

Evening News

He waited impatiently for the elevator door to open, jabbing the up button a second time, as if that would hurry things up. To his left a set of high heels clicked against the foyer tiles. He resisted the urge to glance, judging by the resolute tapping that the woman must be late for work or an appointment. Something in the cadence signaled calm but urgent efficiency. The bell dinged, the door whooshed opened, her pace quickened to a trot. Turning to face the panel, Victor depressed the hold button. It wasn't something he'd normally do, but the thought of her glaring as the door clamped shut unsettled him.

"Thank you," she said, stepping on board.

"Floor?"

"Twenty-three."

"Same as me," he smiled, glancing her way.

The woman returned his smile. Auburn hair, fashionably mussed; jean jacket with the collar turned up and opened to reveal a T-shirt with a rhinestone starburst stitched onto the chest; tight jeans. She was most certainly not a secretary or a professional woman. Model? Actress? The frank curiosity of her pale green eyes startled him. She was on the point of saying something, when the elevator lurched into its ascent, sending the blood rushing down to Victor's legs. He hated elevators.

They hurtled up in silence, but he could feel those inquisitive green eyes of hers reading him. Who was she? Did he know her? His body elongated with the force of deceleration. The elevator jerked to a stop. The doors rumbled open. "Twenty-third Floor," he managed with a nervous grin.

His fellow passenger smiled, stepping off the elevator ahead of him. Then she waited until he disembarked and walked down the carpeted hallway beside him. "Victor Daly?" she asked, by way of introduction. He nodded. "I'm your nine o'clock. Maria Selkirk." When he looked surprised she added, "I recognize you from the picture on your web site."

He shook her slender hand, oddly aware of how small and cool it felt inside his own. “I see you’re not unnerved by elevators, Ms. Selkirk,” he observed.

They both laughed as he held open his office door.

A half hour later he had an outline of Maria Selkirk’s petition scribbled out on a legal pad. Married seven years; wealthy by any standard; one child, Aaron; husband Laurence Selkirk, a high flyer in the shipping and airline industries; extramarital affairs documented by a private investigator. She wanted a divorce. But Maria Selkirk wanted more. She wanted her husband out of her life.

“Based on the information you’ve given me, you could make a case for divorce with generous support payments for yourself and Aaron,” he said gingerly. “Have you thought of alternatives, though?”

“Such as?”

“Counseling, that sort of thing.”

She grimaced. “I thought you were a lawyer, Mr. Daly. That’s what I need right now.”

He sighed. “I’m a lawyer doing his job. The court will consider favorably any efforts that have been made to restore your family relationship, Maria. An ‘A’ for effort gets you a tick in the plus column.”

“Not applicable in this case,” she countered. “There’s no point trying; I don’t even want to pretend to try.”

“Why? A judge would be interested in your answer, too, Maria – especially if your husband’s lawyer raises the question and points out how hard *he’s* tried.”

“If my husband really was what he seems, a garden house philanderer, I wouldn’t be sitting here in your office, Mr. Daly,” she said. “I’d be trying to work things out, as you suggest. But Laurence is not who he seems. He’s handsome, cultured, successful – yes. He treats people decently for appearance’s sake. But...” She paused, looking miserable.

“You want sole custody, with supervised access. *But what, Maria?*”

“It’s difficult to explain.”

“You have to understand, the court won’t place any stock in your feelings. A judge needs very good reasons if he is going to limit your husband’s access. In the view of the court it is in the best interests of the child to maintain a relationship with both parents,

and that takes precedence over just about anything. I'm not being personal here, please understand, but in my experience the court tends to see arguments against liberal access as vindictive..."

"The law is an ass!" she glared.

"And blind to boot," he agreed. "But it's that guy up on the bench we have to convince, Maria, and unless you have a really good case I cannot, in good faith, recommend an application for restricted access. Have there been instances of physical abuse against you or Aaron, recklessness that could be construed as endangerment, that sort of thing. There's no way what you have presented so far would persuade a judge to grant anything other than joint custody. In fact, an aggressive application for sole custody and limited access might undermine your own standing. We have to do what's best – in the court's opinion – for Aaron," he coaxed.

"Thank you for your time," she flustered, picking up her purse and heading for the door. He moved to usher her out, but she waved him off. "I'll find my own way," she said. Then she was gone.

Victor scanned the lines of notes he had taken in his cramped, tidy hand. If a stranger reviewed them, what kind of conclusions would they draw about Maria Selkirk. Well heeled, unhappy and cheated in marriage, braced for the emotional wreckage of divorce. He tore the sheets off his legal pad and inserted them into a folder, which he would add to a stack teetering on the edge of his desk. 'Selkirk, Maria,' he wrote on the tab for Vanessa, who would file the information later.

Victor wondered if he'd ever see 'Selkirk, Maria' again.

~

Maria accelerated into the basin of False Creek toward the Burrard Bridge. "What did you expect?" she muttered. How *could* a guy like Victor Daly help? How could the creaking bureaucracy known as Canada's legal system possibly figure out a slippery bastard like Laurence Selkirk? She needed a more robust practitioner of the legal profession, a legit version of... well... Laurence Selkirk. Maria laughed out loud. "Stupid bitch," she groaned, shaking her head in disbelief. Guys like Laurence always turned out to be... well... guys like Laurence. Capital 'A' type ass holes. She'd never want a prick like him for her lawyer, or doctor, or anything else.

“I want a man with a slow hand. I want a man with an easy touch,” she mimicked bitterly.

The light at Pacific winked yellow. She pulled up hard, resisting the urge to blow through. The last thing she needed now was a \$300 fine. “Can’t afford that kind of action anymore,” she reminded herself. She checked the rearview mirror. Nothing. The light turned green and she punched the gas – a little harder than she’d intended. The SUV bucked, its tires emitting an angry chirp. She was a bag of nerves. Laurence was getting to her, no doubt about it, and he wouldn’t let up until she gave him what he wanted.

And what was *that*?

“Not much, my dear. You, back in the lap of luxury, and my son where he belongs, not shackled up in a dingy little hovel where there’s barely enough room to swing a bat!”

“Fuck you!” she grimaced, remembering his snide tone. “Fuck you, you shit.”

That’s how Laurence worked – like dripping acid. The cops could tap his lines and listen in for hours, without ever picking up anything conclusive. Threats prowled beneath his smooth manners though – like sharks.

You’d look a fool if you ever tried to pin anything on him, or worse, like a paranoid delusive. Laurence Selkirk gave to the best charities, bought fine art, attended plays, rubbed elbows with the city’s elite. Who would the world believe? One of Vancouver’s finest, upstanding citizens, or the raving wife he’d raised from the gutter?

No contest.

Of course, if things ever went to court a different picture would emerge. That was the only thing that kept him from muscling her aside. He’d rubbed more than elbows with the wives and daughters of the city’s elite and she could prove it. Laurence Selkirk didn’t want *that* kind of news splashed on the front pages.

Then there was the matter of his shady ‘business’ connections. He wouldn’t want *that* smeared all over the place, either.

“You start it and I’ll finish it honey,” she’d warned sweetly. “By the time we’re through you won’t be able to get a membership into the public shitter at Main and Hastings.”

Maria smiled grimly, remembering his impotent rage. It was a dangerous game, though. Fear plus fury: what did that equal? She tried not to think about it.

Turning right off Cornwall onto Chestnut, she headed into Kits Point. She'd rented a two bedroom house off a friend and sympathizer, a woman who could understand the plight of an upper class marital refugee, and who happened to have strong opinions on the subject of Laurence Selkirk. "Stay as long as you like," her benefactor had said. "I know you'll be good for the rent someday!"

Turning left onto Ogden, she was cheered by the splintered views of Kits Beach and English Bay glinting between the trees. It had been just over a month since she'd decamped from Laurence's West Vancouver fortress, but her life with him already seemed part of a distant past – almost an illusion, a nightmare. The mansion, yacht, servants, jewelry, stultifying parties, pretentious bitches... all of it had been consigned to what Maria thought of as a parallel universe, somewhere deep inside her psyche.

All of it except Aaron, of course. She winced, the pang of love sharp as a stiletto. If she walked down the sloping landscape toward Kits Beach, she would be able to see West Vancouver across English Bay. She imagined tracing the shoreline to the very point where Laurence's 'Taj Mahal' would be gleaming in the sunlight.

"For you my dear," he'd bragged once.

"But it was built before you even met me!"

"A premonition, my love. I built it in anticipation of you."

Like hell, she blushed. To think, she'd actually been flattered!

~

Just as Victor was about to dash, Vanessa buzzed. "Call for you," she said. "Bit of an odd one," she added, sensing his annoyance.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Said you wouldn't want to miss him, but wouldn't give his name."

"I see," Victor sighed. "Well, then, I guess I'd better not keep our mystery man waiting." He jabbed the blinking button of Line 2. "Victor Daly here," he barked.

"Hello Mr. Daly," the caller responded cheerfully.

God damned salesman, Victor sighed, impatient.

"Can I help you?" he prodded.

"Yes, actually. I would like to retain your services."

"If you talk to my secretary, Ms. Kormer, she will arrange for a consultation."

“I don’t need a consultation, Mr. Daly. I want to retain your services right away.”

“Fine, Ms. Kormer will set up an appointment and we can get right down to it,”

Victor said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m on my way to court...”

“So you’ll represent me?”

“I’ll decide once I know who you are and the particulars of your case Mr...?”

“Selkirk.”

“Sorry?” Victor’s larynx tightened.

“Laurence Selkirk,” the man said with an easy familiarity that suggested Victor should have known him. “I need a family lawyer Mr. Daly, and I understand you are the best.”

“I can’t represent you.”

“Why not?”

“To busy,” Victor said. “Now if you don’t mind...”

“I’ll pay whatever it takes, Mr. Daly,” Laurence said casually. “The matter really is quite urgent.”

“No!” Victor said firmly. “Now I have go.” He hung up.

“Jesus Christ,” he cursed, hurrying out the door and past Vanessa’s desk.

She glanced up at him.

“Don’t ask,” he muttered, fleeing into the hallway.

It could have been coincidence, he supposed, trying to figure the odds - like being hit by a piano that just sort of fell out of the sky.

~

Most evenings Victor took Toobee – as in “to be or not to be” – for a ‘walk n’ toss’. Good for the dog, good for the master – especially after a day like the one Victor’d just had. His consultation with Maria Selkirk and the follow-up call from her husband had set him on edge. He needed to dissipate some nervous energy.

Toob trotted ahead, as far as the retractable leash would allow, yanking this way and that, straining so hard he had to hack every few steps because he was being choked by his collar. Toob’s immediate desire was to sniff every bush, stone, hydrant or post that might reveal the scent of a rival or mate – which meant sniffing every bush, stone, hydrant or post in his urban universe.

“Heel!” Victor barked. “Toobee! Heel!”

The dog never listened. Never learned. Scolding, pleading, treats, nothing made a lasting impression on Toobee because nothing could override his yearning to procreate. “You’re neutered, god-damn-it! Give it up!” Victor groaned. But the phantom urge drove the poor dog to distraction. Victor had come to view it as a form of insanity and accepted Toob for what he was: a canine sex maniac. This incurable tickle in the loins, this ever tightening knot in the gut, it couldn’t be normal. *There must be a cure!*

Victor had tried obedience school. In fact The Come, Sit, Heel Academy of Canine Manners unabashedly touted itself as the best, not to mention most expensive, canine learning experience ‘available to master and friend’. Despite all that, Toob would still only come if you reeled him in; sit if you pushed down on his rump; heel if you taped him to your leg. As for the ‘mental leash’ Ms. Chalmers, their instructor, talked about so passionately, it never materialized for Toob. No matter how often and earnestly Victor coached, the mystic mind-meld that would allow commands to be expressed in the subtlest nuances of voice and gesture failed to take hold. The click of a tongue or flick of an eye might have a talented Come, Sit, Heel graduate herding sheep, leaping through hoops, or dashing into burning buildings to save little children. “We never fail your dog,” the Academy bragged, it’s motto forming a halo round the head of a goofy looking mutt. Ms. Chalmers was not about to let Toob be the exception.

“You are simply an incorrigible master, Mr. Daly, therefore I am obliged to refund the balance of your fee and ask you not to return to classes,” she informed him in the privacy of the ‘Principal’s’ office after Toobee’s final, disastrous session. “Your dog’s behaviour is a disincentive to the other students here.” Toobee had apparently humped Ms. Chalmer’s leg once too often. The expulsion was final. No appeal.

There was only one thing in the world that obsessed Toobee more than humping, and that was tennis balls. As far as Victor could determine there was no limit to the number of times Toob would chase down a ball and lay it at your feet to be thrown again. Victor bought himself a long handled thrower to reduce the strain on his arm and to increase the “chase interval”. This gave him more “think time” and reduced his exposure to Toob’s frantic barking – a part of the “fetch cycle” as unavoidable as it was unpleasant.

They had their routine down pat. After work Victor would change into his sweats, grab Toob's leash and the backpack that contained the thrower and tennis balls. Most days they'd head for Sunset Park, the closest off-leash zone. Sometimes they'd jog across Burrard Bridge to Kitsilano Point and a larger slice of sand and grass near the Vancouver Maritime Museum. Victor would "hurl the fuzz" until Toob seemed tuckered out, eyes glazed, sand-coated tongue lolling out the side of his chops. Then they'd walk home, each satisfied for his own reasons they'd spent some quality time.

"What'll it be?" Victor asked after shucking his suit.

Toob stared dumbly at the dangling lead.

"Kits or Sunset? Take your pick."

Toob barked. Twice. Kits it was. So there they were jogging through Vanier Park, their progress interrupted by frequent sniff 'n piss stops.

~

The phone sat on its hallway stand, a primed bomb. She needed to get away.

"Come on Buddy!" she said, mussing Aaron's fine, blond hair. "Let's get outside for a while. Go down to the beach."

"But I want to watch Arthur on TV!"

The show would be over in five minutes, so she gave in. If the phone rang, she wouldn't answer. While Aaron lolled on the living room sofa, watching TV with his head upside down over the edge of the cushions, she stuffed a small pack. "We'll have a picnic," she called from the kitchen.

No answer. Not surprising. *First Law of Child Thermodynamics: forced enthusiasm generates resistance.*

"Ready?" she encouraged, switching the TV off the instant his show ended.

"Mo-om!" he wailed.

"Come on," she countered brightly. "Let's go."

By the time they reached the sidewalk Aaron had got over his crankiness. He held her hand as they crossed Ogden, then took off, skimming over the lawn of the Maritime Museum, arms angled back like the wings of a fighter jet. "Whoosh" he yelled, curling round in an arc then zooming by Maria.

"Control tower to Aaron! Control tower to Aaron!"

“Copy control tower,” he beamed.

“Bogey at two o’clock, by the stairs down to the beach.”

“Bogey up your nose!” he teased.

“Aaron!” Maria shrieked. “Besides, it’s boogers up the nose, bogeys by the stairs. Got it?”

“Roger!” Then he was off in pursuit of their imaginary enemy, screeching low over the lawn and down the wooden stairs.

Maria quickened her pace, not wanting to let him out of sight. She tracked his erratic flight path down the steps, between the beached logs and lolling sunbathers. While he continued on his imaginary mission, she found a spot, nestling her back against a curve of driftwood. A slow sigh escaped her, so deep, so relaxing it felt as if she was breathing through her skin, that she might sag into the contours of the warm sand like a deflating beach-ball.

Aaron returned. Forgetting his military calling, he decided he was an engineer and set to work digging a channel down to the sea. She watched adoringly. Was that the fate of the single Mom? Fixation beyond reason?

Their departure from West Vancouver had yanked Aaron out of his familiar environment. He had no friends here, no favorite haunts; only a beginner’s set of toys and her. Daycare helped – at least it gave them a break from each other – but for now Maria *was* his best friend. She enjoyed her time with him, of course, but by bedtime she would feel the strain of smiling and hear weariness in her own voice. That’s when she was most vulnerable. Laurence had sniffed that out of course.

“What the hell are you trying to prove?” he’d demanded last time they spoke.

She wondered herself. How long could she keep this up?

She’d read somewhere that kids filter out sounds they don’t want to hear – sounds that threaten. Was that true? What sounds had Aaron blocked to keep his world from cracking? Doors slamming. Her howling like a wounded dog. Laurence finally losing it... Yelling “Shut the fuck up!”

Maria closed her eyes tight, squeezing out the demons - the guilt. On the scale of abuse, Laurence’s behaviour seemed petty and paltry. Not the stuff a family court judge

would rebuke. Victor Daly had been right, of course, she didn't have grounds for anything more than a bitter division of assets... including their child.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the yapping of a particularly annoying dog somewhere up the beach. The barking was so shrill and persistent, Maria had to make time for a disapproving glance toward pet and owner, a Jack Russell terrier, frantically urging its master to launch a ball from its plastic thrower. The man, who was facing away from her, cocked, swung, and hurled the fuzzy projectile as far down the beach as he could, the momentum of his swing twisting his body round so that he faced Maria.

"Christ!" she laughed. It was Victor Daly.

Hurriedly, while his obnoxious pet galloped down the sand, he retrieved a mobile phone from the pocket of his sweat pants and punched in some numbers. He raised the phone to his ear, waiting for whoever he was calling to answer. Before he started talking, the Jack Russell was back. The dog horked up the ball at his feet and started barking and capering again, like a maniac. Victor stooped, picked up the ball, and tossed it as far as he could without using the thrower. While the dog fetched, he talked a few seconds, then punched the end call button and put the phone back in his pocket.

Maria fumbled around in her pack and retrieved the novel she had been intending to read. Quickly she opened the book and held it up in front of her face, just to be sure Victor Daly didn't see her.

~

The message indicator was blinking when Maria and Aaron stepped into the foyer back at the house; she ignored it.

"Come on mister," she ordered Aaron. "You need to jump into the bath."

"Mo-om!" he protested.

"Your hair's full of sand," she pointed out. "And look at your feet!"

He shook his head and glanced down. "Don't need a bath," he sulked.

Maria sighed, ushering him down the hall. "We'll gather up your favorite toys, the whole fleet. It'll be fun."

Aaron allowed himself to be guided into the bathroom. Reluctantly, he slipped off his sandals and swim suit while she ran the water and added some bubble bath. When she looked up he was staring at her accusingly.

“What?”

“You said I could have my toys,” he sniffed.

“Oh for goodness sake!” she laughed, hugging him. “I’m sorry honey. Mum’s not really with it today, is she? You jump in; I’ll go round up the navy.”

She watched him swing his leg over the side of the tub testing the water with his toe. Aaron moved cautiously, like a bird. He seemed so fragile, so vulnerable.

His bath toys were stored in a plastic milk carton at the foot of his bed – new carton, new toys. All his favorites were still at Taj Mahal. There, of course, he had his own bathroom and could leave his toys right by the tub. Here they had to drain for an hour or so, before Maria lugged them back his room. Just one of the inconveniences of their life in exile, not to mention the more grandiose loss of a heated outdoor pool where naval campaigns could take on truly epic proportions.

Maria sighed, hefting the milk carton and heading back to the bathroom. She couldn’t switch off the blinking answering machine light pulsing inside her head. Laurence would have known that. Even though she couldn’t see it, the red glow irritated, an inflammation at the core of her brain.

“Here you go,” she said, submerging the milk crate in the water like a crab trap.

Rummaging through the collection, Aaron pulled out a Playmobil Zodiac. Patiently he recovered the diver that went with it and a rescue helicopter, along with its pilot and, of course, the victims of whatever disaster he was concocting. Certain she had faded from even the periphery of his fantasy world, Maria slipped quietly out of the bathroom and headed for the kitchen. The angry red light went with her, a firefly dancing behind her eyes. *Coffee*, she thought. *Or herbal tea... chamomile, perhaps*. Absently, she put the kettle on and waited. Would he call again? Should she answer?

The kettle shrilled. Startled by its harsh edict, Maria tore open a tea packet, inserted the bag in a large cup and poured in the boiling water. The red light still glared, a pinpoint now at the far end of infinity. She could hear Aaron down the hall, varooming around the tub with his Zodiac, whump-whumping overhead with his chopper. The sounds of his play reached her from a great distance, as if he existed in another dimension, as if he was part of her past.

“Jesus!” she groaned, stumping out of the kitchen, snatching the phone out of its cradle and punching the message button.

“Prick!”

~

“You have two new messages; first new message...”

“Hi Mar!” Cathy Vermeer chattered. “How about a snort of Starbucks to start the day tomorrow. Nothing too early. Maybe elevenish. A working girl needs to catch up on her beauty sleep come the weekend, you know.”

Maria shook her head and laughed. “Sure Cath,” she agreed.

“Second new message...”

“Hello Ms. Selkirk,” Victor Daly said.

His voice caught her off guard and Maria was annoyed to find herself smiling. He sounded nervous, klutzy. Did she feel sorry for him, or did she really like him? Maria couldn’t say. It was utterly beside the point anyway.

As he talked another sound caught her attention. Suddenly a dog’s barking and whining filled in the background, it intensified when – as she recalled – he would have been bending down to pick up the ball with his free hand, after having dropped his thrower. “Quiet Toob,” he commanded, to no effect. Then the distracting antics of his unruly pet faded into the background as ‘Toob’ chased after the ball.

“Could you please call me,” he Victor completed his message hurriedly. “Tonight if possible.”

Maria laughed, jotting down his home number, wondering what it could be about. From their consultation, she’d assumed there was wasn’t much he could do for her. Maybe the call had nothing to do with legal stuff at all, she thought, but quickly dismissed the notion. That would be unprofessional, and Victor Daly didn’t strike her as the type who would let down his professional guard for a minute – not even wearing sweats on the beach.

“Blam!” Aaron yelled, sloshing at least a gallon of water over the side of the tub.

”Hey! Ease up on the tsunamis buddy,” she yelled.

Victor Daly didn’t have any kids. She would have bet on it. She punched in the number, trying to conjure up what kind of setting a man like him would inhabit. Modern,

probably. Elegant but minimalist. Lots of space around sleek, designer furniture. Contemporary art on immaculate white walls...

“Hello?”

“Hello Mr. Daly. It’s Maria Selkirk.”

“Oh! Thank you Maria.” He paused for a second, uncertain.

“What is it?”

“Well, I had an unusual conversation this afternoon,” he began cautiously. “It’s placed me in a bit of a quandary, really, but I think you need to know about it. At four o’clock I received a call from your husband...”

“From Laurence?”

“He wanted to retain my services. Said he would pay whatever I asked if I would agree to represent him.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Normally I wouldn’t share this kind of information with anyone, of course. But the circumstances seemed so strange, I felt you should know... I declined his offer because it would have placed me in a conflict of interest to accept.”

“But I’m not your client!”

“Technically, no,” he conceded. “But your name is on a file in my office and let’s just say we haven’t yet decided how to proceed after our initial consultation. Call me when you’ve had a chance to think things through.”

“Thank you Mr. Daly,” she said, her voice barely audible.

~

Cathy insisted on buying, so Maria ordered a plain coffee and nothing on the side. As a photo technician at London Drugs Cathy didn’t earn a lot. Enough for an attic suite on Kits slope and annual trips to Europe, Asia and – this coming year – Africa. “Who needs anything more than that?” was how she put it.

Who indeed?

Cathy was queued at the pick up counter. *No missing her, that’s for sure.* Pink track suit with blue stripes, which did nothing to conceal her plumpness; black hair tied back in a long ponytail; red nails that reminded Maria of ladybugs; thick glasses in heavy black frames that always seemed to sit slightly askew; pallid, course complexion. Laurence had

asked pointedly on more than one occasion why Maria insisted on staying friends with Cathy.

“Because I like her,” Maria always answered.

“Why?”

“Because she doesn’t give a damn what you and your snobby friends think.”

“I got you a latté,” Cathy announced, plunking their cups down on the table. “And a strawberry-rhubarb turnover.”

“But I only wanted a coffee!”

“Tough!” Cathy rebutted, falling heavily into the armchair opposite. “I’m going to fatten you up yet. You just wait and see.” She extracted the turnover from its bag and placed it on the table in front of Maria, then did likewise with her own. “So tell me about this lawyer guy,” she said – Maria had mentioned Victor in her return phone call the night before. She’d left out Victor’s brush with Laurence because Cathy tended to get upset.

“Not much to tell, really. He’s a bit of an odd duck.”

“Well let’s start there. You’re life’s so much more interesting than the soaps or reality TV Mar. Don’t deny me my Saturday morning fix.”

Maria described her first encounter with Victor in the elevator. “He was petrified,” she said. “Like a man standing in front of a firing squad.”

“Vertigo?” Cathy ventured.

Maria shrugged.

“Maybe it was something else entirely,” Cathy teased. “Maybe he’s one of those guys who can’t get enough oxygen when they’re confined in a small space with a beautiful woman.”

“Are you blaming me?” Maria laughed.

“Oh, if you only knew the damage you wreak. You would blush.”

Cathy bit into her turnover and chewed hard, scrunching up her eyes in delight.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Maria chided. “Elevator sex is just the latest figment of your overactive imagination my dear.”

“You like this guy?”

“Cathy! That’s outrageous!”

“But true.”

Maria rolled her eyes.

“So is he going to represent you in Beauty verses The Beast?”

“I’m not sure. Besides, you’ve mixed your metaphors.”

“Why not!” Cathy parried, shrugging off the critique.

It was complicated, that part. Maria had gone over the question herself a hundred times. There was the money, of course. But money problems had a way of sorting themselves out in Maria’s experience. Then there was Victor’s lecture on the merits of trying to sort things out – although that was probably boilerplate from some textbook on how to be a good divorce lawyer... besides his perspective might have changed a little since Laurence’s call.

If he only knew, Maria found herself thinking.

“Ahem!” Cathy prompted.

“He doesn’t think I’d stand a chance of getting sole custody or restricted access,” Maria said. “Not based on what I told him.”

“What didn’t you tell him Mar? That you need the kind of lawyer who sticks up for mothers instead of rich pricks?”

“Cath!” Maria scolded.

“Well it makes me mad.”

The heavy frame of her glasses accentuated Cathy’s scowl. If Victor had been present, he might have been treated to a cup of hot latté in his lap. “He doesn’t strike me as the kind who sees the law as a blood sport, is what I’m trying to say,” Maria sighed patiently. “And – in his defence – I didn’t give him the whole story. He’s only got the sanitized version Cath. If he knew the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, he might not have been so... solicitous.”

“Why the hell *don’t* you tell him!” Cathy demanded, drawing curious glances from nearby tables.

“It’s complicated,” Maria hushed, trying to blunt the ferocity of her friend’s urging. “And irrelevant, Cath. Nothing’s proven; none of it would be admissible.”

That shut Cathy up. Not even she knew the full story – the true nature of Laurence Selkirk – but she knew enough to respect Maria’s warning. Cathy bit off another chunk of turnover and chewed savagely.

“Do you ever watch nature shows, Cath?”

Still chewing, Cathy nodded.

“I watch them with Aaron sometimes. I’m thinking now of tigers. They’re so beautiful, gorgeous really, right up to the moment they jump out of the bushes and grab you by the neck. That’s Laurence. He’s waiting. I know every second of every day that he’s crouching in the tall grass waiting for that triggering instant.”

“Shit!” Cathy grunted.

“Anything could set him off. He might sense that he can beat me; then again, he might get scared that he’s going to lose. Either way, he’s going to make a move sooner or later, and I’m nowhere near ready for him... So how’s that for reality TV?”

“Pretty crappy.”

“Then let’s switch channels, hon.”

~

Hello Dearest,

I really do think we need to work this out, don’t you? It’s not right that Aaron doesn’t get to see his father, and I don’t get to see my son. Nor do I feel there is any reason for you to be slipping back into circumstances you escaped after we met. That surely cannot be good for either you or Aaron.

I suggest we meet at a neutral location and begin negotiating a settlement we can both live with. As you know I have ample means to fulfill any reasonable commitments made in good faith to support you in a comfortable lifestyle. I also appreciate that Aaron will want to continue a loving relationship with both his parents. Indeed I think it would be best if we worked things out and stayed together as a family, but both parties would have to agree to that.

Since you haven’t responded to my phone calls and emails, I have taken the unusual step of having this message hand delivered. If you continue to spurn my attempts at reconciliation, I shall have to begin exploring more effective measures to bring you to

reason. I have avoided doing so for Aaron's and our sake. I don't think a messy confrontation would be in anyone's interests.

Sincerely, Laurence.

The note was taped to the front door when she got home from coffee with Cathy. She wondered who'd helped him write it. Some sleazebag lawyer got up in a suit with four buttons on the sleeves no doubt. Probably someone she'd met at the Taj sipping scotch and eyeing her appreciatively from a distance – the same way you'd admire anything with 'PROPERTY OF SELKIRK SHIPPING' stenciled all over it.

She cast back to the last few parties at the Taj. There had been a legal up-and-comer on the invitation list recently. Stan Something-or-other, of East European extraction. Maybe it was him. It was unthinkable that Laurence had crafted the missive himself or that any reputable lawyer would have helped him, certainly not if they could read between the lines.

"Messy confrontation," Maria mused. "Now what could *that* mean?" Messy was such a versatile word. Messy as in mussed hair, disorganized room, complicated divorce, or...

COUPLE INCINERATED IN WALLEY BUNGALOW

The charred remains of a man and a woman were found in a burned out bungalow in Surrey. Firefighters made the grisly discovery after battling a three alarm blaze though the night. Police are treating the fire as suspicious and the deaths as possible homicides...

"Messy," Maria grimaced.

It turned out the victims had both worked for Selkirk Shipping – she in the Surrey warehouse, he as a container truck driver. When she asked him about it, Laurence said, "Honey, I've got hundreds of people working for me – thousands, actually, if you count contractors and service providers. Not all of them are fine upstanding citizens, much as I'd like them to be. Some are screw ups. But that's not my fault, is it?"

He'd said this with a death's head grin, and Maria remembered feeling sick.

That's when she'd started watching her husband more closely...

Maria jumped when the phone rang. Sighing she picked up the handset. "Hi" she said brightly.

“Just thought I’d let you know I had some visitors this morning,” Cathy quavered, her voice cold with fury.

“What’s wrong?”

“Somebody broke in while we were out sipping lattes. They totally trashed my place Mar. I mean trashed! They dumped, slashed and smashed everything.”

“Oh Cath!” Maria groaned, feeling the dreadful pull of a dark undertow picking up speed. “I’ll be right over.”

“What about Aaron?”

“He’s still with his sitter,” Maria said. Then it struck her, the ghastly truth: she didn’t know for sure Aaron was where she thought he should be. She could never be sure unless he was in her sight. “I’ve got to make a call, Cath, then I’ll be right over, okay?”

“Yeah,” Cathy said. “See you.”

~

The intercom buzzed, penetrating from somewhere beyond consciousness. Victor’s eyes blinked open. Nothing. The darkness of dreamless sleep had morphed seamlessly into utter, waking darkness... as if he had been born blind... or was a diver who’d been sucked into the depths of the Marianas Trench, ten kilometres beneath the rumpled surface of the Pacific. He didn’t panic. If you panicked the inexorable pressure would crush you. If you allowed the fear of death to take hold you were well and truly dead.

He breathed deliberately. Still had some air. Perhaps enough. Calmly he allowed himself to float free, drifting up toward full consciousness. Life took hold. TooBee erupted, barking like a maniac beyond the bedroom door. Victor groaned, propping himself up on his left elbow. Seams of light outlined the rectangular portal of his sliding closet door. The intercom squawked again. This time right inside his head, it seemed.

“Shit!” It was Larry. They were going to play roller-hockey in the parking lot at Sunset Beach, then balance their Karma with a greasy breakfast at Hamburger Mary’s – their usual Saturday routine. And after that: his meeting with Rick and Pauline to debrief their shoot from the night before.

Now that he was fully awake, a new version of panic took hold. He wasn’t going to drown, but didn’t know what lay on the other side of the closet door. Pauline might have fallen asleep in his bed. She should have left, but more than once he’d come-to and found

her slumbering amid the tangled sheets. Larry would have to wait downstairs, if that was the case. Then Pauline could slip out discretely after they'd left to do their *boy-thing*. Victor eased the closet door open a crack, peeking into the bedroom. No-one.

He struggled to his feet and emerged into the light of day, stumbling out of the bedroom and down the hall, jabbing the intercom button on the way by.

"Hi Larry," he said.

"Did I spoil your beauty sleep, man?"

"Come on up. I need to get ready."

Victor pushed the lobby door release then headed for the bathroom, leaving the front door to his penthouse ajar so Larry could wheel in. Leaning against the sink, he examined himself in the bathroom mirror. "You look like hell." He set to work, splashing cold water on his face, brushing his teeth, taking a piss.

"Hey!" Larry shouted, banging on the door. "How you doing beauty boy?"

"There's coffee brewed if you want." Victor blessed the technology gods for automatic coffee makers. "We might miss the first period."

"But we won't *be* missed, eh?" Larry joked.

True. They were the worst players in the league, invariably chosen last and given defensive assignments. What Victor really wanted was to play goal, but one of the supposed benefits of roller-hockey was fitness, so he stayed out, doing his best to impede the dazzling displays of skating and stick-handling put on by the younger, more talented players.

Younger! Christ, you're only 35 man. Not even middle aged by most standards. There were older guys in the NHL. Not much comfort in that, though. He shed the thought with his bathrobe as he stepped into the shower.

Then, out of nowhere, he remembered Maria Selkirk. Her face materialized, a hologram of hope and desire. Victor blushed. *What are you thinking.* "Look at your life, man!"

But what the hell, he'd give her a call anyway. After all, they did have some business to conclude. Was she his client, or wasn't she? He needed to get that straight. And after the mysterious call from Laurence Selkirk, he really *did* want to take her on.

He frowned, annoyed with himself. How often was he going to do the *White Knight* thing. When would he learn there are two sides to every story - even the messiest, ugliest, most scandalous stories you could imagine.

~

Maria couldn't believe the thoroughness of the cyclone that had ripped through Cathy's apartment. "I'm *so sorry*," she commiserated, struggling with her own guilt and the cold fury that had settled in her gut.

"It's not your fault," Cathy said. "But if you ever get a chance to stick a shiv between that bastard's ribs I'd be forever grateful."

"What did the cops say?"

"They said they'd do their best, advised me to get a double deadbolt and an alarm system, blah, blah, blah..."

"I mean about Laurence."

"I didn't bring the subject up."

"Oh?"

Cathy shrugged. She slumped on her sofa, which the vandals had slashed, leaving tufts of padding hanging out of its wounds.

"The cops didn't ask you if there was some motive? Maria gestured at the spray bombed walls.

Again Cathy shrugged. Then she grinned. "I told the handsome young officer that I could only wish for a lover half so crazy-jealous. He thought the line was pretty good."

They laughed.

"You've got insurance?" Maria said hopefully.

"Yeah, I'm covered. He's really done me a favour when I think about it, eh? A couple of hundred bucks for the deductible and I get to do an extreme makeover of this dump. Maybe I should send a thank you card."

Maria grinned. "Aaron can stay with his sitter for a couple of more hours. Come on girl, let's get out of here and have a heart-to-heart."

~

"So how was it?" Rick asked.

Is he being ironic or obtuse? Victor scrutinized the actor, looking for signs of intelligent life behind Rick's pale, blue eyes. Pauline sipped at her coffee and awaited developments. She often slipped into the observer role during planning and debriefing sessions – until her interests were affected. Then she'd launch words like laser guided missiles.

"It was okay," Victor offered, turning back to Rick. "But I want the action to be... uhm... overstated from your point of view. Just slightly, but enough that a viewer will recognize you're putting on a bit of a show."

He'd expressed himself clumsily, but *this was* uncharted territory.

Pauline raised her eyebrows. Apparently she found the suggestion surprising. "You mean you want them to see through the role? Aren't we trying to create an illusion here, an alternative reality? Now you're saying you want them to know we're acting." She swept a strand of glistening black hair away from her face, glancing round the coffee bar to see if anyone had noticed. The gesture seemed natural as bird preening on a telephone wire. But only someone like Pauline could get away with it. She fixed him with that shockingly beautiful stare of hers – that perpetual look of aggressive innocence.

Funny word, innocence. Pauline had taught him it was not at all synonymous with naivety. They were quite distinct qualities. Radical innocence could be austere and knowing. If there was a woman in the world he could worship, it was Pauline. She was a goddess. But sometimes her aura seemed permissive, almost promiscuous, and he couldn't prevent a visceral surge. He crossed his legs and sipped his coffee.

"You're not quite understanding me, Paul," he said in a calming voice. "I don't want the audience to know Rick is an actor; I want them to sense his aroused spirit. He's putting on a show *for you*, not them."

"Ooh," she batted her eyelashes. "Sounds so macho."

"I kind of like it," Rick taunted.

"It's not meant to be macho," Victor explained, feeling himself losing traction. "It's like a songbird, sitting on the highest branch, straining to get the notes just right. All part of the performance. I want to capture that subtle instance of male pride and female appreciation..."

“Oh, give me a break! And you quit smirking,” Pauline said, turning on Rick, who raised his hands in mock surrender. “You just want something that titillates the male peacock ego.”

Rick grinned – his turn to await developments.

“Trust me, Pauline. Can you do that?” Victor coached.

She stared, hard, until he squirmed inside his skin.

“Okay.” she said at last. “But if this strays into the cheesy zone, I’m gone. Handsome here may be happy to put on a muscle shirt and tight jeans for the fashion photographers; I’ve got my career as a serious actor and dancer to think about. This project has to stay firmly within the category of *Artistic-with-a capital-‘A’*. If it isn’t an activist statement on the beauty of naked, sexual humanity, I don’t want any part of it.”

“Of course,” Victor agreed. “It’s a collaboration, Pauline. It doesn’t go anywhere unless we’re all happy. You *know* that.”

So much for the piper-payer calling the tune. At \$300 each per session you’d think they would cut him a little artistic slack. Not Pauline. And a deal was a deal: the models got paid, they viewed every shot, and selection for the show was by consensus. Unused images were deleted. Permanently. Those were the terms, take ‘em or leave ‘em.

She doesn’t need me; I need her, Victor remembered.

Well, perhaps things weren’t that cut-and-dried. Even goddess-actors had to vie for recognition. And that’s what Victor offered – a niche in the local art scene. Pauline knew from his previous shows - from the photo gallery that was his apartment - what he was capable of. But this *Inside Out* exhibit would be different. *Monumental*, he’d promised. Controversial too, of course. It would draw the usual calls for censorship or charges under Canada’s prudish obscenity laws, or failing that, even *more* prudish laws. And so on...

All of which fell within Pauline’s brand.

The right kind of notoriety can be a career-booster for an up-and-coming performer, Victor reminded himself. *It might bounce differently for a Family Court lawyer, though.*

“You’re fucking crazy,” was how Larry put it. “You’ll end up disbarred!”

He didn’t know the half of it.

Inside Out. The title amused Victor. For the audience it would really be the exact opposite – the viewers (participants in Victor’s lexicon) would be moving from the *outside in*, entering a sexual realm they dared not discuss or even contemplate. He had to create an illusion that would get them out of their unconscious frames of reference and into his exhibit seamlessly – as if slipping into a dream.

He envisioned two exhibition spaces. In the “antechamber” erotic studies of Pauline and Rick would be mounted on the walls. A video presentation in the centre of *the reorientation zone* would zoom in on the lovers’ dance - but so close the shifting landscapes of flesh and hair would become almost unrecognizable. It would create the sensation of flying over a living topography, allowing viewers to explore forbidden contours. Surrounding the central video would be a forest of banners, suspended from the studio ceiling. Participants would move into this setting like feral creatures pushing through dense underbrush. The soundscape would include wind chimes, rain, the murmur of conversations in public places, rush hour traffic, occasional snatches of pastoral music. The scentscape: musk, lavender, second-hand smoke... he hadn’t figured that out yet...

Then came the sanctum sanctorum of love, the inner chamber. It made him a bit squeamish just thinking about it. He knew he was onto something potentially good. *No sense going where you’ve already been*, he reminded himself. *Got to push beyond the boundary, push until the elasticity is stretched to the limit, until it becomes transparent, the stretched molecules of its skin on the point of tearing open to a new vision.*

~

“Shit!” Maria muttered under her breath, hoping Cathy hadn’t noticed the message indicator blinking on the hall phone. Laurence, she guessed. Had to be. She couldn’t help wondering what he’d do next. Plant a bomb under the seat of her SUV? Hire a hit-man? Have Aaron snatched and whisked out of the country aboard a private jet? *He’s a fucking terrorist.*

She walked past the phone into the kitchen where she busied herself putting on the kettle. “Herbal or regular?” she called over her shoulder.

“Gunpowder, please,” Cathy answered from the living-room.

Maria surveyed her temporary digs. *How long until Osama bin Husband launches a direct assault*, she wondered. She pictured him stumping around the Taj Mahal, consumed with rage. *Pathetic really.*

“So when are you going to answer it?” Cathy startled her from the kitchen door.

“Huh?”

“You’re phone: it’s lit up like a Vegas casino.”

The kettle shrilled. Maria moved it off the element, tossed a bag into her new polka-dot teapot, poured in the steaming water, then replaced the lid.

“You really want to hear him gloating?” she said.

“Who?”

Maria didn’t bother answering.

“It might not be him,” Cathy tested. Then added miserably, after a long silence, “Just a hunch.” Then finally, “Well.. okay... maybe I’m fishing, but you’ve got to answer sometime, right, and I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.”

Annoyed, amused, Maria didn’t know what to feel. She wondered if she could survive living in close quarters with Cathy Vermeer - even for a few days. *What was all that weird stuff with the camera at her place, anyway?* In an exaggerated huff she brushed past her friend and jabbed at the phone’s message button.

“You have one new message. First new message...”

“Hello Maria,” Victor Daly said. “Just following up. I normally don’t push, but I’d really like to meet with you. Call it an extended consultation... over dinner, perhaps. Can you give me a call.”

“An ‘extended consultation’,” Cathy mimicked dreamily.

Maria shoved her, laughing. “You’re incorrigible,” she objected. “He’s inviting me to a business dinner. We’re still trying to figure out if he’s going to represent me...”

“Represent you as your lawyer or your lover?”

“Don’t be stupid!” Maria hooted. “Okay, I like him a bit. Maybe more than a bit. But I’m a married woman, remember?” She let her objection sink in, then added. “A married woman whose husband hires spies and thugs to trash her friends’ apartments. About the stupidest thing I could do right now would be to fall in love, eh? With the guy who might be my lawyer, eh?”

“Ouch!” Cathy squawked.

“Besides, I’m not sure about Victor, and I don’t think he’s so sure about me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know he likes me, Cath. But there’s something strange about him. He’s... aloof. It’s like part of him wants to push things, but another part is holding back. Am I making sense? I get the feeling he’s got secrets.”

“About his sexuality, you mean?”

That hadn’t occurred to Maria, but she let the suggestion hang.

“Well, much as I like the company of gay men, I can tell you he’s not one of them,” Cathy pronounced after a moment’s reflection.

“You’ve never met him!”

“I know, honey, but the notion just doesn’t fit into my movie,” Cathy teased. “And if you’re thinking that’s weird, well since when did romance start following Roberts Rules of Order.”

“Your movie?” Maria protested.

“Damn rights. You and lover-lawyer may be the stars, but by the sounds of things, you both need somebody behind the scenes making a story up for you... I’m happy to oblige.”

~

“A lawyer who works weekends. Commendable!”

“Piss off.”

“Who invites prospective clients out to dinner.”

“Give it a rest Larry!”

Not likely, Victor thought. This was too good for Larry to let go of. Still, Victor was glad he’d told his best friend about his predicament. Larry might be a pain in the ass, but there were usually glimmers of truth in his teasing.

“Who no doubt will make house calls eventually,” Larry added.

Enough already! Victor flicked a cashew at his tormentor, hitting him smack on the forehead. The nut bounced into Larry’s beer.

“Ow!” Larry complained. “Now look what you’ve done!” He peered into his ale, staring at the offending nut as if it was a severed toe. “This is an import, too,” he held up his glass indignantly.

“Get over it,” Victor advised.

Larry sipped at the beer, sucking up the errant cashew and munching it down appreciatively. “So you really like her?” he said.

Victor nodded morosely.

“Why so glum, then?”

“I haven’t felt like this since high school Larry. I mean, this threatens everything.”

“Oh-oh.”

“A couple of days ago life was normal...”

Larry raised his eyebrows.

“Okay. So maybe I’ve got a few kinks in the old DNA that make my version of ‘normal’ a little bit ‘ab’. But I don’t have any heads in my freezer or anything like that. I take pictures some people consider naughty; I sleep walk into closets; I play roller-hockey in a gay men’s league...”

“And your point is?”

“My point is: I like my life, Larry. I’ve got a great job, the best apartment in all of Vancouver, occasional and very enjoyable sex, friends who are weird enough to be wonderful without being dangerous, all the time and money I need to pursue my art, and a dog to remind me how much I don’t want kids. Who could ask for more?”

Larry shrugged.

“But when I look at Maria, man, I want her. Not just in bed. I want her in my life. I hardly know the woman. She’s got a kid and a husband, for Christ’s sake. But I want her. Does that make any sense? Tell me it’s crazy!”

“It’s crazy,” Larry agreed. “But you know what’s crazier?”

“Tell me.”

“I envy you, man. And I really hope you don’t screw this up.” He held up his glass. “To the real thing!”

~

The target, a mannequin propped up on a bench about thirty metres away, would have to do for now. You could just make it out in the dark, but if it had been a real person, with a real face, you wouldn't have been able to recognize who she was. You'd have to know who you were aiming at beforehand. More importantly, if the person saw you, they wouldn't know *who you were either*.

Laurence tried to imagine Maria there, instead of the dummy. He couldn't summon her as a superimposed mental hologram, though; his mind refusing to conjure his wife on command. So he had to make do with the formless idea of her, without actually putting a face to it – an abstraction. In a way that made his hatred purer, he told himself.

He raised the rifle, took aim, squeezed. Pop, pop, pop! Three balls whizzed out the barrel. Smack, smack, smack! All on target.

“So it'll work out okay,” he said. “Even in the dark?”

“Yeah,” his bodyguard confirmed. “As long as we can get to within 30 or 40 yards of them.”

Laurence nodded, curtly. They walked over to the mannequin, examining its wounds. “Good cluster. Every one of 'em hit the target, exactly where I aimed,” he boasted.

“Yep,” his bodyguard agreed.

“We're on, then,” Laurence announced.

~

Out of the way. Pricy enough to keep the fast-food crowd at bay. Nice view. A chef with a name. Victor was pleased with his choice of restaurant for their meeting: The Fish House in Stanley Park. *And it is a meeting*, he reminded himself. As long as he kept things in that frame of reference there would be no awkwardness. He could enjoy Maria's company without getting drawn into some sort of dicey prenuptial tango.

But it wouldn't be easy. He'd have to go through dinner with his eyes shut if he wanted to avoid the exquisite geometry of her neck, her electrifying green eyes, the slender curl of her fingers around a wine glass, the easy elegance of her smile, the luster of her fine auburn hair. He'd have to stop his ears if he wanted to keep himself from analyzing the pitch and cadence of her voice, the tuning-fork harmonics of her laughter...

Fuck off Daly!

Could you say *You're beautiful* to a client? It would be so much simpler if you could just be forthright about such things. *Nice outfit. Super shoes. Good business concept. Oh, and by the way, you're stunning...*

“What are you thinking?” Maria broke through the lull in their conversation, which to that point had stuck to pretty much to script.

“This maple glazed salmon, it's delicious,” he said. “How's your meal?”

Maria had chosen a mixed seafood grill, despite its not having the ‘Ocean Wise’ endorsement, indicated by a little fish logo next to the appropriate menu items. “My meal is fine,” she said, taking a sip of her wine – a light-bodied red, recommended for seafood lovers who are not fond of white wines. “I take it you're something of a connoisseur, Victor.”

“Oh?”

“No ordinary mortal smiles over his meal the way you were just doing.”

He grabbed his own glass for a quick slurp. Being nonplussed by a little joke was a sure sign of danger; wondering how well the dinner was coming off another. *Back to business, Daly*. From what she had described, Laurence Selkirk must have had a personal chef. Dinner in Stanley Park was no big deal for Maria, even though in her present circumstance she probably couldn't afford to share the bill... not that he would have let her anyway.

“So how did you meet him?” he probed.

She glanced out the window, as if something out there in the gathering dusk might be waiting for her. “I did some work for an organization called The Street Level Society,” she began. “They help men and women get their lives together and advocate for services on behalf of street people. It's a radical group in some ways – I mean, imagine asking for more funding for shelters and lobbying for a guaranteed income. I still catch glimpses of my former pals on the evening news, usually waving placards and chanting at protest rallies. Anyway, back then they thought they could make some headway in the boardrooms of B.C., so they hired me as their ambassador to business – I had the right look, I guess.

“Selkirk Shipping was one of my cold calls, and I always went for the top. Laurence asked me out to dinner; donated ten-grand over dessert.”

Victor looked surprised.

“He wasn’t the first man to proposition me... or the last.”

Victor half expected her to tilt her glass in his direction, blushed in anticipation.

“Besides, I didn’t consider his tactics inappropriate. Where I was coming from people demanded a lot more for a lot less. I was never much of an activist, myself. Just a girl who had been down on her luck and wanted to give back to the people helping her out. I suppose I was the poster-girl for the cause – someone The Street Level Society had actually saved from the clutches of prostitution and drug abuse...”

“You were...?” he let the question trail off.

“Yes,” she confessed. “Just long enough to scare the crap out of myself. I was the one-in-a-thousand who had enough shreds of self-respect left to really want out. I also turned out to be young, good-looking and articulate once we scrubbed some of the grime off and got me straight: just what the Street Level Society needed to make themselves saleable to the right kind of donors – the ones who actually had some money.

“I played the role well. My looks, my story, a hint of flirtation, they were all part of the pitch. So Laurence propositioning me in his own terms didn’t come as a big surprise. I persuaded him to double his initial offer before I said yes to another date. I know it sounds crude, but I was speaking Laurence’s language, it was a part of me he loved – I suppose yearned for would be a better word – that fine line between salacious and sophisticated, do you understand? That’s who I was.”

“And now?”

“I’m not playing you, if that’s what you mean.”

They laughed. Victor couldn’t think of another woman he’d ever met who could get away with a line like that. “You’re a fascinating client,” he said, raising his glass and tilting it in her direction.

She acknowledged his toast with the slightest inclination of her head and turning up of her lips.

“Funny thing is: he figures he’s the one who raised me up from the gutter. That’s part of his problem, you see, he thinks I owe him for my subsequent life of luxury – that I didn’t bring anything of value to the table except rough-cut charm and beauty.”

Victor looked puzzled.

She smiled the way you would at an uncomprehending child. “Laurence thinks he’s responsible for the success of everyone and everything within his sphere of influence; that as the creator, he’s also the owner of his ‘people’. That’s what galls him most about me and Aaron leaving, the fact that I absconded with two of his prize possessions – me and his son. *His* son, I have to emphasize.”

“You seem to be implying that he feels he has a right to have not only Aaron, but also *you* back.”

Maria stabbed a prawn with her fork and kept on smiling. “The reason I’m telling you all this is I don’t doubt it will come out in court, if you’re serious about taking me on as a client, so you might as well know.”

“We wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t serious,” he said, pausing to let that sink in.

“When you visited me in my office the other day you said Laurence is not what he seems. What did you mean by that. Has he threatened you?”

She put her fork down and stared across the table. For a second he thought she was going to bolt again. “Let’s put it this way,” she said at last, her voice level and controlled, “there are some things I would not raise in court, Victor. Not if I value my life. The only reason Laurence hasn’t taken back what he believes is rightfully his is because of what I know and could say – and because of some very incriminating evidence I have locked away in a very safe deposit box. If he ever figures I’m actually going to release that stuff...”

His gut twisted. “What?”

“It’s a delicate dance Victor, on the edge of a very high cliff. Laurence, me or maybe the two of us could go over if we make any wrong moves. Sure you want to join in?” she smiled.

“Absolutely!”

“I have a friend, Cathy,” she continued. “I met her through The Street Level Society, actually. She was the volunteer worker who first reached out to me when I was in the dumps. We went out for a coffee Saturday morning. When she got back to her place it was trashed. Somebody broke in and spray bombed everything in sight, slashed all her furniture, turned her drawers upside down. This wasn’t the work of amateurs. It was

carried out in broad daylight. Nobody heard or saw a thing. These guys knew what they were doing and when to do it.”

“Jesus!”

“I’m radioactive, Victor. The more you know about me, the more dangerous things get. Do you want me to go on?” She fixed him with a hard stare.

“Yes.”

“My husband is a criminal. Big time. With connections to organized crime. I know for a fact he’s had people ‘offed’ and I don’t doubt for a second he would have me fitted with a body bag if he could get away with it, or if he ever gets desperate enough. If he thought I was going to go public with any of the stuff I know, he’d kill me. Period. Cathy’s apartment was a warning, Laurence’s way of saying ‘I’m watching you bitch’ in the most vulgar terms he can get away with.”

“This does complicate things,” Victor admitted.

“Sure does,” she agreed. “Still want me as a client?”

“Maria,” he pleaded, “I want you as a friend.”

At least she didn’t recoil, he thought.

But he didn’t take her hand, which lay within reach, next to her wine glass. Instead he held her in his gaze, illuminated by the bright, vivacious designer light, which bled into darkness beyond the restaurant’s plate glass windows.

“Besides,” he added after a while, “you’re not the only one with back story. Would you like to see the dessert menu?”

She laughed with alarming clarity.

Say something, he told himself.

~

A red glow brimmed the jagged, western horizon; the gibbous moon beamed down through the trees onto the paved bicycle trail; they drifted along in contented silence. After his tantalizing dinner comment about back stories, Victor had clammed up. They’d made small talk over coffee and wedges of chocolate cheesecake, then decided to loop down toward Second Beach before heading back to the parking lot.

Figures drifted through the gathering dusk, shadows just out of sight, yearning for other shadows. Their presence made Maria nervous, but she tried not to let that interfere

with her contentment. It had been so long since she'd heard herself laugh like she did in Victor's company, her voice skittering off into the night. It almost seemed another person had taken over her body and was gliding along with this strange new man.

What if he takes my hand? she wondered. Would she allow it or pull away? *Don't be stupid. You only met the guy a few days ago... a weirdo in an elevator.*

"I'm feeling a little cheated," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I blabbed all night about the shady details of my life with Laurence, not to mention my promiscuous life-before-Laurence, and you sat there like a sphinx the whole time, taking it all in. I thought you were going to balance things out by revealing some of your dark history."

He laughed. "Fair enough," he said, then lapsed into silence.

"Well?"

"Well it's not so easy for me, is it? I mean, it's not like I have any salient characteristics or events to talk about. I don't know where to begin."

"How about at the very beginning: where were you born?"

"Don't know."

"Oh, come on!" she scolded.

"Seriously. I'm adopted. I don't know where I was born, or exactly when."

"You're kidding, right?" Maria blushed.

"My adoptive Mom and Dad are teachers. I grew up in East Van steeped in socialist theory and the liberal arts."

"Have you ever tried to find your birth parents?"

"Nope. Richard and Nora *are* my parents. I don't have their DNA in my pedigree, but odds are I wouldn't like the genetic profile of my bio-folks anyway. Best leave some stones unturned is how see it."

She sensed irritation, that verboten nerves were being plucked. But Maria wouldn't stop. Not yet. Friends pushed into sensitive zones, opened sick room doors, let in fresh air. He'd have to put up with her snooping.

"My friend Cathy is adopted," she said. "You'll have to meet her..."

Oops, Maria thought. Another boundary stumbled across. You're really 'friends' when you start introducing a guy into your circle, aren't you?

“She signed up on some kind of registry and so did her birth mother. They met last year; it was like a new world opening up for Cath – a whole tribe of half brothers and sisters she never knew existed. I’m not saying she hasn’t struggled with it, but on balance it’s been a positive experience.”

He had become a darkness within the darkness, a gravity that absorbed light.

“I don’t usually tell people about my grafted genealogy,” he said.

She glanced at him inquisitively.

“It’s not that I’m ashamed or anything...”

“What then?”

She touched his arm. He flinched as if he’d been nudged by a wet nose.

“I’m afraid of what I might find in my *before-times* I guess. I have absolutely no recollection of life before the Dalys.”

Maria frowned. His skittishness alarmed her. She felt as if she was chasing him down a rabbit hole into an M.C. Escher maze, where stairways turned in on themselves and morphed into infinite loops.

“How old were you when you were adopted?” she asked suddenly.

“About five.”

“And you have no recollection...”

“None.”

“So what is your first recollection, Victor?”

He hesitated. She thought he might not be able to go on.

“I remember waking up in a hospital room. A nurse was there with me. She stroked my hair. Imagine what it’s like to be a frightened, lost dog, who’s been abandoned on a country road and hit by a car. Along comes a stranger, a woman, who coaxes the dog back to life... that’s my first memory on this planet, waking up in a hospital bed. I am one of those few people who remembers the day he was born.”

“And the time before that?”

“The dog doesn’t have any conscious recollections of the time-before.”

She waited for him to continue...

“I’ve been told I was hit by a car on a country road in Langley. Knocked unconscious. My parents had to tell me that much to explain the total amnesia concerning the time before. I’ve read that part of my story in the newspapers of the day, but it’s like I’m reading about somebody else. I don’t have any real memories of that night, or the time before.”

Victor paused again, letting what he’d said sink in.

“In that sense *I am* like a dog Maria. A dog doesn’t hold memories of the events in its life like we do. It knows there’s places and things it’s afraid of - phobias it can’t explain – but it doesn’t associate its fears with any tangible memories.”

“But they’re etched into the circuitry of his brain, right?” Maria probed. “They affect him even though he’s not aware. If he ever sees his former master. for instance, he’ll recognize him at some level. Maybe he’ll wag his tail, maybe he’ll cower, maybe he’ll bare his teeth, but he’ll recognize him won’t he?”

“Maybe that’s why he never wants to meet the guy,” Victor concluded.

“Never?”

He out waited her this time, clamming up for good Maria figured. “Sorry. I’m nosey,” she said.

“I wanted you to know this,” he responded quietly. “But I can’t really take you on a guided tour of my personal *Neverland* because I can’t get back there myself – and it’s not likely a place of childish fantasies. That part of me resides in a different universe.”

“Could your parents have died in a crash or something?”

“No. I was abandoned on a country road in Langley, like an unwanted puppy.”

Maria let go. If their friendship deepened, they would talk again, but for now they had both learned more than enough to walk on in silence.

~

Part of him was relieved; part afraid. As his adoptive parents Richard and Nora knew about the break in his genealogical record, of course. And Larry. But no-one else. The official story must have been documented in a yellowing folder in a locked cabinet somewhere. Let it molder. He, Nora and Richard had agreed tacitly to forget. No pillars held up the arched ceiling of the Vatican; no strings supported the laboured flight of a

jumbo jet; there was no cornerstone at the foundation of Victor Daly's life. Every question didn't need an answer.

So what is it about this woman that makes me want to explain everything about myself? he wondered.

They walked on, the lights of the West End glimmering insistently through the trees. Victor wanted to find some sequence of words to unlock their silence, but nothing came. *I've said too much already*, he decided...

What was that!

Startled, he peered into the darkness toward to a clump of bushes next to the Stanley Park Lawn Bowling Club. A fleeting movement had broken the thread of his deliberations, something darting through the plane of his vision with what seemed to be intent. It might have been his imagination, so ephemeral was the disturbance. Or perhaps a nocturnal creature taking refuge in a thicket.

"What?" Maria sensed his alarm.

"I thought I saw something near the bushes over there – probably a raccoon."

"Don't you try to scare me mister!" she objected.

"I'm not!" he protested, raising his arms in mock surrender. He was about laugh it off, but checked himself when he saw how frightened she was.

"I'm sorry, Maria," he said. "Let's get out of here."

"I'm a bag of nerves," she confessed miserably. "He's getting to me, there's no denying it."

Victor had taken her arm and was pointing her back along the path toward the Fish House, when a series of muffled pops sounded from the direction they had been looking. A dark stain burst on the front of Maria's dress. Then another. And another.

"No!" Victor yelled, leaping in front of her. She screamed, a feral cry of outrage and fear. Victor hustled her across Stanley Park Drive, toward the embankment down to the Sea Wall. Smack, smack, smack... three rounds slammed into his back as he shoved her down the slope and tumbled after her, the stream of fire ricocheting through the leaves and branches around them.

By the time they came to rest, the shooting had stopped. Victor scrambled back up the embankment, afraid the killer might be approaching to finish them off. "Run Maria,"

he bellowed over his shoulder. “Get the hell out of here!” Peering into the darkness over the crest of the embankment, he caught sight of a shadowy figure fleeing between the trees. He lunged forward to give chase, then stopped.

Maria!

Spinning, he charged back down the embankment to where he’d left her, sitting at the edge of the seawall pavement. She slumped forward, her shoulders heaving. “The fucking bastard!” she howled. “Fucking bastard!” her voice carrying over the black expanse of English Bay.

He knelt beside her. How could she still be sitting, breathing, cursing her fate? It didn’t make any sense. He placed his hands on her shoulders and pushed back gently to examine her wounds. Three spatters were tacked down the front of her dress.

Paintballs! They were shooting fucking paintballs!

“Thank God!” Victor cried. “I thought... Thank God!” He hugged her.

Maria submitted for a moment then shoved him away. “Let’s get the hell out of here,” she said, scrambling to her feet.

“But...”

“Come on. We need to get away before the cops show up.”

Confused, he trotted along beside her. She brushed some of the twigs and dirt from the front of her dress, then clambered back up the embankment to Stanley Park Drive, Victor in pursuit. “You’re not going to call the police?” he demanded.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it would only push us closer to the tipping point,” she shot back. “He’s upped the ante, Victor, and if I go to the police I’ll be upping it, too. Besides, I’m not going to give the bastard the satisfaction of a police file with our names in it.”

“But...”

“End of discussion!” she shouted, turning on him.

“Whoa! Okay,” he raised his hands.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed. “But I’m scared, and I’m thinking what we did tonight was stupid. Laurence knows about us now...”

“Knows what?” he protested feebly.

“I need to clean up,” she said, walking on. “Can we make a pit stop at your place.”

“Sure,” he agreed. Then Victor remembered the photos – Rick, Pauline and their predecessors, populating his own private gallery in all their naked glory. He sighed. How would he explain *that*?

~

The elevator doors rumbled open and they stepped into the marble foyer. Behind the door TooBee barked and scrabbled frantically. Victor fumbled with his keys, hurrying to get in. “Quiet Toob!” he shouted, grabbing the dog and picking him up. TooBee squirmed and wriggled, licking at Victor’s face for one second then twisting round to bark at Maria the next. She frowned.

“You need to take that creature to obedience school,” she advised.

“We failed,” Victor answered glumly.

“Stop it!” Maria chastised.

TooBee cocked his head and looked at her as if she’d uttered something obscene in his own Jack Russell dialect. He barked complainingly.

“Enough! Bad dog!”

“Ms. Chalmers says there’s no such thing as a bad dog, only a bad master.”

“Who’s Ms. Chalmers?”

“She’s the Principal of The Come, Sit, Heel Academy of Canine Manners,” Victor explained glumly. “She expelled me and the Toob after three weeks. We were ruining her record and making a mockery of her philosophy...”

Maria laughed at the pair of them, the quizzical looks on their faces only making her laugh harder. TooBee glanced at Victor, desperate for some type of explanation for the bossy female who had just entered their lives. It almost seemed as if the dog was saying: ‘She’s one of your kind, you tell me what’s going on here.’

Victor smiled bravely.

“I’m sorry,” Maria gasped.

“No you’re not.”

“But you’re just so... *funny*, the two of you.”

“I like making you laugh,” he said bravely. “Is that okay?”

Bingo! Direct hit! You bastard, she thought. You and that stupid dog.

“Of course it’s not okay,” he answered for her. “You’re a married woman, with a kid to take care of and a lunatic husband to avoid. You don’t need a confessed weirdo and his unruly dog complicating your life. Especially when that confessed weirdo is reputed to be your lawyer. Do you want a drink?”

“Confessed weirdo?”

“Well... frustrated artist if you need a suitable synonym. Take a look round, you’ll see.” He turned and headed for what she took to be the kitchen. “Scotch okay?” he asked over his shoulder, disappearing around the corner.

“That’d be fine,” she answered. Then she noticed the framed photographs lining the hallway in both directions. His apartment was an art gallery of sorts, the collection crowding every plausible space in an orderly progression. Maria peered at the frame directly in front of her, unable to make the image out. She had to restrain a little trill of amazement when the image resolved into a recognizable pattern of skin and hair: it was the base of a human penis standing erect in the rolling, wrinkled landscape of a scrotum.

“I warned you,” he called from the kitchen, amid the tinkle of ice cubes. “I don’t usually allow clients to view my collection. Not good for business.”

“You took these?”

“Guilty,” he confessed. “That’s Richard, you’re looking at. Self-styled Richard the Great. A bit of an air-head, but he makes up for it with his Grecian physique. I’ll introduce you to him someday and become instantly jealous.”

A breast cupped in a caressing hand; a face contorted in ecstasy; tongues touching. Maria moved from portrait to portrait, intrigued by the gallery of carnal intertwining. The images merged into a sensual collage.

“They’re exquisite,” she said.

“Not everyone thinks so,” he cautioned, handing her a scotch and continuing down the hall. “A lot of people think they’re smut.”

“How dare they!”

She would never have considered herself a defender of erotic art, but the images didn’t strike her as obscene at all. They were... what would an art critic say... *powerful... powerful statements*. She was fascinated with the compositions, and vaguely uneasy with

her own envy. None of the exhibits in any of the pretentious galas Laurence had dragged her to had even come close to this.

We're meant to be portrayed this way, she thought. As minor gods.

Victor disappeared round the curving hall into what she took to be a bedroom, re-emerging with a bathrobe draped over his arm. "If you're not too shy, why don't you hand me your dress. I'll rinse the paint out and iron it dry." He gestured to the bathroom door. "Take a shower if you want."

She hesitated.

"Don't worry," Victor joked. "There's no peepholes or hidden cameras."

"You must think me a bit of a prude."

"Prude, short for prudent, which can also be considered a close relative of intelligent... yes, perhaps I do." He tilted his glass at her by way of a toast.

She blushed, unused to outright flattery.

"Careful," she warned. "A woman gets accustomed to high praises. Then what?"

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing less than the truth," he insisted.

Maria stepped into the bathroom. She slipped out of her dress and handed it to him from behind the door, which she then shut more firmly than she'd intended. She decided to take a shower after all. The attack in the park had left her feeling violated. Trust Laurence and his henchmen to come up with a perverse tactic like that. Her spirits sagged.

Then she remembered Victor hustling her down the embankment and giving chase to her assailants. *Such an unlikely hero!* But he *had* risked his life. A man who couldn't step into elevators without breaking a sweat, who called himself a solicitous solicitor for God's sake! She eased herself into the steaming pulse of water and let out a grateful sigh.

To Maria it seemed like more than the mud and twigs of the evening's atrocities were being washed away; a whole lifetime of dirt and neglect was dissolving under the stinging jets.

"Damn it!" she resisted. "God damn it!"

She looked down at her own breasts, at the smooth curve of her belly, then beyond to her thighs and feet. The water streamed over her skin. What would it be like to touch *and be touched* as if love were a species of ballet, hands, tongues, toes exploring the tingling

limits of ecstasy. Wasn't that the greatest gift true lovers could share – the physical expression of joy?

And had Victor really captured that in his photos?

What would it be like to have him take a photograph of me? she wondered... then, *Who would take that picture?*

~

She's seen my pictures. "Good," he said out loud. *That's good.*

What's more, she seems to like them. "Even better," he said.

"How's it coming along," she called down the hallway.

"Ready in a minute!"

He'd washed her dress by hand, bunching it so only the stained areas got wet, then squeezing out the moisture as best he could. *Destroying evidence*, he thought, but didn't care. Now he worked the iron quickly, nudging its prow between the pleated fabric, pressing hard. But before he could finish, Maria padded into the dining room.

"Not perfect, but it'll do," he said, holding the garment up for inspection.

She examined it, wincing. There were still faint splotches where the paintballs had exploded "Thank you," she said.

"It's ruined, isn't it?"

"I just didn't want Aaron to see me looking like somebody's bingo card if he wakes up. After tonight this dress goes into the garbage."

"No it's doesn't!" he commanded. "Keep it in your closet. Just in case it's needed as evidence. And don't ever tell anyone it was me who washed the stains out, okay?"

She reached over the kitchen counter to take it from him and their hands touched. Just for an instant, but an instant longer than necessary. They stared at one another defiantly.

"I really don't want 'us' to happen," she said.

"I know you're not going to believe me, but I don't either. Honest."

"But it's too late, right," she responded more snidely than she'd intended.

He grinned. "Cold showers and vigorous exercise. That's the ticket."

They laughed.

"Seriously. What are we going to do?"

Victor shrugged, thinking how exquisite it would be to take a picture of the sharp boundary between his bath robe and the elegant curve of her neck. He wanted to kiss her there – feel the electricity of his lips shiver down her spine.

“I’m not going to stop seeing you, if that’s what you’re asking. Not unless you insist. Maybe not even unless you get a court injunction.”

“Will you represent me on that?”

He laughed, but winced at the same time.

~

“Good thing you’ve got flexible childcare,” Cathy yawned, swinging her legs off the sofa and sitting up groggily.

“Thanks Cath,” Maria said, kicking off her shoes. “How was the little rascal?”

“Best date I’ve had in years,” Cathy grinned. “Handsome, polite and only interested in what’s up here.” She tapped the side of her head.

“Yeah, well give him a couple of years, honey. That will change.”

“So how was *your* date?”

“It was an eventful meeting...”

“Okay! I *really* like him!” she confessed when Cathy stared at her the same way you would at a waiter who’s forgotten the cutlery.

“So what’s the matter with that. You look like you just swallowed a gallon of Buckley’s cough medicine.”

“I don’t want to *really* like him!” Maria wailed.

“Oh. That *is* a problem, I’m sure.”

“Besides, he’s... uhm... strange.”

“He’s a man. What did you expect. Some are better, some worse, but all their brains are pickled.”

“It’s not that, Cath,” Maria laughed. “He’s a gentleman, too – I mean a gentle man. He loves me. He came right out and almost-said so... on our first date... it wasn’t even a date, for Christ’s sake, it was supposed to be a sort of business dinner...”

“Oh come on!” Cathy hooted.

“Okay, okay,” Maria surrendered. “So I knew that was a ruse, I just had no idea how deep he would go on the first dive.”

Cathy smirked. “What do you mean ‘he’s strange’. Not as strange as your last date I hope. Or at least not as strange in the same ways.”

Maria felt her face pucker into a frown. “I’ve already told you about his thing with elevators.”

Cathy nodded.

“Then there’s this little tick he has when you touch him...”

“You touched him!” Cathy shrieked.

“Well, yes. Incidental touching, shall we say. In the park and going up the elevator to his apartment...”

“You went to his place!”

“Well, yes. I had to get cleaned up a bit...”

“Cleaned up! What were you doing, rolling around in the bushes?”

They laughed, leaning into each other like a couple of school girls. “No!” Maria gasped. “Well, yes, actually. I’ll tell you that part later, but you should see his place, Cath. It’s magnificent. It looks right out on False Creek and he’s got it done up like something you’d see in an interior design magazine. You can tell he thinks about everything before he buys. And neat! Holy smokes, not a coaster out of place.”

“What’s so strange about that. Were you expecting to find underpants hanging from the lampshades, empty pizza boxes under the sofa? Maybe he’s gay. They tend to be more finicky.”

Maria shook her head. “It’s what’s hanging on the walls that’s strange.” She described Victor’s collection of photos, feeling more than a bit squeamish putting what she’d seen into words.

“Erotic art, right? Not porn?” Cathy wanted to know.

“It’s gorgeous. I’ve never been a fan of the genre, but his stuff is so sensuous, so dignified. You have to see it.”

“I’d like to,” Cathy said thoughtfully. “Sounds pretty amazing.” She paused, then asked, “Has he ever exhibited?”

Maria shrugged.

“Surely someone with that kind of talent would have mounted a show or two. I’ll have to consult Dr. Google.”

Again, Maria shrugged.

Then Cathy noticed the stains on Maria's dress. She craned forward, gawking. "Miss your mouth or something?" she asked. "Looks like shrimp cocktail."

"That's what I've been putting off telling you about Cath," Maria said, stiffening. "Laurence struck again. That makes twice in one week."

Dumbstruck, Cathy listened intently as Maria described what had happened. "Holy shit!" she gasped. "He's really dialing it up Maria. You've got to go to the police. I mean, how long before his goons start firing real bullets?"

"It would be a waste of time going to the cops, Cath." Maria repeated tiredly. "There's no way they could link this to Laurence. It could have been a random incident – kids with nothing better to do. I know different and so do you, but Laurence would laugh the cops off his property if they ever confronted him with this."

"Yeah, but wouldn't it be worth-while building up a record? Isn't there something called 'cumulative evidence'? You get smarmy phone calls. My place gets trashed. You get assaulted in Stanley Park. There's a pattern of accelerating violence here. Maybe even go for a restraining order? Push back Mar. Push hard."

"Restraining order!" Maria scoffed. "Even if I could get one, do you think some judge's order is going to stop Laurence from doing whatever the hell he wants? How often have you read in the news about some poor woman being murdered by her stark-raving ex against the wishes of the court? Like I said, going to the cops would only up the ante – and get my name linked to Victor's as more than a client. Laurence would love that. In his twisted mind it would be just cause for pushing things even farther. He's enjoying himself Cath. Don't you see? He really gets off on this crap."

"Then what *are* you going to do?" Cathy demanded angrily.

"I'm going to look for places to run and hide. Bide my time. See if an opportunity opens up. I don't know..." Her voice trailed off into silence.

"What about Victor? Can't he help? He practices family law for God's sake. He must have run into situations like this before."

"There's not much he can do unless Laurence steps into the open," Maria sighed. "As long as the asshole shoots from cover and uses proxies, it's going to be really hard to prove anything. He's made a career of this, remember..."

She was going to leave it at that, but the phone rang and she knew it would be Laurence this time.

“The fucker even makes the phone ring differently,” she moaned.

Cathy grabbed the handset off the coffee table before Maria could get to it. “Hello?” she barked.

“Maria’s gone to bed,” she said coolly.

“No, Laurence, I won’t wake her up.”

“I don’t care if it’s a fucking emergency, it can wait.”

“I’m just visiting. My place needed a makeover, so Maria said I could stay here. Sort of like an adult sleep-over.”

“Well, it’s really been nice chatting Laurence, but I’m missing my beauty sleep, so if you don’t mind, I’ll say good night.”

“Yes. I’ll tell her you called.”

“Prick!” she exploded, punching the end call button. “If he calls again, I’m gonna yank the phone cable out of the wall, Mar. This is god-damn ridiculous.”

“Thanks hun,” Maria smiled, hugging her friend.

“No problem,” Cathy grinned. “I kind of like needling the bastard...”

“Okay! I know,” she conceded when Maria frowned. “Don’t tease the tiger. But sometimes you have to let him know you’re not going to roll over and play dead, don’t you?”

“Oh, he knows we’re alive, Cath,” Maria said. “The bastard knows every move we make, times everything to his best advantage. Christ, he might even be listening in on our conversation right now.”

“Let’s not get carried away, Mar!”

“Windows vibrate. Houses reveal their secrets, for those who’ve got the right technology, my friend. He knew when to trash your place; knew Victor and me would be dining in Stanley Park; knows when Aaron’s at daycare and what route we follow to get there; he’s mapping our every move, Cathy. Believe me.”

“Then let’s shut up and go to bed. He can listen to me snore for a while.”

~

At least once a month, Victor went for dinner at his parents' place in East Vancouver. Richard and Nora Daly had grayed since he'd left home; they both walked with a slight stoop, and seemed on the verge of doddering. Wrinkles, liver spots, cataract, *the curses of the living dead* (as his father put it), were beginning to shrivel their looks and their prospects.

"Why don't you guys retire early?" he asked once. "You've put in enough time by now to collect a pretty hefty pension between the two of you."

"Retire!" Richard yelled. "Why would we want to do that?"

"Why not?"

"Our work isn't finished yet. I, for one, am not ready to wash up on some tropical beach to spend the rest of my days sipping rum and cokes, playing golf and baking like a stuffed Christmas turkey. What about you dear?"

"I don't think that's exactly what Victor envisioned, honey," Nora laughed. "But, as you've put it like that, no, I'm not ready for retirement either. I love my kids."

They'll be NDP 'til their dying days, Victor grinned, zipping through a yellow at Terminal and Clark, heading up First Avenue. They believed in workers' rights, robust social programs, universal health and dental care, free education from the cradle to the grave... and in their only adopted son, *despite his disappointing penchant for penthouses, fast cars and erotic art*.

He gunned the Porsche, nipping into the gap in front of an old lady puttering up the hill toward Commercial Drive. He glanced in the rear view mirror. The old bird in her hulking Buick hadn't even noticed his nifty maneuver. *Nobody loses*, he supposed: those with quick wits and reflexes worked the interstices and seams to gain an edge; the jostling herd lumbered along at its accustomed pace, unaffected. His parents frowned on that sort of 'aggressive' thinking – Nora would have scolded if she'd been sitting in the passenger seat.

From anyone other than his parents, he would have brushed off that kind of disapproval as a species of envy.

Right onto Commercial, south to McSpadden, left down to the end of the street and he was home. It still felt like home, even though he'd been on his own for 15 years. And it still was *his* room up in the dormered attic – same squeaky bed, chipped chest of

drawers, cramped desk. *Why don't they redecorate?* he wondered, pulling up to the curb. Maybe he'd try to persuade them again. It was creepy, having his old room preserved like a museum.

Nora looked up from the flowerbed at the foot of the front porch as he crossed the sidewalk. "Well, look who the wind blew in!" she waved, hoisting herself up from her knees. She might have been a missionary in some disturbed corner of the world, maintaining her sense of tranquility and decorum by nurturing an English garden amid the mayhem.

"Hi Mom," he smiled.

They hugged.

"Where's Dad?"

"Barefoot and in the kitchen," she bragged. "It's his turn at the stove."

"Then I'd better get in there and offer moral support to my half of the species!"

"Moral support!" she shrieked. "You roll up those designer sleeves, young man, and get your hands in the soup. I didn't raise my boy to be a mealy-mouthed chauvinist, paying lip service to the cause of woman's equality." She brandished her trowel dangerously.

"All right! All right!" he retreated into the house. "Hey Dad!" he shouted from the vestibule. "I've been ordered to join you on KP duty."

"In here son," Richard called from the kitchen. Wiping his hands on his candy-striped apron, he hugged Victor hard, once – a masculine clutch-and-release. "You're looking good," he said.

"You mean I haven't added any paunch since you saw me a couple of weeks ago?" Victor feigned surprise. "I guess my fitness program is paying off."

"Fitness program?"

"Two beers a day, minimum. And lift your elbow off the arm of the couch for each swig. Extend your arm out in front of you when switching channels with the remote – gain that little extra shot of cardio. Raise your head off the cushion every now and again for a look round. Work those neck muscles. That sort of thing.

Richard chuckled. "Come on," he said. "You do the carrots, I'll continue with the potatoes. We're going to have a chowder the likes of which has never been tasted outside

the sacred precincts of Nantucket, home made bread, some of my favorite Australian white wine, and side dishes of absolutely perfect asparagus, drizzled with butter and lemon... yes, real butter. Mum and I had it out in the grocery store dairy aisle. I prevailed.”

Before he began chopping, Victor swung open the fridge door and grabbed a beer. “The fitness regimen is never broken, even for away-games,” he said, twisting the top off and tilting the bottle to his lips. “Want one?”

“Yeah. Why not,” Richard agreed. “But you know I really mean it, you’re looking good.”

Victor handed him a beer and nodded. “Thanks Dad,” he said, then they got down to business, their knives clacking in unison at the kitchen counter.

~

Cathy couldn’t help making comparisons: her trashed apartment in Kitsilano, the mausoleums of West Vancouver; her crappy little Toyota, the gleaming limos of the ultra-rich; her dumpy body, the spandex tigresses loping long Marine Drive.

“*If I had a million dollars...*” the Barenaked Ladies insinuated themselves into her thoughts. She hummed along mindlessly, then laughed when she recognized the tune. Slowing, she waited for a string of eastbound cars to pass, then zipped through a gap in the oncoming traffic, entering the cloistered calm of Laurence Selkirk’s neighbourhood. The Taj occupied a waterfront hillside off Erwin Drive, which did a circuit through a pod of mansions east of Lighthouse Park. She’d visited the place four or five times over the years, reluctantly accepting Maria’s invitations to Laurence’s snooty soirees. More recently she’d resisted. “I always feel like swinging from the chandeliers or knocking over one of Laurence’s precious vases when I’m there,” she’d complained. “I can’t stand it, Mar! It’s stifling.” So they’d shifted venues from West Van to girls’-nights-out in Kits, or downtown, or... *wherever, darlink – it’s the company that’s important, not where you keep it.*

Cathy thought she’d seen the last of the place, but here she was back at the gate, having asked for a little tête-à-tête with the man himself. Laurence had been mildly surprised and highly suspicious when she’d insinuated an invitation out of him.

“And to what would I owe the pleasure of your company?” he’d asked over the phone, in that deliberately smarmy way of his.

“Oh, I thought we might talk about our mutual circle of friends,” she’d answered breezily. “You know, catch up on a bit of gossip, compare notes. It’s been so long since I’ve visited The Taj, I’ve forgotten what an uncluttered, architecturally proportioned household should look like.”

He hated it when they called his mansion ‘The Taj’. Cathy smiled, remembering how his bristling energy had crackled up the telephone line. “My apartment is such a shambles right now,” she’d continued, “a little visit to your place might give me some ideas on how to redecorate.”

“Come on now, Cathy,” he sighed grandly. “Let’s be serious, shall we. Why do you want to see me? I mean, we’re not best-of-friends, you and I. Has Maria put you up to it?”

“Sometimes we do things for our friends they don’t know anything about.”

“What kind of things?”

“Act as intermediaries, for instance.”

“Why would you want to act as an ‘intermediary’ for Maria? She’s perfectly capable of acting on her own, isn’t she?”

“I think she’s afraid of you, Laurence.”

“Afraid! Why should she be afraid?”

“Anyone who would do the kind of damage that was done to my apartment must be pretty pissed off...”

“What are you talking about?” he asked blandly.

“Oh! I thought you might have heard. But I suppose the trials and tribulations of little people like me don’t often make it through your info-filters – unless we end up murdered or something like that – so how *would* you know? Somebody hired a wrecking crew to do some interior decorating at my place: tip drawers, slash upholstery, that sort of thing. Anyway, that’s not what I’m phoning about. I’m phoning to see if there’s any way I can help Maria...”

“I don’t see how...”

“Like I said, maybe I could act as a sort of intermediary.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“A little bird that flits back and forth between the two of you with tokens of hope, like a dove landing on the rail of Noah’s arc.”

“No need to be facetious,” he said, his tone conciliatory. The seconds ticked anxiously by, then suddenly he agreed. Beyond her most deluded expectations, he’d agreed! *Did he really have any choice?* she asked in retrospect, pulling up outside the Taj’s gate. Then, *What the fuck am I doing?* She punched the intercom button, which was positioned at window level on a metal post.

“Yes?” a dignified voice inquired after a suitable pause.

“Cathy Vermeer. I’m expected.”

“Please come in,” Laurence’s ‘man’ Gordon said, his voice formal as an undertaker’s.

The gate rolled aside and she drove around a concealing outcropping of landscaped rock along the circular drive to the Taj’s front entrance. Like most West Vancouver mansions, the Taj was oriented toward the ocean. Because the land sloped away, the building appeared modest from its street side. Laurence’s architect had capitalized on this limitation by blending the entrance into its environment - a perfunctory and uninspired nod to Frank Lloyd Wright Cathy judged.

The mansion’s carved wooden door swung open as she wrestled herself out of her Toyota. *Got your metal detector tuned to extra sensitive?* she joked nervously, rounding the car and crossing the expansive, cobbled drive. Gordon gestured pompously, then led her through the foyer – a marbled balcony – then down a sweeping staircase into a reception area. “Mr. Selkirk will be with you momentarily,” the valet said, inviting her to take a seat in a leather chair next to the fireplace. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

Cathy shook her head. “No thank you,” she said.

As soon as Gordon had whisked himself away, she catapulted out of the chair. Positioning herself in the centre of the room, she circled through 360 degrees, taking it all in. Then she walked over to the glass wall that looked out over English Bay, moving her body so the micro-lens disguised as a button on her jacket’s breast pocket would capture the panorama. The data from this maneuver was being transmitted down a wire, into a slim digital camera. The images would be grainy and jerky. But that would only add to

the effect. She imagined the scene alternating with flashes of her vandalized apartment... It could work.

“Hello Cathy!” Laurence approached jauntily.

“Laurence,” she gave his extended hand a curt pump, letting it go as quickly as possible, as if it were a dead rat.

“It’s a great view, isn’t it?” he said, gesturing toward the expanse of English Bay out beyond his patio. “I enjoy it too – every morning – until I remember how much I paid for it.” He laughed icily as they turned from the window, heading back into the stern elegance of the armchairs. “So perhaps you can elaborate a little on this mediation proposal of yours,” he was saying.

He ushered her toward the armchair, but Cathy refused the invitation to sit. Instead, she opened a wallet-sized purse slung from her shoulder on a skinny strap, and pulled out a wad of photos, which she held up for him. “I thought you might like to see these,” she said, keeping her voice bright with sarcasm.

He scowled, looking at the first from the series she’d taken in her gutted apartment. “Are you here to harass me, or to help Maria?” he demanded.

“This one’s my living room,” Cathy ignored him, shuffling to another photo. She positioned herself so his head would be dead centre in the camera, a maneuver she’d practiced with an artist-friend. The photos were ordered so she could cut them into a video sequence of his reactions.

“Quite the makeover. You can see how they’ve added swatches of colour in a random composition all over the walls. I’m most impressed with the avant-garde approach they’ve taken, breaking the conventional boundary between wall surfaces and furniture. Spraying over the TV screen was quite a statement, I thought.”

“Enough!” he commanded. “Get out of here now or I’ll have you thrown out...”

“See the decorative slashes, releasing the inner content of my sofa cushions...”

“Get out!” he shouted. He didn’t move to stop her, though, or to leave. Laurence Selkirk just stood there and glared, gloating, Cathy thought. Just what she’d expected. *Arrogant bastard.*

She flipped to the next photo. “This is the sanctum sanctorum, my bedroom. My place of fantasies, dreams and occasional close encounters. The makeover crew went for

a distinctly wild and rumpled look here, adding more identifiably personal touches to the themes of random wall-colouring and slashing. See how they emptied my dresser drawers and harmonized my wardrobe with its altered milieu. Quite ingenious, don't you think?"

A hand clamped round her arm like a vice, yanking her away from Laurence, who continued to regard her with a smile both bitter and contemptuous.

"Get her out of here," he ordered in a precise, dismissive tone. "Make sure she's right off the property."

She let the photos drop to the floor as she was pulled away and steered forcefully in the direction of the staircase. She tried wrenching her arm free, but Laurence's bodyguard yanked her straight and growled, "Just walk with me ma'am and everything will be okay. I'm going to escort you to your car then I will see you off the property, do you understand?"

"Do you do home decorations?"

"Once you are off the property, I will ask you to leave the area. Mr. Selkirk's house and its approaches are monitored 24/7. Do you understand?"

She glanced up at her handler. He was a beefy character in a casual jacket and slacks. Sandy blond hair, cut short. Angular features. Handsome in a Sears catalogue sort of way. She walked obediently in his grip across the cobblestone apron to her car.

"Do you ever ask yourself why you work for someone like Laurence Selkirk?" she wondered out loud, getting in.

"Don't come back," he warned, leaning over the opened door. "I don't want to see you again, ma'am; and if you've got half a brain, you will use it to avoid seeing me." He slammed the door and stepped back, motioning her to drive off.

~

After dinner, the news. He hardly ever watched any other time, but *The National with Peter Mansbridge* was part of Richard and Nora's routine, so Victor caught up in monthly installments. He eased into his end of the living room sofa, letting the chowder and asparagus settle while – as Richard had once observed – *a distillate of current events, as selected by a racially, gender balanced and career savvy crew of middle class commentators* was delivered.

"They never get it right," Richard complained from his matching armchair.

At the far end of the sofa, Nora sighed dramatically and rolled her eyes.

“Then why watch Dad?”

“When you’re in the desert, you drink muddy water.”

Victor laughed. There had been a time when his parents’ eccentricities had embarrassed him. But age and distance had transmuted criticism into a species of amused pride. He saw Richard and Nora as steadfast champions of a better world, who held fast to their ideals despite the obvious. They seemed to believe lust and greed were aberrations – that the nihilistic bent of human nature could be educated out of us if only enough money was devoted to the cause.

Peter Mansbridge finished listing the top stories of the day: Iraq, of course, and Afghanistan. The price of gas. Global warming and rising sea levels. And so on. “Tonight we conclude our *Missing Persons* series with a story out of Abbotsford, British Columbia,” he was saying. “Police there have kept open the file on a young woman who vanished without a trace more than three-and-a-half decades ago. Crystal Doer’s parents left the 16 year old at home alone, when they went to church that morning in August, 1972. They never saw their daughter again...”

A photograph of Crystal Doer flashed onto the screen.

Victor jolted forward. “I know her,” he gasped.

“What?” Richard shouted over the din of the television.

“Nothing, Dad,” Victor answered, shrinking back from the screen, confused.

Stupid! he thought. *How can I possibly know a girl who was probably dead before I was born?* It didn’t make sense. But there was no denying he had seen Crystal Doer’s face before – or one remarkably similar.

Nora, sitting next to him on the sofa, gave Victor a worried look. “You mean she looks like someone you know?” she suggested.

“Yeah,” he quickly agreed.

That must be it.

“Let’s switch it off,” Nora said during the commercial break, just before the missing persons item was to air. “It’s depressing.”

Richard looked puzzled.

“Well, I’m going to pour myself a cup of tea,” she announced grumpily, leaving them just as Peter Mansbridge introduced the feature segment.

“Thirty-five years ago, on August 13, 1972, Albert and Barbara Doer said good-bye to their 16 year old daughter Crystal and left for church. They’d had a dispute with the girl, and the fact haunts them to this day. They wanted Crystal to go with them, but their daughter was in a rebellious mood and refused. They were angry when they left and concerned about the behaviour of their *little girl*. They closed the door behind them and never saw Crystal again. She simply vanished, leaving a gaping hole in their troubled lives. Here’s Natalie Clancy with their heart-wrenching story...”

The scene switched from the Toronto studio to the front lawn of an anonymous bungalow. Natalie Clancy stared into the camera for a moment, as if she didn’t know it was switched on, then started talking. “For thirty-five years the Doers have been waiting for their daughter to come home. The church-going family lives in this modest bungalow in Abbotsford, BC, the same house their daughter disappeared from so many years ago. They still haven’t gotten over the pain of losing her.”

As she cued the clip, the image transitioned to the Doer’s dining room. The graying couple sat on the far side of a mahogany table, holding up a picture of their daughter. A strip label identified them as Albert and Barbara Doer. “We’re still waiting for her to come through that front door,” Albert said grimly. “In our hearts she’s never left. We know she’s out there somewhere and we’re hoping that maybe she’ll see this and give us a call. That would be the happiest day of our lives – if she’d only give us a call.”

“But no call has come,” Natalie Clancy cut back in. “And police have not been able to find a single clue into Crystal’s disappearance from this rural home. There were no reports of Crystal being spotted anywhere else that day, and there haven’t been any since. There was no sign of a struggle. No note to explain where Crystal had gone. Nothing. So hers has become one of the unsolved missing persons cases on file with police forces across Canada. With no clues to act on and little hope of finding any leads after thirty-five years, the Crystal Doer case has slipped into the bureaucratic limbo of unsolved mysteries – cases where police are not even sure a crime has been committed.

“The man in charge of the investigation, Inspector Kevin Hamilton, admits the trail is cold, but insists the file has not been closed.”

“We simply can’t say what happened to Crystal,” Inspector Hamilton explained sadly. “We don’t have any evidence to act on. A search was conducted at the time. Neighbours were interviewed, friends, teachers, coaches – anyone who might have had some information that would lead us to her. But we never got any leads. It’s hard for the parents.”

“Do you hold out any hope?”

“Someone, somewhere knows what happened to Crystal Doer, and we continue to hope that person will come forward. A show like this might jog somebody’s memory, and we urge people to give us a call if they remember anything from that day – anything at all”

Again, Crystal’s face peered out from the screen; again, Victor’s stomach tightened.

The image dissolved to a shot of Natalie Clancy touring the Doer property, the camera following along. “The Doer house is located in a rural neighbourhood on a quiet street. There are no houses for more than a hundred yards in any direction and the house faces a wooded area. Police won’t speculate about what might have happened here, but it’s not surprising there were no witnesses to Crystal’s final hours at home. There would have been few people around.

“Did she go for a walk? Somehow get lost? Was she picked up by someone?”

Albert Doer raised his hands in frustration, then let them fall. “We don’t know. We pray that she ran away. Hard as that would be to accept, it’s what we pray for, because that would mean she’s alive somewhere and can contact us when she feels it’s okay. That’s all we want, is to hear her voice again, see her smile. There’s not a day goes by I don’t want to hold her in my arms and say ‘I love you honey. I love you.’ But we’ve got nothing left except for pictures and memories.” His eyes moistened. Barbara Doer touched his arm gently.

“Jesus!” Richard sighed. “I can’t even begin to imagine.”

Natalie Clancy cut in, but Victor wasn’t listening. She was reeling off statistics and odds – stuff he didn’t want to hear. Albert Doer’s appeal troubled him. Confused, he tried to ward off a disturbing sense of responsibility for a man he didn’t know, whose daughter he couldn’t possibly have met.

“Well,” he announced, launching himself from the sofa. “Got to go.”

“So soon?” his mother pleaded, having returned from the kitchen with her tea.

“Yeah Mom. Busy day tomorrow.”

“You’re *too* busy these days,” she complained.

Richard and Nora shepherded him to the front door and watched from the porch as he climbed into his car and drove off. They smiled and waved, proud as always that he was *their* son. But – for a fleeting moment – he couldn’t help seeing a look of fear transform Nora’s features. She recovered quickly, almost before he’d caught it, but he knew she had recognized someone in Crystal Doer, too.

~

“What the hell!” Victor glanced left down First Avenue as he sailed through the intersection. He’d missed his turn. “Shit!” he grumbled. Rather than double back he continued along Commercial. He’d take a left at Venables, heading west from there.

Crystal Doer? What *was* it with her? He rummaged his memory for some plausible connection to the pretty young face he’d seen on TV... anything other than the obvious, the most plausible truth.

“No!” he resisted.

Could it be that she reminded him of someone he’d known at school: someone else’s girlfriend maybe, an unattainable prize shrouded and consigned to that vault where we banish our embarrassments, our memories of defeat? Or maybe she resembled a colleague or client, someone he’d only recognize in court, not out of legal context? Nothing cured the sense of certainty that had taken hold, though...

I knew her well.

Victor accelerated. The reflex of driving would distract him, the blur of parked cars, buildings, intersections.

How could a teenager disappear like that? And why? He sifted the available evidence for clues. *Did she run away? Was she abducted?*

Suddenly a pedestrian appeared in his windscreen, doddering out onto the street behind a stroller. Victor jammed on the brakes, pulling up just shy of the crosswalk. The codger gave him a dirty look. “Watch what your doing, you idiot!” the old man shouted, shaking his fist.

“Sorry!” Victor pleaded through the windshield.

As soon as his accuser cleared the front bumper, Victor popped the clutch, eager to get away.

Crystal Doer?

“Who is she?” he shouted. That’s what it all boiled down to. He wanted to avoid the question and its cascading permutations, but the memory of Crystal wouldn’t let him.

“Why?” Gripping the wheel, he sailed through the intersection at Venables.

“Shit!” Now he’d have to carry on to Hastings and make his way west from there.

What happened to her?

Abduction seemed unlikely. How could you grab a young woman from her home without leaving any signs of a struggle? *So let’s assume she left willingly*, Victor pushed his analysis. *Why would a sixteen year-old girl run from a loving home without even leaving a note?*

His thoughts focused instantly. Christian family; pretty, teenaged daughter. What did that add up to? *Secret lover?* Victor figured. *She had a boyfriend. Couldn’t confront her parents with it. She got pregnant. Afraid, ashamed, she had to cut and run. Thought of an abortion. Couldn’t do it. Or wanted to do it without them knowing?*

“August, 1972,” he said out loud. “Her child would have been born in the spring of ‘73 – maybe earlier.”

About my age?

“For Christ’s sake!” He thumped the steering wheel, jammed a CD into the disk drive and cranking it up. He careered through his turn at Commercial and Hastings, accelerating west, into the straight-away.

“This is fucking ridiculous!”

Why, then, had Nora reacted too? The sudden anguish in his stepmother’s face pained him... how he hated that word ‘stepmother’, but he couldn’t avoid it. Not now. Had to be precise. She must have seen it too – the resemblance between him and the enigmatic girl in the news. It wasn’t that they were identical, but there had been similarities about the eyes, the thin slightly upturned lips, the pudgy nose. You couldn’t escape the unsettling suspicion that he and the missing girl might be related.

“No!” he objected.

But the hunch wouldn't let go; it had rooted. It sucked the life out of his former notions of who he was and who he might turn out to be. *Fuck!* This possibility, this potential truth did not need light to grow, Victor realized. He could seal it up in a dark never-to-be-opened cell of his psyche and still, it would send out shoots. Rhizomes would burrow through the interstices of mind, insinuating their ways into the meaning of his life.

Even if Crystal Doer turned out to be a total, unrelated stranger, she had altered forever his frame of reference. He was no longer a man whose identity began with the given name Victor, ended with the surname Daly.

Stopped for a red light at Hastings and Main, he watched the perpetual intercourse in front of Carnegie Hall, diagonally opposite. Hookers, dealers, addicts, johns... the illicit business of the place went on at all hours in every kind of weather. These people, some barely recognizable as human, flocked from the warrens and grottos of the Downtown Eastside. They made deals to fuck, shoot up, rob. They swapped far-fetched dreams about winning lotteries, carrying off heists, making life-altering trades. They got sick and died, right there on the street.

Crystal Doer might inhabit a place like this. The thought rendered Victor inexpressibly sad. He slumped into the leather upholstery of his Porsche, might have stayed that way forever, except the light turned green, a car honked and his cell phone rang all at the same time. "Hello," he barked, accelerating through the intersection.

It was Maria.

~

"He called. Wanted to let me know *he knows everything*," Maria stammered, stumbling over her fury. "That I've been to your office, that it was you with me at dinner last night, everything! Jesus, Vic, it's not news, but I'm scared."

"What else did he say?"

"With Laurence it's not so much what he says as how he says it. He's a master at innuendo," she sighed. "He told me that he's contacted the best family lawyer in the city, and that he'll go that route if he has to. He asked what I was doing last night, and why I couldn't come to the phone... but really, he's not asking at all; he's telling me what he knows."

“Did he threaten you?”

“If you mean did he come right out and warn me to ‘stop seeing Victor Daly – on a professional or personal basis – or else’, no. He’s not stupid. But you better believe that is what he’s saying.”

He took a left at Carrall. Even as he talked Victor scanned the action in the little plaza opposite, where the dealers controlled their patches of sidewalk. They kibitzed and strutted like hyenas, creatures patrolling the capillary ends of a vast, parasitic economy that thrived on human addiction, misery, death.

“What do you think he might do?” Victor probed.

Silence.

“How do you think he’s getting his information?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “He’s tagged my vehicle, I guess; bugged my phone; got me under twenty-four hour surveillance... who knows? I’m calling from a pay phone, just to be on the safe side.”

“Where are you?”

“Starbucks, corner of Cypress and Cornwall.”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” he said punching the accelerator.

Traffic was light and he made Expo Boulevard in under a minute. Cutting right he gunned through the intersection, heading for Pacific and the Granville Street Bridge.

“We’ll get a security agency to do a sweep of your place for starters,” he said. “I know some people who are pretty good. If Laurence has you under surveillance, they’ll figure that out too.”

“Victor?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t pay for any of this.”

His turn to go silent.

“And will Laurence know what we’re up to?”

“If we start killing bugs he will,” Victor said. “But we don’t have any options at this point Mar...” His throat constricted, an inflection of intimacy choking off his words. He pushed through. “If it comes to it, I have access to a safe place you and Aaron can go.”

His words toppled into yet another silence.

“Do we have a choice?” he reasoned. “We either draw him into the open or give in to his tactics. A proceeding in Family Court might force his hand. You’ve got evidence of his philandering – that will be enough to get a divorce. You’ve also got evidence of his underworld dealings – I’d like to see it.”

“We’ll both be dead if he finds out,” she warned.

“I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

~

He pulled into the lot, climb out of his Porsche and sauntered into the coffee shop. It occurred to her that other patrons, watching his easy gait, wouldn’t know he had a care in the world. Catching her eye, he strode over to her table, leaned forward and hugged her. Maria didn’t object, but didn’t exactly encourage either, responding with what she would later characterize as ‘my rag doll hug’.

Bitch, she thought, blushing. His display of affection – solidarity really – was utterly guileless. How could she take exception? He pulled away and straddled the chair opposite, his legs splayed out in front of him, arms clasping the seat back.

Maria shook her head and laughed. “All you need is a ten gallon hat to fit that big head of yours into and you’d be perfect for the part,” she teased.

“Why, thank you ma’am.”

His relaxed display *did* have a calming effect, she had to admit.

“Where’s Aaron?” he wanted to know, suddenly serious.

“Cathy’s still camped out at my place. She’s paying her way in childcare credits and loving every minute of it.”

“Does she know what’s going on?”

“Oh yeah,” Maria nodded. “She knows.”

He scanned the parking lot and street outside. “Do you think anyone’s been following you?”

She shook her head.

“They might not be easy to spot. We’ll have your vehicle checked for location transmitters and your place for microphones. What about your mobile? Is it secure?”

Maria looked surprised.

“It could be transmitting your location to Laurence even as we speak. You’d never know it. Laurence could also be listening in on your calls. It can even be set to act like a microphone, picking up conversations in a room.”

She reddened. “How do you know all this shit?”

“In my profession even old dogs have to learn new tricks,” he grinned. “Protecting my clients’ interests means knowing how their privacy and security might be breached. Like I said, we need to get a pro in to do a sweep of your house and car. We also need to get you a new mobile with enhanced security.”

“I thought I was being so careful,” she said bitterly.

He leaned forward, his face inches from hers. “You’re my client now, Maria,” he informed her, “and we *are* going to be *very* careful. We’re going to figure out some way to make it safe for you and Aaron. I think we start in Family Court with an application for divorce seeking full custody and restricted access...”

“But you said yourself that wouldn’t work!”

“That will be our opening gambit,” he explained. “We might not be able to win, and his lawyers will probably come to that conclusion pretty quick. But they might not have the whole picture.”

“You mean the underworld stuff I told you about?”

“To begin with. We’ll see if we can dig up some more.”

“Dirt you mean? As if a bit of bad press or exposure is going to scare him off?”

Maria shook her head sadly. “I’m not sure I want to go ahead with this.”

“That’s okay,” he said. “Your call. But in the meantime, let me have a look at the stuff you have on Laurence. I’d really like to go over it, if you don’t mind.”

She took his hand. “You understand, don’t you... why I’m afraid?”

“It’s your show, Maria, but I’m not going away.”

She smiled doubtfully.

“Good. Now let’s get you home. I’m going to call a guy I know who will do a sweep of your place. If there’s anything there, he’ll find it.”

~

TooBee went through his usual antics, racing up and down the hall, pawing at Victor’s leg, barking. “Settle, man!” Victor grumped. “It’s only been a few hours.” He

placed the dossier Maria had given him on the counter top between the kitchen and dining room, bending down to pat the dog. “Okay,” he soothed. “Okay.” TooBee wriggled, panted and grunted, his claws clicking frantically on the hardwood.

Victor and Maria had gone over the thick sheaf of field reports from Don Pirelli, private investigator, and a hodge-podge of evidence Maria had ferreted out during her last months with Laurence. “These are duplicates,” she told him, handing the information over. “Like I said, a complete set is also stored in a safe deposit box, along with my final will and testament.”

The dossier sort of made things official. Pro bono of course, but nonetheless...

Victor sighed. All he had of Maria for the moment was a collection of evidence concerning her husband’s infidelities. There’d been plenty of opportunities to signal he wanted more: when they were walking in Stanley Park; at his apartment; even at Starbucks a few hours earlier. She would have allowed tokens of intimacy – a reassuring touch, lingering perhaps a moment too long; a glance that became too intense; hugs enhanced with fingertip trceries of spine...

Stop!

Stepping round the counter into the kitchen, he poured himself a scotch. “Inside Out,” he muttered. What would she think when publicity around his latest photo event hit the news? She’d appreciated the photos in his apartment, but that was pretty tame stuff.

Victor sighed again, then flipped open the dossier on Laurence Selkirk. PI Pirelli had logged a lot of hours. “That’s one of the perks of being hitched to a rich bastard,” Maria had quipped. “You get to use his own money to buy some high priced surveillance.” When Victor mentioned how difficult *and dangerous* it would have been to tail a guy like Laurence Selkirk, she shrugged. “I warned Vince,” she said, “but he didn’t seem fazed, said he had his ways.”

A man who likes his job, Victor figured, and who’s good at it, he guessed, judging by the tidy stack of reports.

He continued leafing through the chronology of Laurence Selkirk’s movements: his office downtown; the Vancouver Club; The William Tell with business associates... “Whoa!” Victor held up a photo of Laurence leaving what appeared to be a motel room. A second shot caught a young woman exiting the same room: #25, Kingsway Motor Inn.

“Jesus!” Victor sucked in the air between his teeth.

May 23, 3:34 p.m. Subject’s car parked eastbound on the street outside the Kingsway Motor Inn. Mr. Selkirk exited the vehicle, walked through the parking lot let himself into Unit #25. Exited the room at 4:05 p.m. alone and drove away. I figured there must have been someone in there with him and decided to wait and see if his companion would come out. At 4:09 p.m. a Yellow Cab #567 pulled up to the unit and shortly after a young woman (see photo 2006-05-23/16:10:21) exited the room and got into the cab. I decided to follow to see if I could determine who she was.

“Smart move,” Victor nodded.

The cab with Subject #2 inside proceeded west on Kingsway to King Edward, then continued west on King Edward to Angus Drive, then north to the intersection of Alexandra Street, where Subject #2 disembarked and entered a private property. Confirmed later that Subject #2 was Brittney Goddard, daughter of Hugh and Melinda Goddard, owners of Financial Ventures West...

“And one of the wealthiest and best connected families in Vancouver,” Victor murmured. *No wonder Selkirk doesn’t want this stuff turning up in court. Hugh Goddard wasn’t the kind of guy you wanted to piss off...*

The dossier contained three more shots of Brittney Goddard and Laurence Selkirk at the motel, all following the same pattern: him arriving, staying about half an hour, then leaving alone; her catching a cab after he’d gone. There were others, but Victor didn’t recognize any of them. It didn’t matter. There was more than enough evidence to prove Selkirk’s infidelity. But Pirelli didn’t stop there.

June 10, 2006: I approached the motel desk manager at 5:10 p.m. and asked if I could rent room #25. When she declined, I offered \$100 for a ‘10 minute stay’. She agreed. Entered room #25 at 5:16 p.m. Blankets and bedding were unmade. There were stains on the bottom sheet, which I swabbed. Detected a residue of white powder in a crack on the Formica surface of the night table. Collected a sample. Exited room at 5:23 p.m.

DNA analysis of swab is included in this file confirming the semen was Mr. Selkirk’s. The white substance collected from the night table was verified by laboratory analysis as cocaine.

Victor shut the dossier. There was more. Lots more. *It can wait*, he sighed, wearily. Even though he had seen many files like it, this one left him feeling soiled, as if absorbing its words somehow left a patina of filth inside his skin.

~

“So how does it feel living in a joint that has more bugs in its walls than the Cockroach Inn?”

Maria sighed, settling onto the other end of the sofa, which was long enough that they could both stretch their feet in front of them, facing each other with their backs against the puffy white arm cushions. “Infested,” she said glumly. “I feel infested. That bastard has a way of getting under your skin.”

“I’ve got you under my skin. I’ve got you deep in the heart of me...” Cathy crooned.

“Don’t be such a brat!”

“So deep in my heart you’re really a part of me. I’ve got you under my skin.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’ve got a voice like a strangled chicken?”

“Well, I suppose I don’t have a reason to trill quite so... uhm... melodiously as you. Romance really does add a certain charming ring to the human voice, especially to the female voice, don’t you think?”

“Oh, shut up and stop behaving like a snotty little sister,” Maria grouched.

“You wouldn’t be so short with me if you knew what I do about your paramour.”

“Paramour?”

“Well, maybe I’ve been a bit premature there. But I don’t doubt for a second that he *wants to be.*”

“For God’s sake, Cath,” Maria laughed. “What’s got into you? And what is this juicy tidbit you’re keeping from me?”

“I’ve been checking in with Dr. Google and he’s yielded quite a bit about our dear friend Victor Daly. I’m surprised you haven’t done the same. I’ve discovered he’s not only the city’s most highly sought after Family Court lawyer, he’s also...”

“A photographer...”

“An underground photo artist of superlative genius,’ is how the reviewers put it. ‘An iconoclast of prim and proper fashion. A hiker of Victorian skirts.’ Don’t know how I never heard of him. After all, I am a devotee of photo art.”

“I already told you about this,” Maria frowned. “Nothing surprising there.”

“Maybe not, but take a look at this.” She handed Maria a computer print out.

Daly exhibit to cross legal, moral Rubicons

Photo artist Victor Daly, whose day job is Family Court lawyer for the rich and famous of Vancouver, is going to put it all on the line next month with an exhibit called Inside Out, which promises to “break new artistic ground” and skirt dangerously close to breaking a few prudish laws.

Daly intertwines theatre and art in both the creation and display of his imagery. His shows are ephemeral installations. To see them in the absence of the opening night shenanigans is like peering at coral on a mantle – the structure is there, it’s compelling and beautiful, but you know something is missing. It’s become a record of fecund, pulsing life; but not the life itself.

I can’t say this without sounding kinky, but a Daly exhibit forces you to think of the physical form of the audience, how everyone around you would look in the buff. And that is especially so on his opening nights. You’re looking not only at the photos and the installation enactments, but through them at each other. It’s weird.

This is not voyeurism or anything even close to pornography. In his ‘environments’ you want to connect with your fellow humans, break down the barriers convention imposes. You want to ‘go native’ so to speak.

His upcoming show Inside Out, will push this aspect of his work beyond the bounds of what is socially acceptable, Daly promises. He wants to break down the ‘community standards’ that are used as an excuse to censor erotic works, forcing them within polite limits. Not to put too fine a point on it, he intends to deliberately break not only the mold, but to challenge Canada’s antiquated obscenity laws as well – a delicate dance for someone in his profession!

“Word has it that his next show will feature his subjects on the wall and in the flesh. Models, who have been collaborating with Daly on this work, will perform ‘a ballet of sexual acts’ as Daly puts it. ‘They will become living projections of the two dimensional representations all around them.’

“He plans to mount this exhibit in two rooms. The first gallery he envisions as a ‘sexual decompression chamber’, where our inhibitions will be incrementally absolved.

The photographs will surround video representations of erotica, the camera zooming in close, giving the surfaces of flesh an almost 'geographical aspect'.

He who dares cross the threshold into Gallery Two – and it is the patriarchal branch of the species that will be most threatened by this sensual Rubicon – will witness the live performance. Whether you interpret the models' acts as dance, striptease or gross indecency will depend to some degree upon who you are, I suppose, and how well Daly and his partners choreograph their movements...

Maria stared at the printout. A part of her couldn't comprehend the words. She had experienced the pictures on Victor's walls as elegant abstractions. But this went farther, *way farther*, its implications altering the memory of what she'd already seen. An artist and his subjects could not give her permission to see the things he intended.

"I'll have him if you won't," Cathy said, only half joking.

"Am I such a prude, Cath?" Maria pleaded.

"No," her friend answered thoughtfully. "And I really hope I didn't damage anything by showing you that. I just thought you should know."

"There's nothing to damage," Maria said firmly. "Victor and I are not an 'item.' Our relationship is professional, period. Has to be."

Cathy raised her eyebrows, but kept her mouth shut for once.

~

Maria, Aaron, Laurence, Cathy, PI Pirelli... Crystal Doer...

Crystal Doer?

He hadn't heard of any of these people a couple of weeks earlier. Now they crowded his thoughts, a horde of uninvited guests whose pedigrees he couldn't piece together.

He closed his eyes, relaxed.

"Crystal Doer?"

Always his thoughts returned to her. He felt her presence, as if she were with him in the darkened room. He half expected her form to emerge from behind the billowing curtains, or to hear her voice distinctly in the night sounds of the city. Could she be alive after all these years? Her parents still hoped. *She's run away*, they kept telling themselves, clinging to the belief that someday she would come to terms with whatever it was that drove her from them, *then she'll come home*.

Or she'll phone from a town at the end of a long dirt road where the nightly entertainment is watching the Northern Lights. "Mom!" she'll say. "Dad! Can you forgive me?" And they won't even say a word. They'll just cry, longing to hold her in their arms, to splice together the snapped sinews of their long lost lives...

"You cannot have a name."

"What?"

"He says you can't. So I'm going to call you Emanon – noname in reverse – because if you say something backwards it makes no sense, yet it exists, and that makes it doubly meaningless. I'll still be obeying, but I will have a sound that means 'not you', which implies you. Get it?"

If I even thought of a name like Billy, or Jake he'd know it. Even thinking about thinking it is dangerous. He can sense disobedient thoughts the same way a bloodhound sniffs out molecules of human sweat. You must never reveal the secret of your name to him. He'll beat me and you within an inch of our lives if he ever finds out.

"Who is he?"

She didn't answer. Her spirit faded, a weak signal obscured by the shifting electromagnetism of the earth, the city.

"Who is he?" Victor shouted after her, but she was gone.

He stared into the misshapen gloom of his bedroom, wondering what to make of this startling vision. Was he mad? Had he become a medium for the long lost spirit of Crystal Doer? Was he infatuated with a decades old photo of a dead girl?

Victor kicked the sheets away, freeing himself from their tangles and rolling out of bed. The bedroom had become a locus of weirdness, a place whose vibrations destabilized rational thought. He wrapped himself in his housecoat and padded down the hall. The inky well of False Creek, its shores encrusted with the garish phosphorescence of the city, came into view through his living room window. He stared down at his chosen world. At first nothing seemed out of place. Granville Island, the Granville Street Bridge, Burrard Bridge, all the meaningful structures that triangulated his sense of who and where he was remained in place. But...

You're out there, aren't you?

Crystal didn't respond. Quiescent now, she'd become a presence perfectly merged with the dark interstices of his universe. *When you speak, you become a point of absolute being, but really you're everywhere.*

He'd never thought such a thing before. Victor felt himself connected to an absolute certainty: Crystal Doer's spirit had broken free from the black holes of time and space and he was the only human being in the universe equipped to pick up her background signal. She cried out for justice. His world was imploding, everything he'd ever known bending and buckling under the influence of an irrational new gravity.

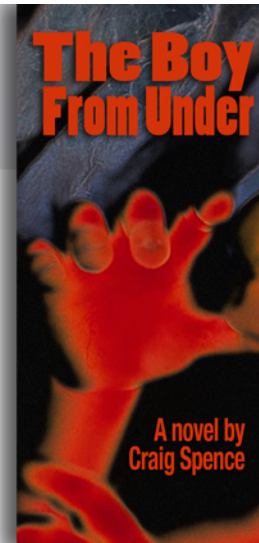
"This is fucking crazy," he said.

Hope you're enjoying *The Boy From Under*!
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