

# **Tapping the Scottish**

**Part I**

*A Collection of Stories*

by

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## Billy and the Witch

That chill winter evening, Billy strode east along Gallowgate toward The Saracen Head pub, a crowd of his co-workers slightly ahead on the pavement. He'd detoured into a shop to buy a pack of fags, stopping to light one in a recessed doorway because the icy wind kept extinguishing his match. As he doubled his pace, a heavily cloaked figure rounded the corner of Great Dovehill Street. The tall welder pulled up short to avoid a collision.

A hood concealing the features, swift feet continued past him, westbound. Gloved fingers tossed an object in the air.

Mouthing a sarcastic remark about carelessness, Billy had turned in that direction. The coin gleamed beneath the nearby street lamp; his right arm reached out and it fell onto his palm.

On closer inspection, he discovered it was a gold sovereign.

He glanced up; his brown eyes locked momentarily with glowing hazel orbs. A melodious contralto intoned, "Your every dream shall be fulfilled."

Befuddled, his left hand brushed a strand of shoulder-length reddish-brown hair off from his face.

The elusive female had vanished.

That encounter had occurred in the mid-1960s. He'd pocketed the sovereign and, migrating to his flat overlooking the River Clyde, taped it to the back of a framed photo of his parents which hung above his bed.

Over the next decade, having left the Glasgow shipyards behind, Billy rode a wave of success as front man for the rock band he'd formed with other discontented welders. They'd secured a manager and toured throughout Great Britain, Ireland and Europe. He wrote their songs and stepped up to the microphone on a nightly basis; crowds in the clubs and larger venues appreciated the group's talent and style.

A rainy Saturday night in London's Soho district dampened Billy's enthusiasm - as well as his long wavy mane and scruffy beard. The Torchmen had received a standing ovation as they concluded their final set. As he exited through the stage door, however, he wished he owned a Mackintosh.

An overhead fixture did little to illuminate his surroundings. He muttered a few expletives about the weather and set off to find a pub where he could enjoy a pint of heavy and pick up an eager female to take to his hotel.

"Ye are nae an ambitious man, Billy," wafted through the gloom.

He recognized the lilting burr, though he'd only heard it once before. He spun on his snakeskin boot heels, slipping sideways on damp cobbles. Steadying himself against a stack of crates, he grumbled, "Who *are* you?"

"'Tis nae a question ye should ask me, but ask yourself."

Less than three meters along the alley, he detected movement. He lunged; the cloaked target eluded his grasp. Off-balance, he clutched a rusted downspout.

Those mysterious eyes flashed with reflected light before being obscured by the shadows.

The train couldn't deposit him in Glasgow fast enough the next day. The photo of his parents still hung above the bed, his accommodations now in the city's posh West End. He wrenched the gilded frame from its nail and stared at the gold sovereign still secured to the cardboard backing. He'd scribbled the date with a nubby pencil: February 1, 1965.

Exactly a decade between sightings of this strange apparition.

He flopped on the double mattress. Two other commonalities flashed through his mind: St. Bridget's Day and the more traditional celebration of Imbolc, heralding the coming of spring.

"Fuck!" he muttered, hurling pillows at the wall.

Regretting this outburst, as he bent to retrieve the bedding, he noticed the time on his Rolex wristwatch: 11:45. He straightened, a wee grin curling his lips between his untrimmed mustache and beard.

The one person to whom he could confide his innermost secrets would be finished at Mass on the hour.

Billy hadn't set foot in St. Peter's Catholic Church, Partick, since he attended school there as a lad. His cousin Mary, however, had remained true to this parish of their youth, employed as director of music. Grabbing his Jaguar keys off a hook above the living room desk, he descended the stairs, rounded the building to the car park and set off in search of answers.

The prim, sandy-haired woman breezed from the church after an aging congregation had dispersed, heading along Hyndland Street toward her flat. She blinked twice at the sight approaching her, dropping the attache case stuffed with sheet music and rushing forward to embrace her tall, lanky kinsman.

"'Tis early in the day for ye t' be about," she scolded Billy, holding him at arm's length to inspect his grubby clothes and uncombed mane.

He feigned a casual attitude. "How about a jar at The Sarry?"

"On a Sunday?"

"Why nae?"

Mary knew this man too well, and sensed his troubled spirit. She paused long enough to place her belongings inside her door, then slipped her arm through his as they headed for where he'd illegally parked.

Being back at The Saracen Head pub brought with it abundant memories for Billy, and less pleasant ones for Mary. On nights her cousin drank too much, in order to prevent him from being arrested, the barman would ring her to fetch him home. He'd spent many painful hours heaving into her toilet.

They settled in a high-backed wooden booth, the premises dim and sparsely populated - regular patrons performing their Sabbath duties with devout wives. Two large glasses filled with the potent cider fondly referred to as scrumpy were delivered to the stained table before they were left in peace.

"If ye tell me ye ha' gotten some lass pregnant, I'll kill ye," warned Mary.

Billy gulped his drink. "Nae, nae."

"Then, what's got ye in such a state?"

"I think I'm goin' mad."

"Ha' ye been smokin' weed and droppin' acid, like the boys in yer band?"

"Ach, nae. One puff o' that shit, and I'm done."

"Then, what?"

He launched into the tale of the ethereal being and the gold sovereign. Mary's broad smirk - in reaction to how his hands trembled as they gripped the empty glass and his gruff baritone quavered - astonished him.

"'Tis nae funny, woman," he complained.

She countered, "Aye, 'tis hilarious that ye dinnae know the history o' yer own family."

His head tilted left, so strands of unruly hair fell over his face.

Mary signaled the barman for refills, leaning forward to quietly divulge, "I ken that your mum ne'er told ye. She probably does nae know, herself. And, your da would nae speak o' it out o' fear."

Billy shuddered. "Fear?"

"The men o' our family are bedeviled by a witch."

The musician stiffened. "Bullshit."

"Nae. 'Tis true. Since the seige o' Culloden, it has been their fate."

"How so?"

"Two o' our ancestors - brothers - fought wi' Bonnie Prince Charlie against the English. The elder was injured badly in battle, and the younger carried him t' a nearby village t' have the wounds tended. The woman agreed t' save his life, but at a cost."

"What cost?"

“No one knows,” confessed Mary. “The loon reneged on the bargain and the price was nae paid, so the men ha’ been plagued by all manner o’ misfortune through the centuries.”

“Why would a witch promise me m’ dreams would be fulfilled, if ‘tis supposed t’ be a curse?”

The woman deliberated silently for a moment. “There ha’ been... exceptions.”

“Exceptions?”

Fresh pints placed on the table, the pair briefly concentrated on their glasses.

Mary licked her lips, savoring the tangy apple. “Aye. The witch has taken a fancy t’ some o’ the lads and, in such cases, they prosper.”

“So, ye think this witch fancies me?”

“Ye ha’ done right well for yerself, Billy.”

“Does the story ye ha’ heard say anythin’ about her showin’ up now and again?” he queried.

“Nae. As m’ mam let slip, ‘tis just... assumed bad times are caused by her curse.”

“Then, why...”

Mary thumped her cousin’s shoulder. “Dinnae be so dense, ye big numpty.”

Billy realized the church organist was pissed. He paid their tab and helped her into the brisk February air, settling her on the Jaguar’s passenger seat and driving her home. They parted with an affectionate hug; he promised to keep in touch.

Before he closed the door of her flat, she’d slumped on the sofa, snoring.

Not one for idle ruminations, Billy tried to ignore the notion of some 18<sup>th</sup> century witch interfering in his life. He had songs to score for recording sessions, then promotion of the album’s release on television and radio chat shows, a tour from spring through autumn - an endless cycle of activities.

He even ventured into acting, guest starring in British sit-com episodes and dramas. While the generous fees augmented his wealth and his reputation, by the early 1980s, he’d tired of that grind.

He’d allowed his hair to be cut short for such roles, shaving off his beard. He’d sported whiskers since his teens, and resented their absence. Growing them back was an itchy, uncomfortable process, as well.

One advantage to this change in his appearance: many of his avid - rabid - groupies didn’t recognize him. He could meander through the grocer’s unimpeded, or enjoy dinner at his favorite restaurant undisturbed.

*She* recognized him, nonetheless. February 1, 1985, dawned cold and clear in New York City, where Billy had relocated after six of his songs topped the Billboard 100 charts. He owned a condo on Central Park West, enjoying the view from his window, if not personally availing himself of the expansive greenery surrounding the lake itself. Fans on this side of the Atlantic far surpassed their British counterparts in the degree of aggression exhibited while pursuing celebrities.

A Cadillac limousine deposited him at the high rise's main entrance as pastel hues lit the eastern sky; he'd made the rounds of late night talk shows and parties, and spent a couple hours in the arms of a passionate, buxom blonde...

There she stood, enveloped by the voluminous grey cloak. Any ordinary passerby would have mistaken her for an inanimate sculpture.

Billy could have readily contradicted that assumption.

"Ye fancy a tumble?" he drawled as the limo eased from the curb.

"Ye ha' nae rid your soul of delusion."

"Delusion? What delusion?" He stumbled on the concrete steps. "Ye told me I'd achieve m' dreams, and I ha' done. I ha' no delusions..."

"What ye ha' achieved is nae your true dream, Billy... what ye really want can only be discovered by bein' honest wi' yourself."

Unable to insert his key in the lock, he sucked air when icy fingers clasped his, guiding the metal into the orifice.

"When next I come, ye must ha' an answer, or ye will prolong m' misery, and that o' your descendants."

Abruptly sober, he twisted his forearm and captured her wrist in an iron grip. "What d' ye mean by that?"

She didn't struggle, instead favoring him with fiery hazel eyes. "Ye ha' lived on this earth more than forty years, yet ye dinnae ken your purpose. Time is short, Billy."

Shrill sirens approaching the nearby intersection distracted him for a second and, when he faced her once more, she'd disappeared.

He shambled to the lift and burst into his pad as the phone rang. Snatching up the receiver, he barked, "What?"

"So, ye ha' seen her again, eh?" Mary.

"How d' ye know?"

"I marked it in m' diary."

"Ten years ago?"

"Aye." She heard a string of expletives. "What did she want o' ye?"

"She said I ha' nae found m' purpose, whatever the fuck that means."

“Wi’ great blessings comes great responsibility, cousin.”

“Ye know I dinnae believe in that tripe...”

“‘Tis nae t’ do with what ye believe, Billy. ‘Tis natural law. Those who ha’ much must gi’ back t’ those who lack.”

“So, she wants me to gi’ away m’ money?”

“‘Tis nae for me t’ make that decision. Ye must find *your* purpose.”

His baritone dripped derision. “Ach, thanks a lot, Mary.”

He slammed the instrument on its base and crossed to the liquor cabinet. Mirrored in the glass, though, he saw that face... those eyes...

“Fuck!”

Billy’s participation in organized religion had dwindled in his 20s, witnessing how Scottish denominations demanded compliance with scriptural and doctrinal mandates, clergy hounded their flocks for money, while society’s poor were neglected and the wealthy grew richer. He’d, consequently, eliminated a pervasive sense of guilt from his existence that came with living up to certain standards.

He had agreed, periodically, to contribute autographed memorabilia to nonsectarian charity auctions, or appear in promotions funding children’s cancer research or college scholarships for musical prodigies. Beyond that...

Three closets filled with colorful, avant garde costumes went on display at the Museum of Modern Art, a special exhibit and sale which supported Juilliard programs. A collection of 28 Fender six-string and twelve-string guitars were pared down to seven; the signed instruments raised more than a million dollars for Vietnam veterans health care initiatives.

Billy had his lawyers set up a foundation that would channel profits from his newly released album to a variety of worthy causes. He performed a special concert in Central Park - and another the next summer at the Hollywood Bowl, after he relocated to Malibu - with all proceeds going to aid the homeless.

If these efforts were meant to make him feel better, they failed. He still envisioned dark clouds over his head whenever he ventured outdoors, imagining the gloom would never ease so he might see the sun again.

Mary flew over from Scotland for his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in November 1994. She couldn’t stop smiling the entire visit, seeing her cousin so beleaguered by uncertainty, and his drawn visage sparked biting remarks at his expense.

“Oh, shut up!” he barked their final evening together at his beach house.

She apologized - half-heartedly - as she sipped red wine from an etched crystal goblet. “This whole exercise has proved futile,” she lamented. “The only

thing ye ha' succeeded at is reducin' the number of boxes that need t' be packed in the movin' van."

"If ye know so much, then, tell me what t' do!"

"All I can tell ye is how the others fell short."

"Eh?"

From her backpack, Mary extracted a well-beaten leather journal and tossed it at her host.

"What's this?" he puzzled.

"A diary written b' the women o' our family about the men and their failin's."

Billy's brow furrowed. "Goin' how far back?"

"Two hundred years."

He flipped pages covered with illegible scrawl. "I cannae read this!"

"Then, let me summarize." Mary reclaimed the volume. "Our grandfather wed his first wife when she was just fifteen, and beat her t' death after she produced three daughters, all stillborn. His second wife, our grandmother, only survived because she left him when the twins - your da and me mum - were three. *His* grandfather sired no less than eight illegitimate children around Aberdeen, and so on."

"Bastards!"

She closed the tattered cover. "Aye. They had nae concept o' what it meant t' love - honestly and deeply - and made the lives o' their wives and children miserable."

"So, the witch continued the curse?"

"Aye."

"And this purpose she spoke of..." His voice trailed off.

"Ach, why is it men rarely grow up, just grow older?" Mary shook her head, sandy curls bobbing. "Ye are that daft, Billy. Ye need t' find yourself a woman and love her t' the depths of your soul, t' make amends for the wrongs o' the past."

"That's... that's... nonsense!"

"'Tis the only way ye will satisfy the witch."

Billy ran fingers through his unruly greying mop. "The only women I meet are lookin' for a one night stand, who sneak on the tour bus or int' m' hotel room. Nae good prospects for a lovin' family life." He glanced out ceiling high windows toward the beach. "Even out there, the women are more worried about their tans, or keeping their tits and ass firm."

Joining him to admire the view, Mary could not conceal her mirth.

Billy flew into a rage. “Dammit, woman, what would ye ha’ me do?”

“Ha’ ye thought about goin’ t’ church?” she chuckled.

A hand callused by decades of fingering guitar strings raked her cheek, and she tumbled over the leather sofa.

Immediately, Billy dropped to his knees beside her. “See? I’m nae better than those fools in the book,” he moaned.

“Then, I gi’ up.” Massaging the red patch of sore flesh, she snatched her bag off the cushion and marched from the dwelling.

The musician stood in the doorway as the rented Mercedes tore south toward Los Angeles.

Billy’s agent, manager, sound engineer and drummer failed to contact him over the course of the next month. He didn’t pick up the phone and messages multiplied on the answering machine until the tape was full. He ignored the doorbell when they drove out to check on him.

Their consensus: he’d fallen off the wagon after almost nine years of sobriety and might be lying dead in a Chinatown alley.

In reality, he’d ensconced himself on the deck facing the Pacific, transforming from pale blue to sun-kissed golden, eating little and sleeping nearly 20 hours a day.

A spaniel licking his hand - dangling over the edge of the chaise lounge - roused him that balmy Wednesday afternoon. Brown eyes blinked at his surroundings, then realized he had uninvited company. The black Cocker squirmed with excitement, front paws on the woven seat, as Billy greeted him with gentle strokes.

“Who d’ ye belong to, pup?” he queried.

The reply came in the form of a trim tawny-haired female in baggy pink t-shirt and cut-off jeans, climbing the steps barefooted. She held a leash attached to a broken collar.

“I’m so sorry,” she gushed, squatting beside the animal. “Did he frighten you?”

Billy managed a smile. “He woke me up, is all.”

“You’re... not from around here. Scottish?”

“Aye.”

“I’m Bree. My people originally came from Balloch, near Inverness.”

Billy straightened on his seat, intrigued. “And Culloden.”

“I’m visiting my brother down the beach aways.” She extended her right hand. “I live in Chicago.”

Thick fingers clasped slender digits. “Nice to meet you.”

Bree glanced around. "Would you happen to have a water dish handy? I think he's thirsty."

"Help yourself."

She slid aside the glass door and poked around the kitchen, selecting an orange Tupperware bowl and filling it at the tap. She set it on the wood planks, and the dog slurped the liquid greedily.

"Sometimes it's like he takes me for a walk, rather than the other way 'round," Bree snickered, hazel eyes flashing.

"I had a dog, a long time ago, a Labrador. I had the same problem."

The pair chatted for over an hour, then Bree noticed the time. "Oh, hell! Matt is taking me to dinner in town!"

Billy supplied her with a length of rope to use as a make-shift tether, so she could lead the puppy - oddly named Acid - through the sand. "I hope t' see ye again," he said in parting.

For the first time in weeks, he navigated the spacious domicile, pulling bundles of letters from the mailbox and scooping piles of newspapers off the welcome mat. The most recent bore the date: February 1, 1995.

He grunted at what might have otherwise been considered a coincidence. "All right, all right. I get the point."

Billy and Bree were married that Christmas week, the gold sovereign tucked in the pocket of his blue tuxedo trousers. They moved back to Scotland, where he became a leading proponent and producer of Glaswegian folk-rock. Their son was born a year later, and twin girls at the turn of the century.

When she arrived at the Aberdeenshire baronial estate for her cousin's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, Mary declared the witch's hex reversed.

"How d' ye know?" he prodded.

"Trust me."

Her declaration proved accurate; Billy never again saw the shrouded spectre. The pall that caused such depression had lifted from his shoulders, and he discovered the contentment of loving and being loved in the heart of a growing family.

The coin became a family heirloom, passed from father to son as a token of good luck.

## An Unsavory Influence

Joe MacLean had sat on the edge of my bed many times through the years.

As my dad's best friend and partner in the region's most renowned architectural firm, he spent a lot of time at our country house, for both business and pleasure. He'd been married - three times, as I recall - but his obsessive creativity drove women who tried to live with him to distraction. In an ironic twist, each of Joe's spouses had insisted on pre-nuptial agreements so he wouldn't benefit from the wealth they brought into the union when or if they parted. He was the one, however, who amassed a tremendous fortune due to his innovative building designs, and these greedy females never received a cent of his earnings once the divorce decrees were finalized before a judge.

Not that Joe celebrated what he viewed as failures in his personal life. He really wanted a family, and envied my dad's affection for me.

See, Dad and I were thrown together quite by chance or, better, by a stupid and totally avoidable accident. When my mom went into labor, the doctors misjudged her condition and, once I was delivered, she died on the table. Photos in scrap books showed her as beautiful, but her health had always been delicate, according to what my grandparents and cousins confided to me.

Being his own boss allowed Dad the time needed to raise me. He would focus on projects while I napped in my crib, or at night. Once I started school, he resumed a more normal schedule, interrupted by the principal's periodic summons to her office because I'd punched a classmate or let fly with swear words at the teacher.

That unladylike behavior was mostly Joe's fault.

After his first wife dumped him, Joe began hanging around our house. He would help Dad cook and ate dinner with us which, rather than being a quiet affair, included rowdy tales of their college days peppered with lots of expletives. I was tasked with clearing the table and loading the dishwasher; Joe volunteered to rinse the plates and pots. His non-stop banter made me laugh until my sides hurt and tears streamed down my cheeks.

I'd be so hyped up, in fact, I refused to go to bed. Dad would - albeit playfully - blame Joe, who would atone by perching on my mattress and inventing tales of biker gangs facing off with police, moonshiners running liquor across state lines, and other unsavory escapades until I dozed.

The night of my tenth birthday, Joe arrived at the house, late and alone.

Dad had arranged a party: he'd ordered a special cake, delivered by the bakery that afternoon, and a stack of gaily wrapped presents weighed down the

living room coffee table. My confusion increased when the large sausage pizza and bread sticks arrived and he still hadn't shown up. As the food grew cold, my spirits plummeted.

I cried myself to sleep, not afraid but disappointed. I was used to being on my own after school for a couple hours so, even though I reasoned that a meeting ran long or some deadline required Dad to stay late at the office, having my special day ruined really hurt.

Pressure on the twin bed roused me. The night stand clock read 12:37. I rolled right to find Joe's youthful face and wild hair resting on my pillow.

"Hey, kid," he whispered.

"Joe?" I tried to sit up, but his strong arm restrained me. "What are you doing here?"

Somber brown eyes, reflecting the nightlight's glow, gazed at me.

"Where's Dad?"

"Go back to sleep, kid. It's too late to talk now."

Because I trusted him, I closed my eyes. His steady breathing soothed me, and I didn't wake until the sun shown through the blinds.

Joe hadn't moved from his place atop the Darth Vader quilt, and I saw he wore a black leather jacket, chaps, and square-toed boots. He'd been out on his Harley - but, then, he'd promised me a ride on the Fat Boy for my birthday.

I nudged him, and he rolled off the narrow bed, hitting the floor with a curse. It took him a few seconds to realize where he was, then he stretched and knelt on the carpet, his head towering over me.

"Mornin', kid."

"Joe, where's Dad?"

His Adam's apple bobbed. "You're a smart kid, too smart for your age, really..."

I waited, and the silence raised goosebumps on my arms.

Abruptly, he threw back the quilt and scooped me in his arms. He'd never hugged me before - nor had my dad ever been demonstrative in that way - and being cradled against his hard chest perplexed me.

"Joe, please."

For a man who could spin a humorous story without a moment's notice, he barely managed, "Come with me, kid."

"If you put me down, I'll get dressed."

He paused, then realized my request made sense. "Meet me downstairs."

"Give me a few."

He left the door open when he departed, and I scrambled to pull underwear, jeans and a plain green t-shirt from a white French Provincial chest of drawers. I ran down the hall to the bathroom, washed my face and brushed my teeth. Standing on the edge of the tub, I saw my short brunette curls standing on end in the mirror. I doused my head with water and used a comb to try and smooth the mess.

Not that it did any good. Joe paced the foyer as I bounced down the steps; he offered me a motorcycle helmet before grabbing his off the sideboard.

We were going for a ride on the Harley, after all.

“Why the drama?” I asked, astride the saddle and holding onto his jacket with all my strength.

He didn’t respond; maybe he couldn’t hear me with his ears covered by protective headgear. Pulling into the police station parking lot, though, provided an answer I would rather have not known.

Joe clasped my hand in his massive paw - another first. We walked together to the imposing brick structure with its huge arched glass windows, designed by my dad. Through the entrance and buzzed into an inner corridor, we were directed by a blonde female in uniform to an office with four ugly green armchairs around a small square table.

Dropping into one by the window, Joe did something he’d never done before. He inclined his head slightly left and blinked, a silent instruction that I should sit on the chair next to him.

“Has Dad been arrested?” I puzzled.

The door opened just then and a smiling woman with large oval pink-framed glasses, wearing a calf-length peasant skirt and white scooped-neck blouse breezed in, carrying a purple ring binder. She eased herself into the chair across from me.

“So, this is Kari,” she began.

Joe repeated the head movement and blink.

“Kari, I’m Missy Halpern.”

My brain trying to connect a thousand dots, I croaked, “Hi.”

“You know why you’re here?”

“Not a clue.”

Missy glanced at Joe, who shrugged.

“You... understand what death is, Kari?”

“Sure. My mom died when I was a baby.”

“Well, I’m sorry to have to tell you, your father died last night.”

My heart stopped. All I could do is gape at her.

She consulted sheets in the binder. “He was leaving his office with a large package that blocked his view and, when he stepped off the curb into the street, he was hit by a car.”

My neck swiveled toward Joe. “Package?”

“He’d bought you a set of skis, kid. He was gonna take you to Aspen for Christmas.”

A thousand regrets flooded my mind: no birthday, no party, no presents, no ski trip, no... Dad.

Both adults expected me to cry, I guess - but, I didn’t. I just stared at the pale yellow wall.

“She’s in shock,” remarked Missy. “We’d better call the doctor.”

“No,” Joe said. “She’ll be fine in a minute.”

“Mr. MacLean, you’re not a professional...”

“Maybe not, but I’ve known Kari since she was born. She’s like a little computer, and she’s processing this information...”

“Who’s her next of kin?”

“According to Ed’s will, I’ll be her legal guardian.”

“You?” The derisive chuckle that accompanied this reaction jarred me from my stupor.

I blurted, “Why not?”

Missy flipped a few pages and thumped one with her index finger. “He’s got less than a stellar track record where relationships are concerned...”

Joe bristled, and I saw an uncharacteristic anger rising in him. “Regardless of my past, Ed’s wishes must be honored. That includes no wake, no services...”

“That’s outrageous!” Missy exclaimed.

“You’re in no position to dispute the document’s validity.” Joe rose and extended his fingers toward me. I leapt off the cushion and slipped my hand in his.

“Child Protective Services has the authority...”

Joe stiffened, his voice a growl. “They can only intervene if there’s a verified complaint of abuse or neglect.”

He was right, of course.

The ride home was an adventure in itself: careening around corners, avoiding cats darting across the street, nearly hitting a low branch left dangling after a lightning strike. My cheeks were flushed when I crossed the threshold; Joe dropped a key ring on my palm.

“All this is yours now, kid.”

“Are you going to live here with me?”

“If you want. Or, you can move into my place.”

My chin drooped. “Dad said it’s a barn.”

He roared with laughter, and I felt better.

“Yeah, I’m not much of a housekeeper.”

“Neither am I.”

He scanned the rooms. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that.”

“You mean, you didn’t know Dad hired a maid to come in once a week to do laundry, dust and vacuum and mop the floors?”

For a minute, Joe reminded me of a curious dog, head tilted and eyes wide.

“I... guess he could afford it.”

I tugged his jacket sleeve. “Joe...”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Is Dad in heaven?”

He dropped to one knee, his face level with mine. “As much as he loved you, I’m sure he is. Anyone who loves so deeply would be welcome there.”

My classmates were surprised to see me at school the next Monday but, with no funeral, I had no reason to be absent. In fact, my routine remained pretty much the same with Joe in charge of my days - though, I admit, they were much more fun.

After encounters with Joe about my grades or rule violations, I overheard my teachers and the principal refer to him as the “wild man of Borneo.” To be sure, he didn’t fit the profile of a standard father. He never wore suits, wavy hair fell below his shoulders and was streaked with shades of premature grey, brown, red and blond. He spoke boldly, refusing to be intimidated by these administrative types.

“I know where she gets her cocky attitude,” my sophomore English instructor commented after mid-term conferences.

I rejoiced, because I wanted to emulate Joe in every aspect of my life.

He bought me a Harley for my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and, when I graduated in the top 10% of my class at university, he sent me on a round-the-world cruise. His rationale: “If you don’t experience different cultures and people, you won’t know how to deal with those closest to you.”

Arriving home just before Thanksgiving, I was flabbergasted by the change in him. I hugged a man reduced to flesh and bone. He confessed that he’d been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer 18 months earlier, refusing treatment and keeping it secret from me.

“I’ve already transferred ownership of the firm to your name,” he announced.

“But, I’m no architect!”

“You have a well-qualified staff, and your business degree makes it possible for you to keep things profitable. You’re set for life.”

For the first time in ages, I shed a tear. “I wanted *you* in my life, forever.”

“Ah, kid. Nothing lasts forever. We’ve had a good run...”

His body weak, I guided him to the living room. He sank on my dad’s recliner with a sigh. I parked on the red leather ottoman I’d imagined my throne as a child and held his hand, watching his eyes slowly dim.

When interviewers for the trades ask why I never married, I don’t mention that no bond with a man - or woman, for that matter - could equal the depth of what Joe and I shared. Even trying to find someone of that caliber would spoil my memories.

Besides, I couldn’t handle anyone else I cared about so completely dying.

## Three Way Split

The technician, busy texting their partner from the control console in the operations center, hadn't detected anything unusual when the MRI concluded Rowan Valentine's brain scan. The open-and-wide platform had retracted, allowing the outpatient egress from the chamber - except not one but three individuals rose from the flat surface in what would have appeared an optical illusion had the individual behind the protective glass been paying attention.

The first bore youthful attributes: a wild, shoulder-length reddish-brown mane, a shaggy mustache and goatee. Next, a middle-aged version sported multi-colored hair - red, brown, blond and grey - with a trimmed mustache and soul patch. Last, an elder sat upright, white locks flowing.

Without acknowledging each other, they exited the clinic bound for points unknown.

Once the technician concluded their online argument about what to cook for dinner, they swiveled toward the computer monitor and reviewed images showing a sizable tumor near the subject's frontal lobe. The file was forwarded to the neurologist handling the case, marked "Urgent."

Rowan, a trim 59, had pretty much ignored the headaches' increasing intensity over the past six months. He never missed work at the city's Department of Health, testing water samples in the lab after main breaks or storm-caused sewer overflows.

He felt no different as he drove his Ford Focus to the brick edifice overlooking the river, and spent the rest of the afternoon analyzing bacteria from a newly-dug well set to supply a posh subdivision.

Old Rowan, well into his 80s, clad in a casual collared shirt and jeans commandeered from the clinic's staff locker room, contented himself with observing the world from a park bench. He smiled as children played on the swings and jungle gym, marveled at dogs sniffing each other and stopping at every bush as their owners tried to exercise, and admired the fortitude of joggers and cyclists perspiring profusely.

Young Rowan, approximately 27 and sworn to fulfill every impulse, migrated toward the metropolis' seedy neighborhood. He availed himself of dive bars, imbibing considerable amounts of alcohol and fighting burly bikers who'd insulted his bright patchwork shirt, striped trousers and snakeskin boots, stolen from a thrift shop. Their skulls cracked, he ventured out to select a suitable companion, satisfying his lust multiple times in a sleazy hotel before beating her and slashing her cheek with a razor-sharp switchblade. He left her - bleeding and

sobbing - in bed without a word, opting to gorge himself on the breakfast special at a nearby diner.

Tawny curls secured with a hairnet, Alice MacKenzie reveled in the early morning silence of the wee restaurant, spending her energy sanitizing fixtures the midnight shift had left unwashed. Mostly college kids, they hadn't the same standards of cleanliness as local health officials, who performed unannounced inspections with the hope of slapping the establishment with fines or closure notices in retaliation for the owner speaking against the current elected administration.

Backlit in the entrance by a brilliant sunrise, the day's first customer might have been a ghostly spectre conjured by mystical sprites. Alice sucked air through clenched teeth as she slid the cash drawer in the till, the form so perfectly proportioned.

He crossed the tile floor and swung long legs over a red upholstered stool, slamming his fists on the stained, laminate counter. "Coffee!"

"Ready in a jif!" Alice stated, slipping through the kitchen door.

A white stoneware cup and saucer were delivered with a welcoming smile. As she'd poured the steaming brew, she'd studied his features via the pass-through, convinced she'd seen him before...

"How ya doin'?" she queried.

He countered gruffly, "Eggs over easy, double portion of bacon and hash browns, toast and a tall stack of pancakes."

Alice chuckled, "Hollow leg?"

That had been the term her mother used when her four brothers emptied the refrigerator in one sitting.

"Shut your trap and bring the food," he growled.

This ominous baritone dispelled the woman's notion of their previous acquaintance. Hazel eyes flickered with hostility...

She retreated to the kitchen and cooked his order, not glancing up from the grill until the platter had been loaded with the requested, aromatic assortment.

Only then did she realize another patron had seated himself in a booth against the wall, waiting patiently for service.

According to the wall clock, the diner hadn't opened yet.

That's when she recalled she hadn't unlocked the door...

As the dark-haired figure tore into the meal, she grabbed a notepad and pen from a wicker bin on the shelf and approached the padded bench.

"What can I get for you this beautiful morning?" she inquired.

He practically beamed, smooth countenance framed by white strands. “‘Tis a gorgeous morning, innit?” He disregarded the menu she offered. “Just hot chocolate, please.”

“Coming up.”

Alice retrieved the plastic-covered sheet from the wobbly table, catching a glimpse of his eyes.

The same color as the other...

She spun toward the counter; he’d cleared his plate and left without paying.

“Damn!”

Nimble fingers tenderly patted her hand. “He’ll be back and, if not, I’ll cover his bill.”

“You his father?”

“No.”

Alice muttered, “You... bear quite a resemblance...”

“Aye, ‘tis true.”

“And, I’d bet a day’s tips I know you from somewhere...”

Thin lips between his mustache and full beard twitched in a noncommittal smile.

Completely flummoxed, she returned to the kitchen and grabbed a jug from the refrigerator. A lover of hot chocolate herself, she eschewed adding a packaged mix to boiling water.

As she stirred cocoa and sugar into the saucepan of warming milk, a memory flickered in her brain: preparing this same concoction for a well-dressed gentleman in a downtown coffee shop during her summer as a barista after graduating high school.

More than a decade ago.

Her only reason for making the connection: so few men ordered hot chocolate.

And, he’d tipped her \$10.

She delivered the mug topped with whipped cream to find a third customer on the premises, seated at a four-top near the window.

A businessman on his way to a meeting, perhaps, given his suit, tie and polished brown oxfords.

As he shifted his attention from traffic to her, she halted mid-stride, gripping a chair back to avoid collapsing outright.

The same eyes, the same face - just a different age...

She detoured to the door.

Deadbolt locked.

“What the hell is happening?” she shrieked.

The man rose and placed firm hands on her shoulders. He suggested in a soothing tone, “Best you go to the kitchen and stay there until we... sort this mess. Things might get... ugly.”

“Who *are* you?”

“To be honest, at this point, I’m not quite sure.”

“That’s... ridiculous!”

“Please, Alice. Do as I ask.”

“No! Whatever happens, I have to be a witness, in case there’s damage or... or...”

The elder approached from behind. “‘Tis only fair.”

Her heart skipped a beat as gentle digits lowered her onto a seat.

“Promise you’ll stay put and not interfere,” directed the octogenarian.

Hesitantly, she nodded.

A white head tilted toward his junior, a mere blink confirming approval to proceed with the task before them. When they moved along the counter, Alice spied the third man poised beside the cash register.

He must’ve ducked into the men’s room and waited for her to be distracted, in order to rob the place...

She leapt to her feet. “You bastard!”

“Alice, please!” admonished the suit.

The younger advanced on the pair. “You can’t do this!”

“Aye, we can,” declared the senior of the trio.

The true Rowan affirmed, “We must. A flaw in the hospital equipment’s magnetic configuration didn’t merely record scans of my brain, it fragmented my physiognomy and generated corporeal replicas.”

“So, I’m nothing more than a *malfunction*?” scoffed the younger.

“Aye,” the elder remarked. “As am I.”

During this exchange, Alice registered them together, bathed in an eerie, celestial light - so similar to old cartoons where a character debated options with a haloed angel on its right shoulder and a horned demon on its left.

The younger rationalized, “It’s not like we can crawl back into that contraption and be merged again into one...”

“That’s definitely not... feasible,” Rowan concurred.

“Then, there’s nothing else you...”

A pistol's retort nearly deafened Alice, who sank to her knees at the prospect of a dead body on the floor. Through her tears, she glimpsed the other two embrace before a second shot reverberated through the dining room.

She buried her head in her hands.

Five minutes passed before she was raised to a standing position, her arms pruned away from her face.

"It's all right, my dear. It's done."

She stared past Rowan at empty space, the only proof anyone else had been present: used dishes.

"What the hell..." she gasped.

"The old man and the kid were... products of a misaligned computer grid," he explained.

"You mean, like holograms?"

"More solid, but essentially, yes."

"Good and evil drawn from your own soul?" Alice pressed.

"Quite an astute assessment, my dear. Every human being, in fact, embodies a combination of good and evil, the capacity to be an angel or an absolute demon..."

"And, now they're gone?"

He sighed. "I only terminated their physical existence. Their dominant attributes persist... in me."

"To be given free reign?"

"The good, hopefully."

Alice contemplated Rowan's serene countenance. "You want some breakfast?"

"No, thanks. It's home for me and blessed slumber. I've been tracking that scoundrel all night, after the clinical supervisor notified me about electrical surge in the MRI."

"I would've loved to have been a fly on the wall when those gauges went haywire."

"Actually, the technician on duty didn't discover the problem."

"How *did* they figure out what happened?"

"Security cameras in the corridor captured me going into the MRI chamber and three people leaving. They ran diagnostics on the machinery and discovered a glitch..."

"Hell of a glitch! Sounds like something straight outta *Star Trek!*"

Rowan grinned a moment before collapsing on the chair Alice had vacated. Anguish twisted his features into a horrific mask.

Alice's mother had died of a brain tumor; the manager's familiarity with the debilitating headaches and the cells' rapid growth did not require her to ask this man about his situation.

He recovered soon enough, declining her invitation to rest in the owner's office. "I'd love one of your delicious hot chocolates - you truly make the best I've ever tasted, y'know - but, some other day." He paid the bill and tucked \$10 into her fist.

She unlatched the bolt and flipped the embossed sign to "Open" as he departed.

The daily newspaper lay on the stoop. She unfolded it on the counter, recognizing a police artist sketch of the younger Rowan captioned by accusations of grievous bodily harm in the bar fight, along with assault and battery of the prostitute, listed in serious but stable condition at the same medical complex where the MRI had created him.

Alice gazed at the spot where he'd stood when his material essence dissipated. Not a trace of him remained... except the impression of his menacing hazel orbs on her psyche.

What guarantee did she have a mere bullet had scattered his accidentally bonded molecules, and they would not reassemble to wreak additional havoc?

A lilting Scottish burr caressed her ear: "If he comes, so shall I, and no harm 'twill come t' ye. For every demon, there's an angel..."

Alice hauled a loaded grey bus tub to the dish room as regular customers filled the tables, while the cook and wait staff punched the time clock. By the end of a very busy shift, she'd dismissed the whole ordeal as a hallucination induced by lack of sleep and an excess of caffeine.

Every time she glanced in a mirror, though, she swore those eyes peered over her shoulder, a portent of evil to come.

## Language Barrier

Henry Higgins opened that door.

The professor from George Bernard Shaw's stageplay *Pygmalion* - and, later, *My Fair Lady* - sparked Enid's fascination for dialects within the English language when she first saw a live performance as a child. She'd saved her allowance for months to buy a miniature cassette player, recording random conversations and listening to them again and again. She became adept at recognizing distinct variations on vowel sounds and filled blank journals with definitions of singular terms by country, city or suburb.

Her passion evolved into a career at a prominent Ivy League university. Sizable grants funded research that took her around the globe as she tried to quantify why so many branches of English had developed to the point where - as many comedians noted over the decades - those who claimed it as their mother tongue couldn't be understood by others boasting the same etymological origins.

One summer's excursion to Great Britain extended into the fall, thanks to a bizarre incident. She'd alighted from a Glasgow bus near the Queen Street train station and stumbled on the curb, dropping her messenger bag. Bending to retrieve it from the pavement, she didn't see the helmeted teen on a scooter veering erratically through traffic - and he didn't see her.

Enid pitched forward, hooking her leg on a steel bollard, and wound up at the Royal Infirmary with a severely sprained ankle. The Accident and Emergency physician ordered her to put no weight on her foot for a week, minimum.

Months of racing from place to place, the imposed rest would be welcome, she decided. After 24 hours of ice packs reduced extreme swelling, she arranged to be wheeled in a chair from her room to a sun porch at the end of the wing. There, she watched Glaswegians go about their daily life on the streets below, her ears tuned to the cacophony around her.

The Scottish burr of hospital employees, patients and visitors ranged from thick to mild; some locals couldn't even comprehend each other, Enid realized. If anyone observing her among the plants wondered about the tranquil smile on her lips, they never asked.

She reveled in the repetition of personal information to hospital staff, exchange of gossip, and medical consultations more suited to a private office, mentally analyzing the relationship of terms like "piss," "pissed," and "pish."

The first referred to urinating.

The second meant being intoxicated.

The third was used by someone disputing the voracity of a statement, similar to “That’s rubbish,” or “That’s a lie.”

Enid unintentionally eavesdropped on a pair of administrators discussing a recent fundraiser for homeless initiatives. The organizer mentioned to her companion how the crowd’s generosity “just blew me sideways” (astonished her) and performances by the musical artists “went down a storm” (were very well received).

Frequent use of four-letter words - in a variety of contexts - transcended class distinctions, the patient learned. Some expressions, like “bugger-all,” eluded her until heard on multiple occasions, and she eventually made the connection. “There’s bugger-all on the telly tonight,” complained an orderly at the nurses’ station - substitute “nothing”.

Enid paced herself, returning to her bed for lunch and a nap, so her throbbing brain cells could digest all this input.

“It’s marvelous!” she proclaimed to the Dean of Arts and Letters when he phoned mid-week to check on her recovery.

He sniffed, “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. Do I need to notify the accounting office of any expenses that fall outside the scope of your grant?”

Inhaling slowly, Enid debated whether her next research project should delve into how an academic preoccupation with money stifled honest pursuit of knowledge. “No. Everything will be covered by the young man’s insurance.”

Assurances that graduate students would keep her classes on track until she returned preceded the call being disconnected. She reclined on the pillows and closed her eyes against fluorescent ceiling fixtures, until she sensed a presence beside the bed.

One lid fluttered; a hazel orb focused on an unexpected image, and she jolted upright, yanking crumpled sheets up to her neck to conceal the tie-dyed concert t-shirt doubling as pajamas.

“I didnae mean t’ startle ye.”

Enid couldn’t seem to find her tongue. “It’s not... I just... You didn’t... I...” In an act of desperation, she tugged the sheet over her head like an embarrassed child.

Nimble fingers plucked the fabric off her face. She saw straight white teeth gleaming between a neatly trimmed greying mustache and goatee.

“‘Tis always an honor t’ meet a fan,” said the aging but trim, leather-jacketed figure in tight blue jeans and lizard skin boots.

She could feel the heat of her reddened cheeks and lowered her gaze. “Thanks.”

“It might surprise ye t’ know: I’m a fan o’ yours.”

Her chin shot up; she squinted at this famous musician. “What?”

“Did ye nae ken m’ youngest daughter is one o’ your grad students?”

The surname was rather... common... Enid admitted silently.

“She does bugger-all but talk about ye ev’ry night on Facetime. The work ye are doin’ is dead impressive.”

“Is that why you’re here?” queried the professor.

“Seein’ your accident on the telly blew me sideways. I thought it only right t’ offer m’ assistance during your recuperation.”

So flustered, Enid had forgotten her manners. “Won’t you sit down, Mister...”

“Donald, please.”

Not that the molded green plastic chair was comfortable, but he didn’t seem to mind. They chatted about common slang, music, life at the university and much more until her dinner arrived.

Enid hadn’t spent such a pleasant afternoon in ages, with an intelligent, well-grounded individual who cared not one jot about his fame, despite having murals honoring his accomplishments plastered around Glasgow.

On a break between tours, Donald visited her every day until the doctors agreed she could be discharged. Then, he invited her to complete her rehabilitation at his country estate in Aberdeenshire.

She availed herself of the dwelling’s massive library - including an extensive selection of tomes on Scottish language evolution, Donald’s father having himself been a renowned linguist affiliated with the University of Edinburgh. By Christmas, she had narrowed her research on global English dialects to the dozens found within the borders of this relatively small country. Her paper complete and submitted for publication, she packed her bags and, ankle still experiencing periodic twinges of discomfort, flew back to the States.

Customs agents at New York’s JFK International couldn’t expect Enid to declare the wealth of memories she brought home along with souvenirs for her loyal staff and students, nor the metamorphosis of body, mind and soul that altered her future endeavors.

Neither her peers on campus nor her closest friends really believed a chance accident had led to her transcending more than just the language barrier.

## Temptation and Its Consequences

The devil comes in many shapes and sizes.

Iris hoped, throughout her life, to avoid him but, somehow - in the depths of her being - she grasped that they would meet face-to-face eventually.

She'd caught glimpses of him over the years: in the Glasgow slums of her childhood, the orphanage where she'd barely survived after her parents died in a horrendous car crash before her twelfth summer, the restaurant where she scrubbed pots, having no options for any type of respectable employment without a decent education.

When a bout of pneumonia sent her to hospital, doctors discovered cancer had already spread from her bones to her lungs. The prognosis: six months, tops.

She'd just celebrated her 37<sup>th</sup> birthday, if you equate the term to a candle in a day-old cupcake she'd bought at the neighborhood bakery.

Discharging herself against medical advice, she spent her last tenner on a taxi to the pub near her pathetic excuse for a flat. She'd noticed him - on and off for the past few weeks - in the corner booth. He'd raise his pint of Tennent's toward her as she chatted with friends; she ignored him.

Then.

Not now.

The barman greeted her as a gust of wind blew the door from her hand and slammed it against the wall.

"Helluva night, Iris!"

"M' regular, please, Bobby!" She waggled her thumb toward the dimly lit section of the establishment.

"Aye!"

She didn't ask permission to drop onto the warped bench opposite the shadowy figure.

He smiled, straight white teeth reflecting the wall sconce's eerie glow, though the rest of his features defied description - purposely. One second, he appeared young and red-haired, the next older, with a shaggy grey mane. "You finally ready?"

Iris waited until her tankard of scrumpy was delivered; a deliberate sip afforded her a moment to relish the taste while Bobby returned to his other patrons. "I dinnae ha' a choice."

"Oh, don't ever let it be said I denied you your prerogative for a prolonged, excruciating demise."

"'Tis nae death I'm worried about, since I ha' nae really lived."

“Is that what you want: to live?”

She squirmed on the hard seat. “I ha’ heard the stories, and I’m nae gonna take the fuck. Everything will be in writin’, properly signed and witnessed.”

“Witnessed? No one can know...”

Iris started to rise.

He waved her back to her place. “So be it.”

A folded sheet of paper was flattened on the table, itemizing her wishes. “I want twelve months without the slightest twinge of pain.”

“Acceptable.”

“I want five million quid to blow as I please.”

“Acceptable.”

“I want Kinnaird House in Bearsden, appropriately furnished and staffed with a cook, butler and maid.”

He smirked. “Isn’t that a trifle large for one person?”

“Who says I’ll be livin’ there alone?”

“Ah!”

“I may decide t’ hold orgies every night.”

“With whom, might I ask?”

“Whatever man - or men - I please. Maybe women. Who knows?”

“Such depravity will earn you a prominent place in the nether regions.”

“Fine wi’ me.”

“Acceptable.”

Iris slumped against the booth’s vertical slats, quite knackered after the day’s ordeal. “Just t’ be clear: whatever man I take a fancy to, he’s mine.”

“One, or more than one?”

“I may want something different every day. There’s so many possibilities, and it’ll be dead easy...”

“You have an insatiable appetite.”

“I ha’ limited time.” She sighed. “When I was younger, I ha’ nae the means t’ ... attract the best. Now, I’ll ha’ the best while I still can.”

“Leading them into sin, so they’ll be damned, like yourself. Acceptable,” he chuckled.

She countered, “Why ‘tis a sin t’ enjoy the flesh God ga’ us?”

“Ask the ministers of the Church of Scotland or the priests of Rome.” He confiscated the document and scanned the childish scrawl. “Anything else?”

“A chauffeured Rolls Royce.”

“Agreeable.”

“And, last... chocolate.”

“Sorry?”

“An endless supply o’ chocolate.”

He chortled, “I’m not Willy Wonka.”

“Wi’out that, there’s nae deal.”

“You’re taking the piss, eh?”

“Nae.” Iris puzzled why this demand would cause her... broker so much consternation. “Ye cannae tell me ye ha’ nae sources...”

“It’s not that. I’m just wondering if one soul is worth so great a price.

Normally, we agree to just one or two special favors. This... laundry list...”

“If ye dinnae wish my custom....” She drained the remaining scrumpy and slid off the bench. “Good evenin’ t’ ye.”

He caught her up as she reached the exit, but Bobby collared him before he could follow her onto the street. “Nae skippin’ wi’out payin’, lad?”

The 20 pound note fairly scorched the barman’s palm as he was released to pursue his prey.

“Iris, wait!” he shouted as he jogged toward her.

Her pace never faltered. She knew he wanted what she had to offer, and would eventually consent to all her requests.

They clinched the deal in a Queen Street coffee shop just before dawn, a barista serving to verify both signatures. As they parted ways, a silver Rolls braked at the curb and its liveried driver emerged to hold the rear door for her.

Iris embarked on a whirlwind of activity, every second of her days filled to overflowing. Her residence boasted an indoor pool, where she swam laps in the early morning while dozens of trousered party-goers sprawled over chairs and sofas, and her latest paramour slumbered in the master suite after a night of intense sex. Leaving the others to fend for themselves, the couple shared a gourmet breakfast before driving into Glasgow, where she dropped cash like water on racks of clothing, shoes and coats, aisles of food and personal necessities, trucking them to the homeless shelters to alleviate the misery of the poor.

All she craved in actuality: a cessation of physical agony, an abundance of chocolate and men...

By the end of the year’s contract, she’d tired of the house and the Rolls, with just a few quid stashed under the mattress.

What Iris didn’t anticipate: her intermediary’s reticence to collect on the debt.

They met in the same booth at the same pub where negotiations had commenced. He took a gulp of Tennent’s, almost reluctant to speak.

“Is there a problem?” she queried.

He sputtered, “You... are one hell of a woman in the sack.”

“How...”

“It’s part of the job to monitor a client’s... compliance with the agreement.”

“If I stepped out of line, you could summarily... terminate me?”

“Indeed.”

An inkling of opportunity flashed through Iris’ brain. She hinted, “Instead, you found yourself tempted?”

“Which... isn’t...”

She swung toward the antique grandfather clock beside the bar. “There’s still six hours...” She clasped his hand and drew him from the building, tossing Bobby a wad of fivers.

The chauffeur dismissed, she steered the elegant vehicle over the River Clyde. Well beyond populated areas, she parked on a turn off and allowed her companion to have his way with her on the leather-upholstered rear seat.

He wasn’t the best, nor was he the worst among those who’d shagged her. What he’d done, though, is compromised himself - violated the contract’s small print, which prohibited him from directly interfering in the signer’s downfall.

Iris, in fact, had triggered *his* downfall.

A yawning black chasm opened beneath them; he was sucked into the void, yowling piteously all the way.

Constables found her dead body in the Rolls the following morning, a scene she viewed from an elusive parallel realm commonly referred to as heaven.

The rewards for besting the devil are quite... rapturous.

## Hip-Hip-Hippie

“Out-bloody-rageous!”

“It’s a disgrace!”

“You should be ashamed!”

In the split-second it took the naked man to gleefully dance past elderly spinsters seated along the revival tent’s center aisle, mobile phones notified police and mothers shielded their children’s eyes.

A muffled, “You go, Big Yin!” reached the intruder’s ears.

An oldster near the exit tried to trip him with her cane; he nimbly hurdled the obstacle.

“Dinnae be so horrified, ye hypocrites! If ye believe such things: this is how God made us!” he shouted before ducking through the half-open flap.

The gold-robed roving evangelist on a raised dias, struck dumb by this interruption to his sermon on sinfulness of the flesh, eventually recovered his composure, thanks to a youthful female entourage, who gravitated to him with paper fans and glasses of clear liquid - though not necessarily water.

No matter what he tried, however, the solemnity of the event could not be recaptured. People gradually filtered from the temporary structure, leaving donation baskets almost empty.

Meanwhile, at the far end of a make-shift car park - a vacant cattle pasture - Hamish MacLellan zipped tattered blue jeans over his Y-fronts and poked a head crowned with wild, multi-colored hair through the neck of his dashiki shirt. Slipping into square-toed black leather boots and a brown leather duster trimmed with faux fur at collar and hem, he straddled the modified Harley Davidson chopper, revved the engine and sped off into the night.

What better freedom than to travel at will, all earthly possessions tucked in a duffel atop the guitar case strapped behind his back rest.

He’d been heading toward Stirling after earning a few pounds playing pubs in Perth when he noticed signs for the religious gathering on a remote stretch of road and figured opening the eyes of those in attendance to a few hard truths would do no harm. He liked to rattle the status quo periodically.

Keeping his own eyes open grew more difficult as he journeyed south. Not only was the hour late, but soupy fog descended, causing his headlight beam to diffuse and obscure the road. Chill air condensed the moisture, adding a slickness to the surface. He slowed to 40 kph, but that still didn’t prevent him from sliding off the asphalt when he missed a sharp curve.

Inside the tiny cottage, the impact sounded like a bomb exploding. Skye Burridge bolted from the armchair in the cozy parlor as her grandmother's porcelain figurines tumbled from their shelves and shattered on the floorboards. She wrenched open the door and rushed into the darkness, a weird glow emanating from the opposite side of a low stone wall.

Scurrying through the gate, the woman glimpsed motorcycle wreckage, a body sprawled on the cobbles. She strode forward, heard groaning, and sighed with relief the victim was, at least, alive.

At first glance, she wondered if this was a bear trained to ride in a circus. Squatting beside the lanky form, she gently brushed aside the mass of tangles, to see even more hair - a scruffy mustache and untrimmed goatee - adorning a weathered face.

Eyelids fluttered; Hamish stared up at the trim blonde in quilted robe. He tried to speak, but she silenced him with a finger on his lips.

"Lie still," she instructed. "I'll ring for an ambulance."

"Nae, nae," he countered, weakly. "I'll be fine in a bit."

She objected, "Ye ha' taken a terrible fall..."

"Just blew me sideways, is all. Sorry about the damage..."

"'Tis happened many times in the past. M' gran always said this was a bad place for her da t' build the house."

Hamish attempted to rise, managing to prop himself on his left elbow. He breathed steadily, then sat upright. His shirt hung in tatters, his jeans ripped at the knees.

"Ye may be lucky t' ha' only a mild case o' road rash," remarked Skye.

She straightened and offered her hand. He grasped it and pulled himself vertical, only to stumble when he put weight on his left foot.

Skye caught him before he fell. "It may be broken."

Hamish tested it again. "I dinnae think so. Only a sprain."

"Ye can nae be sure without having a doctor check it oot."

Freeing himself of her grasp, he leaned on what remained of the stone wall. "Is there somewhere I could rest awhile?"

"More than awhile, b' the looks o' yer ride."

Hamish gazed at the twisted frame and bent wheel. "Oh, fuck!"

"'Tis just metal. It could ha' been ye." She slipped her arm beneath the duster, around his narrow waist and balanced him on his right foot. They hobbled along packed dirt to the modest dwelling, where a fire on the grate radiated warmth.

"Ye live here alone?" queried Hamish, falling onto the armchair.

“Since m’ da passed.”

“How d’ ye keep yerself from goin’ mad?”

Skye retrieved a banjo propped in the corner, smirking.

She didn’t expect her guest’s reaction: sheer horror.

“What is it?” she wondered.

“M’ guitar!”

To calm him, she ventured outdoors once more, extricating his belongings from the crushed vehicle. The duffel left in the foyer, she delivered the scuffed case to its owner.

“Seems to be undamaged,” she stated.

He hugged the hard surface to him like a mother reclaiming a lost child.

“Thank ye.”

Sinking on the floral-print loveseat, she raised his left leg onto her lap.

“Let’s see aboot gettin’ this off...”

Hamish cringed in anguish as she tugged the leather, though his facial hair hid most of the expression.

Skye ventured, “If it hurts that much, I can cut it off...”

“What, m’ leg?” he shrieked.

“Nae, ye big numpty, the boot!”

They laughed together at his mistake and, while thus distracted, Skye yanked the sole, freeing Hamish’s ankle.

Swollen, but not black - as occurred with a fracture.

“Ye are that lucky.” She arranged the limb on pillows beside her. “I’ll get some ice; ye should be able t’ walk in a day or two.”

“I cannae impose...”

“‘Tis no imposition. Bein’ a nurse, I’m used t’ it.”

Plastic bags encased in towels, packed around the injury, Hamish felt the right eejit with this stranger. She proceeded to examine his knees and torso, using alcohol to clean irritated skin and tweezers to pluck out embedded debris. Gauze then covered the wounds, expertly taped to prevent movement.

Well past midnight, she guided him toward the master bedroom.

“I cannae...” he protested.

“Nonsense. If ye sleep on yer back, the discomfort should be minimal.”

“When I sleep that way, I snore.”

“M’ da reminded me o’ a buzzsaw. Dinnae worry yer head o’er it.”

Hamish slept like a log, roused by birds outside the window to discover fresh ice around his leg and a hot breakfast on a tray beside the bed. Skye breezed in with a carafe of steaming coffee and a large ceramic mug.

“H’ do ye feel?” she hailed.

“Better. Thanks.”

“I’m that glad.” She presented the aromatic brew. “When ye are done eatin’, the shower’s waitin’.”

“Shower?”

“Ye are a right mess, t’ be sure. Dirt in yer hair, in need o’ clean clothes...”

Hamish hadn’t given his appearance a second thought. “Oh, aye.”

“The stall has bars for ye t’ hold, so ye should nae need m’ help.”

She left him to his own devices, for which he was grateful. More than a hour elapsed before he hobbled into the parlor, where she idly strummed her five-stringed instrument before the fire.

“I thought ye could pay for yer lodgin’s by playin’ a bit for me,” she hinted.

“Oh, aye.” The Martin guitar needed tuning after its ordeal, and he realized positioning it on his thigh caused twinges of pain, but he managed to make a good showing of the talent that had ensured his survival the past eight years.

Recognizing the tunes, Skye joined in; both wore huge smiles when the final notes echoed through the house.

“Ye are quite good,” praised Hamish.

“As are ye.”

“Ha’ ye ever thought o’ playin’ professionally?”

“Ach, nae. Bein’ a nurse in Glasgow was more than a full time job, then when m’ mam died and Da needed me t’ care for him in his last days...”

“What about now?”

“I... would nae know how t’ begin...”

“We could perform together. I ha’ a gig tonight in Stirling, as a matter o’ fact...”

Skye pondered this free spirit - his shoulder-length mane, mixing shades of brown and red with blond streaks - secretly envious of his lifestyle. Since childhood, she’d been forced to be responsible for others: her younger brother, who’d suffered from a rare form of cancer and died before his seventh birthday; countless patients on the hospital wards; her dad, while dementia slowly robbed him of his memory.

“How will ye get there wi’out yer bike?” she asked.

Confidently. “We can thumb a ride. Wi’ a pretty lass like ye, ‘twould be easy enough.”

“I ha’ a car.”

Brown eyes flashed. “I dinnae see...”

“‘Tis around back, in the barn.”

“Oh, aye. What is it, then?”

“A Jaguar E-type convertible.”

Hamish’s jaw dropped. When he recovered his composure, he muttered, “How did ye come by...”

“‘Twas m’ dad’s. Bought it new thirty years ago, and kept it in top condition, until he could nae work on it anymore.”

“That would make it easy t’ get t’ Glasgow, Edinburgh... we could earn enough t’ get m’ bike fixed and so much more...”

“Split fifty-fifty, right?” Skye prodded.

“Oh, aye.” Hamish peered through the bay window. “Where can I put the pieces until I can haul it t’ a garage?”

“Already in the barn. Our local constable stopped by this morning, askin’ about it. He helped me move it off the road.”

Hesitantly: “I’ll.. ha’ t’ thank him when I see him.”

“Nae, unless ye want t’ be arrested.”

“Arrested?”

“He knows about yer little stunt at the revival...”

Rather than display regret, Hamish grinned broadly and shrugged.

The pair departed for Stirling after an early dinner, serenading the audience with a broad range of tunes until last call. Skye had a pleasant alto voice, readily harmonizing with Hamish’s melodies, and they went down a storm. They crashed in a musty flat two flights above the pub - as was Hamish’s agreement with the proprietor - then spent a few nights in Glasgow, before receiving an invitation to perform at Gleneagles.

They were approached by more than one agent as their popularity grew through word of mouth; Hamish refused lucrative recording offers on their behalf, as well as tours of major cities in the UK and across Europe.

In six weeks, he’d saved enough to pay for the motorcycle’s restoration. He decided, too, that once the Harley could be safely driven, he’d leave Skye far behind.

Not that he didn’t admire her talent, or how her quiet beauty augmented the tips they received when on stage. Nor did she convey any interest in escalating their relationship beyond a strictly business arrangement.

It didn’t even bother him when she took to wearing the fur-trimmed duster, thoroughly a hippie, herself, with tousled blonde tresses, flared-leg red velvet slacks and tie-dyed shirts.

He felt certain yearnings within himself, and he had no alternative but to stifle them. He’d never hesitated to get a leg over random women in whatever bed

he might occupy of a night, but this ache to settle in one place, with one female, defied his resolve to remain independent.

They made incredible music together, but he'd soon be going solo once more.

A week off in May brought them back to Skye's cottage to rest and refresh themselves. Hamish contacted the mechanic no sooner than they arrived; parts on backorder had delayed the project, now finished. Rather than have Skye drive him, he hitch-hiked into town, desperate to end their partnership.

That night, while she slept, he'd pack the duffel and the guitar, setting off on his own.

Baked chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, a colorful salad and chocolate cake filled his stomach - he'd miss her cooking, to be sure. That she'd been a true asset, he could not deny. She listened to his ramblings, encouraged him, never imposed her viewpoint upon him nor complained about the travel or the accommodations they were offered... an ideal companion.

As for the Jaguar: it saved him from many a rainy day on the road.

He dried the dishes as she washed them, shuddering at how he'd adapted to such domesticity. They played a few songs together, flames crackling on the hearth, before retiring to separate rooms.

Skye heard the Harley rev and glanced at the clock on the night stand: 3:00. She was amazed it had taken Hamish this long to make good his escape.

A yoke of guilt remained on his shoulders for months after his departure. Repeatedly tempted to revisit that marvelous little cottage, he steeled himself against the notion.

For her part, Skye missed their wandering and the music, but not Hamish. She'd long since learned to remain detached from other human beings; losing those closest had devastated her emotions, and she would not voluntarily put herself through that agony ever again.

He had regained his independence; she'd never lost hers.

## Objective: Ice Cream

Student-teacher Diane Hinton readily agreed to chaperone teenaged girls traveling across the glen to the St. Ambrose Boys School spring dance for one reason: she'd never attended extra-curricular social functions during her own years in secondary school.

She wanted to experience what she'd missed.

The lithe brunette could easily have been mistaken for one of her charges, though the rules of conduct for chaperones prohibited fraternizing with males enrolled at the host institution. She could, however, accept an offer of a turn around the gymnasium floor with one of the older men.

And, older they were.

Much older.

White-haired, balding, corpulent, arthritic... or priests in forbidding black cassocks.

At least, the music - while mostly from the 1940s - was upbeat and well-performed by a local quintet. Rock 'n roll wasn't permissible by conservative standards but, from Diane's perspective, the youngsters seemed to enjoy holding hands as their feet kept time, bodies closer together than propriety dictated, except for when they passed near the cluster of scowling adults.

Then, they stepped apart so as not to be censured or banned from the premises.

Diane lingered at the refreshment table, sipping tangy punch, when she noticed the intruder beneath the stone arch. Lean, jean-clad, with scuffed black leather boots, tie-dyed t-shirt beneath a patchwork vest, a windswept, wavy mane dangling below his shoulders, untrimmed mustache and Ho Chi Min goatee, he might have served as the poster child for this decadent era of the late 60s. He resembled itinerants seen hanging around the freight yard, waiting to hop into an open car and travel to points unknown.

"Miss Hinton," whispered the headmistress, scurrying from a brief consultation with her peers, "please ask that person to leave."

Diane's initial reaction: "Why me?" Yet, she said nothing, merely nodded and set her empty cup beside the crystal bowl of shimmering pink liquid, skirting the assembly to the foyer.

"What's doin'?" came the Glaswegian-accented baritone as she approached.

"See for yourself."

He grinned, cigarette-stained teeth not really appealing. "Right, let's ha' a go."

Before she could demur, Diane was twirled into his arms, and he guided her in a waltz around the fringes. A glance over his shoulder confirmed her superiors' disapproval; she shrugged while trying to aim him toward the doors.

Still, as he pressed his frame against her, she detected her temperature rising. Something inherently virile about him - in contrast to the incipient clones observing the scene - made her heart race.

"Let's... get some air," she managed as they neared the stage.

"Aye."

Abruptly, her fingers were grasped by callused digits; she practically had to run to keep up with his rapid, lengthy gait.

They didn't head outdoors, however. She was ushered along a dim corridor; his free hand tested knobs until he found an unlocked room and yanked her inside.

Diane protested, "What the..."

He smothered her tirade with his mouth, and she melted within an embrace that set her every nerve tingling.

During a pause to catch her breath, she heard, "Get your knickers off," and the sound of his zipper.

He took her on the counselor's sofa with an enthusiasm that outstripped her erstwhile boyfriend's best efforts, then - with a drawled, "Thanks" - abandoned her. She lay in the dark until she recovered a modicum of composure.

Diane was mobbed when she emerged from the building's recesses; she explained that the man had departed, and she'd availed herself of the toilet after ensuring he'd left the property.

Those elders, who probably hadn't engaged in sex for decades - if ever - believed her.

She migrated to where cake and ice cream signaled the conclusion of the festivities, a scoop of strawberry not quite eradicating the taste of feverish kisses.

Through days and weeks until the end of term, Diane dreamed of the drifter's musky scent, his insistent caresses, his lips and tongue assaulting her flesh. Even if she'd caught his name, she would not have dared try to find him, given the strict regime at St. Gertrude's Academy.

Summer break couldn't arrive quickly enough for her liking.

The trials of keeping four dozen supposed young "ladies" in line thoroughly knackered her. Their determination to break the rules required her to stay awake most nights, sitting a post at the bottom of the former castle's servants'

stairs, the route by which those who violated curfew invariably sneaked back to the dorms.

She'd already decided to transfer into a different course of study that autumn.

A black taxi deposited her and three pieces of luggage at the house where she'd spent most of her life on a brisk June Saturday. Her father carried the largest into the two-story domicile; she emptied the rest into a wicker laundry basket in the utility room behind the kitchen with a promise to her mother that she'd wash everything before dinner.

While sorting colors from whites, Diane heard an ominous rumbling and felt the plank floor tremble. Located nowhere near the train tracks, she shuddered at the prospect of an earthquake - not common to the region, but not impossible.

She dropped a heap of towels and rushed out the back door, where the racket reverberated off nearby structures. Neither of her parents - weeding the flower bed and trimming a hedgerow, respectively - paid any heed.

Diane momentarily feared for her sanity. "Dad?"

"Eh?" He didn't miss a beat in his rhythmic motion.

"What's that..."

The maritime engineer grimaced. "Rafferty's wastrel is home again."

She scanned the block of identical faded brick facades, narrow drives occupied by modest sedans or family vehicles.

Except one.

A customized low-rider trike with high-backed, hand-stitched black leather seats for driver and passenger spewed fumes into the air as its engine coughed. Behind it, a multi-drawer red metal toolbox on wheels hinted adjustments were in progress. Then, the mechanic straightened and assessed his efforts.

Had he planned to *increase* the decibel level? Diane puzzled, recognizing him.

"That isn't... wee Bill?" she speculated.

Her father replied, "A damned shame, innit? Turned his back on a football scholarship... for what?"

She'd attended school with Rafferty as weans - before boys and girls dealt with the hell of separate classrooms. What he'd become...

In good conscience, she couldn't just stroll down the lane and greet him with a familiarity bred by intimate contact. Their prior acquaintance added a bizarre layer of awkwardness to the dynamic...

Still, as he drove the motorcycle toward the River Clyde, she didn't attempt to hide. Distracted hazel eyes swept his surroundings.

Diane had no doubt he'd seen her, though his brain hadn't registered the image.

She'd dealt with similar issues all too often in the classroom, her students' attention span severely limited.

Humorous how he frequented the same pub his father - and hers - had passed many a Friday night since World War II. The clientele had changed, though, with folk music types and stoners outnumbering the rowdy working class. Diane showed up solely for the purpose of meeting friends home from Oxford and Harvard in America and, when they didn't show, she felt quite the idiot in the booth alone.

She couldn't tear her eyes off Rafferty: the long legs, tight arse, trim waist, square shoulders, and a head that might have been transplanted from a grizzly bear. He laughed at his companions' jokes, and contributed a few of his own between gulps of heavy.

What harm would there be if she eased up to the bar to order another glass of scrumpy and, maybe - on accident - bumped into him?

Diane realized she lacked the courage so touted by those in the burgeoning feminist movement who proclaimed a woman's duty to defy taboos where sex and career were concerned.

Not that she cowered, but she didn't assert her advantage, either.

At least, not for a month.

Well into July, her frustration at being a spectator in her own life peaked. She'd heard gossip among the neighbors that Bill Rafferty would soon be off to ramble at will, his mother miffed by his refusal to accept a steady position in the family business.

If Diane didn't act soon, she might lose the chance forever.

Her parents watching telly that Tuesday evening, the young woman crept out the side door in skin-tight cut-off shorts, a tank-top with a huge multi-colored peace symbol and hemp sandals. She'd buried her curls beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat. She strode toward Rafferty's residence just as he swung onto the trike.

That roar echoed along the block for just a few seconds before all felt silent. He vanished into the shed, fetching a wrench, then bent to adjust some component of the engine - giving Diane enough time to glide up the drive.

She'd rehearsed her greeting since that morning, but her brain failed her. A wee smile preceded, "Nice wheels."

Rafferty straightened and stared at her; smoldering hazel orbs barely concealed the gears grinding as he calculated the best tactic to get her in the sack. "Wanna ride?"

Diane couldn't mistake the innuendo.

Discarding the hat, she climbed behind him onto the comfortable perch, and he steered the beast of a motorcycle away from the city, summer wind cooling them as they sailed along the open track.

Rafferty braked beneath a huge oak near a tiny loch and twisted toward her. "C'mere," he instructed.

"Sorry?"

A firm grip tugged her forward across his lap, his feet still wedged in the stirrups. "There's something I've always wanted to try," he muttered. "This is the perfect stretch to test my theory."

Their noses inches apart, Diane wondered, "Dangerous?"

"Dead easy."

"Then, I'm game."

The trike cruised along the asphalt with the pair in this position, Diane's head resting on Rafferty's shoulder so he had a clear view of the road. He'd loosened his jeans - as had she - and the motion as they sped over the rutted surface brought them both to climax in less than five miles without much exertion on their part.

That final moment, though, nearly cost their lives. A bus of holiday revelers passed on their right, and Rafferty wrenched the handlebars as he tensed; a collision was avoided by less than a meter.

Some of the occupants on the transport got an eyeful of the couple's nether regions, too - expressions of disgust combined with laughter as they bounced toward their destination.

The pair checked into a rustic bed and breakfast away from the tourist enclave after enjoying fish and chips and triple-scoop ice cream cones at the lakeside. They explored each other's bodies through the night, neither focused on the future.

Rafferty dropped Diane at her house late Wednesday; she detected his reluctance to take his leave. He'd expressed admiration for her singular attributes, so why should he risk never finding the equivalent elsewhere?

"There's no stopping us," he stated, engine idling beside them.

She countered, "Except every practical consideration."

Men, as a rule, weren't known for being practical, she'd learned.

"I'll admit this, Bill: what happened at the spring dance was fantastic, and I've no regrets about reconnecting with you. Life is, unfortunately, about more than just doing as you please."

“Says who?” He drew her close and kissed her passionately. “We pass this way but once, and life is too short *not* to do as we please.” He swung a leg over the trike’s fuel tank. “Do you want to revel in the fantastic before you die, or experience a slow death trapped by society’s expectations?”

“I hope for the former, while dodging the latter. I’m sad to admit your habit of roaming the country, scratching for pennies, doesn’t resonate with me.”

He acknowledged her decision by tilting his shaggy head slightly and blinking once. Then, the trike shifted into gear and left a patch of rubber as it thundered into the sunset.

Diane breezed into the house, invigorated as she raided the freezer for chocolate ice cream. Despite her objections, Rafferty’s carefree attitude had nonetheless altered her perception: she decided to devote her efforts to those who’d been victimized by society’s prejudices, empowering them to pursue a stable future.

## The Best Medicine

Such a comprehensive study of the effects of live performance on audiences had not before been undertaken. The university's research team embraced this opportunity, however, as integral to developing non-drug-related treatments for various forms of mental illness.

In anticipation of receiving substantial grant monies, three lauded psychologist/professors partnered with the prestigious Center for the Arts, placing cameras and monitoring equipment throughout the theatre, with totally anonymous results compiled after each show.

Individuals - mostly season ticket holders - were solicited to participate in the experiment, wearing sensors that transmitted their emotional response to the onstage presentations via a wireless connection with a laptop computer.

Random patients from a network of regional counseling clinics were escorted to the touring Broadway musicals, amateur dramas, ballets, and orchestra concerts - welcoming a chance to mingle with a class of people they would never encounter in their daily lives, in clothes they could never afford on their salaries or government benefits.

That particular psychological factor was included as a separate category in the correlated data.

Conversely, more casual productions - rock concerts or improv ensembles - elicited an vastly different range of results to be audited by the graduate students and their mentors. The "guinea pigs" displayed a more grounded comfort level in jeans, t-shirts and sneakers; the spontaneity of their reactions increased exponentially.

More challenging for the team: enlisting performers to allow their connection with the audience to be tracked. The troupes were rarely available for more than two or three nights - four was an exception. Arguments about whether such limited input would be valid were mediated by the project lead, who figured that having such information and discarding it later was better than not having it when it might be essential to proving the proposed theory.

So it happened, when Tam Conneely arrived for a sold-out week of comedic insanity, he was approached by Dr. Andrea Marshall in the corridor outside the star's dressing room.

The two sized each other up for a prolonged moment. The academic wore her reddish mane pulled into a tight bun, thick prescription lenses in octagonal silver wire frames distorting fiery blue eyes, thin lips slightly parted. Her credentials dangled on an orange lanyard around her scrawny neck atop a starched

mauve blouse, tweed skirt and flat loafers. The Scotsman, tall but not athletic, hair a multi-colored mass of longish waves, scruffy mustache and untrimmed goatee, sported a purple vertically striped shirt, floral-print leggings, and pointy snakeskin boots.

“Do you have a minute, Mr. Conneely?” she began.

His burr sent chills through her frame. “Ach, only lawyers and wankers hoping t’ put the bite on me for a fiver call me that.”

“Fair enough, Tam. Might I have a word?”

“Aye.”

He ushered her into the modest, sky-blue painted chamber. A make-up table stood empty against the north wall, lightbulbs surrounding the oversized mirror generating additional heat on an already balmy summer evening. On the stool sat a tattered duffel, half-zipped. The open closet held a vacant rack; a rumpled daybed occupied space beside the bathroom door.

Refusing the offer of a seat, Andrea briefly detailed the university’s efforts to gather insights into the impact of live art on mental health, concluding with a plea for Conneely’s cooperation.

“Nae, nae,” he refused flatly. “I would nae be able t’ focus if I knew m’ every word was bein’ analyzed.”

“But...”

He insisted his visitor settle on the quilt-covered mattress, dropping beside her. “Ye must ha’ read some background material on me before ye dared make such a ludicrous request. I ha’ never kept secret how difficult ‘tis for me prior t’ goin’ onstage. Once I’m there, however, the stories burst forth in an entertainin’ fashion - thankfully - and, afterward, it takes hours for the excess adrenaline to work its way oot o’ m’ system.”

“Yes, I know...”

“I ha’ t’ ask ye t’ respect m’ wishes, and try t’ ken m’ reasons.”

A massive yet soft hand patted her forearm, signaling an end to the discussion.

Dejected, Andrea rose. “Are you sure...”

“Oh, aye. Now, if ye will excuse me...”

The woman made her exit, unfazed by the personal contact. She realized, all too well, those of another temperament might have fainted on the spot at the mere touch of a such an icon. A sense of something unbalanced in Conneely nagged at her; those brown orbs harbored a secret - if not many.

She didn't stay for the show, a deliberate choice to maintain her objectivity throughout the data-gathering phase of the venture when, truthfully, she loved the theatre in all its various incarnations.

Better had she remained in the massive structure, perhaps. When her cell phone rang near midnight, she woke in the recliner where she'd dozed off reading *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, glancing around the living room in momentary confusion.

The grad student sounded stressed. "The recording equipment is on the fritz."

Andrea heard a muffled cacophony and checked her wristwatch. "Is he still going?"

"Over four hours now. The laughter hasn't stopped for a minute."

"I'll be right down."

The failure of an amalgamation of specially designed electronics wasn't going to put years of work at risk. Her vintage grey Corvette exceeded the speed limit through the suburbs, ignored traffic signals and braked beside a fire hydrant, spilling her onto the sidewalk just as crowds burst excitedly through six sets of glass doors.

Fighting a tidal wave would have proved less strenuous.

She instinctively shifted direction, veering down the alley to the stage entrance.

Fortunately, autograph seekers had yet to converge, and she gained access with no difficulty. Climbing a circular metal staircase to the converted costume shop, her lungs heaved with exertion when she stumbled across the threshold.

A trio of voices assaulted her ears; she silenced them with a raised hand. Order restored, she listened as each technician explained their diagnosis of the malfunctioning components.

Teenage years spent competing with five brothers to build the ultimate gaming computer stood Andrea in good stead. The vibrations caused by 6,000 people rocking with mirth had jarred loose contacts on a tangle of wiring, disconnecting sensors from the main console.

The issue would not recur during Conneely's next six appearances, she made certain.

She also left her subordinates with a mild scolding about the state of the room: printouts piled willy-nilly, dates missing from reports, fast food wrappers, cups and sacks strewn on desks and floor, and more.

Their apologies wafted after her as she departed, an almost eerie silence enveloping the wings. A loudly ticking wall clock declared it 1:25 am.

“Shit!” she muttered, straining through the dimness for the door.

She froze when a melodic whistle echoed from the depths of the gloom. Confident footsteps grew louder; she glanced around for some form of concealment, before grasping no one could see her in the dark, anyway.

What she presumed to be the stage manager, or the theatre’s security guard, breezed within inches of her. A shaft of light illuminated the figure when a heavy steel panel creaked outward: Tam Conneely.

She rushed after him - or, rather, after the glow. Once outside, she inhaled the putrid scent of rotting garbage and dog excrement, and glimpsed Conneely, 50 yards ahead, round the corner onto Fourth Avenue.

Away from the hotel where he’d been booked into the penthouse suite.

“What the hell...” murmured Andrea.

She followed him at a discreet distance, innocuous enough in black t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. Even if he’d craved a drink - an ineffective means to flush the remnants of energy from his body, a necessity he’d mentioned earlier - the bars in town were already closed.

No. He never glanced twice at flickering signs he passed on the quiet thoroughfare, striding beneath the street lamps, fists jammed in his trouser pockets, without a care in the world.

The comedian veered right on Oak Lane, an upscale residential neighborhood. Andrea, through sheer exhaustion, had fallen far behind and, when she reached the intersection, he had vanished.

A pre-arranged assignation with an eager female fan? she puzzled.

Not unlikely.

Brains having a particular creative bent often developed unusual links between disparate activities. One poet she’d included in her doctoral dissertation claimed he required alcohol in the wake of long sessions consigning his rhymes to paper, “to raise my spirits, fire the belly and chase away the demons.”

Another, a renowned novelist, found relief in the physical. “The flesh is the traditional solace of the tormented soul,” he’d confided to her during their interview after delivering her alma mater’s commencement address on a rainy May Sunday - a clumsy attempt to seduce her.

Legal and illegal drugs, the intensity of sports like jogging or bicycling, gorging on a favorite food...

Essentially hogwash, of course, but Andrea could not discount how these concepts prompted the establishment of mental responses almost impossible to alter without supreme diligence and therapy.

She increased her pace past 19<sup>th</sup> century-style domiciles, wrought iron fences bordering neatly landscaped lawns. When she tripped over a section of uneven concrete, she grabbed a rose-covered trellis to steady herself, piercing her palm with thorns.

“Shit!” she hissed, retracting the appendage and kissing bleeding punctures.

She spun toward the street, determined to forgo this nonsensical pursuit.

That’s when she realized the obstacle in her path had nothing to do with cement.

A shapely leg ending in a bare foot, red stiletto beside it, stretched across her path.

Andrea squatted to inspect the scene, shuddering at the sight of a young woman’s slender body partially concealed by a row of perfectly sculpted yew bushes, flesh still warm.

Her first reaction: phoning the police.

Her second, as she paced nearby, waiting for the first responders: why hadn’t Tam Conneely noticed the corpse?

Logic dictated he might not have walked this far down the block, or had crossed the pavement to the other side. As chaos reigned for the next few hours, though, of the many residents - young and old - who viewed the proceedings from nearby windows, or stepped onto their porches, he was not among them.

Irritating and repetitious interrogation by uniformed officers and plain-clothes detectives frazzled Andrea’s nerves. She didn’t reclaim her Corvette from its unauthorized parking spot until dawn, and could barely keep her eyes open to drive home.

She slept on the living room sofa until mid-afternoon, having been unable to shuffle as far as her bedroom once unlocking her cozy bungalow’s front door.

No need to listen to the local news to learn the victim had been strangled. She’d seen as much when the coroner’s assistants loaded the deceased onto a gurney. Bruises caused by powerful fingers compressing the windpipe were unmistakable.

A stern reminder of why Andrea abandoned med school for a less gut-wrenching major.

The question of identity was solved even before the coroner arrived on scene. A red beaded bag - matching her shoes and false fingernails and still clutched in her left hand - had contained a leather wallet with \$500, driver’s licence and university ID.

The motive had not been robbery.

A check of her name in the court database showed a series of misdemeanor prostitution-related solicitation charges, for which she'd been sentenced to probation.

"A john who refused to pay, I'll bet," remarked a pompous corporal observing the activities to a patrol officer. "They argued and he did what he needed to shut her up."

His comrade countered, "In this neighborhood?"

"Hey, the high class ones make house calls."

Andrea cringed at such generalizations.

Still... if there had been an altercation - and the coroner estimated the time of death to be within 30 minutes of his arrival, meaning just minutes before Andrea found the body - had Conneely witnessed the event and hidden to protect himself? Then, sneaked away so he wouldn't have to be involved in the aftermath?

She waited in his dressing room that evening, having full run of the complex after nearly three years associating with the staff. When he flounced in at 7:00, he pulled up short at the sight of her.

"What the devil..."

"I hate to interrupt your pre-curtain angst," she declared. "Have you seen the news?"

"I dinnae watch telly, and ha' nae time t' read the papers."

"Or to report seeing a murder?"

He switched on the make-up table lights, contemplating his reflection in the mirror. "What a load o' pish."

"Why *were* you wandering around the city so late?"

"Ye are nae the police."

"Would you rather talk to them, or me?"

"Neither." He approached, lifted her roughly off the daybed and shoved her toward the door. "Be gone wi' ye, and dinnae come back!"

Andrea left instructions with the graduate students to notify her of that night's results as soon as Conneely left the stage. Cognizant she'd seriously rattled his cage, that he actually exceeded the level of humor from his previous performance amazed her.

Phenomenal self-control!

He didn't leave the Center for the Arts until nearly 2:00 am; her extended vigil wedged in the recessed service entrance of a posh restaurant opening onto the alley caused her joints to ache when she finally moved to shadow him.

Perhaps the night atmosphere cleared his head after hours of stories whirling through his mind and out his mouth, she mused, making chase along

Eighth Avenue. In that mode, he might be completely oblivious to his surroundings, including a tragic death.

The workings of the human brain continued to elude precise explanations...

Damn his long legs! she cursed silently, losing him again once he turned onto Washington Boulevard near the river.

The lead report on Saturday's truncated evening news detailed a body found floating in the water near the pier at the intersection of Washington and Sixth.

"Shit!"

Conneely, sprawled on the daybed - still in his "costume" of Scottish-blue t-shirt, black jeans and open-toed sandals - snored noisily when she intruded on his privacy without knocking. The matinee had been a massive triumph; anyone willing to sell a ticket for subsequent gigs could score an easy \$5,000, according to online chatter.

Andrea sat on the stool, watching the comedian dream. Unintelligible muttering, flailing of arms, grunts and moans denoted a troubled psyche. His subconscious was fighting - who, or for what?

A stage-struck intern, son of the Dean of Science, carried in a tray with Conneely's dinner: spaghetti carbonara, a green salad, bottled water and triple chocolate cake. She doubted he'd eat a bite, tempted by her own growling stomach to partake of the ample portions.

He didn't wake until the stage manager called "Fifteen minutes!" through the door. That, in itself, was a sight to behold; he might've been shocked by an electric cattle-prod.

"Ye here, agin?" he swore, managing to maneuver himself into a vertical position.

She stared at him, mute.

"I tol' ye..."

Rising, she nodded sedately. "Break a leg."

As a capacity crowd cheered him from the wings, Andrea drove to campus, taking advantage of late library hours to scour microfilm archives and current publications. She wanted to quash her suspicions about Tam Conneely, like her academic rivals wished to quash her theories about innovative mental health treatments.

Only with supporting data was that viable.

First, she jotted a list of dates and locations where Conneely had performed over the past decade. Then, she randomly selected corresponding records, concentrating on reports of unsolved, violent crimes.

Her hopes were soon dashed; her faith in law enforcement capabilities crushed. A six-page, four-column table, hand-drawn, detailed the victims, cause of death and proximity to the venue - no more than a mile.

Irrefutable evidence a serial killer roamed at large.

God forgive the man for releasing his excess adrenaline on unsuspecting passersby.

It also explained why someone so huge in showbiz circles traveled without the customary entourage, or even a “handler.”

Andrea didn't need any help setting her trap. A folding screen, tucked in the dressing room's unused closet, provided ample concealment for the wooden chair she'd hijacked from the wings. She sat patiently as the post-intermission set ran well over two hours...

Tam Conneely didn't come down from his “high” quickly. Post-curtain visitors meandered in and out, regaled by even more stories as midnight passed. Andrea admitted to herself that his humorous observations surpassed most of the mirth-fueled philosophers she admired, and her torso ached from the exercise of stifled laughter when the final guest bade his idol farewell.

In the hush that ensued, the perspiration-drenched Scot shed his garb in favor of an artist-painted white linen suit and yellow suede Hush Puppies. He was admiring his appearance in the mirror when Andrea cast aside the screen, locked the door and confiscated the key.

“Went down a storm tonight...” Conneely drawled.

She inquired, “How long have you suffered from... blackouts?”

“Blackouts? I dinnae care fuck-all about...”

“It's either that, or you remember killing all those innocent people.”

He stiffened, towering over her by nearly a foot. Her spectacles slid down her nose; she swallowed a wave of fear.

“Ye ha' nae idea how it feels... the poundin' inside m' skull, thoughts flashin' past like fireworks...”

“You'd be surprised,” Andrea assured him. “But, releasing those emotions on random souls...”

“Ach, nae. Nae random. Muggers, whoores, rabid fans who cannae take nae for an answer...”

“So, the guy they found in the river, stabbed...”

“Tried t' rob me. I only defended m' self.”

“And the gal Thursday night?”

“Blackmail. Claimed t' ha' photos o' me in a compromising position wi'... a particular official, who's married t'... well...” He shrugged.

“She wanted money?”

“A quarter million dollars.”

“Shit!” Andrea sucked air through grit teeth. “There are so many, though...” She unfolded the list and dangled it before him.

Conneely didn’t seem to care. “Ha’ ye nae been around public figures much?”

“Not really.”

“Walk a mile in m’ shoes, woman. We are victims o’ the masses’ fetishes and foibles, adoration and hatred. Ach, how I wish I could return t’ Glasgow or the peace o’ m’ house in the Highlands. Instead, e’ry day I must fight for a second’s privacy...”

“Why didn’t you give proper statements to the authorities when these... incidents took place?” she queried.

“If they had asked, I would ha’ done.”

“You could have volunteered...”

“T’ face the cameras, the journalists... paparazzi hopin’ for a sensational headline?” he grumbled.

“Why not hire professional bodyguards to keep those types at arm’s length?”

“Seein’ people manhandled, insulted and disrespected goes against e’ry reason I ha’ for steppin’ on stage. I could nae justify the expense.”

“What about the lives you’ve taken? What about *that* expense?”

Conneely had no verbal reply. He lunged at her, hands encircling her neck. She felt him squeezing, retaining her wits long enough to free her father’s old Army revolver from the waistband beneath her t-shirt and firing into his mid-section.

He staggered backward, stunned, landing on the daybed.

The police would have arrested her, if she hadn’t video recorded the encounter with one of the miniature cameras used in her team’s research. Conneely’s confession would have gone viral on the internet, had she not convinced the chief that hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxpayer funds would be wasted, and years of research invalidated, if he released his intended statement to the media.

Rather, with the perpetrator of the deaths expired, dozens of cases could be closed with a minimum of fuss.

The world was, rightly, saddened by Conneely’s untimely - and officially “accidental” - demise. Andrea’s involvement remained confidential; the statistics garnered from his four performances at the Center for the Arts proved, especially

in cases of mental illness, laughter of the kind he'd elicited from his audiences was, indeed, the best medicine.

Had the comedian not so often wandered into the wrong place at the wrong time, he might have lived a long and fairly contented life. Further study into his background uncovered a history of abuse by members of his immediate family and, as a coping mechanism, his adoption of the code - seen by Andrea on an embroidered patch sewn to his duffel - "Do no harm but take no shit."

He'd died defending that code.

## Paying the Price

Yes, I've made mistakes in my life.

Lots of mistakes.

And, if I've learned anything, it's this: never acknowledge mistakes in writing, on paper, on a computer, or on any manner of recording.

That's because somebody - usually sticking their nose where it doesn't belong - will discover those admissions and use them to their own advantage.

Or, out of sheer spite.

My mother fell into the latter category.

She'd exploited her status as a widow for decades, wearing black long after the standard period of grieving expired, and making certain she got noticed as a tragic figure at public gatherings attended by my father's military friends and their wives. My brief yet torrid affair with one of those men after I graduated from college - tuition paid by veterans' organization scholarships and grants - raised in her a soul-warping jealousy.

Thus, she determined to disgrace me and generally make my life hell.

Lying to my landlord to gain access, her search of my apartment while I was on holiday in the Seychelles matched that of police detectives hunting for clues to convict a murderer.

She found my diary in a hidden compartment under the hardwood flooring beneath my bed. and sent photocopies of graphic entries to the wronged spouse so, when I deplaned from the return flight two weeks later, I was mobbed at the baggage claim carousel by reporters and photographers, the story going viral on the internet.

That's how I ended up moving 1,700 miles across the country, cutting and dyeing my hair, and securing a new identity thanks to a less-than-ethical lawyer who'd briefly been the step-father of my freshman year roommate in the campus dorm.

No longer being able to claim my degree made securing a decent job difficult but, at least, I'd permanently severed ties with that vindictive woman.

I mean, how was it my fault that I'd kept in shape by playing intramural basketball, cycling, and eating healthy? My father, before being deployed overseas, taught me to respect and be kind to others, and people, generally, liked me.

Older men gravitated toward me - thinking me naive and innocent, I guess. I've lost count how many professors made passes at me, despite a faculty code of conduct that prohibited fraternization with students. I valued my education enough to politely turn down their offers of dinner and a movie, and more...

Guys my own age sought airheaded blondes - it's a crass generalization while utterly true. That freed me from dealing with their childish whining, since I preferred intelligent conversation.

Meaning: I had few close chums and a lot of casual acquaintances - male and female - even after five years in the new city.

I started as an accounting clerk in a CPA's office, being good with numbers and the requisite software. One of the clients, an artist, inquired about sketches hung in my cubicle and, impressed by my talent, recommended me for a post in the local television station's advertising department.

Within months, I was creating and editing videos for on-air programming and independent organizations.

Approached the following autumn by a prominent nonprofit in the early planning stages of their annual fundraiser, I accepted a generous contract to script and execute a series of promotions intended to double the previous year's donation total. When I received an email the following Monday, announcing the star of this effort would be an international celebrity, I nearly choked on my hot chocolate.

He resembled a wild man: a lion's mane of long, wavy grey, untrimmed salt-and-pepper full beard and mustache, a physique somewhat gone to seed...

How could they believe his involvement would advance their cause?

Possibly on the draw his name held in certain influential circles.

A name I can't divulge, because of yet another horrendous mistake on my part.

Or, was it?

He arrived a fortnight later - yeah, I integrated quite a few British-English terms into my vocabulary because of this debacle. I think he expected a limousine to retrieve him at O'Hare International. Instead, he got my gold 1972 Mustang Mach I.

Hey, when buying a car, I wanted a singular ride I'd enjoy driving, rather than a chip-controlled clone.

At least, the front seat had plenty of space for his long legs. His bags fit in the trunk, barely. When I asked about his entourage, he dispelled my illusion about his ego: he traveled alone, leaving his handlers, wife and kids at home.

Not that he could walk along any city street incognito - with that red velvet suit, hand-tooled black leather boots and recognizable visage.

He did, at least, conform to Hollywood standards in his request for five-star hotel accommodations. A penthouse overlooking the river had been secured, and he approved, toting two of his bags across the threshold while I pushed the rest on a luggage cart, in the absence of a bellhop.

“So, what’s our schedule?” he queried with a distinctive accent, once the floral arrangements - to which he was allergic - were removed by housekeeping staff.

“We start Wednesday morning in the studio, giving you a day to recover from any jet lag,” I explained. “We’ll do the voiceovers, then do the location shoots.”

“You’ll be done with me by the 18<sup>th</sup>?”

Initially, I didn’t quite know how to respond to the question, latent paranoia imbuing the words with a double meaning. Then, I managed, “Whatever the terms of your agreement state.”

“Thanks.”

Dismissed, I had my hand on the doorknob when I remembered a vital aspect of this project. I crossed the lush carpet to the oak desk near full-length windows, retrieving a business-sized envelope. Presenting it to him, I announced, “Here’s a credit card for you to use when making any purchases during your stay.”

The account had a \$10,000 limit, but the nonprofit’s board thought that sufficient to cover meals and other incidentals.

How little they knew about those accustomed to a certain upscale lifestyle.

Another “Thanks,” prior to adding, “Do I have your number, in case of questions?”

Back to the desk, I jotted my cell on a sticky note.

He inclined his head slightly and blinked: permission to depart.

Tuesday was crammed with meetings, the nonprofit board and administrators finalizing drafts of narrations and signing off on story boards. I arrived at the recording studio before 6:00 a.m. on Wednesday, making preparations before swinging by the hotel to fetch our goodwill ambassador promptly at 7:30.

His professionalism astounded me. In the booth, a water bottle and coffee mug kept his throat moist. He rehearsed the text once; sound techs needed no more than two takes to get the audio that I’d be blending with a soundtrack and visuals.

“What are you doing for the music?” he asked during a mid-morning break.

“Stock stuff.”

“Nothing original?”

“It’s not in the budget to hire a composer.”

“Find me a piano, and I might be able to do something.”

Mentally kicking myself, I’d forgotten that he’d written the entire score for his first play - produced in London before I was born. “That would be fantastic!”

Phone calls secured an instrument worthy of his skill and its delivery to the penthouse by mid-afternoon. We were, in fact, far ahead of schedule because of his dedication and willingness to take direction, so allowing him time to plunk out notes on a keyboard didn't impinge on my expenses.

Come Friday, he was eager to experience more than just the downtown amenities. I drove him to dinner at my favorite Chinese restaurant and to the county park for a leisurely stroll along colorful trails. When I suggested a nightcap at our premiere Irish pub, he refused, confiding he'd been sober since his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday.

"Good for you!" I said, having myself never enjoyed the taste of alcohol.

"What do you have planned for this weekend?" he asked as the Mustang idled beneath the hotel's portico.

"Nothing much."

His smile hardly visible within the whiskers, he hinted, "Are you up for a road trip, so you can open this baby up and satisfy my need for speed?"

"I suppose you want to drive it, too," I quipped.

"If you're willing."

"There's an abandoned racetrack on the south side, then we could see where the road takes us."

He suggested 10:00 as he swung off the passenger seat, and I agreed.

One facet of this job I hadn't read in the contract: entertainment committee.

His interest in classic cars, and their performance, soothed my frustrations a bit. His father had designed engines for Rolls Royce, so he spoke knowledgeably about the topic. We spent a marvelous, cool day roaming the state after he pegged the speedometer at 140 mph on the overgrown concrete oval, ending with a quiet Italian dinner at a lakeside café.

"If you ever want to sell that beast, I'll meet your price," he promised over the antipasto.

I shook my head, mouth full of fettuccini alfredo.

The sunset accompanied our leisurely cruise to the city, and he instructed me to park the Mustang and come up to his room. "There's a coffee maker I can't quite figure out..."

Having reviewed the credit card activity and counted multiple purchases of caffeinated drinks over a four day period, I figured brewing his own would be more economical. We rode up in the elevator, tackling the first order of business when entering the foyer: the air conditioning had been left on and it felt like winter.

A faux fireplace didn't alleviate the problem, and we wrapped ourselves in blankets off the king-sized bed.

"A cup of coffee would be great right now," he chuckled, "but I'm too cold..."

Living at chilly latitudes had acclimatized me to the weather; I shed my flannel cloak and migrated to the kitchenette, where the espresso machine presented quite a challenge. I've always been reluctant to let technology best me, though, and two cups of steaming delight were soon being consumed.

"Can you write out the directions for me?" he requested.

"Already done."

"Clever girl."

I'd never been kissed by a man with a beard, and wasn't sure I liked it when he leaned toward me. Still, my heart rate increased as his hands caressed my arms and I threw caution to the wind.

Hell, we pass this way but once.

Or, at least, such was his justification for me spending every non-working hour in bed with him at the penthouse for almost three weeks.

Until a Sunday morning phone call from the reception desk announced his daughter's arrival.

Known for his frequent use of colorful expletives, he outdid himself as he leapt off the mattress and scrambled for a robe to cover his nakedness.

Me? I scooped up my jeans, socks, underwear, t-shirt and sneakers, ducking into the bathroom. I tried to calm my respiration as I burst into the living room seconds before he opened the door and embraced his eldest.

"You should have texted me you were coming," he scolded. "I would've met you at the airport."

A lovely young woman, favoring her mother, I presumed. "I got invited to tour a couple midwest colleges during my fall holiday, so I booked a flight last-minute."

"You must be knackered," he remarked. "Would you like some coffee?"

That's when she noticed me, brewing espresso.

"And, who's this?" the teen inquired suspiciously.

Her father swallowed hard. "Kelly, this is the lead producer on the project, Jules Minchin."

Presenting her a cup, I smiled.

"Awfully early to be out and about, don't you think?" came the accusation.

Fortunately, this wasn't my first rodeo. "We're hoping to catch the sunrise over the river."

“Indeed.”

“I can see you’ll be busy, though, so we’ll try again tomorrow, okay?”

Grabbing my windbreaker off the sofa, I headed for the door.

Pausing in the hall to fiddle with the coat’s stubborn zipper, I heard her squeal, “Oh, Dad. Not again!”

What excuses he made, I didn’t care. I descended to the parking garage, climbing into the Mustang and heading to my apartment. Piles of laundry awaited; I’d just thrown the third load in the dryer when the doorbell chimed.

Kelly stood, shivering, on the stoop. Whether the cold and blowing flakes of snow were the cause, or her misplaced anger at me for seducing her father, I had no interest.

Being unkind wasn’t in my nature, though. “Come in.”

Once she had a mug of hot chocolate to warm her hands, she exploded. “I’m warning you: stay away from my father.”

Oh, to be so self-righteous!

“Look, kid. He has a contract, and so do I. Thousands of people served by this agency are depending on us to appeal to the masses for donations that will keep their programs going for the next year.”

“Does that contract include shagging him?” she snapped.

“Is that what he told you?”

She drained the mug, trying in vain to conceal how the liquid scalded her tongue. “He didn’t say a word. I know his history...”

“And, I know yours.” Time to speak truth to privilege. “You’re a pampered little daddy’s girl who gets miffed if he pays attention to anyone else, even on legitimate business. You’ll pout and fuss until he caves... How much money do you want?”

She reared up from the sofa. “How *dare* you! I could ruin you!”

I rose. “Go ahead. But, keep this in mind: any rumors you leak to the media about me will include your father, who might well become a victim of our ludicrous cancel culture once the reports circulate. That’ll mean his income will dry up - and so will yours.”

Her jaw gaped, then gradually closed.

Irritating signals from the utility room reminded me clothes needed to be hung in the closet.

“I’m not going to wait for an apology, just go.”

A whipped pup would have retreated no more contritely. Her tantrum didn’t end with that visit, however. She must’ve contacted freelance photographers

- paparazzi - between college tours, because during the course of the next week, my Mustang was followed by an assortment of nondescript Chevys and Toyotas.

My trash was hijacked, including scrawled cards her father had included with red roses laid on the Mustang's seat...

Never positive Kelly was behind the blackmail attempt, I suspected she would've got a cut of the action if I'd paid the price demanded by the sleaze in the navy suit, who presented an album of vaguely compromising photos and florist receipts at my office the day before I drove my wild savage lover to O'Hare. Maybe I should have kept my distance, confining our interactions to details of the production; what harm would modest expressions of appreciation, images of us holding hands on a public sidewalk or him comforting me after I tripped over my tripod and skinned my knee in the forest do either of us?

"I have more..." this extortionist threatened.

That's when I made what proved to be my greatest mistake. I shoved him out the door with the pledge, "Unless they're of me riding him like a stallion, forget it!"

Only one building in the city towered higher than the hotel - and only a specific type of jerk would rent a high-powered telephoto lens for his camera based on my impulsive declaration, taking up a post on the topmost floor of that structure, aiming his equipment at the penthouse's bedroom window.

That last night, we reveled in each other, not bothering to draw the curtains...

I paid dearly for my folly. Two years passed before a hacker recommended by my erstwhile lawyer breached the miscreant's hard drive firewall and uploaded a virus that destroyed all digital images, along with any backups on external drives plugged into his system.

My partner in passion never got wind of my dilemma - we lost contact after that arduous month - though his daughter amassed quite a fortune of her own, the origins of which multiple British agencies investigated after she let slip during a television interview she paid no taxes on the cash stream.

Comforting, this assurance that everyone makes mistakes.

## A Baffling Tragedy

Even tenured professionals had never encountered the like.

In a 15-minute span around 4:00 AM on a blustery May Thursday, 32 people died at St. Thomas' Medical Center on three floors: the Intensive Care Unit, the Heart and Vascular wing and the Cancer Treatment Center.

As dozens of monitors alarmed, minimal overnight personnel couldn't handle the rush. The county coroner was still collecting bodies mid-morning, having borrowed transports from neighboring jurisdictions.

Chicago Police got involved only when Detective Pete Niezgodski swung by the facility on his way downtown, visiting his sister and newborn nephew. Curiosity regarding a long line of vehicles near the loading dock prompted him to ask the maternity ward's head nurse what had transpired.

Her vague response piqued his interest.

After cradling the hefty family addition in his arms, Niezgodski inquired about security for the massive structure. He was directed to an office on ground level, where uniformed rent-a-cops drank coffee and chatted while 20 screens mounted on one wall displayed entrances, corridors and stairwells.

"You got footage from last night?" he asked.

The lead guard replied, "Sure."

"Run it."

"Which camera?"

"All of them."

"Are you crazy?" objected a sandy-haired female technician.

The burly official settled at the control console. "Something - or someone - caused all those deaths, and I'm going to find out why."

A hospital after hours is mostly a quiet structure, except for the Emergency Room. Niezgodski limited his review to the 30 minutes between 3:45 and 4:15, when most of the black and white images remained static.

"Where's the staff?" he puzzled.

"On their lunch break, most of 'em."

Indeed, a scan of the second floor cafeteria showed activity at the vending machines and scrub-clad employees interacting around four square tables.

The detective instructed. "Show me the ICU."

Ten glass-encased cubicles lined a dimly illuminated hall, lights from breathing apparatus and other equipment reflecting on the panels. Niezgodski signaled the guard to fast-forward, shouting at her to reverse when a life-sized shadow passed through the frame.

His outburst gathered the others from their duties; eight pairs of eyes watched a tall, trim figure with shoulder-length dark hair, clad in a light-colored robe that reached to his bare feet, glide through the unit.

From behind Niezgodski, a red-head remarked, "From this angle, it looks like Jesus."

A collective shudder ran through the assembly.

"Is there another view?" he wondered.

"Not for this area."

"Then, let's look at the others."

The rooms where patients with heart ailments were treated had the equivalent of picture windows beside the doors, with curtains that could be closed if they wished more privacy. The recording showed most with the glass unobscured, possibly to allow the nurses to observe those inside without disturbing their sleep.

The mysterious wanderer, again seen from the back, strolled along the hall, pausing to peer through random casements before continuing toward the stairs.

"Damn, why aren't these cameras high definition?" barked Niezgodski.

The lead guard supplied, "We're waiting for a grant to fund the upgrade."

"Show me the cancer unit."

That grainy clip, at least, showed the subject's face - fully bearded.

"Christ!" swore the youngest of the team.

The cop countered, "Not likely."

"But, what if those who saw him *thought* he was the Lord?" the tech speculated.

"We'll never know, will we?"

The lead stated, "You could question any family members in the rooms with the patients. Maybe they saw something..."

In fact, five of those non-patients had died, Niezgodski discovered. Those he interviewed through the day had been asleep and didn't notice anything unusual.

He chanced upon a single witness: the daughter of a man who'd been in a major car accident had been keeping vigil at her father's bedside in the ICU, leaving to refill her coffee cup around 3:55. From the visitors' lounge threshold, she'd caught a glimpse of the spectre, who'd been humming a pleasant tune. As alarms nearly deafened her, she'd raced back to the room without giving the vision a second thought.

"He *did* look like those pictures of Jesus sold in Christian gift shops," she acknowledged. "He had an almost beatific smile..."

Niezgodski stifled a sarcastic comment, chin lowered. He couldn't justify spending most of his shift investigating a divine apparition.

In a private room on the hospital's fifth floor, appendicitis patient Barry Calhern slept late. He'd been awake most of the night, thanks to frequent checks of his pulse and blood pressure, and drinking a really awful mug of coffee from a pot he'd located in an employee break room after wandering the building in the wee hours.

When his girlfriend came to pick him up once the doctor approved his discharge, she packed the white terrycloth robe in a sports bag, not zipping it until he'd thrown in the brush that detangled his long reddish-brown mane.

"You think I should shave off the beard?" he queried, studying himself in the bathroom mirror as he secured his hair in a ponytail with a rubber band.

"Yeah," she sniffed. "I'm tired of my friends telling me you look like Jesus."

## Quick Stop

The two women - blonde and brunette - stepped across the threshold that blustery night, clearly travelers en route to destinations unknown. The Connemara pub sparsely populated at what locals considered an early hour - the musicians weren't scheduled to gather until 9:00 - the owner directed them to sit wherever they chose.

A booth beyond the bar provided a bit of privacy, and minimized the noise of wall-mounted televisions broadcasting the latest football match. Plastic-sleeved menus were presented by the barman, who stood over six feet tall.

His general appearance qualified as that of a "hard man," as the Scots described such a one. A longish, disheveled grey mop, stern features and a stiff spine indicated he took no crap from anyone.

He favored the brunette with a penetrating stare, and she wondered if he doubled as the bouncer with rowdy clientele. Her companion asked about the availability of chicken goujons; he grumbled about checking with the cook.

Less than a minute passed before he returned, confirming this option. The blonde requested a full order, while her friend opted for a child's portion.

Hours in a car put a serious damper on the latter's appetite, thanks to a temperamental stomach.

Little did she realize her choice would draw additional attention from the barman.

As, upon delivering her hot chocolate, he quipped, "Not up for a large one?"

Though American, she'd visited Ireland many times, and sensed a double meaning to the query. She didn't respond.

Placing a platter with breaded chicken tenders and fries - called "chips" in country - before her, he pressed his advantage. "Good kiddies who clean their plate get a lollipop."

She wanted to slap him.

Instead, she feigned a chuckle.

The owner did, indeed, present a metal bucket of sweet treats as the patrons concluded their meal, and both women selected one. The barman delayed bringing their bill - for what reason, they couldn't fathom.

When the brunette shifted on her seat to scan the rustic surroundings, she noticed him staring at her with smoldering hazel orbs.

"I think he fancies you," said the blonde.

"Oh, fuck that!"

A stack of Euros covered their total and a tip, with each taking a turn in the toilet before they departed. Upon exiting the thatch-roofed establishment, the American found her way blocked by the barman, gazing down at her.

His head tilted slightly left, and he blinked.

Her peripheral vision caught a sign for “comfortable accommodations” at the intersection.

Meanwhile, the blonde unlocked their rented Toyota and waited... though not too impatiently. She retraced her steps, in fact, declaring, “I need to pick up a few things at the shop.”

No need for acknowledgment, she ventured between parked cars and across the road.

The brunette swallowed her heart. This journey was supposed to be about discovering her roots, now her husband’s suffering with Parkinson’s disease had ended. Why did this distant cousin keep pushing her to... to...

Because she hadn’t been with a man that way for nearly a decade, and she was still relatively young: in her mid-50s.

She mimicked the barman’s gesture and, together, they strolled along the pavement.

An hour later, she emerged from the converted school, calm and smiling, the man on her heels. He kissed her lightly in parting, then resumed his duties in the pub, a blend of accordion, fiddle and guitar wafting through the open door.

She slid onto the passenger’s seat; the blonde smirked deviously as she shifted the Toyota into gear and steered into the night.

“What?” muttered the brunette.

“Glad to know you’re still alive.”

She retorted, “We pass this way but once.”

## Rebel Without a Sword

A wee bloke by modern standards, Callum walked with a confident swagger that practically dared anyone to mention his lack of height. His reputation as a boxer and a jockey - an odd combination, but well suited to his physical attributes - also caused patrons in the Glasgow pub to clench their jaws when he passed.

He straddled a bar stool and pounded stained wood. "A pint of heavy," he shouted over the din of music and laughter.

The glass sloshed over when the auburn-haired barmaid placed it before him; she cringed, reaching for a towel to soak up excess froth.

Callum smiled sympathetically and patted her cheek. "Accidents happen, m' dear."

Gulping dark brew, he spun on the seat, scanning the establishment. A cuckoo clock hung among the liquor bottles confirmed his contact was already ten minutes late.

When weighing virtues and faults, tardiness topped his list of the latter. His schedule required prompt completion of myriad tasks; he didn't have the luxury of waiting on others to meander into a meeting at their leisure.

A tradesman, well trousered, was being oxtered from the premises when a familiar figure sidled over the threshold, buxom blonde on his arm.

"Oh, Christ..." huffed Callum.

Tall, with a longish white-streaked mane and broad shoulders, colorful tattoos adorning muscular arms, he deposited the woman in a high-backed wooden booth before approaching the bar to fetch their drinks. "Ach, wee yin! What's up?"

"I could ask you the same, Harris. You know that's against regulations." Callum's thumb waggled in the direction of the table.

Waiting on orders of scrumpy, the sleeveless t-shirt and jean-clad man chuckled. "Oh, aye. An' who are ye gonna tell?"

"I don't have to say a word. The boss has ways..."

"The boss dinnae care what we do, or who we do it with, and well ye know it!"

Callum had to admit, in the depths of his being, Harris was probably right. Communications from the head office had long since ceased. This corner of the planet - for the most part peaceful - had fallen off the radar decades earlier, with areas of major violent conflicts receiving far more attention.

"Still, that's no reason to flaunt your rebelliousness," he scolded his companion.

Sliding a tenner to the barman, Harris grabbed two etched tankards. “Dinnae mention rebellion t’ me, wee yin. Ye are the reason I’m stuck in this hell-hole, and I intend t’ make the best o’ it.”

Callum dogged his steps, dropping onto the bench beside the preening female, whose lipstick slipped and streaked her cheek with a ochre gash.

“Oh, you cheeky bastard!” she squealed, roughly shoving him from the booth so she could scurry in tight black leather mini-skirt and spaghetti-strap top to the ladies’ and repair her make-up.

Callum resumed his place and leaned across the board. “Focus for a minute, can’t you?”

“What?” Sipping fermented cider, Harris muffled a belch.

“I’m off.”

“Eh?”

“I’m submitting my resignation in the morning.”

Fists slammed the warped surface. “Oh, nae agin!”

“Look, Harris. I’m fed up. I’ve been at this for too many years, and I want out.”

The raucous guffaw silenced those nearest. “Are ye gonna take us all down wi’ ye, like last time?”

“No, I’m going to make it clear I’m acting entirely alone.”

“Ye ha’ said *that* before! The muckety-mucks ne’er believe ye, and we’re all roasted in yer wake.”

“I can’t help if the team dynamic went pear-shaped early on. The six of us weren’t... compatible.”

“That was yer opinion, Cal. Me and the others got on like a house afire. ‘Twas ye who rocked the boat t’ the point we... went our separate ways.” Harris had drained his mug and that of his date. “Dinnae it bother ye only the two o’ us remain, after ye kept pushin’, pushin’, pushin’...”

“Protocols are meant to be followed. Instead, the situation descended into chaos.”

“Dinnae ye mean ‘anarchy’? Your reports used the word often enough.”

Callum bristled. “All right. Anarchy. When your lot refused to listen to reason...”

“Ye took it upon yerself to act as judge, jury and executioner.” Harris slumped against vertical oak slats. “I thought, when the boss issued a formal censure, ye would calm down, but I guess yer type ne’er gets it through such a thick skull.”

Rising, he debated whether to get refills, or reclaim his companion and leave. She wasn't happy at how their romantic interlude had been disrupted, standing at the bar and tapping her stiletto heel impatiently.

His parting shot: "If ye do this, good luck when ye end up in a worse hell!"

The woman abruptly keeled over as Harris reached for her. Enraged, he lunged at his former associate. "Ye bastard!"

On any normal evening, the bouncers would have intervened and oxtered the pair into the street, where they could continue their fight without endangering other customers. As floorboards jolted and windows rattled, though, the greater concern was escaping a crumbling building.

The combatants, pummeling each other, ignored falling ceiling tiles, upended chairs, and twelve different brands of whisky commingling at their feet as shelves collapsed, spilling valuable contents.

"Ye had nae right..." Harris stormed, right hand squeezing his opponent's throat.

Callum, however, benefitted from a wiry physique and years of practice in the ring. He battered Harris' mid-section, inflicting pain sufficient to force a release of his hold. Then, a left uppercut cracked his jaw and sent him reeling into the wall.

When dust from collapsed rafters and plaster dissipated, Callum stood alone. A crowd huddled on the pavement opposite, astonished by the scene. Emergency vehicle sirens screeched in the distance.

"You sent me here to do a job!" he shouted to the night sky. "Then, you denied me the means to fulfill my duties! I tried to persevere, but you thwarted my every move! If you didn't want me to serve the cause of justice, why didn't you reassign me?"

No response forthcoming, the wee bloke sank among the rubble. A squad in white medical coats navigated their way through the mess, hoisting him upright. He struggled and flattened four of them with powerful blows before a constable fired his sidearm.

Callum sagged against a beam, brown eyes wide but unseeing.

A second later, he'd vanished, leaving only a whirlwind of white feathers.

"What the hell?" croaked one of the psychiatric orderlies.

Harris, who had extricated himself from a nearby mound of debris, replied, "He was a very misguided, very unhappy angel, who failed t' ken that mercy supercedes justice. He saw himself as a divine instrument o' retribution but, when his sword was confiscated, he spent centuries railing against the new order, repeatedly inciting rebellion among traditionalist factions to restore what he

believed was their original purpose. He wreaked havoc in many lands - more devastating than what happened here tonight - throughout yer history. Wi' the demise o' his physical body, he'll return t' the ethereal realms, so he can do nae more damage on this plane of existence."

A second orderly scoffed, "You're a right nutter."

The wee smirk curling Harris' lips served as his answer. He brushed dirt from his jeans and shirt, crossed the road and signaled to a slender brunette with a slight inclination of his head and a suggestive blink. Arm in arm, they strolled into the shadows.

He couldn't blame the authorities for not accepting his tale, even though he'd shared the absolute truth about Callum's trials and tribulations, truly a rebel without a sword.

Some angels had a really tough time living among the humans on earth.

## Seasoned Wood

“Cantankerous old git.”

The janitor nearly snapped the broomstick in half after the limping patient dragged his cane through a pile of dead leaves and debris that had been swept from the corridor. Behind him, a cheery nurse practitioner stood on the neurology clinic threshold.

“Don’t be so hard on him,” she admonished.

“What, he feel you up again?”

“He... likes to flirt.”

The green-uniformed employee assessed her flushed cheeks. “And...”

“He danced me around the exam room a couple times, that’s all.”

“Did he propose marriage?”

“Always. His stroke left him with an... overactive libido.”

“Only because he was quite the skirt chaser *before* the stroke.”

Sandy curls bobbed toward him. “How’d you know?”

“He and my father were at university together. He rarely slept in their dorm room, out banging co-eds every night.”

“My records show he was married for more than thirty years,” the woman stated.

“Married, yes. Faithful to his wife, no.”

The practice administrator exited his office at that moment, and the pair returned to their respective duties.

For Lydia, that meant a mountain of paperwork - or, in this age of technology, inputting data on the computer. A recent software update had severed the link between radiology, the lab and various specialists, requiring test results be typed by hand into each patient’s file.

She’d taken the required classes in high school, but never got beyond the “hunt and peck” method of using a keyboard. The afternoon off enjoyed by other staff, she spent behind a desk.

While realizing the necessity of the task, the perky 33-year-old would have preferred to take Wilf Hogan up on his offer of dinner and...

“An older man,” he stated in a cultured yet playful baritone, “wine crafted from my own vineyard... seasoned wood...”

She’d never heard a proposition phrased that way, and felt herself smiling in spite of the ethical implications of accepting.

He’d made a fortune over six decades, and remained quite handsome despite his 75 years, with a full head of wavy white hair, erect posture...

When she'd refused him, he'd advised, "Throw caution to the wind."

If she did, she might be set for life, and to hell with 9-to-5 office hours and weekends on call in the Emergency Room.

For now, she labored through stacks of manila folders, transferring EKGs, MRIs, and blood counts onto the screen. Wilf wasn't due back in the office for a month, meaning this drudgery remained her lot for the immediate future.

Or, so Lydia believed until the reception desk phone rang as the scheduling clerk was pulling on her overcoat. The cubicle's intercom buzzed, announcing the caller requested her by name.

"Hello?"

"Lids, it's Jeff."

"Hey, Jeff. Busy in the ER?"

"Busy enough," replied the second-year resident. "We've got one of yours here."

The nurse practitioner stiffened. "Who?"

"Wilf Hogan."

"Shit!"

Jeff chuckled through the line. "It's nothing serious, Lids. He attended a hospital board meeting earlier and, as he was leaving, a dog walker with a half-dozen mutts on leashes lost control, and Mr. Hogan's legs got tangled..."

"What's the damage?"

"He fractured his right ulna."

She sighed audibly.

"When I suggested he contact local home health services, or even check in to a rehab facility, he told me to ask you to take the job."

Lydia gulped, but said nothing.

"I think he's smitten with ya, kid," Jeff quipped.

"Where... is he at the moment?"

"Being fitted for his brace and sling."

"Tell him I'll swing by in an hour." The receiver dropped onto its cradle; she tried to regulate her breathing while scouring the last few sheets of paper in the rack. At least, she wouldn't leave her co-workers hanging if, in fact, she resigned - effective immediately - based on Wilf's situation.

Lydia knew everyone on staff in the ER, located across a landscaped pedestrian quad from the medical complex. She was waved through the locked access door without delay, weaving her way through a maze of passages until she located Wilf in an exam room.

Seated on the bed, bare-chested, he retained his trousers, socks and shoes. “Ah, there you are, my dear!” he beamed, his smile invisible between the full grey mustache and neatly trimmed beard. “Just in time to help me with my shirt.”

“You’ve been discharged?”

His left hand gripped her arm, almost possessively. “That cocky young sawbones is sorting out the paperwork as we speak.”

“And, then?” Lydia queried.

“We’re going home.”

“We?”

“You and me. I presume that’s why you’re here.”

“I’m... here to listen to what you have in mind...”

“I’ve been told I’ll be needing a nurse, full time, for at least six weeks. It seems a break like this heals more slowly the older you get. I’d rather give my money to you, who I trust implicitly, than some stranger I don’t know from Adam.”

Lydia felt her heart pounding in her chest. “I’m... honored that you’d consider me for such a... a...”

“Then, you’ll hire on?”

“I...” Inner conflict knotted her stomach, quickly dispelled. “Yes.”

“Brilliant!” He rose, not releasing his grip. “When we’re done here, we’ll stop by your place and fetch your things.”

“My things?”

“Yes. You’ll be living on site. Didn’t I mention that?”

“No...”

“I... have a tendency to be up at odd hours, and if I need assistance...”

Lydia smirked, noticing his brown eyes twinkling at the word “assistance.”

A white Lincoln Continental limousine transported the pair to the Greek-inspired mansion in the posh North Hills. Compared to its neighbors, the dwelling might have been considered modest - boasting only ten bedrooms - but Lydia let out a low whistle when the butler ushered them past Doric columns and through arched stained glass doors depicting maidens among abundant flowers.

“When I’m otherwise occupied, you have total run of the place,” Wilf declared, escorting her up a curved flight of Carrara marble stairs. In the east wing, the master suite connected by a window-lined passage to a comparable - albeit more feminine - apartment. “My parents were old fashioned,” he chuckled. “They slept in separate rooms for the sake of propriety, not wanting the servants to know they really... well...”

“How many servants are there?” wondered Lydia.

“At present, four: Duggins, the butler, Mariah, the cook, Effie, the housekeeper, and Kyle, the gardener-slash-chauffeur. There used to be more.” Wilf signaled the latter to deposit Lydia’s duffel bag on the carved chest of drawers. “Make yourself at home.”

Lydia swallowed her heart. Her entire flat could fit in this expanse. “Oh, I couldn’t! Isn’t there something smaller, simpler...”

“I need you close, my dear. This is the most viable option.” Before departing, he kissed her forehead - given that he towered over her by practically a foot, that of itself was the most viable option.

The pair settled into a pleasant routine as weeks progressed. Lydia helped Wilf out of bed each morning, resigned herself to joining him in the shower - wearing her bathing suit - to wash his hair and back, while she convinced him to use his left hand on his front. She dressed him and they went down to breakfast, where she buttered his English muffins and cut a generous portion of ham into bite-sized chunks.

He worked in the study from 10:00 until noon, mostly monitoring his investment portfolio and reviewing grant applications submitted to his charitable foundation. Lydia explored the house during that break or read a book selected from the impressive library.

After a light lunch, they walked through the gardens, dormant at this time of year, but still beautiful beneath a blanket of fresh snow. Wilf napped in the afternoon, sequestered himself in the study for another hour or two before dinner, then regaled her with stories of his many adventures in the living room until retiring around 9:00.

Lydia accompanied him on errands and to follow-up appointments for his arm which - as he predicted - mended gradually, per the x-rays. She avoided contact with her former colleagues; they’d reacted badly when she quit, chastising her for an impulsive decision she would regret as time passed.

How could she regret Wilf’s kindness and generosity? she mused one April morning, watching the sun rise from the balcony outside her bedroom. Like a beau from bygone centuries courting his intended, he arranged for fresh roses to be delivered to her every Monday, including affectionate notes in his own handwriting. He granted her the use of six cars in a massive garage, though she wouldn’t dare venture out in the Ferrari, Rolls Royce or Lexus, for fear of the paint being scratched or having an accident.

He made those around him laugh with his dark sense of humor, chuckling heartily with them as he transformed some ordinary incident he’d observed into a funny tale.

His kisses grew more amorous with each succeeding day, and she relished how her nerves tingled when their lips met. In his embrace, she felt the effects of his post-stroke condition, cognizant he would bring her into his bed soon enough.

“You remember when I proposed to you at the clinic before this” - he wriggled his brace - “happened?”

Arranging the latest red blooms in an etched crystal vase, she countered lightly, “Such flattery isn’t soon forgotten, even though you’ve also tried to woo other nurses, grocery clerks and joggers in the park.”

His left arm slipped around her waist from behind. “Will you still refuse me after we’ve shared so much?”

“What about your family? What would they think...”

“In some ways, it’s a blessing I never had children. As for those cousins and sycophants, waiting for me to die so they can get their greedy hands on my money...” he growled. “I’ve already changed my will, placing you in complete charge of my assets so they are properly distributed to charity...”

Lydia felt a tear trickle down her nose. “Honestly? You never went to the lawyer’s office...”

He cuddled her. “As much as I pay the firm, *they* come to *me*.”

“What would you expect of me as a wife?” she muttered, flummoxed.

“Not much more than you’re already doing. You’ve seen to my needs so well, and it’s definitely appreciated, but you’ve neglected my most valuable asset.”

The nurse practitioner snickered. “You want me to polish your seasoned wood?”

““A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,” Wilf quoted John Keats. “Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.””

A platinum band bearing a 20-carat radiant-cut diamond slipped on her third finger, left hand. The county’s superior court judge officiated at their wedding in the mansion’s library the following Thursday, with the servants present as witnesses.

Wilf Hogan’s remaining days were filled with joy, as Lydia presented him with a son and two daughters, pregnant with their fourth child when a massive stroke took him from her.

Seven years of bliss gave way to profound mourning, blended with the responsibilities of motherhood. While - as an eligible, rich widow - she could have picked from a crop of ardent suitors buzzing around, she contented herself with treasured memories of her husband’s unrivaled seasoned wood.

## Once Upon a Graveyard

With myriad technological advances in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the question of whether mystical beings exist might be thought settled once and for all.

I'm here to tell you: that's not the case.

Every day, I receive letters, emails, texts and phone calls from people who believe they've encountered elves, trolls, sprites, fairies, goblins and more. Some, admittedly, are nutters and their ramblings are justifiably filed in the dustbin. Others... well...

What I've witnessed over the past 45 years has blown me sideways on numerous occasions.

Frightened the shit out of me, too, sometimes.

Still, I keep leaving my desk piled with unprocessed property deeds to investigate the inexplicable...

I chanced upon Lurene Carr in a cemetery near Inverness, while researching a family's claim to land slated for development as a hotel. As this slender - albeit disheveled - brunette meandered through a sea of weathered stone markers, she conducted an animated conversation - with herself. She wore no ear buds to promote the idea she was speaking with someone via her phone; in fact, she possessed no phone, as evidenced by her skin-tight jeans and floral crop-top.

The questions she asked aloud were answered with pathetic uncertainty.

Quite unusual questions.

Not sure if she'd noticed my presence, I approached via a circuitous route. Only a heartless prankster would startle someone among the dead by popping up unexpectedly.

My proximity disrupted her vocal reverie; she averted her gaze, pretending to read the epitaph on an oversized Celtic cross.

"I was wondering if I could be of assistance."

She managed a wee grin. "Thank you, no."

American.

Bowing slightly by way of apology, I reversed course. Rustling of the unmown grass behind me caused me to halt at the wrought iron gate; she collided with me and recoiled, burbling excuses.

"No harm done," I assured her.

"Are you... from around here?"

"Aye."

"Do you know anything about the... um, creatures, that wander these parts?"

“If you mean animals, not really.”

Her youthful features - though she might have been anywhere between 20 and 45 - melted into a tragic mask, and I thought she'd burst into tears. “No, not... animals.”

Gently, I grasped her arm and led her to a granite bench near the hedgerow that bordered the acreage. Well trained by my father, I always carry a clean handkerchief, and offered it to her, sitting beside her.

She accepted and unfolded it with a deft flick of her wrist, dabbing her eyes. Once she regained her composure, she leveled troubled blue orbs at me.

“Tell me,” I urged.

“You'll never believe me.”

“I... try to keep an open mind in an age where anything is possible.”

She snickered, “Then, you're one in a million.”

I shrugged.

A few deep breaths preceded her introduction and the tale of her travels from Kansas to London, then north to Birmingham, York and Glasgow. Adopted as an infant, she'd been able to trace her biological mother - already deceased - to Canada, but her original birth certificate did not include her father's identity. DNA tests connected her with paternal relatives in the UK and Ireland, so she'd resolved to dig into her roots.

“I contacted the genealogical society in Partick,” she continued. “They weren't able to help much, but promised to notify me if they discovered any links to the information I provided.”

That evening - a fortnight ago - she'd decided to do a bit of sightseeing and stopped by the Scotia Bar. As she stood among the regulars, listening to their chatter, a man came up beside her. He purported to have knowledge of her ancestry, and bought her a large whisky.

He led her to a table where she peppered him with questions. His replies blended a few facts with vague supposition, leading her to doubt his veracity.

“But, God, he was handsome,” Lurene sighed. “He had this full head of wavy, multi-colored hair, like six different beauticians had worked on him at the same time without talking to each other. The strands... glistened when they caught the light. His hazel eyes practically glowed, and he had a dimple on his chin.”

A sarcastic comment about love at first sight died in my throat.

She related how the stranger hinted he possessed irrefutable proof of her father's whereabouts and, with a bit of patience on her part, he would arrange for them to meet.

In the interim, he made himself available to show her the countryside.

A train from Queen Street Station deposited her at Loch Lomond the next day. He awaited her on the platform, and they walked for miles through rugged terrain, away from the tourist enclaves. He had what the Irish termed “a silver tongue,” recounting Scottish history in such a way that he might’ve viewed it first-hand.

“He painted scenes with such vivid phrasing, I got goosebumps,” confessed Lurene. “Then, just as I steeled myself to accuse him of embellishing the truth, I turned to where he’d been standing - and he’d vanished.”

My own goosebumps at this declaration confirmed a niggling suspicion.

The woman had been targeted by a mischievous fairy.

I shifted my weight toward her. “You strike me as someone who may be... sensitive to... to...”

“Ghosts?” she supplied.

“Aye.”

“Yeah. I’ve come across a few over the years.”

“Seen them, or felt their presence?”

“Felt their presence, mostly.”

That affinity for supernatural phenomena made her a magnet for the fae.

“Did the person who ingratiated himself to you reveal his name?” I queried.

“No.”

“Did he touch you at any time?”

She deliberated briefly. “Not in any meaningful way.”

“But, he *did* touch you?”

“He held my hand as we climbed over boulders and fallen trees. That sort of thing.”

When I didn’t respond right away, she scowled and prodded me to speak my mind.

I countered, “Have you seen him since?”

“No.” She seized my shoulders with surprising force. “What does it mean?”

“In classical lore, once a fairy targets a human, the situation can get rather... dicey.”

“How so?”

“If the fairy’s attentions are rejected, they can lay a curse on the human that leads to a horrible death.”

Lurene released me and shuddered. “But, I didn’t reject...”

“You said you were going to accuse him of lying.”

Her jaw gaped. “You think, because of his... ethereal nature, he suspected...”

“That... potential does exist.”

“Are there... any other options to be considered?”

Too many to count, I acknowledged silently. “You may have walked too close to a fairy mound, and his own bid him hence. He may have grown bored with you, which wouldn’t necessarily spare you from a curse, or he may have been distracted by someone more... exciting.”

The woman squirmed on the bench. “Wait a minute. Fairies are... no bigger than a pencil, say, with wings...”

A common misconception. “Actually, no. They can take on any size that’s conducive to their purpose.”

Her shoulders sagged. “Well, that’s not exactly what I planned to learn on this trip.” She flexed her wrists to stop an involuntary twitching. “Will I ever know for sure why I was... on their radar? I mean, going through life with a curse hanging over me...”

“Aye, ‘tis no way to spend the years.” A rabbit scampered through the overgrowth. “Why come here at all?”

“I got a call yesterday at my hotel from the genealogical society that my father’s grandfather might be found here.”

“And you didn’t think that suspicious?”

“Not... really.” She shivered anew. “Oh, shit.”

“You didn’t recognize the man’s voice on the phone?”

“How’d you know it was a man?”

Instinctively, I clasped her left hand, whispering, “Very slowly, stand up.”

“What?” she hissed.

I warned her to silence with a finger on my lips as we rose.

Movement in a dormant field beyond the graveyard both excited and terrified me. The grass, despite morning dew having already evaporated, sparkled moistly in the sunlight, and I glimpsed a fairy mound to the west. An undeniable heaviness descended on us like a pall; my grip on Lurene’s fingers tightened.

As if passing through an opaque curtain, more than a dozen fae materialized in a semi-circle near us. The central figure stood tall, as my companion had described him - intimidating beyond words.

“*You* are her great-grandfather,” I murmured.

“Aye.” Hazel orbs flashed menacingly. “I know your face. Ye have crossed int’ our realms before. Who be ye?”

Lurene replied boldly, “A trusted friend.”

“Our kind place no trust in humans.”

“Our kind?” she echoed, eyes darting from the spectral entity to me.

Explaining her mixed blood proved difficult, not as simple as pronouncing someone the offspring of a Protestant married to a Catholic, which caused centuries of tension in Scotland. “If I understand this correctly” - I glanced at the fae, who inclined his bushy head slightly and blinked affirmation - “when your arrival in country became known, they wished to assess your character, in anticipation of inviting you to... to...”

“Come home,” interspersed a female, flowing white tresses rustled by the breeze.

“Aye,” her consort noted.

Lurene stormed, “I don’t believe it!”

“We could nae but regret depriving ye o’ a father, child,” her ancestor stated. “He breached decorum, and an example had t’ be made...”

“You destroyed him?” I sputtered, before biting my tongue.

“Aye. We had nae choice.”

Lurene demanded, “Is that why his name isn’t on the birth certificate?”

My familiarity with Scottish legends allowed me to answer. “He never divulged his identity to her. If he’d done so, he’d have been trapped permanently on the human plane.”

“This is ludicrous!” she shrieked, slumping against me.

Tenderly, I embraced her, patting her spine as she sobbed.

My inquiry wafted over her shoulder to the fae. “Why did you make yourself known to her, then abandon her?”

The female tittered, “‘Tis a fault our men are beguiled by beauty. She was t’ have been brought before us wi’ very little... fanfare, the facts laid bare.” She elbowed her consort. “His plan t’ lure her hither came close t’ blatant seduction, and I could nae allow such deception, so he was summoned away.”

“‘Tis nae wrong t’ dote on m’ own wee granddaughter,” retorted the elder, only to receive another shot in the ribs.

“And, now?” I probed.

“She is most welcome int’ our company...”

Wet cheeks lifted from my damp shirt. “What if I don’t want to join your *company*?”

My mouth near her ear, I quietly advised, “Remember what I said about a curse?”

“Oh, fuck that!”

Lurene filled her lungs with heather-scented air; she broke from my arms and marched toward the cemetery gate.

The bolt of lightning struck her dead, and laid me flat on the rocky ground. The impression of a sharp object prodding my chest to the throat, “Do ye nae come here agin,” lingered when I regained my senses.

Alone among the graves, no evidence remained of Lurene Carr and, on the drive to Glasgow, I wondered if I’d hallucinated the entire episode.

Until I returned to my office, where my email Inbox was full of posts detailing fae sightings around Inverness. News feeds scrolled headlines about an American traveler who’d disappeared from her Glasgow hotel, as well.

Confiding the story to the authorities would land me in the asylum, so I went back to work.

## The Neighbors

In a bygone era of the American Midwest, when new neighbors moved into a house along the block, women with any kind of a view would perch behind sheer curtains obscuring their living room's picture window - possibly sporting binoculars with a phone propped against one ear - watching the moving van being unloaded. They would report to their gossip chain all the details, and critiques, of the furnishings, cars, children and adults, even before the family had a chance to break the tape on the first box to unpack.

A "Welcome Wagon" of the bold and nosy would bring 'round casseroles and other gifts, ostensibly to lighten their neighbors' burden as they settled into their surroundings, but mostly to check out the interior decor, then pass judgment via the grapevine.

Not so in the second quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In most cities across the country, residents no longer even know their neighbors' names. Youngsters aren't required to endure the embarrassment of their parents screening friends based on the latter's father's occupation, mother's clothes or style of discipline.

Fraser Duncan, for that very reason, was able to slip quietly into the life of North Washington Avenue without disrupting the routines of those in the cookie-cutter domiciles closest. His rented U-Haul braked in the drive at 10:00 AM on a spring Thursday; he offloaded his belongings into the two-car garage in less than an hour and returned before rush hour in his silver Honda Accord.

The automatic steel raised-panel door closed. No one saw him unpacking the bare minimum of possessions - the house already a victim of a government-contracted consultant.

Not his cup of tea, this decor, but he couldn't complain. Tasked with keeping out of the public eye and off the radar, he adopted a schedule of rising late, lounging on the deck behind a tall privacy fence with a good book through the day, exercising in the built-in swimming pool, cooking simple meals and watching television in the evenings.

His neighbors didn't realize the dwelling was occupied unless they saw him venture out on errands. He never received any mail, didn't subscribe to the newspaper...

Text messages exchanged between women active in the homeowner's association argued about his appearance. Some pronounced him a "tall and distinguished widower" while others described him as a "short and stocky divorcé." His hair ran from close-cropped black to shoulder length and white. He

wore silver wire-framed glasses, while others swore he had contact lenses. Conservative suits vied with casual t-shirts, jeans and boots for his attire.

Duncan shopped at the family-owned supermarket across the highway but, when grilled by the curious, cashiers couldn't remember him at all. He seemed quite ordinary, nondescript, passing unnoticed - which pleased him immensely.

The only friend he made during his first three months in this locale: Aisling Warner, the reference librarian at the Knightsbridge Branch. She'd assisted him with securing a patron's card, then checked out a stack each week after reshelving his previous selections. All too soon, he was requesting books from within the regional system, and she handled the deliveries, placing them in the "Hold" section.

They chatted as she ran each volume - fiction and nonfiction - beneath the red laser scanning beam. She enjoyed his Scottish burr; he inquired about her origins, detecting her Irish inflection. She'd met and married an American student while he was studying at the University of Galway. He'd died of cancer the previous summer, which was when she learned she and her two children from a prior relationship could be deported.

"There are ways around that," Duncan assured her.

His declaration - made as he departed the building that summer Tuesday - intrigued her. She wrote herself a note, so she would remember to raise the topic on his next visit.

Fortunately, she saw him arrive the following Wednesday and, the reading room deserted, used the pretext of showing him a recently published series of science fiction novels to draw him over the threshold.

She left the door open, speaking in hushed tones while gazing out the window at the nearby city park. "What did you mean when you said there's a way around being deported..."

He replied, "You need t' marry again, is all."

"My days are too busy to horse around with dating, and hoping some guy will propose before there's a knock on my door..."

"Then, marry me."

Longish brunette curls bobbed as her head whipped toward him. "Huh?"

"There's no waiting period in this state; we could pop down t' the courthouse and get a license this afternoon, if you wished..."

"But, you hardly know me!" Aisling scowled. "There are laws against... marriages of convenience, and some serious penalties if Immigration officials find out!"

Duncan ran elegant fingers through his shaggy greying mane. "I... have certain dealings with Washington, and they can't touch me. My house has four

bedrooms: your children can each have one, as can you, and we'll all be comfortable..."

The opportunity to escape her present apartment, sharing a room with her teenaged daughter and squeezing past each other in the cramped kitchen... "How would I explain it to my kids?"

"I leave that t' you." He checked his wrist watch. "When's your lunch break?"

"One o'clock."

"It's almost that now. I'll wait for you in my car, and we'll get this sorted."

Not a typical wedding night. After the brief ceremony before a justice of the peace, Duncan dropped Aisling at a high-rise complex near the river. She sat down with her children when they arrived from school, announcing they would no longer have to fear being ejected from the country they'd come to view as home.

The advantages of the arrangement outweighed the disadvantages - in fact, there were no disadvantages, in their eyes. Steve and Colleen Joyce willingly packed their belongings into cardboard boxes, reusable shopping bags and suitcases, loaded up the Ford SUV and rode in the back as Aisling chauffeured them to the subdivision.

Youngsters playing kickball in a nearby cul-de-sac paused their game at the sudden activity; their mothers and siblings abandoned indoor chores to view the unfamiliar occupants.

They would see a lot of them in the coming days.

Steve, 12, recognized some of his classmates from middle school on the bus, and they began hanging out at the park in the afternoons. Colleen, 15, plastered posters of her favorite boy bands on her walls - the first time she'd ever had permission to do that - and accompanied other tittering females to the mall.

For her part, Aisling reveled in the opportunity to retire of an evening at her leisure, and sleep soundly without interruption. She appreciated Duncan having dinner prepared when she got off work, and gladly washed the dishes and performed other household tasks.

As the holidays approached, the block became a massive display of lights and inflatable Santas - except for Duncan's. He hadn't ever paid attention to the commercial nature of the season, and didn't bother competing for the highest electricity bill.

Steve and Colleen found themselves on the receiving end of nasty jibes as snow blanketed the yard. They petitioned Aisling, who mentioned the issue to Duncan over coffee that chill post-Thanksgiving evening.

He acquiesced to his wife's request without argument. They raided the local Home Depot on Saturday morning, and spent that afternoon setting up twinkling signs and plastic angels.

Beyond the low hedge to the left of the drive, Duncan's neighbor scraped ice off his Mercedes' windshield. "Must be nice to have family living with you," he called.

The Scotsman glanced up from connecting a power cord to the orange extension. "Sorry?"

"Your daughter and her kids. Must be nice to have them here."

Duncan straightened, teeth clenched. He grasped that this idiot was just trying to be sociable, but why assume? Dropping his tools, he strode into the garage and lowered the door.

Aisling stood over the stove, preparing a pasta dinner. When the fixtures rattled as the wooden panel slammed, she regarded her husband's smoldering brown eyes and set aside the slotted spoon.

"What happened?"

"Eejits!" he grumbled. "They think you're my daughter!"

She chuckled lightly. "Well, they've never seen us show any affection toward each other..."

"What business is it of theirs if we do or we don't?"

"People are like that."

"Well, they can fuck off!"

Aisling laid her hands on Duncan's chest. "I'm the first one to admit this... situation has benefitted all of us, Fraser. But, have you ever considered..."

"We agreed..." He clasped her fingers gently. "Besides, I'm too old..."

"You're not, either. You'd be surprised what I hear those biddies chattering about at the library when they think I can't hear - or maybe, they do it deliberately, knowing I can."

"Tell me."

"Since you brought a woman into your house - even if they think I'm your daughter - they want to get in your bed."

"Seriously?"

She nodded, smirking. "Forbidden fruit, y'know."

Duncan gazed into her violet orbs. "After dinner, we'll give them a show that will shut them up... permanently."

"What do you have in mind?"

He kissed her lightly on the lips. "You'll see."

Rather than switch on the exterior lights he'd labored hours to install, the homeowner positioned a color wheel near the picture window so it would illuminate the living room in such a way that spectators watching through the glass - draperies fully open - would not realize what they were seeing.

"Are you sure about this?" Aisling giggled as she dried her hands after draining the sink of soapy water.

Enthusiasm amplified his Scottish burr. "I've been notified that we ha' t' move anyway, so why not go out wi' a bang?"

"Move? Why?"

"I promise t' explain afterward."

Aisling trusted this man who had rescued her from an uncertain fate when he maneuvered her into the center of the carpet, classical music playing through stereo speakers. They started by dancing slowly then, as the music's tempo intensified, Duncan began unbuttoning his wife's shirt. She did likewise with him, until the red, blue, yellow and green shafts of rotating light glimmered off their naked bodies coupling passionately.

Along the street, horns honked, and pedestrians admiring the displays gasped and hooted.

The following Monday, fire engulfed the house, and the authorities reported the inhabitants died of smoke inhalation after a short in the Christmas tree wiring sparked the blaze.

Reporters interviewing neighbors about the tragedy received conflicting accounts;

"Such a generous father, taking in his daughter and her children after they'd been evicted from their home..."

"A newly married couple, very reclusive..."

"The children are in a better place, seeing how badly they were abused..."

Fraser Duncan, his wife Aisling and her children were resettled 1,200 miles away, with new identities and a lavish new home.

The former NSA agent confessed to her how the Feds had used him as bait to smoke out a mole within the department. Once that miscreant exposed himself, was arrested, prosecuted and behind bars, the Witness Protection Program stepped in to facilitate Duncan's retirement.

Cradling his newborn son in his arms that autumn, he gazed at the towering Rocky Mountains, scoffing at the concept of a quiet existence. If anything, he'd be busier than ever.

## Thoughts of an Aging Hippie

“Never make eye contact while eating a banana.”

That statement always makes people pull up short and do a double-take.

I love their reactions.

Coming to this park every day is the way I continue to stir the pot, to rouse people from their complacency. Anyone who innocently sits down for a game of chess leaves with more than they bargained for: a nugget of wisdom, a puzzle to solve, a soul-defining view of the truth.

The whole purpose of becoming a hippie in the 1960s was to shake up the status quo. Young adults of that era - mostly born during World War II or shortly afterward - were tired of the dullness, the “beigeness” of life. We wanted bright colors; we wanted hair that wasn’t neatly combed; we wanted songs we could sing loud; we wanted to love who we pleased and how we pleased; we wanted a spiritual experience deeper than the religion our parents had inflicted upon us; we wanted justice and equality for all human beings. We created optimism, a thing about which the world knew very little.

As the majority of those hippies advanced into their thirties, they succumbed to the beige: taking 9-to-5 jobs, marrying and starting families, wearing suits and ties or polyester dresses, buying a house and paying bills. They forgot their radical ideals and focused on getting ahead in the world; they dismissed the cries of the oppressed or, to use the current parlance: those who are marginalized.

It was a damned shame, really. The momentum of the 60s was lost and what could have been an evolutionary movement that swept - and saved - the planet faltered.

I mean, think about it: wherever mass gatherings occurred back then - like Woodstock - we represented a true rainbow. People of every color, every culture, every persuasion. There was no judgment, no class system. We stood together, with the only question: how do we fix this mess?

We spoke truth to power and, slowly, got the media coverage needed to spread our message of peace and love. We opposed war, not just in Vietnam, but *all* war. The wholesale murder of people in foreign countries qualified as the gravest sin against humanity, and we weren’t going to tolerate politicians who supported those actions.

There’s a popular saying: “If you remember the 60s, you weren’t there.” I admit, I got plenty drunk, and plenty high, but I *do* remember.

I wish more people from my generation did, or that history accurately reflected those years because, 60 years later, we're still subjected to idiots who order our troops across the ocean to interfere in the sovereignty of other countries.

Where are the 21<sup>st</sup> century hippies?

They don't exist. Young people today are too busy staring at their "smart phones" - an oxymoron, if ever I heard one. Cell phones have robbed their users of the capacity to hold an intelligent face-to-face conversation without being distracted each time the device pings. Living in the same house, family members text each other rather than walk from room to room to talk. With one of those electronic trackers in their pocket, people are never disconnected, constantly findable.

We've lost our privacy: the ineffable solitude of sitting quietly under a tree and contemplating the beauty of creation, or hiking a trail and feeling the wind on our face without being forced back to a technology-controlled routine via signals jamming the airways.

Advertisers persist in trying to convince the gullible they need the latest gadget or pill. Geez, the pills I popped back in the 60s didn't come with five pages of health warnings about how the immune system could be compromised, liver or kidney failure, rashes, heart issues or death. We didn't worry about the future; we lived in the moment.

It's been bad enough - as cable and streaming services have expanded - having all sorts of pundits on news programs not just reporting the day's events, but telling us what we should think about them, what we should accept as "normal." There *is* no normal. There's no such thing as *normal*. Each person is an individual, unique, worthy of respect and love, who should be allowed to live as they damned well please, to think what they damned well please.

The world would be a better place if that idea could be taken to heart. To further complicate things, though, we now have artificial intelligence inventing images and statements, confusing people about what is reality and what is computer-generated rubbish. If we continue along this path, pretty soon human beings will be nothing more than mindless drones, being spoon-fed information rather than discovering it for themselves by reading the classics, traveling to exotic locations or just *talking* to people.

The greatest lesson to keep with you is this: we pass this way but once. There's you, and there's the rest. There's now, and there's forever. Do you want to follow the herd, or be true to your heart?

You've taken the first step, kid - and here's a gift for you: checkmate.

Turn off that silly recorder and be off with you to school.

If you intend to write this up for that campus rag, I'll let you snap a photo or two to go with it. Even if they don't bother to read the article, those college students will be able to see life in every wrinkle around my eyes, every whisker on my chin. The curious will come, eager to learn, and there just might be hope for them.

## Sci-Fi Lament

Throughout human history, authors of rousing adventure tales and tragic dramas, creators of suspenseful mystery movies and franchises like *Star Wars*, and showrunners of television juggernauts like *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* have ignored an essential fact of life: the need for a bathroom.

Alfred Hitchcock, if I recall correctly, was the first to show a toilet on film in the 1960s. Nearly 15 years later, Archie Bunker of *All in the Family* flushed, and the audience laughed.

Of course, this doesn't help modern day time travelers deal with primitive conditions in the past. The equipment designed to transport those of the present to other dates on the calendar doesn't include sending a port-a-john along for the ride.

That situation was not clearly explained to eager contestants on the game show *Scavenger Hunt*, which premiered on the Intergalactic Network in during Sweeps Week 2142. Tasked with locating treasured artifacts from obscure cultures in less than six hours for a prize of five million credits surely motivated some of those who applied to participate in the competition. Others - like myself - expressed an interest in seeing how those cultures survived in the face of war, deprivation, and other challenges.

None of us, crudely costumed in clothes of the specified era and assembled on the teleport pads for the pilot episode, could have imagined the privation we'd face.

I'm the first to admit that historians are not really practical folk. We don't live in the moment; we are immersed in bygone centuries, surrounded by stacks of yellowed tomes or museum displays. Archeologists, for that matter, are even worse when it comes to performing simple day-to-day functions, like cooking or brushing their teeth. They'd rather be knee-deep in an excavation site, brushing granules of dirt off shards of ancient pottery.

So, we were ill-prepared for this journey, except I made a point to avail myself of the nearest restroom before the lights indicated we were on-air. We weren't scared - innumerable tests had been run on the gadgetry to ensure our safety - we just hadn't been briefed on what to expect when we recovered from the initial disorientation caused by phasing from matter to energy and back again.

Hugh Simms, a colleague at university, and myself were slated to search a 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish monastery for a gold-and jewel-encrusted crucifix. We materialized on the outskirts of Inverness - not as I remembered it from my

childhood - and set off across drought-withered fields toward an imposing Gothic church.

Our roughly fabricated robes should have enabled us to blend in with the monks but, nearing the enclave, we were immediately identified as foreigners. It didn't help that our accusers spoke French and carried muskets. From within fortified stone walls 50 yards north, English forces were firing on our position.

All I could think about: having to pee.

Hugh offered the soldiers a blessing, in French, and we retreated toward a wooded glade. He stood watch while I waded into the underbrush - not easy hiking up the thick fabric and squatting...

"I don't get it." Hugh scratched his shaggy, greying head. "These guys shouldn't be here."

Fastening the wide leather belt around my waist, I gazed at the battle. "Don't you think I know that?"

"We were either sent to the wrong time, or something's changed..."

The discussion abruptly ended there, because a horde of kilted Scots descended upon us through the trees, wielding axes, pitchforks, swords and clubs.

"Oot o' the way, ye papist bastards!" shouted the leader, knocking us onto our backsides as he accelerated toward the foe.

Hugh and I remained on the ground, utterly bewildered. The Scots should not have been fighting on the side of the English...

Unless, the Scots intended to expel both nations from their territory...

We wouldn't have the opportunity to learn the truth.

Two sets of powerful hands grasped our cowls and hoisted us upright. Struggling served no purpose; these men were massively built and reminded me of paintings I'd seen in my youth: wild red manes, full beards, broad shoulders...

"Get yer filthy hands off me, ye big jessie!" I shrieked on impulse.

That quickly, we were dropped - lucky to land on our feet.

"'Tis a wee lassie!" guffawed the one.

Hugh was roughly shaken.

"This yer father, lass?" queried our second captor. "Or, yer gramps?"

"Are ye escapin' from the fray?" added the first.

Hugh silenced me with a subtle nod. "We are simple travelers who sought shelter overnight in the town. This morning, we were roused from our bed by the French, who confiscated our belongings and left us only these..."

A quick thinker, Hugh.

"Roused from bed?" snapped the larger Scot. "'Tis unnatural for a father t' sleep wi' his daughter."

My companion asserted, "We are man and wife."

I swallowed my heart in that moment and, lightheaded, thought I might faint. When a massive paw seized my left hand, I froze.

Wearing my deceased mother's wedding band saved us.

"Be about yer business," the warrior scoffed, waving us away. "Dinnae let me see yer face here agin."

Hugh bowed slightly to acknowledge the directive, took my hand and guided me further into the woods.

"We've got to get out of these clothes," I suggested once the sounds of battle faded.

He retorted, "To hell with these clothes. The production researchers should have been more thorough..." He halted mid-step. "Unless..."

"Unless?"

He plopped on a rotting log. "Where were the other teams being sent?"

I'd tucked the list of destinations and their objectives - chosen randomly from a hat by the six teams - in my costume pocket. "Fourteenth century Beijing. Twelfth century Calcutta. Eighteenth century Poland. Fourth century Rome. Nineteenth century New York City."

"Dammit!"

I stared at his furrowed brow, curious.

"Don't you see? In an effort to win this ludicrous contest, our competitors have altered history." He rested his face behind trembling hands. "We'll be lucky to get home."

My stomach flipped, my muscles tightened... and I had an overwhelming urge to pee. "Give me a minute."

When I returned to the spot, Hugh had set off along a packed dirt track.

"Wait for me!" I hollered.

"Hurry!"

Catching him up, I fell into step. "What's the rush?"

He paused, allowing me to listen. Horses - lots of them - were approaching from the south. Reinforcements from England, no doubt.

Against protocol, I'd pinned a miniature watch in my bra; Hugh's features twisted into the strangest expression as I groped inside my robe to free the device. "We're got a little over three hours until the recall," I stated. "If that hour passes and we're still here..."

"Then, we're stuck, because the future isn't our future anymore."

Not one to swear except in extreme circumstances, I let fly a few choice expletives. "The one contingency they didn't take into consideration..."

Fleshy digits clasped my arms and Hugh's brown orbs fastened on mine. "Would you be content spending your life in this time, this place, with me?"

"We may have no choice."

Hoof beats louder, we skittered for cover in a dilapidated cottage - the occupants possibly burnt out by invaders, given the scorch marks on stones and trusses. We sank against the wall, beyond knackered, and fell asleep in each others' arms.

I awoke in a sterile white chamber, medical personnel milling around uncomfortable beds, monitors beeping at regular intervals. I jolted into a sitting position, heart racing.

"Calm down, you're safe," soothed a nurse in yellow scrubs.

Safe, but where?

She answered the unspoken question. "It's taken thirty years, but we got you back."

I flopped onto the pillow, repeating, "Thirty years?"

A government official - by the badge he wore - approached. "The Intergalactic Network went bankrupt paying the fines for sending people through time without adequate precautions. None of us would be here today, if one enterprising technician hadn't installed a failsafe that voided historical damage inflicted by the couples who went to Rome, Calcutta and Beijing. The overload fried the retrieval system, though, before we could fetch you home. Bringing in experts trained to recalibrate the components ran into the trillions."

"What about the teams sent to New York City and Poland?"

"Killed, sad to say."

"That... wasn't included as an option when we signed on to do the show."

"The network circumvented standard broadcast regulations," confessed the representative. "You will be duly compensated for any inconvenience..."

Inconvenience? The idea caused a raucous laugh to burst from my lips. Sucked from the distant past into my own future, I'd undoubtedly been terminated from my position when I didn't show up for work at the university the Monday after the episode aired. My parents and siblings would have presumed me dead - my parents themselves very probably gone to their eternal reward. My apartment would have been emptied, my furniture sold or donated to charity, the space leased to new tenants...

Chronologically three decades older, I remained a spry 41; Hugh would legally be 87. Once he revived, we'd have a lot of talking to do.

Of more immediate concern: I had to pee.

## Death Sentence

Rita Chase had heard too many stories from friends, relatives and neighbors, endured trite television and movie plots featuring the scenario of an individual being diagnosed with terminal illness who experienced a radical transformation of personality in the final months of life.

She considered the tales hogwash.

Until it happened to her.

Something about the phrase, “Your heart’s fucked,” delivered from the stern lips of her general practitioner - an avid Billy Connolly fan - shook her to the core of her soul.

She only had herself to blame, though: he’d asked if she wanted the truth, and she’d insisted he be blunt.

Just how blunt, she hadn’t expected, and using the very statement at which she’d laughed so hard when mingling with the audience in Adelaide, South Australia, had blown her sideways - another of the renowned comedian’s frequent observations.

She wasn’t laughing now.

Not that she regretted the knock-about life she’d led since graduating from high school 45 years earlier. The people she’d met as a journalist, the places she’d traveled... the only things missing: stable relationships and the platform to really make a difference.

She’d never covered politics on a scale that could influence federal elections, for instance. A brief promotion to an editorial position gave her a rash, in fact. Major advertisers in the publication where her tirades against key failings by the legislature were printed threatened to pull their accounts unless the owners silenced her.

Rita had walked away, her integrity intact. She preferred chatting with owners of classic cars, anyway, or summarizing gritty criminal cases from a courtroom gallery.

The doctor’s appointment had only been scheduled to address lingering fatigue after a recent European trip, gathering photos and information on a popular artist whose bronze sculpture sold for more than ten million dollars at auction in New York. The physician checked her reflexes, listened to her lungs through his stethoscope, ordered blood tests and x-rays...

Trembling fists pounded the steering wheel of her Honda Civic in the medical complex’s parking garage. She’d been making retirement plans: renovating the family farm in southern Illinois and breeding Cocker Spaniels...

No time for that now.

As she groped for tissue or paper napkins to wipe her nose, Rita found the 9mm Glock pistol in the glove compartment - a gift from the police chief back when she was writing a series on local gangs terrorizing the city. She'd trained on the gun range prior to accepting the gesture, then never used it, despite being sorely tempted by thugs who couldn't keep their mouths shut or their trousers up.

She'd written a Sunday feature on the sagging trend and, within days, high school teachers across the Midwest noticed a sharp decrease in the number of reminders to their students about this dress code violation.

Her previous car - a sweet 1978 Mustang II - had been targeted, totaled when two stolen SUVs sandwiched it at the intersection of Main and Maple. The culprits fled, and had never been apprehended.

Rita's slender digits closed around the butt of the weapon. A full clip remained...

An overpowering need for vengeance consumed her - what did she have to lose? She'd be dead in a few months, if not weeks...

During the drive to her studio apartment in a converted office tower, her eyes drifted along the sidewalks while she mentally critiqued the appearance of middle-aged businessmen in tailored suits, uniformed delivery drivers, service technicians sporting tool belts or pushing metal chests on wheels, retirees out for an invigorating stroll. She'd never pursued any kind of social interaction with their ilk, a combination of growing up with four brothers and interviews with narcissists who believed themselves God's gift to women and the world.

Still mistaken for a 45-year-old, reasonably attractive with short black curls, a fit physique and flashing hazel eyes, she determined that she could - and would - break a few hearts in the throes of her last hurrah.

Every second would be relished balls-out - which she knew didn't mean what so many thought, but referred to a train operating at full speed - and damn the consequences.

She had no intention of starting fresh in the morning, either.

Clad in skimpy cut-off jean shorts and a Chicago Cubs crop-top - in the past worn when she'd mown her grandmother's lawn - Rita set off as the summer sun dipped below the horizon.

Network anchors on the early shift scrambled to gather facts from wire services and reluctant sources before going on-air that Thursday. Along one city block, eight teens had been killed, their own firearms still tucked in their waistbands.

Police on scene declared it an ambush by rivals, but ballistics analysis released mid-afternoon confirmed all the projectiles had been fired by a single gun.

No one had seen or heard anything, leaving the investigation in limbo.

Beth Ahearn, rookie assigned to breaking news after Rita's sudden resignation, wasn't content just rehashing details, especially after similar massacres occurred in other parts of the city each night for a week. Some friends from school - relatives of the deceased - confided to her stray gang members had gone into hiding, fearing for their lives.

Other mysterious deaths warranted six-column headlines in regional and national papers, the perpetrator nicknamed "The Raging Hooker" by a syndicated columnist with a sarcastic bent. In the hours after plucking shell casings off the asphalt, detectives were being summoned to trashy hotels, where men in various states of undress lay on beds in unlocked rooms, knifed in the ribs.

No murder weapon was found on the premises. The coroner's report included the hand-written comment "post-coitus" beneath the cause of death.

Publishing file photos of these victims, at least, merited some input from the community. Bartenders identified three as regulars in their respective establishments, though they couldn't recall when they'd left on the night in question, or with whom, and no security cameras were available inside or outside those particular buildings.

Beth didn't like being stonewalled by her contacts, or running up against dead ends. Having trained under Rita during her internship on the paper, she tried to phone her mentor without success, then went hunting for her at some of her favorite haunts.

Afterward, the young woman wished she'd refused this assignment.

Sarrie's Pub exceeded the description of a dive even by generous standards. The dim interior, combined odor of spilt beer, vomit, fried foods and urine forced Beth to battle a wave of nausea no more she stepped through the peeling front door. She never grasped why Rita gravitated to the place - certainly not for music on the tinny piano or the clientele.

Rita had once described the latter as "left-over hippies" from an era prior to Beth's birth. "They crave a return to their dissolute youth," reasoned the veteran journalist.

Tie-dye shirts, flare-legged jeans, fringed suede vests and ratty leather sandals created a singular type of conformity among the patrons. Beth slid into a booth opposite the bar and nursed a rum and coke while she waited.

Though Rita never showed, those two hours were not wasted, in Beth's estimation. She listened intently to the not-yet-slurred conversation of a solemn trio, ostensibly lamenting the absence of their fourth comrade, Les Rafferty.

Beth recalled his mug shot from that morning's front page. Unkempt reddish-brown hair, scruffy mustache and untrimmed goatee, thick eyebrows, a nose that had been broken more than once...

"If he hadn't gone off with that hot chick the other night..." grumbled a rotund, balding figure.

His buddy - a lanky, whiskered former athlete - retorted, "You know, every time she popped in, he hit on her and was rejected. When she came on to him, grinding against him like that, it was all he could do to not fuck her right there across the stool!"

"I wonder who killed him." This from the third.

The first: "Maybe her husband caught them, and they fought over the shiv."

"Naw. What I heard from Dietrich, the cop: whoever did it knelt over the body and thrust straight down. Like he'd just shot his wad into the slut, and this was his reward."

Beth shuddered, fished \$10 from her purse to pay her tab and fled.

She hiked down the block to another watering hole Rita frequented, rounding the corner as the door flew outward, nearly smacking her in the face. She recoiled and paused until the panel closed; a giggling Rita on the arm of a distinguished, grey-haired gentleman strode past her, bound for a black Jaguar.

Beth resisted the urge to shout Rita's name. The rookie reporter had never heard the older woman laugh, even at off-color jokes some men inserted between questions about their legal troubles or professional accomplishments. She slunk along the shadows to her Ford Fiesta, following the convertible east when it pulled onto the street.

The Hideaway Inn offered "cozy rooms by the hour." Beth parked 50 yards beyond the entrance, witnessing the couple head straight to a room on the second floor overlooking an abandoned diner.

Rita had evidently booked the room in advance.

This being a weeknight, not much activity transpired around the structure, so the college graduate ventured closer, climbing rusty metal stairs and creeping along the open balcony.

Discretion clearly wasn't Rita's priority. Beth heard passionate moans and cries through albeit paper-thin walls, along with floorboards creaking from exertion and whining box springs.

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" came an excited baritone.

After a moment's silence, a shriek: "OH. GOD. NO!"

Rita didn't exit the chamber for 30 minutes. She'd showered, changed into her signature jeans and AC/DC t-shirt, and carried a small duffel. Beth ducked behind the ice machine along the passage; the former journalist descended and almost pranced in the opposite direction; her Honda eased away from the curb moments later.

Beth shuffled to her vehicle, cell phone to her ear, not realizing the navy blue Civic blocked her egress.

She halted mid-stride. "What the..."

"Two things about putting stickers on your car, kiddo," wafted through the darkness. "Helps you find it when you're shopping, and also makes it very recognizable when you should be incognito."

"Rita, why..."

Beth hoped sirens in the distance would frighten the murderer.

No such luck.

"Just making the world a safer place and delivering a little justice before I go to my final reward," she snickered.

"Safer? How?"

"I was willing to step out boldly to ensure a slew of teenagers are thinking twice about joining up with a gang. Instead of terrorizing neighborhoods, they're too worried about being snuffed themselves."

"And justice? What did that man in the hotel do to you?"

"Not to me, per se. But to every gal he believed a plaything for his lust."

Rita leaned on the Ford's hood. "You see, Beth, I've watched his kind for years - exercises to hone my observational skills, which are essential to any good reporter. Remember that! They feel it's their right to fondle a waitress' tits or grab her ass, even follow her into the ladies' room and have a quick one in the stall. Try to call them out for it, and we get slapped down. Well, no more!"

The younger woman swallowed hard. "I've... never heard you talk like that before."

"Because now, I have nothing to lose."

Ford Interceptors converged on the site; Rita paid no heed, sidling to the Honda and driving into the night.

Beth was lauded as a hero for breaking the case, though Rita eluded capture. The police broke into her apartment just after sunrise to find it stripped of all personal belongings.

Her protegee couldn't stifle a laugh from a vantage point beside the elevator. More than once during their association, Rita had advised her that flexibility made for reliable reporters. "Never be tied to one place; travel light."

Also, having access to phony IDs and license plates helped.

Beth read the death notice for "Octavia Decker" - accompanied by a very recognizable driver's license photo - just before Thanksgiving. She'd died of heart failure while staying in Key West, Florida.

The notice was forwarded to the city's detective squad, enabling 37 death investigations to be closed.

The young woman always wondered how many other unsolved murders Rita had perpetrated on her cross-country trek; she never became a "flexible" journalist, staying close to home instead of traveling the highways and byways in search of answers.