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The Ghost Writer

by
Stephen Braund

**A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through the English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor**

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2002

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One Spicy Dish

1.

Arthur Bunt had never intended to become a food critic. Growing up in rural Idaho under the parentage of two devout Lutherans, food was not an occupation, it was what you put on a table. But in the last year of the last decade of the twentieth century he found himself in Turkey again, eating a kebab topped with chillies. He had first smelled such a dish twenty-five years earlier. Smell always brought back memories better than sights or even sounds. Taste was king. He chomped down on the roll. The juices gushed into his mouth. The pointy spiciness melded to the sturdy spine of the savoury. Arthur liked to think of himself as an artist and his palate as his... palate. This kebab was a minor masterpiece, it deserved inclusion in his article. As critic, he did not live to destroy the creations of the chef. He lived to provide a host for their combinations. Some people didn't understand this. He was hated by some chefs. But they needed him as much as his belly craved their food. Most of them could not appreciate complex culinary combinations of flavours as he could. He was a star. Having done the job for more than twenty years, his celebrity earned him a unique position as both critic and muse. Chefs would tailor their menus to his picky, yet appreciative, palate. Arthur loved writing about good food. He would go to great pains to ensure that quality was rewarded. But he also hated, with equal measure, the cheap and lazy chef who would try to pass off gruel as haute cuisine. This was why he was hated. There were a lot of lazy people out there. His pen was mighty, and his words cut deeply. He knew dozens of restaurants that went out of business weeks after his review was published. The power was nice.

Apart from the occasional bout of food poisoning – for which his pen provided retribution – the life of food critic was also pretty easy, especially the life of a food critic as famous as Arthur, and working as head chief writer at *Bistro*. The American foodie magazine contained Peabody winning stories, boasted a circulation which outpaced that of Playboy and sold three times as many copies as its nearest competitor. Yet, having mentioned all of this, Arthur was not particularly happy. All the celebrity and power could not help him with this trip. Not this time.

If Arthur had been coming to Turkey for 22 years, then he had been eating regularly at the *Havuzlu* restaurant for 20 and a half. There were restaurants on the Upper East-Side he frequented on a less regular basis. He loved *Havuzlu*. Now an ugly dragon of a problem had reared his head. If he was a good employee, as he had been for 25 years (and why wouldn't he be, they gave him money to travel the world and gorge himself on good food) then he was forced to divulge his knowledge of this country he loved. More specifically, he would have to inform them about Havuzlu. He would be forced to trade secrets with the enemy: the readership of the magazine. He could already see them, fat and richly dressed slinking into the darkened restaurant and *his* refuge for the last twenty years. They would talk loudly, order loudly and try to engage in small talk with Türgüt, *Havuzlu's* oldest waiter, who would politely change the subject to the wine selection. These vulgar zombies of wealth and good intentions would talk through their meals, commenting loudly on the nature of exotic Turkish cuisine, just as they had talked loudly reassuring each other that Tuscany was the most sumptuous place on earth twenty years earlier. And then, as they left - full of wine and smugness for their brave Turkish adventure - they would tip handsomely. And in this way Ekrem and Türgüt

would become rich. They would turn the place into an upscale diorama of Turkey. Belly dancers and “local” musicians would begin to snake their ways through the tables each Wednesday or Tuesday or whatever it was that would see the most luxury tour buses swing into town. They would sell out because, as Arthur readily admitted, his conversation and twenty years of patronage simply could not compete with all the extra cash those marauding gourmands would bring in. This was the problem. Arthur recognized Ekrem could not be blamed for any changes he might make when the masses arrived. Ekrem was a good man, had worked hard for these years offering excellent unaffected food for a reasonable price. Should he not be rewarded for his honesty and good nature? Why should Türgüt be prevented from kissing the bloated asses of luxury-bus crusaders and owning a summerhouse further down the coast? Who was Arthur to decide? Arthur knew that both men were more than deserving of such material pleasures. Besides, did he not work for a magazine that led the charge of the idiotic swine? Jesus, he sold out on a monthly basis. Why not Ekrem too? Because, Arthur reasoned, Provence had fell and Tuscany had too and he refused to let it happen to this one restaurant in this last country in Europe. One restaurant was not too much to ask for. Other men had dens where they could retreat. Superman had his cave of ice. Was Arthur not allowed *Havuzlu*?

Arthur had spent most of this trip battling the dilemma. The week before, at *Bistro*’s monthly brainstorming session, Becky, a junior copywriter, let it slip that he was intimate with Turkey. Jerry, his boss, decided that Turkey was the new It place and that Arthur should have the honour of revealing the country’s vast and romantic culinary

history to the hungry and neglected readers of the magazine on his side of the Atlantic.

Arthur had no choice but to accept.

In all honesty, at the time he was happy to go. New York in November was cold and dreary and Arthur had tired of listening to the cold rain slap the dining room window of his brownstone walk-up. He was more than happy to escape to the mild comfortable winters on the southern Aegean. Since he had arrived, however, his attitude had changed.

Certainly, most of his favourite haunts were still there. They were all as good as he remembered them to be. He had no problem sharing them with his readers, but *Havuzlu* was different. It was his sanctuary. Tourists from the west and beggars of the East could not reach him there. He knew what would happen if he praised *Havuzlu*. It had happened before.

Arthur Bunt had never meant to become a food critic. Back in the sixties, Arthur had found himself in Provence with no plans and little money. During this marvellous youthful rambling he had nothing to do but hop from bed to bed and kitchen to kitchen. He hadn't started out life as a food critic and he hadn't started out as a sex maniac. His upbringing was subdued and his parents – both in their late thirties when they had him – were very old-fashioned. Old fashioned in only the way that desperate Lutheran dry-land potato farmers in Idaho can be. Sex was not discussed. Emotion was not discussed. Arthur felt free of constraints in Provence and that is why he loved the place and the people in the place. His hair grew long; his skin got tanned. Arthur was a dynamo, and the menu of his Provence tour of fishing villages contained many a spicy, exotic, and sometimes surprising dish. During his summer of love, Arthur realized just how clichéd the situation was, but there was nothing he could do about it. Sometimes, events occur

over which you have no control, he told himself, and as tacky as they may be, as implausible to the voyeur peering in, they just are, and if you find yourself caught up in such a moment, then you have no choice but to go along with it.

So he bedded housewives, lonely while their husbands took business trips to Lucerne or Berlin with youthful secretaries, young girls, travelling Europe on their own, on their own for the first time. Sometimes he bedded the husbands too, during their business trip to Berlin. He devoured it all with the same fanatical appetite. The gender of the lover never really bothered him. He figured this was do to his upbringing. All sex is taboo. You are better off if you're not doing it. If you are doing it, whatever it may be, then you're already doomed. There is no slope of wrongness. The act is wrong. He happily skipped across the line and his life became more interesting. Sexuality was a category in and of itself. Arthur had no interest in creating more rules to live by. And that is how he came to wake up one morning in the bed of André, a Parisian gadfly par excellence and self-proclaimed queer.

André liked the word queer. He had never particularly cared for the fashions and mores of acceptable society and wore the term as a badge of honour. He liked being different than the rest of the world. They were boring; he was fabulous. They were drab and normal, and he with his colour was queer. Grand. André had been coming to Provence for twenty years when he met Arthur in the street. He took great joys in breaking sensitive young men out of constrictive upbringings. Over a glass of Pernod, André realized Arthur was one of these nice fellows. He decided it was his job to help the guy. So they became friends. Over breakfast with André, Arthur discussed poetry and other sensitive matters which go nicely with champagne and orange juice.

Arthur was happy with André. He was introduced not just to pleasures of bedroom but to the kitchen also. André's friends included starred chefs and other bourgeois connoisseurs of fine foods. From these people Arthur developed a love of bouillabaisse and baguette and other specialities of the then French backwater. One of André's friends was an editor with a London foodie magazine. The gentleman suggested that Arthur -whose small talk at parties consisted of endless observations of food and drink – should submit them to the magazine in London.

That was the beginning of Arthur's career as a food critic, and the end of Provence. When he returned to the region, only a couple of years later, he found the restaurants packed with hip young Englishmen and their girlfriends, or mistresses. His friends in the cafés and bistros had been displaced. He had nowhere to go. He was alone in the only place he had truly been happy. Arthur remembered all of this as he chewed on the springy flesh of the market bought pita. Eating always brought back memories. He tasted a hint of cinnamon and slipped back into the accompanying memories.

When he returned to New York from Provence, all those years ago, he spent the first few weeks continuing his bedroom tastings, and then the unimaginable happened. He fell in love. Mary had picked him up at a cocktail party. They both loved food, and she had read his article in the London magazine and felt they had much in common. This connection lead, as all things did at that time in his life, back to his bedroom. She made him crepes the next morning and he knew he found his soulmate. The problem was that she wasn't looking for a mate. She was looking to mate. Nothing more. After a few weeks, Arthur's longing became a drag. He was always asking her if she was good, if

things were nice, and could he get her anything, and is the room too cold. It bummed her out. Then she left. Arthur couldn't eat for a week. He survived by slurping down Bloody Mary's at the corner bar.

Then the bitterness set in. Mary was worthless. Women were worthless. Men were too. All people were, really, because they always end up disappointing you. He swore that he would never let the same thing happen again. He pushed all the memories out, except her recipe for crepes. The crepes he remembered fondly. They could stay. He made a batch and ate it. They were great. His belly was full and he felt better. Food was more than a suitable replacement for sex. Food was filling. It filled the well in the stomach where sorrow lived. Food was indulgent. Food was transcendent. It didn't walk out on you. It did not break your heart. It targeted a different organ altogether. He put away his Bloody Mary's and resumed his culinary adventures with a new flare. The transformation from lover of French women to lover of French food had begun. Over the next few years, he tried to date, but found the process tedious. Eating in fine restaurants was far more rewarding.

When he returned to Provence the next year, he went looking for his friends, but his people were gone. The food, however, was still there. He could still buy the chickpea pancakes from the vendors, munch on olives or destroy his favourite shirts during passionate orgies of bouillabaisse. Suddenly, his tongue – so appreciated by his friends before – was now being used for enjoying the fruits of the sea. The only birds which caught his attention after that second trip were the roasted ducks and fowl baked with butter and tarragon and served up with vegetables and sauce on a silver platter. The only men in white who caught his attention were the wait staff at the finer bistros of the

region where he now spent his time. He ate, with true fervour, this fine food of France, but there was a sadness there too. Always, he thought of the lost Provence and that marvellous year he spent there. His friends had gone, his lovers had gone, but the food was still there. It was still as good as he remembered it. And that made him happy.

When he liked a restaurant, he wrote nice things about it, and was rewarded with more good food. When he didn't get on with a certain uptown bistro, he said so, and the bistro went away. Arthur could still remember the first time a restaurant shut its doors soon after his review. Simultaneously, he felt guilty for this power and was thrilled by it as well. By the time he returned to Provence he was well known and well respected. He reminded himself of this as he sat at a courtyard café in Nice lamenting the loss of his old stomping ground. It was at the café, that he overheard an English couple talking. He was listening in because he was bored. Besides they were tourists.

"It's marvellous, Terry."

"You don't say." He was nibbling her arm.

"Not like here." She sneered at the English tourists across the courtyard. They were looking into a patisserie window.

"Julia, oh Julia." He continued to peck at her wrist.

"Filled with the awful tourists."

"Hmmm."

"I hate the English."

"But Tuscany. Oh those hills. And the food." And she clasped her hands together with Old Testament force. The action, while joyous and reverential, was also quite powerful, and had the unfortunate affect of smacking Terry hard across the nose.

While Julia and the wait staff tried to prevent the blood from staining too much, Arthur was up and off. After quick stop at his hotel, he was on a train to Milan. He wanted to discover the new place, the new food. To Arthur, back home, Italian was Spaghetti and Meatballs. Of course there was more to it, he had to find out what that was. Screw sex. He wanted a piece of Italy. He had not been this excited since that first trip to Provence. In Milan he didn't sleep, or wash, or even eat. He just switched trains and carried on the slow winding path to Siena and the heart of Tuscany.

It was lovely. From the moment he arrived, he knew he would vacation amidst the sensual rolling hills and trickling streams until the end of time. His excitement carried over into his writing and his review of the region was made the cover story. They even used his travel photos. Arthur was ecstatic. His career was on track, and he had discovered his new Eden.

The next summer, however, Tuscany was filled with the very same tourists he found sullyng Provence. But this was worse. Waiting in line for a pasta shop he had discovered the previous summer, and had written about in his article, he overheard an American couple behind him. The man asked why they had to wait for this particular restaurant, when there were so many others not as busy.

"Stop whining," she said. "Arthur Bunt wrote about it in that marvellous piece in *Bistro*."

What a moment. People on the street knew his name. He was the authority. He was to blame. Damn. He was in part responsible for these buffoons eating his food and breathing his air. It was a tough chew, but Arthur tried to reconcile himself to this new life and his new power. He had discovered those restaurants, and received credit for it.

But now, the place had lost its charm. Still, the new restaurants he found there did cater to his every whim. The chefs knew who he was. Have the finest wines. Have the finest veal. Have my fine daughter. He took the *Osso Buco* and the *vino*, but left the daughter. Such a dish did not delight him anymore. There may have been less adventure on the second trip, but the quality was always maintained and he could feel responsible for it. Arthur liked this *prix fixe* sort of life.

As the rest of Europe was discovered and rediscovered by one and then another class or sub-class of Britain, America and Western Europe, editors at food magazines found themselves with greater and greater stress of finding the next big thing. As more and more of Europe had already been written about, there was less and less to explore. Thus the boundaries of acceptable travel (safely exotic) were pushed outward. Ten years earlier, Arthur had single-handedly put regional Mexican cooking on the international map. Last year he had covered Laos, Mozambique and Qatar, none of which had caught on - he had been pushing cilantro and coriander in years when sun-dried tomato and arugula pulled the points of the other writers' pens. It was concerning. He needed a good story, one that would keep him on top. He liked being on top.

When Mozambique didn't catch on, Arthur took it as more proof that editors were not looking for something new, merely something novel, different enough to intrigue without offending the boorish palates of the people who bought the magazine and bought the nearly 100 pages of advertising per issue. His bitterness grew. For while decades as the top man allowed him to savour the flavours of obscure international delicacies, and then share this appreciation with the world to great acclaim, the process had also left

Arthur a bitter man. He loved the fame and the power, but he began to hate the people who gave him his power and fame. So he began to run away more and more frequently. More and more frequently, he ran to the coasts of Turkey and the hidden treasures there. Now he was being asked to report on this area.

Thus, Turkey, the place to which Arthur had fled after Provence and then Tuscany had fallen to masses, was now in the sights of the western media. And so, instead of paying for his holiday this year, Arthur was being paid. He was being paid to write about what he knew. He didn't even have to do any research. He just had to cross the street to *Havuzlu*.

Arthur had wandered from the market of the spicy kebab and had ended up without meaning to along the harbour and across from the door of *Havuzlu*, his one remaining paradise. While change knocked down his haunts in New York, in Provence, in Tuscany, *Havuzlu* remained unsullied. It was Eden.

So determined not to spill the beans on *Havuzlu*, Arthur had been limiting his visits there. The first evening in the small coastal town, he chose instead to pick a restaurant at random. He ended up in a small café at the other end of the harbour. The place was a tourist dive. There were belly dancers rolling their hips through the aisles. It was horrible, but exactly the place that *Bistro* readers deserved. He would give the swine their swill. He ordered. The food arrived. He pulled out his notebook, he took out his pen and like a reluctant surgeon about to perform an amputation, he began to write.

In Turkey, stuffed eggplant bears the name of imam bayildi, or the Imam fainted. Such a noble title was bestowed on this rich dish, the story goes, when a priest, the Imam,

tasting the dish for the first time was so overwhelmed from the experience that he fainted with delight.

Not bad. It was true. He continued.

Sitting in this small seaside café, off the local promenade, in this small coastal town, beside the sands which divide the sea and a turquoise sky, the experience of sliding my knife through the purple satin finish of the aubergine, spearing this morsel of imam bayildi, lifting it to my watering mouth and letting my taste buds out of their cage, is an experience which has much to compete with for the attention of my clamorous brain.

What now? *I do not faint.* Good.

But how the smooth silky texture of the Eggplants flesh contrasts with the rich, decadent meats and herbs inside. It is the gourmet's equivalent of a violent scherzo by Beethoven, or Shostakovich. The smoky note of the roasted exterior provides another element of the complex harmony of flavour, biting into the smooth calm of the flesh itself. Competition for the dominating theme of the spiced rice, infused with the exciting flavours of fresh herbs. Surely, this symphony of flavour has never been performed with such inspiring gusto as here at the Gunay Restaurant, Eight o'clock in the evening, here in The small coastal town, before a stream of residents wash past my tiny sidewalk table, along the boardwalk line, beneath the setting sun with the accompaniment of the slapping sea.

Those were lies. There was not even an element of truth in the words. The eggplant had been kept over the flame for too long, and the smoky undertone desired in such a dish had been discarded in favour of an acrid char. It was as burnt as Aunt Betty's attempt at toast, as scorched as Brother John's attempt at barbequed chicken breast.

Furthermore, beneath the black and blistered skin of the eggplant, the flesh was hardly cooked. Quite the feat: burnt exterior; undercooked middle. Kudos. The mistake was the kind of culinary misstep that an average cook would have to strive to achieve. The cook at Gunay Restaurant was not an average cook by any measurement. He was bloody awful.

Arthur put down his pen and glared at the *imam bayildi* sitting in front of him. His telepathy didn't work. The dish still looked greasy and burnt. He had been staring at it, on and off, for close to fifteen minutes while he wrote the review. Now the food would be cold too. The oils would already be coagulating. They would further coagulate in his belly, and eventually in his arteries. He was no longer hungry. He stopped prodding the specimen and put down the fork in his other hand. Arthur read the words on the notepad sitting beside his glass of water – the one element of the meal that was actually satisfactory. The line about infusions of flavours was particularly misleading. The eggplant was not infused with oil; it was drowning in a cheap bitter olive oil. “Awful,” he thought. “I am a liar,” he whispered to the pool of oil beneath the aubergine.

So am I. I'm not really olive oil.

“No?”

No, I'm actually rapeseed oil. The owner floats olives in me, to give me a little flavour.

But in Turkey, oil is cheaper.

I know, but the chef is an evil, evil man. He is trying to kill you.

That did it.

He arose, put on his raincoat and walked to the cash register. The cook-slash-owner-slash-server sat by himself behind a faded counter smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper. Arthur wanted to brain him for putting forth such a travesty. The man lifted his chin slightly in acknowledgement of the colourful Turkish money, and then returned his gaze to the day's football headlines. Arthur did not complain. He could leave the offensive dive. On the way out, he walked past a businessman sitting by himself and eating tripe soup. He was also reading a newspaper. He was trying to sneak a spoonful of soup into his mouth, beneath the edge of the newspaper, but he kept spilling the swill all over the broadsheet. Apparently, thought Arthur, the necessary ingredient to this food's success was newspaper. It sopped up the oil.

Outside, a steady stream of rain fell from the grey heavens above. A few lone strollers could be seen rambling along the lonely concourse, umbrellas at the ready. Arthur opened his own to keep himself dry. It was a fruitless gesture. It was warm and so humid that while the umbrella and his raincoat would keep water from falling on him, they could do nothing about the muggy sweat forming on his skin. He would be drenched before he reached his destination.

Still, the small coastal town was beautiful. That was why he kept coming back. The sun may have been hidden by thick grey clouds, but the boats in the harbour were still a beautiful sight. The lights from the town bobbed along the water and shimmied up the bobbing masts of the docked boats. Seagulls swooped and cried. He looked to the sea and meditated on the reflecting lights in the water. What the hell, he thought. Arthur turned from the sea and crossed the street to *Havuzlu*. If he was to lie about the food and the restaurants he ate at, then he would cocoon himself in his sanctuary, eat their

scrumptious delights, write the review they deserve and the slap on the name of some other restaurant. He could look in the phone book back at his pansiyon. He wouldn't even have to see the offensive diners. He pulled open *Havuzlu's* glass and metal door and made his way inside.

The knowledgeable gourmand traveller knows not to expect the scent of coffee grounds in Turkey. Coffee with breakfast is instant and kept on hand for the tourists. Tea is served in tiny tulip-shaped glasses and is the passion of Turkey today. It is strong it is sweet and it is most agreeable. I dare anyone to leave the country without this sweet addiction.

Arthur was having fun. It was a new day and he was sitting in a cheap plastic chair outside a carpet dealer's, sipping tea and beaming ear to ear. Last night's meal at *Havuzlu* made life better. Today, he could enjoy the fake entries. He could sit quietly and enjoy a tea or the sweet alcoholic liquorice bite of a glass of raki and let his twenty years experience take over.

One of the greatest pleasures of the Turkish food universe is the marketplace. This morning, my first full day in the city, feverish with hunger, my senses excited and alive with being back in this magic place, I awoke and went to a local market. To the right, two old men sat and played backgammon, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. On my left, an old woman stood beside her wares, mound after mound of paprika and spices. To imagine the dead limp paprika you shake onto a hardboiled egg is a disservice to the variety of this ancient spice awaiting you in Turkey. In a line, in front of this wizened old woman, old with age and secrets, lay the tubs of paprika and spices.

So much red, you have never seen. Red deepening from red. Red, like a summer's sunset reflecting off a stiller sea.

Red.

Like the shimmering shoes of a Technicolor Dorothy. Red. Like a drop of blood on a white towel, widening. Red like blood gathered in a pool rippling in on itself. Red, disappearing into red. How, glad I was to be back in this wonderful country, the air rich with the scent of cinnamon and diesel dust. It is the city's perfume. It was innuendo, an inference of fragrance that hung there, between the old men lighting up another smoke. And between the smoke and the smell of passing cars and the spices from the market, I found a man selling shwarma. There is nothing like shwarma right from the market, amid the hustle and bustle of the businessmen on their way to work and schoolchildren playing themselves to school.

And so he let his eyes seek out the dirtiest market stalls willingly. No pastry was too greasy, too syrupy and sweet, no slice of chicken shwarma too slimy, undercooked, bacteria-ridden to gain mention in his purple prose. He sought out the vilest, rawest blackest food the worst the city had to offer. He wanted to punish the readers. They would come here and eat this food. And they would enjoy it, because he told they would enjoy it. They would enjoy it all the way to their hotel bathroom. This was true power.

He looked across the road. The kebab stand was doing poor business. He didn't wonder why. Flies circled the raw skewered meat. He would not have eaten there had he been paid to do so. Obviously, he was being paid to do so. Too bad. He invented another glowing review. Then he lunched at *Havuzlu*, renamed Ataturk Café for the sake of the article. He was enjoying a delightful piece of lamb – grilled with rosemary over an

open fire, the flesh was moist and succulent, but crisp on the outside. The recipe was simple but the food was pure quality. There was no dilemma. He had power. He would abuse it. This trip would work out after all.

2.

Isabelle Dupont was exactly twenty-three years old. It was five thirty-seven in the morning and now she was exactly twenty-three years old. For the first time since she was six, she actually witnessed the minute hand snuggle up to the black seven of her alarm clock. She was able to watch this auspicious event because she couldn't sleep. She started her new job in less than four hours. To say that she was excited would be an understatement. This was the day she would start her job as one of the seven food critics employed by *MAITRE D'*, number two gourmand magazine on the market. Only two months earlier, she had finished her master's degree in Journalism from Columbia and before that, she had interned for the summer with *Bistro*, magazine numero uno. Moving from the largest rag as intern to the second largest as paid employee (with benefits) was not common. It was positively rare. A food critic was usually expected to struggle in small town newspapers for decades before they were deemed worthy of such a plum position. Most food critics would kill to have her position. All Isabelle had to do was get out of bed. Her father was the acting CEO and founding editor of *MAITRE D'* itself. She was the boss' daughter.

Isabelle knew she was lucky. She wasn't stupid, just rich and privileged and lucky to have a father in such a position. But she wasn't stupid. She always graduated at the head of her class. She was her high school valedictorian, a Cum Laude during

Undergrad, and had gone to Columbia for her master's degree on full scholarship—not that she needed it. She was smart and that was why she took this job. Sure, she knew it reeked of patronage, her appointment by her father, but wasn't this what the top of the class was supposed to do. The guy who graduated at the head of the class the year before jumped straight into a gig with the Wall Street Journal – a publication, she reminded herself, whose readership was far greater than that of *MAITRE D'* – so there was absolutely no reason to feel this guilty. She rolled over to the other side of her king-size bed and realized that only a couple years earlier, she may have felt guilty. When she was in the first year of her graduate degree, she had caught a momentary case of guilt. What if, she had wondered, if I hadn't been born to this father but someone else. Would I have had the privilege of the schools and the lifestyle that such a man's connections afforded? Of course not. This thought plagued her for months. It didn't help that she was hanging around for the first time in her life with real scholarship kids. She had met them on the first day of class.

All the students who received scholarships were corralled into the Department lounge and given the *best and the brightest* speech. It was ridiculous, but it created a bond between the people in the room, and from then on, she and Rahib and Sarah made sure that they met for coffee every evening at eight o'clock. She had been awakened to how lucky she was. But guilt can only last for so long. She was raised a Lutheran and not Catholic like Sarah, and did not possess this ability to live constantly in guilt for something she had no control over. And her friends' attempts to make her 'see how lucky she was' were beginning to annoy her. Perhaps, she thought one day, they were just interested in the power that she had been born with. They would have to work for it.

It was a simple situation. It was not worthy of guilt. Power made the world go round. She had it; they wanted it. No guilt. The return to rich girl behaviour caused a rift. By the second year, Rahib would cross the street to avoid her. It was sad, but it taught Isabelle what power was and whom she was up against. She would use the knowledge for her own benefit and triumph over everyone.

The morning of her birthday, the morning she could not sleep, she thought about power. The visions of her future bounced through her head as it bounced from one overstuffed down pillow to the next. This new job was exciting. She would have the chance to try out her theories and dominate the world. She was a monster. Grrrr. She was Godzilla; she was going to kick some serious ass.

At work, her day got off to a rocky start. Her coworkers glared in her direction, many openly pointed at her orange and black toenail polish. Isabelle had always enjoyed painting her nails: the wilder the better. As a girl she did it for fun. Now she did it as therapy. When she couldn't sleep, she painted them up in intricate Tiger tail designs. Her coworkers did not appreciate the work. They smirked. Then they became openly hostile when she spilt a large coffee all over the advertising proofs for that month's issue. She only confirmed their suspicions and they felt confident in telling her to her face. She was nothing more than a useless Daddy's girl who had got the job because of the ultimate connection. For the first time in her short life, she felt awkward and didn't know how to break out of it. Women who should have received short sassy retorts now received nothing more than the silly stammers of a confused girl.

"Um, where is the copy room," she asked a couple of women chatting in the aisle. Not only did they not answer her, they never stopped their conversation, nor did they

even look her way. She had no choice but to shrug and then spend twenty minutes more looking for the photocopiers. As she was making some copies, someone spoke to her. He was a mailroom rat. He said, "The consensus is you'll be out of here by Friday. I bet fifty on a month. I figure your dad will keep you around for at least that long. The others say that money is what really matters and the second you fail, you're gone."

And that was it. Her nervous demeanour and foolish appearance disappeared like the guilt she had tossed aside the year before. She was who she was, she was smart, she had the degrees to prove it. More importantly, she spent more money during one day at a European spa than idiots like the mailroom boy did on his car. She laughed to his face, watched his confidence wither and then charged off to the staff meeting where the journalists, and her father, the editor, would determine which direction the next issue would take.

"We need a more exotic twist," her father was saying. "Suggest."

"Mexico," said someone unimportant.

"Tacky."

"Provence."

Everyone shook their heads.

"Turkey," she said. The voice was clear and strong. "I heard that Vogue is shooting a piece in Istanbul." The room looked at her. The very notion that this creature had spilt coffee like a nervous schoolgirl vanished from their silly middle-class heads.

Isabelle was standing at the back of the room – above the comforts of the ergonomically designed chairs which sat around the large cherry wood conference table.

When she had arrived all of the seats were taken. It didn't matter. All the eyes in the room were now on her.

"Isabelle, dear, did you say Istanbul?" Maureen, the head writer, and perhaps only one of two people in the city whose pen inspired true fear in even the most red-faced devils of surly celebrity chefs. She idly thumbed through a copy of time. "Arthur's there."

"You don't say?" Arthur, Arthur, Arthur. She ran the name through her head, trying to figure out who Maureen was talking about.

"Arthur Bunt?" Her father asked the question her pride prevented herself from asking. No one was looking at him though, nor were they watching Maureen, all eyes were still on Isabelle. Maureen rarely discussed others' ideas.

"Yes, that's the one," Maureen continued.

"Really."

"He goes there every year."

"To Istanbul?"

"No, some town on the coast. I'm sure I'll remember the name if you give me a minute." She looked up from the magazine. "He told me the name last year at a Christmas party. He was very drunk."

"And Vogue's there?"

"In Istanbul," Isabelle answered.

"I don't like this. He's going to declare open season on Turkey, and we'll be playing catch up."

"Maureen, you want it?"

“It was her idea, let her have it.”

“Good idea. He won’t recognize you. You can steal the story right from him.”

“I interned on his floor.”

“Recognize an intern? Oh that’s good Isabelle.” The others laughed at the joke while wondering why it was funny.

“Okay.”

“That’s my girl. Now go home and pack. You’ll leave tomorrow. And tell your mother I’ll be late for dinner.”

He left the room and the others filed out slowly, most taking path on the other side of the table, so that they would not have to look at the conquering interloper. Once the room was empty, she stood there alone and victorious. This was the way things were supposed to be.

As a girl, Isabelle had received the nickname Dizzy. She could remember the exact lineage. He father would occasionally call her Izzy. A maid misheard this name once and could never be convinced that the girl was not called Dizzy. Her friends liked the sound and began to call her Dizzy too. She hadn’t really liked it. She didn’t aspire to be dizzy, a ditz, a stupid person, but the name stuck with those friends. They liked the irony. They were twelve and they already liked irony. Isabelle left them behind with a move, but the memory of the name stuck. Names, Dizzy now understood, had a great influence on how others saw you. Just as an elementary school might be disinclined to hire a teacher named Randy Pantz, so too did most people would expect a certain neurosis when meeting a Dizzy. To be sure that the nickname was never attached to her again, Isabelle made sure that her performance, her behaviour, her voice always

portrayed a woman for whom 'Dizzy' could only be an antonym. In that room, looking out over the skyline of New York and soon to be on her way to Turkey, Isabelle knew that the complete eradication of such a name was only weeks away. When she scooped Arthur's story – failure was not an option, so she knew it was a matter of 'when' and not 'if' – no one would dare look at her with anything other than respect. Even Sarah and Rahib would be forced to admit that she was more than a privileged child.

Isabelle carried her dreams of victory and grudging bitchy smiles with her on the plane ride from New York to London. To celebrate, she had three glasses of champagne and then spent the rest of the ride amusing herself by hitting on the obviously gay flight attendant. If asked, she wouldn't have known why she did it, tormenting servants was hardly a hobby, but the flight was long, power was fun, and she was flying first class.

3.

The bus she took from Istanbul to the small seaside village – where Arthur was rumoured to be staying - was terrifying beyond belief. The driver was a maniac, passing cars on blind curves, honking all the while to warn the oncoming traffic and to ward off bad luck.

The Turkish lady sitting beside her, a smartly dressed woman returning to her hometown after years abroad, laughed at Isabelle's terrified face. Explained her situation, her history, her goals, and then the driver.

"Did you know Turkey has one of the highest rates of car fatalities in the world?"

"No." The woman laughed some more.

“See that hanging from the rear-view mirror?” A piece of highly decorated fabric bounced as the bus swung around another car. “It is for protection against the evil eye.”

“How interesting.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be there soon.” Then the lady spoke of the storyline of a soap opera Isabelle had never heard of, let alone seen, simply because she was a kind person and thought it might keep Isabelle’s attention off the road. It only partly worked.

Isabelle still had moments of terror- went they rocked around a tight mountain corner and the momentum carried her into the shoulder of the good Samaritan - but for the most part the intrigues of rich Turkish businessmen and their scheming mistresses captured her attention. She understood Turkey when she arrived in the town. You could tell a lot by a culture’s soap opera. The drivers were crazy. She understood that. The moment Isabelle got to her hotel, she went straight to the lounge and ordered a drink.

Outside of the hotel, in the town itself, she didn’t really know what to do. She understood the workings of rich vindictive businessmen of Istanbul and their wicked wives, but she couldn’t see any around. She felt lost. She decided to find Arthur instead of exploring. She would tail him. Her internship with his magazine had introduced her to his good taste, as well as his many disguises, so she was confident that she would find him. She would then eat in the same places, spend the evening writing the article, and then send it off to New York before he had even started in on his. Their magazine was printing on an advance release basis – three full weeks from the cover date - so if she could get the story, Isabelle and *MAITRE D’* magazine would get the glory, while *Bistro* with its mere one week advance would look unoriginal and bomb. Her career would be set, money and respect would rise like a triumphant soufflé with truffles and gold flakes,

and she would one step closer to taking over her father's position and dishing out cruelty to those current coworkers who did not appreciate her. It was simple. So she asked the concierge at the hotel – the Ramada – where to dine. He gave her a list of five expensive restaurants. Just the sort of place a food critic should be found. Off she went.

She spent all afternoon and evening taking a cab back and forth between them, looking for Arthur, but with no luck. As she lay across her bed, she concluded that finding a travelling food critic was not as easy as one might expect. She had spent all day looking for him without luck, and in all that time had neglected to eat a single thing. Thus, she was at the end of her first full day in Turkey and had not even noshed a single bite. She was starving, so she called room service. She was too tired to even venture downstairs to the starred restaurant. If she kept up like this, and she could not find Arthur, she would be out of a job, even if her Father was the boss.

“Fuck,” she said to no one in particular. A pillow was flung across the room. Its perfect arc was broken by the wall. It fell to the floor with a wimpy thud. She reached for its companion, but before she could do further feather damage, her food arrived. She crammed hot spicy tidbits into her mouth. She took a drink of wine and washed down the mouthful along with any lingering insecurities.

The next day went much better. She woke up refreshed – not jetlagged and not starving. Today she was hungry only for glory. The tourist brochure left in the rooms mentioned a market down the road and she decided to explore. At the market, she wandered through aisles of bright red tomatoes. When she lingered too long, the owner offered a sample. It was the best tomato she had ever tasted. It occurred to her that her coworkers may have had a right to hate her. Although a fine journalist, she couldn't cook

a pot of pasta, and during her long college years had consumed mostly pizza and Thai take-out. She wasn't sure if she even really liked food. It was there for nourishment: don't get enough vitamins, you die; eat too much, you get fat. Now, she found herself getting excited over a tomato. When she was a child travelling through Italy, she remembered her father trying to make her try a slice of the bright red ball, but she had convinced herself that tomatoes were icky, and refused to try one. It drove him nuts. He would put up with it in New York, but watching his daughter - the daughter of an editor of a food magazine - turn down a true, authentic beautiful Italian plum tomato? It sent him into a state. Still, she refused to touch it. Now, she found herself contemplating their colour. They were just so perfectly red. And there were tables of them. Tables of plump, heavy tomatoes ready to explode into your mouth, sweet and tart at the same time. She moved on and found figs. The man told her the season was almost over, so she bought some. They too were plump and juicy and sweet. She ate three more before setting off. If she looked like a fool standing in the middle of a busy, working market stuffing figs into her mouth like a starving chipmunk, Isabelle didn't care. It all tasted too good.

To the right, two old men sat and played backgammon, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. On her left, an old woman stood beside her wares, mound after mound of different coloured spices. The mounds of paprika caught her attention. Like the tomatoes, they were red. Like blood. But a deeper colour. And the barrels ran along, so deep and rich in colour and smell, red deepening from red. Red. Like a summer's sunset reflecting off a stiller sea. Red. Like the shimmering shoes of a Technicolor Dorothy.

She couldn't control herself. She scribbled down the observations in a tone which seemed appropriate for a food critic.

She was swept up with the sensuality of the place. She bought a large bag of the Paprika even though she had no intention of cooking during her stay. It was just too beautiful not to have. She smelled the bag.

"Mmmmmm."

The woman at the stall laughed and gave her a bag of cinnamon. As she inhaled deeply the contents of the simple plastic bag, a large produce truck drove by and the air was scented with cinnamon and diesel dust. It was the city's perfume. She felt very poetic.

The men playing backgammon ignored her as she glanced over their shoulders and tried to remember the rules of the game. Everything was exciting and new. This was going to be some trip. She no longer felt the need to find Arthur. She could do this herself. It would be easy.

Her happiness carried her through the market and the long hot afternoon. After dining at a tolerable restaurant across the street from her hotel, her belly was full, but she didn't want to stop. She was still hungry. So she asked the concierge where the good clubs were. He pointed her in the direction of a large Disco done up to resemble an ancient ruin. Retro 80's music ripped through the otherwise calm seaside air. The cover charge was \$20 in American. She figured that this was not a place for locals, but once inside the garish temple of nostalgia, she saw dozens of Turks dancing and drinking. Apparently rich Turkish boys and girls felt the need to cut loose too. After a few drinks at the bar, she made her way to large, multi-tiered dance floor. It was designed so that no

matter where you looked there was a blouse to look down, or a crotch in your face. The purpose of the place was not subtle, and neither was she. She was drunk.

She swayed her hips to the music. Three men appeared beside her. The one with shoulder length hair caught her eye. His shirt was unbuttoned enough for her to see his broad chest. He smiled and moved closer. So she moved closer to him. She writhed against his body. She knew what he wanted and she wanted it too. This was her favourite way to spend a Saturday night, but in the weeks leading up to her new job and this trip, she hadn't the time to actually engage in her hobby. It was nice to have the chance once more. She grabbed his large arm.

"You're so strong!"

He flexed the muscle and winked.

"You smell like cinnamon too." Why she felt the need to bring food into this was beyond her. She was too drunk to contemplate the connection. She was too drunk to do much apart from kissing.

So they were kissing. Songs came and went, and they stood there, slithering into each other. Finally she pulled away from his lips long enough to ask, "You're not just trying to marry me and get a Visa, are you?"

He looked hurt. "My father owns half of Bursa."

The hurt disappeared quickly, as she pulled him back into the sphere of her French perfume.

Then they ended up back her hotel. He was lying beside her in bed. He was naked. They hadn't turned on any lights, but the lights and the smells made their way through the open window. The smell of diesel and spices and this tight, thrusting man

filled her. She could taste the cigarette on his tongue. She watched the muscles move beneath his tight skin, like desire trying to get out. Her senses were full. She felt alive.

The next morning as she opened her eyes, she saw him walking towards her carrying a tray of tea. "Good morning" he said. "I thought you might like some."

"Hmmm." As she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, she tried to remember why she thought it would be a good idea to move from the club to the hotel. She took a sip of tea, and as the sweet amber liquid streamed into her belly, she remembered. After sipping the cup in silence for a few moments, she asked, "What's your name?"

"Selim." He had a slight, soft, charming accent. He was sipping his tea too.

"You do this often."

"Drink tea? Of course."

"Not tea." She set down her glass. "Women. You often end up in a hotel room with a strange foreign woman?"

"Not as often as my friends."

"Really?" She raised her eyebrow.

He moved closer to her. "Many European woman on holiday are looking for a Turkish man."

"And you're the willing souvenir." She walked to him and pinched his cheek.

He blushed and looked into his tea.

"Are you trying to read the leaves?"

"Maybe." He poured the contents of his empty glass onto the saucer.

"And?"

He whistled. "I see you meeting a beautiful man. You will have amazing sex."

"Wow, that's amazing." She took his hand and led him back to bed.

4.

She left Selim in the lobby of the hotel. They kissed on the cheeks and went their separate ways: he to his BMW roadster, and she to tail Arthur. Fortunately, she found him across the street from the hotel. He was not more than a hundred yards away standing next to a small car. He was buying what looked to be razor blades from the skinniest man she had ever seen.

Trailing someone was fun. She darted around tomato stands, and hid behind fruit carts. When she ran after Arthur, she did so on tiptoes. The people looked at her as if she were mad, but then in a town where bus tours were not uncommon, they were accustomed to strange foreigners doing strange things. She had been following him for twenty minutes when he stopped suddenly and turned around.

"Why are you following me?"

"Me?"

"I can see you reflection in the store windows."

"Oh." She paused while she thought up her next line. "Autograph?"

"What?" It was his turn to be caught off guard.

"Can I have an autograph?" She fumbled through her pack and handed him a small notepad.

"Are you serious?" He had not let go of her arm.

"Of course. I love your articles."

Arthur looked into her eyes, as if such an action would tell him where he had seen her before.

“You look familiar. Who are you?”

“Just an American backpacking around the continent?” He said nothing. “I’m from Chicago,” she volunteered.

He let go and got a look at more than just her face. “What I’d like to know is what kind of backpacker does her walking in flimsy little sandals like that.”

“These are my spares. My... uh... boots are at the hotel - HOSTEL - they’re at the hostel.” She reminded herself not to sweat. It has the mark of the guilty. Under the hot midday sun, she felt as if she were in an interrogation room.

“You’re as much a backpacker as I am. Here.” He grabbed the pen and notepad and signed his name. “Still, you look familiar.”

“Most people say that. I guess it’s my face.”

“Right.” He stood there. She stood there. “Goodbye!”

“Oh, yeah, by. Thanks.” Isabelle walked away quickly. He didn’t follow. She darted down a busy commercial alley, full of shops selling t-shirts and fake Rolexes. She thought she’d wait there for a minute and then pick up Arthur’s trail. A shop owner on the street had other ideas.

“I have just what you want. Look.” He pointed into his shop.

“Oh, no thank you, I don’t really want to buy anything. I’m just waiting.”

“Yes, look, look.” He held out three different styles of watches.

“No.” But he kept showing her products. This is the worst hiding place in the history of hiding places, she thought to herself. She bought a watch just to shut up the man.

After counting off two minutes and thirty-five seconds on her newly purchased ‘gold’ *Rolax*, she wandered back towards the stall where she had met Arthur. He was gone. She checked the time, but the watch was not working. She smacked the metal object against her palm a few times in a rudimentary resuscitation manoeuvre, refusing to believe that it could have died already. It had. She considered tossing it into a pile of rotting peppers at the curb, but she didn’t. It looked pretty on her arm. Is it possible to combine fashion and food. Maybe that would be the direction she would take the magazine after she inherited it.

“Where would he eat?” She wondered it allowed. She was trying to focus, and found that speaking to herself was incentive to her easily embarrassed to sharpen its focus.

“A restaurant.” Sometimes good ideas took longer to boil to the surface.

“Restaurant.” A man immediately appeared at her shoulder. “You want? Come with me. Come.” This time he grabbed her arm and pulled. She would be bruised before the day was out.

“Cut it out.” She pulled away but decided that she was hungry, and she wasn’t going to find Arthur anyway and yesterday was a hungry waste of time and how bad could the guy’s restaurant actually be. So she went with him.

The restaurant was a simple affair. There was little in the way of decoration. But there were numerous people sitting and eating, so she decided not to run. A steam table

and a cash register rested at the front of the room. A doorway leading to a very noisy kitchen was at the back. A mirror hung from one wall. A speaker was mounted to the other. Turkish pop music was playing. She was beginning to recognize the different hits. The one playing as she entered the establishment was becoming one of her favourites. "Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm." She hummed along. The man who had brought her there disappeared through the doorway at the back so she looked through the glass protecting the steam table and pointed to a tray of something covered in cheese. The man behind the counter gave her a portion. She paid and went to a table near the rear. Then, she ate.

The cheese was smooth and warm in her mouth. The vegetables, whatever they were, crunched rewardingly in her mouth. It was good. It was really good. She continued to pile it in. When she was done, she returned to the table and ordered a stuffed pepper. The server also pointed to a salad, so she took it. She finished both in minutes. She was beginning to feel full. Her nerves were alive again. She could feel the hard plastic chair underneath her. She could smell pepper and then cigarettes again. Does everyone smoke here, she wondered and then answered herself by looking around the room. She was the only one not smoking apart from a man standing outside and peering through the window at the food. She looked at the man again and her stomach dropped. It wasn't the food. It was Arthur.

She sunk down in her chair and grabbed a Turkish paper from the table beside her. She made a paper tent and hid behind it.

Arthur entered and looked around. Not bad, he thought. Unpretentious, but clean and full of people. A good sign. He pointed to the NAR EKŞİLİ PATLICANLI KÖFTE. You didn't often find Eggplant with pomegranate sauce. He also ordered the

saffron pilaf, *SAFRANLI PILAF*. You could hardly go wrong there. The server happily plated the food and accepted Arthur's generous and unexpected tip.

Isabelle was too nervous to move. So she peered out from the paper from time to time and waited for Arthur to leave. He didn't. He was taking his time. Arthur was happy to be eating again. His stomach was on edge. The only thing he had put in it so far was the six or seven cups of tea. This was rewarding. It was hot, it was cooked, and it was good. He took out his notebook and wrote a few nice things about the place.

After ten minutes of her peek-a-boo game, Isabelle grew tired of waiting for the fastidious jerk to finish and leave. He was carefully cutting, and then examining, each piece of food before putting the morsel into his mouth. She considered making a move to the back door and trying to sneak out that way, but when she peeked out from behind the paper she noticed that Arthur was facing her. Any move and he would see her. She sat back in the chair and looked at the paper. Why are the pictures upside down, she wondered.

Arthur was taking a sip of water when noticed the table in the back. It caught his attention because whoever was there, was reading a newspaper upside down. Also, the pair of long tanned legs ending in flimsy little sandals stuck out. It was the girl again. He wondered if he should go back and confront her, or simply take his time and make her wait. He also wondered why she looked so familiar.

Arthur didn't know very many young women anymore. Those days had long since ended. Surely, he would be able to remember where he had seen this one. She claimed that she was from Illinois, but her accent would be far more comfortable in the Hamptons. He thought about the office. Perhaps she was slumming in the mailroom.

But why would then would she not just say so. Arthur knew he a reputation for being a hard taskmaster, but he wasn't so hated as that. Was he? He took another bite of the KÖFTE with pomegranate-tomato sauce. So who would not want to be seen. Could she be a bitter Chef wanting to knock him off because of some bad review. That didn't make sense either. He had been doused with water from a waiter's jug, received countless midnight death threats, had a skewer of marinated pork stabbed into his hand, and been slapped countless times. Those attackers had been comfortable in serving up the cold plate of revenge back in New York. Why would a chef travel all this way to attack him? Besides, he hadn't seen hatred in her eyes earlier that day. He knew what it looked like – you could see it – and it wasn't anywhere to be found in those green eyes.

If not a Chef, then who. He looked at the paper propped up on the table, and the legs sticking out from under it. They came to an exciting end in ten tiger-tail toenails. He recognized the print. That intern who had spent the summer on his floor had also painted her nails. He had never forgot the strange designs she chose to grace her toenails. Okay, he thought, she's an intern. Why is she following me? She wasn't working at his magazine any longer, so his editors weren't checking up on him. Perhaps, she is working for another paper. That seemed more logical. The competition had tried it before. He always caught them though. They might trail him on the street, but once in the restaurant, most found it impossible not to order the same food as him and then take notes while they sat there, metres away from Arthur. Food critics rarely made good private eyes. This one wasn't taking notes, not that he could see, but she was hiding.

He ran a piece of bread through the sauce and enjoyed the flavour. When he had savoured all that was there, he walked to her table and tapped on the paper. She didn't move.

"You have the paper upside down."

She put it down. "Oh, hello," She was now trying to hide behind a large smile.

"It's you again. What a coincidence."

"It is, isn't it."

She didn't know what to do next, so she looked at the broken watch on her wrist.

"Well," she said as she stood, "look at the time. I must be going." She grabbed her purse and tried to leave. He grabbed her arm.

"I know who you are?"

"Yes?" She was still smiling.

"You interned with us."

"Yes. That's right, I did. Ha, ha, ha." Playing dumb was harder than she could have imagined.

"Cut the crap." He sat down and pulled her with him. "Why are you following me?"

"But, I was here first."

She had a point. Still, he thought, this was too much of a coincidence. "Who are you working for?"

"Working?" He tugged her arm.

“I don’t have time for this. I’m on holidays. I don’t need people following me.

He stood to leave. “If you’re trying to steal my story, don’t. I really am on vacation and I want to enjoy myself. Just leave me alone.”

She watched him walk to the door. He had the door open when Isabelle thought of something to say. “Wait.”

He stopped.

“I’m not trying to steal your story. I just -” She would return to the office a hero, but rot in hell for this one. “- I just wanted to study under you.”

“What?” He had not moved.

“I work at *Maitre D’*, but you’re the best. I wanted to study with you.”

Arthur knew it was a load of crap, but the girl was interesting. He heard her out. “What about Maureen. You work with her, don’t you. She makes more money than me. She’s won just as many awards.”

“Oh. she hates me.” He figured that could be the truth. Maureen was very possessive. She had been the one to skewer his hand with the pork *souvlaki* when she saw him dining at the same restaurant she was reviewing. He hadn’t been tailing her, but that hadn’t seem to cool her temper, or the skewer of pork.

She continued, “They hate me because I’m the boss’s daughter.”

He hadn’t expected that revelation. Neither had she. Isabelle wondered what the hell had possessed her to admit her lineage to her competitor and the man she was supposed to follow. There was no way this was going to work.

“And you want me to introduce you to this country, even though you’re the daughter of the competitor’s magazine? Sorry.” He turned to leave.

“We chose the same restaurant.” She didn’t know where it came from, she had long since stopped thinking straight, but the words had come out of *her* mouth. He wasn’t moving. “That has to count for something, doesn’t it? Ending up in the same restaurant.”

“It could be a coincidence.”

“We’re blocks from the market. It could be fate.”

She spoke the right words. Arthur believed in fate. His life seemed to be run by it. There was no reason he should end up as The Food Critic. His career was one a shining example of the intangible substance of fate. Chance encounters sometimes provided good futures.

“Fate, huh.” He stepped back into the room and let the door swing shut.

“It could be.”

He returned to the table and they talked. An hour later, when their jaws were sore from the talking and the food, they had reached an agreement. She could hang around with him, but she was to only eat where he ate, and not to venture out on her own. She was thrilled because she had managed to swing it so that she would he would willingly introduce her to the right restaurants and the right food. He was pleased because it meant that he could keep her from *Havuzlu*. Also, it turned out that the girl was great. She was witty, clever, she loved food, and she had bizarre painted toenails. She was intriguing. For the first time in twenty some years, he found himself more interested in the conversation he was having over tea, than with the tea itself. This would work out alright.

5.

They met the next morning in her hotel's restaurant.

"First rule, avoid the hotel."

She looked around. The room was beautifully decorated, the food smelled divine.

"What? It's no good here?"

"Of course it's good here. They employ a world-class chef." He rolled his eyes.

A waiter appeared. Arthur ordered them tea.

"But the reader will find this place on their own."

"What if they're staying at another hotel."

"It doesn't matter. The readers are swine. They're fat, lazy and scared. Even if they read your piece with the best of intentions and actually go looking for your suggested restaurants for one or two meals, they'll get tired, or scared or be too busy being bussed from one ruin to another to bother looking for anymore. They'll give up. They'll eat at one hotel restaurant after another, unless the concierge informs them that's there's belly dancing to be had at the dive down the road. Then, they'll go to that one."

"What a nice cheery outlook on life. What a way to start the day.

He smiled as he took a sip of his sweet hot tea. "Besides..." He took another sip.

"Besides?"

"They don't buy it because they want to improve their tastes. They buy it because they want to *appear* to have improved their tastes. Don't confuse the two. How many people do you think actually make the recipes we include in the sidebars. It isn't more

than five percent. How many people do you know who own Viking ranges, or the best Japanese knives but can't manage to boil rice."

"Hey, making good rice is hard."

"Uh-huh... I don't want to be a cynic, but it's true. I've seen the studies. We're selling an image here. That's why I can be so mean in my reviews. The people want a tough critic. They want someone to act like a snob for them. That way, they can go to the starred restaurant and feel like they belong to some exclusive stratosphere of good taste."

She had stopped taking notes. "Oh."

"Oh." He was enjoying this. He liked his voice. Lecturing people made you feel good about yourself. Besides, she was smart and an eager learner. And she smelled good. "Drink your tea. Once you're back home, it's impossible to find tea like this. You'll miss it."

She took a sip from the tulip shaped glass. The tea was strong and sweet. "It's good."

"Not as good as what you'll find on the street. These chumps here serve too many tourists who want coffee to keep it really fresh. Out there, the street vendors are serving it constantly. It's always fresh." He wiped his mouth with a napkin and then tossed it on the fine porcelain plate. "So. There's your first lesson." He stood. "Avoid the hotels."

They left the hotel and wandered the city. If Arthur saw something that looked good, they would stop for a bite. They spent the afternoon that way, walking and eating. Arthur wasn't nearly as scary as Isabelle had feared. Instead, she found him eccentric in

the way that a person might be if they spend their waking life talking about, thinking about, eating, and then digesting, food. He was her peculiar, funny and utterly cuddly uncle. He wore a jacket no matter what the heat. He wore the same suit everyday. He lived out of one single, large briefcase. He bragged of the Spartan contents within: two pairs each of underwear; socks – all black, all silk; drip-dry slacks; and two collared shirts. He also carried a cotton handkerchief, but as it always travelled in his coat pocket, he didn't feel it should count as luggage. He was cute.

Arthur couldn't get over how good she smelt. What was happening here, he wondered again and again. He hadn't noticed a woman's perfume in years. In the last couple of decades, if he noticed a woman's perfume, it was simply because some old cow at the opera had put too much on. This was different. He liked being with her. He liked walking and talking with her. He liked eating food with her. And she loved food too. He watched her nibble on the *Borek*. A tiny crumb stuck to her upper lip. He pointed it out and she thanked him for the observation. Later, as they were taking sips of *Ayran*, she looked at him, laughed, then leaned towards him. His stomach leapt. She wiped some of the yoghurt drink from his chin. The drink was good to calm upset stomachs, but it did nothing to dislodge his, which was stuck in his throat. It stayed there the entire afternoon.

She had no fear with food. He offered her a stuffed fig, and she put it in her mouth. It was in her belly before she even asked what it was. Okay, so it wasn't like he was asking her to sample the cuisine of the Mongols on the upper Asian plateau. But then this obliviousness to reality, to the outside world, was part and parcel of what ailed him. Near the end of the second day, as he watched Isabelle concentrating on the Kebab she

was shovelling between her red painted lips, Arthur hoped that she would accept his invitations for dinner when they were back in New York. He often had dinner parties. Isabelle and her youthfulness, he felt, would make an ideal addition to his circle. By the third day though, his stomach was still lodged somewhere in the back of his throat, and he realized that he did not want her at the dinner parties as a clever young associate. He didn't want to be just her friend. He hungered for more.

He met her for breakfast that third morning at her hotel. They ate bread, slices of tomatoes and crisp cucumbers, and yoghurt with honey. Isabelle was doing all the talking.

"It is so ridiculous that New York, that America, for Christ's sake-" She waved a slice of tomato menacingly. "Cannot produce a designer with a vision all his own. I mean, what's up with that?" She kept going, but the words never made it past Arthur's outer ear. He was too busy watching her lips open and close. Those lips. The way they closed around a slice of cucumber. The way she would put a spoon of her yoghurt and put it in her mouth and then moan with pleasure. Lordy. She took a bite of a tomato which was so fresh and ripe that its juices squirted into the hungry air, and Isabelle had no choice but to take the entire slab of bright red fruit into her mouth all at once, lest she make even more of a mess. He looked at the fruit on his own plate. He marvelled at how the red fruit – so adept at masquerading as a vegetable - lay there, naked, in brightly coloured slices, one on top of the other, all burning colour against the sharp, pure whiteness of the plate. He picked up one and put it between his lips. He sucked in the seeds and the juice. He shifted in his seat and realized that he had an erection.

When was the last time he had been like this? He couldn't really remember. He knew that he was approaching his twentieth year of celibacy, and could only guess that he had not been conscious of this state for almost fifteen years. He remembered the first few years after the choice for solitude brought the occasional longing and the accompanying rigidity. But that was so long ago. How many salads had he himself prepared without this result. He had had worked in the same office as her for months. How come he had been fine then. How come he was feeling this now. Here? How many other beautiful men and women had sucked on tomatoes before his hungry gaze without this reaction? He let the fruit linger in his mouth and closed his eyes. A soft low moan escaped his lips. It wasn't so soft.

Arthur opened his eyes. Isabelle was looking at him with an expression of bemusement and concern.

"Turkey has the best tomatoes, don't you think." He wiped the juice from his chin.

The concerned expression disappeared. "They do, don't they." She took another bite of the sweet, tart fruit. "They're really, really good."

Isabelle spent the rest of the day thinking about food. Arthur worried about his penis. They sat then walked, then sat and ate, all the while oblivious of what the other was thinking.

At the end of the day, Isabelle met Selim and they went to bed. Arthur went to his bed and stared at the ceiling. He thought of Isabelle eating a tomato. He couldn't fall asleep. His room was stuffy and hot. He finally drifted off as the sun rose and the cock crowed his morning matins.

6.

The tall, burnt, midday sun snuck through the cracks of the ancient stones. They had been piled one atop of the other. Independently, they were just cracked, dusty grey blocks of stone. Together they were a Grecian arc, old and pocked marked, but magnificent nonetheless. Time took away much from the structure, but its true, original nature was still apparent. It interest Arthur at all. He had seen ruins of Ephesus before. He had rented the car for Isabelle. He wanted to take her on a picnic to the ancient theatre at the sight. She agreed and was excited to see the place Arthur had told her so much about. It was she who held his interest. It was she who lay not a few feet from his food, from his body.

Bunt sat on a red and black woollen blanket and looked towards the sky. The sun, at its peak was more white than yellow. The sky was blue, narrowing to powder yellow, then ultimate white as it stopped being the sky and became the sun. It may have been November, but in the Southern Aegean the hanging, lingering, burning ball of fire could still remind you it was there. At this time of year, it had almost burnt itself out, but like any fire, you felt its bite the most just before it died. Bunt was hot, but still he did not undo his tie. Propriety still held sway. So he pretended not to notice the sweat beading at the back of his neck, the moisture stuck to his spine, trapped with nowhere else to go. His jacket, usually on his back, lay beside him on the blanket. He had also allowed himself the pleasure of rolling up his sleeves two turns, so that the beginnings of his forearms were exposed to the rays of the sun burning overhead. Those were his concessions to the heat. Isabelle was lying a few feet away, beside a tin of biscuits.

“This is great.” She was looking around her at the dusty stone expanse. She did not notice Arthur sweating and looking her way.

He took a drink of the Perrier, and felt drops of water, the condensation, fall from the bottle and onto his steamed cleaned and now steamier shirt. Ordinarily, such a mess would have bothered him, but today, beneath the sun and in the hot Mediterranean wind which whipped its way through the ancient, the dusty ruins of Ephesus, it seemed a trifling situation to concern himself with.

“Arthur, you’re dribbling.” Isabelle reached over and dabbed his wet shirt with a napkin. He didn’t move. “You’re becoming an old man.”

“Not that old,” he said and smacked her behind as she leaned over to grab another napkin.

“Hey,” she said, laughing. She threw a towelette at him and returned her attention to the contents of her backpack. This trip was just what she needed. Arthur was nice. He really was just some sophisticated uncle. An uncle whose insights she would steal for her own. She could have felt guilty about such thievery. She considered morality the night before, as she lay in bed listening to the deep breaths of Selim beside her. She considered how these dilemmas are the sort that consume average people. But she wasn’t average. She never had been. And in her industry, scooping one another was part of the game. Still, she thought fondly of Arthur, and considered that maybe she would thank him in the notes of her article. He deserved that much. He was such a nice guy.

Arthur watched how her thighs shifted beneath her tight thin dress. He couldn’t stop sweating.

He picked up a jar of pickled eggplant and tried to focus his attentions on the spicy dishes which lay in wait. He put it down and began to fiddle with a jar of olives. He looked down towards the stage of the ancient theatre. At the base of the seating, tourists mulled about. One busload of travelers after another were lead into the area by a loud, friendly tour guide. The city had built a large wall around the base of the theatre to keep the spectators safe from the wild animals imported for the gladiator fights. Now, only tourists in mismatched socks prowled the dusty stone floor. The rubes took pictures, pointed, and moved on to the next part of the tour, probably the library, or the brothel. They always seemed to love that, Arthur considered contemptuously. All those polite grandmothers from Iowa who would send redneck neo-hillbilly fascists to Washington to sign laws preventing the sale of wine to minors, put alderman in office on the promise of getting rid of some decrepit peep show on some run-down and broken Elm Street, would then stand and giggle while the nice Turkish guide alluded to the nature of the ruins in which they stood. How shocking, to be surrounded by the same four walls which once enclosed actual whores. Oh how shocking, two thousand years ago, people had sex right here. But for every group of yokels looking at the whorehouse there seemed to be three more standing at the base of the theatre: pointing, yelling and interrupting his very nice trip with the pretty young thing lounging beside him.

“See those people over there.” He pointed towards the brothel.

“Yes.”

“They’re standing in a brothel.”

“Really?” She turned her face down, so that she was looking out from under her teasing, pointed eyebrows.

“Oh yes. Prostitution was quite common back then.”

“Isn’t this where Paul came to preach?”

“Yes, but I think he left. He must have had his share of the place.”

“You better watch out, Arthur, you wouldn’t want to be corrupted.” She took a bite of a red pepper. To Arthur, the action seemed more than just suggestive, it seemed an invitation.

Arthur, found it amusing that Isabelle thought of him in an asexual way. For a moment he wondered if he should tell her of his adventures through Europe back before she had been born, but decided against it. She was enjoying herself. Despite the suggestive food play, he realised that it had been a long time since he had thought of women in this light. Perhaps he was imagining things. He wasn’t imagining the low cut of her light summer dress, so he turned his focus downwards, and played with his food a little, glancing up occasionally, to watch a bird circling high overhead, between the sun and the hungry mulling crowds below.

When he came up with the picnic idea, his intention had been to escape the hungry tourist masses he wrote for. He didn’t want to think of them. He already felt guilty enough about his plans not to write about *Havuzlu*. Poor Mustafa. He would never enjoy the fame he deserved. But Arthur would still be able to have his quiet corner table. A fair trade. Arthur knew he was a jerk, but he refused to share his paradise with the people below him, gawking childishly as a foreign culture. They consumed, enjoyed it for the moment and then, poof – *carpe diem* – they moved on, before boredom had set in, before the place became stale, or not quite *It*. They didn’t know what appreciation meant. They were automatons, but worse. You couldn’t turn them off. And that’s why

Arthur hated them. He threw a pickle towards them. It hit the ground a few rows down from its hurler, not even halfway to the stage.

“What was that?” Isabelle was looking at him. She wasn’t smiling. She looked concerned.

“I hate them.”

“You don’t even know them.”

“We write for them. Of course I know them. And I hate them.”

“Where is this coming from?”

“You know that I have been coming here for almost twenty years.”

“I guess so.”

“When I first came here, there was no admission. The only people here were archaeologists and local families having lunch – like us.” He swooped his arms like a conductor.

“So?”

“Look at them.” He pointed down at them below, small little creatures scurrying about the rocks. “They’re ants. They’re not here because they actually love it. They’re here because a tour operator in Des Moines or Cardiff convinced them that Turkey is the land of adventure and cheap knock-off wrist watches.”

“So what, you should have to take a test before your allowed a visa into the country. ‘I’m sorry sir, your interest in this country is superficial. We can’t let you in.’ Is that what you want?”

He didn’t like her mocking him. She didn’t understand. “No. But,”

“You know what your problem is Arthur, you’re a snob. You’ve been criticizing for a living for too long, and you don’t know when to stop.”

“No, I just don’t-”

“How come they can’t enjoy themselves too. Even if that way is different than your own.”

He didn’t answer right away. He watched an overweight woman touch the stage. A man was taking her picture. “Because they’re destroying it. It’s not the same as when I first got here. You know, the first time I came here, not even Istanbul had a McDonald’s. Now we need drive a half an hour from here to enjoy a McSodium burger.”

“So? Everything changes. The apartment where I was born was torn down years ago and replaced by a condo complex. I’m not upset. It’s the way of the world.

He wanted to tell her that it wasn’t always that way. That change doesn’t have to be so relentless if we don’t want it to. But for the first time since he had met her, he was aware of the years which separated them. How could he explain loss to someone who didn’t care about her home’s destruction. How could he explain that not everyone thought the same way she did. That perhaps the tourists below were not so harmless. He wanted to talk to her about this, but didn’t. “Here, try this,” is how he ended the conversation.

“Mmm. What is that.”

“A special type of Baklava.”

“Wow, do you have anymore?”

He gave it to her and then lay on his back. Under the hot sun, amidst an ancient ruin of broken stones he felt insignificant and old. There would never be a stop to those

who circled down below. They would come with or without him, and they would make the city safer, and more comfortable and digestible to their palates. He wouldn't be able to stop the English pubs and German Beer halls. They had already established beachheads all along the tourist resorts of the Aegean and Mediterranean. Drive half an hour from his favourite coastal town and he could enjoy a full English breakfast anytime of the day.

Isabelle hummed to herself as she wrote in her metal-ringed scribbler. Arthur rolled his head and watched her. She made him forget the groups beneath him, down by the stage. He watched the way her nose twitched as she wrote in her notebook. She was enough for him. It hadn't been for years, but right then, between the sky and the sea a few miles off, her waist, moving beneath the flowery summer dress as she sneezed, seemed solid to grab onto. He felt an overwhelming need for safety. He needed to grab on for dear life.

They spent the afternoon wandering the ruins with the masses. It disturbed Arthur to think that to anyone sitting where they had lunched earlier, Isabelle and himself would just be a part of the crowd. He would be worrying about this, and then she would take a picture of a random stone pillar and he would forget the people around him. She became a pillar for him. And she didn't even notice.

In the car on the ride back to town, Isabelle couldn't shut up. She hadn't had a vacation for years, and missed the reviving pace of a good wander. She had enjoyed mingling with the tourists, smelling their different aftershaves and perfumes, listening to their accents, trying to guess where they came from. If she could place the accent –

Montana, Kansas, Eastend – she would then try to figure out how they came to be in the ruins. She would guess at graduation presents, retirement rewards, romantic trysts with older bosses. She loved seeing all these different people in such a theatre. It was especially good that the theatre was so old and dead. They brought life back to it. She told all of this to Arthur in the car, as the trees rushed past their open windows. Coming from her mouth, he was almost convinced. He smiled and let the wind blow through his hair.

Arthur's outburst over lunch *had* concerned Isabelle. That was why she talked so much. She wanted to keep him distracted. She didn't need such bitterness in her life, even if this part of her life would be over in just a day. Really, she couldn't see his position. It was childish. So she talked and he listened. He had hardly spoken since lunch. But he wasn't spewing his acrid words, and so she was happy. Actually, Arthur was happy too.

"How strange it must be to grow up beside a ruin," Isabelle was saying. She was yelling hard to be heard over the wind. Her throat was growing sore. "The oldest thing in my neighbourhood was an abandoned warehouse and that was maybe a hundred years old. I went to school with this girl from Montana who came from a town that was founded at the turn of the century. That's young. But here everything's so old. Look over there: more ruins. It isn't even marked. God, they're just sitting in that farmer's field. He's growing tomatoes around them. How bizarre." She stopped the barrage and took a drink of water.

In the time it took to slug back a mouthful, she noticed another roadside stand.

"Arthur."

He said nothing, but looked straight ahead, having been lulled into comfortable silence.

“Arthur.” She tapped his shoulder.

“Hmm.”

“What are they selling.”

His eyes followed her pointed arm towards the stand at the side.

“Honey.”

“The jars are all different colours.”

“Honey is serious business. I’ll show you.”

At the next stand, he eased the car onto the road’s shoulder. Isabelle followed him to the farmer sitting under a tree. He let Arthur do the talking. In short, stilted sentences Arthur spoke to the old, moustachioed farmer. The man led them to the jars. He picked one up and spoke. Arthur translated.

“This one comes from bees who live in Cyprus stands. This one is buckwheat. This one is the most expensive. He won’t tell me where the bees come from, but he says they only visit a specific flower.”

Arthur took a jar of the expensive stuff and another jar of dark red honey.

He paid the man, and then led Isabelle back to the car. “We can put this on the bread left over from lunch. They took the bread to a stand of trees and sat down. They didn’t have a proper spoon, and the honey dribbled over the jar and their hands.

“This is excellent. Thank you for stopping.”

“You’re welcome.” As Arthur responded he tilted his bread and the honey dripped onto the thigh of his pants. “Shit.”

Isabelle laughed and pointed. He dabbed at the spilt honey, but only managed to spread it around. He was ruining his favourite pair of pants. Now he would only have the one pair to wear. Shit.

Isabelle kept laughing.

“What?” He threw down the rag and glared at her. Her eyes were moist. Her breath was warm.

“Your face.” She pointed at him, taunting him, but doing so upset her balance and she dropped her piece of bread. It landed, honey side down in the v-neck of her dress. She stopped laughing and Arthur began. She pulled the bread from her chest, but a thick layer of honey covered her breasts.

Arthur stopped laughing and looked at the tanned breasts now glistening with honey. “You seem to have got into a sticky situation there.”

“Very clever.” She dabbed at the sticky stuff with a napkin they had brought for the picnic.

“I could help you get that off.” He knew it was inappropriate, but there was nothing like honey on a woman’s breasts to make a man forget about propriety.

“I’m sure you could.” She looked up from the stain. Arthur’s eyes were stuck to her chest. He was scarcely breathing. She didn’t like the direction this was going.

“Arthur, you’re staring.”

“It looks tasty.”

Shit. It had happened again. Without warning a nice aging man had managed to transform himself into a wicked lecher. How could the sight of spilt honey do such a thing. Had she swooned when his lap was covered. No. Then why her? Who was this

guy? She wanted the nicely tailored man to return. Unfortunately, Isabelle notice, Arthur had left his jacket in the car.

“I’m glad you don’t work at my magazine any longer.”

“Why?” Don’t say it. Don’t say it. She repeated the naïve, futile mantra.

“No one would get any work done with you around.”

She tried to diffuse the situation. “Hah. My coworkers hate me.”

“See, you should come and work with me.”

“I don’t think that my father would like that very much.”

“Whose life is it, your father’s or your own.”

“Arthur.”

“Yes?”

“You’re still staring.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He looked into the darkness gathered between the trees. There was nothing there, so he planted images of Isabelle covered in honey and bees circling their fertile goddess who continued to modestly dab at her breast.

“Perhaps we should change the subject.”

“Sure.” But neither said a word. She couldn’t think of how to regain control of this. Arthur couldn’t care about control. His mind had become a temple for this newly discovered modern Artemis.

Neither spoke for the remainder of the forest break. Arthur returned to dabbing at his own crotch and Isabelle had stopped trying to clean herself. She would wait until the hotel.

Back in the car, Arthur tried to think up excuses to be around Isabelle. He didn't want to drop her off. He didn't want to go back to his hotel. He was alive for the first time in so long, and she was the reason. He wanted to be with her. Her perfume lingered in the small car's interior. He came up with the ludicrous proposition that she must come with him to a Belly Dance performance that evening.

"Belly Dancing?"

"Yes, I know it's boorish, but your readers will expect it."

"My readers. What kind of magazine do you think I work for."

"You'd be surprised."

"No more cynicism."

He had parked the car in front of the hotel. She had her hand on the door handle.

"Are you sure?"

"Come on, it'll be fun."

She thought about it. It was a bad idea. He needed to cool off. She needed to shower. But, she hadn't yet seen the dance, and it was true, the readers would expect it. Against her instincts and better judgement, she decided that if she changed into something very modest and then kept talking, she would be alright.

"Fine." The tone was hardly a ringing endorsement, but Arthur missed the clue.

"Great."

For Arthur, things were looking up. Except that he was looking down, at the line of thigh which peeked out from under her skirt.

As she walked down the hallway to her room, she considered going back to the car – where Arthur was waiting - to cancel the plan, but decided against it. She needed the time it would take to change to think of what to say. Despite his newfound creepiness, he had been very good to her, and she had a hard time thinking of him as anything more than a nuisance. She would change, and then go and tell him the bad news. She would just flat out explain to him that his role in her life was nothing more than a quirky uncle.

Arthur parked the car in the hotel's lot and then made his way to Isabelle's room. He needed to talk to her. He skipped through the halls. He felt alive. He was in love. He knew it. It had been a long time, but he recognized the feeling. He remembered Nicole before they had soured. He felt the same now. In Isabelle he saw everything. He knew that food had been a replacement. It was love he was after. He had wasted years furthering his career, but what a waste. In his life, his belly was full, but not his soul. It was as undernourished and bloated as the belly of a poor Ethiopian child starving on the six o'clock news. His soul. That was what mattered. He needed nourishment. She could do that for him. She would be his manna. His Artemis would offer bites of the soulful food he needed.

He reached her door and knocked. He could hear her fumbling with the chain. He fiddled with the words he planned to say. The door opened.

"Arthur. I thought you were in the car."

"Isabelle, I love you."

Shit, she thought. Here it was. No easy way out this time. The guy had no clue. Worst of all, she had no power here. There was nothing she could do to end this situation. She had no choice but to let it play out. Her power, her money and upbringing were useless. She was powerless. So she tried humour. "It's nice to see you too Arthur."

"I'm serious." He pushed past her into the room.

"Hold on." She wanted to keep trouble out. Now it had made its way into her room. "I didn't invite you in Arthur."

He wasn't listening. "Now please listen to me. I have something to say. I've been thinking about how to say this for some time now." He paced the room as he spoke. Isabelle still stood beside the open door. She hoped that he would take the hint and leave.

"Arthur, I can't go to dinner. I don't feel well."

"I know this will be strange, coming from me. I think it's strange. I haven't felt like this in a long time." There was nothing she could do. He was so worked up that she could have left the room and he wouldn't have noticed. But she didn't leave. She waited for him to finish.

"I've been doing this for a long time, and in all that time I never once met anyone who could take me away from the job. Then I met you." He looked at her. He was going to cry. Isabelle looked away. This was going too far.

"Arthur please," she still wasn't looking at him. "You're being silly."

"No," he smacked his thighs with his hands. "Not silly. You're all I can think about. Room service could arrive with a plate of the sweetest baklava, and I wouldn't care. Do you realize how odd that is."

“Arthur, I want you to leave.”

He walked towards her. “I love you.”

“I know.”

“Really?” His heart leaped into his throat. He could feel the blood pumping through his veins. He was pins and needles. “You know?”

“Yes.”

“This is marvellous. This is-“

“Arthur, please.” She cut him off. “You aren’t listening.” He stopped moving and looked at her. “Arthur, I don’t love you. You’re as old as my father. You’re a mentor, not a lover.”

“But, Isabelle.” He had heard her, but he hadn’t heard her. He knew what she was saying. He wasn’t stupid. But he didn’t want it to be true. So he tried to reason with her. He wanted to convince her that this marvellous feeling which had been vacant from his life for so long was delightful, was delightful, was de-lovely. He held back song, but he could not hold back his love. It had to be shared. “If you would only let me share this love, you would be so happy.” He was smiling. His eyes felt full. He wanted to cry.

Isabelle could see it. She needed him gone. Immediately. “I’m here to steal your story.”

He laughed. “So. Take it. I don’t care.”

“I promise you, I’ll give you credit but I have to because it will make my career. You’ll be helping me -” Now it was her turn not to listen. She was so determined to finish her confession with the style it deserved that it took a moment for his words to register. “What?”

"I don't care." He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Take it."

The fool. She was stealing everything and all he could do was smile.

"I love you." It was the smile which made her angry. She wanted him to realize that she had been scooped.

"No you don't, Arthur."

"I do."

"But Arthur," she turned his face towards upwards to hers. "I don't love you. Not in that way."

"But you could. I know you could."

"No, Arthur, I couldn't. I only want your story. I want your job. Not you."

"Take them." He smiled again. "I used to think that I couldn't love anyone else again, but I was wrong. You'll see. Trust me. You'll be so happy." He could feel his heart thumping in his ribcage. He could feel the blood rushing through the veins, the molecules of air as they flew into his lungs, the synapses of his brain as they popped and sparkled like a diamond under a full moon. Like this diamond named Isabelle before him.

He turned from her and walked to the nightstand. He grabbed a pen and some paper and scratched out a few words. "Take this. I want to give this to you." He would offer the only gem he knew. She wouldn't take it.

"Arthur, aren't you listening? I thought you'd understand. I will never love you."

"You will. Please just take it." He pressed the paper into her hand.

"You should go."

"I'll be waiting for you. You know that."

“Go, Arthur.”

And he went. It surprised Arthur that he did. In the room beside her, he felt so alive. But he wanted to obey her. He wanted to do everything he could for her. So he went. For the first time in a long time, he wasn't hungry. He felt satisfied. He had love. That was the tricky part. Now all that had to happen was for her to reciprocate. But he was a patient man. He would wait. He knew she would come around. He smiled all the way to the car. Life was beautiful. Everything would work out just fine.

When Arthur had left, Isabelle looked at the paper he had given to her. On it, he had scribbled, *Havuzlu* and there was an address beside it. She recognized the address, but couldn't place the name. She didn't know what to do. She was not at all happy with the way the situation had turned out. He hadn't understood a thing. Or he hadn't cared. Either way he was still there. He may have been outside and down the hall, but he was still *there* and she was still not free of him. She didn't know what to do, but she knew that she didn't want to stay there. Her bags were already packed for the next morning's long trip home, so she went to the front desk and convinced the manager that she needed another room for that night. She didn't want to underestimate Arthur's instability. The manager agreed and she moved into the new room.

After the lugging her bags to the porter, she was hungry and so she went out to the city. She found herself on the street of Arthur's *Havuzlu*. She went in. It was a humble eatery and she wondered why Arthur had said he was 'giving' it to her. An hour later, she understood. The food was indescribable. It was good beyond measure. She felt relaxed. Her belly was full; her mind was alive. The atmosphere was so calming, she felt as if she were sitting in a rock garden, or the courtyard in a monastery. Arthur had given

her a perfect meal. Surely, he knew that she would write about it. Perhaps he understood that she was going to scoop him. Perhaps she had just given up. He had offered her this place, and this place was going to be a cover story. Maybe he didn't want to leave her with a bad taste in her mouth. She tried not to think too much about his motives. She didn't want to deal with the horrible possibility that he had not given up. So she returned to her hotel room and wrote the article.

It was a winner. She was a winner. She knew it. Isabelle Dupont would return to New York victorious. The magazine would publish her writing as a cover story – there was no question of that now - and everyone in the industry would know that she had scooped the notorious Arthur Bunt. Her career was made. Success was now all but guaranteed. People would flock to *Havuzlu* all because of her. Everything was going to be great.

As Isabelle ate and then wrote her article, Arthur spent the night sitting on his bed. He imagined Isabelle eating in his favourite restaurant. He knew she would enjoy it. It made him happy to think of her enjoying herself. The desire to make others happy: that is what love is. He imagined her breaking into the roasted peppers and the steam rising up to engulf her pretty face, cleansing her, purifying her. He knew that she was capable of fully appreciating the way that the spicy meat mingled with the full-bodied wines Ekrem served. She would appreciate it and then she would understand that they were the same. She would love him back. He fell asleep happy and awoke to the rising sun and the cars racing under his window. She was in one of those vehicles on her way back to the airport in Istanbul. She would be thinking of him, the way he thought of her. How could she not? He had shared *Havuzlu* with her. He could hardly wait to get back

to the city. He would return to New York and they could be together. She would understand. He rolled onto his side and stared at the wall. His stomach was calm. There was no call for food. He wasn't hungry. He thought of Isabelle's full red lips sucking on a bright red tomato. That was all the sustenance he would need. Cherry-tomato lips. The thought made him happy. Everything made him happy. Everything was going to be great. He was in love and soon he would return to his lover.

The Ghost Writer

1.

Everyone has a purpose in life. Even if they're dead. Tolstoy had one in his novels dealing with the nature of history and fate, Frieda Kahlo had one with her eerie workings of the trapped woman, the nice old Korean woman down the street's got one with her tiny little orange candies she gives to the neighbourhood children. How do I know that this is her life's great mission? I don't. I'm guessing. But I do see her giving away the candies every afternoon and that has to count for something. I also believe, that the greats begat greatness by sticking to their purpose, by not giving up, by rushing madly towards their calling, ignoring the naysayers and tilting headlong towards beautiful airy windmills. Look at the previous examples. Two of the three are dead, but they wrote and painted and did it. They had a purpose. I also have a purpose. I am one of those people. My confession: my name is Stephen and I am a writer.

When I was a little boy, I was a compulsive reader. I would read any book I could get my hands on. When there were no books to read – such as at the breakfast table – I would read the cereal box. When I had finished reading the English side, I would sound out the French words. This is one of the benefits of growing up in Canada – cultural superiority by breakfast, or your money back. Language. I love how words float on paper like Cheerios on milk. As soon as I was old enough to realize that those books I loved to read were written by someone, I decided that I wanted to be one of the people who wrote them. So I went to university to study writing.

After four years in Flin Flon, Saskatchewan, at the illustrious Community College for the Betterment of Loggers and Miners (CoCoBeLM for short) I had my degree. What an honour. However, having been removed from the horrors of retail employment for those four years— I paid for tuition using an inheritance from my grandfather – I was perhaps even less suited to the grind of day-to-day employment. So I enrolled in the grad program at the University of Windsor and promised myself that by the time I graduated two years later, I would have completed my first *great* work. I want to clarify this. I had completed novels before. They just weren't any good. I can say this now. I have grown. I suppose that I suspected it then, but it wasn't until my second year, when I was living in an un-insulated room above *The Goadling Panda* Chinese restaurant on Wyandotte that I realised it was my kidney stone. Incidentally, the kidney stone phenomenon was my first great theory. In my second year, after a bottle of wine and some pharmaceutical support donated by my friend Angus, another writing student, I came to the realization that all writers have that one first bad novel in them. The trick was to pass the kidney stone early, quickly, and then get on with it. That first novel completed in the summer before my first year was that stone, it was gone, and I would be free to write great works. That was the plan, but a few months later, at the end of my second year, I had finished another book, and I knew instinctively that it too was a jagged pebble. The final two years saw two more awkward works, each one as flawed and forgettable as its predecessor. But I wasn't worried. I knew that time would mature my sensibilities and abilities – like a fine wine – and that by the end of my Master's programme my work would stand beside Melville and Miller on some barren and dusty library shelf. Until then I would hone my skills in the workshops of the Automotive University I had come to call home.

The first year of the programme had passed without incident. I had completed a collection of linked short stories set in a small Ontario town in the late 19th century. It was poetic, it was long, and it was boring. The night I hit the final key on my computer, saving the work for the final time, I was glad to be done with it, and filled with a warm religious feeling that I had finally passed that awful kidney stone and was prepared to ascend the steps of greatness. Simultaneously, I swore off poetic writings and decided to write cleanly, deliberately, and forcefully. I called on my nice looking peach of a girlfriend who I had met at a keg party a few years earlier (she liked the idea of dating a writer – a trait that is, sadly, so rare in Windsor) and we had been dating ever since. So, I went to her house to tell her the good news. I had passed the stone and was ready for some real action. She was happy for me, and we fucked. The week before, still in my poetic, romantic phase, we would have *made love*, but having embraced the cold spare style of The Truth, we fucked. She was not a fan of this new kitchen sink realism and we broke up a few days later. Go figure.

That night, lying in bed, looking up, imagining the heavens above, hidden for the moment, by my yellowed ceiling, I began to imagine reviews for the work I would write and submit for my Final Project, the final necessary ingredient for the title of Master. I imagined the reviews. I imagined the interviews: I debated whether or not I should appear as the bright young talent, dressed in the latest fashions, or appear world weary, cynical and clad in crumpled clothes reeking of gin. I decided to aim for fashionable and clever and then evolve into scotch-soused and soured middle-age. I fell asleep content with my genius. The stone had been passed. Glory Awaited.

Fall fell into cold, weary winter. The snow melted and slush stuck to the sides of my old tattered boots. Through it all I sat at my computer and wrote. What more is there to say about writing. You sit there and type. Then you stop, think about it, make corrections and then type some more. Ironically, one cannot be anymore descriptive and literate about the process. We can wax lyrical about grave diggers, but the excitement of the artist's process, this alchemy of words, remains elusive and, finally, not terribly exciting. What kind of writer would I be if I bored you to violence? A Polish short story writer? Ha, ha. No, I jest. What kind of artist would I be if I mocked the hard fought brilliance of others. I resent no artist. Not even slam poets. They're so cute. Anyway, I typed a lot, seasons changed, and before I knew it, summer had arrived with its baroque fruits, blooming flowers and feverish heat.

I was lying on the couch. I had spent the previous afternoon under the sweltering summer sun drinking beer, and was left strung out, like a piece of laundry hung out to dry. It was a rough day. To further my physical ills, Martha Stewart had been pre-empted by parade coverage. It was the Fourth of July. It was hot, sticky, and I was not amused. How could a civilized individual be expected to get through the day without the propriety and guidance Martha and her napkin arranging provided? He cannot. Thank you, my point exactly. I couldn't be bothered to change the channel, so I sat there wallowing in my warm fuzzy, yet immediately forgettable lethargy. I looked out the window, and watched the neighbours across the street. They were on their front lawn, playing with their toddler. He had grown considerably since I saw him the week before. This family fascinated me. I don't know why. They weren't so much older than myself, so perhaps this is it. I just liked watching the daily intrigues that go along with life in

519. Last night, I watched as the wife left the house dressed in a slinky black number with a man in a suit, who was definitely not her husband. I hoped that this was not a case of infidelity, but seeing her so attired - all sexed up like that, on the arm of a man, who was not her husband, smiling as she entered the car of the tuxedoed stud, I could think of no other possibilities. Work dinner? Perhaps. I felt sorry for the husband. I liked him and his pale belly that jiggled while he gardened with his son in the morning while his wife was at work. Not that any of this is important. It merely reflects the intellectual depths to which I had descended.

That morning, however, the man was not outside. No one was doing anything. Now that school had let out, I couldn't even count on children dragging their feet comically on their way to school. I let the blinds slide over the window, and I looked around the room. It was boring. Most of the posters had fallen from the walls again – the heat had a habit of melting the glue on the tape - and I had been too lazy to put them up. Obviously the walls liked going naked. Who was I to argue? No poster? Fine. I looked at my feet. I wiggled my toes. Boring. I pulled my shirt up and examined my belly button. Here was a subject I could get into. Those who dismiss navel gazing as frivolous have never given it a chance. It is a noble past-time. I like my navel. It is as good a navel as I have seen. It is an innie, which suits me fine – the honest ruggedness of outies kind of scare me – and has numerous black hairs around the outer ring. Why the hair does not grow within the dip itself, I do not know. It is curious that the cell's DNA dictates such specific information. It would seem much simpler to ignore the subtleties of hair and let it grow everywhere. It might be more fun too. Some people could have

hairy palms. That would be nice. Handshakes would be that much kinder, cuddlier, and more revealing.

My navel is free of foreign objects, like bolts or rings, and usually lint too. Today however, I was able to pluck copious amount of greyish-red lint from my fabulous navel. Whilst on the subject of the navel, let me also state that I have never understood how lint that forms in this region. How does it get there? Does it really rub off of clothing? I don't believe it. Assuming that a t-shirt rubs off at a consistent rate – the piece of lint is perhaps the size of a dime – then how is it that after a couple of months I have a shirt left. Shouldn't there be a giant hole in the belly. I know that if I scuffle around a carpeted room on my knees day after day, my jeans will quite quickly develop a rude hole. Why is the same not true of t-shirts? You can see the excitement the navel willingly offers. You could think about it for hours. So I did.

Later that day, after much serious introspection, I turned off the radio – an AM country station from Leamington. All the best things seem to come from Leamington. I put on my old Converse sneakers and a shirt free from mustard stains. I had things to do. I had to meet Harry, the advisor to my final project also known as THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN MY LIFE. I had given Harold Pinsky, noted scholar and my thesis advisor, a draft of the project a week earlier. He had called and asked me to come in to discuss.

Before proceeding any further, there is something you should know. While I have been forthright and direct about myself thus far, I have to make an exception here. You should be informed that while I have used real names and individuals thus far – my name is Stephen, my girlfriend was Tanika, the novel I am about to describe is accurate –

descriptions of Harry should not be trusted. You see, I have discovered that university professors rarely enjoy coming across caricatures of themselves in print.

In the first draft of my project I had included a thinly veiled caricature of a professor in our department. The character was a Professor of Old English who had spent so much time with his nose in his book, that he had become unhinged and began haunting the hallways of the university dressed as a large Green knight, killing janitorial staff and wayward students in creatively anachronistic ways. I thought of him as a twisted Don Quixote tilting at grad students instead of windmills and having greater, gorier success than that other knight. I meant no disrespect to the professor in question. I chose him only because of the remarkable shape of his balding head. The lumps and angles of his skull are spectacular. At any rate, my advisor did not share a cranial interest in the man whose office was next door, nor did he appreciate my stellar word play. He advised me to remove the character or change the description. I tried to remove the character but the novella up to that point had been exclusively about a mad professor of Old English who becomes unhinged and murders faculty and students using creatively anachronistic methods. So there were problems. Cutting the professor was a tough decision. Who am I to ignore the muse? However, I am anything if not prudent, and Lord knows I would not want to offend anybody. Certainly not the body who would be grading my project.

So, Harry is not his real name. Harry is a pseudonym and the choice of the name is random, so don't bet the farm that Harry is a man. He may be a woman. I can't go into it anymore than that, but it is only fair to tell you that names and genders may have been changed. So then, Harry is my advisor and he is a marvellously charming and helpful guide.

Dr Pinsky was waiting for me in his small book-stuffed office. I was late and traffic was bad. Okay, the traffic didn't affect me. I was walking. A week earlier, the engine to my 1972 Pontiac LeMans had literally fallen out. It was a sad day. I wish I could say that the reason I left it in the back alley behind my building was as testament to its former glory, but that is a lie. I simply didn't have the extra cash to have the beast towed to a wrecker. My landlord made the occasional noise about the mighty beached whale behind her property, but unless she wants to pay for removal, there it will sit - a shrine to my poverty. So I was walking and Harry was waiting.

Harry, I wanted to assume, would be sitting in his office awaiting my arrival, rereading passages from my Magnus opus, but somehow I knew that he would be sipping a coffee at the secretary's desk, trading departmental gossip. His loss. How often does one have the chance to supervise a creative writing project that is both entertaining (who could not enjoy a story of a demented janitor at an Ivy League College) while at the same time meaningful (a history professor is crushed beneath a fallen stack of *The Journal of 20th Century Popular Culture*). I was engaging in a dialogue with issues of male violence of the past (the obvious medieval references to the Green Knight) as well as the courageous call for purest Marxist revolution (it is a poorly paid janitor who bridges and then destroys the classist divisions in a public universities in Canada – only murder can supersede the bloated professor's tenure). It had something to say, it was important, and yet, up to that point, Pinsky had shown little enthusiasm for the work. Still, I persevered.

As I walked along the river path on the Detroit River, mighty Motown loomed across the shimmering water, the sun lingered large above it. I was reminded of the breakdown in order that occurs whilst living in Windsor. Anywhere else in our fair

country, the U-S of A sits to the south of us. Now, go to Windsor and try to reconcile Detroit's inherent north-ness. It doesn't work. In Manitoba when you see the Geese which bear our name flying high in the tall autumn sky, you know that they are heading towards America and to the South. Not in Windsor. In Windsor they seem to be flying north, and before I call out and tell them that they are going the wrong way, I remember that Detroit is to the North, and I am lost once more. I fear that if the nuclear reactor in Ohio down the river were to explode and the TV people said to run west to safety, I would move east out of sheer confusion. Windsor is a strange place.

But to Pinsky's office and the awaiting critique of my manuscript.

He was waiting for me with his door open. I knew it at the other end of the hall. I could smell the stale coffee and lingering tobacco –which wasn't fooling anyone in the non-smoking floor. He was reading a paper, which looked very much like *The Journal of Post Post-Modern Literary Distopianism*. Such a choice would suit his tastes. I guessed he was looking for call for papers. He was a writing machine. He averaged six or seven a semester. Some would say his lectures and teaching style reflected this unbalanced interest in publications, but I think that unfair. He was an interesting man, and I was relieved when he was named my primary advisor. But that was before the consultations began. I coughed the cough of the polite and he looked up from his reading.

"Stephen," he said and then paused. "Come in." He put down the paper and pushed a wheeled chair in my direction. It came to a stop as it hit my shins. I couldn't help thinking that the push was a trifle excessive and intentional. I rubbed my sore leg as I sat down. I'm quite certain I saw him smirking. "You're here about the novel."

“I would like to say the visit is a purely social occasion, but I can’t lie to you, Professor. Ha ha-ha ha ha-ha.” I laugh when I am nervous.

“Of course not. Shut the door, would you.”

I did. He opened a drawer on his desk and pulled out a pack of cigarettes – unfiltered *Silk Cut*. He only smoked unfiltered. I figured he enjoyed the attention he got by picking the occasional piece of tobacco from his tongue. He liked attention. He took a cigarette from the pack and proceeded to light it.

“Now, Stephen, I’m going to be honest. I have some problems with your work.”

I felt my stomach drop. I was not expecting this. This was the third rewrite. How many could he expect me to do?

“But I made the changes you suggested.”

“Na, ah, ah, ah. I tell you the problems and then you respond.” He took a long drag from his cigarette. “You know that.” The smoke came out of his mouth towards me like a shot, like an accusation of wrongdoing.

“Sorry.”

“Firstly, I thought we talked about this crazed Knight character.”

“You told me to axe the paper-cutter murders.”

“I wanted you to get rid of the character entirely.”

“I can’t.”

“Why is there a Knight roaming the hallways of a twentieth-century university. The only thing he does is kill off most of the English faculty.” He looked angrier than usual.

“He’s integral to the story. He’s a symbol of the university’s attempt to downsize the arts. His sword is a metaphor for budget cuts.”

Pinsky said nothing, but continued to smoke. Alternating his gaze between my face and the window beside me. In a matter of moments he had finished the cigarette and started a second one.

“Okay look, it’s nice that you are using metaphors and symbols, but your use is a tad heavy handed and, quite frankly, more than a little immature.” He looked at me as if he was wondering how I had ever been let into the Graduate program. He looked at me with his puzzled look quite often.

To be perfectly frank, I had also begun to wonder the same thing. It seemed that my poetics and artistic interests seemed very different, if not diametrically opposed to those of every other student in the program. The writing workshop of the previous year had been one long exasperated collective rant against my stories. No one was able to recognize my rather obvious over the top style of symbolism – like the murderous knight - which was part and parcel of the style I was trying to achieve.

He continued.

“At this point, I’m sorry to say that I am beginning to wonder how you got into the program.”

The truth was that when I was submitting my application portfolio, I didn’t think my story of budget cuts and university politics was ready for submittal and so I handed in a collection of freewriting I had done that weekend. I wrote whatever came to mind within a strict five-minute block. At the end of the five minutes, I would introduce line breaks and commas, and pass off the work as avant-garde poetry. In hindsight, it really

wasn't really reflective of what I was all about, but I was accepted and perhaps the problems were to be expected.

"I don't know if that's entirely fair," I parried his charge. "I think we simply come from different poetic ideologies. I believe."

"-I know what you believe," he interrupted, "we've been through this before. There is no point discussing this any further." He stubbed out his cigarette and tossed me my mighty manuscript. It landed with a thump in my lap. Tossing a large heavy object in such a region carries with it certain meanings. I could not help but wonder if the action was an attempt to literally emasculate me. "Look it over and book another appointment with the secretary. I'll see you then." I took the work and left his office.

In the hallway, I flipped through it. There was not a single page of the thousand-word manuscript that did not have a mark on it. The bastard, I thought. He was incapable of imposing his ideas upon me. From the very beginning of the consultation process, he had tried to foist his interests upon me. It was only when he realized that I was not interested in the status quo for which he stood that we had begun to clash. I had no interest in booking another appointment. It would take me days to digest his comments. I put the manuscript in my backpack and left the building. Elvis would have been proud.

I was about a block from my apartment, when I smelled the smoke. A few steps further and I could see the fearful flames flickering out my kitchen window. I had a horrible feeling that I had once again forgot to turn off the toaster oven that morning after making my breakfast tuna melt and I was responsible for the blaze. It was shaping up to be not a very good day. The fire trucks had not yet arrived and most of my neighbours

were standing on the lawn in front of the building, mulling about, and waiting for something. My landlord was there too. When she saw me, she pointed at me and yelled, “You!”

I tried to blend in with the other tenants, but they moved away, and she was upon me instantly. “If you’re responsible for this, I’m pressing charges.”

“Mrs. Sandoval,” I thought I would calm her down, “I’m sure the fire trucks will be here shortly, and everything will be alright.”

“They better be.” She glared. “But you’ll still be evicted. And don’t expect a good reference.”

“No, no, you don’t have to do that. Only my apartment is on fire. You should be happy, all of my belongings will be ruined.” And then I realized the true horror of the situation. Inside my flat, on my desk, sat my computer. In that room were the only copies of my manuscript –apart from the hard copy I carried in my backpack. While I had backed up the work, the Zip disk was sitting on the desk beside the monitor – for I had not anticipated the possibility of fire engulfing the room itself. Obviously, that was a mistake. That project was the sum of all my thoughts, feelings and experiences of me up to that point. It was I on paper. If it burned, then I did so too. I had to get in there and save it.

Without a word, I pushed past Sandoval and rushed into the evacuated building. I could already feel the heat and I was still a floor away. In a moment I was down the stairs and at my door. I put my hand against the painted steel door. It was scalding. I used my shirtsleeve to grip it. It opened easily. Apparently, I had also forgot to lock my door. I don’t need to explain to you how engaging the writing of a thesis can

be. Nothing else seems to matter. And it was that idea that burned in my head as I rushed into the smoke filled flat. I had to get to my computer. I had to save my manuscript. So onward-ho! Unto the breach! The smoke was thick and acrid and filled my lungs with the bitterest smoke I had ever consumed. I coughed and fell to my knees. I remembered the visit of the fireman when I was eight and in grade three. *Stay on the floor/ go to the door.* I stayed on my knees and tried to crawl below the smoke that was swirling about the ceiling in great black clouds, but I was not going to the door, I was heading towards the flames.

The smoke was still there, so I crawled towards my room on my belly. The heat was unbearable. Thanks to the poor layout of my basement apartment – no one cares about basement suites – the kitchen was situated right beside my room. To get to the computer and save my words, I had to crawl right beside the blaze. There was no door on the kitchen doorway. I would have to crawl through fire to achieve my purpose. A harder task I had never imagined. Lordy, how those flames rose up as if commanded by some zealous prairie preacher, standing on a box of purest ivory, thumping his Bible. They reached up from the floor all the way to the ceiling and licked up and out the kitchen doorway, out onto the hallway ceiling. There was an apocalyptic feeling in the air. Maybe it was only the smoke in my lungs, but I could imagine that the hellfire below burned like this. The heat of the flames nibbled at my skin. I was sweating from the heat and, this close to fire, it began to boil on my skin. It was too painful to move, so I tried to wait out the heat, wait out the fire. I hoped that the firemen would be there soon. I could not hear any fire trucks, but over the sound of the wooden kitchen counters snapping in the fire, it would have been impossible to hear anything beyond the close confines of the

smoke surrounding me. To comfort myself, I imagined Leonard Cohen lamenting Joan of Arc. It was so apocryphal. And this feeling lasted for a good minute as I watched the flames dancing about me. I would die there, on the floor, in the flames. It seemed so Romantic. A young writer dies before his time. Is that not the dream of all artists and young rebels? I decided that Leonard would be proud. Perhaps he would write a song about me too. The romance in death is strong. Young genius dies young. His manuscript discovered after the fire, published to great acclaim. I thought of the thick hard copy in my backpack and realized my error. I had brought the book in with me. It too was in danger of burning. Furthermore, I remembered that Leonard, the monk, had come down from his mountain a few years earlier and was probably touring at that very moment. He was, no doubt, sipping expensive wines from the navels of bronzed beauties in Stockholm, or Paris. He was still alive, sucking down oxygen cleansed by trees and ferns and still walking throughout the land of the living whereas if I did not move, I would never have such experiences. I would die young, alone and because my words would die with me, I would also die completely unknown. There is no romance in that.

Suddenly, I had the urgent will to live. Just like that the cool romanticism of the situation disappeared. I made the decision to get out, to finish my manuscript, to survive. The metaphors and symbols and grand beauty of an early death went up in that same puff of smoke which filled my choking lungs and put tears into my red, swollen eyes. The flames did not dance overhead. They flickered. They stabbed out. They were vicious snakes, with sharp deadly fangs, and they were trying to get me. I didn't want to be consumed in some hateful blaze. I made the choice to live.

But it was too late. By the time I realized that I had something to offer, the smoke had filled my lungs and left me coughing and thrashing on the hot ground, most unromantically, like a steak searing on a smoking grill. And there is nothing poetic about that. Like so many of my choices, my choice for life was made too late. Like all those calculus answers that came to me sipping a Coke twenty minutes after class the right choice came minutes too late.

The flames continued to slither up the wall and bite at the ceiling above. They would bite and rip at the load bearing beams that would burn and smoulder until they could no longer support the massive weight above. The whole ugly mess would crash down upon my lifeless, useless corpse.

The smoke became so thick that I could not see, and it filled my lungs with such fervour, that I could no longer breathe. Then my clothes caught fire. When I was seven I was scared shitless of dying in a fire because of the endless filmstrips inflicted on us by a paranoid school system and well-intentioned fire department that seemed to believe that by merely beating into our memories the phrase 'stop drop and roll,' along with showing us countless people of different shades falling to the floor and crawling on their bellies away from deadly toxic smoke and to the safety of fresh air outside, that death by fire would be eradicated from the world. Like smallpox. I am proof that they were being naïve. I was already on the floor so there was no need to stop and drop and I would have liked to crawl to safety, but nowhere in my training was it explained how to escape from a circle of flames. Never did the teacher and our uniformed guest explain that in the instance of a fire, one should not dally over thoughts of the great bards of our time, and their thoughts on fire, but instead high-tail it out of there pronto. If they did I wasn't

listening, and I would bet potatoes to platinum that existential ennui never came up in their discussion. Perhaps if they had fully explored how to overcome spiritual desolation during a fire, I might have survived, but it must not have stuck them as imperative. Johnny Cash sings of a Ring of Fire, but fails to mention how to get out. So I died.

I died that day, and I am sure that if a friend – someone who knew me, really knew the way I felt about things, knew my regrets and all the bad habits I never had a chance to correct – were to have seen my corpse burnt black and bent hard with rigour mortis he would recognize a pissed off expression in my charred eye sockets and the turn of my blistered remaining upper lip. He would know that that I knew I had made a mistake and that I was pretty damned annoyed at having done so. Instead, it was a good-natured freshman of fireman who came across my lifeless, though still remarkably warm, smoking corpse. He didn't recognize the expression on what remained of my face. So I became his anecdote: another case study to scare children into learning how to stop, drop and roll, and convince mom and dad into buying a fire extinguisher for every room in the house. So I was remembered. It was worth it.

So there you have it. That's how I died. If you're disappointed, you're not the only one. It wasn't what I was expecting either. I suppose that it never is. I died in a fire trying to save words made digital and stored on a plastic disk. It seems a silly thing to die for, but I am an artist. Art is life. Life for Art.

And that was just the physical death. The actual transference, that was still to come. And if this hasn't been the horse and pony show you've been expecting, hang in there, Secretariat is at the gates, and the gun is about to go off.

2.

After I stopped breathing, I remember watching the flames flicker before my eyes. I lacked even the strength or will to keep my lids open, so I shut them. Soon thereafter, I died. And while I may have closed my eyes, darkness never came. Instead I saw the flames continue. I watched them burn bright, brighter than I had ever seen them burn. Brighter than the sun. Brighter than the sun after leaving a movie theatre in the middle of the day. Then the flames burned brighter. They burned blue, then yellow, and then a shimmery white. I should have been afraid at where I was going, but it all happened so quickly and as soon as the fire turned white, I remember blinking, or thinking of blinking, and looking at what I thought was a cloud. It was purely white, and I thought that it must be heaven, but the cloud began to move and the whiteness became not the stuff of clouds at all, but the surf of the ocean. It began as the foam of waves lapping against the shoreline, so it was white like the clouds, or a hot fire, but then it began to slide into a different sort of white, the way that the tide laps onto beach midday under the hot California sun. I had been to the beach plenty of times as a child, and while I was always fascinated with the movement of the sea, it had never held still long enough for me to contemplate just how much the foam resembled the clouds in the sky. Here, time had less sway, and the moment that the wave crashed against the shore in frothy ecstasy time stood still long enough for me to mistake the tide for a frosty cloud. Then the water rushed back towards the mass of the sea from which it had come and all that was left was the yellow sand. Rock upon rock which had been crushed and washed up and turned to yellow grains now lingered in the groove of a larger boulder that was an integral part of the shore, until the blue water rushed onto this liminal earth

between liquid and solid. Again and again the waves broke in cumulous froth. I could never tell where one image ended and the other left off. It was all the same and I remember thinking that this must be what eternity is. The tide crashed in again and again, faster and faster until it looked like the wind moving through a field of prairie grass. Then I was looking at a field of prairie grass. The long stalks bending and swaying in the gushing wind. From the grass came the sensation of the wind and birds gliding in the intricate movements of the air. And some would land on branches of trees. Trees of countless, nameless varieties all smelling of sap and springtime. Their branches did a waltz in the pleasant breeze and the shimmering movement brought forth the idea of water rippling on a windy evening. This water became a stream and in it reeds and weeds swayed under the clear water just as the prairie grass did under the large blue summer's sky. And then I saw the light again, up in the sky where a sun where it ought to be. Every fibre in my body wanted to go towards it and I would have, but I looked down and saw not a tree, a stream, or a cavernous ravine, but my manuscript lying in an empty, dried up creek bed. Oh, I thought, I can't forget that, and I turned away from the light and reached out for the papers. It was then that everything went black.

I awoke on a red velvet couch in a small room containing nothing but that article of furniture and a desk, on which sat a large silver typewriter. This wasn't my room. I had never owned a typewriter. It occurred to me that I was dead and that I must, therefore, be a ghost. I rose (I wish I could say that I floated, but alas, my aching joints reminded me that even in morbid afterlife, I would lack the ability to be cool) and moved towards the strange metallic grey typewriter resting on a simple school desk sitting underneath a large picture window. Great gobs of light shot down on the typewriter.

There was a piece of paper stuck halfway through the rollers. I was there, it was there, so I took the paper and read it: *'...I moved towards the strange metallic grey typewriter resting on a simple school desk sitting underneath a large picture window. Great gobs of light shot down on the typewriter. There was a piece of paper stuck halfway through the rollers. I was there, it was there, so I took the paper and read it...'* Strange, and stranger still, was the stack of paper that lay in a neat, orderly stack beside the desk itself. It took only a minute of grabbing sheets at random to realize that what was written on the white copy was the story of my life. It began with my conception – something I had no interest in reading - and it ended with the present moment. So exact was it, that after those few short minutes on the ground, I looked up again at the cold grey typewriter and saw another sheet locked in its jaw containing the words, *"...those few short minutes on the ground, I looked up again at the cold grey typewriter and saw another sheet locked in its jaw containing the words ..."* It was all there in black and white: my life my words. The whole experience left me feeling a little disoriented.

Perhaps I am not giving the right impression. Reading this, everything is clearly spelled out. You know that I was alive, died in a fire, and then found myself in an unknown room where a typewriter seemed to be hacking out the story of my life. If you forget what happened, you can go back. If you wonder, 'did he really die, or did I just assume that,' you can go back a few pages and find that I concretely exclaim that I am dead, and any misunderstandings are cleared up. It is all very convenient. I had no such luxuries. The room was strange, the typewriter was strange and standing before the typewriter reading my life as it happened - as it was still happening - was confusing. For example, I was unfamiliar with the apartment I was in. I had never lived in such a place

and, as I have already stated, I had never used a typewriter to create my stories. So this was disorienting. Furthermore, I had a splitting headache which seemed to get worse when I tried to think about what happened and how I had got there. Even reading my death scene was a cause for pain. It sounded familiar, but when I tried to remember the event myself, my head ached, the room swam and the typewriter seemed to float upwards and crash into my forehead and anything I could remember seemed to be a memory of having it read it instead of living it. Perhaps the best example I can give you is the confusion two siblings can generate over the discussion of shared childhood memories. Did you actually give your sister a bloody nose when she was seven thanks to a stunningly executed flying elbow during a backyard wrestling match as she says you did, even though you have no recollection, or is this 'memory' of which she speaks just a scene from some long cancelled sitcom like *The Wonder Years* which you know for certain had just that kind of scene in its first season. The writing on the page was my story, but it was not in my voice. It was very disconcerting.

I don't know how long I spent on the floor curled up like a foetus, looking up at the magical paper in the typewriter. I could consult the stack on the floor for clarification for such information is certainly there, but it's not important, and besides, the initial fascination at seeing your life written down on paper passes.

Finally, after a good mulling over the situation and when the dull throbbing in my head had died down, I picked myself up and got on with it. I knew that I was dead. I had read about it in the stacks, so I had the confirmation I needed. I suppose I trusted the authenticity of the type for lack of alternate opinion. So then, I began to work out where

I was. The simplest way seemed to be to look out the window, but the sun was too bright, and I couldn't make anything out.

So, I thought I had better go outside, and just see where I was. If I was dead, but in a room as earthly as to contain cockroaches and typewriters, then perhaps, I thought, I was a ghost. That seemed like a nice prospect. I could haunt the earth 'ooing,' with ghoulish voice, scaring poor families from the haunted house they just bought, posing as Civil War generals for clairvoyants. Being a phantom, as far as I could tell, had its advantage. It would be a nice break from all that writing. I looked at the door. I had planned on using my hand to open it, the same as I would have before I passed over, but I was a ghost and ghosts can pass through walls like Casper. So off I went towards the dark wood door ahead.

I contemplated my folly as I lay on the ground, looking at the ceiling.

I would have stayed there longer but the blood from my nose was running down the back of my throat. I didn't want to choke on it. If I could hurt from walking into doors, and I could bleed, then there was nothing to indicate that I couldn't choke to death, and one death a day was enough for me. I wiped the blood from my face with my shirtsleeve. Just as I was going to get up, I noticed a book hanging from a string from the ceiling and dangling directly above my throbbing head and bloodied nose. Well, I thought, that is certainly odd. A book right there above me, hanging on a thread.

I got up, stood on the chair and pulled on the book. The string snapped easily and the tattered black paperback was mine. I was looking at the rear cover. The yellow font declared in garish font, 'immensely readable,' and 'a roller-coaster ride of excitement, chills, thrills and a shocking ended that will leave you gasping for more.' What was this?

I turned it over. *I'm a Ghost, You're a Ghost.* Aha! The title told it all, but just for the thick headed, a sub-title informed the reader that they were holding, 'Self-Help for the Recently Deceased.' I felt hopeful that this book would bring some answers. There was no copyright information, nor any mention of the author. However, the first page dedicated the work to, "Sarah, for her love and understanding while I polished this gem." It was a nice thing to say. And noble. How many authors are willing to remain anonymous while their spouse gets the mention. I read on. The second page began, 'So you're dead.' I was. This writer was certainly talented at anticipating his reader's thoughts. I reminded myself to remember such tactics when writing my own book. He continued, 'Do you find yourself looking around a strange room, feeling alone and wondering just who you are? Don't be so hard on yourself. Being a ghost requires far more emotional and spiritual strength than you might have predicted.' Truer words had never been written. I could have used a good hug right then, but the typewriter hadn't made any move towards intimacy. So I tried to take comfort in the kind words in the book. I won't bore you with all of it. It varied in quality and value, though that may just be the inner editor talking. One chapter, which did prove very useful, was entitled, *Ten Ways to Maximize your Death*, and listed the many misconceptions about the afterlife. Number one stated right off that you can't walk through walls. Number three contained the equally disappointing revelation that *flying is for the birds*, not ghosts. Perhaps being dead was not going to be a laugh riot after all. Perhaps the only juicy tidbit was that 'you can scare the living if you try really hard,' only to continued, 'but only those ghosts lacking in moral fibre and low self-esteem would feel the need to do such a thing.'

When I had read the book from cover to cover, I got up and left the room. This time I opened the door with my hand. Boring, but effective.

Outside, it was bright under the summer sun. Hot too. It seemed all too familiar. The scent of burning plastic wafted by on a steamy summer breeze. A Taxi drove by. His door read '*Windsor Taxi Service*.' I don't know what I was expecting from the afterlife, but Windsor was certainly not it. The cars all still raced by as if they had somewhere to go, but with an angry bitterness not found in Toronto, Montreal, or even Detroit across the river. It was as if the Windsor driver realized that they were only kidding themselves. I turned and looked at the building. It was red brick, four stories tall, and looked to date back to the early-twentieth century. Again, I could not place it. I decided to go for a walk, see where I was. The area was old. The boulevard was busy, but there were no pedestrians. I guessed maybe Walkerville, maybe Victoria. I couldn't tell. Crummy afterlife. My clothes were sticking to my skin. It occurred to me that it was still exceedingly hot and oppressively humid. I was dead, and lost in a very hot place. A line of cold sweat ran down my spine and nestled into the crack of my ass. I began to worry. Windsor was bad, but was it that bad?

I walked for at least ten minutes without encountering another living soul. I still had no idea where I was. The street signs all seemed to be on the other side of the road, or bent away from my greedy eyes. A few times I scuffled into the street to read them, but a car would zip around the corner and I would have no choice but to jump back to the safety of the sidewalk.

Eventually, I found myself at the river. Detroit loomed across the water. If I needed any confirmation that I was indeed still in Windsor, I had it. Perhaps I should

describe how I came to rationalize Windsor as the afterlife. I mentioned already how it is different from the rest of the country, due to its extreme southness. I would like to expound on this further and hypothesize that because of this strange location it is both a part of Canada, and yet Geographically apart from it. No other part is below America. Windsor is. It's simple, really. I could only assume that this was the reason I now found myself walking along the bank of the Detroit River. I could see the Ren Centre looming over the other towers and parkades. It still reminded me of a Black caped knight, grinning slyly as it ripped the last rotten morsel of gruel, or tankard of mead from a starving peasant just because he could. Thinking of knights brought thoughts of my work. Poor me. It had burned up. I would have to rewrite the entire thing.

Along the path, couples power-walked with sweat rolling from their tired plump faces. I saw large groups of frat boys getting some fresh air before they returned to the dark smoky interior of the strip clubs and single women crying over the railings, lamenting the loss of their last \$500 at the fluorescent Hell of a smoke-filled Bingo Hall or Casino, moments earlier. They were there and they were not. No one acknowledged my existence. It was nothing new, but it concerned me. If I was a ghost, and the living were simply going to ignore me, then whom would I talk to. It was a lonely feeling. I decided to have some fun with the living. I saw a man and woman, walking slowly, weighed down by sloppy mushy love. I began walking towards them. They never looked at me, but just before I would have hit them, they turned suddenly towards the water, and took a place at the railing, cooing to each other and kissing and generally not paying me any notice. The book had said nothing of this fun pastime.

I tried again. I saw a businessman and walked towards him. He too ignored my presence, until I was directly in front of him and then turned away, back towards his office and pay check – I presume. Again and again, I tried to walk into people and failed every time. Eventually, I tired of forcing the blind living from the road, and I picked up my pace. Why? I don't know. I was in Windsor.

I walked for half an hour, until my feet grew tired. I sat down on a bench. It was facing the river and the skyline of the city across it. I watched the wind blow garbage past me. Roller bladders whipped by. There was nothing interesting here. I listened to the city hum in front of me. I had this overwhelming sense that over there, across the river, that is where life was. Here, I felt alone and trapped. It was infuriating to think that a measly river like this one was all that separated me from the life of a real city. Sure, the City ran a Tunnel Bus that could get me across. But it cost money, and, checking the pockets in my pants, I realized that I had no money at all. I looked at the bridge, looked at the trucks slowly rumble across carrying their heavy loads. I wished I could join them, but the sidewalk on the bridge had been closed for years. Someone had once told me that too many people tried to kill themselves by jumping off midway. Perhaps the respective coroners in Windsor and Detroit didn't like the ambiguity of those corpses. Was it a Canadian death, or American? At any rate, I couldn't walk there. At one time, a ferry ran the river. It had been decommissioned decades earlier. I was trapped. There was no way out.

I continued to sit and listen to the river and birds cawing out as they looked down on the murky water for a tasty lunch. The whirring grind of the people mover – perhaps the most useless example of public transportation ever conceived (a monorail trapped on

a five block circular track going nowhere at all but round and round in circle like some bored giant's hobby railroad set) made its way across the river and into my ears. It was hot and muggy I thought to myself as I pulled the collar of my shirt away from my neck for the thirty-seventh time. I looked around at the people around me. Some were clearer than others. Some had lively vivid skin, while others had a ghostly pallor like me. I assumed the pale ones, like me, lacked that vital essence which gave the living their healthy glow. So pale meant dead; bright meant alive. The pale ones were pulling at their collars and shifting uncomfortably in their pants and skirts. The living didn't seem to care as much. Everyone was drinking Tim Horton's coffee. It was seven thousand degrees outside, and still they drank their coffee.

Bells jingled behind me. I turned. A pale man was riding an ice-cream vendor's bike towards me. Ice cream, I thought, that will do the trick. Apparently others had the same idea. They huddled around the man, calling out for service.

"Coffee," he yelled. "Steaming hot coffee for sale!"

I pushed into the pathetic pale mass of people gathered around the bike. "Ice Cream?"

"Coffee!" He was trying to give some to a crying, sweating colourless woman of seventy or eighty. She kept knocking it. The hot liquid splashed over the lip of the cup and onto a blue-tinged man of eighty who was standing beside her. He didn't seem to notice as he begged for his own.

"Lemonade?" I tried again.

"I've only got coffee." The evil ice cream zombie grinned at me. I was scared and so turned away. I'm no wimp, but what ghoul would want coffee in such heat.

“Why is he selling coffee when it’s so hot outside,” I said to no one in particular.

An old man answered.

“It’s Tim Horton’s.”

“So? It’s ten million degrees outside. Why would you want coffee?”

“It’s Tim Horton’s. Tim Horton’s!” This seemed to be answer enough to this strange inhabitant of this place at the end of the country known as Windsor. He pushed hard into the crowd. He kept mumbling ‘Tim’s’ to himself. It was all too scary, so I left the mindless zombies to their strange craven desire for a second-rate coffee. The affliction seemed to possess both the living and the dead of Southern Ontario.

I walked on and let the sad and lonely calls for *Tim* fade into the growing distance. The scene was not pretty, I reflected, but it was a valuable lesson nonetheless. As in life, not all ghosts have the same elevated tastes as myself.

I heard the grunting. It was actually a series of grunts, followed by a whooshing crashing noise, followed by a long pause and then the grunting would begin again. So bizarre was the soundscape that I had to check it out.

There, across the green, a short, squat fat man was trying to pull a Radio Flyer wagon – once red, now sun-faded into more of a soft and pleasant rust colour – filled with empty beer cans up the embankment. He looked pale and dirty and I was sure that he would smell. His jacket was far too large for him and down the back it ran a large tire track. It looked liked it belonged to a semi-truck – a bread truck at the very least. It extended up into his hair, which stuck straight up, as if smushed there by oil and grease and the force of a spinning wheel. I walked to the hill, which ran along the river for kilometres and formed a natural barrier dividing the riverfront path and parkway from the

houses and roads above. He was about halfway up when I arrived. It took him perhaps another five minutes before he was, perhaps, three metres from the top. If you have been to Windsor's riverfront, you know that the embankment is not that high, and the amount of time it was taking this bum to make it up was excessive. Two metres from the top, he tripped and the wagon raced down the short steep hill, the empties clanging and bouncing and making the amount of noise a couple of kids would make riding a red Radio Flyer wagon down a short steep hill. The Radio Flyer came to a sudden stop at my shins.

"Ouch," I said. First Pinsky, now this man. What could this shin coincidence mean? A great deal of pain.

"Who's that?" said the man as he slid down the hill on his bum. As he proceeded down the slope he would periodically yell out to me "What're you doin' with my cart"; "Don't touch my cart "; and, "Who's that." When he finally got to the bottom, he stood up and brushed the grass and yellow brittle leaves from his ass. "Who's that?" He said it again.

"Me."

"Who?"

"Stephen."

"Whatta' you want with my cart?"

"Nothing?"

"Who's that?" I said nothing. He said nothing. Our quick, duelling bursts of silence continued. Sure, to the hypothetical bystander, the silence was long, smooth and shared by us both. But one look in the old man's eyes and you knew that he wasn't about

to share anything as golden as silence. So we duelled without saying a word. Then he leaned over and started to pick up the cans. I wasn't sure who had won the stand-off.

"Need some help with that?"

"No."

"I could give you a hand. It would get done faster."

"Don't want your hand. Want to get up that hill. To the top. It's there; I'm here."

(As an editorial aside, please understand that am the one who has added the semi colon.

There is no way he would have understood such a grammatical tool)

"Bummer." Then he returned to silence and began to pull the wagon towards futility.

I didn't try to stop him. It has always been my policy not to interfere. If some wrinkled old man wishes to pull a wagon up a hill by himself, I will not stop him. If, however, I am bored and have nothing better to do, I will certainly watch him. He pulled the wagon up the hill to the exact spot he had tripped at before and this time he tripped again. This time I did not stop the wagon with my shins, and this time the man, after again sliding down the hill on his dirty behind, ignored me as he went about gathering the bottles. Then he began his climb again. I watched him repeat his folly three more times before I grew tired and continued my walk. As I strolled along the path, I would turn occasionally and see the man, in the distance, pulling the wagon up the hill, or sliding down it on his wrinkled posterior.

I suppose I owe you an apology. I started off this tale with a good deal of humour and lighthearted scenarios, and now I've gotten all dark on you. This is typical of literary fiction. And I've fallen into the trap. Sorry. It's a habit.

I assure you, though, being dead isn't all that bad. It has its lighter moments. Actually, I was just getting to one. I was getting near the university – where another type of the dead reside - when I came across a scene certainly worthy of description. Sitting on a park bench in front of the river, a ghostly black man was sitting and speaking at a woman. She was a proper lady, not dead and not a ghost.

“I love you, baby. I've always loved you. Why can't you see it? Why can't you admit what you feel? Dammit baby, your heart is an icicle.” I say he was speaking at her, for despite the rather dynamic prose, she took no notice of the poor creature. I stopped a few metres away and watched. He pushed back his shiny curls of pomade and smoothed out his short, neatly trimmed moustache.

“Baby, baby. Why won't you look at me? Don't you know it's you I've always loved?” She shifted in her seat and then began applying powder to her nose. She sucked in her cheeks and turned her head and did all manner of actions except actually acknowledging this ethereal suitor. I was not surprised. Those power walkers of definite mass and girth did not move for me, and I did not expect any more recognition from this attractive woman. Why, I wondered, did he persist? As I thought this, he turned my way and noticed my lurking presence. I turned quickly and gazed across the river at the post office, but he was on to me.

“Hey you,” he said. “What you looking at?”

I said nothing, but continued to look straight ahead. I watched pigeons play in the breeze.

"I'm talking to you. I know you can hear me."

I whistled. I was whistling Dixie. Really.

"Hey." He got up and approached me. "Hey." He put a hand on my shoulder. I turned and looked into his deep colourless eyes. They were a vacuum of light, a pool of nothingness blacker than ink in a cave on the first night of a new moon. They were fascinating.

"Yes?" I was all innocence and conviction.

"Don't play with me. You could hear me. I know you was listening. Whatchew want?"

"Nothing," I replied. I really didn't know how to answer him. It wasn't that I really wanted anything. I just found the situation interesting, but how do you tell a stranger that he interests you. This is not something someone wishes to hear. Ever.

"I don't trust white folks who go watchin' old black folks and then say they don't want something."

"I was just gazing."

"Yeah, well gaze elsewhere," he said.

"She's not paying you any attention."

He paused, looked at me eyebrow crooked questioningly, then as if he had determined that indeed I was a trustworthy sort – interrupting gazes notwithstanding – he told his sad tale.

The Tale of Minty Prolix

I was born in Hamtrammack. My father worked the line at a car plant. My mother stayed at home and did the dishes until she lost her mind and we had to put her away. I was born Roland, but I never liked that one all that much, so I asked my friend to give me a nickname. That was when I was seven. Mama was still at home washing clothes and stewing tomatoes for us, when Jimmy from next door looked at the mint ice-cream popsicle I was licking, and pronounced me Minty. Prolix came later. I was in high school and trying to convince Jimmy to come to a brothel I had heard my uncle talking about: 'Ah it's great Jimmy,' I said, 'they got all sorts of women there. And you get to choose which one you want. They all line up in this little room while you sit on the couch and watch. And they let you. I heard my uncle. Can you believe I? And you get to watch and choose and then you go to a bedroom and THANK YOU MAM'. Jimmy wanted nothing to do with it. 'I'm writing a paper,' he said.

'Ah, come on, Jimmy,' I said.

'No,' he said.

'Yes.'

'No.' And on it went, again and again, until finally, he looked up from the thesaurus he was consulting for his important paper and said, 'Leave me alone Minty Prolix, I've got work to do,' and just like that fate blew me her kiss. So, Jimmy was to blame you see, and from that time on, I was known to all as Minty Prolix. Ma never called me Minty or Prolix, she still called me Roland, but she was stark raving mad and no one paid her any attention anyhow. My father never

called me anything other than 'you,' as in 'hey you, get the hell in here,' so Minty Prolix seemed to stick. And the women seemed to like it, 'Oh Minty, you're so cool,' they would say and laugh and then flirt some more. No one but Jimmy seemed to know what 'Prolix' meant, and he had left for College in Washington by then, but they all seemed to like the way it rolled off the tongue 'Oh Minty Prolix. Smooth like a candy they way it rolls around the tongue'...

- and on he went bragging and swaggering about the women he had known. I will spare you the details. No one likes a braggart. And who wants to hear about sex, anyhow. Incidentally, as Minty went on about his exploits, I couldn't help musing at just how wrong people are to assume that dead men tell no tales. Here was Minty sitting beside me, as dead as that doornail in your front entrance yammering on and on, spinning one yarn after another. Of course, without getting too far off topic, it should be noted that you can actually die of boredom. One woman I came across along the riverfront before I happened upon Minty (which I have ignored for reasons of pacing) just happened to have died of boredom. Apparently, as a teenager she had complained loudly to her poor mother that she was "sooo bored" and how unfair this, and indeed life in general seemed to be. She survived her teenage years only to plop her growing ass onto a large mauve couch where she spent her afternoons watching talk shows and soap operas and whatever game show happened to be on at the moment, not because she was terribly interested, but because there was just nothing else to do. And as she lay there bemoaning the increasingly poor quality of soap opera hunks, she would occasionally brush Doritos and Oreo crumbs from the belly encased in a pink cotton sweatshirt, everyday stretched tighter and tighter, until one day her heart stopped beating and she no longer had any

reason to bother about crumbs. She too found herself sitting on a park bench looking across the river at Detroit. I won't get into the details of her experiences over here, as they are as exciting as her warm-blooded life. I would like to think that if nothing else, I am mindful of your feelings, dear reader, so without further delay we pick up Minty's story, scores of women later.

...and boy was she loud. Wooooooo-ee, like a freight train. So then I was twenty-nine. I had just returned from Chicago. I got a job in Pontiac without real trouble. Being a former sailor scored me some points with the owner of the club, who had done his time as a cook on a submarine during the Korean War. He said soldiers had work ethic, so he gave me the job. I didn't do much, started by sweeping up, until he let me pour drinks on Fridays. I met plenty of ladies there, let me tell you. They came in all shapes and sizes. Colours too. It was a jazz club and Jazz seemed was popular with the white ladies back then. I met this very succulent blonde that way. Suck-you-lent! Anyways, the club, that's where I first saw Billie. She was a singer in one of the bands travelling through. She was it. I saw her and knew that my days of smiling at ladies at bus stops were over. Let them get on the bus. Billie was it. Problem was, she didn't seem to care that I existed. After her set on the first night of her stay - Charlie booked the bands in a week a time, back then, so they could really get into a groove and strut their stuff - I sent her a drink with a little card inviting her to the bar for a nice chat. I watched as she read the card, and smiled when she looked my way. Then she returned the drink. Larry, the waiter who delivered the drink laughed at that one. So, I waited for her outside the club, the next night. It was cold, and I stood

leaning against the cold, corrugated steel siding, waiting for her to come out the back door. She did, and walked right by. Oh, she was rude! I followed her around all week and she wouldn't say hello. By the last night of her stay, I was getting desperate. I was in love, man. It was love. She just didn't know it. So, the last night, I bought her a rose and refused to take them back when she rejected them. I made Larry carry them back up to her. She still wouldn't take them, so he laid them at her feet. She left them there, after the show, and walked straight outside without stopping, without talking to anyone. I ran after her. Larry was happy for the chance to stop moving and be the bartender if only for a while. So, while Larry watched the bar, I ran out the door and caught her just as a taxi pulled up beside her.

'You can't go,' I said. 'We haven't even met.'

'I have no interest in meeting a man named Minty.' I suppose Larry had told her my name when he delivered the drink that first night, or maybe one of the coat-check girls told her about my reputation, I don't know, but I was in love and she was standing beside a cab.

'Minty's just a nickname, baby. Roland. My name is Roland.'

'A nickname says a lot,' she said as she got into the cab. 'Bye.' She waved with her middle finger. 'Baby!'

And then she shut the door and drove off. I tell ya', I was devastated. I was in love with this woman and I had never so much as had a conversation with her. So, What could I do? I had to follow her. Right then and there, I hopped in the next cab waiting at the curb and gave chase, like a hound after a fox. And oh

what a fox! I had to catch her. She must have known that I was following, because her car kept going faster and faster. Well, I was on the scent, my blood was in full boil, so I told the driver to go faster and to follow her. He said that it was against the law, going fast like that, so I slipped him a dead president and we was off. She was turning and dodgin' and I was flying after her, sometimes her taillights were all I could see of her car, dodging down a narrow alley, or up a wrong way street, but I never lost sight of her and I started to catch up, and at one point, I could actually see her sitting in the backseat looking out the window with the fear of God in her eyes, and that was when I realized that it was different for her, she wasn't in love with me, the way I was with her, and I felt my stomach drop out, 'cause I realized that even if I did catch her, she wouldn't want nothing to do with me. I suppose I should have told the cabbie to pull over, but I let him keep chase, so I could apologize to her. I never meant to scare her. Life is short, and no one should have to live it in fear. We kept going and she kept running, and then she started taking more chances, going down darker, narrower alleys, cutting up the wrong way on one-way streets, turning too fast around sharp curves. And I guess that's how her car managed to flip over and slide into that telephone pole. It all happened so fast, one moment her taillights were burning in the dark night, cutting through the darkness in front of me, and the next I see them, one on top of each other, sliding towards the curb and then go out all together. I was shook up. I never meant any harm, but the cabbie, he must not have believed me, because he didn't stop, but took the corner even faster and kept on going. So we drove past the wreck, and I could see the glass everywhere, but

not her- on account of the car still being on its side – although I did see the driver, who was halfway out the front window, shards of glass cutting into his dead body. Oh god, I was scared. 'Oh shit, oh holy shit,' the driver kept screaming over and over fidgeting with the rear-view mirror as we sped past the wreck and left it behind us, and I was too overcome with shock to do nothin'. And all I could do, while the driver muttered "holy shit, holy shit," was to look out the back window and watch as her car sink into the darkness. After a few turns, and tire squeaks, the driver stopped the car and told me to get out. He just stopped, turned around at me, and with wide, white eyes, told me to, 'Get the fuck out.' So I did, and he drove off. I must have been in a warehouse district, because it was really dark, only the moon and a couple of yellow lights hanging off the side of a big building cut into in the black sky. It was real quite, except for a couple of dogs barking somewhere, and the sirens wailed somewhere in the distance, but they were so far away, they sounded soft and peaceful. Still, I walked away from it, down the dusty gravel road. I kept walking until I heard the water splashing. At the end of the road was the river, black in the night. But I could hear it, and across the river, a few dots of life. I couldn't hear the sirens anymore, but I couldn't stop picturing the car and the man hanging out the window. I couldn't stop thinking about what I had done to Billie, and I was so sorry. I just wanted to say I was sorry, but it was too late, and now the only thing left was the river lapping at my feet. So I walked into it, hoping maybe I could wash myself clean. I remember the cold water stinging my legs, and my balls, then my chest, then my head went under and the pain became kind of a cloak that was wrapping around

me. And I do remember how the only thing I could hear was the sound of my heart beating and then the air leaving my mouth – it was so loud – and then how my lungs filled with that terrible cold water. I think I tried to fight it when the water got in, and lord how it stung. I kicked my feet and swung my arms, but it was too late and my feet were caught on something, like a tire, or maybe just weeds, or maybe I just didn't kick hard enough, but when I realized that I wasn't going to get back up, I just let go and let the water wash over me. It felt good. I remember that. It was peaceful in the river. And at night so it was black and I didn't have to see myself. Then it went even darker.

When I awoke, I was lying on one of these park benches, Detroit across the river. I don't know how I got here; I was just lying on the bench. So I've been looking for Billie, you know I figured I could say I'm sorry, but I haven't seen her yet.

Then Minty turned away from me. He was looking at an East Indian family taking a picnic further down the path. He squinted at them.

"Look." He raised his tired arm towards them, "It's her." He turned to me and there were tears in his eyes. "I gotta go, man."

I sat on the bench while he rose and carried his longing towards another wrong woman. I didn't want to watch. A bird flew by and cut across my gaze of the brick and concrete towers of Detroit glimmering in the summer heat like a mirage of palm trees standing against the desert sky. Like an emerald city off in the distance.

After Minty, I was tired of talking to the park bench people, so I climbed the embankment and continued East along the road there. I was well aware that I was heading to the university, which you should know, as I don't think it was any coincidence. I wondered what was going on there, whether or not Pinsky had even noticed my demise, or if he had pushed my manuscript from his head already. I wanted to see his comments. So on I went, under the hot summer sun, hot and wet and sticking to the same red floral print shirt I had been wearing when I had entered that burning building located not far from where I stood.

When I walked the streets on the legs of a living man, I didn't often think of dark, dirty, desperate death. It wasn't a lifelong obsession. Sure, I thought about it when I was seven, but who didn't. I remember lying on the bed of my mother, having a story read to me, and how I would be exceedingly happy and content, and then my stomach would drop. I would be aware that this great happiness which was my childhood was a finite experience and nearly at an end. I seemed to know that there were only a few years of the mother-read stories left in my life, and perhaps even fewer still of my own inclination to receive such gifts. Perhaps I didn't realize that I would not want to have a bedtime story when I was ten, but I certainly knew that ten year olds never wanted stories, and I knew that I was seven and I could do the math. Such mathematical equations segued nicely into calculations of years remaining until my death arrived. It seemed far off, but still it was there looming, waiting for me in the pit of my stomach.

This childhood contemplation of death, despite the fear and hypothetical number of years, was an abstract kind of thinking and I can assure you that I never imagined that I would be spending eternity in Windsor. I never imagined that I would be sweating

myself silly, having carried the annoying habit to The Other Side. It comes as a great disappointing surprise. Sadly, this great unknown seemed to be very much like the known world I had left behind, and while I would like to say it's hotter and stickier, I don't know if that is entirely true. My memory of Windsor at the height of summer was no cooler than the muggy air bouncing off my dead ghostly frame as I walked towards the university.

The sound of bells ringing hit me when I was still blocks from the concrete institution. The noise came to me through the trees with the birds swooping, curving and chirping in the hot air. The bells were not a joyful sound such as you might hear after a wedding: ringing happily and quickly, over and over again. This time, the bell rang slowly and with deliberate precision, out of respect for the ritual. And it was this solemnity that drew me off the riverside road, away from my destination and through the side streets, towards an Anglican church a couple of blocks from the river. It was at the church from which the ceremonial clanging came. Two limousines were parked at the curb. The doors to the church were open. I went in.

It was a funeral, but I didn't need to see the urn sitting on an altar to know this. The room was filled with a sad calmness. No one was whispering. No children misbehaved. The only sound, apart from the Minister speaking from his podium, was that of soft sniffing and crying. The church was dark except for the light shining down upon the podium and altar. The only other light in the room came from the doors through which I had just walked. No one noticed me as I took a seat in the nearest aisle. The room, though large, was full and the only seat nearby was in that aisle. I sat down beside a pale

looking apparition. He resembled a man in his fifties with his salt and pepper hair. He smelt vaguely of a hospital. He too took no notice of me.

The Minister was speaking with a solemn tone. His hair was white, and thinning and under the light shining down upon him, his hair took on the look of long threads of silver. He looked angelic. I wondered if this had been planned. He was leaning over the podium, reading from his sermon notes. Occasionally, he would look out over the audience as though stressing the point, a line from the Book of John, or a line from Psalms. The audience continued to weep to itself, perhaps growing slightly louder under the Minister's occasional glances.

And it was Jesus who spoke of putting our lives into the hands of God," the Minister was saying, *"Marcus was a good man, and he will be missed. Let us look to Revelations for inspiration..."*

I was listening to the Minister sermonize and thinking about my own funeral – I wondered if there had been one – when the man beside me leaned over and said "Jesus, what a load of shit."

The people in our area shuffled slightly, but otherwise made no movement to suggest that they had heard his outburst. Even though I was not with the man, and pretty well certain that the others in the church could not see me, I winced nonetheless. How else should one react to a man both swearing and loudly condemning a Minister's sermon while still in the church? I am not terribly religious, but it seemed a stupid thing to do. I wanted as far away from the sinner as possible. I said nothing, but continued to watch the Minister – who had not heard the remark, or pretended not to hear the blasphemer.

The Minister continued, *'...as John says to Peter... I shall now read from the Psalms.'*

"Bullshit. What a great steaming pile of cow's dung." He shifted anxiously in his seat and gripped his program tightly. I thought he was going to throw it. He leaned into me, his mouth was inches from my ear, and asked, "Who is this guy. He couldn't be further off the mark than this. Revelations, John, what the hell does this have to do with the life of the deceased? It's insulting."

'And if anyone needs our prayers, it is Marcus. A kind man, and a man whose soul needs our good prayers to Christ now more than ever.'

"See!"

There was no ignoring him. He was obviously talking to me. I couldn't very well pretend he was speaking to someone else and I didn't want to anger him. He looked like he could be violent. "Yes. I see." Under the circumstances, this was the best I could manage.

"Good. It makes me mad."

"Did you know him?" I tossed my head in the direction of the urn. Let me rephrase that, lest you think that my skull fell off my frame and rolled across the floor. What I mean to suggest is that I pointed to the urn with a casual nudge of my old bean.

"Know him," he asked. "I'm Him... or, He was Me. I can't quite figure out the semunt ... seman ...uh, the right way to say it."

"Oh." This was a surprise. "So, this is your funeral?"

"You're insightful. Oh, I know, it's a little tacky, but I couldn't resist."

"And, you're dead."

“Just like you.”

“How did you know?”

“Christ, how long have you been here? They can’t see you. Unless you really try hard, and then only sometimes.” In my own defence, while I had figured this out, no one had actually acknowledged my own ghostly presence before. This was new.

“Oh. Well then, my name’s Stephen.” I extended my hand. He ignored it.

“That’s nice.”

“Oh.”

“I’m just shitting you kid. Larooo, Marcus Larooo at you your service. L-A-R-O-O-O. Like it sounds.” He shoved a large paw in my face.

“L-A-R-O-O-O?”

“A long story. When my father – he was French – came here, he tried spelling it properly, but the idiots kept calling us Larux or Laryx –which is not surprising considering the people around here refer to roads like Pierre as ‘peer-ee’ and Ouellette as ‘O-lette,’ what chance did we have. It drove my father nuts, so he gave in and spelled it phonetically. Then he added another ‘o’ just to be safe.

And then he went quiet and we listened to the Minister talk about salvation for a while. Then Larooo began muttering again. I couldn’t make out much, but I distinctly remember hearing more scatological commentary. Eventually he exploded with a large yell.

“Bullshit.”

“Can I ask you something?” I was concerned. This kind of obsession in faeces could not be healthy.

He looked at me. His grey hair, longer than I first imagined, swung around his head, landing in front of his eyes. "Shoot."

"Why are you so angry?"

"Why?" Upon uttering the word, his finger shot out from his fist, his arm extended and he was pointing accusingly at the Minister dressed in his ceremonial robes of white. "Aren't you listening to this? What is this? This is bullshit, that's what this is."

"So you don't agree with what he's saying?"

"Who cares if I agree with what he is saying is true. What do I care if the man believes in this Jesus guy? I only care that he is spouting this shit at my funeral." At this he stood up and began pointing violently at the crowd gathered before him. "Look at them. Did they come here to hear some guy talk about Jesus? If they wanted that, they could have waited until Sunday. I died; it's my funeral. He should be talking about me."

"Well, he does say your name occasionally."

"My name! Jesus Christ. What the hell is that?" He turned to me and grabbed my collar. "You know how many times I met this man? Twice. Once on my wedding and once at my niece Bernadette's Baptism. That's it, twice. And you know something else, he was my wife's choice at the wedding. The guy I wanted was on holidays." He let go of my collar.

"Okay, okay. Take it easy."

"Twice. So forgive me if I am a little perturbed at having to listen to this guy on the last occasion when any group of people will think about me. It's my day, and this jackass is standing up there speaking about God. I stopped going to Church when I was eleven. The Sunday school service for the eleven and twelve year olds was held at nine

o'clock in the morning, which was too early for my pre-pubescent liking, so I just stopped going. My mother complained a couple of times, but my father didn't care, so, whatever, I stopped going. And for the next thirty-five years I am pleased to say that I only had to listen to some windbag yammer on about some magical kingdom five other times: at the funerals of my parents, my wife and then the wedding and the baptism I've already told you about. And then today, I show up expecting to hear few people I know, like maybe my kids, or my employees, hell, even my deceased-wife's brother say a little something nice about me, perhaps a mention of perhaps one or two of the seconds which transpired during any one of the forty-six years I managed to pack in over there. Instead I am subjected to the false words of this man. I'll bet he reads the same damn speech at the funeral of the ninety-year old woman tomorrow afternoon. The bloody Book of Revelations. Give me break." Here, he shook his head. "Pardon me if I'm a little pissed off." If he were in a western and had a hat, he would have, at this point, smacked it with gumption against his knee.

"Hmmm." His face was pinkish and steam was coming from his ears. I had only seen this in cartoons, and was a little taken aback. I had ever put much thought as to whether such an occurrence was feasible in apparitions, and was unprepared.

"Don't 'hmmm' me. You either disagree with me and think I'm crazy, or you agree with me, but are too respectful to say so in a church." He wiped some spittle off his chin and rubbed his ears until the smoke stopped. "You're dead. Live a little. Hell."

We just sat there for a minute, listening to the Minister proscribe solutions to a variety of situations. When his chest had stopped heaving and the colour of his face had

returned to its proper ghostly pallor, I asked him about the people sitting in the front rows of the church.

“The woman on the right is my daughter, Linda, with her family.”

“Very pretty.” The woman had blonde hair, was overweight and looked to be in her late thirties, a number I didn’t feel like asking him about it. Either she looked older than she actually was, or she really was that age. Asking him about it could only result in awkwardness and controversy and considering his earlier tantrum, I had little desire to raise his ire. Her young children were pinching each other, and the father was trying to restore order. The daughter sat motionless, oblivious to it all.

“The other one’s my son, James. I don’t know who he’s with. Must have picked her up on the way here.”

The son was in his late twenties, or looked young for his age. His companion did indeed look as if she had been picked up. Her blouse, while black, was hardly suitable for funeral, unless that funeral happened to be for a stripper, and the other stripper guests were very understanding. Despite the son’s poor choice in escort, he appeared devastated. Even from the back row, you could see the tears dripping down his cheeks. His chin was quivering and occasionally a strangled noise would arise from his throat and into the echoes of the large church. The only comment I could think of was, “He looks nice.”

“He tried to have me cryogenically frozen.”

I stared.

“Yeah, just in case they found a cure for old age in the future. He said that I told him this was my wish on my deathbed.”

“Was it?”

“Hardly. I said, ‘Boy it’s cold in here, It’s usually far too hot.’ And then I think I aired my opinions on laziness and vacations, but I suppose he must have got twisted around in his head.”

“So he was going to freeze you?”

“Yeah, but he only had enough money to preserve my head. Apparently there is a reason that only the super rich do the whole body.”

“Upkeep must be costly.”

“I suppose. I have no idea what they do with the body if they only keep the head”

“I would assume it’s humane and respectful.”

“You’re paying enough. You’d better get respect.”

I looked at him while we spoke, but he never turned my way. He looked intently towards his family and frowned. For the first time since beginning our conversation, it seemed he wanted silence. For a moment or two the Minister’s prattle drifted out over the crowd and to my ears unobstructed the angry words of my neighbour. Then Larooo turned to me and whispered in my ear. “Don’t you want to know what happened?”

“I didn’t want to be nosey.”

“You’re not. I want you to ask me.”

“What happened?”

“You’re not very good at conversations, are you?”

“I don’t get out much.”

“Well, pretend that you care.”

“Okay, Larooo,” I said and I leaned towards him, scrunching up my brow and taking the pose of the interested. “What happened? Were you cryogenically frozen?”

“Oh course I wasn’t frozen. What the fuck do you think that urn is holding up on table?”

“Ah Christ, I don’t need this hassle.”

“Blasphemer,” he yelled and he jumped up and began pointing and screaming at the top of his voice. “Blasphemer, I’m sitting beside blasphemer. And in a Church too!”

Fear crept up from my belly and filled me with the urge to run. Who was this man? He pretended to want me to speak casually, and then when I did he pointed his finger at me. I rose to run, lest the churchgoing folk rise up and rip me limb from limb. Yes, I was dead, and no they couldn’t hear me, but in my panic, consumed with this fear –an emotion which I must have carried with me across the line between the living and the dead – I simply forgot that I was a ghost, the same way a newly married woman might forget that her last name is Smith and not Johnson. Yes, I was afraid of what the others – including the owner of this house – might think. I tried to run, but tripped instead and hit the ground hard. I looked up to see the bastard pointing and laughing. I didn’t like being the butt of jokes in life, and lying there I realised that being dead had not make the experience any better.

“Oh shit. You should have seen your face. Priceless. He laughed with a loose, hacking cough. I supposed smoking was the cause of his early demise.

I stood and brushed myself out of habit. No one was looking our way. They were still mourning the death of this asshole.

When I had returned to my seat and reclaimed a certain calm, he picked up the conversation where he left it before his hilarious prank.

“My daughter has more money and better lawyers. They managed to find some document declaring my ultimate desire for cremation and they were able to block his move. See how pretty I look in a tiny metal vase.”

“Absolutely charming.”

Behind the squat silver urn was a picture of Henry. He looked younger, less pale, but he still had a sly smirk on his face. He looked good.

“Nice picture.”

“My son took it in Hawaii.”

“So you’re not mad at him for what he did.”

“Hell no.” His choice of words unnerved me. “Grief does strange things to people. The boy loves me more than any of them. Right now he’s remembering how I used to read to him before bedtime.

“You know that.”

“I do. I seem to be able to hear their thoughts.”

“Really?” I had not noticed the ability in myself as of yet.

“Really. And speaking of which, I truly regret willing my model trains to my nephew. Right now, he can hardly contain his excitement for tomorrow’s meeting with the lawyer. The greedy little shit. I thought he liked me. I assume he’ll be disappointed with the trains. Serves him right.”

“Is that why you’re still here? You just want to discover your real friends.”

He didn't answer me immediately. He just stared towards the family who had survived him. "At first I wasn't sure why I was here. I knew this couldn't be *It*. You know, the alpha and omega, but here I was, and I didn't seem to going anywhere. So I started hanging around the kids. See what they were up too. I figured maybe I had some unfinished business with them. Then the boy came up with plan to freeze me for posterity and I thought, 'aha', this is it. I have to prevent this from happening. But when I realized that he really missed me and it wasn't just another of his hare-brained schemes, but real love, however misplaced and misguided, that pushed him to this freezing plan, I knew I was here for something else."

And he paused again. Although dead, he had not lost the annoying habit of pausing for effect and desire to milk a story for all it was worth.

"And?"

"And what."

"Do you know why you are here?"

"My kids hate each other. They haven't spoke for ten years. Even at last year's family reunion in Maui - where that picture was taken - they never said a word. It makes me angry." He hit his hand on the wooden bench before him. No one noticed but me. "I can't just wander off while they sit there, filled with hate." He pointed to 'the boy' and his daughter. She was sitting with her husband and children in the front row of the right aisle. She looked stern, but the crumbled Kleenex in her palm tugged on the curtain of composure.

"I can't figure out why they despise each other so. I remember when James was born, Linda held him and wouldn't let him go when my wife asked for him back. I cried;

I really did. When he was older, he would follow her around and copy everything she did and she let him.”

“Sounds sweet.”

“It was, and I never had to worry about him. She was always looking out for him. When my wife died, Linda was in her teens and James was still a little kid. She acted like a mother. Then he turned sixteen and things began to change. He moved out before he had even finished high school, and they stopped talking. That was years ago. I can’t imagine it was anything spectacular. I figure she was offended at his sudden independence, you know.” Then he started speaking in tongues. Not tongues exactly. Perhaps more a bad high falsetto to represent a young woman’s voice, but sounding more like a fish wife, or rather a comedians poor imitation of one:

“‘*You can’t go to that party,*’

“And he countered, ‘*why not?*’

‘*You’re too young,*’

‘*Says who?*’ *Who’re you? You’re not my mother.*’

‘*Don’t you dare step out that door.*’

‘*I’m outta here.*’ - figure it was something like that ”

“It seems feasible.”

“So then they’re not talking and a shitload of years pass and this family feud bullshit becomes a habit and then the status quo and before you know it they don’t even care why they hate each other, they just do. So there. Fucking Stupid.”

“Fucking Stupid.”

He looked at me like he could tell that I was mocking him, but if he did, he didn't let on. He just gave me a, "yeah."

"But you never tried to stop it. The fighting, I mean."

"I wasn't the most observant parent, you know. When Donna, my wife was alive, I let her look after the kids. When she passed away, I basically moved into my office. I stayed there too long and was gone from the home too much to have had any real authority with them. I paid the bills and sent them to the university of their choice, but they didn't listen all that much. I had also convinced myself that I was being a great parent. What sixteen-year old doesn't want to be on their own? In retrospect it doesn't seem such a good idea." But hey, they've gotta be happy now. I left them a fortune."

"Hmm." What do you say to someone who really thinks that this money is fair trade for a father's life? Still, I have never had any interest in being the killjoy moral jerk pointing out the obvious. What good would it have done. He was dead and gone already. There was no use in shitting on him even more.

"Yeah, hmmm."

I figured I'd just help him solve the problem. "So what do we do know."

"I have a plan."

"What"

"I'm going to try to possess the priest guy and just tell the congregation what I want."

"We can do that?"

"Ah, sure. I've seen in movies plenty of time."

"But the Book, *I'm a Ghost, You're a-*" He cut me off.

“It’s outdated. Get yourself a copy of *Get Dead, Get Real*. It’ll set you straight. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

And off he went. The red carpet rushed by under his small feet, as he raced towards the Minister who was still droning on about salvation. In the front row, Linda sat quietly. Her husband was whispering something quietly in her ear. James had cried himself into exhaustion. His head was resting on the bare shoulder of his acquaintance. She was patting his hand whispering to him and generally looking most uncomfortable at the situation she had managed to get herself into.

Larooo was walking around the Minister plotting his next move. He spoke to him. “I’m going to possess you now.” Nothing happened. The man kept up his sermon. Larooo flicked the ears of this man of god. Nothing happened. By this point, I had made my way up on stage, and beside Larooo.

“It doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Try hitting him.”

Then he punched him in his gut. The Minister stopped and coughed, but otherwise seemed fine.

“Jesus, I was joking.”

“Blasphemer!” Larooo was incapable of knowing when to quite, so he kicked the lame joke until it was well dead, lying there on the floor cut and bloody and lying in a pool of its own brain matter. Eventually he tired of the gag and tried kicking the minister again.

“Stop it. You can’t just attack the clergy in the middle of a church... with a large crowd watching.”

Larooo smiled. With his Maui portrait right beside him, I changed my mind, he actually more vigorous and alive, now, dead.

“Enough of this fucking around,” said Larooo and he jumped at the man. When I say he jumped at the man, what I really mean is that he walked ten metres back behind the man, rubbed his hands and then charged this poor unknowing man speaking to the miserable crowd. When Larooo was perhaps a metre away, he lunged forth his arms, as if he was trying to impale the Minister. Whatever he did, it worked because Larooo disappeared into the man of God. Immediately, the minister in his long gown began to spin around. His arms shot out akimbo. His whole body shook and drool ran down his chin.

“Aghuuhhhgg,” said the possessed man.

Chaos broke out amongst the group of mourners. Linda was on her feet, and James had stopped crying. He stared quietly at what transpired before him. In the back of the church, a woman – the type that seems to be an integral part of such chaotic, crowded scenes – began to scream. Then she creamed louder.

“Arghuh. Guuuulrp. Acccccch,” said the minister.

“Oh God,” someone cried, “do something.”

But what to do? The minister was spinning wildly, and the congregation did not know that he was possessed. For all that they knew, he may have been doped-up on amphetamines. And so they stood still and watched, most saying nothing more than “I can’t believe this.” “Can you believe this,” or “I say,” all lines which when heard as the background comments of extras in movies, a viewer is much inclined to dismiss as

ridiculous and phoney, but the truth is that in situations like this, such melodrama is accurate.

Most just mumbled, but that woman near the back continued to scream at the top of her lungs apparently under the impression that voicing ones shock in the form of a loud shrill squeal was a admirable contribution to the proceeding. Eventually, a man standing next to her slapped her across the cheek, and said, "pull yourself together." Not realizing, perhaps, that she now expected to faint politely, she turned and decked him across the chin. He fell to the ground. He was out cold. She began to scream again.

Larooo still had no real control over the Holy man. He was spinning more violently now. He bumped into a chair and then slammed into the podium. It fell to the ground with a mighty thud. I would like to think that this man of God, fearing his soul was in danger of being snatched from him, began to fight back. But standing there beside the urn on the altar, there was no way to verify this apart from the lurching of Larooo.

Linda lost her composure. It fell from her hardened face the same way the red velvet curtain came down on possessed cleric.

"Stop it!" Her cool, calm demeanour dissolved beneath the tears that were now flowing from her eyes. "Stop it, stop it, stop it." But Larooo continued his puppet show.

Then, hearing his older sister - actually hearing her - for the first time in more than a decade, James walked to her and gave her a hug. So overcome with emotion, she could not keep up her perpetual artifice, and she let him hug her, and she hugged him back. And they cried together.

Larooo, oblivious that his plan had backfired (though succeed nonetheless- perhaps succeeding despite himself) danced on and on and on right into the altar. The

urn went flying. I leapt into the air, in quite heroic style and caught the memorial the moment before it hit the ground. It was very dramatic. Unfortunately, everyone was still focussed on either the siblings or the deranged minister and had not seen the urn fall. I was a little annoyed that once again my brilliance was ignored by those around me, but even then I realized that they wouldn't have been able to see me. They would have seen this ceremonial container floating in the air. And people who have just witnessed a holy man go mad during a funeral service probably don't need that kind of stress. Dozens could have fainted and been injured, possibly seriously. I'll take pride in my good deed silently.

Eventually the minister fell to the ground and the jolt knocked Larooo out. The Preacher lay still. He was unconscious. Larooo sat up. He was sweating profusely.

"Fuck. It didn't work. I couldn't seem to figure out which string moved which part."

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. I've failed. I hate failing. I never fail."

"You didn't fail, you Jackass." I pointed out towards the crowd.

Everyone was weeping. He saw his children crying and hugging and cried too. The lady at the back had stopped screaming. Instead she was kicking her face-slapper who still lay on the ground, motionless.

The brother and sister stood at the front of the church between the aisles and held each other. The minister was crying on the podium. No one noticed him. There is nothing like the sight of two estranged family in a weepy hug to forget deranged, possessed clerics. Such happy events give us all hope that perhaps forgiveness exists,

that things will end well before we die and go to the big farm in the sky. It helps them forget that they could end up like me and Larooo. Everyone cried some more.

“It just breaks me up inside,” he said as he dug at his eye. “Ah hell.” He sighed, and cried and shrugged his shoulders, because what more could he do. His children had finally given in to a moment of happiness. “Ah, Hell,” he said again.

And then a low calming voice called out over a P.A. system I had not noticed before announced:

Paging Mr. Marcus LeRoux. Monsieur LeRoux please come to the check-in counter.

Marcus stood and looked at me, “Hey, that’s me.” He wiped a few more final tears from his eyes. He was smiling. “It’s me.”

I stood and shook his hand. “Well, it was nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” And he turned towards the door of the church where light was pouring in. Just before the door stood a desk and behind that desk was a beautiful blonde woman in a tight but conservatively cut white uniform lined with golden embroidered wings on the shoulders. He began walking towards them. I followed him.

At the counter, I could hear *The Girl From Ipanema* playing quietly in the background, though I still could not see any speakers. It was a soft soothing sound, the likes of which you might hear during a long elevator ride. I felt relaxed just standing there. The woman at the counter adjusted her pillbox hat and smiled right back. “Mr *LeRoux?*”

“No, I’m Andrews.”

"Oh dear, you don't seem to be on the passenger list." A slight frown formed on her flawless forehead.

"Oh." To say I was not a little disappointed would be lying.

"Get out of the way," Larooo said as he pushed me aside. He slapped a fist against his chest. "I'm LeRoux.

"Well, hello Mr LeRoux."

"Hello to you too."

"I hope your wait was not too much of an inconvenience?" Her mouth was still pressed into a full-toothed smile. It occurred to me that the only time we saw her break the pose was when she was speaking. Even the slightest pause brought with it the smile.

"Ah, no. I just stopped in to my funeral." The smile was infectious. I thought Larooo's face was going to rip in two.

"Isn't that nice."

"Hell, yeah."

A frown entered her brow. She tilted her head slightly, and said in a baby's voice, "Now Mr *LeRoux*, we don't use words like that here. Do we." And she was smiling again.

"Sorry, hon. Old habits die hard. Ha, ha."

"Excuse me," I said, "but I don't suppose there is anyway that maybe, if it would be too much of an effort if you could write me on to the, um, list?" The intonation of my words sloped and dipped like the peaks and valleys of a mountain range. I was desperate and nervous. I would say that my actions now bring embarrassment to me, but they don't. I can think of few things worse than listening to a couple of people prattle on

about a great party, only to be ignored and not invited yourself. That music sure was nice. I wanted a part of it.

For the first time, she lost the pleasant look so omnipresent up to that point. Instead her words delivered with an icy glare. "I'm sorry sir, but no exceptions are allowed." She somehow managed to turn her back on me and focus entirely on Larooo even though I was standing a sneeze away from the man.

"Mr. *LeRoux*, You may now check-in and take your seat on the plane."

"Golly that's great.

"Ho, ho, ho." Her laugh would have served her well in the Cleaver household. The 'Beav' would have looked up to her.

"Am I first class?"

"Why, everyone flies first class, silly." And she took him by the arm and led him, as gently as you might a child, towards the bright white light pulsing at the entrance and then they were gone.

I have rarely felt as empty and alone as I did at that moment, and that includes all the mornings I spent sitting on my couch watching Martha Stewart, munching on Pop Tarts and doughnuts. Perhaps, the funeral would cheer me up, seeing all those people coming together to celebrate the life of someone as loved as Larooo. But when I turned, I realized that the church was empty and they must have left while we carried on our business with the happy stewardess. I turned back to face the door and now the desk and the light was gone. I could see the trees in the churchyards wilting beneath the summer wind.

I remembered all the paper coming out of the typewriter on the desk that morning. For the first time that day, I no longer had any interest in going to the school – Pinsky be damned – that manuscript in the apartment was what held my interest now. Larooo had a purpose, and I did too. I had known this purpose since I was fifteen. I had to finish my novel. So I set off, across the grass and back from where I had come, to look for the apartment and the writings held within.

A funny thing happened on the way back to the apartment. I was perhaps only three or four blocks away from the church, still miles from my destination, when I decided to take a shortcut down a side street. I was tired of University Drive, and I thought I would walk along the dirtier and far more interesting Wyandotte. Perhaps about halfway down this side street – its name eludes me – I saw my building - that is the building I had left that very morning. That is a building I had left on the other side of town. It was a peculiar coincidence, to say the least, but my legs were tired, so I went to the door. The outer security door opened on my touch, even though I was not using a key, and locked tightly behind me. The lobby had the same musty smell it did that morning when I set out on my stroll. Everything looked the same.

I walked upstairs to the second floor. It was the same. The door with the golden *italic 232* was still there and when I turned the handle, the door opened quietly. Everything was the same. There was the couch whereon I had awakened that morning. There was the desk before the large open window. There was the typewriter, silent and motionless. And there too, on the floor in a stack perhaps forty pages longer was the manuscript I had perused that morning.

I picked up the top piece and the ink smudged beneath my thumb. The font was the same; the spacing was the same. It read:

I walked upstairs to the second floor. It was the same. The door with the golden italic 232 was still there and when I turned the handle, the door opened quietly.

It was the same as when I left it. The only difference was that the apartment itself was miles from where it should have been. I could have worried about this. Perhaps I should have worried. But I didn't. I was too tired. The chair to the desk had been pulled slightly away from the desk, inviting me to sit down. Its soft seat was enticing, so I plunked myself down, and looked up at the ceiling. I was tired of reading about myself. And for the first time that day, for the first time since I had passed over, I wanted to write. I needed to write about Minty and Larooo. Looking down at the typewriter, which had since typed out the previous moment's thought, I realized that I could finish my novel. Beside me was a typewriter. I had reams of paper at my disposal, not to mention an unlimited supply of time. I had a roof over my head. And I had ideas.

I knew where I had gone wrong with the novel the last time around. I had a new perspective now. Being dead brought with it an abundance of critical knowledge. Things had changed. I knew what was important in my story and what was not. It was so obvious. Make the Knight a little gorier, play up the whinging of the faculty. Oh, it all came together as I sat in that chair and stared at the ceiling. This was going to be brilliant. It would sell millions of copies.

I began to type, and I have been typing ever since. I like to think that Death sits beside me as I type. I can feel him there, looking over my shoulder, grimacing at the inevitable typos and poor grammar. He whispers in my ear, tries to give me advice on

what I should leave in and what I should take out. He speaks to me - *tap, tap, tap* - when the keys strike the page. He's no longer a pit in my stomach, but my muse.

Oh sure, I take breaks occasionally. Sometimes its good to stop and consider what you've written, do a little navel gazing – still a favourite hobby – and perhaps take a stroll. When I do, I think about Larooo and how he left only after he had resolved the conflict of his children. I hope that Minty could resolve his guilt and crash the gates of that all-important club upstairs. I also hope that the aromatic gentleman pushing his cart up the hill could make it to the top. I don't hold out much hope, but he does have a purpose. Who am I to mock futility? Is finishing my novel any easier than getting a wagon up a hill. After six months of consultations with Professor Pinsky it seemed just as hopeless. Draft after draft, it haunted me then, and yet I continued. Death has been an eye-opener. I have clear purpose, and a better picture of what my story is all about. Sure, the paper has piled up so much that it now takes up two thirds of the room and I can no longer see the couch. But I'm certain that this draft is the one, and the Editor(s)-in-chief upstairs will deem it worthy of publication. I hope to soon see a light under my door, through the piles of papers. And when I open that door, I will see nothing but a light brighter than a bonfire. Brighter than the fluorescent bulb which flickers over my head as I sit here and write this now. The light will come, and then so will the pretty, pleasant stewardess.

Those nights when I wander the town, always tugging a damp collar away from my sweaty neck, I keep my eye out for someone to relate my story, like a clairvoyant with a good hand for transcription. I'm also on the lookout for a Ouija board, or even table tappers. Although the latter are awfully hard to find these days. I met an old

Victorian gent the other night. He too was looking for a little extra-sensory action. He tells me that it used to be easier to find a table of well-heeled ladies and gentlemen looking for a conversation with the dead. He says being dead just ain't what it used to be. Still, I keep looking. I figure my work is far enough along to seek representation. Unfortunately, there aren't a great deal of agents in the Windsor-Essex area. I can't even find a dead one. You'd think they'd feel at home among the dead.

So, I wander the riverfront trails, and Detroit is always there, across the river. I can see it from my room. I can see it right now, as I type these words. The Renaissance Centre looms, the sirens wail. And on some nights, like this one, when the air is calm, and the river is still, I can see the reflection on the water. Detroit seems to float there, otherworldly. As if it's the apparition. Some nights, when the river is so still, the city looks so close that I want to reach out and touch it, grab hold of it. But I can't. The currents are strong, I'm told. Besides, it's just an apparition, like me. So I keep writing, hoping to finish. Hoping that one-day that pleasant stewardess will appear at my door, dripping with light, and ask me to come upstairs. Oh boy.

To the Members of Stephen's Master's Defence Committee:

The graduate secretary tells me that a woman claiming to be in the possession of a magic typewriter was looking for me. She had claimed to have transcribed a novel from the ghost of one of our students. Luckily, I wasn't there and the crazed woman left the manuscript at my door. I have decided to pass it on to you as a curiosity. The loss of Stephen has unnerved us all. This fiery death of an unknown artist will be remembered with the romance and poetry he was never quite able to master in workshop. Why someone would tarnish his memory with such clamorous cacophony is beyond me. At any rate, the material within is hardly Master's material. I would advise you to glance at this offending jumble in the same fashion you might a roadside car wreck, or a transvestite hillbilly on Jerry Springer. You have been warned.

Harold J. Pinsky
B.A., M.A., PhD., DPhil., L.L.B.E.A.N., etc., etc., etc.

VITA AUCTORIS

Stephen Braund was born in Southern Alberta. He currently lives in Toronto. He received his M.A. in the autumn of 2002.