

1 Walo's First Row

'Thank God,' Dean thought, as he pulled back the covers and climbed into bed, 'I'm finally getting this thing started.' He'd picked up the package at the post box nearly three weeks earlier, thinking he'd just get to work on it right away. But something always kept him from feeling like starting something new. He was either tired from work, had something going on early in the morning or was just feeling a little reserved about doing it with Marilyn laying there beside him.

Tonight, Marilyn was away, off to a conference for four days, then helping her sister get ready to have her third child. She'd be gone for twelve days and although Dean welcomed the solitude, the house always felt funny when she wasn't home. There was always a residual noise – her shuffling around, a bathroom fan running, the microwave and the ever-present television. She kept it on even if she wasn't watching. For her it was a companion, for Dean a constant irritant. She watched everything, he watched pretty much nothing.

As he lay in bed looking at the cover of the DVD, he heard a noise, in the far end of the house. He stopped and kind of cocked his ear, listening intently. There was a second noise, much closer and his heart sped up as he translated it into someone coming closer to the bedroom, coming up from the garage in the dark.

He lay perfectly still, waiting. Nothing. Then just outside the door a rapid ticking and the furnace kicked in. Even though it was almost 70 feet away, the change in air pressure as the fan started to spin made the register just outside the door make that sound. He never noticed it when Marilyn was home, but when she was gone and he was alone, it had a creepy edge to it and he felt like a little kid, afraid of the dark, momentarily.

He swallowed, laid the DVD down, cupped his hands in behind his head, stretched his legs out and relaxed. 'How in hell am I going to get this going if I'm listening to every little freaking noise this place makes,' he thought. He reasoned that every time he was alone in the house, he went through this same range of emotions and it annoyed him. Normally erudite, all it took was a slight provocation and he was uncomfortable in his own home. A house where nothing violent had ever happened, never a fight, never even a shouting match with Marilyn. Never a break-in, nor a problem with a neighbour, nothing.

He heaved off a sigh, reached out with his left hand to find the DVD player on the side table and pulled it over and set it on his chest. He flicked the latch with his thumb and the lid lifted up with a wheezy little sigh, coming to rest with the screen about 15 inches from his face. He cracked the DVD case and pressed his finger on the plastic centre of the case, popping the disk up. He slipped it into the player and felt along the front edge for the 'Play' button. He pressed the button and the machine whirred, a large white DVD symbol appeared on the screen and lit up his face. When the screen went white, the whole end of the bedroom was lit up, and it flickered as the content started to appear. The screen went dark and some characters faded in, presenting a menu. Dean selected 'Introduction' and watched as the scene changed and morphed from a desert sunset to the Milky Way, then a dark universe with twinkling stars that moved almost imperceptibly toward him. A quiet male voice started speaking slowly, congratulating him on choosing to experience Harmonic Hemisphere and assuring him his life would shortly become a celebration of peace and strength and contentedness.

'Long overdue,' Dean thought, 'I'd pass on the peace and strength for a little contentedness right now'. The voice explained how to set himself up for the introductory session, how to place the ear buds in his ears and relax until they felt comfortable and not distracting. Gentle music played

behind the voice and Dean acknowledged that the intrusion of the ear buds would likely subside just as the voice described it would.

‘Thank God’ he thought again, and then admonished himself. ‘Why can’t I stop saying that phrase? I’ve abandoned any notion of God or any deity for that matter, years ago, yet I still essentially utter a fucking prayer every time even the smallest thing happens in my life. If I’m going to thank anyone or anything, I should thank Marilyn, or maybe her sister for creating the opportunity to be alone for a few evenings and actually explore something I’ve only heard and read about before.’

The soft voice explained how the tones would be quietly introduced, first one, then another, their frequencies modulating continuously until they were producing a steady polyphonic harmony. This broad tone would increase in amplitude very slowly but steadily until it drowned out any thought and drew Dean’s focus so strongly that the hemispheres of his brain would be in perfect balance.

Once this balance was achieved he would experience a state of consciousness that was his alone and anything he heard or saw would be his unique vision, overwriting any indoctrination he’d experienced. The session would continue until he’d been in the relaxed state for at least thirty-five minutes. Then the tone would fade away and he would either get up, refreshed, or slip into a deep, and restful sleep. If he slept, he’d awake the following morning feeling as though every cell in his body was refreshed and recharged.

The voice went on to explain how important it was that Dean repeat the first session until he was sure he’d exhausted every benefit before moving on to the next sessions and the rich world his brain would enter as he progressed through the DVD.

Dean had read enough about the process to realize that he’d have to invest many evenings before he’d be at a point where he’d notice a significant uptick in his mood. He also realized he had to temper his eagerness if he wanted to get the most out of this initial session and really focus on the harmonic tone and try to ignore the technology in the ear buds and the player, but mostly he knew he’d struggle with his mind drifting and losing track of what he was actually learning.

He pulled a small package out of the drawer in his bedside table and pried the Velcro fastener open. In the very faint glow from the DVD screen, he could see the plug on the earbuds quite easily and slipped it into the input on the side of the player. Then, one by one, he inserted the ear buds into his ears, twisting them gently until they felt like they were in the right position. The voice was louder and more forceful and the music had much more depth and richness. There was a layer of strings in the music he hadn’t even heard, listening through the player’s tiny speakers.

He noticed a pulsing button on the upper right of the screen. He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t noticed it before, or whether it just appeared, but it was a small golden orb with text around it that said, “When you’re ready to begin”. Dean stretched out more and slid his legs out wider onto cooler parts of the sheets. He positioned his left hand on the bed beside his left thigh and visually noted where the right hand would land after he clicked the button. He placed his thumb on the track pad and guided the cursor up and over the glowing golden orb, tapping the outer ring of the trackpad and then slipping his hand under the covers and down beside his right thigh. The screen went black and the earbuds went silent. There was a long pause, then very faintly he heard a single tone, about 600 hertz. It ebbed down in pitch, moving from the centre of his head down to just under his right ear. The tone started a very gentle and slow vibrato that pulsed steadily for what seemed a long time. As his mind started to drift away, a second tone started, again at 600 hertz, drawing his attention back, as it drifted from centre to left before settling into a vibrato that

was distinctly out of sync with the first. At first the two tones were beating against each other in an almost cacophonous manner, before a third tone, very pure and smooth, arose in the centre, intersecting the other two tones and increasing in frequency. When it struck a particularly clear note, the vibrato disappeared from the first tones and Dean experienced a tri-tone chord which was very quiet, but so intense, it was almost painful. It became so distracting, he wanted to rip the earbuds from his ears and he could feel his right hand involuntarily lift off the bed and start to move up toward his head.

Then, suddenly, there was a peculiar v-v-r-r-i-i-n-n-g-g and the uncomfortable sensation vanished. It was like his head had launched and was moving vertically at a high rate of speed. He wasn't able to concentrate on the sound anymore, his mind had flushed with rich, vibrant colour and he felt himself being pulled up and out of his body.

The sensation was exhilarating, exciting and he seemed to be whipped along through not darkness but an impenetrable cloud of pure colour, racing toward an increasing intensity and brightness. He wanted to open his eyes, put on the brakes, hang on to something, but nothing responded, his eyes remained closed, his hands limp at his sides. Dean felt totally unprotected like he was flying headlong into a cement wall in the rich, dense fog with nothing to protect him. He heard an alien, eery wailing sound coming up through the harmonic tone that sounded organic, intensely familiar and yet completely unworldly.

As it reached a crescendo, Dean realized that his throat felt like it was being shredded by a steel wire brush and the wailing sound was his own voice reacting to the sounds in his head. There was a sickening catch in his throat, the wailing stopped abruptly and the volume of the tones dropped off to nothing.

He lay there in the dark, surrounded by silence, wondering what, exactly, had just happened to him. He tried to open his eyes and found they popped open easily. The screen on the DVD player was black and the only light in the room was the green glow from an LED alarm clock radio. He tried to move his hand and again, it moved easily. He raised it up onto his chest, feeling around for the player, fumbling for the switches, finally touching the stop button with his thumb. The earbuds made a 'pop' when he clicked the machine off. He pulled them from his ears and lay there. 'Fuck, that was really weird' he thought. 'What just happened to me there?'

He hadn't expected to lose control. Everything he read made it sound like this was a meditative state but all of the overtones of the experience had been violent. It was the antithesis of what he wanted to introduce to his life right now; he wanted peace and an escape from the stress and discontentedness of his life. This sensation was a gross assault and an evil intrusion. But he couldn't wait until tomorrow night, when he would try it again, this time trying to figure out where he was going and what was happening to him.

2 Spatter The Dew

Standing on the hill, looking down the gravel road leading into the village, was like watching the beginning of an epic movie where the sea was playing the supporting role to a cast of brilliant stars. The rough, winding road outlined the hill, disappearing at times behind smoothed mammoth boulders, then wound through a small collection of simple, frame houses, each built wherever the seashore permitted.

It was coming twilight and the only sounds were a single cylinder inboard, putt-a-putt-a-putting somewhere out of sight and the occasional squawk of a seabird, layered over the steady rolling

surf crashing on the rocky shore.. The village sat still as if deserted in the pale blue of the evening light.

Then two men appeared walking quickly up the road and the far side, shoving each other occasionally and talking in loud voices. They jumped down off the road and through a yard, past a rack of drying nets and floats and walked into a small blue and white house. A single light shone from a window on the ground floor, the second floor was dark. The silence returned as the boat faded off into the distance, either off to sea, or into another cove for the night. Then, a lone fiddle started playing, first a few tuning strokes, then the introduction to a maritime jig that repeated several times then trailed off to silence again. There was laughter and then more fiddle music before the door opened again, the music and light spilling out on the ground behind the lone figure that departed. The door slammed shut and the fiddle music, while still audible, continued.

The man that left the house walked up the hill, pulling his jacket up to cover his neck and the back of his head, shielding himself from a wind that was picking up and rapidly cooling off from the night air. He crested the hill and then stopped, pulled open his jacket and pulled out a small tobacco sack, fished around and pulled out a crumpled cigarette. He tilted his head down inside the jacket, almost into his arm pit and after a flash of light and a billow of smoke, pulled his jacket shut and continued hiking quickly into growing darkness. A dim light, from an oil lamp, glowed in another house and then another, all the while the fiddle continued to play uptempo dance music, which alternated with laughter.

The sweet scent of onions wafted through the night air as the village, such as it was, seemed to be sitting down to supper, all at once, together and apart.

The sound of the sea masked the gravel rattling off the Chevrolet sedan as it bounced down the road, swerving around potholes, its lights variously on and off the road as it navigated down into the village. It pulled up in front of the house with the fiddle music and two men got out. One carried a guitar case and a fiddle case, the other a bag of either groceries or liquor. When the second man opened the door, the fiddle music stopped and the laughter and cheering began, heralding either some hungry men, or more likely some boys ready for drink.

“Have yas eaten?”, a woman asked. “Even if I had, Margaret, I’d be wanting to set and eat more whatever that wonderful smellin’ meal is you’re cookin’”, the man with the instruments said, dropping them down beside the couch. “It’s just spuds and salt fish,” Margaret said, “but there’s lots and lots, sit yourself down there and I’ll bring you some nice buns.” The two men jostled with each other on their way to the table, laughing as they each pulled out a chair and sat down. “Where be Mr. Scammell? He can’t be on the chuck today is he?”, one man asked. “He headed off over to Stagg’s place to help him with the Easthope. It almost lost the bunch of them t’other afternoon tryin’ to get in”, Margaret said. “He’s had his supper already and should be back presently, he just need to help Don Stagg lift it up, he said.”

She filled two bowls off the stove and placed them in front of the men at the table, handing a large spoon to each, and with a lyrical little laugh said, “Git at ‘er, boys, it’s best before it’s cold. Here, Thamas, have some spuds.” The tall brown haired man laughed and answered, “I’ve never heard of your cookin’ gettin’ cold, Mrs. Scammell, or bein’ left over after either.” The other man, who had said little, beckoned to the men in the living room, one of whom sat quietly holding the fiddle and bow, “C’mon Charles, git some grub in ya, Tammy and me’ll finish it right quick if ya don’t. Come on, Eddie.”

“Ya, byes,” Thomas said, “Johnnie’ll git yer share, for sure”

The foursome kept up a friendly banter while Margaret bumped around the kitchen, opening the cupboards, digging out a box of cookies, pouring water into a huge tea pot. Once the boys had their fill, they pushed back from the table and Margaret cleared the dishes off and into the sink. She was heating water on the stove when the boys went into the livingroom, Thomas digging a guitar out of its case, Charlie picking up his fiddle. "Johnnie, come look at this here," Thomas said, holding the instrument up and placing his fingers on the strings. "This here's that chord ya need fer 'Old Maggie's Wake'. It's an 'F' a some kind, but it fits right in there, you'll hear the spot." The two men sat down, Johnnie with the guitar, Thomas poking at the strings with his finger, showing him how to make the chord. "That's good 'un, it sounds pretty sweet, never heard it before, I don't think. What was I was using?", he asked. "Whatever you'd be callin' it, it don't sound just right like this here 'F'," Thomas answered.

As they spoke, Charlie plucked along on his fiddle, his bow clamped in his big hand, sticking straight up through his fingers. Eddie stood beside the couch in the corner, leaning against the wall. As Thomas reached over and opened his fiddle case, the door flew open and the same man that had climbed the hill, earlier, strode into the room. "Tammy Marshall, good to see ya made it over. How ya bin bein' then, bye?," he said, genuinely excited to see the young man. "Any better and I'd be crappin' me drawers, Mr. Scammell and ya'd not be likin' that one bit," he laughed, hugging the older man. "I'd not be touchin'; you if you'd freshly shat, bye," he cackled, pulling his coat back and folding it over the back of the kitchen chair.

"Have cup a tea, Rex?", Margaret asked. He turned and wrapped his arms around her and gave her an exaggerated kiss on the cheek and then walked her into the kitchen. She poured the tea into a large white ceramic mug that Rex took from her and walked back into the living room. He placed the mug on the windowsill and the whole window immediately steamed over. He reached down under the couch, pulled out a canvas bag, pulled the drawstring and reached inside, pulling out an old brown fiddle and bow. "Make some heavenly sounds, byes?" he asked. No one answered, they just grinned and waited while he plucked his fiddle into tune and rosined his bow. "Uncle Manuel Milks the Cow," he called out, driving the bow savagely into the strings and stomping his foot on the floor. The other three picked it up within a couple bars and after a bit of a shaky start, the quartet was soon playing a perfect rendition of the popular tune.

They continued to play through much of the evening, stopping occasionally to have a cup of tea and to eat a batch of biscuits that Margaret made after she did the dishes. She sat the whole evening, alternately chatting with Eddie or watching intently, particularly Thomas, with her hands buried in her apron in her lap. He was regarded as the best of the young fiddle players and he played the local music with a vigour and zeal that held him apart from even the fine old players who'd been playing their whole lives.

He lived to play partly because it was something he'd gotten from his father, something he thought he'd always do with the old man. It was something they'd done since he was a child and his father was an unimaginably patient teacher. When Thomas Sr. didn't come home one weekend and the whole coast knew he was gone for good, his young son, just 12 at the time, swore to keep his memory alive with the fiddle.

He loved to come over and play with Rex and Charlie because they both played well and they knew all the tunes his father had played. Rex kept telling him how important it was that he learn them well, since one never knew when Rex, like Thomas Sr., might sink into the deep dark sea. Whenever Rex brought up Thomas Sr., the room got quiet, the fiddles were stilled and it wouldn't be long before Rex was begging off to go to bed. It bothered Johnnie that every night seemed to

end on this somber note, but Thomas never let on and was always game to get at the music whenever they were together.

Johnnie drove him home and when he came back a half hour later, his father had gone to bed and Charlie had headed off to his tiny house down the way. His mother was sitting, reading. Johnnie poured a cup of tea and sat down on the couch across from his mother. "Is Daddy off to Pushthrough in the mornin', then?", he asked. "He says he needs to help Charlie Stagg some more with the Easthope. Charlie Rose is gonna help them, too," she said. "What are you up to tomorrow, then?" "I'm getting' the Chev ready for the road, Ma. She needs better brakes and the rad's still leakin' a bit. She needs to be runnin' good by the weekend."

"What's happenin' then, Johnnie, are ya off somewhere?," she asked. "Me an' Tammy Myshral's off to Tronna, Mama. I'm gonna be his manager and get him on the CBC," he said. The room dropped silent and Margaret just stared at him. Johnnie didn't quite know what to do. He knew he couldn't say a word about his plans while his father was in the room, but he could test the waters with his mother. As determined as he was to get off the island and head up to Ontario, he was deathly afraid of his father and his temper. He knew that Rex wouldn't want him going to Toronto, but he also knew that wouldn't be the source of his rage. Many a young fiddle player had left the Rock looking for fame, only to disappear or return years later, drunk and diminished. He wanted the young Myshral to stay home, to keep the music alive.

"Yer father's going to hit the roof, son, he'll never let you or Tammy go to Tronna. Why do you even think such a thing?," Margaret said, laying her book down. Tears welled up in her eyes as she faced something she knew was coming ever since the young Myshral came home from his father's funeral. He'd said someday he'd make Myshral a name every Canadian would know. He said it was his father's dream to play at the PNE in Vancouver, something driven more by its distance from home than the popularity of the music on the far coast.

Margaret knew that day, that some day, the boy would make good on his promise. She was also pretty sure her boy would be part of the bargain, since he and young Myshral were hardly ever apart. It wasn't having him leave home that was the problem, it was that every kid that left for Toronto always came back sadder and never wiser from the big city and never really seemed like a Newfoundlander again. She wanted more than that for her boy, but was at a complete loss at how to talk him out of it. She dreaded the thought of telling Rex in the morning, but tell him she must.

3 Take Three To Play

Johnnie watched out the back window as his father threw crab traps from the wharf onto the back of the Heart's Content. He recognized the anger and frustration and defeat each time the stocky man grabbed another of the wooden crates and his stomach knotted knowing he was the cause of this new-found grief. He'd known this moment was coming from the instant he and Thomas Myshral decided it was time to seek fame and fortune way up in the Canadian Shield.

Still, this rift with Rex completely subdued his excitement at packing his duffle into the Chevrolet and heading off. His mother had been quiet the past few days and he couldn't tell whether it was disapproval or just the sadness a mother feels when a child heads off on that inevitable journey. In Newfoundland, it had become a fact of life. While the fishery seemed strong, the men that were passing their boats and business on to their boys saw doom on the horizon. They said the government was ruining the fishery and that huge foreign fishers would soon come in and wipe out the cod to the point locals would be eating only cabbage with their spuds and tea.

Johnnie had never cottoned to be a fisher. He'd always had the big dream that he'd be up on stage, not in the spotlight, but right along side the greatest talent in the land, and he'd be counting the cash and living large in hotels called the Royal Something-or-other and washing down filet mignon with a mug full of Screach.

But this morning, he felt like a traitor, like he'd dealt Rex his final disappointment. First off, he hadn't worked out as a boathand, getting tossed in the sea on every trip, sometimes more than once. Then he was fired from the cannery for getting caught feeling up Rosalind Abbott in the lunchroom. What a twat. Why'd she tell? She seemed to be liking it at the time and seemed to find any excuse to be alone with him. But what the hell, he hated the 'fockin' cannery jab' anyway.

And then there was the look on his father's face when he arrived home with the Chevrolet. He was sure Rex would walk around and run his hands over the broad tail fins and marvel at the huge cat's eye taillights. Instead Rex threw his hands in the air and yelled at him, pointing out the car was too low to get down to the dock and could carry, at best, a pair of crab traps in the trunk and bopper all for nets and floats. Johnnie teared up at the memory of making the deal, knowing all the while that the '56 Dodge flat deck was the right vehicle to buy, but the dark blue '59 Chevrolet looked like it could easily pull up in front of a mansion. He didn't realize that people who lived in mansions didn't drive ten year old cars, unless they were Rolls Royces or maybe Hispano Suisas.

He stepped back from the window when Rex looked back up at the house, hands on his hips. When he turned and strode across the wharf and jumped down on the deck, Johnnie felt under the bed for the duffle, tears turning the room into a dreamy watercolour. "Fockin' old man, why does he torment me? Why can't I be more than a fisher from Caplin Cove?," he said in a forceful whisper, directed certainly more at himself than anyone else that could be listening.

He packed a few clothes but left the shaving gear. The brush and razor still really belonged to Rex, even though he'd long since started using other ones when he shaved every few days. Still, Johnnie didn't want thief added to traitor; he wanted to be able to walk through the door some day with wads of cash and not have to see his father's downcast eyes when he did finally come back home.

He had to sit down on the bed. His burning face and red eyes would send Margaret into hysterics and getting past her and out the door was going to be trouble enough as it was. He wanted to stride out through the kitchen, give her a quick hug and get in the car and go. He didn't want to stop and talk. "Leavin' is best done rightl smartly," he whispered. That's what Rex said when they would head off down to Ladle Cove to go out on a deep sea trawler. As safe as it was, the deep ocean scared the bejesus out of Rex; enough family members lay at the bottom of the Atlantic to make him believe the ocean was God Himself. And he knew, whenever he was alone on the deck in a storm, penance for an assortment of stocked-up sins was just a missed footstep away.

Johnnie wiped his face with his pillow case and looked in the mirror. He looked like shit. He smiled, but knew it didn't change a thing. He sucked his breath in hard and just stood there, waiting for his face to be normal enough to face Margaret, who he could hear shuffling about in the kitchen.

The tiny starting engine crackled away, never quite smoothing out before dipping almost to a stall and cranking the diesel in Heart's Desire to life with a blast of thick blue-grey smoke. The diesel rattled and banged and the smoke turned to black before Rex pulled it back to an idle, then slowly

backed the boat away from the wharf. When he hammered the throttle and the bow swung round and the Heart's Desire headed toward the sun, Johnnie knew that Thomas would be grabbing his fiddle and duffle and heading up the road to the Chevrolet. Johnnie had told him, "Don't be getting here before Rex is on the water. There'll be a fockin' war and I'll be an early casualty."

Johnnie opened the bedroom door and strode out with the duffle up high on his shoulder. He knew that would save him having to say anything to Margaret. She turned and looked at him, wiped her right eye with the back of her hand and thrust her left deep in her apron pocket. She pulled out a closed fist and, grabbing Johnnie's jacket with her right hand, stuffed something in his jacket pocket. "This is from your Dad and me," she whispered, throwing both arms around him and hugging him hard, her face buried in his chest. "You get on now, if you miss that boat you'll be back talkin' with your Dad tonight and he hasn't changed one bit." She started to cry and stepped back tried to shield her face. "But he will, Johnnie, he will change. He won't be right again 'til you're back here, so for God's sake, son, don't let last night be your last under his roof."

Tears poured down his cheeks and he staggered through the livingroom like he was hammered, catching the duffle on the doorway as he tried to stampede out the door. He had to drop the duffle to get the keys to the Chevrolet out of his jeans. He popped the trunk as Thomas jumped down the embankment on the far side of the yard. He threw his duffle into the trunk and grabbed Thomas' fiddle case. Thomas laid his duffle into the trunk and asked, "Where's yer guitar, then? Ya playin' fockin' spoons in Tronna?"

"Ah, fock me Jesus, it's in the closet. I have to go back in there. Ah, fockin' Jesus," he spat. "Get in the fockin' car, Johnnie. I'll go get your guitar. Don't close the trunk, fer Jesus sake, or you'll just have to get out again." Thomas strode over to the house, jumped over the step and opened the door. He closed the door behind him and walked over to the closet. As he reached in for the guitar case, he realized Margaret was sitting in the chair right beside him. He'd almost bumped her on his way to the closet.

He reached down and wrapped his arms around her shoulders and could feel her quaking and trying to stifle her crying to be able to speak to him. "'We'll make yas both proud Mrs. Scammell. We'll be thanking Daddy and Rex and you on the Jubilee before you know it. When we're on the television we'll tell ya, so yas can git over to Harbour Grace and have a look," he said, masking his uneasiness with a faintly false enthusiasm. As much as he wanted to console her, he really just wanted to go.

"I gave Johnnie a little money, Tammy, he thinks that gas tank will just stay full by itself. Take good care and play from your heart. That's what your Daddy did," Margaret said, before starting to sob again. "Be happy for us, mizz Scammell, we's all gonna be rich and most famous in no time. Johnnie will be the best manager, you know that."

He felt a little cowardly backing out the door, and he forced himself to walk, not run, to the back of the car. He had to move stuff around before he could get the trunk lid closed and then he practically jumped the length of the Chevrolet to get in the passenger door.

"Let's get gone, John!," he cried and Johnnie dropped the clutch and the big blue sedan bounced up backwards out of the yard. Johnnie pulled the shift lever down into first and the back tires spun as it headed up the hill. Neither boy looked back when they crested the hill, they just looked ahead not knowing what the hell really was waiting on the other side.

They drove for several minutes in silence, but when they pulled onto the main highway that would take them down to St. Johns, they felt like the drama was over and the excitement was

about to begin. They both knew they had to get past New Brunswick and up into Quebec before it would really feel like they were on their way. They'd each been to Nova Scotia several times and it never felt far from home.

Thomas dug around in his shirt pocket and pulled out a crumpled up package of tobacco. He unrolled it and pulled a single, wadded up cigarette paper out, smoothed it on his thigh, then started fishing around in the package for tobacco. He placed three separate pinches into the palm of his left hand, then deftly picked up the paper in his right and poured the dry flakes onto the paper. He rolled it around gently, licked the edge and finished the roll.

Tobacco poured out one end, he said "Fock!" under his breath, and twisted the cigarette down to about half the length of a tailor-made. He knew the first draw was going to burn the shit out of his throat, but he'd not had a smoke since before bed last night. He had woken to the sound of crab traps crashing onto the deck of the Heart's Desire and had barely time to have a pee and stuff some clothes into his duffle bag. He was grateful his own mother was away looking after his grandmother and not crying at the door like Margaret.

The first drag was particularly rank, didn't taste anything like the reward his senses wanted. "How much money did your mama give you, then, Johnnie?," Thomas asked. "Thank Christ this tobacco's run out, I don't think I can smoke another one this bad." "She didn't give me no money, what you talkin' about?," Johnnie said, startled. "She said she did, you fockin' liar. How we getting' to Tronna if she didn't give you some cash, then?," he demanded. "She give me fock all," Johnnie said indignantly. "I got forty-six bucks saved and that's it. With what you got, we can get to Tronna and find some work. We'll be fine. I got a small sack of Players in my duffle. That'll get us to Montreal." "I got no money at all, Johnnie. You's the manager. That's yer job. I'm the fockin' talent," Thomas said. "I'm yer fockin' meal ticket, boyo."

Johnnie's face burned. He knew Thomas was right, in a way. He was a pretty average guitar player, not a powerhouse like Thomas, not imbued with a latent ability to just pick up a melody and play it and never forget it, the way Thomas did. Mostly he'd learned from Charlie, who would patiently show him the chords and play the tunes really slowly until Johnnie could manage to get through the progression enough times to start working at speed. Charlie never yelled, "Pick it up!" the way Thomas and even Rex did when he got lost in a tune or started playing in the wrong key. One time, when he thought he'd had a pretty good night, he overheard Eddie asking Charlie why Johnnie couldn't tell when he was playing the wrong tune. "Give him time," Charlie had said, "It ain't everyone that does this, ya know. Look at you, ya stunned prick, ya got the best squeezebox around and all you can play is "My fockin' Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean. No wonder, lad. She wouldn't want to be over here listenin' to you play accordian!" As much as Johnnie was encouraged that Charlie thought he'd get better, it bothered him that Eddie, who truly could play very little, found issue with his guitar playing.

It gave him pause. When people asked him to play, he'd only get the guitar out if there were several others around that were pretty good. When people, especially girls, asked if he played, he say, "I'm just a rhythm player." Guitar players, as a matter of pride, wanted to be able to say they played lead guitar with someone, never rhythm or bass. Most of the players just played single note rote lead passages, not fluid progressions that melded with the melody of the piece of music they were playing.

By contrast, Thomas Myshral and his father before him, could play every tune note-perfect and play soulful melodies so sweet you didn't need to even hear lyrics, the fiddle sang the complete

tune. Even the tone-deaf stopped and listened out of respect. When Thomas Sr. and his band played a dance, people came from miles away, then slept in the hall afterwards, when the dance wound down. Thomas didn't have that kind of a following, mostly because young people didn't tend to go to dances in the same way. They'd go out for a drunk or to get sweaty in the back of a car, but not to waltz with women three times their age when the music slowed, or bounce around the floor when it was jigging time.

In fact, girls had more to do with Johnnie's desire to play than anything else, at first. He'd sit on the corner of the stage, fumbling his way through the dance tunes and find there was always some girl, sometimes more than one, that would say, "Hello, Johnnie, Scammell, how have you been keepin'?", in a voice that resonated from far lower than their larynx. That always foretold a moment of quickened pulse, turgid nethers and the sweet smell of a maiden up close.

That thought was broken by Thomas demanding, "So what did she give you then, bye? She said she give you money and she sure as fock don't lie like you." Johnnie was annoyed at his insistence and snapped, "She give me nothing, ya fockin' prick. How much did your mother give to you?" Thomas looked up, indignant. "Me Mom's off helping Grannie. She's not there because Grannie needs the help, but because her cupboard's got something in it. She'd have give me a wad of cash, but all she's got is fockin' soda cracker coupons. You said you'd take me to Tronna. You backin' out? 'Cause if you are, you know, I can find a manager anywheres that'll put me on the train and put me up at the Royal York. I's money in the bank, bye. And your mother told me she give you money. All I want to know is, can you buy me some fresh fockin' tobacco?"

Johnnie thrust his hand in his jacket pocket, planning to throw some cigarette papers and lint in Thomas face. His fingers collided with a lump of papers and he could tell when he wrapped them around it, it was bills. It was what his mother had shoved in his pocket. He pulled it out and took his eyes off the road long enough to look it over. There were more than 30 bills wrapped in a wad, the outside one was a twenty. "Look out!" Thomas yelled. Johnnie wrenched the wheel to the left as the Chevrolet careened off into the ditch and tossed the rolled up bills at Thomas, yanking the wheel back and forth as the big sedan fishtailed down the highway, skidding first into one ditch, then the other. As it crossed the crest of the road, he finally lost it entirely and slammed on the brakes. The car spun round and headed off into the ditch backwards, stopping suddenly with a crunch and disappearing into a cloud of dust.

"Fock me Jesus, Johnnie, there's over three hundred bucks here!," Thomas yelled. Johnnie was trying to start the car, which had stalled and get it out of the ditch before somebody came along. The car fired, ran roughly for a few seconds, then died. "Jaysus, Tammy, we've wrecked the car!," Johnnie said, cranking on the key. The car cranked and cranked and then the cranking started to slow down as the battery lost power. Johnnie let up, opened the door, climbed out and then slammed the door, screaming "Fock!, Fock! Fock!," over and over and walking around to the front. He opened the hood, but saw nothing amiss under there. In the meantime, Thomas climbed out the passenger door and came around and stood beside him. "Maybe she knocked the points loose," he offered, reaching toward the distributor cap. He snapped the spring clips back and lifted the cap off. The rotor was still in place and the cap appeared intact.

He put the cap back on and started checking the plug wires. "Fock me, Thomas, I thought we was dead for sure. Sonofabitch, we're only 40 miles from home, not even," he said dolefully. "Already we've run off the focking road." Thomas pulled the wad of cash out of his pocket where he'd placed it when he got out of the car. "It's just an inconvenience, bye. We can get this focker towed and fixed and still be in Montreal in a couple days," Thomas said. "Gimme dat focking money, Tammy, me mother give it to me, not you." Thomas started counting the money, as if he was going to split it with Johnnie, but Johnnie lunged over and grabbed it all,

quickly shoving it back in his pocket. Thomas just laughed at him and started walking to the back of the car. They both stood on the bank above the car and surveyed the damage. The bumper was crumpled under the fender on the passenger's side and the trunk lid was sprung. The driver's side rear tire was off the ground a couple inches, so they'd need a tow, if Thomas couldn't push the car down into the ditch enough to afford some traction. He jumped up on the broad tailfin and started jumping up and down until Johnnie yelled at him to get off. As Johnnie berated him for damaging the car, they both heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. They watched as a three-ton dump truck came down toward them, gearing down and coming to a stop in front of the Chevrolet.

"That's not the spot you're supposed drive her, son," a grizzled old man said out the passenger window, "She's all uphill from dere, bye!" The driver shut the truck off and it lurched when he dropped the clutch as the engine died. He climbed down and came around and had a look. "No problem, sonny, we can yank that Chev right back up on the road. I'll go get me chain."

"Get yer ass off the seat," he said to the old man, pulling the passenger door open. He pulled the seat back forward and started dragging a long piece of chain out onto the ground. He walked down into the ditch and crouched down, sticking his head under the front bumper. "Lots to grab onto dere," he said, reaching under with one hand and dragging the chain around the front bumper mount. Then he went back and climbed under the back of the dump truck, again, dragging the chain around something under it.

Johnnie was watching intently, trying to figure out how he was going to pull the car, sitting at right angles to it. The old man hit him in the stomach with the back of his hand and said, "Git some a this in ya." Johnnie looked down at a paper bag, with a bottle in it. There was no lid on the brown bottle, so he just put it to his lips and tipped it up, filling his mouth with a sharp, sweet burning liquid. He immediately recognized the characteristic taste of Screech and swallowed hard as he passed the bottle back to the old man. "Give yer buddy a pull, too," the old fellow said and Johnnie passed the bottle to Thomas. When he'd swallowed and grimaced the driver was at his side. He, too, took a strong pull off the bottle and handed it back to Johnnie. "Hit her agin, bye," he said, heading around the back of the truck.

He climbed up in the cab and started the truck. Johnnie could see him through the big side mirror on the passenger's side of the cab. The old man beckoned to the boys and said, "We better get out of the way, she's gonna come flyin' out when he hits the end of that chain."

The three ran down through the ditch and up the embankment behind the car. Before they got to the other side, the driver dropped the clutch and the truck lurched forward, quickly taking up the eight feet of slack in the chain. When the chain tightened it made a loud bang, the back of the truck jerked sideways and the car leaped off the embankment and headed off behind the truck. He dragged it about 40 feet down the ditch before it came up on the road. He slammed the brakes on and the front of the Chevrolet went in under the box, crashing hard into the back of the truck. Both vehicles were engulfed in a cloud of dust and as Johnnie ran down the bank he noticed the back bumper was actually stuffed up under the car by about a foot and the rear fender was buckled. The driver pulled the truck forward and Johnnie heard broken glass falling on the ground. He ran up to the passenger's side and realized the front fender was also buckled, the hood was humped up and both passenger side headlights were in pieces on the ground. What he couldn't see was the antifreeze pouring down out of the punctured radiator.

"Fock me jaysus, now what we gonna do?," he said, talking more to himself than anyone else. "Ya shoulda told me she was in neutral, ya stupid shit," the truck driver said, pulling the chain off the hook on the truck's dump. "I wasn't thinking she'd ram me truck like that. You owe me a

new tail light fer sure and it looks like me mudflap's focked too."

Johnnie just stood by the front of his car, stunned. Minutes earlier, he was imagining driving up a long, curved driveway in Toronto, impressing some famous record producer with the shining Chevrolet. He had no idea what it would cost to fix. "Who's gonna fix me fockin' car?," he yelled, turning toward the truck driver. To Johnnie, it was a rhetoric cry of exasperation. To the trucker, it was a challenge. He answered with a sharp jab to Johnnie's solar plexus, dropping him to his knees. The old man, who was standing to Thomas' right, was tipping the last drop of Screach into his mouth when Johnnie yelled, responded to the rabbit punch by slamming the empty bottle into the side of Thomas head, sending glass flying and knocking the young fiddler cold. He crumpled backwards into the ditch and the old man started kicking him in the side.

The truck driver grabbed Johnnie's hair with his left hand and punched him three times in the face, shoving him down face first in the gravel. "Let's git the fock outa here, Toby," he hissed, heading toward the cab of the truck. He fired the machine up, jammed it into gear, grinding as he dropped the clutch and the truck jerked ahead and roared off down the road.

Johnnie looked up as it drove away, mouth open and bleeding, wondering what he'd done or said that caused this incredible pain in his face. He couldn't see Thomas. He started spitting blood out of his mouth and swearing, finally pulling himself up to his knees, then fell backwards and leaned against the front tire of the Chevrolet. He rubbed his hand on his cheek and felt a hard lump, like an Indian rubber ball under his eye. He realized he was looking out of his right eye and his left eye was swelling closed. He looked down at his hand and saw it was covered in blood and he felt faint.

'Where the hell is Tammy?' he asked himself. He tried to get up to look over the car and felt his temples start to pound. He fell back down and sat for a second, gathering his senses and catching his breath. He couldn't tell if he was crying or whether he was just searing mad. He sniffed and almost choked, drawing a huge amount of blood into his throat. He reached up with his left hand, grabbed the fender over his had and heaved himself up to his feet.

Thomas had rolled over and was on his knees, with his back to Johnnie, trying to get up. As he turned his head to his right, to look up at the car, all Johnnie could see was red. A cut, high on Thomas' temple, was pulsing blood down the side if his head. His eye socket was filled with blood and it covered his cheek and dripped off his chin. Johnnie fainted and fell, face-first, into the fender of the car, sliding down into the gravel.

When he started to come to, he looked up to see Thomas standing over him, his blood dripping down onto his face. He was sure they were both near death. He'd never, in his 23 years of rough and tumble Newfoundland upbringing, been punched in the face. He'd had a nosebleed or two, but never suffered more than a few cuts and bruises. Thomas wasn't talking, but Johnnie could see both his eyes were open and seemed to be functioning. He was trying to help Johnnie to his feet, but ended up pulling himself down, and sat right beside him.

They sat, side by side, speechless, for a couple of minutes. "Did we smash her bad, then, bud?," Thomas asked. He thought he'd been hurt in a car accident, remembering nothing about the truck or the two men in it. Johnnie sat, his face resting in his hands, his mind jumping from the here and now, to Toronto, to home, less than an hour back down the road. He couldn't go home, couldn't bear the humiliation. He couldn't go to Toronto, they'd laugh at his smashed-in Chevrolet. And as much as he really didn't want to be where he was right now, it's all he had.

Slowly he got to his feet. He walked around the front of the car, surveying the damage. The

trucker's chain lay on the ground, still wrapped around the bumper mount. A pool of green liquid seeped through the rusty links, enveloping the broken glass in the dust. He bent down to unwrap the chain, but his head pulsed so hard he stood right back up. Thomas sat with his head leaned against the fender, just his left eye seeing around the front of the car. The spark was gone from his normally shining eyes and now, more than ever, he missed Thomas Sr. He'd know how to handle this. The younger man was totally unprepared.

4 Grania's Welcome Home (The March)

Somehow, a mother knows. That's what Jacqueline was thinking as she peeled the carrots in the kitchen sink, sliding her peeler up the long, slender cylinders in smooth strokes, neatly slicing off limp slices and leaving behind a smooth, bright orange vegetable, ready for dicing.

She'd decided Thursday to make Shepherd's Pie on Saturday, thinking about her son, Jason and his return home. Friday evening, just as she was sitting down to watch some television, the phone rang and Jason's voice filled her ear and mind. "Ya gonna be home tomorrow, Mom?," he asked. "Of course, baby, where are you?," she asked.

She'd heard from him the day before, when he called home from a training centre in New Brunswick, where he was on a course. "I'm over in Montreal, but I've caught a flight to Namao tomorrow morning and should be in Red Deer by supertime." Jacqueline had laughed out loud. "That's why I just got some hamburger out of the freezer, to make up a big Shepherd's Pie for your supper," she said. "Are ya getting psychic in your old age", he asked, laughing.

And now, she put the carrot and the peeler down. She was sure she'd heard the thump of a car door on the street in front of the house. She slowly walked through the kitchen, then the living room and looked out the window. And there he was, walking across the lawn, looking so trim, so perfectly groomed, so unbelievably handsome in his uniform. "Oh, my God," she squealed under her breath and ran in quick, short steps to the door. When she swung the door open, he was standing at the top of the step, looking even taller than the last time she'd seen him, just three months before.

He reached down and put his arms around her and pulled her up into a big, warm hug, kissing her on the cheek and then putting her back down. "Ya look great, Ma," he said, dropping a small leather satchel on the floor by the door. He reached down toward his feet, but she stopped him. "Don't worry about your shoes, for Pete's sake, come in here where I can look at you! God, are you taller?," she cried. "Nope, still six-one, same shoes," he laughed. "Must be the uniform. Where's the old man?"

"He should be back pretty soon. He's over getting the water tank fixed on the 5th wheel, I expected him home by now," she said. She grabbed his arm and led him onto the kitchen and over by the table. "Can a get you a beer?," she asked. "Nah, I better not, Ma, but a glass of water would be great," he said.

They chatted for a while talking about the officer's course he'd been on and his apartment in Gagetown. He swore it hadn't changed since the day it was built in 1958, twenty years before he was born. In fact, Jacqueline was a toddler when they were building what was then married quarters. It was now temporary housing for personnel that came in for six to eight-week courses, before deployment elsewhere in the forces.

Jason had joined the forces full-time after doing a hitch as a reservist. His interest in the military

was always a little confusing for his mother. As a child and teen, he'd been decidedly pacifist, focused far more on music and politics than anything vaguely militaristic. He'd worn a pony-tail long after it was stylish and resisted conformity in virtually everything he did.

As a reservist he was first sent to help out during an ice storm in Quebec, then backed up firefighters in the Okanogan when wild fires threatened and actually consumed several small communities. Jacqueline remembered the pride in her husband's eyes when he saw Jason's group on the news. Even though they were just sitting around on a lawn waiting for a chopper to take them out to a base camp, and Jason wasn't even in the shot, John felt the boy was a great addition to the Scammell clan.

He'd come home at the end of that summer and seemed kind of reluctant to return to school. After discussing it with his parents he signed up to go to Bosnia, followed by a short stint in Haiti and when Jason landed back in Canada, he'd already made arrangements to continue his education as a full-time member of the Canadian Armed Forces. He had told his mother it was the only way left to do hands-on good in the world.

And that's how Jacqueline saw him, her baby boy, getting up every morning to do hands-on good in the world. She was grateful. Two of her friends were having serious problems with their boys, the same age as Jason; one wouldn't move out and had created a non-stop sea of tension in the family home, the other was awaiting trial on his fifth criminal charge in two years.

Jason seemed to be holding something back and she couldn't read what was on his mind. He seemed to be normal at first, but then seemed to kind of quiet and furtive, then normal again. 'Oh, well,' she thought, 'if he has something to tell me, he'll get to it in his own good time, he always does.' She went back to the kitchen and continued putting the Shepherd's Pie together and put it in the oven. Jason moved to the kitchen table and they continued to talk, about nothing, really, that they hadn't already discussed many times before.

They were sitting in silence when the truck pulled in the driveway and he heard the familiar slam of the driver's door. "It's a brand new truck, Mom, why do you suppose he still has to slam the door?", he asked. "He don't know his own strenk!," she laughed, feigning her best Newfy accent. John swung the kitchen door open and strode in, pretending, poorly, to be surprised at the sight of his son. "Holy shit, you're home, son, God it's good to see ya," he said, hugging the boy. They were exactly the same height, but John looked shorter, carrying an extra 30 pounds around his waist.

He and Jason laughed and hollered, cracking jokes at each other and generally making merry at the boy's arrival home. John took a beer out of the fridge for each of them and when, after his father's insistence Jason still didn't want one, put them both down at his place at the table. "I'll do your share then, bye," he said, laughing out loud.

They continued their banter as Jacqueline set the table and made a salad to go with the Shepherd's Pie. The three of them sat down to a pleasant dinner, John downing three beer, Jason, two large glasses of water. After supper, as they moved back to the living room, Jacqueline looked disapprovingly at John as he fetched another brew out of the fridge. Number four was the tipping point. Generally, after four, John settled in, drinking them like water, fairly quickly transforming from a good conversationalist to a slurring, belligerent boor, eventually tuning into the television and out of the rest of the world. She dearly hoped he wouldn't do that with Jason just home, but every indication was the novelty for social small talk was rapidly wearing off.

Jason had taken his tunic off, and discarded his tie, but he still looked slick and polished in his

crisp pale green shirt. He walked across the room and reached in his pocket, pulled out a small envelope. "I've found a really nice gal, Mom, I wish she was here so you could meet her in person. You're really going to like her." He pulled a small photo out of the envelope and handed it to his mother. "Oh, my God, she's so beautiful!" Jacqueline exclaimed. "Oh Jason, what a lovely girl." John reached across and took the photo from his wife and looked at it intently. "Jesus, yes, son, good job on dis one. She's a real beauty," he said, cradling the photo in his hand.

"She's from Vancouver, and she's working in Fredricton right now. But she's heading back west in a couple of months, so I'll be bringing her here to meet you. She thinks she's got a line on a transfer to Calgary, so we're probably getting a place together there."

His father kept staring at the picture and Jason couldn't decide if he was smitten, or if the beers were just slowing him down.

He and his mother talked at length, with John interjecting occasionally. Finally, Jason held his hand out and was relieved that his father relinquished the photo without making a big deal out of it. They'd had a good laugh about the story of her name, Jasmin Lace. Her parents had gone out on a date the night she was conceived, getting fairly tipsy at the local Chinese restaurant, the Jasmine Palace. Only half the neon sign was lit up when they left, so it said 'Jasmin lace', the 'e' and 'Pa' were dark. Her mother had jokingly said if she ever had a daughter, that's what they'd call her. They were still kidding each other about it six weeks later when she announced she was pregnant and by the time the baby was born, it was a good thing she wasn't a boy.

Jacqueline was genuinely interested in what was going to bring Jason to Calgary and how that would impact his military career. "Actually, I'll likely be stationed somewhere else, but Jasmin will live there and I'll get there when I can. When my next deployment is up, I'm leaving the forces and going civilian. She'll be working in Calgary and I have a plan so I can follow her wherever she goes from there. Who knows, maybe even here, Mom."

"So, where are yas off to next, son," John asked, sitting up in a deep cushioned chair by the couch. "I'm heading to Afghanistan for six months in November," Jason said. The room got very quiet and for a moment, all three seemed to have forgotten about Jasmin.

5 Whiskey The Dolphin

Bill and Ed were sitting, enjoying their coffee, not saying much, when Margie came in the back door. "Hi, Ed," she said, curtly, and in the same breath said, "There's lots more in the car, Bill." Both men jumped to their feet and headed out the door. It wasn't the sharpness in her voice as much as the need to be doing something productive that motivated the pair. They were both struggling, having retired seven months earlier and, after the longest vacation they'd ever taken, were hovering near depression as they faced the realization they weren't indispensable valued employees of Ferny Industries anymore.

For Ed, the daily visits with Bill were a respite from the nagging ennui retirement had become. They meant contact with Margie, and while not fulfillment of the longing he'd felt for more than four decades, they did address the feeling he held each day at work.

He'd been in love with her since they were teenagers; she was his constant fantasy, the face in his dreams, the locus of his lust in his most private moments.

Bill knew nothing, had not in inkling that his companion at work and play, the most significant constant in his life, had any feelings at all for his wife. In fact, over the decades, they'd never once had a conversation that contained even a thread to this type of emotional connection. They talked and thought in three spheres: work and the politics therein; hunting, fishing, mechanics and carpentry, the four interests they shared; their children, who, as adults now, seldom received more than cursory, polite attention.

But every day now, Ed's heart rate went up as he went out his back door and built until he walked in Bill and Margie's back door. When she was there, he was immediately mollified, when she wasn't he ached, feeling dejected and more than a little lost. It was the energy he got from Margie that sustained his friendship with Bill. They hadn't shared a new experience, truly new, in ages. Everything was a repeat of an earlier time, whether it was a new shotgun that replaced an older firearm, a new hand tool, never as good as the old ones, a new anecdote that was just another variation on what the kids said or did this week. That and mundane shop gossip, which was probably the most significant fuel in their co-dependency, outside of Margie.

They had played through this script so many times in the past that Ed knew which bags to grab first and where to take them. He was pleased to see Margie in the pantry as he stepped toward it with two bags filled with canned goods. "Oh, thank you, Ed," Margie purred as she took the bag from his left arm and slid it onto a shelf. She looked into his eyes as she closed her fingers over the top of the second bag. "Did you get a muffin, yet? I told Bill to eat them before they got stale," she said.

"Yes, Margie, those are really good. I had three," he said. He thought she'd made the banana muffins because she knew they were his favourite. She actually chose banana because the bananas were turning black on the counter. She still hadn't made a full adjustment to the kids being gone, even though it had been three years since any of them had lived at home.

He headed back out for a bag of potatoes and quickened his step a bit – if he was back in the house soon enough, he'd be close to Margie in pantry again, of only for a few seconds. He caught himself mid-scowl when he realized Bill had the spuds and he'd be left with the laundry soap to take down to the laundry room.

His long-standing fantasy was the death of his life-long friend. Bill would die, Margie would turn to Ed for affection, his wife Jeanette would go off and visit her family in England and never return and he and his true love would be together forever. It had never really occurred to Ed that Margie didn't share this fantasy, that her fantasy was a world with neither Bill nor Ed in it.

But she was always so nice to him. Bill got the sharp edge of her tongue, Ed could only hear the same gentle purr he'd been hearing since grade eight. She always served Ed his coffee first, offered him the first muffin or cookie and sat beside him at the dinner table or on the couch when he and Jeannette came to visit.

And she'd changed so little over the years, in Ed's eyes. Her hair was always perfect, and even though its colour was now a concoction created by her hair stylist, he thought it was the same shade it had been when puberty first forced him to notice such things. She was so slim and svelte, although she actually weighed 40 pounds more than she had at graduation. And she smelled so good. It was an aroma that locked him in 1962. While it seemed like the same perfume to Ed, Margie actually changed her scent many times over the years, tiring of Chanel No. 5, then Temptation, then Allure. She'd actually sold Avon products for more than ten years and Jeannette was one of his best customers, but Ed never really noticed they wore the same cologne. Margie smelled warm, inviting, enticing; Jeanette smelled vaguely of vegetable soup.

With the groceries put away, Bill called Ed out to his workshop to help him clamp down some plywood pieces in a set of cabinets he was building for a friend who was renovating a revenue house he'd bought. Bill enjoyed working with Ed, since they both tended to see the projects the same way. Do it right the first time, measure twice, cut once, build a good foundation and the project always was easy and fun to finish. Neither of them ever tired of the smell of fresh-cut wood, either. They did all the woodworking at Bill's, all the mechanical at Ed's.

He and Bill had built a massive garage at the back of his house, big enough for three vehicles and a paint booth. Above, they'd put together a mother-in-law suite where family and friends often came and stayed. All the time he was building it and at least once a day in the fifteen years since it was finished, Ed imagined making love with Margie in the suite. Sometimes his fantasy had her living there, with he and Jeanette living in the house. When Jeanette would go off to work at the hospital kitchen in his daydream, he and Margie were always consummating their secret love.

Ed looked at the work ahead of them, pleased to notice it would take them long enough that he'd stay for lunch. He was taking Jeannette to the doctor in the afternoon, for another round of tests, but had told her he'd be there just in time to get going. He and Bill methodically set to assembling the wood pieces, gluing and clamping from opposite side of the island workbench that dominated the two car garage of Bill's house.

"Jasmin's got a new boyfriend," Bill said. "A really nice kid. He's finishing up a hitch in the army. I'm kinda hoping it turns into something, he really seems to have his head screwed on straight and Jas really likes him, she says." Ed nodded, running his index finger down the edge of a piece of plywood, pressing the glue back perfectly so that when the two pieces went together, not a single bubble would appear on the surface. "Where's he from, then?" Ed asked. "He grew up in Red Deer and Fort McMurray, it sounds like. He's going to be coming for a visit with Jas at the end of the month. You'll like him, I bet."

"How's Jasmin doing in New Brunswick?" Ed asked, realizing too late he'd asked Bill the same question while they were having coffee. Bill didn't seem to notice. "She likes the job and Fredricton's okay, but she's looking to come back out west. Wants to live in Calgary, close to the mountains. I was hoping she'd come back to the coast, but there's something about the prairies she really likes. Not the cowboys, I hope."

"Well, Calgary's only a day's drive, only an hour if you fly," Ed said. "There's lots going on there and in her line of work, I bet she can find something really good."

With the frame clamped together, both men lifted it off the workbench and walked it to the front of the garage. Without talking they headed back over to the table saw and each picked up a stack of pieces of plywood, and carried it back to the workbench. They worked methodically until noon, hardly speaking, Bill whistling softly and, as was his wont, regularly cutting a fart and chuckling.

It was, as they say, Bill's signature. It was a source of pride, being able to fart, pretty much at will. It usually gave rise to a comment, either by a witness, or Bill himself. He'd often say, "Ooo, get any on ya?" or "Ahhh, good one" or "My best turkey fart this week". Mostly it was an innocuous habit that Bill felt shielded him from pretension, a deadly sin he used in defense of his obvious shaky self-esteem. He could, in truly polite company, almost always resist the urge, but when he wanted to establish his 'street credibility' he'd often pass gas with such force and frequency that people that didn't know him well would marvel at his prowess.

He'd been doing it so long, he actually played his anus like an instrument, blowing either long basso profundo farts, or pinching his cheeks and producing short squealing noises. He once spelled out SOS in Morse Code, but he was the only one present who understood what it was. When he explained it, people just had blank looks on their faces.

The foul habit actually began when he felt the need to get a response out of Margie. She had been so horrified and embarrassed, it became his punishment of choice any time she slighted him. Like a child reacting to bad behaviour rewarded, Bill learned to use his bowels to get the attention he craved.

The downside, beyond the fact that most people thought of him as an ignorant boor, was the stink. He farted so much and so often that if he wasn't surrounded by intestinal gas, he wasn't really comfortable. Margie responded to this by filling their home with every manner of air freshener and spraying the rooms as she walked through them. Ed could usually tell the climate in the home when he arrived by the freshness of the perfumed air and whether or not Margie was carrying a can of aerosol.

His experience was the opposite. Jeannette was a chain-smoker, who often lit a new cigarette while a lit one lay in an ashtray near her. As close as Bill and Ed were, Bill and Margie never came to Ed's home; Margie couldn't stand the stench or the thick smoke that was always there. The only clean air in the house was in Ed's garage. He was a non-smoker and he spent most of his day either in the garage, over at Bill's or cruising through Canadian Tire, Home Depot, Princess Auto or the Tool Warehouse. If he wasn't going to go to Bill's, he'd often pick up a large coffee at Tim Horton's, then cruise through Tool Warehouse, or another supply store, checking out the bargains, looking at new tool lines and thinking about Margie.

Retirement for Ed meant being able to see Margie almost every day and the frequency did little to dull his ardour. If anything, it aroused him more. When he'd been working, his life was far more regimented. He got up at the same time, had breakfast, went to work, came home, worked in his garage or went over to Bill's. He'd always been a project guy and had built a beautiful hot rod. He built it to impress Margie, of course, but found it drew all kinds of unwanted attention. Whenever he'd drive it, people would wave, point, even come up and talk to him if he stopped at a gas station or convenience store. In fact, everyone loved the little roadster but Margie, it seemed. He offered to take her for a ride one day and she declined quickly, saying she'd just had her hair done.

So, he sold it a swap meet about six months after he'd finished it and for a fraction of what he'd spent building it. He had a big, thick photo album that chronicled the project from a rusty old basket-case to finished hotrod. He'd often go to his garage and slowly go through the album, enjoying the project and the hours, though never seeming to regret selling the car.

Ed was thinking about the hot rod (the plywood frame pieces he was clamping together were very similar to the subframe he'd built to keep the body in place while he trued it up and welded it), when Margie opened the door. "Would you like to stay for lunch, Ed?" she asked, "We're just having soup and sandwiches." "I'd love to, Margie," he answered. "It'll be ready in a few minutes, boys," she said, closing the door. Ed and Bill both went over to the sink and washed their hands and Bill stood picking bits of glue off his fingers, after he'd dried his hands.

"Jeanette given any more thought to retiring?," Bill asked.

"Nah, she's gonna work 'til she dies, I think. She hates that hospital so bad, but she's also pretty sure it will go under if she isn't running the kitchen. She's been doing it 32 years. I'm kind of surprised they haven't forced her to retire. Most of those folks leave at 55. Shit, she's 62 and figures she's got another 20 years," Ed said dolefully.

Bill leaned over and raised his left leg about 10 inches off the floor. ‘Pf-f-f-f-a-w-w-a-a-a-a-p-p-p,’ his rectum sounded, before he sniffed the air and said, “Smells like lunch, let’s go,” and the two of them headed through the door, into the house.

6 The Two Acre Plot

Marilyn stepped out of the change room and walked up to the front of the store. “I really like this one,” she said, “but it’s just a little small. Do you have it in six? There aren’t any on the shelf.” The clerk took the skirt and looked at the tag, smiled and said, “Let me check for you,” and typed some numbers into her computer. “It says here we do. Let me go in the back and look.”

Marilyn turned and looked out through the shop window, into the mall. All down the long aisle, store after store, it all seemed the same. The same stores as home, the same merchandise, same prices. She decided she needed to get off the beaten track, to go downtown and find some specialty shops, where she could buy clothes that weren’t the same as every other woman in the building.

She’d come here for a conference and after two sessions, had skipped out to the mall. Most of the sessions were fluff, not of any real interest to her. The next day was a hands-on, interactive session with a speaker she’d read about and was intrigued by. He had a radically different approach to management and challenged people to adopt his techniques and lighten their work load, all the while delivering a higher level of service to their clients. She’d heard all that before, but there was something his pitch that made it seem different. She’d know better tomorrow, she thought, and turned to look for her clerk.

The girl stepped back in behind the cashier’s counter and said, “Sorry, no size six. I do have a similar skirt, a little different cut, but almost the same shade. Would you like to try that?,” she asked. “Maybe tomorrow,” Marilyn said, knowing she’d never be back. “I need to get downtown for an appointment, I’m meeting a friend for lunch. Can you call me a cab?”

“Actually, there’s always a cab waiting right at the front doors to the mall. There’ll be one there when you step out the door.”

Marilyn thanked her and headed out into the mall, turning her little lie into an excuse to head downtown. ‘Screw this conference’ she thought, ‘What I need is a break.’ As she stepped through the automated mall doors, she saw a cab pull up to a taxi stand across the driveway. She raised her hand, the cabbie put the car in park, waved her over and got out and opened the back door. “Good afternoon, medeme,” the short, balding olive-skinned man said, gesturing into the back seat. “Where you are going to?”

“I want to go downtown. I want to go to a nice ladies wear store where the clothes aren’t from China or India,” she said, flippantly. She hoped the driver wasn’t from India and she realized he probably wouldn’t have a clue where there was a decent clothing store. “I know just place,” he said quickly. “Sava, nicest store in town. Only beautiful women shop there, You’ll like.” he said. He kept up a steady banter as he drove downtown, half the time she didn’t have a clue what he was talking about, she just nodded and said “uh-huh” and looked at the city flashing by. He was a good, if typical cabbie, smoothly drifting the car through lane changes, always being in just the right spot to make his turns and soon pulled up in front of a very nicely kept old store front. Large windows flanked the front door, which had, very simply painted in a small, neat script, ‘Sava’. “Fourteen dollar, please,” the cabbie said. “You want me wait?”

“No, that will be fine,” she said, handing him a twenty. He jumped out and opened the door for her and pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket, very deliberately flipping through it looking for a five, simultaneously looking up her skirt as she turned to get out the door. Her immediate response was to cancel the tip for his ogling of her thighs, but looked at Sava and thought, ‘this is what I asked for’. “Keep the change,” she said, stepping past him. “You sure? You want me wait? No charge,” he said. “No, I’m going to be a while,” she said. “You tell Nalah, she call me,” he said, pointing to the store. “She know me, tell her you riding with Sam.” “Yeah, fine, okay,” Marilyn said, thinking he might be able to find her a nice lounge and restaurant later.

Marilyn stepped up onto the sidewalk and looked in the large shop windows. Each had three mannequins, draped in fabric that flowed down and folded together on the floor of the window display. The windows framed the door perfectly and seemed to draw her in. She put her hand on the big, brass handle, pressing the latch down with her thumb. The door was heavy and seemed to tug her in once she pushed it open. The store smelled of fresh, clean fabric and a hint of what she thought was vaguely English Leather.

“Hello,” a small voice said and Marilyn looked over at a young, pretty girl standing behind a large, low wooden cabinet, folding a bolt of Merino wool. Marilyn stepped closer, “Oh, that’s lovely,” she said running her hand over the fabric. “Is very nice, Merino wool,” the girl said. “Is not your colour though, come I show you,” she said, walking toward the back of the shop. Marilyn followed her and in seconds was surrounded by luscious fabrics she thought had disappeared years ago. The girl was apprenticing to a middle-aged man who was busy sewing a jacket for a suit. She helped Marilyn look through the bolts, asking her various questions and finally suggesting a particular style of suit. She took a garment bag down from a rack and unzipped the front, showing Marilyn the suit inside. “This is perfect for you,” she said softly. Marilyn took off her jacket and the girl walked around her, carefully measuring and writing down notes. She asked Marilyn about her wardrobe, about what she did, where she worked, how she cared for her clothes. After a few minutes, she went over to the man and spoke softly. He stood up and came over and looked at Marilyn and the fabric.

He explained how he would make the suit and recommended she consider ordering more than one from the pattern he’d make. It would give her a balanced, tailored wardrobe and would reduce the cost of each additional suit by about 30%.

He then complimented the younger woman on her choice for this customer and told her she was a credit to the craft. He spoke to her in a language that Marilyn didn’t understand, and the apprentice smiled, flushed a little and thanked him, in English. He went back to his work and the young woman lead Marilyn over to a desk and offered her a chair.

She shuffled through some large binders, looking at their spines and then pulled one from near the bottom of the stack. She opened it and turned it so Marilyn could look at it. It contained photos of women in tailored outfits, a catalogue of blouses and accessories. The girl explained that each suit was delivered with a complementing blouse, tailored to the measurements of the suit. “It’s to make the fit perfect,” she said. “You won’t find these clothes in store. Only with your suit from Sava.”

Marilyn was feeling almost faint. In the past hour and a half, she’d escalated a \$40 skirt first to a \$2,000 suit, then to four suits for a total of nearly \$6500. That was about what she’d spent over the past three years, she was thinking. “These garments will serve you well more than five years, even longer,” the girl said. “You make good choice.”

She explained that Marilyn would come Saturday morning for a fitting and then come back later in the afternoon for a final adjustment. She would take the first suit with her on Monday, the others would be delivered to her home in about ten days. Marilyn explained that she'd be leaving Sunday on a two o'clock flight. "You come Sunday morning, early. Anwar will be finished first suit then."

Marilyn asked if she could look through the binders and the girl was happy to oblige. She offered Marilyn tea and lead her to a large, comfortable chair in a corner near the front of the store. When the girl set down a stack of binders on a side table, Marilyn offered her hand and asked, "What is your name?" The girl took her hand, very gently and said, "I am Nalah, I am apprentice to Anwar." She left Marilyn with the binders and disappeared through a curtain nearby. After a few minutes she returned with a tray that contained an ornate tea pot, a tea cup and saucer and a small plate with three small, plain cookies on it. She handed Marilyn the tea cup, then, holding the tray on her hip, poured a cup of tea, placed the pot on the tray and picked up the plate of cookies, placing them on the top of the binders, then walked away, back through the curtain. Moments later, she reappeared, behind Anwar and came out through the store and back to the large cabinet and folded and unfolded bolts of expensive looking cloth, speaking quietly to Anwar, who also muttered softly and kept working at his table.

Marilyn was very impressed with the photos and the designs in the binders. Several times, she wanted to call Nalah over, but decided against it. She was already over budget and could only imagine the prices on these very exclusive-looking garments. When her tea was done she got up and started walking toward Nalah, who got up and met her in the aisle. The two women walked to the back of the store and Nalah started preparing Marilyn's invoice. Marilyn said she was looking for a nice place to have dinner and wondered if there was somewhere downtown Nalah could recommend. Nalah spoke to Anwar, again in the foreign language and Marilyn strained to recognize it. 'Farsi? Turkish?' she thought. It was soft, vaguely Indo-European, but she couldn't quite place it. She also couldn't tell what nationality either Nalah or Anwar were. They seemed different from the cabbie and she was guessing maybe Egyptian, based mostly on Anwar's name. She thought it crass to ask.

Anwar got up and came forward. He reached out for Marilyn's hand and when she offered it, he held it gently. "Please come my home for dinner. It be my honour. Is my daughter birthday. My family welcome you. Please come," he said, looking beseechingly into her eyes. "Oh, I couldn't...", Marilyn started to say, but Anwar cut her off. "Please come, I send car to hotel for you. Seven o'clock," he said, smiling and humble.

Marilyn decided on the spot, 'what the hell, this is a wild ride, why not.?' She also was extremely curious and thought she'd find out where these wonderful, gentle people were from. Anwar spoke to Nalah, who asked, "Can I call you taxi?" When Marilyn nodded, Nalah pulled a cell phone out of her pocket, flipped it open, touched a button, hesitated a second then said, "Sem" and closed the phone. She walked Marilyn to the front of the store where the same cabbie waited in his car.

As she stepped down onto the sidewalk, he ran around and opened the rear door, averting his eyes as Marilyn swung her long legs into the car. "Is nice store?," he asked, not really waiting for an answer. "These nice people. They work very hard. Sava is best tailor in city. Where we go?" Marilyn told her the hotel name and then largely ignored his continual prattling on the trip back across town. She was thinking she should get more cash when she got to the hotel, since cab fare was going to eat up her supply pretty quickly at \$20 a ride. When Sam pulled the car up in front of the lobby, he put it in park and jumped out and ran around to open the door, again, looking away as she got out of the car. She opened her purse to get some cash and Sam said, "No charge, Anwar pay," holding his hands up as though he was afraid she'd force the money on him. "Well,

thank you so much,” she said, wondering what the protocol for the tip would be. “I come here seven o’clock,” he said, nodding his head in a faint bow, stepping back and heading back to the driver’s seat. Marilyn was puzzled. She didn’t recall anyone phoning him in the car and no one spoke to him at Sava. She wasn’t sure whether the emotion that was welling up in her was caution or suspicion, but she headed off to the lounge for a quick glass of wine and a little soul searching to find out.

7 Let Down The Blade

Gusting winds blew the big soft snowflakes around the yard outside the window and reminded Margie of when she was very small, watching in wonder as winter was setting in. She remembered vividly the room being very warm from a snapping and crackling wood fire, the windows being fogged up and reaching over the back of the coach wiping a spot clear, to see the snowflakes swirling in the early evening darkness.

She remembered her father coming in, a blast of cold air, his snowy boots clomping on the floor and then picking her up swinging her over his head. When he pulled her to his face, placing his cold nose on her bare belly, she wiggled and giggled furiously, and noticed a fresh, new smell carried in from the cold.

That feeling of nostalgia held her in a warm cocoon as she mused, looking at her grand-daughter paying on the livingroom rug. She had been playing with the small child, and marveling at her verbal skills. She spoke so clearly, in complete sentences and seemed to be always thinking of what she would say next. Often, when Margie asked her a question, she’d think for a moment, then respond.

So, Margie was taken aback when her granddaughter looked up, out of the blue and said, “Oh, grandma, I love you so much,. You’re my favouritest grandma.” Those should have been words that would warm a grandmother’s heart. Instead, Margie stood in stunned disbelief, a chill running through her from head to toe. It wasn’t the cutesy ‘favouritest’ word causing the chill, but a realization she was experiencing déjà vu. She said that exact phrase to her own grandmother more than 55 years before. It was a different era, to be sure, but the real difference was the relationship between the two people. Margie loved her granddaughter dearly and loved to share time with her. She found excuses to have the small child come stay overnight and it wasn’t just to give her daughter-in-law a break. She truly enjoyed her company and they did many things together each week.

Margie’s grandmother positively loathed her. She was mean and neglectful and harangued her, even though she was such a small, sweet child. Margie’s memories were of fear and sorrow and crying. Her grandmother seemed to thrive on making her cry. When Margie uttered that phrase all those decades ago, it was partly defense, partly defiance. She stood there stunned, not believing this little girl had uttered that same phrase.

She walked over to her and reached down to pick her up. She was almost too big for Margie to pick up but she did, held her close and murmured in her ear, “And you’re my favouritest little girl in the whole world,” her voice cracking on the word ‘world’.

She stood holding her until she felt she was losing her balance, partly from the weight of her granddaughter, partly from her fragile state.

“Why you crying, Gramma?,” the little girl said. “Because I love you so much, Dulcie,” Margie said. They sat down on the couch, Dulcie straddling her and wiping the tears from her eyes,

slipping her little fingers in behind Margie's glasses. She took the glasses off and set them on an end table and dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex.

She regained her composure completely, except she had this heavy foreboding that something had surfaced here and she didn't quite know how to deal with it. She looked around for a distraction, finally settling on a snack. "Would you like some crackers and cheese, Dulcie? Gramma needs a cup of tea." It was no surprise when Dulcie asked, "Can I have tea, too, Gramma? Can I have tea with you?"

Dulcie went back to playing with some toys in front of the couch and Margie went into the kitchen and filled, then plugged in her kettle. She stood there watching Dulcie play, waiting for the water to heat. She opened the cupboard and asked, "Apple Cinnamon, with honey?" "Yes, please, Gramma," came the tiny-voiced reply.

Margie thought back to the day she'd said "Oh, grandma, I love you so much. You're my favourite grandma." She was sitting at her grandmother's kitchen table, trying to cut a bird out of a piece of cardboard. She was having trouble cutting, partly because the cardboard was so thick for her tiny fingers, but mostly because her eyes were filled with tears. She'd just endured another profanity laced tirade from this mean old woman, ending with, "I hate you. You are the worst child."

When she'd uttered her phrase her grandmother hissed and yanked her off the kitchen chair and over in front of the counter, about to turn her over her knee for a beating. Then she looked back at the table and saw the box and said, "I'm going to wash that mouth out with soap. Swallow Soap." She slammed Margie to the floor and thrust her hand into the box, sending it skittering off onto the floor. Her hand came up trailing soap granules and she jabbed her fingers into the little girl's mouth. She kept shoving the soap in and bashing Margie's head on the floor, Margie reflexively straining to spit her fingers and the soap out and fearing for the world that her young life was about to end. Her head hit the floor and there was a flash of light, then blackness. As her small body went limp the old woman let up, let her drop and stepped back. She looked down at the unconscious child, a bubble of blood standing out of one nostril and powdered soap all over her face.

She sat down, panting, fearing, for a moment that she'd killed her granddaughter, grasping for an alibi. Before she could think of anything, or catch her breath, she heard the scunch of gravel as a vehicle pulled in the lane beside the house. She swept the child up and headed into the bathroom, slamming and locking the door. Margie was regaining consciousness, crying and spitting, her head aching as she'd never felt before, urine running down her legs and onto the bathroom floor. She threw up. She gave her grandmother the perfect alibi, the explanation of why she was in this state in the bathroom.

Her grandfather came in the house. "Hallo!", he called. "We're in the bathroom. Little Margie's sick," her grandmother said. Margie was sobbing deeply, in a state of confusion, not sure of what had just happened to her, but with her grandmother's words still ringing in her ears, the soap still stinging her mouth. It burned as it seeped into her throat and she could feel the blood plugging her nostril.

"Here, drink this! Rinse your mouth," her grandmother said, in a forced whisper. Then she grabbed her hair and held her face up close to hers and said, "Don't you say a word, little girl, or you'll swallow soap 'til you shit your dirty little pants." Margie was horrified. She didn't know what was happening to her and what her grandmother was about to do next. "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!", she screamed, flailing around in her grandmother's arms. The old woman grabbed a

towel and quickly wrapped it around the child's head, and squeezed her tight to her chest until she went limp again. This time, Margie stopped crying, and slumped down onto the floor, sitting there, eyes dull, sucking her breath in, in quick, staccato breaths.

She sat for a long time, her little chest quaking as she tried to get her breathing to smooth out, to no avail. Finally, her grandmother reached for her, "Let's get you cleaned up," she said. Margie recoiled, trying to squirm away from her, but she could feel herself coming up through the air and when her feet left the floor she let out a wail, and vomited again. She felt a cold, wet washcloth on her face and smelled the rancid aroma of a dirty cloth. Her grandmother roughly cleaned the blood, soap and puke from her cheeks and chin.

Her rough hands reached up under her dress and yanked her panties loose, tugging and yanking until they cleared her slender ankles, "Ya pissed yer pants," her grandmother hissed. "Ya think I got nothin' better to do than clean up after ya. Ya filthy little shit!"

"What's going on in there," Margie heard her grandfather say. "If she hadn't been eating the goddamn soap she wouldna been sick," the old woman answered, through the door. Margie's grandfather picked the spilled box up off the floor. "She better not have been eatin' this soap, it's got lye in it," he said. "That could kill a little gal."

"That's just what she was doin'. Made her puke and piss her pants."

"She's probably poisoned. We better take her over to Doc Thompson's and make sure she's okay."

"She's just fine. She'll be just fine. She just needs some time," her grandmother said. She rinsed the facecloth out in the sink and was about to scrub Margie's face again when she realized she had blisters all down one cheek and over her chin. "There, you stupid little bugger, see what you did?"

Margie just stood beside the washstand and moaned. She'd never had a headache like this, even when she was sick with the flu. Her mouth was filled with blisters and a strange metallic taste she'd never experienced before. Her grandmother took her arm and lead her out of the bathroom, pulling her into her skirt so Margie's grandfather couldn't see her face as they went past him and into the bedroom. She took a clean pair of panties out of a small valise and roughly tugged them up Margie's legs, pulling the covers on the bed back and shoving her in. "Get some sleep," she said flatly, and left the room.

For the moment, Margie was grateful for the peace but very fearful that her grandmother was going to beat her more, or worse. Her little chest still heaved in short little stabs of breath until she finally fell asleep, wincing from her aching head, unable to endure any more wakefulness.

Her grandfather sat at the kitchen table, carefully cutting the bird shape out of the now-empty soap box. The Swallow Soap Company, exploiting the popular Ink Spots song. 'When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano', designed a box with a painting of a large swallow, flying in the sky on one side, sitting on a wire on the other. In the background, on both sides, warplanes floated in a blue sky. They sponsored a radio show and it was a popular pastime to cut the birds out and hang them from the ceiling with strings, one side a pretty lithograph, with the name of a loved one away in the war written on the other. Many people took the hobby up and it wasn't uncommon to see many of the birds hung in people's windows. Swallow Soap was cheap and one of the few things not subject to rationing.

It became a status symbol of sorts. People who couldn't afford the store-bought soap and made their own were quietly derided for not acknowledging 'the boys' over in the European conflict.

Swallow Soap was a very popular gift throughout the war, but the soap and the cut out birds vanished almost completely when the conflict ended.

Margie's grandfather, never learning what his wife had done to her that day, gave her the bird he cut out when she went home a few days later. Her blisters had mostly healed, although it took weeks before her mouth returned to normal. Her mother said over and over how much she'd appreciated her own mother looking after Margie so she could go on a short vacation. Margie decided she'd best never tell her the truth about her grandmother and vowed to never be left alone with the woman again.

She treasured the printed swallow as an icon of her loathing for the old woman.

8 Seven Of Eight

Johnnie leaned on the fender, trying to think of what to do next. Slowly, it started to dawn in him that the car may not start and the green liquid might mean it wasn't going anywhere even if it did. His head continued to pulse and he remembered some Aspirin in his duffle. He walked around back to retrieve and as he passed Thomas he noticed his lifeless downcast eyes, and the darkening blood from the gash high up on his temple. "You're bleeding pretty good, Tammy. Are ya goin' ta be okay?", he asked. Thomas raised his hand and wiped the blood away from his right eye and then looked at his hand. "Fock me, Johnnie, I'm not so sure. Maybe we better flag down a car and get me to the hospital. Where are we, John?, what's happened here?," he asked.

"I hear a car comin', Tammy, we'll get yas fixed up," Johnnie answered, not really sure what else to say. He fished in his pocket for the key to the trunk, then realized it was still in the ignition. He walked up and opened the door, bracing himself for the pain that would be pumping in his temples when he bent down. He grabbed the key and as he pulled it out, it fell on the floor of the car. He was preparing to get down to pick it up, when a voice behind him said, "Stand beside the car, son, keep your hands where I can see 'em."

Johnnie turned to see a black car parked beside him and a man in uniform speaking to him through the passenger window. Emblazoned on the door was the crest of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary. "Thank God, you're here," Johnnie said, approaching the door. The driver jumped out of the car and barked, "Turn around and put yer hands on top of yer car!," Johnnie didn't know what to think. The RNC had always been a source of pride and respect for him. He'd even considered signing up, but realized that he'd have trouble with his bootlegging and tobacco-running relatives, so cooled to the idea. He turned and did as he was told. The second constable opened the passenger's door, got out and walked over toward him, then stepped to the front of the car. "Jaysus, Patrick there's another one o'er here!," he called out, stepping around and in front of Thomas.

"A little early to be pissed, isn't it, son?," Patrick asked. "I'm not drunk," Johnnie protested, "We just run in the ditch." "Well, I smell focking Screach, lad, and if you h'ain't been drinkin' it ya been defiling it some way. Wha' dya do, pour it on the ground, then?," he asked.

"Patrick, this bye's bleeding pretty bad, I better radio in for the ambulance," the second constable said. "I'll call in," Patrick said, "Grab the First Aid box, Terry, and see if you can patch him up a bit." Patrick then turned to Johnnie and started peppering him with questions. "Who are yas? Where ya from? Where ya off to? Who's drivin' the car? Can I see yer license, registration and insurance?"

Terry set the First Aid box on the hood, opened it and ruffled through it, pulled out a large paper envelope and ripped the end off, revealing a huge gauze pad. He pulled the pad out and bent down, dabbing at the cut on Thomas' temple. "Here, son, hold this tight to yer head," he said. "I'll wrap some bandage around it to keep it in place. Press tight, now, we got ta stop ya bleedin."

Johnnie answered each of the questions in order and reached down to open the door to retrieve his papers. "I'll get them," Patrick said, "They in the glove box, then? Watch him," he said to Terry, as he pulled open the passenger door. It made a loud bang as he opened it, the front fender was jammed back into it. He reefed hard on the door to open it wide and then bent down and started looking through the car's interior. After scanning the inside, he opened the glove box, ruffled through some envelopes and other trash, found the little black plastic folder with the name of an insurance company on it. He opened it and held it up, then tucked it in his breast pocket. "Where's yer license?," he asked. "It's here in me wallet, in me hip pocket," Johnnie answered, gesturing down with his hand. "Put yer hands down and get it out for me, son," Patrick said.

As he pulled his wallet out, he could hear Terry talking into the radio, ordering an ambulance. He was relieved that help was on the way, but his concern about the seriousness of the situation was escalating. Was Thomas going to die on him? Had he got his buddy killed? Would he be charged? He wasn't sure what to do, but remembered his father telling him, 'don't be thinkin' ya can bullshit the RNC. They'll get ya sooner or later, so make sure you tell them the truth.'

Terry checked on Thomas, then came over and looked at Johnnie's face. He took a bottle of alcohol out of the box and dampened a gauze pad, then wiped Johnnie's cheek. The cool alcohol felt refreshing, then instantly stung, causing him to jerk his head, which sent a stab of pain through the backs of his eyeballs. He wavered a bit, but caught his balance.

Patrick looked at his license and then at Johnnie. "You Rex Scammell's bye?" "Yes, sir," Johnnie said, surprised and little relieved to hear his father's name. "Check the trunk, Terry," Patrick said flatly. As Terry went to the back of the car, Patrick walked around and opened the driver's side rear door of the big Ford cruiser. "Get in here and tell me what hell you bye's been at," he said, gesturing into the back seat.

"We wuz drivin' down the road and I pulled some money out of my pocket and give it to Tammy. I took me eyes off the road a second and next thing I knows, we's runnin' into the ditch. I cranked her out of the ditch and she starts fishtailin' and ends up flyin' assbackwards off into the ditch back there. While we was standin' there, a coupla guys in a dump truck pulls up. The one guy, he hooks onto my Chevrolet and yanks it out ta that ditch so fuckin' hard it rams the back of his truck. Then he gets mad and he and his buddy beat the shit out of us and left us here on the road." "Ya smells of Screech, son. I didn't see no dump truck drivin' up here. I don't think yer tellin' me the whole story," Patrick said.

"The truck went the other way. You come up behind us and those guys headed off toward Clarenville. They passed around a mickey of Screech when they was pullin' us out. We both had a couple pulls, that's all. I swear to God it's the truth, Constable."

Patrick opened to door and got out. "You stay put. What dyas see in there Terry?" he asked the other officer who was still rummaging through the duffle bags in the trunk.

"Nothin' much here, Patrick," he said, walking around the passenger side, leaving the trunk lid open. They both walked over to Thomas, who was sitting against the tire, his head head leaning against the fender. "Maybe we should lay him down, Patrick,," Terry said. Patrick declined, saying he'd only bleed worse laying down. He knelt down in front of Thomas. "What happened to ya here, son?" he asked. Thomas sat silent for a few seconds. "We crashed the car, sir," he said

finally. “How much ya had to drink then’ son?”, he asked. “Nuttin’ today. We had a couple beer last night. Not much really.”

“Looks to me like this bye was holdin’; the bottle when they launched her into the weeds,” Patrick said. “He’s got Screach all over him and likely knocked his head on the winda pillar, I’m guessin’.”

“Ya seen anybody else here today, then son?” he said, getting closer to Thomas’ ear. “No, just me, Johnnie and youse guys,” Thomas said, softly. “Yas weren’t throwin’ a few with a coupla truckers?,” he asked. “I ain’t been in a fight since grade seven,” Thomas said.

There was a rattle of gravel followed by the tired growl of a siren as the ambulance pulled up. It was an old Pontiac station wagon, green and white, with a big red cross emblazoned on each side door. There was a large red dome light and chrome siren mounted on the roof. A large man got out from behind the wheel and a woman stepped out from the passenger’s side. She carried a small black leather bag. She started to walk toward the cruiser, where Johnnie was sitting, when Terry called out, “The hurt one’s over here, Janet.” “Oh, Hi, Terry, what we got?” she asked as she walked around the front of the Chevrolet. “Oh, you’ve already patched him,” she said, kneeling down in front of Thomas. She carefully unwrapped the gauze bandage and removed the large pad.

“Oh, this needs a stitch or two,” she said, softly. “Eddie, we should take him in and let Dr. Fields have a look,” she said. “Can you bring the stretcher?”

Thomas said he could, and the two constables stepped forward to help him up. Janet, the nurse, handed him a fresh gauze pad and told him to hold it on his head. The two men carried Thomas to the back of the ambulance and slid the stretcher in over the tailgate, then strapped it down.

Janet looked in the back of the cruiser at Johnnie, whose eye had now swollen completely shut. “Can I open the door, Patrick,” she asked. “Sure, Janet, he’s no problem. That’s a nasty eye, though,” Patrick said. She opened the door and looked closely at Johnnie’s eye. He winced when she touched him, but was grateful for the attention. He was still confused about what was going to happen. “Is Tammy okay?” Johnnie asked. “I think he’ll be fine once they stitch him up a bit,” she said. “He’s lost a bit of blood, but he’s going to be fine. We’re going to get Dr. Fields to have a look at him. He should look at you too. Are you hurt anywhere else?,” she asked. They continued to talk, Johnnie trying to figure out what was going to happen next, Janet explaining that she was only a nurse and that she didn’t know what the police were going to do. She left him in the back seat and got in the ambulance, which promptly, but unceremoniously, drove away.

The two constables came over to the cruiser and told Johnnie to get out. They administered a roadside sobriety test, getting Johnnie to do a variety of dexterity exercises, which, in spite of his distraction and pounding headache, he did easily. “You’re lucky you aren’t too pissed, but I’m going to have to charge you for crashing your car. You’ve injured your buddy pretty good and I think you’ll have to make good on driving with undue care and attention,” Patrick said. “Do you have enough money to pay for a tow truck?”

“How much would dat be, ya figure?”, Johnnie asked. “Well, she’s 24 mile into Clarendale from here, I’d guess about forty bucks,” Patrick replied. Johnnie realized he’d given the roll of bills to Thomas, but he still had his own \$46 in his pocket. He reached in and pulled it out and started counting. “I give me money to Tammy. I’ll have to go to the hospital and get it back. But I got more than forty bucks here, sos I can get it towed, I guess,” he said. “Where should I tow it to?”

“They’ll take it down to Monroe’s Garage. That’s where the tow truck’s from. Let’s see if you’ve got enough money,” Patrick said, holding his hand out. Johnnie held onto the cash and said that Thomas had a wad of cash he’d given him. Patrick asked him how much cash he’d given Thomas. “I don’t know, it was quite a big wad, with a twenty on the outside, I didn’t get a chance to count it,” he said. “How come you don’t know how much money you had in this wad of cash?,” Patrick asked. Both he and Terry tensed up and started walking toward Johnnie, Terry reaching back and putting his right hand on the handcuffs on his belt.

“I’m guessing you’re one of the lyin’ and thievin’ Scammells, then, John,” Patrick said. “Your buddy don’t remember no dump truck or beatin’ and that grey duffle is from the Department of Fisheries. We had to let your old man go for lack of evidence, but I think we’ve got what we needed now. I’ll give ya one last chance to tell us the truth about what’s goin’ on here and then I’m gonna take you into the cells until we get you figured out proper.”

Johnnie didn’t know what to say or do. The grey duffle was one he’d picked up out of the tackle shack months before and he had no idea how it got to the shack in the first place. He’d thought it had belonged to his father. Johnnie handed the cash in his hand to Patrick. “Me mother stuffed a wad of cash in my pocket when I left the house this mornin’. Me and Tammy are on our way to Tronna, where’s he’s gonna play the fiddle and get on TV. I’m his manager. I didn’t know she’d put it there ‘til Tammy said so and I checked. I give him the wad to count…” His voice trailed off as he felt Terry’s hand in his right rear pocket. “What’s dis here den”?, the tall constable said, pulling several bills out. Johnnie reached back, remembering he’d taken the money back from Thomas. “Oh, fock me, I forgot he gimme it back,” he said, pulling the rest of the bills out. Terry took them out of his hand and put all the money together and started counting. He flipped through the wad, folded it over and held it out to Johnnie. “There’s three hundred twenty nine dollars here. If this money is rightfully yours son, then take it. But if you fockin’ stole it from someone or somewhere, don’t lay a finger on it. If it ain’t rightfully yours and you take it now and we find out where you got it and it wasn’t your mother, you won’t just go to jail, you’ll be in prison. So stop your fockin’ lyin’ and get on with the truth!”

“I ain’t told you boys nothin’ but truth, not since you got here. What I told you is exactly what happened. I don’t know what Thomas told you but he saw everything. He saw them pull the car out, he saw that focker punchin’ me, everyting. I don’t know what he did to his head, but he wasn’t hurt in the car for sure. We checked the plugs and pints and he wasn’t bleedin’ then. He wasn’t even scraped. He was laughin’ the whole time.”

“Get back in the cruiser, Mr. Scammell,” Patrick said. With Johnnie locked in the back seat, the two officers walked around the car, pointing and talking. They looked at the ground and Johnnie thought he could see the tire marks from the truck. They looked at the chain and finally, went back and opened the passengers’s door again. Patrick bent down and Terry went around to the driver’s door and leaned in and over the front seat. Patrick got out and walked through the ditch, bending over and picking up the paper bag with the broken mickey in it. He took out a small spiral coiled note pad from his pocket and pulled a pencil out of another. He leaned against the fender and wrote some notes hastily in the book. He and Terry both spoke quietly, seemingly so Johnnie couldn’t hear. Patrick went round to the back of the Chevrolet and took the grey duffle out, carrying it over and dropping it behind the cruiser, “Call Monroe’s,” he said to Terry, who opened the passenger door to the cruiser and sat on the edge of the seat. He pressed the button on the small black microphone.

“Twenty-three HQ”
Silence.

“Twenty-three HQ”

Silence.

“Twenty-three HQ”

After another moment of silence there was a faint squawk from the dashboard before a voice said, “HQ”

“Can you phone Monroe’s and tell them come get this car out here at, just a second,” he said turning to look at Patrick behind the car. “Where we be exactly?” he asked.

“We’re just down from Moresby’s place, a half mile from the bridge.”

“Hello, HQ?”

“HQ” the faint crackling voice replied.

“10-79. Send the wrecker out to Moresby’s place and pick up a blue 59 Chev that’s wrecked here. Over”

“Which Moresby. The woodlot or the bootlegger. Over”

“I tink dey’s one and de same, HQ. Over.”

“What’s the plate number on the car? Over”

“What’s the plate number, Patrick?,” Terry asked.

“Newfoundland plate. 23-268, Canada’s Happy Province, ” Patrick said.

“Plate 23-268, Over.”

“Car is a blue 1959 Chevrolet? Over”

“There’s only one wrecked car on this stretch of road, he can’t miss it. But yeah, it’s blue. Over.”

“I’ll make the call. Over”

Patrick opened the truck and deposited the grey duffle inside. He went over and opened each of the Chevrolet’s doors, locked them and closed them. When he got to the driver’s door, Johnnie shouted, “Hold it, I don’t have me keys!”

“I’ve got dem here,” Patrick said. “They was on the floor.” He slammed the driver’s door and came back to the cruiser. “I’m taking you to the detachment and checking out that duffle. If it turns out it’s not stolen, we set you loose in town., if it is, we’ll be holding you while we go pick up your old man.”

“Can we wait for the tow trock,” Johnnie asked. “I can’t leave Tammy’s fiddle in the trunk. And my guitar, too.”

Patrick sat for a moment. “We got other work to do. We can’t sit and wait for Monroe, he could be all day gettin’ here. I’ll get the instruments and we’ll bring dem wid us.”

He left the cruiser and went to the trunk of the Chevrolet and carried the two cases back to the cruiser and put them in the trunk. He got back in behind the wheel and started the cruiser up. Before he took put the car in gear, he took the microphone off the dashboard and pressed the button.

“Twenty-three HQ”

Silence.

“Twenty-three HQ”

“HQ Go ahead.”

“We’re 10-59. 30 minutes about. Prisoner on board. 59 maybe 69. Over”

“See you then. HQ Over.”

C Molly Will You Do It?

Dean felt the buzzing on his belt and grabbed the cell phone before it made an audible sound. He didn't recognize the number, so flipped it open and put it to his ear.

"Hello," he said flatly.

"Hi, baby! How are you doing?", " Marilyn asked.

"Oh, great, sweetie, nice to her you voice. Where are you?"

"I'm sitting in a lounge at the hotel, with a glass of Chablis and thinking about you," she purred.

"Well, that's nice, baby, I was just thinking about you and hoping you'd call. How's the conference?"

"It's going great. I took the afternoon off, though and did some shopping. Too much shopping probably," she said.

"Too much as in you're tired, or too much as in you need me there to carry your parcels..."

"No, too much as in spent a lot of money," she said laughing.

"Well, jeeze, you've never done that before," Dean said, using his best ironic tone. "What did you buy?"

"I ordered some suits from a tailor here called Sava. They are so beautiful. They're the nicest clothes I've even owned, I think."

"Uh, **some** suits, Marilyn? Don't you usually buy **a** suit? How many did you get?"

"Well, I don't actually have any of them yet, but I bought four. And some blouses."

"You bought four suits? At some kind of sale?"

"No, sweetie, it's a tailor shop for women. They showed me a beautiful pattern that looked really good on me and they had the most beautiful selection of fabrics, so I have the same suit, well, kind of the same, anyway, in four different colours. They're going to be fabulous. And I saved about 30% by buying a bunch."

"Well, that sounds pretty cool. You always look great, so if you think these are the most beautiful, I can hardly wait to see you in them," Dean said.

"I'm afraid to tell you how much I spent," she said, giggling.

"But now you're going to. Okay, Marilyn how much did you spend?" He did a quick calculation in his head. If they were \$700 apiece and she bought four less 30% that would be just shy of two grand.

"Sixty-five hundred dollars," she said, as tentatively as she could, almost placing a question mark at the end.

"Holy fuck, Marilyn, you've got to be joking! \$6500 for some suits? Wow. That's more than it cost to redo the bathroom!"

"It cost nine thousand for the bathroom," she said flatly. "And these suits will last at least five years, so I figure about twelve hundred a year."

"Thirteen actually," Dean said, "Mind if I buy that Benz and keep it for 20 years?"

"Well, your Benz will look a lot better with me getting out of it with one of these suits on."

Dean wasn't really bothered by the cost of the suits. He knew that they'd enhance her career and that she made plenty of money to cover them. He wished they were a tax writeoff and started to scheme ways to use the expense to lower the income tax hit. He made a mental note to talk to his boss about it and see if there was a loophole somewhere they'd be able to exploit.

"Your suits will look better to me with you getting out of them," he laughed.

They small-talked through the rest of the conversation and she filled him in on the conference and her plans to fly to her sister's on Sunday.

Then she told him about the weird circumstances about the taxi ride and how she wasn't aware they'd called the cab and how she was going to dinner at Anwar's but had some misgivings about

the evening. Dean asked her if she was really uncomfortable and if so, why she was still going. Marilyn said she wasn't exactly uncomfortable, she just couldn't figure out how they'd put it all together. As a seasoned traveler and adventurer, this evening was right up her alley, she thought. She'd eat some great food, meet some interesting, maybe even unique people and fall asleep tonight with a satisfied sigh.

They talked for a few more minutes and then Marilyn signed off in her customary fashion, taking more than a minute to actually say goodbye, like she didn't want the conversation to end. Dean was more concerned with his own evening when he flipped the phone shut. He was determined to have another session with the Harmonic Hemisphere software and had to get some work cleared off his desk before he headed home. He flipped through some file folders and found what he was looking for. His finger slid down the first page of a document, then stopped. His left hand reached out and dialed numbers on a keypad. A tone murmured near his computer monitor. There was an audible click and then a female voice said, "Harrison Harmon."

"Uh, hi, Ed Myskowski please,"

"May I tell him who's calling?" the voice said.

"Dean Wasser, The Cloak Group"

"Thank you Mr. Wasser, I'll see if Mr. Myskowski is available."

There was a brief hum, then a few strains of elevator music before a male voice said, "Dean! Thanks for calling back. How's it going?"

"It's going great, Ed. Look, I can put this whole thing together and we can do a presentation Saturday, if your client is available."

"They said they'd be around," Ed said. "I'll confirm that before you book a flight though. Want to take in the Rangers game Friday night if we can confirm?"

"That would be awesome, Ed. They're playing Philadelphia, MSG will be a freaking zoo!"

"And we've got killer seats, man. You can stay at our place Friday night and we can do the presentation Saturday, hopefully morning."

"That sounds terrific. Call me right back, okay?"

"Will do. See ya"

Dean tapped the line button to end the call, reached over with his right hand and scrolled down the desktop of his computer, deftly double-clicking a folder, then selected a subfolder with his left hand on the keyboard. Once opened he scrolled through a list of documents, clicking until he had a half dozen of them open. He looked through them, zeroing in on a section, selected it copied and pasted, then pulled down a menu, applied a style, saved the document and sent it to the printer.

He called out, "Jocelyn? Can you proof that page on the printer and make sure there aren't any typos in it?" He started scanning statistics, alternately nodding and shaking his head until he found what he was looking for. "Forget that, Joss, I just found something better." He copied and pasted the information into a document, saved and printed again, and got up and went to the printer himself. He looked the page over and then dropped in Jocelyn's desk. "Have a look at this. Does it make sense?"

He stood and watched her look it over. She pursed her lips and looked up at him. "If we tell them this now, what do we tell them when we try to close? We should keep this as a kicker and just lead them with the quarterly numbers. They look really good for this client and if they start looking iffy, pull these numbers out."

"And if we don't need them?"

“Give it to them as a snack after. It’ll send them home happy with their work. You going to get it done Saturday or does it wait ‘til next week?”

“I’m waiting for Ed to confirm. If he does, I’m heading home for the day.”

Jocelyn got up and picked a folder off her side table and headed for the door. Before she stepped out, she turned and asked, “When does Marilyn get back? Can she meet you in New York?”

“No, she finishes up in Chicago Saturday, then flies to her sister’s for a few days. She called a few minutes ago, actually, taking a break from the conference and buying some clothes.

Expensive clothes,” he said, chuckling.

Jocelyn smiled and headed out the office door. A line lit up on Dean’s phone and he heard the receptionist say, “Can you take Ed Mick, Mix,” “Myskowski,” Dean said, “Yeah, you bet, thanks.”

He hit the button and said “Are we dancing Saturday?”

“Affirmative, but we have to get in early. Middleton’s got an 11:30 flight he can’t miss, so he wants us at 7:30. I’ll grab you a room and you can do the talking,” Ed said. “Maybe I’ll grab us a couple, I’d have to leave home at six to make that time, I think.”

Ed had transferred to the New York office earlier in the year and was finally figuring out how to get around.

He made a fundamental mistake, grabbing an apartment that was affordable and getting talked into it by a slick-talking manager that needed to get out of a lease as he transferred across the country. Ed was saddled with a long-term lease and a two-hour commute most days. He was spending a fortune on hotels when he had early meetings and had an impressive wardrobe.

Whenever he stayed downtown it was a last minute decision, which meant buying an outfit, sometimes a suit, even, so he wouldn’t look bagged out or be late for an important client.

He liked it when Dean came to town, because he was so well traveled, he made good decisions and Ed learned a lot from him. Dean had been telling him to get rid of the apartment and move downtown, so he had been looking for a sub-tenant and it looked like he’d finally found one. He was sure Dean would be impressed with him and that was important.

“That sounds great, Ed. I’m heading home here, now. Joss will let you know my flight, just in case, but I’ll see you at the office Friday. I need a face-to-face with Jabber and he should still be there then. See ya Friday, man.”

He tapped the button as Ed signed off and went out in the hall to look for Jocelyn. She was walking toward him, smiling. “I’m going to New York this weekend, too,” she said. “I’ve got a course Friday morning right downtown. Want to do dinner?”

“Jeese, Joss, I dunno,” Dean said, obviously uncomfortable. If Marilyn found out he and Jocelyn had been to New York together while she was out of town, she’d go into a funk. “I’m meeting Ed and going to a hockey game,” he said. He knew it sounded lame, but his instinct made him turn her down and not allow any chance for error. “No problem – maybe I’ll fly home in the afternoon, then. Or not”

Dean knew what the ‘Or not’ meant. She’d know not just where he was staying but his room number. That was her job. She’d never done anything overt, but he always felt she was game for a tryst. It wasn’t often Marilyn and he were out of town at the same time, which was probably good for his fortitude.

He headed back to his desk, grabbed his jacket and went out the door. He definitely needed Harmonic Hemisphere tonight, He needed a serious distraction and it was the perfect opportunity. He was walking through the parkade when his cell phone rang. he rolled his eyes when he saw the name on the caller ID. "Deano!" the booming voice said when he put the phone to his ear. "Hi, Alex, what's up?" Dean asked. Alex started making small talk and Dean knew he wanted something. "I'm in the parkade Alex, can I call you back?" Alex knew he wouldn't.. "Look, Deano, man, I really need a favour." "What is it, Alex?," Dean asked. "Fuck, man, I got a problem. We're at the Cross and Bernie's real sick man. He's in the hospital and we gotta have a good night, I need you to come and play with us, man." "Aw, Alex, man, I just can't. I got a big meeting first thing tomorrow and a bunch more shit, too. I just can't."

"Dean, man, you can't let me down, man. This is an important gig and I'll, like, owe you forever, man I really need you. Not just me, the whole band, man." It sounded like a step back in time, same conversation, different gig.

"I can't Alex, I've already got a commitment for tonight. Call Chico, he did all your sessions and knows the material and he's a fabulous bass player. You need his number?"

"Chico's a fuckwad. He never takes my calls. His head's so far up his ass, man, he'll never come through for us. Don't make me plead, man, we really need you, just this once."

"Sorry, Alex, I haven't touched my bass in six weeks and I've got something else on I can't cancel." Dean resisted the urge to flip the phone closed, as much as he wanted to, he just didn't do that to people, even the annoying ones. Even telemarketers, for Christ's sake.

"What are you doing, man. Tell me what's so important you'll turn your back on your friends?"

"Look, I gotta go, Alex. Sorry." Dean flipped the phone shut, relief and guilt colliding as he stuck the cell in its holster. 'Crap, I shouldn't have done that', he thought. But he was incensed that Alex would challenge him that way and that he'd use the other band members, if his own influence failed.

The band, now called Sunscum, was, arguably, still the best local live act. When Dean was its bassist, it was called Flip It. A six piece band, often accompanied by an excellent horn section, Flip It filled every venue it played. The only people ever disappointed by the band were those left standing on the street, when they couldn't be crammed into a hall, theatre or night club.

It remained a local act because the musicians all had business interests that over-rode any risk they'd be willing to take to 'make it big' in the music industry. Three of the players, including Dean, were businessmen, which meant they could never agree to a management contract and largely saw the music business as a collection of weasels they didn't want to be associated with. Playing the gigs, writing the material and rehearsing, were all rewarding for each of them. And the adulation of the fans was completely consuming and addictive. They played where and when they wanted and for big dollars. The night the Rolling Stones played in Toronto, they still turned three hundred people away from the Tropica, which has a capacity of 2200.

Dean started the band with his good friend Rollie, when they were both in their teens. They had a nice little five piece band together and were heard one night by Wilson Pickett's management. They were hired, kind of as a novelty, to be the opener for Pickett's European tour. Before the tour ended, they were the warm-up, the act that preceded Pickett and they were quick studies, sounding like seasoned rhythm and blues players after just seven weeks on the road.

They came home and retooled, developing a new repertoire of R&B standards and started writing music and lyrics in that style. They were invited to a showcase and simply slayed every other band that played. They met a record producer, cut a demo and got stuck on a shelf, obviously a

threat to someone. But they made fast friends with the horn players that worked their sessions, who, to a man said, "Call me, anytime!" And they did.

Two of the members, Rollie, the keyboard player and John, the rhythm guitarist, were in real estate, hence the name, Flip It. They took the money they made playing music and invested it in real estate deals, turning properties over at a fabulous rate and making a fortune. They were rich enough to retire at 24, but then the only thing they loved more than a good real estate deal was the energy pouring off a crowd and the roar at the end of a tune. From a marketing perspective the name alluded to flipping the bird, an attitude with some social muscle at the time.

The band had a knack for saving the best to last, performing encores that whipped the crowd into an absolute frenzy. For Dean, Rollie and John, ending the night was cathartic, a prequel to getting a good start on business the next day. The other three were wracked by a peculiar loneliness after the crowd went home and lead them into what can only be described politely as decidedly anti-social behaviour.

Alex kind of controlled it, sort of patrolling the edge of the abyss, pulling back just short of self-destruction. Nicky and Silas had no sense of restraint. If danger lurked, they were always ready to pursue it. When Alex ran out of money, he stayed home and laid off the partying. Business sense for the other two was declaring a fire sale on their souls whenever the cash ran out, usually every few days.

John, Dean and Rollie were the writers, so they made the royalties. They also had the wherewithal to finance the band's business needs, and recouped their investment just like it was a piece of property. Nicky, Alex and Silas made just enough money to stay in trouble and they developed an expertise and notoriety that kept the band in the news when the entertainment section ran out of ink.

Everything changed on New Years Eve, 1999. Flip It! was booked for a huge gig at Nathan Phillips Square, an engagement that was billed as a defiance for the technological meltdown that was predicted for that fateful night. The stage was a high tech space, designed to keep the entire performance area and instruments at room temperature, even though the outside temperature was going to be -15 C.

When they took the stage at 11:20 the crowd was already in full gear, having built their high on three hours of non-stop rock and roll from Toronto's best. Accompanied by six horn players in two sections and four session singers, Flip It! was an impressive sight that exploded into a high energy rendition of 'Take Me', a fast-tempo shuffle that had become their signature over the years. The show escalated from there, cascading into midnight and the revelation that the planet was still alive, in spite of the change of centuries.

They took a short break and at ten past twelve, launched into a one-hour set that was so tight, so smooth, it sounded like an hour-long medley. After two tumultuous encores, mayhem broke out. The band exited the stage, was quickly hustled into waiting limos and off to an all-night and very exclusive party in Rosedale.

Marilyn was in the limo when Dean stepped in the door and they rolled around in the back seat in a state of sexual frenzy, taking five minutes to pull themselves together when the limo pulled up in front of a mansion, the home of real estate magnate Ira Weinstein. Most of the band was already there, they were the life and centre of the party.

Dean was standing on a balcony, looking down at the crowd and realizing that this was likely the pinnacle, life would never get better. The band was happy and satiated, having played a perfect

performance. Marilyn was by his side, so proud to be part of this celebration and this close to this special man.

As the moment faded, Dean started to feel like moving on, going home where it was quiet, relaxing with this stunning woman and finishing what they started in the limo. And the world was all theirs, so they did just that.

He slipped his hands under her shoulder blades and as he pulled down on her shoulders and thrust himself deep inside her, a broad grin spread across his face. It wasn't just the ecstasy of the impending orgasm, but the roar of the crowd in his ears and he collapsed, spent entirely and lay quietly on top of her. They alternately panted and giggled, too tired to even roll off and go to sleep.

But, sleep found them and when the ringing phone finally reached Dean, he was still laying across Marilyn's legs. Instinctively, he picked up the phone. "Fuck man, you gotta come down here," was what Dean heard. It was Alex and the last thing Dean wanted was to go back to a party, much less the kind of party Alex would have slithered to once the mansion wound down.

"No way, man, I'm not leaving this bed 'til tomorrow," Dean said. Alex exploded into what sounded like a rage, until Dean realized he was crying. He couldn't make any sense of the incoherent rant coming out of the receiver, it was just a mishmash of expletives and rage, with no pauses for Dean to even say Alex' name. Finally, it dissolved into wracking sobs and Dean said, "Alex, for fuck sake, what's going on?" This wasn't a completely unique state for Alex, who often went over the top, then melted down into coherence and, casting off whatever crisis he'd invented and eased back into normalcy. As Dean waited for the sobbing to subside and Alex to respond. He heard a beep on the line indicating a second call. He felt around with his thumb and pressed the flash button twice. "Dean? Rollie. Bad fuckin' news man. Fuckin' Silas and Nicky both fuckin' OD'd. They're dead, man. They're fuckin' dead. Can you believe that?"

Actually, Dean could. And did. "Where are you, Rollie?," he asked. "I'm at Charlotte's. We're heading over to St. Michael's. That's where they took them. I don't know where Alex is, John's already on his way."

"Alex is on the other line," Dean said. "Find out where he is, I'll go get him," Rollie said. "We'll pick you up on the way."

"I don't want to go there, Rollie, and Alex is completely fucked up. You don't want to take him there." there was a pause, then Rollie said, "If we're all there, we're all clean. Anybody who isn't there is gonna come off as some kinda fucking junkie. The press will be all over the place. We all have to be there."

Dean knew he was right. It was at moments like this that he wished they had a management company to look after this; a publicist to bullshit the press for them. But this was the price for being real and Dean knew it was a small payment and he owed it.

"I'll find Alex and meet you there. I'll call a cab and get there as soon as I can."

"Fuck, sorry man," Rollie said. "Thanks. See you there."

Dean clicked the flash button and heard Alex in midsentence, cutting him off. "Where are you Alex?"

There was a pause. Then, in a calm, eerily quiet voice, Alex said, "I'm at St. Mikes, with the boys. With my friends."

"Stay calm man, I'll be right there," Dean said, clicking the phone off and dropping it on the bed. Marilyn was staring at him, a sheet pulled up to her throat. She knew something huge had happened, but didn't seem convinced she wasn't dreaming. Dean was pulling his clothes on and

explaining, as best he could, what was going on. She wanted to come, he explained it was better if she didn't. As always, she trusted his judgment and lay back down. When he kissed her forehead, tears welled out of her closed eyes and down toward her ears. She rolled over and covered her head with both her arms.

By the time the cab pulled up in front of St. Michael's, Dean was in a state of resolution. He had accepted it all, including his role and walked through a crowd of reporters and hugged each of his bandmates. He turned to the reporters and the single television cameraman and delivered an eloquent statement. He finished with as good a sendoff as Nicky and Silas could have asked for, as forgiving as it was inaccurate. The press bought it. It sounded like a tragic accident.

Dean closed the book on the pair three weeks later when the coroner reported they'd been duped, thinking they were getting a mild hit of heroin, only to inject a massive and lethal dose of pure Cambodian drug that made headlines as it cut a swath through the North American junkie community.

Within a few days of their deaths, other musicians in the city had called and enquired. Flip It! quietly replaced Nicky and Silas with Bkuto Andatao, a Senegalese Muslim and Mike Greer, a virtuoso guitarist that also eschewed drugs of any kind.

When they started gigging again in March, even long-standing fans couldn't tell them from the old configuration, but Dean could. They were both better players and Alex was the only remaining unreliable factor. Even he had to get his act together, since he'd covered a lot of his issues with the struggles they'd had with Nicky and Silas.

Dean stayed with the band through 2005, when he moved to New York for eighteen months, to be groomed to take over the Toronto operation. In mid-2006 he moved back, but didn't have the energy to support the two very different lives. He also resented the fact they'd changed the name, sold out to a pop negativity that was the polar opposite of Flip It!'s style and energy. He had a bass and keyboard at his condo and he used them therapeutically, taking the edge off bad days, pulling stress into perspective the same way others did through meditation. But he never quite got over the urge to stand in the light, throw his head back and hit and hold a high soaring note and feel the crowd's unfettered enthusiasm wash over him.

The urge made his hands sweat. So much that he almost dropped the phone when he pulled it out of its holster. "Dean, fuck, man, don't let me down," Alex whined. They spoke briefly and when Dean flipped the phone shut, he started rationalizing. He missed Rollie and John. Bkuto was so much fun to play with...

C Beggar's Belief

Jasmin deftly closed all the open documents on her computer and logged off. She gathered her keys and a small compact off her desk, picked up a package of gum and tossed them all in her purse. She walked over and took her coat off the rack, swung it around her shoulders and walked out the door. She reached back in, checked the handle and, confident it was locked, closed the door and walked down the hallway.

She was on her way home, hoping to find a message there from Jason, who was in Alberta visiting his parents. She also planned to call her mother and discuss plans for Christmas, having

discussed a transfer to Calgary with her boss earlier in the afternoon. She could tell the feelings were mixed; on the one hand, her company took pride in its ability to move its employees up through the ranks and find better opportunities through transfer. Management saw it as an opportunity to keep talent and the investment in development in the company and not allow their best employees to be continually siphoned off by competitors.

On the other, Jasmin had done wonders for the Fredericton operation. More than just good at her job, she'd taken a critical view of how the office ran and how employees were used. She had come up with a work plan that meant they finally were meeting deadlines and budget, but more importantly, employees that were holding the operation back and actually poisoning the work atmosphere had been identified, exposed, and eventually moved out.

It had been a stressful process, particularly for Jasmin, but now that it was completed, Senko was a great place to work. It had taken a while to get her boss to buy in, but eventually, she stopped seeing Jasmin as a threat and realized she would be there long after the stunning blonde from Vancouver had settled in another part of the company.

Now that the perceived threat was gone, she worried the office would degenerate with Jasmin gone. She also knew there were no candidates locally and few across the country that would actually come to the small New Brunswick city. Most of the recruiting came from Toronto, many of the best qualified were visible minorities and they didn't feel that Fredericton had a very welcoming community. Marla, Jasmin's boss, felt the reputation was unearned; she enjoyed cultural activities and events all the time, and thought outsiders were always made to feel welcome. But, it was a hard sell nonetheless and Jasmin's impending departure was weighing on her mind.

Marla knew that as long as Jason Scammell was stationed at Gagetown, Jasmin would be happy to stay at the Senko office. But he'd learned recently that he would be deployed to Afghanistan for what was likely the final stage of his military career, so he and Jasmin were making plans to either settle elsewhere or marry, likely both.

Jasmin was mostly clearing the air and opening up a dialogue with Marla, to ensure the transition was smooth. She didn't want to spend six months in a hostile office, particularly after bringing this one around the way she did. She was impressed that Marla asked her to mentor her, show her how to manage the resources so the office wouldn't slide back, regardless of who replaced Jasmin. But she also knew that would be a challenge, since Marla's penchant for gossip and vindictiveness often interfered with her otherwise acceptable management skills.

On the plus side, she recognized Jasmin's skills and wanted to acquire them. On the negative, she really struggled with criticism and often couldn't separate professional from personal. Jasmin got to the car, popped the trunk and put her laptop and purse in, since she was planning to stop and do some shopping for something for supper and snacks for later. When her purse hit the floor, her cellphone squawked, so she dug around and pulled it out, hitting the button just before the call went to voicemail.

"God, you're beautiful," Jason said, "Where you at?"

"Oh, hi, baby. I'm just getting in the car." She leaned back against the Volkswagen and tipped her head back and a smile spread across her face. All her stresses from the day rose off her like the mist off a pond when it's hit directly by the morning sun. She didn't worry about him and their careers often separated them, but she was always content at just the sound of his voice. "Where

are you?," she asked. "I'm at my folks. We're having a great visit, they've got themselves a nice place here in Red Deer."

"I can't wait to meet them Jason, they sound like such a great couple. I confirmed some time off in October, but don't have the dates yet. It depends when the next cycle starts."

"It would be best if it's later in the month. They aren't saying anything at HQ, but I'm guessing we'll fly out the end of the first week of November. At least that's when we'll go, I don't know about the next full troop deployment."

They continued to chat about the possibility of a trip to Red Deer together to meet his folks before he left. They'd both like that, partly the 'meet the folks' thing, but mostly, Jasmin said she wanted to be able support Jacqueline once Jason was gone. Jasmin was strong and a realist and knew she'd be a big help, especially if she was just an hour and a half away. She could pop up on weekends and keep Jacqueline distracted, if she had trouble with Jason being in a war zone. She'd gotten sick when he was in Bosnia, caused by the stress of him being in harm's way and not being able to contact him.

He was actually in a safe place there, far from any hostilities, but once, when he'd phoned home, a flight of CF 18s had flown over the hotel he was staying at, just over the tree tops. Jacqueline thought it was an explosion. Jason had put the phone down to close his window and when he picked it up again, his mother was hysterical. She was home alone and still sobbing when their conversation ended a few minutes later. She had never been fond of his military career and now the thought of Afghanistan pulled her into depression.

"Mom's really looking forward to meeting you and the old man thinks you're really hot," he said. "If she's not worried about me. she'll be worried about him." But, he explained, his mother hadn't taken the Afghanistan news well at all and he definitely thought Jasmin's Calgary plan would be helpful. "Maybe I should marry you before I head out," he said. "Are you proposing to me?," Jasmin asked, incredulous. "I thought I already did," he replied. "Well, no, sweetheart. You've said many times that we should be married, you've talked about when we're married. You've even called me your fiancé, but you've never actually proposed." "Oh, you mean like on bended knee and all that?"

"No, I mean like, will you marry me? You've propositioned me a few times and I'm glad you did, but you've never, as they say, actually popped the question."

There was a curious silence and then, recognizing that saying nothing was communicating something, Jason said, "I know what you mean and I will and I'll think of something nice. It sure as hell won't be on a cell phone in a parking lot somewhere,"

They both laughed and agreed that they were both too romantic and enjoyed surprising each other too much to waste such an auspicious opportunity. They spoke for a couple more minutes before Jason signed off, asking Jasmin to call him late in the evening from her landline.

She got in the Volkswagen and headed off to her apartment, a small suite in an older building, not far from downtown. Senko was located across the river, but the only accommodations there were new, expensive and pretty much absent of character, so Jasmin had looked around before she settled in her apartment. She was part of the team that designed a city-wide wireless network and had requested that she be part of the implementation of the system. Too often, she felt, employees were involved in projects, then disconnected from the results. She was a big-picture planner with a hands-on need, her previous boss had said.

Driving home, she listened to the radio, tuned to a station on the Gagetown base and idly listened as she drove down to the bridge and across the river. The two on-air jocks were both enlisted men, both radio amateurs, but were having a good time joking about news items and talking about how they enjoyed the military life. Jasmin was thinking how much more intelligent Jason seemed than these two and had to remind herself that he wasn't first and foremost a military man. He'd done most of an education degree before he signed up full time.

She was about to hit the button and switch to CBC when they started to talk seriously about being deployed to the Middle East. Even though they chose their words carefully, since they'd obviously been cautioned about making on-air statements that could embarrass the military, they still sounded like they thought this was a simple mission, they'd go over there and pull the country out of the stone age, instill democracy and come home heroes. 'How naïve,' Jasmin thought, then punched 'one', tuning in CBC.

She listened to two people discussing a meeting in Fredericton that evening before they cut to the news. She'd already heard all the stories on the radio in the office, so she switched it off, then turned into a strip mall off the end of the bridge. She went into a small bakery and picked up a couple of buns, a loaf of bread and stepped over to the cashier. She spoke to the woman in French, grateful for the opportunity to use the language. She'd learned to speak French in high school, then polished up her conversational French when she went to Europe, where she completed a couple terms of university in an exchange program.

It was an element of Fredericton she enjoyed, finding many people that spoke both French and English. She'd even chosen events where she could go and listen and speak with Francophones, even though she didn't have an interest in the event itself. She'd met some interesting people there and had gone to a couple of Francophone dinner theatre performances. She'd taken Jason once, but he had very limited French and lost interest after just a few minutes. French wasn't just uncommon growing up in Ft. McMurray, but markedly unpopular.

Jasmin left the bakery and walked across the street to an Asian grocery. She picked out vegetables and then returned to the car and completed the trip home. She wasn't expecting a message from Jason, since she'd just spoken to him, so she was pleasantly surprised when the message light was flashing on her phone. There were two messages; one from Jason telling her he'd try her cell and one from Margie, her mother. Margie said she'd try her again later, and hoped she'd be home.

Jasmin made supper and sat down, quietly eating, watching television in the livingroom from her kitchen table. She wasn't really interested, just casually looking at the screen, not following the program. When the phone rang, she reached down, picked up the remote and shut the television off.

She took the phone off the end table, punched the 'Talk' button and pressed it to her ear. Margie said. "Jasmin? Are you there?"
"Hi, Mom, how are you?" She smiled because her mother always asked if she was there, not really believing she was until she spoke, it seemed. She always sounded anxious, even when she was calm and happy.

Margie filled Jasmine in on everything that was happening at home, focusing more on what she was doing than Bill. In fact, she rarely mentioned Bill unless asked about him. After the small talk, Margie told Jasmin about her déjà vu experience. She was still very unsettled about it and didn't understand, why, after all these years, it had come back to haunt her. While

she had told Jasmine about the episode with her grandmother, she had downplayed the violence and focused more on her own feelings.

She and Jasmin talked at length about déjà vu, parapsychology and other psychic phenomena, never really resolving Margie's issues, but having an enjoyable productive chat that didn't bog down in minutiae and gossip.

Margie was pleased to hear that the transfer to Calgary was under discussion and that soon she'd be back in the west and closer to home. She was also happy to hear that Jason was home, visiting his folks and hoped he could come to the coast for a day or two. She had met him when she was in Fredericton visiting Jasmin, a trip that, by design, didn't include Bill. She laughed when Jasmin told her about the proposal discussion and she'd learned enough over the past few months to be surprised if they didn't marry. It was a relaxed relationship that would inevitably become permanent, Margie believed.

"So, we'll be seeing you at the end of October you think?," Margie asked. "I hope to be in Calgary by then, so we'll likely come to the coast before Jason heads out, assuming he's still going. These things can change in a hurry, you know," she said. She didn't worry much about the deployment, but she knew what he wanted to do career-wise, so if the Afghanistan posting didn't happen and they moved out west, that would be fine with her.

11 Beaujolais In Boston

The bartender came over to Marilyn's table in the corner of the lounge. "How are you enjoying the Chablis?," he asked. "Probably more than I should," Marilyn replied, pushing the tall stemmed glass toward him. He deftly swirled the golden fluid around the bowl of the glass, lifting off and tilting the bottle back, touching the edge of the neck to a cotton towel on his left forearm. "I really like this one. Normally, I find Chablis a touch harsh, but this one seems to be gentle and full-flavoured and kind of sticks around."

Marilyn looked up at him and smiled. "I find it takes the edge off a busy afternoon. If water did that, I'd probably stick to it. I'm going out later, so I hope this doesn't make me sleepy or bitchy." "I can't imagine that," he said, and wandered off to the next table, where he had some glasses to pick up. It was a quiet lounge, which Marilyn appreciated, she didn't need any more jostling just now. She'd come to peace about the suits and money, mostly because Dean seemed so comfortable with it. It was true, this wardrobe would not just last, it would likely be a factor in moving her career forward. If she looked like an executive and backed it up with experience, she couldn't imagine not advancing at a pretty good pace. She had the goods, damn it, and deserved to be working on the best projects. She hoped, in fact, to translate one of the sessions at this conference into a proposal to do a makeover on a couple of divisions. She'd need budget and a free hand, but she was confident she could sell the plan. She'd done well over the past year, made significant changes and improvements and still was well-liked by the people around her. Not too ambitious, but not content to sit still, not even for a minute.

She was thinking about that when she noticed the clock on the wall outside the lounge. It was ten to six and she needed to be showered and ready for seven. She had to force herself not to toss back the last of the Chablis – it was three mouthfuls, actually, so she sat back and savoured first one sip, then another. 'Screw it, gotta go,' she thought, throwing the final bit back. She set the glass down, scribbled her signature on the bill and headed out the door. "Enjoy your evening!", the bartender called. She looked back, smiled and nodded.

She felt a distinct wobble when she stepped out of the elevator and thought, “Aw, shit, not this again,” she said, to no one, then realized if she was staggering and talking to herself, maybe going to a dinner party with strangers wasn’t such a great idea. She walked down the hall to her room, deftly plugged the card into the slot, saw the little green light flash and twisted the handle, opening the door. She closed the door behind her and walked into the centre of the room, dropping her coat on the bed as she walked by. She realized she wasn’t particularly tipsy, just tired and a little un-nerved.

She went to the windows and checked that the curtains were closed and reached over her shoulder, pulling the zipper down from the top, then reaching up from the bottom and pulling it the rest of the way down. She reached down and pulled off one shoe, then the other, before pulling the dress off and dropping it on top of her coat, and heading to the bathroom.

She flicked the deadbolt on the room door before stepping into the bathroom. ‘Shower? Bath? Shower? Bath?’ she thought. If she had a bath, she might relax too much and not want to go. She was conflicted, wondering why she was trying so hard to talk herself out of this, why she just didn’t make a decision. Normally, this would be completely routine. But there was something about how all the events of the afternoon played together, like someone was directing her actions, someone other than herself.

She thought back to the girl in the dress shop at the mall. She was supposed to have another skirt in the back, but seemed to be directing Marilyn to the tailor downtown. Had she called the cabbie when Marilyn stepped out the door?

‘Screw it, I’m going to shower’ she thought, unsnapping her bra and swinging it over onto the vanity. She didn’t like the red marks the bra left on her breasts, nor the crease across her chest underneath them. She made a mental picture of her new suits, imagining herself with a sports bra under the jacket. Comfortable, no binding, no bouncing. She slipped her hands under her breasts and held them up slightly, then let them drop, watching them bob in the mirror. A smile crossed her face as she came to the realization that at 32, there wasn’t even a hint of sag, not stretch mark anywhere.

She slipped her hands under the waist band of her thong and lost her balance as she pulled it down to her knees and tried to lift her left foot up and out of it. She steadied herself with her left hand and kicked the thong off onto the floor with her right foot.

She leaned on the vanity with both hands and looked at her face, then her eyes in the mirror. She pressed her pubis against the counter edge and proclaimed herself sober enough to continue and turned, stepping over the edge of the bathtub and pulling the curtain around to the taps.

“Crap!” she said out loud, as she realized she hadn’t taken her shampoo and body wash off the vanity. She stumbled clumsily out of the tub, almost tripping over the shower curtain. She grabbed the products in one hand and stepped back in, setting them on the tub edge while she knelt down and turned on the water. She tested it repeatedly until she was sure the temperature was just right and had stabilized.

She rinsed her hair and then lathered it up, scrubbing behind her ears and down her neck. As she rinsed her hair, she squeezed the body wash into the palm of her right hand. She rubbed her hands together and then washed her upper body, crossing over her chest, across her breasts and over her shoulders, through her arm pits. She put more body wash in her hand and ran her hand down between her legs, tipping her head back and letting the water spread across her face. As the warm, familiar sensation started to course through her she caught herself. ‘If I start this, I won’t be going

anywhere at seven o'clock,' she thought, quickly moving her hand down the outside of her legs and then washing first one calf, then the other.

She ran her hand up her shin and judged herself stubble-free enough for the evening's engagement and then turned the water off and pulled back the shower curtain. She wrapped her self in a large bath sheet and wrapped a smaller towel around her head. She opened the bathroom door and went out into the room, letting the air circulate and the fog on the mirror clear.

She gathered her dress up, folded it and put it in a laundry bag in the bottom of the closet. She flipped through the three garments hanging in the closet, wondering which would offend Anwar the least. These were all big-box fashions, suitable for a conference, but not really up to a sophisticated dinner party. She considered trying to freshen up the dress she wore for the flight down, but imagined it wrinkled as it tended to get and opted for a dark blue cocktail dress. She lay it across the bed and opened the drawer, looking through it and pulling out a pale blue bra and a dark blue thong. She picked them because she wanted to save her other underwear for tomorrow, when she would be going from morning to night without a change. Comfort trumped fashions as she assembled the evening's outfit.

She stepped back into the bathroom and retrieved her blow dryer, then sat down on the settee and started drying her hair, flipping it forward and back until it started to hold shape. She picked a brush up off the side table where she'd left it in the morning and with a few quick strokes, looked as fresh as when her day started. She quickly put on her makeup, then cast aside the bath sheet and dressed. As she put her watch on she checked the time. 6:50.

'Not too fucking drunk', she thought. Then Marilyn kind of slumped. She wasn't drunk at all. She was slipping into that funk one finds when they have a couple, start to get a buzz and then quit. 'Probably why people don't quit when they should,' she thought.

She got up and gathered her coat and purse and headed out the door. She traveled down the elevator with an elderly couple; the woman asked her what she thought of the city while her husband tried to look inside Marilyn's dress. She glared at him when the elevator door opened and he looked away, but she could tell he didn't care. He hadn't seen much, but more than nothing and was an improvement over staring at the mirrored walls of the elevator. Marilyn walked across the lobby toward the front door and could see Sam's cab sitting on the street, close to the driveway.

As she stepped out the door, she saw him pull the car into gear and head up the drive toward her. He stopped in front of the door and jumped out, walking around and opening the back door. She looked him in the eye and before she could say anything, he said, "Let me help you, Miss Carlson." She smiled and continued to hold eye contact, a showdown to see how he'd look up her short skirt without being caught cold. To her surprise, as she bent down, he turned his head and looked behind the car, not returning his eyes until she'd smoothed the cocktail dress over her thighs. He gently closed the door, then pressed it to latch firmly and then climbed back in behind the wheel.

"How did you know my name", Marilyn asked. Sam, who had reached over and picked up his microphone with his right hand, laid it on the seat beside him. "Nalah tell me. Anwar tell me to take good care with you, you are his special guest," he said. "You are lucky woman. This is a wonderful family you go to tonight. Maybe you be their friends," he said. "Maybe," Marilyn said, feeling a little less creeped out that he knew her last name. It made sense, she thought. He'd have to know who to ask for if she hadn't been waiting in the lobby.

Sam pressed the button on the mic and said something Marilyn didn't hear. Then he started speaking in another language. He said what sounded like several sentences, the last couple fairly forceful. Then, noticing her watching him in the mirror, he smiled and put the mic in its holder on the dashboard.

He guided the car through the heavy traffic, jostling for position to get into an outside lane. He made a left turn onto a broad parkway and picked up speed, deftly changing lanes until they were sliding smoothly through the other cars, heading down toward the ocean.

Marilyn looked at the cab license on the side pillar, noticing Sam's picture. His name was listed as Zghir Bustani and she assumed the address listed was the cab company's. "Why do they call you Sam, if your name is Zghir?," she asked. Sam looked uncomfortable and she couldn't tell if it had to do with his identity or being challenged by a woman. "Most American can't say Zghir, but say Sam easy," he said, "So I call Sam."

"Where are you from?" she asked, curious about what sort of a name Bustani was. She thought originally he might be Pakistani, even Arab. "Los Ang Geleez," he said, his discomfort returning. "No, no, not here in America, where are you from before you came here?," she asked. Marilyn was enjoying getting a bit of an upper hand, she didn't like that he seemed to have a little more control of the situation than she, knowing where she was going and when. "My family in Lebanon," he said. "I live here now. No Los Ang Geleez."

"How long since you've lived in Lebanon?" she asked. "Long time. Twenty year, maybe." She asked him some more innocuous questions, but was thinking of other things the whole time. He didn't speak well enough to have been here 20 years and he clearly hadn't adjusted to women having independence. She thought he was lying, and gave him maybe five years, not much more, in this country.

"Do you go back to Lebanon often," she asked. "One minute, I need to call," he said, reaching for the microphone. He was quite animated in the call and then pulled over and stopped. He pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number. He started talking rapidly in another language and Marilyn thought it sounded different than the Lebanese her neighbours had spoken, when she was growing up. She thought she should have been a little more earnest as a teen, maybe she'd have learned a little more of the language.

"Ah, well," she said, under her breath. Sam continued to speak and at one point got quite excited, then sounded contrite. Finally, he said several times, "Beg pardon, beg pardon, beg pardon," quietly as if repeating it for his caller. "Miss Carlos, beg pardon," he said, closing the cell phone and pulling back into traffic.

"Oh good," Marilyn thought, "He doesn't actually know my name."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes, then Sam signaled a right turn and pulled into a lane lined with palms. Marilyn could see open water at the end of the lane, and Sam angled the cab off to the left and into a wide curved driveway that lead through gardens to the entrance to a grand old home. Another car was departing and Sam had to pause before pulling up and stopping. He got out and opened Marilyn's door, again averting his eyes as she swung her long legs out and stepped out on the sidewalk. She looked up at the beautiful home and saw Nalah and Anwar walking out the massive door and coming toward her. Anwar stepped ahead and held out his hands. As Marilyn took his hands, he bowed slightly and said, "Welcome to my home, Miss Marilyn Carlson, thank you for being my guest."

“Oh no, thank you!” Marilyn said emphatically, wondering what the hell the protocol really was here. She thought he was going to kiss her and was relieved when he didn’t. Nalah stood to one side, smiling and then joined the couple as they walked up the steps to the open door.

Marilyn was stunned by the huge foyer inside the door. A handsome young man, a teenager in a waistcoat reached out for her coat, smiling and Anwar, held out his right arm for Marilyn to take. He walked her through the foyer into a large noisy room, filled with people standing and sitting everywhere, talking and laughing. A small group of musicians were tucked into a corner, playing music quietly. When Anwar stepped up to the edge of the huge rug in the centre of the room, the whole room fell quiet and he said a phrase in some foreign tongue, followed by “Miss Marilyn Carlson!” The salon erupted in polite applause and Marilyn thought she must be caught in a case of mistaken identity.

Anwar walked her around the room, introducing her to people, explaining who they were, in the introduction. There seemed to be no relation between the guests. Some were clearly related, others were Americans that seemed no less uncomfortable than Marilyn. A stocky woman in an ill-fitting black cocktail dress raised her eyebrows when Marilyn was introduced to her, seeming to have an ‘Aha!’ moment.

The introductions continued and Anwar guided Marilyn through the room and over near a large double door. She could see more people sitting in another living room, but Anwar seemed to be guiding her past the doors to another small, single door further up the room. When they got to it, he let her arm slip off his, and reached out and opened the door, gesturing for her to enter. It was a small office, lined with shelves filled with books. Too small to be called a library, with only an ornate desk and two chairs and a pair of small tables. “Please, sit,” he said, gesturing toward a chair. Marilyn sat, smoothing her blue dress as she did, looking amusedly around the small room. The people outside the door were faintly audible, attesting to the room’s sound conditioning.

“Soon, my daughter, Sofia, will join us. She is anxious to meet you before the dinner,” Anwar said. “Why would your daughter want to meet me, Anwar?” Marilyn asked. Anwar seemed taken aback, as if Marilyn’s question was a challenge. She realized she didn’t know his last name and maybe referring to him by his given name was offensive. “What is your family name, Anwar?” she asked. “Hussein Al-Jamil,” he replied. “Are you Lebanese?” she asked. He paused, looking at her earnestly. “I am American. I have been American ten years. My family lives here and sometime Iraq. But now, we only are from America.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. I’ve met so many people today and from so many different backgrounds,” Marilyn said, her voice trailing off, eyes falling to the carpet. “Is okay. I understand. Come, here is Sofia,” he said, and held his hand out beside him. A small woman with fine features and a very dignified bearing stepped through the door and took Anwar’s hand. She looked at Marilyn and smiled and before Anwar could speak, she said, “Welcome, thank you for coming, I am Sofia.” She dropped Anwar’s hand and reached both hands out to Marilyn, who responded in kind. “Happy birthday, Sofia,” Marilyn said. Anwar closed the door and the two women walked, still holding both hands, to the chairs and sat down.

The three of them spoke quietly for a few minutes, making polite small talk until a chime sounded somewhere on Anwar’s desk. “Let us join the others now for dinner,” he said.

12 Treading The Labyrinth

“Holy crap, Afghanistan,” John said. “That’s a pretty dangerous place these days, son.”

“It’s all relative, Dad. Last year in Alberta, more people died in collisions involving tractor trailer units than have died so far in Afghanistan, in all the time we’ve been there. It’s still a pretty ugly place, but I’m happy to go,” Jason said. He looked at his mother, “This will be my last go round, Mom. I’m going to go civilian again after this hitch,” he said.

Jacqueline was sitting quietly, not sure what to say. After feeling overjoyed at the thought of meeting Jasmin and having a daughter-in-law, it all felt kind of fleeting. She was worried that irony would play into this being his last deployment and could only think about something going wrong.

“I thought you had to stay in five more years,” she said quietly. “No, Mom, I already did my time. I’d have had a longer hitch, but I had two years toward my degree when I enlisted. There’s a serious disconnect between the military and Foreign Affairs, and I think I can be part of the solution drawing them together. I have friends in Foreign Affairs and we’re going to try to make some good things happen. If we don’t fix, it Mom, we’ll never have any success in Afghanistan, just more fighting and pissing billions down the drain.”

While the couple realized their son was a soldier and all that meant, they also knew he spent most of his time training others, more often with a remote control in his hand than a firearm. The trio talked about where he’d be and what he’d be doing.

“While I won’t do much TIC time, I won’t bullshit you either. I’ll be working outside the wire most of the time, training and recruiting Afghans for their own army. I’ll have plenty of buddies watching my back, but I’ll also be a Taliban target. And it’s dangerous getting on and off the base, but I’m pretty sure everything will be just fine. I’ll head out about November 6, I’m guessing, and come home in May. I’ll come straight to Calgary, unless they need me to do some HQ time before they let me go.”

“What does Jasmin think of all this?,” Jacqueline asked, reminded of the cheerier news about the new woman in Jason’s life. “She’s cool. She’s really happy I’ll be getting out and going into Foreign Affairs. if it works out, we’ll do a lot of traveling together,” he said.

“Does Foreign Affairs have an office in Calgary?,” John asked. “No, I’ll do all my work with them out of the country. I expect to do six and eight month contracts, spend a little time in Ottawa and the rest out here.”

“Kind of hard to keep a girl happy form that far away, isn’t it?,” Jacqueline asked. “Well, Mom, I remember when we were kids, Dad would head off from McMurray and sometimes be gone for a couple months at a stretch, and you’re the happiest married couple I know.”

Jacqueline sat completely still and said nothing. Jason and his sister Brenda thought their father was off working, but actually, he had taken up with a waitress from the Oil Can and was living with her in a trailer just outside of McMurray. They were hard times for her. His trucking business was doing really well, he owned nine units and spent most of his time ‘keeping them working’, a euphemism for sitting in a lounge all day buying the cocktails for a purchaser from Syncrude. In the meantime, Jacqueline stayed home and raised the two kids, planning a divorce and her exodus from McMurray with half the trucking company’s assets.

One night, the waitress didn’t come home from work, but stopped at the Peter Pond where she met a musician doing a single in the lounge there. It was lust at first bite, she swept in and grabbed a suitcase full of clothes in the early morning and the pair headed down 63 for points beyond. When John sobered up and realized what had happened with her, he went home and pleaded with Jacqueline to take him back. She didn’t agree at first, but did let him sleep in the

basement rumpus room. The kids used to harass him every morning and tease him about not being able to make it upstairs to bed.

Then, over Christmas, Rex and Margaret came out, so John and Jacqueline put up a façade of sleeping together. With his folks set up in the rumpus room, John came to like the idea of a nice warm woman beside him in bed. One night, late, he started stroking Jacqueline's back and gradually, as he worked his hand lower and lower, her resolve started to melt and she became a nice warm woman again. When she rolled over, his hand landed on just the right spot, and suddenly, they were married again.

John strayed again, as truckers have a wont to do, but always out of town, out of sight and with someone who didn't care enough to stick around or stake a claim. Jacqueline had her secrets, too, but she knew to just look Jason in the eye and say, "Thanks, son, we sure are."

They spent the evening talking about Afghanistan and getting a different perspective than they'd previously entertained. Jason wasn't a hard core soldier and didn't hold the view that the Taliban should be rounded up and shot. He knew they were victims in their own land and even though they were misguided and hiding behind a definition of Islam that didn't hold up to scrutiny, he also knew they were changeable. Take the guns away, take the dogma away, give them a decent life to live and they were essentially, just uneducated, stone-age guys. Not unlike the fundamentalist Christians that set up a church and camp on the road out toward Fort McKay. They, too, didn't want their women educated and kept them down, used them badly, all in the name of Jesus. While they didn't share the Taliban penchant for bloody violence, they also weren't watching their country being occupied by agents of Satan. Well, they were, but they viewed it a little differently. Although the people around McMurray thought they'd be witnessing a Jonestown-style massacre someday, the cult actually tempered down a lot, a few left, a couple of the men went to work at Suncor and the next thing everyone knew, they were partying with the rest and the best of them.

Jason knew he couldn't expect this from the Taliban, but he hoped someday, his work would lead to an Afghanistan that was peaceful, productive and safe for kids.

On the other hand, he knew that the strife had lasted a thousand years and no amount of occupation would lead to peace. But he thought the current plan, subdue the Taliban, try to get a democratic foothold, was the best chance the country had. His first mission was to get over there, get his work done and get home, all in one piece.

"If it works out, before I leave, I'm going to bring Jasmin up here. Maybe you can invite her for Christmas, if she doesn't head out to the coast.

"Well, Brenda and Ted and the kids said they're staying in Houston this Christmas, so maybe that would be nice, having someone here with us" Jacqueline said.

Jason told his folks about his friend Ashland, a guy he'd met in Gagetown who was in Afghanistan now. He heard from him regularly, and was excited about spending some time with him when he got to Khandahar. He was Jason's eye on the action and had, through their correspondence, convinced him the trip would be a worthwhile one. He talked about progress and the difference between what the politicians said and reality and had Jason convinced the deployment was the right thing to do.

He could tell the folks were wearing out on the subject and he thought he should be heading back to Edmonton, grateful his mother hadn't made a big deal of him not staying overnight. He got up and gave his dad a hug, grabbed his tie and stuffed it in his tunic pocket. He was standing in the kitchen talking with his mother, while John turned on the television and flipped the channels until

he hit the National. The top story was three more Canadian deaths in Afghanistan, so the three stood in the middle of the livingroom, watching, almost in disbelief.

There was footage of a blown out APC, with combat troops standing around and a correspondent talked about how a taxi had pulled out to pass the convoy as it slowed to turn off the highway. As it pulled past the APC, it exploded, blowing the heavy vehicle over on its side and killing two of the men. A third died before they could move him from the scene.

The correspondent told how the soldiers had broken protocol, waving the taxi past as they slowed to turn. Normally, the vehicle wouldn't have been allowed to get that close and it was one man's error that cost three lives.

A higher ranking soldier, looking unconvincing with his stiff upper lip, talked about the solidarity of the troops and how the explosion was a vagary. But you could sense his helplessness; there's no one to wreak revenge on in a suicide bombing, the perpetrator is dead before the event has finished happening.

Jason finally sat down and when the broadcast finished, he took the remote from John and surfed up to CTV, hoping to see something he'd recognise on their newscast. He wasn't sure what, but he needed to know more. He had friends there and since they hadn't identified anyone, he didn't even know that they weren't people he knew. He was hoping to catch a glimpse of Ashland, just to know he was okay. He realized it was ridiculous, of course. There were more than two thousand Canadian members in Afghanistan, it was kind of like a lottery.

The CTV newscast had more information, in addition to three killed, four more were seriously injured. He thought it odd the CBC didn't report any of that. His folks started reiterating their misgivings about his deployment, his father trying to keep a brave face, Jacqueline being quite blunt. She'd like him to just drop out now, take a job in Red Deer and forget the whole thing. They all realized the futility of their conversation and Jason hugged them both again, promising to spend a few days when he came out in October.

He left the house and climbed in his rental car, turning on the radio and tuning it in to an Edmonton station that featured news twice an hour. He listened to a guy named Dan Tencer speculate on the upcoming Oilers season and the same newscast, with even less information than the television, every half hour.

He wanted to listen to music, to move the deaths out of his head for a while, but a macabre curiosity kept him on the news station.

13 An Cupan Tae

As they pulled into town, Johnnie asked where the hospital was. "It's right across the road from the detachment," Terry said. "Your friend will be close by." While large enough to have a hospital and police detachment, Clarendale was still a very small place. As you pulled in from the north you could actually see the roads pulling out east and south. It was just a few seconds before the cruiser pulled up in front of the detachment, a one-storey frame building with white shiplap siding.

Patrick opened the door and helped Johnnie out of the back seat and lead him into the front of the building. He was told to sit in a chair near the front door. "Don't decide to go wandering anywhere, Scammell, I'll see what the NC wants done with you," Patrick warned. Johnnie sat quiet and looked around, eventually picking up a magazine and thumbing through it.

There was a little old man sitting at a desk behind the front counter, who was on the phone when the trio walked in. He put the receiver back in the cradle and looked over Johnnie's way. "What ya doin' here, bye?" he asked. "I had a car wreck," Johnnie said. "My buddy's over in the hospital."

"So, whyn't ya go see how he's doin'?" the man asked. "The constable told me, sit tight," he said. "Then ya did somethin', didn't ya?" the old man said, squinting at Johnnie.

"Truth is, we did a lot, but nuttin' against the law," Johnnie said. "We just had a wreck and got beat up a bit, that's all."

"Where yas from," the old man asked. "I'm Rex Scammel's bye, down at Caplin Cove." The old man didn't show any signs of recognition, which kind of surprised Johnnie. For better or worse, Rex was well known to law enforcement and they were still pretty much in their home stompin' grounds. If the old man knew him, he wasn't letting on. He dug through a file folder and flipped through several pages, ignoring Johnnie and not speaking. After a few minutes, the door on the office opened and Patrick and Terry stepped out, followed by an older officer, and the three of them walked out the door of the detachment and opened the trunk of the car. Johnnie turned his head slightly to see what they were doing, but not enough to catch the attention of the old man. He didn't want to look too interested.

The officers took the duffle out and brought it into the detachment and the older officer looked over at Johnnie. "Where'd ya get this bag, bye?" he asked, in a threatening tone. "I picked it up off the back of the Heart's Content, me father's boat," he answered. "Did he give it ta ya,?" the officer asked. "No, I just picked it up. There was a bunch of them there, I think they come from the dump, maybe."

"They don't dump new duffles in the dump, son."

"It were pretty beat up when I got it. Me mom washed it up a bunch, so it looks better now."

"Well, it looks like she washed up all the evidence, too," the older officer said.

Johnnie wanted to challenge them to see what it was they thought Rex had done, but thought better of it. "Can I go see Tammy at the hospital?" he asked. Before anyone answered the officer looked at Patrick and said, "Maybe we need to have a chat with that bye, before they get out of Clarendale. You stay with this fella, Terry," he said, as Patrick and the older officer headed for the door. Before they could leave, the phone rang, and the old man gestured to Patrick. "What is it, Scotty?" he asked. "It's Monroe," he answered standing up and handing him the receiver. "Yes, bye," Patrick said and stood listening before turning to Johnnie. "What d'ya want them to do with yer car?" he asked.

"I need to get it fixed, so I can get the hell out of here," he said. The older officer said,

"Clarendale not good enough, bye? Ya want to leave us in a hurry then?"

"No disrespect, sir, but this ain't been a good day fer me and Tammy. Can Monroe fix it to run? I can go home and fix it proper."

"Terry, take the bye over Monroe's place and see what needs to be done to get the two of them out of Clarendale, would ya." the older officer said. "The bye is comin' over," Patrick said, and handed the receiver to Scotty, who hung it up.

Johnnie and Terry took the cruiser over, and he appreciated sitting up front instead of like a caged animal behind the driver. The car was still on the wrecker when they pulled up and an older man in oilsoaked wool pants and a shirt so grimy it's original colour was a guessing game between red and blue came out the open garage bay door.

He and Johnnie spoke briefly and he took him around the car inspecting the damage. Johnnie explained that it wouldn't start. "The exhaust is plugged wi' mud," the man said, pointing to the crumpled tailpipe. They agreed on \$150 to make it roadworthy and pay for the tow and the man set to work. He put a hook under the front bumper and, with the car braced against the back of the wrecker, pried the fender back to reasonably straight. He then hammered the hood flat with a sledge hammer, striking it about a dozen times. "I got an old rad in that one over there he said, I'll put that in. Come back in a couple hours," he said. "But gi'me some money first, all of it."

Johnnie was despondent when he was riding back to the detachment. The car was going to run, he was sure, but it sure looked like hell. Somehow when he said 'fixed' he visualized back to normal, not all beat up like an oil barrel that's washed up on the shore.

When they pulled up to the detachment and he opened the door, he immediately heard the sound of Tammy's violin coming from inside the building. Patrick had a big grin on his face and although he ignored Johnnie he said, excitedly to Terry, "We got Tammy Myshral playin' the fiddle here, can you believe that?" Terry smiled and acted like he knew Thomas, but he was really just playing along with Patrick. When he sensed it, Patrick started telling him first about Tammy, then his Dad. He explained that Tammy's Dad had played with his own father for years. Johnnie was stunned. He knew everyone Thomas Myshral had played with. He learned to play himself from these men.

"Who was your Dad, then," Johnnie asked. "Albert Pike," Patrick replied. "The piano player?" Johnnie asked, incredulous. "I just et supper with him a week back."

Suddenly, the atmosphere changed and Johnnie didn't feel like a prisoner anymore. He walked over to Tammy, who had his back turned and turned as he walked up. The right side of his head was shaved and bright orange with mercurochrome, a dozen stitches sticking out just below his new hairline.

"Get your guitar Johnnie, these byes needs a party," he said. As Johnnie got the guitar out and slung the strap over his shoulder, he dug in his pocket, coming up with a handful of picks, kept one and dumped the others back. As he started to tune up, the older officer stepped back in the door, carrying a fiddle case.

Johnnie thought he was dreaming, playing Squid Jiggin' Ground at four in the afternoon at the police station. The men played and Patrick and Terry clapped and hollered, even old Scotty seemed mildly entertained, although he stayed at his desk and continued to work while the boys played. The older officer stopped at one point and picked up the phone, dialed a number and told someone he'd be bringing two hungry lads over for supper.

At about 5:30, Monroe called to say the car was ready. They put the instruments down and walked over to the garage, a couple of blocks over.

The car looked rough, but when Johnnie turned the key in the ignition, it jumped to life. He left it run and walked around it. Monroe had replaced the headlamps on the right side, wrapping wire around the outside light to keep it from falling out. The inside light appeared to be bent down, but at least it was intact. He noticed Monroe and the older officer talking out by the road. Monroe came over and handed Johnny a wad of bills, "She didn't take so lang as I t'ought, bye," and walked back in the garage door.

Johnnie and Tammy got in the car, Tammy's door closing with a crunch as it bound against the fender. "Got yer ass out of another sling, John Scammell. Ya better get me to Tronna this time," he said, without a hint of humour.

They went for supper at Ted's the older officer's house, ate a wonderful meal prepared by his wife and spent the evening playing fiddle tunes and laughing, drinking a little but not too much. When it was time to wind down, Terry took the boys back to the detachment and they spent the night sleeping on the hard steel cots in the cells, laughing about their fate and the road ahead.

"We'll be sleeping in Montreal this time tomorra," Johnnie said. "That's what ya said yesterday," Thomas responded. As grateful as he was that they weren't laying in locked cells, Johnnie was a little bitter that he was being held up as the cause of it all and Tammy the saviour. That wasn't how he saw it, but there was no percentage in arguing the point..

14 Shove The Pig's Foot A Little Closer To The Fire

Bill turned to Ed and said, "So my little sweetheart's running off with a soldier." Ed, who was taking a large gulp of coffee in as he heard the words felt it jam up and explode in his nose, spraying all over the table. Bill started to laugh out loud and Ed did his best to recover. "Margie's leaving you?" Ed said, with no small amount of despair in his voice, "For a soldier?"

"Nah, ya dumb shit. Margie's my wife. My little sweetheart is Jasmin and she's got a new boyfriend she found on the base back in New Brunswick."

Ed sat stunned, wiping coffee off the front of his shirt and reaching for a napkin to clean up the table. He noticed his hand shaking and he hoped Bill didn't. "I bet he's a nice fella," Ed said, not because he believed it necessarily, but he wanted to steer the attention away from his flustered demeanor. The last thing he needed was for Bill to suspect he was interested in Margie. He'd managed to keep it secret for decades.

"Margie'd never leave this place," Bill said. "She's got it all fixed just the way she likes it. There's so god damn much perfume in this house I almost crapped my pants the other day, just trying to make it smell normal. I noticed I never can tell when a woman's wearing perfume. Ya know why? "Cause I soak in the shit every night. It's a wonder they didn't think I was queer at the plant."

"I think they did, Bill," Ed said, throwing his head back, laughing. "We all thought you'd be a transvestite when you retired." Ed was still making up for his shaky state. He was amazed that he'd heard Bill the way he had. He knew Jasmin had a new boyfriend and it bothered him that now, after all these years, he seemed to be trying, day after day, to sabotage his own cover.

He started making small talk, bringing things up almost at random to steer the conversation away from anything to do with Margie and infidelity.

It wasn't much of a challenge. He got Bill started on environmentally sound insulation and then just sat back and listened as Bill told him about every other insulating material that was cheaper and better than what was available today. He went on and on and Ed mostly nodded his head, occasionally feeding Bill a phrase to keep him going. All the while, triggered by the thought of her running off with someone else, Ed imagined her laying naked, running her hands over her breasts, his mind thoughtfully airbrushing her public hair into a blur to salvage her dignity from his imagining eyes.

"Ya know," Bill said, "When ya think about the energy saving from that green shit, ya gotta factor in what it takes just to make it and ship it to the store. That uses more energy than your house will lose in ten years."

Ed sat there, wondering what the green shit was, further confused when Bill leaned over and punched out a trumpet blast off his bar stool and then started to giggle. “Shit, just about did it again.”

He got up and grabbed the carafe out of the coffee maker, swung over to the table and filled first Ed’s cup, then his own. “Ya know, we spend a lot of energy shipping this shit up from Colombia, too, but I don’t care, this is damn good coffee.” Ed didn’t bother pointing out that it was Kenyan coffee, something he only knew because he’d read it as he carried the bag of groceries in. He knew Bill would answer that it actually used up ten times as much energy, then.

Margie came in from the livingroom, walked over to the sink, opened the cabinet door, pulled out an aerosol can and proceeded to spray down the kitchen. The she turned and went back out through the livingroom and disappeared. She looked older, a little more worn than she had in Ed’s daydream a few minutes earlier. Although he hadn’t noticed the odour of Bill’s latest fart, he was struggling with the density of the air freshener. He could taste it on the edge of his cup as he slurped up some more coffee.

“Think Jas’ll marry this guy?”, Ed asked. “Ah, I dunno,” Bill said, “She’s kinda spoiled. I bet she keeps him a round a couple years and then goes and gets another degree. She thinks he’s a good kid, ya know, but she didn’t seem, like, ya know, smitten.”

“Smitten.” Ed corrected.

“Ya, that either,” Bill said, smiling.

“I don’t know if I’d want to marry a soldier,” Ed said, not catching himself quickly enough. “I don’t think you’d find one willing, Ed. Besides, Jeannette’d have yer balls just for thinkin’ about it.”

“That’s not what I meant, Bill,” Ed said, irritated. He started explaining how in this day and age, soldiers are getting killed again, after decades of being glorified file clerks.

“Well,” Bill said, “They killed a few of our peacemakers too, ya know. Remember old Jack? His kid got whacked over in some goddamned place and we weren’t at war then.”

“Peacekeepers,” Ed corrected, “Jack’s son Lyle wasn’t killed fighting, they crashed a supply helicopter or something.”

“Ya, you’re right. Where the hell was that? Honduras?”

“Cyprus, Bill, over near Greece. We should travel, you know. We’ve sat in this goddamned town for fifty frickin’ years and we never go anywhere. We should pack up and head off somewhere we’d never dreamed of going.”

“Ya, let’s go down to Tahiti. The women there go around topless all the time.”

“Nah, they speak French there. Let’s go to Fiji instead. They speak English, it’s cheap and really beautiful. Bet we could stay there a month for five hundred bucks apiece and do whatever we wanted.”

Bill looked pensive, “Nah, Margie’d never go for that. Away for a whole month? She can’t be away from the grandkid for a week.”

“Who said anything about taking the women. Shit, Jeannette doesn’t retire for another five years,” Ed said.

“Right you are, buddy, what the hell was I thinking,” Bill said. He bent over and tried to touch his toes six times in rapid succession, punching out a sharp little fart each time and missing his toes by a full six inches.

The two men took their coffee cups, as if on cue, and headed back out into the garage, not really knowing what they’d do there, just that they’d spent as much time in the kitchen as they were going to, this afternoon.

15 Riding On A Hand-Car

After he dropped his coat on a chair in the hall, Dean went into the bathroom. He relieved himself and stood, looking into the mirror, wondering if he was too old and tired to just pick up and rock and roll at the drop of a hat. As he looked into his eyes, he was overcome by the thought that he'd set this evening aside to explore Harmonic Hemisphere, a process he thought was going to move him forward spiritually and now he was taking a step backward and playing a gig he really didn't want to do.

'Is there some reason I seem to keep putting this off?' he asked himself. 'Am I deliberately sabotaging this?' Part of his concern was that he seemed intensely interested and if it caught on like he thought it might, it could cause problems with Marilyn. She was pretty conventional, all her spirituality tied up in a lapsed Protestantism. If challenged, she likely couldn't say definitively whether she really was an atheist. Some days, she thought there was a god out there somewhere, other days, she wasn't sure. Mostly, she didn't think about it at all and that was convenient. She liked her spiritual side to be somehow tied to her career. As it flourished, other things seem to matter less. While there were days when he was pretty sure that all applied to him as well, generally Dean thought they'd stay an item forever. But the vague mysticism attached to Harmonic Hemispheres was just the kind of thing that might start to distance her. And maybe, on some level, that was part of the attraction. As good as their relationship was, it didn't fill every void in his life and lately, with his music career ebbing and business coming into singular focus, voids were starting to pop up regularly.

He felt self-conscious looking onto his own eyes in the mirror and found he was making faces, ridiculous faces, just to defeat the seriousness of the moment. After repeating a couple of favourites and then seeing his sheepish grin, he turned and headed out into the apartment.

He walked through the kitchen nook and opened the fridge. Not seeing anything appealing, he started assembling a mental menu of fast-food places on the way to the gig, finally settling on a sushi bar that was close to the club Alex told him to come to. He went into the den and picked his bass up off a guitar stand by the desk and slipped the strap over his shoulder. His left hand automatically rolled up the fret board, perfectly composing a variation on a pentatonic scale, while his right thumb rested on the E string, dampening it. He could feel that the D string was a tad sharp, something he'd come to expect when the guitar sat for a few days.

He did a quick once over, tuning the instrument using harmonics and then slipped it off and put it back on the stand. He went to the closet, returning with a weathered aluminum travel case and laid it across the arms of the chair in front of the desk. He snapped the latches and opened the lid, reached in and removed a terry towel laying in the case. He picked up the guitar and quickly and gently, rubbed it down from top to bottom with the towel, then laid it in the case, carefully spreading the towel on top of it. Before he lowered the lid, he flipped up the lid of a small compartment near the headstock and did a quick visual check of the contents, then closed the case lid and snapped the latches, turning them into the locked position. He grabbed the case by the handle and swung it off the chair and walked out in the hall, putting it down in front of the door.

He looked in the mirror again and even though he had decided he'd just wear his suit pants and shirt from work, he changed his mind. He went into the bedroom, slid back the closet door and started going through the rack of shirts, finally pulling a pale yellow faux satin shirt off a hanger.

He pulled his white shirt off, sniffed his armpits and headed back into the bathroom. He freshened up his deodorant and then, almost an afterthought, sprayed cologne across his chest. He slipped the satin shirt on, and then his overcoat, felt in his pocket for his keys and confirming them, grabbed the guitar with his right hand, the door handle with his left and exited the apartment. His spirit was lifting with each step as he was heading back to a place that chased the world away and was truly his domain.

The elevator door opened on the seventh floor and a petite woman, in her forties, stepped in. Catching his cologne, she turned her head and looked into his eyes, then trailed off, following his body down to the guitar case in his hand. "Oh, are you a musician?" she asked. "No, I'm actually a hitman, but keep it to yourself, I'm off-duty right now," Dean said. The woman laughed. "I guess that sounded pretty stupid, didn't it? But, you could have just stolen that guitar, I guess."

"Nope, it's mine. I play bass, actually."

"Are you somebody famous?" she enquired.

"Have you ever heard of Flip It?," he asked.

"Oh yeah!" she squealed, enthusiastically. "That's who you are! I saw you at Nathan Phillips Square! I have your CD! We were listening to it just the other day!"

"We're at the Cross Club tonight, you oughta come down," Dean said, realizing he was setting himself up. Once she figured out he lived in the building, she'd become a liability. They always did. And he hadn't even thought about sleeping with her. Well, that wasn't true, that fleeting thought crossed his mind when she walked through the elevator door.

"Oh, hey, we just might!" she squealed.

After a brief pause, she said, "I thought Flip It broke up..?"

"I'm just sitting in tonight. There's still three other original members in the band, but they call themselves Sunscum now."

"Ha-ha-ha," the woman laughed nervously, "That sounds like 'Some Scum'"

"That too," Dean said, laughing. "We still play all the same tunes, you'll love it." The door opened and he gestured with the guitar case. She strutted out of the elevator, exaggerating her stride and Dean stood watching and appreciating the show. As they walked through the lobby, she explained she was off to supper with her girlfriend and then, who knew, they were probably going somewhere for a drink and a gab.

"See you at the Cross Club," he said, winking, and headed down the stairs into the garage. He wasn't sure where Marilyn had left the car and was mentally chastising himself for getting off in the lobby, just to tag along with the woman. 'Tsk, tsk,tsk' he said silently.

As he walked around a concrete pillar he saw the blue Mazda in the distance and swung the guitar around to his left hand, reached into his right pocket and pushed the button on the key fob twice. The taillights lit up and he could hear the doors clunk unlocked. He popped the tailgate and slid the guitar in, pulled a blanket over it and closed the tailgate, then got in the driver's door.

On the trip downtown, he turned on the radio, scanning through the presets looking for something to listen to. Finding nothing, he turned it off. As he drove along he realized he was relieved he hadn't asked the woman if she needed a ride downtown. It's the kind of thing he'd normally do, innocently, but he remembered that these situations never ended as innocently as they began. He pulled into a parking stall and walked down the block to the sushi bar. He ate light, knowing he'd be singing a little later, likely a lot, he hoped.

He started humming, then singing, one of the Flip It! hits he'd written called 'Lowering Your Self Esteem', about talking a woman into bed and out of a relationship. He chided himself, but kept singing. That led to a ten minute warm up of his voice, reaching for notes and then trying to hold them until lights changed or cars turned or any other measuring device that strained his vocal chords.

By the time he pulled into the parkade under the building that housed the Cross Club, his trademark vibrato was strong and his falsetto clear, clean and right on key. He went up the elevator to the penthouse where the club was located, in silence, but ready to walk right out on stage and get at it.

That was a little premature. It was just after seven and the band wouldn't start until nine at the earliest. Normally, they dicked around for twenty minutes, doing a half hour set and then got down to it in earnest about 10:30. But with Alex running the show, who knew what to expect?

The stage looked eerily familiar, the same keyboard rack, Bkuto's drum kit, the same amps and speaker cabinets in the same positions. Except, there was no bass amp. 'If Bernie was sick and in the hospital, his amp should be right there, beside the drum kit, in that empty space' Dean thought.

He went over to the bar, leaving his guitar case leaning against the front of the stage. There was no one around, so he pulled himself up on a stool and sat, waiting. After a short time, a waitress appeared and walked in behind the bar. "Can I get you something,?" she asked, smiling.

"Ah, ginger ale, please," Dean said. "Tall, easy ice."

She took a can of Schweppes out of the cooler, dropped a couple ice cubes in a tall glass, popped the top of the can and started pouring. Looking at the stage, she asked, "Are you the new bass player?"

"I'm the old one, actually. Alex called me in when Bernie got sick."

"Bernie's not sick. He quit," she said, all the joy draining from her face. "Well, maybe sick of Alex bullshit," she said, then smiling, added, "Did I say that with my outside voice? Damn!" Dean had a sinking feeling, and as good as the ginger ale felt, the sushi was decidedly unsettled in his stomach. He tried to get something more definite out of the waitress, but she wasn't talking, except to say the band was playing really well and drawing excellent crowds, even early in the week and she'd made a mortgage payment in tips in a couple of nights. Dean started to think he was in the wrong business.

He was hoping Rollie would show up soon – he generally came early to the club and checked to make sure everything was working, in spite of a tech crew that took care of those things. But he seemed to need some time in the space. Dean thought Rollie would have liked to have a sleeping bag and stay backstage. In the early days, he'd often find him in the middle of the night noodling away on a portable keyboard through headphones. Rollie was always ready to go at showtime and Dean was surprised he continued to put up with Alex. Both Rollie and John applied different rules to music than they did business.

In real estate, everything was done according to a plan, every detail was looked after and anyone who didn't fit into the team was gone, replaced by the right personnel. In the band, they put up with a lot of stuff from Alex and particularly Nicky and Silas, who really saw themselves as international jet setter rock stars, when really they were big fish in a pretty small pond. Toronto had produced some extremely impressive players over the years that were big locally, but

unknown elsewhere. In some respects, it was the Toronto curse – there was plenty of lucrative work, but little attention from the outside. A dominant instrumentalist in, say, Los Angeles, Chicago or New York, would be known all over the world, without ever leaving the city. In Toronto, you had to make it somewhere else, if you wanted to be a household name.

And the nature of the business itself played into that. So many artists were besotted with the idea of stardom that they put all their energies into that. If they were a hit, they had an army supporting them. That army disappeared as soon as a label-mate had a new release. You were only as good as your latest hit and if you didn't get the support and exposure, you didn't get the hits, no matter how good, musically, you were.

Flip It! had circumvented all that. They didn't rely on recordings and radio play for an income and they favoured big club dates over concert work. As a result, they were always in demand, playing the biggest clubs in the Golden Triangle, getting opening act and headline status at the R&B festivals, selling plenty of recordings through independent distributors and generally keeping big music at arms length. And they made plenty of money and kept it all in-house. The accountant for Rollie's real estate firm managed the dollars and he was competent, humble and honest; a great combination for longevity and return on investment.

Dean asked the waitress about the horn section, since he could see three mikes set up stage right, at the back. She came over and leaned on the bar in front of him, draining the can of Schweppes into his glass. "Terry and Jackie from Brass Ring have been here for a couple weeks and a guy named Marco started Monday night. He plays alto and he's really, really good. He plays the solo in "Take Me" even better than the original and I didn't think I'd ever say that. He's also really nice."

Dean couldn't remember a player named Marco in the Toronto scene and he knew pretty much all the decent horn players. He asked if Marco was local. "He said he was from Montreal, but I heard him talking about playing in Europe. Maybe France-French, now that you mention it. I think this is his first gig. Friends with the drummer, what's his name?"

"Bkuto," Dean said.

"Yeah, Buck-You-Toe," she said, "He's a good player, boy."

Dean continued to talk to her, learning that her name was Karen and that he'd likely met her a few years earlier at a party after a gig. He didn't remember anything about her, but she seemed to know a lot about Flip It! – their songs, the guys in the band, incidents that had happened over the years.

While they were talking, Rollie walked in the door. "Deano!" he called out, "Good to see you man!" He came over and the two hugged. Dean realized it had actually been several months since he and Rollie had actually talked. Normally, they saw one another every few weeks, but Dean's work had been taking him out of town more, he and Marilyn tended not to go out as much and he hadn't been playing at all, not even much at home.

"Oh, that's excellent, man," Rollie said, referring to Dean's sitting in. "Oh, this is gonna be great. The band sounds really good in here and we've got a really fine alto player this week, Marco Lafrenniere. Maybe you've heard of him. He toured with Wynton Marsalis, played on Mary J. Blige's sessions. Fuck, he's good. Nice guy, too."

Dean asked what happened to Bernie. Rollie got kind of quiet and asked Karen, the waitress to get him and glass of soda and a twist of lime. When she brought it to him, he turned and walked

toward the stage and Dean understood he was supposed to follow. When they got out of earshot, Rollie turned and said, “He had something happening with the waitress, not sure what exactly, not sure if it was even anything. But fuckin’ Alex, you know him, starts in on Bernie about her. Did a whole fraternizing with the staff number, then called the chick down, said she was an energy vampire, accused Bernie of not paying attention and making mistakes and finally, he said ‘Screw it, I’m done’ and Alex just came unglued on him. He ended up taking his amp and leaving at the end of the night, just like that. I played bass on pedals last night and it totally sucked, so, man, I’m happy to see you tonight. Are you doing the whole week with us?”

Dean didn’t know what to say. He thought he was sitting in while Bernie was sick or until they found someone else, one, maybe two nights maximum.. With his dear friend Rollie standing in front of him, he was prepared to play for a month. He couldn’t, of course, he had other commitments. Then he remembered he was in New York Friday and probably Saturday, too.

“I’m in New York Friday night, and Saturday, too, I think. I guess that just leaves tonight and tomorrow, but I can cover both of them.”

Rollie looked downcast. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do, Dean. We’ve got excellent bookings, the band sounds great, everything’s perfect except fucking Alex. I can’t handle him anymore. It’s been too fucking long, man. It’s like a bad marriage we’re keeping together so we don’t have to sell the house.. It really sucks. I felt like hiring a hit man the other night. I thought Bernie was going to smack him and I really hoped he would, you know. And that’s just not me, I’m not like that.”

“So dump him,” Dean said. “He’s got no legal connection to the band, there are plenty of young R&B singers in the city that would jump at the chance.”

“Dean, it would take a month just to get the auditions organized and then at least a month of rehearsals. I’m not sure I can convince John to give up the cash to finance that and I don’t want to start canceling gigs, but getting rid of him is really fucking appealing right now.”

“Hang on,” Dean said, “Remember that kid, Sid McCarty? he was the one that was hanging around when were doing the Bluestone sessions? He said if we ever needed anyone, to call him. And he could really sing! Remember when he did the beds? They were good enough to cut and they were all single takes. Even Alex was impressed and even, I think, a little jealous of the kid.”
“That was four years ago, Dean.”

“Let me try to find him. I sense you either dump Alex or you’re packing it in, here,” Dean said.
“Well, you’re right about that,” Rollie responded, “There will come the time to hang it up, just like it did for you, but musically, I still love this band. Not ready to quit, not interested in starting over or being a sideman.”

Dean looked at his watch. It was 8:30 and he was getting more comfortable by the minute. A short, fat guy with a pony-tail and a black t-shirt walked in. On the front of his shirt in white print it said, ‘Of course, it’s too loud, asshole. That’s how we like it’.

Dean rolled his eyes and smiled. This was Troll and he’d been part of the crew years ago, but left to go on the road with some country star. When he looked up and saw Dean, a huge smile split his face in half, exposing a missing front tooth. “Parker! You homo! You fuck! Wow, is it great to see you!”

The pair embraced and stood looking at each other and laughing, trading insults and rejoicing that they’d be working together that night. Troll told Dean not to worry, he’d direct inject him into the

console and give him a pair of fifteens on the floor as a monitor. “We don’t need no pussy bass amps, man, we got lots of gear, we got you covered big time.”

Dean was relieved. He knew Troll would make it his highest priority that the bass sound perfect onstage and in the mix and that he knew just how to do it. He also knew Troll actually had better control if there wasn’t a bass amp on stage and when Troll had control, things went just fine.

They talked for a few minutes, catching up on each other, while Rollie stood on stage, checking and adjusting his keyboards. Troll finally explained that he had a bunch of adjustments to make and stepped aside. Dean went back to the bar, ordered another ginger ale, this one with a shot of vodka in it. “Do I have to report the vodka to Alex,” Karen asked. “I would if it was Bernie.”

“No, I’m just fillin’ in. Alex is on a need-to-know basis and this is something he just doesn’t need to know.”

Dean spent the next hour meeting, hugging and yacking with the band members as they arrived and started to wonder, at 9:30, why Alex hadn’t shown up yet. “Rollie,” he asked, “Shouldn’t Alex, like, be here by now?”

“He’s in the lounge downstairs. He doesn’t want to have to deal with you before we start. He knows you’ll be pissed about him saying Bernie was sick. He’ll walk in just in time to play, the fuck head. He’s probably loaded, too.”

Dean shook his head and stepped up on the stage. He was standing in front of the horn section and making small talk with Marco when he heard Troll’s voice in the monitor. “Deano, play me a bit, okay?” Dean picked up his bass guitar, plugged in the cord that was laying on the floor in front of him and started running through a couple of warm-up scales. In moments, the stage was filled with rich, clean bass notes. He snapped the strings with the ends of his fingers and the monitors responded with punchy, tight crisp notes.

“You’re a wizard, Troll-man,” he said quietly into the microphone standing in front of him. “Wait ‘til you hear your vocals,” came a raspy reply in the floor monitor.

Rollie walked over beside him and started reading the set list on the floor in front of him. “We’ll be changing this a bit,” he said. “You okay to sing a few?”

“Ready to rock,” Dean said, glancing at his watch.

Rollie scribbled some things on a sheet of paper with a felt pen and taped it to Dean’s mic stand. Dean slipped it off and laid it on the floor, where he could see it better. He looked out into the club and could see that about a dozen tables were occupied and Karen was serving drinks. A bartender had arrived and was working behind the bar. As he slipped the bass off his shoulder, Troll streamed come canned music through the front end and flooded the stage with soft, gold light.

Dean stepped through the door at the back of the stage and walked down the hall past the dressing rooms and stepped out onto the club floor. He looked back at the stage and it looked just as they always looked, like a dormant monster, snoozing, but capable of erupting at any moment. Butterflies, a constant companion before, were forming in his stomach, an anxiety he had come to appreciate, even enjoy. Sometimes he got the same feeling entering an important business meeting, where the outcome could affect his standing with the firm, indeed his whole career, but here it was different. He knew the outcome – an outpouring of pure energy and a state of grace. The anxiety was just the trigger from his expectation for perfection and even though he hadn’t played much lately, he knew no one in the crowd would have an inkling of his rustiness.

He turned and started to head toward the soundboard, hoping Troll would explain the late start. Before he got there, Alex came through the door, walking briskly, followed, as he always was, by an entourage of self-important, ill-dressed punks. Dean would have laughed had he not been so angry.

Alex came over and made a big show, fawning and thanking Dean over and over, never giving him a chance to respond. A short black kid, wearing the hip hop skater pants and cocked ball cap uniform shoved his arm up in front of Dean as an invitation to shake hands. Dean ignored him and he self-consciously withdrew his arm, and turned away pretending he hadn't been spurned.

Dean asked Alex to step backstage and go over the set list with him and Alex turned to his 'crew', as he called them, and told them to take seats over by the sound board. Backstage, after a few minutes, all the musicians were together and Rollie and John went over the first set. It was a straight ahead explanation and Alex kept his distance.

"Well, let's get at 'er," John said, and the nine players walked single file down the hallway, through the door and to their positions on stage. The club's MC, a stand-up comic, looked nervously over his shoulder as they walked out on stage. He continued a gag he had started, pausing and checking, trying to time the punchline into a segue to introduce the band. Dean placed his fingers on the strings, ran the volume control up under his little finger and watched Bkuto count in the intro, slashing his drum stick through the air, feigning contact with the other stick.

Alex, with his back to the audience, whirled around as the band hammered the intro, spinning around and across the stage and nailed the opening line to "Take Me".

The half-full club responded, cheering and whistling and the set was launched. 'Just like old times,' Dean thought. The set proceeded at a frenetic pace and after just a few tunes, Dean felt completely comfortable and understood why Alex would be harder to replace than he thought. He was an excellent showman and his verbal and visual cues to the rest of the band were the reasons the sets ran so smoothly and everyone knew exactly what was happening. By the end of the set, Dean had almost forgotten that Bernie wasn't sick.

16 The Empty Lighter

Seated well down the table from the head, Marilyn was grateful she didn't have guest-of-honour status. She was concerned when Anwar took her into the den and Sofia came in to meet her, but now understood it was just a courtesy because she was a visitor. She thought she could quietly fade into the crowd and slip away early in the evening and return to her hotel.

On her right was a middle-aged man, wearing a dark blue suit, a crisp white shirt and floral tie. He seemed ill at ease and nodded to her several times, but didn't speak. Finally she turned to him and extended her hand. "Hello, I'm Marilyn Carlson," she said, smiling. He took her hand, with a firm grip and said, "I am pleased to meet you, Marilyn Carlson, I am Yusuf Abdel-Rahman." He seemed more comfortable and they started to make small talk, waiting for Anwar to speak and get the dinner underway. He told her he worked at the Chicago Times in the mail room, as a supervisor. He was clearly surprised and dismayed to learn that Marilyn was an executive and, he guessed correctly, made a lot more money than he did. He was curious why she was here at this family occasion and she had little to offer as an explanation. She did tell him she was a customer of Sava, but that seemed to make him more uneasy.

She was running out of things to say when the man to her left interrupted. "Excuse me. Yusuf, good to see you. Who's this beautiful woman you're with?" the man asked, looking straight at Marilyn and smiling. "I am not that lucky, Alan." Yusuf said. "Pleased to introduce you, Miss Marilyn Carlson."

"Nice to meet you, Miss Carlson, I'm Alan Craig," the man said. "Please, call me Marilyn," she replied. She thought he sounded Australian, although his accent wasn't particularly strong. "Are you Australian?" "Kiwi, actually, been a few years though. Been here about fifteen years, five in Chicago."

"What do you do, Alan, besides try to charm strange women?"

"Actually, you're hardly strange at all. For a Yank, you're pretty normal, actually. I work in marketing, at the Times. I work with Yusuf a fair amount, actually. Great guy to do business with."

The three of them continued talking and Marilyn was grateful to be occupied. Their conversation was finally broken by the tinkling of a small bell and they looked to their left to see Anwar standing at the head of the table, Sofia seated to his left. He waited until the room was still and then started speaking, first in Farsi, then English. He welcomed everyone and told the story of his daughter Sofia. He broke into Farsi a lot and it created gaps in the story, leaving Marilyn with the impression their life was confined to their time here in Chicago.

He spoke for about five minutes and then Sofia rose, embraced him and spoke as well, in a language Marilyn couldn't identify right away. It seemed different from the Farsi the Anwar spoke, but similar. It was evident he shared that language, as he nodded often and smiled broadly as she spoke.

Finally, Sofia welcomed everyone in English and sat down. Anwar joined her and the service staff started serving the meal.

It was as spectacular as it was a new experience for Marilyn. She wasn't very familiar with the food from the Middle East and the spread at the table was challenging. She'd try something thinking it would be benign only to gulp and wash it down, then something with extreme trepidation and find it was a wonderful, new and tantalizing flavour. The way the meal was served, she wasn't able to decide the portions and she was actually relieved when it appeared the meal was winding down.

Sofia stood and welcomed the women into another salon and they sat at small tables round the room and drank either strong coffee or tea. Marilyn was relieved to be served tea, her senses unable to accommodate the possibility of a strong dose of caffeine.

After some time passed, the women returned to the dining room which now had its tables removed and the band had moved to the end of the room and was playing quietly. Alan Craig came over and spoke with Marilyn, politely, but too familiarly for her taste. She wanted the evening to be over, to be back in her room, quiet and alone.

She noticed that Nalah was not present and hadn't been since she welcomed Marilyn at the front door. She wondered what her role in the family was, whether she was an employee or family member, or both. She thought if she could find Nalah, she could ask her what was going to happen, maybe have her track down Sam to take her home. At least she could make some sort of appeal and not feel obliged to stay too late.

"Do you know Nalah," she asked Alan. "That's the girl that works with Anwar at the shop," he answered. "She's out in the foyer, handling the receiving line."

“Receiving line?, Marilyn asked incredulously, “How late is this party going?”

“Well, only a small number of guests were invited for dinner. Most people come by this evening and they won’t likely stay too long. The party lasts for a couple of days, but that’s mostly family and close friends. Getting weary, are you?”

“It’s been a long day, Alan. I was at a conference and took off at noon to do some shopping. I met Nalah and Anwar at Sava and have been going flat out ever since. What’s the protocol for going home? I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, but I’m bushed. I was hoping Nalah could call me a cab.”

Alan laughed. “It might be tough to find a cab tonight, most of the Chicago fleet is attending this party and are off duty.” He could see his remark had deflated Marilyn, so he added, “Not really, it just seems that way. I can drop you off.”

As much as she wanted to go home, she was still mindful of the first words he said and wasn’t sure she wanted to ride with him, much less have him know where she was staying. But she also realized he was pretty small game: she’d fended off far more aggressive men and really wasn’t that concerned about turning down one more. Mostly she was craving a little solitude and maybe a quiet chat with Dean.

“Would you think it would be okay for me to go in and speak with Nalah?” she asked. “Sure. Of course. Why not?” Alan replied. “Here, let me.” he said and lead her through the crowd, past the band and out into the foyer. Nalah was speaking with a couple and noticed Marilyn come into the room. She smiled and shook the man’s hand and then gestured, showing them into the dining room. She came over to Marilyn and asked her how she was enjoying the party. Marilyn was polite, but said it had been a long day and she was getting quite tired. Nalah said she understood and took her to one side, out of earshot. As she spoke with Marilyn, she kept watching Alan, as if to see whether he could hear her or not. She explained that she would take Marilyn to say good evening to Anwar and Sofia and then have Sam come by and pick her up. Marilyn didn’t understand why Craig shouldn’t be privy to any of this information, but she also didn’t want him to know where she was staying. She wasn’t being antisocial, she was really tired.

It took twenty minutes to corner Anwar and Sofia and say goodnight and Marilyn as still none the wiser as to why she was invited in the first place. This was a pretty private affair and she was just a customer, nothing special, in her estimation. If there was something special about the day, it was that she had spent so much money, more than she’d ever dreamed of.

She was relieved when Sam was waiting at the bottom of the steps and walked her to the car. He got the door and she was too tired to try to catch him, not even caring, really, if he saw a little thigh or even a little more.

Sam drove slowly down the drive, looking at the gardens and exuding a certain pride, as though he was, if not the owner, at least somehow responsible for this beautiful property. Marilyn noticed this and wondered, almost aloud, how a tailor could afford such a luxurious property. Given its location and the size of the grounds, it had to be worth tens of millions of dollars.

She reflected on other incongruities. The house seemed to have almost no art in it. The furniture, while functional and attractive, didn’t match the grandeur of the home it was in. The meal was interesting and varied, but not the kind of opulent feast she’d expect at this type of occasion. She remembered one platter going by, that she hadn’t actually sampled, but it appeared to be a huge plate of hamburgers. Ordinary burgers, in plain buns, no produce. She was sure it must have been an exotic Iraqi dish.

When they came to the end of the lane, Sam turned right, instead of left. Marilyn remembered turning right into the lane and was immediately concerned that she was heading away from not toward, her hotel.

“Are we going the wrong way, Sam?” she asked. “This better way, nicer drive, along the water,” he said. Marilyn remained a little suspicious, but noticed the water coming up and soon they were on a broad parkway right next to the lake gliding along about thirty feet off the water. The view was pretty spectacular in both directions. Sam was making a broad gesture and talking about the landmarks, but she couldn’t understand what he was saying. He reached his right arm through the partition and was pointing at some building but Marilyn couldn’t hear him so she leaned forward, not seeing the tiny silver cylinder hidden in the palm of his hand. A blast of mist hit her full in the face, stinging her eyes, “What the f. . . .,” her voice trailed off as the inside of the cab started spinning and she was enveloped in a cloud of black and fell face-first onto the floor of the taxi.

Sam slammed the partition window and opened the window beside him, smiling at the simplicity of this operation. ‘She saw nothing’ he thought to himself, as he picked the mic off the dashboard and said something in Arabic, then hung it up.

17 Time Past, Time To Come

At the far end of the straight stretch and still an hour east of Ottawa, Johnnie decided he need to pull in and get some fuel. Thomas was asleep on the back seat, his mouth wide open, his hair hanging down and covering up his stitches. Johnnie wanted to stretch his legs, maybe get a drink and was considering waking him up so he wouldn’t be bellyaching later that Johnnie was cheating him out of a snack.

“Tammy! Hey! Wake up, Tammy! Ya want a Coke?” Johnnie yelled, watching him in the mirror. Thomas shuffled a little and his eyes fluttered and he started smacking his lips, waking up slowly. “What, what d’ya want? Where are we at?” he asked.

“We’re still east of Ottawa. Ya wanta Coke or something?” Johnnie asked.

“Are we stopping to eat, Johnnie?” Thomas asked. “Nah, we’ll eat in Ottawa, they’ll just have crap here at this gas station,” he said. “I’m pretty hungry, Johnnie,” Thomas said. He started climbing over the seat, then changed his mind, realizing the car would be stopped in a few seconds.

He fell back into the seat and held his head, rubbing his right temple.

“Maybe they got good home-made pies,” he said, based on nothing but a little dozy belligerence.

“We’ll get a good feed in at Ottawa, Tammy. They’ll have lots of good places there.”

“How far to Tronna?” Thomas asked. “It’s about 300 mile from here, Tammy. We’ll be there by supper,” he said, not realizing it would take much longer to travel, since they’d be passing through dozens of towns between the two cities. In fact, they’d be sleeping in the car near Peterborough, but neither of them had even heard of that city yet.

Thomas finally agreed to a Coke, then grabbed a bag of Cheezies before they left, tanked up and headed toward the nation’s capital. They’d been told to cross the river and drive up to Mattawa, then cut south before resuming their western trek, but Johnnie couldn’t see how that was going to save them any time. Now, with traffic building and Ottawa on the horizon, he was wishing he’d paid more heed.

Halfway across the city on Rideau Street Thomas said, “Johnnie, there’s that pizza joint. That’s the one she was talkin’ about,” referring to a conversation the night before with a waitress in Montreal. She said her friend worked there and that the pizza was the best they’d find between

Montreal and Toronto. Johnnie slid the Chevrolet into a parking spot in front of a place called Imbro's. "I dunno Tammy, it looks pretty expensive. We're getting a little shy on cash, ya know."

"We'll tell her we know Celeste, maybe she'll give us a break," Thomas said.

They stood for a minute on the sidewalk, Thomas searching for his cigarette papers, Johnnie scanning the street for some place cheaper. "There's Harvey's right down there, Tammy. They make a hamburger a beautiful thing," he said, half joking. "We've had nothin' but fockin' burgers for two days, Johnnie, I need somethin' substantial."

They went in the front door and a wonderful aroma enveloped them. They squinted into the dark room and a young, attractive waitress came up to them. "Un pair? For two?" she asked. "Are you Marie Rose?" Thomas asked. "Um, yes, why do you know my name,?" she asked, not concealing her interest in Johnnie very well, but nursing a healthy wariness, nonetheless.

"Celeste in Montreal told us to come see you, said you'd feed us good pizza and give us a good deal, too," he said. "Celeste!" Marie Rose shrieked. "Where did you see her?" she asked excitedly. "We had supper with her last night," Johnnie said. "She sent us to see you." They didn't have a lot more to tell her, since they'd only spoken to her for a few minutes the night before, after they'd finished their meal.

Thomas realized that Marie Rose didn't know that and immediately warmed up to the petite brunette. He walked beside her as she showed them to a table and asked her what the best pizza was. She walked back to a servery and returned with two goblets of ice water and a pair of menus. "Would you like a beer to start?" she asked. "Yes," Thomas said quickly, "I'll have a Labatt 50." Johnnie frowned, computing the price of a beer in a place like this. "I'll stick with the water, Johnnie said, glaring at Thomas.

He started scanning the menu as Thomas talked with Marie Rose, who looking sideways at Johnnie said, "You should try the Imbro's Special," she said. "One of them will fill you both." "That sounds great," Johnnie said, still glaring at Thomas.

Once Marie Rose left the table and Johnnie hissed at Thomas. "We're fockin' near broke, bye. We can't be drinkin' beer, we can't even afford the pizza.. It'll take two more tanks of gas just to get us to Tronna and then what? Eatin' outa the garbage can?" Thomas glared back. "If ya hadn't run in the fockin'ditch, bye, we'd be eatin fockin' steak."

Johnnie felt like cuffing him, the bitterness that he'd brought no money of his own along welling up, wondering of they were going to survive the rest of the trip intact. "I brought moren tree hundred bocks", he said, "Moren enough for me and the car. Ya haven't brought a goddamn cent and ya haven't played a tune since Clarendale. You said you'd be playin'us all the way to Tronna. We're gonna need some dollars, bye. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorra, but we need to start makin' it, instead of the other way 'round."

Thomas was getting ready to sneer something back at Johnnie when Marie Rose arrived with the pizza and two beers and two frosted mugs. She set the food down and put the beers in front of them. "Now, don't fight boys, have nice lunch and just be friends." She slid the bottle of Labatt 50 in from of Johnnie and said, "Can I be your friend, today? I don't want him to be drinking alone."

"You can be my friend for a long time," Johnnie said laughing, pouring the golden liquid into the mug. He looked at the bottle and said, "How big is this? It looks like a giant size," he said. "It's a quart." Marie Rose said. "Didn't you have any beer in Montreal?"

“Nah, we wuz drinkin’ Coca-Cola there, darlin’,” Thomas said, rolling his eyes Johnnie’s direction.

Johnnie couldn’t believe it. A huge bottle of beer and it was free. Marie Rose told them to enjoy their lunch and promised to come sit with them in a few minutes. The pizza was like the beer, mounds of spiced ground beef, onions, mushrooms and a thick layer of cheese on top. Way bigger than anything they’d seen at home. It looked more like a tortiere than a pizza.

The boys tucked into it and were soon humming along, tummies filling, beer swilling and Johnnie never took his eyes off of Marie Rose. ‘I wonder if she’d like to come up to Tronna with us?’ he thought, trying to figure out how he’d phrase the question.

Thomas finished off the last of the pizza and was looking at the last of his beer in the mug when Marie Rose came and sat beside Johnnie. They made small talk and Johnnie couldn’t come up with a way to pop the question, just too bashful for this big town gal. She explained that she was from Cantley, up behind Hull and needed a ride home after work. Johnnie took the hint, but didn’t know if they could manage another day on the road. Then she said, she’d buy lunch if he’d drive her home. He took the bait in an instant.

They headed down Rideau street while she finished her shift, agreeing to pick her up at 3. They went past a small two storey strip mall and on the second floor, Johnnie spotted a sign that said, ‘Hole in the Wall’ and underneath it a neon Labatt beer sign. He walked up the steps and looked at the posters plastered all over the bulletin board. Mostly psychedelic and rock and roll bands, but one was called Les Coursiers and had a fiddle player in it.

He opened the door to the club and walked in, again, struck blind by the darkness of the room and almost stunned by the strong smell of stale cigarette smoke and beer. The place was musty and pretty dirty looking. But there was a small stage on the far side of the room, a single spot light hung from the ceiling at a severe angle.

“Anybody home?” he called out. “Just a minute,” a male voice came from in behind the bar. Thomas opened the door and light flooded in. He almost bumped into Johnnie standing just inside the door. A long-haired guy with a thick dark beard came out from a doorway just past the bar. “What can I get ya?” he asked.

“We’re looking for work, we got a band,” Johnnie said.

“What are yas called?” the guy asked. “Tammy Myshral,” Johnnie answered. “You’ve probably never heard of us, we’re just up from Newfoundland.”

“You’re right. How many are ya?” he asked.

“Just me and him,” Johnnie responded, gesturing to Thomas.

“That’s not a band, that’s a duo. We don’t hire duos. We just hire bands, four, five, six pieces.”

Johnnie started telling him how Thomas was the best fiddler in Newfoundland and was on his way to Tronna to play on the CBC and make a record. He swore up and down they were as good as any four piece band and half the cost.

“Not interested,” the guy said, walking away. Johnnie kept talking, the guy kept saying “Not interested, ya gotta be a band”. After a few minutes Johnnie said. “Let us play you a few tunes. Free. Won’t cost you a cent. We’ll just get up on the stage there and play ya a couple. If ya don’t like it, we’ll go away.”

“Go ahead,” the guy said. “As you can see, I don’t have anyone here to chase away, so I can’t lose. Except, remember, I don’t hire duos.”

“Go get your fiddle, Tammy,” Johnnie said. Thomas was reluctant, but when Johnnie headed to the car, he came along. The drug their instruments in and by the time he was tuned up, Thomas was ready to play. He hadn’t really played much since the police station in Clarendale and his head had finally stopped aching, he had a full belly and a pretty good buzz on from the quart of beer, so he whipped off a jig, then a polka, another jig and then stopped. “So, what do ya think?” Johnnie asked. “I think I only hire bands,” the guy said. As he spoke, the door opened and two older men came in. “Qui fait le musique?” one asked, then saw the two boys as his eyes acclimatized. “Bien! Bien! Encore! Plus de musique!”

They sat at a small table and Thomas reeled off another quick tune, looking at Johnnie and helping him through the progression. “Squid Jiggin’” he said and launched into another tune, turning round to see the bearded guy serve the men each a quart of beer. After a few minutes, another pair of guys came through the door and ordered beer and then four more. An old couple came in and sat close to the stage, yelling encouragement in French and stomping their feet on the floor.

The bearded guy came up and set a pair of quarts on the stage and pointed to a guy at a back table. Johnnie held his beer up in salute and said, “Thank you.”

“Pas de probleme,” came the reply.

The boys played a several more tunes and were really starting to find a groove, when Johnnie looked down at his watch., It was time to pick up Marie Rose. At the end of the song, he took off his guitar and said to Thomas, “We gotta go now, Marie Rose is getting’ off work.”

Thomas wiped his fiddle down and put it back in the case. There were now nine people in the room, all hollering for more. Johnnie went over to the bar and the bearded guy. “Do ya need us to come back tonight, then?”

“No, I got a band showing up in a couple hours. They’re here the rest of the week.”

“How about next week, then?” he asked. “I don’t hire duos,” came the flat reply.

“How about 20 bucks for the money we made ya here, then?”

“Ya said it wouldn’t cost a cent. Ya got a couple beers, be happy with that.”

“How much ya pay if I come back with a bass and drummer?”

“Sixty a night fer four of yas. But I’m booked to the end of August.”

“Maybe I can call ya,” Johnnie said. The two boys were giddy on their way back to the restaurant, thinking that finding work was as easy as walking down the street.

Marie Rose was little annoyed that Johnnie was late, but she was standing beside his car when he walked up in front of Imbro’s. She knew it was his car by the license plate and she was holding a parking ticket in her hand when he walked up.

After a little joking and talking, the trio got in the car and headed off. Johnnie drove carefully, mindful of the fact he’d had three of the large beers and the car looked like crap. ‘If I was a cop I’d pull this wreck over’, he was thinking.

18 Fine Times At Our House

Jason and Jasmin embraced as they stood on the front step of his parent’s home, waiting for someone to open the door. Jason was a little ill at ease. Not knowing just how to feel, bringing this woman home to meet his mother, wanting the both to like each other, accept each other. But he hadn’t proposed to Jasmin yet. He sensed the time wasn’t right. He was off to Afghanistan in a few days, she was settling in to her new life in Calgary. It felt permanent, but not at the same time.

Jacqueline opened the door and shrieked, Jason picked her up when he hugged her and then set her back down. "This is the beautiful woman I've been telling you about, Mom, this is Jasmin."

"Oh, my God, hello Jasmin, welcome. Oh, Jason, that photo didn't do her justice! Come in! Come in!"

They stepped into the house and Jason and Jasmin sat down in the livingroom. Even that felt weird for Jason, normally, he'd follow his mother into the kitchen, but he waited for her to bring the refreshments. She'd obviously been preparing them for some time, bringing first a tray with sandwiches and cookies, a second with glasses, tea cups, a pitcher of juice and a pot of tea.

The three of them sat and chatted for more than an hour, mostly the obligatory small talk. Jasmin was a little uncomfortable with how many times Jacqueline commented on her beauty. As accustomed as she was to having people remark on her beauty, she thought Jacqueline, an attractive woman in her own right, seemed to be compensating for some other potential misgiving about Jasmin's character.

She started to dispel that by getting up and taking the dishes into the kitchen, engaging Jacqueline in some 'girl talk' and generally making herself at home. When John finally came in the door, the two of them were happily making supper together. He, too, made just a little too big a deal about Jasmin's beauty. She wasn't uncomfortable with the attention, but didn't really know what to say after, 'Oh, thank you.'

She is a stunning woman and Jason had been intimidated when he first met her. He'd had an opportunity to speak with her at length when they first met and she had made clear her interest in him. Had she not, he'd never have asked her to go out.

He, too, marveled at her features, full lips, big, bright eyes, a perfectly balanced face with high cheekbones, a nice, but strong nose and flawless skin and hair. She was also a dominant figure, five foot nine inches tall, slender legs, small waist, substantial bust. Jason couldn't believe she'd never been a model; she couldn't believe he didn't understand why that wouldn't interest her. At supper, the talk was all light and friendly. John was on his best behaviour, not drinking much, swearing less and consciously trying not to stare at Jasmin. Jacqueline noticed him looking at her and was conflicted between a twinge of jealousy and pleased that he liked the person that might be his daughter-in-law.

The small talk also kept them from discussing what was really on all of their minds: Jason's deployment in just a few days. The subject was broached when John asked Jason how his buddy Ashland was doing. "He's coming along really well, Dad. He got out of the hospital a couple of weeks ago and he's getting stronger every day, I think. He's talking about coming back to Afghanistan after Christmas, but I don't think they want him over there just yet."

Ashland had been injured in the bomb attack that happened the last time Jason had been home. He'd been inside the APC that was hit by a suicide bomber. His convoy had stopped to pull off the highway when a taxi tried to pass. The crew let their guard down, thinking the taxi could pass, since they were all turning off. Halfway up the column of vehicles, the taxi exploded, killing three soldiers. One had been standing in front of the vehicle, another was sitting at a gun position on top. The third was inside and died when the vehicle was tossed on its side. He'd struck his head, dying a few moments later. Ashland had also struck his head, being tossed around the vehicle's interior, fracturing his skull, breaking his arm, shoulder and collarbone. He was comatose for several days, finally coming to in a hospital in Germany. Three weeks later he was

on his way back to Canada and now, just as Jason was about to head to Khandahar, he was starting to make progress and plans for his future.

Discussions of Ashland lead to the upcoming deployment. Jacqueline looked at Jasmin and asked, "How do you deal with the anxiety, knowing Jason will be over there and how dangerous it can be?"

Jason tried to interrupt and downplay the danger, but Jasmin seemed to have anticipated the question. "I don't obsess on it. I think when your number's up it's up, you know. And I just don't think it's his time to go. But if it is, it's just something I'll have to deal with at the time. I can't deal with it or worry about it now. I just think about him coming home."

Jacqueline flinched at the thought that Jasmin felt she was obsessing and commented that she didn't think worrying about her son was obsessing. "You're right Jacqueline, and I didn't mean to infer that you were. You're his mother and your feelings about what he'll face are very different from mine. I love your son very much, but all I can do is focus on our future, since we don't have a long history."

Jacqueline smiled, but it was a pursed smile as she pondered just how this girl could be so cavalier. She had embraced her as her son's life mate, but was now was reconsidering. This girl and her son were just dating, just sleeping together and she started to cool toward her.

John sat in silence, not quite understanding what had just happened, but knowing something had. He looked at Jasmin and asked, "Why don't you come up for Christmas with us? You probably don't want to spend it alone. Or are you going home to the coast?"

"Actually, John, I'd really like that. I told my office manager I'd cover for her so she and her family can go away at Christmas, so I'll only have a couple days off."

Jacqueline looked stunned. This was not the way this was done. She was the one who did the inviting in this house and she already had plans to have a house full. But she said nothing, deciding she'd deal with John later when the younger couple was gone. She thought she was struggling with Jasmin's attitude but really, she was losing control of her son and her home, and it was unfamiliar territory for her.

The rest of the visit was very low key. Jacqueline was polite, maybe a little too polite, and she was torn. She wanted the evening over, but didn't want to say goodbye to her son. Then Jasmin stood up and walked over to her. "Jacqueline, I'm going to go back to the hotel now. I think you need to have a chance to be alone with Jason before he goes. I've really enjoyed meeting you both and spending the evening. I'll call you next week and we'll talk about Christmas."

She put her arms around her and Jacqueline hugged her, but the moment only compounded her emotional confusion. Jasmin hugged John, gave Jason a quick kiss and headed for the door. She said goodnight and then walked down the driveway to the rental car and drove off into the night. She stopped at a Tom Hortons and picked up a decaf coffee and drove to the hotel. She was sitting up in bed, watching the news, when Jason arrived. He was very quiet., neither of them knew just how to handle this night.

They were both lonely. Neither was aroused. They knew the morning and parting was inevitable, but didn't know how to embrace it. It was the first that Jasmin has really considered that Jason

might not come back and even he had trouble envisioning the life after Afghanistan he spent so many months meticulously planning.

“Mom and Dad really like you Jas. I’m glad you’re coming up here for Christmas. That was really nice what you said to Mom.”

“They’re nice, nice people Jason. I’ll keep calling he while you’re away. I think she needs to hear from us. Maybe we can all talk on the phone at Christmas. Is that a possibility?”

“Anything’s possible, sweetie. I don’t know how they deal with Christmas really, whether we have access or not. Maybe you’ll see me on one of those goofy CBC things.”

With the television and the lights off the conversation segued into tenderness and quiet love. When it was time to sleep, they nodded off, not in a pool of post-coital sweat, but a mist of escape, trying to find a way to end it without saying goodbye.

19 The Road Downhil

Margie came in from the garage and took off her coat. She’d been at the hospital helping the minister with his pastoral visits. She worked with the hospital staff to make sure that anyone who wished was visited. Often, ministers didn’t show up for their visits and then people from their congregation might be visited by another church. Some people thought it an unsavory practice, but Margie didn’t agree.

She was troubled by new privacy rules that prevented the hospital from telling her who was an inpatient. She also sensed they wanted fewer pastoral visits and wanted the hospital stays to be short, with fewer and fewer overnight stays. She could see the day coming when they only went to the hospital to meet people when relatives had died and she wasn’t happy at the prospect. She put her coat in the front closet and headed upstairs to her room. Ed and Bill were downtown somewhere and she didn’t expect to see them until Bill came in for supper. She welcomed the respite.

She lay on her bed for a while, drifting from thought to thought, not really focusing on anything. Then she started thinking about her granddaughter and how they seemed like kindred spirits even though they were both from such different backgrounds.

After a while she got up and went out in the hallway. She pulled a stepladder out of the closet and positioned it under a square framed indentation in the ceiling. She climbed up and lifted the cover, pushing it out of the way and then stepped off the top of the ladder and into the home’s attic. She pulled a string and a single bare bulb spread light all around the attic door. She walked, hunched over, along a narrow pair of boards that ran from one end that part of the house to the other. She walked along, peering through the shadows at a collection of boxes, not sure she remembered what the box she was looking for actually looked like. She was trying to remember whether she’d consolidated the contents into another box, trying to remember when she’d last seen it. They’d lived in the house nearly 40 years, although it was hardly the same house. They’d added rooms as they’d added kids. And now, they had a lot of empty space. Margie thought they should empty the attic and keep all the boxes in one of the spare rooms. Jasmin rarely came home for more than a day or two and the kids never seemed to be home at the same time.

‘That would make this a lot easier’ she thought. Wanting the boxes all moved, so she could easily look for her buried treasure, she decided to ask Bill and Ed to look after that the next time they were having an idle afternoon. Maybe even tomorrow she thought. But her moment of quietude

was now and she didn't know that she'd have either the time or the inclination tomorrow or any other time in the near future.

She reached toward a box, pulling it toward her. She squinted to see what was written on the side. 'Boston Belles' was crawled in felt pen. That was the name of the theatre group Margie had worked with as a seamstress and costume designer. She could never bring herself to throw the old costumes away. In with the costumes was an old ratty photo album, a spiral bound book with pages that had a sticky plastic protection sheet stuck directly over the photos. The photos had lost much of their rich colour, partly due to the processing technology, but mostly due to a reaction of the chemistry in the photo to the glue on the protector page. Margie wasn't in a mood to reminisce on that period. She was looking farther back.

She moved a few boxes and then the memory started to come back. The shoebox she was looking for was in a bigger box, with 'Christmas decorations' written on, then scratched off, and heavy multi-layered taped corners. She pushed first one, then two boxes off the ceiling joists and then spied the box, tucked neatly between the 2x4 rafters in the old part of the roof. She squeezed through, one foot on each joist straddling the insulation below.

She grabbed the box and dragged it along the joist closer to the centre walkway, then tipped it so she could get some light into the inside. She pushed some bags of cloth out of the way and slid her slim arm down the side of the box, smiling as her fingers touched the shoe box, confirming her memory and the treasures within.

She was looking for a book, one that had been in the family since she was a very small child, purchased, she thought by an aunt. It had simple words and drawings in pen and ink, but very detailed. It was a story about a woman who worked in an orphanage and though Margie didn't really care for the story, the drawings of life in the previous century enabled her to make up her own story, a story of a life she would have lived, had she been alive then.

She struggled to pull the shoe box up from the bottom of the big cardboard box, again wishing the men would just move it to a more accessible location.

Finally, she threw the box on its side and pawed the contents out onto the attic floor, until she'd uncovered the box. She pulled it out, backtracked along the walkway and, setting the box down, lowered herself down onto the ladder. She reached up and took the box, placing it on the stepladder's platform, then turned off the light and closed the trap door behind her. She smiled. She'd never have left that big box laying spread across the attic floor like that before. 'I may not live to put those things back and some day the grandkids will find it. They'll think it was Bill', she thought, smiling.

She put the shoe box on her bed and came back out and put the stepladder back in the closet. Then she came over, sat down and lifted the shoebox into her lap. The lid slipped off easily and she carefully took several articles out of the top of the box, uncovering the book. 'The Carrington Medallions' it said on the cover. Margie frowned, she didn't remember that being the title. Although it looked the same, it seemed like another book, a different memory. She opened the cover and the book slipped down between her thighs, falling open to a large bookmark. Margie felt tears well up as she lifted up the bookmark, a large cutout cardboard swallow. She held it up and tried to clear her eyes, but the distortion of the tears seemed to make the whole room feel like a dream state. "Oh my God," she said in a wavering weak voice, "Swallow Soap."

From where he was laying Thomas was sure they'd slept until noon at least. The sun glared in the side window, heating his face and the interior of the car to the point of giving him a headache. He reached above him and cranked on the window handle, relieved at the rush of cool air from the shaded side of the car. He tried to wind down the opposite window with his sock foot, but gave up when his arch started to cramp and the window was barely an inch from the top. "Johnnie! Are ya with me then, bye?" he asked. A muffled response came from the front seat, then silence again. Thomas marveled at the birdsong, there seemed to be thousands of little birds twittering, non-stop. At home there'd be the regular shriek of gulls and an occasional squeak of a shorebird, but nothing like this continual blanket of chirping and repeating melodies.. When he concentrated, he could hear one bird call that was the same phrasing as the introduction to Spatter the Dew, one of his favourite slip jigs. He started to have a realization that the music he loved and played and had been passed down from generation to generation was actually stolen from other life forms. Well, stolen might be a little harsh, perhaps borrowed was a better term. The birds, after all, still got to use the melodies as their own.

"Johnnie! Are ya with me?"

Another muffled grunt from the front seat. Thomas flicked the door handle and the driver's side rear door popped open. He rolled off the seat, and became wedged between the front of the back seat and the back of the front. He pulled himself up and then out of the car, standing up and stretching and then looking around. It had been dark when they parked late in the night and he was looking across a broad expanse of lawn, a park, toward a slow-moving brown coloured river, lined with huge oak and elm trees. The trunk of the tree closest to him was massive, so large, he imagined it could contain the living quarters for a whole family. He walked gingerly across the gravel in his sock feet looking up into the dense foliage of the tree's canopy. He felt a twinge of concern – he wasn't used to having things like this over his head. It felt like the huge branches could break at a moment's notice and drop on him, crushing him. He knew that wasn't rational, but it felt like it could happen.

He stepped over a low barrier at the edge of the parking lot and onto the grass, immediately realizing that it was soaking wet. He thought that odd, it hadn't been raining, that he could remember. He sat down on the barrier and peeled off his socks, then walked carefully across the sharp gravel back to the car and draped the socks on the hood. He went to the driver's door and saw that Johnnie still hadn't moved. He opened the door and looked in, giving his companion a nudge. He got the same muffled response. He looked at the clock. It read ten minutes past six. It had to be morning, or the clock had to be wrong. It couldn't be this warm and humid this early in the day, he thought.

He decided to walk down by the river until Johnnie woke up. After walking a short distance, he sat on the roots of one of the huge trees, looking up the river, then down, marveling at the continuing birdsong and activity. There seemed to be birds of all sizes, more than he'd ever seen, not like flocks of sea birds going from place to place, these avians obviously lived right here.

He heard some chattering, a sound he didn't recognize and then some squeeking, seeming to be a response to the chatter.

He was interested and listened intently. It seemed to be getting louder and closer. All of a sudden, not fifteen feet away, a large raccoon stepped out of the bushes, walking straight toward him. He sat, stunned, not knowing what to do. Behind the large raccoon flowed first one, then another then two more very small raccoons, marching behind what must have been their mother. She stopped, four feet away, sniffing, staring right at him. He sat perfectly still until she took another few steps, now just three feet away. Thomas moved. The raccoon leaped straight up. Thomas jumped

up, slipped, then tripped over the tree trunk and fell flat on his back. When he looked up, they were gone, not a sound, not a sign.

“Johnnie, Jesus, bye, ya gotta see this, wake up for the love of Mike!”

He swung the door open and grabbed Johnnie by the shoulder. He woke up properly this time, looking at Thomas like he’d been attacked. “I seen a raccoon! I seen a raccoon. Ya shoulda seen ‘em, a bunch ‘o dem, cutest little fockers yas ever seen, bye!” Johnnie was mildly amused at Thomas’ excitement and also that he was awake this early. Normally, he’d be an hour or better behind Johnnie. He was a little surprised this was Thomas’ first raccoon, then realized he’d seen several, but always at night in the car headlights and long after Thomas had fallen asleep.

Johnnie got up, rubbing his eyes. He climbed out of the hot car and into the relief of the cooler morning air, gingerly walking across the gravel and onto the grass and under the nearest shade tree. They sat together a few minutes, Thomas teasing Johnnie about Marie Rose and the fact they’d disappeared and left him in the car nearly an hour. “She’s a damn fine gal, that one,” Johnnie said. “I’ll be back to visit and this time without you, for sure. She give me breakfast money, if ya can believe it.”

They engaged in idle banter a for a few minutes, then resolved to drive down the road until they found a place to eat, hoping they were still heading toward Tronna. Johnnie retraced the direction in his head, trying to remember how they’d gotten to this place to sleep. As they drove along, Thomas looked back at a sign. “Well, Peterborough’s back that way, where we come. Should that be right?” “We’re on the right track, Tammy and there’s a little town just ahead, I can see it.”

They pulled past a little sign that announced the corporate limits of Cameron and pulled up in front of a small café. They walked in the door and sat down. A large man came over and said, “Excuse me lads, but you’ll have to put shoes on before I can serve you.” Both boys laughed out loud and then politely went back out to the car. “Do we need socks, too?” Thomas yelled. The man smiled and waved them back in. “Sorry, lads, that’s the health regulations. That’s the only part of you that looks like a hippy, so you’re welcome here now.”

In a few minutes, they were tucking in to huge plates of bacon, eggs and fried potatoes. They ate until they were full, drinking three large mugs of coffee each. Johnnie looked at the bill the man had placed on the table, then dug in his pocket for some cash. “Looks like she’s buyin’ us lunch too,” Johnnie said, smiling. “I should be standin’ you for stud, bye!” Thomas squealed. “Johnnie! I never knew!” And the two of them left, laughing, with a dollar tip on the table behind them. The big man waved to them as they backed out and headed off toward Toronto.

It was an uneventful drive, other than watching the gas gauge. They pulled into a serviced station and filled up, clicking the pump off at exactly what Johnnie had in his pocket, \$5.13. He looked at the gauge as they pulled away, and was relieved to see it climb almost to the top. They didn’t have lunch money, but they were full from breakfast. When he commented on not having money for lunch, Thomas said, “I’ll find yas a nice fat waitress to service and we’ll eat just like kings!” and laughing hysterically.

Both boys were nervously happy, finally making it to Tronna, the big time and milk and honey just around the corner. They pulled into the outskirts just a little after 11 a.m. and then were amazed that it took almost two more hours to get downtown. They pulled into a parking stall and got out of the car, locking it up. Johnnie went up to the meter and was pleased to find fifteen minutes remaining. Walking down the sidewalk into the oncoming pedestrian traffic, Johnnie realized he had no ideas where they were going. “Can ya tell me where the CBC is?” he asked a man walking toward them.

“It’s over on Front Street, just up from Eatons.”

He asked a woman, “Can ya tell me where Front Street is? She stopped and pointed at the next intersection. “Take Simcoe down to the corner and go right and you’ll walk right to it.”

By the time they got to the CBC building, Johnnie realized the time had long expired on their meter, so he turned around and headed back to rescue the car. He was deathly afraid it would be towed as Marie Rose told him of a trip she’d made to Toronto where the car was impounded and it cost a fortune to get it back. He smiled, remembering she’d agreed to pay his parking ticket in Ottawa, as well.

They navigated their way back to the CBC building, dismayed there seemed to be no place nearby to park for free. He pulled up to the curb and told Thomas to stay in the car. He walked up to a policeman standing at the corner. Thomas watched in the rearview mirror as Johnnie engaged in an animated discussion with the officer. The officer kept pointing at the car and at a sign beside it. Thomas couldn’t see the sign in the mirror, but he did see the officer grab Johnnie and turn him around and point at a bus coming down the street. Johnnie sprinted back, lept into the drivers seat a sped away, the bus pulling into the bus stop right behind him. “We’ll never get you on the CBC if we can’t park this fockin’ car, Tammy!”

Finally about four blocks away there was a park, with a small parking lot, empty, beside it. He pulled in. “Grab yer fiddle, bye, this might be the only chance we get.”

The two of them walked all the way back to the CBC and walked past the building twice before Johnnie realized Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was the CBC. And it was a big building. He was disappointed the sign was kind of small and insignificant. They went in the foyer and walked up to an older man in a uniform, sitting behind a brown wooden desk.

“I’m looking for Ron Kantor,” Johnnie said. Thomas looked surprised. He’d never heard that name before. “His office is on the seventh floor, 712,” the man said. The boys clamoured into the elevator and headed upstairs. They got out on the seventh floor and started looking for 712, ignoring the strip signs on the wall. They came to a door with 712 on it. Johnnie swung it open and they strode in to a small ante room, with chairs along one wall and a woman seated at a desk. “Can I help you.” she asked, smiling. “I’m here to see Ron Kantor,” Johnnie said. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kantor is in the studio. Did you have an appointment?”

“No, but I’d sure like one,” Johnnie said. “When’s he done in the studio?”

“Does Mr. Kantor know you’re here? Did he ask you to come here?” She seemed a little less friendly and a little skeptical.

“This here’s Tammy Myshral. He’s the best fiddle player in the whole country. Mr. Kantor needs him ta play with Don Messer and the boys on the Jubilee.”

“Don Messer’s Jubilee has been cancelled,” the woman said sternly. “Does Mr. Kantor know you’re here? He had nothing to do with the Jubilee.”

Johnnie sat down and told the girl a tale and kept talking even when she ignored him and went back to her paperwork. Every now and then she’d smile when he said something that sounded cute or his accent was particularly thick. Behind him, Thomas quietly got his fiddle out of its case, and gently tugged at the strings as he clamped it under his chin. Satisfied it was in tune, he launched into Whiskey the Dolphin, a lively reel.

Johnnie got out his guitar as Thomas played and soon the pair were reeling off jigs, reels, waltzes as quick as they could, hoping they’d impress the girl enough to get an appointment. The door swung open and a young man strode in, a huge smile on his face. He stood and watched, tapping

a foot on the floor, occasionally clapping his hands in time. When the music stopped he extended his hand to Thomas, but Johnnie stepped ahead, putting his hand out and saying, "John Scammell. I'm Tammy's manager."

"And a damn fine manager you are, too, son, bringing him here like this. I'm Allan Alberts. Why don't you boys come down the hall with me."

They followed Alberts down the hall, instruments under one arm, cases under the other, struggling to get them through the doors. 'We've hit pay dirt,' Johnnie thought, finding a chair to drop his case on and getting ready to play more. Alberts sat behind his desk and asked question after question, always asking Thomas, but accepting the response when Johnnie interrupted and answered.

He explained that there was certainly a place for Thomas on the CBC, regrettably not with Don Messer, whose show had been cancelled, but on a radio show they'd be doing in the fall. "I told me mother we'd be on the Jubilee," Johnnie said. "I'd have to write her and tell her about the radio."

Alberts explained that canceling Messer had caused big problems; a lot of people complained, even the House of Commons was in an uproar. "Then why don't you put him back on,?" Johnnie asked.

Alberts didn't have an answer but he continued to talk about a place for Thomas on the radio show he was going to be involved in producing in the fall. He explained that Thomas need to join the American Federation of Musicians, which confused them both, since they only wanted to play in Canada.

Finally, Johnnie said, "We need to work now, Mr. Alberts, today. We don't have a dime between us. We got no place to stay and nuttin' ta eat. We drive around the block three times, we got no gas either. What can ya do fer us right now?"

Alberts sat quiet for a minute, then turned and slowly dialed the phone. After a pause, he said, "Bill? Al. Look, I need a gig for a fiddle player, really good. Plays the Newfie stuff better than Messer. Have you got anything for him tonight?" Long pause. "Here in town?" Pause. "Kincardine?" He put his hand over the receiver and said to Johnnie, "Can you have him in Kincardine by eight o'clock?"

"Where's Kincardine?" Johnnie asked.

"It's three hours west."

"We got an hour to spare," Johnnie said.

Alberts hung up the phone and got up and went to a cabinet at the side of the room. He opened a drawer and shuffled through some files, finally pulling out a sheaf of papers. He took the papers back to the desk and carefully inserted a sheet of carbon paper between them and then cranked them into the typewriter in front of him. He typed a few characters, then adjusted the pages, typed a bit more. He stopped, pulled out a package of cigarettes, took one out and lit it up, dropped it in an ashtray and started typing again. "Mind if I try one of them?" Thomas asked him. He held the package out and said, "Help yourselves, boys."

While Thomas and Johnnie lit up their smokes and sat back, Alberts pulled the pages out and said to Thomas, "You need to sign this, so you can work tonight. They'll pay you eighteen dollars. You have to pay two-fifty for dues. If they keep you on 'til the weekend, you have to phone me here. You need to bring me ten percent. If you don't come back, there's no more work."

"What about me, Mr. Alberts," Johnnie said. "They don't need a guitar player, just a fiddler. If you're his manager, he owes you ten percent, too."

Thomas looked at the document and got ready to sign. "It says Thomas Godfrey Marshall here. My name's Myshral."

"Your name's Marshall now. T.G. Marshall. Nobody can read your goddamn name the way you spell it."

"Come on Tammy, we'll fix that later," Johnnie said. He turned to Alberts. "I really appreciate what you done Mr. Alberts. You've really helped us out. I know they'll want Tammy 'til the weekend, and we'll get your money to you right away. But we got nuttin' left. It took everything we had to get here right now. Can you give us a little in advance so we can get to Kincardine?"

Alberts took out a billfold and holding it away so they couldn't see what was in it, he pulled out two bills, a ten and a five. "I wouldn't normally do this, but I can tell you're good kids. Don't let me down boys, I'll hunt ya down if you do. I know every place there is to play in this province. If you don't show up next week, I'll make sure you don't play anywhere here again."

The boys pumped his hand over and over, then packed their instruments up. Alberts scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Thomas. "Make sure you get there in plenty of time. The club's called the Moonlighter, it's on the main drag. When you get there, ask for Bill Gilroy, but don't show him that contract. That's between you and me."

For the second time in two days, the boys headed back to the car, giddy and with confidence. Johnnie was amazed it was as easy as he'd dreamed it would be. Thomas was calculating eighteen dollars a night, less ten per cent twice and taking off gas and meals and rooms. Sounded like twenty dollars to him. And he didn't have two dollars to throw away.

When they got to the car, he took out the paper that Alberts had typed up in the office. "I can't be Thomas Godfrey Marshall, Johnnie. It disrespects me father. He'd fockin' roll right over and box me ears if he saw dis."

"Let's look at dat," Johnnie said, reaching for the paper.

"You get drivin' I'll show you it later," Thomas said.

22 Looking Out The Window

The club cleared out about 2:30 in the morning and Dean was sitting at a table with Rollie, Marco and Bkuto. The rest of the band had left and he knew he was going to regret this late night. He had to be at the office in five and a half hours and still had a half hour drive ahead of him.

It felt good to have played as well as he did. The tunes hadn't been a challenge, but the pace was quick and Alex was cuing Bkuto and Rollie and not Dean, so it sometimes took half a bar before he was sure what was coming up. He didn't make any identifiable mistakes, but it wasn't quite second nature, like it used to be. He had to fight from being a spectator. Bkuto was such an excellent player, so dynamic, with such tight chops, that Dean caught himself watching and listening. But it was, by all accounts a successful night sitting in for Bernie.

Alex let Rollie work him and try to get him to stay for the weekend, knowing Chico wasn't going to help, no matter what. Dean explained how he had to be in New York for Friday evening and couldn't be back in time to play Saturday either. Rollie had resigned himself to playing the bass parts on the pedals, even though it took all the pleasure out of the evening for him. But, it had to be, if they couldn't come up with a bass player and there really was no one else they could think

of that was available on short notice. The players around that were good enough were already playing gigs of their own.

Dean finally stood up and headed for the stage. He picked up his bass and put it in the case, put on his coat and headed for the door. The other three stayed sitting at the table. "See you tonight," he called out and headed toward the elevator. He turned on his cell phone and dropped it back in his pocket. After a few seconds, it beeped, letting him know he had a voicemail. He waited until he was in the car, then pressed the button to retrieve the message. It was Marilyn. She sounded really groggy and distant, almost belligerent. Then she seemed to be crying, then out of breath. He couldn't really make out what she was saying and then the message ended.

He tried her cell number, but got no response, then it went to voicemail. Her normal voice told him to leave a message. He sped home, wondering what had happened to her, very worried, imagining the worst. When he got to the condo, he sat down on the couch, used the landline to call her cell. Still no answer.

He went into the den and shuffled through the papers on his desk until he found a scratch pad with a name and number scrawled on it. He didn't know her room number because he'd only call her cell. He dialed the number and waited and eternity, it seemed before a voice said "Sheraton Suites Elk Grove Village"

"Uh, Hi. Can I have Marilyn Carlson's room, please?"

"Do you know the room number, sir?"

"No, I don't."

There was a pause. "That room isn't taking calls, sir."

"Look, Marilyn is my partner. She called and left a message on my cell. She doesn't sound well. I can't raise her on the cell. I need you to try her room."

"I'm sorry sir, it's three a.m. and that room isn't taking calls."

"Then please go up and make sure she's okay. She sounded drugged." Dean realized that sounded stupid, no matter who he was talking to. "Not like taking drugs, but maybe sick, I dunno. I'm really worried. She may be dying up there."

"Is she ill, sir?"

"She sounded ill, yes. Please either call the room or call a doctor."

"I'll speak to my supervisor. Can I call you at this number?"

"Please do."

He put the phone down and laid across the couch. He was tired but his pulse was racing, so he got up and paced, carrying the phone with him. He looked out the window across the city, a fog was building, coming in off the lake and obscuring the skyline. The CN Tower and the buildings around it turned into golden silhouettes, just the brightest lights shining through the thick mat of moisture.

"Phone back. Phone back" he said out loud. He was just about to punch her cell number into the phone when he realized they wouldn't be able to reach him if they called. Dean went and got his cell out of his coat and sat down again, dialing Marilyn's cell number, waiting, and getting voicemail again.

"It's ringing, I know it's ringing. It's not going straight to voicemail so I know she's got it on. If she's okay, she'd have her phone off by now."

He dialed the hotel on his cell and got in a holding loop. When he finally got a hotel operator, he started over again, but got the same result. They wouldn't phone the room at quarter to four. They couldn't send someone up to check. He went into the bedroom and laid down on his bed,

clutching his cell in his right hand, the cordless in his left. He was just vibrating, but he was also fatigued. Before either phone rang, he drifted off.

Meanwhile a hotel operator spoke with her supervisor. She reported the conversation with Dean and another she'd had coming on shift. She couldn't be certain, but she thought Dean was describing a woman her colleague had seen come into the lobby, seeming disoriented. She'd walked around, confused and finally disappeared into the elevator. Security had been dispatched, but wasn't able to find the woman. They did find her on security video on three different floors, walking around as if lost.

"If this is the same woman, she may be ill, as this man has said. What is our policy on the privacy of guests when we have a concern about their well-being?"

The supervisor asked her some questions, then called security and asked to see the video footage. Only a few of the sightings had been saved, the security supervisor said. "What's the chance this is woman is a guest in 1504?"

"Could be. The sightings are on floors below that, but twelve was where we lost her."

The supervisor checked her watch. She thanked the operator and said she'd handle it. After the operator left the office, the supervisor picked up a handset, dialed a number and waited for a response. She spoke quietly, reading from a list she'd made on her desk.

She hung up the phone and called the security supervisor. While she was on the phone, he tried to call Marilyn's room, with no response. They met in the security office and took the elevator to the fifteenth floor. As they approached the door to 1504, the security supervisor checked his watch. "It's 4:41, by my watch." The supervisor wrote the numbers down on a clipboard she was carrying. "God that's a ghastly smell," the supervisor said, covering her nose. The security supervisor knocked on the door. They waited. He knocked again, louder. "Miss Carlson? Hotel Security. Do you need assistance?" No response.

The security supervisor inserted the door card and opened the door. The stench rolled over them and they both gasped, holding their breath. The security supervisor entered the room and could see Marilyn lying in the middle of the bed. He fumbled for the light switch and when he turned it on he could see that Marilyn was laying in a pool of vomit, and was a sickly grey green colour. He placed his hand on her neck. "She's still with us., call 911."

The two stepped out of the room and closed the door, walking quickly down the hall. "I hate that," the supervisor spat. "What the hell does she have? Are we both exposed? Shit!"

"It's probably just the flu. Looks like it was coming out both ends. They stopped in the elevator lobby and waited. A few minutes later the door opened and two paramedics stepped out, wheeling a stretcher. They went down the hall to 1504, waited while the security supervisor opened the door and went in. A short while later, they came out of the room with Marilyn on the stretcher, moving quickly.

Dean jerked when the phone rang, then stared at the pieces in each hand. The cordless rang a second time and he pushed a button and said, groggily "Hello?" A long pause. "I'm her partner. We live together. Yes, I'm the person you should call in an emergency. Is she alive?. Is she okay?"

He started to break down, then caught himself. "Okay, okay, yes, okay, yeah, oh, thanks, thanks for calling me back." he put the phone down. She was alive and on her way to the hospital. He contemplated how he was going to get to Chicago.

22 The Time Of Day

The Moonlighter was, as Al Alberts had said, easy to find. Johnnie wheeled the Chevrolet into the parking lot beside it and checked the clock on the dash. Time to spare. The boys got out and walked to the front door of the club, to find it locked. Thomas leaned up against the window and cupped his hands around his eyes so he could see into the interior, but it was cloaked in darkness. Johnnie read the sign. 'Moonlighter Supper Club - Open at 5:30 Daily'

"We got fifteen minutes to wait," he said, and turned and walked back over to the car. Thomas walked the other way, down the street, just looking around at the main drag in Kincardine. Nothing really struck him one way or the other, except the supper club was right beside a church and they seemed to share a parking lot. St. Paul's Anglican and a nightclub. He could see the clientele going either way.

Sitting in the car, Johnnie noticed the back door of the club was open, behind a large screen door. He walked over and opened the screen door and peered into a large commercial kitchen. "Hallo. We're with the band," he said. A small, older woman came over and greeted him. "Ya can come in here and get to the stage, but don't be smoking in here, ya gotta do that outside."

Johnnie walked in and strolled over to the bandstand, a small area on the side of the room, filled with a drum kit, three amplifiers and a couple of microphones on stands.

While he stood there, another person came in the kitchen door and walked through the kitchen and up beside him. "You the fiddle player?" the man asked. "No, I'm John Scammell, Tammy Myshral's manager."

"He's got a manager? Alberts didn't say anything about that. Where's the fiddler?"

"He's just out on the street, havin' a look about," Johnnie said. "Are you the bandleader?"

"No, I'm Bill Gilroy. I'm the agent that books this room. I'm meeting Teddy here, he's supposed to be here now, to get the contract signed. What kind of a name is Tammy? I thought that was a girl's name."

"Not Tammy, Tammy. Thamas. Thamas Godfrey Myshral."

"Tammy, that's what I said," Gilroy said.

"No, you're sayin' it wit an 'a'. It's Thamas, with an 'o'."

Gilroy stared at him. "Why does he need a manager?"

"I'm getting' him on the CBC," Johnnie said.

"Good. You do that. We can make posters, then," Gilroy said.

Another man came through the kitchen and walked up to the bandstand. "Gilroy. Glad you could make it. You got the paperwork?" the man asked.

"Yeah, come on over here," he said, heading for table in the corner. Johnnie waited by the stage, aware that he wasn't welcome in the conversation at the table. After a few minutes, the other man waved him over. "Where's the fiddle player?" he asked. Johnnie said, "I'll go get him," and turned and went back outside. He walked up to the street and looked. He could see Thomas looking in a store window, so he whistled and waved him over. The two of them went back through the kitchen and joined the two men at the table. The other man, Teddy, was more welcoming than he'd been with Johnnie and started talking with Thomas about the music they'd be playing. Thomas nodded a lot, but Johnnie could tell he didn't recognize any of the songs Teddy mentioned.

“I’ll tell you the key and just play along. Tomorrow, we’ll get a chance to rehearse a few. It’s all easy stuff, you’ll do fine,” he said. He looked at Johnnie. “Can I get you to do me a favour?,” he asked. “Sure,” Johnnie said, enthusiastically, happy to oblige and be included in some way. “Good, I need you to go put up some posters. I’ll get them and a staple gun for ya,” he said and got up and left. He stopped by the door, turned and said, “Ya comin’?”

Johnnie spent until eight o’clock stapling up posters wherever he thought they’d fit. A couple times people came out and cursed him and tore the bills off the poles he’d stapled them to. When he got back to the Moonlighter, the band had already started playing. He walked in and sat at a table. A waitress came over with a menu and asked him what he’d like to drink. “Oh, nuttin’” Johnnie said, “I won’t need nuttin’ to eat either. I just come in to hear the band.”

“You can’t stay if you don’t at least eat,” the waitress said. “I’m the fiddle player’s manager. I’m just here lookin’ after him.” She left and a few minutes later a man came over and stood over him. “Ya gotta eat or leave,” he said. “This is a supper club, not a beer parlour.”

Johnnie protested and explained he was Thomas’ manager, but the man looked him straight in the eye. “I don’t care of you’re Colonel Tom fucking Parker, either order some food or leave.” Johnnie looked around. “Maybe if you’re more polite, you’d have more people in your place,” he said, as the man grabbed his shirt front and yanked him up out of the chair. “Get out of here, before I kick your ass, ya cheeky bastard.”

Johnny had no desire to feel the force of a fist again and he was happy to oblige. He headed for the door, but the man grabbed him and steered him to the front. He looked over his shoulder at Thomas, but he had his back turned, watching Teddy and didn’t see him leave.

He sat on the car most of the evening, listening to the band. Thomas didn’t play a lot, but did pretty well when it came time to do a solo and did some very nice harmonizing fills in some of the songs. The band stopped playing at one point and the big sign on the front went dark a few minutes later.

Johnnie could hear them partying inside and when he went up to the screen door, he found it locked. He could hear Thomas talking inside and went back and climbed into the back seat of the car. Much later, Thomas came out the back door and came over to the car. “Can I get the trunk key, Johnnie, I want to put my fiddle in.”

Johnnie was really hungry, a fact aggravated by his having smoked a dozen cigarettes while he waited for the gig to end. But they had no money. Thomas hadn’t asked for an advance on his wages.

Johnnie decided they’d bunk down in the parking lot, so they each lay down on their respective seats and continued to talk. Johnnie could tell Thomas was holding something back, but in the dark, he didn’t have to wait long. “I hired on with Teddy,” he said.

“You’re playin’ til Saturday, den?” Johnnie asked.

“No, I hired on, Johnnie. We’s headed up to Kapuskasing come Sunday and then Kirkland Lake and Timmins. They liked me playin’” he said.

“That’s good news, Tammy. I better get the car fixed up a bit, though, that’s a long haul up to Kapuskasing.” Johnnie was avoiding the obvious. He knew that Thomas meant he was heading off without him.

“I’m ridin’ up wit dem boys, John,” he said, quietly. It was always dead serious when Thomas had called him John. It had been Johnnie, ever since they’d been small boys.

“When ya comin’ back? Where am I gonna meet ya?” Johnnie asked.

“Maybe you should head down to Ottawa and get together with that Marie Rose. That was a good t’ing dere, Johnnie” Thomas said, cheerfully, but a little patronizing.

“I’m your manager, Tammy. I’m goin’ back to Tronna and getting’ that Al Alberts to get you on the CBC. That’s our deal.”

Thomas was very quiet and didn’t respond. Johnnie pressed a little. “This band here is fine and all, ya sounded real good, but it’s just playin’ supper clubs. You’re too good to be just playin’ here and Timmins and all.”

“They’s takin’ me to the Shelbourne Fiddle Championships, Johnnie. I’m gonna take the trophy away from Graham Townsend, they said.”

“Who’s Graham Townsend?” Johnnie asked.

“I dunno. But someone pretty good, I bet. He won it this year.”

“So, what are ya sayin’ Thomas? I brought you all the way here and spent all me money and now I can just bugger off?”

Again, Thomas was quiet. “Well, Tammy, what are ya tellin’ me?”

“They never heard of John Scammell, Johnnie. Nobody here’s heard of John Scammell.”

“Well, not yet, Tammy, but you wait.”

The car was silent, only the occasional sound of a cigarette rolled, a match struck, a cough, then finally a gentle snore from the back seat.

In the morning, Johnnie was awakened by a car pulling up along side his. He sat up and saw Teddy get out of them passenger door and walk toward him. Thomas opened the back door and got out. “Can you open the trunk, please, Johnnie?” he asked. Johnnie did so and Thomas removed his duffle and fiddle case. The two boys parted without another word.

Johnnie turned the key in the ignition. He was down to just under a quarter tank of gas. He wasn’t going far and his head was aching. It hurt that Thomas didn’t have the decency to ask him to come for breakfast, since he overheard Teddy saying they’d eat before rehearsal.

He walked down the block and came to a small café. He walked in and went over to the woman at the cash register. “Is there some work I can do for you, to earn a bite to eat, Ma’am?” he asked. “Boy, you’ve come to the right place,” she said, laughing out loud. “Henry. Help’s here!” And old man that looked like Santa Claus out of season came out from the back of the café. “This young lad’s looking for work,” she said. “Wants to trade for some breakfast.”

“He looks like he needs to maybe eat first, Ella. Hello, son, I’m Henry Baker. This is my friend, Ella. What can we do for you?”

Henry and Johnnie worked out a deal. He had a huge pile of junk in his back yard that needed to be cleaned up or the town was going to fine him. He figured it was two or three days work and he’d be happy to feed Johnnie and give him a little cash, but not much, if he’d give him a hand.

Johnnie showed his appreciation by digging in and working hard, only stopping when one of the two would come call him for lunch or supper or coffee. The sweat it raised on him hid the tears and the heavy work tempered his anger. He parked the car in the yard and slept there at night, cleaning himself up each morning and night in the café’s washroom. He never went near the Moonlighter, walking a block out of the way for fear he’d hear Thomas’ fiddle playing, when he went for a stroll and a smoke late at night.

Henry had a friend, Bob, with an autobody shop and he needed someone to come in and clean up and help work on cars, so Johnnie started there the following week. After a few days, the owner let him move into a small room in the back of the shop. It was small, reeked of laquer thinner, but it wasn't the car.

Johnnie started coming into the shop at night and working on things, cleaning up the paint rack, fixing up a tool rack, really cleaning the paint booth, never asking for any compensation. Bob wanted him to apprentice and Johnnie thought it would be okay, but his heart wasn't in it. He fixed up the Chevrolet with parts he scrounged from the auto wrecker they dealt with, eventually sanding the whole car down and repainting it. It looked really nice when it was all done, just like new.

He met a guy named Ross, from Nova Scotia and they became friends. Twice he'd traveled down to Ottawa to visit Marie Rose, but the second time, she seemed kind of distant and he sensed she was relieved when he left. 'Met someone new, I guess', he thought.

One day Ross told Johnnie about his dream of going to Ft. McMurray out in Alberta. Lots of money to be made, maybe millions. Millions sounded good to Johnnie, so one day he called Ross's bluff. "If ya save up five hundred bucks, I'll take ya out to Ft. McMurray," he said. "I got way more than that now. When are we leaving?"

The next morning, early, they loaded up the car. Ross had several boxes, some full of tools, some with books, another full of record albums and a big bag of magazines, all with the titles ripped off. He collected them from the drug store. He stacked them all behind the car and left Johnnie to do the loading. Try as he may, he couldn't fit them all in. Finally, he grabbed his guitar case, and without even opening it for a last fond look, he jettisoned it off into the bushes behind the body shop.

He left Bob a note, thanking him for his kindness and generosity and headed off to Ft. McMurray. They had a great trip across the country, staying in decent, but not expensive motels, picking up hippies hitchhiking, smoking grass occasionally, having a beer or two and landing in McMurray ready to go back to work.

Within two hours of arriving, Johnnie was a truck driver, wheeling a big International dump truck out on the Syncrude site, working long hours, living in a rented room in a trailer in the bush. Ross wasn't so fortunate. Everything he tried ended in some sort of failure or another. He wasn't good at much and didn't really favour hard work. One day he sold a bag of pot to a guy and found out later it was an undercover narcotics officer. He flagged down a truck and left all his boxes and all his worries behind, watching Highway 63 disappear behind him in the big West Coast mirror. He got out in Edmonton, put out his thumb and before the cop could come back for another buy and the bust, he was walking down 4th Avenue in Vancouver, humming One Ring Jane, a Mother Tuckers Yellow Duck tune.

Johnnie stayed on, bought himself a dump truck, then another, then a third. He started hiring Newfies, just buying more trucks every time he got his all booked. By 1973, he owned eleven of them and had just married a lovely young gal from Beaverlodge named Jacqueline Dupres. As much as he loathed the cold and the dust and the gold rush mentality, the two of them did well by Ft. McMurray, had their ups and downs and finally sold it all and headed south to Red Deer, when their kids were looking to turn into bad teens.

He never heard from Thomas Myshral again, although he met some folks in a bar who said he'd moved back to Newfoundland to look after his mother.

C A Daisy In December

The Christmas lights blinked on the eaves of the Scammell house, looking like lace icicles, the latest seasonal rage on the prairies. John had spent the day getting them just the way Jacqueline liked and came in for a drink before supper. He was kind of excited, knowing Jasmin was coming up for dinner, bringing Ashland, Jason's friend with her. He was mostly mended and was trying to get his CO to help him get back for another hitch in Afghanistan. He didn't like the way they treated broken soldiers here and was determined his best healing would be done by surviving a full hitch in Khandahar. He didn't want to leave the military this way. He hoped to hang out with Jason until his hitch ended, knowing that Jason was packing it in when he came home.

Mostly, though, he couldn't relate to civilians anymore. They just didn't get it. Jason had put him in touch with Jasmin and he'd visited her twice in Calgary. He more than understood Jason's feelings for this woman, easily the most beautiful and intelligent he'd ever been close to. He was thinking this had to be their last trip up here together, since his feelings for her were starting to overwhelm any sense of loyalty to Jason. He could handle it, though. The folks would be around, he'd drop her at her hotel, pick her up in the morning and head back to Calgary and drop her off. That would be that.

They drove up together, alone, in a Chev Cobalt he'd rented. Jasmin wanted to rent a car of her own and meet him in Red Deer, but he talked her out of it. He was all about the money they'd save. But it was really her sitting beside him that drove his decisions.

Jacqueline met them at the door, welcomed them both, meeting Ashland for the first time. She and Jasmin went in the kitchen, John and Ashland went downstairs and watched the first period of the Oilers in Detroit. The women talked as they worked, both carefully avoiding any subject that harboured the potential for conflict.

Jacqueline had never warmed up to her after the conversation about Afghanistan. She thought Jasmin was aloof and she also was a little uncomfortable with her being with Ashland, Jason's friend. It didn't feel right to her. For her part, Jasmin didn't want to get into a big sentimental discussion about Jason and the fact that she'd changed her plans and was spending Christmas with friends south of Calgary. She'd come up a few days early to visit John and Jacqueline and was having serious misgivings about Ashland. He was creeping her out, everything about him and his attachment to the military and violence was contrary to her own sensibilities. He wanted to get back so he could kill someone, avenge the deaths of his three buddies, torture someone for exposing his weakness, for his own injuries. And he seemed obsessed. Jasmin wanted Jason home, so they could start a new life together, he working in Foreign Affairs and making progress wherever he worked, she shifting her career into a higher gear.

She was polite to Ashland and even laughed at his jokes, the ones that were in poor taste, the racist ones, the sexist ones. She didn't feel a need to educate him, just humour him and get him on his way.

As they sat down to supper, she sensed that Jacqueline was trying to set the table up so she and Ashland couldn't be seated next to each other. She knew from the last time she was here that Jacqueline and John sat beside each other at the supper table, with the end places empty. She seated them across from one another, and she and John at the ends of the table. "I thought I'd try this so everyone would have plenty of room," she said, noticing that John was looking a little confused when he came up to the table.

She imagined Jasmin was touching toes with Ashland under the table, looking at him too much, smiling at him too sweetly, laughing and giggling at his poor jokes. She was in a state by the time dessert was finished and it was time to retire to the livingroom. Jasmin sat on the couch, John in his Lazy Boy and when Jacqueline went back to get the cream for the tea, Ashland took her place on the couch beside Jasmin. She had to restrain herself from asking him to move.

Ashland had a beer with John watching the game, another with supper and asked for a third when Jacqueline offered him tea. John went and retrieved them and soon the four of them were sitting in the livingroom. John oblivious, Jasmin impatiently watching the clock, Jacqueline's eyes flitting back and forth between Ashland and Jasmin and Ashland undressing Jasmin with every look.

Finally, Jasmin broke the tension. "You know folks, I've had a pretty busy day. I'd like to go back to my room, now and just relax in a tub of suds and get to bed early."

'Oh, baby!' Ashland thought. 'Oh yes, baby!'

'Oh, shit, she's screwing him,' Jacqueline thought. "They're going back to the hotel to screw all night!"

'Damn, he was going to tell me about that firefight', John thought.

Jacqueline said, "Why don't I call you a cab, Jasmin, Ashland can stay and visit with John and me."

"Oh, would you? Thanks!" Jasmin said.

"No way. I'll run you back to the hotel. No need to call a cab. Really, I should be turning in early too.," Ashland said.

John sat watching as his wife turned herself inside out trying to orchestrate the pair apart. Finally, Jacqueline said, "I think maybe you should have a cab, too Ashland. You've had a bit to drink. I can call one for you, too."

Jasmin thought that a little strange, two cabs, same hotel. But she really was ready to be away from all of them, so she stood up and headed for the closet and her coat.

Jacqueline and Ashland continued to spar on the issue of him driving and finally John said, "He'll be fine Jacqueline. He's only had three and he's been here almost three hours."

Their goodbyes at the door were almost terse, embarrassed even. Jasmin was relieved to get in the car and she watched Jacqueline looking out between the curtains as they drove out of the driveway and down the street. She didn't wave, she just stared, Jasmin thought.

She watched Ashland as he drove. He seemed fine, handling the small car with ease, shifting smoothly, shoulder-checking, signaling and humming to himself. He was imagining her breasts swelling up through the soap suds and visualizing spreading her out in front of him on the stiff bedspread on the big wide hotel bed.

As they came down 30th Avenue, she watched him looking ahead at red light they were approaching. He was timing the amber on the cross street. As the car ahead of them braked, he smoothly pulled the Cobalt into the left lane, pulled the shifter from fifth to third and wheeled the little car toward the intersection, his eyes glued on the amber light. It changed to red. As they entered the intersection, the light turned green and Jasmin saw the lights of another car through the windows of the car beside her. She got her hands to the dashboard as the interior filled with blinding light. The car struck the rear quarter panel behind Jasmin and the Cobalt jerked violently, spinning completely around and striking the curb on the right side of the intersection.

The air bags exploded and the little car shot up a berm, its front end catching the ground near the top, catapulting it over the berm and across the sidewalk. It was like a circus ride, moving in slow motion. Jasmin opened her eyes and saw the ground, bare frozen grass with a sprinkling of frozen snow, coming up toward her. The car landed on its roof, the pillar striking Jasmin in the centre of the forehead. Then all was silent. The dashboard lights cast a dim glow in the interior and a bright beam of light from the glovebox cast a line across Jasmin's nose. She took three short, quick breaths and her pupils turned to black, cold moons.