

Scary Stories & Rude Poems
by
Christina Crowe

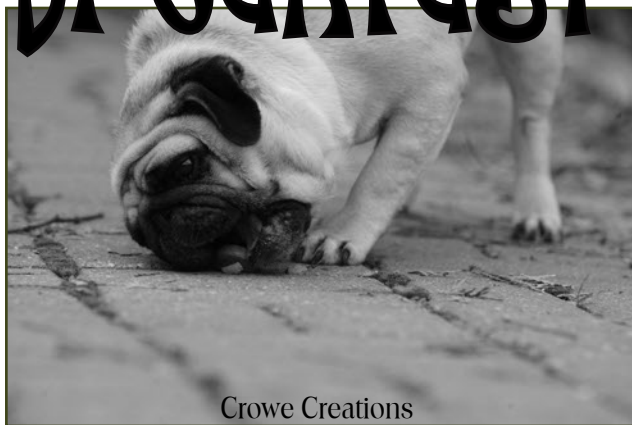
Girl
A / Dog's
Breakfast



Crowe Creations
Ottawa Canada

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Front cover (Pug): Can Ch Solna's Kismet, "Kaitlin", a.k.a., Katie,
a.k.a. CB (Cuddle Bunny), owner Lorna Sale.

Kismet: fate, destiny.

"Our prize and such a warm little persona,
but a little shit also." — L. Sale

Back cover (Pug): Poohpugs Trip Around The Sun, "Murray".

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To Antonio
who helped release the hound in me.

To Juan
who called me a fackeen beetch.

To Dave
who reminded me that I'm not a dog and
never was.

Acknowledgments

A huge thank you goes to Carol A. Stephen for the painstaking editing of my poetry and for improving my stories; and to Sherrill Wark of Crowe Creations for putting it all together. Tony D gets an extra-special imaginary (thus chaste) kiss-on-the-lips for his constant support of my every project. D. S. (unaware of it) was responsible for the reawakening of my Muse, ergo the consequent publication of *A Girl Dog's Breakfast*. Lorna? Shit, gurl! Nobody rocks like you. Speaking of unaware, you have no idea the courage that rubs off you onto those around you. Thanks for that. Most of the stories arose from contests on The Mile, a Stephen King Discussion Board where it was "anything goes". I made some lifetime friends there.

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Tossed Cookies

Clawless old cougars
flawless memories never
settle for road kill

* * *

Alleycat evolves
hunts young strong healthy tender
skews evolution

* * *

Tingling with passion
I reach for copper skin. It
clings to another.

* * *

The bungee that holds my heart to you
has snapped.

* * *

Kissing on the First Date (or Mom Was Right)

Oxytocin floods
empty spinster's bed, his side
Velcro, her side skin

Beavers

Aside from
the rude term
men use for
a woman's parts
(and I am one of them ...
a woman, I mean)
I had never seen
a beaver
not even in a mirror
until
those People Eating Tender Animals
(or whoever the hell they are)
complained.

Now I see my woman's parts
all over Highway 417.

It breaks my heart
when
during rush hour
(in the mornings, especially)
I have no choice but
to
run over
smash
destroy
obliterate
parts
of myself
that once were prized.

Killer Beagles

THEY CAME AT HER FROM THE shadowed stand of white pines and rhododendrons near the East Wing of Beatty Foods Corporate Headquarters. At first, she felt no fear. Who could be afraid of a pack of eight or nine Beagles, not one of which was more than a thirteen-incher? At first, too, she thought some displaced member of English royalty should come leaping out of the darkness, over the split rail fence that bordered the expansive landscaped lawns, his horse slathered with foam, to confirm that she was dreaming.

That was at first. It didn't take her long to come up with a second opinion on her situation.

They were Beagles, all right. But somebody must have forgotten to tell *them* they were Beagles, because they weren't acting like Beagles. Not by a long shot.

* * * *

Perth Conway couldn't believe that the red telephone on his desk was ringing. It had never rung before. His hand shook as it grasped the receiver in the middle of the third ring.

"Perth Conway," he said, even though he knew it wasn't necessary to identify himself. From Subterranean 3 of Beatty Foods Research Laboratories, both the dog kennel facilities and the poultry facilities had a direct line to the red telephone on his desk.

"*PERTH!* Get over here NOW! *Jesus Christ!*"

"What's going on?"

"If I ever see a fucking Greenpeacer again, I'm going to fucking KILL him!"

"Ed?" Perth could hear the panic in his own voice now. He'd never heard Edsel Dempster say as much as *darn* as long

as he'd known him. "What's happening? Where exactly are you?"

"The East Wing."

That's what I was afraid of, thought Perth. *The Beagles*. The A Colony. In particular, that vicious, fear-biter out of the J Litter, the F₄ generation — the fourth sibling-to-sibling-bred generation from the original, genetically altered foundation pair. "Is Judy giving you a problem again?"

"It's the fucking whole J Litter! All nine of them! They went NUTS! They . . . They . . ."

"Okay. Calm down. Tell me exactly what's going on."

"They ate Cecil."

It sounded to Perth like Ed had just said that the Beagles had eaten Cecil Beatty, The Project head. "Wha—?"

"Excuse me a second," Ed said.

Perth heard a soft clunk as Ed set the phone down. He could hear someone violently vomiting. The helpless sound of it made his own stomach quiver.

A slight scraping noise, heavy breathing. Ed was back on the line.

"You all right?"

"More or less."

"Ha ha. I must have misheard you. Sounded like you said they ate Cecil? You're kidding. Yes?"

"Not kidding."

"Call Medical. I'll be there — "

"All the medical assistance in the world won't help poor Cecil."

"— in five."

Ed's words had sent a guilty shiver through Perth. Perth had never liked Cecil, but Ed's account of Cecil's demise sounded gruesome. Painful. Perth wouldn't have wanted anyone to die like that.

It would be easy to blame the government for this mess. High taxes, the brain drain, the funding cutbacks, and the government's knuckling under to the Greenpeace lobby, reducing The Project's gene pool to pathetic levels. Perth could certainly understand the why of Ed's vitriolic outburst against them. The Greenpeacers, as Ed always called them,

had driven The Project underground. Underground — and along another path — all the way to Subterranean 3, the most secure (and private) division in Beatty Foods Laboratories, where today, apparently, something had gone terribly wrong.

Perth should have expected something like this. Three years ago, after the addition of amoeba DNA, the A Colony's breeding program had immediately met with more so-called success than they could have imagined. But self-denial can be a strong motivator when millions of dollars are involved. Millions of privately funded dollars. Beatty Foods dollars. The Project was so secret, not even Agriculture Canada was aware of it.

And rightly so. The Project was illegal. Thanks to the Greenpeacers, for nearly ten years now, the use of companion animals: dogs, cats, rabbits, and monkeys — what next? guppies and goldfish? — in gene-altering research had been outlawed. Early convictions had extracted hefty fines, most in the six-figure range. In later years, powerful left-wing pressures had demanded that the Courts administer severe prison terms as well.

Perth was already feeling claustrophobic when he reached the East Wing. He peered through the wire-reinforced window in the door that led to A Colony. He could see Ed on his hands and knees, scrubbing at the floor, his bulk swaying like a bored circus elephant.

Perth tapped on the glass. "*Ed!*"

Face glittering with perspiration, Ed slowly raised himself to his knees using the door as support. Still kneeling, he moved away so Perth could swing the door into the corridor.

"It happened here?"

Ed nodded.

"Where were you?"

"I tried to help. I tried to open the door. But he was leaning against it. And they . . . So were they. I couldn't open it. Even when . . . when he . . . was half gone." Ed stifled a retch. "I still couldn't open the door. They only weigh fifteen, twenty pounds. Except for Jonah. He's the biggest. But I couldn't open the door! I couldn't help Cecil!"

Perth did a quick calculation in his head: Nine Beagles at twenty pounds apiece plus Cecil, whether outside or inside the dogs, would come to about three hundred and fifty pounds. Ed was a big man, but the heaviest thing he ever weight-lifted was a box of Labatt's Blue every weekend.

"You did all you could, Ed." Perth shrugged his shoulders and looked again at the blood flecks on the floor. "Not much left of him. Where are they now? The dogs, I mean. In the kennels?"

Ed's expression of dazed amusement reminded Perth of the time his oldest son had accidentally driven his bicycle into the shallow end of the swimming pool. Ed sat on his heels and pointed. "They left."

"What?"

"Ate through the wall." He pointed down the hall toward the stairwell. "A cement wall! They chewed through it. Cecil was right about splicing in that hyena jaw gene at F₂. Pure genius. Damned-est thing I ever saw." Ed looked at the floor. "Well, except for poor Cecil, that is."

This is not good, thought Perth. This is so far from being good, it goes around behind and bites its own ass.

How will Mrs. Ferrand Beatty, widow of the late founder and CEO of Beatty Foods, and CEO herself now, react to discovering that her greed had probably been instrumental in the grisly demise of her own son, Cecil? As mean as a vixen, she was as full of pass-the-buck as her old fox of a husband had been. Mrs. Beatty was not above getting her own way, or dodging trouble using whatever means necessary. If she had a mind to it, she could expedite Perth Conway and Edsel Dempster into prison, or worse, just as quick as you please. The "worse" would be more likely given that The Project's research results were being sold surreptitiously to unfriendly foreign powers. Not the type of information one wanted publicized. Especially when your name was on all the paper-work. People have died for less.

Perth and Ed had been handsomely remunerated. It said so, right there in their bank statements. She herself could in no way be connected to The Project. The original funding had

come directly from the inheritance that her son, Cecil, had received from his loving, late father's estate.

"We have to get rid of the evidence," said Perth.

"Think I don't know that? Mrs. Beatty's going to kill us." Ed went back to scrubbing the faint remains of Cecil off the floor.

"Do we have any cement in Stores? Cinder blocks? Anything to replace that wall?"

Perth was quite sure Ed had started to cry.

"I'll go look," offered Perth. "You carry on as best you can. Try to think up a story. 'Cecil left town unexpectedly' won't cut it with his mother."

"Think up a story? A goddamn STORY? Mrs. Beatty doesn't even believe you when you tell her the goddamn TRUTH!" Ed stopped scrubbing and got to his feet. "Why don't *you* stay here. And *I'll* go look for cement. At least I know where they keep the paint."

Perth picked up the scrub brush. "Go out the back way. Prop the door open with this."

"The emergency exit? You want me to prop open the emerg—?"

"So you can get back in?"

"Right." Ed nodded. "It's not alarmed when the precious Cecil's on the premises." He gave Perth a look bordering on hatred before he took the brush from him and waddled away.

Perth called after him. "I'll check the kennels."

Ed responded with a weak wave and Perth thought that the slump of Ed's shoulders made him look ninety years old.

If you had asked Perth Conway why he'd ever agreed to get involved in this particular project, he would probably have given you the spin that genetic engineering saves babies' lives, makes the planet green, and generally benefits humanity. But the truth was, a cheque for two point five million dollars made the offer irresistible, even as it proved that something stunk.

There wasn't much mess in the kennels. He latched cage doors, tossed food and water dishes into one of the sinks, then hunted for a mop to collect the spilled water and food nuggets.

A mop was lying on the floor. Perth couldn't imagine Cecil cleaning up so surmised he'd been fending off escaping Beagles with it.

As Perth swept the string-mop under the central stainless steel table, something clunked.

Cecil's cell phone.

Open.

Perth navigated to Calls Sent. *You called your Momma.* He ran out of the room to the stairwell that led to the emergency exit door where Ed had gone, and bounded up two at a time, all three flights. At the door, he noticed dozens of claw marks near the lever. The broken lever. As he jumped out of the doorway, he spotted Ed, his back against the exterior wall. No slumping shoulders now, he seems to be trying to dissolve into the bricks.

The door banged against the bricks, then swung around to bounce against the wooden brush that lay against the step.

"We shouldn't have made them so smart," said Ed. "Look."

The smell hit Perth first. "You throw up again?"

"Not me." Ed pointed. "Them."

"WHAT?"

"Seems the gene that makes them like to eat was a success, too."

Perth felt his knees buckle. "What are you telling me, Ed?"

"No false advertising at Beatty Foods: 'Our test dogs couldn't stop eating Doggy-Os.'"

"They vomit to eat more?"

"We are watching scientific process in action."

"Cecil called his mother from downstairs." Perth held out Cecil's phone. His hand was shaking.

"I wondered what she was doing here."

"Oh. God. Please don't tell me that's Mrs. Beatty. Don't tell me that."

"Takes care of our little problem. Don't you think?" said Ed.

"Uh. Yeah. But they vomited Cecil. Where are we going to hide *that* mess?"

"The kitchens. Doesn't look much different than the stuff we already feed them."

"Very funny." Perth's back rubbed against the rough brick of the building in much the same manner as Ed's was doing. Perth slid toward the door. "Uh. Ed?"

"Yeah?"

"We should maybe get back inside? I think they've finished eating Mrs. Beatty. Isn't that Judy? Staring at us?"

"Exactly why they made you boss and not me. Let's go."

Judy. The fear-biter. Except now Perth was having second thoughts about the label "fear-biter". She'd only been trying to eat you. While she played for sympathy at the same time.

Hoping to appear as tall as possible to intimidate the dogs into keeping their distance, he slipped the toe of his shoe into the space between the door and the jamb. Ed was so close beside him, he could feel breath on his neck. "Watch *them*! Not me!" He slipped his arm into the space, began to open the door as slowly as possible. "They see us yet?"

"Judy's looking this way. I think she just threw up. And it looks like one of the others prefers a hot lunch."

"A time like this you suddenly develop a sense of humour?" He squeezed his body through the space. "I'm in. Oh God." He could see through the door's meshed glass.

He propelled the door wide open. It banged against the bricks and stayed there. He looked up at the broken and wagging door mechanism. No way it was going to stay shut. They'd have to hold it closed until the dogs decided to move away from it. They were coming now, but not all of them. Some were busy making room in their little furry tummies for the two men. Judy was in the lead of those who came at him and Ed.

"*Get in! GET IN!*"

Despite his bulk, Ed managed simultaneously to grab the broken door lever, haul the door in, and kick the scrub brush

free, but before he could shut the door completely, Judy's jaw snapped onto his ankle.

He screamed. Nearly fell. Grabbed the door lever and began banging the door against Judy's back. She bleated in pain each time she was struck but would not release her grip.

Perth could see that the door lever was staying in place by only one bolt and that one was coming loose the more Ed banged Judy with the door.

One of the other dogs began to climb over Judy until it saw blood on her back. It reversed its climb to drive its teeth into Judy and came away with a hunk of meat. Judy's jaws relaxed on Ed's ankle. Ed kicked her away.

At first, the other dogs tried to push through with their snouts but Perth and Ed's well-placed kicks to their tender noses drove them back, if only temporarily.

Finally, they managed to secure the door.

"A feeding frenzy," said Ed, face pressed against the door window. "A fucking feeding frenzy."

It didn't take long for the dogs to consume Judy. They'd never been housed in the same cage, never been in contact with another dog even for breeding — breeding had always been by artificial insemination. So when they finished Judy off, they started on each other.

"They don't even know each other is a dog," said Ed. "Well. Maybe they aren't anymore. Purely canine, that is. Anybody ever work out the percentages of the other species in them?"

Always the scientist, thought Perth. *That's why I hired him.* He put his arm over Ed's shoulders. "I don't think it's going to matter in a few more minutes. Isn't that Joshua finishing off the last little bit of uh . . . evidence?"

"That's him all right. He always was a pig."

Vampiric Teeth

Seal hunters bludgeon
babies with vampiric teeth.
On TV
we do not see these children smiling
only bloodied
dead on the ice
or gracing shoulders
of some rich bitch
we envy.
On TV
we do not see
road-kill carcasses
of forbidden beavers
once held
briefly
compassionately
by iron teeth
nor the bleached
starved bodies
of a million dead seals
on previously unknown beaches
where they now
need
vampiric teeth.

Stood Up

It was raining but I had a small umbrella
enough to cover
the important parts of me.

I reached the place we were to meet.
Patio chairs on top of tables sent me
away.

Waiters don't work in the rain.

I
twirled my umbrella near the entrance to the pub
hoping
to catch your attention.
But an old bearded fuck drooled at me.
I scurried home.

Larry

THE SPCA DRIVER CRADLED THE big dog in his arms as he ran.

“Bring him through here.” Jody, the veterinary technician, pushed her thumb against the dog’s gums as she ran alongside the driver. “Gums are really white. He’s shocky.”

Dr. Scarlet was already standing beside the stainless steel surgery table. A kennel girl held a set of clippers in the air, poised as though she were about to drill someone’s tooth with them.

“Right here. This table,” said Jody, patting it.

The driver set the unconscious dog down like a sacrifice on an altar.

“See who shot him?” asked Dr. Scarlet. “I mean did you see what kind of gun it was.”

“Two guns. Rifle and revolver. Don’t know which one got ’im. Maybe both. Only bleeding from one spot far’s I can tell. I’m guessing one of the cops missed.”

“Cops? Cops did this?”

On the driver’s belt his beeper went off. He tilted it, squinted, sighed. “Need me for anything else?”

Marie, the kennel girl with the clippers, caressed the dog’s forehead. “Why’d they shoot him?”

Dr. Scarlet worked through the dog’s blood-soaked fur like a monkey looking for nits. “There it is. Buzz that for surgery, then we’ll flip him over, see if there’s an exit wound.” He pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket, flicked it on, lifted the dog’s eyelids one by one, passing the light back and forth. He replaced the flashlight before he, too, pressed his thumb against the dog’s gums.

The driver said: "I didn't see nothing. Only going by what the lady caller said. Bunch of people chasing a wolf through the rock cut back of Maple and they shot him. Well. Shot *at* him. Said the bullets were whizzing around everywhere. Off the rocks. Stupid."

"Wolf?" said Jody. "He's a German Shepherd. Anybody can see that."

"Anyways. I gotta go," said the driver. "Who's gonna sign this?" He fished a crumpled form out of his hip pocket.

* * * *

"I hope they find his owners. He's such a sweetie-pie." Jody sat on the floor beside the dog as he kicked and pawed the air, whining. "I hate it when the anesthetic's wearing off."

"They all do that," said Marie. "They all survive."

Jody raised an eyebrow at her then shrugged off the comment that lay in her throat.

"You get a close look at this thing?" Marie asked. She held a lumpy bead of metal between her thumb and forefinger. It glinted as she turned it.

"The bullet? Just a hunk of metal is all."

"It's silver."

Dr. Scarlet, who'd been changing scrubs, reentered the case room. "That's what I thought it was, too." He laughed. "Either the Lone Ranger was in town or that dog's a werewolf. How's he doing, Jody?"

"Stable. Taking his sweet time waking up. Was really thrashing around a few minutes ago. Like he was running away from something." She caressed the dog's neck.

"Who was on the phone?"

"SPCA," answered Marie. "Checking on our patient. Nobody knows where he came from. Looks like nobody owns him."

"*Aaawww*. I hate that. Poor baby doesn't even have a name."

"How about Larry?" asked Dr. Scarlet, smiling.

"Larry?"

"Larry Talbot. The Wolf Man. Lon Chaney Junior? No? C'mon. That old movie's on TV every year at Halloween. Haven't seen it?"

"I did," said Marie.

"Larry." The name rolled off Jody's tongue. "When's the SPCA taking him?"

"Bring me out Callie Dempster, Marie. Owner's got a pick-up appointment in half an hour. Need to get that drain out." Dr. Scarlet turned back to Jody and the dog. "Don't see why you can't take him home with you. We'll keep him under observation a couple more days. What do you say? Be company for you."

Jody hugged Larry. "I'd like that."

As Dr. Scarlet began to examine Callie Dempster, he turned to Jody again. "But isn't it a full moon tonight?"

Marie laughed.

Jody joined her without really getting the joke. "What's that got to do with anything?"

* * * *

"*Larry!* This is the tenth time you wanted out in the past three hours. You don't even pee. I want my shower and I want to sleep. I have to get up for work at seven. So do you."

Jody's rear-facing apartment, which had once been boyfriend Mike and Jody's, opened on a large yard surrounded by a cedar hedge. The hedge was thick and deep but she didn't want to risk having Larry wander off in a neighbourhood that was strange to him, especially after what he'd been through that day, so she grabbed the dog's leash from the doorknob and hooked it onto his collar while he stared, panting, at the door.

"Wait a minute." Before she grabbed the doorknob, she had, out of habit, checked the area where Dr. Scarlet had removed the silver bullet. It hadn't passed through anything vital, it had lodged under a rib, no doubt from a ricochet. Marie had shaved a square. Six inches by six inches. Right to the skin. Jody'd watched her do it.

"Turn around. Was it the other side?"

The patch of velvety-grey skin that had been painted with orange-staining Betadine for the surgery was gone. The hair had grown back.

Jody knelt to ruffle the fur on Larry's right side where she was certain the incision had been, but could find nothing. She

thought also that his hair felt thicker. Coarser. Darker. When the driver brought him to the clinic, the dog had had a coppery blood smell, but now the odour was feral, redolent of forest, swamp, and danger.

She raised her hand to his throat to release his collar which slid to the floor with a soft clink. Still kneeling, she scrabbled for the doorknob with her right hand, turned it, pulled it inward. Larry's fur brushed first against her breasts then against the door before he disappeared into the darkness of the back yard. She left the door open.

Next morning she was awakened seconds before the radio alarm by soft, wet warmth as Larry licked her cheek. He looked the same as he had when she'd brought him home, right down to the bald orangey-grey square on his right side.

"You'll never believe the weird dream I had." She slid her legs off the bed. "You were in it."

He followed her into the bathroom where she brushed her teeth, applied mascara to her upper lashes, ran the comb through her hair before wrapping it with a scrunchie; she peed, washed and dried her hands. She had hung her towels over the shower rod last night, and they would have been dry by now, but it didn't register that they were wet again, and draped over the rim of the tub. Larry wagged his tail, watching Jody with his soft brown eyes. She could have sworn he was smiling.

"You're so cute. Let's get your collar and leash on."

Larry stepped away from her.

"Sorry, boy. Gotta follow the rules."

She hadn't believed he would understand what she said, but he walked over and placed his neck against the collar.

"Woo. You're some smart doggie, ain't ya?" She snapped on the collar and leash, opened the back door and stepped through. Larry followed.

* * * *

"So," asked Marie as she curled her arm around a spaniel to grasp its front leg. "What are you and Ryan going to be doing for your hot date tonight?"

"Dinner." Jody inserted the needle into the spaniel's vein

and drew back on the syringe. "That's all." Jody pulled the needle out and set it in the blood-work tray.

Marie grinned. "Think your new dog will get along with your new squeeze?" She lifted the spaniel off the table.

"Larry's a sweetie-pie. Aren't you, Larry?" She looked over at the corner of the case room where Larry appeared to be sleeping soundly. He opened one eye, panted three times, went back to sleeping. "Nobody is squeezing anybody. And it's not a date."

"You know Ryan always liked you."

"Mike and I always liked hanging out with Ryan. He's fun. But —"

"He's good looking. He's smart. He's charming," added Marie. "Polite. And don't forget those beautiful blue eyes! Yum. Blue eyes just do me in. They're so —"

"He was Mike's best friend. It would be like doing it with my brother."

Jody didn't want to get involved with anybody; she was still recovering from the loss of Mike. She still couldn't believe he was gone. He'd been an experienced hiker. He couldn't possibly have gotten lost in those woods. How many times had he led groups through there? No one in the group had been able to tell the police and forest rangers anything about his disappearance. They'd heard nothing, just woke up and he was gone.

Ryan had supported her — like a brother — since it happened.

"Any more heartworm tests out there?" she asked Marie.

The spaniel pawed at the door to the waiting room. "This guy's the last. You may as well go home, get ready for your date — er . . . dinner."

Jody packaged and labelled the day's blood tests for the courier, grabbed Larry's leash, and was about to call him but he was waiting at the door for her. Wagging his tail. Looking happy.

* * * *

Jody had always suspected that Ryan had an interest in her that went beyond her being his best buddy's girlfriend. He'd

made a couple of alcohol-fuelled advances (one right in front of Mike), but nothing more than that. She should have put two and two together this particular evening. Ryan had suggested dinner at that fancy French restaurant and had shown up clean-faced and smelling of a different aftershave. Back at her apartment he asked to come in for a drink and before she could respond, he stepped inside.

Larry trotted over immediately to sniff Ryan's groin.

"Larry! That's rude."

"Hey, pal. Not so close to the family jewels. Heh heh. When'd you get him?"

"He's a patient."

"Can't you put him somewhere?"

"Come on, Larry. You go bedroom, okay?" Larry obediently entered the bedroom. She closed the door. "I don't have anything to drink. Anyway, don't you think you've had —"

"Coffee's okay." He pushed his way past her to the kitchen, opened the cupboard over the stove, pulled out two coffee mugs, opened a different cupboard, and removed a jar of Maxwell House coffee.

"Ryan. It's . . . Um. It's . . . It's late. I'd rather just call it a night if you don't mind."

Ryan closed the space between them and looked down at her. "What if I do mind? Isn't it time we kicked it up a notch?"

"What?" She attempted to maintain her space but realized her back was against the wall. She put her hand to his chest thinking he would back away but he grasped it tightly and with his other arm pulled her toward him, trying to touch her mouth with his.

"Let's not do this," she chuckled. "You've had a couple of drinks. You know what happens. This time of night *any* woman starts looking good, huh?"

"Not as good as you, baby." He seemed to think that sounded a lot more romantic than she did.

"Ryan. That's enough. Okay?"

"Relax, Jody."

She didn't know how he managed it, but the first thing she knew, she was on her back on the sofa, he was on top of

her, his hand was hand up her shirt, her bra was loose.

“Don’t do this!”

“Relax. It’s not like you’ve never done it before.”

“*Ryan!* It’s *me*. Jody. We’re friends. Just friends. Right?”

“I got a cure for that.” Again he tried to kiss her but she turned her face away.

“Ryan . . .”

“Hmm.” He nuzzled her neck.

“Ryan?”

“Hmm.”

“Better. Not. Move.”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t move. The dog. Look at the dog.”

The growl was subtle. Its meaning was not.

Larry stood at Ryan’s elbow—no, not Larry. This wasn’t sweet-natured Larry the dog, this was the feral other, the one who stank of some dead thing floating in the swamp. It moved closer.

“What’s going on?” A drop of perspiration fell from Ryan’s forehead onto Jody’s. “What is that?” Another drop of perspiration landed on Jody’s lip.

From her position on the sofa, she watched the wolf’s primitive black eye, a flash of white below the iris, then the muzzle turn to Ryan’s face. The stench of the wolf’s hot breath clung to her. She felt the harsh, rattling suck of air into its lungs as it readied itself. A quiver along the upper lip. A lifting of the lip. Milk-white teeth, death-black gums. Spittle forming. Dripping. Felt the rumble from the gut of it before the snarl broke free.

“Get off me easy. Slowly. Carefully. No sudden moves.”

“Ya think?”

“Don’t fuck around. Get off.”

The wolf continued sucking air and spraying snarls until Ryan was upright and heading for the door, shuffling backwards, hands out. “Easy boy. Easy. I’m leaving. See? See? I’m almost there.”

Jody stayed where she was until she heard the soft *snick*

of the apartment door's latch sliding into place. The old Larry padded to her side, licked the hand Ryan had grabbed, stared into her eyes.

"I know this is going to come out like the understatement of all time, but you give me the willies. You know that?" She got up from the couch, smoothed her clothes as she walked to the bedroom door, stopped. It was closed. "You're amazing."

"You don't know the half of it," said a familiar voice behind her. "I'm learning how to will myself into human form but it's not lasting long yet. I need more practice."

Jody turned slowly to face him. She couldn't believe it could really be Mike. But it was. It was. He'd made his way back to her.

"It's really you! You've come back to me!" She threw her arms around him. "You came back!"

"I don't know how long I can stay human this time. Maybe if you kissed me like that princess did to the frog?"

Miracles

I can't believe
you've scaled my barriers
tunnelled under my walls
swum my moat
with all the alligators
all the sharks
in there.
Yet here
you are
alive
breathing beside me.

Internet Dating Lunch

Smorgasbord of
cocktail wieners
made by Maple Leaf®.
Some ham.
Much cheese.
Frantic,
oysters clutch my sleeve.

Tall
from behind a wilted lettuce
thin, dark, smooth,
and garlic-laced,
pasta speaks to me,
a feast for
all
my senses.

The Globe

“**I**’M SORRY, JONATHAN, I JUST DON’T think it’s right. I knew your mother, God rest her soul. Went to school with her.”

“Mister Kingsbury. These were hers and now they’re mine. Are —”

“Lenny. Call me Lenny. That’s what the sign reads out front of my shop, doesn’t it? Lenny’s Pawn Shop? Actually, it was named for Dad. But then so was I.”

“Right. Right. Are you going to buy this stuff from me, or not?”

Lenny slid off the stool behind the counter, grimacing as his feet touched the floor. “Damn knees. Been giving me hell since college. Ever play any football, Jonathan?”

“Mister Kings— Lenny. I’m in kind of a hurry.”

The narrow seat of Lenny’s trousers shone in the overhead fluorescents as he hobbled toward the front door of the shop. “Well? Did you?”

“Did I what? Oh, football. No. Never did. Wasn’t much into sports. Listen, can you kind of speed it up a bit? Like I said, I’m —”

“What do you need the money for, Jonathan?” Lenny flipped the sign on the door so it read OPEN on the inside. He flicked the deadbolt. Then he turned to face the young man who stood at the counter, nervously picking through the contents of the large jewellery box that sat there beside the old-fashioned cash register. “Drugs? Gambling debts, maybe?” The OPEN sign swung back and forth behind him.

“What business is it of yours? Do you give all your customers the third degree?” Jonathan picked up a large brooch

in the shape of a turtle. "What about this one? Mother always said it was her most valuable piece."

"Yes, yes. I've seen her wear it. Lovely piece. Lovely." Lenny hobbled back to the counter. "Come with me," he said. "Bring her jewellery box. We'll go to my apartment. Have a cognac. Maybe two. Maybe talk a little business. What say?"

Jonathan looked at his watch. "I don't have a lot of time."

"Yes, yes. I understand. Do you like cognac? Or would you prefer Scotch? Perhaps brandy. A liqueur?"

Jonathan looked at his watch again. "Oh, all right! Whatever."

He followed Lenny through a hall into a small parlour cluttered with furniture, lamps, and wall hangings. Above a fireplace hung a large black and white photograph of a beautiful young woman, head thrown back, flowers in her long dark hair. She was seated on a boulder on a long beach. Skirt pulled up to her thighs. Toes in the water. She was laughing at the photographer who was obviously standing in the lake or river in front of her. One of her fingers was hooked into the strand of beads around her neck, holding it out playfully to the side, as though to display it.

"That's a hot lookin' babe," said Jonathan without realizing he'd spoken aloud.

"That's Beth."

"Beth?"

"My wife."

Jonathan flushed. "I . . . didn't mean to be rude."

"No offense taken," said Lenny handing Jonathan a snifter with an amber liquid halfway up the bowl. "My personal favourite, Grand Marnier." Lenny saluted with his own snifter and sipped. "I imagine you meant it as a compliment. Please. Be seated." He indicated a large comfortable-looking brown leather chair. Lenny sat on a hardback wooden chair.

Jonathan hesitated. "I don't want to take your chair. It must be more comfortable than that one you're in."

Lenny laughed. "That one's comfortable, all right. But I have a hard time getting out of it." He patted his thigh with his free hand. "Knees don't work too good anymore."

Jonathan sat. The chair was, indeed, comfortable. He leaned back and crossed his ankle over his knee.

Lenny took another sip of liqueur, set his glass on the end table beside him, then leaned forward. "So, Jonathan. Let's cut the crap, okay? What do you need that much goddamn money for?"

"I . . . Uh . . ."

"I think you have an appointment. You've been looking at your damned watch ever since you came into the shop. Being in the pawn shop business you get to know a lot about people and people's troubles. My guess would be that you owe some folks some money. And it probably isn't the folks at the bank. Am I getting warm?"

Jonathan uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, elbows on knees, cradling the brandy snifter in both hands. He nodded, head down.

"What is it? Drugs?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Dogs."

"Racing or fighting?"

"Rather not say."

Lenny smiled. "Ah. Gambling carries many curses along with it, doesn't it? How much you into them for?"

"Ten thousand."

Lenny sucked in his breath and leaned back in his chair, reaching for his glass. "That doesn't sound too healthy." He took several sips from his glass before replacing it on the table. "Give me the jewels. I'll see if I can help you out." He took the box. "Your poor mother must be rolling in her grave."

As Lenny sorted through the jewellery box, Jonathan rose and began walking around the room, looking at the pictures, wall-hangings, and furniture, thinking that some of it was probably quite valuable. Then his eyes returned to the picture of the woman over the fireplace.

"Is your wife deceased?"

"Can't really say," said Lenny. "These pearls are worth a bit. And, of course, that turtle brooch is magnificent. Two, three grand at least."

“What do you mean?” Jonathan frowned, suddenly feeling uncomfortably warm in the small room. “You don’t know if she’s dead or not? Did she leave you, or something?”

Lenny turned toward him, his jeweller’s ring still over his right eye. “Just as I said. Can’t really say.”

Jonathan shrugged and turned back to the picture. It was then that he noticed the dusty globe on the mantel beneath the picture. He stepped closer to it, setting his snifter beside it.

Through the dust he could see a figure encased in the globe. It appeared to be that of a middle-aged woman. A gaunt, half-starved woman whose entire body seemed to exude grief.

He took his handkerchief out of his pocket, picked up the globe and wiped the dust from it. Immediately it seemed to glow with an inner light of its own. An unwelcome shiver ran up Jonathan’s back from his buttocks to his neck.

It was not a shiver of fear.

It was a shiver of desire.

Quickly, he replaced the globe and picked up his glass and drank half of the burning liquid in three gulps.

“See that globe beneath the picture?” asked Lenny whose back was once again turned toward Jonathan. “Beth stole that. Shortly after that picture was taken. Never met a more honest person in my life than my Beth. But she stole it. Stole it from some kid who’d brought it into the shop in a real hurry to get rid of it. Said the kid was acting really peculiar, so she refused to pawn it for him, figuring — and she was more than likely right — that the kid had stolen it. But she told me that after she’d touched it, she had this terrible . . . terrible . . . What’d she call it? ‘a terrible need’ to have it.

“So. She stole it. It was now in her possession. You’d think she would have been pleased. But just before she went . . . Well, just before she went where she went, she warned me never to touch it. She put it on the mantel there, right where it is, and it’s never been touched since.”

Jonathan glanced again at the globe and what he saw made his skin crawl: The woman in the globe, who now bore

an uncanny resemblance to the woman in the picture, was smiling at him.

“Yes. She told me that anyone who touches that globe must possess it, and whoever possesses it soon becomes possessed by it.” Lenny turned toward him, closing the cover of the jewellery box, and removing the jeweller’s ring from his eye.

“Tell you what,” he said, tapping the top of the box. “I’ll give you ten thousand for the whole lot. How’s that sound?”

Jonathan nodded, unaware of either the sweat running down his back or the thin thread of saliva hanging from his open mouth.

“Now you have to understand, son. I don’t keep that kind of cash sitting around the apartment.” Lenny groaned as he stood up from the chair. “Damn knees. Been giving me hell since college.” With the jewellery box tucked under one arm, Lenny hobbled toward the hall. “I’ll be back with your cash in a flash.” He turned and smiled at Jonathan. “You just hold tight. Won’t take but a few minutes. Bank’s just down the street.”

And he winked at him.

* * * *

When Lenny returned fifteen minutes later, he was greeted by his Beth.

In the joy of their reunion, neither of them paid any attention to the barely audible screams coming from the globe lying on the floor by the doorway.

Delights

You bring me
hand-picked treasures
you know will delight me
will divert my attention
from your intentions.

Did you learn this trick from
Mister *Pisaura mirabilis*
the spider who presents
his heart's desire with
a silk-wrapped bug?

Wish I May . . .

1

TANYA WAVED GOODBYE AS MARGO left with her new friend, Matt, Pat, Jack? Tanya remained at the bar. She shifted on the stool and sipped her beer.

“May I join you?” A male voice.

She liked his face. Interesting. Maybe Irish. Kind of familiar, too. “Do I know you?”

“Sean Raify.” He extended his hand.

“Tanya.” His handshake was a slight, quick pressure of his fingers on hers. She wondered where she had seen him before.

He slid up onto the stool beside her. “Your friend left without you I see.”

“Her sitter has to be home by eleven. School tomorrow.”

“And your sitter?”

“Mom’s cool. She’ll just take a nap on the couch until I get home.” Tanya sipped her beer again. “Say. How do you know I need a sitter?”

He winked at her. “Maybe I know more about you than you think.”

She wasn’t certain she liked that idea. “You a secret admirer or something?” She gave him her best and biggest smile.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. We met last year. When your little girl was born.”

“You work at the hospital?”

He winked again. “Sometimes.”

“What do you do?” she asked.

He signalled the bartender who brought him a mug of something hot.

“You drinking coffee?”

“Tea,” he said.

Weird, she thought. “So?”

“What?”

“What do you do?”

His smile was warm, his eyes twinkled. “I guess you could say I sort of fix things.”

“Like toasters and TVs and things like that?”

She liked his laugh. “More like situations. Troubling situations.”

She leaned toward him. Lowered her voice. “Like a godfather? You know. Like in the movie, *The Godfather*?”

He threw back his head and laughed merrily.

She couldn’t help herself. She laughed, too.

“No, no. Not like the godfather. I’m more like a fairy godmother.”

Still laughing, she said: “I like a man with a good sense of humour. Seriously, though. What do you do?”

He leaned very close to her and whispered in her ear. “I make women happy.”

An involuntary shiver of pleasure rippled through Tanya’s lower belly. “Oh,” she said.

With his lips still almost touching her ear, he said: “Finish your beer. I’ll walk you home.”

2

Tanya had asked Sean to wait by the hedge until Mom left and she had checked on Lizzie, the baby. She half-expected that he would be gone by the time she went out to the hedge to invite him in. But he was there.

“Sorry I took so long. Mom loves to chat. She hasn’t made any friends at the home, even though she’s been there for a year now.”

“Why doesn’t she live here?” he asked.

“She wanted me and Lizzie to have the house. She prefers her little apartment at Rosedale Acres to this big place.”

Sean followed Tanya into the back yard. They entered the house through the kitchen.

"Nice place," he said.

It was a nice place. Tanya hadn't changed a thing since Mom left last year. Copper-bottomed pots hung on hooks on the north wall. Over the island in the centre of the kitchen, track lighting filled the kitchen with a homey glow.

"The living room's through here."

"Your mom liked blue."

"Yes. She does. Have a seat. Can I offer you anything to drink?"

"What's that song?" he asked, then sang: "Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I'll not ask for more." Sean sat on the sofa, then patted the cushion beside him, indicating that Tanya should sit beside him. "Nothing for me. But go ahead and have something for yourself."

He looked around the room, and Tanya noticed that his eyes appeared to linger on Mom's collection of Royal Doulton figurines. Tanya also made note that he seemed very comfortable sitting on Mom's sofa.

"Sure you won't have anything, Sean?"

"I'm fine. Tell me, Tanya. You don't remember me at all from last year? It was a year ago yesterday, actually. A year and a day as they say in the fairy tales." He smiled and she felt herself melt into that smile as she poured Grand Marnier into a snifter.

"I really don't remember, but you're familiar." She sat beside him on the sofa and he put his arm around behind her.

"You don't remember the accident?"

"Accident?"

"Yes. The accident. Don't you remember?"

"I remember nothing about an accident." She drained her glass and rose to get another.

"There was an accident. Lovely young woman involved." He leaned forward on the sofa, elbows on his knees. "Not unlike yourself. Same flaxen hair. Same lovely Irish blue eyes."

Tanya filled her snifter and returned to sit beside him.

“But I’m not Irish.” *Damn, there’s something sexy about this guy. He just kind of draws you in. I’m not gonna let him go home tonight.*

He laughed. “Ah, but all women are Irish to me. Come sit beside me, my darlin’.”

Tanya had filled the snifter almost to the rim with Grand Marnier and she held it cupped in both hands while she wriggled closer to him. She did not sip, she gulped three mouthfuls back. “So what about this woman and the accident?” She was feeling a trifle jealous, but she wanted to let him know she was interested in what he had to say.

“She was seven months pregnant, driving the mom-in-law’s car, husband asleep in the back, mom-in-law in the passenger seat. This woman was drunk as a fart.” He put his arm back behind Tanya and began to caress her temple. “Terrible thing to drink when you’re pregnant, but to drink and drive on top of it . . .”

Tanya nodded. She was beginning to feel the effects of all the alcohol she’d consumed. “Hmm. Yeah. Terrible.” She made eye contact with him so he’d know she was interested in him. To let him know she wanted him. And she did want him. How sexy could one man be?

“Terrible accident. The woman blamed a dog being on the road for hitting a semi loaded with logs. Spun into it trying to avoid the dog, she claimed. Wiped out Mom-in-law, Hubby, and darn near herself. The baby was born prematurely — a wee girl — but it died soon after the accident. Other than a lot of bruises, the woman was unharmed. And that business about the dog was pure shite.”

Tanya took another gulp of Grand Marnier even though she knew she’d already had too much because her vision was going. She tried to smile at him again but knew she was about to lose her decorum so didn’t even try. “Then wha’?” she asked.

“Well. I just happened to be there when the woman made a wish.” He pulled his arm away from behind Tanya and placed his elbows on his knees again. “She didn’t pray to God.

She made a wish. And I just happened to be there. Remember what I said about what I do? That I make women happy?"

Tanya chuckled. "She made a wish? How silly."

"It's been a year and a day since." Sean looked at Tanya and winked.

"What'd she wish?"

"She wished for more time with her child and her mother-in-law. She loved her mother-in-law very much. Called her Mom. Her own mother was dead, you see."

Tanya felt the booze hit her then and she fell back onto the sofa. She was dizzy, disoriented.

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and his lips felt like the soft whispers of an angel's wings. Into her ear he whispered: "Take me into your bed and you will learn everything."

That fluttering in her lower belly again. With hooded eyes, she breathed "Yes."

3

When Tanya awoke the next morning she had never felt so good in years. Centuries! She moved her hand over in the bed to find Sean, but the bed was empty. Not even warm.

"Shit!" she said. "Not again. Thought you might have been a keeper, baby." She sat up on the bed and wiped the sleep from her eyes. "Speaking of baby . . . Hey, Lizzie, sweetheart. How ya doing this morning?"

She got up and stumbled into Lizzie's room.

No baby. No crib. No toys. No diaper bag. No change table. No can for used diapers.

"What the hell?"

Frantically, she ran to the telephone and keyed in the numbers for Mom's apartment at Rosedale Acres.

We're sorry, but the number you have dialled is not in service.

She dialled again.

We're sorry, but the number you have dialled is not in service.

“Oh! Shut up, bitch!”

Tanya punched in 911.

“My daughter’s been kidnapped!”

“Your name and location, please?”

She told the female dispatcher.

“I’m sorry, Tanya. I’m so sorry. There was a Mr. Sean Raify in a while ago. He warned us you might be call—.”

“My daughter! My baby! My baby has been kidnapped!”

“Tanya. You have no baby. Don’t you remember? The accident? Last year?”

I Am NOT “Horny”

I am ember smouldering
under the surface
to be fanned
to flame.

I am volcano.

I am rock tensed
before the quake.

I am forest
to be explored
by trusted hands.

I am a well
to be plumbed,
tongued, tasted by one
who knows
my depths.

I am wave on the sea
to be crested by one
who
wants me.

I am not
“horny”.

The Grape

is a jealous
mistress.
She tolerates
no rival.
The mistress
is a jealous
rival.
She tolerates
no grape.

No Sense of Humour

PHILIPPE BEAUDREAU WAS THE most handsome man I'd ever laid eyes on. He was also the most successful sales exec at Beatty Foods. He was being polished — no, *honed* to a keen edge — by none less than Mrs. Ferrand Beatty, the CEO of Beatty Foods, to take over her favourite position, Vice-President, Marketing. So why Philippe ever took it upon himself to murder the incumbent VP, I'll never know. I'm sure he could have charmed her to death, although she was a pretty smart cookie. She saw right through *me* the first moment we met, but she hired me as her Exec Assistant anyway.

My boss, Roberta, was working under the axe, as it were, because of her tongue: It was English (not bilingual) and it waggled at both ends, as well as in the middle, especially at office get-togethers and anywhere Scotch was available to soak it in. She had her own sort of charm, you see, and was not averse to getting people into corners, extracting family secrets from them, then repeating the secrets later — loudly and with as much crudity and cruelty as she could muster. I often felt like killing her myself. She could embarrass an android.

I was there the first time she met Philippe, and I saw the stars and fireworks and little Valentine hearts shooting out from her eyes and ears and mouth. Roberta was instantly in love. I must admit that my heart made a flutter or two when I shook hands with him the first time, too. Roberta made quite a fool of herself at that executive luncheon. I'd been working for her for a few years by then, and knew there was no use in my playing Mommy by trying to remind her to practise some decorum. That always made her worse, she'd tell jokes on *me*,

then. Like the time she told a visiting Japanese delegation about what my late husband and I had done at the drive-in one silly night. She used people to get a laugh. She was definitely a clever, witty person — should have been a comedian — but she hurt people.

“Life’s rough at the top,” she would laugh while she ordered another Chivas and soda.

Philippe hadn’t been working at Beatty Foods for long before everyone knew he had a shot at the vice-presidency. Roberta was livid. She’d round-heeled her way up to where she was and expected all her former trustees to back her up in her fight to keep her job. They wouldn’t, of course. She had foolishly burned all her bridges by telling everyone in the company every intimate physical detail of every executive she’d bedded. Everyone *else* had had a good laugh, especially about the eczema on the Treasurer’s arse. No one ever retaliated with their own insulting revelations, the execs were true gentlemen in the kiss but don’t tell department. Besides, although I never saw her naked myself, I don’t think they could have faulted her on a thing, she was gorgeous. She didn’t even need to wear a bra.

I guess I might have given you the false impression that Philippe Beaudreau was an earth-walking angel. His being a murderer certainly puts him a few rungs down on the sainthood ladder, I know. (Excusable, though, if you’d known Roberta.) He bit his nails, had this annoying nervous habit of trying to lasso a corner of his moustache with his tongue, and he had no sense of humour whatsoever. I like to think it was his lack of a funny bone that killed Roberta. There would be something supremely just in that.

I would have remembered that Halloween night anyway. The weather was dreadful (what the television and radio weatherpeople insist on calling “freezing rain” — a contradiction in terms, if you think about it). One of the local kids was struck by a car. There was a big hullabaloo about that, I’ll tell you. The kid wasn’t hurt badly but it was a cop car that hit him. There were three separate hold-ups by three separate hooligans at local Mac’s Milks within a half hour of each

other. One of the hooligans shot himself in the foot; another wasn't aware that the owner's Rottweiler liked to sleep behind the counter, so he lost a finger (the one he had in his pocket as a gun); and the third robber crashed his brand new Kawasaki into Mrs. Levesque's brand new greenhouse. (Mrs. Levesque was a pure heller when it came to her plants. She put the kid in the hospital for three weeks.)

All in all, it was not a good night for doing much of anything. Astrologers would have said that Mercury was retrograde, or that the moon was in Aries squaring Capricorn, or something. Roberta wasn't into astrology any more than the rest of us, except to ask "What's your sign, big boy?" She didn't know that the Fates portended no good that Halloween night.

Roberta loved Halloween. She always dressed up for it in some weird get-up and either tried scaring the hell out of the little kids (and usually succeeded in sending a few home in tears), or else she'd dress up like a hooker and head down to the local prostitute hangout. She'd suck some balding old man into taking her for a drive whereupon she'd slap his face and tell him "I'm not that kind of girl." Risky, but Roberta loved excitement, thrived on practical jokes and got her jollies out of putting people down, especially men.

This particular Halloween night, she asked me to help her out. She wanted to play the joke of all jokes on Philippe Beaudreau. She wanted to stage a break-in at his house after he'd gone to sleep. He'd only moved in the day before, so most of his valuables were still neatly boxed — and labelled. She didn't plan to steal anything. She'd move some boxes out to his garage, just to scare him. That's what she needed me for, in case the police showed up. I was to back up her story that it was a Halloween prank and not an actual robbery.

What she didn't know was that Philippe Beaudreau had been robbed no less than eight times when he lived in Montreal, so he kept a gun by his bed. His new house was already equipped with a burglar alarm which alerted him in his bedroom. He was determined to kill the next *maudit voleur*, damn thief, who set foot in his house.

I needn't supply you with the grisly details of what happened next. Roberta ended up with a neat, round hole in her forehead and a humongous hole in the back of her head. Philippe was given a fifty-dollar fine for discharging a firearm within city limits.

So why do I say Philippe is a murderer? Wasn't it merely a distorted yet just self-defence? Well, between you and me and the gate post, Philippe might not have had a sense of humour, but he sure had a sense of smell. On the way to the police station (we were both taken in for questioning) he leaned over to me and squeezed my hand, ever so gently, and whispered "I always hated her perfume. You could smell it a mile away."

Bird Songs

Mom and I would walk
along the perimeters of the farm where
she grew up.
There her father
had used her older sister
for himself
in lieu of his
used-up 9-kids wife.
I knew my mother had father-fear in her
but the things she taught me about
the songs of birds
and what life
is really about
was more important
than what happens in some families.

If you can identify
the birdsongs
if you can walk through a field and hear the redwing
if you can listen to cicadas at 92 Fahrenheit,
if you can do that
when you know
your father
is doing
forbidden things to your oldest sister
and you know you're next,
if you can identify bugs and birdsongs,
your soul is still
operational.

My Siamese Cat

All the love I want
I get
from my Siamese cat.
I know his full name —
the first I gave to him
the last I use when he's bad
so he'll pay attention when I'm displeased
and remember.
I know his marital status
(I took care of that one, too).
My Siamese cat does not deceive me.
His motivations for loving me?
He has needs
only
I
can satisfy.

It Came through the Chimney

“**T**HERE IT IS AGAIN, MITTENS. Did you hear that?”

Pretending to be oblivious to the strange scratching that emanated from somewhere above them, Jinnie’s cat stood up and arched like one half of a McDonald’s sign before rolling into a ball again.

“I’m sure there’s something up there.” It was Jinnie’s first time away from home and the first time she’d ever been completely alone without even her brothers and sisters. She was terrified, and felt bad now for always complaining that they annoyed her. She would give anything to be annoyed by her little brother Thokin or her cousin Azumus right now.

She didn’t count the cat as anything that could defend her if the need arose. The cat was a throwaway gift from the previous tenant so Jinnie didn’t think it would have had time to build up any loyalty toward its new owner yet. Jinnie didn’t want to go outside to look up on the roof, either. It was brutally cold out there and snow was hard to move around in. It was like the sand of her homeland: shifting, catching at your ankles, trying to suck you down as though to eat you. Snow was lighter and softer, but more dangerous being in too long than the mid-day desert was.

Nor did Jinnie have anyone to call; her family and all who knew her lived light years away in another country. Another culture. Another world.

Even if she’d been more fluent in the Earthling language, she couldn’t afford a television or a radio yet. School came first, Papa had told her. The extras come when you earn them.

But she so wanted to know if there might be something she should be afraid of in the tiny knocks and scratches echoing above her head.

She'd only been in the country for four days, arriving — they told her — the first day of winter. Our winters were never like this, she thought. Our winters are wet, muggy, humid. They drown the land, they don't wrap it in ice to be stored like meat.

A noise again and from the corner of her eye she thought she saw a movement, or was it a shadow, near the fireplace. Dark, smelly dust fluttered down inside the firebox. A black boot appeared. Then another.

Suddenly, a fat man dressed in red appeared before her. His long beard and even longer hair — long, like a woman's hair, she thought — were white. He laughed as he threw a large knapsack onto the carpet at her feet.

"I caught you awake," he chuckled. "Where are my cookies? My milk?"

Jinnie's shock at the man's unusual method of arrival was overshadowed by hearing him speak in her own language. She barely had the presence of mind to snatch her cloak from the sofa to throw it over her head.

"What do you want with me?" She fell to her knees in terror.

"I want to wish you a Merry Christmas," said the strange man, still laughing. "I have gifts for you. Look." He emptied his knapsack onto the floor. There was a small television, a radio, an intergalactic cell phone, a computer.

"What magic is this?"

"The magic of Christmas, my dear."

"How does it all fit in your knapsack?"

"Like I said. It's magic."

"I cannot pay you." Jinnie's head lowered and her cloak slipped to the floor.

"You owe me nothing. I'm Santa Claus. I do this every year."

She led Santa to her meagre kitchen where she had some harzjad biscuit and moop-jij on the counter. He ate it with delight, smacking his lips.

“Better than cookies,” he said, smiling. “You’re already on my list for next year if you can cook like this.”

“And I will welcome you.” She bowed, which was the custom on her world.

Then Santa put his finger against his nose and nodding, rose up the chimney.

Jinnie returned to the sofa to hug Mittens. “I’ll never be afraid of anything here again,” she said. “Let’s see what’s on the television. Let’s learn more of the ways of these people.”

It almost looked like Mittens was smiling as she snuggled against her new owner. She began to purr happily. So did Jinnie.

Refugee

Just another woman
on a bus
my eyes meet hers
encounter caverns
set deep in pain, that
conceal unknown bones,
gnawed memories.

Somewhere beneath the permafrost of scars
her smiles hibernate.

I cannot hold her gaze,
her tears fall from my eyes.

Chain of Events

AFTER MY HUSBAND PASSED, I didn't want to live in that big house all alone, so I went house hunting. I got a real deal on a place with three acres a few miles from town. I loved the sound of my new address: "Butterfly Road, RR 2, Shaw Falls." I'd always wanted to live in the country.

I'm like the cat that Curiosity is always after, but it took me ten years to check out the lane that ran alongside my house. I'd heard there was a cottage back at the river.

Connor, my neighbour on that side, used the lane to get to his shed where he stored his tractor a.k.a. lawn mower or snow-blower or snowplow, depending. He was an old man, but every day, rain or shine, snow or ninety-degree heat, he'd have the pedal to the metal on that thing, just like a kid would. He'd drive it, decked out appropriately for whatever season it was, all along Butterfly Road. First, east toward town, then west past my right-hand neighbours. But he never went any farther down the lane between us than his shed.

Left of him, if you were facing Butterfly Road, was what my right-hand neighbours and friends, Leanne and Teddy, called Connor's-Ditch-Rhymes-With-Connor's-Bitch. Connor's wife was the neighbourhood whiner.

You could see two small houses perched along the other side of Connor's Ditch when you were driving back from town. Never saw hide nor hair of either owners except for the one time Jean Bourdeaux and his two boys came by looking for their dog. I knew the dog. By sound. But no, I hadn't seen it.

I took the opportunity to ask him. "Can you see a cottage back there from your place?"

He looked at me as though I'd just confessed to cooking his missing dog for breakfast.

"T'anks for your 'elp. Bye-bye." He propelled the kids back to the road, chattering away to them in French. The older one glanced back as though I had also *eaten* their dog for breakfast. (By evening, their pooch was back home. Barking.)

I also once asked Connor's wife about the cottage, but when I did, she said she'd forgotten something on the stove or whatever, and ran away into her house without so much as a see ya.

Leanne and Teddy told me they could see the cottage in the winter when the wind was right and that spruce right there would bend a little and you'd be able to see a bit of the red-brown roof, and no, they'd never had reason to go anywhere near it. A finger of their sixty-acre horse ranch poked through the trees along the back of my property. Behind that, maple trees, red and white pine, and bush birch jostled against each other all the way down to the Bonnechere River where, supposedly, the cottage lay.

You could stand at the start of that lane until the Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup, but because of the right-angled turn a hundred and fifty yards in, right about where Connor's shed stood, you couldn't see anything but trees and tall shrubs on three sides. Now that I think of it, the only thing I ever did see back there was a lone black squirrel one year, and I only saw him the once. At the time, I attributed the briefness of his visit to the plethora of nasty red squirrels who ran things in this neck of the woods.

I shouldn't say I never went back there in all those years. I went as far as the bend twice before getting the courage to go all the way in.

The first time, I was completely taken aback to find a building immediately behind the thick white pines at the rear of Connor's place. Was this the enticing cottage? I was expecting to see houses on the far side of Connor's Ditch, but not a house right behind his place. I for one wouldn't want to live that close to Connor's Bitch.

The second time I went back there it was October. I decided to walk a little farther so I could maybe see where the lane went. It snaked again toward the river. Long lane. More bush.

The lane sloped downward dramatically into what appeared to be a curving-around continuation of Connor's Ditch. Did Connor's better-than-thou wife think herself so important that she chose to live in a house half surrounded by a moat? The lane rose into the canopy and I could see no farther. I tried to peek under the skirts of the trees, but even though the maples and birches were nearly naked of leaves, the evergreens were not, and the lane rose too sharply.

"Hey, Leanne! I walked down that lane today." I heard her intake of breath through the phone. "I saw a building behind Connor's. Is that the cottage?"

"No, Colleen. It isn't."

"How do they get along with Connor's wife? Awful close."

"It belongs to the Lamouries. Nobody lives there anymore. A couple of years before you bought, the guy hung himself."

"Creepy!"

"Creepy? You know that house the Bourdeauxs live in?"

"Them and their dog."

"Years ago, they used to chum around with each other. Connor was part of that group. A guy hung himself at that house, too."

"Nah," I said.

"Yah," she said. "Everybody thinks it has something to do with that cottage back there. I wouldn't go near it if I were you."

"Leanne. You always make me laugh."

"I'm not joking!"

"I don't believe in Santa Claus. Or the Easter Bunny. Or Voodoo curses."

"They say there was a lot of abuse went on in that family. Sexual abuse. Incest. I even heard that one of the girls had a deformed baby. They kept to themselves, though. Nobody

knows anything for sure. But people across the river say they saw weird stuff going on around that cottage all the time.”

“Abuse? Nobody called the cops? Connor’s bitch would have. Yes?”

“People around here pretty much take care of things themselves, same as they did back then, fifty years ago. Don’t go back there, Colleen.”

The theme music for *The Young and The Restless* signalled the end of our during-the-commercials conversation. We did this five days a week.

“Back on!” we chorused. “Later.”

The second that *Y&R* was over, I headed out the door. I was going to see that cottage if it was the last thing I did. I power-walked down that lane around the first bend and into the second. It wasn’t until I got to the bottom of Connor’s Ditch and looked up that I slowed down. I slowed down to a stop.

Part of me knew nobody was living in the small building immediately behind Connor’s, where the Lamourie guy had hanged himself. That same part of me knew nobody was in that little pale blue cottage at the top of the rise ahead of me, either. But there is a part of all of us that has remained unchanged through millions of years of evolution — even the scientists don’t know how it works, they call it our reptilian brain — the part of us that knows when something’s off.

I realized I’d been holding my breath. Believed that was why I was slightly dizzy. I started up the rise.

The cottage was pretty enough. Its grey blueness would have made it invisible against the late-day sky, but enclosed as it was by red pines whose sun-seeking tops disappeared within themselves, it became instead a nebulous shape against the flaking splotchy bark of the tree trunks that seemed almost to be protecting it.

When the rise flattened, I could see a heavy, rusted chain attached to a spike in the ground. No vegetation existed within the area of that sad circle, only packed sand. I expected to see a doghouse, or a hole in the skirt of the cottage for a dog to go into for protection from the elements. What I did

see made the hair on the back of my neck stand up: a low, narrow shed, a cot within, a filthy shredded pillow and dirty mice-eaten blankets.

Shaken though I was, I continued up the three steps to the veranda where I planned to knock on the door. I could not get the feeling out of that reptilian brain of mine that somebody was in there.

“Hellooooo. Hellooooo? Pizza Pizza.”

If anything, the area became quieter.

It took a great deal of my nerve to walk along the veranda and look through the front window. It was a large opening made up of many small panes. All were intact.

In the kitchen: floor-to-ceiling cupboard, small wooden table with a little green drawer-pull on the side I could see, two chairs. Beyond the kitchen door was the living room: wicker couch behind a flat-topped trunk which doubled as a coffee table. I followed the veranda to the back of the cottage and that's when I saw it.

I couldn't have seen it from ground level. I only spotted it because I was walking so slowly. If I stepped back it disappeared and if I stepped forward or sideways, even by an inch, it disappeared. Exactly where I stood, and the height of me, five foot seven, was the perfect line of view for seeing it. A hole. Not a real hole, but a shimmering darkness that I could only describe as a hole. Its width would be that of a large man's shoulders, its length, the length of a child. Only God knew its depth. It may have been a trick of the coming twilight as well but I could have sworn I saw movement within it.

Although I was able to shut out from my mind what life must have been like for a human being tied to the chain at the front of the cottage, I could not deny the reality of this strange dent in the earth.

I did my best to gauge the number of steps required to arrive at that amorphous hole without actually falling in blindly. Falling in? How could you fall into a hole that didn't exist? *Ah*, interrupted my reptilian brain. *Are you willing to take that chance?* I was.

Step by calculated step I approached it until I was almost

on it. It was there. Right there. Six inches past my toes lay an invisible passage into the earth.

To assure myself, I beheaded a late-season dandelion and dropped it. There the dandelion lay, pursed like a toothless old man's mouth, a stem length from the tip of my sneaker. I nudged the plant with my toe. Nudged it again. Still there. Then it didn't so much disappear as fade into the green quicksand of grass that surrounded it.

I beheaded another dandelion. Dropped it where the last puckered face had slipped into the ground. It floated downward in a gentle spiral landing on the same spot as its predecessor.

As I extended my foot to push it farther onto the non-existent hole, another wave of dizziness overtook me and I lost my balance. To balance myself, I had to put my foot down on top of the puckered mouth of the dandelion. From this view I could see a dark shiver of emptiness. I felt myself falling. The sensation was brief. I saw nothing then but shining darkness, glistening, moist stars. Drowning. I was drowning in the earth.

I raised my arm, felt it grasped. I was pulled up and out of the blackness. I now stood in a room with wooden walls and a wooden floor, my neighbour Connor's hand around my wrist.

There was no longer any hole at our feet, but I tried to step away from where it had been. Connor's grasp prevented it. In his hand, I saw the rope, brown and frayed. I knew it would be rough and would scratch the delicate skin of my neck as it tightened. It was not tied in a noose, in a neck-breaking knot, it was tied in a choking slip-knot. A horrible way to die.

He threw it over the beam above us. I knew we were in the small house behind his because I could see the Bourdeaux dog through the window, its jaws open-shut, open-shut, open-shut in a soundless yapping. Although it was dark, he was seeing us.

I felt the circle of rope brush my cheek before it settled heavy on my shoulders like a dead snake. I clawed at the rope

but Connor snugged it around my neck. Trying to loosen it seemed impossible.

When my feet left the floor I panicked and kicked. I dug at the rope around my neck. Pulled. But everything I did seemed to make it worse. I was raised higher and higher.

I tried to make eye contact with Connor, hoping to reach the sane part of him if any existed, but I heard the sound of rushing waters in my ears. I was going to pass out. I was about to die.

Just beyond Connor I saw a being materialize. Short. Broad. Malformed, with a man's shoulders but the body of a child. He bore a massive chain around his neck. Before I passed out, though, I saw his hands grasp Connor's neck from behind.

* * * *

I came to lying in the lane at the top of the rise near the cottage. There was only lush grass and autumn wildflowers. There was no chain, no shed, no pathetic dirty bedding. The Bourdeaux dog was barking more passionately than ever. The sky rippled with emergency service lights. A lady cop at my elbow asked if I was all right.

"Connor," I said.

"Yes. He's a goner," said the cop. "Hanged himself."

I got to my feet. "Come with me." I led her around behind the cottage and pointed at the hole that didn't exist. "Dig there. Right there."

Snow

Relentless crystals escape
cold toxic confines
crushing claustrophobic clouds.
White
bombs us with
melting water
acid-laced.

The Vortex

THEY HAVE WARNING LABELS on almost everything these days. Supposed to keep people from getting hurt or landing up in trouble. But I guess they can't label everything. For instance, nobody ever warned me against smoking salvia. Didn't actually even smoke the shit. Me and the girlfriend were just standing there, under a window at that low-rise on Rochester. I think you know the one I mean. The smoke floated out with a lot of giggles so we figured it was maybe somebody smoking some imported weed. That we could get a free stone if we stood there long enough, and breathed in and held it.

The girlfriend wigged out. I wasn't surprised, she gets scared easy sometimes. I asked her, I said: "Baby? Do you see that little piece of paper rolling along the ground going the opposite way to the leaves and shit?"

Her eyes were all big. Bluer than usual I thought. They were so big I thought they were going to fall right out of her head.

"I don't see nothing," she said, shaking her head for the longest time. "Nothing."

I forced myself to believe her even though I knew different.

I took her hand and tried to lead her along the street. You know, in the same direction as most of the stuff was blowing? The wind was really picking up, so it should've been easy for us to just walk along with the wind pushing against our backs but it didn't seem to be working that way. A garbage can lid spiralled past us along the gutter. And I swear the little drop-kick of a dog taking its walk across the street was actually

airborne on the end of its leash. The owner had a real worried look on his face. Probably mirroring the look on my own.

I don't know when exactly it was I lost the girlfriend. It was like some powerful force just ripped our hands apart. It hurt, I tried that hard to hang on. For as long as I could, I tried — I mean she's my girlfriend, a guy's gotta protect his girlfriend, you know — but the pull came as if she'd suddenly gained thousands of pounds and I couldn't hold her. I couldn't.

Then I started feeling like I weighed more and more. I think you could say that the Law of Gravity went haywire because I went crashing to the ground, all flattened out kind of. On my back. I could still breathe but it was getting harder to do all the time. I started sliding along the street and I could feel the leather in my new jacket kind of scritch along the cement as it peeled off me along with the rest of my clothes. This pissed me off. It's one thing to feel helpless like that but after you'd forked over five hundred bucks on a leather jacket only three hours earlier, your priorities might be skewed for a bit.

I didn't see the hole at first. Felt it more than saw it, you could say. But when it did come into view, my priorities — I should say ALL my priorities except the one about saving my ass — fled.

How can I describe it? Not that I think you'd want to know what it looks like in case you ran into this hole-thing yourself some day — I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy, you gotta trust me on that one — but I'm just thinking, posterity, you know? Like I never did much of anything in my life so maybe I could leave this one thing behind. After all, there's an awful lot of people out there would love to know what something like that really does look like.

The noise struck me first. Like the biggest frigging jack-hammer you can imagine. Kind of a howling, growling, debowelling roar that you didn't exactly hear with your ears but felt in the hollow of your rectum. I couldn't hear my heart beating but I knew that the drumming in this place would match my pulse if you took it. A throb like that in your head

nobody can endure for long. I knew I couldn't. I tried to put my hands over my ears but that left my body, my ribs especially, wide open to assault from some powerful, throbbing, crushing beat. The breath was crushed out of me so I dropped my hands to my sides to take the blows against my arms and no longer against my torso. But somehow, moving my arms that quickly to my sides had spun me around. Now I was going head first down what I can only describe as a tunnel, a narrow, crushing tunnel that my poor head was opening as it was forced along the way by that incredible power, that terrible weightiness, that suckingness.

I could see a harsh brightness which burned more pain, electric into my eyes.

Murmurings, whispers tore into my ears.

In a rush of fluids I burst forth from the tunnel into an indescribable radiance. Roughness grabbed my flesh. I would surely fall, crushed against some unknown substance below. Hard, cold objects intruded upon my mouth, my nose, my ears.

Again, the assault upon my hearing: "It's a boy!"

One-Man Band

I thrummed
after the first strum
of his practiced
fingers.
He played
us all
one string
at a time:
A harmony
of
sour notes.

Sensitive Slope

1

“**Y**OU SURE WE TOOK THE RIGHT road, Gord? I mean, did you see that place back there? There wouldn’t be anybody actually *living* there, would there? Well, don’t just shrug. Did you have a good look at it? So overgrown. And quiet. Quiet as . . . Well, very quiet. And that poor dog on the front porch! Did you see it? Pacing back and forth on the porch. I swear it couldn’t be any skinnier. Poor thing. They must be real hicks. I mean real hicks! Like hillbillies, even. What if they’re dangerous? Like, crazy, or something like that? I wouldn’t want to live within twenty miles of people like that. But that poor dog. He looked afraid. Afraid to come down off the porch. Did you see him? The way he was looking at the ground? All that long grass. Maybe it’s full of snakes or something. Why would he be afraid of the ground? We must have taken the wrong road. You sure you took the directions down right? The ad said it was a lovely country setting. Friendly neighbourhood. This can’t be the right road. Let’s turn around and go back. Give me that real estate guy’s cell number. What’s his name? Ralph. Yeah. Ralph Rousselle. Let’s call him. We must have taken the wrong road. Come on Gord, give me the number. No, you’ve got it. You put it in your shirt pocket, remember? Oh. Look at this one coming up! It’s practically half sunk into the ground. It looks like a beached boat. I don’t like this road, Gord. You must have taken the wrong road. This can’t be right. Just give me the guy’s number! I’ll call him. Get the right directions.”

“Here. Make a damn fool of yourself if you want. But look up the road there before you waste money on a cell call.”

“Is that the guy’s car? You sure, Gord? Hard to tell from

this far back. You said it would be a red car. Looks more maroon to me.”

“Shut up, Jocelyne. For once in your life can you just shut up? And don’t pout. That hasn’t worked for me since you were fifteen. Forty years of your pouting is about as much as any man can take. Wipe your nose and keep your stupid mouth shut while Ralph and I talk.”

Jocelyne patted her eyes with a No Name tissue, emptied her nose into it, then dropped it into a plastic bag hanging under the dash. She kept her eyes lowered even after Gord decelerated, stopped, then guided their six-year-old Hyundai into the driveway.

Only then did she look. A squat gnome of a man stood like an anvil in the driveway at the front of their car. The leathered terrain of his face was partly darkened in the mid-afternoon sun by a homely straw hat which appeared only slightly less seasoned than he. He wore no tie. His brown suit jacket was unbuttoned. His plain cotton shirt enclosed his massive pectoral muscles like skin on a ham. Legs curved like the old branches of an oak. The jacket’s right sleeve undulated with his wave of greeting.

“Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael! Lovely day for house hunting!” He skittered round the car to meet Gord emerging. Thrust his hand out. “Nice to see you again, Mr. Carmichael. Glad your missus was able to come too.” He leaned down to peer into the car’s interior, grasped the brim of his hat. “Meet-cha, ma’am.” (Jocelyne had to smile in spite of her anxiousness.) Then back to Gord. “Care to do the walkabout first? Before the house, I mean? Take less than an hour. Be good walking today. Land’s dry. Been no rain for more than a week now.” Then back to peering inside the car. “Ma’am? Up for a bit of a walk, are you? Plenty wildflowers. And birds. You might get to spot the flickers. Pair of them hanging around here the last while. In and out of the bush. Don’t think we’ll go in the bush, though. Too many ’skidduhs. At my age, I don’t want to be getting that West Nile Virus thing, now do I? ’Sides a bush is a bush, eh? One’s the same as another. Bush is only two acres anyhow. How about it?”

“Wait in the car if you don’t want to come,” said Gord,

the twitch of his jaw telling Jocelyne that he now wished she hadn't come at all.

"What'll it be, ma'am?" Smiling. Pleasant? Or perceptive?

"I'll wait here."

"Suit yourself, ma'am. You might want to take a gander out back the house. There's some dandy gardens. Mrs. Whalen, the former owner, had quite the green thumb. Real pretty gardens."

"Thanks. I may do that." She smiled, then turned away to look out her window toward the east.

The men circled the rear of the car. Jocelyne watched them as they started down a wide aisle carpeted with bright green lawn. Red pines stabbed the sky on the road side of the aisle. A sweep of canoe birch fringed the other.

As the men moved off into the distance, she was impressed by the unusual picture they presented: her husband, tall and slender, lithe as elastic; the other man, short and wide, blunt as stone. Compared with her husband's, even the other man's head looked somehow compressed. It seemed as though some immense burden had sat upon him from childhood, making him grow outward instead of up. Or, like some of her husband Gord's aquarium fish — those incredibly ugly, lumpy, thorny algae suckers he called *Plecostomus* — constrained to a size relative to the capacity of their quarters.

Jocelyne shivered as an unwelcome image came to mind: the image of Gord's tropical fish collection being slowly cooked alive as hers and Gord's rented farmhouse was being gutted by last week's fire. The landlord had tried to blame the fire on Gord. But the landlord's two previous convictions for arson with the same M.O. had convinced the Fire Marshall and the police, otherwise. Still, that was no comfort for Jocelyne who had lost Trixie, her cat, to smoke inhalation, her very large and very old collection of family photographs, hand-sewn quilts, and a set of Royal Doulton china — not a saucer of which survived. Their insurance would cover the things, but not the memories.

Gravel crunched beneath her Reeboks as Jocelyne

stepped out of the car. The house didn't look all that bad after all. The property was certainly beautifully landscaped. Shrubs hugged the stone steps that directed the eye to a welcoming front entrance, a dark green door which complemented the blushing peach brick of the house's exterior. The windows stared back at her, their draperies just visible at their edges. "Fully furnished" the ad had stated. She would wait for the men to return from their — what had Ralph Rousselle called it? — their walkabout, before she would enter the house. She would do her own walkabout behind the house to check the gardens that Ralph had so highly recommended.

She crossed in front of the car, heading toward the brick walkway that passed beneath the breezeway between the house and the garage. The paving stone path broadened into a patio on which clusters of herb-filled planters rested. A large deck leading to the back door supported a barbeque, a deacon's bench, a wicker table, and two Adirondack chairs. Beyond the patio stretched an acre of lawn dotted with dozens of topiary figures: peacocks, spirals, and lollipops. On top of a rise to the north rode a topiary horse and rider, with five hunting hounds close to heel, running a fox heading down the rise. Evergreens — white spruce, hemlock, and pine — hedged the topiary on three sides. Through openings — gateways, really — in the hedges, she could see more lawn swept with great expanses of yellowy-green juniper, and cotoneaster, looking pink, she knew, because of the hundreds of tiny red berries among its leaves.

She whispered "This is absolutely gorgeous!" felt immediately foolish over her reluctance to disturb the animals, then took an unsure step toward the peacock, wanting to caress it.

It was then she realized what the topiary had been reminding her of subconsciously: The topiary figures at the Overlook Hotel. *The Shining*. The little kid and the dog, the rabbit, and the three lions which had attacked him. She silently cursed Stephen King for having scared hell out of her with that book, for having implanted that unpleasant association into her psyche. Gord had often asked her why she read "stuff like that" if it frightened her so much. She didn't know, said it merely fascinated her, that she found it to be

cathartic. She regretted reading some of those books. They were so well executed they had remained with her for days, even weeks sometimes. And sometimes, like *The Shining*, for years. She shook off the feeling and stepped again toward the peacock.

She couldn't be entirely certain, but thought she heard — or felt? — a low growling, like distant thunder. She hesitated, turned her back to the peacock, toward the road, saw nothing, heard the sound again. She felt it increase in volume and in pitch. Now a mechanical rumbling. Squealing metal. Familiar. The earth quivered.

Earthquake!

She ran back across the lawn, under the breezeway toward the car. Then stopped. The rumbling, the squealing, the pulsing earth intensified. Something was coming. Fast. And it was big.

Then Jocelyne began to laugh. "It's a train!" No wonder it was familiar. As a child, Jocelyne had had to cross the tracks on the way to and from school. She had often stood at the crossing with her school friends while the huge, thundering beasts sped by. She and her friends had loved watching the trains, smelling the stinking wind that the train billowed into the air, and especially waving at the conductor who always seemed to be standing at the doorway of the caboose.

She stood beside her car as the train thundered by on the other side of the road. The earth pulsed and danced beneath her feet. *Not sure I'd like being this close to train tracks. But I guess I could get used to it.* She waited until the train went by then returned to the back yard.

That's funny. I could have sworn there were five hounds chasing the fox. She walked toward the grouping of hunter, hounds, and fox. She noticed a small bare patch of ground beside the hunter like that beneath the other hounds. She frowned and bent over the patch to examine it more closely. It appeared that the ground had been recently disturbed. It was almost as though some one or some thing had pulled the hound underground leaving a small mound of disturbed earth behind. She laughed nervously. *Yeah, right.*

She soon forgot about it as she wandered about the

landscaped lawn, in and out through the hedge gateways, admiring the beauty of everything. By the time the men returned, she had completely forgotten about the hound.

The house, indeed, was fully furnished, and beautifully decorated.

“My goodness,” she said. “Was the former owner . . .”

“Mrs. Whalen,” offered Ralph.

“Thanks. Was Mrs. Whalen some kind of decorator? Everything is gorgeous. Outdoors. In here. Beautiful.”

“Now I think on it, she could have been something like to that, ma’am.”

“Why did she decide to sell? Obviously she put a lot of love into the place. Hard to believe she’d want to sell everything. Even the furniture? Doesn’t make sense.”

“Life’s not always something people can put a lot of sense to sometimes. Don’t go troubling yourself about why people do what they do. That kind of thing can give a person a headache.” That smile again.

“Where did she move to? Retirement home or something?”

“Who’s to say? Word is, she went away somewheres.”

“Well, how long ago —”

“Jocelyne! Quit pestering the man,” interrupted Gord. “I’m sure he has more to do with his time than gossip. Do you like the property or not?”

“Why, yes! It’s lovely! Of course, I like it. But shouldn’t we think about —”

“Fine, then.” Gord extended his hand to Ralph. “We’ll take it. Get the paperwork together and find out how soon we can move in.”

“She’s ready for moving in right now,” said Ralph. “And it just so happens I got the paperwork in my car. All’s I need is your signature, Mr. Carmichael. Then I’ll get my lawyer to do his lawyering, and she’s all yours. ’Course, I’ll need a cheque.”

“No problem,” said Gord. “We’re already pre-approved on the mortgage.”

“But Gord! Shouldn’t we discuss price? Put in an offer, or whatever they call it? Haggle a bit?”

“That’s already been taken care of, Jocelyne. What do you think we men were doing while we walked around out there? Enjoying the scenery? Honestly, sometimes . . .”

“But . . . It’s so sudden! I mean —”

“Jocelyne,” Gord lowered his voice, speaking through his teeth. “We can’t afford to stay in the motel for the rest of our lives.” Then he turned toward Ralph again. “Well. Let’s get that paperwork out of the way, shall we?”

* * * *

After the paperwork was done — Jocelyne having served as witness — she mentioned the train to Ralph, how the train had shaken the ground as if it were Jell-O.

“Sure does jiggle, all right. That’s because of the Champlain Sea.”

She and Gord asked the same question simultaneously: “The what?”

“The Champlain Sea. We’re standing on its bottom.”

Both she and Gord looked at the ground.

“You’re kidding,” said Gord.

“Never been much of a kidder, Mr. Carmichael. It’s a fact. We’re on the bottom of an old sea. Something to do with the glaciers squashing the earth so bad that when they left, there was a big old crater, and the Atlantic Ocean just poured right in and filled ’er up. And kept ’er squashed. That much water would weigh a powerful lot.”

“Amazing,” said Jocelyne.

“I’ll be damned,” said Gord.

“But what’s that got to do with the train and the way it shakes the ground when it goes by?”

“Quite the phunomunum, isn’t it?,” said Ralph. “I heard tell that there’s a special kind of clay in the ground around here. Kind of a slippery clay. Maybe it got that way on account of all the squashing it got. Maybe it didn’t. Who’s to say. Don’t know too much about all that scientific stuff. Except I heard that if you squash the ground hard enough, and long enough, you can make a diamond, so if you had a bunch of glaciers sitting on top of you for a couple thousand years and then millions and millions of tons of water, I’d guess it might do more than a little to your constitution, eh?”

Ralph chuckled and turned toward his car, waving the paperwork in the air. "If the lawyer is still in his office, he'll take a gander at these right away. Len Ritz sort of owes me a favour. I think you might even get to move in tonight. Doesn't that sound fine, folks?"

"Thanks, Ralph," said Gord. "We start packing up at the motel, then?"

Ralph had opened his car door. "I'll get this second set of house keys to you before checkout time." The keys clinked as he waved them, their ID label hanging off them like a toe-tag. "Save another day's rent, eh?"

Ralph paused. "There's another thing I've heard about the ground in these parts."

"Oh, really?" asked Jocelyne ignoring Gord's eye-rolling as he got into their car. "What would that be?"

"Not sure if it's an old Indian legend, or if folks around here just made it up. Sounds a mite made up to me, but you never know about legends, now, do you? Sometimes there's a grain of truth behind them."

Gord started the car. Jocelyne knew he'd be ready to blow a gasket soon, but she stepped closer to Ralph's car.

"Tell me."

"They say . . ." Ralph adjusted his hat, pulling it farther down over his eyes. "They say that when the Lord threw Leviathan into the sea, it was this here sea." He pointed to the ground. "And Leviathan still rests down there."

"Eastern Ontario's Loch Ness Monster?"

The tiny smile that tugged at the corner of Ralph's mouth told Jocelyne that he didn't think it was as funny as she did. "Perhaps. Perhaps. I guess there's as many people believe in the Loch Ness Monster as don't, but like I said, Mrs. Carmichael, you never know about legends. Sometimes there's a grain of truth behind them."

He touched the brim of his hat. "I'll be saying good day to you now, ma'am. Got to get to Len Ritz's office before closing if you and the mister want to be getting out of that motel room today."

He got into his car and drove away, leaving Jocelyne with a very odd feeling in her stomach.

"Gord! There are canned goods in the cupboards! This is amazing!"

"The freezer's full, too," he said as he shut the door to the basement behind him.

Jocelyne hung a set of keys back on the hook beside the door to the breezeway. "Is it really true that her car is ours, too?"

"That's what Ralph said. He's going to meet me at the license bureau tomorrow to get that settled. Want a nightcap? The liquor cabinet is really well stocked." Gord strode into the living room and opened the cabinet doors, then leaned in and after a moment or so, extracted two bottles. "I feel like a martini."

"You don't look like one," laughed Jocelyne. "Martinis sound good to me too. I wonder if she had olives." She opened the cupboard door again and rummaged around for a moment. "Bingo! Could we hope for ice cubes?"

Gord opened the top door of the refrigerator. "I'll be damned. Ice cubes. Frozen juices. Chocolate ice cream. Unbelievable."

"Doesn't look like she was planning to leave, does it? Ah, a pitcher. A jigger. Martini glasses. She must have liked her martinis, too. What kind of gin is it?"

"Beefeater. Martini and Rossi vermouth."

"La ti da. The good stuff!" Jocelyne rinsed the martini glasses and wiped them dry with a dish towel then handed them to Gord. "I'm still very curious where Mrs. Whalen might have gotten to, you know? It's strange she would just sell everything. I mean, absolutely everything. Even the ice cubes. Doesn't it seem peculiar, Gord? Thanks." Jocelyne took a sip of her martini. "Hmm. Perfect. Well? Doesn't it pique your curiosity just the slightest? . . . Gord?"

"What?"

"Aren't you the least bit interested in where Mrs. Whalen went?"

"Nope. And it isn't any of your business, either."

"Somebody must know where she went. She had to sign the papers, didn't she? . . . Gord?"

“What!”

“Didn’t she have to sign the papers for the house?”

“That lawyer, Len Ritz signed. I think he’s got Power of Attorney.”

“Something’s not right, Gord. Don’t you think so? I mean, Ralph and the lawyer? Maybe they’re in cahoots with each other, and maybe they kidnapped her or something.”

“For Christ’s sake, Jocelyne. Shut up, will you?”

“But Gord. It just doesn’t seem right. It doesn’t feel right. Everything’s been so sudden.” She sipped her martini as she followed Gord into the living room. “I’m going to ask around in the village tomorrow and find out the truth about what happened to that woman.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Gord sat down in the emerald green arm chair across from the television. He grabbed the remote and switched on the set.

“Why not, Gord? Why shouldn’t I ask around? After all, we just bought the woman’s house, didn’t we? I’m sure people would understand our curiosity.” She sat on the matching sofa. “Wouldn’t they, Gord?”

“You are not to go nosing around in the village about other people’s business. It’s not polite. Now shut up and let me watch the news in peace.”

3

The whole house was shaking. The bed vibrated and shuddered as she awoke.

A train was passing. She was in a new house. Everything was fine. She reached over to touch her husband but Gord wasn’t there.

Dim light entered the bedroom window. Sunrise. But where was Gord?

She stuffed her feet into her slippers then picked up her robe from a chair beside the closet door. *Where’s Gord?*

Still half asleep, she stumbled into the bathroom to pee, then entered the kitchen where she found the note from Gord:

Gone to see Ralph about car
registration. Don't know when
I'll be back.

No signature. No "Love Gord". No nothing. She set the note back on the table and sighed.

As she busied herself with emptying the dishwasher, the house began vibrating and shaking again.

Not another train! she thought. *This could get to be annoying if they're that frequent.* She waited but no train passed. Nor could she hear the telltale sounds of one. There was only that violent shaking. *Is this an earthquake?*

She staggered onto the back deck to the yard where the topiary figures were.

The peacock was missing.

Reluctantly, Jocelyne examined the spot where it had been. The earth had been recently disturbed like the earth beneath the hound that had disappeared the day before. Goose bumps broke out on her arms. What was going on?

The ground beneath her feet undulated. It felt like she was standing on the back of an elephant that had taken a slow, deep breath of air, or on the edge of a trampoline onto which someone had just rolled a basketball. It made her dizzy, like the time she had spent several hours on a rough lake, bobber-fishing, and then tried to walk on dry land afterwards.

She turned slowly, then ran back into the house where she tossed back a good shot of Beefeater gin, straight.

* * * *

By two o'clock in the afternoon, she was into the rum, and getting more and more fumed as the minutes passed that, one: Gord still had neither returned home, nor called to tell her when he would be doing that; and two: she couldn't keep herself from staring out the window at the back yard's topiary figures.

Two trains had passed since the morning one that had awakened her, but there had been no changes to the topiary

figures. The remaining ones still sat there, silent. She didn't think she would ever be able to step out into that yard again.

She recalled having driven down the road to this place the previous day, and having seen that pitifully thin dog on the porch, pacing and looking at the yard off the porch as though he were afraid of it. She wondered if he had starved to death or died of thirst yet. Or, if in a blind panic, and out of sheer desperation for food or water, he had finally leaped off that porch onto the uncertain ground beside it.

The alcohol she had consumed was beginning to take its toll. She had never been more than a one- or two-drink person since high school after she and Sharron Latendresse had demolished that bottle of Baby Duck. It had seemed she would never stop puking up that vile-tasting liquid which had tasted not much worse coming up than it had going down.

She snuggled deeper into the afghan wrapped around her and closed her eyes.

4

A violent shudder awakened her. The sun was a red ball in the west. Its light hurt her eyes, her head pounded, and her mouth tasted like she'd been licking the floor in a hen house.

The house was quivering, pulsing, palpitating.

She managed to crawl out of the chair she was in, but had forgotten about the afghan that by now had entwined itself around her feet. She fell. Felt her head strike the sharp edge of a piece of furniture. Then nothing.

5

When she awoke — came to? — the house was silent and unmoving. Dark. Her head throbbed where she'd struck it, and when she tried to place her hands beneath her shoulders to boost herself upright, her left hand slipped in something lumpy, slimy, and stinking of vomit, booze and blood.

"Oh! Gross!" She fought to keep her stomach contents — or what was left in there — where they were. She succeeded, but a chilly rush made her gasp: I could have choked to death on my own vomit when I was unconscious.

She had no idea what time it could be. She couldn't see

her watch, and for a sickening moment thought she might have been blinded by that knock on the head.

Somehow she sat up, realizing too late that she was sitting in her own vomitus. Using the arm of the chair beside her, she stood, then groped around the sunroom, searching for a light switch or lamp, trying to remember where those things had been when she'd first come out here.

And when was that? Yesterday afternoon? When?

She fumbled with the lamp beside the chair she'd been sitting in and it crashed to the floor.

"Dammit!"

Slowly, carefully, she felt along the wall until she reached the doorway to the main house. Felt around the door moulding. Still no switch. *Of course not. It's on the inside.* Feeble light invaded the sunroom, illuminating her mess. I have to clean that up before Gord sees it and has a conniption fit. But first, she had to brush her teeth and splash cold water on her face. Half a bottle of Scope wouldn't even begin to eliminate the foul taste in her mouth.

Turning on every light within reach along the way, she stumbled to the bathroom. She expected to look pale and hung over, but had not expected to see a gash on the left side of the face in the mirror, with dried blood all over the forehead and cheek. It had even run under her eye.

She turned on the faucets and scrubbed her face, wincing when her hands touched the bump on her forehead. Reddened water swirled down the drain.

She brushed her teeth, rinsed and gargled three times with Scope, removed her clothes and threw them into the hamper. Naked, she walked into the master bedroom where she dressed.

* * * *

By the time she finished cleaning the vomit and blood and the broken lamp from the sunroom floor, the sun was peeking over the horizon. She carried the garbage bag out onto the deck and was about to walk down the steps to the garbage bin, when she looked out toward the topiary figures.

They were gone. All of them.

And there was something gnawing at the edge of her mind

about the steps she was standing on. Hadn't there been three of them?

A nervous laugh escaped her throat.

The house is sinking!

She dropped the garbage bag and jumped back onto the main deck. The garbage bag rolled down the two steps onto the ground like some obese black Slinky. She stood staring at it for a moment, then ran back into the house, into the living room to the telephone. She fumbled with the drawer knob under the telephone table, nearly wrenching it off in her desperate search for a telephone book.

Have to find Gord. Where could he be? Did he come home last night then leave this morning? Where could he be? I'll call that lawyer. Ritz. That's it. Len Ritz.

She found the number but when she picked up the receiver, dead silence. *Of course. We haven't had the phone connected yet. Dammit!*

My cell phone! It was in her purse in the bedroom. But her cell *wasn't* there. And her wallet was unzipped.

What? She opened her wallet. The hundred dollars that had been there — *yesterday?* — was gone. She flipped the catch on the section that held her bank and credit cards. They were gone too.

Had someone been in the house while she was passed out and robbed her? Couldn't have been. Her handgun was still in her purse. If it had been a robbery, surely they would have stolen her pearl-handled Snubnose .32, also. It must have been Gord. But why?

She had to get out of here. And fast!

She stuffed her wallet back into her purse which she slung over her shoulder. She grabbed her sweater from the back of the chair beside the bed and headed for the kitchen.

The breezeway was paved. She could get to the garage — and Mrs. Whalen's car — without walking directly on ground. She hoped the garage floor would be concrete or pavers. She snatched the keys off the hook beside the door and dashed along the breezeway to the garage, glancing fearfully at the back yard. The garbage bag had disappeared. But that was impossible. She must be hallucinating.

She yanked open the side door of the garage. Good. Concrete floor. At the front of the garage she lifted the sliding door which squawked in rusty protest on its rollers. Back to the car. The key fit in the car door and unlocked it. The key fit in the ignition, but when she turned it . . . nothing but a chilling click. Maybe the battery was dead, or the terminals weren't making a proper connection. She fumbled under the dash for the hood release. Out of the car. She heard a train approaching. Or was it a train? It was. She could see it now beyond the open door of the garage as it rumbled past. With some effort, she propped the hood.

Battery. Where's the battery? There is no damn battery! It's gone! SOMEBODY TOOK THE GODDAMN BATTERY!

The floor of the garage tilted and a barely audible rumble came from somewhere deep beneath her feet.

"Oh, God. Please. No. Not again." She unhooked the prop and let the hood slam down on its own as she raced round to get into the driver's side of the car. She slammed the door. Locked it. Hugged herself against the fear.

The floor bucked and heaved under the car. She pushed in the clutch, released the parking brake, and put the car in neutral hoping it might roll back through the garage door onto the road behind her. Away from the back yard. Away from the garage. Away from . . . whatever was under the earth.

The garage floor rippled again and the car rolled, not backwards, but into the wall in front of her, smashing against the wall, sending cans of paint and plant pots from the shelves onto the car's hood. The garage floor continued to rise. If Jocelyne didn't get out of the car soon, she would be crushed inside it like a bag of garbage in a garbage truck.

She fumbled for the door handle and for a bloodcurdling moment forgot she had locked the door. She clawed the lock tab up but was still unable to open the door because it was slowly warping out of shape. She tried winding the window down but it would go only part way. She lay back on the seat and drove her heels full force at the window. It shattered.

"Thank God!"

She managed, somehow without cutting herself, to crawl through the car window, but the garage floor was a jumble of

crumbling chunks of concrete. The middle of the garage floor was no longer concrete. Something was rising out of the floor. Something green-wet and scale-glistening, impossibly large, and most definitely alive.

She screamed, lost her footing and fell back against the crumbled chunks of concrete. The floor undulated, surged, opened farther, hunks of concrete falling away from the gaping maw like rotten teeth.

Then she saw its eye. A monstrous, feral thing. As uncaring as a fish's.

She scrambled over the broken concrete to the side door, her knees and hands screaming from dozens of abrasions and cuts. She turned, only to convince herself that she had not seen what she had seen, but it was real. The creature had come even farther out of the hole. The car was crushed flat against the wall which bulged outward. The roof of the garage shrieked, began to sag, but she couldn't tear her eyes from the hideous being emerging from the fetid depths of some unknown place beneath the earth. A huge nostril blew a hot, stinking wind into the air. The stench made her gag.

She twisted the knob of the garage door and burst outside, landing in a bloodied heap on the pavers.

The creature roared, nearly bursting her eardrums with the power of its voice. Not thinking, she bolted into the back yard to where the topiary horse and rider had been. She turned, staring in total disbelief at what was happening to the garage. The bulging back wall exploded sending paint cans and pottery shards everywhere. The roof squealed as its nails were wrenched from its beams. It collapsed. *Whump*. The car, its roof crushed, rolled partly out of the garage. The creature roared again and Jocelyne covered her ears with her hands. Suddenly, its horrible head burst up through the rubble, shaking rafters and splintered wood everywhere.

Behind her, something ripped. A gigantic scaly tail tore from the ground to lash the air above her head. She was standing on the monster's back. It pulsed beneath her feet. Although her damaged and bloody knees were painful, she scrambled down, the creature's skin like sandpaper against her hands. She sprinted to the road, past that horrific pair of

eyes and those hot, stinking nostrils. The house was nearly half buried in the ground. No. Not buried! Half sunk into the ground. She ran and ran and ran seemingly forever, until she could no longer breathe. She sat down heavily at the side of the road.

How far had she come? She looked back and could no longer see her house. She laughed. *That doesn't mean anything. It's probably already underground.*

She glanced across the road and recognized the squalid property where the skinny dog had been pacing the porch. The dog was there but no longer pacing. He lay still. Poor thing must have starved rather than try to escape.

But there was an old farm truck in the driveway. Maybe the keys were in it. She hoped so. She didn't think she could walk far with her knees the way they were. And her adrenaline rush was over.

As she limped to the truck, the dog stirred, raised its pitiable head.

"Hey, pups! Just want to borrow your truck." His tail wagged slightly. "Oh, poor pup. Come on, boy. Come on."

The dog staggered to his feet and when he leaped off the porch, he stumbled. His eyes closed for a moment and she thought in his weak state he'd given up, had decided to accept whatever fate might present him from below ground. But he recovered, came to her. His tail beat a slow dirge against the rocker panel of the truck until she opened the door. He climbed into the cab, settled on the passenger side. She climbed in after him.

Blessedly, keys were in the ignition. Now if only it would start!

"Here goes nothing, my friend!" She cranked the key and the truck farted to life. She caressed the dog's shoulder then backed out of the driveway.

6

Without knowing exactly why, Jocelyne drove to Kellyville's Motel where she and Gord had been staying. The Hyundai sat in its regular slot.

That's funny. He must have forgotten something.

Just as she was about to get out of the truck, the door of their unit opened and an attractive young redhead wearing a classy-looking purple pantsuit emerged. Gord stood grinning in the doorway.

The redhead kissed him on the lips. He put his hand on her breast. The redhead laughed, then ground her hips into his before stepping away.

Jocelyne could hear: "Save that for tonight, Gordie." Then after blowing him a kiss, the woman got into the dark grey SUV beside the Hyundai.

"That, my friend," she whispered to the dog, "is a class A, number one asshole who is now in *big* trouble."

She waited until the woman's vehicle had disappeared into traffic, then using her own set of keys, she got the dog into the back seat of the Hyundai. She drove the borrowed truck around the block, then with tissues from her purse, wiped down the truck where she might have left prints.

She removed the gun from her purse, made sure it was loaded, walked back to the motel and knocked.

The door opened.

"Did you forget —?" Gord gawped like a dead fish, but when he saw the gun in Jocelyne's hand, his mouth snapped shut and his eyes opened wide.

"Come with me," she said. "We've got some business to take care of."

Gord said nothing, but stepped out of the motel room, his eyes on the gun.

"You have your car keys?" she asked.

Gord produced them.

"Get in. You're driving." She waited until he was almost inside then she climbed into the back seat beside the dog. She poked the gun into the back of his neck. "And give me your wallet!"

He gave it to her. "Where to?"

Jocelyne could see beads of perspiration on his neck. "Our new house. Where else?"

"Jocelyne —"

"Just shut up and drive, Gordon."

When they arrived at what had been their house — by now, the roof was all that remained; the garage had totally disappeared — she ordered him to turn the car around and get out.

“Jocelyne —”

“Just shut up and do it. And leave the keys in the ignition.”

“You can’t be serious, Jocelyne.”

She kept the gun trained on him from the back window.

“Now go stand there where the garage used to be.”

“I can’t, Jocelyne. I just can’t. You can’t make me do it!”

“Cripers, Gord. You’re whining like a little kid.” She pulled the trigger and a puff of gravel sprayed from between Gord’s feet.

“All right! All right!” he said, holding his arms out.

“Okay. Just take it easy with that thing.”

“I know how to handle a gun, Gord. You were a very good teacher. Now walk.”

He picked his way cautiously across the gravel. Once, he halted. She fired. He quickened his pace.

“What’re you trying to do? Scare me to death?”

“What were you trying to do to me, Gord? Get me eaten alive by that . . . that . . . THING under the ground?”

He turned, arms out. “Please, Jocelyne. I’m sorry. Okay? I love you, baby. Let’s go back to the motel, have a couple of drinks and talk this over. Okay?”

“Nothing to talk about anymore, Gord.” She pulled the trigger again and shattered his left kneecap. He fell. As he writhed on the ground, clutching his blood-soaked knee, she climbed over into the driver’s seat.

“Sounds like a train coming,” she said. “Then again, maybe it isn’t a train at all.” She started the car.

“JOCELYNE! YOU CAN’T LEAVE ME HERE LIKE THIS!”

“Just watch me.”

As she pulled slowly away, she saw the ground undulate briefly beneath her husband, and then he was no more.

On her way to the hospital, Jocelyne dropped her new dog off at the Kellyville's Veterinary Clinic.

"His name? Oh. That would be Amigo. Do whatever needs doing for him."

8

"Yes, I know, Officer, it sounds crazy. But I'm telling you the truth! It was horrible. My poor dear husband gave his life trying to save me from that awful landslide. It was horrible!"

"That's enough talking for now, Mrs. Carmichael," said the plump nurse. "You need to get those wounds cleaned up. You're going to need a few stitches. And antibiotics. Any allergies?" The nurse pushed Jocelyne's wheelchair away from the police officer and down the hall to an emergency room bed. "You've been through so much, you poor dear. And losing your husband? That must have been a dreadful experience."

"Yes. Especially for him."

"Now, now, Mrs. Carmichael. We want you to concentrate on getting yourself all better. Try not to dwell on what his last moments must have been like. You'll just end up worrying yourself sick, poor dear."

"It'll be difficult, nurse. I just keep running it over and over in my head what he went through those last few moments. But I promise I'll try to put it all out of my head and get on with my life." Jocelyne smiled sweetly at the nurse.

Eternal Miles

to Swotki Kochanek*

Eternal miles
enchant
enhance
excite
encourage

eviscerate

extinguish

love.

**This is Polish for “sweet lover-boy” or equivalent. (He came on to me as Polish.) This came from my adventure into the world of the Nigerian Internet Dating Scam. But not for long . . .*

Valium

In the old days
tranquilizers
sent depression away
but when you
went off them
there it was,
back
on the doorstep
with extra hatboxes
suitcases
a couple of poodles
and twelve cats.

Exercise in Terror

RICHARD FELT LIKE A CAT turd in need of a decent burial. He knew he should have gotten a flu shot — and they were free this year, too — but he was so sick of doctors, physiotherapists, and all things medical, that he had not been able to bring himself to go. A little jab in the arm would be a drop in the bucket compared with what he'd had to endure during the last six months, but he just could not garner the guts to do it.

Every bone in his body screamed. The bones that screamed the loudest were the ones his nutcase ex-wife had redesigned last spring. His face ached worse today than it had after any of the reconstructive surgeries he'd undergone. He could almost feel the lump of lead that still nuzzled against his spinal cord. He was sure he must be running a fever high enough to cause hallucinations because he could smell perfume. Her perfume. That psychopathic witch had nearly blown off his leg — not to mention his nuts — and here he was six months later, standing in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil, smelling her stinking perfume. It was so strong, in fact, that he had to remind himself that Jane was still locked up in the psych ward at the Royal Ottawa Hospital.

He was relieved he'd been able to drop off his daughter, Nell, at the birthday party over on Ritz Avenue. That would give him a few hours' peace. How in heaven could Sally Jones handle a dozen 4-year-olds for a whole afternoon? He wasn't sure he could handle one 4-year-old until Tuesday when his parents returned from their business trip.

His father, in his sixties, still had the energy to go bopping around the country buying salvageable antiques, and not-so-

salvageable junk from local auctions and garage sales. Richard, thirty-two next month, couldn't even wipe his butt without breaking into a sweat from the pain of turning to reach it. It even hurt to stand some days. Like today, with this stupid flu, while he waited for the kettle to boil.

Good old Neo Citran. One pouch would allay enough aches and pains long enough to let him take a short nap in the La-Z-Boy before picking up Nell.

He poured boiling water into the mug Nell had given him for Christmas. The one with Dalmatians all over it. It was, he knew, just another very large hint that Nell just had to have a dog. She'd been bugging him about a puppy ever since he'd taken her to see *101 Dalmatians*. She had persuaded her grandparents to buy her the DVD which, much to their remorse, she played religiously and loudly every Sunday afternoon. They indulged her as much as possible, to the point of spoiling her, but after what the poor child had gone through last spring, who could blame them? It had been bad enough for Richard to lie there helpless while Nell's mother stood over him with the gun, but to have his beloved daughter shrieking in the background was far, far worse.

He stirred the contents of the mug then raised it, trying to summon that sweet, lemony, medicinal odour into his head. Half the pleasure of Neo Citran was its odour, so he was annoyed to discover that Jane's perfume had once more invaded his nostrils.

That damn perfume. It cost sixty bucks for a quarter ounce. My Sin. How apt.

Its scent — and its name — had been part of his initial attraction to her. But back then she had only dabbed the tiniest amount behind her knees and in the secret curves between her legs. Oh, how he had loved the smell of her then.

How he had loved her then.

He had even loved her when things started to . . . to what? Slide? It had been no toboggan ride down a snow-packed hill. It had been like a bum-slide down the Eiffel Tower. Then they'd hit bottom. Richard shivered. No. The divorce hadn't been the bottom. The divorce had been merely a mogul on

the ski slope of his life. After the divorce, the stalking, the threatening phone calls, and the restraining orders against her had been puny saplings slapping against his ankles on the way down the beginners' slope.

She'd always had a quick temper, but things had improved after Nell's birth. Jane's irrational outbursts had ceased for the year and a half following Nell's birth.

Then the accusations resumed. He'd never had the slightest twinge for any woman but Jane since the day he had first laid eyes on her, but her paranoia — or whatever it was — was implacable. And dangerous. She'd once hit him in the stomach with a crystal ashtray. If it had struck him three inches higher, in the solar plexus, it probably would have killed him.

Still he had stayed with her, tried to understand, tried to appease, tried not to think of divorce or separation. Besides, how could he tell his fellow fire fighters that he had left because his wife was beating up on him? But the night she took the knife to him was the last he would tolerate. He had wrested the knife from her without sustaining too many slashes to his arms and chest — and without hurting her — but he knew he could not live like that any longer. Nor could his child, who, thank God, had been visiting his parents *that* weekend.

Richard took a sip of hot Neo Citran, then limped slowly into the living room where he nestled into the comfortable leathery brown folds of his father's favourite chair. *Action News at Three* would be on. He clicked the remote, and as he placed it back on the small antique table beside the chair, he felt something go in the small of his back.

"Ow. Jeez-zusss. Dammit."

This had happened to him twice since the shooting. Temporary paralysis, the doctors called it. It would pass in a day or so. How very reassuring. Tell that to my nerve endings when the physiotherapists have their sadistic go at manipulating my body in ways Nature never intended.

He had left his cell phone at the far end of the couch. Might as well be in Timbuktu. But when he didn't show up

to collect Nell, Sally Jones or her husband, Tom, would probably take a spin over to see if anything was wrong. Richard could wait for a few hours as long as he didn't have to take a leak in the meantime.

He took a couple more sips from the Dalmatian mug, and as he replaced it on the table, he thought he heard a floorboard creak upstairs. But that thought danced away when a reporter came on the screen, and started talking. At first, Richard didn't pay much attention to what the man was saying because behind the reporter was the Royal Ottawa Hospital, present abode of the psychotic Jane Brown. Richard could even see the windows of the floor she was on. Carmichael Five.

It was common knowledge that the fifth floor of the Carmichael Building was the last place anyone — sane or insane — would ever want to be. Richard had seen what lived on that floor. Once.

When Jane's abuse had intensified early in their marriage, he had made an appointment with a psychologist, hoping to learn more about it. Admissions was on the first floor of the Carmichael Building. Doctors' and psychologists' offices were on the second. He had planned to take the stairs up the one flight, but since the elevator had arrived as he was passing by, he had decided to take it instead.

Although he pushed 2, the elevator — which had probably been installed before Otis started shaving — took him all the way up to the fifth floor. It bounced there while the doors, scratched with claw-like marks and graffiti, coughed open to reveal a crosshatch of bars. Several crater-eyed, unshaven, dishevelled men in thin pyjamas shuffled toward the elevator. An old man extended a dirty hand as he approached and the unmistakable smell of shit wafted into the elevator. Richard punched 2 again but still the doors yawned and the men ambled closer. The smell of shit intensified. Shit Hand reached through the bars into the elevator, clawing the air. A teenager, his face a road map of criss-crossing scars, concentrated on twirling the dial of the large combination lock looped around the bars. Another man, a skeleton covered with dingy skin, juggled a lock at floor level

while a tall black man with the most amazing bags under his eyes did the same with one at the top of the door.

Just when Richard was at the screaming point, he recognized the C — for Close — button and jammed his thumb into it, breaking his nail in the process.

The doors had wheezed toward each other and the elevator had trembled to the second floor.

But now, the *Action News at Three* reporter for sure had Richard's full attention: ". . . and was pronounced dead. A second intern is in critical condition with life-threatening injuries. Two of the women who escaped from the fifth floor of the Carmichael building last night have been apprehended, but the third, considered to be the most dangerous of the three, is still at large. Police caution that if you see this woman, do not approach her. Contact them immediately. Police are not releasing names at this time, but describe the woman as being five-foot-five, a hundred and thirty pounds, blond hair, and hazel eyes, 27 years old. When last seen, she was wearing jeans and a dark-green leather jacket. Reports say she has a small amount of cash with her so may be using OCTranspo bus routes. She could be anywhere in the city. Harry Green reporting to you live from the Royal Ottawa Hospital."

"Holy jumped up Jesus." Richard whispered. "It's *her*. Got to be her."

His head reeled with an avalanche of memories. Last spring, Jane had somehow talked a judge into lifting the most recent restraining order against her for one day a month for a supervised visit with Nell. That first — and last — visit came back to him now with the clarity of an Arctic air mass.

Saturday, May sixth. Jane had insisted on cooking supper: pork chops with apple sauce, baked potatoes with sour cream, and green beans. Apple juice for him and Jane, milk for Nell.

Nell had eaten the apple sauce and part of her pork chop, declined sour cream for her potato of which she had only eaten a few mouthfuls. She refused outright to eat her beans so was banished to bed in tears by her mother.

Richard loaded up the dishwasher and started it.

“Turn that damn dishwasher off! I’m trying to hear this!” Jane’s voice came from the living room where it appeared she had settled in as though she’d never been forced to leave.

“Sorry.”

“You always do that when I’m watching *Wheel of Fortune*. Fuck, you’re inconsiderate.”

“You want a coffee before you go, Jane?”

“No. I do not want coffee. Make me a cup of tea. And quit interrupting.”

The kettle was soon whistling, and Richard poured boiling water into Jane’s favourite teacup, dipping the tea bag by its string . . . eight, nine, ten. He took the pitcher of milk out of the refrigerator, a lemon wedge from a Ziploc in the crisper drawer — just in case — the sugar bowl from the cupboard. He placed it all on a white napkin with pink flowers on the edges, then carried the tray into the living room.

He set it on the coffee table in front of her.

She stared at it. Then stared at him. He could tell that her teeth were clenching by the movement of the muscles in her cheeks.

“You forgot something.”

“What?”

She got up.

“Jane. What did I forget? Just tell me. I’ll get it for you.”

“The fucking spoon, you asshole! Your feeble little mind must be on your whore!” She threw the tray at him.

He managed to dodge it but not before the cup, full of scalding tea, landed on his foot.

“Ow. Dammit. That hurts.” He bent to tear off his shoe and sock. “Jesus, Jane. Don’t blow a fuse.”

“I’ll show you what hurts, you fucker.” She stormed out of the room. “And clean up that crap!”

Richard picked up the teacup, milk pitcher, and sugar bowl from the mess on the floor and limped back to the kitchen with it.

He was reaching for paper towels on the counter when he heard the click behind him. He turned. She was pointing his own target pistol at him. He sidled toward the back door.

"You aren't going anywhere, you son of a bitch!"

A shattering pain seized his lower left leg. But he was able to remain standing. Somehow. He thought he might have howled some gibberish about the mess in the living room.

"While I was away, I found out who your girlfriend is, Dickie."

"Jane. Put down the gun. I don't have a girlfriend. I've told you that a hundred times."

"Fucking liar! I wonder how she'll like your face like this, Dickie."

Another *pop!* The blow to his face was stupendous. It rocked him hard enough to slam the back of his head against the cupboard door behind him. He heard a crunch and hoped it was the cupboard door and not his skull that had caved in. He saw stars and tried not to laugh as some crazy cartoon picture swam into view, complete with stars revolving around its head, and chiming *tweetle-tweetle* sound effects. But he was able to remain standing. Somehow. And he knew he wasn't howling. He was screaming. Screaming at the top of his lungs.

He wiped tears and sticky stuff out of his right eye with the back of his hand, vaguely aware of a small shape in the kitchen doorway.

"Mommy?"

"Shut the fuck up and go back to bed, you little shit. Mommy's mad at you and she will deal with you later."

"Daddy?"

"Go next door, sweetie," said Richard. "Go see Mrs. Smith."

"She's not going anywhere, you fucker! Especially not to that whore of yours. How will your whore like you dickless, Dickie?"

She fired again and this one brought Richard down.

The only thing he remembered after that was his daughter's shrieking face, frantic pounding at the back door, distant sirens, and the stink of his wife's perfume. Then blessed darkness.

The first bullet had shattered his tibia, the second, his

cheekbone. The third bullet had missed his genitalia and his femoral artery by inches. It had bounced off his ilium and had lodged in his spine, too close to the spinal cord to be safely operable.

He rubbed his cheekbone now as though to erase the memory of that night.

Suddenly, weakness drifted over him like a shroud and he knew it wasn't from memories, Neo Citran, nor the flu. It was because he heard a footstep.

Slowly he turned his head to the left, that ear burning with listening, hairs prickled his neck.

There it was again. On the stairs. Footsteps on the stairs. Perfume. Her voice singing a childish nursery rhyme:

Oh, where have you been Dickie-Boy, Dickie-Boy?

Oh, where have you been charming Dickie?

I have been to see my wife.

She's the joy of my life.

She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.

"How've you been, Dickie?" She came round the chair. She was holding something behind her back.

"Hello, Jane."

She slowly backed toward the television, a sad smile touched her mouth. "Heard you've become sort of a semi-crip," she said. "Too bad." She reached behind the television, fumbled there for a second or two, then the TV winked out.

Her body hid what she did next, but when she stood up, Richard knew what she had done. She had plugged in an electric hedge trimmer. Richard recognized it at once. It was the one his father had picked up at a garage sale the previous month. Richard was supposed to fix it for his father. But Richard hadn't done that yet. Richard and his father had had words over that just last week.

"I'm going to put you out of your misery, Dickie. Lord knows you've been nothing but a misery to me. Putting me in that hell hole on Carmichael Five. There's crazy people there. You dared to put me in with a bunch of crazy people?"

But I still love you. So I'm going to do you a favour. I'm going to cut off your works. Everything. Right to the bone. Then you can't get into any more trouble with women.

"Don't worry," she said, stepping closer. "It's got a long cord. It's not going to unplug. See?" Without quite turning she demonstrated by giving the cord a flip, snaking it across the floor.

Richard moved his right hand closer to the mug of Neo Citran that sat, still three-quarters full, on the little antique table.

"Ready, Dickie?" She flicked the switch and the hedge trimmer hummed to life.

A little lower and a little closer with that sucker and you're history, Jane. Keep both hands on it just like you're doing now. He grasped the nearly full cup of Neo Citran.

He paused for a breath, then tossed the contents of the Dalmatian mug onto Jane's hands. It took one second for the Neo Citran — damn, that stuff's worth every penny — to run down her hands into the cracked housing of the hedge trimmer, and two seconds to run down onto her feet.

Richard had never seen her look so surprised. Actually, shocked would be a more accurate word. Then, as though some giant Puppet Master had cut all her strings at once, she collapsed. The hedge trimmer farted and jittered for two more seconds before the lights in the living room and hall winked out.

"Well, Jane," he said. "It appears you've blown your last fuse."

Brown Eyes vs. Blue

I want to dive into
brown eyes,
swim,
let their waters lap me.
Blue
I prefer
to blacken.

Kathy's Decision

“IT WAS LIKE WALKING AROUND IN NOTHINGNESS is what it was like! What you think it would be like, Megan? A walk in the fucking park?”

Kathy Jackson ground her partially smoked cigarette into the warped aluminum ashtray on my desk. The ashtray was full. Three butts fell out and a lot of the ashes, too. I resisted the urge to pluck a Kleenex from the box beside me and slide the mess into the wastebasket.

Kathy lit another cigarette. I plucked a Kleenex anyway for my nose. Although the room was high-ceilinged and large enough to accommodate eleven of my colleagues' desks, the smoke from Kathy's cigarette hovered over my desk at nose level. I'm allergic to cigarette smoke. I wanted to get this interview over with ASAP.

“I'm just trying to establish some background,” I said.

“Come up with a motive, you mean.”

She actually made brief eye contact at that point, and what I saw there reminded me of my dog Magic's eyes that day I had to take her to the vet's to have her put down because of the cancer. Pain, confusion, and — the one that still tugs at my guts every time I think about it — trust.

“Hell, Kathy! We've been called to your place for domestics how many times?”

She shrugged.

“Emil was trouble since he was born.” I put my pen down and shoved my notepad away. “You should have come to me, Kathy. A judge would have ordered treatment. They have good anger management programs now. For drugs, and booze, too.”

“He woulda killed me if I'd gone to the cops,” she said. “You know how he hates — hated — cops.”

“Did you plan it?”

“Huh?”

“You set it up so he’d be drunk on the balcony. Then you come up behind him, push him over. Is that how it happened?”

“I told you I don’t know. It was sort of like a dream, but it wasn’t a dream. It was like I was in my own body, but I wasn’t making it move. Someone else was moving my body.”

Just peachy. An insanity plea would never fly. I’d known Kathy all her life and the only thing crazy about her was getting mixed up with Emil Jackson.

“Come on, Kathy. Don’t pull that shit with me.”

She hissed something that I couldn’t quite hear.

“What’d you say?”

“It was Sister Triste.”

“Holy smokes, Kathy!” Maybe she *was* crazy. Sister Triste was the local witch doctor, for want of a description. A lot of folks in the neighbourhood — and I didn’t count myself among them then — believed she had . . . Well . . . certain Powers. Of the Voodoo type.

“Kathy. Are you saying you believe Sister Triste possessed you?” I covered my mouth so she couldn’t see the smile that threatened there.

“Yes,” she whispered.

This was getting peachier by the minute. I allowed myself a deep sigh, then pulled my notebook toward me. “Start at the beginning. But let me get this mess cleaned up first.” I took a plastic evidence bag out of my bottom drawer, peeled off a few Kleenex, scooped the whole mess into the bag, zipped the bag, then dropped it on the floor beside the wastebasket. I brought out a new ashtray from the supply in my second drawer.

I turned to a fresh page in my notebook, entered the date, and her name.

She started at the beginning, and I started to make notes.

“I just wanted him to stop, you know. I love . . . loved him. When he wasn’t drinking or taking them drugs, he was a good man. He made me laugh. Made me happy. The sex

was good. And he always told me — and I believed him — ‘Baby. Nobody will ever love you the way I do.’”

Thank God for that, I thought.

“And he was always so sorry after . . . after . . . Well. He’d have maybe a bad day at work. Like with the boss ragging his uh, you know, ass. He was always so worried about me and making things nice for me. Like buying me clothes; teaching me how to cook the way he liked things done. He watched out for me, too. Like . . . Warning me about my friend, Betty. That I shouldn’t hang around her no more. She was bad news, he said. Like maybe Betty was running around on Fred. Emil said he’d kill me if I ever done anything like that. That means a guy really loves you a lot.”

I nodded.

“I just wanted him to stop, so I went to Sister Triste. She knows lots of stuff. I figured Emil wouldn’t mind if I went to her. I lied to him about why, though. I told him I wanted to get rid of this wart.”

She held a finger up for my inspection, and her own.

“Still got the wart. But don’t got my Emil.” She sort of smiled, sort of shrugged, and gave me those trusting puppy-dog eyes again.

I looked back down at my notebook and doodled something.

“So,” she continued. “I go see Sister Triste and I’m, like, surprised that she’s so happy to see me. Ma and her always had bad blood between them. Don’t know why, but they did. I tell her about my wart, then I tell her I want Emil to stop, you know, beating on me.

“She’s real interested in that. Says: ‘He beat you cause you need beating. Like your Mama needed beating. Women bring it on themselves. Something in them enrages a man and he can’t help hisself. A woman’s chemicals. Women got a chemical in them enrages men. You take this.’ So she hands me this liquor bottle, but there wasn’t no liquor in it. ‘Good medicine in there,’ she tells me. ‘You take three tablespoons every day an hour ’fore he show up home. And no more beatings.’”

"I took the bottle. I took the medicine, and just like she said, he stopped beating on me. He stopped for a week!"

Kathy lit another cigarette. I blew my nose again and didn't pick up my pen for quite a while after that.

"Then something funny started happening to me."

"Like what?"

"Started having funny dreams. Not funny ha ha. *Bad* dreams. Waked up sweating in the middle of the night." She punched out her cigarette. "Awful dreams. Dreams like sometimes I was in somebody else's head, and sometimes they were in my head. It was awful. Not having control of yourself. Like what I said before, like just stepping around in nothingness. I didn't feel like *me* no more. Didn't feel like nobody else particular, just not like me. And then it was like I'd be making supper for Emil. And I'd know he'd be mad at me for changing the way I cooked things for him. He was always fussy about his food and how it should be cooked. Did I tell you that, Megan?"

I nodded.

"So . . . I would *change* things. Not much, but enough to know it weren't me who was doing the cooking anymore. Don't really know if it was somebody else in my head or not, but it sure as fricking *felt* like somebody in there.

"So I go see Sister Triste again. Before I can open my mouth she's telling me what's going on. Scared the living doodies out of me. Especially since she's, like, so fricking *happy* about it. So then, she says: 'Emil is a bad man. He beat up my old Daddy and robbed him one time. You know that?' I said I didn't. She says: 'And your Mama did something to me one time. Something bad. You know that?' I said I didn't and she said she wasn't going to tell me what it was neither. But she said that things was going to work out very fine for Sister Triste and that I could bet on that.

"Can I get something to drink? A pop, or something?"

I called to Charlie a few desks over to get us a couple of Cokes from the machine down the hall.

He said: "Sure, no prob."

I asked Kathy if she wanted a break from this. She said she didn't so I reached for my pen again but didn't pick it up.

"She got into my head," she whispered. "I don't know how she did it but she got into my fricking head!"

"Kathy."

"She did. She really did. I know she did. I should never of gone to her. Mama always told me stay as far clear of her as you can ever get. But I went to her. And she got in my head. Emil got tossed off the balcony like a bag of dog food. And I didn't fricking do it! It was HER done it. In my head. She was in my head."

Charlie came back with the Cokes. Kathy popped hers open but didn't take a drink. I didn't touch mine.

"Kathy," I said. "There's no way someone can get inside you to make you do things. Just get yourself a good lawyer. Listen. I've known you since you were a kid. I'm on your side. Maybe you'll get off on the insanity thing." I'd always liked Kathy. Didn't believe for a minute she was capable of violence even with Emil giving her grief for over ten years now. Never Kathy to do something like push someone over an eighteenth-floor balcony railing — not even an abusive husband. She wouldn't do it. She just would not do something like that. I told her: "I'll talk to Sister Triste."

Kathy started screaming which, of course, turned every head in the room in our direction. "*No! No! No! Don't, Megan!*" She stood up and grabbed me by both biceps across the desk and the hem of her shirt knocked the half-full ashtray onto the floor. Another mess. "Don't go!" There was no longer that trusting thing in her eyes. There was only pleading pain. "No. Megan. *NO.*"

"I have to," I said. And I shook her hands off my arms. "It's my job."

She sat down, reverted to that darned puppy-dog look again. "You ever ticked off Sister Triste?" she asked me.

"Probably," I said. "I'm a cop. We get complaints. We check things out. She was mighty pissed at me that time we had to charge her for making the Ellis boy sick with her stupid medicines."

"Don't go," said Kathy, right then looking like a Titanic survivor. One of the ones who'd been in the water for a long, long time. "She'll get into your head."

“Kathy. Go home.” I smiled at her and patted her shoulder.

“Don’t,” she said.

But I did. I’m a cop. It’s my job. When I walked out of Sister Triste’s house—a long time later—I felt like I’d missed that last step in the dark and was walking around in nothingness.

Midnight Call

From night's coma'd dreams
of blowfish,
I rise zombie-like,
to stare,
tranced,
at telephone's lone twinkled cry.



Christina Crowe was born in Ottawa Canada. Her website, crowecreations.ca/christina, deals with the prevention of suicide. She also has a blog you can access through her site. Currently, she is working on her autobiography, *My Search for Serotonin*. She's only indirectly related to Crowe Creations through a previous marriage of Sherrill Wark, its owner.



A Girl Dog's Breakfast

is a collection of dark short stories and short light poems written as catharses. Christina's abusive ex has not been treated kindly. She claims you'll never spot him, so suggests you not bother trying. "Although," she adds with a sly grin. "Any character with blue eyes is suspect."



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