew he had to confront his demons, and resolved to take concrete steps to gradually wean off the late nights in the back of the shop. Feeling better with that resolution, he rolled over for just a few more winks of sleep.

Mina sat on her meditation pillow. She was about an hour into a two-hour afternoon meditation, and she beamed Light and Love to the space around her, down and around the block, out and over to all those she had come into contact with over the last little while. At one point she heard a commotion, and slowly opened and then closed one eye. A bit later she heard a cheer rise up from some distant point, but kept on meditating. And when she heard the

cheer again she knew it was time to investigate. She sent out a mental invitation to all those she knew would be happy to revel in this cheering.

Mina cut across the alley and stepped lightly down Cross Street. She continued on the long block to the old Town Hall, and as she walked she heard the intermittent cheering coming from behind the beautiful old stone building. She wanted to keep her distance until the others showed up. Mina didn't know who or how many would be coming, but she did know there was always safety in numbers. So she went around the long way to the parking lot and hung back in the wee pocket park that housed some old military cannons. Symbolic protection, from some of the poor behavior she had heard about since the troubles began.

But the crowd was buoyantly positive. A farm wagon had been rolled in to serve as a makeshift stage, and the municipal councillor was up on its deck, speaking into a microphone and skillfully working the crowd into a modest fever. "The last week has presented a lot of challenges for us all." He paused for effect. "But I am happy to announce that the federal government has released reserves of wheat and grains over the last 48 hours and bread companies and bakeries have swung into high production." A cheer went up from the crowd. "I was just over to the grocery store and shelves were getting restocked at a great clip. The purchase restrictions and the security guards will stay for just a bit, to ensure that everyone gets their share and that things stay orderly." Another cheer went up. "And as for moving forward..."

Mina saw Henri, Arabella and Magdalena first as they lived on the same street and had walked over together when they found themselves out and about at the same time, moving in the same direction. Then she saw Alphonse, looking a bit shy and then a bit sheepish when he spotted Magdalena. It didn't escape his attention that she was wearing a tight black bodysuit, albeit with a multi-coloured floral peasant skirt. They all assembled in a pod and migrated over to Mina. She greeted them with a warm smile and a look that was difficult to decipher.

"My friends, I'm glad you accepted my invitation to come and hear the good news about the apparent resolution of the food crisis."

"Er, always nice to see you Mina, but I'm afraid I didn't receive an invitation from you?" Arabella had not had time to brush her hair, but her feet smelled fantastic from the effects of the footbath.

"Me neither, Mina, I was just lying down and something came to me that I needed to jump up and come over this way." Magdalena raised her eyebrows fetchingly.

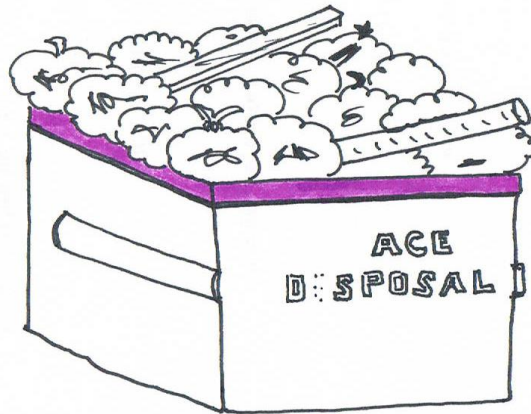
“Right, I was in my meditation, heard the cheering, and then sent out a message to you all via the ether to come join me. Nothing sophisticated, just tapping into fourth-dimensional wave technology.” Mina gave them all a knowing look.

“Madame, are you having some fun with us?” Henri looked skeptical.

Mina displayed a filigree of mock annoyance.

“Dear sir, please, do you still question how your wireless phone works? I use the same technology to communicate mind to mind, but it doesn't need the expenditure for a monthly data plan!”

Perfect Mind, Perfect Health



Henri was in his side shed, sorting the byproducts of daily living into various piles on the concrete floor. He composted all of his organic kitchen waste and leaf trimmings in a bruised drum in the back forty of his property, and put the resulting compost down on a nicely productive backyard vegetable garden. Henri was very scrupulous when he bought anything, looking closely at the possibility of some slipstream that couldn't be composted or recycled, and often made this the deciding criterion for the purchase. But the city went to biweekly garbage pickup, and then to monthly as operating budget issues closed off the lifeblood of the municipality. And just last month they cut off curbside collection altogether. The ubiquitous garbage truck, with its squeaking brakes and rank aroma, was seen no more on the tree-lined streets of the town.

People still produced garbage and recyclables and compostables, but Henri decided to take matters into his own hands. He would compost any organics out in his yard, and would not produce a garbage stream from that point on.

Others would have to walk, bike or drive their wastes to some depots sprinkled throughout the town, or to the larger waste transfer station out on Olympic Drive. But his recyclables were considerable in volume, so he kept everything neatly sorted and stored in reusable mesh bags and got them ferried out whenever Arabella was doing a run in her 1982 Carman Ghia. Today was one of those days, because she had recently received a shipment of two Afghani rugs that had come overwrapped in bubble wrap and packing paper, and they had collectively decided to make a sojourn to the transfer station.

At the same time, Alphonse and Magdalena were loading the trunk of his battered Alfa Romeo with the leftovers of a small do-it-yourself renovation to Alphonse's back rumpus room. Alphonse had invited Magdalena for a modest lunch, and she had secretly delighted him by wearing the same black bodysuit that she had been wearing the other day and in his not-so-innocent reverie. The fact that she had paired the bodysuit with a pair of men's boxer briefs and brightly coloured Keen sandals did not significantly alter Alphonse's admiration. After eating, the ever-practical Alphonse had shown her his completed renovation and she had been the one to then suggest that they could tidy things up and run the detritus over to the transfer station. After a bit of effort and some pleasantly close bumping of hips and arms, they were set for the short ride to Olympic Drive.

They roared up the access road to the transfer station and swung left to the sector where recyclables are dropped off. Just ahead of them was a sporty Carman Ghia, driven by Arabella who was sporting a smashing silk scarf and svelte leather driving gloves. It appeared that her passenger Henri would do most of the material unloading.

Hello, kind neighbors, fancy meeting you in a joint like this!" Magdalena jumped out of the Alfa Romeo and gave a spirited wave.

"Why dear Maggie, if I had known you had some materials to bring over I would have knocked on your door." Arabella patted down her hair and shifted her scarf to center.

"Appreciate the thought, Arabella, but I had been loitering around Alphonse's house and suggested we tidy up a bit from his recent DIY project. I suspect certain gentlemen would leave the final clearing of the decks to the next decade or so if unprompted." Magdalena chuckled and looked in Alphonse's direction, who rolled his eyes and winced before jumping into the conversation.

"I live close by but I rarely come over here. I have a few teenagers in the neighborhood who are happy to run my recyclables and the odd bit of

garbage up to the depot bins off York Road.” Alphonse paused as he thought he had heard a rumbling sound, and then went on. “Part-time jobs for the young folks have really dried up relative to when I was that age. So a bit of cash flow to these kids can’t be a bad thing, and I can count on them for some eaves cleaning, grass cutting and leaf raking on top of the recycling runs.” The rumble was audible again, and it sounded like metal cascading on metal. It appeared to be coming from a large bin right in front of the foursome, marked ‘Metal’. Henri went over to the 5 foot high bin and deftly pulled himself up on its perimeter lip to peer inside.

“Sir, are you okay in there?” Henri’s voice had a querulous tone. A sack of cans sailed over the edge of the bin and landed somewhat unceremoniously at Arabella’s feet. Fingertips poked over the edge, and in half a second a man hoisted himself up over the lip and landed lightly on his feet beside Henri.

“Norm?” Magdalena’s voice was just on the edge of breaking into a chuckle.

“Guilty as charged, m’dear. And I might add that you look particularly fetching on this fine day.” This was said neutrally, with only the mildest hint of a leer.

“Hey, laughter yoga compatriot, what are you doing dumpster diving?” Alphonse came up and gave him a mock punch to his right shoulder.

“Well, if the truth be known, the recent food crisis has put a bit of a dent into my micro-finance operations. My needs are modest, but I still need a bit of cash to live in the lifestyle that I have grown accustomed to! So I have taken to scaling the fence of this fine specimen of centralized infrastructure as they won’t allow pedestrians just to amble in due to some cockamamie safety protocols. I then pick through the metal and glass bins and separate out any aluminum beer cans and glass wine bottles. I pop these into some mesh bags and throw them over the fence, and then stroll over to the beer store for some hard cash negotiations. I am certainly appreciative of the townsfolk who let these things migrate into their blue bins!” Norm grinned and flashed a striking row of teeth.

“Scaling that fence is certainly impressive, particularly for a man of your... vintage.” Henri caught himself at the last second, but he was always taken by a show of strength.

“*Merci bien, monsieur.* Listen, I’ve been amazing myself of late. I’m the first one to admit that I have had my share of demons. But something stirred me to walk more, and to do it reflectively. And then I bumped into these two at laughter yoga. And then some chanting. And Tomasina has crossed my path and I’m now weaving in Qi Gong, Ayurveda, kundalini yoga and aspects I

won't even admit to in mixed company!" He looked towards Arabella and gave her a lascivious wink. "And as more and more light pours into me with these modalities, my demons are fitfully retreating to the shadowy corners of my psyche. Pretty soon there'll be no place left to hide and they will totally disappear!" Norm had his hands up and out, with his voice excited.

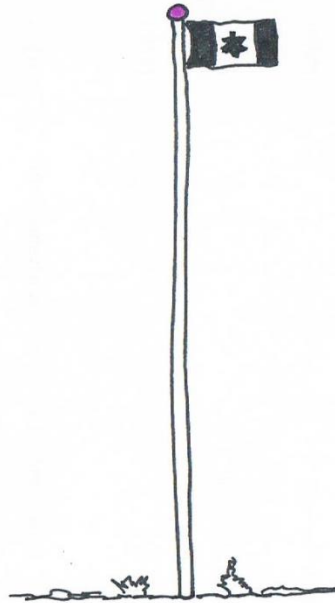
"And for a guy who has just been dumpster diving, Norm, you look amazing!" Alphonse said this genuinely, as the transformation in Norm from the laughter yoga session not so long ago was astounding.

"Well, that's the amazing thing, Alph. As my demons head for the hills, my health problems have just started to fall away. I have suffered for years from acid reflux, but now it's gone. My eyes, after years of too much reading, were always giving me problems but now they feel clear and strong. My left Achilles has always squawked since one memorable squash match in the dungeons of Hart House, but it too has mysteriously ebbed away. I'm starting to believe that somewhere within me is a perfect body, and as I get my mind aligned correctly it will simply manifest itself without too much fanfare." Norm had dropped his hands, and said this in a quiet, near-reverential tone.

"I used to see you downtown in the days... and in the nights, but that has changed also." This was said in a near-whisper by Henri.

"Henri, those forays to the speakeasy were emblematic of a time in my life where everything crumbled. As all these good things have come into my life, the tipples were the first to disappear." Norm paused and put a hand on Henri's heart. "And friend, I hope they fall off your dance card also."

Shift Happens



Arabella paced up-and-down inside the entrance foyer of the School of Art. It had been a few years since the renovation of the art school, bringing the former-industrial-headquarters-turned-into-cultural-trendsetter fully into the twenty first-century. But the modern entrance, looking a bit like a Vegas takeoff on a Martian spaceship, still rankled Arabella who had been a generous and regular donor to the renovation campaign. Not so rankled to prevent her from booking the upstairs loft for irregularly spaced public talks. She had arranged for a geophysicist from the university to come speak on geomagnetic pole reversals, and he was late. The loft space was filling up nicely with interested folks or people who came to free events simply to get out of the house. Two tardy couples bounded up the stairs as she looked out the door to the courtyard. The first was Norm and Tomasina, who were arm in arm and seemed to have the energy and verve of over-amorous twentysomethings. Norm nodded to Arabella with mock solemnity, and whirled Tomasina up the stairs while giving her bottom a tweak. The second couple was Alphonse and Magdalena, their affection for each other distinctly evident but Alphonse's Germanic heritage preventing him from any public display of this. They, too, scampered up the stairs to the loft and a balding gentleman in a tweed jacket materialized thereafter at Arabella's side, with proffered apologies and some muttering about graduate students keeping him at the office.

Moments later, with the quick establishment of a laptop emitting a colourful PowerPoint presentation and the wiping of wire-rimmed spectacles, the earnest academic stood quietly before a murmuring crowd.

“Friends, I would like to call this meeting to order.” The murmuring continued, and a number of people continued to stack up Peek Frean cookies and pour lemonade at a rear table. Arabella smiled a cold and distant smile.

“You are too kind... on behalf of the Desjardins Club, I am delighted to introduce our speaker for the evening. Dr. Seymour Rathbone is an eminent geophysicist, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and an internationally renowned expert on geology and the magnetic fields of the Earth. It is indeed our privilege to have him address us this evening, and it is my pleasure to turn the podium over to him for what I know will be a very stimulating evening of science. Professor Rathbone...” Arabella flushed fetchingly, and extended a tanned hand with a beautiful turquoise ring towards the earnest academic.

He stood at the podium and shuffled some notes, before taking up a remote clicker in hand that had a built-in laser pointer. He looked out at the crowd as if it were a motley crew of unruly undergraduates, which was a reasonable approximation of the level of consciousness for a considerable cross-section of the audience. Some grimacing, then some adjustment of his glasses, followed in turn by a pronounced hitching-up of his trousers. Early indicators were that it could be quite a long evening.

“Thank you for this invitation to speak. I will set the stage, then give you some background material that will illuminate my main points, and then sum up with some conclusions.” More trouser hitching, followed by some remote clicking that went opposite to the intended direction.

“Right. We all live on Earth, and our society rests on a very thin crust of the Earth's mantle, upon which we build our cities and highways and cell towers and amusement parks. Some of this crust is rock, some of it is rock covered by deep soils that we farm or have forest stands upon, and the majority is rock covered by oceans. But this rock is pretty thin, relative to the diameter of the Earth. And inside the Earth's core is molten iron, spinning around and around. So think of the crust we live on as the cooled and solidified skin of this molten iron core. And this crust is made up of various pieces or plates that move around and bump into one another or pull apart from one another. This is how we get our mountains formed, by plates of crust bumping into one another.” Seymour paused to take a healthy slurp of water from a glass set out by Arabella.

“So far, so good? So we have this internal core made up of molten iron, and as the Earth spins the whirling iron creates a geomagnetic field. The strength of this field varies with time, and has been dropping considerably of late. But I can't over-emphasize the importance of this geomagnetic field. It literally creates a force field of protection around the Earth, bumping away all kinds of

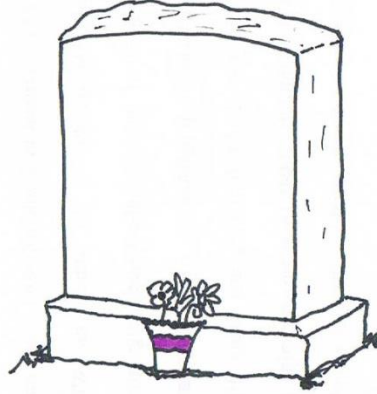
debris that comes to us on the solar wind.” This was accompanied by a particularly arresting colour graphic. “There is considerable evidence that Mars once had deep soils and lots of water, not unlike the Earth. But a change in its geomagnetic field intensity caused the solar wind to literally erode away its soils, and once that happened it became a very arid planet indeed.” Seymour pursed his lips for effect, and advanced slides.

“But another aspect of the spinning molten iron dynamo deep inside the Earth is that it creates magnetic north and south poles. Remember those bar magnets from high school physics, where one end attracts and the other end repels? Well, based on evidence from iron deposits in rocks, every so often the magnetic poles shift, and North becomes South and South becomes North. We don’t really know what causes this, I’m sorry to say, but it happens intermittently and we term this as a pole shift. And we are considered to be far overdue for the next pole shift. Which leads me to some current research....”

At this point many audience members went into that zone of low-level slumber that can be brought on by too much detail or a heavy dinner. Some valiant souls struggled to stay awake. Norm visually admired the considerable charms of both Tomasina and Magdalena, and got caught doing this on three distinct occasions. Arabella sat off to the side and once felt her head snap, and resolved as mistress of ceremonies that she must stay awake. But the end came soon enough, mercifully.

“To finish with some practical conclusions. The last few weeks have shown us we live within a precarious relationship with the Earth. The pole shift may occur tomorrow, or it could affect our great-grandchildren. But when it comes, and it most certainly will come, I would submit to you we will see considerable changes to the Earth as we know it. The shifting poles and the resultant magnetic field changes could significantly ramp up tectonic plate movement. We have seen a lot of seismic events over the last decade, both earthquakes and volcanoes, and I suggest to you we will see a lot more of this and perhaps over a very short time period. This could mean coastlines could change quickly, and a number of spewing volcanoes could change our climate and food production and air travel all in one big domino effect. So my advice would be to live each day fully and simply prepare yourself for some big changes when it does unfold. I know this may sound daunting, but from a scientific perspective it is absolutely fascinating. Consider Krakatoa, and the large chain of volcanoes in Iceland, if they were all to pop in a given month...” Seymour went past the limit of his audience, in length and detail. But the talk had made many in the audience reflect, particularly given the food shortage they had all faced of late. Norm, for his part, decided to live each day fully and slipped his arm around both Tomasina and Magdalena while they descended the stairway. Alphonse walked behind, more amused than annoyed.

Listen to Your Body



They spilled into the courtyard of the art school and turned right onto Artists' Way, ambling toward King Street. Neither were fully established couples, so there was that bit of awkwardness that often arises when the end of night is near and no one knows where things will end. So it was safer to keep on strolling, and the gorgeous night air was a perfect accompaniment for that decision. They jiggled and jogged and started to wend their way past the stately homes of Cross Street. The Driving Park was getting quiet at this time of night, and they crossed through it in an irregular fashion and mounted some wooden steps leading to the Grove Cemetery. After some memorial stone dodging, they found themselves on a grassy slope under some very majestic trees. Sandals off, four people luxuriated in the cool of the grass and its impending dew. A few late-to-bed birds sang out in a non-committal way, and a large black squirrel tut-tutted from a low branch of a darkish hemlock.

"Alphonse, with the view we have from this impressive slope, is it fair to say we are looking in the direction of your home?" Norm had never been to *chez Neumann*, but had found over the years that domestic conversation was an effective way to get down to more substantive fare.

"Yes, perhaps no more than four blocks away, or less as the crow flies." Alphonse looked at Norm neutrally, but could never truly dispel the mental image of their first meeting at the laughter yoga class.

"I'm used to seeing more light in the sky towards that zone, from the baseball fields near the public services building?" Tomasina had not lived in town a considerable time but had observed its nuances and details with the eye of a *connoisseur*.

"Hmmm, you are right, there used to be a lot of night games and those light standards cast quite a glow. But since the EcoPark has become a reality, they have cut back on the wattage a bit and have installed reflecting panels so that the glare into nature is greatly reduced. I love it now out on the canal, in my

kayak. At dusk it really feels like dusk, and I think that's important for all animals, including humans!" Alphonse chuckled and Norm snorted, getting the joke.

"So what did you folks think of the talk this evening? Interesting? Stimulating? Scary? Mysterious?" Magdalena wanted to get the vector of conversation slanted to something more tantalizing than the foot-candle intensity of baseball field light standards.

It got off to a bit of a shaky start but started to gel quite nicely as most people nodded off." Tomasina closed her eyes for emphasis, and then snapped them open. "But it's a bit like waiting for The Big One in California earthquake circles, we all know it's going to happen eventually, but it could happen well after one has shuffled off this mortal coil. So does it truly change the way you live life?"

"Well, m'dear, your point is well taken." Norm leaned over and tweaked Tomasina's cheek, in a way that made Alphonse blush and Magdalena smile. "When I hear about a pole shift and all the probable outfalls that would ripple out from it, I do pause and think about life to a deeper degree. It may be my philosophy training, but if life as we know it could change drastically tomorrow, shouldn't we perhaps live life differently today?"

"I agree, it certainly pushes me in that direction also. I've never been very materialistic, and the stuff that I do have I could happily give up tomorrow. But as a society that isn't true, and it seems like more and more folks are hung up on material goods. Just go to the mall, heaven forbid, they are full and not just at Christmas time. But a lot of changes are coming to us, and I know we will undergo a huge loss of material goods. So whether it is from a pole shift, a massive storm or flooding due to climate change, a broken economy or a war, many of us will face the future with a lot less material possessions." Alphonse said all of this quickly and softly, and looked from person to person as it tumbled out.

The silhouette of a man and his dog appeared on the lower part of the slope, and they slowly and intermittently worked their way up towards the group. The dog had considerable nervous energy, while the man appeared to be tentative and plodding.

Stephen, is that you?" Alphonse called out in a light manner.

"Yes, why hello, Alphonse. And good evening to the rest of you." Stephen's voice sounded hollow and brittle.

"It's been a while since we crossed paths, Stephen, how have you been?" Magdalena said this warmly, with empathy.

"Uh, not so well. It's been a rough patch of late. The food crisis didn't help things, and I've been having more than a spot of trouble...at home. It's been touch and go with my wife, much more go than touch." Stephen blurted this out wryly and then paused. "I'm a private person but I feel I need to tell this to someone. My wife has been hitting the bottle a lot, and...when she's hitting the bottle... she's also been hitting me." This dropped like a bomb on the two couples.

"Oh, Stephen I am so sorry." Tomasina jumped up and gave Stephen a lingering hug. "I know there's a lot of spousal abuse, but it's usually men hitting their women. The other way around is just as damaging."

"I know it's not really her, you see, as she is the same lady I married when she's sober. But she's been confronting a lot of demons from her childhood, and the pressures of today's world have exacerbated it all, and here we are. Working on it, and I'm still hopeful. But it's had a huge effect on my own health." Stephen pursed his lips glumly.

"In what way, friend?" Norm always went past the bounds of propriety.

"Well, if you really need to know, it's digestive. I have not been a regular guy since all of this started, and it seems to get worse and worse as one effect spirals into another." Stephen had a look on his face that telegraphed to all but Norm that he was outside his comfort zone.

"Hmmm, it sounds like a classic case from Gabor Maté, the chap who wrote *When the Body Says No*. Dr. Maté has lined up a raft of health problems with emotional conditions that correlate very strongly. When bad things happen to us, and we trap the emotions inside of us, it shows up in predictable ways in our physical health." Magdalena winced and looked down. "Abuse and digestive issues seem to go hand in hand. When it happens to a person, they clench and cringe, and that gets locked into the gut and all points south."

"Well, that sheds some light on things. So what do I do, going forward?" Stephen's voice was child-like.

"Let out the trapped emotion, man. Scream it out...here, I'll show you!" And with that, Norm let out a piercing and angst-filled scream that filled the night and caused a number of nested birds to fly away to a quieter perch. "And listen, I know a little bit about confronting demons through liquid sustenance. I would be happy to have a heart to heart talk with your wife anytime, anywhere." And a second, even more impressive outburst caused two nearby

neighbours to pick up their phones and register another noise complaint due to supposed teenagers in the cemetery.

Waiting for the Veils to Drop



It was one of those impromptu social occasions that Arabella loved to arrange. The days were getting a bit shorter and the air a bit crisper, so she thought some good strong tea and cream with home-baked scones would be proper inducements to having a few friends over. Her long-time chum, Barbara, had just come back from an extended trip to Iceland and Arabella thought the evening could revolve around highlights of this trip and any conversational tangents that arose. Barbara was the first to arrive, followed closely by Mina, who had been shopping for garlic at the greengrocers this morning and had eagerly accepted Arabella's invitation to tea. Next to arrive was one of Arabella's long-time collaborators on community volunteer projects, Gabriel Dunlop, who came in with a spring to his step and a vibrant warmth in his greeting to all. Last to arrive, in the familiar pattern of tardy school children who live directly adjacent to the school, was next-door neighbour Henri LaMontagne. He had more substance to him than his last visit to Arabella's, but his stubbly cheeks could have benefitted from a good razor and he still wasn't quite the sharp-eyed neighbour that Arabella could recall from a few months back.

The collective group settled in Arabella's gracious and well-appointed living room, while Arabella brought in a heavy tray laden with the accoutrements of a classic tea time.

Dear friends, please settle in with your tea and help yourselves to a scone with butter and cream. I have woven in some of Winona's finest peaches into the scone batter, hopefully a perfect companion to the Devon cream! Tonight is not really one of my salon gatherings, more of an excuse to get together with friends and perhaps hear a bit of dear Barbara's experiences in Iceland?" Arabella looked over at Barbara, expectantly.

"I have to say that I have no photos to show you, as I deliberately refrained

from taking any so I could soak up the actual experience. But I have to tell you, it is the most enchanting place. The sheer magnitude of the sky may be only rivaled perhaps by a place like Kauai. But Iceland is no tropical paradise, more like a showcase for Mother Earth's dynamic character! I visited countless hot springs, bubbling lava fields, amazing rock formations and hiked along a string of very active volcanoes. The energy was amazing, very hard to describe in words, but very pure and very palpable! I can hardly wait to go back." Barbara took a deep swig of her cooling tea.

"It has been quite a few years since we visited Iceland." Gabriel was reflective in tone. "One of those deals where you can fly to London via Reykjavík for the same price as a straight flight to the UK. We saw the city, and toured two ecovillages out in the hinterlands. Mary and I were struck by the place in a profound way."

"Did either of you see any of the little people?" Mina said this in an even tone, with one eye open and one eye closed.

"Do you mean faeries? If so, no. Lots of folkloric tales were told to us by our guides, but we saw no little people." Gabriel looked almost relieved.

"I saw some things that might qualify as such." Barbara spoke very quietly. "I swore I saw some miniature folks, wee people, one morning near a very unique glade of trees. When I looked directly at them they seemed to disappear, but when I looked a bit askew, they were clearly back in my peripheral vision. And one evening, near a thermal spring, I saw a circle of light on the ground, spinning and tumbling around the mass of bubbling water. I have heard of faerie rings, and this seemed like a close cousin. When I saw these things I felt very calm, and time just seemed to take a holiday."

"Oooh, Iceland has just been placed on my bucket list! I have been intrigued about faeries and dwarves and gnomes since I was a little girl, and often wondered if we might have the equivalent benignly lurking around our perennial plants?" Arabella was excited.

"Many cultures have this kind of thing in their collective consciousness, and I am sure we have our own version right here in our little town." Mina smiled in an off-hand way. "Sometimes when I admire the flower beds of the Cross Street homes I see little light sparkles around the budding flowers. These are probably daevas, small energy forces that are in charge of bringing the plants to the flowering stage."

Rudolph Steiner, with his super-sensible sight, could see wee little men underneath the ground, pushing up on plants to cause them to break through the ground as budding sprouts." Barbara's eyes had a dreamy cast to them,

although she had the indifferent tone of someone describing how the morning newspaper was delivered.

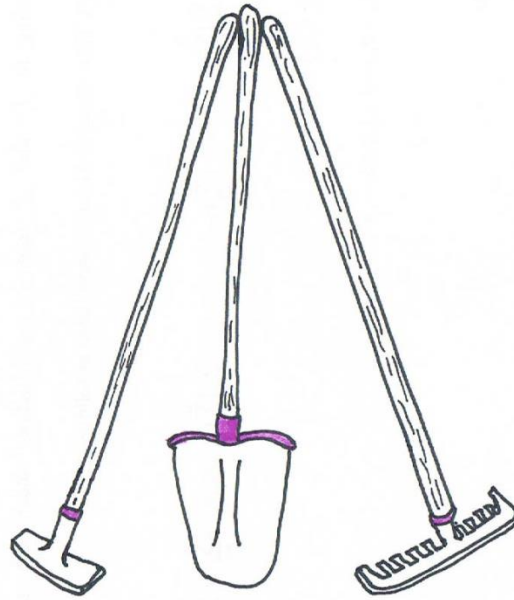
“How is it that these things seem more common in a place like Iceland, or is it just certain people can see these things and others cannot? Some of my buddies would be rolling their eyes big-time through this conversation.” Henri emitted a wry smile, and scratched his chin stubble reflectively.

“I have no lock on the truth, but allow me a few responses. Certain places on the Earth-Iceland, Kauai, Sedona-have special energy and perhaps the little ones gravitate to these places as they find higher level sustenance for their special work. But let's say they are everywhere to some degree, but some people can observe them while others cannot. So for those who cannot yet see, it's as if there are veils in front of them that block their vision. For the people who can currently see, either the veils are transparent or they can rise above the veils and see the true picture.” Mina smiled with her lips held tightly together, eyes closed.

“The yoga tradition also talks about veils, and as individual and collective consciousness rises, the veils drop. One at a time, or in bunches, but they drop, drop, drop. And with each dropping, we see life differently.” Barbara trained her eyes directly at Henri. “Young man, when I look at you, I see a pure, peaceful and powerful soul. What do you see when you look at yourself in the mirror? Someone who needs a shave? Someone with puffy zones under his bloodshot eyes? Someone with thinning hair from too much baseball cap wearing?”

The room went quiet. Perhaps Barbara had stepped over a line. The hostess definitely thought so, as her frozen half-smile and raised eyebrows attested. But Henri looked back at Barbara, without malice or embarrassment. A flicker of a smile crossed his countenance. “I am forever in your debt, *madame*, for your directness and honesty. I feel a veil with the weight of a heavy stage curtain has just dropped with a resounding thud. And to my dear neighbor, I am in critical need of refreshing my cup of tea!”

It's Later Than You Think



Stephen had everything well organized, all categories of tools hanging smartly on numbered hooks. The spades, hoes and rakes were particularly popular, given the amount of backyard gardening that was going on these days. This had been true for a while, but had ramped up significantly since the food crisis. If you couldn't buy food you could at least attempt to grow it, and this tool-share cooperative helped people with the means to get this done. Stephen had set this up as a natural annex to the community gardens, but had been confounded by a lack of storage space for tools near the gardens plus the fact that the demand for tools was highest in the heart of town. So when the former high school and middle school perched beside Spencer Creek had been converted into loft condos, the property owners had suggested they would build a series of connecting sheds at the rear of the parking lot to house tools and equipment for sharing within the community. Within a month, Stephen had collected an impressive range of hardware for lending, all from neighbours who were downsizing and simply had extras of every tool imaginable. All that was left to do was recruit a few more volunteers to monitor the operation and he could expand the lending hours considerably.

So on this late August evening, with darkness looming earlier than most people hoped for or wanted, Stephen sat and sorted through a pile of returned tools, cleaning off the odd bit of residual caked mud and oiling all metal surfaces with a few swipes of an old-fashioned shaving brush dipped in recycled motor oil. This had been his father's way, and practices embedded in childhood die hard, particularly those with practical benefits.

A playful knock on the shed door snapped Stephen out of his reverie. It was

Magdalena, returning from some class or the other, blending vitality with a dollop of sauciness in every word and action. "Good evening, kind sir. A damsel in distress is in need of a post hole digger, to construct a low fence along her side garden. Any chance of success?"

"Magdalena, it always does my heart good to cross your path. A breath of fresh air I might say? And you are in luck, we had our first post hole digger donated just last week, and it's still sitting over there in the corner. It's got a bit of heft to it, but you've always struck me as being able to handle a challenge that others might shy away from. Go ahead and help yourself and I'll record your name in the logbook."

At that point a muscular and foreboding silhouette occupied the shed entrance. The man hesitated, and turned away as if to retreat, but then corrected course and walked towards Stephen. It was Henri, dressed totally in black, and casting an appreciative eye sideways to the lithesome form of Magdalena as she stretched and bent in picking up her device. She did not know Henri, even though their homes were not physically distant from one another. But Magdalena knew a little about energy, and she wasn't particularly taken by what she felt emanating from this chap. So she murmured a quick under-the-breath thank you to Stephen and exited with her substantial load.

"Henri, what can I do you for?" Stephen didn't particularly get warm vibes either from Monsieur LaMontagne, but he couldn't resist a bit of folksy repartee.

"Stephen, I need a basic set of metric wrenches. I have kicked my habit of nipping out at night for a bit of libation at the local speakeasy, but I still like to have the odd drink. So I have bought a home vintners kit to make some wine that will help me bridge the gap back to sobriety. The frame has a few more nuts and bolts than I figured on, of varying sizes. So here I am..." His voice trailed away.

"You have your choice, sir, of a range of complete sets. Far left side, under the workbench. Call out the label number and I'll jot it down here in the records." As Henri started to walk toward the bench, Stephen put one hand out and touched him on his left tricep. "Henri, given what you shared with me a while back I feel I have to share something in return. You woke me up to what was going on with my wife. We've confronted a lot of things, gnarly things, in the time since. Some of these have been unpleasant, some of them downright painful. But it's been excruciatingly horrendous of late... just three evenings ago she tried to take her own life."

Henri's eyes bugged out and his mouth opened as if to speak. But Stephen

continued after catching his breath and letting his heart rate settle a bit. "It was terrifying, but I caught it in time and she's going to be okay. She's still in the hospital, but the docs seem to think it's going to be alright. For this time we're okay, and I hope and pray that there won't be a next time." A tear trickled down Stephen's right cheek.

Henri still had his mouth open, but it was a female voice that rippled through the air within the dimly lit shed. "I am sorry for your near-loss, Stephen, I truly am." Barbara spoke this reverentially. "Me also, sincerely." Tomasina's voice sounded beaten-down. The two women had been hovering at the threshold of the shed entrance, quietly listening to a mockingbird up in the trees near the railroad embankment, when Stephen had confided in Henri.

"But to hearten you, dear Stephen, all things happen for a reason. Even very difficult and negative things. In retrospect this may be the jumping-off point for a complete re-evaluation by your wife of her life, and a collective rethinking of your relationship." Tomasina said this softly and with compassion.

"Hmmm, sure, but I could have lost her and in such a terrible way." Stephen pursed his lips.

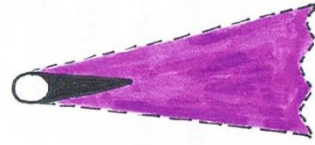
"Yes, but you didn't." Barbara said this very matter-of-factly.

"But she was very close to the line, and if I hadn't checked on her when I did..." Stephen's voice trailed off, and another tear rolled down the course of his cheek.

"Death is a funny thing. Edgar Cayce said the soul has a number of possible exit points from the body, perhaps planned out ahead of time from another realm. So this could have been one of those departure points, but she chose to defer the jumping off. David Hawkins has taught that we all come here with a purpose, with certain tasks to get done, certain services to accomplish. And when these get done, it's time to fly. So your wife still has some things to do and I suspect you have things to do together. So instead of grieving what might have happened, perhaps softly celebrate the opportunity to make amends and create something amazing in the time you have left in your lives." Barbara smiled softly and her eyes twinkled.

Henri gave Stephen a bear hug, and a curt nod to the two women. He also had work to do, some of it external that involved metric wrenches, and much of it internal that required tools of a different nature.

Leave Room for Dessert



Norm sat uneasily on the street furniture bench, shifting his weight from one haunch to the other and attempting to make eye contact with people he knew as good bets to drop a loonie in his palm. For the last few days he had relocated his microfinance operations two blocks eastward to the benches lining Grafton Square. A number of interesting new shops had recently infiltrated the previous barrage of financial advisors. One served up homemade organic ice cream, and the other offered raw and vegan desserts in a takeout setting. All of this tied in well with the Canadian penchant for stroking one's sweet tooth, and street life had picked up considerably. Norm was happy with the extra foot traffic but he felt out of his element. So he was a bit comforted when he saw a posse of semi-familiar faces come out of the ice cream shop and park themselves at a table within relatively easy earshot. He put on a nonchalant air and leaned back into the wooden planks of the bench.

Arabella and Gabriel Dunlop had been at a volunteer group meeting, and walking back home together had bumped into Stephen and Patricia. Arabella had suggested going to the new ice cream emporium, and they all now sported small cups of frothy creaminess.

"I love lemon meringue pie, and I swear this serving of ice cream has half a slice of pie woven into it. This new place reminds me of the shop that used to be on Ogilvie, Room for Dessert?" Gabriel smacked his lips and smiled simultaneously.

"Oh I remember that place well, I still have the resultant love handles!" Stephen set his cup down and gave the sides of his torso a hearty shake.

"I know men like to talk about their love handles, but they creep in for us women also, and the closing down of that was a blessing for my figure." Arabella smoothed her sweater over her hips. "But now this new addition will most certainly test my willpower."

I feel the same way, but after gardening for several hours a day I have found I can pretty well 'eat like a horse', or is it 'eat a horse'?" Patricia snorted at her own joke, making some blueberry ice cream go down the wrong way and setting off a paroxysm of coughing.

"Well, one could have a much worse vice than the imbibing of ice cream,

certainly much better than drinking or dr..." The sad look on Stephen's face arrested Arabella's prattling. The conversation stopped on a dime until Stephen painfully broke the silence a moment later.

"Drinking seems to be part of our culture, the liquid drug that most of us think of as benign. But my family has been hard hit of late due to my wife's decision to find solace in alcohol and one thing spun through to the other until we were very close to a point of no return. We're not out of the woods yet, but it's getting better. It was very dark not so long ago, but now I'm seeing and feeling more light." Stephen popped a huge dollop of rhubarb custard ice cream into his mouth

"So you're out of the complete shadow of the situation, and migrating into the zone of the penumbra." Arabella smiled warmly, hoping desperately to make amends.

"The penumbra?" Stephen had lost most of his high school physics.

"The umbra is full shadow, where no light can be seen. But the penumbra is the transition zone on both sides of the umbra, where some light mixes with the dark. And as you go further and further away from the full shadow zone, the proportion of light becomes greater and greater until you are back into full light!" Patricia had spent most of her life teaching, and never missed an opportunity to throw illumination on any subject.

"Ah, it strikes me as a good physical analogy of what we might be experiencing in society at large." Gabriel's face had a serious cast. "Lots of difficult challenges over the past few years, and particularly over the last little while. But there have been many positive stories of people helping one another, and entire communities coming together and choosing peace over continued strife. So more and more light creeping in, and perhaps we can influence with our minds where we sit in this zone of light and dark?"

"This goes back to one of my favorite topics, the diffusion of ideas through society!" Stephen had forgotten his troubles and was sitting on the edge of the table's seat. "I know the young folk will say that everything these days is disseminated with social media, and all ideas spread out along the virtual strings connecting the billions of computer and cell phone users. But there is something more primal, and less technological, to get the word out."

"What do you have in mind, dear Stephen?" Arabella took a dainty swipe at her French vanilla ice cream.

"Exactly, dear Arabella..." Stephen had an expectant look on his face.

“Exactly what, Stephen?” Arabella treaded lightly, mindful of her earlier gaffe.

“In mind, in my mind, thoughts in my mind, the same thoughts in your mind! You see?!” Stephen raised his head back, laughing, and slapped his knee.

“To some degree, but...hmmm, this sounds eerily familiar to something I recently experienced with Mina. I can’t say that I fully understood it then, or now.” Arabella had a frozen smile on her visage.

“It all depends on the strength of our ego. If I let ego go completely, and you think a thought, I will receive this thought fully. And I register it and let it flow outward, and it then goes out to thousands, millions, billions perhaps? Now that’s true diffusion of ideas.” Stephen sat back, contented.

“I’m kind of with you, old man, but how does this work?” Gabriel played a convincing foil.

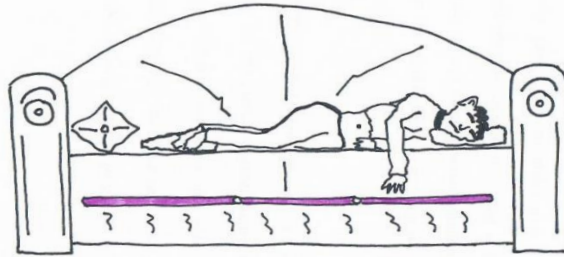
“It’s fourth dimensional technology, and it’s between our ears. My mind sends out a thought in a wave, and it gets picked up by a receiver, your mind. It’s like a cell phone, it sends out a message in a wave, and this wave goes through to another cell phone. I’ll send out a thought of love to you all.....can you feel it?” Stephen looked warmly at each of them.

“Sure, but I can see you, look at your eyes, read your body language. I don’t think that’s fair for something you’re saying can go miles and miles and across the seas?” Patricia looked benevolently at Stephen.

“Okay, I’ll close my eyes and ask you to do the same, and you can tell me what you feel or ‘hear’”. Stephen’s voice went quiet.

A few seconds went by, and they slowly opened their eyes to see Norm standing over top of them. “Good evening folks, I definitely felt love emanating from this fine group. And now who will be the first to be hugged?”

The Village Idiot



PAINTING BY THE AUTHOR

the town engaged in a variety of activities. Older folks dressed in whites, studiously rolling forward lawn bowling balls. Young families unpacking picnics for the splash pad area, bickering intermixed with displays of affection. Ethnic groups grilling kebabs and playing a quick bit of pickup soccer as an appetite stimulant. Individuals sitting on benches, flanked by their loyal canine friends. Trim and tanned tennis players engaging in spirited doubles play. Teenagers and twentysomethings, sporting tattoos and some attitude, reveling in a game of beach volleyball. Earnest middle-aged types dancing Lindy Hop on the concrete pad of the skating rink. Sleepy-eyed parks-and-recreation workers unloading a truck at the end of a shift. Patricia did multiple loops of this circuit every day, and it was never an identical experience but always had a number of consistent elements. This soothed her, and a much needed soothing it was, as she had been worrying a lot about Stephen. Their community activities had greatly diminished, and she was concerned about his wife and about him. So all of her worries intermingled with the thoughts generated by the activities going on within the park, in an amalgam of negative and positive, darkness and light.

At some point in her perambulations, Patricia came abreast of Mina, walking very slowly and purposefully, her hands extended to her sides and a bright red beret on her head.

"Hello Mina, it's Patricia. Am I interrupting you?"

"Ah, Patricia, nice to see you my darling. Interrupting, not at all, life is merely shifting from one thing to another." Mina beamed in the direction of Patricia. "I am doing a few rounds of the Driving Park as a walking meditation, before my guests arrive. Slowly, slowly, slowly focusing on the beauty of each foot strike."

"So you have some guests arriving, how wonderful! Family or friends?" Patricia had often marveled at Mina's independence, but was happy she had some pending arrivals.

"Neither. No family connection, and I don't know them at all. But hopefully soon-to-be friends." Mina shrugged impassively.

"You have people coming to stay with you, yet you don't know them? Unusual, no?" All of this was accompanied with a sideways grin.

"No, not at all. I am loosely tied to the couch-surfing phenomena. My son screens potential visitors, lets them know when they can arrive and when they will need to leave, and he gives me a call with their names and the related dates. They show up at my door, I serve them *dal* and rice, and they sleep on an old futon in my living room. I often get taken out for breakfast, or receive gifts of pottery or other artwork, and usually make some really neat new friends." Mina pursed her lips. "When I became a widow, my doctor son wanted me to have some company. I didn't want to remarry, so the couch-surfing thing has been a much preferred alternative."

"Very cool, I will have to look it up online and may even give it a go myself! So tell me, Mina, what do you think about while you do your walking meditation?" Patricia leaned in conspiratorially.

"Well, like most meditation, the best strategy is not to think at all. I just step, step, step, and try to relinquish who I am. Let go of my story. In essence, I'm trying to lose my ego and not be Mina, but simply just be. This used to be challenging to do, but with more practice and the feeling that more Light is coming to us here on Earth, it seems to be easier and easier to achieve." Mina gave out the slightest sigh of contentment.

"So you really feel a shift, that more Light is coming to us?" Patricia asked this innocently.

"Oh yes, dear Patricia, without a doubt. I see signs of this every day. Lots of darkness still around to be sure, but more and more Light." Mina smiled broadly.

"What other things do you find happening as this shift occurs?"

"Oh, where do I start? I find I am looking at people differently than before. I'm trying to see them as who they truly are, and there are times I can blur my eyes a bit and I can see the person as a burst of light! It's as if they disappear for a second, and are replaced by a projection of their true essence. This has happened a number of times, and it's a bit mind-blowing when a tall athletic gent just disperses away and is replaced by a glowing incandescence!" Mina's eyebrows skyrocketed and her eyes danced.

That is amazing. It reminds me of something I read a while back, where different cultures pray while looking at themselves in a mirror, and after some time they lose their own image and all they see reflected is a spark of light!" Patricia's eyes flashed.

"Different modality, same phenomenon. Another thing that is happening is I seem to be able to remember in great detail things I have read or studied in the past. I've always had a good memory, but it seems to be going beyond just that. Details and concepts that I'm not sure I've ever come across seem to just burble up from somewhere and make sense to me. My doctor son will prattle on about procedures and the effects on the body and everything seems crystal-clear to me. I ran a *masala* shop, and am no doctor, so I can't link it back to formal training. But there it is!" Mina rolled her hands skyward, in the classic Indian tradition.

"Perhaps you are becoming a savant, from the French verb *savoir*, someone who knows everything?" Patricia shrugged her shoulders.

"I know of the term idiot savant, so are you trying to tell me something?" Mina snorted, just a bit.

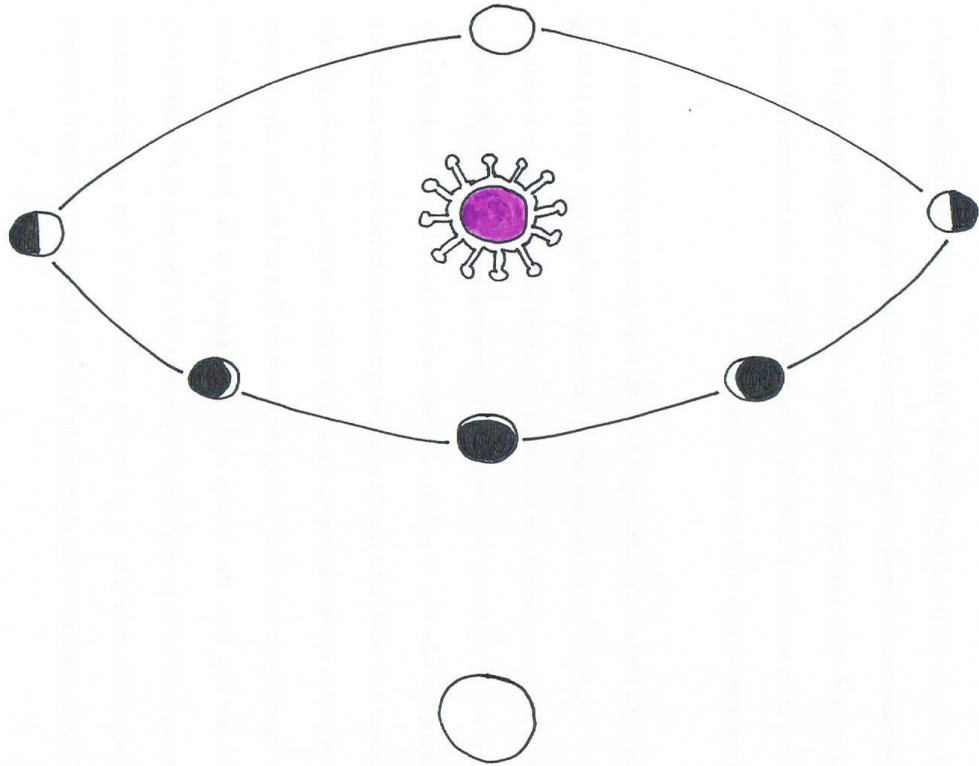
"I realize there is an archetypal character of The Fool. The simpleton who walks the town, dispensing practical wisdom through his madness or awkwardness, but I wasn't linking you up to this in the least!" Patricia patted Mina's forearm.

Whew, I'm off the hook, but I think we need to revere The Fool when we see him or her. They may have access to unbounded knowledge, but also the courage to snap us out of our comfort zones and into a more integrated reality." Mina paused, and then continued on in a quieter tone. "Do you know that fellow Norm, who sits outside the banks and touches up people for a loonie? Perhaps not the classical idiot savant, but he may be the closest we have in our little town. I have been stopping to chat with him more and more, and he has a very deep knowledge of many things, and is a very bright light..."

As Mina and Patricia continued their walking and sharing of ideas, they strolled past The Cove where Magdalena and Tomasina were moving on mats through a series of slowly-held yoga poses. They were dressed in figure-hugging yoga wear, and to the casual observer looked like two very fit and lithe yoga devotees. At the rear of The Cove, sitting on a picnic bench, was a sharp-eyed Henri. Over the last week he had been doing a lot of fasting and high-speed calisthenics. He watched the two women with rapt attention, and was almost motivated to meander over and join them. Not today, he finally decided. But the very thought encouraged him to get up in the morning and

shave, and continue to get his mind and body back into shape. He made a mental note to stop by the library and check out a yoga video, if only for future considerations.

The Goddess of Love



Alphonse set down his paddle and let his kayak glide effortlessly through the darkening waters of the West Pond. He couldn't convince Magdalena to join him on this very clear evening, but if truth be told he delighted in these solitary outings. The moon was coming up brightly, and off to his left he could see Venus rising. As an artist he received a lot of inspiration from this planet that feeds the human need for aesthetics, and lately he had felt her nudgings towards love and romance, her other and more well-known strength. So he glided along, one eye out for interesting birdlife and the other transfixed on Venus, feeling her pulsating energies flowing to him and through him.

Across town a beautifully dressed Arabella knocked on the front door of Gabriel and Mary Dunlop's home. She was bearing an old-fashioned cake box, and inside was a beautifully concocted chocolate cake with banana cream icing, made from the Duke family's secret recipe. Gabriel came to the door, smiling broadly and gave Arabella such a hearty hug that the cake almost went tumbling to the ground.

"My, that was a close call, I believe I will bestow this upon you now and get it

into safer hands! A mere trifle to honour the anniversary of you and your dear Mary.” Arabella gushed and smiled fetchingly.

“Oh, how thoughtful of you, Arabella. Mary, come and look at what has come in by special courier!” Gabriel turned and projected in the direction of the kitchen. A moment later a trim, no-nonsense woman came to the foyer wearing a red apron and wiping her hands on a tea towel.

“Arabella, what a nice surprise! And, oh my, is that a home-made cake?” Gabriel popped the top off the cake box while Mary sidled in to embrace Arabella.

“It's the Dukes' signature dessert, and we're all twenty pounds richer as a result! I had heard it was a special anniversary for you folks, and wanted to mark the occasion.”

“Might you be able to join us for a light bite, and a piece of cake!? We went out for lunch to celebrate, and are still feeling full as a result, but would love company...” Gabriel said this somewhat convincingly, but with the air of a man who knew mid-stream he should have checked off with his wife.

“A gracious and generous gesture to be sure, old friend, but I actually have a date this evening. Oh, I suppose that's overstating it a bit, a chap I met at one of the art gallery soirées has invited two or three folks to join him for a glass at the new wine bar that recently opened up in the old Valley City space. I don't know who any of the other invitees are, and I'm hoping they don't show up, as I daresay this gentleman would definitely be a person of interest!” Arabella blushed lightly and batted her eyelashes. “Here I am prattling on like a schoolgirl in front of friends who have shown their commitment to each other over an enviable amount of years!”

“No need to explain, Arabella. It's stirring to think of the possibilities that love might bring to you. You would be an amazing catch for any gentleman, and this chap sounds like he has you on his radar!” Mary said this almost conspiratorially.

“Thank you, dear ones. And before I take my leave, you must come out on your porch and look eastward. Just over the treetops is a rising Venus, as bright as a diamond on an engagement ring. Look, just over there, now that's what I call an anniversary present! Okay, toodle-doo!”

At the same moment, Mina walked up Sydenham Road to the lookout bridge. The sidewalks on both sides had been extended past Cayley Street to the bridge to service foot traffic going to the new Via Rail stop just west of the overpass. She climbed purposefully and slowly, looking up at the evening sky

and the darkening shades of blue as the stars unveiled themselves. Up ahead on the bridge itself was a man, elbows resting on the rail and looking out impassively onto the town unfolding below.

“Good evening, Norm. It's nice to see you.” Mina didn't shake hands, but stood directly beside him with her left elbow nearly grazing his right elbow. Norm looked sideways and flashed a grin, showing some teeth and some absences of teeth.

“It's Mina, correct? We have had occasion to talk numerous times but I'm not sure I've formally introduced myself.”

“Mina Patel, grew up in India, immigrated to Toronto, have one son and am now a widow.” Looking left, with a soft nod at the end.

“Norm Tryon, grew up in Manitoba, studied philosophy, was a professor for a good long while, messy divorce, daily trips to the LCBO, scholar of human behavior and practitioner of micro-finance.” Said with a low voice, and a cinching up of his trousers.

“Those are just our stories Norm, we can let them go in an instant.” Mina turned her head slowly.

“Listen, I have had so many different lives packed into this one it makes my head spin. But what are you trying to say to me?” Norm turned his head slowly and looked deep into Mina's eyes.

“We have had some deep and profound chats, and I have felt your presence many times during my meditations. I think we both get it, that our stories don't really mean much at all. As we lay them down, along with our egos, we know the unity. I am you. You are me. We are Love. End of story, literally.” Mina looked back up to the evening sky.

“Alright, let's roll with that. But what do we need to do with it?” Norm knew the answer before he heard Mina's response.

“Nothing to do. Just be. With that knowledge in hand, in mind, just be. Just be Love. There are others out there who know this, and they are just be-ing for their communities. So we need to just be for our little town here. For as long as we are in these bodies, just be.” Mina said this simple truth very softly.

“A lot of folks know that some change is afoot, no?” Norm also spoke this softly, and to Mina's ear, with just a hint of an Indian accent.

“Yes, lots of people are waiting for the return of their prophet. But what they

don't realize is that the prophets over the years were tapping into the same Love consciousness. They're not going to return in physical form, the 'return' is when we all tap into this same consciousness. And as more and more of us do this, big changes will happen in how we treat each other and Mother Earth, and more and more will plug in."

"You remember that old Beatles' tune... 'oh yes, it's getting better, it's getting better all the time...getting so much better all the time!'" Norm sang this passably, with no hint of embarrassment.

"My second favorite song, after 'All You Need is Love', or maybe 'Imagine'." Mina smiled broadly. "So it is getting better all the time, and we have some help on a daily basis from an external source."

"From where?" Norm asked quizzically.

"From there." Mina pointed up and out. "From the planet Venus. Many cultures over millennia knew she was a special force in our lives, projecting love to us and guiding our higher thoughts. She is a bright beauty, and even more so this evening as she is in a crescent phase. The shadow we see is a penumbra, going from quite dark on the far edge to very light when we are on the verge of popping out into full light. I see this as a metaphor for life on Earth. Currently, some of us are in a lot of darkness and some of us are one breath away from full light. And as the process unfolds, the penumbra will get smaller and smaller until we will all be in the fullness of the Light." Mina's eyes glowed.

There was the low rattle of an impending freight train.

"When I was a kid on the Prairies we had a tradition of making a wish when a train would thunder under or past you."

"A beautiful tradition, dear Norm. Shall we hold the collective wish of a world without strife, a world with abundance for all, and a world where the lyrics of the song 'Imagine' are actually reality?" Mina clasped his hand tightly.

The freight train roared through, under the bridge, in a hypnotic whirl. High in the sky, the penumbra of the crescent Venus became incrementally more light-filled and radiant.

Children of All Ages Welcome



School had been back in session for ten days or more, but this particular Saturday afternoon was a rain date for the welcome-back barbecue for the alternative school now housed in the old public school building bordering on the Ann Street Creek. Scores of children ran around the playground, some dashing back and forth to the security of their parents, some playing games and some standing quietly on the edges of the treed playground having silent conversations with squirrels and birds and unseen beings.

Not only schoolchildren and their parents were out, as it was a community event that included after-school caregivers, neighbors who waved at the pedestrian school buses meandering by in the mornings, and dog owners who brought their pooches to the school for the new pet therapy program.

Magdalena ran tiny tot yoga programs in the gym, and had come along with Alphonse who had recently started to do some enrichment classes in portraiture with the older students. They stood off to the side, somewhat awkwardly, but still very pleased to be there. It may have been their difference in ages, Alphonse's Germanic rigidity or the fact that he lived alone for so long, but one got the feeling that this friendship would probably not go to a more committed level.

Norm and Tomasina arrived on the scene, arms locked together and devilish smiles on their faces. Tomasina had been helping Magdalena out with the kiddie yoga classes, and Norm had been bringing his two German Shepherd friends to the school for pet therapy. The change in Norm over the last few months was simply astounding, so much so that he had quietly moved into Tomasina's cottage and was contemplating applying for some sessional teaching of philosophy at the nearby university.

Gabriel and Arabella stepped lightly into the courtyard, smiling and waving to the parents and chucking a number of kids affectionately under the chin. They served on the school's Board of Directors, along with Stephen, who arrived just a moment later. He had a tentative look but an optimistic cast to his jaw, and he stopped and waited at the gate. Coming around the corner was Stephen's wife, using a cane for reliable locomotion. The trials she had faced over the last while were subtly evident, but these melted away momentarily when a mop-haired lad of seven yelled out 'Grandma' and came over and tightly hugged her leg.

Henri was an after-hours coach of the boys softball team, and he had bumped into Patricia on the walk, who had single-handedly arranged for vertical trellis food production in the schoolyard this past growing season. Patricia saw Stephen and his wife and grandchild out of the corner of her eye, and was relieved that their ship seemed to be righting itself and was now on course. Henri was dressed in an expensive black silk shirt crafted in Milano, along with a pair of cream-coloured flannel trousers, all of which showed off his considerable physique. He was crisply coiffed and gave off a trailing essence of some expensive cologne. Arabella looked over at her neighbor and gave a flirtatious wave, noting Henri had distinctly turned a corner and feeling a tremendous sense of relief.

Mina and Barbara were close to the last to arrive. They often sat together on street furniture here and there throughout the downtown, and were well known as wavers and kind greeters to the passing school-bound junior pedestrians. They nodded to parents and grandparents, but took the time to float through the schoolyard together, having a word or two and a gentle pat on the head for virtually every child in attendance.

"Mina, I'm so glad we came, these kids are just so special!" Barbara kept working the crowd while looking back over her shoulder to her friend.

"I have always felt this, but even more so now that it appears I may not have grandchildren of my own." Mina's ever-present smile dimmed a slight degree. "For many years now, the New Age folks have proclaimed the unique nature of babies and children coming presently to the Earth, calling them 'indigo children' and then 'crystal children'. And when one looks deeply at these beautiful young ones, it's easy to see that they are very special indeed."

"You know the concept from Mary Baker Eddy, that a child is a spiritual idea of the Divine? I've always loved that, the notion that a new baby is a beautifully lustrous spiritual idea, arriving in from on high!" Barbara projected her right hand upward.

"I have loved that philosophy also, and it has really made me ponder these kids over the last little while. As more and more religious groups wait for their Master to return, they need to look more closely at the babies and children in their midst. Perhaps these shining crystals are coming in at this time to show us the way to Love, and they are reflecting that to us with minimal-to-no distortion. If we look deeply into their eyes, perhaps the shadow within us would burn off immediately!" Mina picked up a little girl who had toppled over at her feet, and gave her a tight hug.

The little girl looked up at Mina and said "What grade are you in?"

Barbara chuckled. "Out of the mouths of babes, Mina! Perhaps she's reminding us that we're also children, and that we as well are spiritual ideas?"

The Ann Street Creek bubbled by, hosting filamentous water spiders and darting minnows. Its edges were still in darkness, but as the Sun grew higher and higher in the sky, more and more of its surface projected crystals of light to the children of all ages assembled on the playground.

~the end

A Darkened Pane, With the Hue of Quicksilver



Written and illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

for Rashné, Jasmine, Cyrus, Rocky and Buddy

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List of characters (in order of appearance)

Maria Miamica is quick to smile, and even quicker to help out. A woman who has her feet planted in the old country and her hands weaving a mosaic of good deeds in the new. She is the kind of person with scores of friendly acquaintances, but who spends most of her hours working alone on her family farm. Life is good, but could always be better, and this thought sustains her as she unravels another section of irrigation hose.

Arabella Duke is quick to smile, and is arguably the most connected of the town's citizenry. Expansive in her spirit and her good humour, there isn't a volunteer activity around that has not felt her sure touch. Arabella comes from old money and she has stayed single after a mists-of-time failed first marriage. Conservative and polished at her veneer level, but underneath lie practices and potentials that would raise more than eyebrows in the old-money strata of The Town.

Gabriel Dunlop is a man of substance, conservative in temperament, but liberal in his worldview. Salt of the earth, dedicated community builder and one who has a defined fondness for homemade pies. Married to the same woman for 37 years, affluent in an understated way and with the frugal tendencies of a person with Depression-era parents. At the end of a very solid professional career, he intermittently takes stock on what he might do next, beyond learning to play the harmonica and dabbling in *tai chi*.

Mikey Stellis was on track to be a defensive back professionally, but a late high school catastrophic injury set those plans asunder. He is the quintessential big, good-looking guy, but never seems to have a woman in his life. So he immerses himself in his livery business, and watching hours of sports on his big-screen TV down in his basement. Underneath the rippling pectorals beats a large and warm heart, and this will position him well to make some significant changes in his life.

Henri LaMontagne is a somewhat abrasive neighbour, with a flat stomach and equally chiseled chin. He is the most competitive member of a lackluster slow-pitch team, and writes many letters to the editor in a combative but common sense tone. Henri has many wounds that have been puttied over during the course of life, but his feet of clay seem ripe for exposure and some degree of erosion.

Magdalena McDermott breathes life into everything she touches, and is the quintessential old soul in a young-looking, twenty-something body. Bikram yoga and long-distance running, along with collage art and web graphics, fill

her days perhaps a bit too fully. Her romantic life is curiously quiet, but an independent spirit and a too-firm grip for initial handshakes may be reasonable explanations for this current state of affairs.

Stephen Tucker is a family man who puts first things first. He runs a building restoration business that takes on neglected homes and abandoned factories and breathes new life into them. Stephen is involved in making his community a better place to be, but sometimes overlooks things that are directly below his feet.

Norm Tryon reminds a casual observer of one of those garage sale candleholders that just might clean up nicely with sufficient quantities of pewter cleaner. Prairie-born, and well marinated in the teachings of Kant and Schopenhauer. He sits on street corners and wears once-prime shirts with very frayed collars. He has the gift of the gab, with a dark wit, and it just seems plausible that he might soon emerge from the cocoon he has spun from the torments of his mind.

Tomasina Skye is a woman of indeterminate age, whose friends can legitimately claim she looks a bit younger each time they cross her path. She has lived in The Town for just a short time, but has travelled sufficiently to fully appreciate its charms. She lives alone, in an old converted brewery, and stays open to the possibility of change in every dimension of her life.

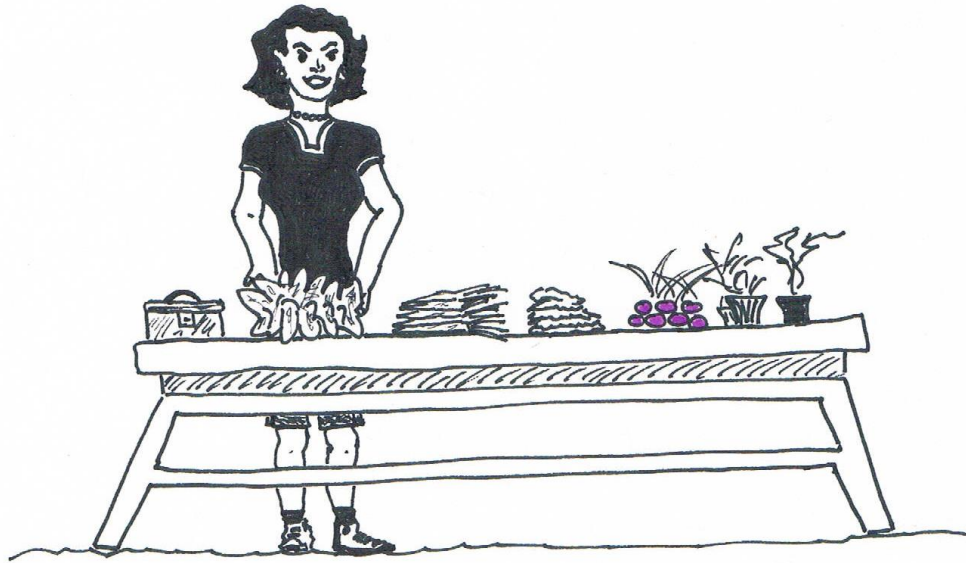
Jody Denton is both snarky and charming in equal measure, and is one gal who can turn heads. Not quite a mafia moll, Jody hangs out with dubious company and runs errands that have an underlying ethical code that is defensible only to her. Jody embraces her shadow side, flaunts it even. But you just have the feeling that this level of brazenness will certainly earn its share of negative karma, of the John Lennon instant variety or meted out over time.

Mina Patel spends her days in a quiet way, the sounds of CBC One interlacing with the clatter emanating from the tearoom kitchen across the alley from her small flat. Still showing evidence of the beauty that would slow traffic in earlier days, she takes long walks around the Driving Park in all manner of weather, and never fully admits how much she misses her dear husband. Mina embodies the Now, and projects Love to all and sundry who cross her path, but it is clear she has no interest in political correctness nor the preservation of sacred cows.

One Year From Present Time

Part I: Interior Darkness, Poised for Change

Tawny Sinews and Rainbow Chard



The smells of the Earth never failed to intrigue and excite her. The impending rain, blossoming tree flowers and dew-lined vegetable clusters all have their olfactory counterparts, many of them blending together into a harmonious and complex compendium. She rises very early, with no hint yet of dawn, with the quiet phase right before the birdsong having its own special energy for reflection and introspection.

Maria was an immigrant's child, conceived in the old country but emerging in the new on this very fertile farmstead. Not quite peasants, but close enough in all of the positive aspects, and both she and her brothers had learned how to grow food and lots of it from the deep topsoil on top of the Escarpment. The two brothers had been smart and savvy in New World terms also, taking law degrees in turn from Osgoode and now running a successful joint practice from a second floor walkup above a florist's shop near the Summerhill TTC station. So it had been up to Maria to steward the family farm, and she had been happy to do this since she was a teenager.

Just when her Ma had pretty much given up on the daughter-matrimonial front, she had met a pipefitter at a Legion dance and they were facing the confetti within six months. Her delighted parents built a good-sized addition on the rear of the farmhouse to accommodate an expanded kitchen and a

large room for the impending *bambini*. But the little ones did not materialize, and the doctors pronounced that the fertility counts were low on both sides of the gender equation. But all things happen for a reason, as both her Ma and Pa aged prematurely and her husband decided that a young apprentice with a curvy figure may be more winsome company if he wasn't cut out to be a father. So Maria decided to keep the Miamica lands as working landscapes and help her parents age peacefully in the overly expansive family room.

All of this was borne with some degree of stress and loneliness, but only at a surficial level. Her upbringing had been traditional, and this had come with a considerable and enduring sense of faith. As Maria came out of sleep every morning, in that quiet time when the veils between the Earth and other realms are the thinnest and most transparent, her thoughts went immediately to the Divine. Not the judging or smiting God from the homilies, who induced guilt from every human perspective, but a loving Presence that seemed to be softly connected to all the rhythms of the Earth. She would take this into her wash up and simple breakfast, to the feeding of the golden Lab and out into the prep for the early morning work. Her overalls were loose and worn, but couldn't quite conceal the fact she had good genes and lots of hard work had given her a figure that would still be riveting in a fancy evening dress. But suitors were few out in the fields and at the roadside farmstand, and given her romantic luck to date she told herself this might be another indirect gift from the Divine.

She would pick early, just when the sun was rising on the horizon and the dew seemed to evaporate quickly in anticipation of the incoming solar energy that would coax it from its liquid to its vapor phase. The farmstead operation grew spinach, arugula, kale, carrots, rapini, bok choy and swiss chard with rainbow stems. All organic, all picked at optimal ripeness. Maria would sell this at the farm gate as afternoon rush hour traffic went by the farm, and her loyal clientele would happily carry away everything she picked on a particular day. And once a week she would leave the farmstand to her Dad's hesitant care, as the *Miamica Famiglia* stand was an attraction at the Thursday afternoon market in town.

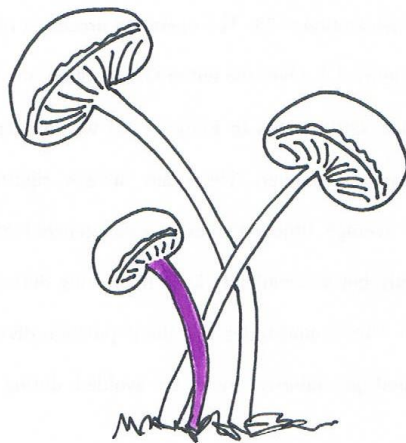
Whether it was on the quiet farm or at the more bustling market, Maria kept her eye on the prize at all times. Every person she met, she viewed as an opportunity for incremental healing by seeing the inherent good in them. Mass on Saturday evenings had confirmed in her mind that she would give all challenges up to a higher power, and she could peripherally see the outstretched helping hand in her mind's eye whenever a challenge did arise. So she held this image throughout the days, and gave thanks for the assistance before slipping off for an early bedtime each evening.

Mental preparations and clean living set the stage for what would be needed

down the road. On a Thursday afternoon in mid-June, when the downtown market was only in its second stanza of the growing year, a trim and sharp-eyed Maria set up shop with an amazing supply of early greens that had been grown under glass in an annex building beside the family barn. An early onset of Summer temperatures and considerable outdoor work had given her muscular arms a bronzed glow, her wingspan unfettered due to a tube top worn under her denim overalls. No need to go to a gym to look like Michelle Obama she thought, as she kootchicooed babies and hugged regular customers getting back into their market rhythms.

Nearing the end of the market, a few folks wearing V-for-Vendetta maskware floated through the crowd, their painted-on perpetual smiles standing at odds with a certain underlying tension. Maria had sold everything but a few bunches of carrots, and had stepped around to the cab of her truck to grab a touch of lemonade. Returning momentarily, she realized something was amiss. The three bunches of carrots were gone, but this was no big deal as she would have given these to the Food Share gleaners anyways. But the battered red toolbox, holding more than \$900 in cash from that day's sales, was gone. It could have been anyone in the teeming crowd that Maria anxiously surveyed, but she figured she knew who it was and that it had been plucked within seconds of her turning her back. She closed her eyes and shifted her anger over to the outstretched hand in her mind's eye. She was due a new cashbox anyways, and the next one would be securely chained down to her display table.

You've Got The Power



Arabella Duke was a creature of her upbringing and her social position. She had every opportunity given to her in her formative years, and this along with an engaging personality and photogenic looks had promised significant achievement literally waiting to be plucked. But we are also creatures of our choices, and Arabella had selected a bad boy as her mate right out of grad school, and this had severely constrained conventional achievements. This

character had not been the ardent lover early indicators had signaled, and his penchant for psychedelic drugs had hobbled both of them in the limited term of their married existence. So Arabella had cut it off before patterns could get entrenched and old money severely depleted, and had come back to The Town to live with her widower dad in their elegant home sitting in the lee of the Escarpment. She had always been Daddy's girl, and that could be part of her problem, but she had helped him through to a graceful departure and was now mistress of the perhaps overly expansive home. After her Dad had gone, she had thrown herself into countless volunteer activities, with some of them as his replacement on several boards and some new things more resonant with her interests. Arabella was an innately social person, and she had socialite roots, so it was no surprise that her home was often filled with friends and hangers-on.

But volunteerism can only go so far, so she had recently returned to some support mechanisms from the past to get her through quiet evenings and rainy afternoons. This had been brought in from the wings by a trip to Mexico, where a tour of the Mayan ruins of Uxmal near Merida had brought her into contact with an older gentleman selling small bags of white fungal matter. He had patiently explained to Arabella that these were not ordinary mushrooms for culinary purposes, but were instead gifts from the gods. So she had ingested more than a few of these while sitting on her hotel's rooftop, and it was as if the universe had unwrapped itself and she had careened around it on a white-knuckle roller-coaster ride that didn't come to a stop for thirty six hours. Prudence had caused her to wait a bit, but she was back at the Uxmal ruins before she flew home, and had made arrangements for a package of said fungi to be mailed to her each month, with the contents marked "Mayan Condiments". These had arrived every month since but one, where Arabella correctly surmised that a Canada Customs agent had some amazing daydreams on a particularly dreary afternoon.

So on a rainy Sunday morning, just far enough into late Spring that the gardens were fully lush, Arabella found herself with a free day. She brewed up a pot of mushroom tea, and then reflectively nibbled on the residue ensconced in the tea strainer. Twenty minutes in, she felt the familiar stirrings of a fantastical journey. Arabella thought it might be fun to watch some television while all of this was unfolding, and turned on the large screen TV in her solarium and propped up her feet on a comfy pillow. Images of parliamentarians debating some policy measure...nope...a made-for-TV movie with dubious acting...keep going...a lacrosse game from an arena on The Mountain...not today...a well-dressed televangelist with very good hair smiling broadly at a packed audience. Arabella did not normally watch Christian evangelical shows, but something about this chap made her set down the remote. He was certainly handsome, and as she watched him with increasingly mushroom-addled eyes, she thought he was actually genuine.

Arabella turned up the volume and locked in.

“You all have amazing power, right at your fingertips. It’s your natural inheritance, what God has given to you from the start to realize the dream in your heart.” Arabella still felt the stirrings of something like this, from a long time ago.

“In fact your power is unlimited, there is nothing you can’t do if you relentlessly strive and get yourself in alignment with God. It’s what I call Resurrection Power. The same power that God’s Son tapped into to bring himself back from the grave, that’s the same power we can all tap into.” The televangelist smiled broadly, hands extended outwards.

Arabella felt something move deep inside of her. This message definitely had hit a nerve. Maybe this is exactly what she needed to hear on this grey Sunday morning. And if this innate power inside of her could be harnessed creatively, she just might be able to avoid the fungal shortcuts and achieve her dreams on her own steam.

Above All, Exhibit Kindness



Gabriel was flat on his back, torqueing a pipe wrench this way and that to bring the steady drip-drip of the under-sink water line to a prayed-for cessation. He was in the tiny kitchen of a cute-as-a-button English cottage just up the street from his home, one that had recently been bought by a spry widow desiring to be closer to her grandchildren . Gabriel had struck up a conversation while raking leaves last Autumn, and had volunteered his services for manageable house maintenance tasks, as he knew well the challenges his own fixed-income Mom had faced before she had given up her home a few years back.

He was near the end of his career, and while it had been rewarding and had

provided a good base to raise his family, he found himself thinking more about how he might help his community as he progressed from work to retirement. Gabriel had been on plenty of committees and service club initiatives over the years, but he was thinking more and more about actual hands-on involvement.

So while this germinated and flowered in his thoughtscape, he had started to help out the odd neighbor who needed some assistance or support on the days off he had started to take as a taper-down to retirement. So here he was, shoulder to shoulder with a box of recyclables and the smell of sink cleaner to move him forward to a quick resolution on the plumbing front.

“There, I think that will do it, Esmerelda. These are all old homes up and down the street, with plumbing to match. But keep an eye on it, and give me a call if you see any water or hear a drip.” Gabriel scooched out from the below-sink cupboard and sat up gingerly.

“Oh, Gabriel, I can’t tell you how happy I am that you resolved this in such a quick way! I know I’m stuck in the 1970s when it comes to prices, but a \$95 charge for just having a plumber show up is something that I can’t seem to get my head around. So let me send this wee plate of homemade fudge along with you to share with Mary, as a token of my appreciation!” Esmerelda gave him a tight hug and a tweak on his chin.

Strolling back home, Gabriel came abreast of two neighbourhood kids doing some intricate chalk art on the sidewalk out in front of their home. Doing a quick assessment of what Mary would say if he came home bearing high-calorie fudge, particularly since she had been working hard at successfully melting off some extra Christmas weight, he stopped dead in his tracks.

“Young ladies, are you professional artists?” All said with a twinkle in his eye.

“No, um, no, um, we just like to play around and see what comes to us and then we use chalk to bring it to life.” Big toothy grins, garnished with apple cheeks.

“Oh, OK, I was thinking that if you were professional artists, I would have to pay you to look at your chalk art?” Gabriel said this in a dead-pan fashion.

“Oh, if you would like to pay us, then yes, we are professionals.” This was said with a steely glint from the eye of the older of the two children.

“Hmmm, let me see, do I have any money....not there....not there either. But wait a minute, I just so happen to have a plate of delicious fudge, made lovingly by Esmerelda up the street. I could pay you two artists in fudge...but

perhaps you don't like fudge?" Gabriel spun this out slowly.

"But we love fudge!!" Both standing up on cue, with big smiles, now in on the joke.

"Well, if you love fudge, then this will be a most suitable recompense for your amazing art installation here." And with a mock flourish, Gabriel gently placed the plate of goodies into two sets of chalky hands. He turned and strolled home quickly, before negotiations ensued on which were the best pieces and how much might be reasonably consumed before supper-time.

Gabriel sashayed up his front steps and noticed the time on the clock above the hall tree. Mary would be home soon, and undoubtedly would be tired and hungry from a full day of counseling her clients. He put on some Latin music and started to chop up garlic and zucchini that he could stew up and add to the quinoa he had cooked after breakfast. Kindness shown to all was an important way to live a more conscious life, but even more important when interacting with his better half. Gabriel went about his kitchen chores, wearing an apron that rarely saw laundering, and whistling softly.

Remember Who You Are



Maria was back at the market the following Thursday, with lots of fresh

vegetables on display on her old trestle table and a bright red cash box on a thick gauge chain tethered to one of its legs. She had resolved to lock this up if she ever left the vicinity even for a few seconds. Once bitten, twice shy on one hand, but believing in the good of all people on the other hand. She usually came early to get set up well in advance, because once things got rolling it was often non-stop.

“Good afternoon, *buon pomeriggio*, how are you today?” Maria beamed at an older lady with two grandchildren in tow.

“I would like some kale, and some of your rainbow chard, as well as a bunch of your carrots.” The grandmother was no-nonsense, with a flicker of a smile.

“Grams, I don’t like kale, it’s too chewy.” One of the granddaughters scrunched up her nose.

“I will make it up as kale chips, with lots of coarse sea salt. You will be asking for more, as soon as you taste the first chip!” Grandma put it all in a cloth bag quickly and moved on before negotiations could proceed any further.

Next in line was a lanky, bearded gentleman, boasting a Pugwash Peace Conference T-shirt and a pair of very high-end Birkenstocks. “Hi there, Maria. I just came back from a biodynamic growing conference, and I’m excited about getting more raw food into my diet. I’m committed to having a meal of raw vegetables every day, just like Edgar Cayce used to recommend, so let me take one of everything and tell me what I owe you!”

The sun shone warmer and the line got longer. Maria beamed a smile at everyone, and worked through the queue in a methodical way. She knew regular customers’ favourites, and she took time to come around to the front to tweak a few babies on the cheek and to give an older gentleman a hug. “Ernie, it’s been too many weeks since I’ve last seen you. I heard that you went in for a hip replacement, are you recuperating OK?” Ernie basked in the attention, and told everyone within earshot of his distaste for hospital food and the visual charms of a young nurse who had worked the graveyard shift. He had been a widower for a decade but still had play in him in most aspects.

Towards the end of the day when things were winding down, Arabella arrived, looking for some herbs and hot peppers to make a carafe of *huile picante* for an upcoming dinner party. She had been coming to the Miamica farm stand since she was a kid growing up in town.

“Maria, what I would give for your beautiful skin! If I spent as much time in the sun as you do I would look like a wrinkled hag, but you just look better every time we cross paths!” Arabella gave her old friend a warm hug.

"Bella Arabella, your name was divinely chosen. And God gave you both beauty and charm! I'm just a daughter of the old country, and lots of fresh vegetables and olive oil keep me in fair form. But our charms don't seem to translate into much success on the romantic front, do they? Not that I would have much time for a man these days, with the farm work calling and my parents the way they are?"

"And we're not getting any younger, are we? I'm always keeping me eye out for possibilities though. The rental house next door is turning over, and I've been seeing some promising chaps stopping in to peruse the opportunity. If they are single and move in right next door, I'm putting it out there that something might evolve!" This was accompanied by some mutual giggling.

Gabriel showed up around this time, discreetly holding back a bit as he had correctly detected a somewhat intimate conversation unfolding between the two women. He had walked Esmerelda down to an appointment at her chiropractor, and had realized it was market day and that he had a few moments before it wound up.

"Kind sir, I'll be with you in a jiffy." Maria gave him a sly smile and winked at Arabella, who turned and saw that it was Gabriel Dunlop, someone she had worked with on a raft of community initiatives over the years.

"Well, I do declare, here is a fine and honourable specimen of the best our town has to offer in the way of men!" Arabella gave Gabriel a sideways hug and patted him on his chest. "Maria, if Gabriel was not happily married to his dear Mary, we would be well advised to queue up for his considerable charms, as he is a veritable darling!" Gabriel blushed, and started to wonder if he had really needed fresh greens after all.

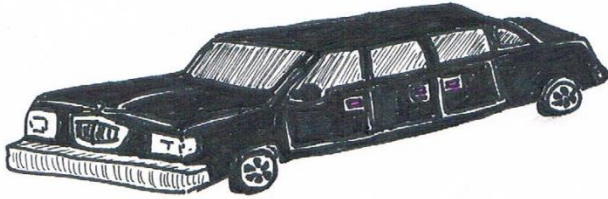
"Now Arabella, you seem to bring out the worst in me! We're acting like a bunch of lusty teenagers reducing *Signor Dunlop* here to mere eye candy. When I take a step back I have to think about what I truly am, what we all are in an underlying sense." Gabriel checked his watch and mentally calculated when Esmerelda would be done at the chiropractic clinic.

Maria kept pontificating. "You see, we have to remember who we really are. I'm Maria, you're Arabella and you're Gabriel. But we're all a reflection of something totally amazing. We're all spiritual, and we're all a spark of Spirit. So when I hold that in mind, constantly, it makes this life we all live very different. This realization makes a lot of problems melt away quickly, particularly something like our romantic situations!" Maria smiled wryly.

Gabriel had the air of a man who had stumbled into a bike gang meeting. "I

think I'll just grab some spinach and then I'll be on my way..."

Strength Training



Gabriel shuffled away quickly, after a friendly tip of his hat to the two women but leaving no doubt he was quite interested in extricating himself from further conversation. The two women chuckled and clucked, and put their heads together for a smidge of whispered repartee.

On the market's edge, a limousine pulled up and parked illegally on the curb outside the café on Millers Lane. A large well-built man in a tight-fitting tuxedo jacket, designer T-shirt with a surfing motif and black Diesel jeans stepped out from the driver's seat and slickly opened up the rear door for his sole passenger. A lady of some vintage, wearing a sharp suit and pearls stepped out gracefully with two cloth shopping bags in hand. "I shan't be long, Mikey...just picking up a few things so don't go too far afield." She squeezed his arm affectionately and floated over towards the flower and mushroom stand. Mikey cracked his knuckles and looked instinctively up and down Miller's Lane, sensing that he would have just enough time to grab a coffee if the lineup wasn't overly long. He strode up the steps with quick, cat-like motions, his ponytail bouncing as he crossed the café's veranda.

Back at Maria's stand, she had said goodbye to Arabella and was tidying up the remaining vegetables in attractive piles in the hopes that she could clear it all by the impending closing hour. A sideways glance down the parking lot gave her cause for some degree of nervousness. Six young people were walking slowly through the market, wearing black T-shirts, black fedoras and black V-for-Vendetta masks. The painted-on smiles belied their body language, and they hung tightly in a pack and seemed to be communicating with each other through some kind of hand gestures. They weren't shopping, they were just looking at the scene slowly and intently. Maria was sure that some of these young folk were responsible for her missing cash box. Nothing she could prove, but she reached over and gave the new box's lock a tight squeeze. Maria called out to her neighbouring vendors and discreetly suggested to them to keep alert for trouble. But the group passed by quickly, perhaps sensing the potential for confrontation, and brushed past an older well-dressed lady, knocking a nice bouquet of sunflowers to the ground.

Instead of apologizing and picking up the errant flowers, they all snorted under their masks and made a beeline between the two farm stands bordering Miller's Lane.

Gabriel was in the process of picking up Esmerelda after her chiropractic adjustment from the fellow who rented a room on Thursdays at the doctor's office in the old house at Millers Lane and Hatt Street. She was stepping along pretty lively, Gabriel thought, much improved from the inbound trip a mere twenty minutes earlier. They turned the corner on Millers Lane but had to press tight into the hedge along the side yard of the doctor's office as a polished black limousine shot past them with its two right wheels up on the narrow sidewalk. "Criminy, you'd expect better driving from a trained professional!" Esmerelda's face was flushed and she had dug her nails into Gabriel's forearm. He cranked his neck to follow the offending vehicle and noticed it turned right onto Hatt without so much as how-do-you-do for the stop sign at the end of the street.

The two of them were a bit rattled, but quickly calmed themselves down and walked towards King Street. When they were just abreast of the café, a big man in a tuxedo jacket came thundering down the veranda steps, a takeout cappuccino sloshing violently in its enclosed volume. "Where in the hell is my car?" His eyes bulged in concert with his muscular neck, and he shifted his sunglasses down his nose to look directly at Gabriel. "Mister, did you see a black limo? I just stepped in for a frothy one and absent-mindedly left the keys in the ignition. This is a small town, for cripes sake!"

Gabriel swallowed hard and instinctively put out his hand to the chap's girthy upper arm. "Esmerelda and I had just turned the corner at the doctor's office and were almost knocked over by a big black car riding halfway up the sidewalk. It rolled through the stop and turned right onto Hatt at a pretty good clip."

"Jesus, Mike and Mary... I get my car jackd while I'm actually working. I've got a respectable client strolling through the market right now, who won't be getting home on my steam. That car cost me \$60K two years ago, and I've done some customizing to make it...more comfortable. If I get my hands on who drove off with it, I will literally twist their necks!" Mikey torqued the top of his coffee cup with dramatic effect.

"I'm afraid neither of us has a phone to notify the authorities." Gabriel looked pensive. "Perhaps we could walk over to one of the kind vendors in the market, and see if we can borrow their phone to make a call."

The trio cut through between two stands and made a beeline to Maria's operation, where she was selling her last bunch of rapini to Mikey's polished

client. Gabriel explained what had transpired to Maria and she quickly called the police to request them to come out and question anybody who may have seen the auto theft unfold.

“This seems like a pattern to me. Some young guys wearing masks came through last week and I stepped away for a drink and upon my return my cashbox was missing. You step in for a coffee, keys are left in the ignition, and a car disappears quickly. I just saw some of the same type of guys wearing the same masks float through here, just minutes ago.” Maria pursed her lips.

“We were so concerned with our own safety that I didn’t even register who was in the limousine.” Gabriel shook his head sadly.

“Well, I’ll call a normal cab to get Mrs. McGillicuddy here home safe and sound, But I’m ruined if I don’t get that limo back. Absolutely ruined.” Mikey teared up.

Maria patted his face and wrapped her arms around his big frame. “Hey Mikey, c’mon, you’re tougher than that. You’re a big strong guy. You can work hard and get another limo. These same guys took close to a grand of my cash, but I didn’t let that steal my joy. I just handed it over to the Big Guy, who takes care of everything.”

“I’ve had a tough life, Maria.” He started to blubber softly. “I’ve never really had someone to back me up, no matter how hard the situation becomes.”

“Trust me, the Big Guy will give you all the strength you need, to face any situation. Even this one. Life hasn’t been a bed of roses for me, either. But every morning I tell myself, ‘God is the Strength in which I trust’.”

Mikey let out a deep sigh. “That’s exactly what I need to hear to calm down. But if I catch those guys, I will literally stuff their masks down their throats!”

Big Mind



Arabella had circled back to Maria's market stand, after getting halfway home and realizing she had not picked up sufficient greens for the upcoming dinner party. She came upon the situation, with a distraught Mikey wiping away tears with a massive jacket-sheathed forearm, and Maria and Gabriel patting him soothingly on the back. Esmerelda stood off to one side, biting her lip and holding the energy of someone who would much rather be in a calmer place.

Arabella stepped in with the practiced air of a can-do organizer, and suggested they let Maria cap off her day and the rest of the group could jump in a cab and go to her home for a nice cup of tea. They quickly strolled over to the cab stand outside the old Post Office, with Esmerelda suggesting she would be just as happy to be dropped off at home so she could make an early start on her preparations for supper.

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The limo had a designated driver that late afternoon, but sobriety was only to be measured in relative terms to the other four occupants. They had jacked the odd car before, along with countless e-bikes and bicycles, but never a limousine. Once they had gotten over the initial excitement, they slowed down considerably and Pork Chop the driver kept checking in the rear view mirror for any noticeable trailing traffic.

"I love these date squares, but who in the hell grabbed this multi-grain bread crap?" The masks were slinked up on their heads except for one, and a skinny kid with a challenged complexion threw a chunk of dark loaf onto the floor mat.

"Listen, dude, I grab what I can from the bakery guy every week, but I don't

have a lot of time to work with. Lollipop does a good job of distracting him with a nice view down the canyon here, but I think he's onto me." A good-looking young kid with sunken eyes gave an affectionate squeeze to a petite redhead wearing a tight leather jacket.

"Sorry Rambo, I'll try to detain him visually a bit longer, just so you can grab some Wonder Bread or its equivalent for ol' Tiger Stripe up there. Wouldn't want him to go on a health kick and start demanding gluten-free from now on, would we?" The girl playfully put her arm around her boyfriend's neck and pulled him tight to her enviable chest.

"So where to, boss?" Pork Chop was a big guy, but held the wheel of this expensive vehicle with a lot of poise and grace.

A metallic-sounding voice emanated from underneath the mask of the person sitting in the rear left. "Go out Governors, watching all the speed limits, then up Weirs Lane to Highway 8. I'll make a few calls to see where we can best ditch this limo until its disappearance dies down a bit, and then we'll see about getting it to a body shop for a little flashier paint job. Then one of you can ride with Pork Chop over to Detroit or Chi-Town where we can sell it for 10-15 large, no questions asked. And I can arrange for a briefcase or two with false bottoms to accompany you back on the plane, to make it a very profitable weekend." The Oracle spoke slowly, deliberately, as if reading from a script.

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"So what do we do tonight, Oracle, can we call it a day after we drop this buggy?" Rambo had come up for air and put his hand on Lollipop's knee.

"We'll grab another car and head to Brampton for some glow lights and drip-line tubing for the grow-op in the student house we just took over. Pork Chop will drive and Lollipop will ride with me in the back. You and 'Stripe can hitch a ride back into town and do whatever you feel like as long as you meet me at the student house by 10 tomorrow." The Oracle said this in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Uh, Lollipop and I were wondering if we might get together tonight with another couple, actually my brother and his new girlfriend." Rambo leaned over and flashed a hopeful smile.

"Perhaps another night, Rambo. Or should I say Romeo? Lollipop needs to ride in the back alone with me, so we have enough room for some of her special affection. Don't look so dejected my friend, you will remember this is the deal we worked out when you both let me know you wanted to become more than just friends. Lollipop and I go back a long ways, I take good care of her, and a couple of times a week she shows her appreciation. So yeah, we're

going to have to lose you two chaps.”

There was a strained silence as they turned onto Weirs Lane. The little redhead popped her mask down over her face and slid a hand onto the closest knee of both her backseat companions. She angled her lithe figure ever so slightly in Rambo’s direction, as if to subliminally suggest where her true affections were truly directed.

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Arabella carried a tray of iced tea in highball glasses into her solarium to a waiting Mikey and Gabriel. The two men were sitting comfortably in dark leather La-Z-Boy chairs, put in by her Dad when her Mom was still alive so they could have movie nights in style. She had thought about serving something more brisk, but decided against it upon reflection. Mikey would need to be talked back into a calmer state without the use of something that might exacerbate the problem.

“So Mikey, just put your feet up and have a sip of this iced tea. You have chauffeured me around to more events than I can remember in that beautiful limo of yours, and we’ll help you get it back before you know it.” Arabella gushed and patted his arm.

“OK, alright, OK, but I have to tell you this has thrown me for a loop! I’m a gentle guy, but my size gives me the reputation for potentially being a bruiser. That car is well known around town, and I can’t believe anyone would touch it as they should be scared to deal with me in the aftermath!” Mikey grimaced and pounded a fist into his other hand.

“Car jacking, even in our fair little town, is becoming much more common. It’s come up from the States, and I think that’s where a lot of the heisted cars go.” Arabella pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows grimly.

“Listen, to have my car jacked, just the thought of it makes me lose my mind!” Mikey leaned back and virtually howled.

“Perhaps that’s a good place to start...” Gabriel smacked his lips after a good pull on his iced tea.

“I’m not sure I follow, or if I should take offense to what you just said?” Mikey looked bewildered.

“No offense intended. I was just thinking to some of my spiritual training. I don’t do a lot of New Age things at all, being pretty conventional in a lot of ways. But something I do often is to try to step outside my ego boundaries,

outside the conventional thinking of my own little mind, and attempt to think coherently with the Big Mind. And if I can do that, I might get answers to every question I truly need answered.” Gabriel looked deeply at the two of them.

“Big Mind?” Arabella looked expectant, if not a bit uncomfortable.

“The Mind of the Divine. The Mind of Source. The Mind of God, if you want me to be true to my roots.”

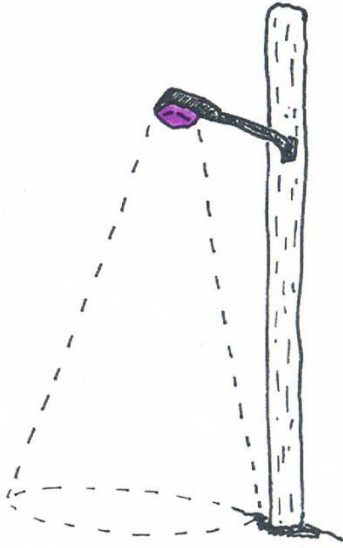
“OK, so if I calm down, and step outside my little mind and go to this Mind you refer to, then what happens?” Mikey was calming down, and said this very slowly.

“Sure, so every morning I tell myself ‘God is the Mind in which I think’. Tall order, I know. But if I really anchor that, then throughout the day when I generate a thought that comes from my insecurities, my biases, my whatever, I just rein myself in and throw this thought out and go back to the thought ‘God is the Mind in which I think’. And the following thoughts are secure, unbiased, as they are based on a foundation of Love and Peace. And the stronger I hold these, the better it gets, and I spiral upwards and upwards. Some people might find it hokey, but I see it as a good way to live.” All of this was said with a broad and disarming smile.

“Alright, Gabriel. You have touched a nerve. Right now I’m going to drop my thoughts of anger, vengeance, and anything else along those lines. I’m no saint, but I have had enough Sunday School training to help me resonate with what you are suggesting. But do you think if I do this, I might ask Big Mind to get my car back unscathed?”

Gabriel leaned forward in his La-Z-Boy. “Let’s just close our eyes, clear our minds, and be open to some answers on where this shiny black limo has ended up!” The room went quiet, and drops of moisture tickled down the sides of three glasses, marginally observable in the waning daylight.

Who's In Charge Here?



The phone rang out in Arabella's kitchen, jarring the three of them back into the present situation. Arabella ran out and grabbed it off its hook before the third ring had run its course.

"Bella, is that you?" The voice was breathless, expectant.

"Yes, Arabella here." She felt as if she should recognize the caller.

"Hey girlfriend, it's Maria. I'm not speaking normally as I'm not sure who's around here. I had to run some irrigation hose out to a farm in Flamborough once I was clear of the market, and as I was bombing up Middletown Road I saw something that made me slow down and stop. The nose of a black limo was sticking out a bit from a grain storage unit on a quiet stretch of road north of Highway 5. Looks like somebody tried to throw a tarp over it to conceal it, but it can get gusty up here and the front end got uncovered a bit. I had a look and jumped back in my truck and drove a few mailboxes away, just in case the guys who jacked it are still around."

"Oh, my, what a stroke of good luck! Mikey is here with Gabriel, and we were all trying to focus on where the car might be. So your call is a welcome answer to our question." Arabella cooed this into the phone.

"Kay, here's what I suggest. I'll double back to town and pick up the two gents. Only three fit into my cab, Arabella, so you'll be spared any opportunity for excitement or danger. We can go to Mikey's place and pick up a spare set of keys, and then we'll take a run out here to see if this is actually his car. With some luck he'll be back in town, driving in style, in under an hour."

“Maria, you’re amazing, I’ll get these chaps hydrated and on the curb for you pronto. We don’t want to waste any time in case the bad guys return!”

Maria fired up her truck and drove south on to Highway 5. Rolling through the stop sign with no traffic apparent on either side, she saw two young men hitchhiking eastward. She thought to herself she rarely saw hitchhikers anymore, and then she jerked her head backwards as she thought she recognized the shorter one as her brother’s son, Tony. She considered turning around and giving them a lift into town via Brock Road, but she reminded herself she was on a mission where time was of the essence so she kept rolling towards Highway 8. Tony was a good-looking kid and a sweet young guy. But he may have started to hang around with the wrong crowd, according to some internal family gossip. If they were still looking for a ride in half an hour she would definitely stop and pick them up.

In a matter of minutes she was at Arabella’s, and they made a quick stop at Mikey’s townhouse off Ann Street to pick up a spare set of car keys. Maria then gunned it out Governors and turned up Weir’s Lane towards Highway 8, unknowingly following the same route the carjackers had taken barely two hours previously. They jiggled and jogged to get around the reservoir at Christie’s and slowly approached the grain storage unit set back from Middletown Road.

“OK before I drive up to the vehicle, can you guys play detective and let me know if you think anybody is lurking around?” Maria’s eyes flashed.

“Cut the engine and I’ll pop out. I have super-sensitive hearing and I can quickly pick up if anybody or anything is around. And if they are, I’ll wring their bloody necks!” Colour rushed up to Mikey’s cheeks.

“Just to bring you back to what we were talking about previously...” Gabriel whispered this and arched his eyebrows.

“Uhhh, right, cancel that. God is the Mind in which I think. OK, I will quickly determine if any of God’s little errant children are puttering around in these parts! Better?!”

Mikey jumped out of the farm truck and scanned his eyes in a broad circumference towards the treeline of a bush. A bunch of frogs called out from a nearby marsh, one of the finger wetlands extending downward from the Beverly Swamp. “Looks very quiet to me. And it definitely looks like my car. Have to deke over there and pull back the tarp further. I have a discreet business decal on the driver’s door. If it is mine, I’ll give a thumbs up and you pull over quick and let Gabriel jump out to give me company back into town.

Maria, your farm is on top of the Escarpment, so you might as well go directly home via Brock Road and Harvest Road. I can't thank you enough! But if it's not my ride, then we'll both need a lift back into town."

Mikey ran in a zigzag fashion towards the limo, having seen far too many action movies to make a beeline. He roughly yanked the tarp back to the car's mid-section and gave out an audible war whoop, his thumbsup following soon thereafter. While he jammed the keys into the door to unlock it, Maria gunned the truck and swung around in a tight arc, spraying gravel and depositing Gabriel on the passenger side in one fell swoop.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go!" Mikey yelled out excitedly and gunned the engine.

"*Ciao*, gents, and next time there's a caper, count me in!" Maria yelled this out and rolled away quickly.

"How's the limo look, Mikey old boy?" Gabriel himself was getting caught up in the excitement.

"There was something sticky on the leather steering wheel cover, and it looks like someone left half a loaf of bread on the floorboard by your feet. But it's still running like a top, so I'm happy as a clam!" Mikey sang this out and gave the steering wheel a playful smack.

Maria raced down Middletown Road and remembered her nephew hitchhiker. No one remained on the side of the road. As she carried on past Flamboro Downs, she vaguely registered that the gambling complex was curiously dark.

Mikey and Gabriel turned left on Highway 8. "I have to thank you, Gabriel. You really calmed me down back at Arabella's, and from that time on things started to get clearer in my mind, and now look what happened! My beautiful black beauty is back in my hands!" Mikey smiled broadly.

"*A votre service, monsieur*. Any time I can nudge a young person to help themselves, it gives me great pleasure." Gabriel looked left and smiled broadly.

"I have to keep that concept, 'Mind In Which I Think', front and center. But I find I bounce around a lot, and I can slip into the negative zone pretty quickly, you know what I mean?" Mikey pursed his lips and looked balefully in the direction of Gabriel.

"I go by the motto 'I rule my mind, which I alone must rule'. Seems simplistic,

but it puts me in control. No one else can rule my mind, so if it's up to me, I might as well be consistent and positive with it." Gabriel spun this out slowly.

"Hey, doesn't this part of Greenville have street lights? And all these homes seem dark, what's going on?" Mikey sped along, waving at the nearby residences.

"Not sure, I know there are lights on the Highway 8 hill. You can see them going up in a necklace of light from a bunch of places in town." Gabriel smiled wanly.

But as they rolled down the hill, there were no streetlights, and the town lay below them in darkness. Then all the lights flickered on and off, on and off.

"What the heck?" Mikey exclaimed. It had certainly been a challenging day.

A Gift to Myself



Maria's cell phone rang as she turned left onto Harvest Road.

"Maria, It's Arabella. Where y'at?"

"Hey, we hit paydirt and it turned out to be Mikey's limousine after all. The two gents jumped in and gunned it, and I took off to go home the back way. But it's darker than I normally figure it to be at this time of the night?" Maria's voice had a querulous tone.

"Listen, the power has been going off and on ever since you three rolled out of here. More off than on. I don't know if it's localized or not, but all of my neighbours are dark up and down the street. My stove clock is flashing and I am scrambling to get a working flashlight and some candles in place. And after all the excitement of today, I feel a bit lonely. Do you have time to roll down for a glass of wine before you head home?" Arabella sounded hopeful.

“Hey ‘Bella, that sounds perfect. My parents go to bed by seven every night, so on market nights they have tucked themselves in before I even get home. So another hour won’t make any difference. Why don’t you call the two gents and invite them along? It may not be a romantic night as Gabriel is married, but it would be fun to have some masculine energy around for a change!” Maria laughed infectiously.

“I’ll see what I can do, just come as soon as you can.” And with that, Arabella rang off and dialed Mikey’s cell.

“Mikey, are you home yet? You’re just about to drop Gabriel off at his place? Listen, before you do that, would you two like to drop by and share a carafe of *vino* with Maria and me? Sure, go ahead and ask Gabriel.” A brief pause ensued. “He’s saying he needs to get home to Mary, but he’ll take a rain cheque? OK, perfectly understandable. But can you come over for a bit? Yes, the lights have been out for a while, but I’ll scare up some candles. See you shortly!”

Arabella lit three candles in her sumptuous living room and brought in a carafe of red wine and three exquisite glasses. She pulled two comfy chairs closer to a dark leather couch, and shifted things around on a low-slung coffee table until she heard the door knocker. She opened the front door and was greeted by the presence of a hulking and smiling Mikey, arm in arm with a tanned and vivacious Maria. She had swept up her hair and had changed out of her farm T-shirt into a somewhat low-cut silk blouse she always kept in her glove compartment. Arabella had the fleeting thought they went well together as a couple.

“Ahh, my darlings, so good to see you safe and sound after your successful mission. And your smiles certainly cheer me up on this night with no artificial light!” Arabella gave both of them a kiss on each cheek.

“You know, I live on a farm and we get up with the birds and go to bed with the birds. A lot of stuff we do by hand in the ways of the old country, but we certainly need power for our cooking and our fridge. So let’s hope it comes back soon. I have some *prosciutto* in the fridge that is already a bit iffy, and I don’t want to throw it out!” Maria pursed her lips.

“Listen, I am the complete urban dude. Everything I do needs juice, from my phone charger to my computer to my wide-screen TV. I love sports and that’s how I wind down after a day of effort, with larger-than-life images on the sports channel. But I also know we live on a razor’s edge, that everything is tied to the grid and to the satellites that run our communication networks. If these go down for a bit, we would be seriously inconvenienced. If they go

down for a lengthy period, I think we would be severely compromised as a society.” Mikey looked rueful.

“Friends, we’ll set all of this aside and go into the living room for a wee bit of wine. I have tried to set a convivial mood with candlelight and a conversation triangle setup, one that might even be called romantic under different circumstances. So please come in!”

Mikey splayed out on the leather couch and the two women settled easily into the comfy chairs. Wine was poured and served, and the three seemed to exhale one collective outbreath.

“It had been off, then on for a few seconds, then off again for a while, then on for a half minute or so, then off once more . Let’s see when it comes back on, I may have to adjust my schedule a bit for the early morning if the juice stays off past then.” Arabella’s tone was uncertain.

“What do you normally do on Friday mornings, ‘Bella?”

“Mrs.Swinson is an old friend of the family, and just lives a block away. I generally go over to her place and make her a hot breakfast, and then we go for an hour’s stroll by wheelchair around the Driving Park. So if there’s no electricity, it will have to be cheese and melba toast instead of porridge and poached eggs!” Arabella sang this out, almost to convince herself everything would be OK.

“I certainly admire your service to one of our elderly.” Mikey said this reverentially.

“Thank you, my darling. I am comfortably off, thanks to my parents and their investment prowess. So I generally volunteer my time to a wide range of activities and people in the town, but I have to say my motivation is not praise or compliments.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...” Mikey sputtered a bit on his wine.

“No, I am sorry, that appeared ungracious. I should have finished my thought completely. I meant to go on to say that what I have concluded after years of volunteerism, is that for everything I give in terms of money or time, I seem to get back tenfold. In how my heart feels, in the warmth of the smile from someone I’ve helped, in seeing donations bring programs and services to life for my friends and neighbours. So as they say, ‘everything I give is given to myself’. But you know, I have found this to be true. Consistently true.”

“Now I know why I have always admired you, Arabella.” Maria’s eyes

glistened.

Glasses were recharged and the conversation flowed along. At one point, Maria slid out of her chair and joined Mikey on the leather sofa. He put his arm around her without fanfare, and motioned for Arabella to join them on the other side. An observer from the hallway would have seen a handsome and muscular youngish man, dressed in a designer T-shirt and a tuxedo jacket, bookended on both sides by two attractive fortysomething women.

"Oh my, it may be the wine, it may be the beauty that surrounds me, but I have to ask if you two ladies are romantically attached to any particular gentleman." Mikey looked to one side and then the other.

"Nope, I think I'm unattached for the duration!" Maria laughed coyly.

"Ditto, but always looking. I have been married once, but that particular garment didn't fit all that well." Arabella pouted, not unattractively.

"Oh, ditto, ditto for me, we are twin sisters on a lot of fronts." Maria reached across Mikey to caress Arabella's arm. A few seconds ticked by.

"Well, let me bridge over this awkward moment. I am a limo driver, but sometimes more for certain ladies. I will accompany some special woman to an event she doesn't want to go solo to, and I provide the car and the male presence. But there are other clients I offer companionship to. They might be widows, recently divorced ladies, single gals who work or study too hard to keep a man happy. I offer them my time and some special services. No sex *per se*, but I'm open for other suggestions. If someone wants to be hugged and kissed, then I am their affectionate paramour. If someone wants to be the dominating empress, then I am their compliant manservant. If someone wants to be the naughty schoolgirl, then I am their harsh headmaster. If they enjoy massage or like to be lightly spanked, I am very good with my hands. And we often end with a special massage, if you know what I mean, like the doctor in the movie *Hysteria*? My code of honour is that I never touch a married lady and I only offer pleasure, never receive it. And this is all done in the broad expanse of my beloved limo's backseat. And you wondered why it has tinted windows?" A lot of colour had risen to Mikey's cheeks.

The two women sat in stunned silence. There had been a few upraised eyebrows and some sideways eye contact between them as Mikey had spilled out his story.

Arabella patted down her hair and broke the silence. "Well, Mikey, this has been quite a day, and now this somewhat steamy material to absorb..." Her voice trailed off.

“And what might you suggest we do with this, Mikey?” Maria’s voice had grown husky in tone.

“Both of you have helped me greatly today. You are two beautiful women, moreso by candlelight. I offer you both an hour of companionship in my limousine, either individually while the other waits here, or collectively in turn while the other watches. Some ladies have found they really like to watch, so you wouldn’t be the first time two friends came along together. But it’s only an invitation, I don’t want to presume any interest on your part.” Mikey spoke this softly.

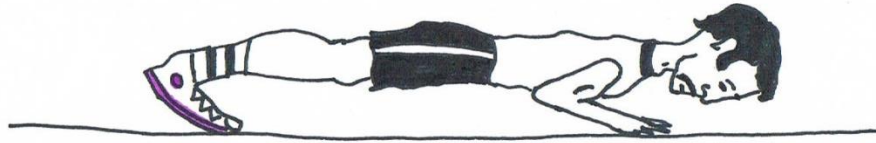
“Oh my, it might be the wine or the excitement of the day, or the fact I haven’t had a guy to touch for so long. But count me in! And I think I would love to watch, and be watched! Heaven help me, the thought of this excites me to bits! I hope you don’t think me kinky, ‘Bella?” Maria leaned in to Mikey and reached over and stroked Arabella’s arm.

Arabella sat up in mock primness, looking straight ahead for effect, but projecting lascivious looks to the other two intermittently. “My stars, look what happens when the lights go out! It appears as if we already have two votes in favour, so against my better judgment and upbringing I suppose I’ll make it unanimous, with a mix of enthusiasm and nervousness. I reckon if we go as a trio it will save us ladies from having to wait around in a lonely and dark house, with all kinds of wild thoughts fueling one’s anticipation! But we will still have to flip a coin to see who gets spanked first! Mikey, grab some more wine from the fridge!”

A moment later the two women stepped tentatively down the front porch steps, wearing expensive sling-back peep-toe pumps that Arabella had rummaged around for from her front closet, Maria in classic black and Arabella in magenta snakeprint. They had quickly shimmied off all their clothing at the garment tree by the front door, Maria slipping on a conservative grey trenchcoat and electing to leave the buttons above the beltline undone, and Arabella cinching up her favourite purple silk kimono with its considerable clinginess in full effect. Mikey followed closely behind, carrying a wine bottle and three cut crystal glasses. The trio slid through the limousine’s rear door, with some muted tittering from the two women, moreso from Arabella who had won the coin toss.

All of this was observed by Henri LaMontagne, Arabella’s new next-door neighbor, who was peering out of his window at the thickening dusk as he contemplated a cold supper. The expectant energy of the two ladies had definitely piqued his interests. But the driver did not get out to ferry the car away. This made Henri furrow his brow considerably.

The Scent of A Woman



The lights came back on in the middle of the night, waking many people who had tucked themselves into bed by flashlight and a soft-spoken prayer for the power's early return. Many people jumped up and turned off the lights, and went back to bed with a feeling of reassurance. And many of these slept in the following morning, with the previous disruption bumping them off their routine of setting their alarm clocks.

Arabella was one of these, having slept somewhat fitfully for most of the night due to a variety of factors. She got up and sauntered out to her deck that was attached to her solarium, realizing she was still wearing her purple kimono from the evening before. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her new neighbor doing an extended set of pushups in his side yard, wearing a white muscle shirt and a pair of old-school boxing shorts. He turned his head and looked up at Arabella on the deck, carrying on with his pushups but giving her a look that appeared expectant and sly at the same time. She had not yet taken the opportunity to introduce herself, and this did not seem like an opportune time to do so. So she blurted out an under-the-breath good morning and slid back into the safety of the solarium. Neighbourly civilities would have to wait until a later date.

The phone rang as soon as she entered the house. "Arabella, it's Gabriel. Thank goodness the power has returned! I hope I'm not calling too early? I thought I would try to reach you before I head into the office. You had kindly offered some socialization last night which I felt I should take a rain cheque on, but I am suggesting I might redeem this tonight as Mary has a number of clients she needs to counsel? I read the Star over breakfast and found there is a public talk tonight at the Town Hall Auditorium. Do you think you might like to take this in? Perhaps Mikey and Maria might also like to come along, I think the subject matter might appeal to Mikey given our earnest conversations of yesterday."

So as events that are meant to happen create compliant schedules for those who need to attend them, it just so happened that Arabella's phone calls to Mikey and Maria revealed that their Friday evening plans were totally fluid. So at 7:15 sharp a black limo pulled up to Gabriel's home on Park Street, and he jumped in the back with the two women and they wended their way to the

Town Hall.

As they mounted the stairs to the second floor auditorium, Gabriel noticed that Mikey was relaxed and smiling, in abject contrast to the situation twenty four hours earlier. They were greeted at the top of the stairs by a sprightly young woman who was quick to smile and offer a warm hand in greeting.

“Kind folks, nice to see you out. My name is Magdalena McDermott. I’m the speaker this evening, and our numbers are going to be modest, so it’s doubly nice to see a group of four arrive! Grab some juice and a cookie and we’ll get underway very soon.”

The hall was indeed sparsely populated, with perhaps a dozen people sitting in groups of two and three on folding chairs. After some deliberation, the newly arrived foursome decided on the second row and to forego refreshments. A moment later a tall man rose and faced the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Civic League, it gives me great pleasure to introduce tonight’s speaker, Miss Magdalena McDermott, a new transplant to our fair town. Magdalena is a graphic designer by profession, but spends considerable time on self-development modalities. Her talk tonight is titled ‘Program Yourself for Victory’, and I have to tell you I am all ears for this much anticipated presentation! Magdalena, the floor is yours!” Stephen Tucker extended a broad hand towards the podium.

But the spunky young lady was not destined to sequester herself behind any lectern. She paced twice back and forth in front of the first row of seats and quickly took charge. “All right, friends, I need to look into your eyes and feel your energy. I am going to ask you all to vacate your current seats and come up here and pack the front row.” This was followed by some sideways glances and uneasy smiles from the assembled group. “Come on, don’t be shy, get up and take a seat right up front.” Slowly, hesitantly, the group got up and shuffled to the front row, eventually all taking a chair within inches of the speaker’s pace trajectory.

“Now we’re talking! I can feel the vibe of this assembled group, and it’s impressive! Ok, what I want to talk to you about tonight is how we can step things up in our lives. We all have more to give, all have more we can do and achieve. Is there anyone in the group that thinks they are living life exactly as they want to?” Silence ensued, with a few grim smiles and raised eyebrows. “OK, we can all kick it up a notch, or perhaps do less and do what we do more mindfully. But if we’re going to live an improved life, or ‘achieve the victory’ if I can use a sports analogy, we have to get our minds in line with what we want to achieve.”

Mikey was listening to Magdalena's message intently. It seemed in his mind that he stood at some kind of crossroads, precipitated by the limousine theft of just a day back. Gabriel's suggestion of getting his mind in line with a higher power had stirred something deep within him, and now this followup exhortation seemed to put the icing on the cake. He had experienced a tough childhood, growing up with a single mom who had shown her affection with the back of her hand. This had caused him to feel insecure, not quite good enough. So perhaps the part of his business which he did discreetly was an attempt on his part to connect with feminine energy in a different way, on his own terms. He glanced sideways at Maria, and she melted him with a genuine smile and a warm touch to his forearm. Yesterday had shaken him to his core, but had also given him clarification in his own thoughts that he wanted life to be different. He leaned towards Maria as if to say something, and was stopped in his tracks by her orange-scented perfume. Al Pacino was right, he thought, it all starts with the scent of a woman. He sat up resolutely, committing mentally to a process that would see him as a new man, strong and victorious. And immersed in beauty, which he now knew he deserved.

The Power of Love



A week or more streamed by, with the perception of time being highly dependent on a person's responsibilities and outlook. A busy soccer mom with myriad responsibilities at home and at work felt this period of time zoomed by in a near instant. The older folks sitting on the porch of the retirement home out on Governors Road felt an afternoon of time crawled by slowly enough, and a full week of similar days could appear to be much longer than the actual calendar suggested. Arabella sat somewhere in the middle of this continuum, busy enough with a range of volunteer and committee responsibilities, but she still felt certain evenings to be longer than she might like.

She found herself reflecting on the events of the power outage evening, and wondered if she might quietly arrange a few quiet appointments with Mikey one-on-one to explore certain fantasies she had entertained over the last few years. There was the willing cabana boy scenario she had often mentally entertained since her last trip to Miami, or the one built around a perspiring meter reader who might be lured inside for something more than lemonade, or the plumber who might want to linger after the sink was unplugged---she would tumble these around in her mind in a feverish swirl until she just had to dial Mikey's cell phone number. Oddly, he never picked up and she didn't have the courage to leave a message. Arabella knew full well that she was potentially playing with fire here, and that a person of her social status and reputation would be well advised to walk on the sunny side of the street. So she would divert her thoughts to classical music or another engaging TED talk and try to keep her mental focus on more ethereal pursuits.

But one evening about eight o'clock her door knocker boomed loudly, and she walked quickly down her well-appointed hallway to see who might be

calling. Through the cut glass design she could make out an imposing male figure.

“Mikey, you doll, I daresay I am now a believer in the concept of envisioning what you wish for! Come in here, you wonderful specimen of a man!” Arabella grabbed him by the lapels and literally yanked him across the threshold, closing the door with a swipe of her right elbow.

“Ooooh, you have been a very irresponsible cabana boy, leaving me no towels for my steam bath and aromatherapy session. But you can make amends to Lady Arabella right now, and get down on your knees and bestow upon me a slow and tender calf massage...” Colour had risen to Arabella’s cheeks and she playfully put one hand on Mikey’s head and started to push him to the Persian hallway runner.

“Arabella, um, we need to talk.” Mikey grimaced.

“Oh no, I don’t tip my cabana boy for conversation, I desire the feel of his strong and soft hands on my beautiful legs. Now, Rodrigo, now!” Arabella threw her head back and gave Mikey a hug so tight that he seemed to flinch a bit.

“Arabella, you are a kind and gorgeous woman, but I am not here to give you pleasure.” The tone of his voice caused her to loosen her grip to some degree. “You may have noticed that I have been ignoring your calls, and that’s not my style. But I felt as if I owed you a face-to-face explanation. So that’s why I’m here.”

“But Mikey, schnoogums, we had so much fun that night the power went out. I know you comped us that evening, but I’m more than willing to pay you for your time from now on, as long as we keep it discreet and under the radar. And I can’t speak for Maria, but we both know how much she enjoyed herself that evening, so perhaps we could attempt to recreate that mood and play together as a trio? Oh come on, don’t make me beg for it! Or on second thought, that could be fun too! Oh Mikey, let’s not waste another moment!” Arabella re-tightened her grip.

“Arabella, for goodness sake, don’t make this any harder than it needs to be!” Mikey bit his lip. “OK, I’ll just spill it all out. Since that evening, something big has shifted in me. I couldn’t nail it down right away, but I figured it out at that town hall talk. It’s Maria. Being around her has just rung my bell. I met up with her and told her this in a very circular fashion, and she just wrapped her arms around me and hugged me non-stop for who knows how long? I just broke down and sobbed like a baby, and she cleaned me up afterwards and served me a piece of lasagna the size of the Toronto Yellow Pages! I’ve been

following her around like a puppy ever since, helping her on her farm, talking into the night. She is the first woman who has truly shown me love, I tell 'ya. I know she's almost fifteen years older than me, but she's got a figure a thirty year old would die for and she is simply beautiful inside and out! We were both nervous to tell you as this all started out under circumstances that involved you heavily, and we were edgy about how you might react." Mikey looked at Arabella tentatively.

"Well, embarrassment is my first feeling, given how I was just acting after you showed up at my door. And some mild regret I might say, since if I had known you would entertain a relationship I might well have offered you a nice place to co-habitate and copious amounts of affection from my side. But my abiding reaction will be delight, as Maria is a dear friend and I know how much she wanted a fellow in her life. And that age gap would be hardly mentioned if it was an older gentleman-younger lady situation, so let's not engender a double standard." Arabella took a step back and touched Mikey's upper arm, eyes moistening.

The door knocker boomed again. Arabella motioned to Mikey to stay still, but he turned and looked towards the silhouette. Gabriel pressed his nose up against the glass, having detected some motion. Arabella reluctantly opened the door.

"Arabella, good evening, I was just dropping off the minutes from our last committee meeting. Uh, Mikey, always a pleasure. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?" Gabriel said this hopefully.

"Dear Gabriel, we are just in the middle of a private conversation, perhaps we could discuss the minutes at a later date?" Arabella's voice was brittle.

"No need to beat around the bush, Gabriel. You've been a real help to me lately, so I don't mind sharing my news with you. I have fallen head over heels in love, and the experience has turned everything upside down!" Mikey smiled broadly.

"The blossoming of love has been known to do that. May I ask who Cupid has adhered you to with the tendrils from his bow?" All of this was said in a courtly fashion.

"Maria Miamica..." Mikey blushed.

Gabriel arched his eyebrows and broke out in song. "'Maria...sing it soft and it sounds like you're praying...sorry, I've always been a fan of West Side Story. Maria, what an amazing woman, and an enviable catch. As they say from where I hail, 'Attaboy, Mikey!'" Arabella stood quietly in the hallway,

lips puckered.

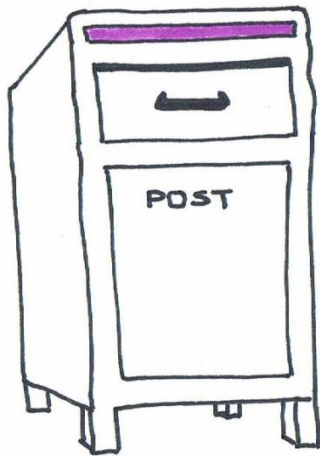
“So Cupid has made a direct hit, and with that I am cleaning up my act. I am not proud to say certain parts of my business have involved activities that would not be approved by any self-respecting church deacon. And I have done other things, for the seamy underbelly of this fair town, that are just downright illegal. But that is going to change, for good I hope, and it all came out of that terrible car-jacking incident.” Mikey shook his head.

“Old boy, we all get a hand dealt to us in life. But it’s what we do with those cards that make it interesting. Some people get a royal flush and just fritter away the opportunity. Other folks get dealt a pair of twos and make great success come from it. So Mikey, you are taking circumstances that came to you on top of the background of your life, and you are using your free will to make positive changes. And the power of Love that has come to you in such a charming way can strengthen your resolve to use your free will in better and better ways. The spiral staircase goes upward and upward.” Gabriel torqued his hands skyward.

And at that point the lights flickered once, and five seconds later the town went completely dark once again.

Part II. Exterior Darkness, Catalyzing Change

Into the Void



The power stayed off throughout the night and was still not back on by sunrise. People rose and started to go about their day but without the rhythms of a normal morning. Simple things like heating water for tea in an electric kettle or blowdrying one’s hair did not get done on that particular morning. Some folks went out looking for coffee and found most places dark and locked. One joint off of Cootes Drive was cooking breakfast with some trundled-in gas barbeques and the lineup was three blocks long, down to the

school bus parking lot by Spencer Creek. Most folks were upbeat but fidgety, with all conversation centering around one topic—when will the power come back on?

The preliminary response to this central question was less than encouraging. Anyone with a handheld device that had a reasonable level of charge still in it, was finding that most major news outlets were reporting that the power was off across most of North America and Western Europe. No one was really sure why, but it was evident that this was something far beyond the conventional power-is-off-due-to-an-errant-driver-knocking-down-a-telephone-pole scenario where half a town might be affected. News agency servers generally relied on power from the grid, so fewer and fewer sources were reporting the limited knowledge of what was causing the disruption. The CBC server was running off a bank of solar panels on the roof of their Toronto headquarters, and some early speculation was that the widespread disruption was the result of solar flare activity. This type of phenomenon, known as a coronal mass ejection, had been picking up of late and a number of scientists had predicted some pretty large pulses were inevitable over the short to intermediate term. Nothing like this had happened since the satellite and Web/server network development of the last few decades, but the projected scenario was that a big enough burst could knock out these networks along with the transmission grids connected to power generation facilities. The lack of power crippled most things or certainly slowed them down to a glacial pace, so folks who feared the worst certainly had sufficient fuel on that particular morning.

It was against this backdrop that Gabriel left his house for his morning constitutional with his doggie Strider. Dog walkers know that nothing gets in the way of the morning walk, be it rain or snow or no power. He walked down Matilda Street, and at the northwest corner of Melville and Matilda, he saw the young lady who had given the talk recently at the Town Hall about to post a letter in the Canada Post mailbox. At the same time a black limousine pulled up broadside to the corner and Mikey popped out, brandishing two large manila envelopes.

“Good morning, fine folks, it’s nice to see that Canada Post will be maintaining its market share even with the power outage!” Gabriel sang this out, with almost too much enthusiasm.

“Good morning, it’s nice to see that not everyone is weighed down by the situation facing us.” Magdalena smiled grimly.

“Well. We had a taste of this more than a week back, so we should be used to the drill by now. But my phone tells me this might be a different kettle of fish.” Mikey held up his Blackberry for emphasis.

"Both of us gents very much enjoyed your recent talk at the Town Hall." Gabriel did a half-bow in Magdalena's direction.

"It was truly great. The combination of your message, and....other factors, made that a life-changing evening. I can't thank you enough!" Mikey opened the box to allow Magdalena to post her letter and gave her freckled hand an affectionate pat.

"You're both too kind. But a speaker loves feedback, so this is much appreciated!" Magdalena flashed a smile at both of them.

"It's at challenging times like this I just mull over and over, why is our society the way it is? Why do we have all of this stuff in our lives? Why is every system we set up so complicated? And then something comes along like this and we are ass-over-teakettle in two minutes or less?" Mikey frowned theatrically.

"You want a simple answer to all of that?" Magdalena's eyes danced.

"Sure, if you have one, give it to us in a nutshell." Mikey said this softly.

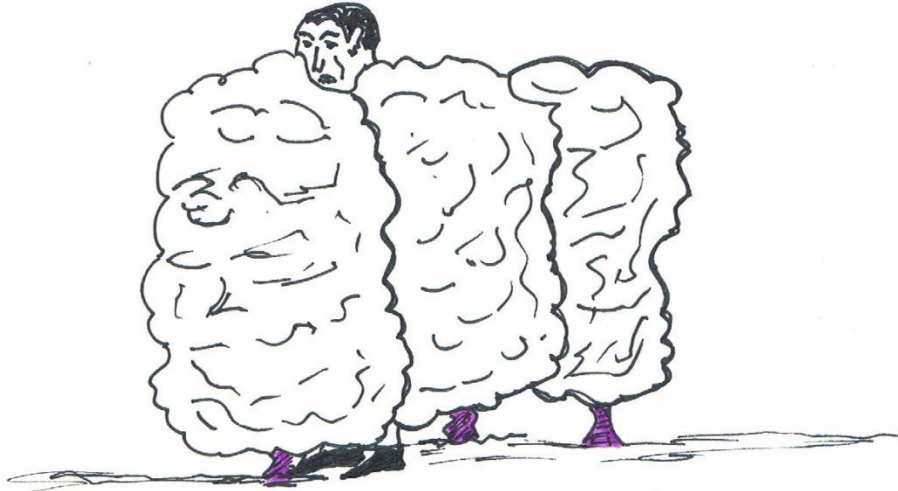
"It's our individual and collective God-void." A few seconds ticked by. "That's it." Magdalena looked straight at Mikey.

"God-void?" Mikey had a furrowed brow, along with a perplexed tone.

"Sure, God-void. When we don't feel connected to Source, we feel an emptiness, a void in our lives. We don't really know why we feel like this, but by gum we feel it! So we go out and try to fill it, with stuff from the mall, or a new car, or alcohol, or drugs or whatever. But these things never work, as they are a physical scratch that cannot satisfy a spiritual itch. So we blindly go and do more of the same, until we run out of money or become addicted to whatever it is we're using to try and fill the void. Eventually we will hit rock bottom and only then we might try out some spiritual solutions to filling this perceived void. And we start to realize that it was only a perceived void, as the connection with Source was never really affected in the first place. All of our problems in life typically stem from us trying to fill our perceived God-void." Magdalena grinned and turned her palms skyward.

"Well, now that we have wrapped all of that up in a tidy package, I will contemplate it while I move on with Strider here." Gabriel playfully saluted and moved on in the direction of Witherspoon Street.

A Sense of Entitlement



The two of them stood there, watching Gabriel's doggie trot beside him in the rhythm of an experienced canine friend. Keeping a bead on the person to the left, looking ahead for any chance of danger, scanning the ground for anything of olfactory interest. Paw up, paw down. No real need for a leash with Strider, unless a particularly tantalizing squirrel crossed his path.

"Do you have a few minutes to chat? I'm Mikey." He offered a hand, along with a shy but broad smile.

"I'm rarely in a rush in the mornings, as I do most of my paid work after my lunch-time siesta. Magdalena. I'm enchanted." Magdalena showed all of her teeth in a glorious smile.

"You're enchanted? With what?" Mikey looked genuinely puzzled.

"Oh, it's just a private joke of mine, riffing off on what my French friends say when they meet someone new. *Enchante*. Enchanted. I'm enchanted to meet you. Not a bad way to start things, don't you think?" Magdalena leaned in close to Mikey, then sprang back, laughing.

"I like it. I'll take the compliment. Oops, let me turn this buggy off, I had thought this would be a quick envelope drop." He stepped through the open limo door and shut off the ignition.

"So what do you do with this handsome hunk of metal?" Magdalena glided her index finger seductively down the shiny black hood.

"You name it. It's not much more than a glorified taxi. The odd airport run, to drop a client or pick up a parcel. Proms, weddings, stags, some corporate stuff. I pick up the odd celebrity for ferrying to their gig, whoever is willing to pick up the freight. Some of the activity is a little dubious, but I'm working at

changing that part of my dance card. Now that I've caught your talk, I'm programming my mind for victory, and I can tell you that it's working!" Mikey reached out and grabbed Maria's hands in his large, tanned mitts.

"I'm delighted that you took my talk to heart. You know a teacher adores a willing student!" Magdalena gushed. "Anything specific you want to share?"

"Well, in a nutshell, I'm in love. You know those newspaper articles about changes to the brain when a person falls madly in love? Well, they're pretty much true! I was one of those guys that had closed off their hearts, 'cause I had a pretty rough ride on the affection front while growing up. Have had a few casual flings here and there, but never a serious girlfriend. Then all of a sudden this lady comes across the radar screen, under some unusual circumstances. Things line up in some strange but wonderful way, and now we're just smitten with one another! The weird thing is, I knew who she was for years, used to even drop off the odd courier parcel to her farm. But never a glimmer of romance, until now. In my mind, it's been a true miracle, and a life-changing one at that!" Mikey smiled broadly.

"An amazing story for sure. But listen, with your good looks and charm, if you tell a hundred single ladies in town that story you will most certainly break a hundred hearts! I'm like you were, with no special someone at present. But I know it will happen in good time, as I feel entitled to miracles!" Magdalena rolled her eyes skyward.

"Entitled to miracles? You mean to say I was entitled to what has just happened?" Mikey's voice was quizzical in tone.

"I know it's a bold statement, but I truly believe it. It's only our perception that makes it seem like a miracle. If we could see the big picture, and all the interacting webs of energy between people and things, then we could see the miracle lining itself up and it wouldn't be so surprising and miraculous." Magdalena offered this up in a matter-of-fact tone.

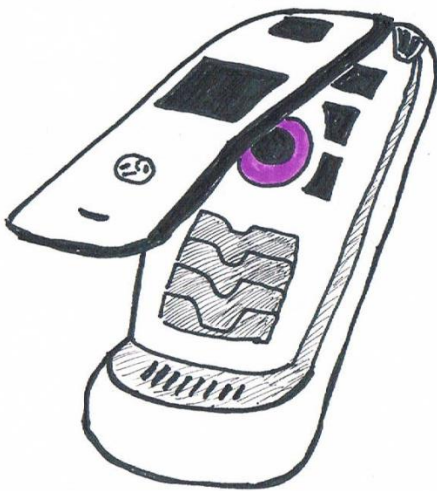
"But I know a lot of people who are in tough situations, just barely getting by on so many fronts. Are they also entitled to miracles?" Mikey was somber, with haunted eyes.

"Yes, unequivocally. If they can align themselves with a positive thought to the future, a belief that their best days lie ahead, then this can drastically shift things towards the miraculous. A cheque comes in the mail, a call comes with a job offer, health improves, children get back on track. All of these miracles will come out of our positive mental alignment and the associated changes in action. Yes, as a child of The Most High, you are entitled to miracles." Magdalena grabbed Mikey playfully by the lapels.

“Listen, I’ll have to digest all of this, but have to run to tend to some things stemming from this power outage. Can I offer up a big hug as a compensation for this great lesson?”

As Mikey drove away and Magdalena strolled down Melville Street taking in the flower gardens, a figure emerged out of the hedge near the mailbox. Looking furtively all ways, he deftly tipped the mailbox on its side and extracted a package from its bottom frame. The man tucked the package under one arm and spryly tipped the mailbox back up to its vertical position. The contents of the package would keep his restoration business afloat for a few more months, but Stephen Tucker had a nagging feeling that his anonymous benefactor would be asking for it to be returned at a premium that would make a loan shark blush.

Love At First Sight



Magdalena crossed the street at Market and slowed down considerably to admire two lovely gardens outside the homes directly opposite the Anglican church. She admired the blazes of colour here and there, the physical geometry of the flower beds, and the web of life undulating in front of her as a mosaic of bees, ants and wondrously active spiders. In the large trees above her, a mockingbird called out passionately, running through his wide repertoire as if he knew he had a paying customer within earshot. She knelt down and put her hands on the grass, closing her eyes and taking in all the experience in one big multi-sensory swoop.

Soft footsteps broke her reverie. A tall man slowed up, an amalgam of fatigue and sheepishness etched across his face. “Stephen, how nice to see you unexpectedly!” Magdalena continued kneeling but gave a playful wave.

“Magdalena...always a pleasure. I was just in the neighbourhood...errrrhhh, as I thought a stroll might get my mind off our power woes.” All of this was said with a slightly forced tone.

“Well, I stroll most mornings, and today offers such a lovely ambiance. I make my living off a computer screen, so the lack of juice certainly gives me cause for pause in the long term, but I am just reveling in this instant of time. The flowers, the sunshine, the birdsong. A beautiful town, with wonderful people to interact with. I know it sounds like PollyAnna, but it’s as close to perfect as one could hope for. It may be my yoga training, or a concept from a book I am currently working through, but to see this very second as a holy instant is what I am consciously trying to do. The past is gone, the future is hypothetical, but now is right here in our hands. So I was just holding that thought when you came down the sidewalk.” Magdalena flashed a disarming smile in Stephen’s direction.

“Magdalena, you know I admire your perspectives, that’s why I asked you to be a speaker for the Civic League series. But call me a stick in the mud, or a pragmatist, but things are pretty tough right now for a lot of people. And it just got worse with this situation. Heck, if it is truly from a big solar flare pulse, and things are really widespread, then it could be a long time before they fix things up and get the juice flowing again. I’m a builder, I know how long things can take when situations get messy. And without readily available power to assess things, order materials---hell, even to manufacture the materials and then get the systems up and running again, it could be weeks or even months.” Stephen shook his head grimly.

“I know, I know, but moping and hand-wringing won’t get it done faster. In fact, it will just push things off even further. We’re all going to have to work together and get it all back on track.” Magdalena stood up for greater emphasis.

“Oh, don’t even talk to me about working together. I thought I had some great crews working for me, but lately they have been sullen and ornery. My banker is at my throat all the time, telling me I need to cut costs, which means I have to push the crews even harder. It’s a vicious cycle and makes me want to hide!” Stephen shifted something bulky which he had tucked under his windbreaker.

“Well at the risk of really being considered over the top, I’ll tell you another technique from this book I mentioned, called A Course In Miracles. It asks us to look at all interactions with all people as if we are meeting them for the first time. Remember the first time you met someone? You were polite, friendly, welcoming. Why? No baggage, no history to contend with, no back story. But if we treat all human encounters as if we are meeting the

person for the first time---even if it's our spouse or a long-time colleague---something will shift in how we deal with the ensuing interaction. We will be more gentle, more kind, more loving---because we have mentally told ourselves there is nothing to resent or tradeoff or remember. Try it with your banker, Stephen, and let me know the results!"

This seemed to agitate Stephen and a parcel fell out from his jacket. The tape holding it together broke on contact with the sidewalk, and rolls of twenty dollar bills in rubber-banded bundles spilled out at Magdalena's feet. At that point Stephen's cell phone rang and he fussed with one of his jacket's pockets, attempting to extract the phone while trying to re-corrall the money back into the package. His cheeks burned as he could feel Magdalena's quizzical gaze.

"Dad...it's me...I think I'm in trouble."

"Priscilla, is that you? We haven't heard from you in months! What's going on?" Stephen's face was now lobster-red.

"Yeh...sorry. I don't have much charge left. I'm down by the Canal and I'm in a bit of a pickle. Can you..." The line went dead.

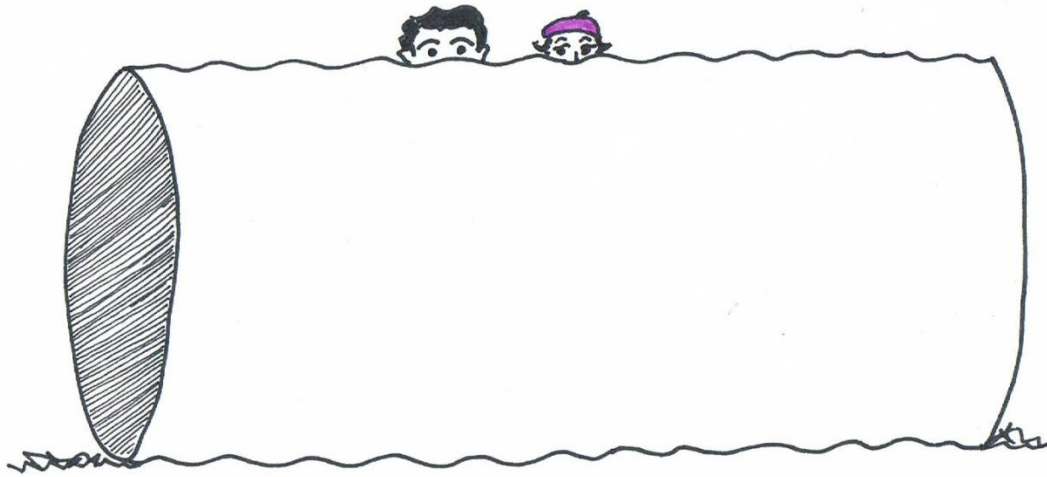
"Priscilla? Priscilla! Can you hear me?" Stephen's eyes started to tear up and Magdalena leaned in to comfort him.

At that point a farm truck rattled up Melville. Maria rolled down the window and stuck out her head. "Are you folks OK? Hold on, I just have to grab this call!" She stuck her head back in the cab and put her phone to her ear. Stephen walked over to the truck.

"Listen, my daughter just called and said she was in trouble down by the Canal. Then her phone died. Could I get a lift over there, as it's more than 20 minutes by foot?" Stephen's face was earnest.

"Sure thing, hon. Jump in. I just want to drop off a basket of food to Arabella's as we're only a block away. Then we'll roar off to the Canal. Funny, I just got a call from my nephew Tony. He mentioned something about the Canal, there was a lot of background noise, and then his phone went dead. Wonder what the heck is going on over there?" Maria frowned and gunned the truck.

Diffused In Light



They pulled up in front of Arabella's house, the truck coming to a shuddering halt. Maria lithely jumped out of the cab and winched a wooden box out of the back, one that was groaning with vegetables. She carried it sideways on her right hip, skipping up the steps and giving the brass knocker two emphatic claps.

Arabella opened the door, perhaps a bit tentatively. "Maria, it's...uh...so good to see you." Her smile was unconvincing.

"Bella, we've been friends too long to try to snow one another. You know why I wasn't returning your calls, and I'm dreadfully sorry for that. I really am. It's just that it's been a bit of a loopy time, we wanted to make sure it was for real, and we knew that you were involved at the outset. I mean if it hadn't been for that wild and crazy night the power went out the first time, then I doubt if this would have ever tumbled out the way it has." Maria turned her head sideways and bit her lip. "But I can honestly say this is the first time I've ever been truly happy on the romance front! I know he's really just a hunky kid from first appearances, but he has shown a lot of depth and really opened his heart to me. So what's a farm gal going to offer her ignored girlfriend as a peace offering, but a big box of what we just picked this morning!" And with that, Maria delicately set the produce box at Arabella's feet and leaned over and bestowed a tight and lingering hug.

"Oh, *bambina*, no need for a peace offering! Mikey came by and explained everything, but not before I embarrassed myself and rolled out half of my Rodrigo fantasy, but that will stay safe within our little trio. All I can say, dear friend, is congratulations! *Tanti auguri*! You have found love and romance, and both sides of the personnel equation are most fortunate in my view. And

with Cupid in the air, who knows what might even stick to little old me?" Arabella did a mock curtsy and picked up some rainbow chard and fanned herself melodramatically.

"My, you won't believe how much of a relief your reaction is! I did not want to go back to the old high school frame of mind where two friends fall to foes because of a mutual love interest. Why..." Maria's words were cut off by the staccato sounding of the truck's horn.

"What's going on there?" Arabella squinted her eyes and looked vaguely in the direction of the vehicle.

"Oh drats, I forgot about Mr. Tucker. I picked him up over on Melville, where we both received calls from young folks who are near and dear to us. Lots of confusion and lack of clarity on what's going on, but we are heading over to the Canal to see what we can do to help. I've got to run, but give me another hug until we can meet up soon!"

Maria ran to the truck and jumped in. As they pulled away, Stephen held up his cell phone for emphasis. "While you were having an extended conversation with Miss Duke, my daughter called again. She was speaking at a very low volume, and it appears she is in some kind of trouble. She's hiding out behind the old pumping station down by the geese feeding area beside the Canal. Seems she's with some young chap, and they are trying to stay away from some aggressive folks who are looking for them. I pressed her for details but she clammed up. Priscilla has been no saint over the past few years, but she's a good kid at heart and I don't want to see her get hurt." Stephen bit his lip glumly.

Maria's phone rang shrilly. "Hey, it's my nephew Tony again..."

"Aunt Maria, it's Tony calling back." All of this was said in a low whisper, and Maria clamped the phone to her ear. "Do you have your truck? Then I need you to come and pick us up before something major happens. I'm here with my girlfriend and we're starting to get scared, as a big group of mean guys just went by with baseball bats and pitchforks."

"Tony, we're less than five minutes away. Is your girlfriend named Priscilla?" Maria was firm and in control.

"Uh, we go by nicknames. Lollipop, is your real name Priscilla?" A pause ensued. "Yeh, her name is Priscilla."

"Well, I'm coming in with her Dad in tow. What have you done to get these folks upset?"

“Um, it’s complicated. We were doing something, it kind of went wrong, and we almost got caught. We ran away and now they’ve rounded up their friends and are coming after us. I swear I’ll tell you the whole story if you can just get us out of here.”

The truck turned onto King Street East, gunning past the Tim Horton’s drive-through. Maria turned to her navigator. “OK, Tonto, we’ve got some fancy footwork to accomplish. Two young folks who we consider special are in a potential danger zone. They may have brought this on to themselves through some bad choices, but we don’t want them bruised up by a lynch mob. So we’re going to have to open our eyes and our minds and figure out a way to help them. I go by the maxim ‘God is the Light in which I see’ a lot, so I am asking for some divine help to illuminate the best path of action. Are you with me, Stephen?” Maria extended her hand for a fist bump.

“Yes, anything for my girl. I seem to be making a lot of compromises these days, so what’s another one?” Stephen winced a bit.

They came up to a checkpoint of sorts, directly opposite the airplane installation outside the Air Force Club.

“Hello folks, what’s your business today?” A heavysset man with a Panama hat leaned into the cab, leering a bit at Maria.

“Oh, good morning! We’re just dropping off some seeds to the geese feeding area so a kids camp can come by this afternoon and have a little interspecies communication.” Maria smiled warmly.

“Kids camp, hmmpfh. Haven’t come across them. How long will you be?”

“Oh, five minutes. Ten, tops. Down and back, really.” Maria scrunched her cheeks up and smiled again.

“Why are you stopping traffic, may I ask?” Stephen often offered up too much information at border crossings, and to Maria’s mind this was in the same vein.

“We’re looking for some young punks who were caught red-handed taking jewelry out of the den of the McGillycuddy’s. Mrs. M. has some nice baubles I tell you, and these ne’er-do-wells were just helping themselves. Lots of stuff has been taken from several households over the past few months—cash, liquor, diamonds, rare coins and even securities. So enough is enough, and a few of the more eager lads will correct them in a punitive way. The power being off has made people even more testy, so I hope it doesn’t get out of

hand. OK then, go on in and drop the seed bags.” He stepped back and waved his hand with a flourish.

Maria and Stephen shot each other nervous looks as they drove down King Street East. As they negotiated the curve they could see a gaggle of muscular men scouring the canal banks down by Olympic Drive. Maria swung the truck hard right and then roared up tight to the east wall of the old pumping station. “Stephen, get out and make as if you are unloading bags of seed. Raise up the tarp high and I’ll hopefully be back in a jiffy!” Maria jumped out of the cab and raced around to the canal side of the derelict facility. Lying there in the lee of a drainage culvert was her nephew Tony and a cute little redhead. They both looked terrified. Maria did not mince her words.

“Stay low and get around to the truck. Jump in the back and Mr. Tucker will cover you up tight with the tarp. And don’t make a peep until I say we’re clear.”

Within a minute the truck backed up and pointed westward into town. When Maria came up to the checkpoint, she put out a tanned arm and wrapped it around Mr. Panama Hat’s shoulder. He gushed, saluted, and waved them all through.

Directions for Coping



Later the next day, knots of townsfolk assembled in the later afternoon in the area in and around Memorial Square. The power was still out, and all of the incomplete information pointed to a series of massive coronal bursts and their resultant effects on the energy grid and telecommunication networks. News was not readily available nor reliable, but it melded all together into an unpleasant and grim result. The emergency response folks were staging an information session in the Square, and had gotten notice out by word of mouth. Mikey, Maria, Arabella and Gabriel stood in the shade of the Canada Trust building, murmuring to one another and looking a bit anxious. Magdalena and Stephen stood together not too far away, locked in an animated conversation. Across the way, leaning up against the shady side of another bank, was Norm Tryon. Norm was a bit disheveled, but was watching all movements and people with a keen and observant eye. Coming down King Street, munching on a takeout falafel, was a lithe older woman dressed in a hippie chic style. Tomasina Skye spotted the familiar face of her yoga teacher, Magdalena McDermott, and ambled over to say hello. In the parking lot of the proposed craft brewery, beside an expensive red sports convertible, stood a young woman in a form-fitting sun dress and distinctive sandals. If her piercings, tattoos and heavy jewelry suggested a high-maintenance persona, then a short conversation with Jody Denton would confirm this in spades. Her eyes flickered here and there over the assembled folks, as if she was looking for someone. Evidently she was not in attendance for mere public service announcements.

“OK, fine folks, I’d like to get started.” The tall and lanky gentleman who

doubled as the town's deputy fire chief and EMS spokesperson got up on an old wooden Canada Dry crate and wielded up a classic cheerleader megaphone. "It's been a challenging couple of days, and we don't really know how many more we'll have to face without power. But we'll make it through if we all pull together." He offered up a hopeful smile and ploughed on. "So first off, basic needs. We all should be OK for water, as the City is running its treatment plants off a generator as well as all pumps. So a good supply of potable water, and we'll conserve as much as we can just to take the pressure off the system. So on to food. Most of us have cleared out our fridges, eating the most perishable products first and cooking up meat on a gas stove or a gas barbecue. If things look a bit iffy, don't take any chances, throw the stuff out. Better to do that than to get sick. Waste collection will still run as normal for the time being." He paused a bit to let people catch up. "Now back to food. Freezers can be a bit of a problem. If you keep the lids closed, things will stay pretty frozen with good insulation. But if the power stays off and the temperatures rise, frozen materials in the freezer will begin to thaw and will need to be used up. So consider cleaning out the freezer now and getting meat and fish cooked up and shared with friends and neighbours. Remember Katrina in New Orleans? People who didn't clear out their fridges and freezers had miniature toxic bio-waste repositories to deal with afterwards, plus the need to buy new appliances on top!" This was followed by a grim smile.

"For new food intake, lots of fruit and fresh produce coming into the stores due to the Summer growing season. The lack of power has stores going on cash sales and even running paper tabs in some of the smaller shops. But nutrition shouldn't be an issue for any of us. Who knows, some of us might even trim down a bit with meat and ice cream falling off our menu cards!" He looked around with a mild degree of mirth, but then plunged on with his script due to the number of furrowed brows that met his gaze.

"OK, getting near the end. We are all thrown off our rhythms a bit with the continued lack of power. It is difficult for people with electric stoves to heat their victuals, so we are asking people with gas stoves or barbecues to volunteer to cook and heat food for their less fortunate neighbours. For those who don't know anyone with a gas-fired device, the Lions Club folks are cooking hot lunches and dinners down by the Lions Homes near Spencer Creek. And one last thing for today. Many of us have become hooked on the ol' AC, and as soon as any hot weather arrives the thermostat gets lowered to the point where you could happily cool sides of beef. But for now that's a thing of the past. Thankfully it has not been all that hot, and let's hope that doesn't change. Once the sun goes down be sure to pop open your windows to let out the hot air and get a cross breeze working through your home. And don't be restricted to sleeping in the upstairs bedrooms in your homes, many people have floated downwards for sleeping to their ground floors or even

their basements. Lots of folks have opted for camping out in their backyards, and the absence of streetlights makes the stars jump out that much more! I'll be back tomorrow afternoon at the same time for more news and updates. Best to all..." And with that he slipped off his makeshift podium, favouring his gimpy left knee now made marginally worse by his root cellar slumber.

Stephen grimaced at Magdalena and the newly arrived Tomasina. "This has been wearing on us all, but it comes at a time when my business was already suffering substantially. I hear this fellow attempt to reassure us, but my mind starts to race with all kinds of fearful thoughts. One bad thing running pell mell into another, and everything just ramps up."

"I'll give you a tip for coping, Stephen, borrowed from dear Magdalena." Tomasina smiled warmly.

"Sure, anything. I'm open to just about anything."

"Just develop a mental picture of what you think Heaven is like. Some would call this our natural home, and where we will return to. So for someplace this special, we have a heart connection to. And as beautiful as Heaven is, we can also imagine it to be blessedly quiet. None of this earthly clamour or discordant noise we put up with habitually. So we link into this beautiful quiet with our hearts, and repeatedly hold the phrase 'The hush of Heaven holds my heart today'. I love alliterations, and this one is easy to remember. Over and over, just hold this thought in mind, and dollars to doughnuts you will feel less stressed and more connected to your inner self." Tomasina looked first at a beaming Magdalena, and then at a quasi-skeptical Stephen.

As this was transpiring, Norm took advantage of the movement of the dispersing crowd and shuffled over towards Jody's sports car. As he came within arms' length he deftly slid a package out from underneath his battered tweed jacket and let it fall at her feet, the ones with tanned toes and glossy purple toenail polish. He bent over to pick up the package, lingering ever so slightly to admire her salient legs.

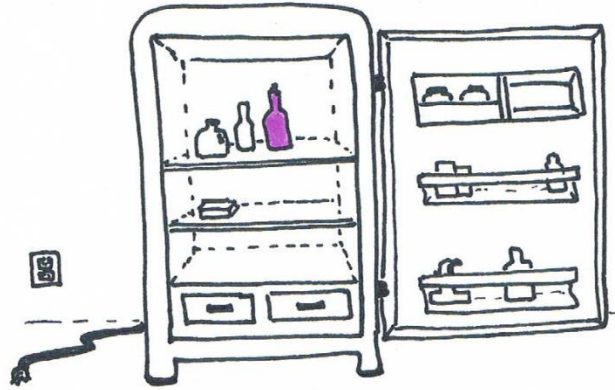
"Oops, my dear, it appears you have dropped something. Allow me to retrieve it for you..." Norm affected a courtly manner, putting one arm behind his back and half-bowing as he passed over the package.

"Thank you, sir." This was said loudly. "You've done your job, now get out of here." The last sentence was said in a menacing whisper.

Mikey had his arm around Maria, and they both gently laughed at some banter going on between Arabella and Gabriel. But his eyes were locked on the departing Norm and the defiant Jody, the details of their interchange

being fully observed by him and being of considerable interest.

Finding the Right Curriculum



The assembly of townsfolk continued to disperse, with Maria giving everyone in her group a quick hug before running off to her truck which was double-parked in the CIBC micro-parking lot, and Tomasina flashing a broad smile to Magdalena and Stephen before setting off down King Street to look for some spices in the now-candlelit Horn of Plenty. Mikey's observations had unsettled his rhythms a bit, so he disengaged momentarily and ambled over in the direction of Magdalena and Stephen. This gave Arabella the opportunity she had been looking for to seek the counsel of Gabriel.

"Oooh, dear friend, I need to discuss something in confidence with you. I know we're out in public, but everyone seems to be going their own way and there's plenty of background hubbub to provide some audio camouflage." Arabella leaned in a bit, close enough for her Versace perfume to register on Gabriel's olfactory meter.

"By all means, Arabella. I'm no counsellor, but think of myself as a decent listener." Gabriel nodded in a reassuring fashion.

"Well, it's a little bit sensitive. Or at least it seems that way. I have had a new neighbor for the last few weeks. Quite a nice looking chap, with a physique to match, I might add." Arabella let out a low and mildly salacious snort. "I've only said pleasantries to him and for the most part have stayed off his radar. But since the power has been out, I suspect he has been drinking a bit or ingesting something to cope, and he intercepted me last evening while I was out gardening near his fence line. I wouldn't say he was menacing, but the

situation was...off-putting, to say the least.” Colour was rising to Arabella’s cheeks.

“I’m dreadfully sorry he troubled you, Arabella. But what was the gist of his offence?” Gabriel opened his eyes wide.

“Well, it’s somewhat ambiguous. First he gave me compliments on my physical appearance. Not entirely unwelcome, but a bit strange given the circumstances and much more forward than the culture of our small town typically affords. But then he said something that could easily have been construed as being a bit lewd, but then just stared me down after he said it. I was so thrown off by his brazenness that I hardly had the opportunity to be offended. But then he went on to describe something from over a week ago, when the power went out the first time, that he contends he viewed from his window. What he described was close enough to what actually did happen, but with considerable embellishments that bordered fully on innuendo. Then he went on to say that a woman of my status and position would not want such stories recounted throughout the town, and that he would be willing to forget the occurrence of what he maintains he saw, as long as I am able to provide reasonable compensation for his silence. He then turned away, walked five paces a bit unsteadily, then wheeled on his heel and told me he would pay me a visit tonight to discuss the terms. And then he winked at me! I’m starting to think he will demand compensation financially, and perhaps of a different nature!” Arabella pursed her lips and looked downward at her feet.

“Arabella, oh my, this is indeed troubling! I feel as if you are speaking a bit in code, at least about the incident he alleges to have seen. But it’s not my business....” Gabriel’s voice trailed off.

“There was something that went on that night, but certainly not as wicked as Monsieur LaMontagne contends. I’m embarrassed about it now, but I do have my shadow side, dear friend. And I don’t want my neighbours and friends, people who knew my dear parents, to be aware of all the sordid details. But if I pay him off, with money or even other favours, I’m just stepping on a blackmail merry-go-round. So the compensation will never be enough, and I will be under this extortion threat perpetually.” Arabella bit her lip and looked nervously sideways.

“Hmm, hmm, that is a conundrum. Can’t you just call his bluff and suggest to him he was mistaken and nothing really happened?” Gabriel sounded hopeful.

“But something did happen, and it could also implicate some friends, and it might tumble out with other details if unraveled.”

"Well then, perhaps just buy some time with this new neighbor. Keep meeting outside, never indoors where your security may be threatened. Keep talking, spin it out, and we can figure out some angle to splash back on him. People who blackmail others are often ripe for blackmail themselves. So we will just need to get some details to neutralize this fellow and all will be good." Gabriel clenched his jaw.

The two stood huddled together, thinking hard.

Across the way, Magdalena was forming her own huddle, by grabbing Stephen by the elbow and the newly arrived Mikey by his substantial bicep. "Mikey, just to catch you up, Stephen has been facing some work challenges and Tomasina and I were trying to give him some ways of looking at things that might turn glumness to joy. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof."

"I came close to my own work woes a week or more ago with my limo-jacking. But it seemed to be an opportunity for me to bump into some amazing folks, and things went from bad to great in very short order. The power outage has actually been good for my business, as lots of people are calling me for delivery of ice or rides to the Lions Club lunches or whatever. But I feel for you, Stephen, if one person is hurting in our community then we are all feeling that hurt underneath." Mikey smiled and nodded concurrently.

"I'll find my center, but it may mean making some tough decisions and taking my lumps, we'll have to see. I might have to ask Magdalena here for a job!" Stephen smiled wryly.

"That would be great." Magdalena's eyes sparkled.

"What do you do for work, Magdalena?" Mikey was just making polite conversation.

"For cash flow, I do graphic design. But my real work is quite simple." Magdalena cut off her sentence sharply.

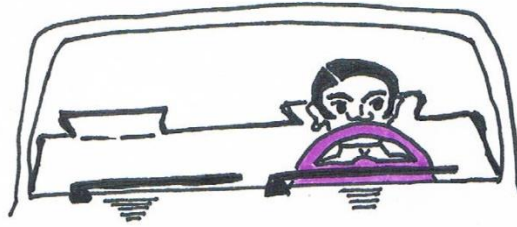
"Your real work?" Mikey was now onto the game.

"Yep, my real work is being a Teacher of God. I learned from an early age that I was a teacher, but not of languages or math, but how to find the way back. Or how to re-remember. Or how to recall what life is really about. I love the curriculum and I love my students." Magdalena double-squeezed the both of them.

"Well, I am a willing pupil then. But I may have to wear the dunce cap and sit in the corner from time to time. " Stephen's eyes twinkled but his smile was

rueful.

Dreams of the Future



Arabella had some volunteer work to attend to at the community services office, tied to the disbursement of endowment interest from a fund set up by her father and mother near the end of their years. Her confidential chat with Gabriel had calmed her down considerably, so she leaned in and gave him a lingering embrace that made him squirm a bit in embarrassment. Her perfume had a slightly dizzying effect, so much so that Gabriel found himself ogling Arabella's bottom as she minced away, its contours nicely framed by a conservative but clingy pleated skirt. Steady old chap, he thought to himself, you're a happily married man. He would help Arabella out of her predicament as a good neighbor, not for the reasons swirling around in the heads of a few earnest matrons who had just witnessed this affectionate parting of ways.

Gabriel strolled over to the trio anchored by Magdalena, who were having their own *tete a tete* in subdued tones.

"I hope I'm not interrupting?" Gabriel smiled brightly.

"Not at all, kind sir. I'm just trying to give my philosophy for living to these fine folks in a hundred words or less. A spiritual elevator talk, so to speak." Magdalena grinned and lifted up her right hand slowly.

"Hey, I'm open to just about anything these days, and particularly from you, Magdalena!" Mikey reached out and gently grabbed hold of her right forearm, easing it above her head.

"I am certainly open to matters of the spirit, have been for a long time. I've been a FreeMason for donkeys' years, and even though we keep a lid on things pretty tight, it's fair to say that it is in essence degrees of spiritual training. But the events of the past while, both in my professional and my family life, have tossed me on my keester! And I have started to fret, then to worry, and now it's bordering on compulsive worry! And that's not a spot from which you hold a spiritual discipline very gracefully!" Stephen shook his head and looked down.

“Been there, done that.” Magdalena nodded knowingly. “All my worrying was centered around some hypothetical situations that largely never came to pass, but would tie me up in knots nonetheless. So now I have an easy answer, for myself, and for you. I know it’s simple, but I just ‘place the future in the hands of God’. When a troubling thought comes up in my mind, I just repeat this line mentally and hand it over. It may seem a bit contrived at the start, but keep practicing it and more and more you will find it calms and reassures you. This is one of the most important things I’ve learned, and can pass on to you.”

While Stephen was ruminating on this sage advice, Gabriel leaned in to Mikey. “A moment for a private word?”

“Absolutely, Gabriel.” Mikey smiled at the other two and stepped away with his compatriot in tow. “What’s up?”

“Do you know a guy called Henri LaMontagne?”

“Hmmm, I cross paths with a lot of folks, but that name doesn’t sound familiar. Is he new in town?” Mikey looked at Gabriel intently.

“I believe so. He just moved in next door to Arabella. Let’s just say their first hellos across the fence have been less than warm. Menacing, in fact. I am doing a little bit of sleuthing to see what this guy does, who he interacts with, so I can help out Mademoiselle Duke. Let me stop beating around the bush, Mikey, he’s attempting to blackmail Arabella and I want to see if we can find out anything that we can use to turn the tables on him.” Gabriel’s eyes became steely.

A mixture of emotions flickered across Mikey’s countenance. “Now I’m on your wavelength, Colombo. I know a little about these sorts of things. I suggest we jump in the limo, and stake out Henri’s place for the afternoon. We might see nothing but him coming and going, but other things may drift across our radar that may be of considerable interest. I know it sounds old school to stake out, but are you game?”

“Count me in!” Gabriel was excited and his expression reflected this.

“I’ve got a stocked fridge in the limo with plenty of snacks and drinks, so if we do a bio-break pit stop at The Horn we can hunker down for a good period of time. Let’s get a move-on.”

Fifteen minutes later saw them parked quietly under a shady tree one house down from Arabella’s, two doors down from Henri’s. They got comfortable,

Gabriel in the back to man the fridge, and Mikey up front with the pass-through window open between the front and the back. They rolled the windows down for cross-breeze and spoke in hushed tones. Both kept a close eye on the front of all the houses up and down the tree-lined street, and particularly on Henri's. The two men shared a few jokes, a few stories from the past, and some discussion around their mutual admiration of professional baseball. After two hours the intrigue of the stakeout started to wear thin, and after another hour it had worn away altogether. Gabriel looked at his watch and realized he should be getting home soon, even moreso with the uncertainty around food preparation in the midst of the power outage. He was just about to communicate this to Mikey when a little red convertible swung around from a side street and roared up to Henri's residence. A snappy-looking young lady jumped out, carrying a parcel, and confidently mounted Henri's front steps.

"Whoa-ho, we just hit pay dirt, Tonto! That's no FedEx delivery gal, that just happens to be Jody Denton. And Jody Denton lives and thrives on the shadow side of life, so if she is dropping something to ol' Henri it means he's involved with something mighty juicy!" Mikey smacked his lips.

"But what do we do, confront them? Gabriel's eyes were wide.

"Oh no, dude, better to divide and conquer. You jump out and go home to your wife, and I'll wait around for Jody and follow her for a bit until we can have a private conversation. I'll get the scoop on Henri, and will get back to you so you can relay it on to Arabella. Now go!"

Peace in our Time



After the public information session had fully wrapped up, and Mikey and Gabriel had hastily taken their leave, Magdalena and Stephen strolled down King Street in a continuing and thoughtful conversation. They had bumped into Tomasina coming out of the Horn of Plenty, who was bearing a small bag of fresh cinnamon and a tiny vial of ultra-expensive yellow saffron. She instantly melded into the vibe of the two-way conversation, and suggested

they make it a three-way chat by grabbing a table at the outdoor café patio up the street. The day was fine, with lots of people out and about due to the power situation and its resultant effect on a large number of employment scenarios. A good three hours later they were still sitting on the patio, engrossed in conversation and the perusal of various pedestrian passersby.

"I have to tell you, loafing away this afternoon has been a balm to my soul. The conversation has been more than stimulating, as well as the fine company." Stephen had an old-world courtliness, which both women seemed to appreciate.

"I do this more often than I care to admit to, but I'm recently retired and have no constraints in the least, professionally or personally." Tomasina batted her eyelashes at Stephen in a very minimal way.

Stephen for his part smiled back flatly and steered the conversation to less murky depths. "I've been married for 35 years, still have children to worry about, and am typically up to my neck wrestling alligators due to my building restoration business. So sitting in a café is a rare treat for me. My business has slowed of late, and the power outage has caused it to grind to a halt. Unless we go back to hand tools, like they used a century ago, I don't see much work activity. But I have promised to keep most of my crews on a half-wage for now, just for subsistence and so I can keep them on call when things roar back. So maintaining the cash flow for this was a real conundrum, until I started receiving these mystery calls."

"Mystery calls?" Tomasina's eyes sparkled, her voice curious.

"Yeh, always late at night, just before bed. Somebody with a funny voice told me they wanted to loan me some interest-free funds, and told me a place and a time to pick it up. I feel uneasy about it, as it's always a package of small bills, taped underneath a post box. I've had three drops to date, and it's always the same routine. The money has sure helped, but I don't know who I will repay or when. It drives me a bit batty when I think about it. Which is pretty much all the time. And my daughter has been in some trouble recently, hanging out with the wrong crowd. I've been wondering if she might be somehow involved with the source of the money. Really puzzling." Stephen scrunched up his face.

"Stephen, I agree this all sounds a bit strange. But if you worry about it constantly, you are going to adversely affect your health. Physical and mental health. It may be too forward, but I'm going to ask you to come out to a bunch of classes I do in the area of mindfulness and relaxation." Magdalena let this sink in and continued on. "It will be a bit different than your FreeMason material, but you will hopefully find some modalities that will allow you to

access the complete peace that is inside of you. Inside all of us. Once we set aside the minutiae of life, achieving peace is what it's all about, isn't it?"

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As a complete contrast to this, Jody Denton zipped down King Street East and gunned it for a couple of blocks, before she realized she had meant to wash and wax her flashy ride earlier that day. She turned a hard right and then two more, zooming into an open bay at the car wash. Management was obviously operating off of a generator or industrial batteries, as the hum and spraying sound from adjacent bays created a chorus to accompany the closing of her car roof. All of this masked the arrival of a long black limousine that parked at a right angle to the wash bay door. A massive male figure stood at the entrance, cracking his knuckles while Jody fidgeted with the wash console box. She looked back over her shoulder, with a distinct sense of dread.

"Mikey, is that you?" Syrupy, but with copious edge.

"Yeah, Jody, but you knew that before you even turned your head sideways."

"What up, dude? Listen, I'm in a hell of a hurry. And now that I think about it, I don't really need a wash/wax. Can you be a good fellow and pull up your limo a bit, and I'll just skooch out and be on my way?" Jody's smile was a frozen one.

"No, we need to talk. But it won't take long. If you can cut to the chase. We know each other well enough to know if we're snowing one another." Mikey's jaw line was tight.

"What are you after, Mikey? I hope I don't need to call the boys in blue?"

Mikey took two steps closer. "Be my guest. I know enough of your shadow side that they would send you to Millhaven for a good long holiday. And some of those boyfriends of yours would go too, so it wouldn't be very pretty for you when you get out. I can tell by your expression you are catching my drift."

"OK, Mikey, so no BS. What do you want?" All of this was said with full evidence of the steel layer under the glossy veneer.

"I saw you receive a package from the old rubbie who panhandles on the bank corner. Let's not worry about him, as he was probably bought out for twenty bucks. But I just happened to see you deliver the package to a new guy in town, Henri LaMontagne. He's the guy I want the dirt on. What's he doing for you and your guys to justify the package?"

“Why do you need to know?” Jody became momentarily defiant.

“Nope, sorry, I hold my cards close to my chest. Give me the dirt on Henri and you are free to zip out of here. No cooperation and I may have to pop the Louisville Slugger out of my trunk and take a few swings at your windshield. Remember Sherriff Buford Pusser in Walking Tall, he was my hero when I watched that movie! I wouldn’t touch a hair on your pretty little head, but your car here will be largely unrecognizable!” Mikey cracked his knuckles again.

“You wouldn’t dare touch my car!” Jody sneered this out.

“Oh yes I would, with relish. Monsieur LaMontagne is doing something he shouldn’t be, and I just want the knowledge of what it is and I’m gone. Let’s just say he is threatening a friend of mine, and I need to neutralize the threat. I’m waiting, Jody.”

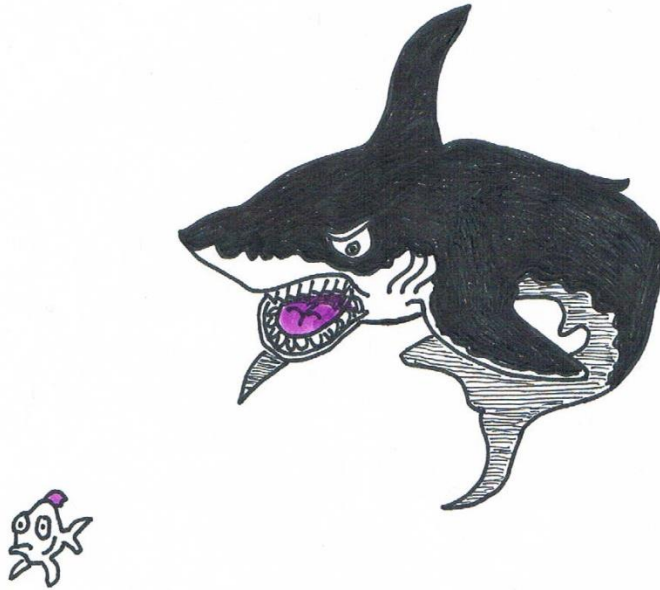
“I don’t know what he does, I’m just the eye-candy courier.” Jody did a fetching curtsy.

“Alright, I said no BS. We all know how close you get to your bosses, and that pillow talk spills all the secrets. Last chance before you see Mr. Louisville!” Mikey rattled his trunk keys delicately.

“Damn you, Mikey! I may be stepping into a minefield here, but I guess I’ll have to spill the beans. One of my *cahunas* runs a little blood sport activity out in the country. Very illegal, and pretty sick in my personal view. Lots of people attend, and more than a few wagers are laid. Henri is the door man for these events and in essence is the gambling operations manager. We’ve been keeping all of this on the down-low.” Jody’s voice dropped.

“Well that’s going to change, to some degree. And just some advice, never wash a car in open-toed dress sandals.” Mikey walked to his limo and drove away in a spray of moisture.

Don't Worry, Be Happy



The conversation back at the café patio was in the process of slowly winding up. They had covered a lot of ground, and had gone a long way towards setting Stephen back on a higher plane of operation as things unfolded in the mysterious web he had found himself falling into. As they rose to go, Stephen hesitated and motioned with his body language that he had a bit more left to say.

“Fine ladies, a final question or two for you both. Let’s assume that I can achieve some level of peace in my core. But is that it? Is peace the ultimate destination here on this emotional journey?” He looked at them quizzically.

They both beamed back big smiles at him and stayed silent. A few seconds went by and he repeated the question he had previously posed.

“Oh we heard you, Stephen. We’re just responding in a non-verbal way.” Magdalena offered up another glorious smile.

“OK, I guess I’m not catching your drift. You remember my point about wearing the dunce cap?” Stephen grinned himself.

“C’mon, what does a big smile mean?” Tomasina jumped in.

“I dunno....something funny? You’re happy about something?”

“Stop right there, you’ve got it.” Magdalena grabbed him by the forearm.

“OK, so you’re happy. Makes sense to me. You ladies do seem pretty happy, genuinely happy even.” Stephen looked at them both with wide eyes.

“Thank you. And that’s the next state once you achieve peace inside. Peace is great, don’t get me wrong. But it’s quiet, benign. Important, but not that exciting. But with peace firmly planted you can quickly build up to happiness. As the Course in Miracles firmly underlines, ‘God’s will for you is perfect happiness’. Perfect happiness! Any takers?” Magdalena flashed her eyes.

“Sure, for sure. But how do I logic out that God wants me to be happy, indeed is willing me to be happy?” Stephen looked perplexed.

“That’s an easy one. You have a child, right?” Tomasina saw a flicker of sadness go across Stephen’s face. “ I know you are going through a rough patch, but what do you want for her?”

“That she has good friends, stays in good health. Gets a job, makes some money, stands on her own two feet. I want her to meet a fellow and get married. She’s a cute little thing and would make a great Mom. I just want her to be...well, happy, I guess.” This all spilled out quickly.

“Hurray, you nailed it! As her parent you want her to be perfectly happy! Who wouldn’t want that for their child? So take it up one level, Stephen. You are a child of the Most High. And She wants you to be happy. Gloriously, outrageously, spine-tingly happy! So get with the program and be happy!” Magdalena put her hands above her head and bellered out the last sentence.

Just a block away a decidedly contrary situation was unfolding. A shaken Jody Denton roared up to the ATM quick-access parking spot outside one of the banks. Norm Tryon was sitting on a bench, surveying pedestrians for the possibility of a panhandled toonie.

“A late good afternoon to you, young lady.” Norm tipped an imaginary fedora.

“Cut out the niceties and get in. I need to talk to you and I need to do it in privacy.” Jody said this pleasantly enough, but with sufficient curl of her lip to make Norm uneasy. He lumbered off the bench and eased himself into the low-slung convertible.

Jody turned on Millers Lane, going past the group that had just been contemplating perfect happiness, with Magdalena heading in one direction and Tomasina and Stephen in the opposite direction. She shifted gears up Millers Lane , turned hard right onto Hatt without observing the stop sign, then turned again and gunned it up Sydenham for a block and a half.

"Alright, Durango, I just got shaken down for some info. The limo driver around town threatened to bust up my car if I didn't sing out what Henri has been doing on the dogfighting side of our portfolio."

"You didn't spill the beans, did you? We could all go away for a long time on those kind of charges! You remember what happened to Michael Vick, don't you?" Norm's face was tense.

"Yes, I do. But he got to me, OK? He threatened to batter my baby here, while he had me trapped in a car wash bay. Who knows what else he might have done? I spend too much time at the spa to meet up with a baseball bat. And he knows all my history."

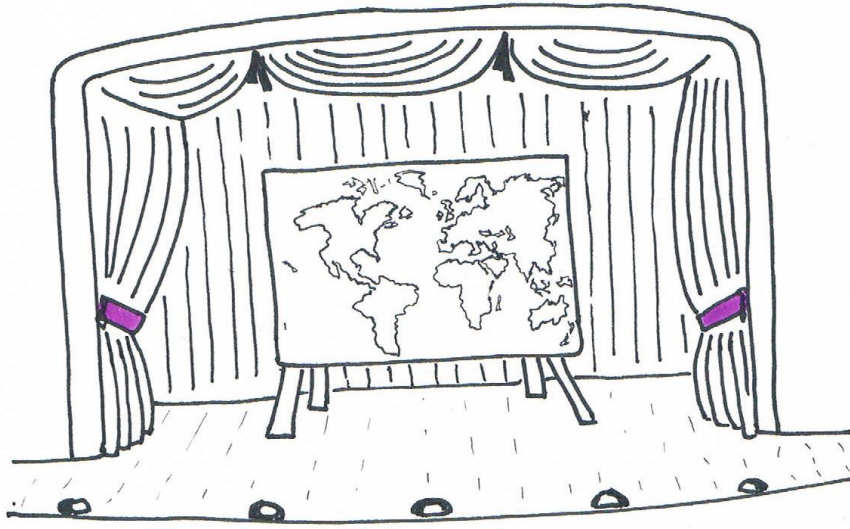
"OK, so what do we do now?" Norm's mind was racing.

"He seems to think that you are just a panhandler. So you can act dumb and just work under the radar, and ensure that Henri doesn't do anything to shed further light on us. And tell him to keep his nose clean, 'cause it sounded like Mikey was going to use the info to neutralize him, so he's got to be doing something dumb. Tell him to be a paragon of virtue from now on." Jody scrunched up her nose.

"Which is what I want to become. Listen, one thing has led to another, and I have found myself in deeper and deeper. I used to do research on the shadow side of human consciousness, for Pete's sake. But once my marriage failed, and I took out a dubious mortgage to stay in the house and pay the bills, it became a very slippery slope. Loan sharks come in a variety of facades, and the toughs in the back can get pretty nasty. I have to figure out an exit plan." Norm buried his face in his hands.

"Well, you can exit my convertible now. I've got one more dirty deed errand before I can go home to a nice bubble bath. And don't cry to me about being in over your head with nasty operators. I'm in so deep I don't know which way is up anymore. My exit plan may be to literally disappear some day, but it's not going to be today. Here's your stop, old fart, I have found this chat to be almost therapeutic. Toodles!"

All The World's A Stage



Jody had pulled in front of a parked car on Sydenham Street, just steps away from the halfway house where Norm lived. But before he could uneasily extricate himself from the coupe seat of the convertible, a truck lumbered down Sydenham. It swung abruptly in front of the convertible, effectively constraining any escape without the benefit of a multiple-point turnout. An energetic woman with a baseball cap pulled down over her face jumped out of the truck's cab and walked over with the air of a police officer reeling in a speed trap victim.

"Hey, you're blocking me in!" Jody's voice took on an uncharacteristic whine.

"Just momentarily. I think I know you, but it's been a number of years. I used to go to high school with a Rick Denton, would he be your brother?"

"Yeah, and you would be?" Jody had regained most of her confidence.

"Maria. Maria Miamica. I farm up the hill and bring crop to market. But mostly I take care of my family. And that's why I've pinned you in. Just for a short chat. And that means you too, Mister!" Maria pointed sternly to a still struggling Norm, who looked as if he wanted to flee any confrontation.

"By all means, Madame. Always willing to converse with a lady, and a very attractive lady I might add." Norm sputtered this out.

"I'm tickled you like baseball caps. Listen, I'll cut to the chase. I was just talking to my boyfriend, and he told me he had just finished having a conversation with a gal in a red convertible. Might that have been you?" Maria spoke this firmly.

"Listen, lady, I doubt if I've been hanging around your boyfriend. You've got nothing to worry about." Jody batted her eyelashes.

"He drives a black limo, with a Louisville Slugger in the trunk. Need any more hints?"

"Mikey? Mikey's your squeeze? Now how plausible is that?" Jody snickered and looked sideways at Norm.

"Well an older and experienced woman, and one with such good cheekbones, sounds reasonable to me. " Norm spoke this in an offhand way, nodding to the two women.

"I'm not here for romantic advice. Mikey, my boyfriend, told me that Little Miss Red Convertible sang a tune on a certain operation out in the country. Like a highly illegal operation, and a very sick one at that. Dog fighting? Are you kidding me? Anybody associated with this should be pilloried in the town square, and justifiably so. But I'm here for family reasons. My nephew, Tony, has been doing some bad things recently. I pulled him out of a situation yesterday and took him home and read him the riot act. He told me a bunch of things, all of them troubling. He's been running drugs, doing break-and-enters, carjacking, and working as a flunky at this blood sport wagering operation. I had to take the wooden spoon, and hard, to get this to tumble out. He's now gone underground, and he's going to stay clean from now on. But he's scared about the kingpin of all of this finding him. So I'm on a mission to help him."

"Nice story, but how do we figure into the picture?" Jody donned a mantle of mock innocence.

Maria leaned in and grabbed one of Jody's ears, twisting the lobe and causing the stud of her earring to jab into her delicate skin. Jody cried out in pain and brought her left arm up to fend off the attack. Maria caught her by the forearm and squeezed it tight.

"Nobody screws with my family, understand? And stop wiggling around, or I'll tear your earlobe right off! Me strong like bull from all the farm work, and I might even relish roughing up a piece of high maintenance furniture like yourself. So tell me who the kingpin is, and where he hangs out!"

"Madame, please cease and desist with the violence. We can all just take a step back and approach this civilly." Norm smiled reassuringly.

"Be quiet, old dude, or I'll come over there and rip you another one! And

don't talk to me about being civil. I live my life in a spiritual manner, but when evil rears its head and breathes flames across any of my family, I fight fire with fire. Tell me who and where on the kingpin. I won't say it again. Or I'll drive straight to the cops with the location of the dog-fighting shed and your convertible license plate number." Maria torqued the earlobe incrementally.

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Just a block away, strolling up King Street, were Stephen and Tomasina. Magdalena had to rush off to a yoganidra class that she was running, and the other two had decided to keep chatting until Stephen's peel-off point for home.

"I have to thank you for your time, Tomasina. It has been a fruitful few hours and I've learned a lot from you and Magdalena. I am not a novice to matters of Spirit, but sometimes one can get caught up in a trap."

"A great pleasure, kind sir. We all can get bound up in our egos, and life can throw us many curveballs to allow us choice. Do we keep focused on what really matters, or do we get snarled up in an egoic web? And it's very easy to see this in others, but sometimes hard to do for one's self." Tomasina smiled graciously.

"So two steps forward and one back?" Stephen's voice was hopeful.

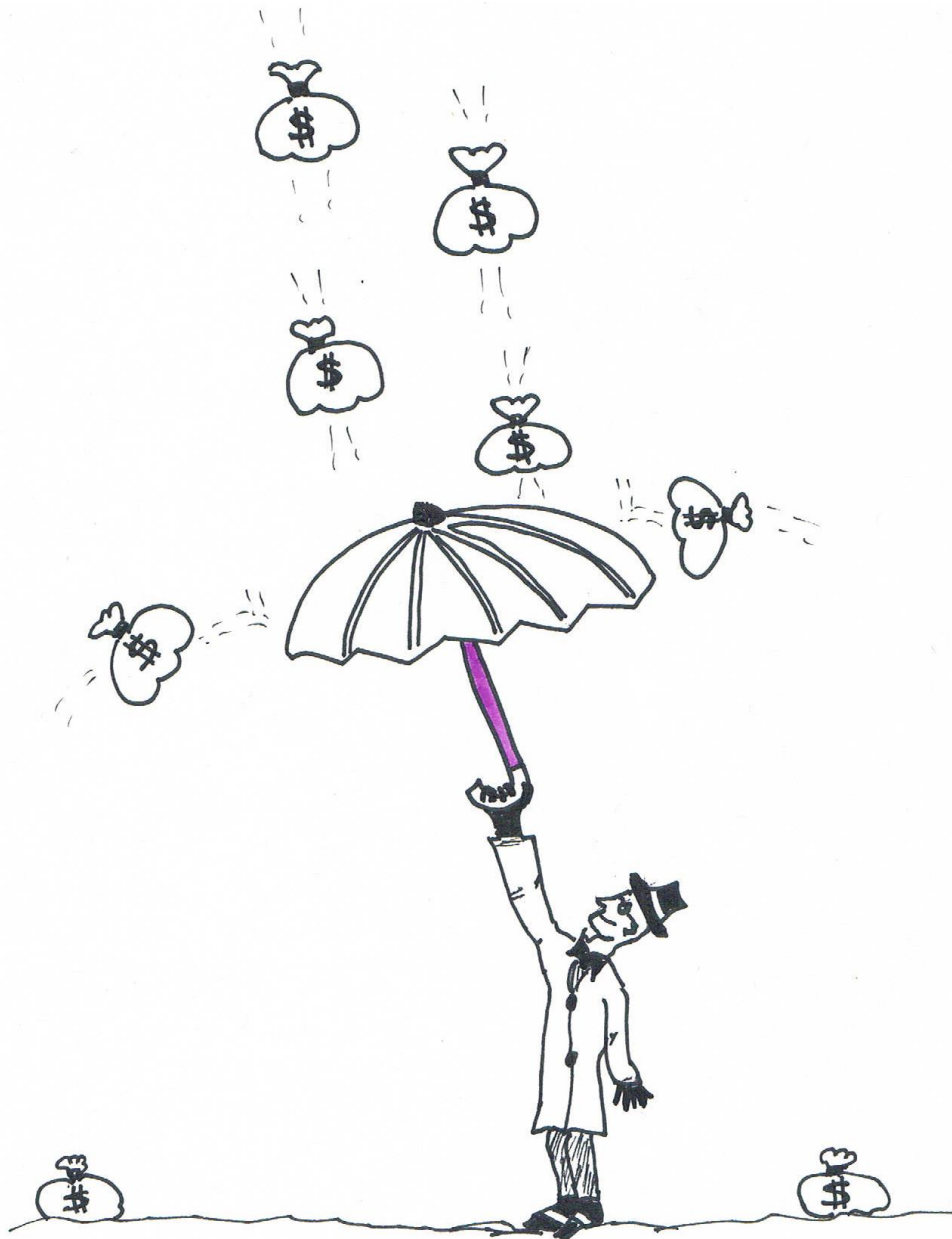
"Much better than the other way around!" Tomasina trilled this out. "Listen, Shakespeare said 'all the world's a stage'. I like that, but prefer even more the adage 'the world is a classroom.' We are here to learn. Some of us get the lessons quickly, some have to repeat the lesson over and over. As we sit in the classroom, there is a bright light attempting to flood in to illuminate the lesson in front of us. But if the window is murky, then not much light gets through. But with knowledge and inner work, we can clean that window and let more and more light in."

"Some days I feel as if my window is impenetrable to light, virtually with the hue of quicksilver." Stephen shook his head, laughing grimly.

"Ah, quicksilver, the ancient hydrargyrum element. Modern day mercury. But mercury tends to ball together, so a lot of light may end up shining through your window, Stephen. And hopefully those quicksilver globules can just fall away into oblivion."

Part III. Our Flaws are the Cracks that Let in the Light

Manna From Heaven



Three to four hours rolled by, and the sun set slowly and the sky turned to that beautiful tint of blue that is emblematic of the end of another Summer day.

The air had picked up some humidity over the course of the afternoon, and the continuing absence of air conditioning meant that many people would spend another fitful night. Everything was cumulative, so that the impaired quality of sleep and the continuance of cold suppers for many gave a prickly edge to even the calmest of the town's personalities. And the continuing absence of Internet and Facebook for the teenage set created a tone of malaise and ennui that had both its shadow and sunny sides. Some youngsters roamed around in packs, looking for any mischief that might disrupt their collective boredom, while others hung out in pods under shade trees and re-discovered the forgotten art of face-to-face conversation.

A dusty farm truck pulled up in front of Arabella's fine home, and Maria quickly climbed out of its cab and trotted up the steps to the ornate brass knocker on the front door. Arabella answered the knock just seconds after the sound waves first reverberated through the humid night air.

"Bella, you're a sight for sore eyes." Maria gave her friend a tight embrace.

"Come on in for some sun-steeped tea, you look close to worn out, m'dear." Arabella clucked this out.

"I tell you, it's been quite a night. I had to step way out of my comfort zone with some folks, and it's nigh on drained me." Maria blew a strand of hair away from her face with an upburst of breath.

"Sit down, take a load off those feet, and tell me everything."

"OK, where do I start? I called Mikey earlier and he told me Gabriel had given him an assignment to get the lowdown on this rascally neighbor of yours. Mikey then cornered Jody Denton down at the car wash and pressed out of her that Monsieur LaMontagne has been working for some illegal and unethical gambling operation out in Flamborough. So please let Gabriel know that Mikey has achieved mission accomplished status, and you can tell the turkey next door to just go away or you'll be calling the police on him. But that's not the whole story. You know my nephew, Tony? Good kid, but a classic case of bad friends. Well, he tells me after I get him out of a pinch that he has been doing odd jobs at a certain operation out in the country, and it sounds eerily familiar to the dive where Henri has been working at. So your neighbor and my Tony are just flunkies for this lucrative activity, and I want to know who the boss is. So I get it in my head to find little Miss Jody and ask her this directly. Her sports car is very distinct, and I just happened to block her into a very tight parking spot. I asked her nicely but no info was forthcoming, so I cranked up the amperage a bit until she literally cried out what I was looking for. She looks tough, but actually has a very low pain threshold." Maria grimaced and shrugged her shoulders.

"You smacked her around in public? Oh my..." Arabella looked genuinely appalled.

"I have my old country tricks. The ear is a very sensitive appendage, especially when a sharp ring stud is being pressed into it. To the casual observer I was just helping her adjust her jewelry. She dared not move to a great degree or that adjustment might have reached epic proportions."

"OK, looking beyond the issue of physical torture, what did your indiscretion extract?"

"There's a ringleader who runs this and a number of other shady operations. She wouldn't fill in details beyond the thing that Henri and Tony work at, but I can always go back if need be. This guy controls a number of kids, Tony and Stephen's daughter for two, and brings in the odd adult like Henri when he can enlist them. She swears she only knows him by his nickname, The Oracle. But she gave me enough detail on where he hangs out and some of his physical characteristics that I think I can identify him. I'm going to mull over a strategy and then go in and nail this guy. I may need Mikey's help, but so be it." Maria sat on the edge of her chair.

"Oooooohh, I don't like the sound of this! This guy could be connected to The Mob, or worse. If you go after him, it could get really ugly." Worry lines creased Arabella's forehead.

"Hey 'Bella, when nastiness lurks in the shadows, you just have to shine light on it. We'll be careful, but it's something I need to do for Tony, for my family. Don't worry, y'hear?" Maria reached out and grasped Arabella's hand firmly.

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In the beer store parking lot, Jody was on the phone with her convertible roof closed and the windows up. She spoke in hushed tones and looked sideways intermittently to ensure no eavesdroppers were lurking in close proximity.

"I'm telling you, I had no choice, they were both very aggressive to me and to my car." Jody frowned while the voice on the other end responded. "I did tell them about the dogfighting operation, yes...yes, I did. But given the amount of traffic you had going in there somebody would have spilt the beans on you soon anyways. It's not a Girl Guide cookie factory for God's sake, somebody would have mentioned it to a neighbor or friend and your cover would have been blown. So shut it down now and don't worry about the money you would have made. Besides, you've got all kinds of other things going on to generate revenue. How many steaks can you eat at the same

time?” Jody inspected her manicured nails while the torrent of response spilled out, and then gingerly reached up and caressed her irritated and abraded left earlobe.

“Nope, that was it. Nothing else, I tell ‘ya!” Colour rose up in Jody’s cheeks and she stumbled a bit on her response. “That’s all I had to spill, OK? Nothing about you, uh, nothing. Just relax and shut down the farm thing. And maybe give a holiday to that Rambo and his girlfriend, they have some kind of family connection to this crazy Maria. Just tell them they’re off the payroll, and they’ve done enough for you to consider everything even. Find some different flunkies and this will blow over quickly and be better for us all.”

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Norm sat out on the front porch of his halfway house. The events of the late afternoon had rattled him considerably, and he simply had to sit to equilibrate a bit and contemplate his next moves. He looked out at the passing traffic and concluded it was time to change how he was doing things. He had gotten in deep with those loan sharks, and one thing led to another and eventually he was on a healthy monthly retainer for doing some errands and the odd distasteful bit of nasty business. But his needs were minimal, and he could just as well do without the money, given its tainted nature. He wasn’t entirely sure he could just walk away from the sordid arrangement, but he convinced himself that after tonight he would surely try.

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Tomasina sat out on her back deck overlooking Witherspoon Park, reading that morning’s edition of the Spectator. Every other article seemed to be about money woes—some American city going bankrupt, tech stocks not doing as well as projected, folks not saving enough for retirement, pension funds in serious trouble. She shook her head and flipped through the last four pages in thinly veiled disgust. She knew her needs were simple, and that she had the advantage of a decent public sector pension. But she also knew lots of others in her same boat that were constantly fixated on money, and were living less-than-desirable lives because of it. You come in with no money, and you can’t take it with you, so why is that all we worry about in between?

Tomasina had the philosophy of spend some, save some, and give some away. She believed money was flow from above, and that the Divine would supply all the resources she would ever need. Not wants, but needs, she reminded herself. And with that tempering thought, she folded up the paper and went in to make herself a nice chickpea salad with the spices she had rounded up this afternoon. A power shortage did not translate to banal cuisine for her, and this upcoming meal was just another sweet manifestation of flow from above.

A Line of Attack



The next morning, Arabella intercepted Gabriel while he was out on his morning perambulation with the energetic and winsome Strider. She had brought along a letter written to some old university chums, and stood by the Melville Street mailbox as she waited for Gabriel to advance along the sidewalk.

"Well, here you are, kind sir. I am a great observer of neighbourhood rhythms and I anticipated I may be able to cross paths with you and your canine pal if I showed up here now, plus or minus thirty seconds." Arabella flashed a dazzling smile.

Gabriel mentally entertained the memory of her departing derriere from the previous day, sheathed in material that gave its dimensionality considerable allure. 'Be mindful of your errant thoughts', he warned himself, and then the advance wave of her perfume made its way to his nostrils. This interchange was going to take some focus. "Good morning, Arabella. Nice, nice to smell you...I mean, nice to see your.... I mean, nice to meet up with you!" Gabriel stammered all of this out and his voice became thick.

Arabella looked at him in an odd way, but pressed on. "Gabriel, I just wanted

to close the loop on that sordid business with my neighbor. Maria dropped by last evening, and told me of some very compromising activities that Henri has been doing. All of this was found out by Mikey and Maria under, let's say, dubious operating policies. But information is power." Arabella crossed her arms sternly across her upper body.

"Mikey gave me a ring to update me. So what did you do from there?"

"I didn't sit around and ponder my moves like a neophyte chess player, I felt a real push to act quickly. So I girded up with my old leather motorcycle jacket, some black spandex tights, my black slingback pumps and my Armani power shades. It was getting dark but I needed these for effect as I always give away my emotions through my eyes. Took a shot of good Courvoisier brandy and went over and rapped on his door." Arabella smiled smugly.

"Wow, gutsy, tell me what happened from there." Gabriel said this softly.

"I told him I needed to talk, in his sideyard, which is exposed to the street but quiet enough for a private conversation. He was dressed in a muscle shirt and patterned boxer shorts, so I definitely felt I had the upper hand." Arabella snorted a bit, and Gabriel bobbed his head in agreement.

"I told him I had reflected on our previous conversation, and that he was wrong on certain key assumptions. I then went on to say that I did not appreciate one iota his attempts at blackmail. And as much as I am a lady, I would fight force with force. And so I asked him how his employment at a dog-fighting establishment was advancing his professional career!" Arabella looked sideways as she said this.

"Hoo hoo, score one for the iron lady!" Gabriel clutch pumped his right arm and Strider's leash jerked wildly.

"He looked like he didn't know whether to play bingo or wind his wrist watch. Stunned. He started to sputter something, but I just repeated my lines and told him I was on very good terms with the local police. But he was still a neighbor, and I wouldn't be approaching the constables if he would stay right away from besmirching my reputation, immediately if not sooner. He looked as if all the wind had come out of his sails, and he muttered some apologies and slowly plodded back to his abode. It's a pity that it had to come to this, as he really is a fine-looking young man, and his close proximity could have been quite convenient for certain endeavours. Do you know what I'm hinting at, Gabriel?" Arabella cooed this out in a voice dripping with sultriness.

"Well, no, I mean yes, I catch your drift, but this line of conversation is leaving me in some discomfort." Gabriel coughed discreetly.

“Oh, Gabriel, I detect I may be embarrassing you. It’s just that I’m a bit traditional in my perspectives, and Henri being a decade or more younger than me seems a bit tawdry. I know that hasn’t constrained Maria and Mikey, but it’s not really my cup of tea. But an older gentleman would be much more fitting to my tastes, wouldn’t you agree?” Arabella slowly stroked Gabriel’s lapels with her chartreuse-coloured fingernails. He looked down at her supple hands in stunned silence, her scent creating some kind of paralyzing admixture to all of his senses.

“It’s just that events of the past few weeks have stirred something in me, Gabriel, and I now realize substantial erotic undercurrents roil and foam not too far below my exterior façade. If I expunge these regularly I could get into similar trouble that almost flared up with Henri. But if I had regular meetings at my residence with a respectable gentleman like you, Gabriel, we could explore various themes of mutual interest. I’m speaking a bit in code here, but I think you catch my drift?” And with that Arabella turned sideways and looked upward at a fine stand of pine trees, at the same time pressing her right buttock into Gabriel’s thigh. He literally jumped back twelve inches.

“Arabella, for goodness’ sake. I’m a happily married man and we’re out in broad daylight. Puhleeze...”

“I’m just exploring options, my darling. It’s the least I can do to say thank you for what you have done to help me. And somewhat naughtily poetic don’t you think, to suggest extracurriculars of a nature similar to what Henri was threatening to blackmail me on? I do have my shadow side, Gabriel, and I’m not afraid to explore this in a tangible way, despite my reputation in this fine town. But what better way to explore my shadow, than with someone who has an equally high reputation to protect?” Arabella’s eyes were somewhat hooded, and Gabriel started to get the feeling she may be under the influence of something more concrete than a fitful sleep.

“Goddamn it, Arabella, I am a happily married man!” This was hissed out with more venom and considerably more volume than Gabriel had intended. And as Luck often spins her web, a set of ears was coming down the near-side sidewalk, in the form of a Lululemon-garbed Tomasina.

“Good morning you two, I hope I’m not interrupting a serious conversation.” Tomasina smiled blithely, with just the hint of a glint in her eye.

“No, no, not at all.” Arabella and Gabriel verbally tripped over one another, uttering the same response.

“Well, that’s good. I’m just doing a slow walking meditation on my way to an ashtanga yoga class, and attempting to give up all form or manifestation of

attack thoughts.”

“Attack thoughts?” Gabriel felt he was on firmer ground, and was secretly delighted with the interruption.

“Yep, any thought which is an attack on any person, place, practice or thing. I might not like a neighbour’s Hummer, or their garish patio furniture, or their peeling paint on the window frames or the mounded-up wine bottles in the blue box. The list can go on and on. But I try to curb all of these and cut all attack thoughts to zero. It’s really about eliminating negativity. And if I can accept all things with grace and equanimity, I am very close to a peace that I can carry throughout my day. So don’t mind me, I’m just cruising through and will wish you a great day!” She gave them both a winning smile and slowly drifted down the street.

Arabella and Gabriel followed her progress for half a block, then looked sheepishly at each other and went off orthogonally, with considerable colour in both of their faces.

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Norm sat on the bank corner bench, getting warmed by the early morning sun and contemplating life’s big questions. He had a lot to think about, particularly how to best get himself out of the situation he found himself in. He was looking up at a flock of birds when a person in tire shop coveralls sat down next to him on the bench. Out of the corner of his peripheral vision Norm could detect a ponytail, ball cap, dark sunglasses and a long, bushy beard. A ZZ-top lookalike, Norm snorted to himself. But then the guy shifted in uncomfortably close and the emanating scent didn’t quite fit.

“I remembered you liked ball caps on ladies, but how do you like the facial hair?” The voice was low but firm.

Norm’s gut clenched, but he kept his fabled sense of humour. “ It’s impressive, even by Italian woman standards.”

“One more cut like that and I will strip off this beard wig and ram it down your throat.” Maria whispered this menacingly.

“OK, so to what do I owe the favour of your company?” All said flatly.

“I had a revelation over night. You’re plenty scruffy, but you’re also plenty intelligent. The Oracle must use you for more than simple drop and run tasks. So he’s gotta trust you for more, perhaps even for advice. So my friend, you’re going to deliver me The Oracle. It may take a while, but I’m doing this Sherlock Holmes undercover thing in case Missy Denton gave him my

description. So let's talk and come up with a plan."

"What if I tell you to take a hike?" Norm curled his lip.

"Because my guy pal is just around the corner, keeping an eye on unfolding events. I only have to give him a sign you're not cooperating and it's all over, pal. The next time you're walking on your own in a quiet stretch, you'll be meeting Mr. Louisville Slugger. Three swings of the bat and not much will be left of your knees. So protect The Oracle and you won't walk again." Maria let this sink in. "So now we'll get down to some creative planning, shall we?"

Muchas Gracias



The continuing power outage meant fewer people out and about these mornings. Stores were open, but not quite with the normal routine and pulse of an electricity-driven economy. This quieter pace meant fewer people walking by the bank bench, where a hirsute mechanic in coveralls sat perhaps a bit too close to a disheveled and balding sixtysomething man.

"So you will in essence become a double agent?" Maria said this in an almost-kindly manner.

"Yes, although that mantle may not fit particularly comfortably. I don't appreciate being physically threatened, but from what I saw yesterday afternoon with Jody you are more than capable of carrying out your promise. And if truth be told, something in me has shifted recently. I got involved in this web after a low point in my life, but it's gone on a bit too far and far too long. I actually have gratitude for what you're doing, strange as it may sound, as you may be the unlikely catalyst to get me extricated from this mess. Gratitude. So thank you, *merci bien, mille grazie!* I'll tell you what I know,

and you can see what can be done to rectify things.” Norm stared straight out to the street.

“OK, let’s start with some background. Who’s the kingpin, and what’s the skinny on him?” Maria slung her arm around Norm’s shoulder. He turned sideways to look at the bearded beauty, and then reverted his gaze to the sidewalk. “I don’t know his name. He simply goes by The Oracle. The one who knows all, directs all. He’s the kingpin around these parts, but I suspect he’s part of a larger organization that has its own hierarchy. I got involved in the web up in Hogtown, and when I moved this way some guy showed up one day. Told me that I had to settle some debts, things that just didn’t go away with my relocation. Some physical threats like I just heard from you, but perhaps worse. But if I did certain things, I would get rewarded. The old carrot and stick routine.” Norm nodded his head glumly.

“So what does he look like?” Maria’s eyes flashed.

“Hard to say. I have never seen him without his mask. You know that ‘V for Vendetta’ look? Smiley face, evil eyes? He’s average build, average height, maybe a bit on the lanky side. Funny voice---menacing, a bit craggy, something I can’t put my finger on.” Norm shrugged and looked skyward.

“Does he live in town?”

“Not sure, but my gut tells me he comes in from outside. I see him on foot, he pulls up in a cab, sometimes he jumps on a bus and sometimes he has a kid driving him with what I suspect is a ‘jacked car.’”

“OK, so beyond the blood sport debacle, what else does he run?”

“Nothing reputable, let’s put it that way. He facilitates a lot of the drug flow into this burgh, and there seems to be no shortage of buyers. Lots of folks trying to mask over their pain. And then he piggybacks a separate little extortion ring onto these folks, getting punks to collect twenty bucks a week from these drug clients just so the windshields in their cars stay intact. They’re users, they’re a little jumpy, so they pay the punk and everything stays fine. He and his young hoods set up a lot of break and enter activity, and the good stuff gets bundled up for pawnshops in the city. And recently he has had one of his young flunkies who is a computer genius hack into people’s on-line accounts, and they siphon off a mere fifty bucks as some kind of nebulous inter-branch banking transaction. People make so much money, and it’s all flowing here and there, so no one notices that a little bit has dribbled away. End of the day, it’s all about the money. People have their dark recesses in their psyches, and The Oracle just takes financial advantage of the absence of light. The mask is a metaphor, he likes working in the dark and profiting from

it. Who knows, maybe he doesn't even exist. Perhaps one of us just wears the mask on a rotating basis, resonant with the evil lurking below in all of us." Norm smacked his lips.

"I don't need a philosophy salon, Norm. Just tell me where and when I can cross paths with this dude." Maria patted down her moustache.

"Hey, it's not like a Swiss train schedule! He has fingers in a lot of pies, and he also has an appetite for a few of his more attractive acolytes. But I tend to see him every, or every other, day. He calls ahead, and shows up with some tasks he wants done. I do them and I get paid. Sometimes he sends in one of his trusted henchmen, and I deal with them. I get the feeling he's a bit jumpier lately, as if he knows someone may be on to him. The power crisis is not to his advantage, more people shifted off their NetFlix and Internet dependency, more chance for his underbelly to get exposure. So he might send in more henchmen, but I know you want him and not a flunky, correct?"

"Aces to that, Einstein." Maria patted down her coveralls and crossed her arms across her chest.

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He wasn't quite sure what was motivating him, but Gabriel found himself walking around the block near Arabella's home. He had Strider with him as a suitable foil, and his mind was still reeling from the advances that Arabella had made moments earlier. He suspected she had returned directly home, and he had a strange inclination to walk down the line of coniferous trees that bordered one side of her residence. He was not a comfortable voyeur, but the heat in his head suggested he might be able to take some unrestricted looks into her solarium. Perhaps she might be in there now, he thought. Perhaps in skintight exercise wear? Perhaps wearing nothing at all?

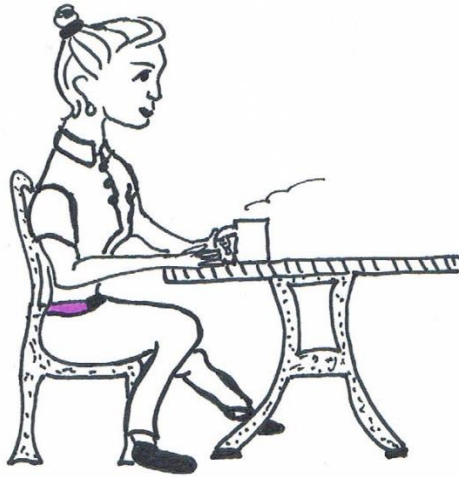
His reveries were broken by the sound of a car pulling up front. He took five strides down the tree line and saw that it was Mikey's limousine. Mikey himself bounded up the verandah steps and gave the brass knocker a healthy clang.

"Special delivery, my dear friend." Mikey kissed Arabella left, then right.

"You darling, I finished my last bits this morning."

"Arabella, this is my last drop. My guy called me this morning and told me that would be it for the mushroom flow. Some kind of management disruption. Sorry."

Received With Thanks



Mikey and Arabella slowly drove away from the front of her home, leaving a confused and embarrassed Gabriel to pull himself out of the conifer stand. Arabella had not taken no for an answer very readily, so Mikey had suggested she come along with him and they would chat about the situation. He had been on the phone with Maria just before he reached Arabella's, and a plan was slowly starting to form in his mind as he drove along and made small talk.

He had always done a few things that were under the radar, and delivering a few packages of recreational substances here and there every week was something that had always kept him going in leaner times. He would get a call from some shadowy figure for a pickup by the school bus parking lot near the creek, was told how much to fork over for the packages and where and when he needed to deliver them, and then carried out the drops with minimal fanfare. He was paid a substantial livery fee for each of the drops, he never kept records of anything so all monies were tax free, and the receiving clients seemed appreciative and downright eager to get their parcels.

But events of the past month had shifted him and sandpapered down his rough edges, and he had been starting to wonder if this line of work would have to be self-terminated somehow. Just over the last few days things had seemed to be a little jumpy, and the edict by cellphone that substance flows would be drying up post-haste seemed to fit with his overall plan. But Arabella had been one of his regular and more pleasant drops for quite some time, then quiet for a bit, and then trickling back over just the last little while. The clearing of addiction was a non-linear process at best.

His beloved Maria was sitting beside that grizzled older fellow, tricked out in disguise and committed to finding and confronting the kingpin. She would need help for this, and Mikey had committed to staying in close proximity to the downtown and staying in frequent cellphone contact. But what Mikey was

starting to line up in his mind was the possibility that the folks he had been dealing with over the years for his clandestine deliveries might be one and the same with the ne'er-do-wells that had been coordinating the shadowy work of Maria's nephew Tony and Henri LaMontagne. And if that was the case, this stakeout by Maria might lead to a bunch of problems being solved in one stroke. One bold stroke, and one that would bring substantial light in to chase away some pretty murky shadows.

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Magdalena sat in the patio of the café, bathed in mid-morning light and enjoying the comforting aroma of freshly roasted beans wafting into the outdoor space. She was waiting for Tomasina, who always ran a bit late to things, running on a schedule that shifted often and to a drumbeat that was only perceptible to her. A perky young waitress came up to her table and set down a carafe of water and a glass.

"Thank you kindly. I'm waiting for someone to arrive, but just may go ahead and ask you for an Irish breakfast tea, some steamed lactose-free milk on the side, and a touch of honey for sweetener. Keep a tab running if you might and we'll just add in my friend's beverage when she arrives, if she arrives, along with anything on the food side of the ledger that appeals." Magdalena smiled beatifically.

"That sounds great! I wish all my friends were like you, setting up a tab for my arrival and being jolly even if I'm running late!" The server chuckled and stood with a tray on one hip.

"Hey sister, my motto is 'give to receive'. The more I do for people, the more that just flows to me. I've just learned this over the last few years and I am grateful for how it has worked in my life."

"Well, with that in mind, don't be surprised if I bring you extra honey for that tea!" The young gal sashayed towards the patio door, throwing this pleasantries over her shoulder.

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Mikey and Arabella pulled up to the parking spot opposite the bench where Maria and Norm were sitting, a tableau of tenseness and under-the-breath mutterings.

"You two, jump in the back so we can talk without restraint." Mikey bleated this out across Arabella's frozen smile.

As the two of them stiffly got up and stepped into the limousine, Mikey

dropped the conversation panel between the driver's section and the passenger seats. "Anything to report?"

"Nada, sweetie." Maria smiled under her polyester beard. "Norm's been waiting for a call from The Oracle, and we're actually starting to become friends. Another example of Stockholm Syndrome in action?"

"Oh, *bella signorina*, give me a few hours and we could become more than just friends." Norm placed his hand on Maria's knee.

"Thanks for the compliment, Romeo, but keep your hands to yourself!" Maria spat this out, followed by a chortle from Mikey.

"Listen, I've got a plan. We need to induce this guy into paying us a visit, but with more than one reason to come into town. This is a busy guy, so we have to set it up that a rendezvous will be profitable and he can kill two or three birds with one stone. I'm thinking that you're still a big part of the puzzle, Norm, but we have to expand the roster a bit on this to make it worth his while. And when he shows up, we triangulate like a wolf pack on him. But one thing I need to be absolutely sure on Norm ol' boy, is your loyalty to the good guys. If that flips or wavers, you'll be dealing directly with me and I can tell you it won't be pretty. *Capisce*?" Mikey glowered ominously.

"*Capisce bene, signor*. Why do I feel I'm dealing with thugs either way? Perhaps it's just because I like your lady friend, sir, even when she's wearing coveralls and a fake beard!"

Forgive and Forget



Everyone had left quickly, and Norm sat on the bench all alone. He had his marching orders, and he knew what he had to do. He was aware of the time

frame he was working within, and it was relatively snug. Doable, but much tighter than he liked. But he knew it was his only real way out, so he would play his part well and make sure it unfolded in a way that was mutually convenient to himself and his new-found friends. He had three phone calls to make, and given their sensitivity and some degree of untruthfulness on his part he knew he couldn't bang these off from the comfort of the bench. So he got up, creakily stretched and made his way around to the rear parking lot of the bank, as far away from human earshot as possible.

"Henri, *cher ami*, *c'est Norm*." His greeting was spoken in a soothing rhythm.

"Norm, great to hear from you, I've been a bit rattled of late so it's nice to hear from someone who seems to be calm and collected."

"Listen, I hear you, brother. I think we all need to go a little quiet for a while, self-preservation y'know? But certain ledgers need to be balanced, if you know what I mean? I assume you have the proceeds from the last week of betting out at the farm?" Norm became very business-like.

"*Oui*, it's burning a hole in my briefcase here. It was a great week and it's a lot of cash. Should I get it to you, as normal?"

"No, uh, a wee change in plans. I have to go out of town unexpectedly, and the boss won't want to wait until I'm back for the cash. So call him and tell him you want to meet up tonight around 8:00, down behind the overflow tank station opposite the Canal. Quick handover of the cash and Bob's your uncle. I've arranged for a limo to pick you up and take you there and back. And your dishy neighbor Arabella will come along, just to give you some company. Who knows what might happen on the return trip? If it looks promising, just ask Mikey to drive you the long way home." Norm cackled at his own joke.

"Ha, fat chance of that happening! I suggested something along those lines to *Mademoiselle* Duke, but was spurned mightily. Why would she be coming along for the ride, anyways?" Henri's voice sounded suspicious.

"Let's just say she owes me a favour, OK? And I've become quite charmed with you, *mon ami*. I don't want The Oracle taking your briefcase and then knocking you on the head and throwing you into the Canal, just to tidy up things on an operation. There is safety in numbers for this kind of thing, know what I mean?"

"Hmmm, OK...should be interesting. What time do I get picked up?"

“At 7:30 sharp, get in the back door of the limo that will be waiting outside your front door. Arabella will be sitting up front for the trip out. You can talk to her about joining you in the back for the return trip. Have the briefcase with you. Call The Oracle now and tell him you want to pass over his money. And that there’s a lot of it.

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Tomasina opened the door to the yoga/dance studio on King Street East. Her walking meditation had taken her a bit longer than she had figured, and she wanted to go in and get her mat set up and get settled as ashtanga yoga was her favourite thing these days. Her appointment at the café with Magdalena for a pre-class tea had completely skipped her mind, such was her level of absorption into ambient birdsong and the beauty of the Melville Street gardens.

A petite Indian woman was sitting on a wooden chair just inside the door, with her eyes closed. She had a beautiful head of hair, swept up in a bounteous bun, and wondrously handsome features. Her eyebrows went up and down every now and then, and it was apparent she was in deep meditation.

Tomasina cringed, as she had entered the studio in a very rambunctious and noisy manner. “Sorry, sorry!” She hissed these out involuntarily, in the best tradition of a polite Canadian.

“No worries in the least. I completely forgive you.” The older woman kept her eyes closed.

“I am very sorry.” Tomasina winced again.

“I forgive you completely. And I forgive you for continuing to be sorry. Love forgives all. As I sit in meditation I connect to the Divine. And The Divine whispers to me that she is The Love in which I forgive.” All of this was said reverentially.

“Wow, I am starting to think I’ll give up on the ashtanga class and just sit at your feet!” Tomasina gushed this out.

The Indian lady opened one eye. “My name is Mina Patel. I am also here for the ashtanga class. Shall we set up our mats near one another?” Her eye re-closed.

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Norm keyed in the number of his second call. This one could prove to be trickier, and he would have to be a bit more of a thespian on this one.

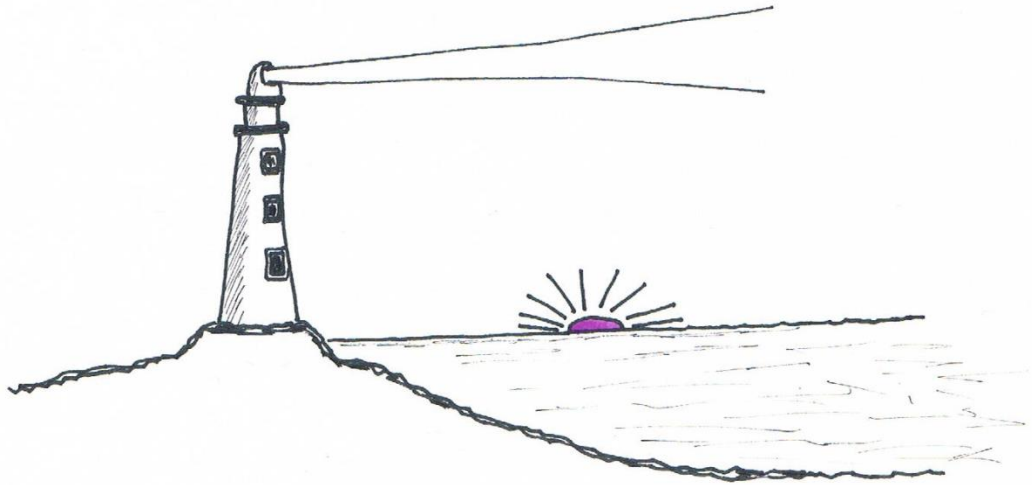
“Jody? Is that you, sugar? Thank God I caught you!” Norm scrunched up his face and spoke this very quickly.

“Norm, is that you? Make this brief, as I am getting a pedicure at this very moment and they are just finishing up. What’s going on?”

“Listen, that crazy Italian woman and her beefcake boyfriend came back and worked me over pretty good. I told them I would help them, and they’re planning out the details right now. But I’m calling you in the very few moments that I have before they come back, to let you know what’s going on. I’ve decided to become a double agent, run their game with them on the surface but stay true to our big guy. But I need you to pull this off, as I’ve been called out of town on a family matter. Just heard that my brother passed away in Etobicoke, so have to go up tonight to make the arrangements.” Norm paused for a few seconds to wipe away purported tears. “So here’s what I need you to do. Call The Oracle and ask him to show up tonight at 8:00 or so down by the Canal. Tell him there will be a little surprise waiting for him, a nice one. And afterwards, Henri will drop by with a satchel full of money for him. And that you’ll be waiting just down the road by Martino Field to give him a lift wherever he wants. Just tuck your little convertible in that single lane that goes into Volunteer Marsh. When he walks up to your car you just skedaddle away under his direction. Sound straightforward enough?” Norm smacked his lips audibly.

“Piece of cake, dude. Now let me go as they’ve done my toes and now want to move on with my manicure. I’ll call The Oracle as soon as the nail polish dries!”

A Bright Reflection



Norm dialed the number for his last call. This one should be easier, he thought to himself.

“Hello?” Cute young voice, fresh and friendly.

“Could I speak with your father, young lady?” Norm was a paragon of politeness.

“Tucker here.”

“Stephen, old chap, Norm Tryon here. I’m calling on behalf of Mikey, our mutual friend. I need to give you some direction on some activity that will occur this evening, or let’s just say a number of us hope that this activity will occur.” Norm thought he heard some rustling in the bushes lining the rear of the parking lot, but when he took the phone from his ear the sounds disappeared.

“You’re talking in code, Mr. Tryon. Speak directly and forthrightly and I’ll be able to assess if this phone call is worth my time.”

“Alright, Mr. Tucker. Let’s stay on formal terms but get right down to brass tacks. Over the last few months your business cash flow has been sporadic, has it not? And a mysterious benefactor just happened to call you to let you know where you could pick up the odd package of cash that would be able to tide you over. Am I correct in my recounting?” Norm allowed a few seconds for a response from Stephen. “So have you ever wondered where this money was coming from, or why it was coming to you?” Norm let this sink in for a bit.

“Errhh, yes, it’s something I’ve thought about a lot, but have no ready answers.” Stephen’s voice was quavery.

"Well, I can tell you that the money was somewhat tainted, having been obtained from a raft of illegal activities. And it came to you, sir, because of your daughter."

"Tainted money? Because of Priscilla? Sir, this seems highly preposterous!"

"I think certain events over the past little while might give you cause to reflect on your incredulity. Your daughter has been in the employment of the ringmaster of this pantheon of dirty deeds, and she simply arranged a business loan for her dear father. And word has it that she also had a bit more than business dealings with the kingpin, so her affections were perhaps retiring the interest on the loan if not the principal entirely!" Norm seemed to be enjoying this, but thought he heard another rustle nearby.

"Sir, this has gone well past decency into unfettered innuendo, which is reflecting on all of my family!" Stephen sputtered this out, enraged.

"So I'm just calling you now, with instructions on how to clear the balance sheet in myriad ways. Be ready for Mikey just before 7:45, he will pick you up with his limo. You and your daughter. She is key to pulling this off. But don't worry, Mikey will tell you the plan he has in mind while you drive. I honestly don't know all the details, but he explicitly told me to tell you that your daughter will be kept out of harm's way. So be ready!" Norm clicked off the phone and tapped it on his palm, reflecting on the three phone calls he had made over the last fifteen minutes.

An arm shot out of the bushes and grabbed the phone clean away.

"Criminy, give that back!" Norm was shocked out of his skin.

"All in good time, my man. Mikey has asked me to sequester your phone and sit with you all day on the bench out front, until he calls us with the all-clear signal sometime after 8:00. We want to help you stay on the sunny side of the street so to speak, and not be tempted to call The Oracle or drop by the Canal area to pass a warning. So let's be good bench mates, shall we?" Gabriel smiled in a brittle fashion, and motioned towards the front of the building.

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Magdalena rolled up her mat, collected her water bottles and jacket, and started to make her way to the rear of the yoga studio. The ashtanga yoga class this morning had been sparsely attended, and she had been struck by the nimbleness of the older Indian woman camped out at the very rear of the studio space. She sat there now, broad smile evident, with eyes open and

shut on an alternating basis.

“Hello, I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you?”

.

“My name is Magdalena. Magdalena McDermott.”

“Mina. Mina Patel. Delighted to meet you.”

“Are you new to town?” Magdalena wagged her hands in her best Russell Peters style.

“A few years now. But I keep a low profile, generally. I have been thinking I need to get out more, meet some new people. And so it seems to be working!” Mina smiled, showing some attractive grin wrinkles.

“Well, I certainly hope you can come back to my classes. You will bring a lot of Light for all of us to enjoy. I have to say, you literally seem to glow!” Magdalena’s eyes twinkled.

“I will take that compliment happily, especially from such an attractive and engaging young woman. But glowing is quite natural for all of us, I believe. If we are reflections of God’s Love, as the Christian Scientists maintain, then reflecting that beautiful Light is really second nature. Quite simple, no?” Mina chuckled.

“When you put it that way, yes indeed. Sometimes, with the way the world is going, we forget these simple truths. But we need to keep sandpapering our egos, washing our windows so to speak. A clear pane of glass can beautifully reflect the Light!” Magdalena sang this out.

“Amen, sister. Ashtanga yoga is the new Windex! Perhaps that could be the advertising slogan for your classes!” The two linked arms and retreated from the studio.

Tactical Movement



At 7:30 PM sharp, Henri stepped out onto his front porch, satchel in hand. He had dressed down for the occasion, wearing a pair of stretched-elastic sweatpants and an old Blue Jays hoodie that he had picked up from the Bible Store. He stole a look over to Arabella's house as came out onto her spacious veranda. She was wearing the same leather and spandex outfit from the night she had chewed him out royally. He started to regret his wardrobe choices, and realized his daydreaming about some kind of liaison this evening with *Mademoiselle* Duke had about as much chance of an ice cube on a hot July day. He walked briskly down to the waiting limo, whose back door was being opened by Little Miss Slingbacks.

"Bon soir, ma belle." He thought he would at least give it a try.

"Jump in, Lothario." Cold and professional.

He slid across the spacious back seat and looked through the open window to the driver's compartment. Mikey leaned back and gave him a faux smile. "Got the money, dude? Good. And did you call The Man to come and pick up his cash?" Henri nodded, perhaps a bit too agreeably. Mikey prattled on. "Good man. We are right on schedule and just have a stop or two before the Canal. From here on in, you do as I say, right down to the letter. Any resistance means Mr. Mikey has to stop the car and come back there and no one wants that, do they?" Mikey flexed his fists and smiled knowingly.

They stopped at a well-kept house near the downtown, and Mikey turned the limo off and beeped his horn two short clips.

“What’s going on, Mikey?” Henri sounded a little jumpy.

“Just trip-chaining a bit here, Henri. A few folks are going our way and also need a lift.” Mikey beeped again.

Coming out somewhat uncertainly was Stephen, dressed very formally. On his heels was Priscilla, his daughter. She was wearing a fetching French beret, and was dressed from head to toe in black leather. Henri looked out with a furrowed brow. The two jumped in the back and the limo moved away from the curb. The father and daughter combo sat opposite Henri, and Stephen quietly muttered a few things over his shoulder to Mikey.

Henri grimaced before speaking again. “Dude, you didn’t say this was going to be a jitney taxi! I thought I was going with you to drop the money off to The Man, and then we’d be done and you could drive me and Arabella back home. But I’m starting to feel a bit cramped back here, and wondering what’s going down?”

“Be quiet and let things unfold. This will all be over quickly.” Stephen’s voice was resolute.

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Tomasina and Magdalena were tucking into a light supper at Magdalena’s place, with each of them having a considerable appetite. Kale chips, purple rice and marinated tempeh were the featured specials that evening, all made up by Magdalena the night before. She and Tomasina shared a lot of meals together, and always had a lot to talk about.

“I loved the class this morning, and I adored that dear Indian woman who showed up.” Tomasina smiled gently at her friend.

“She was a real hoot. Very traditional in some ways, but so hip and hilarious in many others. I really hope she comes back.” Magdalena passed a platter of tempeh.

“She is a true teacher, and boils things down to their essence.” Tomasina went on. “ I complained about a number of little things, and she kept responding with one word. No matter what the issue was, same word. It really made me chuckle.” Tomasina did just that.

“What was the word?” Magdalena was generally curious.

“Forgive. Forgive. Forgive. One word, said many times, for all kinds of situations.

“Makes a lot of sense. And reminds me of the Course In Miracles lesson. ‘Forgiveness is my function as the Light of the World.’ Sit with that a bit and it will change everything.” Magdalena closed her eyes for emphasis.

“Well, it’s debatable that I am the light of the world!” Tomasina raised her eyebrows and rocked her head sideways.

“Concede that one, sister, you know you are a bright light!”

“OK, with gratitude I will accept that. But my function is forgiveness? I am here to simply forgive? That’s all I need to do? Sounds simple on one hand, and dreadfully tough on the other hand for certain situations.” Tomasina looked a wee bit glum.

“But theoretically, if you could forgive everything, what would you not be doing?” Magdalena sat up straight in her chair.

“Not judging?”

“Correct. And non-judgment leads to what?”

“Acceptance?”

“Which leads to...” Magdalena’s eyes opened wide.

“Happiness?” Tomasina was plugged into this game.

“Nice. And full happiness and complete acceptance lead to what?” Magdalena rolled this out slowly.

“Enlightenment?” Tomasina reached a bit on this one.

“Exactly! And who said you weren’t the Light of the World? But I’ll forgive you for your earlier reluctance!” Magdalena grinned and went back to her tempeh.

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The limo slowed just past East Street, opposite the sewage treatment plant. Mikey leaned back and barked over his shoulder. “OK, Henri, a little change in plans. You’re getting out in a block or so, but you’ll have the company of Arabella. Things might get a bit dicey from here on in and I think you’ll be

safer out on your own two feet.”

“But I need to pass this money to The Oracle.” Henri looked askance at Mikey.

“Just pass it over to Stephen and he’ll make sure it gets to the right place.” Mikey explained this in a very patient tone.

“This is a lot of dough, I need to make sure it gets to The Man!”

“Don’t worry, Stephen has a few things to wrap up with The Oracle also. He’ll make sure it all works out.” Mikey’s patience was now veneer-thin.

“I don’t know...” Henri was wavering.

“Give Stephen the satchel, Henri. And you and I can go for a romantic little stroll down to Volunteer Marsh. Do you like the sound of that, bad boy?” Arabella batted her eyelashes over the top of her Armani shades as she turned towards the trio in the back. Henri looked sideways twice and gulped hard.

I’ll Choose Happiness



Norm and Gabriel were still sitting on the bench outside the bank, both with crossed legs and each quite enjoying their spirited conversation over the considerable interval of time. Norm had a scruffy exterior and a dubious allegiance to doing what is right for the world, both quite diametrically opposed to Gabriel’s modus operandi. But they were stuck there until Gabriel got a call from Mikey, so they continued to cover a wide range of discussion topics.

“I live collectively with a bunch of folks just around the corner, many of whom have had severe challenges in their life. They’ve confronted abuse, substance addiction, lack of resources, lack of opportunities—you name it. So many of them are beaten down, hurt, and not able to look at life positively.” Norm held up for a bit.

Gabriel nodded empathetically. "My wife does counselling. I don't get to hear the details due to confidentiality issues, but I get the general thrust. Many people, even in our charmed little town, grapple with some significant demons. So your housemates are not alone."

"And brother, I grapple with my own demons, let me tell you. But I am trying to stay above the fray. Trying to be loose with things that I see that I don't like. Unless it's a big deal, I just shrug things off, don't even bring the issue up. It seems to work better this way, so why sweat the small stuff?" Norm pursed his lips wryly.

"It's what my better half encapsulates in the phrase 'do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?' Our ego loves to point out all the imperfections in others and in ourselves. And these things are there, so the ego is in fact right. Sometimes smugly so. But nobody likes the bringing up of dirty laundry, so there is resentment or pushback or both. But most certainly happiness does not ensue after some petty criticism. So do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?" Gabriel held out both of his hands palms up, weighing two imaginary objects in the air.

"Hmmm, do I want to be right or do I want to be happy?" Norm repeated the maxim for emphasis.

A petite Indian woman materialized immediately in front of the two men. Mina Patel was performing her evening constitutional, slowly and purposefully.

"Choose happiness." Mina yielded a pixie-like smile, bowed a *namaste*, and kept walking up the street. Norm and Gabriel looked at one another and shared grins.

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Arabella walked down the access road of the Public Services Building, just east of Martino Field. She had her left arm linked through Henri's muscular right arm, more for direction than any suggestion of affection.

"So where are we heading cupcakes? Do you want to find a quiet little nook off by the marsh and we can have it off?" Henri leered bit and leaned in towards his neighbor.

"Patience, my dear. I'm not a teenager anymore and find I need at least the back seat of a car to ignite my passions. If we turn right and stroll for just a bit more, we might come across a vehicle that would do nicely for our purposes. I asked a friend to leave her car, if it worked out that we might need it." Arabella leaned in and stroked Henri's ear.

"You randy devilette! And here all this time you've been playing hard to get. I just love it when a woman does that!" Henri gave a playful smack to Arabella's spandex-encased derriere.

"Ah, there it is, our dalliance chariot is just up ahead." Arabella pointed playfully.

"Hold on a minute...that's Jody's convertible. You're friends with Jody Denton? That's weird, as she and I have been having some afternoon delight opportunities as she does her courier work back and forth to my place. Tough as nails, but as fiery as a branding iron! I don't think she's going to be particularly happy to see me here with you, Arabella. And besides, her backseat isn't big enough for a small valise to fit into, let alone a steamy duo!" Henri's voice had the distress level of an over-constrained logistics expert.

The driver's side door opened and Jody stepped out. "Henri, what are you doing here? And why is she here with you?" With that, Arabella threw both of her arms around Henri's shoulders and roughly kissed him on his cheek.

"Uh, well, uh, it's kind of hard to explain. We were on our way to do something important, then plans changed, and now we're just out for a walk. It is a nice night, isn't it?" Henri stammered this out.

"Oh what a big fat, but cute, liar you are! Jody dear, Henri and his big muscles and I were scouting out a spot for a wee bit of romance. You know what I mean, doll, as I understand you've been on the receiving end of his considerable affections!" Arabella playfully spun this out.

"Henri, I'm telling you, tell her to take a long walk on a short dock. I will make it plenty hot for you once The Oracle shows up, and you don't want that. And I will personally enjoy scratching my nails all over this hussy you are hanging out with, just to teach her the lesson that no one looks at any man I'm even peripherally involved with!" Heat was pouring out of Jody and her face became a contorted mask.

"Oh my, The Oracle! I had better take my leave before he shows up. I'll leave Henri all to you, dear Jody. But just one question and one answer to motivate me to leave. I have some friends in the survey just west of here that have lost a lot of valuables due to break-and enters. Any chance you and The Oracle have been involved with this?" Arabella fidgeted with her leather jacket.

Jody's rage had made her incautious. "Tell your chump friends that their choicest bits have been taken by the disenchanting adolescents of their fair

town. And all coordinated by The Oracle, with the parcels being run down to the pawnshops by yours truly. I look over the spoils and have even been known to keep something particularly choice.” Jody fondled a distinctive crystal necklace and twisted it from one side to the other.

“Well, I have found fear and rage to be considerable aphrodisiacs, so I will just step away and leave you two lovebirds to your unshackled pleasure...” Arabella’s words were truncated by the roar of a truck engine. Maria pulled her farm vehicle within inches of Jody’s back bumper, preventing any escape in the single lane enclosure. Twelve large men wearing black balaclavas and wielding wooden truncheons jumped out of the back and quickly circled the truck and the convertible.

“Good evening, sports fans. I was just driving in the neighbourhood and came across a group of citizens who are concerned about the integrity of their homes and the safety of their valuables. Too much has happened recently, so good people have resorted to vigilante measures. Arabella, who do we have here?” Maria was enjoying this.

“I suppose one might say a mid-level manager of a subsidiary firm and a madame vice-president of transport operations, if the break-and-enter ring was an actual business.” Arabella reported this as if she was reading from a business card.

One man stepped forward, the obvious leader. “We are past being upset about our homes being broken into and our valuables stolen. So we mete out justice to those rats we can roust out. Good old-fashioned vigilante violence has a deterrent effect, and we will keep doing it until the violations stop. The police can’t even begin to keep up with the volume, so we have taken matters into our own hands. But we also want to be fair, and make sure we are punishing the right individuals.” He turned his head alternately to Maria and Arabella. “What proof do we have on these two of their involvement?”

“Nothing concrete on the gentleman, and he is my neighbor. If I see anything to incriminate him down the road, I will be the first to call you. And the threat of this will hopefully motivate him to change his path.” Arabella arched one eyebrow.

“And for the other?” Mr. Balaclava nodded towards Jody.

“Does the necklace she is wearing look familiar to anyone?” Arabella posed this neutrally.

A few seconds of silence passed. “Yeah, it looks like the one that came to my wife from her Aunt Clara. A beautiful piece, yanked out of my wife’s jewelry

box last month!” This was shouted out by a squatly-built man with a squeaky voice.

“I bought this at Holt Renfrew over a year ago.” Jody stood defiantly.

“Without direct evidence we do not act, that is our credo.” The leader said this softly.

“Might this help? Something I just taped a few moments ago?” Arabella fidgeted again with her leather jacket and a tape of Jody’s voice played out over the marsh.

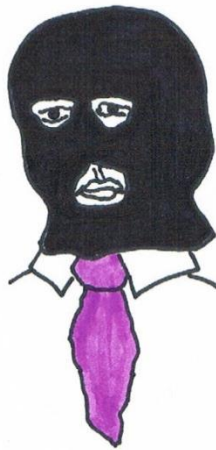
“That’s a lie, a fabricated recording!” Jody sneered, and glowered at Arabella.

“You can see the file’s date stamp on the device—recorded right here about ten minutes ago.” Arabella held out the recorder and wire.

“My wife loved that necklace.” Mr. Squeaky’s voice sounded plaintive.

The circle closed in around Jody. Truncheons were partially raised. She shifted manically to one side, and then backwards. One of her sandal heels snapped off due to the pressure, before the men went methodically to their task.

Life at the Frontier



“And so we wait.” Stephen nervously fiddled with the handle of the satchel containing a copious quantity of unmarked bills.

“Do we all know what we have to do in terms of choreography, to pull this off and keep everyone sort of safe?” Mikey whispered this in guttural tones from the front.

"I...I think so. I would get down flat on your seat, Mikey, in case he can see your profile through the tinted windows. Who knows which way he will be coming in, but I'll get the window down and let out our special whistle so that he knows I'm around. And then we'll go from there." Priscilla said this with equal parts calmness and rising tension.

"Special whistle? He's quite close to you then, this monster?" Stephen spluttered this out quickly, instantly regretting his choice of words.

"He's a brilliant guy, who's pretty messed up. Like me in a lot of ways. He was good to me when I needed some help, and didn't have the maturity to ask you or Mom for assistance. And then we grew closer. We had a mutually supportive relationship, let's just leave it at that." Priscilla said this with a modicum of defiance.

"But what kind of company is this to keep? A guy who organizes break and enter rings, a drug pusher, an animal abuser?" Stephen was seething, working hard to keep control.

"Listen, behind every criminal is a complex back story. He was orphaned at 12, out on the street at 13. Did all kinds of substance abuse, underlain by a foundation of chain-smoking. He ran a mob of street kids who specialized in petty thievery, then worked his way up into drug rings. Then in his mid-20s he got throat cancer, and now has an artificial larynx. He started to wear a mask, to hide some disfigurements and mute out some of the metallic effect of the larynx. Became totally pissed off with the world, and concocted a plan to make money off people's shadow sides. You want drugs or gambling to dull the pain emanating up from your shadow, he and his network will get you anything you want at a price. And while you suffer in your drug-induced depression, from illegal drugs or otherwise, he will be quite happy to liberate some goods from your home or a few dollars from your bank account. He's happy to screw society, because he feels society screwed him." Priscilla paused to let this all sink in.

Bloody ridiculous. I know lots of people dealt a tough hand and they stay above the line and contribute to the greater good. So why the nickname, and why the V for Vendetta mask for him and his gang?" Stephen was disgusted but intrigued.

"He fancies himself to be brilliant, the puppet master who knows all. So The Oracle is the one who knows all, from ancient Delphi. And he has a vendetta against society, and loves the taunting smile of the V for Vendetta mask from the movie of the same name." Priscilla smiled grimly.

“This is going to be an interesting evening.” Stephen and Mikey cracked their knuckles at the same time.

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Tomasina walked home from Magdalena's, her tummy full of tempeh and her arms full of beautiful flowers from Magdalena's garden. When she had moved to town a little while back, she had put out a prayer of thanks for the wonderful friends she had in town. In actual fact, she didn't know a soul, but she prayed as if the friends existed already and the strong relationships were in full bloom. "Thanks in advance" was her motto, and this system of up-front gratitude had materialized so much good in her life. "And thank you for that special gentleman!" She called this out to an observant squirrel on a nearby branch. And then she chuckled to herself, only a bit morosely. That might take more time to materialize than she might like, but she would be patient and repeat the advance thanks.

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"Eee." This eerie whistle went out over the waters of the dusk-draped canal, over and over again. No movement came from either side of the limousine. A moment went by, and the haunting whistle pierced the night air again.

The slightest of sounds unveiled themselves at the other side of the canal, and a paddle board gradually emerged from the vegetation and its shadows. A dark figure crouched low, paddling toward the side of the canal that housed the limousine.

The rear window went down further and a bob of red hair and a toothsome smile hung over the glass. "Orc....it's me. It's been too long, dude. Get off that skiff and get your butt in here. We've got about fifteen minutes before the driver comes back."

"Your amorous suitor arrives, dear damsel." The window closed and the paddle board drew parallel to the near edge. The much-awaited arrival lithely climbed up the canal bank, by reflex scanned the horizon left and right, and then opened the back door and popped inside the limousine. The well-oiled door clicked shut quickly, leaving the back compartment in near-darkness.

"Lollipop, where are you?"

"She's just stepped out. But for your purposes, she's gone for good." Stephen lit a match to provide some flickering illumination.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m her dad. The guy you have been so generously giving credit to over these past few months. But today is payback time, so here is your cash back, with considerable interest I might add!” Stephen threw the valise at the man’s chest. “But now that is settled, I need to take up one significant issue with you. You see, I’m a small town guy with commensurate values. And a punk like you shouldn’t get within ten feet of my daughter, let alone do the kinds of things you’ve had her do. So it’s payback time, Mr. Oracle. Drop your drawers and tell me if you want to lose your whole package or just the testicles.” Stephen deftly whipped out a switchblade and engaged the knife. “One of my neighbours was a US Marine and he has passed along his knife training to me. So consider yourself lucky I don’t just cut you up in ribbons!”

Stephen had his left hand up to block a punch and his right hand slowly and menacingly rotated the knife. But the Oracle quickly brought up his left foot and kicked the knife out of Stephen’s hand. Stephen countered with a kick of his own that pressed the Oracle back into the plush upholstery, but he then followed with a double kick to Stephen’s chest that did significant damage and left the older man vulnerable to followup attack.

But the Oracle stayed eerily stuck to the seat upholstery, freeze-framed for an instant and emitting strange gurgling sounds. Two large and meaty hands had clamped down on his throat from behind, squeezing hard and pulling him backward with tremendous force. Mikey had quietly snuck up from his horizontal hiding position, and was putting his considerable strength to good use.

“Stephen, throw the satchel of money out on the ground. I’ll compress him a bit more and then we’ll heave him out on top of the bag. He’ll come to in a few minutes and he’ll at least have the money that he came for. We can gun it down the road for a block and pick up Priscilla, and I’ll have you folks home in five minutes or less. You’ve had a challenging night.” Mikey grinned and kept up the pressure.

A moment later the valise thudded onto the goose dropping-dappled roadway, and then a masked body plopped somewhat unceremoniously on top of the satchel. The limo fired up and spun, moving quickly westward.

The late evening light grew dimmer and the bird sounds picked up somewhat, signaling the end of another day. After a few moments the man stirred, sat up, and then slumped over to one side. He heard the sound of an advancing car. A few seconds later a red convertible pulled up broadside.

"Ah ha, Jody, my dear." He jumped in the passenger seat. "You are a sight for sore eyes and I knew you would honour your word for a pickup. I was just in a spot of trouble and your loyalty is doubly appreciated....hey...where in the hell is Jody?"

"She's just getting some much-deserved....attention. I'm her friend and she asked me to drive her car and give you a lift back to her." Arabella said this very glibly, but her heart was racing fast.

"Sounds strange, but sounds like Jody. She wouldn't give this car to just anybody, so sweetheart, take me to her and all will be good. She and I are more than just friends, and maybe we could add you into the mix?" He reached over and caressed Arabella's cheek.

"Let's just rendezvous with Jody and we can talk after that...hardly more than a minute away!"

Arabella swung hard right, and then hard right again into the narrow access road. She stopped in a small clearing and quickly jumped out of the driver's seat.

"This place is kind of creepy, spooky light, y'know? So where's Jody?"

"I could have sworn this is where her car was parked last?" Arabella looked theatrically from side to side.

"Jody will be back soon. But I have a few questions in the meantime." A person emerged out of the bushes, wearing coveralls and carrying a bullwhip.

"Who the hell are you?" Said with a menacing tone, but with a gilding of nervousness derived from a glance or two at the whip.

"I'm the crazy lady who has been looking to meet up with you, buddy. Or Mr. Oracle, to be formal. Just call me Maria. I know bad things go on here and there. I have tried to live my life on a higher plane, and have largely succeeded. But then you got your hooks into my nephew Tony. Maybe you know him as Rambo. So tell me what Rambo did for you, and give me a promise that you'll never go near him again."

"Go pound salt, lady. Rambo did some work for me, but that was between us." All said with a curled lip under the mask.

"Tell me what I asked you, and tell me loud and clear. Or Mr. Bullwhip will do the talking. And he just loves a long conversation. I'm strong, way stronger

than you. And I know how to use a whip. And use it I will. Because for anyone who messes with my family, I will surely cut them into shreds!" Maria snapped the head off a goldenrod bush with a practiced air.

"I told you, go to hell!" The whip cracked in on his right wrist, giving him a laceration that bled quickly and copiously.

"I'm getting impatient! How about a few more like that, perhaps some around the groin as I hear you love the ladies. Well Mr. Bullwhip here might just ensure you are equipment-less for this kind of activity in the future!" Maria and Arabella laughed at this heartily.

"OK, OK, just hold off! Tony helped me out on a bunch of things. He was a good worker and I paid him well."

"Was he involved with the break-and-enter ring in the town, pilfering valuables from people's homes?" Maria said this quickly, lawyer-like.

"Yes, yes he was!"

"And you were the kingpin of this shady operation?" Arabella couldn't resist jumping in.

The Oracle looked sideways and glowered at his stand-in chauffeur. "Yes, yes I was." This was said in a subdued tone.

"Louder!" Maria brought the tip of the whip to within an inch of his chest.

"Yes, damn you! I am the Oracle! I am the mastermind! Now let me go!"

Eleven masked men emerged from the shadows. Jody had received her collective beating from the original dozen vigilantes, and one man had been assigned to drop her off at the ER to get her broken fingers and broken nose attended to. Maria called out to the leader. "Have you heard enough evidence?"

"Yes, without doubt. And it would appear this is the core of the hydra-headed monster undermining our community."

"What's going on?" The Oracle was beyond fear.

"These gentlemen have been impacted by your criminal activities. They have decided to take matters into their own hands. Arabella and I will now take our leave. What they will mete out is frontier justice, and it may be better for us to be beyond earshot. May God bless your soul, Mr. Oracle!"

The circle of men closed in, one slow step at a time. They had shown restraint with Jody, given her accomplice status and the fact she was a woman. But with The Oracle now firmly in their grasp, under the cover of impending darkness, their darkest emotions could run unchecked.

Boldness Pays Dividends



A week later, a bright morning unfolded. Something had shifted on that turbulent and momentous evening seven days back. A boil had been lanced, a change in the collective consciousness had begun to be catalyzed. The grid was still down, and would be for quite some time further, but The Town had evolved a different rhythm to cope without power that might be part of the energetic shift they were all experiencing.

A yoga session in the Driving Park was underway, off in the Cove area and bathed in early morning light. Its leaders were Magdalena and Tomasina, both looking trim and energetic and totally happy to be there in the moment. There were perhaps forty people working deliberately through the various *asanas* called out softly by the two women, mainly the usual participants at a yoga class but some familiar characters were interspersed throughout the group. Maria and Mikey were off to one side, bending slowly and purposefully, and sharing some good-natured comments and smiles with one another. They had decided that a change of venue would be good for themselves as a couple, and good for their family. So the farm on top of the Escarpment would be sold, and Maria's mother and father would be bundled up and moved. They would all relocate to a farmhouse in the old country, near a lovely hillside village, that had been passed down by Maria's maternal grandmother. They would grow food and be kissed by the sun, and take good care of one another. Tony and Priscilla would come along for now, and if things worked out, they would start a family together in this idyllic setting.

Arabella, Gabriel and Stephen had their mats all lined up in a pod near the centre of the assemblage. They had been severely shaken by the events of the past few months, and each knew that some concrete steps would have to be taken to mitigate the shadows that had woven together in their respective lives. Yoga may not stick for them as a modality to clear their psyches, at least not for the near to intermediate future, but on this sunny morning it seemed like a good place to at least start.

Henri sat away from the group, back on one of the picnic tables in the barbecue area. He certainly didn't mind the view of a score of trim young ladies in their yoga tights, and he found their slow movements to be subtly intriguing. He would need to work quite a bit longer to clear the sludge off his window pane, but he could anticipate brighter days ahead and this gave him considerable comfort.

Norm paced up and down the road on the western edge of the Cove. He was in the middle of a somewhat uncomfortable call from Jody, who was on the mend but frightfully angry at what she had gone through. Jody blustered and Norm winced, and he was secretly delighted when she told him she had decided to make a clean start and move to Miami. She loved the beach, looked forward to the night life, and relished the idea of a city that lived on the razor's edge. Norm graciously wished her well, and knew that her absence would be a huge step in bringing his own life to order.

And in the very back, sitting on a magenta yoga mat, was Mina Patel. A broad smile was on her face, and she had absolutely no interest in joining in the yoga poses on this particular morning. She was simply reveling in the beauty of the group, the poetry of their movements, and the silken charms of the sunbeams diffusing through a lattice of tree leaves. She had learned as a child to pray quietly and intensely. She held a prayer in her heart, and its magnitude and intention literally lifted her consciousness well out of her sitting body. It was a bold prayer, a prayer for peace and harmony in her adopted town and throughout the world. A prayer for cooperation and love, to take the human species to the next quantum level of its evolution. Mina's consciousness dispersed and enveloped all the hearts of those in The Cove that morning. They felt its associated surge, and many turned involuntarily to its source. What they saw was Mina, grinning like a child and pointing skyward with her right index finger. She knew it would take a bit more time, but in that instant she had every reassurance that her bold prayer would be surely answered.

~The End~



About the Author and Illustrator

Brian Wilson Baetz is a proud son of Walkerton, Ontario, a small town that is the seat of Bruce County and a willing host to the mighty Saugeen River. He has earned civil engineering degrees from the University of Toronto and Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Previously he served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. He is currently Professor and Chair of the Department of Civil Engineering at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Brian is a registered Professional Engineer in the Province of Ontario and is a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers.

He lives with his family in Dundas, Ontario, a town of considerable charm and historical significance, not to mention its enviable amounts of green space.

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