

A photograph of an airplane wing and tail against a golden sunset sky with clouds. The wing and tail are in the foreground, angled towards the right. The sky is a warm, golden-orange color, filled with soft, white clouds. The overall mood is serene and evocative of a long flight.

SHORT STORIES for *the* LONG FLIGHT

Danielle Aird

Also by Danielle Aird

THE FISHERMEN OF PROGRESO

WHO'S ON THE CAMINO?

THE CAMINO IS NOT JUST FOR WALKING

***SHORT
STORIES*** *for*
the **LONG
FLIGHT**

Danielle Aird

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www.danielleaird.com

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WEB SAMPLE EDITION

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What readers wrote about *The Fishermen of Progreso*

“Words cannot describe how much pleasure I derive from your stories... the way I REALLY know is that I can hear myself, in a raised tone, at the final sentence of each piece of your art, shouting... I LOVE IT! I am always reminded of those awesome Alfred Hitchcock hours back in the 70's with always a bizarre twist at the last minute that just made you shake your head and say ‘WOW’”

ROBYN MACDUFF, *Montreal, Quebec*

“Your stories are a fusion of Hitchcock and Maupassant. Remarkable!”

DORIS LESSARD, *Calgary, Alberta*

“Grâce à vous j’ai soigneusement lavé la tomate de mon dîner, hier soir ...j’en ris encore! Je n’ai pas encore lu toutes les nouvelles, mais presque. Je prends mon temps, sinon je risque de ne pas bien me souvenir de ce que je lis. Ce mot pour vous féliciter, sincèrement. Vous donnez vraiment du plaisir au lecteur, tant par le fond que par la forme. Toutes les nouvelles sont intéressantes et on prend vite l’habitude de s’attendre à une petite surprise à la fin, qui peut être amusante ou touchante, ou les deux à la fois. Bref, c’est plein d’émotion, de sensibilité et d’humour. J’admire aussi la variété des sujets et ce qui me frappe le plus, peut-être, c’est que l’on sent que vous avez pris plaisir à écrire ces nouvelles, plaisir qui se communique au lecteur (à la lectrice).”

(English Translation): “Because of you, I very carefully washed my tomato at dinner last night; I’m still laughing about it! I haven’t yet read all your stories, but most of them. I don’t want to read them too quickly because I might forget what I have read. This note is to congratulate you--sincerely. You give a lot of pleasure to the reader with the content as well as the style of your stories. All your stories are interesting and we soon get used to expecting a little twist at the end which can be funny or touching or both at the same time. All in all, your book is full of emotion, sensitivity and humour. I also admire your variety of subjects and I think that what strikes me the most is the pleasure you have taken in composing these stories, pleasure communicated to the reader.”

COLETTE TONGE, (Queen’s University professor, recipient of the Governor General’s Award, for the translation of Robertson Davies’

Leaven of Malice into the French *Un heureux canular*).

“You surprised me each time with the twist at the end of your story. Hurry and write another book soon, please.”

MARGARET HEILIG, *Port Elgin, Ontario*

“You know how to craft a sentence. I have underlined many and will return to them when I feel like I need inspiration for my own writing.”

JOHN TORINO, *Los Angeles, California*

“When I opened the first page of *The Fishermen of Progreso*, I felt as though I had been handed the most beautiful and seductive box of candy! Each story has been a delight and I am savouring each one. But unlike the empty candy box, I will still have the book when I reach the end. Thank you.”

MEG D'ESTERRE, *Garden Island, Ontario*

“I just loved your book of short stories. *Tomatoes* and the one about the plane spotter are our favourites. When I read the one about the tomatoes, I got such a chuckle out of the ending that I made Dean sit down and read it and of course, the one about the plane spotter also. Since a lot of the stories took place in Kingston, I could easily identify with the characters. We hope there will be more books to follow.”

CAROL AND DEAN GLOVER, (pilot), *Gananoque, Ontario*

“I’ve read your book twice now.....how pleasurable....”

ZELMA ZUCKERMAN, *Calgary, Alberta*

“The story that touched me the most was *The Big Black Hole*. The more I read, the more confused I became, just like the character in the story; it was a very strange sensation. You know how to touch the reader profoundly. Congratulations on a well-written book and its beautiful cover.”

LAURENCE LACROUX, (artist), *Hudson, Quebec*

“I love reading the stories My daughter who teaches Grade 8 plans to

read from the book to her class – Grade 8 students have a unit on short stories. She is thrilled to be teaching your stories.”

BEV GOULET, *Port Elgin, Ontario*

“I can’t tell you enough how much we are enjoying your book. I have been reading a story at a time to my wife and let me tell you, they are wonderful. With my being a fisherman, so far “The Fishermen of Progreso” is my favourite. “The Big Black Hole” and “The Muse” each took a turn at the favourite spot for several nights. And several rereads. You are a fine story teller. I have 5 stories left and like I said I have been reading them out loud to my wife. We are taking them slowly, one a night when we are together and savouring each one. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

MIKE STAINBROOK, (crab fisherman) *Petersburg, Alaska*

“My friend read me one of your stories last night. It was lovely to hear it spoken out loud and this morning I woke early and read two more. You are a good writer!! I really admire the way you take a simple idea and capture the moment so beautifully. That is a gift.”

LYNDA WILDE, (photographer and poet) *Kingston, Ontario*

“I feel honoured to have a signed copy of your book and enjoyed reading the first story to my friend as we were on the ferry last night. It was an especially resonant story as it captured the scenario that I used to be part of when I went to visit my ex-husband’s parents! I am looking forward to reading more and will no doubt have more to say when I have read it all.”

JULIET CHALIS, (potter), *Broadstairs, England*

Short Stories for the Long Flight

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Prologue

Danielle Aird grew up with five sisters in the small mining town of Val d'Or in Quebec. Most of her childhood from age six was spent away from home in a convent, surrounded by the kindness of the Sisters of Providence in the small village of Sainte-Ursule. At age 15, she moved with her family to Cochrane, Ontario, a small Pulp and Paper town. She studied at Queen's University in Kingston where she met Neil, her designer-goldsmith husband, a newly-arrived Scottish immigrant. After their three children left home, she travelled extensively to countries with different cultures and had articles published in French and English-language travel magazines. Her book *The Camino is not just for Walking*, about her own experiences along the Camino de Santiago, was published in 2022. A collection of over 100 stories (and photos) written by pilgrims she met along the way on the Camino de Santiago, is expected in 2023. Most of the stories in this book previously appeared in *The Fishermen of Progreso*. Some have been re-written with a different twist at the end. Most of them will catapult you back to a time when internet and cell phones were unknown.

A Forgivable Mistake

My half-sister was eighteen years old when I was born. She was twenty-four when she fell in love with a gentleman who was closer in age to our father than to her.

I was not aware of it then, but having a little sister like me was a terrible inconvenience for Anna. She was well aware that people talked. To make it worse, the year my mother, Papa's second wife, was expecting me, was the year Anna had entered her first year at the Sorbonne in distant Paris.

Anna had even thought of staying home in Vienna, delaying her studies for one year; she knew instinctively that no matter how much people respected Mama and Papa, with her away during Mama's pregnancy and past the month of my birth, jealous tongues would wag.

"Don't waste a year of your life," Papa had said. "If you conduct yourself in a respectable way, people will respect you. As for those who want scandal, they will talk no matter what, so let them be. We don't need them. They are not true friends."

Anna had left for France. Had she postponed her first year at the famous university, nothing would have been different. Of that I am convinced. Because, you see, everybody loves a good scandal. And the more aristocratic the crowd, the more titillating the stories. With the passing of time, some wicked tongues would have managed to forget all the occasions when they had seen my

sister with her slim waistline while my little body was sprouting arms and legs under Mother's loose gowns. They would have remembered a visit to our aunt in Bregenz on the Bodensee. First, starved for a bit of gossip, out of our family's earshot, they would start wondering out loud had it really been just a week? Or was it two weeks? Perhaps a month? A few months? Everyone knows that tales grow at the speed of weeds.

"It seems to me she was away for a good three or four months if I remember well," some nasty, bored gossip-monger would eventually blurt out, hoping to capture the attention of her friends.

"Just before the baby was born, wasn't it?" would continue another.

And there was nothing my parents or Anna could do about that. Human nature is such that, even faced with the most irrefutable evidence, people with lacklustre lives will search beyond it and imagine a series of sordid scenarios to spice up a story. Whether it be to turn a good man into evil or the Devil himself into a God, people's imaginations will find a way. The truth is that mankind needs idols and will invent them. The opposite also holds true.

In the fall, Mother, who was nevertheless concerned about the family's honour, had gone to meet Anna in the French Capital, and during their visit at the dressmaker's, they had ordered all of Anna's beautiful long ball gowns elegantly adjusted at the waist. And there had been several sittings at the photographer's, always making certain Anna was shown in her entire slim profile.

Mother did enjoy social events, but normally an expecting lady would not be attending too many parties. However, with Anna's coming home for the Christmas and New Year's festivities, the two of them had purposely arranged to be seen everywhere possible. They had invited hordes of friends to visit. Our house must have been a hive of activity as it had never been before. I can just imagine Nanette, who stayed with us for more than twenty years, going around frantically hanging decorations and making sure everything was spotless, and poor Mrs. Liszt, probably spending sixteen-hour days in the kitchen.

I don't know if Papa had wished for a boy; if so, I can honestly

say he never let his disappointment show. On the contrary, from the moment I was born, although he had just his two daughters, he spoiled and doted upon each in turn. I remember the day before my First Communion when my school companions and I had been instructed by the priest to ask our mothers for forgiveness of all our sins. I had, instead, asked Papa, knowing his great kindness of heart. Right after school, I tip-toed to the door of his book-lined office near the front of the house. He almost always kept his door ajar and had never chased me out. He always had time for me. I waited for the mass of white hair to turn towards me.

When he saw my little face with the two blond braids in the doorway, he knew I had come to ask him a special favour. He raised his head and put his pen down by the crystal ink container.

"Come in, Bettina," he said, smiling lovingly, and he backed his chair away from his desk to make room for me. I climbed onto his knees and started playing with the tips of his white moustache, twisting them this way and that and laughing. Then, I took a more serious tone.

"Papa, I have come to ask your forgiveness for my sins."

"Is that so?" he asked, looking rather surprised. He had moved away from me a little and looked in my eyes as though expecting me to confess a recent bit of mischief. "Now, pray tell me, what sins would that be?"

"All my sins, Papa. All my sins. Because tomorrow as you know, it will be my First Communion and I must make sure my soul is spotless."

"But your soul *is* spotless, my darling Bettina," he said. "You have never committed any sins. Don't you know you are my perfect little girl?"

I instinctively knew Mama would not have had the same answer.

"Thank you, Papa. Thank you." I put my arms around his neck, gave him a great big hug and placed a kiss on his cheek. Then, I ran out of his study to go and play on the swing hanging from a sturdy limb of the oak tree. I loved swinging and singing and dreaming while listening to the distant bellowing and the tinkling of bells

from the black and white cows dotting the valley below.

I am certain that Papa loved Anna with the same intensity as he loved me. And although I did not know her very well, I loved her with all my heart. Since her graduation from the Sorbonne, she lived far away, in Copenhagen, working as a translator at the Austrian Embassy. That is where she met Ingmar Kronberg. Papa immediately liked Ingmar but he was a bit sad at the thought that his young daughter might marry a man so much older. Mama was about fifteen years younger than Papa so he knew first-hand how difficult it could be, at times, to live with the restlessness of a younger wife. And he must have imagined that it was difficult for Mama also. He took Anna aside after the first evening she brought Ingmar home, and said, “Anna, I want you to know that I think Mr. Kronberg is a very fine gentleman, but have you given any thought to what it will be like for you when he is much older and you are still a young woman? You might feel like dancing at the ball, and he will be too tired to accompany you. He might become ill, and you would have to spend years of your life at his bedside, nursing him. My dear daughter, life will not always be easy if you marry such an older man. Think about it for a little while, I beg of you. If you should fall in love with a younger man who cannot offer you the same lifestyle you are used to, you can count on my help; you know that, don’t you?”

Anna promised she would think about it, but finally she declared, “Papa, Ingmar is the man I want to marry.”

“You both have my blessing,” was all he replied. And Anna knew he meant it. Mr. Kronberg was a wonderful man and Papa, and he enjoyed long conversations in the smoking room, puffing on their cigars, drinking Schnapps or whatever it was they drank in those days, while in the living-room, Mama and I listened with fascination to Anna’s tales of her life in Copenhagen. By the light of two brass lamps above the fireplace, fingers moved skilfully, sewing and embroidering initials on all the beautiful white linen for my sister’s trousseau.

Papa and all of us had agreed to be happy that my sister had

accepted Mr. Kronberg's marriage proposal. He had been married to an Italian woman when he was much younger. There were two sons a few years older than I. Typhoid had taken the first Mrs. Kronberg away during the war, shortly after their second son was born. Papa did not mind Mr. Kronberg being a widower; he would not have liked a divorced man. Mr. Kronberg was obviously delighted to have found beautiful, smart, elegant Anna for his second wife. And he thanked Papa and Mama for their warm welcome.

Anna and her fiancé made the long train journey three more times from Copenhagen before their wedding celebrations, and once, in the summer, we all went for several weeks, with innumerable suitcases, to a small town in Italy, to swim in the sea and to meet Mr. Kronberg's two handsome sons who were a lot of fun because they did not speak our language. We all tried to speak French but I only knew a few words, so it made for a lot of hilarious misinterpretations. We constantly found ourselves in stitches. I loved having two older brothers. I couldn't wait to officially have Anna's fiancé and the two boys in our family.

One excellent reason why I was thrilled that Mr. Kronberg would be a permanent visitor to our house was that he and Anna always arrived laden with wonderful surprises. When they visited, our house was transformed into a wonderland with all the new toys and games. Sometimes however, when we were all together around the dinner table, I imagined his too intent gaze upon me. It seemed to me he was examining my face, secretly wondering about something. Perhaps underestimating the perspicacity of a child, he would turn his eyes, as discretely as he could, from my face to mother's and then to Anna's. I would lower my eyes, as I had been taught to do with my superiors, and I would try to concentrate on the meringues and the babas and the tortes on my plate.

It had been decided that I should call him Uncle Ingmar because it seemed slightly indecent for a seven-year-old girl to call a man with salt and pepper hair by his first name, and calling him Mr. Kronberg put too much distance between two people who would soon be members of the same family.

The night before the wedding, Papa was in the smoking room with Uncle Ingmar. Uncle Ingmar had given me a most wonderful pair of embroidered shoes he had brought from Turkey especially for me; the uppers were made of pink satin or perhaps silk and were decorated with pearls and sparkling beads of silver and gold. I wanted to wear them the next day with my long organza dress, but Mother insisted I should wear the white leather ones. I hoped that, as often happened, just one little bit of pleading with Papa would settle the dispute in my favour, so I went and stood outside the smoking room, waiting for a moment of silence before knocking on the door. Through the etched glass framed in mahogany, I could see Uncle Ingmar's imposing dark shape pacing slowly to and fro in front of Papa who was sitting with his back to the door, by the fireplace.

"Albert," I heard Uncle Ingmar say, "you know I love your daughter with all my heart and I have already promised to take good care of her. I will treat her like the precious treasure that she is. I want to thank you one more time for opening your arms to me, despite my age. You will never have reason to regret it, I promise."

"I have no doubt about that, my dear Ingmar. You are a most welcome son-in-law. We could not have wished for a better husband than you for our daughter. It is obvious she is madly in love with you and you with her. And your dear sons have showed her the respect they would show their own mother. May it always be so."

Uncle Ingmar stopped in front of the tall bronze lamp; he held his cigar in front of his chest and turned towards Papa. "Albert, there is one question I want to ask you before your daughter and I take our vows tomorrow. I hope you will not find me impertinent." Suddenly, his voice sounded very different from usual. I didn't know if I was imagining that because of my own sense of guilt at eavesdropping, although that had not been my intention, but I knew instinctively that something very important was about to be said. I waited. Neither of them said another word.

Uncle Ingmar took a puff of his cigar and lowered it to the ash-

tray to rid the tip of its circle of ashes. I put my hand on the door handle but, as he spoke again, I pulled it back. "You know, Albert, nothing would ever make me change my mind about Anna. You know that nothing in her past could ever make me think ill of her. But I am a curious man, and I would like to know." He turned towards one of the tall bookcases. "I assure you," he continued, without looking at Papa this time, "it would not change anything, not my respect for her, neither my love. And if anything should ever happen to you, I would treat your little Bettina like my own daughter. He turned again towards Papa. "You see, Albert, if one were to be guilty of having loved someone else before, you and I also would be very guilty. You have your beautiful Anna and I have my two handsome sons to prove it. And besides, who has not made a mistake in his or her young years?"

There was a long silence. Papa took a long, long, deep breath.

"My dear Ingmar," he said, and although I couldn't see him because his back was to me, I imagined his left hand twisting and stretching the tip of his moustache. He laughed heartily and finally he said, "Believe me: Bettina is nobody's mistake but my dear wife's and mine. And she is the one mistake in life for which I have never asked forgiveness. I adore my little Bettina; she is a ray of sunshine in my declining years. As for you, my dear son-in-law, I assure you, your kindness makes your mistake a very forgivable one."

There was yet another long silence. I turned the door handle making as much noise as I could. I stood motionless in the opening, waiting for Papa to poke his head around the back of his wing-chair, and see me. Uncle Ingmar stood enveloped in a thick cloud of smoke. His face glowed red like the coals in the fireplace. Papa uncrossed his legs and said, "Come in, my little Bettina, come and sit on Papa's knees."

TWO

Dinner with Friends

We were all four jarred by the unexpected, inelegant grating sound of the intercom buzzer. Pleasantly replete from yet another one of the Paterson's sumptuous gourmet meals, Mireille, Stuart and I, had been quietly listening to Peter's discourse on the virtues of Verdi's *Macbeth*.

A Chateauneuf-du-Pape from the Domaine de Beaurenard had accompanied the *filet mignon* along with tiny potatoes not much bigger than grapes, and roasted in Tunisian olive oil. Half an hour before dinner had been served, Peter had delicately removed the bottle from his wine rack, and after cradling it in the crook of his arm, like a precious new-born baby, he had handed it to Stuart, allowing him to study the label. After a long moment during which my husband had feigned some interest, our host had repossessed the bottle and passed it on to me, carefully keeping the angle so as "not to disturb its contents." The label was rather plain, in a pale shade of nondescript colour, with a coat of arms and the words Chateauneuf-du-Pape in fancy, curly letters, and the rest of the words in plain print of different sizes, according, I suppose, to the importance of the information. I wasn't sure exactly what I was expected to say, so I said nothing but I smiled as I carefully handed the bottle back to our generous connoisseur.

While Mireille had cast a last look of inspection at the details of Peter's table setting, while she had busied herself straightening the white damask tablecloth, making sure the silverware was set perfectly straight, turning a knife to place its blade contiguous to the plate, positioning the salt and pepper shakers symmetrically on either side of the white lilies in their black vase, Peter had invited us to sit down in the living-room and he had filled the time until dinner by imparting some of his knowledge to us, explaining that this Chateauneuf-du-Pape appellation had been in use since the popes had established their residence at Avignon, seven centuries ago.

"It's against all odds that the fat, gnarly vines grow on the steep hills of Provence, in hostile soil where every inch is covered with large pebbles that absorb the heat of the sun, warming the vines at night as their heat slowly escapes."

It seemed to me, in fact, I could swear, that just a few months before, Peter had given us the same lecture, used exactly the same words. Often, when he spoke, obviously determined to inject some culture into Stuart and me, I had a sense of reading a book rather than listening to spoken words. It was as though Peter had rehearsed his speech, like one polishes one's writing, or like a newscaster. And unfortunately, our friend had a practised skill for holding the podium until our boredom could hardly be disguised.

I make it sound as though we were not interested, but in fact, we were, or at least, we had been the first time. It was just that he had this terrible habit of not remembering the knowledge he had already imparted to us.

As Peter, entranced, stared into distant Provence, or downwards past his long, straight nose, at the tip of his freshly polished black Dack's, his well-manicured hands clasping the bottle, just touching the tip of his hand-woven, purple Karen Bulow tie, reciting for the second or third time since we had met him, his long, interminable monologue, aping his original one almost verbatim, Stuart found it even more difficult than I to stifle an ungrateful yawn.

The Patersons had seemed swollen with pride at the prospect

of sharing yet another prized bottle with us, their closest friends. Peter had lovingly, respectfully, twisted the metal of the old-fashioned cork-screw into the moist cork, and Stuart and I had watched in pious silence as he withdrew with utmost care, the pale little cylinder of spongy wood, gently, caressingly, sliding it out of the slim neck. Then, in another one of his ballet dancer's practiced motions, he had drawn an imaginary circle, waltzing the cork past his own nose, and titillatingly inhaling its aroma deep into his lungs, before placing the bottle on the table "to give the wine a chance to breathe." We were, by then, familiar with the ritual.

When sufficient time had elapsed, and upon Mireille's signal, we rose and politely inched out way towards the table, ready to take our usual, assigned places.

Peter motioned for us to sit, but he remained standing during his lengthy evaluation of the wine which preceded our own sampling. He rotated the crystal glass by its stem in front of a fine modern Italian lamp, and informed us of his approval of its deep red colour. Swishing the liquid around, he suspended his schnoz above the escaping perfume, working the small muscles of his round, discerning nostrils. He slurped a large sip into his mouth and, coating the whole interior of his dark palace of delights, chewing before swallowing, he nodded. A contented smile of approval stretched across his face. Erudite, impassioned utterances soon followed as he poured the wine into each of our glasses. When he became silent for a few tense seconds, I imagined that, in a way, pouring for us ignoramuses, his heart must be breaking. Yes, I thought, it must surely be the damnation of connoisseurs to be constrained to share their treasures with people like us.

Stuart and I knew nothing about wine; we certainly had not yet developed the palate necessary for the appreciation of such fine vintages. We were young then and drank Chianti and cheap champagne quite candidly, oblivious to the great world of oenology awaiting our discovery. We were vaguely aware that red wine went with red meat, and white wine with poultry and fish, but that was the extent of our knowledge. We had never, either, tasted Cam-

embert or Stilton, never peeled the leaves off freshly steamed artichokes, to discover their delicious, tender hearts. I had never slid a raw oyster down my throat. Stuart had never even seen caviar. We thought truffles were fancy chocolates. We knew nothing about pigs on leashes snorting around in the loose, humid underbrush of oak forests. Our friends' endeavour was to introduce us to a wonderful world of international delicacies.

"Rich and complex, yet delicate," were words Peter had used that night to impress upon us the quality of the expensive nectar.

Stuart and I had been married less than a year. We had met while I was still attending university. He had come from Suffolk, right after his graduation. When he was in his last year of studies, after winning a somewhat prestigious award for research in his field of Engineering, the recruiting agency of Thornton and Phlebing had read of his accomplishments in *The Sunday Times* and had swiftly found a way of getting in touch with him; fresh, promising young blood was one thing they were quick to recognize and go after. Genocom was contacted, and pronto, the big boss flew to England to interview the young man and lure him to Canada with a deal no recent graduate could refuse. The bait was great. Of course, Stuart had accepted, and he had immediately felt at home in our small university town.

That October, during my fourth year in biology, Stuart was a guest speaker in our department. A week later I ran into him at a cocktail party. A few glasses of wine (no matter the vintage) will do wonders for shy young men. I am quite sure my mini-skirt and long legs also helped, although he insists it was my natural charms and my French accent. Two months after my last exam, we stood in front of Judge Baker. Surrounded by several members of our families, the few casual friends Stuart had met since his arrival, and my university buddies, we were saying, "I do." "I do."

A large, modern apartment building was being erected near the water. We signed a lease for November for a one-bedroom on the eleventh floor with a view on the lake. I moved my few belongings into Stuart's small furnished apartment for the next six

months and off we went for a three-week honeymoon to Europe, stopping en route in England where I was introduced to the rest of his family and friends.

After our European gallivanting, I started my first real job, and at the beginning, after work, we enjoyed being just the two of us. Dinner out on Friday night was usually followed by a movie. We saw every new release. On Saturday, if anything was on at the local theatre, we took a chance and bought tickets. We played tennis. We swam. We jogged together. We had the same tastes for music. We both loved spy novels and adventure stories, and read all of Ken Follett and John Le Carré simultaneously, buying two copies of each book.

All of this, and our weekend outings were quite fine and dandy, but there comes a point in a young couple's life when conversation slows, when much has been said, when there is less to talk about, when it would be fun to spend an evening with friends. But those were the days when graduates had it all handed to them not on a silver platter but on a gold one; the days when an unemployed graduate was an oxymoron. One went to school, studied hard, and got a well-paying job upon graduation. All my close friends from university had either moved back to their home-towns, or gone after jobs all over the country, all over the world.

Stuart had always been an assiduous letter writer. He had kept in close contact with his pals back in England. He had not yet felt the need or had the opportunity to form strong bonds with any of his co-workers; I had come into his life within weeks of his arrival, and from then on, we had essentially been inseparable.

Now, a kind of unavoidable, subtle boredom was surreptitiously creeping up on us. It was not anything either of us could have put a finger on, but deep down we both felt, without saying anything, that something was missing. Our ardour between the sheets was not what it had been. Something we did not know yet and would soon learn was that nothing can better fan the flame of desire than an evening in the company of attractive, intelligent friends, around a well-garnished table.

We had not yet moved into the high-rise, and on Saturday afternoons, we made our ritual visit to Bramont Oriental & European Imports where we had been choosing fabric for curtains, as well as floor coverings and a few pieces of avant-garde furniture which Bramont stocked. When we could not find what we wanted, they pulled out numerous fascinating catalogues and ordered anything we fancied from them. All of these items would be delivered to our future apartment after our move in November. The store was a large, elegant, ancient family establishment; the staff was courteous and always very obliging.

It was there that we met Peter Paterson. Peter was the pride of Bramont. Despite what I assume must have been a modest salary perhaps supplemented by a percentage on sales, he wore designer ties and made-to-measure suits. In season, he daily wore a fresh rose on his lapel. Here was a man with a sensitive mind as well as an occasional wry sense of humour. Over the course of several Saturdays, we became impressed by his knowledge and his appreciation for fine woods and fine furniture design. We crossed the line into friendship when he mentioned that, like me, his wife Mireille was French; he was certain she would enjoy meeting us. Coincidentally, they had signed a lease to move into the new downtown building as well.

One Saturday evening, before the move, our friendship was sealed by an invitation to their apartment for dinner. During that first evening, we discovered that, raised by two spinster aunts who lived off a modest pension, Peter had not completed high-school. The well-meaning sisters of his deceased mother had kindled the cruelty of his school companions by dressing him in old-fashioned wool suits, well-ironed shirts with starched collars, and ancient family cufflinks; they had insisted he wear highly polished black leather shoes. He had been overprotected, smothered, coddled, in a teetotaler home where all manner of fun was prohibited.

In all the years I have known Peter, I have never seen him tipsy, never heard him laugh out loud. A male Mona Lisa, he smiles but does not laugh. Nor can I imagine him ever getting angry. He

had detested school. Bespectacled to top it off, as a teenager, he must already have been an odd character. It was probably a good thing he had dropped out of school: how could he possibly have survived amongst the brutes? Despite, or perhaps because of his sensitivity and intellect, Peter, taunted and ridiculed, had obviously been earmarked by the Great Organizer of Life as a sacrificial lamb of academia.

While he was still in his teenage years, both Peter's aunts had died from the same mysterious illness within a week of one another. He suspected it was food poisoning. Penniless and without family, (his mother and aunts had emigrated from England when he was a baby) he had been hired by Bramont, and had been working for them for many years without any prospect of advancement (he was the only non-family member). He might have gone back to study; he certainly had the intelligence for it, but he had never forgotten the sadistic, brutal ways of the other students, and vowed that the seat of his pants would never polish the benches of any learning institution. A remarkable autodidact, his bookshelves were stacked with rare and fascinating books.

As sometimes happens with eccentric people, one is at first drawn to them, in a sort of like-at-first-sight affair, but after a while, the fascination wears off and their strange habits become unbearable. This, unfortunately, did not happen until Mireille and I had become best friends. We had a wonderful time together. Like Peter, she was a rather unusual person in her own way and she was kind and generous. I liked her. She worked as a legal secretary. We had both grown up in Quebec, attended a nuns' boarding school. Mireille was a good four or five years older than I, and she became a sort of big sister to me. She was a gourmet cook and she never hesitated to share all her recipes with me. We went on shopping sprees together, and at one point, we both had a part in Michel Tremblay's play, *Les Belles-Soeurs*. I would never have dared ascend the steps to the scene without her. I was always knocking at her door for help, and she always made time for me. Together we made the most beautiful macramé plant hangers, although

Peter and Stuart both suggested we give them all away as presents.

I am not an observant person, but my first evening in their living room will be forever etched in my memory, like an old black and white photograph. It was before our moves to our respective new apartments. The Patersons occupied the upper-floor in a ten-year old, rectangular triplex. There were many elegant old apartments with character in Kingston where I would have expected them to live but they were always located in less than sound-proof ancient buildings and, for our newly-found friends, noise was an issue. Peter was fastidious about his music; he wanted no undesirable sound to disturb his Deutsche Grammophon evenings.

Entering their apartment, I felt as though I had just slipped between the pages of a modern architectural magazine: two armchairs and a love seat all of black leather; black and white photographs hung with obvious attention to detail, achieving a perfect balance. The tablecloth was of white linen; the dishes were white with black contour. The kitchen appliances were, of course, white. Mireille and Peter had covered the small kitchen floor area at their own expense with black and white tiles à la Jean Cocteau. A white rug covered the living-room floor. Two Brazilian cow hides (their black and white patches the only asymmetrical pattern) were neatly placed in front of each armchair.

Mireille wore a black bell-bottomed pant-suit. She was small and retiring, and at first I did not take to her, but as I discovered the bright person she was, I began to like her more and more. Unfortunately, with time, as my appreciation for her intensified, our appreciation for Peter faded.

Friendship is an interesting thing. It is a happy accident when two couples take to each other in a way that all four people equally enjoy the company of the other three. More often than not, a friendship exists between two women or two men and the partners follow. After a while, ours became that kind of relationship. We did not dislike Peter; we just felt sorry for him. No matter how pathetically pompous were his ways, Stuart and I always saw in him a little orphan boy, badly loved by two aunts lacking in empa-

thy. Life had been unfair to him. In a way, I thought he deserved respect for having survived so much adversity.

Soon, it became obvious that we were Peter and Mireille's only friends. The four of us were getting together every weekend alternately at their apartment and at ours. Once our routine was established, there was no possible way that we could, without hurting them, turn down one of their invitations or fail to reciprocate. Not the most tolerant person in that kind of situation, Stuart resented it more than I, but he was willing to drag his feet along to the elevator and down to their apartment because, like me, he could not bring himself to hurt their feelings. Besides, all was not without consolation: the food was sumptuous. Not one local restaurant could boast such gourmet fare. And the wine. (Once we got to appreciate it.)

One of the things that particularly irked Stuart was a habit Peter had of inviting us, or to be more honest, of obliging us, to listen in absolute silence to one of his Deutsche Grammophon records after dinner. He would go over to his turntable, and pull out of its sleeve the disc he had already selected for that night, take a soft square of fabric out of a small Japanese lacquered box, pour some special cleaning liquid onto it and run it meticulously along the grooves of the record, going around just enough to cover its entire surface. Then, turning toward us, making sure we were all comfortably seated and ready to appreciate the subtlety of the performance about to spill out of his high quality sound system, he would delicately place the record onto its turntable, and with a grand gesture, lower the needle onto it. But coercing us to listen was not all: to ice the cake, as Stuart would say, after forty minutes or so, when both sides of the record had been played, he would entertain us with a long, detailed explanation of the piece. I use the word entertain here because that was precisely what he thought he was doing.

For some inexplicable reason, after these evenings at their apartment in the new building, Stuart and I always felt like a good romp. So, between a good meal and a good romp, what's a bit of

boredom, I often teased him. Besides, the music was always divine.

That night, when the grating, irritable sound of the intercom buzzer had disturbed our musicologist, he was half-way through his second sentence on the subject of Verdi's *Macbeth*.

"Verdi chose one of the greatest of all dramas as his subject, but the project raised problems. An opera without a radiant tenor hero, without a pair of lovers, tender melodies and impassioned duets?" Here, Peter had paused and looked at his audience, inviting us silently to nod in agreement. We had complied. "Instead of love, the portrayal of evil, instead of lyrical outpourings and dazzling coloratura, music to..."

Peter's words remained suspended in mid-air as Mireille looked at her watch and, puzzled, walked over to the intercom.

"Hello."

"It's us," a woman's voice said.

"Who is us?" asked Mireille, perplexed.

"It's us, Jeanette and Bill." The woman was laughing mischievously.

A look of discontent appeared simultaneously on both our hosts' faces. Peter looked at his watch for the second time in disbelief; it was ten past ten. Mireille stood there for a moment, lips drawn tightly, obviously trying to control angry feelings but she could not hide the resentment in her voice.

"Jeanette! Ah bon..., ah bien..., entrez. Come in."

Slowly, reluctantly, she pushed the button that would unlock the door downstairs.

Jeanette and Bill and their five year old son were expected the next afternoon on their way to Toronto. Peter and Mireille had briefly mentioned their coming. Now, our hosts were angry at this sudden barging in.

"Like a hair landing on the soup," said Mireille, unusually disgruntled. "I haven't even prepared their beds yet. What do they expect?" No, she was not pleased, but it takes no time at all to come up in the elevator, so she and Peter tried to regain their composure before their visitors landed on their floor.

"We'll be on our way then," said Stuart, happy to have found a

legitimate reason to escape now that his belly was full.

"You may as well stay a few minutes and meet my sister," said Mireille.

Someone knocked on the door and she opened it. Her brother-in-law was holding the five-year old in his arms.

"He fell asleep in the car," said Jeanette, and immediately, the kid woke up and slithered out of his father's arms and onto the floor. On the way down, he reached into his father's shirt pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses with thick lenses.

Mireille must have been very astonished to see her nephew wearing glasses because, even before introductions had been made, she asked, "Since when have you been wearing these, Marc-Laurent?"

"Almost a year now," answered his mother. "And he reads like an eight-year old: you just wouldn't believe it."

The boy plastered the glasses on his face, grabbed the first thing he could see with writing on it: the Deutsche Grammophon's accompanying booklet for the Verdi Opera Overtures album. He opened it at random, and, obviously used to giving impromptu performances, he started sounding the words out loud:

"Ver-di ch-ose one of the gre-ate-st of all dr-amas as his su-b-ject, but the pr-o-ject ra-ise-d pr-o-bl-ems. An op-er-a wi-th-out a ra-di-ant te-nor hero, wi-th-out a pa-ir of lo-ver-s, te-nd-er me-lo-di-es..."

Peter stood stiff as a Buckingham Palace guard; he looked at the brat with killing eyes.

Astounded, Stuart and I looked at each other, making a Herculean effort to keep straight faces. We excused ourselves and decamped. We did not even bother to use the elevator, but climbed up the stairs to our apartment two steps at a time, not knowing whether we should laugh or cry.

"Talk about losing face!" I said to Stuart. It was hilarious but at the same time I felt sad for Peter and was filled with embarrassment for him. "How in the world is he ever going to get over that one?"

"Word for bloody word," said Stuart. "Can you believe it? I knew it! I always knew it! A fake! A goddam fake! Well, he's not going

to impress me anymore with his damned pompous speeches!”

They came to our house the next Saturday night and, as usual at our place, dinner was followed by a game of Scrabble. The next time it was their turn to receive us, we dreaded the evening’s denouement. Peter’s self-esteem had obviously long ago reached rock bottom; the last thing I wanted was for him to suffer humiliation. I wondered if he would play any music at all that night.

“How could he not? It would be awkward not to.”

And afterwards, divested of his learned’s cloak, his fraud exposed, how would he keep his composure? What would he do? What *could* he do? I was trembling with apprehension for him.

Mireille served Linsensuppe (a German version of lentil soup), Rainbow Trout done in a German fashion, Kartoffelsalat and, for desert, Rumtopf (fruits in rum). We drank a semi-dry Ruländer with the first course, a Riesling Kabinett from Mosel-Saar-Ruwer with the second.

After dinner, Peter walked over to his turntable. The evening’s selection lay on top of the speaker. He had chosen Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde. When the last note had been played, he leaned back comfortably in the Eames chair, lifted his feet onto the swivelling ottoman, took an exceedingly deep breath and, staring at a bust of Wagner near his turntable, his features, except for his lips, frozen in his face, he started a long, monotonous lecture on the genius of Wagner.

THREE

Double Agent

The Kanata Tours bus was late today. Usually, the packed coach pulled up in front of City Hall at around 2 p.m. Brazeau Rovers had left half-an-hour ago and the young woman had sold twenty-two books. Only a few of the thirty-two tourists had not been interested. Cronin Publishing House was just around the corner, and Sylvia had gone and refilled her bag. Now, there were another thirty paperbacks weighing heavily in her backpack, all eagerly awaiting customers.

She leaned her sign carefully against one of the pillars, took off her backpack, placed it in front of her on one of the limestone steps, and sat down to rest her legs and enjoy a few undisturbed minutes of sun on her face and bare arms while waiting for the next customers. She slid her feet out of her sandals, took off her sunglasses, blew some hot, humid air onto the lenses, and wiped them dry with the bottom of her tank top. Sliding the scrunchy out of her pony tail, she raked her hair with her fingers, shook her head, rearranged the loose hair, and secured it again; it was too hot to be walking around with loose hair bouncing on her shoulders.

Sylvia's mind flashed back for a second to her debut as a writer and this unusual business of selling books. She wished she were home writing now, but book sales had been so lucrative she did not

have the courage to stop. Just a few more weeks, she told herself, but she knew only too well that she was hooked, that the more she sold, the more difficult it would be to get back to her writing desk.

She watched the slow parade of cars with foreign license plates cruising past City Hall and she wondered just how guilty she should feel about it all. Before inventing this original way of pushing books, Sylvia had not been in the habit of committing such unethical acts, but, well, she thought, grinning, necessity is the mother of invention! Nigh on impossible to survive as a writer. You gotta do what you gotta do!

A family of Texans strolling by thought her smile was for them, and smiled back at her.

"Sure is a nice little town you got here," said the man between two licks of his pistachio ice cream.

"Thank you!" Such a friendly face I have! thought Sylvia smugly.

Soon the anticipated bus pulled in. Sylvia slipped her feet back into her sandals, got up, grabbed her backpack and her professionally designed sign, and went to the big charter's door. Forty or fifty passengers spilled out and loitered on the sidewalk while taking in City Hall's elegant facade. On the repeated advice of their bus driver, they made sure their passports and money were secure. They put on sunglasses, adjusted their sun hats, and stretched their limbs while trying to decide how to fill the next bit of time on their own. Should they go inside City Hall and take in a free visit? It was just another City Hall! What could be so interesting about it?

Sylvia noticed her pen had fallen out of her jean pocket onto the step and she picked it up. It wasn't long before someone spotted her sign.

*Free
Guided Tour of Historical Kingston
Follow Me*

A middle-aged woman coming out of the bus turned to her husband.

"Fancy this, I wonder if it's one of those tourist traps," she asked

him. "Should we do it? Where is it that we are now, anyway?"

"Kingston," said the husband. "Kingston, Ontario." He read Sylvia's sign. "Well, I don't see why we shouldn't do it. What have we got to lose? But let me ask a few questions first, just in case."

Mr. Silverdale ambled over to the young woman.

"Hello."

"Hello. Welcome to Kingston, Sir. Would you like to take advantage of my free tour? I'll be starting in a minute."

"Are you working for the Tourist Board?" asked the man. He screwed up his face suspiciously. "Is this one of those tours where we get taken into stores to buy things?" asked another tourist who had heard his question.

"Not at all," said Sylvia, smiling. "Not at all. We will not be going into any stores. I promise. This is an historical tour. We have many interesting sites here in Kingston. Did you have a chance to read about our city on your way here?"

"Not really, Luv," said the man with his Yorkshire accent.

"Well, come along if you're interested. You have nothing to worry about. And if you're not enjoying yourself, you can leave the group at anytime, no offence to me. I promise!"

Mr. Silverdale waved over to his wife who was busy pointing the sign out to the others. They came and joined the dozen or so already gathered around him and the tour guide.

"The thing is we are only here for an hour and a half," said a slightly limping, pot-bellied gentleman from the group.

"Of course, I'm aware of that. I meet this bus every Thursday afternoon. Don't worry; you have plenty of time for my free tour."

"You do this for free every Thursday afternoon?" asked one woman, fancying this might be a pleasurable way of volunteering in her own town.

"Yes," said Sylvia. "You see, I love meeting people, and I think we live in a beautiful place here. I'm a writer and I get inspired from meeting new people from all over the world." She pulled several photocopies of a map of the historical area from the outside pocket of her backpack and handed them around to everyone in

the group. It had ten points of interest marked on it.

"This is where I'll be taking you," she said. "You can keep the map after if you wish but if you won't need it, I will be happy to take it back and pass it on to the next tourists. I know you're not used to our funny accent, but I'll try to make myself understood, eh!"

The group laughed in unison.

"First, I'll show you through our beautiful City Hall, right here."

Sylvia turned to the elegant limestone building with its tall pillars and wide staircase overlooking the lake. "This was once the seat of Parliament. The big wigs of the previous century all sat in there, and look what a mess they've left us with. But we won't go into that now, not enough time for that!"

They laughed again.

"After City Hall, I'll take you to our local market... then to visit the Cathedral..."

Sylvia started on her way, thirty-four tourists on her tail, almost all with the same distinct accent. She was a very efficient guide, had a powerful voice that could reach all ears, was full of good jokes, and spent a fair amount of time poking fun at her own British ancestry; she had been doing this tour for a few months and she knew the whole routine by heart. Despite her heavy load, she was light on her feet, but made sure everyone could follow without being rushed. She had a way of swaying her hips below her backpack, as she walked, that kept many of the men silent.

When they came to a point of interest, she turned swiftly and most of the male gazes tried to refocus on her young face. She first took a minute to explain about the particular building, and then entertained her guests with funny, personal anecdotes which varied, depending on where the tourists came from, how old they were, what kind of interests they might have. If they were from Edinburgh, she unearthed a Scottish great-grandmother and wouldn't you know it, the grandmother had lived in a little village which was very close to the Scottish capital but whose name Sylvia had forgotten; if they were from Cardiff, her paternal grandfather had been Welsh and a cousin of Richard Burton. The tourists all

found her very charming and personable. They knew they had struck luck in finding her there just outside their bus.

"It's always so nice to meet the locals when travelling," said one English woman. "I have been to more than twenty-five countries and the guided tours are always the best part. But a free tour, that's a nice surprise!"

When they came out of St. George's Cathedral, Sylvia suggested they should rest a few minutes on the wide stone steps before heading off to see the beautiful old houses further along on King Street. She knew by now this was around the time when the question would pop up.

It was a young man who popped the question first. He was travelling on his own and had been very friendly with Sylvia since the beginning.

"Did you say you were a writer? he asked. "What kind of things do you write about?"

"Mostly mysteries," said Sylvia. She leaned against her backpack, waiting for the usual series of questions.

"And what did you say your name was?"

More of the tourists were listening now.

"And what are some of your titles?" asked an older woman.

"I've just finished *The Axe-Wielding Professor*. But I'm afraid I'm not very well known. It's not easy to pierce the book market you know. I don't think I'm on the shelves in Britain, anyway. But hopefully that will come."

"Is there a bookstore around here where we could find a copy of your book?" asked another one of the tourists.

"There is one but I'm not sure there is enough time to go all the way there," said Sylvia. "But," she added, casually taking off her backpack. "I happen to have a pile of them in my bag right here. I am taking them from the publisher to a bookstore uptown but here, I'll show you one."

She pulled the backpack from behind her, loosened the drawstring at the top, and produced one of the thin paperbacks. By now, all of the tourists had gathered around her, and were craning their

necks curiously to see the book cover.

"Can I have a look at it?" asked one woman, reaching for the book.

The young writer took out more copies and handed them around.

"This is only twelve dollars," said one of the women, turning the book every which way in her hands. "Do you think I could buy a copy from you? Are you selling these?"

Sylvia feigned hesitation. "Well, I guess I could," she said after a few seconds.

"Then you could autograph it. That would be a wonderful present to take back for my daughter. She loves mysteries."

"Great idea," said the woman's husband. "I mean, that's less than £10. I think we should get one each for Patricia and Susie, don't you think? Especially with the autograph."

"Yes, let's do that. Might you be able to sell us two?"

Sylvia pretended to ponder the question. "I don't see why not," she finally said.

"Oh! Blimey!" said one man; I haven't any Canadian money left on me."

"I'll take pounds, I don't mind," said Sylvia. It wouldn't be a big deal to drop by Wellington Foreign Exchange on her way back to Cronin Publishing.

Within five minutes, as was almost always the case, all thirty copies had been sold. Everyone who had managed to get one was beaming with pride, thrilled at having rubbed shoulders with the writer herself. This would be fun to talk about back home. What a lovely coincidence.

When they got back to their waiting driver, ready for another stretch of highway, they all filed in past Sylvia, and one by one, before climbing aboard for the ride to big impersonal Toronto, they shook hands with her. Some offered her a tip but she refused.

"When I say free guided tour, I mean free guided tour. Thank you."

The driver gave Sylvia a knowing smile and she winked. She put a hand in front of the other so only he would see, and with her

hidden hand, she first made a three and then a zero. The driver was happy. At fifty cents a copy, that would make fifteen dollars. It all added up in the end. Last year, he had pocketed over a thousand dollars. Easy money. And all tax free.

She glanced at her watch. The next bus shouldn't be here for another forty-five minutes. Standing by the limestone steps, a smile of satisfaction on her face, she waved her hand for the next few minutes until the bus had disappeared, then she walked back to Cronin Publishers.

Sometimes she wished she could just be at her computer, writing. If only she could finish that book, Cronin had promised they would publish it too, but she had grown accustomed to this now and the money was just too good. And anyway, there was always the winter, when tourism died down almost completely. She wouldn't give tours in winter.

She counted mentally. Thirty times twelve, that was three hundred and sixty. At twenty percent, that would make \$72. Plus the other two batches she had already sold today and the next batch with the four o'clock bus, she should bring home close to three hundred bucks again today. Who said the book business didn't pay?

At Cronin Publishers, Mr. Hansen, the manager, was in the back. Sylvia walked past the secretary.

"Hi! Sylvia. How's it going?"

"Hi! Monique. Very well, thanks," said the tour guide, rushing to get to the back. "I'll be needing another ten or twenty maps, please," she added, without stopping.

"No problem," answered Monique enthusiastically.

Sylvia was hoping to get at least a couple of minutes to put her feet up; the last shift was always the most tiring. Hers was a long day.

"Hello, Mr. Hansen." She showed him her empty backpack. "Sold every single copy again. You had better give me another thirty. I have a group coming at four."

"Well done, Sylvia. Well done! Now, let's see..." He rubbed his hands together and in a jubilant mood, sauntered back to the

shelves where the last thirty books had been. "Wow! That was the end of *The Axe-Wielding Professor*. Well done! Well done indeed, Madam!" He was grinning like a Cheshire cat. "What kind of thing do you want this time? Do you want the last murder-mystery or maybe the historical novel set in Perth? I've got seven hundred and eighty copies of that one left. They're hard-cover but they're priced at twenty-seven bucks."

Sylvia took a look at the book. There was a picture of the writer on the back cover. She handed it back to Mr. Hansen.

"Are you trying to insult me or do I really look that old?"

He looked at the back cover. "Oops!" he said. "Gee, Sylvia. I'm glad you're on your toes. Sorry about that! I guess I'll have to try and find someone else to help us get rid of these. You wouldn't happen to have an unemployed aunt, would you?"

They often had a good laugh back there. She chose another thirty copies of another dud that had been gathering dust in the back for a few years. Joan Cunningham-Etherington's *The Winking Glass Eye* was sure to sell out in the next two weeks. Then, it would be out of print. And it would be some other obscure writer's turn. Cronin Publishing was doing very well since Sylvia had first mentioned her brain wave. Mr. Hansen knew that if ever she finished the book she had been working on for so many years now, he could safely print thousands of copies and they would all sell like hotcakes.

Her backpack full of *The Winking Glass Eye*, Sylvia trotted back to the steps of City Hall with her sign, just in time to welcome a new batch of tourists with her beautiful smile. My name is Joan, my name is Joan Cunningham-Etherington, she repeated several times to herself while waiting.

FOUR

Fixin' the Roof

This is my lucky day! Look at that beautiful hot sun hangin' up there! Look at that blue sky! Not a cloud in sight! Hard to believe that yesterday it was comin' down in buckets. When I brought the mail in this mornin' I noticed the crocuses peekin' through the ground. The snowdrops are done already, but we had a good show of them this year. My wife says the forsythia looks nice against the Gaskin's newly-painted purple wall, and the magnolia on Mrs. Carrie's front lawn are getting ready to show off again. I haven't been by, but Sunday, Maureen will be back. After church, we'll take a nice long walk past all the lovely gardens near here. And I can tell it won't be long before the lilac blooms. This is my favourite time of year. The robins and the chickadees have been back for a while and last week, I heard the cardinal. He seems late this year. Anyway, Good bye winter. Good riddance! And stay where you are!

I must say it was quite a wind in the night. I hope it didn't cause more damage to my roof. It did a good job, though, blowin' all the clouds away. It's a nice day on the road for Maureen too. She's away visitin' her mom in the hospital. It's the fourth time since Christmas she does the trip by bus. I keep tellin' her she should take the car, but she says she doesn't like drivin' anymore. Each time they

call her about her mom, we think: this is it, it's the end. But old Mrs. Crawford, she picks up again. I'm beginnin' to wonder if she'll not outlive us all in the end. She's proud of the fact that she was born the same day as Her Majesty, and she's determined to outlive her. Well, the Queen does look a few years younger than Mrs. C., that's for darn sure. A trifle more elegant too, to be honest. Well, ninety-two Maureen's mom is, an' still livin' in her own house, though. But now, she has to live with her broken wrist because the doctors can't do nothin' about it. She's just bloody well gona have to wait for it to heal. She shouldn't have gone out when the sidewalks were icy. Stubborn old woman!

We've been tryin' to convince her to get into an old folks' home but what can you do? The old lady's stubborn as a mule. And she's still tellin' her daughter how to do things. Poor Maureen, I know she'll come back exhausted again. I know exactly how she'll feel. I'm exhausted too after Maureen bosses me around. Well, I guess we all need to be part of a peckin' order. I do seem to be at the bottom of the ladder there, mind you. That's why I like a day on my own. I hope the old lady lives on forever.

Speakin' of ladders though, at least this time, my wife's comin' back to a nice surprise. I'm gonna take advantage of this gorgeous day an' of her bein' away, an' I'm gonna get up there an' patch up those nasty leaks. We've had water comin' down in the corner of our bedroom and in the bathroom when all that snow was meltin' after that last big dumpin'. I swear there must ha' been a foot of snow on the roof that day. It's left ugly brown stains all over those ceilings and even down the wall. And part of the wallpaper is liftin'. Maureen's not too happy about that, let me tell you. And now I'm gonna have to repaint and fix the wallpaper. But there's no point paintin' if I don't fix the problem first.

I knew the roof needed fixin' last winter when we started havin' a bit of leakin', but Maureen didn't want me to climb up there. She's the fidgety type, always worryin' that I'm gonna hurt myself. I even had an argument with her. I was just tryin' to explain to her that if we don't look after it right away it's gonna get worse.

"Get someone to come and have a look at it then," she said.

"I'm perfectly capable of lookin' at it myself," I told her. But she wouldn't have any of that so, just to please her, I had a roofin' company come an' have a look. I should have guessed it: they wanted us to put a whole new roof on.

"It's pretty obvious they're not interested in small jobs," I told Maureen. "I'm not gonna pay six thousand bucks to put a new roof on when all we need is a few leaks fixed."

But Maureen doesn't think I understand anything about roofs. She can be pretty naive at times. She's convinced that if Plunket Roofers say we need a new roof, then it means we need a new roof. Women! Unfortunately, we've had more than one argument about it. I wish I could make her understand.

"Come on George," she said when I warned her to be careful with roofers. "They've been in business for over twenty-five years. If they didn't know what they were doing, they would have been out of business by now."

"Maybe." I said. "But how many people, do you think, bother to climb up to their roof or get a second opinion and make sure they do need a new one before they sign the contract with Plunket?"

"Oh, bother! You're a bloody skeptic, that's what you are! Always thinking contractors are out there to steal your money. You think you know everything about everything. An expert-of-all-trades! Phew! You won't even trust the real experts. Remember what happened when you tried to get rid of the bats yourself? Remember what happened when you installed that new toilet yourself? Oh yeah! We don't need a pest control man! We don't need a plumber! Mr. Fix-it-all-himself is perfectly capable of doing the work. No problem! Right!" She took a deep breath, exhaled loudly, and shook her head in despair, "And who cleans up the mess after you? Huh?"

I have to admit she was right about that one. I had made a right mess in the attic with my bat chasing. Broke a few old things. Ah well, they weren't any good anyway! And the toilet, well, I don't like to think about that one. I had to eat a whole lot of humble pie after that, that's for sure. And in front of all the neighbours.

She could at least have waited until we were alone. No, she had to turn all the neighbours against me. I mean, whose side is she on, anyway? It wasn't all my fault after all.

"Come on, Maureen. It's not because a man makes a mistake once in a while that he can't fix things himself."

"A mistake once in a while? Huh! You want me to give you a list of your past disasters?"

"Oh, for crying out loud! You know that's not the point. You know just as well as me there's unscrupulous con-artists out there just waitin' for gullible folk like you to sign big contracts with' em. They prey on old people like us. They think because we're seniors we haven't got all our marbles anymore. They think we've got wads of money hidden under our mattresses. And they're dyin' to get at it."

"Well, I don't think we have to worry about Plunket. They've got a good reputation as honest people. The Carters and the Murphys both had their roof redone by them a couple of years ago, and they had nothing but good things to say about them."

"Well, it may be so, Maureen. But just the same, I think it's better to be safe than sorry, don't you?"

Anyway, I had another company come an' have a look at it. The man they sent couldn't have been older than Little Billy, still wet behind the ears, if you ask me. He walked around up there as though he owned the house; he took one look and said, "Yep, if I were you, I would get a new roof on soon."

I told him I had no intention of doin' that right away and I pointed out to him the trouble spots and told him all we needed was an estimate to have those fixed. I knew I could perfectly fix those myself, but seein' that I had asked him to come all the way here, (because of Maureen) I figured I may as well make it look as though I was intent on havin' some work done.

The kid looked at me as though I had just come out of a flyin' saucer or somethin', then he said, "Look Grandpa, you do as you like, but if I were you, I would go for the new roof."

Cheeky!

We climbed down and after he had left I tore up his business card. I'm not gonna have some cocky little know-it-all come and tell me what I should or should not do with my own house! I can perfectly well take care of things myself.

Thank God Maureen's away. If she knew what I'm up to, she'd kill me! If she saw me now, with the ladder out and all the other stuff, she'd be insisting I put it all away and call Plunket! But she's not here, and for once I intend to do as I please. I've got a can of good-quality tar and everything else I need. Just give me a few hours at the most, and those leaks will all be fixed, and we'll be good for another five years. Boy! She'll change her tune for sure when I show her the two tickets for our Caribbean cruise with the money we won't have to spend on a new roof. The hell with Plunket Roofers! The hell with cocky little know-it-alls! We're not gonna spend our anniversary money on shingles!

I'll be done before the afternoon, then I'm gonna heat up another one of Maureen's nice little chicken pies and have a beer with that, and maybe watch a movie. Maybe I'll invite Edgar over and watch it with him. He gets lonely all by himself, but I don't often invite him over because Maureen doesn't like him. She finds him too opinionated. "And he drinks like a fish," she said to me once. Well, isn't a man allowed to have a few beers once in a while and to have a few opinions? Women!



That was Mrs. Luckwaldt on the phone just now, wonderin' if Maureen was home. She says it's a shame Maureen's sister passed away last year. She says the same thing each time she calls and Maureen's away. "It wouldn't be so much work for Maureen if she wasn't the only one to look after her mother now," she says.

Mrs. Luckwaldt's right. But then, I wouldn't be able to do the things I like as often as I can now. Just the same, it takes a chunk out of your life when your parents are ill and you have to keep goin' back and forth. The old lady should never have gone out

when the sidewalks were icy. She wouldn't be in so much pain now, having to take all those painkillers. Thank God it's her left wrist. Now Maureen has to shop and prepare meals for her and fill her freezer. And she has to do her laundry and the whole house-keeping. I don't envy her. Anyway, I better get up there before I get side-tracked again.

Oh no, that darn phone! Is it ever gonna stop ringin'? I think I'm not gonna bother answering this time. Oh, I better answer, it might be Maureen. Heck, if it's her, she'll call again. But shoot, I guess it might be urgent. Who knows, maybe the old lady passed away.

"Hello. Yes, it is."

"Good Morning. This is Rogers's Rug Cleaning calling..."

"Look, Mister, I haven't got time for this kind of stuff, O.K.! If I need my rugs cleaned, I'll clean them myself. So, just take my name off your list and don't bother callin' again."

They're so bloody annoying with their stupid calls. You just can't have any peace in your own home anymore.



O.K. I better get up there. Gosh that sun is beautiful. Must be our hottest day since winter. Must be nearly 20 degrees for sure. If Maureen could see me climbing up the ladder now, she'd have a fit. I'm so glad she's on the bus. Oh, here comes Ed.

"Hey there, Ed!"

"Good morning, George, isn't this the most beautiful day this year yet? Must be nearly 20 degrees for sure. Hottest day this year! Gosh that sun is beautiful!"

That's my neighbour, Ed McDuff. He's afraid of heights.

"Sure is, isn't it?"

"How is your hip these days, George?"

"All right, I guess, it hasn't troubled me at all for a while. How's your frozen shoulder?"

"Oh, it's coming along alright. How's Maureen?"

"She's O.K. Away visitin' her mom again. The old lady's had

another setback. She broke her wrist when slipping on the ice last month. It's a good thing she doesn't have her dog anymore."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Well, these things happen, don't they? How's Mary?"

"Oh, she's not too good, I guess. The doctor's trying her on some new pills. We have to wait and see. And he says her cholesterol is too high. Well, I better be off. I wanna catch the 10:20; I've got some shopping to do for her. Have a nice day!"

Gee, old Ed's gettin' pretty hunched over. Me, I'm not doin' too bad for an old guy. I'm not even out of breath. It's all the brisk walkin' we do, Maureen and me. And the stairs in the house. They say if you have a two-storey house you live longer because of the exercise you do goin' up and down. I don't know if just going down in the morning and up at night counts, but I suppose it's better than nothing.

This extendable ladder has been very useful through the years. I'm glad I got it. It was a good investment. But the reasonable thing to do, really, would be to move out of here. Now that the kids are gone, who needs all this space. It was good when they were growin' up, but now it just means more work and expensive upkeep. It's a good thing I can do most of it myself, but just the same, in a few years, I'm gonna have to slow down. I'm not gettin' any younger. Too bad Maureen won't live in a condo. She says she won't live in a box. Well, some condos are far from being just boxes. I just wish she would come and see some of them. It's not because some of our friends live in boxes that all condos are like that.

O.K. Well, here's that first spot over there by the chimney. It's the worst one. I think the squirrels or the crows or maybe even the raccoons have been peckin' or chewin' up at the corners there. I wish I could just wring their little necks, the nasty critters. And the crows, if I wasn't afraid of gettin' caught, I'd serve them a juicy breakfast. That would shut them up for a while, send them back to their maker. That young hippy guy down the street, with his flea-infested beard and his dirty jeans, I hear he makes it his hobby to teach the neighbourhood squirrels how to swim under water,

but he prides himself on bein' a bad teacher. Well, good riddance; they've chewed up enough of my tulip bulbs over the years. They won't get my sympathy.

Well, anyway, that spot shouldn't be too hard to fix. Gee, it's nice up here with the sun heatin' up the tiles. I think I'm just gonna stretch out right here when I'm done and take a bit o' the sun before goin' down.



Well, that's lookin' good now. It's a bit harder to fix than I thought it would be. Quite a bit more damage than I would have expected, but I should manage. There shouldn't be any more water comin' down through there. Oh, shhhugar! I got some tar on my sleeve! Geeze, Maureen's gonna kill me! Oh blimey!

Where was that other spot again? Oh yes, by the eavestrough. I see it now.

Oh my! If that's not the Mucks down there! Look at them, Lord and Lady Muck. My gosh, they're gettin' old; he's so hunched over, one of these days he's just gonna keel over and fall flat on his face with those heavy grocery bags.

Gee, it can't be noon already? The kids are comin' out of the school. There's little Michael and his sister Anna. Goin' home for lunch.

"Hey, Mr. Chapman, what you doing up there?"

"Oh, just fixin' the roof. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"We're going' to the zoo tomorrow if it's still nice, my whole class."

"That should be fun."

"Bye, Mr. Chapman. Be careful there, Mr. Chapman!"

Oh no, that's Mrs. Collins out now. Oh no, sh...oot, she saw me! She likes to mind other people's business, I'm gonna get it from her now.

"Mr. Chapman. What in the world are you doing up there?"

"Nothin', Mrs. Collins. Just doin' a little patchin' up, that's all."

"Don't you think you're getting a little old for that sort of thing?"

"I'm up here, aren't I? That should be plenty proof that I can still do it."

"Mr. Chapman! I'm sure if Maureen was here now, she wouldn't let you climb up there like that. That would be enough to give her a heart attack!"

"Well, she's not home and that's why I'm up here now." That'll shut her up, the old witch!

"The poor soul, she's right, you know: you're just a stubborn old fool; she can't turn her back on you for a second that you don't start looking for trouble! Now, she has got her mother AND you to worry about!"

Oh, mind your own beeswax, Mrs. Collins! That's it, go back into your house, you old busybody. Can't a man do a bit of upkeep to his house without havin' all the neighbourhood dames naggin' at him? Oh, shake your head all you want. See if I care. You old cow. What does a man need to do to have people mind their own business? They behave as though I already had a foot in the grave or somethin'. A man's not useless just because he's retired. Even Maureen seems to think I'm an invalid now. It's downright insulting, if you ask me. When she comes back, she'll see I'm no invalid. Savin' her six thousand bucks, that's what I'm doin'.



Well, that's another patch done now. Eh, not bad, Old Boy! Not bad at all! I won't need that new roof for a few years, that's for sure. May be I can even convince Maureen to sell before then. Let the new owners pay for a roof! I'll try to talk to her about it when she's rested from her visit. Now, I'm the one who deserves a rest. I'm just gonna open that can of pop, and drink it right here, and lie in the heat of the sun before I do the last bit. Pretty smart of me to think of bringing a drink before climbin' up here, wasn't it?

That's Ed back already down there. Gee, that was quick! Oh my! already two o'clock! I didn't realize it took me that long.

"Hey there George. You're still up there! What are you up

to, anyway?"

"Oh, nothin' Ed, just a little surprise for Maureen. Almost finished fixin' my roooooo...."

FIVE

Kosher Ham

This incident took place when I was still too young to fully understand what was really transpiring around our dinner table that night. It was many years later that Dad filled me in on all the details. You see, we were not used to such important visitors. Mr. Walt Zackon had come all the way from Philadelphia, flown across the Atlantic, along with the other four or five dozen passengers the Constellation could carry, and now he was coming all the way up here to our house in the little town of Bishopbriggs.

“Mr. Zackon must be on the train from Philly to New York, now,” Mum would say nervously as she dusted for the tenth time the tall bookcase in the sitting-room. “Mr. Zackon’s plane must be getting ready to leave America now.... Mr. Zackon’s plane must be over Iceland... over Arran... over the Golf Course... ach! And probably no visibility there either, what a shame!... Dad and Mr. Zackon must be landing in Prestwick just about now.... Mr. Zackon’s train should arrive any minute now.”

For the past week, Mum had done nothing but scrub, scrub, scrub. The Hoover had gobbled up every tiny bit of dust mite clinging for dear life in the most remote corners of our modest little house. The flatware had been taken out and vigorously polished and put back into its precious blue velvet lined case, solemnly

awaiting Mr. Zackon. All the windows had been covered in and out with a thick layer of powdery soap and wiped by me with newspapers under Mum's vigilant eye until not a trace of white remained. Mum had re-ironed and rolled the linen tablecloth and napkins; she had not folded them as she usually did. "I don't want them to have any creases," she said. I could tell she was very nervous because she hadn't even let me sprinkle them with water as was usually my job, and which I loved doing, to dampen the linen before she ironed. Every wooden surface in every room, even the bedrooms, had their Sunday gleam and woe be me were I to leave a fingerprint anywhere.

"Now, look what you've done!" said my mother, normally a calm woman, when I put my scuffed leather schoolbag on top of the shiny dining-room table the day before the arrival of our distinguished guest. There was panic in her voice, something I had never heard from her before. "Who gave you permission to come in here?"

I quickly realised I would be safer in my bedroom, where I retreated, out of harm's way, with my homework and my toy trains, although it was a cold day and I knew the heat of the fire would never reach me up there.

The day before, Dad had come up to my room after me with a look of despair on his face. He had managed to smile indulgently. "Don't worry, Carrick," he had said. "Mr. Zackon will only be here tomorrow night for dinner and then he'll be gone. Everything will be back to normal after that."

Mr. Walt Zackon had been the talk of the parish for a few weeks now, perhaps even a few months, ever since my parents had received a letter announcing our important visitor's visit to Britain. The man with the funny accent had asked if he could spend a few hours with us before heading south to England where his business affairs would be awaiting him. An avid railway enthusiast, he wanted to ride as many of our renowned steam trains as possible during his stay, and take a series of photographs of the impressive engines.

Wednesday afternoon, at the church bazaar, where Mum had generously displayed dozens of her famous treacle scones and crocheted doilies, after all these cheerful women had, themselves, bought all they could from each other, and while they waited for the horde of usual customers to stream by, Mum's lady friends had asked her how Mr. Zackon would be getting here, and was Mrs. Zackon coming with him? (No, she wasn't).

"And at what time is he due to arrive?"

"And how long will he be staying?"

"And what will ye serve?"

Mum hadn't come to a final decision about the menu, yet. She had first thought of splurging on a leg of lamb but she had heard that some Americans didn't much care for mutton or lamb. Fully aware, since the year we had spent in the United States, of Britain's notorious reputation as a land of mediocre cuisine, she wanted Mr. Zackon to remember his dinner with us as something out of a gourmet restaurant. She wanted him to know that even though we did not have a big house or own a car, we were not only well versed in good manners but could put a sophisticated meal on our humble table.

"They have funny eating habits, haven't they?" asked Peggy MacLeod.

"They only eat kosher meat, you know," added Emma Henderson.

Mum hadn't the slightest idea what kosher meat was; neither had Emma Henderson, for that matter. Nor had Peggy MacLeod. They had all heard the word before but not one of them could have said what it meant; it was just a word. Mum had enough on her mind without worrying about a little detail like that. Her proud head must have been spinning by then, filled with all the other little details she was afraid of forgetting.

Mum and I had met Mr. Zackon only once, when I was four years old. Dad had been transferred for one year to Philadelphia where he was to perform locomotive boiler inspections. First, Dad had made the crossing on his own, on the Queen Elizabeth, and after he had found a suitable house to rent for the three of

us, Mum and I had followed on the Queen Mary. It was upon our arrival in New York that Mum and I had briefly been acquainted with Mr. Zackon. The friendly giant had insisted on coming with my father to meet us in his gigantic black car.

The chauffeur was fleetingly introduced, and while the adults waited for our cabin trunk to be unloaded, he sat back patiently, in his smart uniform, behind the wheel of the big car. To ward off boredom and the burning heat of the sun, he kept himself busy gobbling down the dark contents of one bottle of Coca Cola after another. Every once in a while, he put the green bottle between his thighs and shook out some of the sticky contents from a box of Cracker Jacks, and stuffed them into his mouth. After a while, he caught my eye and motioned for me to go over to him. "What is your name, again?" he asked.

"Carrick," I said, feeling quite shy.

"Here, Carrick," he said, and held the popcorn box out the car window for me to take some. I had never tasted anything so good. When the box was empty, he shook it upside down and out came a tiny whistle that he quickly gave me. In a second, I had it in my mouth and when I blew through it, it let out a piercing sound that made Mum jump.

"Carrick, please behave yourself."

Mr. Zackon looked down at me and smiled. "He's just a boy, let him have some fun."

Mr. Zackon was a calm, friendly man. That was one of the first things one noticed about him. He was twice the size of any Scotsman I knew, though I had never thought of Dad as a small man. Mr. Zackon was so many times my size that when, with his huge hands under my armpits, he plucked me off the ground where I was standing beside Dad, and gave me a big, long, welcoming hug, I feared he might squeeze me so hard that all my bones would break. But they didn't. Instead, a handful of lollipops, including a black one, the most coveted colour of all lollipops, wrapped in noisy transparent paper and held together with an elastic band, was quietly slipped inside a pocket of my short trousers. It made a

funny big lump and when I discovered what it was, I hoped Mum and Dad would not like lollipops.

Mr. Zackon teased me about Scotland. "I hear you drive on the wrong side of the road in your country," he said, "and I hear you chase the poor haggis down the hills, poor little animals; it's not their fault, you know, if they were born with two short legs and two long ones. But I have been told they taste quite good." I didn't know these things. After that, I had taken it for granted, that it was we, the Scots who drove on the wrong side and it had been a few years before I found out the truth about haggis.

After Mr. Zackon's chauffeur had deposited us and our luggage in Chester, near Philadelphia, in front of the two-bedroom house that would be ours for a year, after Dad and Mr. Zackon had pointed out to Mum the intricate gingerbread work along the base of the roof and around the front porch, just before he got back inside the car beside the chauffeur, the friendly giant went back to the trunk of the car and pulled out a large and beautifully gift-wrapped box with an immense bow on top. He handed it to me. There was a smile of infinite kindness on his face.

"This is for you, Carrick, from Mrs. Zackon."

"Mr. Zackon, you shouldn't have," said Mum, not used to such generosity from strangers.

"Don't mention it, Mrs. Brown," he said, showing the palm of his stretched hands as if to ward off more reproach. "You see, Mrs. Zackon and I haven't been blessed with children." I thought he looked very sad for a moment. "I wouldn't dream of depriving Mrs. Zackon of one of her greatest pleasures in life."

When I unwrapped the parcel, I couldn't believe my eyes. Every single one of my friends back in Scotland would have given anything to find one of those under their Christmas tree. And it wasn't even Christmas! In the box was a full Indian costume, complete with a multicoloured feather headdress, fringed leather shirt and pants, even a pair of beaded moccasins that were just a wee bit too big for me. America was going to be wonderful!

"You see," Dad explained to me that night, "Mr. Zackon is like

the Chief and we're the Indians. He's a very thoughtful and generous Chief so all his Indians like him and respect him."

I had never seen the big man since that day in America, never really heard of him in the few years since we had been back, but I thought of him often; I thought of him each time I looked at my prized Indian suit. I had grown much too big for it and I suspect it was worn beyond any hope of recovery but I still loved it and there it was, at the bottom of my drawer where it would remain for many years, hidden from my mother's spring-cleaning eye.

Now, I was secretly hoping the Big Chief would bring me one of those fantastic American toys only rich boys had. If Mum had guessed what was going on in my head, she would have been appalled. She would have told me I was a greedy boy and I should pray to God to forgive me for such a terrible sin. If I had known what Mr. Zackon was carrying in his leather suitcase, I would have been jumping up and down for joy, running around the neighbourhood telling all my friends; I would have been unable to concentrate on my bedtime prayer, unable to sleep.

Like me, in the last few days before Mr. Zackon's visit, Dad had wisely kept out of harm's way. In those days, a man had a definite place in the house and the kitchen was out of Dad's territory. After work, each day, he spent an inordinate amount of time at his desk in a corner of the sitting-room, quietly minding his own business, reading his railway magazines and writing in his diary. If things had been different, and if he had ventured to open the door to the larder, he would have immediately realized what was going on and he could have prevented the biggest mistake Mum was ever to make to offend the sensitivity of a welcomed guest.

I don't need to tell you what was sitting in all its plump, pink splendour on a shelf of the larder. But yes, there it was and it would have been the pride of any good Scottish Presbyterian housewife in Bishopbriggs.

It was all Mr. Hay's fault, you see. Because Mr. Hay, the butcher, was a terrible joker. And when Mum had enquired, out of curiosity, if he sold any kosher meat, he had asked, rather mockingly,

“Why in the world would you want kosher meat, Mrs. Brown?”

Mum had informed him that a very important visitor was coming for dinner at our house and the gentleman happened to be Jewish.

“Och, you won’t find any kosher meat for miles around, Mrs. Brown. May be not even in Glasgow. Personally, I don’t think you should have to worry about that, anyway. I’m sure the gentleman is used to eating all sorts of non-kosher meat, especially if he travels all over the world. Now, if I were you, Mrs. Brown, I would serve him a beautiful ham,” said Mr. Hay, perhaps thinking that Mum would understand the joke and laugh with him, but she was the most naive person you could imagine, especially when it came to mean-spirited jokers, so she said, “That’s not a bad idea, Mr. Hay. Show me what you have.”

And Mr. Hay, instead of laughing with her, must have had a secret, perfidious laugh at his own unscrupulous advice. He had brought out that beautiful ham and my mother had enquired how much it would be and she had been somewhat taken aback at the terribly high cost, but she wanted nothing but the best for our eminent guest. She would find a way of paying for it out of our slim budget.

Dad was working in Glasgow at the time and he had arranged to meet Mr. Zackon at Prestwick Airport. It was a miserable, wet day, and as the rain came sluicing down onto Dad’s umbrella, he lamented our predictable but unwelcoming Scottish weather. He stood, impatient, ready to wave, in the public enclosure, along with the hundred or so men and women who had come to meet the trans-Atlantic flight.

The Constellation touched down on the wet runway, and when the propellers had finally stopped for their well-deserved rest, Dad managed a photograph of Calypso and its mirror reflection on the rain-slicked tarmac. Finally, the passengers scurried out and were met by an employee handing them each a large umbrella. From his side of the fence, Dad waved enthusiastically to Mr. Zackon but he was thrilled not only by the emergence of our prized visitor,

but by the unexpected sight of two famous celebrities, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, amongst the weary passengers! That surprise put him in a very jovial mood. He then committed a great act of love towards me and, repressing his immense embarrassment, he rushed over into the terminal, pulled out the small notebook he always carried in his shirt pocket, went over to the two Hollywood stars and asked for their autographs before Mr. Zackon's amused smile.

From there, a taxi had taken the two men to the Prestwick railway station and Mr. Zackon had said, "I wish New York taxi drivers would imitate you Scots, and use beautifully polished black Hackney Carriages like yours." That made Dad very proud because he thought the Americans always had better quality things than we had. When they got off the train at Central Station in Glasgow, and took another taxi to Queen Street Station for the ride to Bishopbriggs, Dad was indeed in a cheerful mood.

Despite the heavy aroma of Cuban cigars clinging to him and his companion, when Dad opened the front door, he immediately realized Mum's unforgivable blunder. Oh, there was no denying it: the smoked ham smelled heavenly. Panic seized Dad. He must have wanted to just turn around and pretend he had accidentally come into the wrong house. What was he to do now? What could he do? There was no use telling Mum; she would be terribly discomfited. It was too late. What would poor Mr. Zackon think? Dad was mortified.

For the hundredth time today Mum had straightened the doilies on the settee and armchairs; she had just taken off her apron and touched her hair (also for the hundredth time) in front of the hallway mirror; she had put a bit of rouge on her cheeks, fresh lipstick. There she stood, a glowing smile on her face, her large bosom bursting with pride inside her finest blouse. With a confident handshake, she welcomed Mr. Walt Zackon into our modest house.

Throughout the meal, Dad's eyes remained on his plate; he let Mum answer all the questions posed by our most agreeable guest;

he let her receive all the flattering compliments about the food she had prepared. Dad must have thought this would be the end of his job. He must have wondered what in the world Mr. Zackon was thinking, how he could keep such a polite façade. He must have pictured himself, during the hour or so that his ordeal lasted, begging at the local Salvation Army for a bite to feed his family.

The pinnacle of Dad's embarrassment came when, after having eaten a large piece of ham from his plate, and having thoroughly enjoyed it, our guest, smacking his lips, asked Mum, "Now, Mattie, what was that? Was that lamb? I don't think I've ever tasted anything so delicious in all my life."

"Oh no," said Mum, obviously surprised that such a well-travelled and wealthy man had never tasted ham, "that was ham, smoked ham."

Mr. Zackon put his fork and knife down on his plate. During the entire meal, I had been watching with fascination, from the corner of my eye, the way he put his knife down each time he cut a piece of meat, and switched his fork back and forth from the left to the right hand to carry that piece of meat to his mouth. For a few seconds which must have seemed like an eternity to Dad, the man, astonished, looked at Mum, without saying a word. Then he burst into a loud laugh, so loud that Mrs. Cornell must have heard him next door.

"That was ham, Mattie? Ham as in pig?" he asked now, incredulous.

"Yes, said Mum," still totally oblivious to the situation.

"Well," said Mr. Zackon, leaning back against his chair, "I guess I shouldn't have been eating that!" He broke into laughter again and when he managed to speak again, he said, "Gosh, that was good! I swear I've never tasted anything so good!" He picked up his knife and fork off the plate and said, pleading, "do you think I could have another little piece please, Mattie?"

Despite Mr. Zackon's good-natured reaction to this dilemma, Dad, excruciatingly embarrassed, managed a thin smile. He placed his own knife and fork on his bread plate, excused himself, and

contrary to Scottish customs of the time, he picked his plate off the table and joined Mum in the kitchen to refill it as well.

Dad was not the kind of man who normally upset himself over trivial details but this serving of ham to our much esteemed Jewish guest had pushed him beyond his limit. He knew it should wait, but so tense had he been since stepping through the door, that he just couldn't help but slip the question to her now in an angry low voice. He wanted her to know that this was totally unacceptable.

"Don't you know Jewish people don't eat pork?"

What in the world had she thought? He didn't really know what he was hoping to achieve. His was the gesture of a desperate, momentarily irrational man. Mum didn't flinch; she looked at him with angry, resentful eyes for disturbing the ambience of the evening. She placed another generous slice of ham on Mr. Zackon's plate, unceremoniously dumped a smaller one on Dad's, and, head high, with her radiant smile, walked back triumphantly to the dining-room. She gently deposited the plate in front of our Jewish guest, and to save the day, she, out of whose mouth I never have since (and never had before, for that matter) heard a lie, came out with the biggest fabrication she could ever think of.

"Don't worry, Mr. Zackon," she said, "this is kosher ham."

If Mr. Zackon had been a coarse man, I imagine he might have pounded the table with his large hand and laughed his head off, but instead, he gave Mum a most kind-hearted smile.

Mum smiled back, smug in the knowledge that God would understand and forgive her for such a little fib.

When we were all satiated from the main course, Mum took our plates to the kitchen and brought out her most fabulous desert: a Pavlova. While I was still licking my lips from the delicious meringue and whipped cream, Mr. Zackon excused himself and opened one of the bags he had carried with him into our house. He presented me with the set of Minibrix Mrs. Zackon had chosen for me and told me not to wait, to open it right away. Then, while the men retreated to the living-room and Mum finished clearing the table, I poured the pieces carefully from their tall, thick card-

board canister and built my first ever Minibrix construction. Mrs. Zackon was maybe not aware of it but that set of Minibrix was made in England and had travelled to America in a cargo-ship. Now it had come back in an airplane!

Each time my grandchildren play with the sturdy old rubber pieces, I cannot help but relive that whole week, and that whole evening around the dinner table with a distinguished Jewish gentleman: Mr. Walt Zackon. Before leaving the house with Dad who would see him off at the train station up the street, he said to Mum:

“Mattie, thank you so very much. This has been a most memorable evening. And a most memorable meal.”

He shook Mum’s hand and hugged her, and then he did the same to me, and he left.

SIX

Lord and Lady Muck

They lived down the street from Granny Lilly, Lord and Lady Muck. That's what I had always heard Granny and all her friends call the old couple when they told stories about them. I had often seen them go past Granny's window, but I had never actually met them. How was I to know they had another name? I don't even know if anyone else did know their real names, although they had probably been around since long before everyone else on our Street. Nobody remembered them actually not being in that house. Some people even thought Lady Muck was born in the house they lived in. They were a strange couple. I didn't know anybody else who was as old as they were.

Lady Muck was the kind of lady little boys are terrified of being squeezed by for fear of disappearing, swallowed up into their giant, soft bosoms. I always kept well away from her because I had already met too many old ladies who wanted to hug the little cherub I was. Her hair was blue. Her eyes were two little pale grey marbles sunk above a mass of loose flesh. I had seen them once when I had run over to pick up my ball before I noticed that it was her feet it had rolled at. Her eyebrows had disappeared and had sprouted all over her chin instead. Her neck looked like her wrinkled stockings.

Lady Muck's arms were like two Easter hams and her bottom

was like a humongous peach I was afraid would burst through her flowery cotton dresses; an old, giant, soft peach. And once, when I saw her going past the large picture window where I loved to sit in Granny's house, I asked her when she was going to take me to the zoo as she had promised, to see the elephants. Granny had looked out the window and started laughing.

"Whatever made you think of asking me that now?"

"I dunno," I said.

Lord Muck was tall and skinny, and he carried her bags. He always walked a good distance behind his Lady Muck. I remember thinking maybe he was afraid of her too. He used to split the weight of the groceries in two old, stained cotton bags which he carried one at the end of each arm, dangling beside him as he walked, his back bent so that he actually looked much shorter than Lady Muck. But he wasn't.

Once, I had seen her turn around and say just one word to him, and although, from my position on my side of the window, I had not heard the word, I had noticed that Lord Muck had bent forward all of a sudden into an even more dangerous position than usual, as though it was a sword she had poked him with instead of a word. At times like this, I thought he might just topple over and Granny and I would have to rush out and call some of the neighbours to help us pick up the bent man with his heavy cans and jars. Each time I saw Lord and Lady Muck walk by, I watched with trepidation waiting for the moment when, like a guard at a castle's drawbridge, I would have to shout to Granny that the long-expected event had finally arrived.

I don't think they had ever done anything bad to anyone. I think old people need someone to pick on, just like little kids do in school. And Lord and Lady Muck, well, they didn't have any children, and they didn't talk to anyone else on the street. They didn't ask, "How are you today?" and they never said, "Terrible all that rain, isn't it?" and they didn't tip the newspaper girl. They didn't answer the door to canvassers, and they never sat on their front porch. So the rest of the people must have decided they would

be a good pair to pick on, I guess.

I was only vaguely aware of all this but my grandmother would have been amazed to learn just how much I did know. You see, Granny was like most adults, believing you can say anything in front of kids, thinking they are like little puppies and that they wag their tails and go away and forget everything they have heard. But she was wrong, because I remembered everything. I was a quiet boy, and I never talked much, but listen I did. I was all ears because it was all so fascinating. Sometimes, it was like hearing a story about witches, the stories they told, except it was real people they talked about. And I could already tell the difference between real people and storybook fairies and witches. I knew that Santa didn't exist although I pretended I thought he did because I was afraid he wouldn't bring me any presents if I said I didn't believe. And the Easter Bunny, well, who would really believe that? I mean, especially when you happened to be with your aunt in a store the day before Easter and you saw all these adults filling their grocery baskets with Easter eggs and Easter bunnies!

I came on my own to Granny's house once in a while, when my baby-sitter was sick. I loved my baby-sitter because she sat me on her lap and read me stories until I got tired of them, and she didn't mind if I made a big mess with my Lego pieces. But I loved going to Granny Lilly's house too because she always had gummy bears and chocolate kisses for me and she let me play with her little brass camels and the dancing lady doll that moved her head from side to side without moving her body. The first time she took the doll and the camels down from the mantelpiece and let me play with them, she said, "you'll have to be careful. Grandpa James brought these all the way from India." And I was always very careful. But sometimes I liked to just sit by the front window and watch people go by.

Lots of people went by Granny's house, especially when some old fart had kicked his bucket, because Granny lived close to the church, you see, and she told me they had something called a funeral after someone had kicked a bucket. At first I couldn't

understand what she meant so I asked her, “Granny Lilly, what was in the bucket the old fart kicked?” And Granny Lilly laughed and laughed and she said I was going to make her die laughing if I weren’t careful. She said, “don’t make me laugh like that, I’m gona have an accident.” And she ran and hid in the bathroom.

When she came back out of the bathroom, and had finished laughing, I asked her again and she started laughing all over again until she finally took off her glasses and wiped the tears from her eyes and blew her nose and told me that I shouldn’t say “old fart”, that she shouldn’t have said it herself and that someone who had kicked the bucket was dead. I stayed away from buckets after that.

Sometimes, the minister from her parish went by. He was younger than my dad and I thought he walked like a soldier going to battle. One day she pointed him out to me. “This is Reverend Poppit,” she said, and I always remembered his name after that because... well..., because it was an easy name to remember. The week after, I was sitting on the front porch with Granny, and Reverend Poppit went by. She smiled and said “Good morning, Reverend.” The Reverend stopped and Granny took me by the hand down the steps saying, “Come on, Robert, come and meet Reverend Poppit.” The Minister said, “Pleased to meet you,” and he shook my hand as though I were a big man.

After he left, Granny said, “That’s what you should always do when you meet someone because you’re growing up and soon you won’t be a little boy anymore.” She was always teaching me new things like how to sit straight, and how not to speak unless someone spoke to me.

At the end of the summer, the husband of one of Granny’s friends kicked his bucket and Mom told me that I had to go to her house but that I was going to have to be really quiet because Granny was going to have a little party that afternoon after the funeral. I asked her what was a funeral and she said it was a celebration of someone’s life. She said all his friends and his wife’s friends would get together and tell stories about him, and that I must remember to be very quiet. She wasn’t really worried because

I was always a quiet boy.

Mom had told me before that Granny loved having parties. She lived in a big old house. I remember the high ceilings and the big, big rooms. Mom said there might be a few dozen guests that day. "And that's a lot of people, so remember to be really quiet. You can play in the den, I'm sure." And I was going to take some of my Lego with me so I would not be in the way. But Grandma said that I should stay in the living-room, that it would be good for me to experience a wake.

"Kids should learn the facts of life," she said. "and what better way than to do it when it's not anyone in the family?"

So mom dressed me in a white shirt and she put a sort of little black bow around my neck and then she made me wear some funny black short trousers and my leather shoes. When I saw myself in the mirror with all those clothes on, I wished that my baby-sitter would call back and say her dentist's appointment was cancelled.

Mom dropped me off as people were going in and out of the house with large trays of sandwiches.

"Surely, Mom," she said, "he could just play in the den. Or watch television. She produced a video for me to watch.

"Don't worry," said Grandma ignoring Mom's offer. "He'll be just fine. I'll see you later. Most of them will just be here for the free lunch. You know what it's like. I wouldn't worry too much about them."

Later, when all the guests arrived, I was very quiet because I thought I must look strange and I didn't really want anybody to notice me, but mostly, because I was the only child there. I could see into the kitchen where two ladies were putting all kinds of disgusting food on silver trays. They passed around some strange crackers with curly little pink worms on top, and I said, "No, thank you," very politely. There wasn't even anything with peanut butter. I was starving because Granny had forgotten to make us lunch that day, but when the lady passed some cheese around that had blue lines like the puffy ones on one of Granny's friends' legs, she

forgot to offer me some. Although I would not have taken any cheese, I would have liked some of the green grapes from the tray.

I tried not to think about how hungry I was, because Granny was too busy to be interrupted. Instead, I watched dirty Mrs. Lepine who was sitting on the leather couch across the coffee table in front of me.

I had once heard Granny say to Mrs. Wainfleet that dirty Mrs. Lepine never washed her windows or swept her front porch. Dirty Mrs. Lepine was busy with one of those pink worms that had fallen off her cracker and onto the rug. She was pushing it under the couch with the tip of her shoe, but she wasn't looking down as she did it. She was talking to a man beside her. He had a big white moustache and each one of his eyebrows was as wide as his moustache but he had no hair on the top of his head. On the other side of the man was my aunt Muriel. His tummy and hers were exactly the same. God was going to open the little door in Aunt Muriel's tummy very soon and the baby was going to pop out. I was sure there was also a baby in his tummy, just like in my aunt Muriel's, and that really surprised me because nobody had ever told me there could be babies inside men's tummies.

Dirty Mrs. Lepine was looking into his eyes while she pushed the little worm all the way under the couch. Then she caught me looking at her feet and then at the man's tummy so she smiled. Some adults think little children not only remember nothing they hear, but also remember nothing they see.

All the people invited must have arrived by then. Between the four walls of the living-room, it sounded like a flock of sea-gulls in the sky at the edge of the lake when Dad and I went down to see the ducks. All of a sudden, the doorbell rang and no one but Granny and I seemed to notice. She caught my eye and said, "Robert, be a good boy and go answer the door, will you. And let the people in." So I did.

Nobody was paying attention to me; they were all busy talking about the man who had kicked his bucket and had the funeral. I opened the door and there, in front of me, stood Lord and Lady

Muck. It was the first time I saw them in a fancy clothes. Lady Muck was even wearing a purple hat. I wasn't frightened, because there were so many people here, but I was very surprised to see them because I didn't think they had ever come into Granny's house before.

Granny turned her head towards the front door to see who had come in and she said something in a low voice to her friend, and it was just like a wave that doesn't want to die at the edge of the sea and that comes all the way up and wipes out all the sand that a boy has just gathered there for his castle. Her words moved all the way to the front of the living-room and everyone else's words went back into their mouths and they looked towards the front door. Although I had not heard Granny's words, I had seen her lips, and I thought she had said, "Well, well, well, look who's here!"

Rev. Poppit was standing right beside me so I did what I had to do, and I said, in a clear voice, because I wanted Granny to be proud of me, "Reverend Poppit, I would like you to meet Lord and Lady Muck."

SEVEN

Tomatoes

It was a busy Sunday for Judy and me. Tonight was going to be the Big Night. I had vacuumed and scrubbed the house until everything shone that was ever meant to shine. What I hadn't had time to dust or polish I had safely stored away from the prying eye, under the bed and behind closet doors. Judy had taken care of all the cooking, racking her brain to fine tune the last details of the menu. My bosses were coming to dinner.

We were both emotionally drained from the events of the day before. Our neighbour Suyen is like a daughter to us. Even though we aren't much older than she is, we had taken her under our wing and grown very protective of her. The whole episode had shaken us to the point that we even considered cancelling the invitation, but it had been extended for a long time and we loathed the thought of giving our guests a rain check.

Judy and I were afraid of missing out on a possible opportunity that I did not dare voice but that this dinner might bring; an opportunity that might just slip away never to return. Besides, the McCulloughs were an interesting couple. I had heard only a few of Mrs. McCullough's tales, and only second-hand, but I knew Judy and I would enjoy hearing them from the horse's mouth. Apparently she was a great story teller and had many stories about the

ex-pats and the Africans she had met in her years as a secretary at the embassy in Tanzania. They must constitute a colourful palette of characters.

I was looking forward to being with McCullough in an informal setting, our home, around a well-garnished table, with quality wines loosening Mrs. McCullough's tongue. Now, I told Judy, their presence would help take our minds off Petersen's nasty shenanigans. Besides, although McCullough was my boss, it was high time we obliged. He had entertained me often, but it had always been about business. If we had invited them out, it would have been awkward to pick up the tab, so home entertaining it would be. How the invitation had even come about, I could not honestly say; it had been one of these totally impromptu things, and to be honest, I was at the same time nervous but flattered that they had accepted the invitation. Should we cancel, it could be an opportunity forever lost.

Early Sunday morning, not wishing to talk to my neighbour Petersen himself, I had called the hospital, and the nurse had told me not to worry, that Suyen was out of danger now. What a relief it was to hear that! At least she wasn't going to die. Just the same, it was impossible not to feel anger and agitation towards the brute. Anything we could do to try to calm our nerves, we did. We simplified our dinner menu: Judy served an easy but impressive shrimp cocktail rather than the fancy artichoke soufflé she had originally meant to prepare; I baked an apple crumble with a hint of Cointreau instead of my famous triple fruit flambé.

I had been working as an economist for McCullough's consulting firm ever since graduation and although I wasn't supposed to know anything about this, I had heard rumours that my elderly employer was considering asking me to join the partnership. The McCulloughs had no children. He had more than once told me how happy he was with my work, so it did not seem an unreasonable expectation on my part. Nevertheless, I had spent the entire week on tenterhooks.

Judy and I knew very well that if my boss was indeed consid-

ering such a proposal, tonight would be a sort of preliminary test for her as well as for me. She was, therefore, feeling as nervous as yours truly. Mrs. McCullough is apparently well-known for her gourmet cuisine although neither Judy nor I had ever had the pleasure of sampling it. This was their first visit ever to our humble abode. We wanted everything to run smoothly.

They arrived fashionably late, just as the sun was slowly sinking in a flaming pink sky between the tall pines at the bottom of our property. We served drinks and hors d'oeuvres and had a pleasant, relaxed chat. Through the impeccably clean glass of the French doors, we watched the sun's last rays disappear for the night. From the kitchen emanated the exquisite aroma of a roast leg of lamb *aux olives et herbes de Provence*. Judy and I managed to make it look as though we had enjoyed a most leisurely day at the end of a most leisurely week-end.

Perhaps because the need to feed ourselves is a universal one, sharing a meal, be it at a restaurant or in one's home, always strikes me as a somewhat egalitarian ritual where people will expose previously hidden facets of their personality. Despite my having known Mrs McCullough for so many years, I felt that I really just knew her as the occasional visitor she was to the firm. In our house that night, I was to discover what good fun she could be. Not serious at all like her husband. Not that he is unpleasant, but she is more spirited than he is. There is an honesty, a purity, a lack of restraint in her that seem almost indecent. Sometimes when she laughs out loud, it is as though a curtain has been drawn wide open to expose her soul. At least, her not-so-handsome cavalier appears to think so.

Judy and I had totally forgotten to eat lunch that day. When we finally picked up our forks, we both ate heartily of every course. I nearly made the faux-pas of getting up to take away the plates from the salad course when I noticed that Mrs. McCullough was still enjoying the last bites of hers. She paused, her fork in mid-air, one bite of tomato pricked onto it, and asked, "Now, Judy, what did you do to these?"

At first, Judy seemed a bit taken aback. It was indeed an odd question.

“Oh, nothing special, Mrs. McCullough.”

“Now, come on, tell me,” insisted our guest, “I know you did something. I have never tasted such delicious tomatoes in all my life. They are absolutely exquisite. They must be Heritage tomatoes. Are they?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Judy.

“You must have done something special. What kind of herbs did you use?”

“I promise I didn’t do anything special, really,” reiterated Judy, blushing with embarrassment, “just salt and pepper and a bit of garlic and olive oil. Nothing else. Unless I’m forgetting something.”

“No vinegar?”

“No. No vinegar.”

“I could swear I taste one of these newfangled, fancy vinegars in there. No tarragon vinegar?”

Judy answered a silent “no” with her eyes and a shake of her head.

Mrs. McCullough carried the piece of tomato to her lips, touched it with the tip of her tongue, and slipped her tongue back inside her mouth with a look of bewilderment on her face. “No.” She shook her head knowingly. “No, it’s not tarragon.” She paused and licked her lips delicately with the tip of her tongue again. “But what is it?” She brought the fork back to her mouth, elaborately licked the skin on the small piece of tomato, turned it around in her mouth, and suddenly wolfed it down.

I could see that Mr. McCullough was getting a bit embarrassed at his wife’s overly relaxed behaviour, her unusual exaggeration.

“Such a delicate flavour, really, but I do taste it,” she insisted. She put another piece in her mouth. I could almost picture it disintegrating in there. It was finally with obvious regret that she allowed it to slide down her throat.

By now, Mr. McCullough was a little tense and red in the neck. It was not like him, really. His large strawberry nose looked ready

to light up like a bulb on a Christmas tree. He tried to catch Mrs. McCullough's eye. She was ignoring him. He ran two of his fingers back and forth a few times inside the front of his buttoned shirt collar, as if to loosen it, and he swallowed once noisily, before reaching for his napkin again for the umpteenth time and dabbing his already clean lips. It wasn't the first time I had noticed Mrs. McCullough ignoring her husband like that. A few times when she had come into the office, we had witnessed her strutting out like a peacock and later, Mr. McCullough had come out looking rather miffed and distracted. But those had been extremely rare occasions. Now, I suppose it was just her way of saying, "Relax, Old Boy."

"Are they from the market?" continued Mrs. McCullough.

"Yes," said Judy, giving me a strange look which I didn't understand. If I had thought about it, I would have realized she was lying because neither yesterday nor today had she gone to the market.

"Which stall are they from?" Mrs. McCullough was obviously determined to procure some for herself.

"Actually, I don't usually buy from any particular farmer. I really couldn't tell who it was I got these from. I'll make a note of the farmer next time," said Judy, still staring at me with that *shut up, will you!* look. I was completely perplexed.

"Well, whatever you did, Judy, these are the best tomatoes I have tasted in a long time. You are a wonderful cook!"

Mrs. McCullough wiped her mouth and placed her napkin back on her lap. Some legs were crossed or uncrossed under the table, Mr. McCullough repositioned himself on his chair, and more wine was poured into the half-empty glasses, as though to mark the official end of another course. A lively conversation ensued between Mrs. McCullough and Judy about the art of getting the butcher to save the choice pieces of meat for them.

"Never send your husband to the butcher shop," said Mrs. McCullough, laughing.

"Believe me, I know first-hand," said Judy. "Every self-respecting butcher looks upon husbands as perfect opportunities for

dumping their tough bits.”

She was right: how often had I been sent to Vandenhooft’s Meat Market only to come back to Judy’s well-expressed ire as she unwrapped the dreaded piece of meat the butcher had surreptitiously sneaked inside the brown wrapper for me. By the look on Mr. McCullough’s face, I could tell he had at least once suffered the same humiliation.

Judy and Mrs. McCullough animated the conversation for a while with anything but serious talk; they were very much on the same wavelength. And I was happy to witness Judy pulling stories out of Mrs. McCullough who, we all could tell, enjoyed enormously reliving her African years. I thought, how sad that we had never thought of inviting them to our home before. Judy and I had both lost our parents. Most of our friends were around our age. We hardly ever socialized with our parents’ generation. That evening would be the beginning of a lasting friendship, of that special kind that can emanate between two women of different generations, a friendship even more precious in some ways than that between certain family members, because it is all about being on the same wavelength, it is a chosen friendship, and we all instinctively felt it.

When our guests had gone and we were filling the dishwasher before going up to bed, I said, “Well, Darling, I think they were suitably impressed. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I think so. I really enjoyed myself tonight. And I’m sure Mr. McCullough will invite you to join the firm,” said Judy. “Let’s invite them again soon. Mrs. McCullough is a real gem. I couldn’t get enough of her stories. Quite a life she has had!”

She was holding a fork in one hand and a knife in the other. She didn’t bother to place them in the dishwasher basket. She put her arms around me and planted a promising kiss on my lips. “Oh, Robin, I wish I had had a chance to get to know her years ago. Such an interesting woman! I forgot to ask her how the two of them met.”

“Well, let’s plan on inviting them again soon. But Judy,” I said, returning to our task, “what did you do to the tomatoes?”

She stopped and glared at me as though I were some sort of moron. "Nothing. I didn't do anything, I swear!" she said emphatically after a few seconds of staring. "Salt! Pepper! Garlic! Olive Oil!" She enumerated the ingredients with absolute exasperation in her voice. "How many times must I repeat that? What is the matter with all of you tonight?"

Later when she reached the landing on the stairs, she turned to me, a mischievous look on her face. "Martin, I do have a confession to make."

"Oh?"

There was a rather mysterious smile on her face. "Well," she said, "old bastard Petersen, he's so mean, he would never let Suyen part with a single one of his blessed tomatoes so this afternoon, when I realized I was missing a vegetable course and I didn't want to go all the way to the market, I stole the tomatoes from his garden."

"Oh my God!" I said, "Oh my God!" And I burst out laughing.

"I hope the flavour wasn't caused by a chemical or anything like that," said Judy. She had started going back upstairs. Suddenly she stopped in her tracks, then, her mouth fell open. She brought her hands to her face to half-hide its look of horror. "Oh my God! Oh my God! Maybe Suyen used a chemical in her garden and it made her sick. Oh no! Do you think that could be why she got so sick? Oh no! Stupid me, I always assumed that Suyen didn't use chemicals in her garden." She shook her head in despair. Then she seemed to get a hold of herself, and she said, more to reassure herself than because she believed it, "But no, I'm sure she doesn't. I would know if she did."

"I'm sure she doesn't," I said.

"You know me," said Judy, still obviously worried that we had all been poisoned. "I have been known to not bother washing fresh vegetables."

"Oh no! Oh no!" I was bent in two now, laughing even louder this time.

"Well, it isn't that funny!" said Judy, looking down at me.

"You did that, Judy? You stole them and then you forgot to wash

them?" I couldn't stop laughing.

"What's the big deal?" asked Judy. "I mean, it's not the end of the world. Surely he's not going to miss a couple of tomatoes. And I won't be sent to jail or to hell for stealing a few vegetables from a mean old bastard."

"I just can't imagine you stealing vegetables from someone's garden, that's all," I said, finally managing to regain a bit of composure. She climbed up the last few steps and I retreated into the kitchen where I tried to put a straight face on before following her upstairs.

Now that I knew her secret, I could have explained the whole thing to her, but she would not have appreciated it one single bit. Not wishing to bring down her wrath upon me, I refrained from elucidating the mystery of the unspeakably delicious tomatoes. I also had a confession to make but sometimes it is better to button one's lips. Even between husband and wife, some secrets are best kept untold.

Yes, I know, I know. It had been totally childish of me to act on impulse, but what can I say? The devil made me do it. I'm telling you, I just couldn't help it. I hate the guy! Despise him! Cannot stand him! Could not from Day One.

I remember the day he moved in, a few years ago. I swear there was an aura of infernal flames around him. He was evil popped out of the hot hole. He hurled invective at his wife and at the movers throughout the day as they were unloading the van and carrying their wares into the house. They had a valuable, gilt antique mirror, and when he became furious at Mrs. Petersen over some insignificant little detail, he yelled so loudly he startled one of the men who dropped his end of the mirror which ended up in a thousand shards on the cement path. So, what did he do but begin shouting abuse at the movers, accusing them of incompetence. From the look on their faces, I could tell that if their jobs hadn't been at stake, the two guys would have walked away right then and there.

At that point, Judy and I, utterly depressed, had retreated into our house and closed the door, wondering how in the world we

would learn to live beside this satanic new neighbour. Judy was in tears; we had been such good friends with the old couple who lived there before. Mr. Carey had died and Mrs. Carey had gone and followed him. We missed them tremendously, particularly Judy who had become very close to Mrs. Carey in the last year of her life. To have them replaced by this nasty character and his wife was like mourning all over again not just for Mr. and Mrs. Carey but for the good neighbours they had always been.

In the middle of one night, a couple of months after the Petersens moved in, Mrs. Petersen flew the coop. We hadn't really got to know her at all. Apparently she didn't even bother taking anything with her except her clothes and a few personal belongings, and as far as we know, she never asked him for anything. She just left it all behind. Judy ran into her once after that, at Mövenpick in Toronto, and they had lunch together. Mrs. Petersen told Judy that she had just had enough, and she called him a chauvinist pig. It had taken her years to take that step but there was no way she was ever coming back. Judy told me that she was looking ten years younger than when we were neighbours.

"I can't believe I was stupid enough to stay with him as long as I did. Thirty years! Can you imagine! Well, obviously, I had problems of my own but that's in the past now."

"I certainly think you did the right thing leaving him," said Judy. "I don't need to know much more than what I've seen to be convinced of that. Martin and I always felt so sorry for you having to put up with him."

"All I can say is that I'm glad we didn't have any children," said Mrs. Petersen.

Our hateful neighbour often travelled overseas on business and it didn't take long before, seemingly unperturbed by his wife's escape, he came back home from the Far East, one fall day, his little fortune cookie in tow. That was what we called her when we first saw her. I am ashamed of that now. All I can say is that we do judge people by the company they keep. We shouldn't have. Our initial, unfounded opinion of the young woman was totally wrong. Suyen

is the loveliest, sweetest, most diligent person one could imagine. My wife says that she has been blessed with fairy fingers that can turn a beautiful piece of cloth into the most splendid garment. As well, her green thumb has already brought her well-earned prizes at the local branch of the Horticultural Society.

When we first saw Suyen and realized that she had come over as Petersen's concubine, or rather, his wife, we were appalled. She has to be thirty years younger than he, and it doesn't help that Oriental women always look younger than their age. But it took no time at all before Suyen and Judy became friends and we stopped thinking of her in derogatory terms. At the beginning, her English was very limited. Judy was a big help to her. I can still hear them laughing out loud from the garden where they each worked on their own side of the low fence.

"Not lododendlun," Judy would say. "Rhododendron, rho-do-den-dron," and Suyen repeated "lododendlun".

"Rho-do-den-dron," said Judy one more time. "Lo-do-dendlun," said Suyen. And when I looked out the window, I saw the two of them bent in two, laughing hysterically. They reminded me of fragile stems shaking their petals off in a blustery wind.

Judy loves to cultivate flowers but at the end of Suyen's first gardening season, she had to admit that the elegance of our new neighbour's garden far surpassed ours. Suyen also grows vegetables. Petersen loves to boast that since he married her, they eat almost only home-grown vegetables. But I haven't seen him breaking his back in the garden. Suyen even grows beautiful, large beefsteak tomatoes for him although she herself can't eat them because she is allergic to tomatoes.

Meanwhile, the jerk treats her as his slave, but she is so incredibly docile, sometimes I wish I could take her by the shoulders and shake some sense into her.

Whenever I say anything like that to Judy, she says, "Leave her alone, Martin, she comes from a different culture. He is not physically abusive, he just has a twisted sense of humour, and I'll bet she doesn't understand half of what he says. Don't worry; she's

smart; she'll dump him when she's ready."

When Petersen calls her name from the house, her little footsteps carry her so quickly over the back steps, you would think she was his servant. In reality, I suppose she is. It makes me sick to think about it. I agree with Judy that Suyen is very intelligent and probably won't be with him all her life, but she shouldn't have to live as a slave just because some man can afford to take advantage of an unfortunate woman. I don't know what Suyen left behind on the other side of the world, but it must have been pretty horrendous because I have never seen her give him a sidelong glance. I have never heard a single word of complaint from her, not even a sigh, no matter what. It's as though nothing in the world could disturb the serene smile on her face. How anyone can tolerate such a nasty man is beyond me. And the poor woman has no family at all on this side of the world. Maybe she doesn't have any family anywhere; maybe he is all she has. She never talks about herself.

Anyway, the day before my bosses came for dinner, Petersen did something that infuriated me. It was one of those beautiful sunny days with squirrels chasing one another up and down the large oak tree at the front of the house. Suyen had been labouring in her garden since early morning, stopping only to make His Lordship his mid-morning brew and to prepare lunch while he sat on the back porch reading the *Globe and Mail*. She served him his favourite: a toasted bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich. She prepared the same for herself, without the tomato, of course.

When she wasn't looking, Petersen sneaked a piece of tomato into her sandwich. Later, he said that until then, he hadn't been convinced that Suyen was allergic to tomatoes; he had never heard of anybody else being allergic to tomatoes. He thought she was just being capricious. He never expected such a drastic reaction. He almost apologized.

It's a good thing we live near the hospital, and the ambulance came quickly. Otherwise, Suyen might be dead. And so might he! By my own hands!

To calm my nerves that evening, as Suyen lay semi-conscious

in the hospital, I stayed outside, gathering dead leaves under the dim light of the patio. Judy was upstairs; she had been calling her friends to tell them what had happened. Judy is not like me. She is not possessed by the need for revenge. She didn't mention to anyone how the piece of tomato had inadvertently found its way into Suyen's mouth.

I had drunk a few beers and was just about to go into the house and pay a visit when I caught sight of Petersen's large tomato patch. An idea came to me. An evil idea. I looked carefully all around, through the semi-darkness, with my mischievous eyes. Not a soul in sight. Not without a certain amount of trepidation, I must admit, I came over to the fence and made every effort I could so that my spray reached each and every tomato on each and every plant.

After my sweet little act of revenge, I was relieved in more ways than one. I was laughing out loud. I don't think I had laughed so hard since I had put a thumb tack on old Mr. Nesbitt's seat at school in grade five.

To my surprise, Judy was down in the kitchen when I came inside the house. I had a hard time explaining to her why I was in such a jubilant mood. I invented some story about narrowly escaping a skunk's spray. I was glad then that she believed me. I'm especially glad now that the tomatoes tasted good, and that no one seems the worse for it yet. Poor Mrs. McCullough, she'll never find that flavour again.

Unless...

EIGHT

The Boulder

Dad had almost finished building his house in the scenic Gatineau Hills. He had drawn plans for a workshop to be located a bit further back, to the right of the house. The site and orientation of the bungalow had been meticulously chosen. Of the three hundred acres he had bought (for a song because of the boondocks situation) there were about twenty acres where it would not be too difficult to dig a foundation. The spot he had picked, beside a peaceful meadow, had a spectacular view to the west over the valley below. From the large picture window in his living-room, at night, he would be able to admire one sunset after another to his heart's content. To the left, near the pine grove, he had already had the thrill of watching visiting deer at dusk.

That piece of land was my father's dream come true. Before the age of fifty, he had managed to retire, not from the earnings from his hard work as a lumberman, but from a patent for the specialized wood-chipping machine he had invented. And even though his engineer-partners had left him with the short end of the stick, he had still managed to pull enough money from the patent before they had finished stuffing their pockets and declared bankruptcy. He had enough funds invested to live, not in luxury, but comfortably for the rest of his days. Dad wasn't the litigious type; as far

as the engineers and their lawyer-friends were concerned, they could all just go to that place down below where he figured there would be plenty of lawyers and engineers, and where, as a young boy, he had been taught by the priest that it's really hot all the time.

Dad had only attended school for a few years but he was smart enough to recognize that he didn't have the sophistication to outwit those "professional" crooks. He wasn't going to chase after them and hand over to another lawyer the share they had not managed to embezzle from him.

"I have enough to live on comfortably," he said when my brother brought up the subject, "and I don't want to hear anymore about it. It's in the past and leave it there." That's how Dad was about things he couldn't change. On the other hand, when there was a situation he could tackle, he loved the challenge.

Ever since he had decided where the workshop should be built, there was one problem gnawing at Dad's mind. Smack in the middle of the chosen site stood an imposing boulder that would have to be removed. It was an unwieldy, pale grey stone eight or nine feet in diameter and smooth as a pebble. It must have weighed several tons, and it stood there all by itself, as if defying him to move it. It was a mystery how it had ever materialized there in the first place.

Dad did not have the equipment to move the boulder himself, and he was loath to pay a large sum of money for what seemed to him just another logistical challenge. He, who had gone from being a miner and then a lumberjack, to owning several trucks and having four or five dozen employees, had, more than once needed to solve unusual problems. He had an ingenious mind and he felt sure that he would find a way of moving this rock without having to break his back or the bank. Over the course of twenty years, he had built many miles of logging roads. This had entailed removing a myriad of obstacles under sometimes primitive conditions, grading bush-roads so they would not turn into quagmires during spring thaws or under the autumn rains; it had involved building bridges to cross impassable streams.

“Brains, not brawn,” he kept thinking. Now, when Dad set himself a task, he was what grade one teachers call “determined” on report cards. He had already figured it would cost him a few thousand dollars to have a truck with the necessary equipment and manpower come all the way out there and get rid of the nuisance. He wasn’t tight with money but, not having had any to spare until a few years before, he had learned from a very early age not to throw it away. The hiring of fancy machines seemed to him, in this circumstance, to be sheer waste.

Dad believed in fate. He believed that everything had a reason for being. That boulder was there for a reason, and he would someday find out what that reason was. He had started thinking about fate, and believing in it one day when his younger brother, who had become the priest in the family, had pointed out to him that, with his intelligence, he could have had a university degree.

“You could have become an engineer, a lawyer, anything you wanted.”

And when Dad, the handsome six foot lad with the deep blue eyes and muscles like a Percheron, pictured himself the well-fed dog in La Fontaine’s fable, spending his life indentured to a high-paying job, chained to a desk, never being able to smell the pines, to pick blueberries on the job, or leave snowshoe prints in the virgin snow, he had remembered something he thought he had buried deep in the past. He had remembered bald old Brother Lapointe at the college and how he had made him sit on his lap in his office with the door closed and how uncomfortable he had felt; he had remembered how afraid he had been and how he had not known what to do or say, and why he had run away from the college that night. That had been the end of his school days. He was ten years old. At the time, that was how those things were dealt with. You didn’t talk about it; you just went on to something else.

Dad’s parents were illiterate and poor. At the age of ten, my father had started earning his own living. But as far as he was concerned now, he needed nothing more than to hear the early morning chatter of the chickadees to know that Destiny in the guise of

slimy old Brother Lapointe, had played a marvellous trick on him.

It was a glorious day. Dad was coming back from trimming some of the low branches in the underbrush, working on the winding paths he had been clearing to make his walks more pleasant. Ti-Noir started barking excitedly and running away towards the road where a car was cautiously making its way up the hill.

"Take it easy, Ti-Noir," Dad shouted, and he waited curiously to see who would be coming up now, because this was his private bit of road and he wasn't expecting anyone.

He saw the hood of a black Mercedes. Nobody he knew owned such an expensive car. The guy must be lost, thought Dad. City people, you just couldn't let them loose in the back-roads, they invariably chose the wrong fork. The vehicle stopped at the top of the road before the meadow, and a short, paunchy man, about sixty-five, in a dark stripy suit and silk tie came out. Dad let Ti-Noir dance around the man with the shiny black shoes. He faintly tried to discipline him when he put his dusty paws on the man's suit.

"Mr. Lévesque," the man said. He pronounced the 's' the way English people do who haven't learnt French and have never caught on that in Quebec, René Lévesque is pronounced Layvaik and not Levesskew.

How does he know my name? wondered Dad. It was Sunday morning. Dad figured it wouldn't be anyone from the government. Who could this man be? What could he want?

"Do I know you?" He asked the intruder.

"I'm Mr. Loganrooney, Brian Loganrooney," said the man presenting his right hand for a shake. Dad put his hand in his pocket and moved his head back to get away from the pungent smell of after-shave. The sun danced on the big square diamond on the man's short, stumpy fingers. "I hope you'll forgive me for barging in on you like this, Mr. Levesskew. I couldn't find your telephone number from Bell."

Dad looked around him at the sky over the property. There was not a telephone poll, not an electric pole. The man followed his motion.

"Oh, I see. You don't have a phone yet. That explains it. I should have thought of that."

Now, Dad was a man who liked his privacy. He didn't fancy strangers wandering uninvited onto his property. Nevertheless, standing there in his plaid shirt, his machete dangling from his left hand, his tall body silently towering over the uninvited guest, he decided to let him say what he had to say.

"I was here to see this property before you bought it," said the man. "I was all set to buy it but my wife wouldn't have any of it. Women, you know! She wanted a piece of property on a lake and, this here, well, with just the pond, and so far from everything..., from people, I mean, she told me there was no way she would ever move here at all."

There's just no way to please some people, thought Dad. He figured the woman must have died or left her man or something must have happened to make him want to buy the land now. But Dad was not selling. Not at any price.

"I see."

"You got yourself a nice piece of land here for not a bad price at all, Mr. Leveeskew," said the short, fat man, taking in the landscape, all the while trying to ignore the large blade swinging almost imperceptibly back and forth at Dad's side.

"Uh-huh," said Dad, not bothering to move his head.

The little paunchy man with the shiny shoes kept on talking. He had backed up a few steps and he kept at a fair distance from Dad. He looked towards the house. "You've got yourself a beautiful house there. Did you design that yourself, Mr. Leveeskew?"

Dad thought he detected a heavy dose of condescension in the man's voice.

"Uh-huh."

"Build it yourself?"

Dad continued in his bisyllabic way.

"Amazing! It's beautiful!" said Mr. Loganrooney. He swallowed some spit that had been accumulating in his mouth. "Well, I'll tell you why I came to bother you, Mr. Leveeskew." He smiled and

looked up into Dad's eyes. "I've come to make you a proposition."

Dad didn't even bother with a monosyllable this time.

"That big rock over there..." said Mr. Loganrooney, pointing to the large boulder.

Dad turned around and looked in the direction the man was pointing, as though he did not know which big rock he meant. He repressed a smile.

"Yes," he said.

"Would you consider parting with it?"

Dad took a minute to let the words completely sink in.

"Well now," he said, admiring the fancy wheel caps on the car behind the paunchy man, "I don't know. I'll have to think about that. What would you do with it?"

"Well, you see, we did find a property, my wife and I, about ten miles from here on the lake, but the problem is it doesn't have much character, apart from being beside the water. When we came to see this one here, before you bought it, we noticed that boulder there, and now my wife and I, we were thinking that it would make a great decoration beside our house."

"How would you get it out of here?"

"Oh, that would be no problem. I have already talked to contractors about that and it's no problem at all."

"And when would they come to take it away?" asked Dad in the tone of a man asking the doctor how much longer his wife has before the cancer steals her away.

"They could be here tomorrow, if that wasn't too soon," said Mr. Loganrooney.

Dad rubbed his unshaved, unscented chin. "Hmm," he said.

The man put his hand in his trouser pocket, and pulled out a cheque book. He brought out an expensive gold fountain pen from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. The lawyer who had made Dad sign the contract for his patent had used a pen almost identical to it. It was of the kind he had seen in Birks' years before when he had naïvely gone in, thinking he could buy my mother an anniversary present there. That was before he had humiliatingly found

out how much things cost.

Dad backed away a few steps. Mr. Loganrooney started walking past him, towards the boulder. He kept a good ten feet away from Dad. Ti-Noir was following them, wagging his tail as if he had just discovered a nice, plump rabbit, snared the night before. When the man had his back to Dad, Dad asked him how much he thought the boulder would be worth.

Mr. Loganrooney turned around. "Would you take five hundred for it?" He turned again towards the stone, always keeping Dad and the machete in his peripheral vision.

Now, Dad is smart enough to know that a man never offers more than he wants to pay for a coveted item. He scratched his chin pensively. The little man opened his cheque book and leaned it against the stone, his pen at the ready. Dad noticed in ornate letters at the top of the cheque: Brian Loganrooney, Lawyer. And below it: Specializing in Bankruptcy. And below that, an address, a fancy one, Dad guessed.

Dad touched the stone lovingly. He stood silent for a while, pretending to ponder the offer.

"Make it one grand and it's yours," he said in the firm voice of a man reluctantly parting with his most precious treasure.

"It's a deal."

The paunchy man wrote his cheque there and then, tore it from the book, and handed it to Dad. Dad took it and backed away slightly in case Mr. Loganrooney tried again to shake his hand.

Mr. Loganrooney, Lawyer, Specialist in Bankruptcy, put his cheque book and his pen back in his pockets. He started towards his car, jingling his keys.

"And make sure you get it out of here tomorrow," shouted Dad, "before I change my mind."

The man left in his shiny Mercedes. Ti-Noir danced around Dad. Dad folded the cheque and put it in his back pocket. He pulled out a generous handful of bird seed from another pocket and spread it on the ground, then he went into the house to heat up a bit of his rabbit stew and stare at the valley for a while.

NINE

Why She Had Left

She was coming home for the first time since she had left. It was pointless to feel guilty about it. The first year, there had simply been no money for the trans-Atlantic flight. The second year, there had been money but no time. She had started her new job in April. The firm couldn't afford to let her take holidays.

She wondered in what state she would find her parents. How much would they have aged? Would Dad's hair have thinned further? Would Mother's hair be greyer? On the phone, Mother talked at length about her arthritic hands and her shortness of breath. Would her hands be all gnarled now? Would going upstairs or getting groceries be difficult for her? It seemed to her that her parents had always been old. Their only child, she had arrived against all odds, when her mother was already in her fourth decade, and had figured either she or her husband, or both were sterile. Becky had often been reminded of that. She still wasn't sure whether she had been a welcome arrival or a bad surprise. Apparently, her mother had found motherhood quite tiring. And she had not been thrilled to see her friends with grandchildren while she was pushing Becky in her pram "just like a granny myself," her mother would say when she reminisced about it.

In the train carrying her jet-lagged body from Heathrow into

London, where she would catch another train for Canterbury, Becky was filled with apprehension. She hoped they would approve of her new hair colour, not find the style too daring. When she had left, she had still had her long, straight, dull brown hair. Now it was short, really short and perky, with blond streaks which made her feel much prettier. All her co-workers and friends seemed to genuinely like it, but with parents... one never knows. She wore the tiny sapphire earrings that matched the colour of her eyes, and hoped they would distract from her hair. I hoped they won't be too disappointed with my new look, she thought.

Becky was glad she had caught herself in time when she had nearly bought maple syrup as a present for her mother. Something had made her remember a Canadian guest of years ago who had brought some. Her mother had not liked it at all. "Sickly sweet," she had said, after the guest had left. Instead of the syrup, Becky had chosen a very popular pastry cookbook, a British one so the ingredients would be measured by weight, instead of by volume. For her father, she had a large box of Laura Secord Miniatures. Mother would probably not approve, but Becky knew he would love them.

She was apprehensive, but she was excited as well. There was so much she would be able to do in those two short weeks. In Ottawa, she missed the lavish theatre productions of Drury Lane, the modern galleries, the British Museum. She missed the dark, smoky, busy atmosphere of London pubs with their genuine wood panelling, every inch of wallpaper decorated with pictures of royalty, living and departed, of famous visitors, theatre and movie actors, singers... She missed the ancient paraphernalia, the well-worn wooden floor boards and dark furniture, the patterned rugs. "I even miss the bloody stale smell of beer and cigarettes" she had confessed to a friend in Ottawa, but mostly what she really missed was the casual ambiance and the neighbourhood friends in the pubs where she used to spend hours on week-ends.

Would her old friend Marlene manage lunch with her at The Roaring Lion? It used to be their favourite pub. She salivated at the

thought of 'real' steak-and-kidney-pie. Some 'real' fish and chips. And a bottle of stout. The 'real' stuff. And she sighed. Becky was curious to see The Roaring Lion; apparently it had been renovated and even had a new name. Would she be able to get tickets for the Lyceum? She had never forgotten her first time there; she was just a child then. Her uncle had taken her to see The Lion King with Elton John, a show she would remember for the rest of her life. She and Marlene would try to get tickets for whatever was playing now. If the Lyceum was sold-out, they would try for something at the Prince Edward. It was a bit late now for tickets. She wished she had had more time to prepare for this visit. She had reserved almost a whole week for her parents and had plans to catch up with her friends only the week after.

Becky pined for London's nightlife. In the Canadian capital, the sidewalks were rolled up hideously early, even on weekends. At times, she had been so homesick that even a rainy day could fill her with nostalgia for England.

She longed to relive it all. And she wasn't going to miss out on a blissful stroll through Kew Gardens. Then, on a sunny morning, she would hire a car and drive down to Beachy Head for a lazy, bittersweet day on the beach; she would go into the hotel where she and Hakim had been; Hakim, the very handsome Iranian she had met at university and who, soon after, had been called back home to Mashhad. The affair had been ephemeral but oh! so beautiful. He had taught her about Omar Kháyyam. On a sunny, windless day in September, they had lain upon the lush, green grass near the edge of the white cliffs; he had recited verses from the Rubáiyat to her.

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

In a few days, Becky would sit by herself at an open window in the hotel, staring at the sea, smelling the brackish air, listening to the

crashing waves. She would go back to the same armchair where, on a stormy night, he had sat at her side on the wide armrest, his arm around her shoulders, the two of them, lovers, imbued with the awesomeness of the reckless sea. She would hear herself silently calling his name. Hakim! She would remember her trembling hand through his thick black hair, the delicate rosewater perfume of his skin, her white body trembling under his, their muffled cries. She had kept the postcard he had sent her from the Mausoleum in Neyshabur of his favourite poet. She hoped he had found happiness with the woman her parents had pressured him to marry. Or had he lied to her? She would never know. She preferred to think it was not his own decision to go back home.

She would not leave until she had filled her soul with the sound of the waves: that was something for which she had yearned with such intensity these last three years. From her urban environment in the Glebe, how she had missed the seaside!

Should she call Nina? Would she still enjoy a hike with her? Becky only had a couple of friends from her teen-age years left in Canterbury where her parents still lived. Most had moved away, like her, after university. She couldn't remember what it was that had given her the notion of going away. Why hadn't she stayed in her own country, in her lovely little town, so close to everything she liked? Didn't tourists come from all over the world to visit this picturesque spot with its famous medieval cathedral? Now, as the train glided eastward along the tracks, Becky realized just how homesick she had become. It made her wonder whether she should perhaps move back. In her enthusiastic mind, she cast a fresh look at Canterbury. So close to London. Never before had it looked so much like a genuine little paradise.

With my computer and language skills, and my Canadian experience, thought Becky, it probably wouldn't take me too long to land myself an interesting job back here. She smiled smugly at the thought of just moving back, lock, stock and barrel. I should give it a try, she thought. After all, now that Mr. Wonderful in Ottawa had dumped her for Miss Tattoo with her purple claws and

Botox lips, there wasn't that much she had grown attached to in the Canadian Capital that she couldn't just leave behind. She did have a small network of friends (at least those who weren't Jean-Marc's) but she was still young, and she had never really found it difficult to meet new people, to form new friendships. In a way, she would be happy for a change of scenery, somewhere where she wouldn't run the risk of bumping into her old beau. Anyway, it was a thought. And her Canadian friends could always come and visit in Canterbury; they would likely be delighted to have a British friend to show them around.

A dark, ominous sky hung above the city; Becky hoped it wouldn't rain during the entire two weeks of her stay. After all, this was July.

Twenty minutes out of London, the rain came down almost horizontally, pelting the windows on her side of the train, blurring the countryside. It rained all the way to Canterbury. Becky had a hard time keeping her eyes open, but she caught herself a couple of times 'hammering nails with her head', as Ninon would say with her Quebecois accent. Later, when she came out of the ladies' room at the train station, the rain had doubled in intensity so that she wouldn't be able to get into a taxi without getting drenched. Too bad her parents didn't have a car.

She had wanted to call her mother from the airport to let her know her flight had landed safely, but her cell phone was dead and her charger was somewhere in the bottom of her suitcase unless she had forgotten it in Ottawa. Now she realized that she probably could have recharged it on the train but she had not thought about it and she would have had to rummage through her bag which would have been embarrassing. She glanced at the time and sighed. It was ten past three, ten past ten in the morning in Canada, and she hadn't slept since seven o'clock the morning before.

Her father would be home from the office in a few hours. She would wait for him to arrive before going to bed. It would be easier to get over her jet lag this way. And she was anxious to see him. She knew that if she had a nap this afternoon, she most likely wouldn't

wake up until midnight which would start a vicious circle and it would take her half her holiday to be on British time.

Becky was relieved to spot a payphone in the station. She had not expected that. "Becky! How nice to hear your voice, Luv! I've been waiting all morning and afternoon," said her mother. "Why didn't you call from the airport? Or before you got on the train? I wanted to come and meet you at the station."

Becky took a long breath; she turned her head and stared out a window at the rain and the puddles that had already accumulated in the hollow spaces. Some travelers were running from the station to waiting cars, their umbrellas rendered useless by the wind. "My cell phone was dead, Mom." "Did you not charge it before you left home?" asked her mother. "I forgot, Mom. I had so much to think about that I forgot." "You could have charged it at the airport, could you not?" "I don't know, Mom. I didn't realize then that it was needing to be recharged. And then we were an hour late landing. It took a long time to get through Customs. I must have waited another hour in line. Then I had to get my bag. I figured it would just be easier to call from here."

"I was beginning to get worried."

Becky closed her eyes, pinched her lips together and took another deep breath. Her hand went up to the telephone, and her fingers started drumming restlessly. After a second, her mother continued. "Did your flight arrive on time?"

"No, Mum, I just told you, we were an hour late."

"Still, why has it taken you so long to get here?"

"Look, Mother, I had to get from Heathrow to London and then change stations, and with my luggage and all, you know, it all adds up." Becky looked again at the clock and at the pelting rain.

"Why didn't you take a taxi in London?"

"Listen, Mother, we'll talk about that when I get home, alright?"

Suddenly, her intestines started to move madly, as they used to when she was a little girl and would get nervous before an exam or a piano performance. "Mother, I have to go."

"But..."

“Look Mother, I’ve got to go. I’ve got to go to the loo.” There was panic in her voice. “I’ll see you in a few minutes, O.K.?” She hung up the receiver more noisily than she had meant to, and in a panic, wheeled her bag to the bathroom.

It didn’t look as though the rain was planning to ease up too soon, so after waiting several more minutes while trying to make up her mind as to whether it would be better to wait a while, she plunged outside and grabbed the first taxi. By the time she had handed her suitcase to the driver, and waited until he put it in the trunk, she was half-drenched.

At home, Mrs. Buckie was waiting on the doorstep, half-in, half-out of the row house, the door ajar behind her. She threw impatient glances in the direction of the train station; five or six times she opened and closed the umbrella she was holding and fidgeted with its tie, and when she heard the door of her neighbour’s house opening, she quickly retreated inside her own house and closed the door gently. She waited a few seconds to be certain Mrs. Stewart had left and, opening the door cautiously, she stepped back out again. She didn’t want nosy neighbours to come knocking at her door before Becky had had a chance to recover from her flight.

When she saw her daughter getting out of the taxi, first she waved an arm wildly in the air and then, noticing that she was without an umbrella, she shouted, “Wait, Becky, I’m coming over with the brolly,” and while fighting with her umbrella she rushed down the path to meet her daughter.

“It’s O.K. Mother, don’t worry,” shouted Becky, handing the driver the fare and taking her bags from him.

“Your hair! What have you done to your hair?” said Becky’s mother in a semi-audible voice, as she got closer to her daughter. Becky was pulling her suitcase with one hand and holding her backpack with the other. It was awkward trying to hug her mother under the umbrella, right there in the path, with the wind blowing every which way, it seemed. They were both getting soaked now.

“Get us into the house and I’ll give you a proper hug,” Becky said to her mother, immediately regretting her abruptness.

"Look at you, Becky. Look at you! You should have waited for me in the taxi. Oh, look at you. You're all wet," said her mother, almost pushing her daughter into the house before vigorously shaking the umbrella outside.

"Oh Mother, don't worry! I was wet from getting into the taxi at the station."

"Why in the world didn't you bring an umbrella with you? Fancy travelling without an umbrella!"

Mrs. Buckie made her daughter take off her wet clothes. "Up you go and change into your pyjamas. I'll make you a cup of tea and you can have a nap before your father comes home."

"I think I would rather wait for him, Mom. I'm afraid if I close my eyes, I'll sleep right through, and I won't see him until tomorrow," said Becky.

"I can wake you, Love. Don't worry. I'll wake you before he gets here. What time would you like me to wake you?"

"No, Mother. Honest. I think I would rather stay up and catch up with you until Dad gets home."

Resigned, her mother put the kettle on. "I'll make us some tea," she said, and while the water was boiling, she placed a tray of freshly-baked raisin scones on the living-room table. She had meant to serve them after dinner, but insisted that her daughter have some now. Becky tried without success to make her understand that she felt bloated from all the food on the plane, so she reached for a couple and placed them on her plate which she left on the small table in front of her.

Mrs. Buckie brought in the teapot and after pouring some for both of them, she covered the pot with her crocheted tea cozy before sitting down, reaching for the tray of scones, and placing a few on her own plate. When she had settled comfortably in her armchair, she said, "You must be wondering what we've got planned for you, Luv."

Clasping her hands together, she smiled. A proud feeling of accomplishment lit her face; she waited a few seconds for suspense before going on. "Well, Becky, I have told everyone they will have

to wait to see you until the day after tomorrow. I want to give you a chance to rest from your trip. You must be awfully tired. So, anyway, Emma Finlate is the first one I have invited, and she will be here on Friday morning for coffee, then old Mrs. Muftin, she's Mrs. Thornhill now, and she's dying to see you; she'll be here with her new husband Reginald for dinner on Friday. I think she's wanting to show him off. You know her, always the proud one! But he's awfully sweet, you know, and not bad-looking for an old man. He has a full head of hair and a little mustache like your grandfather has on that photo in the hallway. He walks with a cane but I think he doesn't really need it. It's just to make himself look more elegant, I think." She stopped and took a bite of her scone and a sip of her tea before putting the cup back on the coffee table. "The butcher's saving me a beautiful leg of lamb. Saturday morning we've been invited to Gerry and Joan Costswall's new house, you remember them, don't you? Gerry and your dad go back at least fifty years. They moved a while ago because they couldn't manage the stairs anymore. Joan had a hip replacement a couple of months ago but you wouldn't know it to see her walk. And Gerry is waiting for a hernia operation but he's not doing too bad. His doctor just warned him about lifting anything heavy before the operation. Apparently there's a waiting list and it might take a few months before they can get to him. Poor old man... Anyway, Saturday afternoon, we're going to visit Gary and Trudy, they're the ones who moved into the Cloutsin's house. They're having a few of their friends over and when they heard you would be in town, they said they wanted you to be there with us too; they're all really anxious to meet you. Saturday night, it's dinner at the Lendal's..."

Becky's head had fallen back against the armchair. Mrs. Buckie gently woke her and walked her up the stairs to her old bedroom where she slept until her father came home.

T E N

The Caravan of Lossiemouth

If you're not from Britain, and if you have never had anything to do with the RAF, you'll probably not have the slightest idea where Lossiemouth is. If not knowing that is going to bother you, and if you don't like using Google Earth, take your National Geographic Atlas, go to page 143, and look up G22. There it is, in all its Highland splendour, sitting perkily at the edge of the land where the fresh water of the Lossie River flows down to dilute the salt of the North Sea along the Moray Firth.

Picture quiet roads through flat farmlands; picture brightly painted fishing vessels and Seine nets, and you have a pretty good idea what it's like coming into Lossiemouth. If you're driving your own car, and are heading west from Aberdeen, and if you don't mind a strong sea-breeze, about two-thirds of the way to Inverness, a few miles before Elgin, take a fork northward on the B903, and about fifteen minutes later, not long after the gorgeous pine forest, you'll be in Lossiemouth.

At certain times of the year, the pretty seaside village is a popular destination and yes, that was where my husband was heading on his holidays. You will probably be wondering why anyone would

want to go all the way from Kingston, Ontario to Lossiemouth, Scotland. Since you must know: he was going to see airplanes. And thousands of grown men do the same each year, men who are as crazy about airplanes as he is.

All my married life, you see, I had heard Callum dream aloud about making it to Lossiemouth one day, so by the time he hit forty, seeing that he hadn't been there yet, I bought him, as a birthday surprise, a ticket to his native Scotland. Then, since he prefers trains to cars, and since I knew he would enjoy revisiting some of his old digs, I slipped a Britrail pass into the envelope with the ticket.

When I mentioned Lossiemouth, Callum assured me he would definitely find a way to wend his way there, and, at the same time, visit his cousin in Drumnadrochit, a small village near Loch Ness, south of Inverness.

"Don't worry about me back home, I'll be all right," I told him. The standing order was for him to just go and enjoy himself, to forget about us back here for a while.

After a mandatory visit to relatives in Bishopbriggs, near Glasgow, he headed north on trains and buses that would eventually take him to Drumnadrochit and then on to Lossiemouth and his beloved airplanes.

Ever since Callum was ten years old, he had been plane-spotting, a hobby that is little-known here in North-America. A young boy would go to the airport, notepad and pencil in hand and eventually, when he could afford them, binoculars, camera and film. For hours, the boy would watch the air traffic with fascination. This was, after all, still relatively early days in aviation. The boy would record in his notepad the type of each airplane taking off or landing, its number painted on it in large characters and which, like a car license plate, indicates amongst other things its country of origin, the airline it belongs to. Then, he would jot down the time at which it had taken off or landed. Just like collecting baseball cards, rugby scores, or license plates. Eventually, a boy would meet others doing the same thing, and compare notes, see who had seen the

Short

Stories for the Long Flight

is a gallery of some of the characters who have gained squatters' rights in Danielle Aird's mind. Among the uninvited guests are Mr. Nesbitt, a teacher with an original way of dealing with troubled kids; a couple who generously invite an unknown traveller to sleep in their caravan; a little boy who doesn't miss a word from his grandmother's irreverent lips; a nostalgic woman who flies back home to England for a visit with her parents and friends; a boy who becomes confused when his parents engage in unstable relationships; a couple who watches with frustration as their neighbour treats his Oriental wife as a servant; a man who stumbles upon an ingenious way of getting rid of a weighty nuisance on his property...

Some of these stories previously appeared in
The Fishermen of Progreso



www.danielleaird.com