

## Client-Lawyer Relations

**The shutter opened**, admitting a brief defining effulgence. The image – its form and colour – had been rendered digitally, Pauline and Rick’s contortions stored in the hard and fast language of binary code. He zoomed in so his subjects filled the image field. He wanted nothing else in the frame but laced fingers, the arch of Pauline’s back, Rick’s muscular torso against her breast, the crook of an elbow.

Click.

For an instant, darkness. The camera blinked. This troubled him. He usually didn’t notice the shutter interval quite so much, and now it jumped out at him – glimpses inside a black hole. Was something wrong with the circuitry of his camera? Or had the parameters of perception changed? Victor held the camera away from himself, trying to diagnose its possible malfunction. *It must be the camera.* He’d have to take it in and have it checked. He just hoped the glitch wasn’t ruining his takes of the session.

*Keep shooting.* He moved like a dancer, taking measured, choreographed steps around the edge of the bed, over the bed on a step ladder, sometimes crouching low, sometimes on tiptoe. He was part of the ritual. An extension of Rick and Pauline. *The image catcher.*

Pauline shuddered; Rick held off a moment, then succumbed, thrusting, grunting.

*Done.* Victor retreated, pulling the door closed behind him. It had been a draining session. *Incredible!* summed it up. But Victor was glad to be finished. The images would be fantastic, *if the frickin camera isn’t on the fritz.* But much as he craved the artistry of love-making frozen in exquisite detail, he found the process of collecting his images distasteful. There was no denying it. His chest tightened.

*Exhale. Inhale. Let go.* He repeated his mantra.

Quickly he reviewed the photos. Even in the camera’s viewer he could tell they were good. “Very good,” he murmured, setting the Nikon aside on the kitchen counter and pouring himself a drink. “We’re done,” he said.

Pauline and Rick were getting dressed. Their voices came to him from the other side of the bedroom door. He allowed a brief smile. How like laborers they behaved, hurrying home after an evening shift. The ensuite door banged shut and a second later he heard the sound of water jetting through the pipes. A belt buckle clanked. The bed squeaked – probably Rick sitting on a corner of the mattress, pulling on his shoes.

*Exhale. Inhale. Let go.*

As usual, Rick emerged first. He padded down the hall and left without a word. A few minutes later Pauline followed. “See you tomorrow,” she said.

“Yeah,” Victor answered. “I think that’s a wrap, Pauline.”

She paused. He could feel her thoughts; they were expanding inside her, on the verge of language. But there was nothing to say, so she left too. They knew he liked to be alone after their sessions. *To acclimatize*, he called it. Pauline never quite believed he didn’t derive a prurient pleasure from the ballet of their love-making, and perhaps she was right. Maybe his faint sense of nausea was a psychic ruse, his mind tricking him into thinking he had deep reservations about taking pictures of other people screwing. Maybe there was a pornographic element to his artistic form after all.

*Exhale. Inhale. Let go.*

~

Victor’s back ached. He was in the half lotus position, legs folded under him, body slumped forward. He remembered falling asleep in his bed. Now he was in the closet... *again.*

What had awakened him? Not the discomfort of his pose (although he was acutely aware of the pain in his joints), or a full bladder, or his swollen tongue. It was as if he’d heard a sound, but awakened too late to decipher its retreating significance. Perhaps he had dreamt it. Victor couldn’t resolve his vague sense of recall into anything tangible.

Listing sideways, he unfolded his legs on their rusty hinges and reached for the edge of the sliding door. Just as he was about to pull it open, he froze. *What was that?* He’d definitely heard something – could have sworn it. Fabric rustling against skin. *Rick? Pauline? Absurd!* They had left hours ago, and he’d gone to bed. *Toob? An intruder?*

Victor closed his eyes and listened hard.

Silence reasserted itself. But he couldn't shake the feeling that it was a predatory calm. Something had entered the room, a malevolent force that could not be exorcised by mere logic. The presence, whatever it was, affected the very gravity inside Victor's apartment, the molecules of air became so heavy he could almost feel them colliding with his skin.

*Crystal!*

"Don't. Please don't!" she pleaded. Victor ripped the closet door open and tumbled out, ready to wrestle with this thing that had seeped into his life – whatever it was. Panting, he scanned the grayscale contours of tussled bedclothes, night tables, curtains. *Nothing.*

"Get out!" he shouted.

But the presence couldn't hear him, and he realized too late that it hadn't simply vanished; it had dissolved into the interstices of consciousness, a virus infecting imagination. *This is nuts*, he wanted to shout. Instead, he summoned calm.

*Exhale. Inhale. Let go.*

The mantra washed over him, a sensation like gentle waves on a warm beach, lapping at a body in the sand.

~

Laurence crumpled the page and tossed it on the floor, where it came to rest with the others. The final page of Maria's application quivered slightly in his hand. "Bitch!" he spat. "Stupid bitch!" Her name tasted of bile and ashes.

He'd been prepared for this, of course – but in the same way you might be prepared for a plane to crash on take off. It had factored into his calculations, but only as a remote possibility, not a risk you took at all seriously. Now it had happened and he had to do something about it.

A gentle tapping interrupted his cold fury. His study door opened a crack and Gordon stuck his head in. "Sir?"

"Get out!" Laurence bellowed. "Call that stupid prick Wojek and get him over here. Tell him I've got some legal shit that needs reading."

Gordon retreated like a snail into its shell, the door clicking shut behind him. His footsteps padded down the hall. Wojek didn't specialize in family law, but he would know who to get – aside from Victor Daly.

*Victor Daly?* Laurence mused darkly. *No*, Daly couldn't be a target. If he hit Daly the media would be all over it. They'd look into his pending cases, come across the Family Court application that now lay crumpled on Laurence's study floor. It would lead them, and the police, right to his door. *Not yet*, he countermanded. But Daly would pay eventually. *Get some feelers out*, Laurence made a mental note. *Where does Daly vacation? Mexico? Bangkok?* A guy could get knocked off in places like that: another sex tourist blundering into a trap. Laurence grinned at the prospect.

What about Queen Bitch herself? He rocked back, toying with the notion. It would feel good all right. To have her offed would almost be worth the bad publicity. He imagined the charade of a funeral, his protestations of innocence, the media hounding him with inane questions, the police trying to trip him up. Victor laughed, weighing the pros and cons of infamy.

Notoriety had a certain appeal, he admitted. Stepping off the pedestal of respected businessman into the role of shady predator would have its upsides. But for now the benefits of legitimacy outweighed the inconvenience of keeping up its pretence. Exposure would result in serious damage to both his legitimate and clandestine operations.

*You're safe for now my dear. Hair-trigger safe.*

*Maria's friend, Cathy?* Laurence rejected the notion out of hand. Again, the connection was too obvious; and she'd already been targeted once. A second hit – a murder – would have the cops and media swarming like bees. Besides, she wasn't a big enough target.

*Aaron?* If he really wanted to get back at Maria, he would abduct their son...

*Abduct!* he shot forward in his chair, slamming his fist into the desk top. "He's my son! How can I be accused of 'abducting' him for Christ's sake?"

Laurence sighed, raking his fingers through his hair. "Don't be stupid." Snatching Aaron would be playing right into her hands, especially with Victor Daly on her side.

*Don Pirelli?*

Laurence paused, staring at the signature on the bottom of the last page of the PI's summary report, which had been appended to Maria's application for divorce. A lot of the most damning material wasn't included in the document – a tactical move on Maria's part. *My reputation will be dented, but not totaled if this goes ahead*, Selkirk calculated – *her way of holding onto some chips*.

"You've overplayed your hand, my pet" he muttered, warming to the idea of hitting Pirelli. There were tactical and logistical considerations, of course. But the Private Investigator was close enough to Maria that she'd get the message; far enough removed that the cops and the media would not be able to connect the dots leading back to Selkirk. A man like Pirelli would have lots of enemies. Any one of them could be a suspect.

"Perfect," Laurence decided.

Besides, Pirelli deserved to die... nobody spied on Laurence Selkirk.

He crumpled the last page of his wife's application and tossed it on the floor with all the others. "Case dismissed," he pronounced with some satisfaction.

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Truth of the matter was she wanted company. Laurence was sure to respond to her Family Court application and the thought of being alone in the house unnerved her. She could have called Cathy, but her best friend was just getting reacquainted with her newly restored apartment after having spent the better part of a week camped out on Maria's sofa. It didn't seem right to drag her out of her home again. Besides, Laurence might do more than make a harassing phone call this time.

So Maria called Victor and invited him over. After all, the application had been his idea. "Could you pick up a movie or something?" she suggested. "I need a distraction."

"I'll bring Toob."

"Don't you dare!"

"I'm on my way," he laughed.

For the next 45 minutes Maria busied herself with a frantic round of cleaning and grooming. She checked in on Aaron, who was sleeping soundly; tidied the kitchen and living room; even made her bed, which she'd left a rumpled heap that morning. When the doorbell rang, she was in the bathroom freshening up. *You're pathetic!* she grimaced at the mirror. Still, she was happy.

“Hi,” Victor beamed when she opened the door.

“My God!” He’d come armed with a spectacular bouquet cradled in his left arm, a bottle of wine in his right. He twisted, shifting the flowers closer to her. She gathered in the colorful spray of lilies and orchids. “Where did you get these at this hour?” she wanted to know. “They’re beautiful!”

“Emergency order,” he said.

“Only a man who has had to make amends on plenty of occasions could have pulled this off,” she teased.

He followed her down the hall into the kitchen, where she laid the flowers on the counter and began trimming their stems. “Cork screw?” he asked. She pointed to a drawer. Trimming away the plastic seal from the cork, he set to work beside her.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

She thought for a second. “Scared shitless. Other than that, fine.”

Pausing, he leaned with his back against the counter, watching her arrange the flowers in a cut glass vase. “Has he called?”

She shook her head. “I want to take the damn phone and throw it out the window,” she said. “It’s worse when he doesn’t call because the whole damned time I’m waiting for the phone to ring, always expecting it to be him.”

“He knows that, of course.”

“Of course,” she echoed bitterly, standing back to admire her arrangement.

”What’s his game, then?”

“Sometimes silence speaks louder than words.”

“So he’s received our notice. Normally that would have triggered a call right away – to rant and rave, if nothing else. But Laurence doesn’t respond. It’s like he’s fallen off the face of the earth. What’s that say to you?”

“That he’s going to respond in some way other than words,” she guessed, heading out of the kitchen, her floral arrangement held out in front of her like an offering to the gods.

“That’s what he *wants* you to think.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” she stopped and faced him, frowning.

“Pardon?”

“You’re so used to people playing by the Queensbury Rules, you can’t imagine someone really not giving a shit. I’m telling you, Laurence isn’t bluffing. He plays the game his own way: usually it’s in his best interests to be Mr. Law-abiding-citizen, but that’s only an act. If he figures he can get ahead by breaking the law, he’ll break the law.”

“So what’s he going to do?” Victor tried to refocus the conversation.

Maria shrugged. Then, before he could respond, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek – a sudden peck, like a nervous bird plucking at crumbs. Then, as if nothing at all had happened, she led the way to the living room. “He’s not going to take this lying down, that I know for sure,” she said over her shoulder.

Flustered, elated, Victor placed the wine bottle and glasses on the coffee table, pouring as she snuggled into her end of the sofa.

“So what have you got?” she wanted to know, eyeing the DVDs he’d selected. “No horror movies I hope.”

“Nothing but comedy,” he promised. “And one serious title.”

“Oh?”

He held up a DVD. On the cover a naked man and woman entwined in an erotic embrace. Following the arch of her back the title said, *Inside-Out: The Gravity of Love*. Reversed into the right hand corner in small, spindly script were the credits: *Photographs by Victor Daly*.

“It’s a rough cut of the video and audio components for my upcoming show,” he explained. “You don’t have to watch it if you don’t want to...”

“The show where you’re going to have live sex acts performed in public?”

“Well, not exactly in public, and ‘sex acts’ might be an overstatement. But yes.”

“And are there live, sort-off sex acts depicted on the DVD?”

“All the images are stills,” he obfuscated.

“I think maybe I’ll go for a comedy,” she demurred.

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He sat on the floor, his back against the sofa. Maria stretched out on the cushions behind him. She had selected *Little Miss Sunshine* from the movies he’d rented. “She reminds me of me,” Maria said of Olive Hoover, the diminutive heroine of the story.

Maria's hand, which had fluttered by in Victor's peripheral vision, alighted on his shoulder.

Part of his delight was in the casualness of the gesture. Her kiss and now her touch: it was enough, almost too much – as if a mythical bird had materialized unbidden and graced him with its presence.

“This it is pretty black humour,” she observed.

The Hoover family was wrestling the body of their dead, cocaine snorting patriarch out a hospital window.

“Painfully funny, I would say.” He sensed her approving nod. “You really, really want these people to succeed, but you don't want them to change too much during the process. You've got to love 'em just the way they are...”

“How does Olive Hoover remind you of you?”

“Not because I ever stood a chance of winning a child beauty pageant,” she laughed. “I was a bit of an ugly duckling, to be honest. And clumsy as a puppy.”

“So?” he prodded.

“My family was screwed up,” she sighed. “Abusive dad, alcoholic mom, addicted brother. Not the kind of stuff you can turn into farce, though. Just nasty and brutish. There was none of the wit of *Little Miss Sunshine* about it. But I *was* an innocent, like Olive. I had no idea how weird things were at home until I was exposed to *normal* families. That was one of the first things I learned at school: how truly fucked up we were. Then how fucked up the rest of the world was when it came to responding to our dysfunction.”

“From there to the Taj must have been a long journey.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “But the funny thing is the Taj completed the circle: I ended up at the place I'd started from, only on a higher landing. It's easier being dysfunctional in the midst of luxury, but still fucked up. You get to choose from a broader range of antidotes, that's all.”

“How did he abuse you Maria?”

She thought about the question for a moment. “Laurence is a master,” she said. “He doesn't leave any visible scars, but his cuts are deep, if you know what I mean.”

“My father used to come home drunk at least a couple of times a week. We’d scurry like cockroaches into our corners and hope to God he wouldn’t notice us. He worked on the docks. Hated every second of it and took it out on us. I guess he figured we were the reason he had to keep his shitty job, so we should feel some of his pain. When he was in his early teens my brother confronted him once. Dad beat the crap out of him. He was strong as a bull and just a stupid. But at least with him you could figure things out. We learned to cope. I don’t even hate him anymore. That would be like hating a snarly old dog you’ve lived with for 20 years. He’ll be dead soon anyway, so who cares?”

“Laurence is a different animal altogether,” she sighed. “With him nothing’s predictable. If you stood back and analyzed, I suppose patterns would emerge. My guess is you’d see a progression to ever more complicated and sadistic modes of domination – a never ending quest to get a stranglehold on everyone around him. That’s Laurence.”

“Typical profile of a tyrant.”

“You got it,” Maria agreed. “The Calvin Klein version of Idi Amin Dada, a designer makeover of Saddam Hussein. He doesn’t want me back because he loves me; he wants me back because I’m one of his possessions, and for me to remove myself from his house is a form of theft. Same with Aaron...”

“Are you sure?”

“Still playing the solicitous solicitor?” she teased. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

She paused, thoughtfully. “If it was just me, I wouldn’t be so worried, Vic. It’s Aaron I’m afraid for. Laurence will bend him to his will. He won’t let Aaron grow up like a normal kid. He’ll force him to become a mini-Laurence – an Armani thug. Damned if I’m going to let that happen. Aaron is beautiful. He’s sensitive, intelligent, kind. Once Laurence gets through with him he’ll be a heartless moron who calculates every move in equivalents of power and wealth... either that or an addict, trying to blotto the ghost of his psychopath father with booze, floozies and drugs. Laurence will kill the magic in our son.”

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Aaron had obviously awakened and come looking for his mother. He’d drifted from her empty bed into the living room, where Maria had fallen asleep on the sofa. Now the boy didn’t know what to do because a strange man, slumped in the half-lotus position,

blocked his way. Victor feared that if he moved, even to console Aaron or let him by, it would be like a terrifying sphinx suddenly coming to life. So he pretended to be sleeping – an inert obstacle the boy could figure some way around.

He could feel Aaron's intense, gleaming eyes upon him. Victor knew the boy's mind was racing, formulating explanations, coming to conclusions. The ghostly form floated toward the end of the sofa, by Maria's feet. *Easy*, Victor coaxed, hoping his thoughts would somehow reach the waif.

*There is another child in this room.*

The thought came out of nowhere. Victor shivered, as if someone had flash-frozen the core of his brain. From there the fear surged like a sudden injection of ice water – a jolt so intense it stopped his breath.

*Closet!* he remembered.

He was in the before time. Nora and Richard did not exist. He did not exist as their adopted son, as a graduate of Britannia Secondary then of the University of British Columbia. This was a closet in another world.

The hems of anonymous garments brushed against him. They seemed to be gathering round, a tribe of nameless, faceless giants come to smother him in his dark prison. Terrified as he was, he didn't try the door. It had to remain shut. The best he could do was make himself very small. Some air came in through a chink underneath the door. If he pressed his face down he would be able to see something of the world outside – shadows moving through a spectral light.

Sounds infiltrated his prison – grunts and moans. Voices. Her voice and another's. A gruff voice he'd come to loath and fear...

*Jesus!* Victor's mind convulsed.

In an instant the phantom world imploded and he was back in Maria's living room. The boy had crawled onto the sofa and wriggled up into his mother's arms. Maria shifted, cuddling her son in her half sleep. "Hello love," she said.

Then all three of them became very still, Victor praying his episode had passed unnoticed – that Aaron would not add 'weird' to the list of adjectives applicable to the man who hoped to be a friend. He waited until he thought Maria and Aaron were asleep, then edged away quietly, getting up to go.

“Good night,” Maria whispered.

Her eyes shimmered in the dark.

“Good night,” he said. “I’ll call.”

~

Don Pirelli rinsed his coffee mug and put it back in the cupboard. He took one last look round the kitchen. Satisfied everything was in order he headed out to the hall. Grabbing his jacket from the closet and pulling it on, he checked the left inside breast pocket to make sure his wallet was there then patted his right hip pocket making his car keys jingle. He stepped out of the apartment and closed the door after himself. At 6:30 in the morning the exterior hallway was deserted – still too early for most people to be heading to work. He punched the elevator button and waited impatiently.

He’d received a strange call the night before. A woman, who thought her husband was about to skip on her, leaving a pile of unpaid bills and broken promises. She wanted surveillance right away – beginning that morning. So he’d agreed to meet her extra early at a greasy spoon where he sometimes breakfasted.

The arrangement troubled him. Don didn’t like taking on clients until he’d had a chance to do some background work. He was a sucker for a woman in distress, though. Always had been. The elevator door rumbled open and he stepped in. It swallowed him whole then lurched downward, disgorging him at the P1 level. He hurried through the underground to his gray Chevrolet Cavalier. He had chosen the car for its plainness. Who would remember a car like that? You could tail someone for hours and the Cavalier wouldn’t register. It simply wasn’t worthy of notice. He climbed in, latched the seatbelt and turned the key in the ignition. Levering himself with his right hand against the passenger headrest, he twisted round to see as he backed out of the stall. He grunted, acutely aware of the growing stiffness of middle age. He eased off the brake and the car rolled backward.

Half way through the maneuver an alarm went off in Don Pirelli’s head. Something discordant, like an off-key instrument in an orchestra. Something about his mystery caller. Then he remembered: she hadn’t whispered or even lowered her voice during their conversation. But she’d told him she was calling from home, and that her sleazebag husband was sleeping upstairs. Strange, he thought. Even if there was no chance of being

overheard, people tended to whisper in those situations. Come to think of it, Sandra hadn't sounded nervous at all. The words were okay, the story had been plausible. But now that he thought about it, she'd delivered her lines like a bad actor. There had been a blandness to her tone, a resignation out of sync with the character she portrayed.

"Set up!" Don thought.

Suddenly he became aware of his vulnerability to attack from the blind side. A shiver of panic ran up his spine. Spooked, he jammed on the Cavalier's brakes and jerked round in his seat just in time to see a gloved hand, a gun, a muzzle flash. The bullet slammed into his temple, burrowing through flesh and bone like a voracious insect. Two more bullets followed in quick succession. Before the impacts had blossomed into pain Don Pirelli slumped over, dead. The Cavalier rolled backward until it collided with a concrete pillar on the opposite side of the lot. His killer yanked open the door and pumped three more bullets into Don Pirelli's body. just to be sure.

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"This better be good," Cathy grumped, taking up her spot on the sofa. "Television before noon does irreparable brain damage."

"Sorry hun, I just couldn't stand to let it sit there all day, unviewed, but the thought of watching it on my own gives me the creeps."

Had Victor left the DVD intentionally? Or had he been afraid to rummage around in the dark, possibly waking Aaron? She couldn't say. Either way, when she woke there it was, *Inside-Out: The Gravity of Love*.

"Shove it in and let's get going," Cathy ordered. "My shift starts in an hour."

Maria opened the plastic case and slid the DVD into the player. Victor had said it would be sold at the *Inside-Out* exhibition itself and online afterward. "It's explicit without being pornographic... I hope," he'd explained.

How could you make a distinction like that? What subtle nuances of light and composition made one image pornography, another art? Maria couldn't say for sure. But the pictures in Victor's apartment had been explicit without being pornographic, hadn't they? She'd thought so at the time.

"Come on!" Cathy complained. "Roll it."

Startled, Maria scanned the screen icons. Soft music, the tinkling of chimes and the distant shushing trees, filtered in from the background. One of the icons said “Intro”, another “Back Story”, the third “*Inside-Out*”. She selected the introduction.

“No way!” Cathy objected.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want to see the show raw,” her friend protested. “I don’t want a bunch of bafflegab at the beginning. You’re procrastinating babe. Get on with it.”

With a sigh Maria moved the selector over *Inside-Out* and clicked. The opening screen dissolved. At first Maria couldn’t make out the emerging image. Buttocks, she thought. But just as pattern recognition set in, the viewer was drawn outward and the composition turned out to be the crook of an elbow.

“Ha, ha,” Cathy laughed.

Cleavage turned out to be the seams between toes; what might have been the base of a penis a thumb entangled in hair. Image after image turned out not to be what you imagined. Cathy cheered appreciatively.

“What are you on about?” Maria complained.

“It’s brilliant!” Cathy shrieked. “What’s pornography and what isn’t? What’s erotic and what isn’t? He’s taking mundane features of human anatomy, getting us all worked up because we think they’re erotic – or pornographic if you’re a prude – then he changes perspective to show us they’re not erotic at all – or that any bit of anatomy *can be* erotic. They’re elbows, toes, thumbs! Don’t you see? It’s blatant overstatement. Hilarious”

“No, I didn’t see,” Maria responded sourly.

“Don’t take it personally Mar,” Cathy chastised.

The transitions continued, but now the decoys gave way to real erotica. The ‘enactors’ were captured in pose after pose. Hips, genitals, breasts, hands moving over satin contours of flesh, tongues, eyes... Maria lost track. Victor had created a kaleidoscope of imagery, dissecting the nuances of love-making into a thousand brilliant facets, dissolves and zooms.

“Exquisite!” Cathy applauded, as if she was witnessing a natural wonder for the very first time – Mount Everest or the Northern Lights.

“But live, on stage?” Maria objected.

Cathy shrugged. “Why not?”

“Because when you get right down to it love-making is a private act, Cath. When you expose it to public view, something that’s wonderful becomes... well... tawdry.”

“Let me get this straight,” Cathy bristled. “The pictures are okay, but a movie of two people making love would be gross?”

“Yes!” Maria asserted, “Well, no! Not gross. Inappropriate, I guess.”

“Huh?”

“Photos capture poetic moments. Highlights if you will. A movie – or worse, a live show – includes everything. It would turn something poetic into mundane, even ugly prose.”

“So you’re saying those luscious moments would be ruined if the toil of achieving them is revealed?”

Maria felt boxed in. She resented Cathy’s haughty, legal tone, but couldn’t resist answering. “I guess so,” she conceded.

“Likewise, the beauty of the Sistine Chapel would be ruined if we ever learned how many workers had been crushed to death in its making? And our designer lifestyles would be marred if we were ever forced to look at what goes on in the Downtown Eastside or worse, in a Third-World sweat shop?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“You can’t just pick the highlights and say something’s beautiful, Mar. You have to honor the blood, sweat and tears too. And the tedium. And the dirt. And the messy politics. Otherwise art becomes a lie – a form of propaganda, like the gorgeous imagery of television ads and commercial packaging.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Maria snapped. “Real art has always been about what’s beautiful.”

Cathy grinned. “You’re beautiful when you’re angry. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Shut up!” Maria grumped.

~

The murder had been all over the morning news: man killed in an underground parking lot in the West End – not far from where Victor lived. Police hadn’t released any details, not even a name, but information ferreted out by reporters indicated the man had

been shot in his car and that the murder had all the traits of ‘gangland killing’. It wasn’t until early afternoon, while he was doing some research at the Vancouver Public Library, that he opened a tweet identifying the victim as Don Pirelli. He called Vanessa Kormer and told her to cancel his appointments for the rest of the day.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

*Good question.* The news hit like a bare knuckle fist. He’d blanched and still felt queasy. “Yeah, I’m alright,” he said, then disconnected. Scrolling down to Maria’s number he jabbed the call button, sighing impatiently as the phone auto-dialed. She picked up on the third ring. “Can I come over?” he asked.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Tell you when I get there,” he answered.

“Victor?” she demanded, curious, playful.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” he insisted. “Got to go.”

He gathered up the clutter of clippings he’d printed off on the Crystal Doer disappearance and shoved them into his briefcase. There were five or six more microfilms to scan, but they’d have to wait. He rewound the roll already loaded in the reader and placed it with the others in the return tray. Then he dogtrotted to the elevator. Five minutes later he was weaving his way down Richards, making for the Burrard Bridge.

He squeezed the steering wheel, affirming his grip, his ability to maneuver the car right and left through traffic. But the polarity of his perceptions had been altered, the world outside streaming by like an abstract, slow-motion movie through the Porsche’s windscreen. The gaudy parade of buildings and billboards seemed almost transparent – a composition of mist that might be blown away by the next puff of wind.

*Don Pirelli dead!* Had Laurence gone *that* far. Maybe someone else had it in for the detective. A man in Pirelli’s position would have made enemies, some of them powerful. Victor was still trying to sort things out when he pulled up in front of Maria’s.

His heart sank when he saw her.

“Jesus, Victor!” she sobbed, meeting him at the front door. “I knew something was going to happen. I knew it!”

He wrapped his arms around her, held on tight.

“This is Laurence’s calling card. This is how he does business.”

“I’m sorry Maria. I’m so sorry.”

His apology dropped like a stone into a very deep well.

~

“You going to be okay?” he asked, setting the teapot and cups down on the patio table.

Maria nodded, wiping her red rimmed eyes with her sleeve. She wasn’t okay, obviously, but had pulled herself together. And she never would be *okay*, if by that you meant the same as before the wrecking ball hit. Victor had seen it many times: women bearing up.

“It’s pathetic really,” she said. “You look at Laurence and think of him as a violent, evil man. And he is. He’s a prick of the first order. But he’s also a little boy, frightened of losing mum and ready to kill to make sure he doesn’t lose his place in the pecking order.”

“His ‘mum’? What’s his mum got to do with anything?”

He poured her tea. A breeze tickled the cedar hedge, making it swish and dance.

“That’s what we wives and girlfriends become, isn’t it: surrogate moms. I think if you scratch the surface of patriarchy, you’ll find a bunch of old men who suffer from prolonged separation anxiety. Mummy is the central figure in their lives, so instead of letting go, they replace her with a wife then, to make sure they never lose her again, they lock their darlings up, beat them if the spousal unit dares question the arrangement, stone them to death if a rule gets broken.”

“You don’t think we’re all like that, do you?”

“Some men have evolved,” she allowed. “But the instinct is still there, coiled up in the gut.”

“You think I’m like that?”

“You’re a man aren’t you?”

“No fair!” he protested, gladdened by her wisp of a smile.

“Don Pirelli wasn’t like that,” she said. “I really liked him.”

“He strikes me as a man’s-man. What *was* he like?”

“A big, friendly bear,” she smiled. “I didn’t know him very long, but some people’s energy you can read right away. His animal spirit was bear. I picture him shambling

through the forest, swatting aside bees when he wants some honey, shoving his way through the underbrush, not giving a damn what anybody thinks.”

“Bears have their nasty streaks. They maul people. The males can be surly bastards.”

She frowned. “He might have been like that, but I never saw it,” she said. “I saw an honest, gentle man. There was no pretense with Don. He was protective without ever being possessive...” Maria held up her hand to stop Victor’s objection. “I know,” she continued. “I was just a client. But I sensed that’s the way he was. It’s the way he would have been with his lovers.”

“Did you ever feel that way toward him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she chastised, sipping her tea. “But I do size men up sometimes. It’s a game. What would *he* be like as a lover? As a husband? As a father? Do guys play that game?”

Victor thought about it. “I don’t,” he said.

“You stop at: What would she be like in bed!”

“No fair again!” he squawked.

“Don’t be ridiculous again,” she dismissed his plea, shooing him off with a wave of her hand. “You wouldn’t be normal if you didn’t.”

“And do you like it when men think that way?” he tested.

“I would have been disappointed if Don had showed the symptoms.”

“Symptoms!”

She hid her smirk, taking another sip of tea. Victor couldn’t help feeling flustered and happy... and guilty. Don Pirelli was dead for Christ’s sake.

The phone interrupted them. Maria hesitated, letting it ring once, twice... Victor gestured, pointing at himself, and she nodded. He snatched up the handset from the patio table before the answering service kicked in. “Hello,” he barked.

For a surprised second Laurence did not reveal himself. “Is Maria there?” he asked at last.

“She’s not taking calls right now.”

“Oh?” Laurence said snidely. “And who would you be, her personal secretary?”

“Her lawyer actually, Victor Daly.”

“Ah, Mr. Daly. A lawyer who does house calls! Now I understand why you couldn’t accept my request for your services. You got a better offer at half the price, eh?”

“Your wife has suffered a shock, Mr. Selkirk. I’m here to help her.”

“What’s happened?” Laurence demanded. “Is Aaron alright?”

“Yes, Aaron is fine.”

Maria rolled her eyes.

“And Maria?”

“Maria will be fine, too.”

“You could be a bit more precise, Mr. Daly. What’s happened.”

“A friend of Maria’s was killed today. I came over to see if she was okay. Now if you don’t mind, perhaps you could call back another time.”

“What friend?” Laurence blustered. “I’ll remind you Maria’s my wife. I have a right to know what’s going on.”

Victor hesitated, then said, “The gentleman’s name was Don Pirelli...”

“The man who was shot in the West End?” Laurence feigned surprise, a barely detectable edge of sarcasm in his voice. *Nothing provable or even submissible in court*, Victor thought, which made the taunting all-the-more infuriating.

“Yes,” Victor said. “You *do* know who Don Pirelli was, don’t you?”

“Do I?” Laurence allowed a few seconds of dead air, as if he were thinking. “My God!” he exclaimed at last. “Not that detective Maria hired!”

“Yes, the same. It’s not a common name, Don Pirelli.”

“What do you mean by that?” Laurence parried.

“I’m a bit surprised you hadn’t made the connection, that’s all,” Victor said coolly. “I mean, how many Don Pirelli’s are there who are private investigators in this city? It was mentioned in the news reports that Mr. Pirelli was an PI, wasn’t it?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Laurence replied tartly. “I’m a busy man, Mr. Daly. Sometimes connections don’t get noticed when they’re not important.”

“Well, Mr. Pirelli *was* important to Maria, and that’s why she can’t come to the phone right now.”

“Put her on please,” Laurence demanded.

“I’ve told you already, she’s not prepared to talk to anyone at the moment.”

“Then prepare her. I want to talk to my wife, sir, not her overpaid lawyer – you are being overpaid aren’t you, even at your usual rate, which makes me wonder where Maria is getting her money.”

“I beg your pardon!”

“It’s something I need to think about, Mr. Daly. My son has virtually been abducted by her. Maria has a limited list of skills in her resume. How is she earning the money she needs to provide for my son *and* pay the fees of one of the most overpriced family lawyers in Vancouver? It’s a fair question, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think it’s any of your business, Mr. Selkirk.”

“Good god! You’re a lawyer, man,” Laurence said indignantly. “Surely you are aware no stones can be left unturned in these types of situations.”

“Oh, I’m very aware of the muck that exists under stones Mr. Selkirk...”

Maria gestured angrily for the phone from the other side of the table.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Victor said, pressing his thumb over the receiver.

“You want to talk to him?” he asked.

“If I refuse, he’ll just call back after you’ve gone. He’s like a wasp at a picnic table. I might as well take a swat at him now and get it over with.”

“And risk getting stung? You’re sure?”

She gestured again, with a resigned smile. “Hand it over,” she said. “I think you’ve been stung enough for one session.”

“Now I know more than ever that I want to represent you Mar,” he said, passing her the handset.”

~

“Hello,” Maria opened, brusquely.

“Ah! So kind of you to accept my call, dear.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to end this nonsense and settle our affairs,” he said.

“Do you? And on who’s terms? And by what methods?”

“Might I suggest a mediator, Maria. If we can’t achieve a reconciliation at least we can engineer amicable terms of separation, don’t you think?”

*Opening move*, Laurence stakes out the high ground. *Next set?* He'd goad her into an accusation, evidence of her "instability". Or maybe he could get her to hang up, proof of her unwillingness to make even the slightest effort to work things through; or better yet, get her raving like a mad woman... *Is he recording this?*

"I won't compromise on Aaron. Not a chance."

"Aaron is *our* son, Maria. Yours *and* mine. I don't think I'm asking for a compromise when I suggest that as a starting point."

Careful, Maria thought, clamping her mouth shut.

"What grounds could you possibly have for limiting access?" he pressed. "This is ridiculous, can't you see? The whole thing will backfire, Maria. You'll be the one who ends up with limited access, having proven yourself an intransigent, vengeful manipulator who is trying to punish a man's alleged indiscretions by denying him access to his son... no judge is going to buy that."

"Alleged!" she laughed. "I think we can safely say the evidence of your philandering and criminal dealings constitutes more than allegations, wouldn't you? Any reasonable person exposed to the record would have to conclude you are what you are Laurence..."

"Has he been coaching you?"

"Who?"

"Your lawyer friend, Mr. Daly."

"Lawyer-client privilege, dear. You should know better than to even ask."

"What kind of privileges has Mr. Daly been granted, my dear?"

"Fuck you, Laurence," Maria said sweetly.

Victor rolled his eyes and made a slashing motion across his throat.

"Strike a nerve, did I?"

"I'll grant you that, Laurence. You're good at striking nerves."

"Just be reasonable and all this can stop."

"All what?"

He hesitated. "You know what I mean. And I guarantee you, it's going to heat up if you don't come to your senses. Do you think for a second I will allow you to separate me from my son?"

"We'll see you in court then."

“Maria!”

“Did *you* think for a second I was going to knuckle under to your gangster tactics, Laurence,” she seethed, her face flush with anger.

“Gangster tactics?”

“Good-bye Laurence.”

He was still squawking furiously when she cut him off.

~

Al Periconi stared at the sheet covered body for a long time, then nodded. The Coroner’s attendant folded down the shroud. “Shit!” he gasped. The face was Don’s, all right... what was left of it. “Shit!” Al cursed. He wanted to kill somebody then and there. Smash something, anything in this hard, sterile place. There were times you just hated the whole fucking species. He nodded and the attendant covered the mess that had been his brother’s face.

*Who did this? Why?*

The painful truth ached inside Al’s flesh, every cell enraged. That was *his* brother laid out on the stainless steel – the ‘white sheep’ of the Periconi family. Al had never minded Don’s ‘special’ status. He’d been closer to his little brother than anyone else in the family, and the first to predict Don would one day refuse his place in “the business”. But not even he had guessed that Don would become a cop instead of a career criminal, and that he’d move across the continent to take up his calling.

A Periconi becoming a cop! Al allowed a grim smile, remembering the shockwaves rippling through the family. Their father never really got over it. A priest they could have accepted, because he could have forgiven them; a legit businessman, perhaps, because he could have maybe worked with them – as far as the Periconis were concerned, business was what they were all about. But a cop!

As if that wasn’t bad enough: a Periconi becoming a Pirelli! Mother, who had perhaps harboured a secret pride at her son going legit, screamed when she learned Don had changed his name. But he’d been straight up about it: “You can’t be a Periconi – not a real Periconi – and a cop,” he’d explained, “not even as far away as Vancouver.” They almost disowned him... *Almost*. But it was hard to stay mad at Don. He was too nice a guy. *Too nice to be a real Periconi* Al had to agree. They’d made their peace in the end.

Then Don surprised them once more, taking early retirement and setting up as a PI. Al had never figured that one out. Don had loved his job.

“I know too much,” was all he ever said about it.

“Too much about what?”

“Can’t say, or you’ll know too much.”

The special one, Al remembered. Don had needed protecting, not because he wasn’t tough – anybody with any brains would think twice before taking on Don in a fair fight – but because he wasn’t mean. Don had this gentle streak that always gave an enemy a split second advantage – just long enough to pull out a gun and pump a bullet into you. And that’s probably what had happened, Al guessed. Don had trusted and now he was dead.

“Well, I’m a different animal,” Al thought. Somebody was going to pay for this... *eyes for an eye, teeth for a fucking tooth.*

First, though, Al had memorials and a funeral to plan. They’d have one memorial here in Vancouver, *mainly to see who shows up*; another in Montreal, where Don still had many ex-lovers and friends.

Don had made it known he wanted to be interred on the West Coast. *Fuck that*, Al Periconi said. *Your coming home little brother, but whoever killed you is going to be buried here – alive if I can arrange it.*

~

He’d wished the day over – willed the sun to set. Most of all, he wanted to be with Maria. But she’d shooed him out of her house. “Thanks for coming over Vic,” she’d said. “I needed someone, and I’m glad it was you.” But he sensed the straight jacket of obligation she was feeling. “You’ve got other things to do, no?” she said.

Yes, he had to admit. He would have dropped them, too, but Maria wouldn’t allow it. So he carried on with his evening arrangements: a conference with Pauline and Rick at The Naked Truth Gallery, where they were scheduled to meet owner Knute Nielsen to talk through the final details of *Inside-Out*.

“From master painters to masturbators,” was how owner Nielsen described his strange mix of clientele. A skinny, chain-smoker with watery blue eyes and a mop of sandy-gray hair, Knute knew nothing about art and less about running a retail business. What he did know was that war would be less likely if the world went naked, therefore,

nudism was a movement that needed backing, therefore the universe needed a place like the Naked Truth Gallery, even if it didn't turn many heads or much of a profit. "I'm retired, eh," he explained. "I can afford to sit here and greet the weirdoes – present company excluded."

"You're too kind," Pauline retorted, coolly.

He bobbed his head and grinned, accepting her sarcasm graciously.

"The space is barely big enough," Victor launched into his presentation after shooting her an annoyed glance.

Knute had agreed to the *Inside-Out* show because it matched the Naked Truth's mission and because Victor's quirky notoriety would be good for business. He'd exhibited Victor's photos several times before, and even managed to sell a few of them "to clients who were ready to reach into their pockets for money instead of something else." In truth, he was perilously close to financial ruin and needed to do something to attract paying customers. *Inside-out* might be his last, best chance at survival.

"Gawd!" Pauline groaned, rolling her eyes. Apparently the abstract nudist art presently on display was not to her liking.

Knute smiled as if she'd just dropped a compliment.

"The static display will be set up here," Victor paced off the front portion of the gallery. "The photos will be hung around the perimeter. There will also be screen printed banners hanging throughout the space. Viewers will have to make their way through a forest of imagery." Excited now, he moved across the floor like a dancer, brushing aside the imaginary banners. "At the very centre of this forest, in a little clearing, the video display will be set up. The effect will be almost like a camp fire in a wilderness of imagery..."

"A reference to the primitive urge?" Pauline guessed.

"Yes!" Knute seconded, excited by the concept.

"How will people find the canapés and drinks?" Rick wanted to know.

"I want them to come face to face with the art," Victor forged ahead, "to have to work their way through it, as if they were plunging through thick underbrush, then to arrive at this little breathing space, this clearing where the video rendition of the show

will be playing. People will tend to congregate here, but it will get too crowded and they'll be forced back into the erotic hinterland..."

He paused, expecting some comment. But all three of them were staring at him as if he was some kind of mad scientist, enunciating a principle beyond ordinary mortals' comprehension.

"The forest of imagery and light will shade quickly into a black zone right about here," he scuttled back to the point midway through the gallery. "They will experience a feral sensation, like what it is to be animals at night. In another clearing, right about here..." he strode toward the back portion of the Naked Truth Gallery... "you two will be performing. The audience will never get a clear view of the live show. They will see splintered images of your love enactments through the surrounding banners, but won't be able to move in any closer because an encircling barricade will keep them from interfering."

"Interfering?" Pauline echoed.

Victor hesitated. Should he explain the set up fully? Could he trust her to understand? He sighed. "The second grove serves two purposes, actually," he began. "It establishes a zone of privacy around you two. The fractured imagery will make the viewers hungry for more, but the essence of your intimacy will remain concealed. It won't be exposed to public view except in flashes."

"And how will these flashes be achieved?" Rick asked.

"You will be strobe-lit from above and the pulses will radiate out through the spaces between the hangings."

"Amazing!" Knute cried.

"Sounds like hot, sweaty work," Rick complained.

"We'll figure out some way to keep you cool."

"I don't need any apparatus to keep me cool," Rick bragged.

"So what's the second purpose?" Pauline wanted to know.

"What?"

"You said the 'grove' would serve two purposes. What's the second?"

"Oh! Yes. Well, the truth of the matter is that an unobstructed view of the human mating ritual has... how shall I put it... awkward moments. It's not really graceful to

watch. By partially shrouding and strobing your movements I think we will be able to make a statement celebrating the act of love without taking away from the dignity of what is essentially a private act.”

Victor winced inwardly, expecting a full blown tantrum.

Pauline only looked at him thoughtfully, then stroked his cheek with her slender, white fingers. “You *are* a genius, Victor,” she cooed. “I hate to admit it, but it’s true. I didn’t know how we were going to do this part of the exhibit without looking stupid. You’ve figured it out brilliantly.” She drifted over to the spot he had chosen for the second clearing. Standing in the exact centre of it, she rotated slowly through 360 degrees, an expression of childish awe lighting her face. “It’s beautiful, man,” she said. “It’s going to be fucking beautiful!”

“Why d-don’t we d-do it in the ro-o-oad,” Rick sang, pleased with himself.

~

Vague recollections of The Naked Truth Gallery, Don Pirelli murdered in an underground car park, Maria, Aaron, Laurence’s snide voice extruded through a telephone wire... He drifted in and out of semi-consciousness, not caring to piece together the fragmented constellations of this new reality that had somehow manifested inside his head. Important as all that had become, much as he yearned to lay hands on the emerging facts of his existence, he knew they orbited something dark and not yet revealed. Even Maria. She was a bright star in his firmament – but a star that circled perilously close to the sucking rim of his black hole.

He wanted to weep for the inevitability of his loss.

Then things began to come into focus. He had vague recollections of returning home from the Naked Truth Gallery, working on the *Inside-Out* project for a while, then going to bed, alone and exhausted.

He woke up on his side, puzzled by the morning light seeping under his sliding closet door. He had no idea how he’d got there. All he knew was *Larry might buzz from downstairs any minute*, summoning him to Saturday morning roller-hockey. That would set TooBee off, barking like a banshee.

“Get up!” Victor commanded his inert limbs. They refused. Panic set in. He let go his desire to emerge. That would only make things worse. He felt stillborn – or an entity cursed with consciousness but no spark of will. *Is such a fate possible?*

The bleed of light under the door connected to the familiar reality that must still exist on the other side: his rumpled bed, the patterned light slanting in through Venetian blinds, the crystalline structures of the downtown peninsula that would appear if he raised those blinds, the glittering ocean beyond. All of that was out there; none of it mattered. An alternate reality had juxtaposed itself, the reality of a man waking up dead.

*There is another child in this room.*

Maria’s place the night before. Aaron had stumbled in on them, sleeping in the living room. He’d wanted his mother. Then Victor had felt another presence. A being from the time before. He’d been in a closet then, too. He’d been on his side, the mysterious garments hovering over him. Shadows had moved through that spectral light...

*Quiet! He’s coming!*

Her voice, like the glue of gravity, coalesced his splintered shards in an instant.

*No!* he wanted to shout. This was too close to the truth.

He’d been sleeping beside her, curled up in the warm embrace of her body. He remembered vividly now how soft and warm she’d been and how he never wanted to move beyond the bounds of her encircling limbs. Had he really experienced those sensations, or were they dream memories – the kind of knowledge infants absorbed swaddled in sleep? He couldn’t tell. He knew the resonance of her breathing, though, and the throb of her heart. Her blood coursed through him as if the umbilicus was still attached...

“Umbilicus!”

He stumbled over the word. Why these memories, if it wasn’t true? Why this lying next to her, enfolded in her arms as if time was an extension of her womb? He wanted desperately to escape, to burst out of the closet into his old reality. But paralysis held him fast. The still, cloistered air of the closet permeated flesh and bone, rendering him catatonic.

*Quiet! He’s coming!*

“Who’s coming!” Victor mumbled.

Then he remembered being hustled off a bed, a closet door banging shut behind him. He knew what to expect: grunts and moans from the other side of this, his nightmare.

He cowered.

“I don’t want to be here!” he protested.

The intercom rasped down the hall and TooBee went nuts.

Still, Victor could not move. *Am I dead?* he wondered. He had to ask, because even with TooBee choking in a territorial frenzy, and Larry persistent as a horsefly, he could not break the spell. He imagined the police arriving, bursting into the apartment, approaching grimly when they noticed TooBee sniffing at the closet’s sliding door.

“No!” Victor pleaded. What about Maria? His parents? Friends? Clients? What about the Naked Truth Gallery and *Inside-Out*? He fixed on the crescendos of Toob’s barking, which merged into long, harrowing wails. He strained toward these siren calls, trying to move an eyelid, a finger, a toe in sympathy to the dog’s lament. His whole future teetered on the fulcrum of a moment. Suddenly his right index finger twitched and the spell broke, falling away like shattered glass.

Rolling aside the door, Victor struggled to his feet, staggered down the hall. He punched the intercom button. “Hello!” he barked at the machine.

“Christ, man, you’re hard to get up these days,” Larry complained.

“Come on up,” Victor said, releasing the front door lock.

~

Larry wolfed down a forkful of western omelet and hash browns, swilled the partially masticated mess down with a gulp of coffee and emerged grinning.

“Come on, Larry. It wasn’t *that* funny,” Victor gripped.

“It was *too* funny man. The BGs for Christ sake!”

The BGs was a roller hockey club Victor had been invited to join after their morning pick up session at Sunset Beach. He had never been scouted for anything athletic in his life, so he was honored of course. He thought he *had* played exceptionally well that morning, a spurt of aggressive intensity he attributed to his need to blow off steam.

“The Bump N’ Grinders,” Larry chuckled.

Turned out that a qualifying characteristic for the team was you had to be ‘gay to play,’ Victor’s would-be teammate informed him.

Victor had begged off.

“There you were, thinking you had all the right moves, and I guess you did,” Larry smirked.

It was hard not to give in to Larry’s humor, not to see the funny side of his takes on life, even when they came at your expense. Larry’s quirky nature came as a benediction of sorts – his simple delight in the foibles of fellow humans. Despite his teasing tendencies Larry didn’t have a cynical bone in his body. ‘If I didn’t laugh, I’d have to cry,’ was the obligatory, corny comment he’d written in their high school year book...

“Do you ever try to interpret your dreams?” Victor asked suddenly, taking their conversation on a new tack.

Larry looked enquiringly across the table. “No,” he said. “I hardly ever have dreams – or if I do, I don’t remember them.”

Victor didn’t know how to proceed. He and Larry didn’t often talk about such things. Usually their conversations were boisterous, funny. In an odd way, that’s why he’d chosen Larry to talk to about Crystal. Victor didn’t want his visions recast in esoteric theories or new age inanities. Perhaps Larry’s wit and incredulity would be the antidote Victor needed.

“Why do you ask?” Larry coaxed.

“I’ve been having this recurring dream,” Victor began. “It’s weird.”

He hesitated. It wasn’t too late. He could stop and Larry would maybe poke fun at him, but the ghost of Crystal Doer would remain sealed in Victor’s mind-vault. As soon as he started talking about her, she would fly out with his words and – in a sense – become real. Victor feared the damage she might do. Larry waited. His expression changed from puzzlement to calm concern. Amid the clatter of breakfast dishes and the hum of gossip they shared a zone of strict intimacy.

“Did you see that news item a few of weeks ago about a girl named Crystal Doer, who was kidnapped back in the early ‘70s?” Victor began.

Larry shook his head.

Victor described the item, expanding on the CBC report with information he had researched himself and explaining that no trace of Crystal Doer had ever been discovered since that August day in 1972. He showed Larry a photocopied image of Crystal from a

newspaper clipping. His friend looked fleetingly concerned when Victor retrieved the image from his wallet, and Victor blushed.

“Okay?” Larry said when Victor ran out of steam. “I can see you’re obsessing over this missing girl. But can you make a connection for me?” Larry wasn’t being impatient. He would have sat there all day if that’s how long it took. But he thought a nudge would help. “Take the plunge, Victor,” he said. “What does this Crystal Doer mean to you?”

“I think I’m her son,” Victor said, cringing as he let go the truth.

Larry’s expression didn’t waver, but Victor sensed a massive recalculation going on behind his friend’s inquiring expression. The slightest hint of a frown creased Larry’s brow, nothing more. “What makes you think that, Vic?” he said at last.

“That’s where the dreams come in,” Victor said uneasily.

Larry waited.

“You know I’ve never met my birth mother, right? You know as far as I’m concerned Nora has always been my real mom and Richard my real dad.” Larry nodded. “What you don’t know is they didn’t adopt me until I was about five years old. I’ve never told anyone that until recently; Mom and Dad never, ever talk about it either. They say they don’t know anything about the time before, and I don’t ask. It’s a family pact. We don’t go there and we don’t want anyone else going there either.”

“So you recognize this Crystal Doer as your natural mother?”

“No!” Victor rubbed his face. The ghost of Crystal Doer had materialized, shimmered briefly, then evaporated, leaving faint hologram traces on his retina. “I don’t have a single recollection from the time before. Not one. It’s all been erased,” he said at last.

Again Larry waited.

Victor sighed and gulped down some water.

“Are you beginning to remember things?” Larry said after a long while.

“Not exactly. But Crystal Doer comes to me. She talks to me...”

“Waking dreams?”

“Sometimes. I can’t call them memories because they’re completely new, and I can’t even say for sure yet whether they relate to anything real. I’m scared, Larry. I have to tell you, I’m scared shitless. I keep thinking things like schizophrenia, and I want to chase her

out of my brain. But another part of me wants to reach out and grab her and yell ‘Where the fuck have you been all my life!’

“In these dreams I get shoved into a closet, then something terrible happens Larry. Something really bad...”

“What, Victor?” For the first time Larry pressed because he knew Victor had to say the awful things, formulate them into words, sentences, paragraphs.

“I think... I think someone was raping her. Over and over again. Christ it was sick. She would stuff me in the closet and tell me to be quiet, then this guy I never get to see comes in and he rapes her. I can hear him going at it outside the door and even now I’m so fucking ashamed because I didn’t jump out of there and hammer the dirty prick into a pulp...”

“How old were you in these dreams?”

“It doesn’t fucking matter!” Victor shouted. Then he blushed crimson under the curious stares from the surrounding tables. “It doesn’t matter Larry,” he insisted in a harsh whisper. “It still feels like I’m being buried alive under a mountain of shit and boulders. My mother was being raped; I should have done something. I need to do something.”

“What can you do?”

“Find her,” Victor said firmly. “Find the bastard who raped her, too.”

For the first time Larry looked astonished. “Vic, you don’t know if any of this is real. And if it is, it happened more than thirty years ago. The cops haven’t been able to turn up a thing; her parents haven’t heard a peep out of her; how the hell are you going to locate Crystal Doer?”

“This is going to sound strange, partner,” Victor cautioned, straightening in his chair, “but I think she is guiding me. The television coverage triggered things, but now she’s locked-on and she’s not going to let go until I know the truth.”

“I’ve never known you to place much stock in ghosts and the afterlife,” Larry said.

“How do we know she’s dead?” Victor countered.

“Huh? I just assumed that after a sudden disappearance and thirty-plus years of silence, she must be.”

“But that doesn’t make sense.”

“Why not?”

“Because if she was murdered, how did I get here? She must have been around long enough to give birth to me and raise me until *I* was old enough to have recollections of being with her. My guess is she ran off with somebody – maybe a pimp. Things went off the rails and she’s been too ashamed to call home ever since.”

He’d heard of stories like that. It was possible.

Larry arched his brows, but said nothing. “Where do you begin?” he asked at last.

“With Crystal’s parents,” Victor said. “My maybe-grandparents.”

“I wouldn’t introduce myself that way,” Larry advised.

“No,” Victor agreed.

“How then?”

“As a lawyer acting on behalf of a client who has a great interest in the case, someone who feels he might have new information about the fate of Crystal Doer.”

“You know the old saying about lawyers, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

“That the lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client.” Larry paused, sipping his coffee thoughtfully. “And I might add that the nutter who analyzes himself has a madman for a psychologist.”

“You think I should get some professional help?”

“Might be worth looking into,” Larry said. “Whatever you do Vic, don’t keep this to yourself buddy. My couch is always available. No charge.”

~

The funeral home occupies a walled lot on Broadway near Commercial Drive. The obituary notice appeared in the Vancouver Sun a few days after the murder. Fifty-nine years old Don Pirelli, survived by his loving parents, Alphonso and Nina Periconi, a brother and two sisters. No children. The notice said Don had “been taken suddenly” and left it at that.

“Periconi?” she’d pointed out to Victor. “His parents have a different name.”

“Stepson from a previous marriage?” he’d guessed.

They couldn’t find a parking space on Broadway, so he circled the block and parked on Tenth Avenue. They were walking down Commercial back toward the funeral home.

The sun blistered the sky overhead. To Maria it felt as if God was angry. Armageddon wouldn't come as a barrage of fire and brimstone, she guessed, it would begin just like this. Intensifying day by day, until hell-on-earth was revealed.

Victor stroked her back. "You okay?" he asked.

She smiled gratefully. There was still an awkwardness to their small intimacies, but Maria appreciated them –craved them, truth be known. A lingering kiss, a gentle stroke, an arm around her waist or draped over her shoulder. These were tentative gestures, which she permitted. She knew Victor was as scared as her.

"At least he doesn't flinch now if I touch his shoulder," she'd joked with Cathy, whose interest in Victor was insatiable.

Walking down the street beside him Maria felt strangely elated. She'd reached the point where it was hard to imagine him out of her life. And yet, he wasn't fully in her life, either. Too bad they were going to a memorial service, not a concert or play.

They entered the cobbled courtyard through a wrought-iron gate. The place looked more like a B&B than the final stop for people's earthly remains. Stucco, wood and tiles put together in a vaguely Spanish style. An attendant ushered them into an antechamber where small groups of mourners in drab dresses and dark suits clustered uneasily, carrying on murmured conversations. Off to the side a curtained passage was available for those who wanted to pay their final respects to Don in person.

"It's not obligatory," Victor whispered.

"I don't know what to do," Maria fretted. "Is it disrespectful not to say goodbye?"

"Pirelli won't care, and nobody else will notice if you give it a pass."

He was right, of course. She was making more of the situation than it warranted.

"Why don't we go find the chapel where the memorial service will be held and wait there," he suggested. "We don't have to hang around here."

Maria let him guide her toward the door.

But a sort of paralysis set in, as if the air in that anteroom were laced with some kind of venom. It worked its way into the molecular interstices of muscles and joints, restricting her movements like taught elastic bands. She could not leave. *Don't be stupid!* she chastised. But she found herself resisting Victor, turning, moving implacably toward the black curtain that concealed Don Pirelli's corpse.

“You’re sure?” he said.

“Yes,” Maria answered, her voice a flat monotone.

She parted the curtain and stepped into the dimly lit chamber. The coffin had been placed on trestles against the far wall, its lid open, the fabric interior reminding her of the inside of an open clamshell. Maria studied everything around Don Pirelli without actually looking directly at him: the floral arrangements, a photo of him as a younger man in VPD uniform, the polished wood and brass fittings, it was all in order. Satisfied she finally let her eyes focus on him.

His hands were folded over his stomach. You could tell right away they were the hands of a dead man – that the fingers had been arranged one-by-one in a mockery of repose. She followed the blaze of his tie up to Don Pirelli’s face. What she saw there was a graven image, a mask manufactured in a wax museum. The features bore a pale resemblance to Don, but you could tell at a glance it was dead matter, not living flesh. To cover the wounds they had cushioned his head in fabric.

“You knew my brother?”

Maria spun round, startled by the man who had obviously been watching them as they paid their respects. “I was one of his clients,” Maria said. “Your brother was a wonderful man, Mr. Pirelli...” She paused, hoping he wouldn’t notice her mistake. “He was a very generous and brave human being,” Maria covered quickly.

“Periconi, actually. The last name is Periconi,” the man corrected politely, but firmly. “Don changed his name, much to the annoyance – I might even say grief – of my poor mother and father.”

Victor squeezed her arm, a signal that did not escape the sharp eyes of Al Periconi. She judged him to be a man whose anger seared like dry ice. She had met his type before in back rooms and gritty alleys, a man who could grab an enemy by the throat and smile grimly as he choked the life out of him. Victor was right to be nervous.

“You said my brother was brave?”

“Yes. I think Don was brave Mr. Periconi. I think he would have done whatever it took to act in the best interests of his clients.”

“Do you think that’s what got him killed, Miss...?”

“Ms. Selkirk,” Maria answered. “All I know is I liked Don and I wanted to pay my last respects. My condolences to you and your family.” She stuck out her hand, which Al Periconi grasped in his huge paw.

“I’ll find whoever did this, Ms. Selkirk,” he vowed. “I *will* find him. Don’s last name may have been Pirelli, but he was a Periconi. Always.”

“Not a man you would want to cross,” Victor said once they’d left the viewing room and were following the other mourners into the chapel.

“No,” she agreed. “I wonder if Laurence knows about Don’s friends and relations. I’ve got half a mind to introduce them.”

“We’re not certain, Maria,” he cautioned. “Remember that.”

“Just venting,” she shrugged as they went in.

~

Victor punched in the number. He’d been staring at the phone for a good half-hour, remembering Larry’s remarks about lawyer-fools and psychologist-madmen. There would be no turning back, though.

A distant ring sounded at the other end of the line. He imagined the summons echoing through the Doer household, Mr. and Mrs. Doer interrupted from their Saturday evening routine. Based on the CBC newscast about their missing daughter he imagined a quiet house full of knickknacks and frills – the kind of house where you could hear a clock ticking and the sound of a dog’s claws clicking on linoleum. At the fourth ring someone picked up.

“Hello?” Barbara Doer said in a careworn voice.

“Mrs. Doer?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Victor Daly, Mrs. Doer. I’m a Family Court lawyer here in Vancouver.” Victor paused for a second to let her get her bearings. He needed to slow his delivery down. Relax. “I would like to come out and see you and Mr. Doer Ma’am...”

“Because of that CBC show?” she demanded.

“Yes.”

“We’ve had about enough of creeps and crackpots Mr. whoever-you-are.”

“Please, don’t hang up. I’m not a crackpot Mrs. Doer,” he said urgently. “I am a successful, highly regarded lawyer. I wouldn’t be calling if I didn’t believe what I have to say is important.”

“Then say it over the phone.”

“Mrs. Doer,” he pushed on, almost stumbling over his words. “I have information which I believe is relevant to your daughter’s case. I need to meet with you and your husband.”

“You have information about Crystal?”

“I believe so.”

“I have to tell you Mr. Daly we have received a lot of calls. None of them has shed the faintest glimmer on what might have happened to Crystal. Many of them have been very unpleasant. We’re thinking of getting an unlisted number.”

Victor closed his eyes and sighed. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he consoled. “But please, don’t give up. You agreed to the CBC interview hoping to get some fresh information about your daughter. I really believe I may have something valuable to share...”

“Do you know where she is?”

“No,” he clamped a lid on her expectations. “I can’t promise anything. All I can say is I might be able to put us on the right track Mrs. Doer.”

“Wait just a minute.”

The phone clunked onto a hard surface and he heard her footsteps receding. A door opened and closed – a screen door, he guessed. A few seconds later the door opened again and footsteps approached. A man’s footsteps.

“Hello?” Mr. Doer said testily.

“Mr. Doer?”

“Yes. Who are you?”

“As I was saying to your wife, sir, my name is Victor Daly and I’m a Family Court lawyer in Vancouver. I know you two have been bombarded with crank calls because of the CBC segment. I’m not a crank caller, Mr. Doer. I need to talk to you and your wife. I have information I believe is relevant.”

Mr. Doer sighed, a deep, weary sigh. Victor imagined the man, eyes closed, head tilted back, beseeching the god-beyond-ceilings to end this, to help him and his beleaguered wife let go of it all, to forget, to pretend they'd never had a daughter.

"When would you like to come out Mr. Daly?"

"As soon as it's convenient."

"Tomorrow afternoon? About two o'clock?"

"That would be fine," Victor agreed. "Thank you Mr. Doer."

"We can't pay you anything Mr. Daly. Not now, not ever."

"I don't want any money, sir... ever. I only want to help."

The line went dead.

~

Cathy and Maria sat with their backs against a log while Aaron got to work with his diggers, constructing another channel down to the water's edge. Patiently he bulldozed and smoothed the way, intent on his project. Maria smiled. It made her happy to see him lost in play.

"Does he ever miss Laurence?" Cathy asked.

Maria didn't think so. He never asked after his father. Laurence hadn't spent enough time with him; and even when he did make time, he didn't really get to know his son so much as bully and taunt, trying to 'toughen him up'.

"I think Aaron's in paradise right now, having just his Mom around, and he doesn't want to rock the illusion by asking any awkward questions," she explained to Cathy. A gentle breeze tousled Aaron's hair, the same breeze that sent the pillow clouds gliding like ships through a perfectly blue sky. *Idyllic*, Maria thought. *Perfect. Where to from here?*

Problem with fantasies was... they were fantasies.

"Loonie for your thoughts," Cathy said.

Maria sighed, recalibrating, letting the question sink in.

"I've talked a lot about Laurence over the years, Cath," she began. "But there's a lot I haven't told you – stuff I was afraid to talk about because, if Laurence ever found out, he would go ballistic."

"Afraid?" Cathy looked more puzzled than concerned.

“Yeah,” Maria said. “There’s things I’ve kept from you, hun, on a need-to-know basis, things about Laurence that make me scared. After all that’s happened, I think I have to bring you into the loop.”

*Am I exaggerating?* Maria wondered.

Truth was she had inhabited her own fantasy world at the Taj. She’d been married to Laurence eight years and - occasional inadvertent glimpses behind his laundered reality aside – had lived the good life without many qualms. Even if she hadn’t been able to bring herself to believe in Laurence the fine, upstanding citizen and patron of high society, she could at least pretend it didn’t matter what *he was*.

Aaron changed that equation.

Now, as Maria revealed to Cathy the connections between the Taj and its sleazy underworld of drugs, prostitution and murder, the weight of her own testimony accumulated until Maria could barely speak. She pushed through, though, unearthing the sordid details Cathy needed to know.

“I’m sorry,” she concluded miserably. “I should have told you.”

“Jesus!” Cathy took Maria’s hand and squeezed.

Maria wiped the tears from her eyes.

“I didn’t think about it much, Cath,” she continued. “You sort of get used to it, shove it all into the skeleton-closet along with the rest of your junk. Then Aaron came along. At first that was okay. Babies are immune to a lot of stuff just because they’re babies. But as Aaron began to show his personality, Laurence right away wanted to reshape it. He’s as fanatical as any religious nut, Cathy, only his religion is greed and violence. He doesn’t give a good god-damn whether he’s swimming in legal water or in the murky currents of the underworld, anything that leads to more power, more money, a bigger empire, that’s all he cares about. It’s an ugly, brutal game and he’s pretty good at it. The thing about empires, though, is they’re meaningless unless the tyrant grooms an heir. For Laurence to succeed he has to duplicate himself in Aaron. That’s the ultimate proof of an iron will – the ability to perpetuate your reign.

“I couldn’t let that happen – had to get out.”

“Fuck!” Cathy cursed. “How long have I known you – since before you met this creep – and I never once suspected any of this stuff. I can hardly believe it.”

“Believe it!” Maria warned. “You have to believe it Cathy.”

“Yeah, I get *that* message loud and clear.”

~

From the head of the drive the Doer house looked like something you might have seen in a Reader’s Digest Magazine... circa 1950. The stucco bungalow sat in the midst of an immaculately maintained lawn and flower garden. It sported blue and white trim. Frilly drapes hung in the windows. A big old maple, holding up a rustling canopy with its gnarled wooden arms, cast dappled shadows on the front yard. Victor imagined there might have been a swing hanging from those branches in happier days, and that a young girl named Crystal might have been kicking her feet up, flying through the air in a giddy arc.

He parked behind a tandem axle Ford pickup, switching off the Porsche’s engine. A burly chocolate lab trotted out from the back of the house, barking half-heartedly. “Not much of a guard dog,” Victor chuckled, opening the door. The dog thrust his big head inside, sniffing at Victor’s pants, his tail wagging recklessly. “That’s TooBee,” Victor explained, patting the curious animal. Nudging the lab aside, he swung his legs out of the Porsche and stood up on the crunching gravel.

No sign of welcome showed from inside the house. He walked jauntily up the path and knocked. The lab, sitting beside him, woofed a couple of times in a display of diligence. Was the dog senile?

Victor was about to knock again when he heard footsteps approaching. The knob twisted, the door swung open and Albert Doer stepped onto the threshold, filling the doorway. Victor stuck his hand out and Albert shook reluctantly. “Come in,” he said. “Don’t bother,” he instructed when Victor bent to untie his shoes. They turned right, just past the vestibule. Albert gestured to an armchair.

“May I use your bathroom?” Victor asked apologetically. “I shouldn’t indulge in lattes every time I go for a drive.”

Albert Doer was a tall man with chiseled features. His strong, calloused hands suggested a life of honest work, perhaps in construction. He might have been handsome, except for his grumpy look, which Victor took to be permanent. You would have to work very hard to get a smile out of Albert Doer.

“Second door on the right down the hall,” Albert directed.

Victor hurried into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. He opened the toilet seat and forced himself to pee loudly. As his bladder emptied he scanned. Like the rest of the house the bathroom was immaculate. “Too clean,” he muttered. You’d have trouble finding a fingerprint in the place, let alone anything that could yield a DNA sample. Finished relieving himself, he flushed, then opened the sink faucets. The sounds of running water would mask his hurried search. There was no waste basket next to the toilet, where he kept his, so he looked under the sink, where he found a plastic pail. Victor rummaged through the jettisoned materials, plucking out a couple of items that would provide him with the genetic profile he needed – that is if the Doers left genetic traces in their garbage. He stuffed the samples into a plastic bag he had brought with him in his jacket pocket, then washed up and made his way back to the living room.

Albert and Barbara Doer were sitting together on the sofa when he returned, Albert ramrod straight, his hands grasping his knees; Barbara angled slightly and perched on the edge of the cushions, her legs tucked neatly underneath her. Still in their Sunday clothes, they were a handsome couple Victor thought. Strong, hard-working people, who suffered quietly and prayed privately. Barbara had brought out a tray of tea and cookies.

“It was a Sunday our daughter disappeared, Mr. Daly,” she said.

Victor watched and waited as she poured the tea.

“A day much like this. We came home from church and Crystal wasn’t here. We thought that a little strange at first, but didn’t panic or anything. She might have gone for a walk, or a friend might have come along and picked her up. We told her over and over to leave a note if she went anywhere, but she always forgot, so we weren’t alarmed.... Do you have any children, Mr. Daly?”

“No,” Victor answered, accepting his cup of tea.

“Please,” she gestured to the milk, sugar and cookies on the tray. “Help yourself.

“Perhaps someday you will have teenaged children and will understand how difficult it is to keep track of them. Crystal was in a rebellious phase. The last thing she wanted to do was report her movements to us. I don’t think it was so much a case of her forgetting as deliberately refusing to leave notes when she went out. It was frustrating. It made us angry. But what can you do?”

She shrugged. Barbara Doer reminded Victor of her daughter. She had the same Slavic cheekbones and blond, shoulder-length hair. Her clear, blue eyes alighted on him briefly, like nervous birds, then flitted back to the tray, where she was pouring a second cup of tea.

“By evening we were really worried, and began calling her friends. No-one had seen Crystal. No-one had been round to pick her up. These days, I guess you can reach your kids with cell phones, but then we had no way of connecting with our daughter or confirming there might have been a problem. By eleven o’clock that night we were frantic. We phoned the police. They did their best, Mr. Daly. A huge search was mounted. Hundreds of people volunteered. But it’s as if the earth opened up and swallowed our little girl...”

She choked back her tears. Albert reached across and rubbed her back. “Honey,” he admonished gently. “You don’t have to do this.”

“So you see Mr. Daly,” she continued, “it’s been thirty-five years, but for us it’s like Crystal vanished yesterday. You read about other people’s lives in the newspaper over breakfast, and you’ve forgotten about it by lunch. But in real life – when it’s your child – the pain doesn’t go away. Nobody can ever know what it’s like to lose a child until it’s happened to them. It leaves you empty inside Mr. Daly.

“Now what is it you wanted to talk to us about?”

Victor didn’t know how to begin. He couldn’t tell the truth. It would simply be too much for the Doers. But to lie? To dissemble? How could he do that to strangers he suspected were his own kin?

Victor coughed, kick starting his story.

“I have a client who believes he may have had contact with your daughter after the period when Crystal disappeared. I can’t reveal the circumstances to you. The man is very reluctant to expose himself to any sort of publicity. But when he saw the television coverage recently, he recognized Crystal immediately.”

“Can you give us more information?”

“He doesn’t want to take any steps until he has confirmed his suspicions.”

“Confirmed? How?”

Victor hesitated, staring first at Albert, then at Barbara. There was no turning back; no other way of doing this. He swallowed. “My client would like to have a DNA analysis done confirming his sincere belief that he is Crystal’s son.”

The Doer’s stared as if the significance of what he’d just said hadn’t sunk in. Albert Doer reddened. “What is this?” he growled. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“My client believes he is your grandson Mr. Doer,” Victor said, straining to preserve his air of calm authority. “He is absolutely certain he recognized your daughter in the photos that were aired on CBC, but wants to confirm that belief through DNA analysis. If the test results are positive, he will introduce himself to you and do all he can to help locate your daughter. He is a man of some means, who could bring some useful connections to bear on the case.”

“Why doesn’t he come himself if he thinks he’s our grandson?” Albert rumbled.

“As I’ve already explained, before he risks identifying himself he wants proof. He was put up for adoption at a very early age and has no knowledge of the time before that... or so he thought. The picture on TV triggered a cascade of dormant memories, though – recollections that may connect him to Chrystal. He is convinced she is his birth mother and has retained me to act as his intermediary.”

Barbara stared as if in shock, tears rolling down her cheeks. She placed her teacup into its saucer with a clatter. “Excuse me,” she stammered, then left the room.

“You can see how upsetting this is to us,” Albert said. “I think you should leave.”

“I *do* understand Mr. Doer,” Victor apologized. “But I assure you my client has very good reasons for pursuing this matter. I would have thought you would be amenable to pursuing it too.”

“We need more information, Mr. Daly. We need to know who your client is, then we’ll talk about giving you what you want to verify his claim.”

“Okay,” Victor agreed. “I’ll try.”

Albert Doer did not look pleased. He looked more like a burley bouncer with a hate on, expelling Victor from a pub

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The phone buzzed almost the instant he stepped into his apartment.

“Shit,” Victor complained. “Give me a break.” He snatched up the handset angrily. “Hello,” he snapped.

For a second dead air, then a metallic voice, which he guessed might have been pre-recorded to avoid voice recognition.

“Victor Daly! You have been convicted of sins against God and humanity,” it droned. “The New Covenant Society has postponed your sentence to give you a chance to atone. If you do not fulfill the Conditions of Clemency immediately your sentence will proceed. Here are the Conditions of Clemency: you must cancel the abomination called *Inside Out* and publicly apologize to God and humanity for this grave offence; in your apology you must vow to never again pollute the world with the obscene filth perpetrated in your photography – you must either renounce your so-called art, or turn your talents to the service of God.

“If you agree to these conditions you must immediately offer a Show of Atonement. Go to the Holy Rosary Cathedral on Dunsmuir Street. Upon entering the church, kneel and pray for forgiveness. This demonstration of remorse and the fulfillment of the other Conditions of Clemency will be enough to stay the Hand of Retribution, it will not be enough to save your mortal soul, however. Pray sincerely, Victor Daly. Pray to God Almighty for forgiveness and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Therein lies the true Path to Salvation.

“You are being watched.”

The line went dead. So did a part of Victor’s soul. “Ass-holes!” he yelled slamming the handset back in its cradle. Despite the absurdity of the threat, he couldn’t help the clench in his gut.

“Breathe deep,” he reminded himself. *Exhale. Inhale. Let go.* A sense of determined calm asserted itself.

*The New Covenant?* He’d never heard of the organization and wondered if it really existed. The call might have been made by a crank or lunatic loner, but he didn’t think so. Now that his anger had subsided he felt immensely sad. “The narrow minded shall not inherit the earth,” he vowed.

The phone had rung the moment he stepped into his apartment. From that Victor deduced a couple of things: first, this New Covenant outfit might indeed be watching

him, and had seen him enter the building; second, they'd probably call again soon, if he didn't follow their instructions, because they couldn't stake out his place indefinitely. He would be ready. He'd take the call in his study, which had a digital recorder hooked up to the phone.

Think! He needed to think. Should he follow through with the instructions in the hopes of catching sight of a New Covenanter skulking on his tail? Call the police? Do nothing? Victor stepped out onto his balcony and scanned the streets and walks below. One thing was certain: *Inside Out* would not be cancelled. *No way!* He allowed himself a hard smile. The whole point of the show was to counter puritanical nutters like this; the New Covenant intimidation proved he was on track. His previous exhibits had been obscure events, poorly covered by the mainstream media. They hadn't been picked up by the moral radar of outfits like The New Covenant. "Add explicit sex and presto!" Victor grumbled.

He would have to talk to Pauline, Rick and Knute to make sure they were prepared to go ahead too. But Victor didn't anticipate a problem. Rick might waffle, but Pauline and Knute would be in agreement and the three of them should be able to pressure pretty-boy into doing the right thing.

*Judo*. Use your opponent's momentum to your own advantage. Redirect the negative energy to positive effect. Victor punched in the phone number for the Vancouver Sun newsroom. Sunday afternoon: they should be working on the Monday edition. "I have a story for you," he said when somebody in the newsroom picked up the line. "My name is Victor Daly. I'm a photographer and I have received a threatening phone call from a fanatical religious organization called The New Covenant. I will be releasing details at a news conference on the steps of the Holy Rosary Cathedral in one hour." The reporter wanted more, but Victor cut him off. "I'll be releasing details at the Holy Rosary Cathedral in one hour," he repeated.

He'd called BCTV, CKNW, and The Province before his phone rang. Victor turned on the recorder and answered. "Hello?"

"Victor Daly?"

"Yes."

"Did you get our message?"

“I listened to it, if that’s what you mean. I can’t say I got it.”

“This isn’t a joke, Mr. Daly!” the man said petulantly. “You are being watched. The instructions were to act immediately, or suffer the consequences.”

“Who are you and what right do you have to threaten me?”

“I am sworn to uphold the New Covenant and to denounce and punish those who would undermine its moral strictures.”

“I haven’t sworn allegiance to your so-called covenant.”

“You are bound by the laws, as is everyone. We will not allow you to pollute the world and corrupt the minds of others with your obscenities.”

“What do you want?”

“I think we have made ourselves clear, Mr. Daly. Your punishment has been determined. You have one last chance to make amends under the Conditions of Clemency. Do you intend to seek mercy and stay the Hand of Retribution?”

“What is the punishment?”

“The will of The New Covenant will be known when it is carried out. The punishment will be severe in your case. You have caused grave harm, led many souls astray with your hedonism. Will you seek mercy?”

“Yes,” Victor lied.

The caller hung up.

Hurriedly Victor punched in as many contact numbers as he could, giving out the time and location of his impromptu press conference. Was it a mistake to turn The New Covenant’s threats against them? “Too late to think about that now,” Victor grimaced. He’d set the ball in motion and it had gathered way too much momentum to be stopped. He would learn one way or another what the wrath of The New Covenant might mean.

In the meantime he figured he had about 10 minutes to type up a quick media release and make a few copies before he’d have to make a dash for the Holy Rosary Cathedral.

~

By the time Cathy got to the parking lot the sun had dipped toward the horizon, lengthening the jagged shadows of the buildings. The heat of the day was dissipating. She twisted the key once, twice, and her battered Toyota clattered to life. “Good girl,” she murmured gratefully. The car didn’t have long for this world, she hadn’t been able to

save enough to buy a replacement, this one needed to be nursed along. Cathy cursed her bad habits, meager income, and the resulting lifestyle – *a snake that dines on its own tail*.

Since her talk with Maria she had kept an eye on her rear view mirror. She felt exposed now, like a squirrel crossing a very long patch of open ground.

She sighed, turning into the Sunday afternoon traffic that inched along Broadway. She blushed to think how naive she had been. But then again, why should a photo tech at London Drugs and part time student at Emile Carr College of Art and Design know anything when it came to a man like Laurence Selkirk?

That Maria hadn't told her about Laurence's shady side before irked her. *Get over it*, she told herself, wincing again to think she had not seen through his smarmy persona. *What? Were you expecting a black hat or something?* Funny, but even now she couldn't quite see him as the kingpin of an underworld empire.

*Believe it*, Maria had warned.

Cathy's thoughts were interrupted by the grill of a Hummer filling her rear window. "Moron," she muttered. She hated Hummers. The muscular vehicles epitomized everything that was wrong with consumerist society – with the 'global elite' that shaped the market to its purposes and profited enormously, growing ever more wealthy and powerful in the process.

*Ass-hole.*

Before outrage subsided, though, it was overwhelmed by fear. *Is this guy following me?* The question seemed so obvious, now she'd asked. When traffic ground to a halt near Oak, she glanced in her side mirrors, praying that the doors to the Hummer wouldn't burst open, loosing a couple of armed thugs. *Don't be stupid!* she groaned, angry at herself. *Get your mind off it.* The light turned green and she drove on.

She thought about Victor Daly, and smiled. To her he epitomized a version of the desirable bachelor, mysterious quirks and all. Cathy swallowed hard, thinking of Victor and Maria together. *She doesn't know what to make of him...*

The light at Granville winked yellow. She hesitated a second then braked hard. Still on her tail, the Hummer pulled up close behind. "Give me some room, jerk!" she yelled at the menacing grill, then ducked lower in her seat to get a glimpse of the driver. A

square, menacing face, he stared over the top of her car like a robot, not responding to her accusing look. That relieved her.

*Idiot.*

As the Broadway stream stopped, traffic started moving along Granville, a torrent of jostling metal funneling toward the Granville Street Bridge and the gigantic magnet of the city centre. Cathy watched the remorseless flow. *No stopping it*, she thought. Concerns over the environment, the misappropriation of spending for highways and cars, the balkanization of the city with asphalt barriers... none of it mattered. The automobile had become an extension of the human psyche, an expression of mass will. Nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of drivers' rights...

Her thoughts were scattered by a sudden roar from behind. The guy in the Hummer was revving his engine insanely. *What are you? Nuts?*

Then the thing lunged forward, smashing into her back bumper.

“What the...”

Cathy jammed on the brakes, pushing herself against the back of the seat as if she was trying to restrain the monster with bodily force. It was hopeless. The Hummer bulled forward, shoving the Toyota out into the stream of traffic on Granville. It happened so quickly the oncoming drivers didn't have a chance to stop. One car swerved to avoid her, colliding with a vehicle in the inside lane. Horns blared. A following car couldn't maneuver at all in the unfolding chaos. Cathy twisted left, saw the panicked look in the driver's eyes, then screamed. She heard the crunch of metal on metal, then... nothing.

~

“What is The New Covenant?”

“Why would this group target you in particular Mr. Daly?”

“What is the subject matter of your exhibition?”

“You don't think that's obscene, Mr. Daly?”

“Have you contacted the police?”

“Do you take this threat seriously?”

“How do you know it's not a hoax?”

“How do we know this news conference isn't a publicity stunt?”

“What do you think they will do to you if you go ahead with *Inside Out*?”

Victor rated his news conference a success, his limited skills as a publicist-artist paying off. A small scrum had developed on the steps of Holy Rosary Cathedral, the cameras and microphones pointed at him. Most of the reporters didn't know anything about Victor Daly or the *Inside Out* exhibit. He handed out clippings from the Georgia Straight write-up and copies of the brochure that had been developed for the show. To prove he'd been threatened he played back The New Covenant's message, which he'd transferred from his answering service onto his digital recorder. The reporters were biting, Victor thought. He was pretty sure the story would make the evening news and the next day's papers. It had all the elements: drama, controversy and quirkiness. Tens of thousands who had not heard about *Inside Out* would hear about it in the next 24 hours – perhaps hundreds of thousands – thanks to the New Covenant Society.

*That ought to bite 'em in the ass.*

The next move would be up to the holy rollers, whoever they were.

In the midst of the interview, Victor's attention was suddenly drawn by the reporters' glances to the arched entrance of the church. He twisted round in time to see a young man watching the scrum from the top of the stairs. As soon as Victor glanced, the observer descended the steps quickly, taking a position on the perimeter of the scrum. He leaned forward, listening intently to the questions and answers, his young brows furrowed.

*Curious parishioner*, Victor guessed.

“You have been asked by these people to go and pray for forgiveness in the Holy Rosary Cathedral. Are you going to do that?” a reporter asked.

Victor hesitated. He knew it would make great theatre to march right into the church and deny any need for sanction much less forgiveness – to proclaim his natural right to celebrate the human body and the act of sexual union unimpeded by ‘religious authority’. It might clinch a spot at the top of the news line-up.

The newcomer watched with obvious interest.

“I do not believe The New Covenant is sanctioned in any way by the Roman Catholic Church,” Victor responded to the reporter's question. “So I don't think it would be fair for me to intrude on the meditations of those for whom the Holy Rosary Cathedral is a sacred place.”

“Then why did you convene your press conference here?” the reporter pressed.

“This is where The New Covenant instructed me to come. I wanted to show that I am not intimidated by the caller’s threats even though I do honor this place. The Church is a cornerstone of spirituality for millions of believers. I won’t desecrate one of its cherished places by disturbing the legitimate devotions taking place inside.

“But I won’t be dictated to by those who use or abuse the name and authority of the church. Their threats have no moral or legal basis, and if they carry them out they are behaving as mere thugs. I wanted to deliver that message in the shadow of Holy Rosary Cathedral.

“I think that’s all I have to say. Thank you for coming.”

Victor turned and walked briskly away, ignoring the shouted follow ups of the media scrum. He’d made his point, now it was time to go. No doubt they would look for an official spokesperson from the Roman Catholic Church. They would also want to hear from the Vancouver Police Department – Victor planned to file a complaint as soon as he got home. But until The New Covenant made its next move, Victor was finished talking...

“Mr. Daly!”

He ignored his pursuer, striding left up Richards Street past the west side of the cathedral and its administrative offices.

“Mr. Daly, please!”

Victor couldn’t say why, but he relented, stopped and turned. “Who are you?” he demanded. Suddenly aware of the obvious, his muscles tensing, senses alert to potential danger.

The young man who had joined the scrum from inside the church trotted up to him. “I wanted to thank you for respecting the sanctity of the church,” he said, scanning Victor’s face with penetrating, dark eyes. “It was a gesture of respect, very much appreciated.”

“Who are you?” Victor repeated.

“Father Damien Pearson.” The priest fumbled in his pocket and handed Victor a card from a slim, silver container. When he saw Victor eying the stylish holder he said, “One little luxury I allow myself for so many denied.”

“You’re not in your frock and collar Father.”

“Let’s keep walking,” Damien urged. “I’m not sure the media pack his lost your scent. I doffed my official garb when I saw the scrum in front of Holy Rosary. I assumed the conference had been called because it related in some way the church. I wanted to find out more without attracting questions that I might not be prepared to answer.”

“Maybe you can answer a couple for me,” Victor said.

“I can try.”

“The New Covenant Society. Let’s start there, Father. Can you shed any light?”

“That’s why I followed you, Mr. Daly...”

“Please, call me Victor.”

“Thank you. And I don’t mind being called Damien. I followed because I wanted to warn you about The New Covenant. They are a radical sect that is not sanctioned in *any way* with the Roman Catholic Church. In fact they have been condemned and are at risk of being declared heretical.”

“Which means they consider themselves disaffected members of the Catholic Church, right?” Victor observed.

“That’s probably true, but we can’t say for sure. They may simply be using the church for emphasis... the religious equivalent of appropriating someone’s brand, if you know what I mean.”

Victor had to smile at Damien’s impish grin.

“Anyway, you should not treat their threats lightly,” Damien cautioned. “They have followed through in the past. They feel they have a duty to purge the world of... uhm...”

“Filth?” Victor offered.

“That’s how they would put it yes.”

“And how would you put it, Father?”

“I understand what you are trying to achieve, Victor; I cannot condone it. The Catholic Church recognizes the beauty of the human form. Adam and Eve were – after all – created in the image of God. But the act of sexual union can only be blessed within the sanctified bonds of marriage. Anything else is outside our precepts, and anything that encourages sexual activity before marriage must be declared anathema by the Church. I am bound by my vows, Victor. That guides my thinking in this matter.”

“You put it more elegantly than some I have met, Damien, but the message is the same, isn’t it: you believe I am damned to burn in hell for what I am doing. It’s a mortal sin to make art of the human body and promote the natural expression of sexual desire?”

After a few thoughtful seconds the priest said, “All I wanted to do, Victor, was warn you against these people, not engage in a theological debate. You have no doubt inflamed their anger by your actions today. They won’t let this go, I’m sure. They will probably mete out an even more drastic retribution because of your public defiance. You must have known the risk.”

“Yes I was aware of it.”

“You are a man of principle.” Damien said, extending his hand. Victor shook it, surprised by the firm grip and the glint of laughter in the priest’s eyes. “Bless you,” Damien said.

The benediction caught Victor off guard. He stepped back and stared in mock surprise. Again he smiled – naively it seemed to him. A strange sensation of warmth irradiated his insides, a feeling he would later describe as a ‘glow’.

~

Maria felt grumpy and disheveled. She had tossed and turned all night, waking every time a car passed on the street. She had checked in on Aaron a couple of times, half expecting to find her son’s bed empty, Aaron gone.

Sitting at her normal perch at the kitchen counter, she sipped her coffee. The Vancouver Sun lay unopened in front of her. She stared at the nested compilation of hype and horror groggily. Maria wondered sometimes why she bothered with the random jumble of information about disasters, murders and famine that was called the daily news. What did all that have to do with her?

“Chaos Theory,” she mumbled, slurping at her coffee and wrapping her housecoat around her a little more tightly. She had read somewhere that there were intelligent people who believed in the amplification of innocuous events through chance permutations. An ant farting in the deserts of Mongolia might lead to a Tsunami funneling up the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the Third World War, the collapse of the global economy.

Aaron hadn't woken yet. She cherished the quiet time between six and eight in the morning. Was that selfish? *No*, Maria decided. She had a right to a few peaceful moments at the start of her day. Why, then, did she fill her waking interlude with headlines? Maria couldn't say. Habit, she guessed. She unfolded the paper and scanned the front page: more car bombs in Baghdad; a strike by civic workers....

Her eyes locked suddenly onto a teaser next to the newspaper's banner. Maria gasped. What was Victor doing up there on the front page of the Vancouver Sun, looking very emphatic next to a caption that said, 'Erotic artist told to repent... or else! B1'. She shuffled the A Section aside and there on page B1 was a full blown photo of Victor with what Maria recognized as the Holy Rosary Cathedral in the background. "Jesus Christ!" she grumbled, thinking an ant must of farted somewhere in the universe.

***Radical Christian sect threatens art show***, the headline read.

*Vancouver photo artist Victor Daly has received threatening phone calls warning that if he doesn't cancel a planned erotic art show and publicly repent, he will be subject to reprisals*

*"Victor Daly! You have been convicted of sins against God and humanity," one ominous phone message from a religious sect called The New Covenant Society begins. If Daly doesn't cancel the show and recant publicly he faces unspecified reprisals. The group says he must carry out the terms enunciated in its 'Conditions of Clemency' to avoid their wrath.*

*"Here are the Conditions of Clemency: you must cancel the abomination called Inside Out and publicly apologize to God and humanity for this grave offence; in your apology you must vow to never again pollute the world with the obscene filth perpetrated in your photography – you must either renounce your so-called art, or turn your talents to the service of God."*

*But in a move which Vancouver police are calling rash, Daly has turned the tables on his persecutors. At a hastily arranged news conference on the steps of Holy Rosary Cathedral in downtown Vancouver he defended his erotic art and blasted the "narrow minded zealots, who think they have the moral authority of gods."*

*"Inside Out will not be canceled. The show is intended to expose the kind of bigotry that is being shown by The New Covenant. They do not have the moral or legal authority*

*to impose penalties on me or anyone else and if they carry out their threats they are acting as religious thugs.”*

*He defended the show’s most controversial element – the performance of sexual ‘enactments’ live on stage – as a statement against the “lingering sexual repressiveness of modern society”, denying that it was lewd or pornographic. Civic officials and the police feel differently. They are taking a wait-and-see attitude themselves, but have indicated they are prepared to arrest participants if the show goes ahead as scheduled at the Naked Truth Art Gallery next Friday.*

*“We will monitor the event and if any laws are broken arrests will be made,” said police media relations officer Howard Chow. He urged the public to let the police do its work and not to take the law into their own hands. “Any attempts to intimidate or injure the producers of this show will be treated as a criminal offence,” Chow warned.*

*He said the VPD has no information about The New Covenant. Asked if he was concerned that Daly went public with his response before contacting police, Chow said, “In situations like this we appeal to people to step back and reflect. We would hope that people would look for resolution, not make things worse.”*

*Daly said he launched his counter offensive on the steps of the Holy Rosary Cathedral because that is where he was instructed to show ‘atonement’ for his actions. “This is where The New Covenant instructed me to come. I wanted to show that I am not intimidated by the church or the caller’s threats,” he said.*

*“I won’t be dictated to by those who use or abuse the name and authority of the church. Their threats have no moral or legal basis, and if they carry them out they are behaving as mere thugs under the pretext of being righteous followers of Christ. I wanted to deliver that message in the shadow of Holy Rosary Cathedral.”*

*Church spokesperson Father Damien Pearson said The New Covenant has “no status whatsoever within the Roman Catholic Church” and that he was ‘mystified’ as to why the sect would choose Holy Rosary Cathedral as a place for Daly’s penance.*

Maria sat stunned for a few seconds. “He should have called,” she muttered angrily. Then she remembered getting in late the night before and not answering her message machine for fear it might be Laurence again, and because she had Aaron sleeping in her arms and wanted to get him to bed. *Shit!* She grabbed the phone and punched in Victor’s

number. No answer. She tried his cell, getting through to his answering service. “Call me you sinner!” she teased.

For a while Maria sat lost in thought. The New Covenant Society? She imagined earnest young men in casual cloths sitting around a kitchen table plotting acts of violence in the name of the Lord. They might have been Muslim, just as well as Christian. Or Sikh. Or Hindu. “Even Buddhists for Christ’s sake,” she grumbled. *Who are these people anyway? Why don’t they live their perfect lives in their own glass houses and leave everyone else alone?*

She sighed. Maria had read enough. She was ready to fold up the paper and throw it in the recycle bin when a picture at the bottom of page B1 caught her eye. A mangled Toyota Tercel sat in the middle of Granville Street amid a litter glass, metal and plastic. In the background an emergency response crew was loading someone into an ambulance. The car looked familiar. It was the same colour and make as Cathy’s. It was also on the same route Cathy would use coming home from work. ***Woman deliberately rammed into busy intersection*** the headline blared.

*In a bizarre incident a Toyota Tercel was rammed into the intersection of Granville and Broadway Sunday afternoon. Witnesses say the Toyota, driven by an unidentified woman, had stopped for a red light, heading west on Broadway. A blue Hummer deliberately rammed the Tercel into Granville traffic, where it was struck by a northbound vehicle. The driver of the Hummer then fled the scene.*

*The woman sustained serious injuries, police said. They have not yet released her name. They are looking for the blue Hummer and are asking for information about the driver and vehicle. They will not confirm speculation that the incident was a case of extreme road rage.*

*“We do not have enough information at this point,” media relations officer Howard Chow told reporters. “Right now we are trying to determine who owns the Hummer and who was driving it. We ask the public to please phone us with any information they may have.” Witnesses to the accident were unable to get the license plate number of the Hummer, but Chow said it is a relatively rare vehicle and police are hopeful they will be able to find its owner soon.*

*Traffic on Granville and Broadway was blocked for hours as emergency crews and police worked on the scene. Because of construction on Cambie Street, and restricted access to the Cambie Bridge, a huge traffic snarl developed...*

“Please, God, no!” Maria groaned, studying the photo of the smashed Toyota to see if it contained any identifying features. *Nothing*. Still, a certainty began to creep in that the Toyota was Cathy’s, and that Cathy was at that very moment in Vancouver General Hospital, being treated for ‘serious’ injuries.

Maria grabbed the phone again and punched in Cathy’s number. She waited, praying, but there was no answer. She tried Cathy’s cell. Again, no answer. She phoned London Drugs, but the store wasn’t opened yet. She and Cathy moved in different circles so Maria couldn’t think who else to call. She was reluctant to contact the police or Vancouver General Hospital. As a last resort, perhaps, but she wasn’t ready to leave any telephone trails leading back to her. There were too many awkward questions that might be asked. Then she remembered The Street Level Society and punched in the number.

“Hello?” a gravely voice answered. “Street Level. Can I help you?”

“It’s Maria Selkirk,” Maria said.

“Maria who?”

“I used to do volunteer work for the society,” Maria explained.

“Oh yeah,” the woman said. “I’ve heard your name. What can I do for you?”

“I’m trying to get in touch with Cathy Vermeer. I saw a picture of a traffic accident in *The Sun* this morning and it looks like it might be her car. I’m really worried.”

For a second the line went dead. “You’re the third person to call,” the woman told her. “We’re pretty worried too. We’ve tried the police and the hospital, but they won’t tell us anything. We can’t tell for sure from the photo if it’s Cathy’s car, but it could be.”

Maria said goodbye and hung up.

~

“I don’t often get to say this, so I’m not going to miss my cue: you’re a very lucky woman, Cathy.” Doctor A Bjornson stood beside the bed, looking down at Cathy from what seemed a great height. She was a big woman, whose presence filled the room. “A broken leg, cuts and contusions and possibly some internal bruising – nothing that won’t

heal. Normally after an accident like this we'd have to plaster and stitch you back together like Frankenstein."

Cathy didn't feel lucky. Every joint, every muscle in her body ached. She couldn't twitch without painful shockwaves rippling through her nervous system. Simple acts, like taking a sip of water or shifting her weight on the mattress, were punctuated with yelps and groans.

"Can't you give me something Doc?" she pleaded.

"If your discomfort is too severe we'll increase the dosage of pain suppressors."

"Discomfort! It feel like I'm being acupuncture with railway spikes."

The doctor smiled. She was in her late forties, Cathy guessed. Not what you'd call beautiful, but intriguing... no, on second thought, perhaps beautiful.

"We could increase the dosage immediately," Dr. Bjornson offered.

"I think I'll be okay," Cathy decided, not wanting to *wimp out*.

"The police have requested an interview. Do you feel up to it?"

Cathy sighed. "Yeah. I guess."

Dr. Bjornson nodded curtly. "I'll be back to check on you later," she said. "Let the nurse know if your crucifixion by railway spikes continues and we'll do something about it." She walked briskly toward the door. Just before she exited Dr. Bjornson paused on the threshold, turning to face Cathy. "You can have visitors now, too, if you want" she said. "That is, if the police permit it."

Then she was gone, and Cathy let herself drift, drift, imagining what it would be like for a fallen leaf to land on a perfectly calm pond on a bright summer day...

Something had wakened her. Cathy glanced about, looking for whatever it was that had summoned her from semi-consciousness.

"Ms. Vermeer?" A stocky young woman looked in at the door. "Inspector Diane Reger, Vancouver Police. Is it okay if I ask a few questions?"

"Can I see your badge?" Cathy said, fully awake now.

Inspector Reger looked puzzled and annoyed. She fished a leather holder out of her jacket and flipped it open. Satisfied her identity had been confirmed, she flipped the wallet shut.

"Sorry," Cathy smirked. "I've always wanted to say that."

The inspector pulled up a visitor's chair and sat down next to the bed. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Like I've just been rammed by a god-damned Hummer, then run over four or five times... and pissed off."

"Can you tell me what happened." Inspector Reger flipped open her notebook, using her knee as a writing surface. She jotted occasional entries as Cathy went over events at Broadway and Granville.

"Did you see the driver of the Hummer?"

Cathy remembered the square face peering down at her over the Hummer's grill. "He was Caucasian," she said. "He looked to be pretty big and muscular – at least between the ears. Blond hair. That's about it. I didn't see much more."

"Was there a passenger in the vehicle?"

"I didn't see anyone."

"And you didn't recognize the driver?"

"Yeah. I saw him in a movie once: *Planet of the Apes*."

The inspector smirked, then looked official again. "Do you have any reason to believe this man may have known you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think this attack might have been something other than a random incident?"

Caught off guard Cathy hesitated a split second. "No," she said.

Diane Reger folded her hands over her notepad and fixed Cathy with a sympathetic gaze, her dark eyes probing. "Sometimes we're really afraid to talk about things that are happening in our lives," she said softly. "We're embarrassed, or ashamed, or we don't want to get people into trouble. There's a million reasons people keep dangerous secrets. If someone's threatening you Cathy, you should tell me."

Cathy's chest tightened. The truth bottled up inside her expanding against her rib cage and the barrier of her throat. But she refused to let it out, clamping her mouth shut with every ounce of will.

"Someone broke in and vandalized your apartment just over three weeks ago. Is that incident related to yesterday's accident?"

"No," Cathy lied.

“How can you be so sure?”

“I don’t know. I just am!”

“Okay,” Inspector Reger said. She thumbed back through her notebook. “When you vacated your place so it could be fixed up, you stayed with a Maria Selkirk. Who’s she?”

“A friend,” Cathy said. “Are we just about done? I’m getting tired.”

Inspector Reger closed her notebook and tucked it into her pocket. “We’re done for now, Cathy. But I’m worried, I have to tell you. I don’t want anything else to happen before we talk again.”

*Talk again?* Cathy thought as Inspector Reger pushed her chair back.

“If you remember anything else, give me a call,” the policewoman said, placing her card on the bedside table.

~

“You didn’t tell the police about Laurence!” Maria scolded, keeping her voice down so the other patients in the room wouldn’t overhear.

“You didn’t tip them off about Pirelli, did you?” Cathy rebutted.

Maria had to admit the comeback was a slam-dunk.

“Besides, they know something’s not right,” Cathy said sheepishly, “and they’ll probably be coming to talk to you about it too. They asked about the attack on my apartment, so they’ve connected those dots. I think they suspect I’m under siege by a jilted lover or something like that... I wish!”

Maria suppressed a smile. That Cathy had survived without major injuries seemed a miracle, considering the ‘twisted wreckage’ of her Toyota. “Cath,” she began gingerly, “I’m grateful for your protectiveness, but we’ve got to tell the police what’s happened, right? I mean, you could have been killed.”

Cathy grimaced. The left side of her face was bruised and swollen and Maria felt sick imagining the pain it must have been causing her friend to talk. “I’d agree if I thought he was going to strike again, Mar, but I figure he’s done with me.”

Maria looked desperately to Victor for support.

“She’s right,” he said, deflating her hopes. “I don’t think Laurence would risk another attack on Cathy at this point. She’s not his target, you are. Cathy was just a proxy.”

“Thanks!” the patient grumbled.

“I think *we* need to go to the police.” Maria whispered angrily. “How long can I let this continue? If Laurence is prepared to push this far he’s not going to stop at anything. He’s murdered one person already, and look what he’s done to Cathy. He’ll keep hitting and hitting until I either give in or I’m dead.”

“I’d hold off a bit longer, Mar,” Victor advised.

“Why? What’s the point?”

“He’s been very careful not to show himself,” he explained. “But he’s left a trail already. Like Cathy said, the police have ‘connected the dots’ between the vandalism of her place and the ram and run. There’s also the paintball incident in Stanley Park. Alone, none of those would sway a judge. Taken together, they are beginning to expose a pattern...”

“So you’re suggesting we wait around until he strikes again,” Maria hissed. “Christ, Vic, what will it take? One of us getting killed?”

“There’s risk any way we play it” he countered, stung. “But what’s going to happen if we go to the police right away? They’re going to focus their investigation on him. They won’t have enough to nail him, so he’ll be on the loose. There’s not even enough to get a restraining order, for what it’s worth. And how do you think Laurence is going to react when he finds out we’ve sicced the police on him? You’ve said yourself you don’t want to escalate things.

“Something else we need to consider, Maria.” He paused, reluctant to make his point. “The only reason Laurence hasn’t filed an application himself to have access to Aaron, or even custody, is the risk of exposure. Play your hand now and he won’t have anything left to lose. He’ll be in Family Court tomorrow with an application and there’s a risk a judge would grant him custody.” He paused, letting her anger settle, then continued doggedly. “There’s a preference to leave a child his familiar environment, in the family home,” he concluded.

“But what about everything that’s happened!” Maria cried. “The calls, paintballs, Pirelli, now Cath? What about all that?”

“You know that’s all inadmissible, Mar,” he pleaded helplessly. “It’s all inferential or circumstantial at best, there’s nothing that will stick.”

She stared blankly at Victor, not wanting to believe the arguments that hemmed her in; not able to escape their truth. “He’s winning, isn’t he,” she sighed. “The fucking bastard can do whatever he wants and there’s no way we can stop him! It makes me so fucking mad I want to scream!”

“We’re not done,” Victor promised. “That’s what he wants us to think: that we’re trapped. But we’re not in the end game yet. There’s still room to maneuver.”

“Where!” she growled. “You can wriggle around in a coffin, but you can’t get out Victor. Eventually, you’re going to run out of air!”

He reached out to touch her shoulder consolingly. Maria spun away. He had become another vector in the emotional physics of her downward-spiral.

“I’m sorry,” she pleaded, confused. “It’s just too much Vic. I know you’re trying to help, but it’s just too much.”

“Mar!” Cathy consoled. “Hang in. He’s right. You’ve got to hang in.”

She stared from one to the other of them, smiling feebly. What did they want? What did they expect from a former prostitute, a gold digger, a soon-to-be bitch-divorcee if not a corpse.

Vic and Cathy didn’t waver. They held her fast in their gaze and in the end she had to give in, surrendering to their trust.

~

Knute yawned and sat on the edge of his cot. If business didn’t pick up after the *Inside Out* show, he might have to close The Naked Truth Gallery for good. That was the stark reality confronting him. He’d already given up his apartment and set up housekeeping in the back office to save money. Even so his revenue column didn’t stack up against expenses... not by a long shot. Did he feel depressed about this? Knute scanned his inner psychic network for signs. “No,” he grinned. *Just because something doesn’t work doesn’t mean it’s a failure.*

People spent too much time fretting over corporate notions of ‘success’ as far as he was concerned. If ‘getting ahead’ by crawling over the backs of your bested colleagues was ‘success’ he could do without it. If the Downtown Eastside was a byproduct of the vaunted Fraser Institute brand of ‘success’, then the pasty faced wunderkind of the business world could have it. To him ‘success’ was being able to stand naked under the

sun in the presence of your fellows and not feel a twinge of shame. He could have that any time. All he had to do was pack up for a day trip and head out to Wreck Beach.

But to Knute *that wasn't* enough. He wanted to be able to step onto the bus stark naked, to ride his bike down Denman Street in the buff, to drop into his local coffee shop without a shred of clothing hampering his movements. Knute grinned, doffing his last, encumbering stitch of clothing and stretching out on his cot. Before he closed the Naked Truth he would make one final statement. He would run the business the way it should be run – stark raving naked! He smiled just to think of it. The look on his customers' faces, the furor, the inevitable arrival of the cops – whose duty it was to enforce Victorian notions of dress and manners.

Sleep would come quickly to subdue his reveries. Knute didn't want to admit it, but he was on the downhill side of the bell curve when it came to age. He had worked all day setting up the *Inside Out* exhibit and felt it in his muscles and joints. Victor had dashed in and out to help, but for the most part the lawyer-cum-artist had issued quick batches of instructions, pitched in for fifteen minutes or so, then charged off to meet a client or appear in court. That left Knute on his own to hang the photographs and the dozens of banners that would define the 'Groves of Eros' as Victor insisted on calling the video display and performance spaces.

Knute snorted. "Ridiculous!" he muttered. It was a small matter, but irritating. He preferred plain speaking to the affected language of art. That quibble aside, he knew the *Inside Out* show was going to be sensational and Knute glowed with pride to think that he'd had a role to play, giving Victor Daly a venue. That in itself made the whole Naked Truth enterprise worth-while. Knute yawned again, hugely, then settled into sleep...

Glass shattering, a heavy object thudding and skittering across the gallery floor. Knute woke with a start, uncertain if he'd really heard something or if he was experiencing the fading echoes of a dream. He couldn't identify what the noises might mean. Then another crash reverberated in the gallery and he knew something was dreadfully wrong. Bolting upright, he swung himself off the mattress and stumbled toward the office door. As he ripped it open a whumph erupted – similar to the sound of a gas barbecue lighting, only softer and infinitely more sinister. A garish splash of orange light danced on the walls. He knew instinctively what had happened. Somebody had

thrown a Molotov cocktail or some type of incendiary device into the shop. Through the intervening forest of banners the flames flickered. Knute switched on the lights and grabbed the fire extinguisher from the back wall. Running, he pulled the release pin and began systematically knocking back the flames. In less than a minute he had subdued them.

~

“If you hadn’t been here the whole place would have burned down,” Victor said, surveying the damage. “All my work, poof! Up in smoke.”

“Barbarians!” Knute agreed. “I wonder what they would have done if they’d known I *was* here. Would they have started their fire anyway? Would they have deliberately risked killing me in my sleep?”

The damage was minor: a few singed banners, some burn marks on the gallery floor, and a smashed window. Then there was the graffiti in the back alley, proclaiming cryptically, “Sodom and Gomorrah”, “Fornication”, “Strange Flesh”, “Damnation”, “Eternal Fire”.

“Strange flesh?” Knute wondered. “What does *that* mean?”

“If you ask me it’s the fevered flesh of diseased brains,”

“And the exhibit? It will go ahead as planned?”

“Damned rights it will!” Victor vowed. “It will go ahead better than planned. They’ve done us another huge favour, the New Covenant. Just wait ‘til the media get a hold of this. We’ll have a line up all the way round the block opening night. The place will be so jammed the cops won’t be able to get in to arrest me!”

Knute grinned, but Victor caught a glint of worry in the old nudist’s eye.

“What?” he said.

“Opening night is four days away, Vic,” Knute warned. “Who’s to say what might happen between now and then, eh?” He gestured at the damage done to the Naked Truth Gallery. “These are not the type of people who will be deterred easily. They’re fanatics.”

“I won’t back down,” Victor promised.

“No. I didn’t think you would – not even over my charred body. But if you’re going to poke the hornet’s nest, you better get yourself a long stick and a pair of really good sneakers.”

Victor laughed slyly.

“What?” Knute wanted to know.

“Or a set of protective clothes.”

“No, no,” Knute protested. “You can run much faster in the nude.”

“I guess you’ve got some new skills to add to your resume,” Victor grinned.

“What?”

“Nude firefighter. I think that’s a job description with a future.”

Knute bobbed his head in agreement.

~

Laurence clicked the off button, killing the morning news. He leaned back in his swivel chair and savored the moment, hands locked behind his head, a satisfied smile on his face. For weeks he had been looking for his opportunity, for a way to get rid of Maria and reclaim his son without doing irreparable damage to his legit reputation and making the cops pay more attention to him than they already were. Now he’d get a shot.

“Yes,” he affirmed. “A clear shot.”

There were still logistical issues to deal with, of course. There always were. But those were tactical elements he could sort out with a professional. She would have to be in the company of Victor Daly. That shouldn’t be too hard to set up. “Two love birds with one bullet-burst,” Laurence chortled.

He visualized the headlines: “Erotic artist gunned down with companion”. The media would instantly jump to the conclusion that Victor had been murdered by the New Covenant fanatics and that Maria had been ‘in the wrong place, at the wrong time...’ *and with the wrong guy*, Laurence mused contentedly. They would rerun clips of Victor yapping on the steps of the Holy Rosary Cathedral and in front of the Naked Truth Gallery.

“Shit,” Laurence shook his head gleefully. “This weirdo is a top Family Court lawyer!” Who would hire a porn merchant to represent them in Family Court? Laurence shook his head. “I’ll be doing society a favour,” he smirked.

Of course the police wouldn’t be thrown quite so easily. Laurence went through a quick risk benefit analysis. He would be a suspect, no doubt about it. They would dig up everything in Maria’s Family Court application and they’d gain access to the stuff she

had stored in her safety deposit box. They'd want to ask some tough questions. "Yes, I was angry with her," he would admit. "No, I'm not involved in organized crime. That was Maria's delusion." "No, I didn't want to see her dead. I wanted to work things out with Maria. I still loved her, even though I was angry." Then if they pushed harder, "She was the mother of my son, for God's sake! How could I possibly even think of harming Maria?"

His denials might not convince them, but they would never get approval from crown to go ahead with a case when the motives of their prime suspect were eclipsed by the avowed intentions of a fanatical Christian group that wanted to punish Victor Daly for his pornographic sins and big mouth. The prosecution would never be able to get over the reasonable doubts he would create by having Maria hit in the company of Victor Daly. And with Maria gone, the Family Court file would slam shut too.

The plan stood every chance of success. *A definite go*, Laurence grinned.

He took some measure of satisfaction in the decision. Like a jet pilot thrilling to the G-force of a tight turn, Laurence reveled in the power of a hit. It took jam. It was the ultimate expression of who he was: a man who didn't live by ordinary rules, who would hurt you – destroy you – if you got in his way... no matter who you were. He punched the intercom and summoned his security chief. The call would be placed to his hunter from a secure phone. Arrangements would be made to meet in a dark booth at the back of a secluded restaurant.

~

"Not now, for God's sake," Victor vented.

Yes, he'd ordered the DNA analysis; yes it confirmed what he suspected. "But God damn it, not now!"

He plucked the cell phone receiver out of his ear and tossed it onto the passenger seat, where it lay like the carcass of a sleek, metallic bug. *Stop*. He pulled out of the traffic stream on Robson Street into an empty parking spot, where he sat for a moment, his head resting on the steering wheel.

Barring a miniscule fraction of possible error – a probability as slender as dropping a pebble into a pop bottle from the top of the CN Tower – Barbara Doer was his biological grandmother; Crystal Doer his mother.

He couldn't process the news. It made no sense. Left him panting like a confused dog. Passers by gawked, perhaps mistaking him for a stock broker having a bad day. *Fuck you*, he thought.

He'd requested confirmation as quickly as possible, and the lab had offered a turn around of three to five working days. "We'll courier the actual analysis to you today Mr. Daly," the woman had informed him.

Victor didn't want to see the results. He wanted to forget them. His hunch about Crystal Doer made the rest of his life a *non sequitur*. He shook his head violently. He, Nora and Richard had tacitly, doggedly avoided this discovery. Now this girl – this mother of his – had crawled out of the forgotten den where he'd been birthed.

He bolted upright, surprised to discover his cheeks damp. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and gripped the steering wheel firmly, as if he was already speeding away from Crystal Doer and the nightmare he saw coming. But he couldn't move and felt a fool, sitting there in his Porsche not knowing which direction to go.

*What's outside the God-damned closet door!*

Now the passers-by pretended not to notice. They must have heard his anguished imprecations from inside the badly parked Porsche, but it was too-obviously none of their business. Just another instance of corporate meltdown. Best look away. They brushed past the window, oblivious.

His ghosts were transformations of his mother's clothes, hanging in his before-time closet cell. Ghosts in the form of chiffon and satin, rustling in quiet admonition while she was out there crying and moaning. Wherever she had been – they had been – it was a place called hell. The patriarch's version of hell. So vivid and painful was the truth, he could not breathe and had to utter a strangled cry of atonement. The habits and the burqas and all the other paraphernalia enforced by old men in robes was intended to conceal sexual power – the regenerative source of all being – and replace it with an arid intellectualism as fecund as dried leather.

Victor knew beyond doubting that his mother – the girl named Crystal Doer – had been a victim of tribal brutality and that his father was a monster...

He slammed the car into gear and peeled out into the traffic. He had to get out of there, get anywhere but the place he was. He wouldn't allow the passers by to watch him,

condemn and categorize his anguish. Victor saw through their ugly truth. That's what *Inside Out* was all about. He hadn't known it until then, but the freedom Pauline and Rick had granted was a sacred trust. To have allowed him the fringes of their intimacy – even their freelance intimacy - was a selfless act. It was the diametric opposite of pornography, even though it appeared as smut to vulgar eyes.

These thoughts propelled him through the city, into Stanley Park, where he screamed around the corners, passing anything that moved, until he found himself at Prospect Point, overlooking English Bay and West Vancouver.

~

In other circumstances Maria might have liked Inspector Diane Reger. The policewoman was meticulous and precise in both thought and action, qualities Maria admired. There was an economy and directness about her that made you think you could get to know the inspector quickly, but not deeply. Maria was pretty sure more than one criminal had been outfoxed by the woman sitting opposite at the kitchen counter.

“How well do you know Cathy?” the inspector asked.

“She's a good friend.”

“Can you think of any reason anyone might want to ram her car into oncoming traffic on Granville Street?”

“No,” Maria said. But she sounded unconvincing, even to herself.

“No ideas at all?”

Maria shrugged. “Road rage?” she guessed.

Inspector Reger shook her head. “I don't think so. Witnesses say the Hummer followed Cathy for several blocks. There were no signs of aggression before the incident took place and nothing occurred at the intersection that would have triggered a road rage episode. Witnesses describe what appears to be a deliberate attack and planned escape.”

“Who owns the Hummer?”

“It was stolen. That's another thing that puzzles us: the vehicle was completely clean. No prints, no hair, no forensic evidence at all that could identify the thief.”

“So?”

“If there's no forensic evidence, Ms. Selkirk, it means somebody went to great lengths to cover their tracks. This wasn't some joy rider out to cause mayhem. That

Hummer was stolen by somebody who knew exactly what they were doing... And why they were doing it. It was a deliberate hit.”

“I see,” Maria said.

“A couple of weeks ago Cathy’s apartment was vandalized.”

Maria nodded.

“And she stayed with you while her place was being repaired.”

“Yes.”

“Did she receive any phone calls or visits during that time?”

“Yes. Of course she did.”

“Any you would have considered suspicious for any reason?”

“Look, officer,” Maria sighed. “If she had, I would have told you already...”

“But?” Inspector Reger had zeroed in on a microscopic shift in Maria’s demeanor – the barely perceptible quaver in her voice. She bore into Maria with her steady, imperturbable gaze.

Maria stared back, stalling as a series of intricate permutations sorted themselves out beneath the level of consciousness. Mostly she was trying to determine if she could trust this woman – this cop. “Look,” she said. “I’ve had problems of my own, Inspector, I might not have been as aware of Cathy’s situation as I should have been.”

“What kind of problems?”

“I’m separated from my husband. We’re trying to sort things out.”

Inspector Reger arched her eyebrows inquiringly.

“I don’t know why I brought that up!” Maria flustered. “It has nothing to do with anything. Forget I said it.”

“What’s your husband’s name, Maria?”

“Laurence Selkirk.”

“Address?”

Maria recited the Taj’s address and phone number while Inspector Reger scribbled frantically to keep up.

“Where does your husband work Ms. Selkirk?”

As Maria rattled off the contact information to Selkirk Shipping Inspector Reger stared straight at her, not writing down a thing. “Thank you Ms. Selkirk,” she said when Maria had finished. “That will be all for now.”

“My personal situation can’t be connected to this, Inspector,” Maria protested.

“I’m sure you’re right,” Inspector Reger answered curtly. “Don’t worry. We don’t usually start turning over stones unless there’s already some slime on them. We’re especially discreet when dealing with ‘pillars of the community’.”

~

Cathy wanted to keep “out of sight and out of mind” after she got out of hospital, but agreed to Maria’s suggestion of a quiet get together at her place. “A coming out party” as they called it. Nothing elaborate: Cath, Maria, Victor, Aaron and TooBee “as Aaron’s guest.”

“So?” Cathy said. They were alone on the deck, sucking back Marguerites and watching ‘the boys’ play down at the far end of the yard.

“So what?”

“Have you bedded him yet?”

“Jesus Cath!” Maria yelped, almost choking on an hors d’oeuvre. “Even for you that’s a bit forward.”

Cathy smirked wickedly. “Well?” she said.

“No. I haven’t! As if it was any of your business. For now we seem to be content with a Platonic relationship.”

Now it was Cathy’s turn to choke. “Quick!” she gasped. “Somebody in the house do the Heimlich Maneuver on me. I think I’m going to die... I’ve got this big lump in my throat.”

Maria smacked her on the shoulder, laughing. “Oh sorry,” she cried when Cathy grimaced. That only made them laugh harder. “I’m glad your back hun. The bottom fell out of my world when I saw that picture of your car in the paper. It scared the crap out of me.”

“I wonder what kind of favour old Laurence is going to do for yours truly next,” Cathy said ruefully. “I’ve already been able to redecorate my apartment because of him.”

Now I'm going to be able to get a new car... well, the insurance payoff will give me a small down payment on a newer used car. I'm tired of rattling around town in beaters."

"Who says you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear?"

"Find a silver lining around the darkest cloud."

"Transform lead into gold."

"Hey you two! Keep it down!" Victor yelled. "We can't hear ourselves play."

They smiled and waved. Cathy sipped her drink. "It looks like they're really having fun," she said.

"He's been a *real dad* to Aaron. It scares me Cath."

"There's that word again: 'scared'."

"Everything's uncertain," Maria sighed. "I don't want Aaron getting attached then having things fall apart. It's so natural, so physical between them. They really like each other. But what's Aaron going to do if Vic and TooBee step out of his life?"

"What are *you* going to do my dear. It would seem the Toob is the only one willing to hump you at the moment."

Outraged, Maria slapped Cathy again, provoking another round of laughter. "You bitch!" she shrieked.

"Seriously, though, why are you so afraid Mar?"

"His photographs. His quirky friends. I guess that's got me on edge. The fact that he's my lawyer, and all this is a huge conflict of interest." She glanced down at the yard where Victor and Aaron were playing. "Not to mention his personal foibles," she laughed. "How will *they* play out in Aaron's life?"

"He's an artist, Mar..."

"Whose subject matter is men and women fucking, for God's sake."

"The study of nudes has been a part of the art scene since the Renaissance and earlier, in case you hadn't noticed. Why don't you try catching up to the Fourteenth Century."

"Not the study of two nudes together, having sex! That's a modern phenomenon, usually relegated to smutty magazines and sicko web sites."

"He's pushing the boundaries, true."

"Live sex on stage!"

Cathy shrugged. “Art takes us places we’re uncomfortable – at least art that’s worthy of the name. You’ve seen what Victor does; you know it isn’t porn. It’s the most gorgeous treatment of human sexuality ever– even if it is strictly hetero. Take the controversy out of it and all that’s left is beauty.”

“Try telling that to a five year old kid when you have to explain the etchings on your boyfriend’s walls.”

“Good point.”

They sat in silence for a while, Maria mulling over what had already been said. The fun had drained out of their conversation. Any joy left in the yard emanated from the far end, where Toob had tackled Aaron and was licking him into submission.

“That’s not the only thing this ‘fraidy cat has on her mind, though” Maria said.

The hullabaloo down at the bottom of the yard evoked sadness for her – like the whooping of an exotic, nearly extinct bird.

“I don’t see any way we can survive, Victor and I” she sighed. “Laurence is a predator Cathy – a killer. Look at you! You’re his latest victim. What do you think he’ll do to Victor and me once he’s figured out he can’t get his way? You and Victor persuaded me not to go to the police, and perhaps you were right. But that would only have delayed the inevitable....”

“What do you mean ‘would’ Maria? Have you gone to the cops?”

“They came to me,” she answered. “Your Inspector Reger stopped by for a little afternoon interrogation. I didn’t tell her about Laurence in so many words, but when I mentioned his name, she clued me in pretty quickly.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That I don’t think Don Pirelli was the only one to have Laurence under surveillance my dear, I think the VPD is onto him too. Big time.”

“And where does that leave us?”

Maria winced, the implications of her friend’s question sinking in like barbs. “The hunted animal is the most dangerous,” she said. “Everyone knows that.”

~

The evening had been a success all round. Maria put Aaron to bed, rosy cheeked and full of tall tales about TooBee and Vic. “Go to sleep now, buster. And I mean it,” she warned, switching off the light and closing the bedroom door.

“Not all the way!” he begged.

“Okay.” She nudged it open a sliver. “But you have to promise.”

“I promise.”

“Night hun.”

Then she, Cathy and Vic talked ‘til midnight, their voices floating into the blackness that had pooled at the perimeter of her back yard, bleeding into the sky. Maria contented herself with listening for the most part, while Cathy and Victor yakked about photography, the politics of sexuality, *all that stuff*. They were getting along just fine. Famously, in fact.

*Why am I surprised?* Maria wondered. *Why do I always expect things to go sideways?*

Maybe it had something to do with her upbringing. Maybe her lout of a father had instilled a permanent reflex in her – an invisible flinching of the soul in anticipation of sudden, random viciousness...

She remembered how Victor had flinched that first time she touched him in Stanley Park. *What happened to you in the before-time mister?* As she pondered, he launched into an elaborate explanation concerning the relationship of form to composition ‘in the physical realm.’ Apparently Victor believed that soul ‘expresses itself’ in the material world.

*Why do you have to work so hard to prove that sex isn’t a sin?*

“There’s not a shred of doubt in my mind that this world is an expression of universal spirit,” he argued. “Spirit, manifesting as will, shapes the primordial chaos. The being classical religions call god experiences himself through the experiences and creative enterprises of individuated souls. But individuated spirit is in some senses mirage – it comes into being, makes its difference in the world, then goes under, leaving room for new forms of expression and knowledge. In fact the individual never really existed at all except as an expression of what I call ‘species will’.”

“Now wait a minute!” Cathy objected. “Are you telling me I don’t really exist.”

“Of course you do.”

“But only as a facet of what you’re calling ‘universal spirit’ or ‘species will’.”

“We’ve hit upon the conundrum of human existence. What you are experiencing is the tension between existentialism and what the latter day Christian interpreters call ‘intelligent design’.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Cathy exploded. “And what the fuck does any of this have to do with art?”

“Art is a derivative process,” he cried. “It echoes divine spirit because it is self-exploration of the sublime. In one form or another art is our reason for being. In terms of earthly evolution we as humans have expanded the ability of nature to understand itself. My photography is all about pushing the envelope of self discovery into the sexual realm. Every artist chooses a focus, but we’re all engaged in the same spiritual unfolding...”

*It’s like a court case to him*, Maria suddenly realized. An undercurrent of pleading had entered his voice. Cathy had provoked the conversation, but Maria sensed Victor was talking to *her* through Cathy. He *needed* her to appreciate the undercurrent of *Inside Out*, the powerful nuances that separated his images from the puerile fantasies of the pornographers – the incontrovertible and obvious truth that he was willing to risk his entire career for the sake of his art... and for her.

And there was something else... an edginess she had missed, something he wasn’t saying and couldn’t so long as Cathy was present. He glanced at her furtively, signaling.... *What?*

That he yearned to be alone with her!

Maria yawned pointedly after a while. “I don’t know about you two,” she said. “But this gal needs her beauty sleep. I’ve got a little angel in there who’s going to wake up in the form of a whirling dervish tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn.”

Her comment triggered a flurry of activity. “Don’t be stupid!” she scolded Cathy, who insisted on bringing in her own dishes, hobbling through the house on her crutches. “Shhh,” she warned Victor, who was clanking the bottles out on the deck.

“Here,” she said, handing him the keys to her SUV as they headed for the front door. Victor had offered Cathy a lift home and Maria was going to see them off. “She isn’t

going to be able to squeeze herself into that car of yours without re-breaking her leg,” she said.

“What about the keys? Should I put them in your mailbox?”

“I’ll be up.”

“I’ll be up,” Cathy mimicked cattily.

~

They couldn’t wait, not for a second. The moment Victor stepped inside they let themselves go. “Not here,” she moaned. “Aaron.” So they drew back a moment, like the surging tide between waves. Abandoning the sofa, they hurried upstairs. Then they fell in, and in, and in, two bodies merging, their boundaries blurred. Hungry for each other. Unable to quench the yearning.

~

“I love you. I loved you the instant I saw you. Even knowing you were married. Even knowing you might be my client. It’s a good thing Laurence is such a prick or I’d end up feeling like one.”

They lay side by side, noses inches apart, seeing each other in each other’s eyes. He stroked her auburn hair, letting his fingers follow the silky nap across her temple, around her ear, down the back of her neck. “I’ll be thinking about you all day,” he said. “Every day.”

They kissed, content for now with the gentlest brushing of lips, the most sensuous tracteries of fingertips over tingling skin. The electricity of love-making had not completely dissipated. It flowed between them, an unstable flux that shivered in the neural circuitry.

“This is delicious,” she sighed.

Then she frowned. “But it isn’t the only reason you wanted to come back is it?”

“No,” he admitted. “There’s something I needed to tell you about.”

“Well?” she prompted when he fell silent.

*Why dredge things up now?* Why not seal them back into their crypt and leave them there forever. That’s what Victor wanted to do. But the ghost of Crystal Doer would not be laid to rest.

“I’ve found out who my biological mother is,” he blurted.

Maria propped herself on her elbow, looking down at him. “I thought you weren’t interested in finding her,” she said.

“I wasn’t.” He described the television documentary, how he’d seen Crystal Doer that night at his parents’ house. “I knew instantly who she was. It was like I’d been tasered. It zapped a forgotten part of me.”

“You don’t seem very happy about it.”

“She’s been missing thirty-five years, Mar. Everyone presumes she’s dead and that the missing person file should really be a murder file.”

“Are you sure she’s your mother? Maybe your just projecting.”

“I visited her parents out in Abbotsford – my maternal grandparents. I collected some biological material. The DNA analysis confirms Barbara Doer is my grandmother. Crystal was their only child. She’s my mother.”

He watched as the implications of what he’d told her sank in. “My God!” she said. “What are you going to do?”

“I have to go see them again. The biological sample wasn’t obtained willingly...”

“What!”

“I recovered it from the waste basket in their bathroom.”

“So they don’t know you’re their grandson?”

“Not yet. And, to be honest, they’re not going to be thrilled to find out. They’re staunch Christians, Mar – the kind of people I have been confronting all my life. DNA be damned, they are not going to let the creator of *Inside Out* climb into the branches of *their* family tree.”

“And I thought my family history was twisted,” she shook her head.

He drew her to him. “A part of me wants to chuck it all, Mar. What matters is you and me. But I can’t walk away from it. Crystal Doer is in my genes.”

Her face loomed above him, so intense, so beautiful. She kissed him hard. They fell into each other again, their bodies merging inside another whorl of passion.

~

Now he really wanted them dead, both of them. They would feel the sting of avenging lead. Daly, the bastard, was spending nights at her place. “Some fucking lawyer,” Laurence cursed through gritted teeth.

He waited impatiently for the call to come through. Arrangements had to be made to ensure it could not be traced or taped, a necessary inconvenience, especially considering the heightened police interest in Selkirk Shipping. No question they were sniffing around. His intelligence on that score was solid. Perhaps they hadn’t figured out that the Selkirk operation was being run from inside the President’s office, but they certainly knew that Selkirk Shipping was a conduit...

*Dead!* He banged his fist on the mahogany desk.

The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Selkirk,” the Hunter rumbled. “You wanted to talk?”

“Yes,” Laurence answered, careful to keep any hint of peevishness out of his voice. “I’m just wondering why I haven’t had any good news lately.”

“These things take time. Bringing the right people together in the right circumstances isn’t something I can arrange; I just have to wait for it to happen.” The Hunter’s voice conveyed no emotion. “If you just wanted me to take care of either of them, that could be done pretty quick. But together... that complicates things.”

“Would a little extra money help?”

There was a thoughtful pause at the other end. “It might.”

“I was thinking we could double your fee.”

Again, the pause.

“Would that help?”

“I’ll do what I can Mr. Selkirk. It would be easier if I could do the job with a third party in the frame...”

“No!” Laurence balked. “Absolutely not.”

“He wouldn’t get hurt.”

“No!”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“That’s all,” Laurence said.

The line went dead.

~

“Until now I haven’t *really* appreciated what your photographs are all about, Victor,” Mrs. Daly was saying. As she spoke she yanked weeds out of their back yard vegetable garden – angrily it seemed to him.

“In other words, you’ve always considered my art suspect, Mom. Admit it.”

She tugged another weed, grunting with the effort. “Okay! Okay already! So Dad and I haven’t raised the subject of your art over cocktails with our socialist friends. That doesn’t mean we haven’t been trying to understand all these years.”

Oops. She was in no mood to be humored. He hadn’t even broached the subject of his parenthood yet, and Nora was already upset. Explaining the real reason for his unexpected visit was going to be even harder than he’d anticipated.

How could you tell your own mother that a creature was growing inside you – a mutation of arms, legs, heart, and lungs that was coalescing into something monstrous, but undeniable.

He wanted his old life back – the poster-boy image of new age success that had been him before Laurence. Before Crystal. Before *Inside Out*.

*That’s what they want too.* Nora and Richard. They wanted a son whose lifestyle made them look askance just a little, but which followed a trajectory they could describe with modest pride as up-and-coming.

“You’ve always challenged our notions of who we are Victor,” Nora sniffed. “I suppose that’s what children do. We’re dyed-in-the-wool socialists, and that’s never going to change. But we both feel old. Socialism was a solution for our century, and it’s still relevant, even in the post-industrial age. That said, we can see the possibility of something beyond socialism. I suppose that’s what you’re living.”

“That sounds like a round-about way of conceding defeat, Mom.”

“No! Not at all.” She forced a smile. “Socialism has been the bulwark of change my whole life, Vic. Medicare, Employment Insurance, improved working standards, equality for women and minorities... all those things have come about because socialists like your Dad and I fought hard for them. And we still have work to do. Us old-guard socialists still have to hold the old-guard capitalists at bay while the designer society unfolds. Your

Dad and I will be fighting that fight into the grave, but I'm certain now the new world won't have much to do with our brand of socialism."

She'd never talked like this before and Victor was taken off guard. "How does that make you feel, Mom?"

"Like I've done what I was sent here to do: forced change on a brutal, reluctant world and raised a wonderful son, who's going to be part of that brilliant future neither me nor your father can quite bring ourselves to condone."

They laughed. Nora stood up to stretch, pushing her straw hat back so she could see him better. They hugged. "Enough with the political philosophy, though," she said. "You didn't stop by in the middle of the week to listen to your mom's Grade 12 Socials lecture, I bet. Let's have some tea."

As they climbed the back steps and she put on the kettle, he wrestled with the appalling truth he had to tell. *How can you say the things you have to say to her?* This woman – plump and wrinkled now – had taken him in, raised him, loved him since he was a child. *Since the before-times ended.*

"It's about the girl, isn't it?" Nora said.

"Huh?"

"The girl in that newscast. You're going to tell me something about her."

"Yes, Mom," he stumbled, rubbing his face with his hands.

"Well? Spit it out!"

"She's my biological mother."

*There.* He'd said it. But truth landed like the thud of a guillotine – a horrible sound that left a ghastly pause in its wake. A sound that concluded in eternal silence, which would become the background to any future vibrations they might create through the manipulations of vocal cords and air. Nora stared, he stared, eyes brimming. Then her features hardened.

"How can you know this?" she demanded.

He told her about the DNA.

"If only. If only! IF ONLY!" she trembled, pouring the tea.

*If only what, Mom?*

“If only you’d just let it go. Ignored your intuition. We’ve been happy all these years, Victor. How is this going to add to our happiness, your discovery of a mother who disappeared thirty-five years ago and hasn’t been heard from since?”

He hadn’t expected bitterness. Victor struggled against a vague sense of disappointment. He’d thought Nora would be more sympathetic.

“She’s alive Mom. I know it. I’ve been having these dreams ever since I saw that newscast. They explain so much about who I am. They’re from that time we never talk about, the first five years.”

She bumped his cup down in front of him then turned away.

“I need to know anything you can tell me, Mom.”

“About what?”

“About the time before you and Dad – the time I can’t remember.”

For a second she looked stunned. He’d never asked before. Not once. Nora sighed, such a long heavy sigh it seemed to him she was deflating like a punctured tire. Then without a word she turned and left the room. He heard her heavy tread going upstairs then, after a minute or so, coming back down. A yellow scrap of newsprint fluttered in her hand.

“That’s all I know,” Nora said, thrusting it toward him. “You’re mother’s dead, Victor. That’s what we’ve always thought. We should leave her that way. I’m the only mother you have.” Then she left him alone to read.

***Abandoned child struck by car***, the headline read. The story had been written by a reporter named Ryan Ansell and appeared on the front page of the Vancouver Sun’s final edition for Thursday, September 16, 1976.

*Police in Langley are looking for the parents of a four or five year old child who was struck by a car while wandering unattended on a rural road at about 2 a.m. this morning. The child sustained serious injuries and is being closely monitored at Langley Memorial Hospital, where he was driven by the distraught motorist who hit him.*

*“We are looking for the parents of this child, and ask them to please come forward and identify themselves,” Langley RCMP Superintendent Bruce McCallum told a hastily convened news conference. “We have no idea who his parents are, or what the child was*

*doing out at that time of night. There is nothing to suggest at this point that the driver of the vehicle that struck the boy had any foreknowledge of the child in question.”*

*McCallum said he has never heard of a case similar to this in his 30 year’s experience with the RCMP. “We don’t know if the boy lives nearby, or if he somehow got out of a vehicle that may have been passing through the area.”*

*The boy was wandering, naked in a gully where the Salmon River crosses 56<sup>th</sup> Ave. in the Township of Langley when he was struck. It’s a rural area and it was a foggy night. “We’re hoping other motorists may have seen something,” McCallum said. “We urge anyone who witnessed anything that night to call us...”*

“Me?” Victor choked. “Was that me?”

He could hardly believe it. First his mother vanishes without a trace. Then, five years later, she abandons her child in the dead of night on a rural route where he almost ends up as road-kill.

Reading the article, more memories began to surface. He remembered a police officer – or was it a social worker – questioning gently, probing, asking about how he’d ended up on a dark road, alone, in the dead of night. Remembered not remembering, not having any recollection of what the woman was asking about. All that had gone, had spiraled into the selective, obliterating gravity of before-time. *But it had happened.* There was no denying the scrap of yellowed newsprint in his had, or the tattered memories it summoned.

*What am I getting myself into?* he sighed. Then, heaving himself out of the kitchen chair, he went to look for his mother... his real mother.

~

Once the truth is out you can’t put it back in its box. *Isn’t that the truth?* Victor ruminated, swirling his scotch round in his glass.

Some bits of truth you could just leave lying around, like old car parts in a wrecker’s yard. Others you had to track down and assemble into something meaningful.

Crystal Doer fell into the latter category and he knew it. He had one piece to the puzzle, her parents were two pieces more. He had to go see them. Much as he wanted to put it off, he had to go see them. He punched in their number.

He remembered the phone on its stand in the hallway. There must have been other phones in the Doer bungalow, in rooms he'd never seen. But he imagined Mrs. Doer – it had to be Mrs. Doer – answering the phone in the hallway, agreeing to his request, being at least somewhat understanding about it all.

“Hello?” she said.

“Mrs. Doer? Victor Daly here.”

“Oh,” she wilted, barely concealing her distaste.

“I have to talk to you and Mr. Doer right away. It's urgent.”

For a moment the line went dead. Then she said, “My husband and I don't want anything to do with you Mr. Daly. We just want to be left alone.”

“I'm afraid that's not an option, ma'am.”

“Not an option!” Her voice cracked with anger. “Look, we're devout Christians Mr. Daly. We watch the evening news. We read the papers. We don't want anything to do with the likes of you.”

“One meeting Mrs. Doer, then you can disown my client.”

“Disown! What do you mean by that?” She was more afraid than angry. His warning shot had got her attention.

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “Bad choice of words. You can dissociate yourself from me and my client if you want. But I need to meet with you at least once more. When we last talked your husband said I should provide more details as to why my client believes he is your grandson. I can now provide very compelling evidence that will link him to Crystal.”

Cornered, she didn't respond.

He waited.

“Can't your client get another lawyer, Mr. Daly?” she said at last. “I think my husband and I would be more amenable to meeting with him if he was represented by someone other than you. That would be in everyone's best interests, don't you think?”

“I'm afraid that's not possible,” he said stiffly.

“But we don't want you in our house.”

“Then you and Mr. Doer can come and see me in my office, if you prefer.”

“Can't you say what you have to over the phone, or send it by registered mail?”

“No, Mrs. Doer.”

She sighed peevishly. “Let me speak to my husband Mr. Daly, then he or I will get back to you. Is that satisfactory?”

“Yes ma’am. That is satisfactory. When will you call back.”

“Tomorrow,” she snapped, then hung up without saying goodbye.

~

“For a down home girl you seem to have upscale tastes,” Maria griped.

“Shut up and drive,” Cathy countered.

Aaron giggled from the back seat.

“What do *you* want, buster?”

“Aunt Cathy should have a time out,” he rattled.

“Oh, you little stinker!” Cathy shrieked. “I’m never going to sneak you another Mars Bar as long as I live.”

“What!” Maria squawked.

Now he was laughing out loud at the two bickering women in the front seats. Maria and Cathy exchanged a quick smile, soaking up the appreciation for their shtick.

“Time to get serious,” Maria announced, pulling off Fourth into the Safeway parking lot. The plan was to nip in, buy some essentials, then hit a couple of nearby shops where Cathy could tick off a few of the items on her ‘upscale’ list. “I’ll let you off near the Safeway entrance. Me and Backseat Driver here will meet you inside,” Maria said.

She pulled up to the curb. Cathy twisted, retrieving her crutches from the back passenger seat beside Aaron then wrestling them out the door.

“Come on!” Maria teased in her best cranky bus-driver’s voice. “We haven’t got all day lady.”

Cathy swung herself out gingerly, wobbling precariously on the pavement beside the SUV.

“You okay?” Maria fretted.

“A stabilizing drink would do me good right about now.”

“See you in a sec.” Maria assured before the door slammed shut.

As the SUV nudged forward a car honked. Annoyed, Cathy glanced left, scanning the line of vehicles for the impertinent oaf. *Imagine, honking at a woman on crutches!*

The driver of the closest car shrugged, pleading innocence. Her accusing stare flicked to the second in line, a black Ford Focus, driven by a square faced gentleman with wavy blond hair. Cathy blinked, then did a second take...

Her heart stopped. She let out an involuntary gasp – it was the guy who had rammed her with his Hummer. She was sure of it. He stared straight ahead as if he wasn't aware of her looking at him. She glanced away.

“Mar!” she shouted. But too late. Even if she hadn't been hobbled with crutches she wouldn't have been able to flag Maria down, and the last thing she wanted was to draw attention by yelling again. *What's he doing here?* Was he planning another attack?

As the line of cars started moving Cathy executed an awkward pirouette and hustled into the store. Once inside, she turned again, watching the Ford Focus muscle ahead. *License plate number!* In a panic she clattered out the 'IN' door. “S'cuse me,” she mumbled at the annoyed shoppers. “Let me through!”

*Too late.* The plate was hidden behind the line of following cars. She didn't want the driver to realize he'd been spotted, so couldn't risk approaching the car to get a better look.

*911* Wrestling her satchel over her head and onto the sidewalk, she rummaged for her cell phone, flipped it open and dialed.

“Emergency services. Which service do you need: ambulance, fire or police?”

“Police!” Cathy barked.

Another voice came on the line. “Police, how can I help you?”

“Hello,” Cathy said, whispering now as if she didn't want the thug to hear her. “My name is Cathy Vermeer. A few days ago I was rammed from behind into the intersection of Broadway and Granville...”

“You reported that incident, ma'am?”

“Yes,” Cathy fumed. “It was all over the news. And just a second ago I spotted the guy who rammed me. He's driving though the Safeway parking lot at Fourth and Vine. I think he's following me again. I'm scared.”

“Did you get the plate number of his vehicle ma'am?”

“No, but he's driving a black Ford Focus west through the parking lot. If you get a couple of squad cars down here now, they won't be able to miss him.”

“Are you safe where you are Ms. Vermeer.”

“Yes! I think I’m safe. Can you get some cops down here now to catch this guy.”

“They’ll be on their way, Ms. Vermeer. Stay on the line.”

“Are you sending them now!”

“They’ll be on their way. Are you sure you’re safe? No-one is approaching you or anything like that?”

“No,” Cathy stammered. “But my friend Maria and her son Aaron have gone to park their car. They’re coming in to meet me. What if he’s following them? Not me?”

“Stay where you are ma’am,” the operator advised. “Officers are on their way. There’s no need to...”

Cathy broke the connection. She had to get to Maria and Aaron. They could be walking into a trap. Hop-skipping she darted across the entrance road, tottering between the cars. *Where are they?* Where was the bastard who’d tried to ram her into oblivion? He had to be Laurence Selkirk’s henchman, the target was Maria, not her. *Or Aaron! He’s going to snatch Aaron?*

“Maria!” she shouted, unable to contain the urgent cry.

Then she saw them. A row over, heading toward the store. “Maria!” she shouted.

Startled, Maria looked her way, smiled, then looked puzzled, seeing the panic in Cathy’s eyes. Holding Aaron’s hand, she cut between the parked cars, making her way toward her friend.

“Get back in the SUV!” Cathy shouted.

Off in the distance a siren wailed. Then another.

Fear and confusion contorted Maria’s face into the prelude of a scream. “What’s wrong!” she demanded. “What’s going on Cath?”

A third siren picked up the mournful dirge.

Suddenly there it was, the black Ford Focus, turning into the aisle Maria and Aaron had just left, fishtailing, then straightening as the driver accelerated. “Get down!” Cathy bellowed, lurching toward them. “Get down Maria!”

Grabbing Aaron, Maria rolled onto the pavement. Cathy bustled toward them, cursing her ungainly gait and the clattering crutches. The Focus roared past one lane over,

the driver intent on making his getaway before the police corralled him. Cathy watched as the car swerved right at the end of the row, then accelerated out of the parking lot.

“What the hell’s going on?” Maria demanded, picking herself up and consoling Aaron, who was sobbing.

“They guy who rammed me, that was him.” She inclined her head in the direction of the get-away car.

“Jesus Christ!” Maria cursed, sagging against a parked car. “Jesus H. Christ!”

Dejected, the three of them waited as the wailing sirens converged like fate.

~

“We’ll have to stop meeting like this,” Inspector Reger said, closing the interview room door behind her.

Maria managed a polite laugh.

“So tell me what happened out there today,” the Inspector began.

“We were going to do a bit of shopping...” Maria gave her statement while Inspector Reger observed thoughtfully.

“Did you see the guy in the Ford Focus?” Inspector Reger asked.

Maria shook her head.

“Any idea who he might have been?”

Again, Maria signaled no.

“Let’s go over a few things, shall we,” Inspector Reger said doggedly. “A couple of months ago you left your husband, taking your five-year old son Aaron with you. Three or so weeks ago your friend Cathy and you get together for a coffee at the local Starbucks. Her place is trashed while you’re sipping lattes. Then your friend’s car gets rammed into traffic on Granville Street. Now, the guy who did it follows you and Cathy into a Safeway parking lot... but he’s not following her, he’s following you. Do you see a pattern in all of this? A common denominator?”

“Yes,” Maria surrendered. “Me.”

“I’m glad we’ve both turned to that same page Maria,” Inspector Reger sighed. “So why do you think this guy was following you today?”

“You know why!” Maria snapped.

“This is your statement, Maria, not mine,” the Inspector insisted.

“I think he was hired by my husband.”

“To do what?”

“To intimidate me. Maybe to grab Aaron.”

“Can you tell me a little bit about your husband?”

“I can tell you Laurence would be royally pissed if he knew I was talking about him to the cops.”

“How pissed?”

The question caught her off guard.

“Pissed enough to hurt you, or hurt your friends?”

“Yes,” Maria answered quietly.

“Pissed enough to have an ex-cop gunned down in a car park?”

Maria felt as if she was sitting over a trap door. Any second now Inspector Reger would push a hidden button and send her hurtling into oblivion. Her mouth opened, but she had nothing to say.

“You were Don Pirelli’s client. I’ve seen his file on your husband,” Inspector Reger said matter-of-factly.

“But how...”

“We cross-referenced names in the files Don was working on against other names in our data base. Yours lit up like a winning bingo ticket. And your husband’s. You could have saved us a lot of trouble by simply telling us in the first place. Why didn’t you tell us Maria?”

She froze.

“He found out a lot about Laurence – a lot of stuff we’ve been trying to dig out for years.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“It’s dangerous to know too much about men like Laurence Selkirk, Maria. Isn’t that true?”

“Yes.”

“And it’s dangerous to leave a man like him. That’s true too, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Maria confessed.

~

“I think you and Aaron need a break,” Victor announced, glancing up from the chopping block, where he was preparing kabobs for the barbeque. He’d left work early when he heard about their encounter in the Safeway parking lot.

“I’ll phone Laurence right away and put in my request,” Maria said.

Cathy was sitting with her leg propped up on a dining room chair; Maria with her elbows on the table, her head propped up by the slender struts of her arms. Normally a stickler about video games and TV, she had allowed Aaron unlimited access for the evening. He needed the distraction; they needed some adult time.

“I’m serious,” Victor insisted. “Remember I told you I had a place you could go if things heated up? I think now’s the time. It’s a cottage up on the Sunshine Coast: ocean view, walking distance to anything you might need, electricity and running water, Jacuzzi. I also have a friend who’ll fly you up there. No chance of Laurence following.”

She looked uncertain.

Victor sighed. “Laurence has decided to make his move. And now that you’ve made a statement to the police implicating him in the Pirelli murder it’s going to get a whole lot worse Mar. Which is why I’m suggesting Plan B: get you and Aaron the hell out of here.”

“Will they question Laurence tonight do you think?”

Victor shrugged. “I suppose if they want to catch him off guard they might.”

“The cops already knew about his shady dealings,” Maria said.

“What makes you say that?”

“Inspector Reger told me so in her round about way. She was pumping me for as much information as she could get. Wanted to know about his business deals, what kinds of ‘merchandise’ he transports, who his ‘contacts’ are... I don’t think much of the stuff I’ve ferreted out will be news to them, but with Pirelli they hit the jackpot.”

“Pirelli?”

“Yeah. When he was shadowing Laurence, I guess he saw a lot more than seamy trysts with the wives of the rich and famous, he must have seen plenty of other stuff that would raise an ex-cop’s eyebrows. It wasn’t in the report he gave to me because it wasn’t pertinent to my case, but I think he might have been thinking of using it to buy some favour with the VPD.”

“Oh,” he clued in. “So they must know you’re at risk.”

“They told me to be careful,” she snorted.

“You’ve got to get out of here, Mar!”

“Somehow Pender Harbour doesn’t seem far enough away,” she said glumly.

“You’ll be safe there.”

The phone rang, interrupting their conversation. Maria glanced at the call display.

“Private Number,” she reported, pushing the talk button.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “Yup.” “Right now?” “Okay.” Then she hung up.

“Vancouver police,” she reported. “They think they’ve identified our parking lot friend. They want me to come down and take a look at his picture.”

“Right now?”

“If they get a positive ID, they’re going to move quickly. So yeah. They want me to go down to the station right now.”

“I’ll drive,” Victor offered.

“You okay to stay here with Aaron?” Maria asked Cathy.

“Sure,” she said, doubtfully.

“What’s wrong?” Victor wanted to know.

“It just seems strange they’d want you to go to the station. Couldn’t they print out a copy of the photo and bring it here for you to look at?”

~

She folded her long legs into the Porsche and he closed the door behind her. Maria looked up at him through the window, sweeping back a loose strand of auburn hair. She smiled.

Was Cathy right to be suspicious?

Walking round to the driver’s side Victor scanned up and down the street. Nothing. But what did that prove? You’d need night vision goggles to be certain no-one lurked behind the neighbour’s hedge or in the darkened precincts of the Maritime Museum across the street. And even then you couldn’t be absolutely certain, could you? That was the terrorist’s edge – that and a bloodthirsty psychosis that allowed him to kill without compunction.

All you could do was be ready. For anything.

He pulled the driver's door shut and inserted the key in the ignition. The Porsche purred obediently. As he straightened out on Ogden Victor noted a black SUV pulling out of Cypress Street. Its headlights swept the Maritime Museum lawn as it turned toward them.

*Headlights!*

What was wrong? Something. But Victor say what.

“What is it Hun?” Maria sensed his nervousness.

Then he knew. Like a jigsaw thrown in the air and landing completed on the table, the danger became real and immanent. The SUV was burning holes in his retinas with its high beams. They had been lighting up the museum lawn when he checked up and down the street. He hadn't noticed it then, but now he remembered the bright spray. The SUV had been sitting there, waiting, the whole time.

“Hang on!” he barked.

Braking he slammed the Porsche into reverse and punched the accelerator hard. The tires screeched in grotesque harmony with Maria's scream.

“What's wrong!”

“The SUV!” he commanded. “What's it doing?”

Victor was craning round in his seat, steering the rocketing Porsche backward as it top ended, revving wildly.

“My God! My God! He's coming after us Vic!” she shouted. “He's going to ram us!”

Victor cranked the wheel, sending the Porsche careering into a sharp reverse right, thumping over the curb onto the museum lawn. The car spun out, its front end whipping into the momentum of the turn. As it came round he steered sharp right, jamming the gearshift into first then hitting the accelerator again. But too late. The SUV clipped the rear driver's side, staving in the trunk, then skidding on down the slope. Ignoring the rasp of rubber against twisted metal, Victor peeled the crippled Porsche through its 360, then back onto Ogden. He raced away, watching in his rear view mirror as the SUV reversed, swung round and fled in the opposite direction.

“Call 911 on your cell,” he shouted over the sawing and clattering of his battered Porsche. “Tell them there's a damaged, steel blue Porsche headed from Cypress and

Cornwall, over the Burrard Bridge. It will be speeding, running lights and making erratic movements... Tell them not to shoot!”

“Is he chasing us?”

“I’m not talking any chances Mar,” Victor said. “I’m not stopping until we’re swarmed by cops. Tell them to send a squad car to your house, now!”

“Go back, Vic!” she yelled.

“No! Their after us. We’ll only put Aaron and Cathy at risk if we head back. Call them once you’ve called the cops...”

~

Inspector Diane Reger didn’t let Victor out of her steady gaze for an instant. Her pale gray eyes were not hard and aggressive, as he had expected. They were imploring. Either she genuinely cared or she was putting on a pretty good act.

“So you realized when the vehicle approached that it had been sitting on Cypress Street, waiting, because of its headlights?” She repeated this in a doubtful tone.

“I know it sounds crazy, but yes. That’s exactly what happened. It must have been an instinctive response. I was in a state of high alert after the incident in the Safeway parking lot, and Maria’s friend Cathy had expressed doubts about the call summoning us to come here to the police station. So I was on edge.”

“And what do you think the SUV driver intended to do?”

“For Christ’s sake, the guy chased me onto the museum lawn. He rammed me. I think his plan was to deliberately hit us head-on then gun us down.”

“And you believe Laurence Selkirk was behind this?”

“Yes! Without a doubt!”

Inspector Reger rubbed her eyes then got up and paced behind the interview table.

“You know, of course, that there is another explanation.”

Victor clammed up.

“You have received very public threats from an organization known as The New Covenant Society. You have made a point of challenging them in the media and of going ahead with your show, *Inside Out*, despite their threats.”

“The New Covenant nut-bars were not responsible for this attack. It has organized crime written all over it: the planning, the logistics. A bunch of raving, religious radicals couldn’t have carried it out.”

“A bunch of ‘raving, religious radicals’ brought down the World Trade Centre Mr. Daly. Never underestimate the ingenuity of fanatics and lunatics. We don’t.”

Victor blushed. “Okay. Point taken. But why would the New Covenanters be stalking Maria in a Safeway parking lot when I wasn’t even there? That doesn’t add up. Selkirk has hired a hit man. The killer was tailing Maria, looking for an opening.”

Inspector Reger considered this.

“He used the same guy that rammed Cathy’s car into Granville Street. She recognized him in the Safeway parking lot, remember?”

“Why would Mr. Selkirk, a successful businessman, very highly regarded in the community, go to these lengths, Mr. Daly? Why wouldn’t he simply get a good family lawyer, like you, and take his wife to court?”

“You know the answer to that,” Victor sighed. “You’ve seen the material in Pirelli’s file. If the media gets its hands on *that* Selkirk’s glittering carriage will turn into a rotten pumpkin overnight.”

“Your client has been coercing Mr. Selkirk with the information Don gathered?”

“My client has been trying to extricate herself and her son from the clutches of a ruthless son-of-a-bitch who has connections with organized crime!” he shouted. “He wants her dead because he knows the Family Court case dies with her and her death will clamp a lid on the incriminating evidence my client and her PI dug up.”

“That material could still be leaked,” Inspector Reger pointed out. “And I believe Ms. Selkirk has strongly suggested it will be if she dies unexpectedly.”

“Outside the privileged venue of a court most of that stuff would be libelous. He could contain the damage. From his perspective limited exposure is the lesser of two evils”

“So what do you intend to do at this point, Mr. Daly?”

“I’m going to get Maria and Aaron into a safe house.”

Reger nodded approvingly.

“She’ll leave first thing in the morning by seaplane from Coal Harbour.”

The Inspector continued nodding.

“All I ask is that she have police protection from now until the time she leaves.”

“A squad car has been assigned to her home in Kits Point. I will see to it that she is escorted to the airport in the morning. Are you certain this safe house is really safe?”

“She will be flown by a trusted pilot, first to Nanaimo, then to Pender Harbour, where the house is located. The house is not registered in my name, and cannot be traced to me. It’s safe. I’ve used it before.”

“And what about your own safety?”

“He’s not after me, Inspector. He’s after Maria. Killing me would only make things worse... unless Maria’s with me.”

“What do you mean?”

Victor explained the theory he’d pieced together: Laurence was using the New Covenant ultimatum as a screen. “That’s why he attacked when Maria and I were together. His hired gun has been waiting for that situation – engineered it with a phony call to get us in the same car heading here. The set up created an alternative suspect and motive. You would never be able to get a conviction unless you caught the killer red-handed.”

“Possibly,” Inspector Reger acknowledged.

“Almost certainly,” Victor insisted.

“The Twin Towers, Mr. Daly. Don’t ever underestimate the power of cold-blooded fanaticism. It wouldn’t be safe to assume you’ve heard the last of The New Covenant or that they can be ruled out as suspects in tonight’s attack.”

Victor nodded curtly. He’d been stupid. He hadn’t seen, as Inspector Reger clearly had, that he and Maria faced a double jeopardy whenever they were together. “I understand,” he said in a voice that sounded like surrender. “Thank you Inspector.”

~

The sun skimmed the southeastern sky as they sped over the Burrard Bridge, heading toward Coal Harbour. A police cruiser led the way and an unmarked patrol car followed. Up front their driver and another cop concentrated on the job at hand, getting Maria to the seaplane dock and off their turf.

Inspector Reger had said goodbye at the house. “Keep me informed, Victor,” she’d advised. “If you hear or suspect anything - *and I mean anything* - call me. You too Maria. You won’t be phoning each other I presume.”

“No, we won’t,” Victor confirmed.

“But we need to communicate,” Maria complained in an emphatic whisper, now they were counting down their minutes together.

“I’ve set up a hotmail account,” Victor said. “Toobeeornottoobee@hotmail.com. I did it from a remote computer and it will never be accessed from my home or office machines...”

“Toobeeornottoobee,” she chuckled. “Nice touch.”

Sitting between them, Aaron asked where they were going.

They both looked down and smiled. “We’re going on a little holiday, honey,” Maria said. “To a house near the ocean. You’ll be able to play outside again.”

He looked worried.

“It’ll be okay honey,” Maria soothed.

“Are you coming Victor?”

Victor’s heart clenched. He forced a smile. “I wish I could, but not this time, buddy.”

Maria was crying silently. Victor sort of understood why, but a part of him was confused. He reached across and squeezed her hand.

They lapsed into nervous silence. Then Victor leaned close and whispered, “We have to do something, Maria. We have to put an end to this.”

She turned her face toward him.

“How...?”

“I’m not sure,” he responded. “But I need your permission to do whatever it takes. He’s not going to stop until somebody stops him.”

She swept a few strands of hair away from her face, fixing him with a hard stare.

“Victor? What kind of craziness are you thinking?”

“Don’t ask.” He cut her off. “Just give me permission.”

“I can’t do that!” she said firmly.

“He needs to be stopped, Maria. It’s not just about us. He’s getting away with murder and the system can’t *do* anything about it. *We* can’t do anything about it... except turn the monster on itself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Al Periconi,” he said quietly.

He hadn’t wanted to let her in on it, but saw now that they had to agree. There could be no heroes – no silent saviors acting invisibly like benevolent gods in the mechanisms of their history. What he proposed was dirty, dangerous work, beneath the dignity of angels.

“Jesus, Vic!”

“It will be the biggest risk I have ever taken in my life, but I have to take it.”

Maria looked straight ahead, her profile juxtaposed against the blurred streetscape speeding by. She nodded once.

~

Laurence paced outside the curvature of glass that separated the pool deck from his living room. “Scrubbed,” the Hunter had said.

“What do you mean ‘scrubbed’,” Laurence had demanded.

“A bust! Washout! Screw up! What the fuck do you think I mean?”

Laurence winced, remembering the cold fury in the Hunter’s voice. Somehow Victor had read the situation. He’d seen the trap, taken evasive action. How he could have gotten away, Laurence couldn’t imagine. He’d employed The Hunter often enough to know that the man was uniquely talented.

“Dumb luck,” Laurence muttered.

There seemed to be a lot of that going around. Cathy spotting The Hunter in the Safeway parking lot on Fourth Avenue; the seeming impossibility of getting Daly and Maria alone together so The Hunter could move in for the kill.

Perhaps it wasn’t luck at all. Maybe a guardian angel was looking out for them. Laurence snorted derisively. *Only angel you’re ever going to see is the Angel of Death my friends.* Maybe he was being outsmarted. Laurence laughed out loud. *Dumb luck*, that was the only explanation.

Their unseemly survival was causing him trouble, though, he had to admit *that*. He'd played his high card and lost. Now Maria had fled.

She'd won this round, *the bitch!* But not stupid bitch, he allowed. She'd known from the outset that he'd keep pushing and pushing until she gave in... or he killed her. Of that there could never have been any doubt; it was – after all – the basis of his power. But the failed hit changed the game. Two things were now inevitable, Laurence surmised: Maria would pursue the Family Court action vigorously; and she would remain in hiding.

He reddened. Draining the scotch he'd been drinking, he hurled the heavy glass at the sculpted concrete wall at the end of the patio. It shattered into a thousand glittering shards. "Shit!" he grunted.

All was not lost, though. The police still couldn't establish beyond reasonable doubt that he was responsible for the attempt on Maria and Victor's lives. Not as long as the New Covenant fanatics were out there confusing the issue. Obviously they were incompetents, who had botched their own operation. That didn't rule them out as suspects: he knew it and the cops knew it. He'd have to play cat and mouse for a while, but in the end they wouldn't have a clear enough case to lay charges.

Gordon stepped out onto the balcony and walked in his peculiarly stiff way toward his employer. "Inspector Diane Reger of the Vancouver Police Department to see you sir."

*Right on cue.* "Show her in," Laurence said, noting Gordon's disapproving glance at the shattered glass. The valet turned, retracing his steps back inside.

Maria would have done her worst, Laurence realized. Daly too. Their worst would not be good enough, though. The most Laurence could be labeled at the moment would be 'a person of interest', and to say even that publicly would be more than the evidence could bear. *Take the upper hand,* he thought, stepping into the living room.

"Hello Inspector," he greeted as Gordon ushered the woman in. "What brings Vancouver's finest across the Lion's Gate Bridge onto foreign soil - so to speak?"

"I have a few questions to ask about an incident involving your wife, sir. Are you aware of what I'm talking about?"

Laurence gestured toward an arm chair. “Maria and I aren’t communicating very well these days. So I’m afraid I *don’t know* what you’re talking about. I do hope she hasn’t got herself into any trouble.”

“What kind of trouble might she get herself into?” Inspector Reger wondered.

“I’m not one to spread gossip, Inspector - especially about my own wife - but Maria does have a past that strays rather close to the seamy side. That’s as much as I care to say about it. If you want to know more, you should ask her. My only concern in the matter is that, on her own and under stress, she may relapse. That affects the safety of her and of my son.”

Laurence couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw something like disgust disfigure Reger’s features. The woman was too stony-faced to read, though. *Careful*, he cautioned.

“You and your wife are separated?”

“Yes.” Laurence quelled a sardonic impulse. “Look, officer, is Maria all right? What’s going on?”

“When was the last time you talked to your wife, Mr. Selkirk?”

“I’ve asked you a question, Inspector,” Laurence countered angrily. “I demand to know what’s going on. Is Maria okay?”

“Your wife is fine sir.”

“Then what are you doing here, grilling me as if I was some sort of criminal.”

“We’re investigating an assault on your wife sir. That’s all I can say. You haven’t heard about it?”

“No, I haven’t heard about it!” Laurence said indignantly. “Would I be asking you what happened if I already knew?”

“Perhaps.”

Laurence feigned confusion, then surprise. “Are you suggesting I am somehow implicated in an assault on my wife,” he sputtered. “That’s absurd.” *Time to plead a little*. “Look, we’re in the middle of Family Court proceedings, Inspector. She has virtually abducted my son. Do you think I would do anything that might jeopardize my chances of getting him back?”

She stared, unmoved. Then said, “If your wife was dead, where would your son end up Mr. Selkirk?”

“For God’s sake, that’s ridiculous. I didn’t have anything to do with whatever you’re talking about, Inspector, and I don’t know why anyone would want to attempt an assault on Maria unless she *has* slipped back into her old ways.”

“Can you explain what you mean by that?”

“Drug dealers and pimps are dangerous people,” Laurence said with a show of disgust. “If Maria has looked up some of her former associates, she may well have put herself - and my son - at risk.”

“Are you very familiar with the drug and sex trades Mr. Selkirk?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“In your wife’s Family Court application she has suggested you have connections with organized crime. She says she’s concerned for her own safety and the safety of your son Aaron because of those connections.”

“I’d sue anyone who said the same outside the protection of the courts. It’s a load of crap, spouted by a woman who is both paranoid and a chronic liar. You are being manipulated, if you are following the trail laid out by my wife, Inspector. After eight years of marriage, I can tell you she is an assiduous schemer. I suppose she’s got you, God *and* the angels on her side by now.”

“What do you mean?”

“If it’s a choice between Maria’s story and mine, who are you going to believe? A beautiful, defenseless mother, who has learned to comport herself well in high society; or a hard nosed entrepreneur, who speaks his mind without any - how shall I put it - embellishments?”

“I believe the facts, Mr. Selkirk. I end up where they take me.”

Laurence nodded appreciatively. “I’m glad to hear it,” he said. “And I can tell you, there’s not a single fact in all the nonsense Maria has spewed about me and organized crime. I’m not a saint, officer, but I’m not a criminal either. I’m just a businessman.”

“Where were you last night, sir?”

“Here. My man, Gordon will confirm that.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Selkirk,” Inspector Reger said.

“You’re not going to tell me what happened?”

“As I’ve said, we’re conducting an investigation into an assault on your wife, which occurred last night. I’m not at liberty to say anything more.”

“And I’m a suspect.”

“We’re checking all possibilities, Mr. Selkirk. It’s our job.”

With that, Inspector Reger turned and headed for the stairway. “I’ll see my own way out,” she said when he made a show of getting up to escort her.

Laurence followed anyway, in a show of politeness. “Goodbye,” he said at the front door. *Bitch!* He was sure he would be seeing her again, and that their chats would be anything but pleasant.

~

When he returned home, Victor checked his emails. Over a hundred messages. He groaned. Obviously a blitz organized by his New Covenant friends...

*Have you no shame. I am the father of two teenaged girls. We have raised our daughters to be self-confident, respectful, intelligent young women. Now you come along with your sick ‘performance art’. Can’t you see how disturbing and corrosive your Inside Out show is for most Canadians? You disgust me...*

Victor clicked on the next message.

*Remember Sodom and Gomorrah Mr. Daly. They were destroyed by ‘brimstone and fire from the Lord of Heaven’ and so shall you be. The judgment for your sins shall be awful and eternal and richly deserved...*

Next.

*WARNING TO VICTOR DALY. We have warned you, in the name of God, to put an end to the abomination you are perpetrating with your so-called art. Your Inside Out show is an offence to every decent minded Christian man or woman. For too long you have undermined the moral foundations of society with your pornography and lies. The righteous shall rise up against you, Mr. Daly. The New Covenant will strike you down, the same way a rabid dog would be struck down in the street. You are an animal, driven by animal lust. As an unrepentant sinner you are incapable of receiving God’s eternal mercy. We pray for you, sir. But pity will not stay our hand. For the sake of God’s children you must be stopped and we will stop you.*

Victor stared at the message, imagined a deluded zealot, pecking angrily at the keyboard of an untraceable computer, promulgating ancient tyranny through new technology – the same tyranny that had been shouted from the rooftops and pulpits for thousands of years. How many people had been whipped, stoned and burned in the name of decency and religion? How many had swallowed the bitter pill of salvation? Been forced to bow as if they believed in the weight of sin. And people were still being tortured and maimed.

Victor sagged. *What have I got myself into?*

Wouldn't it be best to just ignore the holier-than-thous, not confront them so vehemently with his art, his idea of impetuous spirit manifesting in living matter? Let them have their shrouds, sacred books, rituals. What difference did it make? Theirs was an expression of consciousness unfolding, too, of the universe awakening, absurd and stultifying as it seemed to him.

He yearned for Maria and Aaron and a quiet life of modest, atheistic bliss.

"I don't want to do this any more," he confessed.

*Who cares anyway? Who listens?*

*"Me. I am listening."*

Victor froze. "Crystal?"

*"Forgive me for I have sinned... and sinned and sinned."*

*"You were sixteen. You were sinned against."*

*"Forgive me, for I have been sinned against... again and again and again."*

Memory took shape and gathered voice in this phantom enactment, this illusion. He remembered staring up at her. They were on a mattress. A naked bulb hung over their heads, glaring. To Victor it seemed a mockery of the moon, forcing him to squint against its harsh effulgence. She curled around him, shielding his spindly body with her own. Over the emaciated landscape of her hips loomed the walls of their cinderblock cave. He had never been outside this cell... had no concept of outside.

Except *he* came to her from there... came at her.

They lived in fear. When the light blinked, she would bundle the boy up and lock him in the closet, where he would lay in darkness while they did the things they did. He had no notion of what those things might be, except for the sounds – grunts, moans, slaps

and the rhythmic complaint of springs. He wished he'd never heard the sounds. Wanted to stop up his ears against them. They were the sounds of something pent up and deformed let loose upon their world. The sounds of something perverted, converted to sin.

“He has a name!” Victor shouted. “Tell me his fucking name!”

But the vision dissipated outward, slipping into the unconscious folds of time and space without answering. Alone, Victor accepted the full weight of his past. He made his way to the kitchen. *A scotch*, he thought. *That'll help...*

Then he remembered his first appointment next day: the Doers, 10 a.m.

“Know something god?” he grumbled. “Sometimes you're a real bastard.”

~

“Mr. and Mrs. Doer to see you sir,” Vanessa said through the intercom, a nuance of doubt in her voice.

“Send them in, Vanessa. Thanks.”

He quickly closed the file he'd been working on and placed it back on its stack. *Should have tidied up*, Victor thought, surveying the clutter on his desk and comparing it to the immaculate state of the Doer household – the counters and tabletops all cleared and scrubbed, the knick-knacks in precise order. The *organized chaos* of his office would add to their sense of unease, to the feeling that they had entered a zone of iniquity.

The door swung open. Vanessa stood aside, shooting him a worried look as she ushered the Doers in.

“Good morning!” Victor greeted them gingerly. He gestured to the two leather chairs positioned in front of his desk. “Please,” he invited.

Barbara hurried across the carpeted expanse first, as if the chair was a place of refuge. Albert followed, herding his wife into the seat to Victor's right then lowering himself heavily into the second chair.

Victor resisted the impulse to extend his hand. It was obvious they were there under duress and the formality of shaking hands would only heighten the tension. He suspected Albert Doer might go so far as to refuse any conciliatory gesture.

“Thank you both for coming,” he said.

“What is it you have to say to us, Mr. Daly?” Albert demanded.

Coughing to cover his consternation, Victor thumbed through a stack of folders to his right, pulling out the DNA analysis on the Doers and himself. He'd thought it might be best to conceal his subterfuge – to plot some way of getting the Doers to submit willingly to a redundant test. But in the end he rejected the idea with an almost convulsive vehemence. *Enough!* he thought. *Enough lying!*

“I’m asking you both to promise what gets said in this room will remain strictly confidential...”

“I can’t promise that without knowing what your going to say,” Albert cut him short.

“It’s information that could lead to Crystal, and will certainly provide details about her whereabouts after she went missing, that’s all I can say without a commitment from you to keep this meeting strictly confidential.”

“Look, you called us here, Mr. Daly, so don’t tell us what we...”

“Agreed,” Barbara Doer cut in.

Albert glared at her, but said nothing.

Victor waited a few seconds for the commitment to sink in, then began.

“What I have in this folder is a report from a very reliable laboratory. It’s a DNA analysis confirming beyond any reasonable doubt the maternal relationship between my client and you, Mrs. Doer...”

“DNA analysis?” Albert Doer rumbled, his brow creased, his look darkening.

“There was no other way, Mr. Doer.”

“But you can’t do a DNA analysis without samples, Mr. Daly.”

Swallowing, Victor forged ahead. “I took the liberty of collecting a sample when I visited your home.”

Barbara gasped. Albert tensed as if he were going to lunge over the desk. Victor wondered what he would do if that happened. *Submit passively? Resist, and further enrage his assailant? Plead for forgiveness?*

“I’m a religious man, Mr. Daly. A peaceful man,” Albert growled. “But if there was anyone in this world I was going to tear limb from limb, it would be you. You’re despicable. I hate you for what you’re doing to us. I hate what you stand for.”

“Albert!” Barbara shouted, startling both the men with her indignation. “Stop it!”

The rebuke stunned her husband. He opened his mouth to reply, but then thought better of it, letting out a long, mournful sigh. "You're right, dear," he apologized. "I'm sorry." Then he sank back into his chair.

"Go on, Mr. Daly," Barbara said stiffly. At the same time she reached across and squeezed her husband's shoulder.

Victor slid the folder toward them across his desk. After a long moment Albert leaned forward and took the file, opening it on his lap. His eyes flicked back and forth as he scanned the report, his expression changing from puzzlement to shock. "For the love of Christ!" he wailed.

Barbara made ready to chastise him again, but Albert shot her a look of such anguish that she froze, her commandment lodged in her throat. "What is it, dear?" she pleaded at last.

"Who's your client, Mr. Daly? The subject listed in this report is you."

Victor said nothing, letting the undeniable truth penetrate Albert Doer's overloaded psyche. For the moment Albert clung to the desperate notion that the documents were a monstrous mistake, some kind of cruel joke. He looked pleadingly to his tormentor. "Victor Daly, that's the other name in this report," he repeated uncomprehendingly. "Victor Daly and my wife, Barbara."

"I'm sorry," Victor said softly. "There is no mistake."

"What are you saying, Albert?" Barbara stared at her husband.

Albert could not speak.

"I'm your grandson, Mrs. Doer," Victor intervened. "Crystal's son."

"Crystal..." Her voice trailed off in utter confusion as she slumped into a faint.

"Leave us alone!" Albert bellowed when Victor hurried round the desk to help. "For God's sake, just leave us alone."

Dejected, Victor crept toward his office door and let himself out while Albert revived to his wife. "Albert? Is this true?" she cried.

Victor closed the door behind him.

"Vic?" Vanessa said, watching him from her desk. "Are you okay?"

He leaned his forehead into the wall. She guided him to the office sofa then hurried to the cooler for a cup of water.

“What the hell’s going on?” she demanded.

“Christ, Vanessa, it’s too fucked up to say.”

~

Maria wasn’t sure if the distance between her and Vancouver made things better or worse. A short hop by float plane seemed hardly enough to prevent Laurence from tracking her down – she was sure he must already be sniffing around the edges, looking for her hiding place. But for a couple of weeks, perhaps, she and Aaron would be safe.

*The tradeoff?*

Once again, they found themselves displaced. The cabin was nice enough. If they’d truly been on holiday, they would have been pleased. But it wasn’t home. It seemed a stark, official place to Maria – just what she would have imagined a safe house to be. To Aaron it was a house minus all but a few of his favorite toys. His crate on Odgen street hadn’t offered a fraction of the selection he’d had at the Taj, but at least he’d got started rebuilding his make-believe world. Now it was back to scratch.

Not having Victor and the Toob around made things even worse. Funny how quickly routines established themselves: the casual phone calls, unannounced visits, evenings sitting around watching TV while Aaron and Toobee roughhoused. She felt banished from a life that was becoming comfortable and – she’d dared to think – happy.

*Now what?*

The excitement of the seaplane flight had sustained Aaron for most of the first day. Because there were no other passengers he’d got to sit in the co-pilot’s seat. “Wow!” was about all he could say about *that*. The pilot, a grizzled specimen named Blackie, had banked sharply once they’d climbed over Stanley Park and the Lion’s Gate Bridge, making his pint-sized passenger squeal with delight.

Blackie had craned round and winked.

“Where’s our house, Mom?” Aaron had yelled over the clatter of the Beaver’s engine.

“It’s over there,” she pointed out her window. “You won’t be able to see it from up there, hun.”

She’d made the preemptive assumption that he was referring to Kits Point, not the Taj, and her prayer that Aaron not look to West Vancouver was answered. His old world

was too much at odds with the new. Aaron couldn't bring those two poles together; powerful magnets of like charge, they repelled.

By bedtime the excitement of the day had worn thin and the prospect of boredom loomed large. What would they do tomorrow, and the day after that. Maria shoved these troublesome thoughts back into the subconscious realm. Let tomorrow happen when it happened. Tonight she wanted to be with Victor – in spirit, if not in body.

*Careful, my love, she prayed.*

She remembered Al Periconi. He was one of those men who emanated power, a bear that would keep charging no matter how much his opponents kicked and screamed. In the end, he would get his way because men like that always did, or they died trying. Al Periconi would kill anyone connected with his brother's death. If he suspected Victor had been a factor, he would kill Victor.

A moth fluttered around the cabin's porch lamp, pinging against the glowing globe. She watched for a while, amazed at the creature's dumb persistence. Then she went inside to switch off the light.

~

Victor felt himself drifting toward the maw of a grinding vortex. Everything he knew, everything he believed was threatened; past, present and future could not escape the churning funnel drawing him in.

"Has to be," he muttered, skirting the hood of his courtesy car - an Echo. 'Abe's Auto Body,' the sign on the door said. 'You bend 'em; we mend 'em.' He glanced up at the sign above the Hot Shot Café. Judging by the state of the place it was a front. Why Al Periconi had wanted to meet here Victor couldn't say.

*Doesn't matter.*

A sudden sense of exhilaration gripped him. Was this what it would be like going over Niagara Falls in a barrel? He grinned. *Sort of.* There comes a point when momentum asserts itself - when the weight of past decisions becomes inexorable. The vortex again, it's vibrations liquefying the ground beneath his feet.

He pushed through the plate glass door. The inside was even less inspired than the exterior, if that were possible. The Hot Shot was a dump.

"Back here Mr. Daly!"

Al Periconi summoned from a table located in an alcove at the back of the restaurant. The sulky barmaid watched suspiciously as Victor made his way between the clutter of tables and chairs to Al Periconi's lair. She flipped back her stringy, blond hair for a better look. *Sizing me up?* Victor suspected. Determining through some mysterious calculation whether he deserved respect?

"Coffee?" Al asked loudly as Victor approached.

"Yes, please." Victor didn't really feel like another hit of caffeine, but it might be taken as a snub if he refused.

"Make the man an Espresso, Tara," Al ordered. "He looks like he could do with a jolt."

Sitting in a chair opposite Al watched Victor with an air of authority. "You are a cautious man," he said. Victor couldn't tell if the remark was meant as compliment or criticism. "You call me from a phone booth; you won't talk even from there. It must be important, what you have to say."

"It is. And I don't want anyone to be able to trace it back to me."

"Dangerous, perhaps?"

"Very, I think."

"Not to you, I hope, Mr. Daly."

"No, Mr. Periconi. I'm just a messenger."

"This is about Don? What do you know?"

Victor unzipped his satchel and pulled out the manila envelope that contained Don Pirelli's report on Laurence Selkirk. He placed it on the table and slid it toward Al.

A part of him winced, remembering another folder full of disturbing information that he'd shoved at the Doer's the day before. He seemed to be making a habit of shocking people. The wrong kind of people.

Al Periconi thumbed open the flap and pulled out the contents. The picture of Laurence at the Kingsway Motor Inn sat on top of the stack. Al flipped through the material uncomprehending. He looked at the date on the report. "This would have been one of the last investigations my brother carried out as a PI," he said.

Victor nodded.

"Can you tell me the significance?"

Victor began, aware of the vortex spinning faster, himself being drawn down, down its voracious gullet.

Al Periconi didn't move, didn't interrupt. He sat stony faced, studying Victor for the five minutes or so it took to explain the contents of the envelope, and the more damning indictment likely contained in a detailed file on Selkirk Don Pirelli had provided the VPD. Periconi's right hand, resting on the table between them, slowly balled into a fist, the knuckles turning white. Tara, sliding Victor's coffee toward him, glanced once at Al's hard gaze and moved off quickly, as if she didn't want to witness what might happen next. When he'd finished, Victor slumped back into his chair.

*I rest my case*, he thought, knowing there would be no careful deliberation, no process of appeal, only swift and brutal retribution if Al Periconi believed what he'd just heard.

"Thank you Mr. Daly," Al said as he gathered up Victor's papers, squared them into a neat pile and slipped them back into the envelope, which he then slid across the table toward Victor. As Victor stood to leave Al added in a voice almost too soft to hear, "Don was a wonderful guy. A hero, really. He deserved to die a hero's death. That, I could understand. But for him to be gunned down like this, as a sacrificial pawn in someone else's game..." He shook his head, unable to find the words he needed to describe his outrage.

"I'm sorry," Victor said.

"Goodbye Mr. Daly. And thank you."

~

*To:toobeeornottoobee@hotmail.com*

*Hello My Love.*

*It's wonderful here. I know Aaron and I are living in a fantasy world right now, but we'll make the most of it as long as it lasts. I don't even want to think about the 'real world' for the time being.*

*Flying up from Vancouver it seemed the spaces were so vast between the blocks of land in the Strait of Georgia. One could almost believe that it would be easy to get lost and never be found. You and I both know that's not true, though. I think of us as cells, all connected to a vast organism that spans nations and continents. We cannot detach*

*ourselves from that all-encompassing reality. The roads, telephone lines and computer networks are the ganglia of this gargantuan beast, and we are neural hubs transmitting signals into the unknown. Someone will spot Aaron, tell a friend, who will tell another friend, who will meet Laurence at a business luncheon. Then the word will be out. We have found a temporary haven, but can never be truly safe. I have this dread that, sooner or later, Laurence's thugs are going to show up, bundle me into the back of a van, and that will be the end of it.*

*In the meantime Aaron and I enjoy our walks down to the government wharf and into the town of Madeira Park. There's a daycare close by and they've agreed to take Aaron short-term in the mornings. It gives him an opportunity to make some friends and me a few minutes to myself. He misses Toobee, and you of course. He really wants you to visit. So do I. Who could have imagined a month ago that things would have turned out the way they have?*

*I've been thinking a lot about you, love. I don't know exactly what you have in mind, Victor, but I hope you're not going to do anything dramatic or stupid. Please be careful.*

*Tell me how preparations are going for Inside Out. A part of me wishes I could be there; another part of me is glad to have an excuse to be well out of it. I must confess to a lingering sense of prudishness when it comes to explicit sex on stage. I still have a hard time conceiving of that as art. I'm not quite as vehement as the New Covenant types, but I do have my limits, dear. Still, I think I understand what you are trying to achieve. My heart will be with you this Friday.*

*Say hello to Cathy for me.*

*Love, Maria.*

~

*From: toobeeornottoobee@hotmail.com*

*Hello Maria. You and Aaron are safe and I will do anything humanly possible to keep you that way. I love you so much I dare not think of you during the day. I have to banish those happy thoughts because they would inevitably dissolve into the depressing reality of life without you. I hadn't realized in the weeks we spent together how much my love had grown. Distance makes the heart grow fonder, they say. Or something like that.*

*I will never stop loving you; never stop doing whatever it takes to keep you and Aaron safe.*

*As for my promise to do something about the situation we find ourselves in, don't ask about the details. We must agree never to talk about it. That would be best.*

*Preparations for Inside Out are in the final stages. I know, dear, how uncomfortable you are with the work. I still wish you could be here to see it. If the New Covenant crusaders don't crash it – and crucify me while they're at it – I think it will be a magnificent show. Pauline, Rick and I are meeting this evening to work out any last minute details. I think she is going to request some changes, but I don't know what they might be. In truth, since I have met you, my feelings toward the work have shifted. If I had it to do over again, I would be less explicit with the performance element. Not because it's shocking. Certainly not because it's taboo in and of itself. But I'm moving toward the opinion that it's best to keep love making – even representational love making – private and avoid the kind of righteous furor a public display is bound to incite. Our moments of intimacy are sacred and to expose them to the vulgar criticisms of sexual and artistic cretins seems questionable to me now – even in the name of art.*

*Enough palaver about Inside Out, though. I'll let the critics over-analyze it.*

*What a week this has been! I met with the Doers the day after you left. They are anything but happy to have me as their grandson. They are such staunch Christians, I'm not sure they are quite prepared accept the admissibility of DNA evidence. If anything, they must think I am the devil's seed. Mrs. Doer actually fainted when I broke the news, and they left the office without uttering a word. I have no idea where this DNA trail is leading.*

*Love, Victor.*

~

He'd expected this day. Feared it. If that stupid bastard Selkirk had known what he was doing, he never would have gone after Periconi's brother for Christ's sake. But that was the problem with pinstripe crooks: they had the power, and the greed, but they didn't have the connections. They didn't know who was who in the intricate maze of the underworld. Selkirk didn't know that Don Pirelli was the brother of Al Periconi. He didn't even know who Al Periconi was! The Hunter hadn't made the connection between

the brothers either, but why should he have? It was up to the guy ordering the hit to know who-the-fuck was being taken out, even if the guy *had* changed his name. You didn't hit someone without making sure you knew his connections.

Now Periconi had phoned to say he needed a job done. He'd invited the Hunter to the Hot Shot Café to set things up. The Hunter wasn't buying. He'd figured it was only a matter of time before Periconi found out who had done his brother. Time was up. He wouldn't set foot inside the Hot Shot Café because he'd never come out alive. He parked a couple of blocks west and phoned on his cell, keeping an eye on the front door. "Al Periconi," he demanded when a woman answered.

"Who's calling?"

"None of your business. Put him on."

After a lengthy pause Periconi came on the line. "Hunter! I thought you'd be here by now," he said with forced joviality.

"What I need you to do, if you want to see me, is step out the front door of the Hot Shot and start walking east along Hastings, Al. I need to see you walking away from the restaurant at the far edge of the sidewalk. Nobody else comes out the front and nobody comes out the back – I've got it covered. Follow these instructions or I'm gone..."

"Whoa! What's up?"

"Once you've left I'll call you again and we can make arrangements. You've got ten seconds, or I'm out of here."

"Hunter?"

"Ten seconds starting now!" The Hunter snapped.

He ended the call. There was no lookout at the back of the Hot Shot Café, but Al wouldn't know that. It was a calculated risk.

A part of him didn't want Periconi to show. The Hunter was certain Al knew what had gone down in Don Pirelli's underground parking lot. Was there any chance at all Periconi would accept it had been a mistake? Were there any terms they could work out? The Hunter had to know, and you could only make that kind of deal face-to-face.

Al stepped out of the Hot Shot and sauntered east along Hastings.

"Yeah?" he barked, when the Hunter called.

“Cross the street and keep walking east,” The Hunter instructed. “I’ll meet you and we can talk for a bit. Try anything and one of us is going to end up dead Al. If it’s me, the cops will know who did it. There will be plenty of witnesses around to confirm my written version of events. I don’t intend on it being me, though. Got it.”

“Okay.”

“I want you to know what happened Al.”

Silence.

The Hunter ended the call. Getting back in his car, he pulled out and headed east along Hastings, past the Hot Shot Café, past Al. He pulled into a side street a block ahead of Periconi, parked, then walked up to the corner and waited. He could still see the front of the Hot Shot. Nobody had left the place. They might call in someone from outside, but there wouldn’t be time for a back up to arrive. The Hunter stuck his right hand inside his jacket pocket and watched Al Periconi approach. “It’s warm out,” he said. “Why don’t you take your coat off Al.”

Al followed instructions without protest. “You drive,” The Hunter said, gesturing Al toward his parked car. “I’ll put your coat in the back seat, okay.”

Al nodded.

“We can talk, eh?” The Hunter said.

~

“Where’s Rick?”

“He had to leave,” Pauline said in her how-should-I-know tone.

Victor pulled up a chair and dropped his latté onto the table. There was nothing left to say as far as he was concerned. The meeting was a formality – like asking someone where they wanted to go after the train had pulled out of the station.

Pauline looked uneasy, though; which made Victor uneasy.

“Anything wrong?” he said.

She hesitated. Looked around the coffee shop as if she’d misplaced a friend or something, then stared at him with her shocking blue eyes. “I want to go representational,” she blurted.

He laughed. “What does *that* mean?”

She sighed. “It means I don’t want to fuck live in front of a bunch of people whose idea of art is a peep show. I don’t even want to pretend to fuck!”

Victor looked serious. “And what does Rick think about this.”

“He doesn’t want to do it either. He’s nervous.”

“Is this a performance issue?”

Despite herself Pauline smirked. “I don’t think Rick would admit to *that*,” she said. “But I think he’d be happy not having to prove it.”

“I see.”

“It can still be a great show,” Pauline continued encouragingly. “We can go through the motions, but wearing tights is all. I want to transform it into dance instead of what it is. It’ll be powerful.”

“But not what people are expecting.”

She shrugged. “Since when is it our mission to give people what they expect?”

He laughed. So loudly that people at the surrounding tables looked askance, wondering what sort of calamity could have provoked the outburst. Pauline scowled. “It’s hilarious,” he said. “Don’t you see, we’ve been behaving like kids on a dare – none of us has wanted to back down, even though all of us don’t really want to go ahead with it...”

“You mean..?”

“Yes! I’ve been looking for a way to ‘go representational’ too. Probably for a lot longer than you. I just didn’t know how to break it to you guys. I’m ecstatic.” He took her hand and squeezed joyfully. “And you’re right, it will be terrific.”

She beamed.

“I’m assuming the stills are okay?”

“The stills are terrific,” she said. “They don’t have to be changed at all.”

“I’m relieved to hear it,” he grinned. “I mean, we have to have something in the show to work the New Covenant crowd into a lather.”

“Are you going to let people know before the show?”

“I’m going to send out a release saying we’ve made a concession to defuse what could end up being a dangerous situation and hope the New Covenant crowd accepts the olive branch. They can claim their moral victory; I get an excuse not to go to a place I’ve discovered I didn’t really want to go anyway.”

Pauline smiled.

“What!” he protested.

“Your quite the manipulator when you want to be, aren’t you?”

“And you?”

She conceded the point with a nod.

~

Laurence didn’t care if The Hunter was a cold-blooded killer. He was going to give the guy a piece of his mind. The man hadn’t sounded the least bit contrite over the phone. “I’ve got some info,” he’d said. “It could lead us to your wife, Mr. Selkirk. I want to show it to you, then you can tell me what it’s worth.”

“What it’s worth?” Laurence grumbled. The man had let slip the perfect opportunity to nail Maria and Victor Daly. Now he wanted money for information that might lead them to Maria and Aaron. *He must think I’m some kind of rube?*

Victor’s show would be over that very night, and with it the opportunity to frame the New Covenant types.

They hadn’t taken the limo. “Too conspicuous,” he’d informed his bodyguard. Instead they were both seated in front of his luxury SUV. It didn’t have the security features of the limo and his companion had complained about that, but a limousine would have drawn attention. “We don’t need that,” Laurence had said conclusively.

The Slumber Inn was located on 200<sup>th</sup> Street, out in Langley. Why The Hunter had picked it as their meeting place, Laurence couldn’t say. It was almost an hour each way, as far removed from the glitzy hotels of downtown Vancouver as you could possibly get. The Hunter preferred seedy dives in remote settings. *He must have had a Rolodex listing of every flophouse in the Lower Mainland*, Victor thought. They’d never met in the same dump twice. This venue lived up to Laurence’s expectations. “Definitely the kind of place that rented rooms by the hour,” he remarked as they turned into the lot.

Room 205 was one of the anonymous doors that opened onto a second floor balcony that ran the length of the motel. Laurence’s bodyguard knocked and stood back, waiting. There was a scrabbling sound as the chain was removed, then the door swung open. Laurence gave his man a second or two to check out the room, then followed him in. The usual: sagging mattress, battered bureau, discoloured walls, the smell of booze and sweat.

This was a place of illicit comings and goings. A place where the unsophisticated lived out their brutish fantasies.

“I’m not happy with your services this time around, my friend,” Laurence said.

The Hunter shrugged. “People don’t always walk into your sights when you want ‘em to,” he said nonchalantly. “If my job was easy, I wouldn’t have a job, eh? People like you wouldn’t hire me. You’d just go out and do it yourself.”

It irked Laurence that the man showed no sign of regret or embarrassment. He swallowed his anger, though. If The Hunter had information that would lead them to Maria, Laurence wanted to see it. Maybe they could come up with another plan. It would be a shame not to include Victor, though. A bloody shame. “What have you got?” he demanded.

The Hunter grinned. “I have friends in high places, Mr. Selkirk. They have access to classified information.” As he spoke The Hunter picked up a satchel from the floor next to the dresser. He placed it on the chair, unzipped it and reached inside...

It all happened so quickly. Suddenly the Hunter pulled out a gun with a silencer fitted to the barrel. He pumped three bullets into Laurence’s bodyguard, sending the man crashing to the floor. Then he aimed at Laurence.

“One sound and I’ll blow your fucking head off,” he growled.

“What are you doing?”

“Shut the fuck up!” The Hunter hissed. With his free hand he manipulated the keypad of his cell phone, punching in a number. He waited until someone answered on the other end, then said, “We’re ready.”

That was it. “We’re ready,” as if he was a chef talking about lunch.

“Why are you doing this?” Laurence pleaded. A sense of resigned desperation had taken hold, though. He knew what was going down, knew that he was in a game with men suddenly much bigger than himself. His dead bodyguard had understood the brutal rules. So did The Hunter. Laurence was only now beginning to see how things would end and he begged for mercy.

“Just let me go,” he pleaded. “I’ll give you a million dollars. Anything. Just let me out of here.”

The Hunter laughed. “You stupid shit. I told you what Al Periconi would do if he ever found out who killed his brother. I told you...”

“But I didn’t know!”

“It was your fucking job to know,” The Hunter grunted. “Your million bucks isn’t worth a thing to me because I’m a dead man unless I can clear my name with Al. You’ll have to make your own peace with him.”

“Please!”

“I said shut the fuck up,” The Hunter warned, his voice murderous.

Footsteps approached. The door swung open. Al Periconi strode into the room. One look at the man and Laurence Selkirk knew he was done. “I didn’t know,” he whispered. “Honest to God Mr. Periconi, I had no idea he was your brother.”

Al didn’t say a word. He smacked Laurence on the side of the head, putting the full weight of his massive body into the blow. With a yelp Laurence slewed sideways and fell to the floor. He lay there, limp, not wanting to move. He smelled the dust and mold of the soiled carpet. It was good enough for him. It was where he wanted to stay. But Al Periconi had him by the collar and lifted him up so they were staring at each other eyeball to eyeball.

“You’re going to get a little taste of hell on earth before I send you down to the devil himself, Selkirk,” the man said. “You’re going to beg for a bullet between the eyes before I’m done, and you know what? Once I think you’ve squealing long enough, you fucking pig, I’m going to grant your wish. Gladly.”

Periconi nodded and his lieutenant zipped a layer of duct tape tightly over Laurence’s mouth.

“You can scream all you want, Laurence,” Periconi grinned. “It won’t bother anybody here.”

~

A line of police stood between the Naked Truth Gallery and the protestors across the street. Behind the line a cluster of television cameras recorded the action. “Shame!” one placard read. “Dignity, Decency, Devotion,” another. “God Loves You; Why Not Love God?” proclaimed a third. “Sinner!”

Victor tried to understand. But he couldn't help gloating, too... just a bit. This was his moment and he was not in too generous a vein. If the protestors broke through, smashed his show, roughed him up, he would still have made his point.

"I can't believe they're coming," he said to Knute, gesturing toward the lineup snaking into the gallery. "They're actually braving the gauntlet of righteous indignation to come and see our show. It's wonderful."

"Idiots," Knute stared balefully at the protestors.

"No," Victor corrected. "We need them as much as they need us. It's all part of the dialectic."

Knute gave him a sour look. Victor smiled sheepishly.

He'd tried to ease the tension by announcing before the show the 'representational approach' he, Pauline and Rick had agreed to. The performance element was no more risqué than what you might see in almost any contemporary ballet. As for the photo and the video elements, they were well within the accepted bounds of artistic freedom. Really there was nothing controversial left to protest... yet the New Covenant types had swarmed to the cause, displaying undiminished moral outrage.

They'd done him a favour. Again. More favours than they could possibly know.

"Absolutely gorgeous!" one woman exclaimed ogling his photographs of Rick and Pauline. "Never give in to the cretins." "It's like dancing through an enchanted forest," another enthused. "Fantastic," was the general consensus. Victor could hardly believe the effect himself. The crowd meandered through the forest of banners in a state of bemused wonder. Just as he'd planned, a cluster had gathered round the video monitors like a clan at their fire pit.

As for Rick and Pauline, they danced like satyrs. Seen as it was through the slits in the surrounding 'artscape' their performance acquired a heightened sense of mystery and – Pauline would have hated the word – sanctity. Of course some of the shock value had been lost in the representational translation, and Knute in particular accused them of artistic cowardice for allowing skin toned tights. But for Victor a new balance had been achieved. He'd never again go as far as he'd almost gone with *Inside Out*. He knew it.

"I guess I've discovered my boundary," he'd explained to Maria in his last hotmail message before the show.

"I must confess I'm relieved," she answered.

Victor smiled. If only she could have been there. He was recording everything, but a digital rendition could not capture the essence of what they'd achieved. That intoxicating atmosphere of defiance and delight could only live on in the minds of those who had actually witnessed it.

He and Knute raised their glasses in a quiet toast.

"They should have been nude," Knute had to complain, but he laughed it off. Even he thought the show was a sensation.

Tilting his glass, Victor savoured the wine's absolving flavour. Then he noticed a face in the crowd, a face he had not expected. Inspector Diane Reger talked briefly to the woman at the door, locked-on to Victor with her calculating grey eyes, then made her way across the room to where Victor and Knute stood. "Good evening Mr. Daly. I need to talk to you," she said.

Blinking, Victor waited.

"In private, please," the detective suggested.

Grumbling, Knute put down his glass and drifted off.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?" Victor asked, suddenly solemn.

"I need to ask you a few questions about Laurence Selkirk Mr. Daly."

"Here? Now?" Victor did his best to look annoyed and surprised.

"Yes, sir."

"But I'm in the middle of an art opening."

"And I'm in the middle of a murder investigation Mr. Daly."

"Murder?" he croaked.

The room lurched. He thought he might faint. He steadied himself, grasping the edge of the wine table. A burning flux rose in his throat. How was Inspector Reger reading all this? As the emotional reflexes of a man in shock? An act, put on by a man with foreknowledge of an event she hadn't even described?

"Mr. Selkirk has been found dead, sir. Murdered."

Victor *was* shocked; Laurence *was* dead. A terrible conclusion he had set in motion had actually come to pass. Inspector Reger was gauging his reaction, Victor suddenly realized, watching him intently with her strangely pleading eyes. He could see why people would want to tell her the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"Does Maria know?" he asked.

“The victims names have not been released,” Inspector Reger said. “Pending notification of next-of-kin...”

“Names?”

“A second victim was found on the scene with Mr. Selkirk.”

“Who?”

“His body-guard we think.”

“Jesus!”

“Do you have anything more to say?”

He looked at her, genuinely puzzled.

“Anything that might help with our investigation?”

Victor shook his head. “I’m shocked, Inspector. Can’t say I’m in mourning, though. That would be a lie.”

“Where were you this afternoon, Mr. Daly?”

“Here. Preparing for the opening.”

“Who with?”

“Knut Neilsen, the man I was just talking to. He owns the gallery. Rick and Pauline, they’re performing right now, but they were helping and getting ready all afternoon.”

“Maria?” Victor remembered. “Who will tell Maria?”

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