

Tapping the Scottish

Part III

A Collection of Stories

by

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Spin

“Get your mind out of the gutter!”

Voices assailed Agnes Van Dyne as she approached the yellow brick building’s entrance, a half-dozen oddballs lingering on the sidewalk with picket signs bearing quotations from the bible reminding perverts of their forthcoming damnation.

The publisher renting two of the three floors produced a variety of smut, mostly sold at truck stops along interstate highways or adult bookstores.

For all this cadre of zealots knew, Agnes could’ve been intent on patronizing the tailor shop on ground level. If so, why harangue her?

Best to ignore their diatribe and be about her business: serving summons on the editor and owner of the trashy magazines.

As paralegal to a prestigious law firm on the city’s east side, she’d accepted additional duties of delivering subpoenas and writs, earning extra pay on nights and weekends, when targeted individuals could easily be caught at home.

A profitable sideline, since she enjoyed little in the way of a social life. Besides, when she knocked at a given dwelling, with her casual and pleasant appearance, no one suspected her real purpose.

Her task completed up flights of marble stairs, the young woman roamed the corridor in search of a rear exit - no luck. Resigned, she pushed open glass doors, bright sunshine deceptive as a chill wind whipped along the street.

She didn’t expect the protesters to rush her, thrusting pamphlets into her fists, roughly jostling her. One man shoved her against the wall; her skull thumped against twisted remnants of a metal sign and she felt herself sliding downward, vision blurred...

The shot rang out, echoing in her disoriented ears like a bass drum.

Next thing she remembered: sirens, paramedics and police swarming the site.

She was lifted onto a rolling gurney, an urgent tenor asking her name.

From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a prone figure, covered with a sheet, being loaded into a second ambulance.

Not until she recovered her senses in the triage unit of the hospital’s emergency room did she think to check inside her jacket.

The pistol she carried in a shoulder holster had been removed.

“Oh, shit!”

An avalanche could have hit Agnes no harder than the craziness that ensued. She gingerly sat up on the exam table’s hard surface, two uniformed

officers positioned outside the cubicle. A mob of others lingered near the nurses' station, none of them doctors.

When they noticed her awake, they descended en masse, a cacophony of questions only exacerbating her throbbing headache.

"Shut up, for Christ's sake!" she shouted, overwhelmed. "What the hell's going on?"

A rumpled plain-clothes detective shooed the crowd from the cramped space, introducing himself as Steve Williams. Reddish-brown mop tousled, mud caked on his black leather oxfords, he pulled a molded plastic chair toward her and sank on it. "You okay?"

"I have no idea," she confessed.

"Are you aware of what's happened?"

"Not a clue."

Williams' explanation landed Agnes flat on her back in a dead faint.

Another hour elapsed before the attending physician allowed anyone near her. "She's got ten stitches in her noggin, and probably a concussion. Go easy!"

Agnes signaled Williams closer, croaking, "Did you say what I think you said?"

"Unfortunately, yes," he replied.

"You think I *killed* somebody?"

"She's definitely dead, and your fingerprints are the only ones on the pistol..."

Her studies of criminal law and love of TV shows like *Perry Mason*, *Matlock* and *Diagnosis Murder* caused a burst of laughter to issue from her sore throat. Had they intubated her at some point? she puzzled.

"There's nothing funny about any of this," scoffed Williams.

"Except, who else's fingerprints would you expect to be on that pistol, since it's mine?"

"So, you're claiming you didn't..."

"Precisely! The pistol was secured in the holster until somebody removed it, either in the ambulance or once I got here."

Williams' scowl transmitted his doubts. He waved a subordinate to search for the holster. "You have a permit for the weapon, I assume?"

"Through the firm."

Thick eyebrows arched above smoldering hazel orbs. When she announced the name, she detected a flash of fear dilating his pupils.

Within moments, they were alone. He resumed his seat, notepad and pen in hand.

“Tell me why you were in that part of town.”

Agnes recounted what her muddled brain could muster, watching him scribble on the paper. Finally, she asked, “Who did I allegedly kill?”

“Betty Neiswender.”

“Who was she on a good day?”

“One of Ed Fenton’s most devout followers.”

“Is that who that was?”

Williams’ weathered features displayed confusion. “Eh?”

“The idiot on the soap box, preaching shit.”

“An... apt description, I suppose.”

A fresh-faced rookie appeared on the threshold, tan shoulder holster over his arm.

“Let me see that,” Agnes directed, grabbing for it.

Williams intercepted her. “Oh, no! That’s evidence.”

“Fine, then you take a good hard look. You’ll see there’s a strap to secure the pistol, and...”

Thick digits checked the integrity of the strip, still fastened. When he flipped the holster over, Agnes sucked air as he let loose with a few choice expletives.

No mistaking a projectile had been fired while the weapon remained inside the leather, the entire end shredded.

“Did anyone try to take this from you?” Williams queried.

“I... don’t know. I was so groggy, if anyone grabbed at it, I couldn’t have stopped him.”

“Why aren’t there other fingerprints?”

Agnes reasoned, “It’s cold out, and they were all wearing gloves.”

Returning the holster to the patrol officer, Williams instructed it be taken immediately to the evidence room at police headquarters. Notepad stuffed in his hip pocket, he rose.

“Ordinarily, I’d take you into custody, but given this development corroborates certain witness accounts...”

“You mean, you’re grilling me just for the fun of it?” raged Agnes.

“You’re familiar with the process of investigating any crime, Miss Van Dyne. We can’t leave any stone unturned.” He retreated from the chamber. “You’ll be available to make a formal statement once you... feel better?”

She exhaled loudly. “Sure.”

Before she set foot in the police station, though, she’d get to the bottom of this debacle.

That meant confronting Ed Fenton.

She should've recognized her father's old friend, but she hadn't seen him in ten years - ever since his messy divorce from a woman who claimed the former mayor had conducted numerous extramarital affairs and emotionally abused her. He'd disappeared and, obviously, undergone a dramatic transformation from a respectable-looking public servant to a fanatical pastor of a gullible flock.

Long white hair and equally long beard, along with a flowing white robe, would've appealed to anyone seeking a modern-day Moses, and his words... well, politicians knew how to manufacture spin on any topic, as Agnes could attest.

Once discharged, parka hood covering bandages wrapped around her cranium, she hiked the distance to the complex where her employer exerted considerable influence on the local justice system. No more had she reached her desk than she discovered she'd been placed on suspension, pending outcome of the case.

Arguing the point against trained litigators would only waste her energy, and she was already beyond exhausted.

"It'll only be for a day or two..." the senior partner assured her.

Agnes departed, dignity intact.

In no mood for a late lunch, she drove to the neighborhood where Fenton plied his trade. Agnes knew it well; he'd created the slum during multiple terms as the metropolis' elected leader. Rampant crime ignored by his cronies appointed to supervisory posts in the police department, shopkeepers and homeowners moved to safer districts, leaving rows of abandoned structures to the unhoused.

A dilapidated tavern became Fenton's "mission" - he provided cots and a free meals, so long as the "guests" were willing to listen to his bluster.

Many weren't, preferring to squat in empty hovels without basic utilities.

Warped door stuck in its frame, Agnes had to exert her limited strength to wrench the panel open. Whatever money Fenton made off this scam wasn't being fed back into capital improvements, she surmised.

An erstwhile barroom now served as a dining area, with battered folding tables and metal chairs. Beyond an empty buffet line, sounds of activity in the kitchen drew her in that direction.

Three women labored over stoves and salad fixings. When Agnes hailed them, they scurried forward, thinking her injured and in need of assistance.

She allayed their concerns, asking after Fenton's whereabouts.

"He's in the chapel," responded a skinny blonde, arm thrust toward the stairs.

"Thanks."

The climb slow due to her depleted strength, she forced herself through a crumbling archway into what must've been the master bedroom of a cozy apartment in its past incarnation. Fenton lounged on a battered plaid sofa, long legs dangling over the arm, snoring quietly.

Agnes nudged his foot with her sneaker. He leapt upright like a man roused from a violent nightmare. Hazel eyes scanned the room, baffled.

"Hello, Ed," she greeted quietly.

Recognizing her took awhile; she suspected he'd imbibed quite a bit of alcohol in the wake of the morning's tragedy.

"Aggie?"

"Yup."

"That was... you?"

"Yup."

He straightened, towering over her by six inches. "What are you... doing here?"

"I came to find out who killed Betty Neiswender."

"Isn't that... a job for the police?"

"If they ever get 'round to it. I thought I'd check out a few theories."

"And keep yourself out of jail?"

She smirked. "What makes you say that?"

"Well... it was your pistol..."

"That never left the holster, meaning someone slipped their grubby little hand inside my jacket to make it look like my fault."

Fenton staggered toward the sideboard, pouring a large whiskey and draining it in one gulp. "At best, it'll be written off as self-defense. You struggled with your attacker over the gun..."

"But, you encouraged your crew to assault me, so you're an accessory, Ed."

"Bullshit!" He whirled on her. "I can't be held responsible if my congregation feels strongly about putting an end to child pornography, thinly disguised prostitution, and unbridled homosexuality..."

Agnes collared him and pulled his face level to hers. "Except, that's a load of crap. You've known me since I was a kid. You attended my university graduation, and knew I'd been hired as paralegal, and what I've been doing these past few years... and that I carry a pistol."

"I never..." He jerked free.

"Who's slinging shit now?" She scrutinized the tacky decor with distaste. "Somebody tipped you off about the magazine being charged with a ton of

felonies, and when papers would be served - and you guessed who'd be handling the delivery. You needed Betty dead, and wanted the deed to look accidental, or like someone else pulled the trigger. Why?"

She received no answer as Steve Williams burst into the room, sidearm drawn. "Sorry, Dad, she beat me to it."

Agnes shuddered. "Dad?"

Fenton chuckled. "One of my... early mistakes, Aggie. Steve's mom and I... hooked up in college, but I was in no position to make an honest woman of her."

She glared from one to the other. "That... explains the strong resemblance."

"I grew the beard to... hide the dimple in my chin, since Steve inherited it, and it's a sure sign..."

She approached Williams. "I don't suppose you're here to arrest him?"

"Nope. My report will state you were interfering with an official investigation and, when you resisted being detained and tried to escape, you were shot. You'll be listed as Betty Neiswender's murderer, case closed."

Father and son sneered at her, a weird mirror image.

"Well, if that's the way it's gonna be, I'll get back some of my own first."

Agnes spun toward Fenton, adrenaline fueling a right hook to his jaw as she collapsed on the stained floorboards.

The phony pastor reeled into the sideboard, toppling rows of liquor bottles, which shattered at his feet.

Hearing this commotion, the cooks ascended the stairs, armed with utensils.

Williams tucked his weapon into his belt to divert suspicion. "Everything's all right, ladies," he announced. "You better tend to your soup and biscuits. Wouldn't want to start a fire by leaving the stove unattended."

They couldn't do as requested, however, because a squad of police officers lined the corridor behind them.

Facts made public on evening news broadcasts stunned the populace. Both Ed Fenton and Steve Williams were charged with a laundry list of crimes, including manipulating Betty Neiswender into bequeathing her considerable estate to the bogus minister, thus precipitating her untimely demise.

Agnes, offered reinstatement to her position with a substantial pay raise, responded to the law firm's three partners with a hearty, "Fuck off." She emptied her savings account, hopped in her Volkswagen Jetta and headed east, hoping to find somewhere less... dangerous to live.

Sleeping Targets

Successful authors always give fledgling wordsmiths the same advice: write what you know.

Well, I know nuns.

Or, to be more precise: Catholic vowed women religious.

The term “nun,” in fact, refers specifically to those who live within a cloister, venturing out only on rare occasions - doctor’s appointments and serious emergencies. They designate a particular member of their community to greet visitors who knock on the door and run basic errands, such as grocery shopping. They profess different vows than most other females: the Benedictines, for instance, declare their dedication to obedience, stability and fidelity to the way of life.

For the rest, vows of poverty, chastity and obedience define them, while they go about their daily business in the world, ministering to the poor, immigrants, hospital patients, students and more. These are “Sisters”, not nuns.

The majority think the terms are interchangeable, however, when they’re really not.

Nowhere did this become more clear than when the troubles started.

Some airheaded news anchor veered off-script during an evening broadcast, and “the troubles” caught on with various media outlets.

Made me cringe, I can tell you.

Made the police department shudder in their shoes, as well.

What other kind of reaction would be elicited when responding to a massive blaze at a historic convent on the city’s west side and discovering none of the 64 occupants, many in their 80s and 90s, had escaped?

As if not tragic enough, the coroner’s pronouncement - at a press conference three days later - that the cause of these deaths wasn’t smoke inhalation, but homicide, stunned the populace.

Each of the women had been stabbed in their beds, the fire an arson to cover up the crime.

I stood on the periphery of the throng, puzzled how anyone who could breach such a vast structure and end scores of lives would believe burning the building would serve any practical purpose.

Or, was the motivation vengeance for some past mistreatment?

When an eerily similar disaster occurred that weekend, I abandoned my first theory. Someone had it in for the Sisters, and it didn’t matter if they were Franciscans, Mercies, Dominicans, or others. A battery-powered boombox found

at the second site blared a recording of Motörhead's *Ace of Spades*, the lyrics altered to express these victims were a "waste of space."

Over the course of six months, 15 communities were wiped out in the greater metropolitan area - more than 450 women.

I had to wonder if the culprit had a grasp of religious life equal to my own. Attending Catholic school as a kid, I'd made friends with the "penguins" as they were still nicknamed, due to their black and white habits and veils. A good student, I devoured books on the saints who inspired this lifestyle, and briefly considered joining them in their charitable endeavors.

As an adult, I hired on as secretary to a provincial superior - the leader of the regional community - moving my way through an assortment of congregations by creating engaging communication strategies to encourage donor support.

These duties even scored me time inside a cloister, videotaping a feast day procession and celebration with the nuns' permission.

I retired with a tidy nest egg at 55, jaded by the drama.

A community of women, even dedicated to their respective vows, is no better than a dysfunctional family, because these individuals never lose their ability to be absolutely human at any given moment. When offended or inadvertently insulted, they hold grudges indefinitely. I lost count of the times I was entrusted with messages by one Sister for another, to whom she wasn't speaking over some arbitrary slight.

Alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness - yes, even sexual perversion - all could be found within the enclosure, the private area where these women believed they were safe from public scrutiny, indulging their petty vices.

In public, they paraded about with a sense of entitlement - whether wearing a habit or secular clothes - believing their every word should be obeyed instantly, their meals and travel paid for by obliging lay sycophants, and worse.

Sadly, those in leadership, elected by their peers, did little to stave the tide of deterioration, for fear of exacerbating the situation.

Thus, everyone was miserable, left to mishandle their own problems while inflicting their tyranny on others.

No wonder young women avoided joining these ranks like the plague. Any more than a month spent inside those walls would drive a sane person to madness.

The few balanced ones who really tried to live their vocation endured an uphill battle to survive amidst the chaos.

After a year of following reports on multiple deaths - the fire scenario eventually abandoned by the murderer, but the boombox a constant, set to replay

the CD track at top volume - I had to ask myself if the victims weren't better off dead.

Official investigations turned up no evidence to implicate any suspect or suspects, though the *modus operandi* could be charted down to the second.

I'm the first to admit women religious are too trusting. Convents and monasteries situated in remote areas, doors tended to be left unlocked on the premise there's nothing worth stealing - despite the preponderance of televisions, technology, and more. Security systems, much less cameras, are rarely installed. Anyone could gain access through a door marked "Private" or "Enclosure - Do Not Enter" after Sunday Mass in the chapel, or Evening Prayer on a weeknight.

All it would take, after that, is hiding until around 9:00, when silence reigned.

Methodically striding up and down gloomy corridors, entering each room, wielding a butcher knife to inflict fatal wounds...

Someone possessed a constitution of steel to unflinchingly make the rounds in that fashion, hands and clothes blood-soaked, time and again.

Personally, nausea got the better of me, just imagining the carnage.

When my cell phone blasted Earl Scruggs' *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* that spring afternoon, I set aside the clippers I'd been using to shape hedges surrounding my garden. My gloves not conducive to tapping the screen, my finger slipped and I thought I'd disconnected the call.

"Shit!"

"Hello?" came a familiar voice.

Fumbling to raise the device to my ear, I gasped, "Chief?"

"Maddie?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

"You okay?"

"Sure. Just... yard work."

"Your favorite."

"Shut up." I bit my tongue at that. "What can I do for you?"

"We need your expert assistance."

"I'm... no expert."

"When it comes to the nuns, you are."

I wasn't going to argue with him over his misuse of the term. "How so?"

"We've created a special task force across the tri-state area, and would like you to serve as liaison with the superiors,"

“Stan, I like being retired, not having to throw around that jargon...” I wasn’t going to admit I’d long since given up the beliefs those women supposedly held dear, about salvation, eternity, deity...

“Please, Maddie. We’re trying to save lives here. If we can convince them to hire security guards, install adequate systems...”

The chuckle escaped my lips before I could stifle it. “They insist it’s God’s will if they’re targeted, eh?”

“Exactly.”

“You think, because so many of them know me, I can convince them...”

“Yup.”

“You’re daft, Stan.” I flopped on a nylon mesh folding lawn chair. “My advice is for whatever agencies are collaborating on this to assign one team a night at each convent. If nothing else, it’ll deter the loony from striking again.”

“We’ve already tried that. The last two crimes happened when one of our cruisers was parked right outside the front door!”

“Then, park near the back door,” I countered facetiously. “Whoever is doing this, he’s no slouch.”

“You ain’t kiddin’.” A pause. “You sure you won’t help us out?”

“Not on your nellie.”

After the signal went dead, I leaned back and sipped from a glass of lemonade I’d poured an hour earlier, fortunately, still cold. The morning paper lay, unread, on a square wicker table; I unfolded it and scanned the front page.

“We won’t live in fear,” declared the Franciscan provincial, my former boss. Stan had hoped I could convince these gals who’d spent years putting on a bold front in the name of Jesus to admit their vulnerability.

Not going to happen.

A sidebar article - kudos to the enterprising journalist who compiled the statistics - showed a distinct increase in donations to the surviving communities in the months since the murders began.

I tasted blood on my lips, after my teeth penetrated flesh.

The memory vague, I had to compose myself and relax, indulging in a bit of meditation while my brain churned through old scenarios.

Ministries of many religious communities attracted the wayward, the socially awkward, aficionados of conspiracy theories, the dregs of society. For those dealing with PTSD, bi-polar disorder or other psychological trauma, not being served in the way they anticipated could cause... issues.

For others, attachments could be forged where the individual being served might be manipulated by the one providing the service...

“Oh, shit!”

When I bolted upright, I knocked over the table, the half-full glass of lemonade, and the chair decided to collapse, landing me in a tangled heap on the grass.

In my capacity as web and social media guru, I'd visited many of the Sister-sponsored ministry sites, always careful to snap photos that wouldn't allow clients to be identified - over the backs of their heads, for instance. But Jerry... he was unmistakable.

He'd been living rough for decades, if I had to guess. A wild mass of grey hair covered his dome and his chin, once sharp hazel eyes watery from persistent drug use. He'd descended from a tall, vibrant businessman to a hunched, cowering shell.

A certain member of the community, who'd been Jerry's fifth grade teacher in the 1970s, insinuated herself into his life with her smile and her wiles, to the point where he addressed her as “my guardian angel.” This Sister knew of the dire financial straits threatening her convent, and if she'd devised a scheme to garner sympathy from the locals, and beyond...

Hoping my suspicions were wrong, I drove downtown. Admittedly, I should have notified the police chief, but I didn't dare risk placing him in an embarrassing position if I was mistaken. My Mustang parked down the block from the food pantry, and I pretended to window shop along a row of boutiques while watching the comings and goings reflected in the glass.

Jerry's innate kindness had mothers and children beaming and laughing as he toted boxes of staples to their transports. Anyone seeing him would presume he couldn't hurt a fly.

But, just as certain warped clerics convinced abuse victims over many centuries their depraved interactions glorified God, those of a given temperament could be lured into grave sin with subtle reasoning.

Toward closing time, Jerry ran a broom along the sidewalk, where broken glass and cigarette butts littered the concrete. Clad in jeans, an Earth Day t-shirt and Birkenstock sandals, his oozing blue-haired mentor appeared from within the structure, passing along instructions - from what I could tell - that sent him toward the intersection and around the corner.

At a discreet distance, I trailed him. He didn't know me from Adam; we'd only crossed paths on a few rare occasions. He never glanced over his shoulder, marching along without a care in the world.

His demeanor never changed, for that matter. He boarded the express bus to the university, strolling from there to the convent of the founding Sisters and

attending Mass in their octagonal, mosaic-laden chapel. I sat two pews behind him, my mouth never opening, though he knelt in prayer like a devout proponent of the dogma I'd abandoned.

All the more ironic when he waited until the women filed through the exit leading to their recently renovated quarters - no longer rows of stark "cells" with toilets and showers down the hall, but *en suite* apartments - then crept after them.

And I tip-toed after him.

He slipped into a parlor, closing the door quietly. I loitered in the library across the hall, fully aware none of these women made use of the room after supper. Their recreation period usually involved watching old movies, playing cribbage or assembling puzzles.

As the sun set, I found myself yawning, pacing to keep from growing bored and dozing. When the grandfather clock in the administrative wing - where I'd once plied my trade - chimed 10:00 pm, I heard the squeak of hinges nearby: Jerry on the move.

He descended first to the kitchen, stealthy in his progress like an experienced burglar. He selected a knife from the dish rack; moonlight through window casements glinted off the blade.

As he retraced his path to the stairs, I intercepted him. "Hello, Jerry."

Flummoxed, he glared at me, pupils dilated - and not just due to the dimness.

I could only speculate what drugs he'd ingested: marijuana, acid, heroin? And, if the Sister in question provided his supply...

"Give me the knife, please."

His voice quavered. "I..."

"If you do as I ask, I promise, you'll receive all the help you need to get your life back the way it used to be."

"I..."

"Please, Jerry. Despite what... you were told, these women aren't a waste of space."

His hummed the Motörhead tune, distracted. He'd not amended the lyrics, but I had no difficulty calculating what vengeful heart had.

Spine straightening, I'd inadvertently triggered something inside his skull.

"Clarissa?"

Best to humor whatever hallucination he was experiencing. "Yes, Jerry, it's me."

"Why did you leave me, Clarissa?"

My turn to stammer, at a loss.

“I’ve missed you so much!”

Suddenly encircled by powerful arms, his lips smothered mine. The knife clattered on the tiles and, when Stan and his cohort rushed in, firearms at the ready, they could only pull up short and cackle with mirth.

Gently, I freed myself from the embrace. No sense upsetting this dupe of a conniving soul. I signaled the police chief to treat him with solicitude; Jerry was escorted to a Ford Interceptor without being handcuffed.

Months of psychological treatment would be his lot.

As for the puppet master who’d pulled his strings...

Her attorneys tried their best to convince judge and jury of her mental incapacity, to no avail. Dozens of prosecution witnesses testified she understood the concepts of right and wrong, and deliberately played upon Jerry’s frailty to eliminate those she saw as rivals for the cash needed to sustain her congregation.

This additional scandal further tarnished the Church’s reputation and, though her actions were renounced by her superiors, donations dwindled to the point that community sold their property and declared bankruptcy, their remaining members relegated to assisted living facilities funded by federal monies.

The mayor, the task force and other local agencies wanted to present me with a variety of citations and awards; I declined the honors.

Between tending my roses and reading good books, I visited Jerry on a regular basis and, once clean, sober and restored to a modicum of physical and mental health, brought him to live with me. He agreed to a total makeover, hair cropped to reasonable length, beard sculpted to a mustache and soul patch. He enjoyed cooking, which I loathed, and serenaded me on piano and guitar as I weeded the flower beds.

He received a sizable financial settlement from the Sisters as part of their legal obligation to various debtors, and we traveled to our hearts’ content, unrecognized as the murderous rampage faded from all memories but those intimately connected to the victims.

Time Bomb

The concept of “normalcy” only extends so far, or lasts so long.

Constancia Miller - Connie to her coworkers - outshone everyone on the graphic design team, attacking each project with a vengeance and beating all deadlines. She'd earned ten percent pay raises over the past eight years by rating perfect scores on her annual evaluations. Her bosses couldn't believe their luck in holding onto her, especially after quite a few rivals bid for her services, offering considerably higher wages and phenomenal benefits.

She refused such overtures, and only Barb Walsh knew the reason.

A summer intern, sworn to secrecy, she carried the burden like a heavy yoke on her young shoulders. In reality, she enjoyed the attention her position as Connie's confidante scored her. The men plied her with boxes of chocolates and floral bouquets; women invited her to lunch or brought her Starbucks, never blatantly voicing the question, but implying they awaited her breach of protocol with baited breath.

Alan Doheny suspected the truth, having been part of Connie's life since high school. His father owned the consulting firm that hired her straight out of college, on the boy's recommendation. Her knack with computers and sideways manner of thinking gave her an edge lacking among innovative sorts.

Her singular mental processes also embodied the potential for serious issues.

He'd witnessed cracks in her facade twice in 15 years, petrified from head to toe.

Those flashes of her inner turmoil lasted but a minute, but boded ill, in Alan's book. As executive vice president - at the tender age of 31 - he foresaw the day when Connie would detonate like a time bomb, potentially destroying the reputation her father had developed, and sending the company into bankruptcy.

Trying to convey these suspicions to the board, however, would mark him as a pessimist, or worse.

“Barb, my office,” crackled through the intercom on the university student's desk that sunny April morning.

“Right, boss.”

Alan despised being addressed as “boss.”

The brunette breezed into a window-lined chamber, notepad in hand. Without being told, she plopped onto the armchair opposite him at the huge walnut desk. “What's up?”

“I’ve... noticed Connie’s increasing irritation with the other staff. Has she said anything to you?”

Barb squirmed on the green leather cushion. “I... can’t divulge...”

He leaned forward, grey-flecked mustache twitching. “You’re not a priest, and this isn’t a confessional,” he warned. “Nothing you say will leave this room, but I have to know what’s going through her head, for the good of all concerned.”

Brown eyes stared at the ceiling for a moment, then she sighed. “Promise?”

“On my honor.” He flashed a Boy Scout salute.

“Did you read any of the fiction she wrote when she was a teenager?”

“I was a student judge for the annual creative writing contest so, yeah. She’d submit, like, six short stories a year, and had quite a unique style...”

“Like she’s writing from personal experience?”

Alan considered briefly. “That’s a good way to describe it.”

“Connie believes she’s possessed by the characters she invents, living details of the plots as the narrative progresses.”

The executive’s jaw gaped. “You’re kidding, right?”

Barb’s curls shook side to side, lips pursed.

“That’s... nuts.”

“She understands that, but can’t seem to break the cycle...”

He toyed with a half-empty coffee mug. “Has she explained the episodes when she’s had... fits of uncontrolled screaming and rage?”

The intern bristled. “If you’re already aware of her struggles, why ask me?”

“I... chanced upon her in the orchestra pit one afternoon when I’d forgotten my backpack after a rehearsal for the Christmas concert. All I could do is watch her trash the instruments and drive both fists through a solid concrete wall...”

“Jesus!”

“I thought it might’ve been a reaction to being dumped by her boyfriend, but turns out, when they actually broke up, she...”

“Wound up paralyzed in the hospital.”

“Just so.”

“The specialists decided it was a hysterical manifestation of clinical depression.”

Alan sighed. “I can’t take the risk of a similar occurrence.”

“I’ve been able to... serve as a sounding board for her... outbursts these past few months.”

“Outbursts?”

“She’s really phenomenal with computers, but can’t get a handle on ordinary human behavior.”

“What about her relationship with her parents, friends, guys?”

“Her parents are dead,” Barb scowled. “I thought you knew.”

“Sorry, no.”

“She and her brother don’t talk anymore. He... resented her for selling off their dad’s collection of classic cars.”

Alan smirked. He and his younger siblings didn’t get along too well, either.

“As for friends: she’s not a social animal. She doesn’t like hanging out at bars, or idle chatter. She hasn’t dated in ages, because she hates those types of games.”

The statement slipped out before he could stifle it. “Maybe she just needs to get laid.”

Barb’s eyebrows arched in horror. “That’s a hell of a comment.”

“Totally inappropriate, and I apologize,” Alan bumbled. “I’m not the first to say it, though. Most of our classmates voiced the same opinion, conscious of how uptight Connie was.”

She rose. “As long as you keep what I’ve told you confidential, I’ll do the same with you. There’s really nothing more I can tell you.”

“A couple more questions: has she sought professional help?”

“You mean, like psychological counseling?”

“Correct.”

“She thinks it would strangle her creativity.”

“What’s she writing these days?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Writer’s block?”

“Not exactly. What’s... churning inside her is so intense, it defies words. She compared it to a volcano waiting to erupt.”

Alan shuddered. “Thanks, Barb.”

The young woman exited the office, leaving him to deliberate options. He recalled the night of the senior prom, held in a lakeside hotel ballroom. He’d stepped out on the balcony for a breath of air, and Connie had been balanced on the railing, howling expletives at the moon. He’d managed to coax her down from this dangerous perch and get her back inside, where they danced until the event ended - both their dates having bolted with other partners.

They’d grabbed a cab home, foregoing the traditional late supper/early breakfast and Saturday at the beach.

Not how he’d planned to spend that weekend.

Meandering downstairs to the graphics studio after lunch, Alan stood on the threshold observing the employees. Three of them might be updating their resumes by month's end, given an obvious failure to produce any marketable ideas. In the far corner, Connie sat before dual screens, thumping the desk with clenched fists.

He eased up behind her high-backed ergonomic chair. "Hey."

"Hey." She neither glanced at him nor altered the rhythm of the beat.

"Dinner at six?"

"Why?"

"Why not?" he reasoned.

"Sure."

"Meet you out front."

She cleared her throat. "I'll meet you there."

"Where?"

"Whatever restaurant you pick."

"I was gonna let you choose."

She could tell by his tone he dreaded her decision. "I'll email you, and I swear it won't be that trashy south side diner, or some fast food joint."

"Thanks," he exhaled.

Ascending in the executive lift to his private domain, shelves flanking the carved fireplace held memorabilia of a carefree era: baseball trophies, yearbooks, the purple tassel from his graduation cap, a pink lace-trimmed garter he'd caught at his cousin's wedding, a photo with an expertly restored '68 Camaro, his first car. He selected a spiral bound volume, the annual compilation of writing contest winners, aptly titled *Keyhole of the Mind*.

The contents provided a view through an elusive keyhole to Connie's mind.

He poured over the pages, analyzing clues about her psyche - and its malfunctions. She recorded common and unusual aspects of daily existence with impressive fidelity, crafting vivid scenes he could visualize before him.

Why she'd never been professionally published eluded him. She could make a fortune.

He posed that very inquiry as he settled in a booth at the Oaken Bucket, a cozy pub overlooking the same lake he'd been reminiscing about earlier.

"My... inner conflicts aren't meant for public consumption," she replied, sipping a gin and tonic.

"You didn't feel that way in high school, when you entered stacks of manuscripts in the contest."

"My... predicament wasn't as... tenuous as it is now."

Alan accepted delivery of a club soda, having no intention of dulling his senses with alcohol. “Tenuous? If there’s a problem, I need to know. I can’t have the business...”

“There’s no threat to your precious business,” scoffed Connie. She beat her chest. “It’s all... in here.”

He reached across the board and clasped her free hand. “What can I do to help?”

“Not a damned thing. No one can help me; I’m too far gone.”

To his ears, the words rang like a warning gong. Once they ordered tempting entrees, the meal passed in awkward silence, Connie downing three drinks before a dessert of triple chocolate cake arrived.

With her slender frame, the liquor hit her like a freight train.

“C’mon, I’ll drive you home,” Alan stated, paying the check with his credit card.

She grunted, “A repeat of past mistakes.”

He lifted her off the seat; she staggered forward, then slipped her arm through his. They navigated between tables and across the lobby without incident, hitting the chill evening air a shock for both.

“Y’know what, Alan?” Connie slurred as they crossed the parking lot to his Lexus.

He chuckled, “What?”

“The world is a fuckin’ shitshow.”

“I won’t argue the point.”

“My biggest beef with humanity is that no one gives a fuck about anyone but themselves.”

This tangent could lead to the core of her problem. “How so?” he prodded.

She slumped on the front quarter panel of his car, gazing up into his hazel eyes. “Take the idea of kindness. It’s a quid-pro-quo arrangement. If I do something for you, say, I want something in return. Donations to charities are a good example. Very few people give from their surplus because it’s the right thing to do. They want a receipt so they can deduct it on their taxes, whether it’s five dollars or five thousand.”

“That’s... a pretty cynical attitude, Stan.”

She mustered a crooked grin. “You haven’t called me that since...”

“The prom.”

“It’s the nickname I’ve always preferred. I hate Connie.”

“Is there anything you like about your life?”

“Not... really.”

“Not your job, your writing?”

“I write because the inspirations bubble up like a fountain...”

Alan supported her at the waist when she slid down the waxed metal. “But, not now?”

“Now?” she mumbled. “Now, the spout has been sealed. There are stories I want to tell, but dare not...”

“Like what, Stan?”

“Stories of murder, sex, perversion...”

He stiffened. “Really?”

“Don’t you read the news? Confirms what I said...”

“If others have written about it, why do it yourself?”

“Because... every human being... myself included... has the capacity to fuck up their friends and neighbors without so much as a second thought. Why do you think horror movies are so popular? Because the people who plant their butts in the theater would love nothing better than to take an axe to the idiots who piss them off and chop them into tiny pieces.”

“Would you?”

Connie inhaled deeply, averting her face. “I... don’t know. I’m... talkin’ nonsense.”

“What would you do if I kissed you?”

She chortled, “Like when you stopped me from jumping in the lake?”

“That was...”

“Pity, plain and simple.”

On the premise that actions speak louder than words, and no explanation would convince her of his sincerity, Alan pulled Connie into an embrace and planted his mouth on hers.

Their temperatures escalated as they groped each other.

When other restaurant patrons emerged from the building, they halted, climbing into the vehicle. Alan started the engine and drove to the county park, stopping along a secluded stretch of gravel road.

He pulled Connie off the passenger seat. “Let it out,” he oozed, holding her hips. “Release all that pent-up energy and frustration. It’ll do you good.”

She whimpered, “I don’t have any friends.”

“Yes, you do.”

“People don’t know how to be friends anymore. They don’t know how to listen. They’ll only do for someone, if they get something in return. That’s why therapists make the big bucks. So many people don’t have anyone else to talk to.”

“You can talk to me, Stan. What’s really at the heart of your... your...”

“I want to find a place where I can live in peace and quiet, without idiots dumping their shit on me, or inflicting their ridiculous judgments on my behavior.”

“No one...”

She reared back, “Oh, you’d be surprised, Alan. Everyone you pass on Main Street judges you, without even knowing your name! Your clothes, your build, your hair color, your *skin* color... All they do is tack labels on you, and everyone else on the planet!”

Connie’s perspective valid, Alan determined, he couldn’t really devise a way to ease her tension.

“What will make you feel better?”

She stroked his cheek. “You’re hoping I’ll let you fuck my brains out, eh?”

“The thought hadn’t...”

“Don’t lie, Alan. I’ve always considered lying the gravest form of disrespect.”

“Fine. The thought did cross my mind, but I’m not tied to it.”

“Then, let’s kick off our shoes, take a stroll along the shoreline and get our feet wet. I haven’t done that in eons.”

“Sure.”

Both Alan and Connie arrived late at the office the next day, delayed by the need to return to the restaurant to retrieve her car, fighting traffic all the way back to town.

Barb didn’t dare ask her mentor the real reason for her bleary eyes, or the wistful smile reflected in the dusty monitor screen. She could tell the older woman’s tension had eased, and detected Alan’s calmness when she encountered him in the break room.

He’d managed to defuse the time bomb and vowed never to disclose the method, respecting Connie’s privacy.

Rude Awakening

A running joke in our family when I was growing up: how my three brothers and I could sleep through almost any disturbance - thunderstorm, tornado, police and fire sirens and, especially, alarm clocks. Our mother trained her prized Cocker Spaniels to race up the stairs at 6:00 each morning and lick us awake, otherwise we'd never get up in time for school.

This assessment of my nocturnal habits still rings true, as proven when I was roused by sunlight streaming through a gap in the curtains that Saturday to find a naked woman beside me on the mattress.

I'd been out the night before with mates from work, sure, but we hadn't been drinking. Participation in a regional darts tournament required total focus, and consuming alcohol took too much of the edge off when the goal was besting the best.

Elimination rounds ran later than expected and, I admit, I was beyond knackered when I trudged into my flat past 2:00. I think I would've noticed, though, if the bed was occupied when I crashed on the pillows.

My first question: had I left the door open, or forgotten to lock it?

Wouldn't be the first time.

Next question: did I know her?

Propped on my left elbow, I studied tranquil features framed by long, wavy brunette tresses.

No.

I skipped the third question: she was alive; ample breasts rising and falling as she breathed steadily.

No smell of liquor, eliminating the possibility she was an inebriate who'd accidentally wandered into the wrong flat.

Recalling a line from the classic film *The Front Page*, where a man sentenced to be hung justifies shooting another person with the pistol in his hand based on the concept "production for use," I briefly considered availing myself of this predicament...

Might've been fun, and I hadn't had any for quite awhile.

Instead, I nudged her shoulder. "Hey."

"Yeah, baby?" she drawled.

"Who are you?"

The requisite three-count before her eyelids shot open, revealing bloodshot blue orbs. She bolted upright, the sheet falling off her torso.

"Oh, my God!" she squeaked. "Where am I?"

“Don’t you know?”

She quivered, yanking the duvet to her neck. “I... don’t know you!”

“True enough.”

“Did you... drug my gin and tonic?”

Fingers ran through my unruly mop, clearing grey strands from my brow.

“We’ve never been to the pub together so, no.”

“But I... I...”

To avoid frightening her, I eased from the bed and snatched my dressing gown off its hook on the wardrobe door. I offered it to her, holding it in such a way that, as she rose, I saw nothing more than I’d already viewed.

No clothes were strewn around the floor, meaning she’d been naked when she arrived.

“Are you a somnambulist?” I puzzled.

“A what?”

“Do you walk in your sleep?”

She tied the robe around her slender waist. “Not that I’m aware.”

“What’s your name?”

“Chelsea. Chelsea Harlan.”

“Well, Chelsea Harlan, where do you live?”

“High Street, Edinburgh.”

When I informed her she was in Glasgow, she fainted.

Fortunately, she crumpled on the mattress.

Once she regained consciousness, I directed her to jeans and a t-shirt I’d selected from my rag-tag collection, which fit her well enough. Shoes weren’t...

A police constable knocked at the door while we were sipping tea. He explained that multiple complaints had been received in the wee hours about a naked ghost roaming Argyle Street, and had I seen anything?

I ushered him into the cramped sitting room.

At least, the mystery was solved in short order. Chelsea Harlan had escaped from the psychiatric ward of the Royal Infirmary, after being involuntarily committed by her sister for pathological behaviors.

“She fled starkers?” I prodded.

Amused, the uniformed officer replied, “No. She was wearing a hospital gown, but when the guards tried to restrain her, it ripped at the seams, and she sprinted away... well...”

“Why would she end up here?”

“Her grandparents lived in this building when she was a child. Possibly some latent memory... and yours must’ve been the only unlocked door.”

So, that much of my theory proved correct.

Docile and smiling, Chelsea accompanied the man to the stairs without even a word of thanks or backward glance.

As I settled in to cook my breakfast, I regretted not getting a leg over.

It's not every day such an opportunity presents itself.

A Late Stroll

The scene reminded Rachel of American westerns from the 1950s and 60s, when a villain or stranger would arrive in a small town, and all the citizens would grab their children, rush indoors and secure the shutters.

Perched on steps in the heart of Tenement Row, she stared left at a lone figure striding along the faded center line, all her neighbors fleeing in abject terror.

Their rationale eluded the young woman.

Her parents had survived on the block for three decades, despite threats by slum lords, government housing schemes and fires, raising Rachel and her two older brothers, now long gone to more temperate climes. The teen saw no reason one man should be allowed to intimidate scores of residents.

Gossip among the women, leaning out their windows of a morning, described the lanky, wild-haired wanderer as a “hard man” - in other words, someone who took no shit. He stood up for himself, using his fists when necessary against anyone who opposed him. A jagged scar over his right eye confirmed the tale of a whisky bottle being broken over his skull in a pub, another running from his left earlobe down his neck proved he’d come into contact with a switchblade at least once during his colorful career.

“The drunk didn’t like his earring,” that story always concluded.

But the large gold hoop, from which dangled three symmetrical pastel blue beads, remained, reflecting light from the lamp above the pavement.

“What’s doin’?” Rachel hailed as his long gait brought him abreast of her.

He halted, glaring at her. “Dinnae ye ken ‘tis nae safe t’ be oot at this hour?”

“Ach, aye, I’m that afraid o’ muggers.” Sarcasm dripped from her mouth.

“‘Twould be dead easy t’ drag ye int’ the close and gi’ ye one, leavin’ ye wi’ yer throat cut...”

“Gi’ it a try, if ye are man enough.”

“Nae time. I’m away t’ meet m’ mates for a pint.”

“Want some company?”

“What are ye offerin’?”

“A bit o’ craic in exchange for a large one.”

His expression bathed in shadows, she glimpsed the hint of approval in his posture, and clasped his outstretched hand. She matched his pace easily, accustomed to keeping up with her much taller siblings.

“Why walk when ye could grab a taxi?” she queried.

“My reputation precedes me, and cabbies will nae stop if they recognize me.”

Rachel contemplated this statement. Wee gestures of rebellion rapidly morphed into powerful statements against tyranny.

“In fact, ye are the first wee lass t’ be this close t’ me in years.”

“Because they fear ye might...”

He grunted. “I know what I like, and I take what I want. Is there anythin’ so wrong wi’ that?”

“I’m the same.”

An iron claw encircled her biceps, forcing her to turn toward him. “Ye are takin’ the piss.”

Her short blonde curls shook sideways.

“What would ye be wantin’ wi’ me, if that be the case?”

Her smile intrigued him. “Like I said: a large one.”

Releasing her, he pulled ahead. “Ach, ye are too young t’ ken what ye are askin’.”

“Ye wanna see m’ drivin’ license?”

“The barman will, I guarantee.” He reversed, walking backward as he spoke. “If ye get blootered, dinnae expect me t’ carry ye home.”

At the junction, a burst of wind loosened the belt around her floral-print wrap-around dress, exposing a pink satin teddy, and matching knickers.

“Ye are daft, lass!”

“Dinnae ye like it?”

He closed the distance between them. “Ach, aye, but...” Mitts fumbling to restore fluttering cloth, he simultaneously felt the barrel of a revolver against his groin. He stiffened. “What the...”

A gruff contralto declared, “Justice, ya gallus prick.”

Constables on their morning patrol discovered his body propped in the recessed doorway of an abandoned bakery.

The families on Tenement Row would never have to shutter their windows again.

Stoners

“Are you holding?”

In a lengthy queue at the neighborhood grocery store, I was facing forward and the words drifted over my head. The baritone deep and quiet, I had no need to swing ‘round to see who would dare pose such a crazy question in public.

“Sorry, no.”

“Damn. I was hoping to make some brownies for the party tonight.” He jiggled a box of Betty Crocker mix to my left.

“Your aunts in town?” I chuckled.

“Uh-huh.”

Harlan usually planned his “hash bashes” to coincide with visits from the two sisters who’d raised him after his mother skipped town with her lover. Getting them high and watching them shed their fundamentalist Christian inhibitions proved a grand laugh for his friends. I’d attended a few of these shindigs and, while not exactly feeling sorry for the old gals, I wondered why he wanted to so thoroughly humiliate them.

After ten minutes, I was next in line to pay for an overflowing basket of chocolate, meat, potatoes and milk - my standard diet.

He whispered, “You’re welcome, of course, if you can rustle up a dime bag or two.”

“Pakistani black?”

“Whatever you can lay your hands on.”

A 3:00 connection scheduled, I focused on the cashier, notorious for double scanning items to increase the total when she thought customers weren’t paying attention. Swiping my credit card, I stuffed the parcels in woven hemp bags and strode toward the door.

No need to give Harlan a second glance; he’d be flirting with the blonde in the green apron adorned with colorful badges sporting phrases like, “Our patrons are #1!”

He flirted with every age and size, as long as they had tits.

If he managed to pull them, they’d smoke a joint or two at his apartment, then do whatever felt right. I’d witnessed him whip down his tweeds in the middle of a gyrating pack of potheads, take the first female he grabbed, and no one objected.

In fact, they cheered him on with cries of “Easy! Easy!” as the girl moaned while approaching climax.

Secretly, I admit, I sort of wished it was me.

It didn't bother me that his reddish-brown waves hung further down his shoulders than my own brunette locks. His ravaged body reminded me of undernourished refugees from Eastern Europe. His long goatee smacked of Ho Chi Min, and the bushy mustache obscured much of his mouth.

Those fiery hazel orbs ripping into my soul, though...

He had a lively mind, as well. When he had a right pupil in his eye, an intriguingly intelligent conversation could be had on diverse topics - all too rare. Normally, by the end of the night, he'd be snoring on the floor, guests stumbling over him.

That June solstice when a rather drunk stoner vomited on his head, I laughed so hard I collapsed on a battered armchair, in tears.

He didn't even wake up.

Regulars and newbies fled the scene, some leaving their purses and coats behind, fearful of his rage. A full 15 minutes elapsed before I could breathe normally again; I commenced the process of cleaning him up so he wouldn't accidentally choke on the Spaghetti-Os and regurgitated margaritas coating his face and hair.

He never knew.

Yeah, I supplied him with 80% of his stash, to keep him from the clutches of bastards who cut their weed with coke or meth to get clients hooked on more expensive substances. My brother grew the stuff on his 1,500 acre farm north of town, ingeniously shielded from helicopter patrols and sniffer dogs.

Half the time, Harlan never paid me, and I didn't care.

I didn't make my living pushing dope.

Dropping the food at my studio on the way back to work, I paused at the intersection of Main and Elmer Street to phone Steve. He invariably stopped his tractor at 1:00 for a smoke, so I knew he'd hear his cell phone blare AC/DC's *Highway to Hell*.

"Swing by at 2:45," he advised.

A sandwich-sized Ziploc bulging with dried marijuana was passed to Harlan in the alley near the diner, just closed for the day after a hectic lunch shift. If anyone in the metropolis hadn't chastised me for being satisfied washing dishes in the dive's back room since I graduated high school, I don't recall their names.

Beyond making sure the pots, plates and cutlery were scrubbed to perfection, I preferred this lack of responsibility.

"You're a God-send," Harlan oozed. "I don't have the cash... on me, but I'll see you later."

My fingers grasped his sky-blue silk shirt collar, and I yanked him toward the brick wall. “There are other ways to settle your debt.” For our lips to meet, I had to stand on tip-toe, simultaneously bending his neck a good six inches.

He got the point and twirled me so my spine pressed against the soot-stained yellow surface.

Every inch of me thrilled by his caresses, he halted short of tearing my blouse open.

“Come ‘round about six,” he instructed, smiling. “We’ll have a tumble before the real fun begins.”

“Promise?”

He laid his right hand on his heart. “I’ve never lied to you, kid.”

Not consciously, anyway.

After showering the aroma of fried chicken and garlic off my flesh, I combed my hair into some semblance of order and chose a tie-dyed kurta, bell-bottom jeans and flip flops from my closet. I rolled a joint from the scraps my brother entrusted to me and settled back with reruns of *I Love Lucy* until the appointed hour.

What transpired that evening is indelibly burned on my brain. I arrived at Harlan’s as the cracked courthouse bell awkwardly clunked six times. The door ajar, I heard him in the kitchen, humming, and smelled the brownies, amply laced with hash.

As the pan cooled atop the stove, he swept me into his arms, carrying me along a short hall. I don’t think he’d made his bed in months; he deposited me on rumpled quilts and stripped off his clothes, adding to the pile surrounding me.

We’d just finished our second go when I peered over his shoulder and saw two thugs - no other word for them - looming on the threshold.

“You... have visitors,” I grunted.

Lazily: “They’re early.”

“These guys don’t look like they were invited.”

Harlan rolled onto the pillow, but never had a chance to ask the intruder’s purpose. That became clear enough when they drew Glocks fitted with silencers from inside their jackets and emptied the clips into his chest.

I had the sense to dive under the bed, disregarding musty sneakers, dust bunnies and empty liquor bottles. From shuddering with ecstasy to trembling in terror, I fully expected to die.

The men made a leisurely exit, their confidence puzzling me. Unlikely, yes, that the gunshots had been heard by any of the other tenants, but weren’t they even concerned I could identify them?

Or, maybe they assumed I was just some strung-out bitch whose blurred vision precluded registering their features, and who wouldn't approach the authorities for fear of being charged with illegal drug possession.

The latter might be partially true.

As I scrambled from beneath the box springs to slip into my clothes, I resolved the cops would never hear a word about this from me - beyond an anonymous call reporting the death - because I wasn't going to risk meeting such a gruesome end.

On my way out, I cut myself a huge brownie.

Within 20 minutes, a duffel crammed with the basics thrown in the trunk of my '74 Mustang, I high-tailed it west.

I'd miss my brother, sure. I'd miss a laid-back lifestyle and the exquisite euphoria when I smoked weed, but none of that would be possible if I was dead.

Besides the "grass" is always greener...

In Reality...

Contrary to popular belief, life doesn't imitate art, and art rarely - accurately - imitates life.

For instance: television series of 30 minutes' duration, or 60 or 90, progress through a beginning, a middle and a tightly wrapped-up conclusion for each episode - unless there's a continuing story arc, or "cliff-hanger" at the end of a season. The same can be said for movies.

Everyday existence simply isn't like that.

As any Hollywood mogul will explain: the purpose of developing a production is to see it continue from year to year but, as when the setting is in an educational environment, the students who are the key characters either move on to higher levels or graduate, requiring a constant influx of new faces to sustain that particular dynamic. There's no way for the audience to establish the customary, vicarious relationship with their favorites, who are gone too soon, so the concept is cancelled, with or without definitive closure.

Compare this to a professor at a state or private university. Semester after semester, he sees a fresh crop of potential scholars and, unless extremely dedicated, reaches a point where he no longer bothers with their names. Periodically, an exceptional individual might stick in his memory based on their intellect or inquisitive nature, but the overall trend is to impart details of the assigned subject and get the hell off campus.

No instructor in his right mind would spend 12 hours a day in the lecture hall or his office, waiting for random students to pop in with questions or curious visitors to engage in idle chatter.

Even if Polly stood out among others slogging through English Literature 101, Philosophy 103, Calculus 100 and other general courses, being a 50-ish widowed mother trying to better her lot, none of the tenured academics would notice her in the ordinary course of their duties. More traditional students might find her an oddity, even befriend her on a casual basis, but she'd mostly be left to fend for herself.

Except, of course, until they recognized her as the manager of the Pizza Oven, a nearby dive where liquor was served to underage patrons with no questions asked.

Her late husband's cousin the town's police chief, he didn't bust her for the violations, knowing she couldn't afford the fines or jail time.

Thus, Polly did a volume business among the teens, exerting a mother's watchful eye to be sure none of them left the premises so intoxicated they would

up in handcuffs. The pub's popularity inspired her to pledge free pitchers of beer and pizza, enticing a few of her English Lit classmates to start a Wednesday night study group in the upstairs lounge, as a means to improve her own grades.

That's where Reginald Stephens confronted her that snowy November evening with his accusation of plagiarism.

She flew into a rage, gathering empty glasses and dirty plates into a grey bus tub. "You think, just because I'm older, I can't cut it in college?"

Unflustered, with his shock of spiky white hair, ice-blue eyes, straight nose and taut lips above the collar of a black overcoat and gold plaid Burberry scarf, the document at issue slammed on the table. "If you don't tell me who actually wrote this essay, I'll start proceedings to have you expelled."

"I dare you to try," she retorted.

From the opposite side of the chamber wafted a rough baritone. "Try what?"

Zippering his jeans as he emerged from the narrow corridor leading to the toilets, a tall, wild-maned figure squinted hazel orbs at the pair.

"You!" Stephens gasped.

"Hello, Reg."

"What... are you doing here?"

"I'm Polly's new bartender."

The professor gaped from this vagabond to his pupil. "What..."

"You two know each other?" she queried, shaken.

A wry chuckle preceded, "He's my baby brother."

Stephens bristled.

Polly contemplated her employee. "You... told me you didn't know anyone in town."

"I had no idea Reg lived here."

Stephens gruffly concurred. "We haven't spoken in more than a decade." He snatched the paper. "We'll continue this discussion tomorrow, Mrs. Baker."

"Sure you won't have a beer? I'll buy."

Looking daggers at his sibling, Stephens scoffed, "Who lent you the money?"

"See you 'round, Reg!" followed him mockingly down dimly lit stairs.

Polly confronted her companion, who towered over her by eight inches. "You told me your name was Jamie Campbell."

His smirk barely visible between a bushy mustache and beard, he clarified, "Two-thirds accurate. Legally, I'm James Campbell Stephens."

"Then, you *did* know I knew your brother."

“Not precisely. I guessed you’d be acquainted with a good cross-section of the campus crowd. I wasn’t certain if he was among them.”

“He... doesn’t trust you,” stated Polly.

Jamie wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her close. “He doesn’t trust anyone.”

“And, if he knew about us...”

“He’d be furious.”

The manager wriggled free. “Is that why you’re here? To get under his skin?”

He caught her hand and pulled her onto a chair. “It’s like I told you, Polly: I was on my way across country, but the crappy weather made riding my trike too dangerous, so I decided to stick around this neck of the woods until spring. Seeing the help wanted sign in your window, I thought I could earn a bit of cash to keep myself in bed and board.”

He leaned forward and kissed her just as Stephens reappeared on the landing, halting abruptly.

“I... dropped my keys,” stammered the latter.

An irritated contralto hollered from below, “Hey, Jamie! It’s gettin’ crazy down here!”

The itinerant rose and excused himself, leaving Polly and her teacher in awkward silence.

A cursory scan of the floor showed no stray fob in plain sight. “You really didn’t lose your keys, did you, Prof?”

“Has he asked you for any money?” Stephens demanded.

“No. He’s earning every penny of his wages, and some fat tips, too. He makes the kids laugh, and they show their appreciation accordingly.”

“Don’t put your faith in him, Mrs. Baker.”

She brushed past him. “This from a man who puts no faith in anyone, or anything.”

“I did... once,” he confessed. “And paid dearly for it.”

Jamie, urgent. “Hey, Polly! We need another case of Jack.”

“Coming!” she responded, doubling back toward the storeroom door. She paused on the threshold and glared at Stephens. “As for my paper: it’s legitimate research, in my own words. Grade it as you see fit.”

Polly emerged with a “B” in English Lit once the December exams concluded, along with an assortment of fair marks from her other classes. She proceeded to excel in subsequent studies after the holiday break, as well. Her relationship with Jamie blossomed, marred only by Stephens’ nightly presence in a

corner booth, where he nursed a beer over three hours, glowering at the bustling clientele.

“He’s jealous,” Jamie remarked after closing that late March Tuesday, wiping down the bar with disinfectant. “He knows he treated you badly, and regrets not...”

“Bullshit!” countered Polly. “It wouldn’t surprise me if, one night, he knifed you in the parking lot. He’s the type who holds a grudge, even if the offense was totally unintentional.”

“Didn’t take much for you to suss that, eh?” He kissed the top of her curly brunette head as he squeezed past. “He’s had it in for me since he was ten, when he poured the entire contents of his piggy bank in my hands and asked me to buy him a remote control race car at the mall. I lost it all in a crap game with my friends, instead. He cried for days.”

“Wow... that’s... cruel.”

“Not really. I thought I’d double it and buy him an even nicer one. Didn’t work out that way, is all.” Arranging clean glasses on shelves beneath the bar, he flashed a grin. “Once I’m gone, he’ll quit skulkin’ ‘round.”

Polly stiffened. “Gone?”

“Sure. Spring’s comin’. In a couple weeks, I’ll be on the road again.”

Through grit teeth, “But...”

Jamie straightened and embraced her tenderly. “We’ve had a marvelous time, eh? Maybe next winter, I can swing back through...”

She shoved him away, words failing her, and stormed from the building.

“Nothing quite like being used, eh?” Stephens’ cultured tenor.

The manager whipped toward him, leaning against the bricks. “Jesus Christ!”

“Sorry, Mrs. Baker. I tried to warn you: Jamie’s no good. Never has been. When he takes off, be sure to check your jewelry box and the cash register, because he’ll grab every valuable he can stuff in his jeans on the way out the door.”

“Is that why you’ve been hanging out...”

Not as tall as his brother, Stephens still looked down at the diminutive woman. “To protect you - and the others. When you were busy at the far end of the bar, case in point, he’d sneak off with one of those young bimbos and... have a quick feel in the men’s room.”

Polly swallowed her heart.

“I sincerely apologize. Not only because of him, but for my attitude toward you.”

“You don’t give a damn about any of your students. Why concern yourself with me?”

“Because you’ve done what so many others have failed to do.”

“Which is?”

“You’ve survived, and thrived, and tried to make something of yourself. Unlike... Jamie.”

Consciously regulating her breathing, despite every nerve tingling with anger, Polly trudged toward her vintage Camaro. “Good night, Professor.”

“Best of luck to you.”

That Polly slid onto the leather bucket seat, yet never started the engine - banging her fists on the steering wheel as tears cascaded down her cheeks - figured into the police report after Jamie Campbell Stephens’ corpse was discovered wedged behind the dumpster by the waste disposal driver at 5:00 AM the next morning.

His torso resembled Swiss cheese, pierced repeatedly by a sharp object.

No weapon found, both Reginald Stephens and Polly Baker were subjected to multiple marathon interrogations. Neither broke under the pressure, and were cleared of all suspicion, the case left open.

Polly eventually graduated *cum laude* with a degree in business administration; Stephens retired as dean emeritus shortly thereafter.

Relocating together to Oswego, New York, they opened a home-made craft business, spending most of their waking hours on the shore of Lake Ontario.

Jamie never mentioned, his presence lingered like a pall until notification arrived via certified mail that an enterprising detective had discovered a viable DNA sample on a black strand plucked off his jacket collar. Matching a cardiac resident at a prestigious Chicago research hospital - former fiancé of a blonde who’d frequented the Pizza Oven - the suspect had been questioned, arrested and extradited, tried and convicted.

He admitted no guilt, nor did the prosecution divulge a motive for the crime.

Polly and Stephens, though, read between the lines of the two paragraphs on official letterhead, a burden finally lifted from their shoulders.

Behaving Accordingly

“You think about sex too much.”

The shaggy brunette head whipped toward the window. “There’s a problem with that, why?”

“You’re in your sixties, for Christ’s sake.”

“Age has sod-all to do with it,” she retorted. “Sex is an animal act, and humans are animals. Why shouldn’t we behave accordingly?”

“We’re thinking, feeling, *civilized* animals.”

“Are you saying other species don’t think and feel?”

Silence. Eyes averted.

“I can guarantee, if you were able to measure the brain activity of any lion, ape, dog or mouse, they’re driven entirely by thoughts of survival, finding their next shag, and how good they feel after they’ve done the deed.”

Renewed antagonism. “There’s a vast difference between thinking and feeling, and acting on instinct.”

“Oh, shut up and leave me alone.”

Approaching the brown buttoned leather executive chair, tone dropped to a growl. “That’s the problem: you don’t want to be left alone. You want every man who crosses your path to grab you, kiss you, and fuck your brains out.”

She snickered. “Well, not every man. Just the ones who make me laugh, can hold an intelligent conversation, have a wild head of hair and a tight ass.”

“And, in return, what do you offer them?”

“A night they’ll never forget.”

A frustrated soul propped on the mahogany desk. “All these years, I believed you an upstanding, moral, smart, dedicated professional.”

“During my shifts, I’ve never been anything *but* professional,” she countered. “Once I clock out, my time is my own.”

“Rumor has it, the janitor has caught you more than once in the disabled toilet going at it with guys from the mail room.”

Her tongue slowly ran across her upper lip. “Rumors without evidence are a waste of breath.”

An accusatory index finger tapped her left clavicle. “What about that? At this rate, you’ll be dead before Christmas.”

Hand adorned with chunky silver rings, she brushed away invasive digits. “At least, I’ll die happy.”

A defeated sigh preceded this intruder’s exit from the office. She leaned back on the chair and kicked her feet onto the blotter.

No explanation would salve the troubled conscience of such prudes, yet the memory still brought a smile to features drawn with the angst of mortality. She'd been stuck in hospital, trapped by administrative bullshit until surgery could be scheduled to implant the pacemaker that would regulate her unsynchronized heartbeat. Meandering down to a make-shift library on the third floor, she'd snatched a random biography off the shelf and settled on a maroon naugahyde sofa to while away the hours between a carb-laden lunch and bland dinner.

She might never be positive if she'd dozed off and dreamed the scene, or if it actually occurred. Amongst the squeaking of gurneys being wheeled along the corridors, snatches of personal conversations and beeping of monitors, she'd heard sneakers pad toward her. A solid grip on her right shoulder distracted her from the printed page; she glanced up. Bespectacled and lanky, long white mane dangling over her, he bent and kissed her, solemnly, gently. Then, he raised his head, smiled serenely and strode away.

She'd recognized him; there could be no mistaking that singular visage. They'd met just the once - coincidentally at a fundraiser for a prestigious university's heart research program - where she'd been snapping photos for international syndication.

He'd reacted with... less than aplomb to her attention, even though the image that appeared in print and online caught his transcendent expression and became a fan favorite - earning her some serious royalties.

Had this been his way of apologizing?

Whatever his rationale, their momentary encounter sparked her desire to pursue all that she'd missed in life by keeping her nose to the grindstone. Upon discovering her pacemaker did not prevent her from having... intimate relationships, she threw caution to the wind.

Why her associates objected to this sudden alteration in her routine, she could not grasp.

Unless, in this particular instance, her critic felt jealous because she avoided liaisons with colleagues in the agency.

To hell with them, and anyone else who would impose their standards on her, she mused. While some proclaimed their wish to "go down fighting," she preferred to go down fucking.

Better than fretting over her remaining days, counting the seconds until the Grim Reaper showed up on the threshold with its scythe.

Not By Choice

Thus it has been, and always shall be.

Once the switch is flipped, there is no way to disconnect the flow of current - not even at the main circuit panel.

The charge continues to build with an influx of voltage, until the whole works explodes in a fireworks display rivaling the most intricately planned holiday festivities.

What is left: a dried husk of a human being, fumbling for nuggets of logic in an existence that defies reason.

In the interim, however...

The shaggy-haired hippie perched on a three-legged stool in the crowded pub jokes about his preferred instrument, noting guitarists step into the limelight to get laid; violinists and pianists make music because their mother forced them to take lessons.

“No one will ever admit to shagging the banjo player,” he chuckles, callused fingertips randomly plucking the strings, left hand adjusting the tone via metal pegs. Once satisfied with the harmonics, he launches into his next song, concentration intense.

She can't take her eyes off him, despite the untouched pint of McEwan's Export going flat on the table beside her. He'd been busking at Glasgow's Barras Market a few weeks earlier; she'd gravitated toward the twang, and delighted in his unusual attitude and talent.

That's all it took for her to descend anew into the pit of agony: sleepless nights, bizarre scenarios crafted by anarchic brain cells, endless streams of dialogue reverberating inside her skull.

How any individual, no matter how wise or intriguing, could seize her soul with such a vice-like grip and hold her essence prisoner, impacting her daily routine, the quality of her professional endeavours, her social interactions, never ceased to confound her.

She morphed into something totally alien from her customary genial self, but could not detach herself from the invasive influence, typing on the computer for hours without a break, story after story - short fiction, novellas, poetry - for months on end.

Aching for the fountain of verbiage to run dry, for some figurative backhoe to thrust its claw-edged bucket into the depths of her soul to cut invisible, electric/adrenaline-fueled cables fused onto her heart, she slogged through each day like a zombie.

Her fevered imagination devised plots where the banjo player fulfilled his ambition of scoring with female fans yet, despite their close proximity on numerous occasions, she never spoke a word to him. Conversely, if he noticed her presence, he gave no indication through word or gesture.

She can only live with the madness wrought by her own creative impulses, dominated by each inspiration as it captures her fancy, an endless, tortuous cycle.

The Silver Skull

The nightmare recurred with annoying regularity, but never with such intensity.

A tidal wave of revulsion and terror washed over Lylia; nerves stimulated, her muscles refusing to move.

“Where... did you get that?” Her usually confident contralto quavered as she posed the question.

Kitchen light glinted off the oversized silver skull ring, the band’s intricate pattern reflecting on stainless steel appliances as Gary sliced carrots for the salad with a carving knife.

The ginger-mopped college student’s rhythm didn’t falter. “My brother, Aaron. He left it behind when he deployed to Afghanistan.”

An Army sergeant, Aaron had died in an ambush six months earlier.

“Why... start wearing it now?” queried his engineering classmate.

“I’d forgotten about it until I found it in my sock drawer yesterday.” He held his left hand up, admiring the design. “Pretty cool, eh?”

Not in the young woman’s estimation, but she wouldn’t dare voice her misgivings aloud.

The 15th anniversary of a particularly sordid ordeal unmarked on the refrigerator calendar, Lylia ached to suppress details that shot through her brain like a Japanese bullet train. She’d been just four years old, but had grown up overnight after witnessing...

A shadow skulked in the passageway, past the half-open bathroom door, where she’d climbed atop the toilet lid to fill a glass with water at the sink. Curious, she’d abandoned her task and slipped through the gap; the furtive silhouette entered her parents’ bedroom.

All Lylia saw clearly was a shiny silver ring on his left hand as he reached for the brass knob.

The child crept along plush carpet, tiny feet silent, despite old floorboards underneath the padding tending to creak when heavier bodies traversed the distance. She heard what sounded like a wet sponge squishing, then hinges grating - the tacky painting of daisies in a vase fitted to the wall that hid a safe.

She’d seen her father open it plenty of times.

Scraping and thumping, then cursing in an unfamiliar masculine register. Hurried footsteps; Lylia ducked into the linen closet on instinct.

Again, she glimpsed a silver flash as the departing intruder fled with a bulging pillowcase, the skull imagery permanently imprinted on her gradually developing psyche.

“Mommy?” she called after the front door slammed and a loud muffler faded in the distance.

No response.

“Daddy?”

Nothing.

Lylia guessed her parents were sleeping, peering into the dark chamber from the threshold. Barely tall enough to reach the toggle switch, she froze as Rory Finch rushed up behind her.

“I saw somebody sneaking out of the house,” he gushed. “Is everything okay?”

This neighbor activated the overhead fixture and promptly rushed to the bathroom, losing his dinner.

Lylia didn't grasp the horror that lay before her, bed clothes dripping red.

Her parents had been murdered.

Rory's wife carried the child to bed, sitting with her as police milled about the structure, gathering evidence, snapping photographs and, after six hours, removing the bodies. By dawn, Lylia had passed the point of exhaustion, unable to close her eyes because, every time she tried, that silver skull ring mocked her.

She'd been bounced from pillar to post over the next decade: her maternal grandparents, an aunt, cousins - agreeing to guardianship arrangements for a cut of her inheritance, ditching her when they failed to profit - and various foster homes, until she ran away at 16 to fend for herself.

Tough going, but she'd scored a full-ride scholarship to the state university, working odd jobs to keep herself in pocket money.

“Do you know where your brother got it?” she pressed Gary, in the process of mixing spices in a vinaigrette.

“From an old girlfriend, I think.”

“You wouldn't happen to know her name, would you?”

The reddish mane swiveled toward her. “Why the sudden interest in a hunk of metal?”

“Humor me, okay?”

Gary removed the band and squinted, reading worn engraving. “S.F. Oh, right. Sally... Fitterling.”

“She live around here?”

“Used to, back in high school. A block over, in fact.”

Lylia leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “Thanks.

She’d vanished before he realized he’d be dining alone that evening.

A phone booth near the corner convenience store still boasted a viable directory; she flipped pages and scanned names and addresses. Slender fingers ran columns until pinpointing Dan and Jean Fitterling, listed on Elmer Lane.

Lylia quashed rising panic as she approached a cozy blue-shingled bungalow, one of countless dwellings built on that side of town in the 1950s for employees working at the now-defunct vacuum factory. Knuckles tapped the screen door frame; a bronze-haired woman yanked wide the inner varnished panel after her third attempt.

“Mrs. Fitterling?” Lylia ventured.

A gruff, “Yeah?”

“I’m trying to find Sally.”

“Good luck, kid. We haven’t seen or heard from her in three years.”

Lylia’s hopes crashed on the concrete stoop. “Thanks, anyway.”

“Whadda ya want with her?”

“She gave a ring to Aaron Wyler before he...”

“Yeah, sad that. Damned invasion hasn’t accomplished much of anything, has it?”

“I agree.”

Mrs. Fitterling sighed. “Sal bought a lot of her jewelry at the pawn shop on South Winchburgh Street, if that helps.”

“It does.” Lylia’s mood brightened a tad. “Thanks.”

She hopped the next bus heading to the central depot, transferring to a route that would drop her near the strip mall where an adult book store, sleazy tavern, thrift shop, and assorted disreputable businesses rented space. A huge neon sign - flashing “Pawn!” - hung above a display window at the far end.

Inside a murky showroom, cases held pistols, watches, necklaces, rings, bracelets, tie-clips, cufflinks, with guitars on hooks suspended from the walls, amplifiers, keyboards, drum sets and stereo speakers scattered around the perimeter.

The proprietor, bald and wearing thick spectacles, eyed her from a desk toward the rear. “May I help you?”

“God, I hope so.”

He rose and shuffled toward her. “Something to sell?”

“No. I’m trying to find something you may have bought and then resold...”

“We can only resell pawned items if the owner fails to redeem them.”

“I... think that’s what happened.”

“Do you have the name of the person who pawned the item?”

“No. That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

“Those records are confidential. I’d need a court order...”

Lylia studied this elder’s expression, positive he was lying.

“It was a very unique skull ring, with deep set sockets, high cheekbones, teeth, full jaws, and swirls etched on the metal. The girl who bought it had it engraved...”

Recognition dawned. “Sal Fitterling.”

“Correct.”

“Regular customer, though she drove a hard bargain, whether selling or buying. I’d loaned the guy who brought in the ring two hundred bucks, and she’d only give me fifty for it. Since I’d had the damned thing in the case for eight years, I took the loss.”

“Then, you *do* remember the guy’s name...”

Lids narrowed, he hesitated. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because that man killed my parents.”

“You’re ol’ Reilly’s daughter?”

Her sandy curls bobbed affirmatively.

“We were in the same Masonic lodge. Good man, for someone so rich.” He meandered toward lopsided shelves, extracting a ledger. Fifteen minutes elapsed while he rifled pages but, finally, he located the pertinent entry.

He scribbled on a scrap of paper, then tucked it in her left fist. “Anything happens, you didn’t get this from me.”

Lylia held up her right hand in pledge. “Promise.”

“God bless you, kid.”

“Thanks.”

He left her to find her way out of the shop, resuming whatever tasks he’d been giving his attention.

Even beneath the nearest street lamp, Lylia couldn’t read the slanted script. She tucked the sheet in her jean pocket and strode toward the bus stop, eager to get home.

She deliberated making a detour to police headquarters before she boarded the last Eastside Flyer of the night, except any delays would mean walking three miles through crime-ridden neighborhoods.

Not a viable option.

Besides, she wanted to personally confront the bastard who’d so brutally knifed her parents.

Gary had cleared the table and washed the dishes before she arrived. He sat in the living room, watching the baseball play-offs. "You okay?" he greeted her from the recliner.

"Better than ever."

"Glad to hear it, I... suppose."

She perched on the recliner's arm and snuggled against him. "If I asked nicely, would you give me that skull ring?"

He smirked, slipping the band off his middle finger. "Anything I have is yours, you know that."

"Cool."

"I'd love to know why."

"I'll... fill you in tomorrow."

He pulled her close. "I'll hold you to that."

After their passions were spent, they showered together and settled on the king-sized bed for a good night's sleep.

Except, Lylia's excitement negated any prospect of slumber.

Once Gary quietly snored beside her, she slipped from beneath the quilt and migrated to the kitchen. A fluorescent bulb over the sink provided adequate illumination to finally decipher the name on the pawn broker's stationery: Tim Goddard, recorded as living in a posh subdivision on the north side.

"Fuck!" Lylia spat.

Her memories vague, she'd never made the connection between her father and this son of a prominent local businessman - who, upon his father's premature death, inherited a vast fortune and diverse portfolio of properties and investments.

Skull ring dangling from a heavy chain around her neck, she drove early to the county library's main branch, parking in front of the reference section's microfilm viewers to scroll through editions of the daily newspaper for the past two decades, pausing at every reference to the Goddard family.

Tim's interests did not run toward the academic, for sure. He'd been given a Harley-Davidson motorcycle on his 16th birthday - the year Lylia was born - and spent most of his days cruising country roads, not always managing to talk his way out of speeding tickets.

One photo of him, straddling the chopper's leather saddle, included the silver skull ring in perfect focus, and she shuddered.

Lylia's question posed with a feigned casual air, the librarian was able to provide the younger Goddard's current address - the penthouse in a high-security apartment complex overlooking the river.

Not difficult for the college student to buy a floral arrangement and pretend to be delivering it to occupants in that building. A uniformed guard cleared her and pointed her toward the elevator; she pressed the topmost button on the interior panel and was whisked upward at a gut-wrenching pace.

Doors retracted, revealing an archway that led into a foyer. Beyond, furniture and fixtures cost more than some hard-working stiff's earned in a year.

The man himself - wild brown mane uncombed, clad in ragged jeans and a Grateful Dead t-shirt - sprawled on a white leather sofa, an empty scotch bottle on the floor beside his awkwardly bent leg, television blaring daytime programming.

Lylia towered over him, scowling. Little better than a drunk - heartless bastard. She slapped his face to rouse him; he bolted upright.

"What the..."

The ring came off its chain and dropped on his lap.

Goddard glanced from the object to this intruder. "How'd you get in?"

She waggled her thumb toward the arch.

"I'll have those rent-a-cops fired..." he grumbled. "Who are you?"

"Reilly Mannion's daughter." She saw his Adam's apple twitch. "I'm here to give you fair warning: I'm on my way to the police."

His natural cockiness reasserted itself as he slipped the ring on his third finger. "What, you want me to buy your silence?"

"No. I just want to know why you felt it necessary to kill my parents."

He rose, standing six inches taller than Lylia. "I have to admire your gumption, kid. Must've taken quite a bit of effort to pull the pieces of this puzzle together. But, you're grasping at straws, especially after so long..."

"The thing you don't get, idiot: blood residue caked in the little crevices of that ring can be tested for DNA, and when the match is made with my mom and dad..."

"You're bluffing."

"Try me."

A switchblade emerged from his trouser pocket, steel deflecting mid-morning sun eerily toward his hazel eyes. He swiped at her; she dodged the slice, grinning.

"You want to die?" he grunted.

"I've wanted to die since that night. You made my life hell, and for what? Money?"

"I was into the bookies for thousands, and my dad wouldn't cover me. The collectors were gonna break my legs, or worse. I knew Reilly kept a stash in his safe; I'd tagged along during the Christmas party when he showed my dad how the

alarm trigger functioned. I didn't just grab the cash, though; he had bonds, stock certificates... I lived like a king for years, spending every dime."

"You could've stolen the dough without killing them!"

"I... didn't plan to, but Reilly woke up, and I had no choice."

"Like you had no choice when engineering your own dad's death?"

"I made sure the coroner would write that up as accidental. It's hard proving someone's been pushed down a flight of stairs."

Lylia drawled, "You *are* a bastard."

"Hey, one murder, two, three... if the dolts on the detective squad didn't connect me to the first one, I knew they wouldn't suspect me when the old man croaked."

Goddard lunged at her; she leapt over the sofa and snatched the fireplace poker, aiming it at his head.

They were struggling for the wrought iron implement when the building's security guard and five policemen burst from the elevator.

"Arrest her!" demanded Goddard.

Lylia dove for the skull ring as arms grabbed for her. "This is evidence Tim Goddard murdered my parents fifteen years ago!" she proclaimed. "He also confessed to killing his own father. Arrest *him!*"

Her words gave the officials pause. When a sergeant arrived on the scene, he instructed his subordinates to take both parties into custody. Lylia didn't protest, but Goddard raised quite the ruckus. He refused to surrender his weapon and be handcuffed; the ensuing tussle propelled him toward ceiling-high windows that opened onto a small deck.

He slammed through the casements with sufficient velocity to flip over the railing, plummeting to the rocky riverbank below.

Lylia accompanied the investigators to their office, giving a lengthy statement. She hadn't been bluffing about DNA evidence: despite the passage of years, residue in the crevices was tested and positively proved the hand wearing the silver band had held the butcher knife that killed her parents.

The file on the senior Goddard's death was reopened; a review of the original coroner's report confirmed the man must've been pushed, rather than accidentally tripping on the stairs. An inquest ruled the force and extent of his fatal injuries had been deliberately inflicted.

Tim Goddard's holdings were confiscated, and a foundation created to fund treatment for victims and survivors of violent crimes. Lylia never availed herself of that opportunity; with the murderer dead, the nightmare ended - literally and figuratively - and she slept peacefully on Gary's shoulder.

Reprobates

“Afternoon, Ollie.” A Scottish-tinged voice wafted through the open casement.

The deeper, resonant reply. “How ya, Bill.”

“Seen the lass today?”

“Been to the city.”

“Later, then.”

“Grand.”

Propped on a stool at the desk in the corner of the loft, Bernadette listened to footsteps fade on the pavement below and smiled. Brushing a wisp of wavy auburn hair away from her eyes, she restarted calculations of the previous night’s sales, from which she’d been distracted by the brief exchange.

The pub thrived, and that’s all she ever hoped.

As for the other perks, well...

Over the course of her short but colorful life, Bernadette had never considered herself pretty. She’d led a rough-and-tumble existence up to that point, scrapping with the boys at the foundling home, being punished by stern, penguin-clad nuns who couldn’t understand such a wee bairn being so defiant. Fleeing that oppressive atmosphere at 16, she set off in search of any blood relation, winding up in County Cork, Ireland, with a father she’d tracked via her mother’s great-great aunt.

That man, however, died within months of becoming acquainted with his illegitimate offspring, leaving his sole asset to her care. She took to the life of a publican with ease, flirting with the men who leaned on the bar or occupied the booths lining the walls, occasionally resorting to tossing a drunk into the street.

They complimented her looks - even in baggy t-shirt and jeans - referred to her as “lovely” and kissed her hand in apology if she caught them swearing. These positive, impish attentions salved a soul warped by years of anguish.

Bill ran a music shop across the square. He’d resigned from his post as a school teacher years before, intent on brightening the world with song. Bernie suspected he could play every instrument displayed in the window, and often heard him picking the strings of a guitar or banjo when humid weather warranted keeping the front door open on breezy summer days.

He stood tall, erect, white mane cascading past his shoulders, with smoldering hazel eyes that bored into the soul.

Ollie, on the other hand, could be considered a “gentleman farmer,” except she didn’t really know if he ever raised a hand on the acreage he owned to the

north, or let his employees do the dirty work. Built like a barrel-chested bull, he had a gruff demeanor and had a reputation for violence.

They weren't Bernie's best customers, but they spent their share at the weekend supporting her livelihood.

Now, more than ever.

Guilt will do that.

Tearing the calculator tape off the roll, she studied the total, pleased, and jotted the number in a hardbound ledger. She rose and stretched her limbs, a forceful thumping in her belly.

Another three months, and she'd be free of this...

Swollen fingers wiped a smudge off the glass as she gazed toward an emerald green horizon. She'd thought about that night on a daily basis, and it still brought a chuckle to her lips.

Irish winters aren't necessarily cold, but they can be brutally harsh, with wind and rain lashing interminably. Matching hearths at either end of the pub crackling, generating soothing heat, Bernadette had beamed at the crowd as she pulled pints and poured whisky. Bill and Ollie had been debating a road improvement scheme proposed by the local council near the stairs, hailing her as she ascended the narrow, warped flight to fetch another case of crisps.

Two minutes later, she was on the floor, the pair helping her upright.

Toting her load, she'd missed a step in the dimness, and plummeted downward, bumping her head on the bannister... maybe.

She felt groggy, and the duo made quite a scene escorting her to her tiny apartment at the rear of the structure.

They settled her on the twin bed, tucking the quilt beneath her chin. They brought a tumbler of water, cold compresses, like parents tending a sick child. Her ears picked up snippets of conversation, but nothing tangible.

Ollie, renowned for holding the record for most pints consumed in two hours, fled to the toilet first. Bernie could only guess blood trickling from a gash on her forehead must've turned his stomach, since no amount of alcohol impacted him thus. Vague echoes of retching commingled with virulent expletives provided background to Bill's tender ministrations.

As if on a shift rotation, however, no more had Ollie reappeared, than Bill retired to the bathroom, losing his dinner and everything he'd drunk in a prolonged session. Seeing the pristine bandage comforted Ollie, and he cradled her palm within his massive paws, watery blue orbs studying her delicate features.

Both in their fifties, she surmised, they were older than her own father when he passed of cancer. A feisty pair of reprobates who should have known better.

Bernie never mentioned the pregnancy; the oversized shirts she preferred hid her expanding midsection until recently. Self-appointed keepers of the town's morality instigated a gossip chain about her unmarried status; rampant speculation about the possible father only added to the pub's mystique.

Business improved exponentially.

The publican suspected Bill and Ollie had discussed the matter at length - very probably right at the very bar she sprayed with disinfectant prior to the evening rush. They'd admitted not remembering anything that transpired after they'd assisted her in the wake of her fall...

A convenient form of amnesia? she puzzled.

She would have liked to clarify their doubts, but her recollection of the details remained sketchy, as well. When she'd called on the doctor the morning after, he'd diagnosed her with a minor concussion.

Pulsating delight set nerves a-tingle - sensations revisited in her dreams ever since. Whether one or both of the men had...

She just couldn't be sure.

Bill too considerate to take advantage of her injury, she doubted he'd gotten a leg over while Ollie was sequestered in the loo. The latter, however... he'd made a grab for her more than once when their paths crossed at the grocer's and the Saturday street market and, if rumors were to be believed, he'd sired a few children of his own in the district.

Resolution to the conundrum might depend on tests made after the child was born.

Except, the unexpected occurred as autumn hues tinted the trees, just weeks before Bernie's due date. She'd switched off the television and was gathering half-drunk pints following Thursday's final call, when she saw Bill watching from the doorway.

"Forget something?" she hailed.

He sidled toward her, a wee grin visible between his bushy white mustache and ample beard. For someone so enamored of the delicate inflections incorporated into concertos, symphonies, sonatas, he made no effort to couch his request in flowery words.

"Marry me, Bernadette."

Glass shattered on the boards.

“Ye cannae raise the bairn wi’oot a father, an’ ye cannae run the pub wi’ a bairn t’ care for.”

“Ya bastard!” came a bellow from the shadows.

Bernie and Bill spun toward Ollie, seething on the threshold of her parlor.

“She’s mine, ya bastard!”

The last thing Bernie desired was to witness a fight between two aging ruffians over her honor. Nonetheless, a whisky bottle soared across the chamber; Bill dodging the projectile with surprising agility. He couldn’t escape Ollie’s bear-like attack, both of them landing on the wood as walls shook from the impact’s force.

Bernie could have notified the Garda, but would have regretted both being hauled to jail. Instead, she filled a pitcher with water at the sink and scurried toward the grappling pair. She dumped the liquid on their heads, and they fell apart, drenched.

“How dare ye, woman!” Bill scolded, wiping a dripping cheek on his shirt sleeve. “Never interfere wi’ men sorting oot their problems!”

“If this is how men sort out their problems, then I want none of it - or either of you!”

Ollie, propped on one elbow, glowered at her. “If you marry me, you’ll have the best of everything - yourself and the little one.”

“I’m content with what I have, and will make sure my son is, too.”

Both perked up at this revelation.

On their feet, they pinned her against the bar, prattling on about how well she’d be cared for, loved, pampered...

Abruptly, she doubled over, excruciating pain twisting her insides. She crashed onto her knees, Bill and Ollie stunned into silence.

“Get me... to hospital...” Bernie gasped, perspiration soaking her ghostly pale skin.

The nearest facility 20 kilometers distant, the pair agreed to rouse the doctor from his much-deserved rest and drag him to the pub, where Bernie writhed on the twin bed, lips bleeding as she bit back screams.

A cursory examination spurred the comment, “The child’s breach.”

“I rang for an ambulance,” announced Bill.

“No time.”

Ollie volunteered, “My Porsche’s outside.”

Bill backhanded him; he crashed into the plaster.

“What the...”

The musician retorted, “How are ye goin’ t’ fit her in a Porsche, ya daft numpty?”

The physician left them to resolve their dispute, raising Bernie from the bed and leading her from the building to his surgery a block away - not an easy feat, her legs uncooperative.

By the time the ambulance arrived, she’d been sedated and a caesarian section performed in what could be deemed primitive circumstances. Mother and child were transported to St. Michael’s Hospital, receiving appropriate follow-up treatment.

Bill and Ollie brought bouquets of flowers the following afternoon, viewing the healthy boy with his shock of black hair.

“See those brilliant blue eyes?” boasted Ollie. “He favors me.”

Bill snorted, “Nonsense. ‘Tis m’ dimple on his chin.”

Not yet fully recovered from the anesthesia, Bernie managed a smirk. These men might not realize all infants were born with blue eyes that changed color over a period of months but, if nothing else, her son would enjoy the solicitude of two doting godfathers.

She named him William Oliver.

If he wanted to discover his biological father’s identity, that would be up to him when he came of age.

In the meantime, the potential sires managed the pub while she took a few days to rest before resuming what some might describe as a “normal” life.

Beginning of the End

Back in the day - maybe 60 or 70 years ago - a common saying among women of marriageable age involved turning the “right corner” and running into their future spouse.

Well, I’ve turned a lot of corners in my life and never bothered to look twice at any of the men walking the other direction.

Nor the women.

Not that I’m lesbian, though I’ve been accused of being one because I firmly hold the belief men don’t grow up, they just grow older - and tying myself to the equivalent of a five-year-old for the rest of my life doesn’t appeal to me in the slightest.

Romantic relationships, in my opinion, waste precious time.

More important matters occupy most days, as it is: unedited video footage, the proliferation of artificial intelligence in both visual and written projects, script revisions, camera malfunctions on location and a myriad of other production issues.

Still, that particular June morning blew me sideways, I can’t deny.

I’d just grabbed a late breakfast at Johnny Rocket’s and was hustling through the mall toward Hollywood Boulevard and the Chinese Theatre - whatever they were calling it this week: Grauman’s, Mann’s, TCL - for a photo session when I rounded the corner near Walgreens and ran smack-dab into...

God.

And, I’m an atheist.

The presumption could be made that I’m playing with semantics, and I collided with a band of Hare Krishnas or Mormom missionaries, offering me Jesus or enlightenment for a price.

That’s not the case.

The figure into whom I crashed - literally - could have been Michelangelo’s model for the creator painted on the Sistine Chapel, imparting life to Adam in the center panel of those frescoes. A white, wild mane, full shaggy beard framing tanned features and piercing blue eyes, calf-length white cotton kurta, matching trousers, Birkenstock sandals and a seven-foot-tall sturdy hazel walking stick indelibly imprinted on my brain.

“Fuck me!” I sputtered, retreating three paces, followed quickly by, “I mean, I’m sorry.”

“No harm done.”

That voice! If I'd had such a resonant baritone narrating my boss' latest documentary, we would've won an Oscar!

For a split-second, I thought we were going to dance - you know, the way people do when they're not sure whether to dodge left or right to avoid a second impact. He simply didn't move, staring down at me and grinning, straight teeth barely visible within the facial hair. My feet might've been stuck to the concrete by wads of discarded chewing gum, my legs unable to function.

"Perhaps you can assist me," he hinted.

Half-expecting him to pull a map from the pocket of his voluminous garment - or the gold, woven hemp man purse slung over his shoulder - if this proved to be no more than a lost tourist, I would've been sorely disappointed.

Also, I'd be late for my appointment. I came from a generation taught to respect one's elders, though. "What's up?"

Up?

That was me in the blink of an eye, transported via some mysterious means to the Angel Flight funicular railway between Hill and Olive Streets in downtown Los Angeles. The restored car braked short of the California Plaza; we sat alone on a bench seat gazing over the city.

"Fuck me!" I shuddered as if an icy wind had whipped through my soul.

His soft hand patted mine, soothing my jangled nerves. "No worries. A little privacy is far preferable to a crowded thoroughfare for discussing serious business."

Words formed inside my skull; my tongue failed to enunciate the burning question, despite my jaw in motion.

"We haven't much time before the technicians arrive to check the supposed malfunction on the track," he continued, shifting his weight to gaze directly at me. "Humanity has reached the point of no return on its road to self-destruction. Therefore, swift retribution will be meted out."

My lips stammered, "Re... tri... bu... tion?"

"The slate will be wiped clean, and a new species of intelligent life will evolve from scratch."

No mistaking the implication of this pronouncement - if this was a genuine deity capable of annihilating billions in the blink of an eye. I swallowed my heart.

"Your profession makes you the ideal recipient of my final message."

My throat constricted, I managed to squeak, "What... message?"

"Humans were gifted with heaven and turned it into hell, so they will spend eternity in the realm of their own making."

It slipped out. “Fuck me!” Struggling to slow my racing pulse, I asserted, “You’re aware... I don’t believe in such... drivel.”

“Which is why I’m here with you and not those who have... abused my name for publicity or financial gain.”

This logic astounded and, frankly, impressed me.

“When will... the end come?”

His tranquil smile surpassed beatific. “It’s already begun. Extraordinary weather will increase in frequency and intensity, multiplying disasters linked to the devastation of the environment. Within months... perhaps weeks...”

Stifling another expletive, I queried, “You realize there’ll be global panic?”

Blue orbs closed, his head tilted slightly left and he nodded.

“This isn’t something I can keep to myself. People must be told...”

“You have my permission to share the truth.”

But, how? “It’ll take awhile to record the necessary audio and video, arrange for air time...” I felt myself smirk. “You wouldn’t want to do the voiceover yourself?”

His pinched expression conveyed the answer better than a curt refusal.

“What about the first of next month?”

“I recommend expediting the process.”

“Such urgency would need to be bolstered with hard cash.”

“Unlimited funds are at your disposal.”

“How is that...”

He tired of the exchange, I sensed. “Wealth is the ultimate illusion, my dear. Coins and bills have no value on an eternal scale.”

He must’ve known I wouldn’t put this generosity to the test by embarking on a spending spree. I estimated two weeks, maybe ten days...

He rose; the rail car resumed its ascent of the steep slope. “I’m so pleased we ran into each other.”

“Me, too.”

He vanished, leaving me stranded.

“Hey!” I shouted as a uniformed attendant secured the car at the station. “What about me?”

The youth squinted, perplexed.

With a cursory apology, I disembarked and strode toward the street. Paying for a cab wasn’t in my budget...

A second later, I stood on Hollywood Boulevard, near the Walgreens entrance.

“Fuck me!”

Repercussions of this encounter forced to my subconscious, I proceeded through the day. By evening, exhaustion prevented me from so much as drafting a rough script or a list of potential actors to read it.

As it turned out, I needn't have bothered. The next morning, the west coast exceeded 90 degrees by 8:00 AM, with highways buckling from the mid-day heat and 8.5 magnitude earthquakes. The east coast, simultaneously, plunged into sub-zero temperatures with wind-chills ensuring instantaneous frostbite for any who risked venturing outdoors.

My news feed scrolled accounts of volcanic eruptions in Hawaii and Indonesia, deluges flooding in eastern Australia, wildfires in the Amazon, tsunamis lashing the coasts of India, melting glaciers in the Arctic, sandstorms in the Sahara, and more.

The connectivity so essential to commerce interrupted by noon, storms ravaging cell towers and satellites inexplicably dropping from orbit, escalated the hysteria I'd predicted less than 24 hours previous. Churches of every sect filled with terrified congregants, their clergy at a loss to comfort them with cliches about the merciful attributes of their god or trite prayers.

Left wondering - at my dinette table sipping cold tea thanks to the power outage - if the individual with whom I'd conversed on the Angel Flight Railway actually boasted divine origins, I doodled story boards on a sketch pad for a 30-second spot announcing the termination of life as we knew it.

Fully cognizant I'd lost the capacity to fulfill the commission.

Or, had he been what, in the 1960s, was described as a "Jesus freak," spiritually attuned somehow to the impending upheaval?

Unlikely, since no mere human could teleport himself and a companion from place to place.

We hadn't - and would never - achieve the technological advances predominant in the *Star Trek* franchise.

Not since childhood, raised by fundamentalist Christian parents, had I addressed their version of omniscience. Yet, I heard myself utter, "Dude, if you're there, tell me what to do."

Secretly, maybe, I wanted to see him again. He'd exuded a peace, in spite of those dire tidings, that I craved while navigating the crazy industry in which I sought to earn my livelihood.

Nothing.

By Saturday, civilization ground to a standstill as the death toll surpassed two billion. The sole form of communication old telegraph lines attached to generators, snippets recounting wholesale desolation confirmed our fate.

Pondering whether extinction of the dinosaurs occurred in similar fashion, I ate lightly while supermarkets and convenience stores were looted for every available scrap. When the shelves emptied, desperate householders grabbed their firearms and shot cattle, pigs and horses, butchers in great demand to cure the meat.

Why I was allowed to witness the gradual disintegration of society, I'm not sure. My guess is that nearly eight billion souls entered the afterlife - according to their respective interpretations - and, maybe, only the atheists survived?

Fortunately, I had a substantial back yard with a fire pit, and had planted rows of vegetables the week before turning that corner and slamming into God...

I didn't starve, like so many - periodically sharing my surplus with stragglers of this bizarre apocalypse. Even so, the remnants will die soon enough, and the evolution of the planet's next enlightened stewards will commence.

If I had my druthers, it would be the squirrels.

However things work out, maybe they'll be successful where we failed so miserably.

The Session

“Luce?”

If the redhead in the square, beige plaid armchair heard the summons, she didn't react. Beyond full-length windows on the west wall, ravens soared on the breeze, tranquil, graceful.

“Lucy, c'mon. Pay attention.”

Her contralto dreamy, distant: “I *am* paying attention. To life in all its subtle beauty.”

“We were discussing your fiction.”

“Which is the embellished account of life in all its subtle beauty.”

Bespectacled, notepad resting on her knee, the psychologist bristled. “How can you justify that statement when most of your plots revolve around gruesome murders or kinky sexual encounters?”

“Kinky's kinda harsh, eh?” Lucy shifted on the cushion toward her companion, smirking.

“Some of the pages I've read, I'd say it's pretty damned accurate, almost rape in some instances.”

“I don't deny rape plays into some of the plots. Most of the horizontal gymnastics I describe, though, involve the mutual satisfaction of both participants.”

“Described in rather... graphic terms.”

“Nonsense! If you do a word search of the files on my laptop's hard drive, you won't find one mention of either male or female genitalia, or any slang variations thereof. It's not porn, for Christ's sake.”

Beads of perspiration formed on the psychologist's temples as she flipped through a printed document. “Maybe not, but the implication is... unmistakable.”

“Geez, Doc. People have sex. It's a major part of day-to-day existence. Just like eating, sleeping, using the toilet... What happens in someone's bedroom is their own affair - literally. Just because you or I don't get into the bondage and leather shit, doesn't mean it's not a thriving industry.”

She dabbed moist flesh with a tissue. “When was the last time you...”

Lucy snorted, “Nunya.”

“The referral emailed to me included a photo from some charity do: you and a rather seedy looking escort.”

“Who, rumor has it, wants to seduce me and bilk me out of every cent.” Blue eyes rolled toward a tin tiled ceiling. “He was my high school world history

teacher. Impeccable reputation, just... rather eccentric. Nothing between us except fond memories of ancient Greece and Australian penal colonies.”

“So, unlike your stories, you prefer a specific type?”

“If you’re asking whether I jump in bed with every guy who looks twice at me: no. As I said, nunya.”

A diplomatic change of topic. “What about the murders?”

“Don’t you read the papers or watch the evening news?”

“No time.”

“In Chicago alone, dozens are killed on a weekly basis. Random drive-by shootings, or targeted attacks. Because I integrate this violence into my stories doesn’t make me some kind of ghoul. Hell, Agatha Christie made a fortune off murder!”

“Do you resent not making a fortune off your efforts?”

The patient’s curls shook sideways, pitying her therapist. “Why can’t you’d understand what I’ve told you time and again: my motivation to write is not money. I write because I must. No differently than an artist paints or sculpts, or a guitarist practices until his fingers bleed.”

“That’s... not normal.”

Lucy straightened, sucking air between grit teeth. “There’s no such thing as normal,” she growled in a staccato tempo. “I may kill on a computer screen, or tantalize readers with bodies entangled in passionate embraces, but that doesn’t come close to the deviants walking down any street on a given day. On to the next, please.”

“You consulted *me*, remember? If not about these... aberrant fantasies, then why?”

She sighed. “Not to play games, Doc. The first day I walked through your door, I told you my dad’s idiot lawyers won’t release the funds in my trust until they have some assurance of my sanity.”

“So, you blame them...”

“I’m not blaming anyone! It’s a fact of my life. Neither of my parents - *adoptive* parents - approved of my wish to be a writer. They thought I’d wind up a drunk on skid row, like Fitzgerald or Hemingway, or a lunatic drug addict, like Hunter F. Thompson. When I morphed my talent into a decent-paying gig as a journalist, they were shocked, but no more pleased knowing I was out at all hours, chasing breaking news.”

“You’ve interviewed your share of crime victims, then.”

“Sat through the trials of their assailants, too.”

Scribbling on lined sheets. “So, details for the murders...”

“Hold on a minute, Doc. Don’t assume anything. Long before I rated a reserved seat in the superior court’s gallery, I read books. Lots of books. Classics, pulp novels, science fiction, cheesy romances. I have an *imagination*. I don’t need play-acting prosecutors or their equally theatrical defense counterparts to supply me with gory details about felonious atrocities. I can out-think the best of ‘em.”

Wood-grained pen paused on the paper. “When you think about... how a murder will take place, and who will be killed, do you have specific individuals in mind?”

“Sure. Usually the villain of the current piece.”

“You... only kill the bad guys?”

“Who’s more deserving of an agonizing, bloody demise?” Lucy quipped.

“You don’t... visualize shoving a knife between the ribs of some... personal enemy?”

Guileless orbs squinted. “I... don’t have any enemies.”

“What about your father’s lawyers?”

“They’re shysters, not enemies.”

“But, if not for them, you’d be rolling in wealth right now.”

“I wouldn’t call a hundred grand wealth. Not in today’s economy. Won’t even buy a middle class house, or a Ferrari Testarossa.”

“They’re subjecting you to this evaluation for such a trivial sum?”

“Shysters, like I said.”

“And, if you’re not deemed sane?”

“They split the lot.”

The psychologist’s mouth twitched. “That almost sounds like a calculated plan to defraud...”

“Good plot for a story, eh?” Lucy beamed.

“Have you... looked into their motivation?”

She chuckled. “An online search, and a few well-phrased questions to the Bar Association exposed them months ago. One of them owes a chunk of change to his bookie because he can’t pick a winning horse out of a hat. His partner has been in arrears on his child support for three years.”

“Yet, you’ve been coming to see me for six weeks...”

“It’s been yet another learning experience in a long line of opportunities.”

Paper and pen flew across the book-lined chamber. “So, I’ll wind up a character in one of your novels?”

“Probably shot by a severely disturbed conspiracy theorist, who’ll end up sentenced to lethal injection...”

“Why kill, though?” The tweed-suited counselor leaned forward, hopeful. “I just want to come to grips...”

Lucy mimicked the posture, so their noses almost touched. “It’s the only way to rid myself of a particular inspiration.”

Settling back on the winged-back chair, a puzzled expression passed over the psychologist’s sun-weathered features. “Are you saying...”

“For me, inspiration is like an infection. Something - someone - gets inside my brain and churns away, the symptoms being words pouring out of me like a fountain or, to put it another way, projectile vomit. The only way to stop the gut-wrenching heaves is, like physicians in the Middle Ages, bleeding ill humors from the system. Once the blood is spent, the body or, in this case, my mind, gradually recovers.”

Silence, then, “So, killing off these characters is your way of exorcizing the demons within your own psyche...”

“Excellent turn of phrase,” Lucy praised. “You’d make a pretty good writer, yourself.”

“I dabble in a bit of poetry now and then.”

“I used to, but the language is too flowery for me.”

“So, once an inspiration has been snuffed, you resume a more ordinary routine?”

“For a few hours, maybe as much as a fortnight, until the next one hits. Since the first day I sat down at my dad’s old Smith Corona typewriter, I haven’t been able to escape the cycle.” Lucy met the woman’s steady gaze. “Now, you’ll check the box that will rob me of my inheritance...”

“I... swear, I haven’t been bribed, or threatened with blackmail... Don’t you think what you’ve admitted is quite... insane?”

“Sure, but I’ve lived this way for so long, it’s the essence of my being. I get by without... much difficulty, earn a paycheck, eat relatively healthy meals, sleep eight hours a night without dreams that are too bizarre... More than most sane people enjoy.”

“Do you *need* the money?”

“Hell, no! But, I don’t want them to screw me out of it.”

“If I were to recommend an indefinite course of treatment, would you submit to regular sessions?”

“To what end? I don’t *want* to change. I don’t see any *reason* to change. The prospect of being stuffed in a box that meets with society’s approval... what a dull future!”

Resigned, the professional rose, hand extended. “I wish you anything but a dull future.”

“Thanks.” Lucy climbed to her feet and accepted the gesture.

“And, when you get ‘round to killing off those two conniving lawyers, fire an extra bullet into their skulls for me.”

The patient guffawed. “Actually, I was going to trap them in a field with an angry bull...”

“Fitting.”

With an impish nod, Lucy departed. The psychologist meandered toward the window, ravens gliding overhead.

Late Shift Radio

Student DJs missing their shifts at the campus radio station wasn't uncommon. Studying for mid-terms, pop quizzes or finishing up research papers took precedence - and rightly so, given the exorbitant tuition being paid to the private university by affluent parents.

Still, Reggi would've appreciated if they phoned or texted to let her know ahead of time, rather than simply not showing up.

What good was a cell phone, if it wasn't used to communicate?

Of course, this station manager knew the youngsters with whom she shared her insights about classical, jazz, pop and other musical styles - along with the operation of antiquated equipment housed at the top of a winding staircase in Mifflin Tower - shunned traditional work ethics. Most signed on to host three-hour shows out of sheer boredom, and rarely lasted more than half a semester.

This snowy November night, Reggi squirmed on a battered swivel chair before the mouldering sound board, the LED clock reading 11:43. She'd been spinning platters - literally - since 3:00, covering for absentees who were supposed to coordinate the weekly Big Band Party, Arias and Operas, and Broadway Musical Delights.

A layer of slime coating remnants of coffee in her ceramic mug, just a few more minutes, and she could throw the main switch.

Footsteps on the metal catwalk outside the studio puzzled her as a medley from *The Lion King* hit the airwaves. Meant ostensibly to keep her awake, she finished jotting entries in the daily log, filing the binder, and restored vinyl to their album sleeves, arranging them on their assigned shelves in the annex.

The scraping of a needle across the turntable made her cringe. A malfunction at this hour would be decidedly inconvenient...

That's when an ominous voice boomed at the microphone: "Enough of such inane trash, people! This frequency has just become the property of the North Central Militia."

Reggi halted in the doorway, jaw agape. Wearing green camouflage, a bandolier loaded with extra bullets across his chest, holding a 9mm pistol in his right hand, a rifle slung over his left shoulder, she had no doubts this trespasser wasn't playing a nasty prank, despite his long chestnut mane and ample facial hair.

Still, anger got the better of reason. "Damn, idiot! You just ruined one of my favorite records!"

The head whipped toward her, thick brows above piercing hazel orbs. "Watch your mouth, bitch, or you'll be the first to die in this revolution."

“Oh, fuck you!” she retorted. “A revolution of one?”

Two strides closed the gap between them; he towered eight inches above her, his scowl threatening. An iron grip encompassed her right wrist as he dragged her to a shuttered window, intended to keep out the bats. Throwing wide the left pane, he shoved her forward so she could view two dozen similarly clad, well-armed jerks jogging toward dorms along the quad.

The woman swallowed hard, not exactly afraid of heights, but terrified she might be thrown to the ground by this lunatic. “Oh... kay... what’s the point of this... uprising?”

He yanked her inside and secured aluminum panels, thrusting her onto the seat, which pitched sideways and dumped her on the tile as her cell phone blared a banjo rendition of *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*.

The device shattered against cracked plaster.

“Shit!” Reggi cursed. “I was still paying for that!”

“Money that could go to help families in need.”

She climbed slowly to her feet, hip bruised. “Eh?”

“Were you here when the tornado hit last March and trashed most of the west side neighborhoods?”

“I’ve been here for ten years so, yeah.”

A derisive growl: “The president of this *noble* institution swore on live television that everyone who lost a home in the storm would be given a substantial grant toward rebuilding costs, along with scheduling students to help with construction. Well, we’ve seen - and heard - nothing more from anyone, and hundreds of families, including many who are elderly, are still living in temporary trailers without basic utilities.”

“So, you’re the sons, brothers, husbands of those who are suffering?”

“Precisely.”

“Well, if you go through with this, you’ll end up with three hots and a cot - in prison - and your families will suffer even more.”

The land line phone jangled on the sideboard.

“Who’s calling at this time of night?”

Reggi smirked, “Probably the university president.”

Or, at least, the communications department chair, wondering why the programming ended without a proper sign-off.

“We’ve got a... situation here, boss,” she mumbled into the receiver.

“Should I drive over?”

“Not... advisable.”

“Then, I’ll send the police...”

“No. The last thing I want is for people to get hurt.”

A groggy bass roared, “What the hell are you talking about?”

The handset was wrenched from her ear, cord yanked from the jack.

Nose to nose, the militia leader hissed, “Are you saying no one heard my statement...”

She fidgeted at such close proximity, his musky scent pervasive. “I... think you forgot to plug the mic into the board.”

“Huh?”

“When I’m... not at the desk, I unplug the wire, so I don’t accidentally trip over it.”

A callused hand raked her cheek. “Bitch!”

Reggi’s spine bounced off a glass partition dividing the studio from the annex before a vice clutched her biceps, jagged fingernails digging into her flesh. “Do what you have to do so I can speak to anyone listening.”

“It’s not likely anyone’s listening,” she countered, poised over the equipment, “after five minutes of nothing but dead air.”

That’s when she noticed the auxiliary mic had been switched on - inadvertently - the transmitter sharing their entire conversation across a 40 mile radius.

Angry shouts and confused expletives from outside drew the pair once more to the window, where they observed groups of students, shivering in a variety of pajama styles, being herded at gunpoint from residence halls to the historic, albeit dormant, fountain near the administration complex.

“What... do you intend to do with those kids?” demanded Reggi.

“First, we’re going to confiscate their belongings and distribute them to those who have nothing. Then, until the president lives up to his pledge, one will be shot every fifteen minutes.”

“You’re insane!”

Sirens confirmed this assessment, with not only patrol cruisers but SWAT vans converging on the mob. At least ten of the rifle-toting thugs dropped their weapons and sprinted into the darkness, much to her companion’s disgust.

“Bastards!” he groaned, whirling from the casement. “The first whiff of trouble, and they turn yellow.”

“I suppose you’re going to tough it out and go down shooting?” Reggi challenged.

“If they aim at me, you’ll take the first bullet.”

“Jesus! Hiding behind a woman!” she scoffed.

“Hey, I didn’t know who I’d find up here. All I knew is that we needed to get the word out, so people would sympathize with our cause...”

“Oh, you go the word out, all right. Those kids’ parents won’t think twice about seeing you and your buddies hung from the highest flagpole...”

He tugged her to the sound board. “Plug in the mic. If I tell them you’re my hostage...”

Reggi complied, suppressing her giggles at this dolt’s ineptitude. She swung the arm toward him, mic bumping his whiskered jaw.

“What about loudspeakers?” he barked.

“There are a few used to blast music for outdoor picnics and other events...”

“Hook me up.”

Brown orbs rolling toward the ceiling, she flipped a toggle and cranked a dial.

“This is the commander of the North Central Militia,” he proclaimed, baritone quavering. “If you interfere with our offensive, the blood of the dead will be on your hands.”

A tenor that might have been filtered through gravel responded via bullhorn. “You are ordered to lay down your arms and form a single-file line on the sidewalk, where you will be read your rights and handcuffed for transport to the county jail.”

“Do that,” their leader snapped, “and I’ll kill the woman I’ve taken prisoner!” He seized Reggi’s ponytail and wrenched her neck as he steered her toward the mic. “Tell them.”

Instead of pleading for her life, she opted for a different tack. “Do what you must to save the students and throw every one of those fools in the can!”

She landed on the floor with a groan; her assailant straddled her, palms encircling her throat and compressing her windpipe.

Mustering just enough strength to thrust her right knee upward, he tumbled off in a heap, cradling his groin.

Supine, she gasped for breath, predicting he’d renew the attack in two or three minutes, once the initial shock to his system subsided. Her fingers detected a ten-penny nail beneath the desk - probably discarded years earlier, when minimal renovations to the tower were completed - that could serve as a weapon...

The door burst open at that moment, narrowly missing her skull. Five masked SWAT officers charged in, apprehending the intruder without resistance.

Reggi, hailed as a hero, was interviewed on every radio and television station from Chicago to Kansas City during the ensuing week, with live feeds to

cable news networks. She included in her statements a plea for the tornado victims, while denouncing the tactics of the self-proclaimed militia.

Called to testify at the trial, delayed by various legal maneuvers until the following summer, only then did she learn the name of the group's organizer: Michael Walsh.

They'd attended grade school together on the city's south side, before his family bought a larger house...

After the guilty verdict and sentencing, Reggi spent many hours at the campus radio station - new deadbolts installed at the base of the stairs and on the studio door - wondering how the introverted artist would've turned out if not for that move and a destructive tornado.

The Tattooist

They'd been together since she posed for his university Life Art course that spring so long ago. Rather than simply capture his interpretation of her curvaceous rear view, given his placement in the studio, he'd embellished her creamy soft flesh with colorful tattoos.

When she glimpsed the canvas, pulling on her robe en route to the dressing room, she halted on delicate bare feet.

"How did you know?" she gasped, leaning over his shoulder to study the images.

His brush paused above the surface. "Know what?"

"That I grew up in a wee thatched cottage outside Glasgow, with roses on the trellis, dogs, and... and..."

"I... didn't. The designs came to me as I painted..."

Every time she sat for him after that, her mystically manifested personal history added singular depth to the renderings, many of which found their way into prestigious galleries.

He christened her "Canabhas Bàn" - blank canvas in Gaelic - "Cana" for short.

When it came to supporting them financially, he morphed his talent with oils into a lucrative career as a tattooist, opening a shop on Gallowgate in Glasgow's east end. Prints of Cana adorned the walls; his clients might have been quite surprised to find her flesh remained its original tone, as did his own.

Unusual, since apprentices with the needles often practiced on each other, winding up as walking murals.

He stood out in a crowd, nonetheless, with his long reddish mane hanging below his shoulders, untrimmed mustache and goatee - all of which went grey before his 45th birthday, continuing to whiten as he aged. Cana didn't age at all, like a specimen preserved in amber, providing him a subject for his ethereal visions during holidays in Aberdeenshire or on the Outer Hebrides.

Entwined together as moonlight filtered through their bedroom window, he'd ceased asking about her past. He suspected she might be of the Na daoine sìthe - the fairies - fleeing their company to experience what the human realm could offer. It didn't really matter to him; the awareness of a connection at the very core of their beings filled him with an unquenchable joy and contentment over the course of decades.

Emotions shattered when he woke up one autumn morning alone.

Her clothes still in the wardrobe, shoes neatly arranged along the wall, silver rings and hand-tooled leather pocketbook on the chest of drawers, he wandered from room to room, searching for some explanation regarding this sudden absence.

Finally, noticing the clock, he cooked some lumpy porridge and rode the subway to St. Enoch's, walking along Argyle Street and unlocking the door as his first appointment arrived. He tried not to worry as he blended colors into a portrait on one guy's biceps, tulips on a woman's left foot, a heart and fly fishing pole on a soldier's chest, and a stylized banjo on a 20-something's knee.

Yet, each time he glanced up while rinsing ink from the equipment, there she was, gazing lovingly down at him.

His heart hardened into a concrete block by closing time.

Though sole owner of the establishment, he'd welcomed two other exceptional practitioners to share the space back in the early days, one of whom continued to ply his trade in the same cubicle 25 years later. Keys tossed to the latter on his way out, raised eyebrows slowed his pace.

"What's up?" came the question.

"I'm done."

"So'm I. Gi' me a minute, and we can walk down t' the Sarry for a pint."

"Nae. I'm done, for good."

"What's... happened?"

"I dinnae know." He slumped against the jamb. "The rent's paid up 'til Hogmanay. You can take o'er the lease and do as you please wi' the place."

"I... dinnae ken..."

"Neither do I. But, I will nae be back."

Making his exit, he left his colleague with jaw agape.

Meandering toward the Barrowland Ballroom, he paid no heed to the bustling streets, the noise, the pishing rain. Detouring through the Barras Market, he resembled a drowned rat, stringently avoided by those with umbrellas rushing toward the bus stop or their flats.

When he collapsed on the bridge over the River Clyde, those nearest assumed him pissed and left him on the pavement, nose gushing blood.

How long he lay there, he could not tell. Consciousness gradually returned; every joint sore, he sensed an anvil on his chest, preventing movement. When his lids fluttered open, minutes elapsed before he could focus on the face hovering above him.

Canan, naked, covered in brilliant colors, delicate hands outstretched.

"Come home, dear," she whispered.

“Where... ha’ you been?”

“Preparing a place for you to paint.”

He ached to reach for her; his arms wouldn’t obey.

“Let go,” urged Cana.

Then, he realized his fate. “You mean...”

“Aye. Ye shall be welcome among us.”

“The fae?”

“Aye.”

With a sigh, he closed his eyes.

Afternoons in the Greenhouse

French doors closed and locked, engraved blue acrylic sign dangling from the brass knob - "Greenhouse in Use" - the Thursday ritual commenced.

A square folding metal table stood in the midst of flowering plants collected from around the globe, two cushioned armchairs positioned on either side. Arabella sat with her back to the descending sun, on a southerly course in these winter months; Martin shifted his to an angle where the glare didn't reflect off his spectacles.

Simple rules guided these semi-friendly, semi-cutthroat competitions: the pair alternated choosing a game from week to week, the winner claiming a preferred prize.

During the six years Arabella and Martin had resided at Candacraig Senior Village, the retired florist had taken quite a shine to the former architect, whose left side was slightly impeded by a series of minor strokes, while his libido remained in overdrive, like some randy teen trapped in an octogenarian's body. Her selection of Cribbage, Snakes and Ladders, Scrabble or Monopoly stimulated his brain cells for an hour or so before he dozed and she made a quiet exit.

For his part, Martin relied on chess to best his lovely opponent. She challenged his decades as Scotland's champion by not employing any set strategy; he could never predict her next move, yet managed to achieve checkmate in the majority of matches.

His triumph secured, they'd retire to a green plaid chaise lounge shielded from view by bamboo and banana trees for a passionate shag.

Amanda didn't really mind losing that much, to be truthful. As owner of her own business since graduating from university, she'd had no time for romantic interactions, working 12-hour shifts without holidays. Grateful that she'd brightened the lives of hundreds - thousands - of customers up to and including the day she signed papers, under duress, selling the shop to a developer who planned to raze the structure and build student housing on the site, she could enjoy a bit of fun while she still retained sufficient energy.

Martin blinked sparkling hazel eyes and nodded approval as she spun the inlaid board so hand-carved white marble pieces aligned before her. Not that this opening gave her any advantage. She'd learned by watching her father play her brothers, never really grasping concepts they discussed *ad infinitum*.

That patriarch, in fact, had held the national title until Martin had beaten him in the regional finals as a lad of 13.

She nudged her king's pawn two spaces forward.

An hour later, she was buttoning her blouse as he zipped his trousers and stumbled sideways into a potted palm.

She scrambled up and gripped him by the waist, easing him onto the cushions.

“I’ll fetch a nurse,” she informed him.

He seized her fingers with surprising strength. “No, Belle. Just let me rest a bit.” He managed a weak grin, barely visible between his bushy mustache and full beard. “You’re so incredible, if I had the gumption, I’d ask you to marry me.”

She lowered herself beside him. “I’d probably accept such a charming proposal.”

Forcing her voice to remain calm, she knew his ashen complexion warranted summoning the professionals...

After those who made the excursion returned from funeral services held in the cathedral - presided over by a bishop and six priests - a special plaque was unveiled near the greenhouse entrance: “Martin Barker Memorial Solarium.”

No one questioned Arabella regarding this tribute, for which she’d paid.

Her serene smile spoke volumes.

The Sanatorium Papers

When I originally offered my services to inventory and dispose of estate property via an ad in the local newspaper, I'd planned on using any extra cash raised from this side gig for my summer vacation. In my mind, earning \$500 in the first six months was a pipe dream.

By year's end, I'd quit my day job as laundry supervisor at the county hospital, spending 70 hours a week sorting through other people's belongings after they died - many intestate.

Drama surrounding the latter dynamic could've been developed into an award-winning soap opera, if I'd been any kind of writer. Spouses and exes, children and grandchildren, cousins, aunts, uncles, adopted offspring, would argue over the smallest trinket sometimes - pretty much anything with sentimental connections, or more tangible value.

Those disputes, I let the attorneys sort.

Being more of a reader, I could often be found in musty attics, selecting rare first editions or vintage magazines that would bring a good price on the internet. I've cultivated quite a network of collectors, and my online shop saw more traffic than some porn sites, specific items attracting international bids.

My grey wood-shingled two-bedroom bungalow became unsuitable for in-person visitors, given the plethora of boxes, crates and bags stacked in every available space. Casual observers might have written me off as a hoarder but, from month to month, the contents changed with amazing rapidity.

Milo Renfield's sudden demise threw a wrench in the works, big time. The scion of a wealthy family, he'd become a beloved patron of the arts, philanthropist, and could often be found at the town's sole Irish pub on Fridays and Saturdays, joining other musicians with his accordion for a rousing jam session.

He hadn't planned to be hit by a drunk driver on his way home that blustery April night and, at 57, hadn't left a will.

Everyone boasting the slightest twig on the family tree descended *en masse* on the 19th-century mansion, claiming their share.

The initial gathering of lawyers engaged by these vultures - their firms being the only ones who'd really profit, in the end, I knew - agreed that I be contracted to provide a detailed catalogue of all possessions within a year's time, distribution to be determined at a later date.

I'd been acquainted with Milo since he refurbished the Little League park when I was 12. He'd hosted an end-of-season picnic for all the teams, and I'd taken

it upon myself to wander the vast domicile while other kids romped through landscaped gardens and rode horses from the stables.

He'd caught me in the ballroom, transfixed by a mural of couples dancing a minuet.

Standing before that chipped painting in the days after his grand funeral tugged at my heartstrings. Beneath faded colors, other images penetrated: sallow faces peering through barred cages.

"You didn't know?" the senior partner of Kipling and Hilton chuckled when I asked him about the rendering. "Before Milo's great-grandfather bought the house, it was used as a sanatorium and, later, a prison."

Thus, in the course of wading through room after room of furniture, bric-a-brac, clothing and framed old masters, I wasn't entirely surprised to find a secret chamber in the library behind a set of cleverly designed bookcases. Within the long-neglected space, shelves lined with green leather-bound ledgers listed patients of the former, and inmates of the latter.

Horrific tales, in the majority of instances: primarily tuberculosis diagnoses in the early era, fresh air and sunlight viewed as beneficial; a few dealing with mental illness, described in primitive terms; opium and alcohol addicts forced to go "cold turkey" and deal with delirium tremens without any sort of relief.

A museum or university archive could input the names, dates and pertinent medical observations in a database, made available to genealogists and descendants of those victimized by a system that lacked an adequate grasp of these conditions and their proper treatment.

Tucking the 1842 text in its place stirred up layers of dust, drifting down, coating my hair and shirt. Particles also got up my nose, and I sneezed uncontrollably...

Violent spasms momentarily blurred my vision, but I swear on all I hold sacred that I glimpsed a crowd of malnourished, pallid individuals clad in baggy white linen nightshirts milling along a corridor a few feet in front of me, accompanied by agonized howls.

My energy taxed by the exertion, I crashed to my knees. Once able to again regulate my breathing, I opened my eyes, the hallucination - mercifully - dispelled.

So shaken by the experience, I secured the hinged panels and tried to forget about that cubicle - though I'd eventually need to consign its contents to bins. High priority was attributed to the dining room: sets of hand-decorated bone china, Waterford crystal goblets and silverware bearing the Renfield crest. The gallery above a curved marble staircase displayed three dozen originals by various Impressionists, and some avant garde sculptures of clay, bronze and wrought iron.

Opting for the easiest task on my three-page list, I emptied every cabinet in the restaurant-style kitchen, piling pots, pans and skillets on the central island by size. Utensils were loaded in cardboard boxes; except for one drawer of chef-quality carving knives, everything could be sold at a yard sale for less than a dollar each.

Weeks passed, months elapsed, and the spreadsheet I compiled grew steadily longer with descriptions and estimates. Had I not been honest to a fault, I could have pocketed a hefty fortune without the potential heirs being any the wiser. A burglar would've had a field day, if not for the security system preventing unauthorized entry to the premises.

Harsh winter weather and the approach of Christmas - always a depressing stretch for me, given how my grandfather died on that holiday when I was a child - kept me hard at my duties, the project deadline February 1. Admittedly, I fortified myself with a double shot of Jameson whiskey before opening the hidden room, electrostatic dusters, bucket of soapy water and vacuum beside me.

Three eight-hour shifts eliminated the majority of allergens that had set me off during my previous visit. I brought in a goose-neck floor lamp, as well, to shine light on each book as I removed it from rough-hewn shelves with gloved fingers.

Stripped screws loosed from rotting wood caused the top row of heavy journals to crash on my head and knock me unconscious.

What other explanation could there be for what transpired next?

Two pairs of strong hands raised me from the clutter, summarily brushing off my jeans and sweatshirt before running down my arms and legs.

"No fractures," proclaimed a nasal tenor to his associate.

The scrawny, straw-haired weasel grinned with hideous blackened teeth. "Good. Any more accidents around the place and we'll be sacked."

Instinctively, I knew better than to ask where I was, or what had happened. A person can learn more by listening, sometimes, than by rattling off questions that mark her as a nutcase.

"Were ye tryin' t' escape, lassie?" the taller, lanky figure wasn't from these parts, for sure. "Ye steal the gardener's work clothes and think ye could sneak off the grounds?"

That's when I noticed the others - lots of others - in the ballroom. The women wore ankle-length frocks of a simple cut, the men wore tab collars, ties and suspenders with tweed trousers. Some sat on lounge chairs positioned near ceiling-high windows to bask in the sunlight, others chatted at small tables over tea.

I sensed blood trickling down my chin as I bit my lip.

"Should we turn her in?" queried the weasel.

“Nae. Too much bother, wi’ the paperwork ‘n all.” I was shoved toward a gloomy corridor. “Off wi’ ye, now, and dinnae be so foolish in future!”

Off balance, I reached for the wall to right myself. I tripped over my own feet and plunged forward, colliding with an immovable object...

Squidgy, at least, like I remembered my father when, as a three year old, I’d jump off the back of the sofa onto his belly.

Slowly, I raised my eyes, to find pleasant hazel orbs gazing down at me.

Familiar hazel orbs.

“Milo?” I gulped.

“What are you up to, young lady?”

This individual definitely resembled the recently deceased Milo Renfield, though he spoke in a lower register.

“I... hit my head.”

“Well, then, let’s have the doctor take a look.”

I froze. “No... I’ll be okay in a minute.”

“Then, you better get back to the office.”

The mansion, as I’d explored it, did not match the configuration in which I found myself. I inched along a waxed pine floor, scanning the hall for engraved signs beside various doors until I saw an empty desk in what would have been, in the modern era, a utility closet used by servants.

One of the green volumes lay open on the blotter; my job in this bygone era was to copy case notes onto the oversized pages.

I shuddered, examining the chisel-tipped pen and inkwell.

To say I felt like I’d plummeted over the precipice into insanity would be a gross understatement. I tried to remain calm, but every nerve tingled as staff wandered in and out, adding files to stacks on a sideboard.

They hailed me as “Jenny.”

Instead of writing, I perused the entries, learning patient names - many of whom paused on the threshold to wish me a good day.

Without any idea of the time, I sat for what seemed hours. When Milo - or his doppelganger - whisked in holding a silver tray loaded with dishes, I must’ve frowned, because he burst into laughter.

“You missed dinner,” he declared, placing his burden in front of me. “You must be famished.”

My stomach confirmed the fact. Lifting the cover, he revealed a mushroom and sauce-smothered pork chop, diced potatoes and apple sauce. He poured tea into a delicate porcelain cup to complete the meal.

“Milo, can we talk?” I ventured, picking up the fork.

“We talk after, usually.”

Somehow, that statement didn't bode well. I managed to swallow a few bites of the tasty fare, sipping the Earl Grey, but fear got the better of me.

“A bird couldn't survive on the little you eat,” chuckled my companion.

I shrugged.

His arm extended to close the door, nimble digits twisting the key in the lock.

Had the woman he thought I was been forced to endure such treatment on a daily - or even periodic basis - I'm sure she tried to escape, too, as those attendants assumed had been my intent.

The promised conversation did not occur as gongs reverberated, capable of waking the dead. Feet scampered along the corridor, screams echoed, and loud popping reminded me of gunshots.

Flipping sheets, I scoured neat script - not my handwriting - for answers to this conundrum. Inside the front cover, the Renfield family crest, so recently seen on the cutlery set, was inscribed above what passed in the early 1800s as an organizational chart for this county sanatorium: Milo Renfield, director; Simon Oglivie, physician in charge, and so forth.

Thing is: the insane seemed to be running the asylum.

I wondered, with that realization, if Edgar Allan Poe had gleaned his inspiration for the short story, *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether*, from this madhouse, or a similar institution.

My suspicions doubled that evening, when an impromptu orchestra mounted the dias at the south end of the ballroom, playing untuned stringed instruments, banging wildly on bongo drums, and blowing trumpets with no rhythm. Yet, those in attendance danced to a waltz beat inside their own skulls, or reeled in groups as if invited guests at some society soiree.

Panic crept up on me like a lioness stalking its prey. In the core of my being, I knew none of this could be real - for me, anyway - but I had no clue how to extricate myself from the nightmare. Migrating along the perimeter of the throng to the veranda, I just needed some air...

Milo pinned me to the stone railing, a randy bastard. When I got back where I belonged - if I got back - I would make it my goal to learn how the Renfields went from violating all codes of decency to respected leaders in the community...

Fortunately, if that term can be used, I stumbled over a granite bench in the garden once he... satisfied his cravings, knocking my cranium against a sturdy oak.

As I slid down the tree trunk, I landed in a pile of books...

I've never been so ecstatic to be sore all over. The thick spines had pummeled my limbs, and bruises already darkened my skin. Climbing off the floor, my left ankle buckled - sprained or broken.

The ensuing week, I sat on a chair with my leg elevated as the swelling gradually decreased. I rifled through each volume, jotting copious notes.

Milo Renfield, the first of that name, had immigrated from Ireland in 1810. Already an alcoholic, he'd contracted tuberculosis, his elder brother committing him to the sanatorium. While noted for his charming personality, the doctors' consensus was that he wasn't sane; they moved him to a locked wing.

He wiled his way off the ward and incited a mutiny; I'd mysteriously landed in the midst of that revolt...

Or had it been a dream?

Milo sired at least sixteen children among the staff and patients, before state inspectors closed the facility. He lived in the gate house, serving as head guard while captured Confederate soldiers occupied the mansion during the Civil War and, in the tumultuous wake of the South's surrender, asserted ownership of the property, undisputed for lack of accurate records.

Accounts of his... inappropriate behavior - these books piled around me - were concealed and, later, forgotten.

His eldest, albeit illegitimate son, Basil Renfield, inherited the property, subsequently passed to his offspring over the next century.

That, at any rate, clarified why so many greedy relatives sought a piece of this ample pie - and, perhaps, rightly so, given the failures of their predecessor.

I was, frankly, relieved to be done with the job, and promised myself a simpler lifestyle in future.

A check for ten percent of the estate's value more than made it possible to keep my vow: I never have to work again, and can read books to my heart's content - though my left ankle still twinges now and then.

A Good Woman

Why the article popped up on Trudi's news feed, she didn't quite understand - but she'd long since given up on trying to fathom how social media algorithms functioned.

Perhaps the author's name, rather common and matching that of her former university drama professor with whom she still corresponded via email, had triggered a connection.

The topic, however, fell outside the parameters of his expertise, while appealing to her avant garde perspective about spirituality.

A disclaimer prefaced the content: "The views expressed in this opinion column are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of this publication."

Little better than a theologically-based rant, the paragraphs lamented how practitioners of every known religion made a point of imposing human characteristics on their preferred deity. In the Abrahamic sects, for instance, psalms petitioned a supreme being to take vengeance on the king's enemies, punish the wicked and reward the virtuous.

A rather childish approach to the infinite.

One sentence struck Trudi as more true than any she'd read in ages: "This proves man created their gods, and not the other way 'round."

She'd acknowledged this concept early in her own life, wading through elementary school history texts' attempts to justify the Crusades and other faith-based wars, or oppression and genocide sanctioned by various rulers claiming the "divine right of kings."

The all-loving God in which she'd believed as a youth did not discriminate based on gender, class, culture, race... Only humanity, in their shallow grasp of existence, could perpetuate such nonsense.

Abandoning such hypocrisy, she acquired an optimism impossible for those burdened with guilt and fear of eternal damnation by sanctimonious clergy.

Trudi rejected the commonly-held notion that money can buy happiness, as well. She paid for her own college education by working in a fudge shop just off campus, complementing each sale of delectable treats with her own sweet smile. A social work degree in hand, she hired on at the local homeless shelter, gradually transforming an establishment mired in paperwork into a haven for those seeking respite from the life's overwhelming trials.

Eventually appointed executive director, she accepted no salary, and classmates - "successful" by society's standards and admiring her moxie - along

with other supporters, contributed generously to the cause, always requesting an official receipt to include among their annual tax deductions.

She spent long hours in the converted seven-story department store, once a main draw in the downtown area. From helping prepare breakfast to directing theatrical performances and coordinating art exhibits based on guest's creative efforts, supervising study groups for children and teens struggling to catch up on school assignments, her energy supply appeared - to those she encountered - limitless.

The only time anyone saw Trudi give sway to negative emotions involved the unannounced arrival of a camera crew from a cable news channel, intent on producing a feature on her innovations.

She phoned the police and had them removed from the premises.

"I'm not doing this for publicity," she declared from atop a table in the dining room to assembled staff and program participants. "I'm doing this because every human being is worthy of love and respect."

The mayor, governor and federal representatives attempted to recognize her with citations and awards; she declined them all. Even when her alma mater notified her that she'd been selected to receive an honorary doctorate, she sent her regrets.

One tribute in which she did indulge: a visit by the sage responsible for the enlightened commentary she'd so recently read: her erstwhile drama instructor.

"How'd you... get sidetracked from the theatrical into the philosophical?" she queried as they sipped coffee in her cramped corner office on the top floor.

Shaggy salt-and-pepper mane pulled into a ponytail, beard and mustache untrimmed since his retirement from academic realms, clad in faded jeans, a Grateful Dead t-shirt and battered, square-toed black leather boots, he might have been mistaken for one of the facility's inhabitants. "A natural progression, I guess," came the reply. "The angst expressed in my students' scripts, the lack of engaging dialogue caused me to reevaluate the purpose of university-level studies and my own passion for the stage."

"You... never mentioned any of this in your posts."

"It took years to navigate my own skepticism; I didn't confide in anyone."

"Because you didn't want to be mocked for questioning the status quo?"

He smiled, teeth barely visible beneath ample facial hair. "I'm so glad you sympathize."

"Come, work with me," she hinted. "I've... done my best to encourage the writers, painters, potters and others who pass through our doors, but I don't have the..."

“Time?”

She chuckled, “No, the resources to direct their talent.”

“Inspiration can be... a harsh taskmaster,” remarked the professor.

“Sometimes, a delicate touch is required...”

“Which I don’t have.”

“You underestimate yourself. The kindness you’ve shown to so many hundreds over the course of twenty years...”

“I... know myself, all too well. I have my strengths, but also some glaring weaknesses.”

Trudi guided her friend on a tour of the building as they drafted a job description for his position. Then, she allowed him to buy her lunch at a café near the county courthouse. They parted as nearby cathedral bells struck 3:00; the volunteer receptionist commented on her flushed cheeks when she breezed into the lobby.

That rosiness faded to a ghastly pale when she switched on the evening news. Miniaturized audio and video equipment had captured the entire interaction in amazing high definition, excerpts of the conversation broadcast and captioned.

Enduring a sleepless night - tormented by this betrayal of her trust - Trudi unfolded the morning newspaper to view still photos adorning the front page, with a full transcript of the recording covering the center spread.

Contrary to her mortification at being duped in such an underhanded manner, the public reaction to the exposé garnered substantial donations. Trudi was praised as an honest, caring individual, an example to a troubled world.

A dozen yellow roses with a diplomatically worded card arrived mid-afternoon; she pitched the florist’s box in the trash, to be retrieved by a child upset that such beauty could be discarded.

Trudi allowed the girl to arrange the flowers in a plastic vase for the dining room, and helped her sound out the lettering on the embossed rectangle.

“The world needed to know how hard you’ve worked to help those without a voice, and that we don’t need God to be good. You’re an inspiration to us all.”

Not one to begrudge another’s intentions, Trudi still promised herself - if their paths ever crossed again - the class ring she wore on her left hand would leave a permanent mark on his cheek.

Positivity

White maple doors simultaneously opened, opposite each other on the clinic's side corridor. Departing patients backed over the respective thresholds, ending their chats with those in the waiting rooms as the panels closed.

When they collided, they whipped around, mutually stunned and embarrassed.

"Sorry," he muttered.

She grumbled, "Excuse me."

Blurred eyes caused them to delay recognizing each other for a moment.

"Oh, hi," she sighed, gazing up at the tall, lanky, white-haired quintessential hippie. "Haven't seen you 'round for a couple weeks."

"I..."

"Cancer treatment?" she ventured, the wall plaque indicating he'd been consulting an oncologist.

"Follow up to prostate surgery."

She saw a tear trickle down his nose. "Didn't they catch it in time?"

He extracted a creased linen handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dabbed moisture from her cheeks before patting his own skin. "No. That procedure was a success."

"Still, the news wasn't good?"

"Parkinson's."

"Shit!"

"What about you? You're not exactly floating on cloud nine."

"My heart's fucked."

Hazel orbs widened. "But, you're so young!"

"I know. Sucks, doesn't it?" She moved toward the exit. "I've got to get back to work."

A shambling gait pursued her. "In your condition?"

"They can't do anything for it, and I've still got bills to pay."

Beneath the green and white canopy, he paused, scanning the drive.

"You waiting for your ride?" she queried.

"A taxi. I'm... not supposed to drive."

Insistent digits entwined with his. "C'mon. I'll take you home."

"It's... out of your way."

"The least I can do for a friend."

Indeed, Sherri and Bob couldn't claim to be strangers, after she'd served him lunch five days a week for more than six years at the local café. When the

midday rush ended around 1:00, she'd take her break and sit with him, discussing assorted and sundry, anything except politics and religion. She enjoyed having a lively intellect to interact with, and he didn't seem to mind her company.

They moved together between rows of SUVs, Mercedes and BMWs to a 70s-era black Mustang. The feisty brunette unlocked the passenger side and held the door.

Carefully, Bob lowered himself onto the bucket seat, knees near his chin.

Sherri reached beneath his legs and jerked the lever which shot the assembly backward.

"Thanks," he chuckled, stretching his limbs.

Despite the vehicle's small size, the engine roared like a semi. The radio had been left at high volume, classic rock blaring through the speakers as the key turned in the ignition.

She twisted the knob to silence the din. "Sorry."

"I'm surprised you're not deaf."

"Huh?" she snickered.

He didn't immediately catch the sarcasm, then smiled between his shaggy mustache and beard.

The shifter slammed the transmission into reverse; tires squealed when she punched the accelerator.

"Take it easy!" Bob warned. "I may be dying, but not today!"

"Force of habit."

The Mustang eased toward the intersection.

"So, your heart's fucked - how?" asked her companion.

"Congenital heart disease."

"What are you... gonna do?"

"Live until the damned thing craps out on me, what else?" She glanced past him for cross traffic, then ran the red light. "What about you?"

Bob clutched the arm rest, jaws clenched. "You're a lunatic!"

"That's not news." She cranked the wheel left onto Main Street. "So?"

"So, what?"

"What are *you* gonna do?"

"I've... been advised to engage a caregiver... initially to come mornings and evenings, then move to a full-time, live-in arrangement."

Sherri sniffed. "And treat you like a cripple?"

"I..."

Beyond the town limits, the car sailed along country roads to a wrought iron-gated estate. Hugging curves at top speed, Sherri beamed with glee.

Bob, pulse racing, swore he'd never ride with her again.

Rubber patches marred the concrete when she slammed on the brakes near a Doric-columned portico. The two story historic dwelling had passed from father to son for six generations, since Bob's family had settled in the area.

"You got a chair lift for the stairs?" she wondered, sliding off the driver's seat.

"No, but..."

"How far is it from the kitchen to the dining room?"

He didn't try to hide his anger. "I don't know..."

"My place is one floor. You wouldn't have to worry about the ups and downs and long distances..."

"What are you saying?"

"Move in with me. We can keep an eye on each other, and avoid having strangers running around the place making sure we haven't croaked."

Bob hesitated with his hand on the brass knob below frosted glass etched with herons. "I'm... used to living alone."

"Things change, dude. You shouldn't be on your own anymore, and you might as well have someone around you like."

"I... can't sell this place."

"So, don't. Sign it over to the local preservation society. They need office space, and you can afford it..."

He squinted at her. "You're serious?"

"Never moreso. You've already tasted my cooking, so you'd know what to expect for meals. There are two bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, so we wouldn't even have to see each other, if we didn't want to..."

"Would you expect me to pay rent?"

"I'll still be working, and the mortgage is minimal so, no. You could buy the groceries, though."

Bob scrutinized the granite edifice before turning toward Sherri. "Deal."

He'd tired of the mansion and the pretense of serving as the local patriarch to every nonprofit soliciting benefactors. The marble steps from the great hall to the balcony had exhausted him these past few months, as well...

Arriving on Friday afternoon with two suitcases, Sherri marveled at his attitude. He felt no need to haul antiques or valuable heirlooms in a rental truck; for all he cared, the lot could go up in flames.

They adapted to each other's presence with little difficulty. Bob was a night owl; Sherri an early bird. She departed for work around 6:00, leaving a delicious breakfast warming in the oven for whenever Bob woke. He pattered

around the house, walked to the library three blocks away and toted home assorted novels and biographies, reading until Sherri strolled in around 3:00.

He relished watching her prepare dinner, contributing by peeling carrots and potatoes, or fixing a green salad. Over dessert and decaf coffee, they chatted into the evening, Sherri dozing by 8:00.

Bob would watch the late news and a talk show before retiring at midnight.

His symptoms - the palsy and lack of balance - increased gradually. Sherri exhibited no symptoms of her heart ailment, except extreme fatigue when they ambled along the river. She switched her schedule to be present in the mornings, helping him shower and dress, and returned in the evening to tuck him in bed around 10:00.

He didn't mind the compromise.

In fact, her gentle solicitude comforted him after decades of having no close confidant.

The night her terrorized screams roused him from slumber was the last they spent apart. He stumbled down the hall and switched on the light; she sat upright on the queen-sized mattress, bathed in sweat.

"My heart... was pounding," she huffed, trembling. "I... thought I was gonna die!"

Placing his palm to the left of her sternum, he estimated 150 beats per minute.

"We should get you to the hospital."

"No!" she practically shrieked. "I... won't..." She seized his pajama sleeve. "Just... stay with me until I calm down."

Her blue eyes eventually closed, tousled head propped on his chest, soothed by his steady breathing.

Sherri opted to draw her pension and Social Security benefits when she turned 65, leaving her position at the restaurant. She and Bob, nearing 77, spent their days reveling in simple pleasures - concerts, picnics, community theater performances - until that fateful night when his foot slipped on the front stoop while toting a tray of flowers purchased at the nursery. She instinctively grabbed to support him, his weight taxing her weakened cardiac system.

Unable to maintain her grip, she collapsed in a heap, and he crashed against the railing, cracking his skull.

Their neighbor, fetching his mail from the box at the curb, discovered them tangled together an hour later. Paramedics arriving in an ambulance declared them deceased before loading them onto gurneys.

Everyone in town attended the joint funeral. The pair were laid to rest in Bob's family crypt, a few old biddies criticizing them for living together without the blessing of marriage, but most aware they'd been good friends who cared about and for each other in their hours of greatest need.

The Green Vampire

Disciplined.

Angelica Norris fit that one word description in every aspect of her personal life. Though a child of wealth, she couldn't recall a time when she rose past 6:00 any given morning. Her own routine set in stone, she still managed to remain flexible in her dealings with those closest, however.

Like the four dozen inhabitants of the mansion in which she'd once dwelled.

When her father died seven years previous, she had little use for the 21-bedroom edifice and its staff of 14. Her parents had enjoyed entertaining the rich and powerful on a local, state, national and international basis; Angelica qualified as "reclusive."

She'd been watching the evening news after what had been a grand - yet exhausting - funeral for that business mogul when a story about human trafficking victims rescued from their captors at a truck stop less than 20 miles away caught her attention. She snatched up the study phone and offered to house and care for the survivors.

The program she developed garnered widespread attention due to its innovative approach to rehabilitation for those who'd been trapped in what many deemed forms of slavery. Each individual was assigned a constant, trusted companion for the first six months, providing reassurance they were never alone, always safe and protected. As they received necessary medical and psychological treatment, and eased into educational and skills training, they gradually recovered their health in a holistic fashion.

All expenses for the nonprofit were paid by Angelica - rather, the foundation she set up with strict parameters for covering expenditures.

No one on the payroll, for instance, earned more than \$50,000 per year. Provided accommodations and meals, she required employees to be dedicated to the cause with every fibre of their being. Managerial level positions were limited to a nursing supervisor and a lead teacher.

Cooking and cleaning duties were handled by the residents on a rotating basis, as they learned to care for themselves and others.

The ballroom, boasting full-length windows on three sides, was converted into partitioned classrooms. The dining room was expanded into the former living room with six specially made tables, each comfortably seating ten. The only ground floor spaces untouched by renovations: the kitchen and the library.

All the rest became bedrooms and lounges where interpersonal skills could be honed.

Angelica retained the swimming pool, landscaped flower gardens, stables and tennis court her mother had insisted be installed as she climbed the social ladder from humble origins. Taking advantage of these sources for exercise brought smiles to faces that hadn't expressed joy in ages.

Those who successfully completed the program received \$10,000 and were placed in a suitable job, rent for a modest furnished apartment paid for a full year.

Any lingering fears about the villains who'd stolen their lives were allayed by Angelica's cooperation with federal prosecutors avidly pursuing indictments against the felons and securing numerous convictions and long prison sentences.

A tiny bothy, or gardener's cottage, beyond a ten-acre vegetable farm served as Angelica's domicile, much preferred to the grandiose Baroque manor. She sipped her coffee on the porch as early risers harvested tomatoes, peppers, onions and more for the Saturday farmer's market held on the front lawn - another opportunity to interact with the public.

As the sun set over the western hills, her soul bathed in pastel hues as birds serenaded the wildflowers and prairie grass that sheltered all sorts of animals.

Angelica contemplated the scene that May evening when she heard footsteps approach from the north. She presumed one of the attendants brought a report on the day's activities.

Instead, a stranger neared, gazing toward the horizon as his tall frame cast a lengthy shadow.

She glanced furtively at him: wild greying mane, unkempt beard, ragged black t-shirt hugging his biceps and chest, ratty jeans and stained white Converse sneakers. His rough-hewn walking stick and denim backpack suggested a hiker who'd lost his way.

"What's doin'?" he spoke in a soft baritone, Scottish accent distinct.

The sandy blonde smiled in spite of herself. "Not much. How 'bout you?"

"Is this the Norris spread?"

"Yup."

"Then, I'll have warm bed tonight."

Angelica shifted toward him. "What makes you think that?"

"Because my dad and Eddie Norris were good friends."

"Who was your dad?"

"Bartholomew Matthias Shepard."

The name rang a bell. She'd heard her father speak often - and fondly - about this associate from his college days; she vaguely remembered meeting him at a Christmas party when she was four or five.

"You're wee Barty, then?" she queried.

"I ne'er could stand that name. I go by Barry." Hazel orbs gazed at her.

"Who might you be?"

Introducing herself, the pair clasped hands.

"Eddie's wee angel," Shepard chuckled. "Every morning, when I was a kid, I'd see you and your dad when I opened the fridge to fetch the milk."

"Not that cheesy photo of him holding me in a red plaid dress, lace collar and frilly five-layer petticoat."

"Aye. My family's tartan."

"I always wondered how that got into my closet."

Dusk descending, Angelica tramped toward the bothy, Shepard following, expectant.

Best to dash his hopes now, she determined. "I'm afraid I can't offer you a bed for the night..."

"Ach, you cannae mean you're full up?"

"It's... not really my house anymore."

"Your dad..."

"Dead."

He grunted, "And you lost the place to unpaid taxes?"

She didn't relish explaining, the tranquility she relied upon to settle her for a peaceful slumber ruined. "The best I can do is a cup of coffee and a quick bite."

"Ach, well. Beggars cannae be choosers."

Slathering peanut butter on white bread in the tiny kitchen, Angelica studied this uninvited visitor surreptitiously. "How'd you... wind up with such a thick burr? I thought you lived in New York..."

"I did, 'til I was nine. Then, m' mum divorced Dad and hauled me t' Glasgow wi' her."

"And you came back looking for work?"

"Ach, nae. Just seein' the sights and callin' on ol' friends."

In other words, a scrounger, she mused.

"That's a bonnie wee sofa in the front room."

"It's a warm night. Sleeping rough shouldn't be a problem."

He drained the mug of tepid brew and snatched the sandwich off the plate, rising. "Nothin' worse than a whingin' harridan."

"What, you expect me to succumb to your... dubious charms?" she scoffed.

“I doubt any man in his right mind would touch you.” He retrieved his pack from the chair opposite.

“Not unless he wanted to lose the family jewels.”

A split second wasn't sufficient to react to an untenable situation. Before the bag hit the tiles, Angelica was encompassed by unyielding arms, her mouth smothered by Shepard's lips. She melted against her own will, and neither closed an eye until dawn peeked through the eastern casements.

Knocking on the cottage door well past 10:00 roused her; she pulled on a blue satin robe and shuffled along the hall. Her maintenance chief brought a reminder about the weekly staff meeting, and tidings of a water main break beneath the kitchen floor.

“Shit!” Angelica ran trembling digits through her unruly mop. “I'll be there in ten minutes.”

“I can tell them you're... not feeling well,” hinted the middle-aged tradesman.

She countered, “I feel just *dandy!*”

The panel slammed shut as she fled to the bathroom for a hasty shower.

Traversing the gravel drive to the mansion, she muttered a silent prayer that Barry Shepard would be gone before she returned home.

In fact, he still lay on the rumpled bed when she sneaked back to the bothy for a late lunch around 2:00. She entertained no illusions about his morals or lack of ambition, but could not deny how her nerves tingled with anticipation when she perched on the threshold, listening to his steady breathing.

He wasn't what qualified as trim, nor would he be judged overweight. He had a... manly figure, similar to her father at that age.

And she ached for a repetition of the tantalizing caresses that had drawn moans of pleasure from the depths of her being.

Still: discipline.

“You gonna sleep all day?” she grumbled, nudging his bare leg with her shoe.

He flashed an enticing smile. “Well, since I dinnae sleep all night, why nae?” An unfocused hand swiped at her. “Unless you want t' go again.”

Angelica's self-imposed restraint crumbled in that instant.

Her subordinates noticed the alteration to her regular habits almost immediately. She absented herself from consultations and participant evaluations, and neglected her duties monitoring classrooms during study periods. A chocolate-making workshop, which she had coordinated, delighted the group involved - Angelica missing from the event.

The nearby town's newspaper printed images captured by a freelancer of her sharing tea with Shepard at a cozy café - wearing a flowery sundress and heels instead of her typical jeans, tank top and sandals - the couple attending opening night of a touring Broadway musical, and strolling together through the county park.

She didn't subscribe to the publication, so she had no idea her outings were being surveilled.

Her employees, however, read every word of the innuendo-laden articles.

Fortunately, her lapse in discipline didn't endanger their positions.

She relied on a separate bank account for her own expenses, while the trafficking survivors thrived in their controlled environment.

Until her debit card being declined at the hairdresser's jarred her back to reality.

Paying in cash, Angelica marched around the corner to the accountant's office, instantly ushered into a panel-lined chamber where her father's CPA glowered over the daily's front page.

"I've been expecting you," he snarled.

"Why?"

A gnarled index finger thumped the newsprint. "You've been making a right spectacle of yourself."

"Huh?"

He shoved the edition across the blotter. She leaned forward and perused the spread. "Oh. My. God."

"Have you any idea what's been going on since this... this... drifter showed up?"

"We've... been... having fun."

"Frankly, I don't care, Angel, though I'm positive your father would be ashamed of you. While you've been having fun, as you claim, every cent allotted for your private use has vanished."

She straightened, stunned. "What?"

"Somehow, he got hold of your login and password, and initiated a series of electronic transfers, bleeding you dry like a vampire."

Swallowing her heart, she retorted, "How do you know it's him, and not some random hacker?"

"Because we traced the transactions through an elaborate series of offshore dummy companies to a crypto fund, which he owns."

"Shit!"

He explained, "He's already spent most of it, but we recovered a few thousand and channeled it to a different institution..."

"What did he buy?" Fists clenched and unclenched as she paced the Persian rug.

"A Lamborghini, a selection of designer suits, a 50-carat diamond ring, and a one-way first class ticket to Milan."

"That bastard!"

"You only have yourself to blame for letting your guard down," chided the financial expert. "I'm absolutely flabbergasted, given how disciplined you've always been."

"Oh, fuck discipline!" Angelica collapsed in sobs on a gold winged back armchair. "I just wanted to live like a normal human being for once!"

"Well, your experiment failed... miserably." The intercom buzzed. "On your way, now. I'll text you when the new debit card is delivered."

Moist blue eyes flashed; he tossed her a box of tissue.

"I didn't think it wise to have any sensitive material mailed to the house. Once he realizes he's lost access to your..."

Slowly, she climbed to her feet, blowing her nose. "I suppose I should thank you, but why didn't you notify me sooner?"

"Vicki at the branch only called about the suspicious withdrawals on Monday. We had to act fast..."

Spine straight, Angelica resolved, "Don't worry. It'll never happen again."

She stormed from the building, nearly causing two collisions as she drove her Lexus toward the estate at twice the posted speed.

Only to find Barry Shepard and his scant possessions gone.

Sheriff's deputies arrested him near the state line, bound for Chicago in a rented Ford. Angelica was permitted to watch federal officers question him at the county jail via closed circuit cameras, after she discovered he had a substantial rap sheet, including wire fraud, burglary, grand theft auto, assault with a deadly weapon, attempted murder and... human trafficking.

En route to the foyer with a plain clothed detective, she halted as Shepard, in handcuffs, emerged from the interrogation suite. He sneered at her with disdain.

She lunged, forward motion hindered by her escort; breaking free, she rushed the suspect, swiping his bearded cheek with her right hand. Three chunky silver rings sliced his flesh, blood staining his whiskers.

"Fuckin' bastard!" she hissed.

He chuckled, "I may be a bastard, but you'll miss the fuckin'."

Her claw raised anew, the detective practically dragged her into the adjacent lounge, where she could calm herself with a chilled soda.

“You could be indicted for assault,” he stated.

“It’d be worth it.”

“He’ll end up pleading guilty to a set of reduced charges, so you won’t have to testify to any... embarrassing details. He’ll probably be sentenced to some medium security facility for a couple years before being granted parole...”

“Promise me the human trafficking charges won’t be dropped,” she demanded.

“That’s... up to the prosecutors.”

“If you can’t promise me that, I promise *you*: he’s a dead man.”

The detective’s brow furrowed. “But, why so adamant about that one crime? You... weren’t involved...”

“Having dealt with victims of that travesty, I’d risk my life to see every last scumbag who inflicted such a hell on them dead. This’ll be a very strong statement to anyone who dares procure human beings for their own... profit.”

“I’ll... do my best.”

Angelica attended every scheduled hearing for what evolved into Shepard’s very complex case, satisfied in some ways that he refused the proposed plea bargain. His trial a media circus, she wasn’t astonished when he was threatened with contempt for his cynical outbursts, accusations flying about jury tampering.

An emergency adjournment just prior to her testimony emptied the courtroom and resulted in a brawl between Shepard, his attorneys and the bailiffs. Shackled wrists and ankles, the defendant shuffled between six guards, boarding an auxiliary elevator.

A leisurely lunch on tap, Angelica had rounded the corner at the rear of the judicial complex, bound for the parking garage, when she saw a prim blonde - another of the victims into whom he’d sunk his fangs - jerk a pistol from her Gucci purse and empty the clip when the loading dock’s steel door flew wide near an armored transport.

Fortunately, Shepard was the only fatality.

After giving her witness statement to first responders, Angelica arrived at the mansion in time to lead the orientation for a new contingent of trafficking survivors, resuming her former lifestyle as if the previous eight months had never transpired.

Shepard had been right though: lying awake in bed most nights, she did miss their... togetherness.

Chivalry Endures

Every Monday, like clockwork, the same customer appeared at the counter, purchasing the same items. Sophie had come to expect him in the minutes before the 8:12 arrived en route to Glasgow, his smile brightening her morning.

A coffee, a wee bottle of Glenlivet Founders Reserve, a scone and a pack of Woodbine cigarettes would appear next to the till, with a 20 pound note. When she handed him the change, he would take her hand and kiss it before striding toward the door, declaring with sparkling hazel orbs, “Ha’ a glorious day.”

Not that he was the typical business commuter by any stretch of the imagination. Sophie served the suits, golfers bound for Gleneagles to negotiate contracts on the links, tweed-clad women trying to make an impression around the board table. This regular emerged from the 1960s with a full head of wavy, long, reddish-brown hair - almost as if a Tweeny Twink permanent had gone wrong - a bushy mustache and Ho Chi Min-style shaggy goatee. He wore tie-dyed t-shirts and floral-patterned trousers with lime green platform shoes, drawing second glances from others in transit.

Around 1975, when Sophie started bringing her toddler to work - unable to afford child care and her parents ailing - her customer added another item to his total: a sweetie for the lad. The gallant kiss would be followed by him squatting beside the boy and presenting the treat.

On the first few occasions, the three-year-old would raise timid brown eyes to his mother, silently begging permission. She would nod; he would accept the gift. Then, it became an expectation, and the child never hesitated to clutch the bag of sherbet lemons and chirp, “Thanks.”

Eventually, Gordy started primary school, and the candy dropped off the traveler’s sale, to be replaced by a cheery, “How’s the wean today?”

“Growin’ like a weed,” was often Sophie’s reply as he scooped up her fingers and planted his lips on her tingling skin.

“Ach, they do, and too fast.”

“Aye.”

“Ha’ a glorious day, both o’ ye.”

And he’d be off.

She watched the man age, but his routine never altered. His dark mane cut somewhat shorter and greying, his facial hair neatly trimmed, the shopkeeper wondered about the purpose of his weekly excursion.

By chance, on a warm April bank holiday, an elder in the queue greeted him by name.

“Mornin’, Bill. Fine day to be fishin’.”

“Nae for me, Jim. I’m t’ town.”

Sophie’s post-transaction exchange with him expanded:

“Ha’ a glorious day.”

“You, too, Bill.”

His left eyebrow twitched with curiosity as he cradled her hand.

She flipped her palm and clasped his in a more traditional style by way of introduction. “Sophie.”

“Ha’ a glorious day, Sophie.”

The kiss, the jaunty departure.

By the mid-1990s, Bill had eliminated the Woodbines and Glenlivet, satisfied with the scone and an oat milk latte. Sophie didn’t notice any deterioration to his bearing or features; he still walked with a regal air and wore clashing attire that added color to cloudy Scottish days.

“How’s the wean?” he asked that June Monday.

“Gettin’ married this week.”

“Eh? He cannae be old enough...”

“He’s 23.”

“My God!” He took her hand. “Sophie...”

“Aye?”

“I ha’ always meant t’ ask ye somethin’.”

“Aye.”

A slight hesitation, as if carefully choosing his words. “Does nae your husband e’er take ye on holiday?”

“I ha’ no husband, Bill.”

“Eh?” He examined the gold band on her third finger.

“‘Tis m’ mum’s.”

“Ye... wear it in her memory?”

“She gave it t’ me when wee Gordy was born, so the neighborhood gossips would nae ruin m’ reputation. I... just ne’er took it off.”

He raised her hand and pressed his lips to the cool flesh, lingering over the gesture. “I wish I’d dared pose the question years ago,” he confessed. “I’ll be back Thursday eve. Will ye come t’ dinner wi’ me?”

“The preparations for the weddin’...”

“Ach, o’ course. Next week?”

“Aye.”

Sophie nursed butterflies in her stomach through the ensuing days, in anticipation of Gordy’s nuptials, as well as the evening out. She’d not had time to

cultivate any sort of lasting romantic relationship; running the shop kept her busy from dawn 'til dusk.

The prospect of closing early delighted her.

Except, the following Monday, Bill did not appear as per usual. Never once had he been late for his train, and she began to worry.

The daily papers, delivered at half-three, provided an explanation. A pedestrian, crossing against traffic near the station, had been struck by a car and suffered fatal injuries. William Caruthers died in the ambulance on the way to hospital.

A four-column photo beneath the front page headline, showing a bouquet of flowers scattered on the pavement, raised a sob in Sophie's throat. She recognized the wrapping, having seen many men marching toward the platform toting such bundles for their wives and lovers.

Bill had detoured into the stall across the road, in a rush to bring her a token of his affection...

Never again to see his smile, or that mischievous twinkle in his eyes... the missed opportunity of getting to know such a gallant - albeit avant garde - gentleman better...

Sophie locked the till and switched off the lights, confusing two customers browsing the aisles. Realizing what was happening, they hurried to follow her out the door. She secured the deadbolt on the rolling grille and shuffled away.

Permanently.

Closing Argument

“Your Honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you ever loved so deeply you would risk everything to protect those who merited such abiding affection?”

In that moment, Vera gripped the podium with whitened knuckles, uncertain her knees would hold her upright. Her defense attorney had advised against delivering her own closing argument; she rejected his logic, insisting he inform the bench of her wishes.

Motion granted, she’d risen from the uncomfortable wooden chair, fortifying herself with a deep breath. She recognized skepticism in the eyes focused on her, but the truth had been denied its voice in the courtroom, and she was determined to rectify that lapse.

“Billy Carson and I have known each other since the first day of kindergarten - many, many years ago.” Her narrative conjured vivid images of the popular class clown and the ostracized girl with thick spectacles and a twisted left foot. While she envied his natural gregariousness, she sat alone in the playground, content to read books while her peers played tag or kickball.

“Our parents were friends, so our families went on summer vacations together and holiday weekend camping trips,” she stated, feeling perspiration beading at her temples.

Not that Billy spent any time with her on their travels, preferring to mingle with the active crowd at the beach or climb trees in the forest.

Surgeries on her deformed leg after second grade kept her in traction for three months, with no visitors except a couple aunts and cousins dragged along as a courtesy.

“When the fall semester started, I was able to keep up with the others, despite a permanent limp. I could run, shoot hoops, join in games of soccer - if I was ever picked for the team.”

One of the teachers, a Bruce Lee enthusiast, started an after school martial arts club, which Vera joined as a way to strengthen her limbs and improve her agility. Not concerned about the color of the belt worn with the *gi* she bought by saving her allowance, she dedicated herself to the discipline, and her proficiency soon garnered awards at competitions on the local and state level.

The woman admitted she used her training to take revenge on bullies who’d mocked her disability, leaving them bruised and humiliated. Finally able to roam school corridors without cringing every time she heard her name derisively whispered, she no longer worried about the opinion of others.

Except Billy.

“When his mother ran off with my dad, it was hell,” she continued. “My mom and his dad consoled each other, moving in together. Suddenly, we were step-siblings which, for two twelve-year-olds, was really awkward.”

Billy got in with a bad crowd as a teen, picked up after the very courthouse in which these proceedings took place was vandalized with graffiti, suspected of shoplifting, underage drinking and smoking weed. Each time the police questioned him, Vera supplied him with an airtight alibi.

He channeled his rebellious energy into a garage band, playing keyboard and singing lead vocals - covers of rock classics and his own compositions. Following high school graduation, the quartet booked gigs at weddings and dances, their fame increasing exponentially when they scored a record deal and their first single topped the charts.

“Billy had no head for practical matters, so I organized their tours,” explained Vera. “I kept sex-crazed groupies out of his hair, kicked drug pushers to the curb, and shielded him from the paparazzi - especially when insane rumors circulated about him having an affair with the governor’s wife.”

She paused to sip from the water glass balanced on the podium’s ledge. “The prosecutor introduced evidence implying I was jealous of the woman Billy married. With the cunning of a melodrama villain, though, he filed a motion blocking introduction of affidavits from Billy’s bandmates, roadies and promoters testifying I was never anything but kind and generous to Michele. When she was diagnosed with cancer, I spent most nights babysitting the children so Billy could keep vigil at her bedside in the hospital.”

Plucking a tissue from a box on the court stenographer’s desk, Vera wiped her nose. “The charges against me stem from a fracas just hours before Michele’s death. I’d phoned Billy at his hotel to pass along the doctor’s assessment that she’d taken a turn for the worse. He cancelled the night’s concert and chartered a private jet to fly home. I brought his three kids - all under eight at the time - to meet him in the airport hangar, and he’d just hustled them into a hired limo when it was swarmed by photographers, reporters and videographers. To prevent any injuries, the chauffeur turned off the engine and engaged the locks, but that lot was pounding on the windows, pulling the door handles and climbing on the roof. If the prosecutor had an honest bone in his body, he wouldn’t have objected to the presentation of security camera footage confirming my version of the story. Instead, he has tried to convince you the half-assed theory he concocted about my sinister motivations is valid.”

She felt her heart thumping in her chest. “I heard the kids screaming above the shouts of that mob as the limo rocked back and forth, and I knew Billy would be terrified for their safety. So, I did what was necessary to protect them. If that’s a crime, then I’m guilty.”

Stunned silence enveloped the chamber when she spun toward Billy Carson, wild-maned rocker clad in blue Armani suit and tie in the gallery’s front row, and touched two fingers to her lips in salute.

As she resumed her seat, the judge proceeded to instruct the jury regarding their deliberations and adjourned the session until notified a verdict had been reached.

Most of the spectators didn’t even have a chance to vacate the premises before the parties received texts to reassemble at 1:00 that afternoon.

The clerk accepted a manila packet passed to the bailiff by the foreman and scanned the contents. She glanced at the judge, who nodded.

“The defendant will rise,” she began.

Vera complied, puzzled by the blonde’s intent expression.

“We the jury in the aforementioned action do find Vera McCready not guilty on all counts: 27 Class A felony assault, 3 Class A felony manslaughter, and 39 Class B misdemeanor destruction of private property.”

Finally, the woman’s knees buckled and she slumped on the table. Her attorney stuffed files in his briefcase and snapped it shut, knowing better than to congratulate her. He’d be lucky to collect his fee on this one.

Photographers converged, daring to snap images for their papers.

Vera was too exhausted to protest.

Billy inched his way through the diminishing throng, nimble fingers loosening the Windsor knot strangling his windpipe. “I’ve... never heard such a genuine profession of love.”

“I meant every word,” she asserted, straightening.

“I know.” He extended his hand; she clasped it. “What say we pick up the kids, hop a flight to Vegas and get married?”