

Tapping the Scottish

Part II

A Collection of Stories

by

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A Christmas Crime

'Twas the day before Christmas, and inside the bank...

If I could've gotten away with writing the article in rhyming verse, I would've created a masterpiece. My editor believed the situation far too serious, though, to make light of the crime.

And, what a crime!

Colleagues in the newsroom despised working holidays; I readily volunteered, living alone and despising traditional celebrations. When a rapid series of alerts blared over the police scanner, I grabbed my camera bag and shot out the door.

Fortunately, snow did not hinder driving across town. I arrived only minutes after a dozen Ford Interceptor SUVs converged on the branch office. Having a cousin on the force gave me an advantage over other media outlets. Jeffrey escorted me into the building before yellow crime scene tape cordoned off the premises.

His only rule: stay out of the way and shut up.

As a consequence, I kept my eyes and ears open - and my mini-recorder running - as uniforms and plain-clothed detectives scoured the space for physical evidence.

Coming up empty.

Admiring the miscreants who executed this robbery didn't fall under my job description, but it couldn't be avoided. Three bank employees - the sole witnesses - described how a man marched through the main entrance clad entirely in black: turtleneck, jeans, leather square-toed boots, trench coat. He sported long white hair, a full mustache and beard.

The traumatized female teller remarked, "Though he was quite slender, I presumed he was a Santa impersonator on his way to a party."

Except, he immediately pulled two semi-automatic pistols from concealed shoulder holsters, shouting, "Hands up, now!"

The trio utterly caught off guard, they had no chance to activate the alarm. They were ordered away from their desks into the center of the floor. "If you want to stay alive, don't move," they were instructed.

Twin barrels leveled at their chests, the employees fought against terrified tears streaming down their cheeks. When Kitty, the branch manager, nearly collapsed in a faint, her companions supported her at the waist.

Their guard's expression of disdain "pure evil," less than five minutes elapsed before he backed toward the exit, weapons never lowered, his eyes never leaving them, and departed.

"He didn't take so much as a quarter!" stated the male teller. "Ruined the holiday for nothing!"

I drew Kitty aside once the police finished with her - we'd gone to high school together - and asked for more details on the confrontation.

"God, Ann, it froze my blood. The guy kept his chin down, staring at us from beneath bushy eyebrows with absolute hatred."

The color of his eyes? I prodded.

Menacing hazel. Her term, not mine. "I swore I was gonna die," she continued. "I'm supposed to fly to Chicago tonight for a family Christmas, but all I want to do is crawl in bed, pull the blankets over my head and stay there forever!"

The security footage I viewed, standing behind the lead detective, proved useless. Some kind of signal jammer scrambled the feed, generating images reminiscent of my childhood, watching television with an old-style rabbit-ear antenna.

One angle did offer a bit of hope, however: as the gunman held the three hostage, another figure flickered across the screen behind them, hovering near the manager's desk for two minutes, then vanishing.

The employees hadn't noticed that second individual.

Further inspection of Kitty's desk verified her failure to log off; a mass electronic transfer of funds had been initiated via the open terminal.

While not escaping with bundles of cash, the culprits had stolen millions.

The chief, arriving from a charity brunch, notified the FBI cyber crimes unit. The computers off limits, I helped Kitty hand-write a sign to hang on the door, informing customers the branch would be closed indefinitely.

Then, I hurried to the office, breaking the story - while area TV station crews waited for a formal press conference to begin.

Staying on top of developments through the investigation's initial hours meant a long, exhausting day for me. A preliminary FBI forensic audit showed the thieves distributed funds to dozens of bogus accounts, immediately redirected to multiple series of other financial institutions using masked IP addresses and configurations of mind-boggling complexity. The final destination might take months to trace.

"In other words, they were good," I prompted the special agent in charge. He responded, "Very good. Professionals of the highest caliber."

Parking near the local Catholic church at a premium in anticipation of Christmas Eve Mass, I hiked from the paper to the only establishment on Main Street still open: Murphy's Pub. They made their profits from craft beer, but served great sandwiches, too.

Seated at the bar - tables empty except for a couple snuggling in the far corner - I ordered a turkey club with chips and a double whiskey.

"You covering the parade in the morning?" wondered Kurt, the bartender.

I snorted, "Are you kidding? I'm sleeping in."

"Incredible coverage of the bank job."

"Thanks."

As I chugged the Jameson - I don't believe in sipping whiskey - my peripheral vision detected motion to my left. A tall figure emerged from the men's restroom, striding toward the street door. I'd never seen him before, yet I recognized him.

Spinning the red-upholstered stool, I stuck out my leg and tripped him, though he recovered his balance without falling. I pitched sideways off my perch and grabbed his arm, slurring, "I'm so sorry..."

"No harm done," he growled.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"I'm away to a bash."

"Well, Merry Christmas."

"Same to you."

Before the door closed behind him, I had my company cell phone to my ear, ringing Jeffrey, pulling a double shift on patrol. My food uneaten, I yelled for Kurt to hold it in a to-go box until I got back, sprinting into the night.

By tracking my personal cell's GPS signal, which I'd slipped in the trench coat pocket, officers apprehended the robber's front man less than two blocks south. I snapped photos of him being handcuffed and, as he was led to the nearest vehicle, he favored me with the murderous glare I imagine had devastated Kitty.

I shuddered involuntarily. If a judge granted this monster an affordable bond, I could kiss my ass good-bye, no doubt about it.

After uploading files on the internet 30 minutes later, I discovered *I'd* become news in my own right. TV reporters assailed me en route to my Honda, videos of my awkward demeanor leading 11:00 broadcasts.

Monday's arraignment hearing denied bail based on the suspect's lack of cooperation; I breathed a sigh of relief in the gallery's last row. The paper's trial coverage, after months of extensive legal wrangling and numerous postponements, fell to a kid hired straight out of college - preventing any hint of a conflict of

interest on my part. I, nonetheless, attended the proceedings each day, snapping photos.

A jury of eight women and four men delivered the guilty verdict after two hours' deliberation. Prior to sentencing, the defendant showed no remorse, instead zeroing in on me among the spectators, flashing that ominous leer as he hissed, "You're a dead woman."

That threat added ten years to his term in a maximum security prison, 30 years before he'd even be considered for parole.

Thus convicted - though the electronic funds were never recovered - a substantial reward offered by the bank made its way into my coffers. I won national journalism awards and a citation from the city, as well. The publisher and my editor, pleased with a subsequent uptick in advertising dollars, granted me a long overdue extended vacation.

The fact this felon's accomplice wasn't apprehended, possibly more than one, prevented the case from being closed in the police files, a subject for periodic updates by the crimes and court beat reporter. In my experience, techies and hackers seldom resorted to murder, especially if they'd gotten away with the goods, so I didn't allow paranoia about my safety to dictate my activities - much.

My nerves remain shattered, every poetic inclination destroyed, my dreams still haunted by that intimidating gaze.

And Christmas continues to be just another work day.

Manufactured Sanctity

Jock Campbell lay beneath the patchwork duvet, hands behind his head resting on the pillow. Not the epitome of fitness, he nonetheless cut a dashing figure behind the television studio podium with his wavy, shag-styled winter plumage and dimpled chin, square shoulders and tailored suits.

He'd finished taping the next week's episodes that morning, and could avail himself of... less stressful diversions for the weekend.

Anita, a buxom South American transplant, popped her dark visage from beneath the covers. She spoke little English, grinning broadly.

Campbell shoved her off the king-sized mattress with his foot. She tumbled to the carpet, grabbing her pink satin robe as she skulked out the bedroom door, muttering Portuguese curses.

Unlike his Catholic colleagues, nothing prevented Protestant ministers from marrying and having sex, but if his congregation and broadcast audience discovered the extent of his perversions, he'd lose a steady, lucrative income and wind up in the midden.

He'd already relocated three times in two years, to keep the curious and paparazzi lenses from peering through his windows. This posh estate boasted electrified fences and 24-hour security, at no little expense.

Somehow, Campbell still didn't feel totally safe.

A publicity stunt gone awry threatened his future.

Rising and slipping into a quilted russet dressing gown, he sidled along the corridors to his study, pouring himself a large whiskey and emptying the glass in one gulp.

He'd railed about the evils of drink since the beginning; his fawning public didn't suspect an unmarked lorry delivered twelve cases of Glenlivet a month for his private consumption.

"So, here you are," came a refined contralto from the threshold. "Had your exercise for the day?"

Campbell glared at the trim figure, short brunette curls framing pleasant features. "*She* got plenty of exercise."

Privy to his darkest secrets, Severin Innes ran Jock Campbell's "ministries" with unrivaled efficiency. He'd married her widowed mother while an apprentice welder in the Glasgow shipyards but - once he heard his "calling" - quietly divorced her. Enterprising and resourceful, Severin engineered his rise to fame as a televangelist without him ever having to set foot in a seminary or cracking open a Bible.

An atheist, she nonetheless wrote sermons capable of edifying the hardest hearts, or fire-and-brimstone tirades that scared unrepentant sinners straight. She described herself as a bullshit artist and ventriloquist, with Campbell being the dummy that spewed her rubbish to the masses.

He'd willingly attest God did not exist as long as he could shag her - or any other willing female.

Most women succumbed to his advances because his hazel orbs held the camera and fascinated them on the screen. Like a theatrical performance, they attended his live revivals during the fleeting Scottish summer and migrated backstage after the last strains of the choir's final song faded. He assessed each one as they gushed over his message, signaling his toadies to lead the loveliest to the tour bus for a quick one.

While he bashed away, Campbell convinced these gullible sycophants they were performing a divine service and would be blessed with prosperity for the rest of their days.

After a decade, though, interest in Campbell's particular brand of salvation began to wane, and Severin devised a scheme to regenerate his popularity. One of Jock's chance remarks to a Glasgow reporter had stuck with her: "God never intended us to be beige."

He'd improvised the phrase on his own, to his credit.

Inventing "The Brothers of the Beige" wasn't difficult. Severin kept her finger on the pulse of the crowds, and grasped how dozens of men resented Campbell for turning their wives and girlfriends into pious dolts. For a few quid each, a cadre wearing beige cardigans began picketing outside the television studio and cropping up at his personal appearances.

The need to produce paid adverts vanished.

Severin's cousin Ralph served as spokesman for the Brothers. He could contrive responses to the most subtle press inquiry, proclaiming Jock Campbell a hypocrite and heretic.

The war of words escalated into more than either Severin or Campbell predicted.

Congregation members assaulted by this growing opposition, the ministry's offices torched, disbanding the Brothers of the Beige proved impossible. The movement had taken on a life of its own.

"Ya gallus bastard!"

Placards on sticks accompanied shouts at Campbell's convoy of vehicles as he left the estate that evening for a testimonial dinner. Severin rode in the last Range Rover, assessing the madness with an objective eye.

Underdogs always garnered sympathy from the downtrodden, and donations to the “church” increased exponentially as the Brothers of the Beige grew more violent. With Ralph gone from their ranks, new leaders made unsubstantiated claims in the media about Campbell’s morals and lifestyle but, without tangible proof, publication editors dismissed the accusations.

Severin anticipated the day when evidence would be dredged up by some enterprising hack eager for a bonus from whatever periodical printed the tale.

The women, like Anita, who serviced Campbell’s more primitive sexual preferences, were required to dress in maid’s uniforms as they came and went, as if working a shift. Most spoke no English, so even if anyone questioned them at the gate, they could not provide a coherent answer.

Severin vetted them individually, exposing plenty of ringers trying to sneak in with a hidden camera or miniature recorder. They were oxtered from the premises and charged with trespassing, facing hefty fines for their trouble.

When a special delivery parcel arrived one sunny June Tuesday, Campbell’s bellow of anguish reverberated through the dwelling to her office adjacent to the kitchen. She left his latest oration unfinished, rushing to the study.

“For Christ’s sake, what’s happened?” she huffed.

He thrust an embossed sheet of stationery toward her.

Silently, she read three typed paragraphs. “So?”

“The Church of Scotland wants me to cease and desist!”

“They have no authority over you.”

Campbell grunted, “If I don’t, they’ll file suit...”

“Let them waste their money. No court will hear the case.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“You’re... not a solicitor.”

“I don’t have to be to know they’re bluffing.”

Elbows on the arms of his buttoned leather chair, he hid his face in his hands. She circled the mahogany desk and straddled his lap, pulling his arms around her waist.

“You trust me?” she oozed.

“Do I have a choice?”

She unzipped his fly and the conversation ended as he stretched her across the blotter and got a leg over.

Relaxed after this exertion, she left him to nap while she composed a scathing yet professional rebuttal to the letter.

Other “official” challenges to Campbell’s methods occurred now and again - duly quashed - even the Brothers of the Beige faded into obscurity, except for two fanatical proponents of the cause. Just before Christmas 1983, the pair infiltrated the compound while an employee holiday celebration was in full swing, throwing rocks through ballroom windows and setting off explosive charges that killed 13 people and injured 21 others.

Severin and Jock - retired to the mansion’s north wing for a round of horizontal gymnastics during the blast - presented distraught faces to lenses transmitting live feeds across the globe, then vanished without a trace.

One of Severin’s original initiatives: obtaining passports and related documents with alternative identities for herself and Campbell, in case of such an emergency.

Periodic rumors placed the pair on the French Riviera running a casino, in Hong Kong operating a fleet of cruise ships, living in the Australian bush, and in the United States, owners of a chain of Mexican restaurants.

None of them true.

Traveling across Europe to the Middle East, Campbell suffered a heart attack on the Orient Express while shagging a waitress from the dining car. Severin abandoned him to the Turkish coroner; he was buried in an unmarked grave. She made off with two suitcases stuffed with cash to live out her days on the island of Malta.

Bedtime Stories

“Daddy, tell me a story.”

The high-pitched squeak reached my ears as I sipped tea near the hearth, knackered by the day’s exertion. Even the hardest heart couldn’t resist those pleading hazel eyes, however, set in a cherubic face framed by a mass of tousled red curls.

“Come here, wean.”

Maybe this daughter of my old age loved these wee tales because they didn’t come from books her mother had collected on shelves near a bay window that overlooked the ocean, white-capped waves lashing the cliffs. I divulged adventures from my own life - and what a life! - sparking her imagination and dreams.

She crawled onto my lap once I set aside my empty cup, her head snuggled against my chest. I stroked her hair as I embarked on the latest reminiscence.

“Once upon a time...”

She squirmed and giggled when I related how I’d wrestled a crocodile in the Florida Keys for a gold talisman stolen from an Indian princess - the reptile simultaneously devouring the thief. She thrilled to recitals of skilled swordplay on the quarterdeck, of men losing limbs under cannon fire, of gun powder explosions that turned schooners into kindling.

My young wife scolded me on more than one occasion. “This is how you lull the bairn to sleep?”

Nevertheless, she loved my detailed descriptions of the action, pretending to focus on her needlework in the chair opposite mine.

In such moments, scenes so vivid they could’ve been reenacted before me, I missed my years as a pirate, roaming the Caribbean. Nothing compared to sails billowing in the wind, feeling the rhythmic motion of a ship underfoot.

Few mention the drawbacks. Even sailors in military service got to stinking after a week or so, because washing wasn’t a priority. My comrades thoroughly eschewed matters of hygiene, except on shore when seeking a buxom wench to relieve their primal urges.

Food limited and basic, illness rampant, danger constant...

Losing my vessel in a hurricane off the Bahamas proved a most fortuitous calamity. We’d dropped anchor and the crew rowed into a cove to find shelter, watching through fierce winds and blinding rain as the craft was torn asunder on the reef. The next morning, light drizzle still falling, the island’s residents came out in droves to scavenge for any valuables.

Many had lost their homes.

Those of my men with a decent bone in their body volunteered to help rebuild a nearby village. Less nobly inclined sods availed themselves of the opportunity to loot the shops and engage in other... illicit activities.

I discovered Suzanne, mere wisp of a lass, huddled outside the remnants of her parents' modest domicile. When the roof collapsed, that couple had been crushed in their bed. I arranged for her lodgings well away from the disaster zone and, when trading ships again began putting into port, I booked us passage to England, from whence we traveled north to Scotland, country of my birth.

We never married, in the socially accepted sense of the word. With the island's government in tatters after a season of tumultuous storms, muttering a few words and signing papers weren't a necessity. We could have asked the ship's captain to perform the ceremony, but Suzanne was already pregnant and confined to her bed with seasickness.

The wealth I'd acquired at sea bought us fertile acreage, farmed by tenants who were treated as equal partners. Though our utilitarian dwelling did not qualify as a grand house, I was considered a "laird" and treated with deference at public functions.

Steady breathing from the bundle cradled in my arms confirmed our daughter slept. I didn't regret those days roaming the globe. I'd mistaken that sort of freedom for a version of heaven; I came to recognize heaven in the peace nourished within these walls, in the smiles of those I love.

I still enjoy telling the stories.

The Mad Monk

Abbot James McEwan sat on the monastery's veranda, a volume of Thomas Merton's journals open on his lap. He ignored the page, however, movement on the forested hill some 200 yards west a distraction.

"Excuse me, Father," came a quiet baritone from between French doors. "She's here."

Gnarled digits closed the book, set it on a hand-crafted oak side table. Tall and spare, McEwan rose and smoothed the black fabric of his scapular, adjusting the leather belt around his white ankle-length habit. "Send her out."

Unusual for Trappist monks to receive visitors within the cloister but, for McEwan, this was not only an unusual situation; it qualified as extremely sensitive.

The woman who emerged from the stone structure defied his expectations. A mass of brunette curls cascaded down her back, multiple silver rings decorated her fingers. She wore a red and purple tie-dyed t-shirt, jeans and Birkenstock sandals.

"Sister Emily?" he greeted, doubt evident in his voice.

She clasped his outstretched hand. "Glad to meet you, Father, despite the circumstances."

"The Benedictines at Stanhope highly recommended you." He waved her to an unfolded camp chair. "I'm grateful you could come at such short notice."

She sank on taut blue canvas. "I'm actually scheduled for a retreat here next week. A few extra days away from the clinic won't upset my bosses too much."

Another flash of activity caused McEwan to stare beyond the rough-hewn railing at the landscape. "This... is upsetting the community quite a bit. We're hoping you can resolve the matter..."

Emily shifted to gaze in that direction. "You think there's a likelihood of serious mental health issues?"

The abbot whipped toward her. "He's gone stark raving mad."

"That's... not a diagnosis used in our field these days."

McEwan practically collapsed onto a wobbly chaise lounge. "I know. I know. But, how else do you describe a man who's been perfectly normal for the 32 years he's lived inside these walls, then goes for his annual silent retreat in the hermitage, and winds up... winds up..."

At a loss for words, he thrust his arms toward the woods.

Emily squinted, viewing leaves of assorted trees rustled by a gentle breeze. "He's still out there?"

“I... dare not bring him back. I shudder to think how such behavior would disrupt the horarium...”

“Fine. I’ll go out...”

“Alone?”

“Of course.” She straightened. “Psychological evaluations aren’t a spectator sport.”

“It... might not be safe.”

“You think he’s dangerous?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

“I’m willing to take the chance. I have my cell phone, in case of emergencies.”

McEwan cautioned, “Signal’s rather sketchy...”

“Then, I’ll scream if I need help. I have a pretty good pair of lungs after spending ten years in a high school classroom.”

“As you wish.”

Emily assessed the terrain. “All I’ll need is a sturdy walking stick. My knees don’t like climbing.”

“You can borrow mine.”

Two inches in diameter, the seven-foot length of willow towered over her while providing required support for the jaunt over open spaces. She’d wandered much of the property during her previous visits, this section off limits to visitors.

Well before she reached her destination, Emily’s lungs heaved from the exertion. She’d never considered herself the outdoorsy sort, and this confirmed her lack of stamina.

Too accustomed to sitting at a desk, she promised herself to make use of a treadmill in the convent basement once this assignment concluded.

A tiny log cabin, no larger than her quarters in that aging bastion, sat on the hill’s crest, boasting a spectacular view of surrounding countryside. Emily knocked on the door; no answer. She worked the primitive latch, pushing the panel inward.

Empty.

Her assessment of any patient included an inspection of their personal belongings. She took this opportunity to rummage around the sunlit chamber, where a few non-perishable food supplies were stacked on a shelf, the fireplace overflowed with ashes, and a Trappist habit was thrown over a straight-backed chair, cloth stained with bright colors.

Emily lifted the garment, holding it toward the window. The randomness of the splotches reminded her of her brothers after an afternoon at the paintball field back home.

Only, this wasn't paint.

All too familiar with natural dyes from years of creating her own vibrant outfits, she puzzled why the hermitage's occupant would desecrate his primary attire in such a manner.

Not that religious habits held the same significance in the 21st century as common prior to the Second Vatican Council. While quite a number of communities opted to retain their traditional garb - or a modified version thereof - many individuals who wore them could be found in lay clothes shopping at the mall, performing manual labor, or traveling incognito.

They switched into their habits solely for liturgical rites or formal occasions.

An off-key melody reached her ears, growing louder by the second. She replaced the robe and hurried onto the stoop, glimpsing the most astonishing sight of her life.

A man burst from the trees, naked except for tattered sneakers, dancing to his own beat. His shaggy mane, fanning out behind him, matched his habit in many ways: an amalgamation of grey, blond, brown and red.

In that moment, she wouldn't have been surprised to learn he'd applied the same dyes to his head as he had the starched linen.

Upon seeing her, he didn't alter his rhythm or pause his song. He flounced up the steps like an innocent child, kicking off his shoes.

"How ya doin'?" he greeted her.

Somewhat tongue-tied, Emily managed, "Oh... kay."

"Come in where it's warm. I'll have coffee ready in a jiff."

"Thanks."

Fortunately, he donned his habit before filling a kettle with water and placing it on the electric stove. He pulled two mugs from a dish rack and set them on the table, sinking on a three-legged stool.

"Someone should've sanded and revarnished these long ago," he quipped, signaling her to its mate. "I've already had two splinters in my bum."

She hesitated before accepting the gesture. "I'm... Emily Harrington."

"I know." He grinned, softening the harshness of his stubbly jaw.

"How..."

"You've attended every spring retreat for the past six years."

"That's right."

“I worked the buffet line in the refectory. Even though we monks don’t talk much doesn’t mean we don’t listen to other people’s conversations.”

A snicker escaped Emily’s lips. “Then, you’re... aware of... why I’m here?”

“You’re not lost on a hike through the woods?”

“No. I’m here to see you.”

“Me? Why would anyone...”

The kettle whistled, and he proceeded to spoon portions of instant grounds into the cups, adding boiling water.

Emily would need to wait no little time until the liquid cooled to drinkable temperature. “Abbot James sent for me.”

His smile widened. “He’s a kind and considerate superior.”

No sarcasm in his tone.

“I agree, Brother.”

“Billy. Call me Billy, please.” Hazel eyes flashed playfully. “The designations of ‘Sister’ and ‘Brother’ - even ‘Father’ - do little to affirm the equality of all creatures before God, instead imposing artificial barriers between us.”

“Very... insightful, Billy.”

He leaned forward, speaking confidentially. “That’s what James doesn’t understand, Em. I came out here three weeks ago for seven days of peace and quiet, as I’ve done every year...”

“Peace and quiet?” she echoed. “But, isn’t the monastery...”

Billy threw back his head and roared a laugh. “Are you kidding? The amount of noise in the cloister could drive anyone nuts.”

“Explain, please.”

“You’ve taken your meals in the guest dining room; you eat in silence and, after everyone is gone, the staff clears the plates. In the refectory, we’re supposed to listen to an appropriate reading, but the monks assigned to kitchen duty trundle a cart around on squeaky wheels, gathering, scraping and stacking plates as soon as the last bite passes our teeth. Silverware clatters, cups slosh... The cacophony jars the soul to its very depths!”

“I get you. I did some work for the Poor Clares in Idaho a few years ago. The extern sister carried a huge keyring in her pocket, and it made quite a racket. Clocks ticking way too loud...”

“Exactly,” Billy acknowledged. “That’s why this time is so precious...”

“Haven’t you... extended your retreat by quite a bit?”

“I’m not... sure I can ever go back to the monastery.”

“Why?” prodded his guest, testing the coffee.

“Because of what happened.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“It... defies words. An experience of such profound... intensity...”

Unlike some other psychologists, Emily respected the concept of spiritual awakenings, moments of enlightenment and so forth. Her studies of the saints, theology and spirituality broadened her perspective, where secular colleagues discounted such episodes wholesale as malfunctions of the brain.

“Tell me in whatever way suits you.”

Billy drained his mug and steeled himself as if for a strenuous task. He related how, on the day following his arrival at the hermitage, he'd been reciting Morning Prayer while watching the sun rise from a clearing down the incline. Bathed in gentle light, he suddenly felt at one with the universe, attaining in that instant a grasp of all life's mysteries. This unrivaled clarity of purpose washed over him like a tidal wave; he comprehended human existence wasn't meant to be black and white - like the Trappist habits - but immersed in colors and an appreciation of creation in its natural state.

“Thus your... ventures in the buff?” summarized Emily.

“Exactly. There's no better way to connect with the essence of being...” He wagged his thumb toward the kettle; she declined a refill. “You... weren't offended by my...”

“Being comfortable with your body isn't a sin.”

He interspersed, “Though some would like their flocks to believe so.”

“Indeed. Besides, you weren't doing it to be vulgar or suggestive.”

“Yeah, I'm kind of squidgy.”

“Squidgy?”

“That's how my mom described my dad. Not quite fit, but not overweight.”

“Sounds accurate.” She added sugar to her coffee. “You've had a nearly a month to ponder this revelation. Why do you think you were so... blessed?”

Billy shrugged.

“What about since then?”

“Other than being shunned by the community?”

“Shunned?”

“James told me I can't return to the monastery until I... reject this truth with which I've been entrusted.”

“Truth?”

“We aren't meant to trudge through our days like automatons, but to relish love where we find it, revel in joy, spread peace and tolerance.”

Emily deliberated briefly. "To what do you credit James' attitude?"

"Because Trappists - too many vowed religious, in fact - are taught from their earliest days of formation to detach themselves from every pleasure, spiritual or material. No particular friendships, for instance. When we love, it's objective, no emotions involved. Joy fills the heart, but should never be visibly expressed. Tolerance... is a myth. That those who profess vows are better than the laity is an unstated given; the ordained in the community are superior to the brothers... It's dreadful, because each person, from the most bereft to the wealthiest, is due dignity, love and respect."

"Amen, brother."

"Thanks."

"What will you do if you aren't allowed to rejoin the monks?"

"What I must."

Emily quivered. "Which is?"

"Do what I believe is right."

"Leave the community?"

"I think the community has... left me."

"What do you want me to say to James?"

Billy smirked. "What does James *expect* you to say?"

"That you're insane."

"Am I?"

"Not in my estimation. You're... a living, breathing saint."

"Oh, please," he scoffed.

"A mystic, then." She carried her mug to the sink. "How would you support yourself if you... received a dispensation from your vows?"

He shot off his chair. "That's the whole point! Life isn't about making money simply to pay bills or amass mountains of stuff. Animals don't do that! They just *live*! They're born, eat, sleep, mate... We should be able to do the same."

"In today's society, that's not realistic."

"Then, fuck society!"

Emily inhaled slowly. "In theory, I concur. The human tendency to pursue power and wealth at the expense of others is... tragic. There's no way to change it, though."

"Isn't there? Didn't John the Baptist, a voice shouting in the wilderness, start a chain reaction that transformed the crowds?"

"And, where did it lead? To his death, thanks to Herod's conniving wife taking advantage of his lust for her daughter."

He sank on the wood, dejected. "So, there's no hope."

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then, what...”

“Come with me. You can volunteer in the clinic, help care for the poor, share your message with them...”

“Will they listen?”

“That’s anybody’s guess but, if they don’t hear it, they’ll never have a chance to take it into their hearts.”

“Where will I live?”

“We’ve got a lot of empty rooms in the convent. In fact, they’re converting one entire wing into senior apartments. I can make arrangements...”

Over the course of Emily’s stay at the monastery, she met with Billy every day, convinced by his sincerity and determination to renounce the conventions of traditional religious life. Abbot McEwan approved an indefinite leave of absence on the proviso that Billy would submit a written request for a dispensation before the end of the year.

Freed of all strictures, Billy became a shining light at the clinic, showering patients with the love and joy nurtured in his heart. Emily herself infected with this spirit, she absented herself from prayers in the convent chapel, realizing divinity could be found in the faces of those she met on the street or in the counseling office.

Harangued by their respective superiors about their juridical status in the Church, both Billy and Emily rejected the notion that signed documents would legitimize their activities. A grateful clinic board member, upon her death, bequeathed them her modest bungalow; they moved in together and continued assisting those who’d lost their way on life’s journey, spreading an appreciation of truth that inspired thousands.

Emily, periodically in the night, lay awake wondering just who qualified as mad: the millions who conformed to society’s stifling norms, or those - like Billy - who’d shed the pall of dullness and basked in the brilliant colors of reality.

For the Love of Chocolate

A stroke of pure luck, landing this job.

Domine initially believed that.

She'd lived in kitchens her entire life, reveled in the aromas of assorted dishes simmering on the stove, spices, herbs... but she only drooled when near chocolate.

In the figurative sense.

Serving as an accredited chef, drooling wasn't dignified... or sanitary.

She'd scored accolades as sous chef in a posh New York eatery when the post popped up in her Facebook news feed, quite by chance. A community of Benedictine nuns wanted to venture into the world of high-end chocolates to support their remote Midwestern monastery and sought a suitable candidate to supervise the enterprise.

Her application via email received a response in less than an hour; the online interview lasted 20 minutes; a letter offering her the position arrived via FedEx three days later, detailing the generous salary, benefits and housing.

Domine discovered just how remote the monastery's location was when she got lost driving there two weeks later. Turning off a gravel country lane, the access road covered eight miles of pot-holed, packed dirt.

Set beneath rolling hills, though, the landscape exceeded beautiful, so she settled in to the task at hand.

Essentially, she built the business from the ground up. An entire floor of the structure's east wing - built in the late 1950s when women flocked to religious communities, but now empty - became her domain. She arranged for most of the walls to be demolished, new paint and fixtures, then stocked the space with the finest equipment and supplies.

Within six months, orders were pouring in for hand-crafted delectable treats.

A pair of black habit-clad women - the youngest in the community, if 65 can be considered young - assisted Domine with packaging the truffles and bars, shipping them to their destinations. By that Christmas, the enterprise was considered a success, with the monastery on its way to erasing mounting debts.

One issue cropped up after the new year: the antiquated electrical grid in that part of the building. For some unfathomable reason, power to the outlets in the candy kitchen became available only on an intermittent basis and, periodically, surged in such a manner that the chocolate tempering machines splattered their contents in all directions.

Including on Domine's face and uniform.

She was busy wiping up the latest mess when Will, the maintenance chief, breezed through the door. He wore insulated coveralls, gloves and a knit cap, having just plowed the parking lot and sidewalk outside the chapel.

A symbolic gesture, in the event any the residents of the nearest town - 30 miles away - wanted to attend the hours of prayer or Mass sung in Gregorian chant by the nuns.

His darkish mustache and untrimmed goatee glistened with ice.

Domine presented him with a mug of hot cocoa. Ignoring it, he bent and licked a droplet of half-dried brownish sweetness from her cheek.

"I've always wanted to do that," he chuckled. "You taste pretty good."

Playfully, she complained, "Some of it even dribbled inside my shirt this time."

"Then, you'd better get cleaned up."

They retired to a locked room at the far end of the open expanse - one of four remaining "cells" or bedrooms where the nuns used to sleep, now used for storage.

Three purposed to that end, anyway.

Domine kept the key to this cubicle on a chain around her neck, preserving a scintilla of privacy from prying eyes. She could nap on the lumpy twin mattress after lunch without being disturbed, for instance, or...

She and Will had embarked on a clandestine affair during the renovations to the wing, fully cognizant, if the two dozen females dedicated to chastity discovered the couple were having sex on the premises, they'd both be ousted without so much as a chance to retrieve their personal belongings.

Discretion paramount, scheduling their trysts in conjunction with the daily horarium - the schedule of prayers and meals - proved surprisingly easy. Will even redesigned the bedframe, eliminating squeaky steel springs in favor of sturdy wood planks. The only audible sounds, if anyone passed near enough outside the curtained window, were his expletive-peppered compliments of Domine's trim anatomy, and her pleased moans.

The chocolate chef entertained no illusions about these liaisons with the long-haired leftover hippie. He lived on-site from Monday to Thursday, driving to his farm on Fridays to spend weekends with his wife and five children.

Occasionally, while she filled molds with milk chocolate, scraping off the excess with a spatula, a giggle would escape her lips. Her assistants' eyebrows would arch in curiosity, but idle chatter wasn't part of their duties.

Still, she'd satisfy their puzzlement with a comment like, "That was a really funny joke," as if speaking aloud to herself.

Tracing the source of the electrical problem meant waiting until the spring thaw, so meters could be used to detect leaks in the buried cables. Will meandered in one May morning with promising news: he'd dug up a stretch of the hill where beavers had chewed through the protective casing, along with nearby tree roots.

Professional electricians would finish the repairs before sunset.

That gave them time...

Time, Domine learned, runs out when least expected.

Will must've overtaxed his system shoveling the trench. When he abruptly rolled onto the floor following their mutual climax, not breathing, she panicked.

Good thing the pair didn't strip off all their clothes; she never would have been able to redress him, her every muscle twitching in fear. She managed to hoist his jeans over his rump and zip them, not bothering to tuck in the perspiration-soaked red flannel shirt.

Stuffing swollen feet into his work boots and tying the laces an aggravating chore, Domine sank on the bed, exhausted. Her brain refused to function, though she had to devise some means to remove the corpse and make the death appear accidental.

But, not while contractors roamed outdoors or nuns prowled the corridors.

Fortifying herself for hours of uncertainty, the chef resumed her experiments with new nougat flavors, combining fruit extracts from the monastery's orchards with more exotic varieties.

None of the mixtures appealed to her, however.

She devoured a bowl of milk chocolate scraps to lighten her spirit.

Around 4:30, the electrician's foreman poked his head through the door, asking if she'd seen Will.

"Not since earlier," she replied - no lie.

"Well, we're all done, and there shouldn't be any more fluctuations."

An unenthused, "Fantastic."

That declaration, though, presented a solution to her dilemma. Will often used a donated golf cart to traverse the extensive property, keys clipped to his belt. The motor being electric, the noise wouldn't attract any attention...

It would look as if he'd rode out to fill in the hole, and suffered a heart attack from the strain.

Try as she might to appear appropriately startled when the Abbess brought word of Will's demise the next morning, Domine feared she failed miserably.

“Oddly, his wife informed me he didn’t want any type of services,” the wrinkled elder announced later that day when all the employees and nuns assembled in the guest dining room. “He’ll be cremated, and that’s all.”

Domine grasped what the devout group couldn’t: Will had declared himself an atheist during the early phases of the kitchen refit, considering it a distinct irony to be on a Catholic payroll. She also determined this isolated life wasn’t the right fit for her... adventurous spirit. She submitted her notice, declining the Abbess’ pledge of higher wages and more comfortable accommodations.

She got as far as Chicago before her 12-year-old Honda Civic quit running. Fortunately, she had friends from school in the city, staying with them temporarily and accepting a position as head chef at a cozy bistro on Michigan Avenue.

Going forward, she confined her adventures to concocting innovative and delicious menu items. Quite a selection of gourmet aficionados and restaurant critics expressed interest in dating her, but Will’s lingering, tragic memory quashed any hopes she entertained of sustaining a meaningful relationship.

Her love of chocolate more than compensated for sex, anyway.

The Last Angel in Connemara

Baal Conn Leish acknowledged perplexity around the subject of pronouns. Shift ended supervising the safe arrival home of various drunks and prostitutes, conversations overheard in the pub about “he” and “she” or “they” and “them” left synapses seldom engaged in this line of work quite rattled.

If only the yearned-for disassociation with the species would be granted.

Tiring, mortals’ incessant problems with each other.

Even more exacerbating: their problems with gods and angels.

The tendency to impose human emotions and attitudes on deity - along with weaknesses to justify their own shortcomings - really griped Baal no end.

Men and women encountered over the centuries, for instance, could not comprehend how angels existed without the need for food, drink, friendship, sex, sunshine, and so forth. Paintings by those deemed “great artists” showed male-featured ethereal beings clad in flowing robes with long blonde hair, as chubby winged cherubs, or shapeless flashes of light.

Proof none of them had ever really seen an angel.

Those who had... well, they wouldn’t dare speak of it, traumatically shaken to the depths of their souls, minds scarred for life.

Others - sensory-challenged clods who couldn’t recognize the divine if their lives depended on it - drifted through the days, oblivious to opportunities standing close enough to touch without straining a muscle.

More a priority to worry about offending acquaintances by using the wrong pronoun or, conversely, deliberately aggravating the minority by harping on their “gender at birth” and sticking to outdated societal norms.

Angels have no gender, and artificial restrictions placed upon them by lesser entities merited little concern. The heavenly choirs referred to each other by name; pronouns weren’t a part of the linguistic lexicon.

Baal could not deny an aching head after listening for hours to a lively - and sporadically argumentative - debate about the definitions of male and female and their relationship to participation in amateur and professional sports.

Without tasting the pint of heavy mistakenly placed on the table by an amiable barmaid.

Or, had she glimpsed the shimmering essence sometimes indicative of an angel’s presence?

If the case, more power to her for being sensitive.

Why not be comfortable while waiting for patrons who despised their careers and families to the core, or those who sought simulated companionship, to get their fill of alcohol - faux fortification against an inner void?

Standard procedure dictated the angel guard the door to dissuade any who might escape into the arms of demons lurking in dark alleys, but this establishment boasted two entrances, and the centrally positioned seat granted a view of both.

Logic, pure and simple.

But, getting an earful of this trifling subject didn't rate as a pleasant experience.

Nor did the downpour when exiting the premises at 1:00 a.m.

Angels, mostly, didn't wear clothes, except in areas where they might be accidentally seen by the likes of the barmaid, for example. Baal had acquired a pair of ratty blue jeans and a peace symbol t-shirt in the 1960s, which got thoroughly soaked as he escorted his charges to their respective destinations.

Once the moon finally broke through persistent clouds, the garments were removed and hung on low tree branches near a beach where Baal relaxed, gazing over the ocean's thrashing whitecaps.

Well named, this Wild Atlantic Way.

Connemara surpassed ordinary parameters of beauty in moments like this, even with winds that could blow a moderate-sized pony of the regional breed off its hooves.

Baal had been placed in charge of western Ireland before the earliest humans settled on the island. Traveling with the man known in later centuries as Saint Patrick had been pure joy, across rugged, glorious terrain, up steep mountains and into lush valleys. What would now be called primitive civilizations, with their wisdom and connection to the earth, put modern generations to shame.

Training apprentices during the Middle Ages induced a bizarre type of exhaustion - newly appointed angels leaned more toward punishing or rewarding their charges than upholding the status quo. Baal petitioned to be relieved of this responsibility, a task eventually transferred to a more suitable Seraphim.

Overall, Baal had maintained a strict objectivity while protecting the innocent from their own worst instincts. Only once did temptation nearly derail a stellar record...

Wandering the Errislannan graveyard - St. Flannan's Cemetery - Baal found Fiona Joyce, a red-haired wisp of a girl from Clifden, no more than 14 summers old, drenched by rain and weeping beside a mound of fresh dirt. She'd been abandoned there by other mourners; the angel marveled at this cruelty. Did they expect the child to walk miles back to town?

Through copious tears, she'd seen him and bumbled a greeting. When Baal inquired about her grief, the tale of her grandfather's tragic demise gushed forth.

In the absence of her own parents, the revered fiddler had raised her. He'd been struck by an intoxicated driver after a Saturday night gig in the Letterfrack pub...

Leaving her alone.

Baal took her in hand, reasons unclear. Pity, compassion? When child welfare authorities knocked at the old man's hovel, Fiona introduced this impromptu guardian as her mother's brother, Billy Connolly - the closest she could come to pronouncing Baal Conn Leish due to an unfortunate speech impediment.

Connolly sounded enough like Conneely - a name prominently engraved on monuments in the graveyard - that the elderly women believed the girl and went on their way.

Baal neglected the assigned rounds during that four year span; corporeality preempted discreet surveillance of the dissolute. Focused on tutoring Fiona in knowledge hitherto shielded from humankind, along with her regular school classes, this immersion in a mundane routine prompted a comprehension of human foibles.

Fiona matured into a lovely, intelligent young woman, her disability cured without the aid of physicians or speech therapy, and Baal's spirit overflowed with affection for her.

Affection that compromised the mandated neutrality regarding mortal well-being.

A lesson learned when, having resumed the requisite monitoring of Clifden's nightlife after Fiona enrolled at the University of Galway, Baal returned to the house in the wee hours of a Sunday to find her on the parlor sofa beneath a partially clothed, strapping lad, smoke bearing a pungent odor of marijuana curling toward the ceiling from the stub smoldering on a china plate near their feet.

That interloper barely survived the violent assault, and Fiona locked herself in her room until Baal vacated the premises - permanently.

The contrite angel never saw her again. Passing the cottage on occasion, a "For Sale" sign confirmed she'd moved from Connemara.

Baal vowed to preempt a future recurrence of that debacle by suppressing every urge to manifest as solid. Receptive sorts periodically detected a vague shadow in the pub or on the street, discounting it as a figment of imagination or a drug-induced hallucination.

Buffeted by pea-sized hail, winds generating miniature cyclones of sand near the water, Baal put this memory to rest.

Being viewed as male while caring for Fiona encompassed points both good and bad. Among the latter: bound in tangible form, Baal lost a freedom of movement angels relied upon to adapt in various circumstances. The ordeal of women flaunting their assets in the library, at the grocer's or during a jaunt in the park also enlightened the angel to the lengths some people would go to sate their lust.

Those interactions best left in the dust, contending with a higher purpose occupied each day. No need to worry about pronouns, either.

A Fighting Spirit

“Many a man’s mouth has broken his own nose, as the old saying goes,” chuckled Bobby.

Shannon concurred. “He should’ve known better.”

They sat in a booth at the Saracen Head pub on Gallowgate in Glasgow, enjoying a pint of scrumpy after a busy day promoting upcoming events at the Scottish Event Campus. Shannon led the public relations team; intern Bobby served as her gofer.

They’d just watched a newspaper photographer get punched for snapping a local celebrity after he denied permission for this invasion of his privacy.

It wasn’t the first time either had engaged in such a fracas.

Cary Knowles reigned supreme for unethical behavior with a camera in western Scotland. He’d been arrested on various minor charges for perching in trees outside hotels, or in flats opposite, and clicking his shutter to capture intimate moments between married couples - or those not married.

Shannon had left journalism due to such breaches of the public trust.

She much preferred the company of musicians, dancers, comedians, and acrobats who performed at the Armadillo overlooking the River Clyde, and the nearby Hydro, designing promotional posters and ads, while supervising updates to the website.

And, on rare occasions, running interference for special friends.

She drained the remnants of tangy cider and tossed a 20 pound note on the table as she slid off the bench. “C’mon, Bobby. Back to work.”

“Sorry?” countered the young man.

“He’s booked in for next summer, and any bad press now might hurt ticket sales.”

The communications major left his glass half full. “Ach, aye.”

Shannon approached Jamie from the front to dispel any suspicion of an ambush. He wasn’t drunk - he’d gone off the jar two decades earlier - but still gave reign to one hell of a temper, left over from the era when he resembled a right tramp with unkempt facial hair and purple-streaked mane hanging past his shoulders.

“Let’s away, boy-o,” she advised, slipping her arm through his.

The tailored-suit clad and clean-shaven grey-haired figure glared down at her. “Am I finally gonna get your knickers off?”

A running joke since their 20s, when he’d been an aspiring performer and she’d been assigned to write his life story as a Sunday feature.

As they exited the premises, mobiles succeeded where the paid photographer had failed, with anchors on late news programs proclaiming Shannon “Jamie’s Saviour.”

They escaped in a rented brown Range Rover only seconds before constables converged to investigate the alleged assault.

No charges would be filed, however, after witnesses made it clear to the uniformed officials Jamie acted in self-defense.

Besides, he’d only grazed the idiot’s jaw.

“You used to hang out with boxers and hard men,” Shannon noted as she drove north. “You never learned how t’ put your opponent on the floor?”

“A lot of faces need t’ be smacked, woman, but it’s been a fuckin’ long time since I’ve taken it upon m’self t’ do so.”

“Out of practice, eh?”

“Aye.”

“Well, then, you should nae ha’ gone t’ the pub and risked gettin’ int’ trouble.”

Jamie snorted, “That prick should ha’ known better.”

Shannon glanced at Bobby, bored on the rear seat. “Told you so.”

In the meantime, Jamie squinted through the steamed windscreen. “Where are you takin’ me?”

“Someplace safe.”

“M’ hotel is perfectly safe.”

The woman guffawed. “Are you daft? For a quick fifty, nine out o’ ten employees would open your room t’ any groupie, bill collector or paparazzi.”

“Ach, you’re takin’ the piss.”

“Fine.” At the traffic signal, she steered right. “I dinnae care one jot if you throw your career in the midden.”

“Ha’ nae you e’er lost a friend, and held a wee wake t’ celebrate his life?”

“When you reach our age, it happens all too often.” She glimpsed his scowl. “Who died?”

“You remember Keith MacAllister, the drummer?”

“Aye.”

“After his last band broke up, he had nae a pupil in his eye for two years or more. Went for a joy ride on his motorcycle and drove o’er a cliff in Aberdeenshire.”

“On purpose?”

“We’ll never know.”

“I’m sorry.” Shannon patted his fleshy hand.

“Drop me at the junction, eh?”

“I... cannae...”

He barked, “What, you’re m’ keeper?”

“You should nae be alone in your grief.”

“Ach, you’re a silly wee woman.”

Another red light and Jamie threw wide the door and stepped out. Bobby instinctively jumped from the back to detain him.

Earning a fist in the chops for his trouble.

Shannon parked the Range Rover and leapt from behind the steering wheel to soothe Jamie’s rage, leaving Bobby to regain consciousness on the pavement.

“An’ you thought I could nae put a man down,” boasted Jamie, flexing his bloodied digits.

“Get in the car, you numpty, before we’re all thrown in the can.”

Bobby’s injuries required a stop at the Royal Infirmary’s Accident and Emergency department, where three cracked teeth were tended, along with a nasty gash on his cheek receiving ten stitches. He was admitted for observation overnight, in case he’d suffered a concussion when he slammed onto the concrete.

Shannon drove Jamie to the West End, where her eldest son’s house stood empty while he traveled in the Far East on business.

“What does the lad do?” queried the guest, awed by sumptuous decor.

The PR executive admitted, “I ha’ nae a clue. We... dinnae talk much since I objected t’ his marriage.”

“Divorced?”

“Within a year. I knew she was nae good...”

“What lad listens t’ his mother about such things?”

“Aye.”

She glided from the foyer into the parlor, switching on an ornate crystal chandelier. A split second later, flame-shaped bulbs were extinguished and agile fingers grabbed her from behind.

“Ach, Jamie, stop,” she chided.

“I’ve waited longer for you than I ha’ for any other woman around the globe.” Insistent lips tasted her neck. “When we first met, I thought you objected t’ m’ ragged appearance. Now I’m respectable, there’s nae excuse...”

“Except, I’ve been down the aisle three times, abandoned by the bastards as soon as they found someone richer or prettier, and I’ve sworn off men for good.”

He raised his face, intense hazel eyes barely visible in the gloom. “You ha’ nae gone o’er t’ the other side?”

“Women are just as annoying as men, if you ha’ nae noticed.”

“Ach, I *ha*’ noticed.”

“Then, what do you want wi’ me?”

“I want t’ get a leg o’er an’ shag your brains out.”

Shannon could not deny her long-standing attraction for him, and no one would ever be the wiser... “No strings,” she warned.

“None whatsoever,” he pledged, sliding his arms inside her blouse.

When morning dawned, rainy and blustery, the pair went their separate ways. Shannon meandered into her office late, laughing off six-column newspaper headlines decrying the Saracen Head incident, wading through stacks of PR requests from promoters who’d booked SEC venues for their clients.

Jamie died tragically in a freak multi-car pile-up on his way to Glasgow’s airport the following Thursday. A heavy autumn frost formed icy patches on the roadway, and his limo couldn’t stop quickly enough when a semi jack-knifed across both lanes.

Watching video of the wreckage on evening broadcasts, Shannon felt a tear trickle down her cheek, nervously twirling a massive silver skull ring on her right index finger.

Jamie had slipped it there before he’d rose from bed, and brooked no argument about her accepting the gift. “No strings,” he’d assured her.

Spinning her leather chair toward the window overlooking Glasgow’s City Centre, she muttered, “Except in my heart.”

A Real Charmer

All too rare in 2010: a true gentleman. Chivalry had long since faded into history, partially due to the equal rights movement of the late 20th century. Not wishing to be treated as the “weaker sex,” women shunned having doors opened for them or, worse, being relegated to subordinate positions in the workforce.

The opportunity to relinquish certain standards of behavior freed males from prolonged courtships and waiting until after the wedding to bed the mate of their choice.

A majority of females deemed this dynamic more honest; others considered the decline in etiquette a tragedy, yearning for the “good old days.”

That latter contingent flocked to Bertram Sinclair when he presented himself at charitable functions, theatrical premieres and holiday parties: he cut a dashing figure in a tuxedo, sported a winning smile, and treated every lady he encountered like a queen.

Sinclair, son of a local banking magnate, never mentioned the wealth independent of his father, who’d retired to the Bahamas with a fortune after selling First City to a national conglomerate. The heir sponsored Little League teams through his real estate office, his posh restaurant kept three food pantries stocked for those in need, and his used book store provided space for gamers to indulge their passion on weeknights, keeping them off the streets and out of trouble.

Police chief Carroll Hardy, fresh from the West Coast, met Sinclair less than a week after his arrival in the thriving metropolis. This law enforcement professional had clawed his way through the ranks, establishing a reputation as a no-nonsense leader who expected absolute compliance with departmental policies. Sinclair championed that approach.

Initially friends, the pair wound up at odds when they vied for the attention of the same young widow. Seething jealousy led Hardy to suspect Sinclair of nefarious intent yet - over the course of a decade - he couldn’t find one iota of evidence to prove his theory.

The object of his affection accepted his marriage proposal after Sinclair moved on to greener pastures, a bee flitting from flower to flower, though none of his ex-girlfriends ever complained about being dumped. Rumors circulated in high class circles labeled him a charming, sensitive type who never crossed the boundaries of propriety.

Then again, women tell as many whoppers as men do about their romantic liaisons and disguise bruised emotions to preserve their pride when they’re left in the lurch.

Hardy gradually compiled a file of notes gleaned from casual conversations at social events about Sinclair's habits. He rarely dated the same woman for more than a month and, oddly, her residence would be burglarized within days of the break, jewelry and valuables stolen.

None of the thieves in these incidents had been apprehended, Hardy discovered.

"What the hell?" he grumbled at a Friday meeting with the detective squad after attending a charity auction Thursday evening. "You guys shoving these reports in a drawer and forgetting about them?"

"No, chief," replied Detective Captain Ian Waverly. "Being understaffed, we have to give priority to violent crimes..."

"I want at least one of you assigned to this case until arrests are made."

That night, Hardy scheduled one of his routine ride-alongs with the street patrols. He evaluated his companion on how well procedures were observed when making traffic stops, and responses to emergency calls. He'd already terminated six officers and transferred four others because their attitudes violated the essentials of public safety.

Hardy recognized the 2005 blue Shelby Mustang pulling out of the Southside Diner's parking lot close to the shift's end. The rookie behind the wheel switched on his left turn signal at the traffic light, only to be instructed to trail the modified Ford.

"Any particular reason?" puzzled the driver. "My wife's waitin' dinner..."

"Humor me."

Hardy was aware a special task force kept frequent watch on the diner as a potential drop site for human traffickers and undocumented immigrants, as well as drug shipments into the county. Supposedly respectable citizen Bertram Sinclair had no business in such a dive...

The Mustang braked at the curb of a decrepit apartment building; its owner had no clue he was being surveilled when he exited the vehicle and used a key to access the structure. Lights flickered in a ground floor unit; Hardy left the police SUV and crept to a window partially covered with a bedsheet suspended from a bent curtain rod.

Through a gap in the fabric, he saw Sinclair rutting on a four-posted bed with a prostitute whose rap sheet stretched longer than his arm.

Diamond bracelets encircled both her wrists, gold rings on her fingers. A ruby necklace bounced between her perky breasts as she rode Sinclair like a stallion.

"Shit!"

Twenty minutes elapsed before the “gentleman” zipped his trousers and departed. Hardy concealed himself behind a row of yew bushes, then summoned backup to raid the premises and arrest the tenant.

He couldn’t stifle a chuckle when, as she was being booked, the desk sergeant consulted with a colleague to determine the color of her hair. The latter joked, “It’s Turkish hooker blonde.”

“That’s not an option in the computer.”

“By the time she goes to court, it’ll have grown out to a natural brown, so put that.”

She squealed, “Hey, how do you know...”

“Your roots are showing.”

Hardy instructed she be escorted to his office, offering her not only a cup of rancid coffee, but full immunity from prosecution if she detailed how she’d come into possession of items listed on eight different burglary reports, and her association with Sinclair.

“I’m not sayin’ a damned thing until my lawyer shows up,” she retorted.

“That’s your right, but it means you’ll be spending years in the can, given your record.”

She broke before dawn, spilling the whole story of how she’d hooked up with Sinclair at a bachelor party for a fellow real estate agent years earlier, and they’d hit it off. He was into the bookies for more than 30 grand, along with a mountain of other debts, and needed some quick cash. She suggested he wine and dine a selection of eligible rich gals in town, then share the layout of their houses, and she’d arrange for them to be robbed while he had an airtight alibi.

“Jesus!” Hardy mumbled when she’d concluded her narrative on tape. He snatched his desk phone and punched an extension on the keypad. Two unmarked cars were dispatched to Sinclair’s mansion in a posh subdivision.

Word came back in short order: in spite of the Mustang being parked on the drive, the residence was vacant.

Hardy glared at the woman. “Where’s he gone?”

“Hell if I know.” She rose. “If I never see him again, it’ll be too soon.” She sidled toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” queried the chief.

“Hey, I’ve got immunity, remember? Witnesses can testify I can’t be charged with a crime, and you can’t hold me.”

His jaw hardened. “You knew he was gonna bolt.”

“Whether I did or didn’t, it’s not my problem. It’s up to you to trace him, and I doubt you have the balls. He’s ten times the man you are.” She leaned across the desk. “And probably a better lay, too.”

Hardy waved her from the room, disgusted.

All that effort and he’d come up empty.

Someday though, Sinclair - playing his gentlemanly game using whatever phony identity he concocted - would be detained and extradited back to face a host of felony charges.

What Hardy didn’t factor into the equation: Sinclair waited in a silver Chevy Impala behind the Southside Diner and, once his partner slid onto the passenger seat, they were off to target new prey.

Where the Ragged People Go

The news rippled around the homeless encampment: another camera crew was on site.

Innovative programs for those impacted by the Recession - and life, in general - attracted journalists, the curious and, not surprisingly, opportunists craving publicity.

William Brown fell into the latter category.

He'd started as a steelworker in Gary, Indiana, in the late 1960s, spending weekends playing guitar in Chicago's folk clubs. The message of his songs resonated with hippies of that era but, instead of pursuing a music career, his warped soul steered him in a different direction.

Television evangelism.

A realization he could amass more cash by preaching his own version of god - a deity that blessed the young and beautiful, or promised youth and beauty to those lacking such natural attributes - soon propelled him into syndicated Sunday morning schedules.

He "confessed" his sinful behavior as a youth: smoking, drinking, drug use, womanizing - using photos of himself resembling little better than a strung-out tramp - and how he was "saved" by recognizing this god dwelt in the pure balance of creation, its face renewed with each cycle of the seasons.

Going from Jesus-style shaggy dark hair hanging past his shoulders, a mustache and goatee in those early days, he "matured" as his audience aged into a shorter, greying, bushy shag and soul patch on his chin, though the mustache remained.

Kudos to his publicity staff, who developed his trademark pose: staring straight into the lens with piercing hazel eyes and the slightest of smiles, hinting at hidden wisdom waiting to be imparted to benefactors willing to pay for the privilege.

Brown made a show of uplifting the downtrodden, *if* they placed their welfare entirely in his hands. That meant - for those who tracked such tactics - signing over their limited assets, just short of their first-born offspring.

When he arrived with his entourage that sultry October morning, the "council" of residents - elected bi-weekly to keep order and handle issues in the tent settlement - welcomed him with profuse compliments. Children presented him with bouquets of dandelions and wildflowers, quickly discarded. He strode through the maze of tarps and poles like a potentate surveying the remnants of battle,

pausing to speak with the unwashed and broken in words that, frankly, curdled Dorothy Andrews' blood.

This young woman had no time for such fools. Tending to her four high school-aged brothers kept her plenty busy. They'd barely caught their bus ten minutes earlier, and she was already exhausted from prodding them to shed their sleeping bags, dress and grab a bite of food to start their day.

Getting them to do their homework later would tax her nerves.

For the moment, she sipped from a mug of tepid coffee, perched in a half-lotus position on a five-gallon barrel of laundry soap as the machine churned a load of jeans.

"What's your story?" queried Brown's pretentious factotum, a few feet ahead of his employer.

She grumbled, "Why?"

"Reverend Brown is interested."

"Bullshit." She'd seen his image on billboards around the city as she walked to the grocery store or applied for jobs. His motivation could be summarized in two words: narcissistic egotist.

With a derisive snort, the flunky moved along the row of structures - except, Brown didn't notice Dorothy had been rejected as a candidate for his largesse. He towered over her, almost blotting out the sun, and favored her condescending leer.

"How are you?" boomed the cultured baritone.

She sneered at his posturing, and the red light signaling a Steadicam in operation. "Crappy, thanks."

"How so?"

"Minding kids isn't easy."

He expressed mild shock - or was it feigned? she mused.

"You're too young..."

"My brothers," she clarified.

"Where are your parents?"

"Dead."

Brown looked toward the camera. "Ah, a tragic accident."

"Tragic, yeah," Dorothy grumbled, "but not an accident."

He squatted so their eyes were level with each other. "Tell me."

Why not? she decided. "My dad worked hard his entire life, but he had a gambling addiction. Got into trouble with loan sharks, and wound up dead in an alley. When my mom found out how deep in debt he'd left us, she killed herself."

The tall form in designer suit straightened. “So, you stepped up to keep your family together.”

“Didn’t have a choice. I’d only been out of college a year, doing communications for a non-profit in New York. I couldn’t let the boys be split up among foster homes. We’d already lost the house where we grew up because of the unpaid mortgages, the cars were repossessed... All we had was each other.”

Abruptly, Brown waved the camera to switch off. Dorothy watched as his head tilted slightly and he blinked a command which sent the cadre of syncophants toward their transportation, leaving him in relative privacy with her.

“What’s up?” she puzzled.

His voice altered from polished to earthy. “You any good at communications?”

“Given half a chance, I would’ve been.”

“You do websites, newsletters, that sort of thing?”

“Sure.”

“You wanna job?”

Dorothy swallowed her heart. More than anything, she wanted to find steady employment that would get her brothers out of this... dump, while gradually paying off the mountain of delinquent bills for which she remained liable. With the infamous Reverend Billy Brown, though? “How much?”

“Name a figure.”

“Fifty a year, plus suitable accommodations.”

He didn’t flinch. “You worth it?”

“I will be.”

“Get packed.”

Fast forward eight hours: Dorothy and her brothers were on a private Cessna jet bound for Los Angeles. Limousines drove them to the “Brown Ministries, Ltd.” compound - a former movie production company backlot transformed into its own city, complete with nine luxurious dwellings, offices, sound stages and editing suites, tennis courts, a swimming pool, stables, and 9-hole golf course.

And an intimidating security force.

“Jesus!” exclaimed Steve, Dorothy’s 17-year-old brother.

She retorted, “I don’t think he has anything to do with it.”

That first week, the Andrews orphans settled into an eight-bedroom furnished mansion down the lane from Brown’s massive estate. A high priority: stocking the refrigerator so growing boys could satisfy their “hollow leg disease” - eating their fill after months of barely enough sustenance to stay alive.

Dorothy enrolled the quartet in the public school system, a complex process involving phone calls, in-person meetings, death certificates, transcripts, and general red tape. Knowing their education would continue, she strolled to the administration building where, once upon a time, moguls dictated the making of classic films. She was ushered deferentially into Brown's office, still decorated with autographed stills of Hollywood stars.

She pondered whether he considered himself their equal.

Seated opposite him at an oblong, ebony-inlaid conference table, she listened to his tirade about ineffectual use of the internet, and its potential to increase his exposure and income. "That's where I need you to focus," he stated. "You'll be entirely in charge."

"You place an awful lot of trust in a total stranger," she remarked.

"Oh, you're no stranger, Dot."

She despised that nickname, and if he'd claimed he'd known her in a previous incarnation, or they had an "instant spiritual connection," she would have slugged him.

Nothing so mysterious. "I heard about your... misfortune when it originally happened. The non-profit you worked for submitted a bid to handle my charitable distributions, with you as the lead on publicizing those efforts. I'd flown to New York to sign the contract but, when I learned you'd resigned, I abandoned that idea, seeking you out to implement a comprehensive communications strategy instead."

"To what end?"

A condescending smile irritated her. "Spreading the good word, of course."

"Bullshit."

He rose, circled the table and leaned on the leather high-backed chair beside her. "You're hip to the scam. When the people like what they see and hear, they respond in kind."

"You're... a bit too old to plug the 'youth and beauty' hype."

"Not when they're willing to believe youth and beauty are nurtured in the soul, in the mind and, therefore, made manifest in the physical body. That's what we're selling."

Selling was the correct term for it, Dorothy grasped. As months elapsed, she crafted materials, print and digital, that catapulted Rev. Billy into the stratosphere of evangelistic endeavors. If he'd been a high-profile athlete, he'd have scored multi-million dollar endorsements from the likes of Nike, Budweiser or Coca-Cola.

Branding of the term “integrated spirituality” sparked fresh interest from Millennials craving meaning in their lives, with Brown’s “revival” tours drawing capacity crowds at a minimum of \$100 per seat.

He spouted utter nonsense of his own invention from the dias, proof to Dorothy his faith lay in the piles of wealth funneled into off-shore bank accounts.

One by one, her brothers graduated from high school, awarded scholarships to prestigious universities for their academic achievements. With them safely chasing their dreams, the woman steadily erased her parents’ past due accounts, clearing the ledgers before her 30th birthday.

By then, her salary had quadrupled, and she’d set aside sufficient savings to take up residence anywhere in the world without further need to compromise her ethics.

If asked under oath by the Internal Revenue Service or other federal agencies whether she’d been privy to Billy Brown’s fraudulent activities, she would have sought protection under the Fifth Amendment. The vast, gated property hid reality from his public: he smoked expensive Cuban cigars - smuggled in via connections on Catalina Island - drank excessive amounts of vintage champagne and 12-year-old Scotch, regularly dropped acid and snorted cocaine, feasted on the finest gourmet fare, and humped females from his private harem - ostensibly designated “domestic staff.”

Dorothy suspected men shared his bed, too, on various occasions.

Brown qualified as “sleaze” in her book, while others on his payroll turned a blind eye, grateful for generous wages in an era when keeping a roof over one’s head through honest labor was difficult.

Her silence could only be bought for so long.

The breaking point came when he summoned her to his house one chilly April evening, ostensibly to discuss the previous year’s tax statement.

“The press release can’t... list the gross total,” he protested, flipping through drafts scattered on his desk.

“You should know by now, Billy, covering up the truth is futile. Every paragraph sent to the media is scrutinized by fact checkers, and when they find an error, things will blow up and you’ll be ruined.”

“It’s not... possible.”

“It *is*. This isn’t like the early seventies, when Nixon tried to cover up Watergate and a wide array of scandals could be swept under the rug. You should have gotten out of the business before we even met, given your... personal proclivities. I’ve done my best to shield you...”

“And a damned fine job it’s been.” He glided to the sideboard, pouring himself a large whiskey. “Have one?”

“No, thanks.”

“You... don’t, do you?”

“Never acquired a taste for it.”

He scanned the liquor cabinet shelves. “We’ve got vodka, white zinfandel, tequila...”

“Nothing, thanks.”

“Then, what *do* you want, Dot?”

“Frankly, I want out.”

“You know that’s... not an option.” He drained the tumbler in one gulp and crossed to her. “In fact, I’ve got a better idea.”

She’d been dreading this eventuality...

“I’ve seen how you look at me when you think I’m not looking at you.”

It sounded like a bad line from an old comedy sketch show, and Dorothy stifled a chuckle. “You mean, with unbridled disgust?”

“Unbridled lust.”

“You’re... not as beautiful as you think you are, Billy.” She retreated toward the door.

Not fast enough.

He’d torn open her flannel shirt and his trousers rested at his knees when the door opened and Steve stuck his head through the gap. “The butler told me Dorothy was here...”

Reports declaring Rev. Billy Brown’s untimely death merited international coverage over the next 24 hours. The coroner ruled the cause severe head trauma due to a fall, omitting the amount of alcohol and illegal substances detailed in the toxicology results. Dorothy told the first responders Brown had tripped over a lump in the Persian carpet and struck his head on the fireplace mantle...

Steve had clocked him with a jagged marble humanitarian trophy - one of many bogus accolades scattered about the chamber - which sank to the bottom of a lake in Orange County, never to be retrieved.

As Dorothy had predicted, Brown’s hypocrisy became fodder for the disillusioned masses. His accountants were indicted on money laundering and other felonies; all his material holdings were sold at auction, the houses demolished and the land donated as a campground and horse therapy facility for disabled children.

She’d funded that endeavor, along with improvements to the homeless encampment where she and Brown originally met, enabling those who’d lost their material possessions to build a future based on dignity, integrity and respect.

Watching Heather Grow

Strange how realization suddenly dawns after years of ignoring the obvious.

Sitting near the peat fire with a cup of tea that windy April morning, I glanced at Heather, dutifully sweeping the cottage floor, and accepted that she'd blossomed into a lovely young woman.

It had been a long road for the two of us to that point. But, then, life for all Irish folk in the late 1800s involved suffering and endurance, whether political or practical.

Our father had been a coast watcher during his all-too-short life. He built the stone cottage overlooking a flat stretch of Connemara shoreline with his own hands, and set about monitoring the western horizon for foreigners wishing to anchor their boats and wreak havoc. He married our mum, a red-haired beauty from nearby Clifden town, who became known for her genuine kindness and skill as a mid-wife.

Together, they had three children: my two older brothers and myself. A rough lot, we boys, giving our mum quite a bit of grief with our antics. That didn't mean, though, when my brothers were conscripted into the British forces to go and fight on the Continent and across the sea, she didn't miss them dearly - or mourn them when word reached us they'd been killed in battle.

I'd been too young to become a soldier, but my strong back made me a valuable asset to those needing help with livestock and other strenuous chores. The few bob I earned went to Mum, who then settled our debts with the grocer and the butcher.

She continued to keep house and teach me from the Bible and a few odd books gifted to her by grateful parents whose infants survived the first few days of life. Thanks to her, I learned to read and write, a smattering of history and maths, and music.

Mum loved to sing. I'd waken each day to her lovely voice serenading the birds.

Days short of proposing marriage to Patricia - a girl from Drimmeen I'd been courting - Da passed of the illness that swept through the region that winter. Mum and I were both devastated. Depending on the doctor, the cause was a strain of influenza, pneumonia or consumption. Either way, his lungs refused to function and he simply stopped breathing.

We scraped together enough to mark his grave with a simple stone cross. Our lives went on much as before, though I never really noticed Mum aging rapidly, her limbs weakening.

That fateful August night she slogged across rain-soaked fields to Martin Joyce's home, his fine lady in labor with their first child. I should've gone with her, but I'd been out with my friends, drinking wine in the Errislannan graveyard. She trudged home shortly after daylight with a hefty bundle, which I presumed to be laundry she'd wash and iron to earn a few pennies.

When that bundle started crying, I tumbled from my bed.

The wailing brat was placed in my arms a moment before Mum collapsed on the floor. "Take care of your sister," she whispered, and expired.

I hadn't suspected she'd been pregnant, herself. Scrambling to calm the baby, I didn't have a chance to calculate the time frame from when Da died to the present, and if nine months had elapsed.

It didn't matter. I'd never cared for a little one and, frankly, at 19, I didn't want to spend my days tied to such responsibility. Leaving her on the lumpy straw mattress, I saddled Da's horse - the only possession he left us besides the cottage - and rode with her to the parish church, hoping to leave her with the priest or some willing family.

No such luck.

In lean times, no one wants the burden of an extra mouth at the table.

Difficult enough to arrange for Mum's funeral Mass and burial with no coin in my pockets.

That could be a major reason I abandoned the Church: clerics concerned solely about being paid for their services, when Mum taught me loving God and our neighbors was the most important task in life. My disillusionment with all things religious also prompted me to name the child Heather, a common Protestant moniker.

Loving Heather in those days would've earned me automatic sainthood, if I believed in such things. Mum had kept the tiny thatched basket in which my brothers and I had slept, storing fabric and wool in it so, at least, I had somewhere to put her. The cloth was put to good use as nappies. She rarely made a fuss, and I took to referring to her as the "Sleepy Dumpling" when my friends would call 'round to invite me out for a pint.

Eventually, they stopped calling 'round at all.

Inheriting a flock of sheep from a cousin provided a modest income and kept Heather and myself in food - along with my skills as a fisherman. I also found

Mum's collection of seeds in tiny clay jars, which revitalized the overgrown garden she'd neglected in her last days.

A simple life, but tolerable. As Heather grew, she took to reading like a duck to water. By her tenth summer, she was teaching *me* from books she borrowed at school, riding a wagon with other farmers' children to lessons most days.

Our cottage having such a marvelous view of the shore, it did not escape my notice that smugglers tended to land their craft on this stretch of beach - far less treacherous than trying to navigate the rocky cliffs to the north and south. They loaded crates of whisky for export, and delivered various goods on the return trip, and I charged them for the privilege.

As Heather matured and showed herself capable of tending to her own needs, I ventured to sea with the crew, sating an ache to travel. England, Scotland, France, Spain, Italy, Morocco... my eyes were opened to the wonders, and dangers, of the world.

Not only did I bring Heather gold bangles, bolts of satin and silk, and books, but piles of cash. The first time she appeared in Clifden in a lavender lace-trimmed gown, all the eligible bucks in the district targeted her as a well-proportioned wife-to-be.

Their parents, though, dissuaded them, due to her status as an orphan.

So, we spent summer evenings watching the sun set over the Atlantic Ocean, waves crashing on the sand. She begged me to take her along on the next run to Belgium, but explaining that women were banned from such voyages fell on deaf ears.

She proposed dressing in some of my brothers' old clothes to conceal her feminine attributes - and that's when I noticed how well-endowed she'd become.

Her curves could not be hidden beneath an oversized shirt and baggy breeches.

Nor could waist-length auburn curls be stuffed inside a cap.

"You haven't cut your hair in years, Bill," she scolded me when I mentioned that issue. "It's almost as long as mine."

"But, mine's a different texture. Yours is shiny and perfumed..."

"So, I'll not wash it for a fortnight, and it'll be just as grubby as yours!"

Twirling a lustrous strand around my index finger, I retorted, "Don't you dare. I haven't risked life and limb so you can resemble a homeless waif."

"But I want to *go* places, see the sights, spend some of this money being... being..."

"A frivolous wastrel?"

“Why not?”

She rejected the notion that, had I the means, I would have presented her in society to be matched with a husband worthy of her intellect and beauty. She shared the wild spirit that tainted the King lineage, and I really couldn't blame her.

Until an extraordinary discovery altered our relationship.

Caitriona Conneely, Mum's great aunt on her mother's side, had lived way too long for her own liking. As my 35th birthday approached, she would be turning 90. A small party was arranged for the aging spinster, both Heather and I invited.

Sharp as a tack, despite her age, Auntie greeted each of us with a kiss and a fond memory. Until, that is, she embraced Heather.

“A Joyce, if e'er I saw one,” Caitriona declared. “A right beauty and well suited to give Billy fine, healthy children.”

“Auntie, you're mistaken,” I corrected the old gal. “This is my sister, born just before Mum passed.”

She bristled. “Wrong, lucky Bill. Your mum delivered this child of Martin Joyce's bride before *that* woman died, and carried her home to you for safekeeping.”

The clamor that arose nearly deafened me.

I drew Caitriona aside. “But, why didn't Mum leave the babe with her own father?”

“Martin was not well, himself. He died hours after his wife. The parish held a double funeral. Do you not remember?”

To my disgrace, I only remembered planning Mum's wake.

“So, Heather is *not* my sister?”

Caitriona swore an oath, placing her hand on the Bible that rested beside her favorite rocking chair.

My heart skipped a beat. For 16 years, I'd seen to this girl's needs - bathing her, feeding her, tending her when she fell ill - sleeping in the same room, albeit in separate beds because I thrashed around like a lunatic in the night. When word spread we weren't siblings, the scandal would ruin us both.

“You love her, boy?” muttered Caitriona.

“Not... that way.”

“It'll come in due course. You can't say you don't know her well enough...”

“True.”

That evening, Heather and I rode home beneath pastel-painted skies. She'd lost her enthusiasm for the festivities, even though she'd danced with every man present as the fiddler played lively tunes.

Every man present, except me.

She seemed to resent the attention I paid to the other women...

I stated, "You can stay in the cottage, and I'll... go..."

"Where?" she challenged.

"Any of a dozen places."

"Leaving me on my own?"

"You're rich in your own right. It won't take long for you to snag a husband."

She reined her mount on a hillock. "I don't want to *snag* a husband, like you do a fish."

"It's what women do."

She balked at the idea, pleading to come with me to the Continent, or beyond. "No one will care about our past..."

Having dodged revenue agents, the constabulary and soldiers charged with apprehending contraband runners, I did not consider myself dense. Perhaps, because Heather and I had lived in such close proximity for so long, I'd stopped listening to her words and missed their intended meaning.

She snatched a handful of my hair - washed and combed for the occasion at her insistence - and kissed me in more than sisterly fashion.

I nearly fell from my saddle.

"Where'd you learn..."

"You think I've never been kissed, Bill? There are men hereabout who should be horsewhipped at their boldness when their parents aren't looking."

"But, why..."

"Because I love you, *eejit*. I have for years."

I swallowed hard. "You mean, you've known... we're not..."

"Two summers now. Martin Joyce's sister was at the cottage when I was born. She took charge of my mum after she died, in fact. We met in town while I was shopping, and she apologized for not being able to take me in herself, but already having eight children..."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because, I didn't want to believe her. The more I spent time with you, though, I grasped that my feelings weren't for a brother, but for.. for... and I feared you'd send me away."

Sliding off the roan, I pulled her into my arms.

Knowing we'll never be separated again brings its own burst of joy each morning when I sit beside the peat fire with my cup of tea and revel in Heather's beauty.

Through the Lens

It might seem presumptuous for a photographer to equate her observational skills to that of a licensed physician, but I can personally attest to diagnosing no less than six incidents of terminal illness months before the respective doctors had the slightest clue anything was wrong with their patients.

All prominent local, state and federal politicians.

Camera in hand - government my beat - I'd been photographing the same jokers for more than 20 years.

Noticing physical deterioration in the subjects of quick snaps isn't difficult in such cases.

The most tragic of these by far: Danny Coyle.

Representative for our congressional district since the 2010 election, he'd started as a geometry teacher at my high school, even pelting me in the head with a chalkboard eraser as I slept in the back corner of his class as a sophomore, leaving me to nap once I solved the proof projected by the overhead onto a wall-mounted screen.

The initial images I captured of him appeared in the yearbook, bestowing awards on the winners of the annual creative writing contest. He boasted a full head of floppy reddish-brown curls, dimpled chin - *a la* the actor Kirk Douglas - flashing hazel eyes behind silver rimless glasses, a nose that broadened at the end, full lips hidden by a bushy mustache and untrimmed goatee.

He'd served two terms on the city council, losing the facial hair, then threw his hat in the ring when the previous Congressman died of an unexpected heart attack just before the April primary. Danny's pleasant but dignified demeanor, vast knowledge of diverse subjects, and determination not to let his constituents fall victim to big money lobbyists scored him enough votes to head into the November one-on-one run-off against an opponent backed by big corporate money.

In a working class city, people didn't abide outsiders trying to exert influence over their lives.

From my perspective - at a distance with a telephoto lens, and close-up - Danny embodied the best of holistic health: body, mind and soul.

He wore off-the-rack suits, even after relocating to Washington, D.C. He maintained his grass-roots attitude, and often guested on the evening news ranting against careerists whose votes were dictated by those to whom they owed favors, rather than the wishes of their district's struggling taxpayers.

Being sent to the nation's capital by my editors to cover Danny's antics proved both a blessing and a curse. A selection of my photos merited publication in

major newspapers or inclusion in national and international reports on a particular day's events. Recognized as having true journalistic integrity - and not the mercenary drive of some freelance hacks - I was granted access to movers and shakers who steered key legislation through the system.

Three huge scandals broke because of my presence where I really shouldn't have been standing at a specific moment. The subsequent backlash from high-profile thugs - what other word describes their tactics? - put me in the cross-hairs of rifle scopes positioned in windows opposite my apartment and office.

Danny took a bullet meant for me, his shoulder grazed as he escorted me to dinner one wintry evening.

He swore he'd been targeted, because of his interference with an appropriations bill that would have funded training soldiers intent on overthrowing the government of a South American country.

That's how we ended up living together, anyway. Seeing him every day, I still relied on my camera to track changes in his posture, smile and eyes.

The latter, hazel orbs staring at me from the computer monitor, utterly disconcerted me. There'd been a unique twinkle, a playfulness, for so long that, when it vanished, I blamed my ten-year-old Nikon and seriously considered upgrading to a newer model.

Over breakfast the next morning, though, I confirmed my suspicions. He gazed through me, as if I wasn't there. A blank stare, unblinking.

He barely moved his head when I carried my dishes to the sink, though the conversation continued. This weird stillness wasn't... natural. His torso reminded me of a mannequin, so stiff...

Whether he realized what was transpiring, I really never knew. Mentally, he never missed a beat. And, rather than broach the topic, I devised a scheme to get him into the doctor's office without starting an argument.

"I think I might be pregnant."

This announcement startled him, but his smile amounted to little more than a twitching of his lips.

Not like the full-toothed grin of prior years.

My appointment scheduled, Danny accompanied me to the wellness pavilion in the Arlington suburbs. A nurse processing my vitals in the exam room, he waited in the reception area - and I explained to her the visit's real purpose.

"So, you *aren't* pregnant?" grumbled the woman.

I grimaced, admitting I might be - or the disruption to my regular cycle might be stress triggered by Danny's condition.

"Let's do a test, to be certain," she suggested.

“Sure.”

The prevalence of nurse practitioners and physician’s assistants blurred the lines of expertise when it came to medical procedures. When an actual doctor brought in the test results, I nearly toppled off the paper sheet-draped table. Danny caught me, the strength in his arms greatly diminished.

“You’re pregnant, all right, but...”

Danny tensed. “But?”

“There’s a history of uterine cancer in your family, correct?”

I nodded.

“We’ll have to monitor the fetus’ development very, very closely...” He glanced at Danny then, deliberately set aside the paperwork and disconnected an ophthalmoscope from its charging base and shone the light in my partner’s eye. “Have a seat, Mr. Coyle.”

When we exited the complex an hour later, I carried a stack of printouts dealing with difficult pregnancies, and Danny faced a battery of tests related to a preliminary diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease.

He gave no indication how such a revelation impacted his psyche. I could only accept the limitations placed upon me regarding work: no more running hither and yon to cover breaking stories. My editors - never privy to my living arrangements - expressed polite surprise when I notified them, and permanently reassigned me to House committee proceedings.

Not that a reduction in activity alleviated my anxiety about giving birth. Once Danny’s CT scan and MRI verified the onset of Parkinson’s that blustery January afternoon, he didn’t wait for me to emerge from the clinic’s ladies’ room. Abandoning me, he drove to the Lincoln Memorial, shooting himself on the steps with a revolver he’d purchased at a gun show the previous weekend.

The arrival of our state’s senators and two Capitol police officers just a few minutes after the taxi dropped me at our apartment sent me into shock, to say the least. Danny’s corpse was shipped home to his sister, who handled the funeral arrangements. The day he was cremated, I lay in hospital, dealing with a miscarriage.

I left Washington, D.C. immediately after my discharge, not packing a stitch of my belongings, and never picked up a camera again.

Christmas Patrol

Christmas reality never matched Christmas fiction.

In Flo's mind, anyway.

Her paternal grandfather's unexpected death on Christmas Day when she was 12 skewed all subsequent holidays, and watching mush-laden films about finding love or redemption - created to foster the spirit of the season - curdled her blood.

She didn't consider herself a Scrooge in the literal sense, but the sole decoration - if it could be deemed as such - hanging in her cubicle at the office through the month of December was a poster that read, "Bah! Humbug."

Her colleagues knew better than to wish her Season's Greetings or variations of the phrase, accustomed to receiving a virulent "Fuck off!" in response.

A peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich with Ruffles potato chips, milk, and a stack of brownies sufficed for dinner, eaten in red plaid pajamas. Classic musicals streamed on the television as she sprawled in a battered recliner.

Even if ghosts intent on dredging up the past, present and future waltzed through her apartment door, her attitude wouldn't have changed. Flo believed each day held opportunities to help others, and charitable giving should not be confined to a few weeks before year end, just for a tax deduction.

She drew her theme song from the musical version of *A Christmas Carol*, written by Leslie Bricusse, which so accurately described her view of such hypocrites: *I Hate People*.

When she snubbed a narcissistic bachelor from her father's law firm who'd asked her on a date, the senior partner excused her behavior thus: "She doesn't suffer fools gladly."

Flo possessed a singular knack for identifying fools as soon as they opened their mouths, making her an invaluable asset to the local detective squad.

Her willingness to volunteer for double shifts so married patrol officers could celebrate Hanukkah, Christmas or Kwanzaa with their families earned her gratitude and respect, even if they disagreed with her opinions.

So it transpired, on a blustery Christmas Eve, the dispatcher relayed information about a drunk wrecking yard displays in a wealthy north side subdivision. Flo not a half-mile distant, grabbing an espresso at the only coffee shop open so late, she dispensed with lights and sirens and cruised into the cul-de-sac without disturbing any festivities.

Pitying those who'd be dealing with high electricity bills in the new year, she couldn't believe the extent of inflatable Santas and reindeer, computer-operated slide shows, animatronic creches and countless colored bulbs adorning the houses. She braked in the middle of the pavement, glimpsing a shadow leaning toward a tall pine, hands against the trunk.

Was he vomiting, or relieving himself?

Unlike a number of her peers, she wasn't about to abuse her authority when apprehending this trespasser. She slid from behind the steering wheel and strolled casually toward the lanky silhouette - oddly underdressed for sub-freezing temperatures - as if paying a call on the residents of that stone-facade dwelling.

"Can I help you, buddy?" she hailed from the driveway.

He spoke not a word, merely raised his head from contemplating deer tracks in the snow. Dark, uncombed strands were pulled into a rough ponytail; an oversized safety pin with a cross, a feather, and a skull on long silver chains dangled from his left lobe. Pulsating white lights caught sharp hazel eyes that bored into Flo's soul.

She sniffed the air: no scent of beer or hard liquor on his breath or flannel shirt.

The intruder's intoxication had been grossly exaggerated by those phoning in the complaints.

"You visiting friends?" she queried. "Relatives?"

Still, no response.

"C'mon. I've got gloves and a coat in the car. Your fingers must be frostbitten" - she glanced down at his bare feet in Birkenstock sandals - "and your toes."

An absolute lunatic, she mused, warranting examination by a doctor and a psychological evaluation.

She extended her hand; he accepted the gesture - his flesh surprisingly warm. She guided him around mounds of plowed slush to the Ford Interceptor, where her grandfather's World War II Army overcoat, pulled from a locker behind the cargo partition, fit him perfectly, and fur-lined leather encased his fingers. She shifted equipment impinging on the front passenger seat so he could climb in beside her.

Anything to keep him from becoming violent - if he was, indeed, insane.

Her neglected espresso still warm, she offered him the insulated cup. "Have you eaten anything today?"

He sipped from the slot in the plastic lid, lips smacking with satisfaction.

"What's your name?"

His lack of verbalization caused her to speculate whether he was a foreigner, an undocumented immigrant or refugee who didn't speak English.

She repeated the question in Spanish, German and Russian, without success.

When she reached for the radio to call into headquarters, he seized her wrist.

"Let's go home."

Flo switched on the dash lights, studying features partially obscured by a ragged mustache and untrimmed beard. "Where's home?"

Address or directions not forthcoming, she had no choice. Shifting into gear, she executed a U-turn and navigated from the subdivision to Memorial Medical Center.

"No!" he objected when they parked near the Emergency entrance.

"I'm sorry, dude. Departmental policy requires..."

The speaker crackled, an urgent tenor announcing a hostage/domestic violence incident in progress at St. Mark's Cathedral, less than two blocks away.

"Shit!" She scowled at her companion. "I don't have time to deal with you now, and you better not cause any trouble..."

Had Flo jogged to the site, she would've arrived quicker, given the number of cars lining the thoroughfare and side streets in anticipation of Midnight Mass. The police vehicle blocked traffic in both directions when it stopped between awkwardly parked Cadillacs but, given the situation, that could be for the best, she determined.

The priest, a gold-trimmed chasuble and stole draped over his shoulders, stood on the top step between open double doors, a crowd behind him gaping at the well-trampled lawn, where a stout parka-clad figure stood holding a weapon - Flo couldn't distinguish if it was a pistol or a knife in the dimness. A woman in a quilted jacket covered a few feet in front of him.

Flo did not rush toward the confrontation; aggravating the perpetrator's mood would serve no useful purpose. She eased along the sidewalk, parallel to the scene, then veered toward the pair.

The man whipped a butcher knife toward her as he hollered, "Stay away from me!"

Flo halted, replying calmly, "I'm here to help."

"Then, make this bitch bring out my kids!"

"Where are they?" asked the detective.

"In there" - he motioned toward the church, tone derisive - "dressed like angels."

“That’s a bad thing why?”

“Because, I’ve told her over and over: I don’t want them raised Catholic!”

Flo sensed another presence; the vagrant had exited the Interceptor and hovered near her right shoulder. “Stand clear,” she hissed to him.

He didn’t move.

The last thing she needed was an innocent bystander harmed; still, she had to focus on the conflict before her. She slowly edged forward.

“Give me the knife, we’ll fetch your children and discuss this somewhere private, rationally,” she stated.

“Fuck off!”

A cadre of officers had assembled along the property’s perimeter, Flo noticed from the corner of her eye. Fortunately, they remained silent, sidearms securely holstered.

“Believe me, dude, I understand your anger,” she added. “But this won’t solve anything.”

He spun toward her, raging, “They’re hypocrites! Pedophiles! I won’t see my kids brainwashed...”

Her assailant thus distracted, the victim was swiftly whisked to safety by two uniformed females.

Hearing her hysterical sobs sent the man into a fury. He lunged at Flo, who dodged the arcing blade. Off-balance, he tumbled into the remnants of a snowman.

She squatted to grasp his forearms and secure handcuffs pulled from her duty belt. In the last instant, he rolled and thrust the knife into her chest.

Strong hands caught her before she crashed to the ground. She gazed into those twinkling hazel orbs with a glimmer of recognition as her comrades rushed to subdue the petrified aggressor.

“Granddad!” she gurgled.

The vague memory of a faded photo, tacked to the refrigerator when she was a child, showed the deceased patriarch in his younger, wilder days.

“Let’s go home, kiddo.”

By the time an ambulance arrived, she’d stopped breathing; a DNR tag around her neck prevented the medics from resuscitating her.

Flo’s Christmas reality - consistent selfless acts - inspired the city’s creation of a fund in her honor to assist the poor, especially domestic violence victims. Her example of sustained advocacy allowed those without hope to be uplifted and thrive, keeping her memory alive.

Primal Urge

Theories abound regarding the chasm between male and female. Maynard Hughes had heard them all.

“Men are from Mars; women are from Venus.”

“Men need to have sex to feel loved; women need to feel loved to have sex.”

And on, and on.

Bollocks the lot, in his opinion.

Sex amounted to a primal urge, albeit expressed differently by various human beings: a way to alleviate tension, experience the heights of pleasure, as well as promulgate the species. Complicating this process by nurturing a “relationship” with a partner defied logic.

Animals had the right idea.

Do what comes naturally, and move on.

Another aspect of this dynamic that invalidated religious attitudes toward sex: if women could only bear children up to a certain age, why did so many still crave a good shag after enduring menopause? For that matter, how did men in their 70s and 80s - even without the aid of Viagra - get their significantly younger girlfriends pregnant?

Such were the thoughts meandering through Hughes’ brain in the wee hours as he lay naked beside a quietly breathing Deirdre. They’d been at it since meeting at the pub for a large one, a standing Friday rendezvous for the past eight months.

Idle chatter or a review of their respective week’s challenges and triumphs didn’t enter into this association. A whiskey down the face, and they crossed the road to Hughes’ nondescript flat above an Asian take-away, tearing off each other’s clothes and making use of the furniture as their wents dictated.

He’d never inquired about her surname, after their initial encounter in a Glasgow courtroom, or her age. He’d acted as solicitor for the defense in a civil case; she served as clerk to the judge. Her curves evident beneath a flowing blouse and broom skirt, he’d taken an instant fancy to her, expressing as much during the morning tea break.

Conflicting ethical standards didn’t detract from his driving ache to get her knickers off at the first opportune moment. Her spiritual outlook, political leanings and career aspirations didn’t present any obstacles to that goal; he cared not a jot about her daily routine or philosophy.

Rutting in a janitor's closet on the top floor of the judicial complex the same afternoon confirmed a physical compatibility. Their coupling blew Hughes sideways, and Deirdre's throaty moans certified his assets amply stimulated her to the desired climax.

No parting kisses, no affectionate texts, no random phone calls - Hughes appreciated the woman's detachment from emotional entanglements as he waded through intricate legal negotiations that required laser-sharp focus.

A glance at the clock on the night stand reminded him of briefs piled in his office, overtime necessary to prepare for Monday's cases before the bench. Two hours before a shrill alarm would shatter the silence.

He rolled toward the dozing goddess and got a leg over, banging away like a lion in the jungle.

Only once Hughes reached his desk in the posh suite of a Glasgow City Centre high rise did the harsh fact these months of unprotected sex might lead to serious consequences strike him. His own paralegal, Sandy, had laid her letter of resignation on the blotter after he'd departed the previous evening. She'd learned of her pregnancy, with the doctor requiring a reduction of stress to ensure the baby's health.

Rumors among the staff periodically hinted Sandy had been engaged in an affair with one of the firm's partners, married with three children.

"Shit!" Hughes muttered.

Not that having kids out of wedlock held the same stigma as in the old days, but the attorney - approaching his own 60th birthday - had no intention of being on the hook for support payments if Deirdre dropped a similar bomb on him.

He'd never bothered to check if she was on the pill...

Twitching fingers plucked the receiver from its cradle and replaced it six times before he raised the instrument to his ear and punched a series of numbers on the keypad.

"Hey, Bob. Sorry to bother you at the weekend, but my secretary dumped coffee on my laptop and all my emails and calendar have disappeared. What time are we starting on Monday?"

A chuckling bass commiserated, "That's why Deirdre keeps a paper copy for me as backup. Computers don't like me."

"She's a grand gal. How long has she worked for you?"

"What, you thinking of stealing her from me?"

"Ach, no. Just curious."

"She hired on when I received my appointment from the Queen. That's... over 30 years."

Hughes quipped, “You don’t look a day over 40.”

“Thanks. She was fresh out of university and has been a real jewel.”

Calculating mentally, the solicitor guessed her age to be mid-50s.

She could’ve passed for 35 with silky ebon tresses, smooth skin, twinkling brown eyes and trim build.

But, no danger of pregnancy.

He relaxed on the buttoned-leather chair. “Thanks, Bob.”

The call ended before the judge could supply the requested information.

Reorienting his attention to the task at hand, Hughes put Deirdre out of his mind for the next seven days.

Come the next Friday, though - and for many Fridays after - he bashed away with an enthusiasm more suited to a lad in his early 20s, until he passed three days before Christmas.

Deirdre simply rose from bed, tucked the duvet up to his chin, pulled on her clothes, and made a discreet exit.

The coroner ruled Hughes died of a heart attack in his sleep, with no mention of the contented smile on his face.

Unexpected Excitement

The annual Memorial Day parade through the city's west side served as a source of solace for many parents, widows and children of American service members lost in 20th century wars - including the ongoing Vietnam conflict.

Not so for Kaci Simms, who lived in a cozy bungalow along the route with her three-year-old daughter, her husband listed as missing in action.

Rose napping, Kaci ventured from the covered porch to the sidewalk, where neighbors lounged on folding chairs, brandishing miniature flags as floats towed by pickup trucks and American Legion honor guards passed. Her younger sister, in blue sequined leotard and white leather ankle boots, twirled a baton behind the banner leading the Young Masons Marching Band, her brother in the saxophone section.

Tightness in Kaci's chest a constant since she'd received the Department of Defense telegram in January, hearing Sousa tunes aggravated her nerves. Still, she managed a smile and a wave for her siblings, while waiting for her father's VFW lodge to come into view as they turned off Oak Street.

Kids ran up and down the cement behind her, jockeying for the best spot to see the clowns and police motorcycles. When she felt a presence at her shoulder, too close for comfort, she spun around to scold whoever dared violate her personal space.

Tall, reddish-brown waves falling past his shoulders, a scraggly mustache and goatee, with bushy sideburns, he wore a Rolling Stones tank top, bell bottom jeans and hemp sandals.

Kaci gazed up at searching hazel eyes and froze. His chin lowered; suddenly, he scooped her into a desperate embrace, twirling her across the house's front lawn and smothering her face with kisses.

Once he set her on her feet, he held fast to her arms as if afraid to release her.

"I... didn't recognize you," he gushed, Scottish burr less prominent than when they'd met on a college campus in Boston. "You've cut your hair."

Her voice a mere squeak, she replied, "You've let yours grow. A lot." She pressed her cheek against his bony chest, body racked with sobs of joy. "Danny, I thought you were dead!"

"I almost was," he confided, the beat of a dozen high school snare drums forcing him to shout. "My patrol got caught in a Vietcong ambush, and I was the only survivor. While recuperating in hospital from a shoulder wound, the brass

convinced me to transfer to Army intelligence. I've been undercover the past eighteen months."

"Why didn't anyone let me know?" Kaci blubbered.

"That would have defeated the whole purpose..."

"So, I was left to suffer, thinking Rose would never know her father!"

The kisses resumed. "I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have hurt you for the world."

A wee face, framed by short curls the color of Danny's, appeared at the screen door. "Mommy?"

"Here, angel."

Together, the couple climbed four wooden steps. Rose hesitated to join them on the porch, unsure in the presence of a stranger.

Kaci squatted to her. "Don't be afraid, Rose. Your daddy's come home."

"Daddy?"

"Aye, lass." Strong hands lifted her so their noses touched. "You're named after a bonnie wise woman, m' own mum."

Though the child, born after Danny was drafted and deployed overseas, had only been shown photos - clean-shaven with close-cropped hair in his military uniform, and in a tuxedo at the church before the wedding - something in his eyes reassured her, and she clung to him. "Daddy!"

So much catching up to do, the trio migrated indoors.

Kaci no longer needed the distraction of a parade.

The Three Wise Men

Rare are the individuals guided by one enlightened soul through their lives, even moreso those who benefit from the influence of two genuine sages.

I fall into a singular category in this regard: I had three wise men in my life almost from birth and, definitely, from my youth. Their insights into the ways of the world were unique unto themselves, yet they blended well in my mind as I navigated the harsh reality of daily existence.

Stan, my adoptive father, qualified as a genius. Age 40 when my biological mother gave birth and relinquished her parental rights to me, he owned and ran a computer repair shop in the Chicago suburbs. He specialized in building custom machines to match the customer's specifications, writing task-specific software, as well. What time he spent at home, carpentry tools in the basement workshop created aromatic sawdust; as a tot, I loved sitting in a corner and watching him shape wood into items useful or simply beautiful. Later, after his wife - my alcoholic, abusive adoptive mother - passed from cancer, I had the joy of listening to stories of his life into the wee hours, even nights when I had to punch a time clock the next morning. He needed to talk after decades of every conversation being dominated by that narcissistic female, and I didn't mind listening one bit.

A genial Irishman, Gene baptized me at the Catholic church just down the road, and spent many an evening breaking bread at our dinner table. Thanks to years studying in Rome and elsewhere, he acquired knowledge of various cultures and religions that grounded him in faith and philosophy. Between Masses on Sunday mornings - me playing the organ and him presiding - we plumbed the depths on topics other teens shunned.

Billy, youngest of this trio, described himself as "hairy" - a term he used for the left-over hippies with whom he socialized. His brownish-red wavy mane hung below his shoulders, and he sported a shaggy mustache and untrimmed goatee. Mischievous hazel eyes hid deep secrets; colorful, mismatched clothes declared his disdain for society's norms. He'd never excelled in the classroom, dropping out as a sophomore. A few years knocking about on a rebuilt Harley broadened his horizons so, when he inherited a modest fortune and the Granada Theatre upon his grandfather's death, he knew exactly what to do with the building.

Single-handedly, he reinvented the downtown district as an arts and entertainment hub.

I acted in a few musicals and served as stage manager for more serious fare while in high school. Nothing moved me more than arriving early for rehearsals to

hear Billy playing plaintive melodies on a battered upright piano in the orchestra pit. We'd chat during breaks, and he made me laugh so hard my muscles ached.

Maybe that's why, when my senior prom date ditched me for the drum majorette half-way through the dance, stranding me in the Grand Hotel ballroom just across Main Street from the Granada, I phoned Billy. I sensed he would understand how foolish I felt and drive me home without judging me.

Except, we never made it that far. No more had we emerged from the high-rise than I dissolved in tears - emotions prompted by the spring downpour, I suppose. He steered me into the theatre and up to his office, where he let me ruin his tie-dyed t-shirt as I sobbed against his chest.

One thing led to another; I'd been unaware he'd furnished an entire apartment in the space beneath the upper balcony.

The grilling I got from Stan's wife - I stopped referring to her as "mother" once her violent assaults made it clear she despised me - when I walked into the kitchen the next morning, formal gown ruined by the rain, almost spoiled the experience of laying beside a man and reveling in his tender caresses.

Not that Billy and I pursued a romantic relationship, me 18 and him 37. Periodically, though, after a late performance or strenuous hours painting scenery, we'd... feel the urge...

Things really got interesting when the community theatre board voted to approve an avant garde Christmas play submitted for the winter slot. Instead of heading to some midwestern university, I'd opted to fill the vacant accounting clerk position at Stan's shop after graduation. I accepted Billy's offer to serve as assistant director for this world premiere, my first challenge manifested during auditions.

There just weren't enough men to fill the roles.

Deliberating options, I recruited Stan and Gene to play two of the Three Kings - Billy being the third.

Those parts allotted minimal dialogue, participation in one rehearsal a week wouldn't tax their schedules too heavily.

Stan found inspiration for his upcoming retirement in this distraction from his grief - I never grasped why he mourned that bitch. When younger cast members realized he'd designed and crafted the manger by hand, they asked whether he taught classes at the trade school. Electrical issues with the sound system meant transporting his tool chest from the shop and inspecting every inch of wiring, to the amazement of those on stage.

Gene provided a much-needed critique of the original script, which played fast and loose with the traditional tale of Jesus' nativity. The prospect of offending

audiences was lessened by a few judicious revisions in dialogue and action, the playwright reluctantly granting permission.

Billy brought enthusiasm and humor to the proceedings. In fact, the sessions my three mentors attended ran longer than other weeknights due to rampant laughter, random improvisations and technical glitches, but no one protested the late Friday dismissals.

The four of us would be last to leave, all lights and doors secured. We'd grab a bite to eat at a little bistro a block north, with the older pair declining a nightcap at the Roundhouse Pub in favor of their beds.

Our opening performance a week hence, a double whiskey satisfied my thirst; Billy downed his, followed by a pint or two of lager. Before he got too drunk, though, I asked about a stack of unopened pastel blue envelopes I'd glimpsed on his desk.

"Your mistake: putting me on a pedestal, kiddo," he slurred. "I've been a right ass in my day."

I denied idolizing him, though he sensed the lie. He expanded on his statement by revealing he'd bedded a fair share of women during his cross-country excursion, and one of them was claiming she'd borne his son. She'd heard of his inheritance and wanted a share for the now 17-year-old.

"That's what DNA tests are for," I stated. "Besides, if she really believed the kid was yours, she would've filed papers with the court years ago."

His neck swiveled toward me. "You think so?"

"I know so. The minute a woman gets pregnant, she starts worrying about how she'll take care of the baby. In my own mother's case, since abortion wasn't an option, she placed me for adoption to be permanently rid of me."

Billy scowled. "That's a... harsh opinion. Maybe she hadn't the means..."

I countered how even cheerleaders knocked up by their jock boyfriends availed themselves of public and private agencies focused on aiding expectant women with health care costs and other essentials. "If she'd wanted me, she would've found a way, including going after the guy who shagged her, just like this... opportunist would've tracked you down before her first labor pain."

"You're saying, she's scamming me?"

"A DNA profile will prove one way or another."

Billy asked how that could be organized.

A judge could order the tests, I informed him, but filing the necessary paperwork would cost a hefty sum and waste precious time, given the backlog of court cases. A document sent certified mail by an attorney might do the trick but, again, those hourly rates could drain even a miser's savings.

I suggested he write a letter, signed by two witnesses, offering a percentage of the inheritance if and when results of a certified DNA test were submitted. Analysis by qualified experts would determine the truth.

As one of the signatories on the declaration, typed up and posted the next day, it didn't surprise me Billy never heard another word on the subject.

Extricating Gene from his particular mess required a different sort of action in the run up to the following Thursday's dress rehearsal.

Maybe the likes of actors Barry Fitzgerald, Richard Harris and, more recently, Liam Neeson, fed the fantasies of a certain females in regard to Irish men. One of that ilk had been stalking the parish priest for months, including sitting in a shadowy section of the theatre during rehearsals and positioning herself in a booth at the restaurant, staring at him, while we munched our late snack.

She wasn't a parishioner; Gene didn't know her name, only that she left bouquets of flowers on the rectory doorstep after morning Mass and sappy greeting cards on the altar.

Tuesday a tech rehearsal, with lighting and sound cues perfected as the actors adjusted to their costumes, I kept an eye on this elusive sycophant and followed her from the venue when she sneaked out before the curtain call run-through. She lingered across the street, with a full view of both the main entrance and the stage door, waiting for her prey...

Until that moment, I never would've imagined myself as protector of the wronged, especially men who should be able to fend for themselves. When my fist impacted her face and she slammed against the toy store's brick facade, though, my role clarified itself inside my skull.

"If I ever see you anywhere near Father O'Reilly again, or he mentions you've left a note or flowers in the church, the cops will be notified and you'll be up on charges." I hovered over her. "You get me?"

Massaging her sore jaw - how much damage could a 120 pound lightweight do, anyway? - she nodded.

Blood droplets on my right index finger's bulky silver skull ring, noticed when I stopped to wash up in the bistro's restroom, confirmed she'd have a permanent scar on her cheek, at any rate.

Developments with Stan stunned me speechless. When the audience migrated backstage opening night to compliment the actors on their portrayals, I saw him being passionately - willingly - kissed by a white-haired matron...

He divulged, on the drive home, she'd been a classmate of his in grade school and, herself a widow, they'd connected once more at a mutual friend's funeral. No chance of marriage, as she had six grown children and multiple

grandkids, and the Social Security Administration would play havoc with their benefits. They'd booked a trip to Hawaii for the holidays and would simply enjoy each other's company while it lasted.

Honestly, I'd grown accustomed to having Stan all to myself, and would miss our marathon chats. He had every right to seek his own happiness, though, after more than three decades of hell living with that bitch.

The media's positive reviews of the play spurred demand for tickets, and another four performances were added to the calendar. A cast party after the final curtain, held at the same hotel where my prom debacle occurred, lasted past dawn Sunday, and dozens missed their respective Sabbath services, sleeping until late afternoon.

Ironic, in my book, given the spiritually-based plot.

Billy and I celebrated as was our wont, lying awake in the afterglow and discussing plans for the new year.

None of the trio knew I'd arranged for the professional who video recorded and photographed every Granada production to print a poster-sized version of the Three Wise Men promo still, which hangs on the wall behind my desk in the repair shop to this day.

All they've taught me, I'm gratified I could use my limited knowledge to repay their kindness.

Under the Influence

Beautician, stylist, hairdresser, cosmetologist...

Tillie didn't care how people referred to her - as long as they referred their friends to her.

She'd been operating the salon at the corner of Main Street and Fir Avenue for over a decade, since her father - the town's lone barber - had retired and moved to Key West. She'd apprenticed with him for eight years prior to that, following exceptional achievements at the beauty college down state. In addition to expanding the establishment's dynamic to include services for women, she took over the male clientele without so much as an adverse comment.

Maybe that's because Tillie's rather ordinary looks posed no threat to the wives of the guys who hung around the shop, talking football, basketball, hockey or baseball - depending on the season - and drinking beer from a well-stocked refrigerator in the back room. Perhaps her generous sponsorship of local Little League and high school teams, even during the recent economic recession, offset her avant garde clothes and eccentric behavior.

Dedication to doing the best job possible topped her priority list; she didn't care what anyone thought about her personally if they were satisfied with how they looked when they walked out the door.

Fingertips adept at tactile identification of hair consistency by simply tousling a customer's mop enabled her to provide superior solutions to split ends, dandruff and such. She never mentioned experiencing her own unique high while stimulating the scalp of an individual seated in the adjustable chair.

No more so than when Angus MacGowan came in for his monthly trim.

If she could've gotten away with it, she would've spent hours just running her digits through his long, wavy mane.

Long wasn't just an arbitrary description. Dense white strands extended to the middle of his back, usually kept braided or in a ponytail. She remembered his younger days, when that head was framed by a bush as red as his tartan kilt, worn on major holidays. He'd greyed in his 30s, and strangers to the area either mistook him for a tenured professor at the nearby university or a tramp seeking a free meal.

He rode a British Triumph motorcycle, adding to his mystique as a rebel. A platinum skull ring adorned his right hand, and a two-inch silver banjo woven together with sea glass beads dangled from his left ear.

That he'd been aware of her presence in the barber shop since she'd become a fixture after school - her mother having died giving birth to her little

brother shortly after she'd started kindergarten - didn't faze her. She flat-out loved his hair.

As proof, a curl of his original, incredible auburn nestled in the etched gold locket suspended on a heavy chain around her neck.

She'd never confess that fact to him - or anyone - having plucked the scrap off the floor as her father chatted with MacGowan at the cash register one sultry summer afternoon.

Tillie forced herself to concentrate on Stella Finch's permanent. She'd tried to convince the mother of three how repeatedly subjecting her hair to these strong chemicals damaged the follicles, but the woman insisted, just as others over-dyed their hair and, consequently, dealt with unhealthy thinning and coarseness.

Ed and Charley popped in on their lunch hour, hoping for a quick buzz. "Go, grab a sandwich," advised the proprietor. "I'll fit you in while Stella is baking."

Dual accolades of the "most sensitive hands in town" and the "fastest scissors" brought a chuckle to her lips.

MacGowan arrived for his appointment - always the fourth Thursday - five minutes early. Tillie set aside her smart phone, having booked an entire wedding party for the following Saturday morning. She craved a cup of coffee, but sated herself with a quick bite of a chocolate bar...

Something struck her as odd when he took his place in the chair. He'd removed the earring; the sole evidence he'd worn the skull ring: a pale indentation around the base of his index finger. She spun toward the window; the Triumph's usual parking spot stood empty.

"What's up, Angus?"

"Time to shear it off."

Tillie swallowed hard. "Might I ask why?"

"I've met someone I care about deeply who... thinks I should grow up."

The words escaped before she could stifle the impulse. "If anyone dared expect me to change as a condition of our relationship, I'd tell him to fuck off."

MacGowan's head jerked around so rapidly, she feared his neck would snap.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"You... don't need to apologize, Tillie. I've been... procrastinating about this for quite awhile, and since I plan to ask her to marry me..."

Brush in hand, Tillie felt a tear trickle down her cheek. This would be the last time - ever - that she'd luxuriate in this exquisite mass of fullness... "How short?"

“The same as you do for Bart Marbury.”

“Oh, God, no.”

“Please.”

She knew, if he regretted the decision, the hair would eventually grow out.

Still...

Setting aside the tools of her trade, she snatched a straight-backed wooden chair from against the wall and plopped in front of him.

“What’s this?” MacGowan queried.

“Angus...” Her throat abnormally dry, she croaked piteously.

“Tillie?”

Clutching at straws, she bumbled, “You remember that weekend Dad was in St. Louis for the Masons convention and you dropped by to check on me?”

“What’s that got to do with...”

“Hear me out. Do you remember, or not?”

The hesitation may have been a ploy, or he might have honestly forgotten the incident. “Sure.”

“I never told Dad what happened...”

“You mean, about the acid?”

“Yeah.” Too funny, really, though she suppressed her chuckle. The black Cocker Spaniel puppy had been a birthday present, and she’d named him “Acid” because his spasms of energy reminded her of how classmates acted when stoned. MacGowan found that tag rather weird, and had asked if Tillie - recently graduated from Washington High - had ever tried the drug. When she answered in the negative, he’d offered her the “trip of a lifetime.”

Her altered consciousness forged a link with the sensation of touching MacGowan’s hair. Colorful strands, charged with static electricity, stood on end, floating on air. Until then, she’d ignored her father’s periodic hints to succeed him as the third generation to run the family business.

“I’m here now because of that night.” She toyed with a stray wisp clinging to his silk patchwork shirt. “I’ve never come down off that high, and if you do this, it’ll destroy me.”

Thick digits encircled her forearms; penetrating hazel orbs studied her pasty features. “Tillie, I can’t be held responsible...”

“Of course not.” She averted her gaze. “But, I *do* know that no person has the right to demand someone else alter their lifestyle or behavior...”

“Even if they’re in love?”

Tillie rose, shoved aside the chair and grabbed the scissors. “Hell, Angus, you’re too old to believe in such nonsense. You sound like a teenager.”

“I’ve always been a teenager,” he grunted, spinning away from her.
“Everyone reaches a point when it’s necessary to... to...”
“Surrender to the conventions of society?”
“Is that so wrong?”
“It is, when you’ve professed all these years the exact opposite, so I believed with every fiber of my being you were legit.”
He swatted aside the checkered chair cloth Tillie draped over his lap.
“We’ve been friends for ages, and I’ve exaggerated a lot of my personal views...”
“Including when we were trippin’ together?”
“For instance?”
“To start: the opinions of others don’t matter, and we should listen to our hearts.”
MacGowan sniffed. “You want the truth?”
“Always.”
“I was just trying to impress you, so I could get your knickers off.”
“Is that your motivation for this?” She tugged his earlobe.
“She’s... a respectable woman. An attorney.”
Tillie’s blue eyes widened. “What? You met in court?”
“I received a summons for jury duty. Six months ago. She was the prosecutor on the case.”
“Isn’t that a bit... unethical?”
“I never made it as far as being interviewed, so, no.” He shifted on the cushion. “Since when do you care about ethics if, as you’ve said, you don’t care what others think?”
“All I’m saying, Angus: don’t lose your real self just for... for...”
“Will you cut my hair, or not?” he barked.
She stiffened. “Not.”
“Then, I’ll drive to Bayswater.”
“That’s your choice.”
He exited the building; she shuddered and sank to her knees.
A “Closed” sign tacked to the window bemused passersby as days elapsed. Customers arriving for prearranged trims, highlights and styling weren’t able to contact Tillie on her cell, her voicemail full. No calls were returned.
Saturday fortnight, Angus MacGowan braked his Triumph at the curb, having heard from the clerk at the grocer’s that Tillie had disappeared without a trace.
Or, at least, without being actively traced.

No one had filed a missing person report with the Sheriff's office, since she had no relatives in the vicinity. The guys who'd usually enjoy a pre-dinner beer and a few off-color jokes wouldn't risk their spouses' ire by driving across the railroad tracks to the Victorian-style house to check if her Chevy Nova sat beneath the carport.

MacGowan rode three miles along roads never paved by the county and discovered the residence unlocked. Inside, Tillie sprawled on an old floral-print sofa in the parlor, zonked out of her gourd.

Switching on a dusty crystal chandelier, he squatted beside her and delicately pried her right lid open.

"Christ, woman," he groaned. "You haven't had a pupil in your eye for weeks!"

A cursory search of the premises revealed a stash of acid hidden behind canned goods in the kitchen cupboard - and this visitor could but wonder if the bad habit to which he'd introduced her 20 years previous had been a constant in her life ever since. He wrapped the tabs in yellowed newspaper from the recycling bin beside the trash, tossing the wadded sheets in a moldy cast iron skillet. He lit a match and ignited the lot, waiting until flames reduced the contents to ash before returning to the front room.

"Tillie," he drawled, "are you in there?"

She muttered incomprehensibly, the gold locket firmly clutched in her fist.

He tapped her cheek. "Tillie, c'mon..."

As if in response to his voice, skewed by the drugs, her fingers flexed like they were running through someone's hair. She moaned with pleasure and, when he trapped her hands between his, she yanked him downward, so his face pressed against her breasts.

Once she felt his singular mane against her flesh, though, she shot upright.

"Angus!"

"Aye."

"You... didn't..."

He eased her onto a stack of neon throw pillows, the weakness of her limbs evident. "No, I didn't. On the drive to Bayswater, I had time to think."

"You... broke it off with the attorney?"

"She... dumped *me*." He grinned wryly. "I told her she'd have to take me as I am, or not at all."

Tillie stroked the waist-length ripples. "Thank God."

MacGowan helped her drink plenty of water, and he prepared her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, not letting her leave the table until she ate the last bite.

He directed her to shower and change, then presented her a spare helmet so the Triumph could transport them into town.

“I need a wee haircut,” he stated, using her keys to unlock the shop. “If you’re... sufficiently recovered.”

She inhaled deeply as she preceded him indoors. “Just an inch off the end, eh?”

A Slight Detour

The technique of acquiring companionship for an evening is described with various terms around the globe. For instance, in the States, it's referred to as "hooking up" with someone. In parts of Britain, "chatting up" a potential partner is the norm. Farther north, Scottish lads "pull" women.

Andy Flaherty practiced the art by simply walking to his car.

The law in Ireland: once hired for a position, it was nearly impossible for employment to be terminated unless serious violations regarding job performance or behavior were documented. Flaherty's post as lead archivist at a popular historical tourist attraction guaranteed his collection of a weekly paycheck as he catalogued and displayed artifacts and photos, in spite of his leisure pursuits.

"Randy" Andy's reputation even inspired a consortium of staff members to keep book on who he would target next, some pocketing substantial amounts at long odds.

Flaherty consistently positioned his silver Toyota in the employee car park's most distant spot, claiming he needed the exercise: a full kilometer to the castle. By no means boasting a body builder's physique, his tall frame, wild reddish mop, twinkling hazel eyes and ready smile appealed to those with latent maternal instincts; his exceptional intellect fascinated everyone he met.

Doors locked and alarms set after closing, he would stroll past the lake with the female of his choice. A set progression, but successful in its execution: more than one credited him as a "natural comedian," easily gaining her confidence by making her laugh with a bawdy story. He'd digress into a bit of spontaneous, romantic poetry about the landscape, slipping his arm around her waist. By the time they reached the coach park - where busses delivered tour groups between 10:00 and 3:00 - their hearts would be racing.

The attendant's shack, a four-meter square structure of painted corrugated tin and windows where guides picked up packets of passes and maps before turning day trippers loose on the grounds, provided the perfect detour for impassioned coupling, shades drawn and deadbolt latched.

Ten minutes later, Flaherty was on his way home.

None of the women who succumbed to his charms in the "shagging shed" filed complaints with human resources; they'd been willing participants, the act consensual. Based on rumors whispered during tea breaks in the lounge, in fact, being selected for one of these adventures became the goal of seasonal docents and housekeepers.

Ensuring their hair and makeup were alluring, uniforms ironed, collars starched, skirt hems altered to accentuate their thighs...

Those with more seniority scoffed at these efforts. Flaherty's preferences ran the gamut from single to married, skinny to buxom, young to middle-aged, tracked on a discreet chart mounted behind shelves of cleaning fluids in a maintenance cupboard.

The sole individual to dodge his attentions: Emma Coyne. Development director for the nonprofit foundation entrusted with sustaining and maintaining the 18th century edifice, she seldom occupied the office in the southeast turret during business hours, her diary a succession of meetings with donors, board members, politicians, and colleagues.

When she did ascend the winding staircase, the sun was rising, or past setting. She wore bulky flannel shirts, jeans and sandals, long brunette mane fastened in a ponytail. More than once, she'd been stopped by the security patrol, forced to produce her drivers license and ID tag.

One such June morning, Emma thumbed through a draft of the annual report, frustrated by formatting and typographical errors. A blue highlighter marked mistakes but, as she flipped the last sheet, the stack skidded off the blotter and scattered on the waxed wood floor.

"Bloody hell!" she shouted, rising to retrieve the pages.

"Eh, what?"

The masculine voice startled her; she'd believed herself alone.

Tales of ghosts haunting the castle played a prominent role in the site's mystique, but she gave no credence to superstitions...

"Who's there?" demanded a quavering contralto.

Flaherty popped his head through the partially open door, grinning broadly. "Sorry. I didn't know anyone else was about."

A sigh of relief preceded her response. "Neither did I."

"I came in early to set up the solstice display."

Emma's brown eyes squinted. "I... don't remember your name."

"Andy. Flaherty."

"Oh, right. You... don't look like yourself."

He brushed cobwebs off his grey boilersuit. "Yeah, you've only seen me in uniform. When I'm down in the dungeon, there's no sense..."

"I've always meant to have you give me a tour of our holdings. I think we could create a marvelous fundraising campaign based on ongoing preservation efforts."

"If you're not busy now, I'd be happy..."

Emma glanced at the paperwork in disarray. “If you could help me a minute...”

“Sure.”

Both kneeling, they gathered the lot, colliding at one point as they reached for the same printed graphic. Their eyes met, a simultaneous “Excuse me” raising a chuckle from their lips.

Flaherty offered Emma his hand as they descended into the bowels of the centuries-old fortress, lighting dim on the best of days. Converted prison cells dating from the 1700s had, fortunately, been fitted with fluorescent ceiling fixtures, allowing for viewing of antique furnishings, paintings, clothing, jewelry and bric-a-brac without undue strain.

“My God, I never realized...” Emma gasped, inspecting a diamond tiara.

“Blew me sideways when I found it in a damaged sea chest.”

“Indeed.”

They emerged from the lower level well past noon; without signal for their mobiles, they’d lost track of the hour. Emma’s notifications chirped in rapid succession, 16 voicemails and over three dozen texts scrolling on the screen.

“I’m... away upstairs,” she stammered. “But, thanks awfully.”

“My pleasure. I’d be... happy to walk you to your car when you’re finished.”

Emma sensed no duplicity in the suggestion. “I’d appreciate that. I have a box of promotional materials I’m taking to Dublin, if you’d be willing to carry them...”

“Of course.”

“I should be ready around six.”

“Perfect.”

An afternoon rain had bathed plants with droplets, shimmering as the pair skirted the lake. Emma fell victim to Flaherty’s charm, though the load he toted prevented him from fully implementing his normal routine. It did, however, permit him to deliberately pause at the shagging shed, on the excuse of resting his cramped biceps for a moment.

The box at his feet, he embraced Emma and inched toward the entrance as his mouth devoured hers.

Shades already lowered by the departed attendant, their foreplay intensified, moving swiftly to Flaherty whipping down his tweeds and unzipping Emma’s jeans.

The security patrol, on their 8:00 rounds, detained the couple en route to the car park, where two vehicles remained - one in a reserved space, the other at the end of the last row.

Reveling in each other's bodies for nearly two hours, they'd both discovered how much they'd missed in life: Flaherty by pulling random women, Emma by letting work dominate her existence.

Though his general demeanor and courteousness never altered, Flaherty made the end-of-day trek to his Toyota alone after that. When on site, Emma would meander down to the archives, or call at his flat on her way home.

Use of the shagging shed continued, nonetheless, the maintenance cupboard chart replaced by a calendar, more than two dozen women on staff reserving dates for liaisons with coworkers they fancied for a tumble.

Slow Torture

A Scot with three sons.

Hamish, Hector and Angus, vile and avaricious.

Twins Hamish and Hector - neither sure who'd been first born - incessantly fought over their "rights" as the eldest.

Angus would've liked to see both his brothers dead.

How do I know this?

I was courted by two of the trio, at various times.

If you can describe conniving efforts to seduce me as "courting."

Even their father, James - when I accepted invitations to dinner - privately dissuaded me from encouraging the attentions of his offspring.

The lads' mother lost - the term always sparked visions of her wandering off on a rainy night into an uncharted forest, never again to be seen - James gave up trying to control the boys. They spent his wealth like water, on clothes, wenching, and drink. When he finally tired of their puerile antics, they rebelled in the most foul of ways.

This fine specimen of a Glaswegian hard man, in his late forties with just a touch of grey at the temples of a massive head of brown waves, could snap the neck of an opponent with his bare hands. He'd engaged in his own share of street fighting as a youth, earning acclaim and riches boxing before royalty and nobility who fancied a wager at good odds.

Perhaps fitting his sons favored their mother, their red, shaggy manes denoting a natural deceptiveness.

I noticed the change in James during Sunday services the spring of my 21st year. My marriage to a suitable lad had been postponed indefinitely after my father died of influenza; as an only child, I had to remain at home and care for my ailing mother. We dutifully attended church each Sabbath, and I watched, stupefied, the subtle deterioration of a dignified patriarch.

After the final hymn that Easter, I navigated through the dispersing congregation to greet James. It took three attempts to dispel what appeared to be catatonia, staring into the distance without registering anything or anyone. When he finally lowered his head to meet my gaze, his hazel eyes didn't recognize me.

I drew him into an alcove to inquire about his health. "All is well," he replied with a vagueness that caused me distinct unease. "All is well."

His sons little better than heathens, they weren't present, so I accompanied James to his coach and four, questioning the coachman, my father's first cousin.

"Andrew, what has happened to your master?"

The burly servant lamented, “Ach, lass, he’s come down with brain fever.”

I repeated this diagnosis in disbelief. “Has he had a doctor ‘round?”

“No, lass. His sons claim they know the signs...”

Feeling a scowl twisting my lips, I hoisted myself onto the perch as Andrew flicked the reins. Leaving my mother to stroll home alone might have struck some as a neglect of my duty, but I had an obligation to the man who’d saved me from a life of misery and disrepute had I succumbed to the feigned charms of his sons.

The three still abed after a Saturday night’s revelry, James and I dined in the parlor on roast pheasant and other delights. I dared little more than a whisper as I asked what had been taking place recently in the vast mansion, and he recounted tales of ghostly apparitions, strange noises in the wee hours, and missing belongings.

“I feel I’m going mad,” he concluded.

“You say the ghost resembles your wife?”

“My dear, departed Annie.”

How to tell this shell of his former self that Annie remained very much alive, living ten miles west with her boorish lover?

Leaving him to an afternoon nap in a winged-back chair beside the magnificent marble hearth, I sought out the butler and the cook, inquiring what they knew of the situation. They’d seen or heard nothing unusual from their rooms in the servants’ wing, also distressed by their master’s unhinged state.

When James awoke, I convinced him to invite me to stay for a fortnight as his guest. While the lads spent hours in idle pursuits, I began searching the premises for evidence of a hoax - and it didn’t take long to discover an oversized white linen gown and flowing red wig stuffed in a laundry hamper on the top floor, a metal bedstead and rod positioned by the fireplace flue, used to create a disturbing cacophony, and other signs of nefarious intent.

I kept vigil the following Thursday in a recess along the corridor to confirm my deductions. Past 2:00 a.m., Hector and Hamish drunkenly swept into the musty room, the latter donning the disguise and venturing out to roam the halls. His twin commenced pounding on the iron bars, almost deafening me.

Running on tip-toe down the servants’ stairs, I burst into James’ bedchamber. A lone candle lit, he sat upright on the oak four-poster, suppressing a panicked outburst. I jumped onto the mattress beside him, forcing him to disengage his imagination.

“Your sons are behind this,” I expounded. “Come with me!”

Nothing so sad as a hard man gone timid, but he grasped the hand I extended toward him and stumbled after me clad only in his nightshirt. We

ascended narrow steps and I positioned him with a clear view of the open door where Hector banged on the make-shift drum.

When Hamish returned, he complained, "The old man didn't rise to the bait, no matter how loudly I moaned."

What transpired next simultaneously thrilled and repulsed me. James confronted and accosted his sons, beating them senseless with the very rod they'd used to make his existence a living hell since the new year. I summoned the servants, who oxtered the offending pair from the domicile with only the clothes on their backs.

Angus, creating an eerie cloud of fog in the garden, where a scarecrow-type form bobbed in the wind, joined his siblings in their disgraced exile.

In James' gratitude for my assistance, he proposed marriage. I declined - then - but agreed to move my mother into the mansion so I could tend her needs while fostering his gradual recovery from this horrendous ordeal. A year elapsed and his vigor restored, we wed in the rose garden.

Our six children have been reared in an atmosphere of love and trust and, fortunately, have never met their half-brothers.

The Essence of Life

Creativity is a boon and a bane, depending.

For those whose talents allow them to break through the barriers of their chosen field and make a comfortable living, it's a boon, Carmen acknowledged. Others, no matter how gifted, might never see the fruits of their inspirations grace the public domain, an absolute bummer.

When a television pilot script netted her a generous contract in Hollywood, she decided to pay it forward by funding scholarships and competitions encouraging artists, musicians, and writers to pursue their dreams. In the administration of those projects, however, she ran into some blatant opportunists.

Too many men she interviewed - ranging in age from 21 to 53 - as part of a review process for an internship with the production company handling the drama series she'd created, seemed to be more eager to get laid than to immerse themselves in their craft. They frequently employed subtle innuendo in an attempt to seduce her, with one even spouting a cheesy quote: "The flesh is the traditional solace of the tormented soul."

Carmen could barely subdue a gag.

Some females hinted at their willingness to do just about anything to be selected for the program, not surprising in an era when taboos around references to sexual orientation had all but vanished.

With her hectic daily schedule, Carmen had no time for relationships beyond the office, and definitely not tenuous liaisons involving bedroom gymnastics. She could have had her pick of partners, given the whistles and unsolicited remarks about her appearance when she trekked from the high rise complex to her car, but shunned them all.

She'd never relied on her physical attributes for preferential treatment. She had a brain that functioned in ways her classmates found odd; they harangued her for thinking "sideways" and kept their distance. As she grew into her teens, her Scottish step-father advised her to abandon thoughts of a career, noting she'd become a "bonnie wee beauty." Her mother preempted disaster by waking early Christmas morning to catch that less than moral man with a leg over the sleeping teen on the twin bed, nimble fingers unfastening her pajama buttons as he "unwrapped" his "gift."

He and his belongings landed in a snow bank at the curb before the holiday turkey needed basting in the oven.

By the foundation's fifth year, Carmen tired of playing mind games with applicants. She formed a search committee to handle the annual task, which also

allowed her extra hours at her own computer, developing new script ideas to keep money flowing into the coffers.

Tapping on varnished oak disrupted Carmen's train of thought that sultry spring morning. "Come!"

Lena poked her tawny head through the gap.

"What's up?" queried her boss.

"There's a man here to see you."

Carmen couldn't repress a chuckle at her assistant's ominous tone. "You make him sound like a bill collector."

"He might be."

"But, we don't owe anybody money." She inhaled slowly. "Did he give a name?"

"Bernard MacGrew."

Bolting from the chair, Carmen rushed across the carpet and wrenched the door wide. Standing opposite the reception desk, a tall, slender figure in brown and tan leather biker's jacket, black jeans and hand-tooled cowboy boots contemplated an original Renoir.

"Ya gallus bastard!" shouted Carmen, leaping into his arms.

Spinning the woman around the floor, his longish mane of mixed colors fanned out behind him, then fell onto his shoulders when he stopped to kiss her on both cheeks.

Released from his embrace, she laughed heartily. "Where ha' ya been, ya right numpty?"

"Here 'n there, an' all o'er," replied a thickly accented baritone.

"Ach, that was always your excuse when you'd disappear, and your mom would call lookin' for ya, worried sick."

"Well, 'tis no less true now than 'twas then."

Carmen clutched his wrist and practically dragged him across the threshold, to Lena's amazement.

"Hold m' calls," the assistant was instructed as the panel slammed shut.

An afternoon catching up after being apart for eight years exhausted Carmen and her "Barney" - named after a character in a 1960s British children's TV series called *Trumpton*. They'd attended the same primary school in Partick near Glasgow's River Clyde. When Carmen's mother filed for divorce, she moved her daughter south to Manchester, and the classmates hadn't seen each other again until they both were studying at Oxford University.

Carmen moved to the States to care for her ailing paternal grandmother without completing her degree, which is where she'd been living when fortune smiled upon her.

Abandoning his pursuit of higher knowledge, Barney had bummed around the globe, Nikon camera slung around his neck. His photos had appeared in prominent magazines: landscapes, animals, violent protests, war-torn villages, portraits of politicians, actors, and ordinary folk.

He'd been commissioned to immortalize Carmen for a "Most Influential Person" feature.

"You're takin' the piss," she objected when he announced the assignment. His wee grin dispelled that notion.

"I supposed I have to wear a dress and pose like some pretentious bitch..."

Barney retorted, "When did you e'er wear a dress?"

"Thanks."

"If you're available tomorrow, we could stroll down t' the beach..."

"Oh, God, not the beach," Carmen grumbled. "Ya know how I hate the water."

"Ach, aye. What would you prefer?"

"Right here, wi' the computer."

He sniffed, "That's..."

"If it's gotta be outdoors, then let it be... with the Hollywood sign in the background."

Barney's head tilted slightly left and he blinked approval. "Say, ten?"

"I'll pick you up at your hotel."

He smirked.

"What? You're not sleepin' in the park?" marveled Carmen.

"I got the call yesterday and dinnae book lodgings before my flight from Istanbul."

"Then, you're staying wi' me."

"I dinnae want t' impose."

"I ha' four bedrooms, three o' which are rarely occupied." She preceded Barney from the suite, leaving Lena to lock up for the night.

The pair spent a pleasant evening together, enjoying Chinese take-out, pints of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, old movies running on television. Carmen had always relished Barney's presence; he posed no threat, a true friend. They could chat on any subject - and had. His romantic escapades in exotic locales tickled her funny bone; her self-imposed isolation furrowed his brow.

“I know we both pledged ne’er t’ marry, but t’ deny yourself well-deserved pleasures...” he scolded.

“I’m havin’ a grand time, right here, right now. Dinnae spoil it.” She sipped from her wine glass. “In fact, what are your plans after ya file all these photos?”

“I ha’ nae idea.”

“Stay here, wi’ me. I can snag ya commissions that will score ya loads o’ dosh.”

Barney fidgeted on the sofa. “You know I dinnae like bein’ tied t’ one place.”

“But, ya dinnae ha’ a home base, nowhere t’ stash your stuff. I’m nae sayin’ ya could nae come and go as ya please...”

“Truly?”

She raised her hand to confirm the promise.

“Let me think on it.” He glanced around the chamber: comfortable, functional furnishings, tasty food... “It’d be dead easy...”

Carmen and Barney spent the weekend organizing their living arrangements, popping out as the sun moved across the sky to capture photos from various angles. When the dynamic image - splashed on a trade periodical’s cover - bolstered the scriptwriter’s career, she brimmed with happiness.

She’d achieved the goals set for herself as a kid: a steady income, a chance to do good for others, and the perfect confidant.

Thanks to their mutual respect and similar perspective, Barney attained a stability that balanced his restless spirit.

Two mature, independent individuals, the matter of sex never entered into it, and neither had any regrets on that front.

Smoker's Corner

They gathered with almost boring regularity, occupying cozy leather armchairs beside a stone fireplace. The shop might not have been licensed to serve liquor, but Archie Campbell, the owner, used the excuse of entertaining friends when pouring large ones of Glenlivet for these patrons.

Cigar smoke created an acrid cloud, dissuading those who eschewed tobacco from entering the premises - meaning, mostly, women. This last male preserve provided respite from nagging wives or clingy girlfriends, fleeting sane moments after hectic days.

On a gloomy June Tuesday evening, Sanny Boyle's teeth shown in a broad smile as a Montecristo bobbed between his jaws. He seldom revealed any personal details about his life, hovering on knowledgeable when the conversation veered onto politics and religion, or sport. His comrades respected those boundaries, but he seemed eager to divulge some vital news on this occasion.

"What's doin', Sanny?" queried Jim West, a retired shipyard welder, whose burn-scarred visage and gnarled hands paid tribute to his working class origins.

Boyle kicked the duffel bag at his feet, declaring, "I'm away t' m' job in an hour."

"And you're smilin'?" Will MacLean retorted. "I'd only be that happy if I was away on holiday t' the Bahamas."

The exchange was interrupted when the door facing Gallowgate crashed open, caught by the wind. Backlit by streetlights, a trim figure glided into the establishment.

Some harried daughter sent to fetch her father home, the gathering presumed, averting their faces.

Instead, the tie-dyed shirt and jean-clad female paused at the polished oak counter. Numerous eyebrows arched when she requested a Bolivar Belicoso Fino from Campbell.

"Gift for your husband?" he inquired.

Only those with a clear view of her tanned features saw the smirk; her long brunette mane obscured her expression from the others.

Presented with the cigar, she made use of a guillotine beside the cash register to snip the tip, plucked a wooden match from a box, lighting the other end and drawing deeply.

Witnessing this violation of societal norms, the men waited for a spate of coughing to commence. When it didn't, they were collectively blown sideways,

fidgiting awkwardly before resuming joint contemplation of logs crackling on the hearth.

Rather than depart the tobacconist's, slender legs meandered toward the assembly. The woman parked herself on a vacant seat beside Boyle, who continued to grin as he flicked ash in a tray on the coffee table between puffs.

Boyle qualified as a unique type of Glaswegian hard man: rough-stitched patchwork jacket, baggy black t-shirt, Dockers and square-toed boots. A wild mass of greying hair, untrimmed beard and mustache added an animalistic aura to his intimidating frame. Hazel eyes that bored into the soul could unnerve the most determined adversary.

The contrast between this pair sparked a ripple of laughter around the circle, mostly to compensate for the mutual discomfort at a woman's presence, hampering uninhibited converse.

"You Jimmy West?" she hailed in an easy contralto.

The balding retiree replied, "Aye, lass."

"My dad worked with you in the yards."

"Who be that, then?"

"Colin MacLeod."

"A good man, a right prankster, rest his soul. Ye be wee Elsie, then."

"Yes, sir."

"Ach, ye grew int' a bonnie lass."

"Thanks."

West leaned forward. "Why be ye here?"

"Same as you, Jimmy. A quiet smoke after a long shift."

"What be yer work?"

"I'm... with the government."

"Secretary t' some pencil pusher?"

"Not exactly."

Abruptly, Boyle stubbed out his stogie, rose and slung his duffel over one shoulder. "I'm away, lads."

"How long will ye be travelin', Sanny?" wondered Campbell.

"A fortnight or more."

"I'll ha' a fresh supply o' your favorites sent o'er," the shop owner promised. "See ye then."

Elsie glanced at her wristwatch, hoisting herself off the lumpy cushion. "Is that the time already? I've got a date tonight."

Boyle preceded her onto the street by less than ten seconds, but he'd vanished from view when she peered in both directions.

“Cagey bugger,” she muttered, strolling north toward her Mini. “Must’ve grabbed a taxi.”

Passing a recessed doorway, an iron vice clamped on her shoulder and dragged her into the shadows, a wiry forearm compressing her windpipe.

“You lot should know better,” growled Boyle. “I’ve already killed a half-dozen numpties who tried to set me up, and would be charged with GBH for what I did to eight others.”

Elsie hissed, “How’d you guess...”

“You were too cool, too confident.” The pressure eased on her throat. “And, skinny as you are, I could see the bump of a pistol tucked in the back of your waistband.”

Boyle relieved her of the weapon and released his grip. She spun to face him; he towered six inches above her and outweighed her by at least four stone.

“I thought it would be dead easy,” she chuckled. “My bad.”

“It’ll be dead easy to end you.”

“Except, there’s a squad of constables and MI-5 agents positioned along this stretch of road. You’ll never make that flight to Mexico so you can snuff the Chinese drug lord bidding for exclusive rights to Latin America’s cocaine supply.”

The assassin backed her against moldy bricks, her position untenable. “I ha’ two irrefutable skills: killin’ people and spottin’ liars. You’re lyin’ right now.”

Elsie, mortified by the ploy’s failure, heard a zipper. She assumed Boyle had opened his duffel, selecting the means for her execution. Probably a knife, eliminating any noise that might attract attention.

The last thing she expected: being raped by Sanny Boyle. He stuffed a rolled up kerchief in her mouth to muffle her screams; when finished, he ritually slashed her right cheek, left palm and thigh of her jeans with a switchblade before plunging the steel into her midsection.

“Dead easy,” he spat, sauntering into the night.

Bleeding and traumatized, Elsie nonetheless resolved to fulfill the mandate imposed by her superiors in the agency: apprehend Sanny Boyle, or prevent his departure from Glasgow. Groping in the gloom, trembling digits fastened on a weighty spherical object. She stepped onto the pavement and lobbed the projectile at her target.

She’d intended to deliver a glancing blow to his shoulder, just enough to disrupt his progress. Whether the asymmetrical shape, his loping gait or some atmospheric variable, the chunk grazed his cranium and he stumbled right, pitching head-first through a storefront window.

Closing the distance at a limp, Elsie could not mistake Boyle's demise. A jagged shard of glass had penetrated his chest, passing through his ribcage and emerging near his spine. Agile fingers searched his bloodied clothes; among scant personal belongings, an engraved cigar case nestled inside his jacket, holding two pristine Cubans.

This criminal's sneer as he exhaled aromatic vapors may have reflected a love for contract murder; as she tucked the steel cylinder in her back pocket - sirens converging on the site - she reveled how her grin when lighting up, post medical treatment, would herald yet another triumph over evil.

No sense letting a good smoke go to waste.

Used Goods

Teenagers in the late 1960s witnessed an incredible transformation of society. Other aspects of daily life, sadly, never change.

I can personally attest: both statements are accurate.

Maggie and I had attended school together in the Partick district of Glasgow, and my friendship with her two older brothers dumped me into a situation I could have avoided - if I'd listened to my father and accepted a football scholarship to the University of Edinburgh.

Kids don't tend to take advice from their parents, though, only realizing their mistake after the fact.

Billy already had his grimy mitts in the music and entertainment business by that point. Ties to the trade unions gave Jimmy far-reaching power and influence. Alec's sources for what he called "soft drugs" - acid and marijuana - and harder stuff like cocaine forged connections with the hippie crowd, as well as toffs with certain... proclivities. Ken - who despised being called "Kenny" - handled prostitution, gambling and money lending.

These four, still in their mid-20s, pretty much ran Glasgow as the 70s commenced.

For obvious reasons, I won't divulge their surnames.

I do want to stay alive.

Basil and Ernie, Maggie's siblings, ran numbers for Ken. When Ernie broke his ankle in a motorcycle accident, Basil encouraged me to tag along on his rounds.

The prospect of dosh in my pockets made asking Maggie on a date a lot easier.

God, she was gorgeous. Innocent. Long auburn hair with natural waves. Sparkling blue eyes. Nice curves. A good dancer.

That Friday night, dressed to the nines, I escorted her to the Barrowland Ballroom. We were enjoying the music and the company, when a shadow loomed over our corner table. I'd seen Billy once up until then, his mop of wavy brownish hair hanging below his shoulders, a mustache and scraggly goatee that reminded me of photos I'd seen of Vietnamese dictator Ho Chi Min.

The right gallus bastard wore a red velvet suit, white silk shirt and purple suede shoes and, with a mere nod, invited Maggie onto the floor.

In no position to refuse on her behalf, I left the decision to her.

When she accepted Billy's extended hand, I let fly with a series of expletives, my opinion of her morals shattered.

I lost sight of them after their first lap past the stage. Basil wandered in and sat opposite me; we chatted awhile but, the band's set ended and Maggie nowhere to be seen, I excused myself and went in search of her.

A warm June evening, frustrated at not finding her, I stepped out the side door into the alley for a breath of not necessarily fresh air. Lo and behold, there was Billy, leaning against the brick wall, puffing a cigarette, tweeds at his knees, with Maggie kneeling before him.

He didn't so much as flinch at being discovered in the midst of such a vile act, nor did the creature servicing him alter her rhythm.

Disgusted, I returned indoors, grabbed my jacket and left.

I wandered the streets, nerves afire. Nearing the River Clyde, I briefly considered jumping into the churning waters, then veered toward Central Station to hop a train south.

Ernie, using a cane, hobbled up to me as I stood beneath the schedule board, rain pishing. Mostly dry, he must've taken a taxi from the East End.

"You away for a holiday?" he asked.

"I'm away, period."

"You're nae gonna shop us t' the police, eh?"

My head whipped 'round, pulling a muscle in my neck. "Sorry?"

"You know too much about the operation, Harky. We... cannae let you go."

That's when I glimpsed the switchblade clutched in his fist.

My parents objected to swearing in the house, but this occasion warranted a sincere, "Fuck!"

Ernie wrapped a sympathetic arm around my shoulders. "C'mon. We'll stop at the pub for a large one on the way home."

I shook him off. "What's with Maggie, anyway? I thought she was..."

"She was, until Alec got his claws into her."

Drugs? I couldn't believe my ears. That sweet, lovely lass...

"Ach, aye," Ernie confirmed when I voiced my doubts. "'Tis Basil's fault, really. Maggie kept natterin' on about bein' a singer, so he set her up wi' an audition with Billy. She cut a demo record, but refused t' pay the release fees."

"Release fees?"

"Put it this way, lad: most o' Ken's girls are wanna be models or singers who would nae..."

"Oh, my God!"

In a rage, I marched from the station, drenched by the rain and splashed with mud by passing busses. By the time I arrived at our flat up the close, I resembled a drowned rat.

And felt like one, too.

Tucked into bed by my mother for the weekend, I shivered with fever, thrashing under the quilts. The image of Maggie in that undignified posture while Billy tapped ashes from his fag on her head only exacerbated my turmoil.

Basil collected me Tuesday morning; he'd come 'round Monday, but my father sent him off with a profanity-laced tirade. Still weak, I accompanied this associate - no longer considering him a friend - across Glasgow, loading an attache case with parcels without too many incidents.

I could never confess to my parents the real reason my knuckles were scraped bloody.

Through what passed for a Scottish summer and into the winter, I didn't see Maggie. Basil and Ernie had moved into their own posh flat, mostly to avoid their own mother's greeting every time she saw red stains on their lapels.

Being trustworthy a plus, I guess, with a certificate in maths, Jimmy pulled me in to act as accountant for the unions. Keeping two sets of books was only half of it. By the mid-70s, the shelf above my office desk in a three-story complex near George Square held ledgers for 13 supposedly legitimate enterprises, all profiting from dirty money.

Familiarity with the personalities of the four main players didn't make my life any easier. I could be summoned to Billy's suite near the Kelvingrove at a moment's notice; he'd be naked in bed with some random slut when I walked through the door. He never bothered to stop her from bouncing up and down while he dictated his instructions.

Alec traveled frequently, clad in tailored pinstripes but with a kinky sandy mop that reminded me of Tweeny Twink perms gone awry. Part of my duty was to ensure customs agents didn't discover what he carried in his luggage. Special suitcases with false sides were commissioned, or he would hop off the freighter on which he'd booked passage before it reached port.

With black hair slicked off a Cro-Magnon forehead and broad shoulders, one word described Jimmy: thug. He wanted his own way and usually got it, thanks to his massive paws and a cadre of enforcers. He once managed to shut down the shipyards because he didn't like the benefits offered in the carpenters' contract.

Ken... well. He could pass as a hard man on the streets but, putting it delicately, Maggie and her ilk weren't his cup of tea.

All transactions involved cash, and no bank ever saw a shilling of the take. I supervised the laundry - as the process was nicknamed - and what I referred to as the Glasgow Mafia lived like kings.

I cut myself in for a percentage, too, and they never suspected.

At least, I thought they didn't. When Alec and Jimmy strolled into my office on a foggy Tuesday morning, I wondered if my timecard was about to be punched. They led me down the stairs to Billy's Rolls Royce, a liveried chauffeur depositing us in the West End.

For once, Billy was fully clothed - a white suit hand-painted with flowers and birds - sitting like a potentate on a golden throne at a huge oak desk in front of windows overlooking a landscaped garden. He held a cigar between his teeth and might have been smiling when I crossed the Persian carpet.

With him, I could never be sure.

"You ha' done good work, lad," he praised me. "We need you t' perform another wee service..."

A reflection in the casements confirmed my frown.

"You ha' always fancied Maggie," he continued. "Well, she's yours."

"Sorry?" I retorted.

"The ceremony is set for Friday, and you'll ha' a grand house two streets over, a new car..."

Certain incidents in my short but colorful existence had blown me sideways, but none as much as this. "Huh?"

Alec and Jimmy eased me onto a wing-backed chair. Evidently, the three of them had... made use of Maggie, and now she was pregnant. The overlap in their relations with her put the actual paternity in question. So, I was to be the scapegoat and claim the bairn as my own.

It came down to protecting the organization's interests. If I refused, I'd be floating face-down in the Clyde by sunset.

A wedding supper for 250 invited guests would be held at the Barrowland Ballroom, the meal catered, with three bands playing through the night.

I wondered just how long they'd known about... Maggie's predicament, to make such elaborate arrangements.

"It'll go down a storm," Billy assured me, rising and clasping my hand enthusiastically.

As I left the room, I heard myself mutter, "Jesus Suffering Fuck."

Alec directed the chauffeur to drive me to an exclusive men's tailor shop, where I was fitted for a tuxedo, complete with top hat. When I alighted in George

Square after lunch, brightly wrapped gifts were already stacked in the reception alcove.

An intimate dinner for Maggie and myself at Malmaison brought us together, though two of Jimmy's enforcers were ensconced at a table near the kitchen. Excessive layers of make-up spoiled what had been her natural beauty, and when I stretched out my arm to caress her cheek, she recoiled.

"What's wrong?"

She burred, "Nothin'."

Tears streamed down her cheeks, washing away ample powder and rouge to expose a hideous bruise.

"Who's given you a right bashing?" I steamed.

Her lips pursed, she remained mute.

"Was it Billy?"

An almost imperceptible nod.

"Why, for Christ's sake?"

She chugged half a glass of French champagne before gushing, "Because, it's him I want t' marry, nae you."

"Is he the little bastard's father?"

"I... dinnae know."

"Then, it's true? You've been passed around like a bowl of Christmas tatties..."

"Aye, t' m' shame."

"I blame Basil and Ernie..."

Her head tilted left like an intrigued labrador pup.

"They should've kept you out of it..."

She mustered a feeble smirk. "'Twas not them that got me int' this. I got *them* int' it."

Blood froze in my veins. "But, Ernie told me..."

"Ach, ha' nae ye figured out what a liar he is?"

The linen napkin mixed with untouched salmon, soaking up the sauce. I shoved back my chair, our chaperones doing likewise.

"Shit!"

To be saddled with a shrew for the rest of my days... better to dive in the Clyde and be done.

"C'mon. I'll take you home," I grunted.

"But, I ha' nae finished..."

"I dinnae care a jot. Let's go."

The Rolls dropped us at the building where Maggie's flat had been furnished with every amenity by her... patrons. Beneath a street lamp, I caught the glint of diamonds around her wrist and pearls dangling from her earlobes.

She would hate living with me, would resent the child that tied her to me.

Dismissing the chauffeur, I led Maggie to the door. As soon as the limo eased past the junction, I shooed her indoors.

"What, you're nae comin' up?"

"I'll nae touch you, slut. Do as you damned well please."

Frustrated, I meandered aimlessly along dark lanes and, when rain started lashing down, I took shelter in the doorway of Police Scotland headquarters.

A constable, thoroughly soaked, ducked beneath the canopy, cursing the weather. "I left m' mac at home."

We chatted about assorted and sundry, before the rookie invited me inside for a cuppa. Seeing the tails Jimmy had set on me, I politely declined and steeled myself for a trek through the deluge.

Instead, I was hustled onto the rear seat of a battered Ford. "The boss wants a wee rabbit wi' ye."

I'd had enough, to be frank. Before these two gorillas could thump me senseless, I burst out the other door and took off at a sprint - much to my knees' distress. Winding through the odd close and scaling fences, I lost them.

Extricating oneself from such a web of deceit might've been dead easy if my head didn't contain so many secrets. I couldn't go home, or to the office, or even to any of the pubs I frequented; if I was seen, a single phone call would bring hell down upon me.

My limbs screaming in agony, I jogged along a quiet street and almost collided with the same constable I'd met earlier. He'd obviously borrowed someone's anorak, peering from beneath the hood at my soggy state.

"You look like you've been chased by a Rottweiler," he quipped.

My chest heaving, I groaned, "Worse."

"Anythin' I can do?"

"Hide me."

He sniffed my breath to check if I was pissed and, when he detected no alcohol, signaled me to follow him to the nearest call box. Within five minutes, an unmarked vehicle braked at the curb, and I was transported to an undisclosed location where detectives took my statement.

Unloading all the details took three days, eight hour shifts.

Placed in protective custody until raids on a host of locations and dozens of arrests transpired, slated as lead witness in a trial that garnered international

publicity, I entered the courtroom to testify that first morning, astounded by the unrecognizable quartet seated with solicitors for the defense: Billy, clean shaven with short bronze hair parted on the left, in grey mohair jacket and slacks; Jimmy, well scrubbed and sedate; Alec finally with a right pupil in his eye after years of being out of his brain on his own gear; Ken uncomfortable in a starched collar and tie.

I'd no more than taken the stand to swear the oath than gunfire deafened those present. The Glasgow Mafia would not go down willingly; six guards and a few innocent bystanders were wounded or died in the escape.

Their empire in tatters, the fugitives fled the country and, last I heard, were flexing their muscles in Central America. Maggie gave birth to a healthy son before Christmas and, by his fourth birthday, clearly favored Jimmy.

I relocated to Wales, where I grow vegetables and teach Sunday school. I've heard periodic comments from parents and acquaintances about my reluctance to pursue any type of close relationship - romantic or friendly - but having survived being so ill used, I prefer my own company.

Into No-Man's Land

“Ye goin’ t’ pull the motor t’night?”

A common question in Glaggow’s Barrowland Ballroom in those late days of the 50s, when young men mingled near the dance floor, prospective partners primping and preening in a long row across the expanse known as “No-Man’s Land.”

One of the latter had been attracting attention for weeks due to a singular trait: she reminded the more mechanically inclined lads of an idling engine, vibrating in a sort of rhythmic, perpetual motion from the top of her dirty blonde head to her garish pink pumps.

They’d nicknamed her “The Motor.”

And, quite a few wanted to give her a test drive.

The reference needed no explanation among these hormone-driven bucks.

Smiles barely masking nerves, the more courageous abandoned their ranks to pose the requisite question, “Are ye dancin’?”

Returning, shame-faced, when their offer was declined.

Those who frequented the venue learned early: once rejected, best to retreat, instead of working the way down the line of females and being repeatedly shunned. Preferable, in the wake of such humiliation, to continue out the door, meander across Gallowgate to The Saracen Head and get pissed.

Billy hadn’t been around for awhile; his father’s unexpected death had left him in charge of the family’s dry goods shop, and he’d been too busy at the weekend to venture over from Partick. That June Saturday, though, he left his mother and three sisters darning socks, ten quid in his trouser pocket.

His mates glad to see him, they nonetheless decided to have a bit of fun. They pointed out Sally, hips gyrating to a beat inside her own skull, and convinced the teen of her eagerness to have a go ‘round the floor.

Suspicious, Billy challenged, “Then why are ye nae o’er there?”

Excuses of a sore ankle, the sniffles, and more didn’t assuage his doubts, but he decided to play their game and flout his prowess with the opposite sex.

He strode toward her with forced confidence. His friends hadn’t been mistaken about how lovely she was, despite a gaudy lime-green sequined dress that reflected light off the mirrored ball twirling from the ceiling.

Even in her three-inch heels, he towered over her. While his twinkling hazel orbs assessed her, she ran blue eyes from his winkle pickers up slender legs draped in Levi’s 501s to a Bronx leather jacket and black turtleneck. Wavy brown hair topped his cranium and framed fresh, frank features.

As the percussion-laden beat of an Elvis tune reverberated between the walls, Billy whisked The Motor past his astonished pals.

The couple remained paired for the next five songs, then vanished.

The following Saturday, Billy was mobbed by a throng demanding details of his exploits. He grinned vaguely but divulged nothing.

Sally, for her part, arrived late, joining the women, still essentially unattainable, undulations steady.

Toward midnight, though, she and Billy disappeared.

A brief account on the *Sunday Times* front page confirmed their fate: they'd driven out past Drumchapel, where the Ford Prefect was discovered in the wee hours of the morning at the bottom of a steep embankment. A police report indicated the emergency brake had become disengaged, causing it to roll down the side road where it had been parked. Both parties, naked, were thrown from the vehicle and killed instantly, their clothes strewn amongst the debris and dangling from nearby tree branches.

A source of humor for the Barrowland regulars in the midst of this tragedy, the final statement by the investigator: "The motor was still running."

Kissed by an Angel

An unfathomable experience.

A life-changing event.

She'd huddled on the lumpy double bed, Amish quilt tucked up to her neck. The ominous blackness and chill wind whistling through gaps in the window frames frightened her; she didn't like being left alone when her father worked nights.

Despite her shivering, she managed to periodically doze...

Then, she felt it.

Blue orbs shot open.

Her initial thought: a lock of hair had fallen across her forehead. She brushed at it absently. No big deal.

A lingering tingling above her nose, though, erased this impression.

Perhaps a spider had crawled across the pillow and bitten her?

She threw back the covers and scrambled off the mattress. She feared spiders even more than the dark.

Along with snakes, bats, mice and rats.

Shuddering anew, she groped her way to the master bathroom, switching on the light above the sink. She fully expected to view a swollen, red lump in the medicine chest mirror - maybe even teeth marks.

Nothing.

Yet, *something* had roused her...

She hoisted herself on the ancient iron sink, hovering within an inch of reflective glass. Her eyes crossed as she studied unwrinkled flesh, detecting...

Silver glitter?

Curious fingers rubbed the spot, the tips visually inspected beneath a glaring bulb.

As she eased herself onto the tiles once more, she doubted her sanity.

Yet, she felt calmness wash over her like a gentle tide.

She returned to bed, snuggled under the hand-sewn comforter and, for once, felt warm and safe.

A faint glow in the far corner might have been a shaft of moonlight through a gap in the draperies.

Or, she might have glimpsed an angel's ethereal aura, assigned to bolster her after her lone parent's untimely death in an early morning collision with a drunk driver.

Recalling this incident on the twentieth anniversary of that man's passing, she still wondered how she'd survived such traumatic news, conveyed by her grandmother, her entire existence upended.

The aging matriarch speculated this nine-year-old had been kissed by an angel, a sign of enduring protection against the turmoil of the world.

Maybe she'd been right.

Tentative digits massaged her forehead, the patch sensitive even now.

Did a fleeting shadow drift along the wall?

Faire Play

Possibly because Cameron had enjoyed playing dress-up since childhood, she made her way each summer to the Highland Renaissance Faire outside Inverness in full regalia, spending three days meandering through a “village” created with grand, colorful tents, temporary pole structures and caravans. She danced, ate and drank, browsed shops selling weapons, clothing, delicately spun glass sculptures, toys, crystals and jewelry. Music from harps, lutes and pipes wafted through the air as she waited her turn on the archery field or watched jousting competitions from a covered grandstand.

Actors got into the spirit of the era with skits on make-shift stages, comedians joked with their audiences, acrobats performed phenomenal exhibitions of agility.

Periodically, since she carried her grandfather’s seven-foot blond wood walking stick, cries of “Staff meeting!” reached Cameron’s ears. She willingly offered her quasi-crutch for an obligatory tap.

An ample kelly green skirt hid her limp well, especially toward late afternoon, when aching knees rebelled at such exertion.

For one weekend a year, she could bear the pain.

This atmosphere of frivolity lifted her spirits; she reveled in the cross-section of humanity that patronized the event. Parents brought their children, often in wee Robin Hood tunics with bows slung over their shoulders. Teens could earn some extra dosh by hiring on as car park or petting zoo attendants, or keepers of the games, allowing youngsters to try their hand at ancient combat with sponge-tipped arrows or foam-capped quarterstaves.

Well-groomed “nobles” populated the faire’s royal court, complete with chains of office and crowns; at the opposite end of the spectrum, hairy peasants - the modern equivalent of 1960s hippies - recited improvised poems for tips or invented stories of long-forgotten lore.

Folks in t-shirts and jeans mingled with those in costume, too, just enjoying a day out.

Cameron felt herself smile when a spry red-haired teen in feathered cap presented her a yellow rose. Her fingers reached for a draw-string purse at her waist to give him a coin, but he slipped through the crowd. Curious, she navigated the crush of bodies on the packed dirt track, veered left at a fork in the path and strolled along a tree-shaded lane where a Glasgow flag rippled in the breeze above a conical blue-striped tent. A gold-painted wood sign proclaimed the occupant “Professor Martist/Fortune Teller.”

A pair of girls burst through the flap at that moment, giggling.
Whatever they'd been told by this charlatan, Cameron mused, must've tickled their fancy.

For charlatan he must be, since she'd never met anyone with second sight, a trait consigned to myths popular in centuries past.

She contemplated the bloom for a moment, then muttered, "What the hell."

The odor of sandalwood incense drifted through the gap in the heavy fabric; peeking inside, six beeswax candles positioned at the points of a hexagon illuminated a round table draped with silver-threaded cloth, its centerpiece a crystal ball on a scrolled stand.

"Come in, lass," boomed a deep voice. "Ha' a seat."

She murmured, "I just... came t' pay for the flower..."

"M' gift t' ye."

"Is that how ye drum up business?" she chuckled. "Your assistant picks random women..."

"Nae, lass. Hughie has... an uncanny affinity for those who need guidance in their lives."

"I dinnae..."

He appeared from behind damask curtains near a gilded throne. "Sit, please."

She complied.

If nothing else, the "Professor" made a good show of his craft. He wore a shimmering dark blue wizard's robe embroidered with white stars. An oversized silver sunburst supported by a thick chain rested on his chest. A purple turban topped his head, with shaggy brown waves flowing over his shoulders. An untrimmed mustache and goatee hid his mouth, but flashing hazel eyes conveyed serious intent.

"Your brain is a swirling mass of questions, unanswered for more than a decade," he declared softly, his gaze never leaving her face.

Waxing philosophical, she countered, "That is the plight of all humanity."

"Ach, aye, but your perplexity does not concern war, world hunger, the devastation of the environment or political corruption. Ye seek the truth about one very close t' ye."

Cameron involuntarily shuddered. How could this stranger know...

Professor Martist ignored the clear orb on the table. "Ye held a deep and abiding affection for this lad, who vanished wi'out a trace before ye took your eleven-plus exam. Ye ha' heard bugger-all from him since, and your parents believe him dead."

A tear trickled along Cameron's nose. "Ye cannae possibly..."

Manicured digits slid a faded Polaroid photo across the cloth.

She didn't need more than a second to recognize the image: her tenth Christmas. She held the gold spaniel puppy her father had given her, and her brother Frankie stuck out his tongue at the camera.

Slowly, her eyes moved from the flat surface to meet the fortune teller's stare. "Where is he?" she demanded.

"Here, Cam."

He rose, grinning broadly, shedding the turban and robe to expose a tie-dyed t-shirt and ratty jeans.

Hoisting herself from the chair, Cameron backhanded him across the cheek. Frankie massaged the sore flesh, annoyed. "What's the big idea?"

"I could ask ye the same!" stormed his little sister. "Where the hell ha' ye been?"

"Here and there."

"Why on earth..."

He waved her onto woven cane, settling himself on a plush velveteen cushion. "Ye were banished from the room the night Dad informed me, if I dinnae enlist in the Army, I'd be goin' t' prison on a theft charge. Neither o' those options appealed t' me, so I bolted."

"Ye... could ha' left me a note..."

"There was nae time. Nothin' I said would convince Dad o' m' innocense - do ye remember Tam and Jimmy?"

"Aye."

"They were the ones who stole the Lord Provost's Bentley and parked it in front o' our hoose. I was... elsewhere."

Cameron smirked. "Up the close, shaggin' Olive?"

"Ye knew aboot that?"

"Everybody did." She leaned forward. "Why dinnae ye ever... send word?"

"Messages can be traced. I could nae risk..."

"If ye believe that, why now?"

"I ha' been here the past six years, waitin' for the chance..." explained Frank. "Ye dinnae read the news, eh?"

"Nae very often."

"Last month, Tam was arrested for murdering Jimmy outside the Sarry Head. They'd done a diamond heist, and he thought Jimmy cheated him when splittin' the take. Once the coppers hauled him in, he confessed t' a lot o' old crimes, hopin' for leniency..."

“Including the car theft?”

“Aye.”

“Why... go through this... charade?”

“How d’ ye think I’ve scratched out a livin’ all these years?”

“As a fortune teller?”

“As a... travelin’ player.”

Cameron squeezed his hand. “Nae anymore. You’re comin’ t’ Glasgow wi’ me.”

“Mom and Dad...”

“Moved to Cornwall last year, after we fell out about my... career. I bought the hoose, and there’s plenty o’ room for ye.”

“Ye fell out wi’ them, too?” Frankie marveled.

“Ach, aye. They... objected t’ me signin’ on as costumer with the Royal Theatre troupe, instead o’ goin’ t’ university.”

She tugged him off the throne and they embraced.

The ginger youth poked his head through the tent flap with a cheery, “Can I get back to work now?”

Frankie tossed him the robe and turban. “‘Tis all yours, lad!”

On their way out, he flipped the sign off its nail.

Cameron studied the freestyle script. “Why ‘Professor Martist’?”

“I started out as ‘The Mysterious Professor M’ then, when I tried m’ hand doin’ caricatures, I shortened it t’ ‘Professor M, artist,’ but the comma rubbed off.”

“So, you’ve always been Frankie MacFarland.”

“And always will be.” He pitched the plank in a trash barrel.

She hugged him again. “Let’s go home. We ha’ got a lot o’ catchin’ up t’ do.”