Whispers in the Dark (Original writing, Short stories).

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Whispers in the Dark
by
Melanie Marttila

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submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
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in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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Dedication

This collection of short fiction is dedicated to my parents, David and Sharon Marttila, who always encouraged my sojourns into the world of writing and who made it possible for me to pursue this dream of words, and to my husband, Philip Minaker, who never stopped believing in me.
Whispers in the Dark

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M.L.M.
Whispers in the Dark

Table of Contents

Papier Mâché Heart 1

The Woman with the Beautiful Name 17

In the Dark . 62

Nocturnal Musings . 94

Tonsillitis Blues 125

Fool’s Journey 162

Fox Fur 194

Vita Auctoris 204
Papier Mâché Heart

To hear you talk about it, my dear, you’d think you were the only girl who ever wanted to do something unconventional with your life. I think you’re forgetting who you’re talking to. So your mother doesn’t approve. She never approved of me either, her own sister, and we still talk to each other. You’ll survive. Your mother’s the least of your problems. You’re eleven now. Soon there are going to be boys, and bitches, and teachers from hell, let me tell you. In fact, let me tell you—a story. And I’ll give you the straight goods, you can trust your Auntie D.

Sitting here, watching the plaster harden on my hands, I can remember the exact moment when I knew I was going to be a sculptor. I had decided a year before in grade six that I wanted to be an artist of some sort, but it wasn’t until grade-seven art class that I knew.

Like you, I was a very shy girl, and my classmates didn’t make things any easier on me. They all thought I was weird because I once admitted that I liked playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. They obviously believed that I thought the game was real or that it had some mind-altering effect on me. There were a lot of movies out about then that painted *D&D* as the root of all evil, responsible for mental illness and suicide attempts. I just liked to role-play and I knew the difference between what I did and what those movies showed.

At the time, Wendy Pini’s *Elf Quest* was one of my favourite comics but I had to stop bringing issues of the expensive graphic to school after Mitch Michaels ripped one of them nearly in half and threw it in one of the boys’ toilets. No one ever saw me at the movie theatre either. I preferred to rent the most recent videos of Japanese Animé. For the most part, I was my own girl, but there was one thing that proved to be my downfall: boys.

One boy in particular, Geoff Sinclair, was my main weakness. I—and just about every other girl in my grade—was crazy about Geoff. He was athletic, and easily filled the armour of a knight or the skins of a wolf-rider in my mind. And he was smart, though he played dumb and tough around his friends. He never put up his hand to answer questions in class, but when called upon, he would always give the correct response. His grades
were consistently high and he never had any homework because he always finished it in class. I was a good observer, a good listener, and though I wasn’t in most of Geoff’s classes, I kept up on what all the other girls said about him at recess.

We shared Ms. Armitage’s third period art class every Tuesday and Thursday, though, and I took every opportunity to indulge my daydreams then. In that class, Geoff sat at the far left table, with his hazel-blue eyes and straw-spun-gold hair, in his polo shirt and skin-tight Levi’s, while I mooned away at him from the other side of the room where I sat at another table with the other social misfits.

To my left sat Frank, or as those of us who shared the torture of embarrassing first names knew him, Francis. Tall and lank-haired, Frank talked incessantly about Johann Sebastian Bach and the joys of playing the organ. He was taking lessons—conservatory, grade six—but that didn’t keep the other kids from playing on the double entendre that lurked in ‘playing the organ.’ I’m not sure if Frank ever really caught on, although he did learn to counterfeit a very convincing smirk. That expression never really allowed anyone true satisfaction from teasing him.

On my right was Greg. He was too obese, even in grade seven, to be called cute, but I had melted away all the layers of blubber in my mind and I didn’t think he was that bad. He was our laughing boy. Kept me gasping for breath between fits of giggles all year at any rate, but I think that that was more a function of being Greg than anything else. His plastic face could only have been inherited from a long line of physical comedians, and his impressions of cross-eyed guppies, slack-jawed yokels, and just about anybody else you could name or point out had saved Greg much of the cruelty our classmates could have thrown at him. I wouldn’t have called either Frank or Greg friends though. I didn’t have any of those back then.

Across from me sat Mitch. Behind his back, we all called him Twitch, but we would never have risked saying that to his face. He was unique. Frank and Greg couldn’t seem to get enough of him, but I couldn’t stand the way he invaded me. Just being near that skin-head punk was enough to rob me of any individuality I might have possessed. Everything always had to be done Mitch’s way. Or else. He never carried out any of his threats on us though. Not really. It was just that Frank, Greg, and I were easily cowed.
He was like one of our parents, keeping us in line with promised punishments. I still don’t know why I didn’t stand up to him sooner than I did. Maybe I was afraid that if I didn’t knuckle under to Mitch, I’d be completely on my own, an outcast among outcasts.

Hate may be a strong word in retrospect, but back then I hated Mitch and his prattling about the Dead Milkmen, or worse, the Dead Kennedys. I hated punk rock, but Mitch made it sound like it was the best music on the planet. Maybe hearing about it all the time was beginning to get to me. I didn’t want to like anything that Mitch liked, but still ... My grudging curiosity about Jello Biafra allowed Maria Gainer, the class gossip, to start the rumour that I was in love with Mitch. That bastard? Really. She couldn’t picture me liking Geoff, or maybe she just didn’t want to. Of everyone I think only Mitch suspected, but then, he made it his business to know everything he could about the people he bullied. All the better to keep us in line.

And then there was little old me, conspicuous as the only female in the group, continuously hiding behind my long, mousy hair, and hunching over to conceal both my height and my developing breasts. No one would have guessed that I was only eleven years old. My mom, your grandmother, had assured me that it had been just the same for her when she had been in school, but I sincerely doubted it. For one thing, I was fairly certain that her mother didn’t exercise the option of entering her in school a year earlier than everyone else. Because my birthday was in November, I was popped into kindergarten while I was still three. And I was sure she hadn’t been in class with a shit like Mitch, or worse, in the change room with Maria, a girl with enormous hair and a mouth to match. I’m sure that girl used all the time she spent teasing and spraying and back-combing her brittle blonde locks concocting stories about me. She seemed to know exactly what to say, exactly what would hurt the most.

So there we were, Frank, Greg, Mitch, and I, the outcasts, huddled on the margin of the class. When the other kids merely glanced at us, their expressions lacked the contempt of their more self-conscious stares. I knew because I watched them. Mitch did too, and he gave them the finger every chance he got. Especially if it was Geoff.

There was some strange kind of competition going on between the two of them. I don’t know what it was. Maybe Mitch saw Geoff as his sole obstacle to schoolyard
domination or something, and if he could beat the toughest, then he would be the toughest. Maybe he just needed someone to fight who wouldn't back down. His bullying tactics may have worked on the rest of us misfits, but Geoff was always a bit out of his league. Still Mitch couldn't stop trying; it was some kind of sick obsession.

I saw it every recess. Mitch would use every pea-wit in his brain to make Geoff look the fool, but Geoff deflected Mitch's cunning schemes with an ease that verged on boredom. I saw it every gym class. Mitch would target Geoff in murder-ball, try to tackle him in touch football, throw wild pitches at him in baseball, but Geoff, who would be on both the cross-country running team and the ski team in high school, was quick enough, and lithe enough, to avoid Mitch’s every attempt to embarrass him. I saw it almost every day after school too, when Mitch would try to fight Geoff in a physical showdown to prove who was top dog. I never knew why Mitch kept at it. All he ever got out of it was trouble from his teachers and an imprint of Geoff's Nikes on his butt.

I remember one of their confrontations earlier that fall when it had still been warm enough to wear shorts. I couldn't help but see the two of them, because they practically crashed into me as I rounded the corner of the school.

Mitch, as usual, was the aggressor.

“What's the problem, dick-face? You scared of me or something?”

“Excuse me? I'd have to be ape-shit to be scared of you!”

“Ape-shit and scared!”

“Listen—Twitch—I’m not going for it, so just give it up and go ho—”

And that was all Mitch needed to hear. He had charged the moment Geoff mentioned his forbidden nick-name, caught the other boy around the mid-section and taken him to the ground not even a foot from where I stood, frozen against the brown brick wall of the school. Geoff began to wrestle his way clear of Mitch, but his opponent had already landed a couple of good punches to his gut. The usual after school rabble had gathered to form a cheering section and as punch after punch landed, they crowded around the two combatants, cheering first one and then the other on to victory.

“Kick his ass, Mitch!”

“Geoff! Get up, man!”
“Go! GO! Go! Go! GO!”

To some of the assembled kids, it didn’t matter who won, as long as somebody did before one of the teachers came out to break up the fight. I, however, just wanted the fight to stop. I wanted to go home, get away, but I couldn’t even look away. Fascinated and repelled at the same time, I could only watch Geoff and Mitch beat the piss out of each other.

Geoff had rallied by this time but as he tried to throw Mitch clear of him, his foot slipped. He kicked out to try and regain leverage, but missed Mitch altogether. His foot shot out and hit my knee instead. His next attempt was more successful though and in an instant, Geoff had rolled over and pinned Mitch face down on the ground. He lost no time, kidney-punching Mitch into submission.

It was all over by the time Mr. Carrothers came out, using his most official principal’s voice to disperse the crowd as he made his way to Mitch’s crumpled form.

“Who did this to you son?” He’d asked as he reached toward the boy.

“Don’t... don’t touch me, man. I’m okay... Just get away from me! I’ll take care of myself!” Mr. Carrothers helped Mitch to his feet anyway, then looked at the torn and oozing skin on my knee.

“Delores?” —I’m named after granny Kramer, on my mom’s side—“Delores, are you all right?”

I honestly didn’t hear Mr. Carrothers the first time. My eyes were glued to Geoff’s back as he walked away, just another kid in the crowd. I could see every small movement that betrayed the pain he was in, the bruising that Mitch had given him. I could see the will that kept that pain in check when he turned his head, and his fear of getting caught. I was watching as his eyes dropped toward my knee, as his lips parted in recognition and apology.

“Miss Tucker, are you hurt?” Mr. Carrothers asked again.

“Oh, no...” I stammered as I looked at my knee for the first time. “I just tripped. I’ll get my mom to clean it up for me when I get home.” I smiled what I hoped to be a convincing smile, but I couldn’t be sure.
“Well, just make sure to go straight home then.” Mr. Carrothers didn’t even bother to ask me if I’d seen anything. He knew the futility of trying to sort out a fight that he hadn’t witnessed himself.

After dusting himself off and waving our principal away one final time, Mitch turned his attention to me.

“Could’ve fingered him for me, Tucker. Oh, but I forgot, you’re sweet on the jerk!”

“Mitch…” Mr. Carrothers had disappeared inside. I was on my own.

“Don’t worry Tucker. Don’t think there’s a chance in hell he’d ever notice you anyway, spaz.” Before he turned to leave, Mitch thrust his hand out, palm open, and shoved me back against the wall.

“Fuck you,” he muttered disdainfully as he walked away.

I waited a few minutes before starting for home myself. I waited until I was fairly certain Mitch was well ahead of me.

“What a debacle,” Frank said coming up beside me.

“A what?” I asked.

“A mess,” Greg supplied joining his buddy. “Jeeze Frank, can’t you talk English?”

“But—”


“Yeah.” I smiled. “I get it.”

“You’re bleeding,” Frank pointed out.

“Yeah. It’s okay though.”

“Oh. Okay. I guess I should go then. I’ve got practice.”

“Yeah, got to get the man home so he can ‘play his organ.’” Greg put the usual emphasis on that. I smiled again. Frank smirked.

“See you.”

“Yeah, bye.”

After that day, I tried to stay away from Mitch’s fights with Geoff altogether. I didn’t want to get caught in the middle like that again. That doesn’t mean I didn’t try to
stop them from going at each other like a couple of gladiators. I just wasn’t very effective.

“Let it go,” I once told Mitch in an uncharacteristic burst of opinion. “Or do you enjoy getting trashed?”

“Let it go,” Mitch whined mockingly, giving me the sit-and-rotate finger. “Like you give a shit, Tucker!”

And that exchange was enough, when suitably twisted around, to keep Maria’s rumour-mill grinding away for weeks. The funny thing was, though, that I did care. Not because Mitch was beaten—he’d done enough to me that I felt he deserved that—but because I didn’t like Geoff when he fought. I thought it was beneath him, and that he only did it because it was expected of him. I just didn’t want Mitch to give Geoff any more excuses to disappoint me.

The current project in art class was papier mâché and so the entire room was littered with pigs, elephants, and a menagerie of other vaguely balloon-shaped creatures. I, however, had disdained the use of balloons and paper drinking cups, opting instead to construct the frame for my pièce d’art entirely out of chicken wire.

It was a heart. A human heart. I had built each of the chambers separately and put them together with plaster-soaked paper. It was the only original in the bunch. That was the whole point. I was tired of simply being weird. I could accept being an outcast, but I wanted to be more than that. I wanted the weirdness to count for something. I wanted to be special. To Geoff more than anyone else. Maybe then I could be free of Mitch’s bullying at last. So this was it: my bid for the respect of my peers and the love of my young life. My heart. Mon Coeur.

It wasn’t bad either, a marvel for a grade-seven artist, in Ms. Armitage’s opinion. She even managed to appease Mrs. Warner, the librarian, when I confessed to ruining her anatomy textbook with plaster. And when our projects were ready for grading, mine was in a class all its own. Ms. Armitage called Mitch’s tattooed pig “very interesting,” and told Maria that she’d never seen anyone make a ballet elephant before, but then she turned her attention to the heart.
“You have a keen eye for detail my dear,” she said holding it up and turning it in her hands. “It looks quite lifelike. Lovely work, Miss Tucker.”

“Thank you.” It was the most praise anyone had received that whole year so far and everybody knew it.

I almost smiled when I detected Mitch’s uncomfortable squirm out of the corner of my eye. No one could attribute the sculpture I had titled Mon Coeur to him. Thank God. I caught Greg making a face as he popped his fingers up like rabbit ears behind Mitch’s head. I smiled quickly, and Frank managed a rueful grin when Mitch smacked Greg’s hand away.

But then I saw Geoff, the look of genuine admiration in his eyes, and I suddenly felt sad. His pig was rather lumpy. I’d discovered he wasn’t good at everything after all, and now I was better at something than he was. It was a weird but happy moment for an awkward, freckle-faced kid, but if you’re thinking that was the moment I resolved to be a sculptor, it wasn’t. I was still wrapped up in Ms. Armitage’s praise and Mitch’s discomfort and Geoff’s admiration. I was still too confused to decide a thing.

I was so confused that, after the bell rang for recess, and Ms. Armitage clip-clopped off to the staff lounge, I walked right up to Geoff and offered him Mon Coeur. Just held the thing out in my hands and shove it at him, smiling stupidly the whole time.

What remained of the class was stunned. I imagined Maria’s jaw dropping open somewhere behind me and Greg snickered irrepressibly at the thought that I had just given my heart to Geoff Sinclair. Even Frank was chuckling, a sound I’d never heard before. Geoff looked at me, a little blankly at first, and then at Mon Coeur. Not even the virtues of my sculpture could save me now. Even then I knew it was a stupid gesture, but there was no way I could take it back.

Geoff accepted the full weight of Mon Coeur from my hands and the smile that was playing with the corners of his eyes was kind, but Mitch’s laughter set the fillings in my teeth buzzing. I almost expected what happened next, but even if I had known, I would have been powerless to stop it. That laughter would have paralysed me no matter what.
It seemed to slow Geoff down too. It slowed him enough so that Mitch was able to take advantage of the situation I’d unwittingly offered him, grab Mon Coeur, and throw it to the floor. It broke neatly in two, the left ventricle and auricle from the right. I was still looking at my broken heart when Geoff shouted,


By the time I looked up, Mitch had this You mean you actually like her? expression falling off his face. Geoff didn’t say another word, he just watched Mitch scutt’l’e out of the room with the rest of the class following him. Frank and Greg looked like they wanted to stay, but after Greg’s imitation of Mitch failed to make me smile, Frank—always the more sensible of the two—pulled him away. I sensed Maria tensing as she passed, preparing for her run with the gossip hounds outside and I could tell Geoff was pissed off by the look in his eyes, but that faded to chagrin once Maria left the room. He picked up the pieces of Mon Coeur and said,

“That was so stupid. You know how much they’re going to tease you? And me. God that was stupid.” I nodded dumbly, lost in thought as he continued. “But I like it. It’s a real heart, not one of those valentine things. It’s cool.”

I noticed I was smiling when my cheeks started to cramp, and all he did was walk away, trying to put the pieces back together. That was the moment. Even broken, Mon Coeur had given me a sense of power I’d never had before. Geoff had noticed me. I was special at last.

Geoff got a week’s detention for fighting with Mitch that day, and that was the last of their fights as far as I could tell. I started ignoring Mitch and standing up to him when I had to, but that was okay too. And though he tried to fix my sculpture, Geoff soon grew frustrated with his lumpy plaster patches and never finished the job.

I started pulling back my hair and standing straighter and I realised in short order that Maria’s change room teasing was pure jealousy, because as big as her hair was, she stuffed her training bra.

Geoff invited me out to a movie the following Tuesday.
“I never thought you were so tall,” were the first words out of his mouth after his parents dropped us off at the Famous Players.

“Yeah, well …” I wasn’t sure whether to take it as a compliment or not. With my improved posture, I was two inches taller than he was. I thought briefly of slouching again, but as we walked into the theatre, I caught him trying to look down my top and I figured there were worse things than being an early bloomer.

“Don’t be a perv,” I said, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Sorry,” he said. And then he smiled, and I laughed a little and we made our way to the concession for popcorn and Cokes.

To my surprise, I enjoyed the movie—Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back—but I wasn’t sure about the rest of what happened in the dark.

First, he held my hand for a bit. Just draped his hand over mine on the armrest. That was okay, even though I thought his palm was too sweaty. Then he slipped his arm around my shoulders and kind of leaned into me. I thought that was weird. And in the theatre, with the armrest in between us, it was a little uncomfortable. Then, during the scene where Han and Leia are trapped on the asteroid and end up kissing, Geoff turned to me and whispered Han’s lines in my ear.

“I’m not a nice man …” I turned to look at him, and in the flickering lights of the movie, I thought he looked scared. Then he kissed me. He pressed his lips into mine and bumped my nose with his and I thought, *What does he think he’s doing?* I never closed my eyes, and when he opened his, he looked at me for a second, and then flopped back into his seat and let me be for the rest of the movie. When we got out, I pulled him aside.

“Sorry about the kiss. I, uh, just never, um, you know, did it before.”

“That’s okay. Listen, um, Delores, you’re a nice girl, but …”

“I’m too nice.” I sighed.

“No!” He seemed surprised. “You’re too tall.”

He smiled, I laughed a little, and we went to find his parents’ car.

Geoff never asked me out again, but he talked to me at school a little now, and I went back to see The Empire Strikes Back three more times. I managed to con Greg and Frank into going with me. Greg emerged from the theatre the first time spouting Yoda’s
canned wisdom, and Frank gave a full summary and critique of the score. By the time my
dad dropped them off, the three of us forged a friendship that was based on more than our
mutual weirdness or our common bond as victims of Mitch’s bullying. We liked films, and
that was something we could talk about without feeling bad. Somehow, in just a few
weeks, my life had taken on a whole new form.

By the end of the semester, I’d given up on ever seeing my sculpture again when it
suddenly showed up in my locker, neatly patched and repainted. The attached note read
“I’m sorry.”

At first, I couldn’t figure out who’d done it. It couldn’t have been Geoff, the
patching was too smooth for his handiwork. So next art class I asked Greg if he knew
who’d mended Mon Coeur.

“Well, uh …”

“Was it you?” I misread his hesitation.

“No, uh …”

“Frank then?” I smiled at Frank hopefully.

“N-no. Not me,” Frank said nervously.

“Who then? Come on you guys. I know you know. Just tell me.” They both
looked down. Then I thought about Mitch. Could it be? I looked at him then. Really
saw him for the first time in weeks, maybe ever. Looked him right in the eyes. He looked
lonely.

“Mitch?” But then he got mad.

“Jesus Christ, Tucker! For someone so smart, you’re really dumb.” Mitch
slammed down his books, got up and left the room, Ms. Armitage shouting after him
down the hall.

“Mr. Michaels! You haven’t asked permission to leave the class! Mr. Michaels!”

And suddenly, things started to make sense.

Mitch liked me.

I met Ms. Armitage in the hall.

“May I go to the washroom please?” She looked at me strangely for a second.

“Certainly Miss Tucker. But don’t dally!” I hurried to catch up to Mitch.
“Fuck off, Tucker.”

“No. We have to talk.”

“Fine then. You’ll have to talk to me in the can.” He walked into the boys’ washroom.

“I’ll get in trouble!” I hissed.

“Suit yourself?” Mitch called from inside. I checked the halls quickly and followed him in. He was sitting against the radiator, hands in the pockets of his army pants. No one else was in there. “So?” He prompted.

“So what’s your problem?” I demanded.

Mitch pushed himself away from the radiator and slammed both hands into my shoulders. I rebounded like a pinball and crashed into the wall, striking my elbow on one of the urinals.

“What’s yours?” He shot back.

“I’m talking to a jerk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mitch moved toward me again and I scrambled around the urinals to get out of his way.

“What it sounds like.” I kept backing toward the door. “Why are you so mean? I thought you liked me.”

“Duh! Finally figured it out, eh?” He took another step toward me.

“Well, duh yourself!” I rallied, started advancing on Mitch. Amazingly, he backed off. “You don’t push friends around. You don’t bully them. If you treated your friends better maybe you’d have more of them.” He flipped me the finger and ducked into one of the stalls. I decided to push my luck. There was something I was curious about.

“How’d you get the heart?”

“Geoff brought it in for me.”

“What?” I kicked the door of the stall, but Mitch had locked it.

“Yeah. I told him I’d fix it. He said ‘sure.’ I figured since you didn’t go out with him again—”

“—you’d have a chance?”

“Well, yeah.”
“I gotta go.” I stormed all the way back to class. Why didn’t he just ask me out in the first place? Why all this bullshit? Why did Mitch like me at all? All this fighting Geoff shit started long before I made the heart, pulled my hair back, stood up straighter. Did Mon Coeur, or my transformation, mean anything? Did he really like the weird mousy sloucher? Did he just want someone he could push around? And who could I talk to about any of this? Greg or Frank? No. I needed a girlfriend. I needed someone I could trust. I needed Mom.

That evening, after school, Mom made us hot chocolate as I tried to explain.

“So do you still like Geoff?” She asked me when I was done.

“Yes. But not in the way I thought. I don’t think we’re interested in the same things.” I hadn’t told her about the kiss.

“And what about Mitch?”

“He’s been so mean to me. And then he does something nice. I don’t know.”

“Can I see the heart?” I nodded, brought it out of my nap sack. “Honey! This is amazing! I didn’t know you were so talented! We’ll have to show your father when he gets home. He’ll be so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I smiled like a geek and Mom brought us some more hot chocolate.

“So. Where did it break?” I showed her. “Well, it looks like he was very careful fixing it.”

“But what does that mean?”

“It probably means he’s sorry.”

“That doesn’t help,” I sighed. “Mom, have you noticed anything different about me lately?”

“Yes. You’re paying more attention to the way you look, but that usually happens when young girls start to get interested in boys. It happened with your sister.”

“But have I changed?”

“I wouldn’t say that, dear. You just seem to be more happy being yourself.”

“So why do I want to mess all that up with boys?”
"If you’re not sure about boys yet, why don’t you give it some time? Just try
being friends for a while. You’ve just turned twelve. Give yourself a break.”

Mom was a wise woman.

The next day at recess, I trudged through the snow toward Mitch, Greg, and
Frank.

“What do you want, Tucker?” Mitch sneered.

“Listen,” I said, poking a floppy mitten at him. “You want to be friends? Fine, but
you have to stop being such a dick head.” Greg and Frank laughed. Mitch’s sneer
stretched into a smile.

“Exsqueeze me? Moi? A dick head?”

“The biggest one around.” I grabbed a handful of snow and formed it into a ball.

“I’m serious. If you don’t start being nice, it’s war.”

“Hey! I fixed the damn heart! What else do you want?” First Greg, and then
Frank followed my lead, until we each had two snowballs at the ready.

“Don’t you fucking dare—” He was cut off as my first snowball hit him. “You
bitch!”

I leapt over a snow bank and prepared to confront Mitch on the field of combat for
the first time in my life. I was scared shitless. Frank and Greg followed me and took up
positions on my flanks—on either side. Mitch tried to gather his own snowballs, tried to
get us back, but with the three of us pelting him constantly, it was no use.

So he changed tactics, and charged.

Mitch didn’t go for Frank or Greg though. He’d have time to deal with them later.
He roared and ran straight at me, jumped the snow bank, and tackled me full force. I got
the wind knocked out of me, and as I gasped to try and get some air, Mitch crammed
handful after handful of snow down my jacket. He was laughing, trying to give me a ‘face
wash,’ when Frank and Greg finally hauled him off me. Since we were behind a snow
bank, the teacher on recess duty hadn’t seen what happened.

“Are you okay, D?” Frank asked. He helped me up and I saw that Greg was
sitting on Mitch to keep him pinned.

“Get off me, you fat fuck!” Mitch shouted at Greg.
“What did you call me?” In an instant, Greg flushed, red as a stop sign.


Greg was angry. We’d never seen that before.

“Oh,” Greg said calmly. “In that case …” He moved as if to get up off Mitch, but then dropped back onto him again. The air rushed out of Mitch’s lungs with an explosive grunt. His eyes bulged out of his head.

“Don’t call me that again!” Greg said. “Maybe I’m fat, but I can crush you.”

He did get up from Mitch then.

“And you don’t want to know what I’ll do if you push me like that again.”

“Hear that, Mitch?” I asked him as he struggled to his feet. “We’re not going to take your shit anymore. None of us. Either you’re our friend, or you’re our enemy.”

“Fuck youse all then!” Mitch shouted and trotted back toward the school.

So, for a while, Mitch became the enemy. He found out what it was like to be alone, truly alone, against the world, or at least against the rest of us kids. But he did fix Mon Coeur, and it wasn’t long before he was forced to make peace. He never really stopped being an asshole though, but that was Mitch.

By the time we went to high school, we were an inseparable gang. We shared everything, my Japanese Animation, Frank’s classical music, Greg’s collection of Abbott and Costello videos, even Mitch’s punk rock music.

I started to enter my sculptures in student shows. Frank started performing organ at the Kiwanis festivals, and Greg went into student politics. Mitch found his niche working for the student newspaper. He’d straightened out a bit by then. He let his hair grow back in and started wearing Levi’s. He had an unexpected talent for photography too, which gave us a little more to talk about.

He’d changed enough that when I felt I was ready to kiss a boy again, it was Mitch I kissed. Surprised? I was too, believe me. I was so used to thinking of him as a friend by then that it never occurred to me that we could have been anything else. I was wrong about that.

But, as you well know, my dear, you have no Uncle Mitch. No uncle anyone, in fact, and that’s the way I like it. When you make your papier mâché heart, or whatever it
is you create or do that makes you certain you have set you feet to the artist’s path, then you will begin to understand that you must be brave. That path, any path you choose, requires difficult decisions, difficult choices, and to disappoint your mother may be the least of your concerns then. Because your mother will always love you, no matter what she says and how many times you argue. She just wants to protect you from the difficulties she’s seen me through over the years.

It’s the people you choose to have in your life that are important. If you’re not strong, those people can either make you, or break you, or both.

This is just my story though. These are just words. In a year, you probably won’t remember most of what I’ve just told you. You’ll have to learn the truth of the artist’s life for yourself. It might help, though, if you have something physical to help you remember. So I want you to have Mon Coeur. It can be your touchstone, or just a silly present from your Auntie D. Like everything else, it’s your choice.

Be brave, my dear.
The Woman with the Beautiful Name

I have a habit of falling for women with beautiful names.
Names as beautiful as they are.
Names like bullets.
Names that catch me in the glare of their headlights and run me over.
And I am dead. Cold on the slab, laid out on the deal, awaiting cleansing, eviscerating, embalming, the afterlife like some dead Egyptian queen. But none of it comes, so instead, I find myself writing. Writing the name, the beauty, the poem. Finding the courage in purgatory and ghost writing to tell them at last how I've written myself into their lives, and how I have to turn around and write myself out again. Suicide with a paper cut. There's ink all over the place, and I'll never wash it all off my hands.
That's what I thought, love after love, until I learned who the woman with the beautiful name really was.
The first time I fell in love was the first day of school in grade three. I walked into class late—a rebel even then—and was instantly burned by the silver fire that danced in her black hair. I was like a moth, drawn to the flame of her. And when she turned around, the moon of her face stole the breath from me. Then the sky in her eyes gave it back. Attendance was the last straw, and with the sound of her name, I went completely insane.

Siobhan,
Your hair takes the light and makes it shine back blue.
That's why you have so much light inside of you.
—From the Shadow three seats back.
That was my first poem, if you want to call it that, the poem I wrote for the dark/bright girl. I wanted so badly to be her shadow, and I was, for a while.
"Like this, Serena!"
"But it's not spelled like it sounds!" We'd been debating the spelling of “xylophone.” She'd written it with a “z” and an “f.” I'd thought “z” and “ph,” but it took
a trip to the teacher to settle our argument. X-Y-L-O-P-H-O-N-E. We were both wrong, and to Siobhan’s way of thinking, that was the greatest injustice of all.

"Just like your name." I, however, couldn’t have cared less. The flaming black hair and the moon-face made a good trap. This moth was happily caught. And pinned, still wriggling, to the card.

"Yeah, but my name’s that way 'cause it's Irish."

"You’re Irish?"

"Yup!"

"You don’t sound Irish . . ."

"I was too young when we moved, but you should hear my Dad!"

"Yeah? So you gonna invite me over after school to hear?"

So, the following afternoon I sat in her living room, listening to the voice, the words of a man who loved his little girl. It was clear, even to my young eyes, that Siobhan adored her father too. She didn't mind at all that I sat there and talked to him for almost the whole visit. She wasn't jealous of the attention I supposedly gave him, rather she seemed to enjoy watching us together. But all I asked James about was his beautiful daughter, which neither of them seemed to mind.

The first year of my friendship with Siobhan was made of weekend sleepovers filled with secrets. It was made of Saturday afternoons swimming at the university pool. It was made of backyard camping in the summer, and worlds made from the whole cloth of our imaginations.

Each night we slept together in the same bed, I would wake and watch Siobhan sleep. Watch her mouth as it fell softly open. Touch her hair as it trailed across the pillow, dark/bright even in the dim glow of the night-light. Sometimes she would open her eyes and smile at me, and then we would talk quietly in the night about dreams and unicorns and Luke Skywalker.

When our parents took us to the Laurentian Olympic Gold Pool, I would watch unabashedly as Siobhan changed, challenged her to go naked with me into the sauna. Our young bodies were mirrors of one another, smooth, unformed, and beautiful.
I watched her, in those days, with the innocence of a curious child. I had no idea what sex was other than something parents did to make babies, and the secret meetings we would have in school, separate from the boys, to talk of parts and function. Things to giggle about when thought of, but never real. I didn’t even know what the word ‘fuck’ referred to, why it was a bad word. It was just something Siobhan and I whispered to each other, to hear the sound of the word, to try to understand its nature. But we failed to crack the code, reveal the secret of the word. Then we laughed about it and tried again.

In the summer, our backyard camping trips were fraught with adventure: snakes and bears and wolves and bank robbers fleeing through the woods would all find our tent, with the two of us huddled inside. Inevitably, I would charge out and challenge whatever threatened us at the moment. I would chase snakes, wrestle bears, stare down wolves, but I would always be captured by the bank robbers, dragged off into the trees and Siobhan would have to rescue me, coming with the police, or some other imagined cavalry to save the day.

Once I found a real garter snake. I was supposed to be taming a wolf to be our pet.

“Siobhan!” I called, as I chased the poor thing about the lawn. “I found a real one!”

“A real what?” She asked emerging from the tent.

“Got it!” I’d grabbed the little snake about half way down its body. It wriggled in my grasp, wrapped its tail around my fist. I whirled and presented my prize. “A snake!”

Siobhan’s scream drowned out my triumphant pronouncement. She turned and ran into the house. The snake was trying to bite me with its toothless mouth. I let it drop and followed Siobhan in wondering why a real snake would be any more frightening than an imagined one. That night, we slept indoors, and when Siobhan opened her eyes in the dark, I saw the fear in them.

“It was just a snake,” I whispered, repeating the words for the thousandth time that night. She just closed her eyes again and turned her back to me. I waited until her breathing announced that she was asleep again.
“Snake,” I said in the darkness. “Snake.” But I could not find Siobhan’s fear in the word. “Snake,” I repeated. “Snake. Snake.” Until Siobhan whimpered in her sleep. Then I let the word go, curled up, my back toward hers, and dreamed of small, wriggling, nameless fears until dawn.

Siobhan was an artist, and we made a good pair. She would draw a picture, and I would write a story about it, or I would write a story, and she would draw pictures for it. But I began to notice that all her pictures were of smiling people and unicorns, even if my stories were sad or scary. The memory of the snake lay between us now, like a squiggly line that neither of us would cross. I searched the shadows for fears to confront and Siobhan searched for ways to hide from her shadows.

Eventually, I stopped showing her my horror stories and tragedies and she began drawing her own pictures that had nothing to do with me. When she moved away in the middle of grade five though, I cried. She was my only friend. But now I had a new fear to face: loneliness. I looked for kindred spirits in the other children, but none of them could compare to Siobhan. They were never invited home after school. Never saw my stories. They never slept over. But I would talk to them in class, play with them at recess. Their games, not mine. And loneliness didn’t seem like such a bad thing for a while.

I went to Lily Creek, found a water snake in Siobhan’s honour. I threw stones to direct it back to the shore and caught it, sunk to my knees in the mud. It was bigger than the garter snake had been, slipperier because of the water. I was startled when I saw the pink flash of its mouth, but I didn’t let go. The bony ridges in its mouth broke my flesh. It was only frightened though, and I could handle a little pain.

I slipped my hand up further along the snake, behind its head so it couldn’t bite me again. It writhed and coiled itself around my arm, stuck its tongue out to ‘smell’ me, but I held on, stroked its head with my finger until it seemed to calm down. It took a long time.

The water in the creek was spring-fed and icy cold. My ankles were numb and I could barely feel the squish of the mud in my shoes. I’d have to throw them out when I got home. My mom would be worried about a cold, or worse, ‘pee-neumonia,’ as she always said it. There was always a price to be paid.
This was what Siobhan feared. Real snakes bite. It took me a while to understand, because I never thought they wouldn't. To me, the fun had always been in conquering the danger. The claws and teeth of the bear, the knives of the kidnappers. My imagination didn't make things safe, it only made me more powerful than the danger to be faced.

I dropped the snake and watched it swim away, dark/bright through the water.

When puberty hit, so did Kiriditse. She was the only black girl in my grade nine homeroom. And there hadn't been any black children at my small public school at all. The fascination was deep and instant.

Her hair was frizzy and cut close to her head. Later, Kiriditse would teach me to braid her hair in short, stubby braids. Braids that would lengthen over the years into a lovely set of corn-rows, and then dreadlocks. She had a fine sprinkling of acne across her cheek's too, but my naïve eyes saw it as some exotic tribal marking.

It was her soft-spoken, polite strength, and her practised, dancer's grace that first attracted me to Kiriditse. And of course, her name. Kiriditse. It was foreign, beautiful, and had a rhythm all its own. A rhythm I saw in every move she made. A rhythm I wanted to learn to dance to.

And so "May I sit here?" became "How are you?" became "Hey Kiri!" became no greeting at all, since the time we were apart seemed insignificant compared to the time we spent together.

She told me one day that her father had been from Guyana, and had come to Canada to work, when he met her mother. A year later, when his work visa expired, he left her, pregnant with Kiri, to return home to his wife. Kiri's mother never spoke his name, had no pictures of the man, and so Kiri never new him. Her mother's parents had returned to Jamaica when her grandfather retired, and every year Kiri spent her Christmas vacation with them. She had smoked marijuana twice while there, and now smoked cigarettes secretly in defiance of her mother. It was bad for the dancing.

"What are you always scribbling there, in that book of yours?" She asked one afternoon as we shared a cigarette behind the school. I didn't inhale.

"Homework."
“Not the green book, girl. The purple one.”

“Oh. That one.”

“Yes, Serena. That one. What you always writing in there?”

“Nothing.” It was my journal, of course, but I wasn’t interested in sharing any of my stories with her. Nor any of the poetry I’d written about her. That would have been too intimate then. Too reminiscent of Siobhan. I wasn’t ready to risk losing another friendship. I wasn’t ready to expose anyone else to my imagination. Or to lay my imagination bare to anyone else’s judgement.

“Well, it’s an awful lot of nothing, if you ask me.” She smiled, but didn’t say anything more about my journal, which was probably why I did share it with her. Eventually. It only took me a year or so. But then I learned something else about Kiri. She had a feel for words, though it never translated into a good grade in English. She could read my poetry and tell me which words didn’t fit.

“You use too many words there, girl,” she’d say. “They get in the way. I can’t see what you’re writing about.” When the words fit though, she’d get me to read my poems to her. She’d close her eyes and I’d read.

Leaves remind me of
you under the moonlight, and
fingertips on fire.

Sunlight reveals how
even your perfect hair slips,
suffers broken strands.

It is your halo
you say, as if it could stop
the leaves from falling.

She’d sigh after I read and I knew that my imagination was safe with her.
In return for my words, Kiri tried to share her dancing with me, but I was too clumsy. She did manage to teach me how thoughts could be translated into movement though. By example mostly. When she had a choreography assignment for her dance lessons, Kiri would use my poems, dance them into life with her body. Later, she would get me to try with limited success. We ended up compromising. My body translated the words into sound with more grace, and the way I held my head, my hands, the way I moved my hips when I read was dance enough for Kiri. When we were done, she hugged me.

"Ah," she said. "Now that was beautiful." And we laughed.

When I found myself contemplating her generous lips, or her white teeth, her elegant hands, or the muscles of her body, when I found myself imagining my lips and fingers on her dark flesh, I tried to teach myself not to give expression to certain thoughts. There was no point. Kiri had discovered boys, or rather they had discovered Kiri, long before I discovered that I loved her. But these secret thoughts still found their way onto the page. And when I saw them there, I began to understand my love for women.

"Flesh mirrors flesh, and love in kind ..." I was reading one of my poems to Kiri and I had to stop. It was so obvious, I thought I had to confess.

"Don’t stop now, girl." Kiri opened her eyes. I sat down. Put my head in my hands, shielding me from her reaction.

"Kiri ... I-I think I love you."

"Well I love you too."

"No. Not that way. Not just that way."

"Oh."

I pushed the palms of my hands into my eyes. This was it. I could feel a cold autumn wind in her pause. Shame. Fear. Here is what I didn’t want to face. Being alone again. Because of what I was. Because I delved into the shadows where other people don’t want to go. Because I refused to hide from my fears for long.

"Do you mean ... you feel ... that way .... You mean you’re attracted to me?"

She asked.
"Yes," I told her. Raised my head to watch her face. Confusion. Pain. "I think you’re pretty. I think I love you. But you’re my friend, Kiri. You have a boyfriend. I would never think of pushing my feelings on you. I don’t want to make you afraid of me. I would never be jealous of Mark. Never try to break you up." I was seeing stars now. Breathing fast, trying to say everything before she could speak again. "You’re my friend, Kiri. I just want you to know what’s happening to me. I can’t talk about this to anyone else. I just—" I closed my eyes. Couldn’t look at her anymore.

"It’s okay, girl." I could feel her hand on my shoulder, hesitant, gentle, warm. I shuddered.

"Don’t cry, Serena." She sat down beside me on the couch. "It’s okay. I’m still your friend. It’s just weird, that’s all."

"I’m sorry, Kiri." I couldn’t say anything more. Sobs had taken over. Great, wracking things that stopped up my chest and pushed sound from me in squeaks and moans. Help me. Help me. Help me. I thought. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts so much.

Because I knew things would never be the same between Kiri and me, and they weren’t. We pretended for a while, but Kiri was nervous around me now, and I couldn’t blame her, because I did love her. I even tried not to write about her, but she was there, in the words, nonetheless. And the words betrayed me every time. She couldn’t use my poems for dance anymore. Not now that she knew that she was at the heart of every one of them.

The next year, Kiri left to study dance at a special school in Toronto and I dropped out of high school altogether. I got a job at Coles as a cashier and moved into a one-room basement apartment on my own. My mother never understood why I was so angry. Why I was so sad. I never told them what happened between Kiri and me, nor what I confessed to her. That fall, the leaves in Bell Park were brilliant. Stunned my heart into silence and my pen into motion. I wanted time to stand still. I wanted the leaves to stay, just like I wished Kiri could have stayed. But in the end, time moved on. Kiri was gone, and, one by one, the leaves fell.

The loneliness returned. And this time, without the ready-made community of high school to draw from, I no longer had even acquaintances to dull my emotional edges.
My co-workers were decent people, but most of them were older than me, engaged, married, some even with children. Louise, the manager, was an older woman, and had two boys my age with whom she was continuously trying to set me up. Derek, the assistant manager and the only male employee there, had worked in Coles since he was fourteen. He graduated from high school the year before, and had his eyes set on corporate stooge-hood as soon as something opened up in the upper echelon.

I couldn’t relate to one of them on more than a casual level, nor could they understand my angsting, most of them having survived their teen-aged years and then conveniently forgotten them. They now held the opinion that high school was a wonderful adventure. I believed they were practising for the day when they would tell their children, as my mother had told me, that their teen-aged years would be among the best of their lives. Louise was too involved in the problems of her own boys to offer me more than a nod and a sympathetic smile, and Derek firmly contended that he’d had no problems in high school. His condescending offer to lend an ear to mine was as firmly refused.

As for making any connections with other homosexuals, I was frustrated by meetings held in remote community centres to which I had no easy access. The in-town gatherings often consisted of protests and vigils, which were less social functions than forums for opinion and debate.

Even at the Gay Coffee-House, hosted by one of the local cafés the first Sunday afternoon of every month, there were no simple conversations. Greetings and introductions were often followed by intrusive questions. So, what do you think about the legislation on same-sex marriages? What’s your position on the lack of benefits for gay spouses? … violence against homosexuals? … discrimination in the workplace? Everyone had his or her cause and if you didn’t share it, the conversation would be ended, quickly, quietly, and terribly politely, but it would be ended nonetheless and the person would move on to find someone more like-minded. Everyone was looking for a mirror in which to see the reflection of his or her own political agenda.

And heaven forbid you should have no opinion at all, no exposure to the burning issues at hand. What world were you living in? Where had you been for the last fifteen years? Didn’t you read the paper, watch the news? Then the questions might become
suspicious. Why haven't I seen you before? Why weren't you at the last vigil/protest? Why didn't you come out to the last meeting of Gays on the Rock?

Cliqués were well established, recruiters harassed newbies into membership or activism. There was only so much interrogation I could handle before I withdrew entirely.

At the end of another year, I was eighteen, with all the angst and anger of my traumatic teens stored up inside me. By small, steady steps, I'd risen in the Coles hierarchy and was now in charge of ordering paperbacks. Poetry contests entered and won yielded associated readings of my poetry and a few, scattered publications in small, but respected journals. No money though, just years of subscriptions to poetry magazines and sudden inclusion in Internet poetry newsletters and listserves. I didn't even have a computer of my own to keep up with them. Just time rented on a machine in the back room of a café and printing paid for by the sheet. Free email through the miracle of Microsoft. I was well respected at work and beginning to build a reputation for myself as a poet, but I was without friends and without the hope of ever finding any.

Tamami was an exchange student from Japan, studying English and French at the University. I met her through the English Literature Society's Writers' Circle where I often gave readings of my poetry.

The first night, she made the circuit of the room, feeding like a butterfly on every smiling face and every extended hand.

"You read very well, Serena," she said to me, eyes fluttering, alternating between shy deference and friendly contact.

"Thank you."

"My name is Tamami Takehashi. I am an exchange student from Japan."

"Oh?" Her name was a kind of poetry in itself. Falling from her broad mouth, floating on whispery wings, straight to my heart. "What program?"

"English and French," she said smiling. "I'm going to be a teacher when I return. Your poetry is very good. Are you a student here?"

"No." I faltered. "I never finished high school."

"That's too bad." She seemed disappointed, but not surprised. She didn't jump to any conclusions. Not like some of the other students here. Tamami didn't judge me by
the choices I had made. "I won't see you in any of my classes. Maybe we could meet for coffee sometime and discuss writing and poetry and Canada."

"That would be nice." She took out a pen and opened her already ink-stained hand upon which she wrote my phone number.

She giggled a little and then cupped my hand in hers and wrote her name and telephone number in precise characters on my skin. Then she drifted away from me, off to make more friends and collect more numbers on her palm.

I didn't wash my hand until I found the courage to call her a couple of days later. We met for coffee, which was actually tea in her case; and before an hour had passed, our friendship was written in indelible ink.

"I love Canada," she said. "In the aeroplane I had a window seat. I looked down the whole way when there weren't any clouds, and your country is so big! An ocean of land! And I like your cities too. They are so flat and spread out. Almost everyone has their own house and their own garden. Maybe that's why Canadian poetry is so lovely. There's so much space in it. You have the space out here." She gestured around her, then pointed to her head and finally to her heart "So you have the space in here."

I'd never thought of poetry in terms of space before. Space to live, space to think, space to feel.

"So how long have you been in Canada?"

"Not long. I just got here after your Labour Day, so only three weeks."

"And how do you like it so far?"

"It's great! I've met so many nice people here. I'm having so much fun."

That afternoon, I gave Tamami a walking tour of downtown. I showed her the stores and Memorial Park. She threw loonies in the guitar case of the busker on Durham St. and then skipped and danced back to the bus stop singing the Barenaked Ladies song the busker had been playing.

"This is me in grade nine, baby. Yeah, this is me in grade nine!"

Tamami couldn't sing worth beans, but she was so happy I had to join in.

Other poetry nights came and went, and over glasses of white wine, I discovered her quiet rebellions. Swearing, getting drunk, even physical expressions of emotion, these
things were frowned upon in her culture. But she decided to satisfy her appetites while she could, here in Canada, because when she returned home, she would return to a life of discipline and restraint. She would return to her fiancée and the teaching job that was waiting for her in the same city she’d lived in all her life until now. There was no question of it for her. Tamami’s fatalism and resultant hedonism drew me in. Her kindness opened me, her trust amazed me, and her simple beauty enslaved me.

Her broad face was never sad. She made a smile look like it belonged on her lips alone. And I was no match for her brown eyes. Keen, intelligent, they missed nothing. Her black hair drew the light into it. Made it part of her darkness. And her body, effortlessly slim. Not muscular like Kiri. She was long-wasted, and her stomach was slightly rounded. I wanted to rest my cheek against it and feel her breathe.

“You don’t like boys, do you?” She asked me one day. I sputtered, wide-eyed, looked around to see if anyone heard her.

“What do you mean?” I was off-centre. Panicked. I didn’t think I was so obvious.

“You don’t like boys.” She was smiling, but had lowered her voice to a whisper to calm me.

“What makes you think that?”

“It’s just a feeling.”

“Well, I don’t know where you got that from.”

“So you’re not gay?” I didn’t know how to answer her. Tamami had become such a good friend. I now spent more of my off-hours on campus, had coffee with her between classes. We talked about everything: school, parents, books, work, Canada, Japan, politics, economy. She’d opened my eyes to things I didn’t think I’d cared about. I trusted her. And when my heart fell back down into my chest, I found my voice.

“Well, yes, I am. I just don’t make it public often. It tends to get me into trouble.” I watched her eyes as I told her. No confusion. No rejection. It was almost too good to be true. But that was Tamami.
"No trouble here. I think it's very interesting, actually. Part of my education here. It's not like there aren't any homosexuals in Japan, but there's a lot of stigma attached to it. Being gay isn't polite. It's not talked about. At all."

My relief was intense. Finally, here was someone I could talk to, share my feelings with. I didn't have to pretend around Tamami like I had to at work. She seemed to accept me completely. Asked me the most outrageous questions. Who did I think was hot? Would I have sex on campus? Where? In someone's office? In the elevator? Would I proposition this girl or that on a dare? I think I was terribly disappointing. Not very exciting at all. There was no living vicariously through my sex life. I didn't have one. But I was reluctant to explain to her that I was still a virgin. In all other respects, we discussed sex with candour.

"You know," she said one night in her dorm room after a reading, "You Canadians amaze me. You believe anything. That guy tonight. He wanted to have sex with me because he heard that Japanese women are very skilled. That we practice on each other before we take a man. That's history. It's true, sex isn't such a taboo topic in private, between mother and daughter, or girlfriends, or husband and wife, but it's not polite. We don't even hug in public, let alone practice sex in private." She laughed. "I'm not some courtesan or Geisha, you know."

"So what did you tell him?"

"I told him I would be too much for him." She laughed again. "You saw. I started coming on to him. Kissed him right there in front of everybody. He got embarrassed. I don't think it's so different here than at home."

"Yeah." I sat down on her bed. "I guess we just talk the talk."

"You know, I never kissed a man in public before," Tamami whispered. "It was exciting!" She smiled.

"Everyone's going to think you're a slut now, though. They're going to believe you're a Geisha or something."

"Let them. I don't care. I have so many friends here. They know me. I show them who I am. That's all that counts. I don't care what some jerk thinks of me, or what
he tells his buddies. I don’t want to know those kinds of people. I don’t want to be friends with them.”

But Tamami was my friend. Me, a high school drop-out with a dead-end job. She got angry with me whenever I mentioned my lack of education.

“You have something that most people in university lack, Serena. You have passion. It comes out in your poetry. That’s one of the things I like about you. You’re not like every other student here. You’re self-directed. You’ve chosen your own destiny. Don’t worry about book learning. I can teach you something if you like.”

She taught me so much. She talked about Chaucer and Shakespeare with a love for the language I’d never heard before. She gave me good books to read. Poetry and fiction. The Brontës, Ondaantje and Atwood, Twain and Dostoyevsky. She even taught me a little Japanese.

“You have to whisper it. You can’t say it out loud,” She told me. “Astaru. I love you.”

“Ash-tah-roo,” I repeated.
“Astaru.”
“I love you,” I whispered. And when Tamami kissed me, I practically fell down.
“Now you teach me,” she said. “Teach me what it’s like to love another woman.”
“But I’ve never—”
“Never?”
“No.” Tamami didn’t hesitate for a moment.
“Then we’ll learn together.”

I felt suddenly afraid of her touch, she who was always touching, hugging, always friendly, always warm. I stepped back, but the room was small and I found myself suddenly against the wall. I leaned into it for support as Tamami moved closer to me, slowly, like I was a frightened animal.

The thought that this was a mistake got lost in the translation of the moment. I couldn’t say no. I wanted this so badly. I felt stupid and weak.

Tamami kept her hands at her sides, leaning in for a kiss so that our lips alone touched. I closed my eyes when I felt her breath, and when her broad mouth touched
mine again, there was nothing but that gentle touch. I tilted my head back slightly as she sucked my lower lip into her mouth. With her hands still at her sides and mine gripping the wall at my back, we slid into a full kiss, her tongue tentatively exploring, as if she expected a woman’s kiss to be different from a man’s.

I was suffocating under the weight of lips and tongues and still she did not touch me. A tear slid down my cheek and Tamami paused to lick it from my skin. She smelled like a spring rain, and tasted like the sun. I was effectively disabled, synapses firing randomly, little explosions of sensation behind my closed eyelids. And still she did not touch me.

I pushed myself away from the wall and into her kiss. Tamami lifted her hands then, but kept them inches away from me. I could feel the warmth of them through my clothes, on my arms, over my breasts, over my belly. There was something reverent there, in the absence of fingers on flesh, but I could not match her intensity. I could not bear it.

So my touch was the first, my hands snaking up from her long waist, under her shirt, flat against the skin of her back. That touch was a relief, and a release. I slid down her body until I was kneeling, arms around her hips, head against the moon of her stomach.

It wasn’t sex that first time. Fumbling and clumsy as it was, it was worship, and in that one night, I became a zealot.

But Tamami wasn’t a lesbian. She was just curious, and the rational part of me tried to be heard above all the hearts and flowers floating around in my head. She loved me as a friend and nothing more. It was useless. Doomed from the start. Tamami was leaving for Japan at the end of summer.

It was March then, and I was possessed of a tunnel vision born of my infatuation. My fanaticism paved the way for obsession. My poetry suffered. It was filled with Tamami’s features, with her body, her gently curving stomach. It was filled with my child-like initiation into love-making. That first orgasm with Tamami, offered by her broad mouth and her slender fingers. Her first with me, still on the tip of my tongue. Her breath from my lungs, her moans from my throat, I was no longer myself, but Tamami. A mirror of her, and the weight of that transformation was more than our friendship could bear.
"I wrote this for you, Tamami. Listen:

You’ve touched the secret heart of me,
the part of me I thought was dead.
Not born, until your hand on mine,
released these words from heart to head,
from head to hand to pen to page
to voice from silence, age to age.
These words of love, I speak aloud.
Your moon-face moves me thus to woo.
With all we’ve shared, tell me, my love, have I
touched the secret heart in you?

“What do you think?” I had to ask her. I should have known by her silence that
she didn’t like it. That it made her uncomfortable. But I was trying to be romantic.

“It’s good,” she said, but she didn’t fall into my arms like I’d dreamed she would.
Instead, she made a polite excuse. “I’m sorry, but I have a lot of work to do tonight. Do
you mind?”

“No. Of course not. I’ll see you then.” I would have kissed her before I left but
she ushered me out the door. Tamami was still smiling, but now there was something
strained about her smile. It was Kiri all over again, but so much worse. I’d crossed the
line I wouldn’t with Kiri and now I knew there were good reasons not to.

“I’ll call you when the mid-semester crush is over.”

“Okay. Bye.” Funny she said that. Mid-semester crush. Because that’s all I was
to her.

Fiction, which I’d abandoned long ago in favour of my verse, began to write itself
through me again. Tragic love stories that were as fumbling and clumsy as that first time
with Tamami. Juvenile. Trashy. Bodice-rippers of the first order, and things best left in
my journal. Misshapen beasts of a misguided Eros, thumbing through the unformed
notions in my mind and creating chimeras of dreams and fantasies. Half-formed
hunchbacks of best intentions and love bent to my own tyrannical rule. Creatures that shuffled through my dark apartment as I lay alone, conjuring images of Tamami. Haunted visions of someone else’s cheek on the moon of her belly, someone else’s lips stealing breath from her lungs.

Because even in the heart of my delusion, I knew Tamami would never be mine.

It wasn’t even a month before she began to avoid me, using other friends as shields between us. She was rarely alone after that. I began to write her letters; tortured, passionate pages that I was never sure she read. Because she never wrote back. Never addressed me in public as anything but a friend.

Love,

Why are you turning me away? Why won’t you return my calls? Have you not treasured our stolen moments together as I have? Don’t you miss me?

I miss you. And for the sake of your classes, I have left you alone, but now I fear that I have left you alone too long. Have you forgotten me?

We have so little time left before you must leave. Why don’t we spend your last weeks here together, in each other’s arms, where we belong? Is it because you are leaving that you are staying away from me? Are you trying to spare yourself the pain of our parting? Because, if that is your purpose in avoiding me, know that you only prolong the heartache we both must feel when you return to Japan.

Do you hate me? Must you hate me?

Please call me. Or next time you see me, say hello to me with the old smile. The smile that says you still love me. I must see you again, one last time before you go. Even if it’s just for coffee. Please.

I love you and I don’t know how to stop.

Please.

Serena.

But Tamami didn’t call. So I stopped going to the university, claimed a close family member died, and took a compassionate leave from Coles for a week. I burned all the books she ever gave me in an old oil drum that my landlord used for burning leaves, watching as page by page, the flames devoured her neat printing in the margins, the
Japanese characters fraternising too readily with English. I wrote with no thought to the words, syntax, or grammar. And at the end of it, my fingers stained with ink, in the same clothes I’d worn for the entire week, and no end to my pain in sight, my thoughts turned to suicide.

A sharp knife, a fast train, a tall building, the still too-cold waters of Lake Ramsey, these were all certain paths that once taken, were impossible to return from. Maybe death was the only lover I would ever win. But these were only thoughts. Appended to the story of my possession as a possible ending to the tragedy and then hidden under my mattress. I spent the rest of that summer trying to crawl back into my own little world, but it was no use. I couldn’t blind myself to the thoughts and feelings that Tamami had opened my eyes to. I bought my own copy of The Divine Comedy and made it my summer’s project to read.

In August, an unexpected knocking brought me to the door. It was Tamami. “I’m leaving soon,” she said simply. “I’ll be completing my degree in Japan.” I stood there, still holding the door.

“I guess I just wanted to say goodbye,” she continued.

“Do you want to come in?” I asked.

“No.”

“Oh. Well goodbye then.” I moved to close the door then stopped. “I—I’m sorry—”

“I’m sorry too—” she added.

“—but I think you should leave.” I closed the door. “Goodbye.” I couldn’t hear Tamami’s response. I waited until I figured she left, until my heart remembered how to beat regularly, until my knees remembered they were bone and not water. Then I moved from the door and walked over to my bed.

“You are not my Beatrice,” I told the pieces of her that still lay under my mattress.

“And this is not hell.”

Loneliness returned in the wake of Tamami’s departure. Even though I hadn’t seen her in months, that one final goodbye was devastating. In that moment, it seemed as
if no time had passed since her earlier rebuff. All the feelings, the pain and grief returned. I was tired of it though. No more, I thought.

I briefly considered calling my parents, trying to reclaim the relationship I’d let decay, maybe even telling them I was a lesbian. Over the months, I’d been surreptitiously checking out the articles in Chatelaine and Canadian Living magazines. Mom had subscriptions to both and, in light of the famous ‘outings’ of people like Chastity Bono, they were featuring articles with titles like “What to do if your child is gay.” Mom read those things from cover to cover. I just wasn’t sure if she’d make the connection between the article and her daughter.

I tried to pretend that my parents would be supportive like the ones in the articles, that they would be understanding, that all would be forgiven, but I knew better. They’d reacted poorly enough to my choices so far.

When I told them I wanted to be a poet, they both thought I was insane.

“What are you going to do for money?” My father asked. He was raised in a Dutch family, with heavy emphasis on the so-called Protestant work ethic. To him, becoming an artist was lazy, immoral, even.

My mother, although she said nothing, was terrified. I really don’t know what I read in her eyes, and she’s never really spoken about it. Maybe the idea of the starving artist popped into her head, inspired by Dad’s money question. Maybe she jumped to the worst conclusions about safety and comfort and what I might have to sacrifice for the sake of being a writer. Maybe it was something else. She could have been worried about what I might write and how it would reflect on her and Dad. I’ve even considered that she might be a little jealous, and what I saw in her eyes wasn’t fear at all, but surprise and anger.

Eventually they accepted my decision, but never understood my chosen career. When I dropped out of high school, it was, in my mother’s words, the living end. Why wouldn’t I go on to university? Shouldn’t I get an education? A degree in English? Why not go to teacher’s college, to have something to fall back on? I was ruining my life.
No, I wasn’t ready to go back to my parents yet. The old arguments would only resurface, or worse, they wouldn’t, and we would all be so polite to one another. I wasn’t sure I could handle that, but I did miss them.

Ironically, I turned to the university, the backdrop of my most recent heartbreak, the academic community I was rejecting in favour of my art. During my visits to Tamami, I occasionally saw posters for the LGBL, the Laurentian Gay, Bi, and Lesbian group. I was prepared to find more of the politics I had encountered at the Gay Coffee-House, but I was hoping to find something else. A friend, a connection, anything.

My first meeting was nearly a disaster, they were asking for volunteers to work on various projects, Aids Awareness Week, co-ordinating an upcoming vigil for the women of the Montreal Massacre with the Womyn’s Centre, and the Take Back the Night march. Nothing overtly political, but still, I was uncomfortable. I felt like I was being ambushed.

I sat there like a lump and firmly refused to offer my services, but nobody took me to task for it. My relief was immense.

They were planning a party too, a wine and cheese mixer. Again, my hands remained resolutely in my lap. After the meeting, though, one of the young men came up to me.

“I’ve never seen you here before,” he said, and I thought, not again. “Are you a new student?”

“No. I just want to ... I need ...”

“A friend?” He asked brightly. “Oh, don’t we all? Well, grrl, you’ve come to the right place. I’m Danny.” He extended his hand.

“Serena.” His handshake was firm, dry, and friendly.

“So. Not ready to take the plunge into volunteerism?”

“Not really. I thought I’d just get to know some people first.”

“No better way than to work with someone on a project. Doesn’t matter which one. You’ll meet someone no matter what you pick.” Danny laughed a little at his attempt at humour. “You don’t have to though. I don’t want to pressure you or anything.”
“No, no. You aren’t.” I couldn’t believe I was saying this. “Where do you need the most help?”

“Everywhere, honey,” Danny said, shaking his head. “Everywhere.”

Through the LGBL, I became friends with Joanne, a comfortably plump, but kind young woman who worked part-time at the tax data centre while she was completing her degree in economics. LGBL put us together on the Aids Awareness committee and as we sat at the display table in the student centre, handing out pamphlets and condoms we discovered we had a lot in common.

“So. Are you planning to march in the Gay Pride Parody this year?” She asked. I laughed at her pun about the annual parade.

“No. I don’t think so anyway. I know they wouldn’t watch it, but I’m afraid that my parents might see me on the news or something. It would be a hell of a way for them to find out, don’t you think?”

“You haven’t come out to your parents yet?”

“No. I’ve never been on the best terms with them. I just don’t know if I can do it. Not that I don’t want to.”

“If you really want to, you should though. It’s hard, and I won’t lie to you, sometimes they never understand, but you have to be honest.”

“How did your parents take it?” I asked. She smiled and paused to hand out a fist full of condoms and a pamphlet.

“No glove, no love! Protect yourself, know the facts.” Then she turned back to me. “My dad doesn’t really speak to me anymore, but my mom’s come around. I’ve had my girlfriend over to meet them even. It was awkward, but at least I can talk to my mom about it. It really helps.”

“I guess it couldn’t hurt. I don’t speak much to my parents as it is. I don’t know though.” It had been on my mind for a while now. I just needed a nudge, a little support. “What if it goes badly?”

“Then I’ll be here. Just do it, Serena. For better or worse, you’ll feel better getting this off your chest.”
And so I found myself a few weeks later, inviting my parents over to my one-room apartment for the first time since I had left home. I ordered in Chinese. I just hoped it would arrive before my parents left in disgust.

My mom hugged me as she came in.

“You don’t know how pleased we are that you’ve decided to have us over.”

“Long time, no see, kiddo,” Dad said as he took his turn with a bear hug. “When was the last time we had you over? Easter? God, that’s almost six months. We really should have called you over for a barbecue in the summer.”

“That would’ve been nice,” I said. “So. This is it. What do you think?”

“Very cozy.” Mom surveyed the drapes, the bedspread, the old used couch I picked up.

“That it is,” Dad added. “A bachelorette pad, eh?”

“I guess.”

We occupied ourselves with small talk, catching up on the last few months, until the food arrived. I showed them my most recently published poem and Dad told me about the sunroom he was building on the back of the kitchen for Mom.

“It should be done before the snow comes,” he said.

“You should really come over and see it.”

When the food arrived, I had to fend off their offer to pay. It stayed polite, though, and I sat them down at the table with the take out and some plates.

“Dig in.” I opened the fridge. “Beer Dad?”

“Sure.”

“Mom?”

“Water’s fine for me dear.” I got a beer for myself while I was at it. I drank half of it before I had the courage to get to the matter at hand. Dad was busy scooping out some more fried rice.

“So. I have something to tell you and, well, there’s just no easy way to tell you this. I just wanted to make sure you ate something first. That we could get comfortable a bit before I said anything.”

“What is it? Are you alright?”
“Yeah, I’m fine.” I looked at Mom. At Dad. “It’s just … I’m just …”

“Spit it out,” Dad advised.

“I’m gay.” It was graceless, but it was done.

“You’re what?” Dad dropped his fork. Mom fidgeted with her napkin.

“I’m gay. I’m a lesbian.” Silence. They were stunned. Hurt I think too, but I couldn’t tell by the blank looks on their faces. “I know it’s not what you expected to hear. But I think it might explain things a bit. I don’t want to hurt you. I just want to be honest. Even though I never told you, it’s been between us for a long time now.” They still didn’t speak.

“You know, I’ll understand if you’re angry. If you don’t want to stay. That’s okay,” I started to babble. “You can take the rest of the Chinese home with you if you want. Or you can leave it here. Whatever you want. It’s okay.”

Dad stood up. Opened his mouth like he was going to speak. Closed it. Opened it again.

“I need some air,” he said and walked out. Mom stood up too.

“Your father’s just shocked,” she said, patting my hand a little awkwardly.

“Frankly I am too. I think I’d better go see if he’s okay. He forgot his jacket and it’s a little chilly.” She grabbed their jackets and headed for the door.

“I love you, Mom.”

“We love you too, Serena. It’s just …”

“Difficult. I know. You better go see how Dad’s doing.”

They didn’t come back.

“That’s actually not too bad,” Joanne told me when I called her later. After a good cry. “I’ve heard worse. Shouting matches. Physical violence. Sounds like your parents probably have a case of healthy denial. They’ll get over it, Serena. You will too.”

“I guess.”

“Do you want me to come over?”

“Would you?” I asked as the tears welled up again. “I just didn’t think it would hurt this much, you know?”

“I know. I’ll be right over.”
Joanne sat up with me all night.

"My dad called me a pervert, a freak of nature, and as far as I know, he still thinks of me that way. At least your dad didn’t say anything like that to you.”

“Yeah,” I managed between sobs. “But he didn’t say anything. At all. He probably hates me.”

“He doesn’t.”

“I haven’t talked to them for so long. And they’ve always disagreed with my choices. I didn’t think it would be so hard. I figured it was just time to be honest.”

“It’ll be okay, Serena. It’ll all work out. Don’t worry.” She made me lay down beside her, put my head in her lap. She stroked my hair until I fell asleep and when I woke up in the morning, she was warming up leftover Chinese food.

“It was the only thing in the fridge besides the beer,” she said by way of explanation.

Mom called to apologise for leaving. She said Dad was too upset. I told her I understood. I didn’t, but what else could I have told her?

That night, Joanne introduced me to Mary, a friend of her girlfriend’s, and we went out on a double date of sorts. Out to drink and dance at Backstreet. It was nothing I’d ever thought to do before. It was nothing I thought I’d like, but Joanne said a change of scene might be just the thing for me.

Mary was a little older than the rest of us, maybe in her thirties. I thought it might be rude to ask though. Her hair was cropped short, and she wore hip-huggers and a little T-shirt with more confidence than I could have managed. She was cute, but not breathtaking, and she laughed a lot. Sometimes she even laughed at things that weren’t funny, but that was okay.

Mary was a good dancer, and patient with me and my shuffling steps. Slowly but surely, I drank my way through the evening, Black Russians and chocolate martinis until I could barely stand. Combined with the loud music and the whirling, flashing lights, the drunk put quite a spin on my night.
I stumbled into the taxi, slurred my address, had trouble counting the money, stumbled out of the taxi, fumbled and dropped my keys, and it wasn’t until I was in my apartment that I realised that Mary was still with me. I couldn’t remember inviting her in.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You’re hammered, my dear," she said.

"Oh yeah," I agreed and fell onto the couch.

"Do you have coffee?"

"In the, ummm," I paused, held up my hands, visualised the kitchen, "lef cubberd."

"Want me to make you some?" She said with a little laugh.

"Sure." My body chose that moment to let me know I had too much alcohol in my system. I made it to the bathroom door before slipping, falling, and puking on the floor. "Aw, shit," I panted.

Quietly, Mary picked me up and helped me back to the couch. She rummaged and gave me one of my big pots just in case. Then she put on some coffee, cleaned up the mess, and helped me to the bathroom again.

"You should take a shower," she told me. "You got a housecoat in here, or do you want some other clothes?" I pointed to my robe on the back of the bathroom door. "Okay, then. I’ll leave you to it."

As Mary closed the door, I bent over, hit my head on the toilet tank, and puked again for good measure.

"I don’ know if I like you goin’ through my cubberds," I announced when I emerged from the bathroom ten minutes later. I felt a lot better though, tossed my clothes in the hamper, and accepted the coffee Mary offered. "Thanks," I muttered.

"Just thought I’d watch out for you tonight. Joanne told me you had a coming out disaster."

"I don’ need your sympathy."

"No. But you do need some friends now," she said and laughed. "And maybe a good kick in the pants too."

"Wha’?"
"We can talk about it in the morning. When you’re sober.” She force-fed me some more coffee and a couple of Aspirin then tucked me into bed before settling onto the couch.

"Folds out,” I mumbled.

"Thanks. Good night, Serena.”

"’Night.” It was nice to have someone look after me, I thought as I fell asleep.

In the morning, it was awkward. I rolled out of bed at eleven with a headache that could kill a cow. I didn’t really know Mary from Eve, and here she was, making me scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast. She must have gone to the store that morning, because I was sure I didn’t have any eggs in the house.

I choked down some more coffee first. Head lowered, shoulders hunched, I’m sure I looked like some kind of hobgoblin. Mary busied herself with breakfast and let me be for a while. I focused on the caffeine and tried to tell the bell-ringers in my head it was long past Matins.

Mary poured me some orange juice. Guess she’d bought some of that too.

"So what did you mean last night?” I asked in a ragged whisper.

"Sorry?” The word filtered through a chuckle.

"By the good kick in the pants comment. What did you mean?” Mary sighed and dished out the eggs before answering.

"Serena, you’re a good writer,” she said sitting down.

"How would you know?”

"I’m a writer too, when I have the time. And I teach at the college. I was one of the judges for the last Writers on the Rock Contest. Your Haiku sequence won that, if I remember. Hands down.”

"So?” I crammed some egg in my mouth. It tasted like rubber.

"So what are you doing settling for a poem published here and a poem published there? You’ve got a lot of work out there now. It’s time to start thinking about a collection.”

"What if I don’t want to?” The toast was like cardboard. Mary poured me some more juice, spilling some on the table in the process.
“Hey, if you’re happy, that’s fine. When I met you yesterday though, I didn’t think I was meeting a very happy person.”

“Why do you care?”

“One reason is that I’m thinking of taking a professional development leave from the college and starting up a small press.”

“Is that why you went out with me?”

“No. I came out because Joanne said she was setting me up with a hottie.” She laughed.

“What?”

“But when I realised who you were, I thought I might be able to help you out a little in the writing department.”

“Like I said last night, I don’t need your sympathy.”

“No sympathy here. I just think a collection of your poetry would sell. That’s business.”

“Well, thanks for taking care of me, and thanks for the offer, but if you don’t mind, you can take your business somewhere else.”

“That’s fine, dearie, but here’s my number if you ever change your mind. And you know,” Mary said, getting her jacket and boots on. “If you ever want a friend, or to talk shop, or to go out again, or anything, just let me know.”

“Thanks,” I said as she closed the door behind her. I heard her laugh out in the hall.

I was totally confused. What in the hell just happened?

The following weekend, Joanne invited me to a Christmas party at her place.

“Don’t set me up with anyone,” I warned her on the phone. “I didn’t appreciate Mary butting into my life. She’s weird.”

“No she’s not. Yes, Mary can be direct, pushy, but she’s a really nice person.”

“Don’t defend yourself. No more set-ups, okay?”

“Just come to the party. It’ll be fun.”

“I’m sure.”
I arrived late and the party was already well underway by that time. I saw some familiar faces there. People from the LGBL group. Joanne introduced me around. I nodded politely and forgot half the names as soon as I heard them but then we came to a tall woman with golden hair.

“This is Morven,” Joanne said and I forgot everything else. She was gorgeous. Lithe, graceful even though she’d obviously had a few drinks. Her green cat’s eyes narrowed slightly as Joanne introduced me.

“Morven, this is Serena.”

“The moon goddess,” Morven said.

“Excuse me?” Joanne moved into the kitchen to get some chips and dip. I was on my own.

“Well, not quite. Selene was the name of the Greek moon goddess, but Serena is a derivative.” Morven moved closer to me. Lifted her hand to touch my cheek. “It suits you well, my dear. You have the most lovely white skin.”

I backed away.

“You don’t waste any time.” I was unsettled by her behaviour, yet ...

“No, I don’t. I’m going out on the balcony for a smoke. Care to join me?”

“I don’t smoke.” Morven grabbed my arm.

“Come out with me anyway, Serena.” I let myself be pulled out the sliding door. There was a web of Christmas lights strung between the railing and the next balcony above. It was lovely.

“Care for a drink, my dear?” Morven purred. She’d grabbed a bottle of wine on the way out.

“Thank you.” I took a swig while she lit her cigarette.

“So you’re the poet.”

“Excuse me?” I said again.

“Joanne told me. She’s been talking you up the whole night, you know. She wants to find you a girlfriend.”
“Jesus Christ!” I blurted. Morven smiled and leaned back into the net of lights. They reflected off her hair, made her look like an angel. “Sorry. I told Joanne I didn’t want to be set up.” I drank some more wine.

I drank a lot more wine while we talked. Morven asked me about my writing, she asked me if I’d ever thought of writing lyrics, and she told me about herself. She was the singer in a local Celtic rock band called McNamara’s Band.

“Got into it for the pussy,” she told me. She certainly didn’t beat around the bush. And I thought Mary was blunt. I was beginning to shiver. It was December, after all, and Morven circled behind me, rubbing my arms and pressing herself into my back. I could feel her nipples harden through both sets of our clothes.

“There now, is that better?” She asked. I could barely catch my breath.

“Y-yes,” I stuttered.

“How about this?” She asked, kissing my neck. I practically dropped the wine. The sliding door opened. Joanne came out.

“Are you two okay out here?” She asked as I jumped away from Morven.

“Actually, I was just thinking of coming back in,” I said squeezing past Joanne into the room.

“I think I’ll stay out here for a while yet,” I heard Morven say.

Joanne caught up to me inside, pulled me over to the chips.

“Be careful, Serena,” she whispered. “You don’t want Morven in your life. Not right now. Remember Krista?” She asked, nodding toward a sullen looking girl in the corner. “She and Morven came in together, but since then Morven’s been making her rounds. I don’t think there’s a girl in here she hasn’t tried to seduce. Trust me, Serena. Stay away from Morven.”

“And she’s a friend of yours?” I asked.

“No. Krista is.” I grabbed a few chips.

“Is Mary coming?” I asked, trying to be nonchalant.

“She was here earlier, but she left. She’s got exams to mark this weekend.”

“Oh.”
I didn’t stay much longer myself. When Morven came back in, she headed straight for Joanne’s girlfriend, Sarah. She swept the other girl around the room as the Chieftains’ version of “Oh Come, All Ye Faithful” played on the stereo. Then before Sarah could break away, Morven dipped her over the back of Joanne’s couch and kissed the girl squarely on the lips.

“Morven!” Joanne moved to rescue Sarah.

“You whore!” Shouted Krista, her face contorting as she fought to hold back her tears.

The party dissolved into chaos, and I took my cue to leave.

On the way home, I decided to take a detour, and found myself in front of my parent’s house. It was only eleven and the lights were still on. I took the chance and knocked on the door.

“Serena?”

“Hi Dad.” Neither of us said anything for a few minutes. My father broke the silence first.

“You must be freezing out there kiddo,” he said. “Come on inside.”

“Thanks Dad,” I sniffled, but not because of the cold.

“Your mother’s in bed,” he told me as I followed him into the living room. “I don’t want to wake her. I was just watching the news. Want to join me?”

“Sure.”

We watched the news together in silence. I still had my coat on. Before too long, Mom emerged from the bedroom.

“I didn’t know you were here, Serena,” she said. “Do you want anything? Coffee? Hot chocolate?”

“No. Thanks, Mom, but no. I’m fine.”

She sat with us for the rest of the news. Nothing else was said. As the final credits rolled down the screen, I got up, put my boots on. My parents saw me to the door.

“We’d like you to come for Christmas dinner, Serena,” my mother said.
“Yes, and,” my father added, running his hands through his hair. “And you can even bring a—a friend, if you like.” I smiled.

“I’ll be here. Alone. There’s no need to push this. It’s weird enough as it is.”

“That’s true.” My father nodded, cleared his throat, looked relieved.

“Love you,” I said, waving, as I slipped out the door.

“Love you,” my mother mouthed back.

“See you Christmas Day,” my father said as he closed the door.

I practically ran the rest of the way home. Not all gifts come wrapped with bows.

Foleshade. It’s the most beautiful name I’ve ever heard spoken. The first time I heard it mentioned I thought, full-of-shadows. I thought it was perfect. Could I expect any less from the woman it was attached to?

I saw her for the first time about a month ago at the art gallery. The reception for the gay and lesbian art exhibit “Out in force” was one of the few gay functions I felt comfortable attending. Foleshade was one of the featured artists. An open lesbian, but a reclusive sculptor, it had taken a lot of convincing to get her to pack up her work in the middle of January and make the trek from her Manitoulin Island studio into Sudbury for the show. There had been talk drifting through the city for months about her. I began to listen the first time her name was mentioned.

Rumours ran wild in the few minutes before she arrived at the gallery. No one in attendance but the curator had ever seen Foleshade in person. What would she look like? What would she say? The curator drifted through the crowd serving titillating bits of information with red wine for effect.

It was perfectly quiet when she walked into the room, and after a few moments, a polite, reserved applause rippled through the crowd. My hands did not move from my sides. I was stunned.

The woman was a sculpture in her own right, a woman of Amazonian proportions. Her African ancestry was etched into her broad forehead and her high cheekbones. Her eyes protruded from deep sockets slightly, giving her an incongruously fearful, uncertain expression. Her head was shaved and she wore a jewelled headband. She turned to
remove and hang her cloak. Her soft, flowing black dress, was sleeveless, with a back cut to reveal the forceful curving of her shoulders as they dissolved into the smooth ‘s’ of her spine. Her nails were short, her fingers heavily ringed. Her breasts swung beneath the fabric, over a stomach rounded gracefully with age. The dress clung to her generous thighs, but slit at the sides to reveal small calves, tightened by high-heeled pumps. The small smile that curved her lips but did not show her teeth revealed that Foleshade was a woman who knew how to make an entrance. I watched her all night.

My palms were sweaty when we finally met. Hers was cool and dry when I shook her hand. I held on a moment longer than I should have. Slipped my fingers across her wrist as she withdrew her hand from mine. I barely said two words before she was ushered off into the crowd again. More people to meet. More important people. A sea of them rushing in to touch and be touched by a woman whose hands could make stone speak.

I moved over to the centrepiece of her part of the show, an unpolished Madonna in dark granite. The figure was a life-sized nude, long-fingered hands above and below a great pregnant belly. The surface of the stomach, however, was done in relief, revealed mountains and oceans, the continents of the globe. It was called “Earth Mother.” I ran my fingers over North America. Found the Great Lakes, Lake Huron, Georgian Bay, Manitoulin Island.

“Serena, right?” Foleshade had found me again.

“Uh, yes.” I pulled my hand away from her sculpture almost guiltily. She wasted no time on that.

“Have you ever thought of being a model, Serena?” A laugh burst from me at her implication. Until one of her eyebrows arched up.

“What, me?”

“Yes.” The look in her dark eyes was serious.

“No.”

“Would you consider it?”

“Why?”

“Because I know what I need and you’re it.”
"Artistically speaking."
"Yes. Artistically."
"I don’t—"
"Here’s my card. Think about it. Then call me. Or email me."
"But—"
"Think about it." She pressed her card into my hand. "At least we can do cappuccino and talk." And then she was gone again, rejoining the Lifestyle reporter from the Sudbury Star. I left.

The next day, I was the first to arrive when the gallery opened. Journal in hand, I spent the afternoon there, touching, and being touched by, Foleshade’s statues. Some were made in the form of ancient figures, fertility goddesses from the Stone Age. Others were contemporary figures drawn from more modern mythologies. Lady Liberty from the French and American revolutions. Blind justice. And there was a book of photographs depicting her other works. Goddesses and saints, figures of speech given form. All women, all rendered as real people, iconic, yet familiar. Every form, from the obese, to the anorexic, from the athletic, to the deformed. All given voice. All evocative. All beautiful. I couldn’t imagine being one of them.

My pen hovered over the page, but I couldn’t write. In every statue, I saw a perfection I was not a part of. A perfection I could not see, that my words were not equal to. I put the pen away.

As I dropped it in my pocket, my finger slipped across the edge of Foleshade’s business card. I pulled it out, a single tear of blood forming at the edge of the paper cut on my finger. I touched it to my tongue, licked the blood off. Looked at the card. I thought about throwing it out, tearing it up, but I put it back in my pocket instead. I determined that I would not call her, that I would not email her. I slept fitfully that night and dreamt of mirrors that shattered and pages written with my own blood.

I called her.

"Serena! I’m so glad you reconsidered!"

"I haven’t really. But I’ll go as far as cappuccino."
“I’ll buy. I’m coming in next week to take my sculptures home. Tuesday afternoon. I won’t be done until about eight or so … Unless you’d like to come out and help?”

“Sure, I’d love to. But I have to warn you, I’m a klutz.”

“Not to worry. Why don’t you meet us at the gallery at two?”

“Us?”

“My assistant’s coming out too.”

“Oh. Okay. Sure.”

“See you then.”

“Yeah. Bye.”

By the time Tuesday morning came, I was a nervous wreck. I hadn’t slept well at all. After tossing and turning for half the night I got up, went to the mirror on the back of the bathroom door, took off my pyjamas and tried to look at myself. Tried to see what Foleshade wanted to sculpt in me. Why I was what she needed right now. Almost forty minutes passed as I scrutinised my body. My face. My hair. Then I took the mirror down and faced it against the wall in the corner of the room.

When I met her at the gallery, Foleshade was wearing jeans and a thick sweater. She looked very different from the night of the reception, and a fine, silvery fuzz had started to curl on her head. But she was still beautiful. Exotic, like her name. And still tall. Almost six feet, even in flat boots.

She, her assistant Stan, an older native man, and I struggled with her statues, trying not to slip in the slush that covered the few steps of drive between the loading doors and the van. The curator directed, apologised for his bad back and repeatedly thanked Foleshade for allowing her work to be shown in his gallery. We were done in just over an hour.

“I’ll meet you at the studio to unload tomorrow,” she called to Stan.

“Drive safe,” he replied in a stoic monotone.

“As long as you do.” Stan nodded, shut the door, and drove away. Foleshade directed me to a beat up old Topaz at the curb. “My car’s over here.”
"Is Simon’s alright?" She asked once we were underway. "I haven’t had lunch yet and I’m a little hungry."

"That’s fine. I haven’t eaten a thing all day." She smiled at me.

"Listen, dear, I’m not in the business of making people do what they don’t want to do. If you’re not comfortable modelling for me, that’s fine. I just thought you might want to. And you’re perfect for my next project."

"What is it?"

"I’d like you to be one of my muses."

"Excuse me?"

"I’m doing a large piece for the National Gallery. The nine Greek muses. I thought you might want to be Calliope. She governs epic poetry and eloquence. When I heard you were a poet, I thought you would be perfect. I heard you’re quite good."

"Well … thank you. I just … It’s just that I look at your statues and I-I don’t see any of their qualities in me."

"Ah. But I do see the muse in you, Serena. And you should trust me. I’m the sculptor."

"Give me lunch to think about it." How could I possibly be a muse? I thought of Siobhan, Kiri, Tamami. These friends had been _my_ muses. I couldn’t see myself in that role. Not without considering that Foleshade might be attracted to me. And that was too foreign to consider. I had always been the lover, not the loved.

Over club sandwiches, Foleshade explained a little more about her project. She had received a Canada Council Grant to do this work, and the National Gallery had promised an honorarium as well. There would be enough money to compensate her models properly this time around. It was her first big project and she was excited about it.

"It’s frightening too. There’s more pressure. The chance of failure is greater."

We were silent for a moment. Munching on possibilities.

"How long have you been doing this?" I asked.

"Almost twenty years now."

"And how did you start?"
‘That’s a story in itself. The short of it is that my parents died when I was fairly young. I was in my second year at the Ontario Arts College at the time. I never graduated. My father had been a mining engineer and my mother a nurse. There was enough money for me to set up investments, and since then I’ve been living off a modest annuity. I live in my studio. It was their cottage. I sold their house to pay for winterising the cottage and to finance my first sculptures.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. It’s all history.’

‘You seem so open about it. I mean, you don’t even know me really.’

‘Ah. But I know how to get secrets out of stone. People are much easier to read. You’re a good person Serena.’ I swallowed the last of my sandwich with effort. I felt a need for wine to wash it down.

‘Thank you. I—’

‘So have you made a decision about modelling yet?’

‘You’re very direct, aren’t you?’ I seemed to be meeting a lot of direct people lately. Maybe it was a message of some kind. To Serena, from the universe: get your life in order!

‘There’s no point in being anything but, I find, So?’

‘I’m still not sure.’

‘Dessert then?’

‘I guess.’

Foloshade summoned the waitress with a single, elegant gesture. We ordered coffee and pecan pie. While we waited, she turned her attention back to the matter at hand.

‘Let me explain a few things about myself, Serena. You’ve probably heard all sorts of rumours about me. I’m not a very popular person in some circles.’ She paused. Collected herself. Continued. ‘I’m forty-three and I can be a very difficult person to work with. And, yes, I am a lesbian, but I never mix my work with my pleasure. I don’t proposition my models, so you don’t have to worry about that. Stan is an old friend. He
owns a small gallery on the Island. He helps me with my shows when he can and he helps
me with funding applications and the business side of art. I was never very good at that.”

The waitress arrived with our dessert and Foleshade waited until she returned with
the coffee before continuing, stirring cream and sugar into her cup.

“I’m a strange old bird, Serena. Do you think you could work with someone like
me?” I took a sip of coffee to ease my parched throat.

“I don’t know.” Foleshade sighed.

“We have some time left. Why don’t you tell me more about yourself?” She said
quietly.

“There’s not much to tell. Never finished high school and never went on to
college or university. I work at Coles for two bucks above minimum wage an hour and I
live alone in a one-room, basement apartment. I write, and sometimes, my work gets
published. I’m getting to know my parents again since I came out of the closet to them,
and I have a habit of falling for women with beautiful names.” Names as beautiful as they
are. Names that—

“And what do you think of my name?” She seemed suddenly shy.

“It’s lovely.” I pushed my untouched pie away.

“I must be nearly twenty—”

“You’re seventeen years older than me.”

“And—”

“Yes. I’m attracted to you. But it’s different this time. I can’t write about you. I
can’t write about your work. You want me to be your muse.”

“That makes you uncomfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” We both took up our cups. Drank. She took a bit of her pie. Chewed
thoughtfully as I answered.

“I don’t know. Because this time I seem to be the woman with the beautiful name
and I’ve never been. I don’t belong here.”

“Don’t you think you’re pretty?”

“No.”
"But you are."

"On the surface maybe. But beauty is more than that. I’m different inside."

"Ah. I could help you there."

"Yes. And I’m not sure I want that kind of help. I’m afraid and I don’t know why." But I did know. I didn’t want to be happy. What would happen to my writing if I wasn’t miserable? If I didn’t hate myself? But there was more to it than that. I was falling for Foleshade. Her brusque ways, her warrior’s body. She was fearless. Shied away from nothing. She was what I wanted to be: an artist on her own terms. We could be great friends, and I didn’t want to screw it up. But another part of me wanted to, and that was what I was afraid of.

"Besides," I said out loud. "There’s another problem."

"What’s that?"

"You don’t date your models." That made her laugh.

"But you won’t be my model forever." I sat back, sighed, smiled, sighed again.

"No. I guess I won’t."

"Does that mean we have a deal?"

"I guess we do. I’ll give it a try, but I can’t promise anything."

"That’s all I ask."

I’ve taken my holidays and spent them on Manitoulin with Foleshade. Stan gave me a ride out on the way back from one of his trips into town. He was funny, kind, and he made no bones about the fact that he looked out for Foleshade.

"I don’t want her getting hurt," he warned. "Don’t go breaking her heart now. That woman’s had enough shit in her life to supply every farmer on the Island with fertiliser."

"Don’t worry Stan. I’ll be too worried about modelling to think about anything else."

"Good," he said and left it at that.
When I arrived, Foleshade had a cold supper laid out for us. We helped Stan unload the supplies he’d picked up for Foleshade in town and then we all sat down to munch on cold chicken, salad, and buns.

After supper, Stan left, and Foleshade set me straight to work.

"You have options," she told me. "The final sculpture will feature clothed figures anyway, so you can wear a toga for the sitting if it makes you more comfortable. I would like to get some nude sketches though, if you don’t mind, so I can get the form right."

"Let’s do the costume first. I don’t think I’m ready for nudity yet."

So Foleshade photographed me, and sketched me in the costume that night. Different poses, different angles. It was hard to stand still for so long. Periodically, she would ask me to change position, and would come up to me to tilt my head just a little bit more, or to bend my arm the way she wanted.

It was different from Morven’s invasion of space. The contract of the artistic venture made her touch safe, and before long, I felt completely comfortable in her hands and under her gaze.

We didn’t stop working until after midnight. She set up a cot for me in the dining/living room, laid out towels for me, and told me to help myself to whatever was in the kitchen.

"So how do you feel after your first evening of modelling?" She asked me, smiling the smile that hid her teeth.

"Surprisingly comfortable," I told her.

"Good." She stretched and made her way to the loft where she slept. "Get some sleep. We’re going to be working all day tomorrow." I thought there was no way I was going to get any sleep, but it wasn’t long before my mind drifted and I found myself dreaming of ancient Greece. Draped in Foleshade’s toga-like costume, I became a poet-orator, hands raised in appeal as I read.

In the morning, I awoke uncharacteristically early. I rummaged in the fridge, cut a grapefruit for myself. Foleshade came down a short while later, wrapped in a kimono, her eyes still puffy from sleep. She started water for tea, grabbed the other half of the grapefruit.
"So. You want the shower first?" She asked.

"Sure. Thanks."

I stayed in my bathrobe after the shower. Tried to work up my courage to pose naked for Foleshade today. The sooner I did it, the sooner I'd be able to get over it. When Foleshade emerged, her dark eyes shifted into appraisal mode. Her mouth pouted a bit.

"I think today I'd like to do something with your hair. It's so nice and straight. Maybe we could sweep it up in a bun ..." She set to work immediately. I ended up with my hair twisted back with some tendrils hanging down. For the first set of studies, I robed up again.

"Okay, Serena. For this one, I want you to think like a goddess. You have the gift of inspiration beating in your chest, fluttering like a bird. It is your power, your gift to give. I want you to think of giving it to someone you love very much. Give it like you would give a little bird. Imagine giving your heart away." I thought immediately of Tamami. How I felt then, when I did give my heart away, and my reason too. Foleshade continued. "That's good. Now look at that person, like they were kneeling in front of you. Look at them with all your love in your eyes. And give your gift to them. Yes. Hold that pose."

She circled me, taking pictures, as I thought of Tamami. How I ruined everything because I was so selfish. Maybe, if I thought of giving more instead of taking, it wouldn't have ended so sadly. I imagined her in front of me. I'm sorry, I thought. I'm so sorry. All my love flooded into my eyes then, and it started spilling over, down my cheeks.

"Serena." Foleshade stopped snapping pictures. "Are you okay?"

"Just getting into the spirit. Keep working. I don't know how long I can keep this up."

"I'll work as fast as I can."

And she was as good as her word, doing mostly quick sketches. Shape and motion. Then she handed me a Kleenex.

"Take a break. Shake the whole mood off. We're going to try something else next. Something not quite so sad." She smiled quickly and arranged her drafting desk to
take the next batch of sketches. I stretched and bounced around a bit on my toes, remembering Tamami on the day of our tour of the town. When we were still friends. It was a good way to leave her. It was a good way to move on.

"Okay, Serena. You’ve given me an idea. I want you to get playful now. Stick with the goddess idea, but imagine this time that you’re giving your gift to a child. You want her to have fun with the gift. Play. Teach her the fun of language, the play of metaphor.” I knelt down and imagined Siobhan. I held the gift up this time, remembering the way we used to play pretend in the back yard. I remembered how she used to charge to my rescue when I was finally trapped by the bad guys, before the snake changed everything. I let the joy of those memories shine through in my smile and my eyes.

"Beautiful!” Again Foleshade snapped picture after picture, but this time, when she was through, she had enough time to do some more detailed drawings. She moved around, dragging a stool along with her on which she perched and did some detailed sketches of my face and hands.

We broke for lunch then. Waldorf salad and cinnamon toast.

"Who were you thinking of this morning?” She asked.

"A couple of old friends of mine.”

"You were so sad the first time, I should have stopped.”

"Oh no! It was a good kind of sad. I needed to get it out of my system, you know? Say goodbye to old ghosts and all that.”

"Okay. And the second time?”

"A childhood friend.”

"Do you keep in touch?”

"No. Not with either of them. But I think it’s better that way.”

After lunch, we did a third robed pose.

"This time, try solemn, dignified, graceful.” I imagined Kiri, how she taught me to express myself. How she gave me the skills I was using to model for Foleshade. I imagined reading for her again.

"Don’t tilt your head so much. Remember: dignified. There we are.”

Finally, we came to the moment of truth.
"Do you think you’re ready to try posing nude?" In response to Foleshade’s question, I shrugged the toga off my shoulders.

"Tada!" I had to laugh, felt embarrassed.

"Okay then. I’ll have to get you to pose like you did before. Don’t worry about the emotions this time. I’m focusing on your body." I felt the blush rise from my collarbone up. "Serena, this is modelling. This is work." I started giggling. "Serena! This is serious."

"Okay, okay." But it took another laughing fit before I finally settled into this session. Foleshade had me replicate all the poses I had done that day so far. Standing, kneeling, standing again. She put me through my paces and again, pulled her stool around to do some detailed sketches.

For the first while, I was thinking of Morven, how naked she made me feel with her bold caress. Then there was Mary, who had taken care of me when I was too drunk to care, who had offered me the chance to publish my own book of poetry. Could I bare that much of myself?

Modelling for Foleshade was one thing, but a book of poetry … There would be only one statue. But there would be hundreds of books. People could own a piece of me, thumb through it, judge it, and analyse it. And it was different from reading my poetry. At least I could interpret my poems for my audience. Could I trust them to interpret my work on their own? Or would they see through me to the desperate, lonely little girl, frightened out of her wits at the thought of letting anyone love her?

By the time I was kneeling again I was thinking of my parents. What would they think of this? Posing nude for a statue that would be in the National Gallery. My God! Christmas dinner had been difficult enough. They showed me their sunroom, finished now, with a pride I felt they may never have for me. Then three hours of small talk and pleasantries. Three hours of not being able to look each other in the eye. We might as well have been watching the eleven o’clock news.

My poor parents. At least they were trying. But they had a hard enough time trying to understand my poetry. I was lucky they didn’t disown me when I told them I
was gay. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad though. A lesser evil among my growing list of transgressions.

I wondered what was the worst in their eyes. For my mother, it could be the loss of family, the risk that she might never have grandchildren, let alone a conventional child. For my father, it would be the ‘sin’ of being a lesbian. He still went to church regularly. It had been a great disappointment to him when I stopped. In his own way, he was a deeply religious man.

And now there was Foleshade. Would I screw up this relationship too?

“Serena!” I’d completely tuned out. Foleshade had come up to me and was offering me my housecoat. “Let’s take a supper break. No more modelling today. I want to develop my pictures this evening.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t realised until now how hungry I was. “What’s for supper?”

“How’s stir fry?”

“Sounds great. Let me get dressed and I’ll help.”

That night, as Foleshade was locked up in her darkroom developing her pictures of me, I paced restlessly. I couldn’t bring myself to look at her sketches, but I didn’t have the patience to do anything else. So I paced. And paced. Until I finally gave up and lay down on my cot. I was asleep before I even registered the thought that I was exhausted.

“Serena.” It was Foleshade. “Wake up. Breakfast is on the table. Come see your pictures.”

“No.” The word escaped before I could censor it.

“Don’t be silly. Come see.”

I felt like I was heading toward my own execution.

“I think this one’s the best,” she said. I edged toward the table. The pictures were in black and white. The one she held up was from the first session. It was taken before I started crying, but the sadness was there in my face nonetheless. The small smile, eyes half-lidded, forehead slightly creased, but there was something beyond the sadness too. Foleshade was a good photographer. Whatever film she’d used, whatever settings, my face seemed to be lit up, angelic. My hands looked so elegant. Or maybe it was the hair,
the toga, something other than me. Even naked, I didn’t look anything like what I expected to. I remembered my night in front of the mirror. I hadn’t seen any of this then.


“You see? You’re the woman with the beautiful name, Serena.” She left me at the kitchen table with one of the joyful pictures, my breakfast untouched.

In the two weeks I’ve been with her, Foleshade has taken the pictures and sketches and used them to mould me in clay. And now she’s carving. Has been for days now, working in stone quarried from the ancient La Cloche Mountains. My time as her model is over. Now it is my turn to observe. I watch her as she works, see her dedication, and every evening, I write.

I am beginning to see myself through her eyes; her hands—the hands that make stone speak—and I am not afraid of what I see. I am learning that I am Serena, the woman with the name of a moon-goddess, that I live in a world of shadows and secrets, and that she lives there with me.

Yesterday, I brought her grapes while she worked and we shared them in silence. This morning, she woke me with a kiss.

Tomorrow, Foleshade will take me back to Sudbury where my poems wait to be gathered together. I will call Mary and ask her if she still wants to publish them. Maybe I will call my parents too, see if they are ready to talk about my homosexuality, to find out what they really think and feel. Tomorrow, the moon will be full, and the future lies open for me, a book waiting to be written.

“Love.” I say to myself. Then again, “Love. Love.” I feel the word open, give up its meaning, float away. I am a child again. Learning the words, consuming them, understanding for the first time the secrets they contain.

Then I run
me and my belly full of words,
out the Dutch-door,
through the muddied fields
of hay stubble,
to the tree with leaves of paper.
Draw forth the quill
stolen from a feather duster.
Prick my thumb
for ink.
Then.
I write.
In the Dark

AshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAsh

There's nothing more powerful than hearing the sound of thousands of voices whispering your name in the dark, or rather, in the near-darkness that falls from the stage. You can see them: male, female, mostly young, but some old—your audience—gazing at you from the first few rows with hungry, half-hooded eyes. They sway in time to the resonance of their whispering, and the occasional flame of a lighter brings another set of eager eyes into view. There are enough of these small eruptions of light that you can almost see a pattern in them, and between the light and the darkness and the deeper blackness of their eyes leaps the electricity of their need. They are waiting for you—for me—to shatter their collective trance with the first chord.

ashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAsh

But I wait. I wait and watch them with these baby blues hidden behind shades. I can see their hunger rearing above them like a monster. They think they feed off me, eating me alive through the sound waves of my music. They think they can suck me dry, but they don't know that I'm the real vampire here. They have no idea that by the end of this concert I'll own every one of them, right down to the last soul.

AshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAshashAsh

So I smile the smile that says, 'I give in ... I'll give you what you want,' but they can't see my eyes, so they don't know the truth. And I feel them holding their collective breath as I raise my hand over the guitar strings ....

But that's only how I dream it will be.

Now I sing behind a chain-link fence, my name secondary to the band's. My fingers fly over the chords anyway; my voice sails. This is my music after all. Stink, Flip, and Lynnie are only along for the ride. They told me so the last time I ran dry, leaving me—and them—without any new material for weeks. We play for drunk losers who haven't enough life for me to bother stealing. So I use mine up, ounce by precious ounce on the stage, because I can't do anything else when it comes down to it. I'd die if I couldn't sing.
As part of Gangrene Heart, I hide my eyes behind shades, but because I'm ashamed. I have no secrets, no power like I have in my dreams. I'll never stand on the darkened stage after everyone has left like I want to. The band plays until last call and then, only minutes after he sweeps the gutter trash back onto the street, the manager—whoever he is, they all look the same—stuffs his money into my pocket like I've just given him the best fuck of his life. Then we're ushered through the emergency exit lugging our hulking equipment after us into the alley where our van is waiting. The door locks itself behind us. I've stopped looking back because the signs mock me. Because even though they're battered and worn, they're better used than the sorry-assed bands that pass under their peeling black lettering. "Service Entrance," they say, and "Please Ring for Assistance." I couldn't feel more like a whore if I tried.

I can't stand on the stage after everyone's gone like I want to. The best I can do is return the next day when the bar opens again waving some flimsy excuse in front of me.

I lost my favourite pick. Have you found one? Well, maybe I'll just check anyway.

Or sometimes I just say that I've lost my last pick, you know how it is. Pinch every penny, eh? Even though picks go for free at most music shops. Or at worst, you can get five for a buck. And the overweight manager with his thinning hair slicked back over his balding head will look at me with the same quivering expression as the night before. I don't know. Maybe there's something about me. The mulatto chick singer. They crave the exotic combination of my blue eyes and black hair—you know, the white chocolate look—and they wonder whether my insides are as sweet my outside. It's even worse when the manager's female. There's something fucked about a fat woman checking out your ass. It makes me wish I had some power other than my music. Then maybe I could keep their sweating palms from brushing up against me and touching me, like pinching my ass means the same thing as shaking my hand.

It doesn't matter anyway. I'm only selling what they pay for. So every morning after a gig, I climb onto the platform or into the caged-in area that serves as a stage. As the manager watches my every move, I get down on my hands and knees—looking for the fictitious pick—and the white dust tips my braids.
I breathe in the chalky beer-tinted odour because it's all that's left of the audience. It's the fallout from their cigarettes, the breath from their lungs, the cells sloughed from their bodies while they were here. And while it's a poor substitute for the life I want, that sad smell I get while I'm crawling on my knees and the manager is ogling my ass is the best thing I've ever smelled in my life.

The way I enjoy it scares the shit out of me. So I try not to think of what all this sickness amounts to. I just think about my dream of being on the stage—a real stage—and I can stuff all the insanity, and everything it means, into a tiny corner of my mind where I can ignore it for a while.

*Everyone has dreams like mine,* I tell myself, *they're just too afraid to make them real.*

I can never wait to get home after being on the road though. It's like I'm two people, the maniac on the stage, and the quiet, serious woman at home. It's confusing at the best of times.

Home is a little shit-box in Sudbury, two steps from the welfare trash. I live there with my little brother Mike. He designs Web pages and publishes his own e-zine, so his days are bound by the edges of his monitor, and often his nights are too. I call him the hermit, but he's inherited my dad's brown eyes and the athletic build that no length of time sitting at the computer seems to weaken.

He pays half the mortgage too, which is a good thing. Even though I worked as a paralegal for four years in Dad's law firm to save up for my own place, a place for the band, things have been tougher than I expected. I figured my passion alone would take Gangrene Heart places, but it hasn't. That's another reason it's good to have Mike around. He's always there when I need to talk.

Flip's been staying with us too since his girlfriend Maria kicked him out. It hasn't changed much, because he usually hangs here anyway. He practically lives in my basement studio—well, it's the beginnings of one. He's the only other member of the band who wants to write music at all. He's been through the royal conservatory as a pianist, and he knew more about composing when he was ten than I do now, but he doesn't seem to want to write anything of his own. Flip just helps me out when I'm stuck.
Whispers in the Dark

Flip's a hottie. A real chick-magnet for the band. Stink's okay, but he rocks like autistic-boy while he's playing bass. And there's a reason we call him Stink. He's a vegetarian, lives on beans. Farts like a cow. And then he drinks beer most nights we play. The girls won't go near him when we're between sets. But they flock to Flip.

I've always liked Flip. We've got a lot in common and we're really good friends, but he's still getting over Maria and I ain't no rebound girl. Figure I'll wait until he finally lets one of his groupies take him home. Maybe after a one-night stand he'll be ready to move on. But then, I'm not sure I want a guy who's into one-night stands. So I don't know.

He knows about my return trips to the bars because he's usually the one who covers for me in the morning. Sometimes he even leaves equipment behind, if Lynnie and Stink don't notice it and pack it away, so I have a real reason to go back. I know he's curious, but I haven't told him about my dream of the stage yet. Somehow I don't think a girl who dreams of fanatics whispering her name in the dark would turn his crank. I'm sure he doesn't know why I need to go back, and so far he hasn't asked me, but he knows I have to go back, and that's enough.

Our friend and pseudo-manager Steve has managed to book Gangrene Heart at a couple of bars in Sault Ste. Marie. Maybe we can hop the border while we're there and hit the States. That's my hope anyway. We have to go farther afield, make a little extra money so we can put out a CD. That's the only way we'll survive. Tapes don't sell very well anymore.

The other day, I was working on some new lyrics in the studio for our gigs in the Sault. Flip was there, as usual, but there wasn't anything musical happening yet, so he pulled something out of one of his pockets.

"You want?" He asked holding the packet of small perforated sheets out to me. I could see tiny smileys on each little square and I raised my eyebrow at him.

"Oh, right," he said. "You don't do this shit. Really, I wasn't thinking. I'm just ..."

"Distracted. It's okay." He started gathering up his things. "Hey, where are you going? I said it was okay."
"Yeah, I know, I just have this rule. I don't get high when someone straight's around. It's like getting high alone anyway." He turned to leave and for some reason I stopped him. It was stupid, but I thought I'd try getting high, just this once. Just for him, so he'd stay.

"How much did you take your first time?" I asked. He smiled, and I realised how long it had been since I'd last seen his crooked grin. I don't even know how much acid he gave me, I just let it dissolve in my mouth while I gazed at his smile.

The high crept up on me slowly, and all the while I was watching Flip's face. He was talking about Maria, his girlfriend, but I wasn't listening. My eyes were darting from his thin, expressive lips to his amber eyes, from his braided goatee to his long, auburn hair. He had almost as many ear pierces as I had, and though he'd balked at the idea of a nose ring—he couldn't imagine what it would be like if he got a cold—he'd had his left eyebrow pierced twice.

He was still talking about her, and I nodded when I figured I should, but even though I didn't want to hear about his life with Maria, somehow I learned that they'd been going out since high school. When she'd been accepted into the commerce program at Laurentian University, he'd enrolled in music there—despite his acceptance at McMaster—so they could stay together.

"I don't know what I was thinking," He was saying. "That's the kind of thing girls think of doing. Letting their hearts drag them places they don't want to be, just because of some boy who'll probably dump them by the end of first semester anyway."

"Yeah."

"I should have ended it, like all my other friends. Said goodbye to her in August. It would have saved us both a lot of trouble."

As Flip talked, a picture of the two of them began to emerge like a phantom from the backdrop of his face. I could see her cropped blonde hair take shape from his eyebrow, and her petite figure disengaged itself from Flip's cheek. He said she was very business-like, really suited to her degree. She wore glasses that made her green eyes look a lot bigger than they were and her skin was clear and pale, except for a faint blush on the cheeks of her heart-shaped face.
"It was the same thing anyway. By the end of the first semester, she was so hopped up on commerce she was already thinking MBA. She wanted me to change programs. Said that the music program here only led to teaching and there wasn't any future in that. She told me to change. Said I could take an applied minor in music if I really wanted to. But she didn't get it. She didn't get me."

The high started tickling at the edges of my vision then and I had to turn my head towards the yellow sound tiles on the wall.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I was on the swim team. She didn't get that either. I was good at it too. The coach called me the next Alex Bauman. That's where I got Flip from. From Flipper, you know, the dolphin. Yeah, I was some dolphin, man."

Immediately, I saw him at the Laurentian Olympic Gold pool, standing shaved and lean, adjusting the swim cap on his head, the goggles over his eyes. I'd have fallen in love with him then too.

"But then I started hearing this noise." Flip moved his arm in a wide circle a few times to illustrate. Click. Click. Click. He made a funny face each time, not like it hurt him so much as it reminded him of something painful, and I thought I began to understand.

"I knew it was something bad but the coach was getting on my back. Faster, better, more. All the time. I thought if I could just get through the qualifying races, I'd make it, you know? So I didn't do anything about it." He paused and I thought I saw something come loose behind his eyes. "The first time my shoulder popped out of its socket I was in the middle of a race. I almost drowned."

And I didn't even need him to finish the story because I saw it all before me like a play on the stage. His swimming hopes were crushed before they could become a reality, and all he had was music, but Maria couldn't let him waste his life as a lowly musician. What about their future? She certainly couldn't raise children on a musician's pitiful earnings, so she rode Flip's ass, until she sucked all the hope out of him, and finally, since she couldn't get him to change, Maria kicked him out.
"I don't even think I love her anymore, but I guess she was part of a dream I had. You know, marriage, music, swimming." He turned to me. "Do you swim?" I shook my head.

"There's nothing like it. Gliding through the water like that you can feel how powerful you are. You can feel ... so ... I guess, free."

"No one can touch you ..." I said. I knew what he meant. I heard the sound of waves, and underneath it the AshashAshashAsh of my imagined audience lapping up on the shore of my stage.

"Yeah."

I looked into his eyes again, wondered what other secrets were trapped in their amber. And everything stopped. I don't even remember if I was breathing. And in that moment there was energy leaping between our dilated pupils, but I couldn't bring myself to take it, to reel him in. Flip wasn't a fish and he wasn't over Maria. I couldn't touch him until I was sure.

So I let the high sweep me away. The room spun upside down and the energy that had been flowing between Flip and me changed forms while I was looking the other way.

I hammer down on the strings. Hard. My fingers hurt, but that's okay. Practise is going well today, a rarity of late. My calluses are getting a run for their money.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Lynnie breaking a sweat as she pounds away on the drums. There's nothing better than a good practise. Well, almost nothing. The stage is a bitch, but she's always there.

"Let's record something," I say at the first break. "You got a D.A.T. free?"

"Sure," says Flip. "What you want?"

"What about "Yo' Mama"?" Lynnie asks. Lynnie loves that song because she has a smokin' drum solo. I'm up for anything. I just want to keep playing. I want to break more than a sweat. Busting a callus takes a lot of work, and I'll have to change strings after because the blood'll rust them, but I'm hot for some damage.

"Alright! Let's do it!"
Flip pops in the D.A.T. and arranges the mics, but he has to test them first, and I feel the moment slipping away. True to form, once we’re recording, we suck. Lynnie even fucks up her solo.

And there ain’t much worse than a shitty solo.

“You’re at a place called The Roosevelt on the 18th, and the The Back Door the next night. I’ll fax Mike the directions.”

“What about the money?”

“The usual. Five hundred for the night and all the drinks you want.”

“Christ, Steve! That’s barely enough to pay for the trip! This isn’t an in-town gig!”

“What do you want, Ash? These guys haven’t even heard of Gangrene Heart. They won’t pay any more for an unknown. You want me to do any better, I can’t do it for free either. This shit ain’t worth it.”

“Is there a cheap place to stay at least?”

“The Rooz is the cheapest place in town. Fifty bucks a night.”

“Fuck!”

“Calm down, Ash. Don’t Lynnie’s folks have a cottage out there?”

“I’ll have to ask.”

“That’s the best I can do for you.”

“Yeah, thanks Steve.” I hang up the phone. Fifty bucks a night, for two nights, plus gas there and back. That’ll use up the five hundred right there, not counting food. I sure hope Lynnie’s folks do have a cottage there, or we’re going to be sleeping in the van on top of the amps.

“What was that about?”

“Shit!” Flip has a habit of walking around this place like a ghost. He scares the crap out of me all the time. “Unless we can get another gig in the Sault, we’re fucked.”

“Don’t worry.” He gives one of my braids a tug on the way by. “You’ll figure something out.”

“Yeah, sure.”
I've got it figured that Flip's dream is to swim again. My dream is to be on a big stage, and doing what I do, that's a possibility, no matter how vague. Flip's got it tougher though.

He hasn't entered the water since this orthopaedic surgeon pronounced his right shoulder "unfit for any strenuous activity." And until it starts interfering with his ability to make a living it's considered unnecessary surgery—it's not like he was a professional athlete or anything. So right now, he's saving money for a joint replacement, or so he tells everyone. He has been for the last couple of years, but he's never managed to save much.

I think he knows he'll never swim competitively again, but he's worried that even with the operation he won't be able to swim at all. So part of him thinks, "Fuck it." And the other part of him, the part that I often find listening to dolphin-song in the dark, says, "You haven't got a choice."

At least, that's the way I imagine he feels.

He's paid me some money—I refuse to call it rent—for the last couple of months he's been staying here. Well, it's only been five and a half weeks. I haven't been spending it though. I've just been saving it and I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it. I think I want to give it back to him, like a gift, so he'll be that much closer to being able to pay for his operation, but I don't know if he'll accept it or how he'll feel about it.

When it comes down to it, even though we've been playing in the same band for three years, and even though he's spent a lot of that time in my basement, I don't know him very well. I mean I don't know if I know him well. I know the person I'd like him to be, but I'm not a fool; he's probably not much like my romanticised ideal.

Flip's in the basement right now and I've been avoiding going down there. It's sad, but I've been avoiding him for a few days because I don't want my eyes giving me away. My feelings are a little big for my heart these days and they just come spilling out of me. I just hope Flip hasn't already seen them. I'd be so embarrassed. Besides, I still don't think it's a good idea to get involved with him yet. Not just because of the rebound thing. I mean, what happens to the band if we don't work out?
I'm still thinking about his money. It is his three hundred bucks. I'll just hold on to it until he needs it, and if I want to give him a gift, I'll have to think of something else.

"Ash." I'm leaping, out of my papa-san chair in less than a second.

"Jesus!" He's up here, in my room, scaring the crap right out of me—

"Hey, Ash,"—and laughing his damned ass off too.

"What?!!" Flip sobers up pretty fast, his deep laugh limping a bit before it falls away completely. I'm definitely pissed off, but usually that just means he teases me. Something's on his mind.

"Are you okay?" He's leaning back on the mahogany-stained doorframe, tilting his head to the side so a stray fiery wisp of bang falls across his eyes. He pulls it back into place with his long fingers. "You haven't been down to write anything for a while." I sigh and flop back into my chair.

"Don't worry about it," I snap, but then I make the mistake of meeting his eyes. The mournful cry of dolphin-song floats up from the basement and I smile at Flip to let him know he's forgiven. "Really."

"I've been waiting ..."

I'm sure he doesn't mean what I want him to mean. It would be a bad thing to get involved with him now anyway. What if we ended up hating one another? Then the band would dissolve and all I'd be left with is my guitar and my dreams of the dark. My smile's faded away. I reach out and grab a book from my shelf.

"I just need a break."

"Well we're off to the Sault next week. I just thought ..." He shifts his weight from his right to his left leg. Nervously.

"Listen," he says, "I've got enough money now, teaching piano at the U, to get my own place. I've got a line on a new apartment over on Kelley Lake Road. I might move out after the Sault."

"Oh?" I'm relieved. Really. My stomach just doesn't seem to believe me. I get up out of the papa-san again, reaching for the puzzle box I keep my emergency fund in. Flip's rent is in there too. I hope I sound convincing. "Well great! You need some help?"
"I have to call Maria yet. See if there's anything left for me to move, but if there is, the van would be nice."

"It's yours."

"Thanks," he says, and I don't know why, but now that I've got my box open, I grab everything, my money too. There must be almost seven hundred and fifty dollars in here. Before I can think, I'm holding the crumpled bundle out to him.

"What's this?" He asks, and the look on his face tells me I'll regret what I'm doing, but there's no turning back now.

"It's your rent money. I can't keep it. And some extra."

"Why?"

"For, uh ..." What will I tell him? "You know, your, uh, sh—for your operation."

God! There. It's out. He's looking at me like I'm some kind of freak.

He starts laughing. I'm confused.

"Aw fuck around, Ash!"

I stand up. Fidget. And Flip wraps me in his wiry arms as his laughter grows harsh. I have no idea what to do, so I stand here stiffly, listening as my heart leaps into overdrive and dumbly breathing in the smoke-laden warmth of his clothes. His hug is uncomfortably tight, and I'm scared but I don't mind. Flip's laughter gives way to hesitant breathing. In another moment, I figure I'll give in and relax into his embrace. He's leaning down to whisper in my ear.

"I have the money. My uncle said he'd pay for my shoulder a long time ago, but I told him no. I don't think a joint replacement's going to solve any of my problems. Swimming's just not what I need anymore." I can barely detect the anger in his voice but it's there underneath his half-hearted amusement, and he pauses just long enough to lend his next words a little extra emphasis. "And thanks, but I think you need that money more than I do."

I don't know what to say. Whether he means it as an insult or not. I squirm a little. I think about hugging him back, about kissing him, but I don't.

Flip finally lets me go, backs slowly into the hallway, the left side of his mouth quirking upward slightly. Without another word, he retreats into the basement, leaving me
in the middle of my forest green den of a bedroom, and a moment later, he closes the studio door and the dolphins’ song is abruptly cut off.

Damn! I can’t believe how stupid I am. How could I ever think he’d appreciate the money. He wants to swim again, my ass! I cram my fistful of cash back into the puzzle box and the papa-san’s rattan moans as I throw myself into it again.

I don’t need to be thinking like this, feeling like—God—a fool. Love sucks. My dream crawls out of its cage and shoves everything else out of my head. I hear the call of the road again. I can’t wait to feel the stage under my feet, the heat of the lights on my body. The hum of electricity singing through cables, singing through the air. The sigh that shudders through me as my fingers hover over the strings. The need, the high, rows upon rows of hungry eyes.

After Sault Ste. Marie we’ll cross the border. I’ll find us a gig. We’ve never performed in the states before. It’ll be different, better. We’ll kick ass.

I’m staring into nothing. Thinking of how it will feel when I hit the big time. People will want me. No games. I’ll be able to feel their need, burning through the audience. I won’t need a fucking keyboard player who’s afraid of the water.

“Here’s the new material.”

The practice is tense. Lynnie can’t seem to keep a beat, Stink’s farting his goddamned ass off, and Flip’s either angry or embarrassed, I can’t tell which. It’s not a good practice for introducing new songs, but we don’t have a lot of time.

“I’d like to have this ready for the Sault.”

“We’ll be lucky if we can pull off the old stuff, Ash.” Lynnie’s ready to pack it in.

“Yeah, at this rate, we’ll be lucky if we don’t get thrown out.” Stink puts down his bass. “I’m going for a smoke.”

“I’ll join you.” Those are the first words Flip has said all night.

“Come on, guys. So it’s a bad practice. Give it another half hour.”

“We’ve given it two hours already. I’m tired.”

“Can we just run through the new song once?”
“After this.” Stink waves his pack of Du Maurier at me. He’s already on the stairs. “Then we’ll run through it once. And then I’m going home.”


“Nah.”

When I get upstairs, I catch sight of Stink out the back door. He’s flat on his back, legs up in the air, lighting blue angels. Immature prick. He’s lucky he plays the bass as well as he does. Otherwise he’d be lighting his farts in the gutter. If I didn’t kill him first. I bring a pitcher of water and glasses back down to the studio. In case anyone else wants.

“You planning a lot more out of town gigs, Ash?”

“Well, we have to start expanding our audience, but I haven’t asked Steve to set anymore dates yet.”

“Just keep it to weekends, will ya? I can’t take time off during the week.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll keep that in mind.” Nobody seems to be taking this seriously.

Gangrene Heart won’t last long with attitudes like Lynnie’s. This is important. Stink and Flip return from outside.

“You ready?” I ask.

“If it means I get to go home.” Stink means it as a joke, but I’m not in the mood.

“Ah, just fuck it. Go home. It’s just a goddamned ballad anyway. I’ll do it a cappella.”

“Ash—”

“Just fuckin’ go home. I don’t need this shit.” They’re stunned at my outburst.

Hell, I’m stunned. “Sorry guys. It’s been a bad night. It’ll be better tomorrow. I just need a good night’s rest.”

“You need to stop worrying about the Sault.” Lynnie says.

But I can’t.
And I can’t sleep either. I just keep thinking about how I blew up. How I nearly screwed everything up. Flip, the band. Was it always so bad? Have I always been such a tyrant? I can’t seem to remember. There’s a knock at the door.

“Ash?” It’s Mike. I acknowledge him with a weary grin. “How you doing?”

“Why you asking?”

“Maybe the basement walls are sound-proof,” he says tapping the wall, “but these ones are so thin I couldn’t help but overhear your discussion with Flip this afternoon.”

“You eavesdropping little shit!”

“Hey, can I help it if voices carry?” I’m about to jump up and throttle him, but it’s not worth it. In my present mood, I might kill him. He steps into my room and leans on the door to close it behind him.

“Why don’t you just tell Flip you love him?”

“Mike!”

“Well you do, don’t you?” He stands there with his back against the door looking at me with my father’s eyes. “I may be a hermit, but I still live in this house. You’ve been letting your edges get soft around the guy.”

“No.”

“Yes. I’ve seen it.” He leaps and flings himself on my bed like a high jumper. “If he weren’t so messed up over Maria, he’d probably see it too. In fact, I think he’d be happy to know he makes you sweat.” He’s lying on his right side with his head propped up on his hand. He’s smiling at me, making fun.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Leave me alone.”

“Tell him.”

“I can’t!”

“Tell him, Ash, or you’ll never know if he feels the same way.”

“I tried to. This afternoon. And all I managed to do was make myself look like an idiot! I’m telling you. I can’t.”

“That’s what I don’t understand about you.” He stands up and marches the few steps that separate us, thrusting his right index finger at me for emphasis. “Nothing can ever be simple with you. You get some stupid idea in your head about how things should
be.” He kneels in front of me and I reluctantly let him take my hands into his own before he continues.

“So far, you’ve been smart about it. You didn’t leave Dad’s firm until you had enough money saved to get started. You’ve pulled me in on the mortgage so you can have a place to practice and record. Now what? You’ve got your music, band, and so many weird stories that everybody I know looks up to you like some kind of hero, but it’s time you started living in reality like the rest of us, Ash. You can’t control everything and make it turn out the way you want it to. Tell Flip you like him and live with whatever happens.” He drops his head in apparent despair and I can tell how long this lecture has been building up inside him.

“What are you going to do,” he asks. “When you wake up one day and the life you’ve ordained for yourself isn’t enough anymore?”

“Well Flip ain’t the answer.”

“How will you know if you don’t try?” Mike tugs on my hands and captures my eyes with his own when I look up. “Ash, you’re almost twenty-seven years old. If Gangrene Heart doesn’t make something of itself soon, you’ll have to go back to Dad and get your old job—”

“No! I’m through doing that paralegal crap!” What? And admit I can’t make my dream work in the straight world?

“But your savings are almost gone, how much longer do you think you’re going to be able to do this?”

“As long as I need to.” But even I’m not convinced I can do it anymore. Mike shuts his mouth, hoping I guess that maybe I’ll give in. The little bastard’s just like Dad.

“You’re more stubborn than Dad ever was, Ash.”

—What?

“Look,” he continues, sighing, “I’ve got enough work now that I can take over the whole mortgage if you need me to. Just let me know.”

I can’t say anything. Between being compared to Dad and Mike’s too-generous offer of financial support, I’m ... I don’t know. What am I supposed to think about all this? Mike extends his legs to stand and I get up with him. Before he can pull away, I
grab him, and hug him so tight that he can barely breathe. I’m holding my breath too. He
breaks away and leaves the room before I exhale, his grin of brotherly love making me
smile back. I close the door behind him and I breathe again. The first one comes out like
a sob though, and then I fall to shit.

Mike’s always been smart. Always. He knows Gangrene Heart hasn’t got much
more time. I know it, but I’ve been trying to tell myself that at the next gig, in the next
city, something’s going to happen. I was a dork trying to give my money away to Flip.
Even he knows we’re going under.

But I can’t go back to work. I just can’t. Every paper that crossed my desk was
the end of someone’s life. Divorce, death, child custody, and money, always money. I
still don’t know how Dad can do it, how he can shut off his heart long enough to rip
someone else’s apart. I don’t know how he can come home to Mom every night and not
tell her how many marriages he’s helped end, how many children he’s helped separate
from their parents, how many people he’s had to reduce to so many crossed T’s and
dotted I’s.

I can’t go back. Because going back to work for Dad means that Gangrene Heart
won’t ever be anything more than a local band. It means I’ll never know what it means to
stand on the stage in the dark. But maybe that fantasy is the problem. Maybe Mike’s
right. I have to face reality.

I can’t do this on my own anymore.

I’m only half-aware that my feet are carrying me down the hall. Flip’s not in his
room. What’s wrong with me? I’ve been hiding behind my fantasies too long—audiences
scream, they don’t whisper. I’ve been setting up false expectations. Flip can’t read my
mind. He doesn’t know how I feel. I grab a dishtowel in the kitchen to dry my eyes. I
can’t just keep hoping that the world will give in some day and work the way I want it to.
I just can’t hope anymore.

I open the door to the basement. There’s a universe of possibilities. I keep trying
to take, own, protect myself. From what? Love? Success? Happiness? What the fuck is
happiness anyway? Just a word. A wonderful word. Whatever it is, I can’t take it. I can
only receive. I go down.
But I won’t get anything until I try giving it first. It’s the law. You don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone. I don’t want to wait that long to know what it is I’ve got. So I’ve got to give it away to find out. But what is ‘it’? Music? Passion? Borderline insanity? And who do I give it to? And How? I knock on the studio door, snuffle quickly and turn the knob.

The door swings in about a foot and a half and I can see Flip sitting at his synthesiser. He’s got earphones on, listening to the playback, and he’s chewing on his already stubby nails. I knock again on the open door, much louder this time, and his head twitches toward me. His eyes open wide for a moment and the one corner of his mouth pulls up uncertainly before his face relaxes into a neutral expression. He takes off the headset. He’s waiting. I don’t know what to say. But he’s waiting for me to speak.

“What did you mean before when you said that swimming isn’t what you need?” I ask. Flip twists his face into something between a sneer and a wince.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s lame.” I step into the room and drop into the first chair I see. “You know. You just don’t want to tell me. What, is it embarrassing? Weird? You know I’m the queen of weird. I’ll understand.” He just looks back at the keyboard and sighs.

“I’m trying not to think of myself for once,” I say. “I’m here to listen. Honest.”

“Are you?” He pins me down with the weight of his stare. “Being honest, I mean. No ulterior motives?” He’s got me there. I guess I’ll have to confess.

“You’re right. I’m down here because I want to know what you meant this afternoon.” The smile that Flip flashes is tight. “I want to make myself feel better, to get rid of this feeling that there’s something I’m missing, that I’m a bad friend if I can’t help you out. I’ve let you down.” I lean forward on the folding chair and it almost collapses underneath me. Flip snorts and this time, the crooked smile stays on his lips. Kind of settles there like it belongs. I stand up and kick the chair away.

“The bottom line is that I want to see that damned crooked smile of yours more often and I want to know what I can do to make that happen. I give a shit—”

“And so you’re here to listen to my troubles. I’m so lucky.”
“So I don’t do this very well. Could you help me out a little?” Please, somebody help me!

“I don’t know. What are you trying to do?” Flip stands up now too, clearly amused by my growing frustration. He’s going to get a smack up side the head if he doesn’t stop soon.

“I’ll know as soon as you answer my question!” God, I’m almost shouting!

“And which one would that be?”

“Why don’t you want to swim anymore? I thought that was your dream. What’s changed?” I want to know what comes after the dream. What’s left for me after my dream of stardom falls apart? What do I do if I have to go back to crossing T’s and dotting I’s? If Gangrene Heart can’t survive? If he doesn’t love me back? Flip sighs heavily and runs his hands through his wild auburn hair. He looks at me, his lips pressing together and parting like he’s going to say something, but he doesn’t. His eyes look an almost feral yellow in the fluorescent lights of the basement. I watch, as they seem to change colour. Yellow, amber, darkening with—

And suddenly his lips are pressing against mine and it’s something I’ve wanted so bad that I close my eyes and forget everything but the kneading pressure of his lips, his warm tongue. I can taste the flavours—hot salsa and dark beer—of his mouth. I can’t remember anything ever feeling this good. Inside I’m jumbled, my heart leaping, and my stomach quivering with the suddenly released energy now coursing through my body. My hands grasp at Flip’s chambray shirt, anchoring briefly in his collar where I can feel his pulse, warm and bounding, as my thumbs rest against his neck. My right hand follows the material of his shirt collar until it reaches the nape of his neck, then tangles in his hair. I pull him into the kiss fiercely, and I feel his hands, one finding its way into the back pocket of my jeans, the other splayed against my back, bringing us closer together.

My whole body throbs in time to my pulse and the scrambled feeling in my gut settles into a warmth that radiates, tingling, through every cell in my body. My eyes flutter open, and I can see Flip’s, the lids half-shuttered and the eyes themselves rolled back. He makes a muffled noise as one of my teeth cuts into his lower lip. His lids flash open. As our eyes meet, amber to blue, I taste the salt of his blood and I twitch with the thrill, my
back arching. The sensation becomes so intense that suddenly I can’t catch my breath and I tilt my head slightly to break the seal of our first kiss. Oh Jesus. Our first kiss.

And it could be more, but I don’t want that to happen. Not yet. I need to know he’s over Maria. I need to know I’m not just replacing one impossible dream with another, so I pull away. Slowly. I try to smile. Find another chair before I fall down.

“Sorry.” I say. “’Bout your mouth.”

“You could kiss it better.”

“I better not.”

“Yeah.” He sucks his lip. I can’t think of what it was I came down here for. I want another kiss. Flip shuffles his feet. I remember.

“So why don’t you want to swim anymore?”

“Because it won’t be the same. Because … I don’t know, because I have the music now.” He steps over to the synthesiser. “Speaking of which. There’s something I want you to listen to.”

He glances at me, suddenly awkward again. He rewinds the tape, unplugs the earphones, and presses play. I hear the familiar cries of the dolphins, but Flip’s added a string section, percussion, piano. The chords climb, the progression moving precipitously to the dominant and then falling away again. I feel the fine hair on my arms rise, and I know it’s good music. Hell, it’s beautiful.

“I call it ‘Swimming,’” he says moving over to the battered old sofa on the opposite wall. He sits it the corner and looks down at the cushion. “I promise I’ll be good,” he adds.

“You mean you’ll behave yourself, or—”

“Yes.”

But it doesn’t matter. I’m already getting up and slipping over to the light switch. A small movement of my fingers and the fluorescents flicker out leaving us the light from the stairs and the glimmering of the synthesiser’s display for illumination. The string quartet surges through a chorus of dolphins leaping in minor thirds until the dissonance resolves into the dominant fifth. In the near-darkness I move hesitantly, taking my place
beside him on the sofa and leaning back onto his shoulder. Flip slides his arm around my waist. I’m holding my breath.

“Ash,” he whispers and a shiver passes through me as ‘Swimming’ modulates into the dominant key. “It’s okay, really.”

My breathing resumes, shallow and thready. I decide to ask the question I’ve been wondering about since I met Flip. I clear my throat, but only a whisper comes out.

“What’s your real name?” I can feel his quiver of laughter.

“You don’t want to know.”

“I do though.” He shifts uncomfortably.

“Dana,” he says and I can barely make out the name because he’s laughing, but as soon as he figures out that I haven’t joined him, he coughs a little and asks, “Yours?”

“Ash.” Flip’s—Dana’s—pause is filled with disbelief. In the background, the music’s progression descends, rushing back into its original key.

“No, honest,” I protest, turning toward him. “I was a blue baby, but because of my skin I was as grey as—”

“—ash. Yeah, I can see that.”

“It was a kind of phoenix thing. You know, rising from the ash …”

“Yeah.” The song glides into a cadence and then fades back into the dolphin-song.

The whole composition ends on a rising cry, despair and hope battling for a moment before the cellos restore order with a final tonic bass.

“What do you think?” He asks in the darkened room, and as I gaze into his eyes, their pupils so large that I can barely see any amber around the edges, I see the electricity of my need reflected in them.

And I’m thinking of leaning in, closer to those eyes, close enough so that the pupils merge into one. I’m thinking of what our second kiss might be like, remembering the taste of him, the salt of his blood. I want more. His neck, his chest, his fingers, his …

“I’m thinking you’re crazy dinkin’ around with Gangrene Heart.” He doesn’t answer. “Seriously. You should be off somewhere composing and selling this stuff, or doing your M.A., or your B.Ed., or … well anything but playing in a band.”
"I guess I'm crazy then. Because I want to stay with Gangrene Heart. I want to stay with you." Flip cups my cheek in his hand, runs his thumb across my lips. I can't resist. I wrap my lips around his thumb, draw it into my mouth, taste it with my tongue.

I let the kiss happen. It's much softer this time. Sweet, gentle. I taste his last cigarette and I realise that it doesn't matter what he tastes like. His lips leave mine and begin making their way along my jaw, down my neck, to my shoulder.

"There," I tell him, and he circles the spot with kisses, uses his tongue, his teeth. And it hits me like a flood, all at once, I can't catch my breath, my heart is racing, I'm dizzy.

"More." It's barely a whisper.

"What?"

I push him back on the couch, taste his mouth again, nibble up to his ear.

"I want more."

Sault Ste. Marie looked like it was going to be a disaster. First there was the Roosevelt. The Rooz. No cage, but God, I wished we'd had one. It was a hiker bar. Why a country and western bastion of red-neck scum like that would give a gig to an alternative band like Gangrene Heart, I don't know.

"What the hell did Steve tell this guy?" I asked.

"Fucked if I know." Lynnie shrugged. Steve was her friend. She was the one who asked him to start helping us out. "Steve knows the kind of music we play. He wouldn't lie, or anything. I mean, it's not like we're desperate for money or anything ..."

But we were. I'd taken my emergency fund. The money I was going to give to Flip, and was going to use it for gas and three nights in a half-decent hotel and food. I owed the band at least that much. I told them we'd clear one-twenty-five a gig, a piece. Flip figured out what I'd done. He pulled me aside at the first opportunity.

"You're crazy!" He told me. "Putting this much of your own money in the band. What are you thinking?"
“These days, to be honest, I’m clueless. But this may be Gangrene Heart’s last out-of-town gig. I want it to be a good one. So if you have something to say, let it wait until we get back. You can accuse me all you want then.”

“Hey, I’m not ‘accusing’ you of anything. But you didn’t have to do this. We had options and we should have made the decision as a band. We could have stayed in Lynnie’s camp.”

“It’s a half-hour out of town.”

“But it’s free. The money you’re spending could have been the start of a CD. You should have let us decide.”

“I just wanted to do something nice.”

“But you have to think of the future.”

“There may not be a fucking future. Don’t you get it?”

“Lover’s quarrel?” Stink teased in passing. “We’ve got gear to set up. Whatever you guys are talking about can wait.”

The manager, Mr. Short, came in to meet us as we were doing a quick sound check. That was a surprise in itself, but the man was even more surprising. He was slim, well-groomed, wearing cowboy boots, jeans, and a corduroy blazer over a chambray shirt. He seemed happy to have us, even after he got a good look.

“You got a place to stay tonight?” He asked.

“Well, not really.” Flip looked over. Raised his eyebrow.

“Why don’t you bunk upstairs then? I’ll give you a bigger room for the basic rate.”

“That’s very generous. But I’ll have to ask the band.”

“’S’okay with me,” Stink said into the mic.

“Go for it,” Lynnie called from the soundboard. Flip just nodded his head.

“Okay then,” I said.

“Move your things in as soon as you want. I’ll just deduct the cost of the room from your fee.”

We spent the afternoon making some last minute changes to our play-list in an attempt to stay out of trouble, but we’d never done country, so the best we could do was
to hold back for most of the night playing ballads and a few cover tunes. It was stuff we hadn't practised for a while, and boy did it show. We only got a couple of beer bottles—one empty, the other half-full—and a still smoking butt thrown at us for our efforts. I had a bruise of my thigh for a couple of weeks from where the Export nailed me, but the bouncers moved fast and the perps were booted out before anything worse could happen.

But the beer bottles really pissed me off and when last call rolled around, I was fed up enough to rock the joint, whatever the consequences. So I got the guys to crank out "Deadbeat" for me and we gave them the works: distortion, feedback, incoherent, screaming lyrics and a couple of 'motherfuckers' thrown in for good measure. Practically growled myself hoarse with that one song alone, and even though no one called us back for an encore, it felt good to leave the room with a taste of the real Gangrene Heart.

"Really liked that one you did on your own with the guitar," Mr Short said as he handed me the cheque. He said guitar with a Texas twang, put the emphasis on the first syllable.

"Oh. 'Rounnder.' Thanks. That one's new." We never did get a chance to practice that one as a group. I decided to give the gang a rest during the second set and do it on my own.

"You really have a set of pipes there, girl." And amazingly, he wasn't talking to my chest.

"Thanks," I said again.

"You did real good tonight."

"We did?"

"Yeah. This crowd makes a point of it to hate every band that comes in here. You did good. Last band they really didn't like didn't come back for their second set." He winked.

"Good to know." I looked at the cheque. Five hundred. He didn't take off the cost of the room. "Ummm. Mr. Short?"

"That's Duane, honey. And I figured you might just as well have the room for free."

"Thank you!"
"You should think about coming back some time."

When I wake up, I realise that I'm still on the couch, legs and arms still wrapped around Flip. I look up and see that he's already awake.

"I was wondering when you'd get up." He smiles. That beautifully crooked smile.

"Didn't want to disturb you."

"What time is it?"

"Bout eleven."

"Oh, Jesus." I try to move, but I've got a kink in my neck and I can't feel the arm that's under Flip anymore.

"Here." Flip helps me up, massages my neck while I try to get the blood back into my arm.

"How the hell did I get any sleep?"

"You were ... tired."

"Uh-huh." Our first kiss set the tone for the entire night. We bit and clawed our way through the darkness. Came like a couple of animals, snarling and straining through the orgasm. The memory calls me back. I want to go there again. But I can't.

"Thanks," I say. I get up. Start gathering my clothes. "So ..."

"So?"

"What are we doing?" I fall back onto the couch beside Flip.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what are we doing getting into a relationship?"

"What's the problem?"

"Maria. Gangrene Heart. Me."

"Okay." He pulls me toward him. "Let's take it from the top." He kisses me on the forehead. "What's the problem with Maria?"

"Like you don't know."

"I want to hear your take on it."

"Okay. She only kicked you out six weeks ago. And how long did you go out with her?"
“Five years.”
“And you don’t think you need some more time?”
“To do what?”
“Get over her?”

“No. Sure, we’ve been going out for a long time. But for the last couple of years, it’s been bad. I’m just like most guys though. I hung on. I saw the problems, but I didn’t do anything about it. When a guy who’s been dumped says he never saw it coming, he’s just feeling guilty. So things have been over with Maria and me for a long time. She just made it official.”

“But still …”

“Yeah. I’ll always have feelings for Maria. But that’s not going to change for a while.”

“Oh. But you don’t think …?”

“I’m okay. I know what’s going on. So. The band.”

“Won’t it make things … awkward?”

“I don’t see why it should.”

“But what if we break up?”

“We’ll have to deal with that then. Why? You planning on breaking up with me?”

“No!”

“Well …”

“Okay.”

“Now what else are you worried about?”

“Just me.” Here it is. I take a deep breath. “I love you. I’ve always liked you, and we’ve been such good friends. We have so much in common.”

“No we don’t.”

“What do you mean? We talk all the time.”

“But what do we talk about? Music. The band. I don’t know anything about you really. And you don’t know much about me. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to get to know you. That kind of happens when you start a relationship, but—”
"We may not have a lot in common. Yeah. I get it. But that doesn't change the fact that I love you. And I'm worried. Because I want the band to go places. I want to go places. And I don't know what I'd do if I had to make a choice."

"Between me and music? I wouldn't want you to have to. But it hasn't happened yet. If it does, we'll deal with it. It's just what we'll have to do."

Flip makes it all sound so sensible. But it's not. Feelings aren't sensible. I'm not sensible.

"Listen," he says pulling on his jeans. "I've got to teach at the U this afternoon. Have to shower before I go. Want to come?" I throw on my shirt.

"Sure. Ummm ..."

"What?"

"Are you still going to move out after the Sault?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No. But I thought you wouldn't want to sleep in the living room anymore."

"It's okay if I stay?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll see what we can do when I get back."

The Back Door was better. Usually, it was all top-40 and house music for the college crowd. And the manager, an elegant-looking black man by the name of Malik Abrams, was definitely surprised when he saw us walk in.

"I'll have to have a little talk with Steve."

This time, despite the misunderstanding, I refused to play down for the audience and Gangrene Heart gave it all we had from the beginning. Under Malik's watchful scowl, the dance floor emptied by the end of our second song, "Separation Anxiety." It filled again anytime I launched into a ballad, though. Some people left. Others came in. Rockers, mostly, but some blue-collar types too, and if I didn't know better, I would have sworn I saw a few familiar faces from the Rooz. Soon, I couldn't see any floor at all.

Rows upon rows of eyes bobbed and jostled before me. Some were wide and frantic, others closed and drowsy. None of them were focused on me though. I wasn't
Whispers in the Dark

what they’d come here for. At the Back Door, it was the dance floor that attracted the
crowd. The chance to pick-up, do some dirty dancing and just come out of your skin for a
night. The energy was everywhere, pulsing in time to Lynnie’s drumming, but none of it
was focused, none of it directed. I needed eye contact for that.

There was one stare that I couldn’t help but notice, even through the flashing
spotlights and lasers. He was Armani man. A sleek, polished Italian. Hair slicked with
gel, and eyes like molasses. Tar-baby eyes. Dark, greedy eyes, like little black holes
sucking up every bit of energy I had to offer. So I gave more. The gloves came off. He
saw my smile, and he knew exactly what it meant.

Every note, every chord, every drop of sweat was charged that night. Each a drop
of nitro-glycerine, waiting to explode. By about one thirty, though, I was about to give
up. The tar-baby eyes seemed to have an endless capacity. Taking every ounce of energy
I had to spare. My voice was starting to split, getting reed-like with the strain, and my
legs were about to give out. I couldn’t jump-kick one more time. I couldn’t climb the
Marshalls, let alone jump off them back to the stage. And our amps were small.

Then I saw it. Mr. Armani smiled. He was surrendering. He hadn’t expected me
to meet his challenge. His brown eyes shuttered, he looked down, and when he raised his
eyes again, he nodded his head, his hand lifting briefly in salute. I’d won.

Flip started the intro for our next song, a synthesised beat that gained in tempo,
until, one by one, the rest of the band joined in. I could feel the rush of returning energy
when Stink began hammering out the bass-line, and when it was time for me to descend on
the crowd with the first screaming lines of “Deadbeat,” I knew that I’d laid claim to my
first soul.

It fuelled me until we finished our set at two.

“Ash.” Flip picked me up with his hug. “You were amazing!” Stink slapped me
on the back.

“Best performance we ever gave.”

“We rock!” Lynnie crowed.

So I was hardly surprised to see Mr. Armani strolling over to us with Malik as we
started to tear down our gear.
"This is Lionel D’Atillio from the Sault, Michigan," he said smiling. "Lionel, this is Gangrene Heart: Ash, um, Flip, Stinky—"

"That’s Stink."

"—and Lyn. Lynnie didn’t correct him. Lionel extended his hand, first to me, and then to the other members of the band.

"I really enjoyed myself tonight," he said. "Usually Mike invites me over and I sit here listening to dance music all night for the sake of our friendship." He paused, laughed a bit for Malik’s sake and then continued.

"But tonight I heard something that could just save my ass." The tar-baby eyes were suddenly greedy again. "Have you ever considered playing a bigger venue?"

"Two thousand." I have to calm the others down. We’re all ‘doing lunch’ with Lionel at the Water Tower. I put Gangrene Heart up there last night because I figured we deserved it after the Back Door.

"Excuse me?" It’s more money than we’ve ever been paid before, but I’ve got a feeling that Armani-man here has deep pockets.

"Three thousand then. That’s American dollars. And you don’t have an agent to pay as I understand it."

"The way I understand it, an arena the size of yours pays out about twenty-five for a big act like Garryn White. The Grifters are probably big enough to get, what, eight, maybe ten out of you? You’re in a bind. Most of the good local bands are on tour themselves this time of year. I think we’re worth five."

"Ash!" Flip hisses. I put my hand on his arm. I know how to negotiate a contract.

"Three thousand five, with merchandising."

"All we have is a cassette. Twenty-five copies. That’s not worth much."

"Four then. And that’s as high as I can justify going." I bring out my pen.

"You’ve got yourself a deal, Mr. D’Atillio. We’ll see you on Friday."
“Oh my God! Oh my God!” That’s been Lynnie’s chant all the way home. “I can’t believe it! Four thousand American for an opening gig! Oh my God!”

“There’s our first CD,” I tell them.

“I almost had a coronary in there!” Stink says. “I thought you were crazy asking for more.”

“But you got it,” Flip says. “See? I told you you’d figure something out. I’d kiss you if you weren’t driving.” I slow down and pull to the side of the road.

“Put your mouth where the money is, baby,” I tell him. He takes off his seat belt, grabs my shoulders, and kisses me. Lynnie and Stink start behaving like a couple of kids, whooping at us from the bench seat in the back. But I don’t care. I’m lost in a tangle of tongues.

“You’re amazing, Ash,” Flip whispers as he pulls away.

I’m going to thank Steve for the Sault. It’s more than I could have hoped for.

I’ve scheduled a whole week of practices. It’s going to be rough, because Lynnie is working, Flip has his piano lessons to teach at the university, and I’m busy duping tapes and trying to sketch out my latest ideas for songs before I lose them. There’s no time to flesh them out now. I’ve got another idea for this weekend, but I have to talk it over with Flip first.

I hear the door open and close.

“Ash?”

“In the studio.” He stops off at the fridge and comes down with a beer. His lip’s curled up in a sneer.

“Bad beer?”

“No,” he says, crossing to the couch and flopping down. “Bad lesson.”

“Oh?” I turn my chair around and face him, prop my elbow on my knees and prepare to listen. My idea will have to wait. “What happened?”

“Ah,” he sighs, a little disgusted, a lot disappointed. “There’s this kid. He’s so hot on a career in music. He wants to teach, maybe even perform professionally.”

“But?” I prompt.
"He’s dyslexic, not that that’s a problem in itself, but his parents won’t talk about his disability and they let the kid think he can do anything he wants."

"But he can’t."

"No. And his dad’s got money coming out his ass and has paid out for this kid to have the best alternative education and tutors all through school. The thing is that dyslexia doesn’t mean you’re stupid, and with the right education, some kids even manage to conquer it, but this kid hasn’t. And I don’t think he will. He’s sixteen and after nearly eight years of lessons, he still gets his fingerling mixed up, insists that he has to do it his way because that’s the way his brain understands it. He doesn’t get it."

"I don’t think I do either. What’s so important about fingerling?"

"Well, he’s got other problems too. Sight reading, dictation, but when you get to grade ten, to your A.R.C.T., you have to do things a certain way. It’s kind of like musical professionalism. The examiners watch you extremely closely. If you don’t use the accepted fingerling, if you don’t perform in the expected way, it counts against you. The examiners can fail you for stuff like that. Sometimes it doesn’t matter how well you play, or how much you love it. And this kid can play, he just can’t play well enough. He’s already failed his grade seven exam once. How do I tell him that he hasn’t got what it takes?"

Flip cares about this a lot, I can tell. He likes the kid and wants him to do well. Maybe Flip even identifies with him. He’s thinking about how he would feel in the kid’s place. He’s thinking about his shoulder and the swimming and how long it took him to get over it, move on, discover other passions. He didn’t get into teaching music to crush spirits. But how do you tell someone they’re not good enough?

"You don’t," I say, and then the words just fall out of me. I’m not even thinking about what I’m saying, and I’m surprising myself with every word.

"You do your best to make him aware of the difficulties and challenges ahead. You do your best to prepare him for them, and you support him. That’s the all you can do. He has to learn the rest for himself. It may not be easy, but you won’t help by taking away his choices, or by letting him make those choices without the benefit of your experience.” Where the hell is this coming from? .
Flip is quiet for a moment.

“I knew there was a reason I loved you,” he says, his face relaxing into a smile.

“You? Love me? Now that’s one I haven’t heard before.” I shouldn’t have said that, but it’s true. He’s never said it. Flip’s smile falters for a moment and then stretches to its full, crooked glory.

“Let me fix that right now.” He gets up off the couch and comes over to me. He kisses me hard, impressing his words on me. “I love you, Ash.”

“Um.” There’s no room for words now. His lips have crushed into mine again, and for a while, we communicate with another language, one of fingertips and lips and tongues and the heat of flesh against flesh.

“Babe?” I ask, nursing a carpet burn on my knee. “I’ve been listening to “Swimming” all afternoon. I’ve been thinking …”

“Of using it for the band?” Flip picks up on my thoughts so quickly.

“If that’s okay with you. It’s your music. We’d have to change the instrumentation a bit.”

“I’ve already worked out a few options. We can toss it around before the others get here.” He’s suddenly all business, but excited too. We dress quickly.

“But I should tell you,” he adds. “I’ve worked out a few more pieces and sent a demo off to Wyndham Hill and a couple of other places. New age music.”

“Great!” I’m genuinely pleased he’s doing something with his talents other than Gangrene Heart. He’s moving on, swimming in other waters now, and I think that’s a good thing.

“You’re not mad?”

“Why would I be?”

“Well, your priority is the band.”

“So? You’ve never given me anything less than your best. If it started to interfere with Gangrene Heart, then we’d have to talk. Even then, it wouldn’t necessarily be a crisis. Like you say, if it becomes a problem, we’ll deal with it then. Together.”

“Jesus Ash, what’s happening with you?”
“I don’t know,” I say, thinking it through out loud. “I think we may just have found a cure for a gangrene heart. Mine.” I wink at him.

“Oh.” Flip's not sure what to say.

“It’s okay. I’m not freaking out on you, or anything.” It doesn’t seem to reassure him. “Let’s just get to work. It’d be nice to have “Swimming” ready for the States, wouldn’t it?”

Flip smiles and grabs a tape.

“I want you to hear something.”

And here we are, standing in for the Grifters. So here we are, opening for Garryn White and Flush. Us. Gangrene Heart. I’m standing on the stage in the spotlight, and nothing can stop me, not even the audience.

I strike the first chord and the arena explodes.
Nocturnal Musings

These tunnels are labyrinthine and I've given no thought to Ariadne's thread or to Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs. I've already been lost several times and I have no courage left to be lost again. Have to save that for what awaits me.

The walls of this place have been formed by water. They are smooth and I can see the patterns of quartz and untapped gold veins running through them. There is an eerie light in these caves that has no source I can see.

The tunnel leads up, and it's getting warmer and warmer. Somewhere ahead, there is a woman I have come to take back with me. I have been told she is a captive, but I suspect that that might not be the case. I pause to look behind myself, down the path I've already travelled, and I see that I have a companion. He is tall and thin. His ears poke through his hair and I see that they are pointed. His eyes are large and his skull seems distended by their size. In the reflection of his polished bronze shield, I can see that I share his features. Perhaps he is my brother, but I am not sure.

His fear of what lies ahead makes him useless though, another victim to be rescued. I begin to see movement in the walls of the tunnel, gold veins moving in serpentine grace.

Suddenly, I come upon the entrance to a cavern. It is crawling with snakes. It is composed of them. I see the woman perched on the back of a great lizard. She has long, dark hair and pale, pale skin. Her violet eyes stand out against her white face. Her beauty is the stuff of myth and fairy tale, but she possesses a commanding presence, a stoic grace granted by numberless years shouldering the burdens of power. The colour of her dress matches her eyes and a golden circlet rests on her head.

The lizard is monstrous with scales so large I could use one for a shield. Its eyes are huge and golden, like an eagle's. It is a meat-eater, long, sharp teeth running up and down from its mouth along its pointed and horned snout. A scaled, bony ridge encircles its head. Its body is lean, but the legs are powerful, its huge claws made for digging. Its tail is almost as long as its body and moves lazily from side to side.
Whispers in the Dark

At the sight of this stunning pair, I nearly drop my spear, I forget, for a moment, what I am here for and when I remember, the prospect of what I must do to leave this cavern with the great lady chills me to the bone. I know somehow, that she will not leave unless that dinosaur of a lizard is killed. And I also know that I cannot hope to prevail against such a monster.

A man in silver armour enters the cavern from another tunnel. He is here for the great lady too. Even with the great sword he carries, his attacks go unnoticed by the creature, which effortlessly sweeps the man aside with its tail. I do not move. I can not move. The beast lunges at me with its terrible teeth bared.

The snakes twine in patterns that begin to speak to me, but I cannot understand their language. My companion cowards behind me as I am finally shocked into movement and raise my shield to the lizard’s attack. The great lady turns to me.

“Wake up,” she says. “You have no business here and much work to do.”

A giant man with wings for arms appears with a flash of light, raises the roof from the cavern andascends into the bright sky above.

Kyte’s muse kicked her awake at 2:27 on a cool June morning.

Carefully, she extricated herself from her bed and its tangle of duvet, cat, and her lover Nathan’s long limbs. The picture was clear in her mind and she didn’t want to lose it. This was her first visitation in weeks and she wasn’t about to let the opportunity pass.

Quickly, silently, Kyte wiggled her toes into her slippers and pulled her painting smock over her naked body.

The background of the painting was of a blue sky with fluffy, white cumulonimbus clouds. That she’d paint in acrylics. Ascending into the heavens was an angel, his face upturned, his body position reminiscent of Christ on the cross. He would be drawn in stark India ink, his feathers detailed in black and white against the blue of the sky.

Chelsea, Kyte’s calico, opened her eyes briefly as Kyte padded out of the bedroom and then lazily began the ritual of closing and opening them several more times before finally returning to sleep. It was nothing unusual for her mistress to sneak into the studio late at night and she’d long ago outgrown the need to be by Kyte’s side as she frantically transferred her vision onto the canvas.
Below the sky and the angel was a map, yellowed with age, the continents outlined in sepia and the icon of the north wind blowing his fury out over the sea. Conté for that, or maybe Prismacolor pencils. The angel’s feet would hang over the edge of the map, drawing the mythical landscape with him into the clouds. Superimposed on the map would be a delicate circle of Celtic knotwork in red and yellow. Definitely Prismacolors for that.

The uneven hardwood floor creaked as Kyte made her way to the studio just across the hall from her bedroom. She’d often thought of sleeping in her studio, or of moving her studio into her bedroom so that she could better serve her nocturnal muse, but in the small rooms of her Toronto apartment there was simply not enough space for such an arrangement. So she’d learned instead to leave part of herself in the trance of dream in order to remain as close as possible to her inspiration. In the dark, she fumbled for her fourteen by seventeen watercolour sketchbook and propped it open on her drafting table. She grabbed a 2H pencil and began to sketch.

Inside the circle of knotwork was a black dragon, a single gold hoop dangling from one of its fan-like crests. Its tail was curled possessively around its prisoner, a princess, no, a queen, in a purple medieval gown, her face proud, her eyes blazing defiantly. In front of the dragon was an elfin knight and her squire, turned away from the awesome beast, crouching behind her kite shield as the dragon’s flaming breath threatened to engulf them. Another knight, in silver armour, his sword drawn, was charging in to save the woman he loved.

The myth was straight out of a fantasy novel. Elves and quests and brave captives. The chivalric adventure and courtly love triangle served to frame the work in high romance and as she placed the pencil down and pulled part of herself from the dream back into the real world, Kyte noticed that the elfin knight bore a certain resemblance to herself.

What does the dragon represent, then? She wondered. And what, exactly, am I rescuing from it? Who is the other knight? And the squire?

She took a deep breath and shook herself more fully awake—questions would only slow her down—grabbed a Colt cigarillo from the pack she kept on one of the studio’s
many cluttered shelves and lit it before gathering her watercolours to flesh out the preliminary sketch.

When she heard the door open, she didn’t even turn. Kyte was familiar with this ritual. It happened whenever her lovers thought that they had earned the right to invade her sanctuary. Sometimes it happened after a couple of months, or after a gift, or a special dinner, but eventually, they all did it, even though Kyte always made it clear from the first that no one, absolutely no one was allowed in her studio but herself and the cat.

Maybe that warning in itself was a challenge to be overcome, the very reason they all had to open the door during one of her late night sessions and sneak up behind her like they belonged in her most private of places. I’m different, they think, she just hasn’t met the right person yet. I understand her and her crazy artistic process. I’ll bring her around. God! She wasn’t sick. It wasn’t like she had to be healed, or that she was a heathen to be converted. This was her studio, damn it!

But none of her lovers had yet proved that they could understand this.

“Leave.” She used the coldest, emptiest voice she knew; the best way, she thought to convey her message. Delicately, she continued filling in the sketch’s knotwork in cadmium yellow.

There was no answer though, and that in itself was enough to still her hand. Kyte turned toward the door, expecting to find the usually magnanimous Dr. Nathan Richmond standing there, frozen, like a boy caught in the act of stealing a cookie. But he wasn’t there. Only a tray with some fruit and a cup of coffee was left, barely placed inside the doorway.

The shock that this simple act of respect evoked nearly evicted Kyte’s muse.

As she pulled in the tray and shut the door again, she heard Nathan’s soft chuckle in the hall.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

It was a day and a half later when Kyte finally emerged from her studio. In that whole time, she’d gone through two packs of Colts, and aside from picking at the trays Nathan left for her and stumbling to the washroom like a zombie, Kyte had done nothing but paint and sketch and channel her vision into reality.
In the end, she’d decided to put each medium on a different surface and then layer the final products on top of the background canvas. The effect was stunningly three-dimensional.

The edges of the map, which she’d copied onto baking parchment, stained and selectively burned, curled away from the background, revealing sky and sea. This last was an addition to the original concept. Once Kyte had decided to burn a few holes in the map, it only seemed right that the lower regions of the background be revealed as water. An island would be too substantial for the vision laid out on top of it.

She’d fashioned the knotwork out of thin wire-edged ribbon, carefully bending and crimping the material, then embossing it with gold leaf, antiquing it with coloured stains, and finally sealing it with lacquer.

Kyte had even fashioned the frame herself, never willing to let some well-meaning, but uninspired gallery owner botch the job. And her work did have to be properly matted and framed; it had to be protected. She’d marbled the gold mat and used thick mahogany moulding for the frame. Just as she had thought, the colours enlivened the work still further, bringing out the depth of the central scene.

Altogether, Kyte had two working sketches and the final product, and she had no doubt that they’d all find their way into the next gallery showing. Her patrons seemed to be so fascinated with her process, they all but demanded the rough work along with the completed piece. It was her distinction, the process, but sometimes she wished that she’d never mentioned it in that Multimedia Today interview five years ago. The phrase ‘off the record’ only served to pique the interest of a good reporter.

Still wrapped in the haze of trance, solvent fumes, and enforced sleeplessness, Kyte dropped her smock into the laundry basket on her way to the shower. Slowly, she let the water free her from the frantic work of the last thirty hours. After scrubbing down with coarse pumice soap to remove any traces of paint, Kyte grabbed the camomile shower gel and let scent soothe both her body and her mind.

She eased into the weeping quietly, relaxing her face and letting her tears mingle with the falling water. She was always empty after pouring herself into her work, but the
crying seemed to make way for her to come back into herself. So she had learned to give into it gracefully, and cleansed by her own tears, Kyte felt whole again.

The contentment that swept over Kyte in the wake of this release made possible the refuelling of her creativity. Tomorrow, she knew, would be a difficult day, passed with pen and journal as she rallied her forces for the next hosting of the muse. Each ecstasy of creation changed her, Kyte found, and she had little time to recognise and accept those changes before the muse returned.

Today, however, would be a day of rest and healing.

When she emerged from the shower, Kyte rubbed herself down with a thick hunter green towel, then threw it over the shower curtain rod and wrapped herself in her long black silk kimono. She paused briefly to run a comb through her hair and to give her teeth a quick brushing, but she didn’t bother to clear the steam from the mirror. Kyte didn’t like looking at herself. It was difficult for her to accept the unrelenting truth she saw in the mirror. As a result, she found it easier to think of herself as a collection of parts.

Her hands were undoubtedly her best feature, and she took care of them the best way she could considering the punishment they took from paints, solvents and the other materials of her craft. She kept her nails trimmed short, so short that some people actually thought she chewed them. If they were allowed to grow, they only split and broke. And she splurged on the luxury of a manicure once every other month at Chez Milla. The owner was an old friend from high school and was kind enough to give Kyte a discount in the name of grade-twelve art class.

When she wasn’t working, Kyte adorned her fingers in silver puzzle rings and Celtic rings, pinkie rings with dangling charms of yin-yangs and pentagrams, and wide filigree rings for her thumbs. She spent hours at local gift shops and craft shows choosing the significant bits of silver from trays and racks and velvet pads.

The rings, if properly decoded, were a message, part of her persona. The puzzle rings revealed her skill, but also an affinity for games. The Celtic rings represented her heritage, the yin-yangs and pentagrams, her eclectic spirituality—she supposed that she should have crosses, stars of David, and other religious symbols too, but she simply didn’t have enough fingers. Finally, the filigree rings were meant to show many things, her
artistic nature, her complexity as a person, her refined sensibilities. Whether she actually possessed any of these qualities was still a mystery to Kyte, but she supposed that if she visualised them long enough, she might one day will them into being.

Kyte's feet were another prized feature. People were often surprised to see her walk into a summer gallery showing in her bare feet, with blood red toenails and toe rings and anklets jingling. Sandals were the next best thing. Tivas or Birkenstocks mostly.

She would often take a lot of time with her hair too. Even though it was turning gray in unflattering streaks, it was still long and straight and gleamed after a good brushing. Kyte could always find some new way to braid or twist her hair to show it off to its best advantage. She had nearly as many jewels for her hair as she did for her fingers: hairpins and combs, clips, barrettes, scrunchies, ribbons, scarves, leather and suede ties, beads ... and elastics of every size and colour. Sometimes Kyte squirmed when she thought of how superficial this accessorising was, but the ritualistic air with which it was carried out comforted her. It was an important part of her life.

Her face could best be described as average. It lacked character. Hazel eyes, neat brows, a straight nose, lips neither thin nor voluptuous. Teeth straightened by braces, no cleft chin, no moles, no acne. It was a good face, but one that could easily be dismissed.

To combat this, Kyte wore bold red lipstick and dark kohl smudged around her eyes. With all the dramatic touches she took the time to perfect, Kyte hoped her body would be the last thing people looked at.

As for that, Kyte's body could politely be termed Rubenesque. There were lumps and creases that were definitely unfashionable in this fitness-obsessed age. More bluntly put, she was fat; not grossly so, and she carried it well, or so friends and fans constantly told her, but the fact that they thought it enough of a problem to reassure her left no doubt in Kyte's mind that she was indeed fat. That wasn't a crime in itself, and Kyte struggled to be satisfied with her body, but a lifetime of television and advertising indoctrination had left her little choice. It was just easier not to look in the mirror and see how far short of the ideal she fell. Then she could try to be happy.

"That Kyte McManus," it was often chuckled by cruel critics, "was never a starving artist." That comment had never been published in her reviews, of course, but it
had been shared around enough that it might as well have been printed on a billboard. In the unkind world of art divas and wannabes, that saying was her unofficial motto.

She supposed that she could have made a decent living as a model in another time standing for some nameless Greek sculptor, posing for Giorgione or Titian, in a Pre-Raphaelite salon modelling for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or maybe in a Parisian loft modelling for one of Salvador Dali’s more obscure, surrealist associates. Rubens would have fallen in love with her. But then she would have run the risk of being caught, frozen on the canvas herself, the personification of creation and not its embodiment. Better to have been painted by Leonore Fini. Better not to have been painted at all.

This morning, unadorned by jewellery or make up, with her hair swishing damply around her hips, and with nothing on save her silk kimono, Kyte left the bathroom and padded into the kitchen. She pulled the cast iron frying pan that used to be her mother’s off its wall hook and fried up a half pound of bacon and two eggs over hard, cooked in the bacon fat. It was good to eat real food after almost two days of just fruit. Usually she ate even less while she painted, and had a whole pound of bacon after, but she felt much fresher today after having more fruit and less fat. She paused in her breakfast briefly to grab the purple marker and write on the fridge calendar in big rounded letters: STOCK UP ON FRUIT!

To cut the grease of the meal, she drank first coffee, then orange juice. That ritual completed, Kyte pulled her chair over and sat in the noon sun where it came through the kitchen window. Her work was done. For now.

She closed her eyes and watched the yellow and orange and red patterns shift and flow on the insides of her eyelids. She let the warmth of the sun penetrate her body. Kyte relaxed in the chair and found herself slowly spiralling down into sleep. She was almost painfully tired.

The man in silver armour lay in a tarnished heap. The lizard was sleeping now, its tail in its mouth like an infant sucking its thumb. The light had faded and the snakes were moving slower. She could see their patterns more clearly now. Caduceus, the serpent in the apple tree, Ouroboros, a pagan goddess, her arms outstretched, becoming snakes, the winged serpent of Mayan divinity, on and on, symbol after symbol ...
companion was gone, had run away, and the giant angel sat on the lip of the now-topless cavern, peeked out from under its wing and shook its head sadly.

"LEAVE!" The great lady commanded.

Kyte woke up when her slumbering body fell off the chair. Before she could forget the dream, she scurried into her bedroom and grabbed her journal. On the next blank page she sketched out the details of her dream quickly. In careful pen strokes she wrote the question—Another series?—at the bottom, but that was as far as she could go. There was no way she return to her studio so soon; she needed respite. The thought of slaving away over another piece with obsessive furore was almost nauseating, and with a final shiver, Kyte dismissed her muse and turned to more immediate and practical concerns. There were dishes to do. She glanced at the clock above the stove. It was 11:45 am. Only twenty minutes had passed since she’d dropped her plate in the sink.

She ran the water too hot on purpose, to keep herself awake a while longer. There was still Chelsea to consider; the poor cat hadn’t been fed in the last day and a half.

But as she dried her hands, Kyte noticed that Chelsea had already been fed. Confusion set in for a few moments until she remembered Nathan. He must have taken care of Chelsea. Just as he had taken care of her.

What a curious man, she thought and smiled.

"Mrrrhow?" Kyte’s voice was a nearly perfect imitation of her pet’s and her call summoned the beast almost instantly.

"Come here and get some pets, baby," she murmured and sat down again.

Kyte drove her fingers into Chelsea’s thick fur and watched the ripple of pleasure roll down the cat’s back. In another moment Chelsea was purring and kneading Kyte’s lap, claws extending and retracting in a paroxysm of sensation.

"Watch the claws," Kyte admonished as she continued to stroke the cat into twitching ecstasy. She didn’t even notice that Nathan was behind her until he spoke.

"Kyte," his voice hesitated a bit, and when she turned to face him Kyte saw that the skin on his broad forehead had creased in its usual endearing fashion. Though she’d been surprised, she revealed no sign of it, only continued to run her fingers through Chelsea’s fur. Kyte was good at hiding her reactions. Years of disappointing reviews and
gallery showings had taught her that, and she was exhausted too. It was hard to talk—
hard to think—after emerging from the studio.

understand why you ... work the way you do, but I think I can accept it. It just worries
me. After twelve hours, I was concerned. By eighteen it was worried, and by twenty-
four, I was just about frantic, but I didn't want to disturb you. I didn't know what to do."

He looked up and half-smiled at her, briefly, and shrugged before continuing.

"I've never known anyone who has an artistic process like that. It's ...
disconcerting to say the least." He paused, looking for a reaction, but found none.

"Let me ask you something. How long have you been living like this?"

She shrugged and continued to stroke Chelsea.

"I wonder," he said after another pause, "how you can stand it."

He waited. She waited. The cat purred incessantly.

"I want to understand, Kyte, but if you're not going to help me, I don't know if I
can," he said and left.

Kyte shrugged her shoulders after the door closed. It wasn't quite loud enough to
be a slam, but it was close. She sighed as she glanced at the clock above the stove. 12:18
pm. Nathan had just come home for lunch. He often did since the University of
Toronto's Teacher's College where he taught curriculum design was just a few minutes
walk south on Spadina from her apartment building. But he hadn't eaten a thing today.

He hadn't even made it past the kitchen door.

Nathan had been living with Kyte for two weeks now. He still had his own house.

"This is just an experiment," he'd said after nearly four months of sporadic dating.
"I think it's time we got to know each other better." He was always so serious and
logical, he made her want to laugh. Life was a series of experiments for the man, but he
never seemed to have any fun. Kyte knew better though. The thrill of each new discovery
made him quiver with excitement. Sadly, she wondered what he'd discovered over the
course of the last forty-eight hours. She turned her attention back to the cat on her lap.
“He’s right and he’s wrong, you know.” She picked Chelsea up and headed to the bedroom. “He’s right in saying he doesn’t understand me, but he doesn’t accept me like he said either.”

Nathan had changed the sheets.

“I really thought he was being rhetorical with that last question, you know?” Kyte muttered to her cat as she slipped under the covers. “Wonder if he’s coming back?”

She yawned, and was asleep before the cat could answer.

When she woke up that night, Nathan was nowhere to be found. It was a sad fact that the departure of lovers was something that Kyte had got used to. It didn’t hurt any less, but it was something she’d learned to take in stride, with grace, and without tears. He would have to come back for his clothes and toiletries, she supposed, but they were things easily and inexpensively replaced. Nathan might decide to purchase some new dress shirts and pants, some new Jockey’s and socks, a new razor with blades. He might not come back after all.

She wasn’t sure she wanted him to come back, though. It might be easier if he didn’t. Break-up arguments usually left her eviscerated and nearly comatose from the effort of reigning in her emotions. Kyte rolled over and grabbed the portable phone beside the bed. She dialled Nathan’s number, but hung up after the first ring. He had call display and would know she called. That, Kyte decided, was enough. Then she dialled *8 for the eighth programmed number on the list and waited while it rang.

“Hi! I can’t come to the phone right now ...” Kyte tuned out the rest of the message and waited for the beep.

“Heather, oh paragon of poetry and purveyor of the sacred bean,” she said when the tone gave her its cue. “It’s Kyte. Just calling to see if you want to do the margarita thing tonight. I’ll be here, so give me a ring.”

“Oh,” she added after a brief pause. “It’s Thursday evening, around seven thirty.”

She pressed the off button and placed the receiver back in its cradle, and though she was still tired, she got up, because there was a whole night ahead.
Kyte tidied the bedroom and got ready to go out. She had no doubt that Heather would call. It was just a matter of when. Her friend was just so busy with her new café she often couldn’t leave her employees to the night shift until six or seven in the evening. It was a new business, and Heather worried about everything. Did the float balance? Was the coffee all right? Should she order more desserts? Were the seats comfortable enough? Was the lighting too harsh? If Heather ran out of things to worry about, she started inventing problems. Everything was a work in progress for her, and if there was nothing to change, repair, or otherwise correct, Kyte had no doubt that her friend would abandon The Leprechaun, as the café was known, in favour of some new venture.

It was just like her writing. Heather fussed and revised each poem to the point of agony, but when there was nothing left to revise, the manuscript would be sent to the publisher and she turned her attention to the next collection. Heather was a very good poet. And she was equally skilled in her dealings with the café. Fortunately, while there was still a lot for Heather to worry about at The Leprechaun, there were more customers now, and with the promise of more financial stability, she could attempt a relaxing evening now and then.

It was a schedule that suited Kyte well, because between fits of inspiration, gallery showings, meetings with publishers and her accountant, she didn’t have a lot of time either. But she needed to step out of her life every once in a while just as much as Heather needed to step out of hers. So they got together whenever they could, went to Toby’s restaurant on Dundas, and drank margaritas, and ate escargots and breaded mushroom caps, and talked until the owner came over to them and kindly ushered them out at two in the morning.

Kyte was in fine astrological fettle about an hour later, in a purple batik sarong covered in representations of the twelve signs and a black body suit with embroidered silver zodiac symbols around the scoop neck and the edges of the sleeves. She anointed herself with patchouli oil and braided her hair in a single, simple rope, secured with a filigree scorpion clip. While she waited for Heather to call, Kyte sat in her comfy green recliner, opened her journal, the covers of which she had bound in stamped leather herself, and carefully unscrewed the cap of her father’s old fountain pen.
My latest vision was a psychological thing. It was like the dreams I used to have as a kid when I worked as a cashier in the K-Mart. I’d wake myself up in the middle of the night looking for plastic bags, in a panic because there were too many people in my line. Those dreams resulted purely from stress and were so grounded in my current situation that I couldn’t help but know that I was feeling inadequate during those first few weeks on the job. This dragon dream is similar. Only now I’m so steeped in painting and the myth of the artist that I can’t dream simply anymore. My mind has to go and encode everything. And now I have to decipher the whole mess.

So let’s start with the elfin knight. That’s obviously me, the artist in my element, just as the elf is in hers: battle. The squire is a mystery though. Someone who is helping the elfin knight on her quest, but someone who also needs her protection. Who . . .

The telephone rang and pulled Kyte out of both journal and chair.

“Hello?” She said after she’d scrambled across the room and grabbed the receiver. She should have thought to bring the portable with her to the chair. “...Hey woman! How goes the coffee business? ... No problem, I was just journalling. ... Well shite, I’d fire the bugger too. Did you call the garda? ...” Kyte had fallen into the pseudo-Irish lilt that she always seemed to adopt when she spoke to Heather, whose Irish accent was not contrived, and pulled the living room phone over to the coffee table. In the end, she had to move the coffee table a bit to keep the cord from pulling the phone onto the floor, but it was stable enough to allow Kyte to ease back into the recliner.

“Don’t be embarrassed, the arsehole was stealing from you for Christ’s sake, you had every right to have him arrested. ... Who else was on tonight? Are they okay with everything? ... Yeah, so they’re students. I remember being pretty flaky when I was that age, but hell, I’m really flaky now, so ... Yeah. So are you up for tonight? ... Great! Meet you at Tob’s in a bit.”

“A bit” turned out to be twenty minutes later, after a short walk down Spadina and another short walk across Dundas. Heather wasn’t there though, so Kyte took the liberty of securing a booth near the back.

“A margarita please, not frozen,” she told the waiter as she edged around the table into her seat. “On second thought, you might as well bring a pitcher. And a pitcher of
water. I won’t be ordering food until my friend gets here.” The young waiter smiled and
nodded.

“One pitcher of margaritas and one of water. Coming right up.” He couldn’t have
been more than nineteen.

*Stack another decade and a half on top of that for me.* Kyte thought with an
uncharacteristically gut-deep shudder. She grabbed her journal from the knapsack she’d
brought with her and began to write.

Just a second ago, I felt old. It’s a new experience, really. I’ve never thought
about my age much. But here I am feeling old at thirty-six. Almost took my breath away.
I don’t understand. Heather has gone through the typical birthday blues at twenty,
twenty-five, thirty—she’s not yet thirty-five. But I’ve never reacted to ageing like this.
Damn biological clock. Guess it’s only a matter of time before I start going crazy over
babies.

The waiter arrived with the two pitchers and as he leaned over the table with the
glasses, Kyte caught the name on his tag: Ian. Then she watched Ian’s tight nineteen-
year-old ass as the boy returned to the bar for his next order. A quick scan of the
restaurant told her that Heather had still not arrived. Kyte poured herself a margarita and
picked up her pen again after one salty sip.

The thought of asking my waiter if he’d like to make some extra money as a model
appeals to me. He’s got a great physique. Good musculature. He’d make a great study,
I’m sure. Probably has the schlong of a horse and the endurance to go with it too. I
wonder what he would think of sex with an older woman. A fat older woman like me.
Wonder what he’d say if I asked him. Wonder if he knows who I am, other than a paying
customer, a giver-of-tips. I wonder what Nathan would think if he knew what I was
considering? Wonder if Nathan will be around to care. Seriously wondering why I care
whether Nathan cares.

“Hey girl. What’s got your nose so deep in your book? You look like you’re
going to split the nib on that precious pen of yours.” Kyte only caught the last few words
of Heather’s greeting as she slipped into the other side of the booth. She looked up at her
friend.
"I'm getting old, Heather." Kyte's announcement was shadowed with despair, and highlighted with panic. The underlying base colour was confusion—a charming chiaroscuro of emotion. Around Heather, Kyte spent no effort maintaining facades. Her gentle poetic friend was one of the few people who understood what it was like to be shaken by a vision until the soft and tender places in your soul ached to give it form.

She also knew what it was like to see and understand herself in pieces, and to be seen that way by others. Heather, unlike Kyte, was what most people considered attractive. She was tall, nearly six feet, and thin. Not wraith-like, but a comfortable, effortless size nine. Her blonde hair turned honeyed gold in the summers and her skin, though fair, always tanned well. Her eyes were a startling cornflower blue and she had the voice of an angel. When Heather gave readings of her poetry, Kyte was always there, in the first row, enraptured by the stage-persona her friend adopted under the spotlight. Her voice melted into her words, flowed with her poetry, carrying Kyte along, pulling her into a place where the real world could be forgotten. Which was strange, considering that Heather’s poetry was based in the real world, bound by it. But while her words related real experience, there was something in Heather’s poetry that was more fantastic, more ethereal. There was something in the way Heather read that transported Kyte and made her want to understand that part of her friend better.

On stage, Heather was a spellbinder and Kyte was not alone in her appraisal of the poet. Heather had had her own string of admirers, both wanted and not. People that were attracted to the pieces of herself she revealed on stage and in her poetry. People that wanted to somehow possess those parts of her.

But she’d chosen to have no man warm her bed, no misplaced obsession to cloud her mind. Heather was alone and had been for a long, long time. She knew what she wanted in a partner and would accept nothing less.

"Jaysus," she said, when Kyte revealed the source of her sudden age-angst. "You deal with enough immaturity as it is, girl, there’s no need for you to be lookin’ for more trouble. Trust me, you’ll be wantin’ to keep your fingers out of that pot. Sweet as he looks, that Ian isn’t worth it."

"I know ... I have no idea why ..."
“You’re so unhappy?” Heather finished for her. Kyte was silent for a minute.
“I never thought I was,” she said.
They were on to the second pitcher of margaritas, there was no more salt on their glasses, and they didn’t think or pause to ask for more.
“Well the princess, or queen, or whatever she is, is obviously somethin’ you think you’ve lost,” Heather explained. “Your happiness?”
“What the hell is that? Have you ever tried to define happiness? It’s impossible!” Kyte threw her hands up in the air.
“Perhaps, but you must be able to think of a few wee things that make you happy...”
“Yes. Painting makes me happy. And our margarita nights.” Kyte stopped.
“And...” Heather prompted.
“And I don’t know. I’m having trouble thinking what else.”
“Does Nathan make you happy?” The question caught Kyte off-guard. She was surprised by her own answer.
“Men have never made me happy.”
“Surely you can’t mean that. You’ve never been without.” They were silent again. Sipping saltless margaritas and picking at cold mushroom caps.
“You know Heather, that might be part of the problem.” Her friend only nodded sagely from across the table. Kyte drained her glass and filled it again before continuing.
“So if the great lady is my happiness, then what, or who is the dragon?”
“It’s you,” Heather replied.
“Oh, that’s stupid. Why would I be fighting myself for something that’s rightfully mine?”
“That’s a question for you. But what I should like to know is why I died in the second dream.”
“What?”
“I’m the other knight, the man in silver.”
“Jeeze, I had you pegged for the squire.”
“I would have thought you would have recognised Nathan in that one.”
"Nathan? I could see that he’s trying to help me in his own misguided way, but how am I protecting him?"

"As the scene implies, you’re protectin’ him from the dragon, from yourself, my dear." Heather drained her own glass, then turned it upside down on a napkin. Kyte was about to object to Heather’s analysis of her dream. It was too pat, too convenient, but then her friend continued. "I’m about done. Time for tea." She hailed Ian and ordered a pot of Irish breakfast for herself and café latte for Kyte.

"You never did answer my question," she said pinning Kyte down with a wicked glare. "Why did you go and kill me?"

When Kyte returned home, Nathan was waiting for her in the living room. His elbows were planted on his knees and his hands were dangling in between them. He raised his eyes to her without lifting his bowed head. His forehead was creased with concern. Kyte went over to him where he sat on the edge of the recliner’s seat and plunked herself down on the coffee table, facing him.

They were silent for a few minutes, Nathan’s brow furrowing deeper and deeper until it seemed like his head would buckle under the pressure. Kyte thought of how Nathan called their living together an experiment. Very scientific. Logical. Because even a failed experiment could be learned from, turned into a positive of sorts. Ending their relationship wouldn’t necessarily be a disaster. Just a ‘learning experience.’ Yeah, he could frame their relationship that way. Label their pictures ‘fig. 1,’ ‘fig. 2,’ etc. Write in his conclusion: as we can see from Graph 3b (Appendix 2), the subject’s emotional state following her neurotic episodes of so-called ‘artistic frenzy’ indicates her incapacity for long-term attachments ... But that wasn’t Nathan at all. She was being unfair. Trying to make it easier for her to shut him out.

"I guess our little experiment failed, eh?" She smiled and sighed. He didn’t meet her eyes. Kyte took a deep breath and continued.

"I-if it means anything.” She cleared her throat. “I mean, if it explains anything, I think I’ve hit my first mid-life crisis.” He chuckled uncomfortably, unkindly.

"The way you work—the way you live your life—has nothing to do with any kind of crisis you may be having. It’s who you are. It’s something that won’t change.”
"Your right. But it's something you can't understand or accept," Kyte informed him with some resignation. Nathan began to sputter something like a defence, but she stopped him.

"Look, it's okay. Maybe I need to be alone for a while. I don't know. But I also need a friend." Nathan snorted.

"So you still want to be friends ..." He almost laughed. "How unoriginal of you."

"Nathan." He tried to wave her away from him, and failing, got up and removed himself from her, walking over to the window. The street below, even at this hour, was bustling with taxi traffic, students wandering in twos and threes, and beggars and drunks trying to get a few more coins out of the night.

"Nathan, why did you go out with me?"

"Sorry?"

"Why did you decide to go out with me, to move in with me? Because it's a mystery I'm hard-pressed to solve." Kyte was still sitting on the coffee table looking up at him in the diffuse city light that filtered through the window.

"You're funny. Intelligent. I wanted to smell your hair, see what you looked like in the morning. I wondered what my mother would say when she met you. Lots of things like that."

"Not my sacred 'process'?"

"Well I knew who you were, so of course I was curious, but it wasn't a secret I was willing to prostitute myself to discover. What did you think?" He had turned and moved back toward the recliner, standing behind it with his hands braced on the back. She was still sitting. Sitting still.

"I'm not sure what I thought, but there have been so many people in the past, so many men, who wanted to be the one to decipher my mystique, to be a part of the process, or to make a name from being my model. Everybody has an ulterior motive."

"I was just lonely."

"And ..." Kyte prompted, as Heather had prompted her so many times that night.

"And I was tired of students and colleagues and women who thought I was something I wasn't."
"Oh." Kyte smiled suddenly, then began to laugh.

"What?" Nathan demanded.

"Oh it's stupid." Kyte waved her hand to dismiss the importance of what she was about to say. "It's just that this is the most civil break-up I've ever had the pleasure to take part in." She laughed again.

"So it is a break-up then. No reconciliation." Kyte shook her head.

"I don't know. I think I need time to negotiate this relationship thing. Get used to being a couple. I never have, you know. I've always been my own woman, but I've never been alone. I've been the hub around which men have briefly circled and then been thrown away by centrifugal force. I have no idea how long it's going to take, this getting used to being a partner. It would be unfair of me to ask you to put your life on hold and wait for me to catch up." She gestured Nathan to come around and sit in the recliner again.

"What if I tell you that I'm willing to wait. As long as it takes. Honestly." Kyte hadn't expected that. He was so damn sweet. Thoughtful. Nathan was the first man who had bothered to respect her space, who wanted to try to understand. Another deep breath prepared Kyte—like a diver—for the next descent.

"Well I do need a friend, if you're up to the challenge. I don't make a habit out of helping people understand me, but it's a tough job and to this point Heather's been the only one to shoulder that burden. I want you to understand me, Nate ... Do you know what I'm trying to say here?" The crease returned to his brow, but he nodded.

Kyte took his hands in hers and cooled his dampened palms with her own, still cold and dry from the night air outside. She leaned into him, her breath scented with the margaritas and coffee she'd been drinking.

"I'm going to tell you about my dreams. I'm going to take you to the place where Kyte the artist begins. Will you stay—to listen?" She was amazed how well he seemed to know her, how easily he caught her slip, and how he knew it was intentional.

"Yes," Nathan said. "I'll stay."

She told him about her dreams.
Then it was Nathan’s turn. His minor in undergrad had been in psychology, and after his B.Ed., after teaching grade 7 and 8 for a couple of years, he’d got into counselling. But counselling kids in school for a few years and being a qualified therapist were two entirely different things. And though psych had been the emphasis for his M.Ed., and then again in his Ph.D., as an adjunct to curriculum design, Nathan’s knowledge was based mostly in theory and very little in application. He was very good at teaching, which was why he’d been snatched up by the University of Toronto when he’d finally graduated, but Nathan had never practised as a therapist. Kyte was doubtful he could come up with anything she and Heather—both of them consummate masters of symbolism—hadn’t.

“Why are you so sure you’re the elf-knight?” He asked her.

“Well, that’s the point of view I took on in the dream.”

“Maybe we’ll leave that for the moment. People aren’t necessarily the most important part of a dream. You could probably find bits of yourself in all of the characters there. I’m more intrigued by the snakes. What do they mean to you?” Nathan was excited now. This dream analysis taking on the air of a new experiment. A new mystery.

“I’m not afraid of snakes. Used to go hunting them in a local marsh when I was a kid up north.” Something registered in Nathan’s gaze, but Kyte continued. “They were speaking to me in symbols though. The caduceus for medical knowledge, healing. The serpent from the Biblical fall from grace. The world serpent, the Ouroboros, with its tail in its mouth, holding the world together. The snake goddess, from Celtic and Mediterranean mythology, guardian of the mysteries. Even the knotwork, in itself, is symbolic of ancient mysteries. The Celtic shamans used to use it as a trance pathway to the other world … What? Nathan, what are you smiling about?”

He stood and began pacing, his eyes still watching her as he moved.

“You saw the great lady as the object of your mission. You had to rescue her. But she was keeping you from something: the snakes.”

“You think?” Kyte was doubtful. In her initial analysis, the great lady was supposed to be a victim, unwilling to be rescued, perhaps, but a victim nonetheless.
"She's like a guardian of the mysteries. Your mysteries, Kyte. She's been handfeeding you images in your dreams. Your muse. But now you've visited the home of your symbols and have deciphered some of them on your own. You don't need her anymore. And she doesn't like it."

"Like a wicked step-mother trying to control me?"

"You can never be more pretty, more talented, more powerful than she was ..." Kyte was silent for a moment. Considering Nathan's offerings. He wasn't trying to counsel her, he was trying to teach her. And though much of what he said hit home—he knew her very well—his approach was making Kyte nervous. She saw the direction he was taking and she wasn't sure it was the direction either she or her dreams wanted her to go.

"Your mother was an artist, wasn't she Kyte?"

"Yes, but just watercolours. Landscapes, northern scenes. She had her own gallery for a while. Great for the tourist business, but she never had shows or anything."

"How did your mother react when you told her you were going to be an artist?"

"Not well, but she was just trying to protect me from the starving artist thing. And there was dad too. Her little business was always a problem for them. But she never competed with me. She never tried to stop me—"

"But the great lady isn't your mother, Kyte. She just represents the lessons your mother taught you. That being an artist was hard, that to be successful, you have to be extraordinary. You have to sacrifice. That men will never accept a woman like you. That you will always be at the mercy of the muse, always unhappy."

Kyte shuddered, feeling the truth settle into her gut, feeling she was coming undone, like the frayed edge of an old tapestry. But Nathan was on a roll.

"And we haven't even talked about the angel yet. Blowing the roof off the hidden cave of your mystery, opening it into a cauldron, the symbol of rebirth? And the dragon, he's just a big snake, the Ouroboros of your private creative world—"

"Nathan stop!" Kyte's voice was shaking now. "You've given me quite a bit to think about already. I'm not sure I can handle any more right now." And Nathan did stop
pacing. Stopped to look at Kyte for a moment, and realised what he was seeing in her eyes.

"Oh, Kyte. I’m sorry. I just thought I was helping." He knelt down and took he hands again. This time his were warm and dry, and hers were cold and damp. "Are you okay?"

"Not sure." But sure or not, frightened or not, it was almost morning. Kyte realised suddenly just how exhausted she was. Stifling a yawn, she musted a smile. "But thank you. You’ve shown me a lot tonight. And I’m not angry with you. Just tired and scared. I think I need a rest now."

"You want me to go?" He asked.

"Yes. I think it’s best for now." She paused and kissed his cheek. "But I’ll give you a call. We have a lot more to talk about." Nathan closed his eyes for a moment, sighed, stood and crimped his lips into a smile.

"Think I’ll see myself out," he said. "Don’t forget to call. I—I care about you, Kyte."

"I know." She listened to the sound of the door. It closed very softly this time.

Nathan had shown her things tonight, things that might actually help Kyte to sort this whole mess out. But first, sleep. The rest would have to wait.

*I’m in the cavern again. The lizard is asleep and the great lady is nowhere to be seen. I take a closer look at the cavern walls. The light is dim and the snakes are moving slowly this time. Again I see the caduceus.*

*Then the staff changes, branches out into the limbs of an apple tree. A snake wraps itself seductively around the branch, tempts Eve, a woman, me, to sin.*

*The snake falls out of the tree, twists to grab its own tail in its mouth, hovers, slowly circling on the wall of the cavern.*

*I turn and find that the great lady is standing behind me. Her every move is full of grace, full of danger. She seems to crackle with restrained power. She smiles.*

"I thought I told you to leave."

"No. I have to bring you back with me."
"Back where?" She laughs. "Which tunnel will we take and where will it lead? Do you know?" I realise that I don’t remember why I’m here, how I got here, or what I have to do to get back. I only know that she must come with me and that this time I cannot fail.

"And precisely how do you intend to take me?" She continues, gesturing to the dragon, now fully awake. I notice that the edges of her face seem to blur periodically, as though she was shaking it very fast. It’s frightening. I see things in her face that I don’t want to see. Shadows that shouldn’t be there. She giggles very unlike the queen she seems to be.

"Others have tried before you and failed." She indicates the tarnished knight. I move over to the heap of metal. I have a sudden need to see his face. I struggle to roll the body onto its back, but it is much lighter than I thought. I remove the helmet and find the armour empty.

The laughter of the great lady stayed with Kyte for a long time after she woke up. It stayed with her for almost an hour, in fact, while she wrestled with this latest dream and its possible meanings.

The caduceus is the sign of healing, the medical profession. The staff was originally the symbol of Aesculapius, the physician of the ancient Greek gods. But then the symbol of healing became the symbol of sin.

And what was the sin? That first and worst of all sins. Was it sex? Or was it knowledge as the snake promised? Or was it something else? Adam and Eve, together, were Promethean, stealing not fire, but the power of creation itself from God. Make, do, create, be. This was the sin, to take our destiny into our own hands. And the knowledge that it was never a sin, just not what God planned. Then the snake, the symbol of that sinful knowledge, changed into the Ouroboros.

The Ouroboros holds the world together. Its shifts responsible for earthquakes and floods. Creative and destructive, it was often characterised as female. The world mother. The earth mother. Mother.

Enter the great lady. Nathan was partly right. The great lady was a mother figure. But she wasn’t just made up of motherly lessons passed on by Kyte’s own mother, it was
every protective instinct she possessed. Lessons she’d learned without her mother’s help. Lessons at the hands of the critics, at the hands of her instructors, other artists, and, of course lessons she’d learned all on her own. What an artist did, what an artist didn’t do. What two people were supposed to do in a relationship. What happened if these ‘rules’ were disregarded.

Right now, these lessons were information embodied in her dreams by the great lady. The great lady, who could not be taken by force, but yet had to be brought ‘back,’ whatever that meant. And what did these dreams mean to Kyte’s waking life?

Before, she had always seen her dreams and the stories woven therein as raw material to be used in her art. It was the distinction of her process. Because of it, she was celebrated something like Salvador Dali had been, but not to the same degree. Her art was not surreal, though, and neither were her dreams. Her dreams featured no melting watches or strangely proportioned animals. In contrast, Kyte’s dreams were clearer, more defined visually, but no more decipherable, it seemed.

What was the focus of surrealism anyway? To bring the images of the unconscious mind into the conscious world, to open the pathways between the waking and sleeping mind and from there to the mysterious realm of ideas and ideals that lay beyond? But that had never been Kyte’s goal. She only wanted to paint, and to do well by her muse, which was also, by Nathan’s interpretation, part of the great lady’s function. Circles within circles. These dreams were becoming one big confusing spiral. And the spiral was another feminine symbol. It would be.

Kyte figured that she could spend days, weeks, even months trying to unravel the meaning of these dreams. But she wanted to know what she was supposed to do now. What was her quest and how could she complete it? Why did she have a quest in the first place? Was there something terribly wrong with her life? Yes. Obviously there was. She was feeling old and lonely, but those emotions were, in themselves, indications of a greater dissatisfaction, a deeper unhappiness.

She hadn’t been able to give Heather a proper answer last night concerning her happiness. But that was one place to start. She picked up her journal.
Unhappiness usually means that you’re not getting what you want out of life. I’m not getting what I want. So what do I want? I want to be an artist. And I am. I make enough through grants and commissions and sales to keep myself sheltered and fed. And I have a certain degree of fame, which I’m not that concerned about. I would rather one of my multimedia works touch someone else, speak to them, make them feel something, than to have my reputation compel people to comments and respond to my paintings in some contrived academic way. Is that what my dream is aiming at? Does the empty armour mean that my art lacks meaning? I don’t know. I hope not, but I don’t know.

What do I want beyond my art? That’s where the confusion starts, I guess. I’d like a house, I think. And a garden. Financial security. I have friends. Well, a friend anyway. I have Heather. And Nathan. Is Nathan a friend, though? Or is he something else? Do I want a partner? Not just a lover, someone to share things with, someone to understand me, or at the very least, accept me for who I am. Yes. I want that too. Money and a house can only go so far.

I have to get my head out of my ass. But is Nathan the one I want to share my life with? He said he’d wait for me. As long as it takes. But does he mean it? And how does this translate into the dreams I’ve been having?

Having some of her reflections in print was helpful, but not helpful enough. Kyte decided that it was time for something different.

What remained of the afternoon, Kyte spent sketching scenes from her dreams. The tunnels, the cavern, the great lady and her dragon. Sketch after sketch, Kyte put them on paper in as much detail as she could muster. If trying to interpret her dreams in words was slow, then maybe trying to draw them would bear more fruit. She was an artist, after all.

At four thirty, she put down her drawings and picked up the phone.

“Bow-ties and marinara at five,” she told Nathan’s answering machine. “I have something to show you.” She hung up and dialled again.

“Is Heather there? ... I’ll wait, thanks ... Hey girl! You free for supper? ... Bow-ties and marinara in a half-hour ... Got some sketches and stuff ... Yeah. Nathan’s going to be here. I hope ... Great! See ya in a few.”
As the water heated to boil, Kyte threw on a pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt. She bundled her hair on top of her head and pinned it in place with chopsticks. She tossed a frozen loaf of garlic bread in the oven to thaw out and a package of sauce in the microwave. Kyte was tearing up romaine lettuce and tossing it with the ingredients of Caesar-in-a-box when Heather arrived.

“So what do you think you’re up to?”

“Making salad.”

“That’s not what I mean. I thought Nathan was goin’ the way of the dinosaurs?”

Kyte shook the salad together in a plastic bag.

“Maybe not.”

“And what’s this? You showin’ your precious sketches before the final work is done? It’s not you, dear.”

“Well this isn’t for a show. I don’t think anyway. It’s stuff from the dreams.”

“You’ve had another?”

“Yeah. And Nathan opened my eyes to some possibilities last night, but I want your input too. Maybe you’ll be the voice of reason in this. Maybe I’ll be. I don’t know yet. But this is getting crazy. I’ve got to figure it out.” Kyte dumped the salad into a bowl and pulled the garlic bread out of the oven by its foil.

“You could use oven mitts,” Heather offered.

“Ouch! Yeah. I could,” Kyte said as the tore open the foil wrapper and slid the bread out of it into a basket. “See this is exactly what I’m talking about. The voice of reason.” She drained the pasta and tossed it with the sauce in a bowl, put everything out on the table with three bowls, forks, and Parmesan cheese. “There. Better dig in before it gets cold. Nathan will show up in his own time.”

But the two women had eaten their fill, had a little tea, cleared away the dishes, finished the first pot of tea, washed the dishes, and were finally settling down with Kyte’s sketches before Heather announced,

“He won’t be comin’, girl.”

“I guess not.”
A second pot of tea was slowly consumed as Kyte filled her friend in on Nathan’s theories, her third dream of the cave, and her own thoughts since waking that afternoon.

“Would you like to hear what I think about all this?” Heather asked.

“That’s what you’re here for.”

“Well, I think you’re spendin’ entirely too much time on the dream and not nearly enough time tryin’ to figure out what you should be doin’ about Nathan.” Heather paused for a sip. “You don’t really want him out of your life now, do you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I want in a man, let alone if Nathan fits the bill.”

A knock on the door kept Kyte from saying any more on the subject.

“Am I too late for supper?” Nathan asked as Kyte let him in. He had his own key, but hadn’t used it. “I had late meetings. Didn’t even get back to the office until a half-hour ago. Sorry I didn’t call, but I figured it would be okay if I dropped by.”

He looked as if he wanted to give Kyte a nice peck on the cheek. Honey! I’m home! It was too domestic.

“I’ll make you up a plate,” Kyte said and busied herself in the kitchen again.

“Hi Nate,” Heather greeted the man as she emerged from the living room.

“Oh. Hi Heather. I didn’t know you were here.”

“That’s all right. I’m leavin’ about now anyway.” She gathered her purse and jacket.

“You don’t have to leave,” Kyte protested.

“Actually I do. There are a few things I have to straighten up at the Leprechaun before I go home. Brilliant sketches by the way. You should think about puttin’ them in your next show.”

“I’m not so sure, but thanks. I’ll see you soon.” Kyte gave Heather a big hug before she left and then popped Nathan’s supper into the microwave.

“Do you want some salad too? It’s a little wilted now, but, if you don’t mind that ...”

“I’d love some salad.”

“And garlic bread?”
“Pasta isn’t pasta without it.”

In a few minutes, Kyte set the re-heated leftovers in front of Nathan, then got her tea from the living room.

“Do you want me to make coffee?”

“No, that’s okay. I’m fine.” He ate quickly, in silence as Kyte drained her cup. Chelsea even roused herself long enough to greet Nathan before retreating to the bedroom for more sleep.

“So. You called me over to see some sketches?” Nathan asked when he’d finished.

“Partly.” Kyte led him into the living room. “They’re sketches of the dreams I’ve been having.”

She led him to the couch and he began to look at the drawings.

“These are great,” he said. “You know, I’ve never been able to see any of your work until it’s up in the gallery.”

“That’s the way I thought I liked it. But I’m beginning to think that perpetuating the myth of my process isn’t so good anymore. Do you know I’ve actually thought that I wouldn’t be so successful if not for that myth?”

“Kyte. You’re a good artist. The process thing is just good publicity. Good Marketing.”

“I know, and I should start thinking about it that way, but I’m so stuck in my own myth I can’t get out of it. And I haven’t been able to let anyone into it either.” Nathan put down the drawing and was about to say something when Kyte held out her hand to silence him.

“Whatever else my dream is telling me, my obsession with it clearly shows how wound up I get in my personal myths. I don’t want to work that way anymore. I want to know that my art is being shown and purchased because it is good, without my reputation getting in the way. If that’s possible. I don’t want to be controlled by the artistic process anymore. At least not that artistic process. I don’t want my life controlled by it either.

“Nathan, you’ve been the first lover I’ve ever had who’s even tried to understand, who’s respected my process, and all I’ve done in return is shut you out. That’s wrong.
It's wrong for me to be at the mercy of the muse, and it's wrong for me to expect everyone in my life to be at my mercy. I think it's time for a change."

Kyte sat down on the recliner and sighed.

"What are you saying?" Looking over at him, Kyte could see his brow buckling again. He didn't want to read anything more into her words. He didn't want to repeat the mistakes of the night before. She got up and held out her hand.

"Come with me," she said. Nathan reluctantly put his hand in hers and allowed himself to be led down the narrow hall to Kyte's studio. Kyte turned at the door and offered him a small smile, then quickly turned the knob and drew him into the room after her.

Kyte thought of the angel in her first dream, blowing the roof off the cavern. Whether it was what she was supposed to do or not, she was doing it. She was letting someone in.

"This room is no longer off limits," she told Nathan as she watched him looking around the room. "You'll have to respect my privacy when I work, but I'm not going to shut you out of my life. I'm not promising this will be easy, but you said you had the patience to wait for me——" Nathan turned to face her again, a look of surprise on his face.

"Kyte, exactly what are you saying?" He asked again.

"I want you in my life, Nathan. I want you in this room, this apartment, my bed, for as long as you'll put up with me. I want you to understand me, all my problems, everything. And I want to understand you. This relationship isn't going to focus on me anymore. At least, I'll try not to let it. You've got to understand——"

"Kyte?" Nathan was starting to look confused, his lips barely daring to smile and his forehead folded up like a mountain range.

"—that I think I love you, Nathan."

"You think?" His lips curved a little more, his forehead a little less. Kyte shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

"You know how screwed up I am up there. How the hell do I know what I'm thinking?" She was laughing a little, still unsure of his reaction. He could still leave. The thought actually brought a tear to her eyes this time around. She hadn't known she really
loved Nathan until she said it. Her heart had bypassed her brain and moved directly to her mouth. Kyte nearly laughed again.

Nathan raised his hand to her cheek.

“You don’t have to cry, you know. I love you too.”

“But …” Kyte could tell that there were more words behind his comforting words, his echo of her confession.

“You were right. What you said before, that this wasn’t going to be easy. Letting me into your studio is one thing. Letting me into your life, into your heart, well, that’s going to be another thing altogether. And I want it all. I need it all. Look at how much it’s taken to get you this far. Nightmares, a near-break-up, you’re not going to make things easy for us.”

“No, you’re probably right about that. I’m pretty set in my ways.” There was a silence. Slowly, Nathan’s forehead unbuckled, his lips bowed, the emotional quake was past for now.

“You see? No easy answers. You’re going to be difficult, aren’t you?” Kyte smiled back at him.

“So what do we do first?”

“Something we know we do well together.” Nathan kissed her, slipped his hands around her waist. “It’s a good place to start,” he whispered against her cheek.

That night, the two of them lay together on the floor of Kyte’s studio wrapped in one of her drop cloths. They were covered in paint from head to toe. Together, they had splattered one of Kyte’s prepared canvases with layer after layer of paint and she had gone back to it after, scraping the surface until Nathan’s face appeared through the layers. The portrait watched over them as they first played, then stripped, then loved on the floor of the studio.

“I’m getting too old for this,” Nathan teased.

“Hardly,” Kyte drawled. “You better get into the shower or you’ll never get that stuff off.”

“Look who’s talking, my painted lady.”

_in the cavern, the lady is silent._
“Will you come with me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She comes over to take my hand. The other elf slowly peeks his head around the corner of one of the tunnels.

“You too,” I tell him. The formerly empty armour shifts and rises, inhabited again. The dragon trundles amiably behind. There are no snakes in the walls, just cave art on the rough surface. The symbols remain the same though. The angel appears, monstrously large, dwarfing even the dragon, and, smiling, he picks us all up in one of his mighty wings.

I’m not sure whether we’re flying, or if the cave has just disappeared, but all I see is white clouds ...
Tonsillitis Blues

"How did this happen to me?" I was almost in tears. "How did I turn into the happy homemaker?"

"Well, that's not quite right. From what you've told me, Ryanne, you're not very happy." Shelagh, the irrepressible She, smirking at the irony of my situation, was calmly sipping herbal iced tea in my kitchen. She'd come on one of her visits, rare since Jimmy had started living with me, popping back into my life like a lost part of myself.

Clarity of thought always seemed to come easier when she was around. She cradled her tea in her hands as the morning sun turned her frizzy blonde hair into a halo. She was relaxed, her left elbow hanging casually over the back of the chair and her legs curled up under her in a prim, cat-like fashion.

"I just can't believe it. I mean, how many times as a kid did I insist that I wasn't going to get married, let alone have a boyfriend, because my life would be too full to make room for a relationship? And here I am, playing Molly Maid to a guy who's almost my common law husband. What happened to all the things I wanted to do? What happened to the joy of the pen on the page? I'm wasting away with Jimmy, She, I haven't written a word in almost a year."

Jimmy was a white picket fence kind of guy. Nothing really wrong with that, it was just that I wanted more, and he couldn't understand it. A clean house and dinner on the table every night meant more to him than my personal fulfilment. He was an old-school sexist pig and I was tired of fighting a losing battle for my self-esteem.

"Then stop whining about it and do something!"

"That's harsh, She—""

"But true. I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't tell you. I only kept my mouth shut so long because I thought that this was the kind of life you wanted now. If I had any idea that you were so unhappy, I would have told you a long time ago to get that asshole out of your life."

"Hey, wait a second, I didn't mean I wanted to dump Jimmy." Shelagh sat there in my kitchen as enigmatic as a sphinx, as bright as an angel.
“Oh, didn’t you?”

So now I’m one of the ‘singles’ again. Me and Shelagh and Margot. All of us nearing thirty with a dread finality, and all of us waiting on the serendipity of the universe to show us what we should be doing now, where we should be going, who we should be with. There’s no use in trying to take control of our own destinies, we’ve decided. Every time one of us has tried to do that, it’s backfired. Like Jimmy backfired on me.

But there’s something else bothering me now. I’ve been having terrible dreams lately. Recurring nightmares really. And I don’t know why. I just know I don’t get a lot of sleep anymore because every time I close my eyes, my dreams start dancing with little girl’s fears. But I’m so tired and I have to sleep sometime …

I’m a little girl again travelling with my parents in the old green station wagon. We’re going to Florida. My parents stop at a gas bar and get out and go inside. I look out the car window and see this huge coconut tree and I think, “I’d like to get one of those for my mom.” So out I get and I start shimmying up this coconut tree like I’ve been doing it forever, but when I get to the top, I realise that like a cat caught up in a tree, I can’t climb down the same way I came up. It’s so high. I’m too scared. I figure my parents will be out in a second, so I wait, but when they do come out, they can’t hear me calling to them from the tree. My voice is so small and I’m up so high, that they just get into the car without me and drive away. I start crying:

‘Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy don’t leave me! Don’t go away! Mommy, mommy, MOMMY!!!’

And I wake myself up screaming for my mother in the middle of the night, sweating like a fiend with my pup Fenris whining and licking my face.

The dream might not seem terrifying from an objective point of view, but I almost pissed myself. It was a child’s dream and a child’s terror. I can’t express it, I can only say that even thinking about my nightmares makes me shake and I don’t know why.

Valentine’s Day came and went without so much as a whimper. I wouldn’t even have noticed what day it was if it weren’t for the card Mom gave me. It was more of an invitation really. Mom wanted me and the other ‘singles’ to drop by for dinner last
evening. With Dad out of town, I guess she's a little lonely. It's just a business trip, but with all the downsizing in the office, there just wasn't enough money in the travel budget to take Mom with him this year. I think it's been good for her though. And I think I like her better when he's not around anyway.

I may have an idea why I've been having so many bad dreams lately. Fen was under the table, mourning the fact that we were doing a good job on the ham bone when Mom started talking about my childhood. She told Shelagh and Margot about the time I had my tonsils out, and how I almost bled to death because the night I came home the stitches ripped open again.

"It's funny I don't remember anything about that."

"Well, you were only four years old, Ryanne. I don't expect you would have many memories from when you were that young. But I tell you, it scared the living daylights out of your father and me. And you, poor thing, you had nightmares for months after."

"I did?"

"Why yes. You'd wake up screaming almost every night. I couldn't get you to tell me what the dreams were about though. I'd just hold you until you went back to sleep and then everything would be all right."

A near-death experience would explain having nightmares. But why am I having them again? Maybe there's a clue in the past. I'm trying to remember bits and pieces of the whole tonsillitis experience, but I've got to have a little time to put Mom's story together with my memories.

"Mommy, my ears hurt."

"Is it another ear-ache, pumpkin?"

"Uh-huh."

She had me lie down on the couch and handed me a tissue to keep the eardrops from running out of my ears. It was a mineral-oil-based medication and I can remember hating it almost as much as I hated the earaches. Five drops in each ear and more in a half-hour if the pain got worse. And it did. It always did.
When I started crying, Mom gave me some children's Aspirin—as much as she
dared—to try to numb the pain.

"Still hurts, Mommy. It's getting worse," I moaned. My fear was genuine
because I knew what was coming. Mom did too. She was as afraid as I was because she
knew that in an hour I'd be screaming and there'd be nothing she could do but watch me
cry myself into exhaustion. But sleep was always a refuge—for me and for her. It was
pretty hard on Mom to be so helpless, and part of me hated her for not helping me.

If I could sleep without dreaming, I might feel like I was getting somewhere.

*I am about ten this time with my mom and my dad and my cousins in my uncle's
van. We are all on our way to the houseboat to cruise the Trent. My uncle puts me in
his LCP and lets me drive. But then he suddenly disappears and I am driving on my own.
Then one by one, everyone else in the van vanishes too until I am alone behind the wheel,
tangled in the seat-belt, helplessly screaming as the van zooms off the road and into the
bushes.*

Fenris is getting used to the dreams by now. She gives me a lot more room on the
bed these days, curling up into a ball of pup on the edge of the mattress. Poor Fen. I've
had a nightmare almost every night this week.

Today, it's lunch at the Poetz Pantry with Shelagh and Margot. We're munching
on hummus sandwiches without a care in the world.

"So do you guys dream?"

"Oh yeah," Shelagh answers. "I write my dreams down every night. I have a
special journal by my bed just for the purpose."

"I don't," Margot says through a mouthful of sprouts.

"What, you don't have a journal, or you don't dream?"

"I don't dream."

"Of course you dream," Shelagh tells her. "Everyone dreams. You just don't
remember yours." Margot finishes chewing and swallows.

"Well, I've got a pretty good memory. I think I'd remember if I dreamed."

"Trust me," Shelagh says. "You dream. Why are you asking Ryanne?"
"I just wondered what you do about nightmares."

"Ah."

"Ah what?" Shelagh pauses for a sip of iced tea.

"That’s why I started keeping a dream journal in the first place. See, you have to start recording your dreams to get a better handle on them. After a while, you start being able to figure out what they’re about. You start to see patterns. Then you can start having an effect on the bad ones."

"And how do you do that?" Margot asks.

"Well, sometimes, instead of waking right up when you have a bad dream, you can just wake up a little and push your conscious mind into the nightmare and start telling the dream how to turn out. It’s hard at first, because you don’t have a lot of control. You may want whatever’s chasing you to turn out to be something harmless, but it turns into something else that scares you. After a while, you get better though. Last time I dreamed something was chasing me, I turned it into Patrick Stewart and he asked me out on a date." She bit into her sandwich. "What?"

"You’re weird, She."

"Why thank you, Margot."

I’ve remembered another tonsillitis attack.

My mom and dad took me out to see my grandparents at the camp they had rented. It was a good hour out of town. And I started to get an earache. We were going to stay for a picnic supper, but Mom forgot my medicine and the pain was getting pretty bad. So we started for home and by the time we got there I was screaming with the pain again.

But I still haven’t remembered anything about the night my stitches burst. And I still don’t have any idea why I’m having nightmares.

*It's a windy spring day and there's still a little snow on the ground. I'm a kid again, up on a high hill, maybe it’s the Niagara Escarpment, and there’s a water tower up there. My parents are there with me, looking at the cannon at the base of the tower. I think that this is a historical site of some kind. We take pictures, but then my parents go*
to see some of the buildings further down the hill, and I slip away and climb up the tower. It's very high up and it overlooks a ravine. It's very, very far down. There is a wide plank off the side of the water tower that goes out over the ravine like a diving platform. I walk out onto it, and I don't intend to jump, but the wind pushes me off balance and no one is there to see me when I fall.

I wake up a good foot off the bed. Must have thrown myself around in my sleep. I've had falling dreams before, but it was my child's terror that made this one so bad. My chest is sore my heart's pounding so hard.

Fen, poor abused pup that she is, has taken to sleeping on the floor.

"I'm not having much luck with this dream control stuff."

"You have to give it some time, Ryanne. It doesn't work right away."

"Yeah, but I'm going nuts here. I can't sleep without dreaming. So I dream, get up, and by the time I get the dream written down, I'm so wide awake I can't get back to sleep again. It's hell at work too. I've been making mistakes in the on-line catalogue. Putting in the wrong call numbers for the books. Mr. Mattheson is going to get angry soon. What good is a cataloguing librarian that can't catalogue?"

"Okay. Sounds like you need some help. I know someone. Her name is Jenny Douglas. She helps people with stuff like this. She was the one who taught me how to do dream work in the first place. I'll give you her number. Give her a call and see if she can't help you out."

Jenny Douglas sees me into her 'office' in the basement of her very humble abode. The old wooden stairs creak ominously and there's no light until we get into the room. Once inside, however, it looks like a little temple of some kind. Diaphanous drapes hang from ceiling to floor, obscuring the room's unfinished walls. There is only one small window opened for fresh air on the east wall just above head-level and through this streams the early morning sun. Under the window is a table, again draped in sheer material. It supports three rows of seven thick column candles, one row white, the next red, and the final one black. I can smell the sage and sweet grass that must be burning in
the little censer that sits squatly before the rows of candles. The smoke swirls sluggishly around the room before floating out the window.

"Before we begin," says Jenny. "I'd like to clear up a few misconceptions about meditation, hypnosis, and the kind of regressions I do."

She gestures to a comfortable chair on the wall facing the altar, which I take only a little hesitantly. When she closes the door, I see there is an old wooden folding chair behind it. Jenny unfolds it and places it to my left before going to the altar and tending the censer.

"I don't make a habit out of making people cluck like chickens or anything like that. The hypnosis only goes as far as the subject lets it. Some people are so resistant that they won't hypnotise at all. Others remain quite conscious throughout the process, and still others are so open to the experience that they relinquish all control to the unconscious mind. I can't emphasise enough that you will be in control of what we do together here the whole time. What I really teach is meditation, which is simply a kind of self-hypnosis. All it amounts to is deep relaxation."

"Sounds good to me," I say confidently. My fingers are nonetheless tightening on the armrests of the chair.

"In the psychology department where I used to work, we used to do biofeedback trials."

I nod. Okay. Conventional psychology. I think I can handle this. Maybe.

A few days ago, we'd met for coffee to see, in Jenny's words "if we could get along well enough to work together." She'd seemed rather normal then in her jeans and T-shirt, with her crooked teeth and kind smile, but that was before I saw her little temple down here. I have to remind myself that the word 'alternative' doesn't necessarily imply that she's the member of some bizarre cult waiting to 'brainwash' me when I'm hypnotised and vulnerable.

From beneath the altar, Jenny takes a white taper and places it beside the censer.

"We'd hook the subject up to monitors: electrocardiogram, electroencephalogram, a mask over the mouth and nose to measure the rate and efficiency of breathing, temperature sensors in the armpits and groin area, stuff like that. It would take a session
or so for the subject to get used to the equipment, but after that, we'd get put them into a meditative state and attempt to take them into wakeful dreaming.”

She's pacing back and forth in front of the altar, her hands rising and falling gracefully as she speaks.

"We'd get them to do various things while in this state: control their dreams, raise or lower their heart rate, body temperature, and respiration. It was quite interesting, really. During some of the advanced trials, we had subjects duplicating some of the feats of the great Sufis. Through meditation, or hypnosis, a human being can perform what might be termed miracles."

Jenny stops in front of me and smiles her imperfect smile.

"So you see, exploring your dreams and going back and looking for a few memories is nothing either so difficult or so dangerous. We're not making history here, just peace of mind."

I return her smile and laugh a little nervously as she moves back toward the table of candles and lights the taper.

"The conscious mind wants to stay awake and in control," Jenny says on her way back to my chair. "One of the easiest ways around this is to wear it down a bit before we start to make inroads to your unconscious mind and those lost memories of yours."

"Well, I guess I'm ready." I don't feel very ready though.

"Don't worry. You always have the option of bringing yourself back to full consciousness at any time. Just remember to do it slowly so you won't shock yourself." I nod, not really sure how I would do that if I had to.

"I'm only going to do a short session this time, and we'll go a little deeper and a little longer each time until we can find what you're looking for."

"Okay," I say again. What else can I say? What am I supposed to say? I've voluntarily put my head in the mouth of this lion, and worries aside, I'm going to see if I can't emerge intact. "I'm ready."

"Good. I want you to look at the candle flame. Just look at it for a while. Get to know it. Notice how there's really no crisp edge to the flame, that there seems to be a ghost image around the edge. I want you to look at the different colours in the flame."
Look at its shape and watch how that shape changes with the movement of air. Just get to know it. It’s going to be your friend. The gatekeeper to the place your dreams and memories live. As you look at the flame, I want you to get comfortable. Relax. Become aware of your breathing, but don’t try to change it. Just breathe. And relax. And get to know the flame.”

I have no idea why I’m making friends with a candle flame. This feels stupid. But I am relaxing, and I do see Jenny’s point about exhausting my conscious mind. I’m getting a little droopy-eyed. It’s kind of interesting.

“Now that you are familiar with the candle flame in every detail, I want you to let your focus slip a bit. Don’t look at the flame specifically anymore. Just let your vision go a little blurry. This is called ‘soft’ sight. As you move into soft sight, let your body relax even more. Find all the places where tension is still hiding and let your muscles go. Let everything relax.

“Let’s move on to your breathing. Think about breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. And breathe a little deeper now. And a little deeper still. And even more deeply. Fill your lungs right down to the bottom with every inhalation. Feel your stomach move to make room for the air with each breath.”

It’s hard to keep relaxed with the deep breathing. There are too many things to think about.

“You’re doing well, Ryanne. Now the next thing I’m going to ask you to do it to take three really deep breaths. And as you breathe, I’m going to count backwards from three. When I reach one, you will find yourself in a very relaxed state. When I reach one, you can stop thinking about breathing and soft sight and watching the flame. When I reach one, you can close your eyes if you want to. When I reach one, everything will just float away, and you will feel completely at peace. Okay? Three … Two … One."

Jenny doesn’t say anything more. I let my eyelids fall shut and start breathing shallow again. This is amazing. I’m so relaxed. I feel like a bowl of Jell-O. And it’s so quiet, I can hear myself breathe. I can hear Jenny breathe too. I can hear a finch out in Jenny’s back yard.
And the smells. I am full of sweet grass. Wrapped in sage. I can even smell the candles, how the wicks smell as they burn. I can ‘taste’ these odours down the back of my throat and over the tip of my tongue. I can’t feel my fingertips anymore. They’re all tingly, and I’m beginning to see shapes in the blackness behind my eyelids. Little red paisley shapes moving in slow circles in time to the beating of my heart.

“Now I’m going to count up from one to three and as I do so, I want you to take three more deep breaths. You’re going to move back into the more controlled breathing again and you’re going to open your eyes. When you do open your eyes, find the flame again but stay in soft sight for a while. Okay? One ... Two ... Three ... Breathe deeply now. And see the fuzzy shape of the flame. Slowly, when you’re ready, sharpen your focus on the flame. Reacquaint yourself with it. Its size and shape. Its colour. And when you’re ready, start breathing normally again. Move your fingers and toes a bit. Stretch a bit. Bring yourself back into conscious reality. When you’re ready."

Jenny stops talking again and lets me come out of it on my own. I feel like I’ve been sleeping.


“Congratulations. You’ve just completed your first guided meditation.”

“That’s meditation?” Jenny’s smile wavers a bit.

“It’s beginning meditation. But we’ll build on it. A little each week.”

“How long was that?” I feel like I’ve had a good long nap.

“Fifteen minutes, start to finish.”

“Really? It felt longer.” I shake the tingly feeling out of my fingers. “So how do I use this to help me remember?”

“Well, you may not start remembering things for a while. In fact, you probably won’t.”

“Oh?” I’m a little disappointed.

“Meditation is an exercise that is designed to first form, and then strengthen the connection between the conscious and unconscious mind. I want you to practice doing a little guided meditation on your own every day this week. At least once a day. You may
want to use it as a prelude to trying to remember your childhood. You may find that it
improves your ability to remember.”

“Okay.” That’s something at least, but I’m realising that I’m not going to get a
quick fix for this problem. It’s discouraging.

“But I’ll warn you, you probably won’t have consistent results for a while. You
may find that when you try to meditate, all the concerns of the day come rushing in. This
time, I guided you through under ideal conditions. You may have more trouble on your
own. If you find a lot of floating thoughts coming in when you meditate at home, just
keep breathing deeply and take a few minutes to address each concern. Isolate one,
recognise it, and then tell it to move aside. You can come back to your concerns after the
meditation and because you’ve taken the time to separate them, you may find that you can
deal with them more efficiently. Oh, and don’t worry about time either. Don’t wear a
watch and don’t think about what you have to do next. You may find that some
meditations take only ten minutes, and some may take longer. You’ll have to keep
practising.”

“It sounds good, I guess, but what do I do to get more sleep until I can get at my
memories?”

“You could try meditating again before you sleep. And when you get to the quiet
meditation in the middle, you can try focussing on the thought that you want to sleep
soundly, but at this point, I couldn’t say what kind of success you might have. There is an
herb called Valerian, though. Find the tincture, if you can, it’s better than the dried stuff.
I find it’s best taken like a tea before bed. One teaspoon of the tincture in a cup of hot
water. You can put a little honey in it too. Valerian is a natural kind of tranquilliser. But
if you’re not sure about using it, ask your doctor about it.”

“Valerian.” Yup. Alternative medicine. I’m really entering a different world here.
I’m going to have to talk to Shelagh about all this. I mean, what has she got me into?

“Any more questions?” Jenny is still smiling, but I can tell that she’s nervous
about me. Because I’m nervous about her. Well, she’ll just have to deal with it.

“Not right now.”

“Great. So next week, same time?”
“Sounds good.” I’ll give it three weeks.

“So now my doctor’s got me on pain-killers and some kind of cortisone for my back, and tranquillisers so I can sleep. I’ve never taken so many drugs in my life! And now I’m looking at going on long-term disability. Maybe even an operation.”

“Jesus, that sucks.”

Margot threw out her back at work a couple of weeks ago. At first it seemed okay, but then the pain got worse and worse. Now it looks like she’s got a herniated disc. She’s had to invest in a special mattress for her bed, a brace, and she has to bring her obus form with her everywhere she goes. She can’t sit down for more than an hour at a time, which is why she can’t work at the office anymore, and the company she works for, Multi-tech, won’t let her take any of the software home to work on. So she’s screwed. She can’t even hire her services out as an independent programming consultant because Multi-tech has her locked into a contract. Shelagh and I had come to her apartment to save her the trouble of going out. “Will L.T.D. be enough for you to survive on?”

“Yeah, I’ve got savings. I’ll be okay for a while. I just didn’t think I’d be out of the workforce so early, you know? I’m not even thirty and I may never work again.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Margot. I’ll bring you to my chiropractor.” Shelagh says.

“He’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“I can’t believe you, Shelagh. You actually go to one of those? I’ve heard of people coming away from chiropractors crippled for life!”

“Oh Margot, you’re being silly. Of course there are things that go wrong, but all doctors make mistakes. Why do you think they have malpractice insurance? But if you look at the statistics, injuries from chiropractic are rare and only a few of those are life-altering.”

“That’s not very comforting.”

“Whatever. I can only tell you that I’ve been seeing my chiropractor for almost ten years now and he’s never done me harm. My mother goes to see him, for Christ’s sake. I trust him. And I wouldn’t suggest chiropractic if I didn’t think it would help.”
"I just don’t think it’s right for me. Excuse me for a bit." We help Margot up. Even going to the bathroom is a chore for her now. It’s so sad. She’s so young.

"So She, you’re really into this alternative medicine thing, aren’t you?"

"Yeah. I swear by it."

"Why?"

"I’ve just been on the bad side of modern medicine too many times to trust it anymore."

"Oh. So why you seeing the chiropractor?"

"Lower back. Kind of like Margot, but not so bad. Moving sets around at the theatre." Shelagh was set designer at the Theatre Centre. She acted and danced too, but she made money designing sets. "How’s it going with Jenny?"

"Okay."

"That doesn’t sound good."

"Well, I’ve been going for two weeks. Practising at home, but it’s hard. It’s not really helping me remember anything more."

"It takes time."

"Yeah. But her Valerian suggestion worked. I’m still having nightmares, but I don’t wake up screaming anymore. I’m actually getting more sleep now."

"That’s good. Stick with it. Jenny’s a good person. If she wasn’t married, I’d have her coming out with the singles."

"Jenny’s married?"

"You didn’t know? Yeah, her husband works at Falconbridge. Shift work, and she does her thing while he’s not home. He’s not into any of the alternative healing she offers, but he’s not against it as long as she makes money doing it."

"Doesn’t sound like the best relationship."

"She doesn’t talk about it much."

"Hey guys!" Margot’s hobbling back from the can. "Twelve minutes. I think that’s my best time in a week!"

We laugh and help Margot back to the couch.
“So what’s the next step, Jenny?” It’s my third session. My self-appointed D-day
Last week, she told me how to use the meditation to visualise, ask for things from my
unconscious mind, like memories or clearer dreams. But so far, all I can do in meditation
is relax, and I want more. This week, she’s told me about the chakras and has asked me
to incorporate them into my daily meditations. Opening them and closing them.
Accessing energy and shutting it off. I want to know if there’s any point in continuing
with this. If it really will help me get to the root of my dreams.

“Once you’re comfortable with the chakras, we can build on that. You can create
a place in your meditations that will serve as a base to contact other aspects of yourself.
You: dreams and memories. Then we can start working on regression.”

“Okay. I see the point of building and practising, but can’t we just do a regression
now?”

“We could, but it’s better if you understand everything that’s involved in the
regression process. You have more control and it’s a lot safer than just popping back.”

“It also makes you more money this way.” I have to be blunt. It’s better if we
understand each other.

“That’s true, but that’s not why I prefer to teach like this. I’ve been on the
scientific side of the whole process. Psychology and neuroscience. And what I learned
doing my two degrees is that the mind is more complex than most people can imagine.
You can’t just open it up like a book and get the answers you want. It takes time. And
since I’ve been working with the spiritual side of psychology, I’ve found that teaching and
training provide a framework that is far more beneficial to the client than a one-shot
regression. I’m giving you the tools to explore your unconscious mind, and when we get
to the point where we start exploring your dreams and memories, we may discover that
there is more to your nightmares than one traumatic childhood experience. We may have
to go further, dig deeper, and this way, you’ll have the experience you need to do that.”

“Okay.” She’s got her back up a little now. But I think I understand. And it
sounds reasonable.

“I mean, if you want a simple regression, I know some people who can do that for
you. I can give you numbers to call.”
“No. That’s okay. I think I’ll stick with you.”

“You know, if you’re not comfortable, Ryanne, talk to me. I’ll explain everything I can.”

“Well, I think I’ll take you up on that, but you’ll have to be patient with me. This is all new territory. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, I’m sorry. I just get flack for what I do sometimes. It’s easy for me to get defensive. It was unprofessional.”

“Yeah. Next week then?”

“If it’s okay with you …”

“Yes. It’s okay.”


Help me. Mommy, help! Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy!

Then everything closes up in warm red blood. It’s all around me now, but I’m not afraid anymore. It’s more like a mist now than blood anyway. I can hear the beating of my heart. Feel like I’m floating, flying like a kite on a string. And I’m moving so fast, being flung around in the warm red air in time to the beat of my heart. So fast, so far in a heartbeat. I’m so fast, so free, flying, flying ... Falling back into the warm red. My heart slows. Red turns to black. I’m safe. I’m home.

“Focus all your attention on the flame, but don’t tense up as you do ... Relax into the flame ... Relax so deeply that you hardly blink ... So deeply that the flame looks like it’s at the end of a long, long tunnel ...”

The wick is long, so the flame is tall. It wavers slightly with the pressure of Jenny’s breath as she talks me under.

“The flame is everything ... It is the only thing ... Focus on it entirely ...”

I’ve done this often enough that it’s old hat to me. Flame is an elegant acquaintance of mine and I only have to address her with my eyes to rekindle the
relationship. Tall, slender, robed in light, soft edges almost indistinct in the fuzzy halo she wears. Blue at the base, growing through orange around the wick, out into yellow at the tips, but nearly white in the middle. Her tip splits and forks a little as she dances in the currents of Jenny’s exhalation. I can see the patterns of heat, the layers of flame that the burning wax produces; the air around them dances in time.

The spell begins to take effect.

“Clear your mind of every thought ... If one finds its way in, give it up to the flame and let it burn away ... Burn them without fear, because thoughts are like the phoenix, they will return from the ashes ...”

Jenny gives me a few minutes to deal with this one because she knows how difficult it is to silence the muttering of daily life. So I burn away my overdue rent, my job at the library, and even little Fenris. One after the other, these thoughts pass into the flame and all I see is its cleansing light.

“Now breathe slowly ... deeply ... With each breath, fill your body with the light of the flame ... the energy of the flame ... Feel it nourishing every cell in your body, purifying and fortifying ...”

I am wrapped in the warmth of the flame, and slowly, it penetrates me, cell by cell, channelled by breath and blood and osmosis. I become a shell filled with the red and orange and yellow of flame, at once divested and invested, vulnerable, yet protected.

A useless thought occurs to me, my mind trying to analyse the paradox of what I am feeling. It incinerates at the moment of conception, consumed by the flame that is me.

“One by one, feel your chakras open ... First the root chakra ... Watch it open like a red flower ... Then the orange spleen chakra ... Then the yellow solar plexus chakra shining with the light of the sun ...”

For the first time in the month and a half that I have been seeing Jenny, I actually feel my chakras open. It’s an unsettling little throb at each point. My stomach starts to flutter. I feel a little nauseous.

“The green heart chakra ... Then the blue throat chakra ... Focus your mind on your third eye, and see the indigo light flood out as it opens ... This is the eye that allows your conscious mind to see the world with the insight of the unconscious ... This is where
all your hidden thoughts and forgotten memories hide ... The eye will help you find them and decipher them ..."

I'm suddenly dizzy. There's a feeling almost like a tingling just above the bridge of my nose on my forehead. My breath catches a bit as I visualise the indigo light energy flow like a wave out of my forehead.

"Finally ... when all the other chakras are fully opened, open the crown chakra ... This is your connection to the universal unconscious ... where all the myths and symbols of mankind reside ... You will need to access the power and information here to learn what you want from your dreams and memories ..."

My crown chakra opens with a sound I can almost hear and though I know I am physically still, I am pulsing with the force of the energy. My heart feels like it's being hurled about the room on the end of a thin tether despite its slow and measured beat. My lungs feel constricted. Even though I'm breathing normally, I can't seem to get enough air.

As the rainbow of colour energy conflagrates and becomes one shining beam of white, I feel the thrill of fear in the centre of my outward calm.

I've managed to figure some things out. My child's nightmares all have one thing in common. I'm always abandoned. But I can't figure out why. Mom's always been there for me. I've got a great family. It could be that I feel that I'm alone. And after being with Jimmy for two years, maybe I do feel that way. But I've got Shelagh and Margot too. I guess I'll figure it out soon enough. With more meditation. With more time.

Writing out my dreams has been a good thing though. It's very comforting to have a pen in my hand again. It's so organic. I deal with books every day, but I'm always entering codes into a computer. I've lost touch with the living part of books, and I think that I might try writing some stories again. It's been so long since I've thought about it. Really thought about it, and writing used to be what I wanted to do with my life. The library degree was just supposed to be a way to make money while I did it.
But now that I’m writing all this stuff down, I’m noticing that I have these blood dreams too and they’re different from the other nightmares. I suppose they have something to do with my stitches ripping open. Mom says there was a lot of blood, but I can’t remember yet. Maybe these new dreams are my memories trying to come out.

I’m first officer on a ship in Her Majesty’s Service. It’s sometime in the 1700’s and we’re in the South Seas somewhere near land navigating a series of submerged islands. I’m looking over the port side of the stern and I see a naked woman sitting on one of the islands. She’s only exposed from the waist up and there are bits of seaweed and starfish and coral tangled in her hair.

As we pass close to her, I see that her eyes are black and they bulge a bit like a fish’s. There are gill slits over her ribs underneath her small child-like breasts and when she opens her mouth, I can see that she has a bony ridge of pointed teeth. Her nails are thick and black; her fingers are webbed. She says one word to me and it sounds like “come” before she dives into the water, a long fish tail following her under the surface. I barely hesitate before I’m following her, over the edge of the boat and I can hear the shouts of the crew behind me as I plunge into the ocean, the blood of the earth.

Then I wake up, and I’m still a man, but this time in the American navy. I’m in a more modern ship, in my quarters, so I can’t tell whether it’s a destroyer, or a submarine. I do know that I’m scared to death though; the feeling in my gut tells me I’m going to die.

As if on cue, my bunk-mate opens the door and tells me that it’s time. Time for what, I’m not sure, but I’m afraid.

“Sounds like a past life experience to me.” Shelagh and I are out by ourselves this time. Margot is still laid up at home and needs her rest. Her doctor has made an appointment with a specialist for her. They’re looking at surgery.

“I haven’t even started working on that shit with Jenny yet. It was just a dream.” We’re slurping egg-drop soup and green tea at the Jade Garden and if it weren’t for us, the staff would probably be shutting down for the night.
“Talk to Jenny. See what she says.” I take a mouthful of soup with green onions and dried noodles. This dream work is getting more complicated. I have more questions now than when I started.

“So how did you get involved with Jenny in the first place, She?”

“Believe it or not, through acting. My prof at the university had her in to teach us meditation as a way of centering ourselves before a performance. You know, dealing with stage fright and focusing on our characters. It was a really good workshop and I decided to take lessons. And then I found out she did dream work too. She was great. Really helped me out. We should ask her out with us one of these times. It would be fun.”

“Yeah, but then we wouldn’t be the singles anymore.”

“Ah, screw the singles. We are who we are.”

“So. Want to tell me about your dreams?”

“Sure, nothing special. I was just really stressed out about school, you know. Having nightmares about monsters chasing me, attacking me during a performance, shutting me in a room and giving me an exam with questions I’d never studied on it. Stuff like that. It was mostly my insecurities about being an actor. Fears about not being good enough to make it. All those things I’d heard about the northern theatre community being tough to crack. Just because it’s so small. I can talk about it pretty easily now, but back then it was scary stuff. That monster was a nasty demon for me. I had to go to some dark places to figure out how I’d made it, given it so much power. But she helped me understand it. She was good.”

“Yes. I’m beginning to see that.” The soup was starting to cool. I took a few sips. Burst a pea between my teeth. “If Jenny was doing this professionally when you were still in school, how old is she?”

“I’m not sure really. Around forty I think. She was still doing work at the university then.”

“And she doesn’t have kids?”

“No. She can’t. Had a couple of miscarriages trying though.”

“Wow.”

“She’s a tough lady.”
“No kidding.”

“Imagine all your energy as a beam of white light ... Funnel it up through your crown chakra ... and let it take you to your special place ...”

I can barely find my special place—a cave high up on a jagged mountain spire—even though I’ve been there the last two sessions. The pulsing, flinging, and constricting pressures of the energy seem to be getting in the way. I don’t think I can control what’s happening to me. Imaginary place slips through incorporeal hands that flutter like moths exhausting themselves on a light bulb. Amazingly, I don’t hear Jenny’s voice again until I feel the rock of my cave solidify beneath me.

“Something is going to happen today ... Just relax and open yourself to the experience ... Remember everything you can ... What do you see?”

I’m lying on my stomach on the flat ledge at the cave mouth letting the sun-warmed rock ground me. I open my eyes and past the edge of the rock I can see the expanse of the green jungle canopy. Bright tropical birds and small agile monkeys are intermittently visible as they fly or leap free of the uppermost branches. Beyond that, I can see the ocean, light green, then blue-green and finally deep blue as the sandy floor of the island shelf drops off into the depths of the ocean. There are other small volcanic islands visible in the distance.

“What do you hear?”

Behind me, there is the soft whuffle of animal breathing. I roll over onto my back and see a panther lounging in the shade of the cave, panting against the wall that seems to have molded itself to the animal. Or maybe it is the black panther that took form from the shadowed rock face of the cave. The screeching of birds and the chittering of monkeys sound in the background and more distant still is the sound of the ocean throwing itself onto the shore. The panther watches me, it’s great green-yellow eyes never blinking.

“What do you feel?”

The roughness of the rock as I slowly shift onto my hands and knees, somehow certain that I must get closer to the beast watching me. I creep forward the few feet that separate us, hand to hand and knee to knee, fear battling with the irrational knowledge of...
what I need to do. I feel my heart, truly beating faster now, struggling against the wild energy still coursing through me. The panther merely pants and gazes.

I reach out tentatively and touch a black paw. The claws are so long they are barely sheathed. The fur is thick and surprisingly soft. I lean forward and feel the breath of the beast on my face.

“What do you smell?”

The panther’s meat-laden breath, more pungent that any dog or cat breath I have ever smelled, and the odour of the cat itself in the tropical heat. It is strong and musky, but not unpleasant. The panther finally blinks and moves forward to touch noses with me.

And suddenly, the throbbing, fluttering energy is calmed. I am immersed in it now, supported and not torn apart by it.

“Thank you,” I say, and the cat huffs once, making me close my eyes, and I can feel myself drifting back into the real world.

“What do you taste?” Jenny says. And I can’t taste anything but my own stale dry mouth and the rusty tang of a bitten lip.

Jenny told me today that the dreams of the naval officers could be past life experiences, triggered by a fear of death or of drowning that could be rooted in my mysterious memories. The blood dream is similar, based in the resurfacing memories of my tonsillitis trauma. It sounded to her, though, like an out of body experience, which could also be triggered by remembering the trauma. Near-death experiences often result in dreams of dissociation, or floating away from yourself. So Jenny says. I’m sceptical, but she didn’t try to convince me of the ‘truth.’ I think that’s one of the things I like about Jenny. She knows what she knows, and lets other people decide the truth for themselves.

Anyway, she said that there were a few things she wanted to tell me about now that I was beginning to have weird dreams. She said that I might meet my spirit guide soon. Spirit guide, higher self, guardian angel, whatever. She told me to call it what I wanted and that it depended on my personal belief what I was comfortable with. I’m leaning toward shamanic totem myself, because of the panther, but she said I might meet
this thing in a dream or during a meditation session. She seemed really pleased when I
told her I already had. She said some people even have waking mystic experiences, but
that’s really rare and she doesn’t expect that I’ll have one of those.

I can just imagine it. I’m walking Fen in Bell Park and a chipmunk jumps out at
me and starts chattering away, or maybe I’ll meet one of the homeless people downtown
and I’ll discover my spirit guide is really a crazy street person. Yeah right. Maybe the
mermaid is my spirit guide and not the panther. It all seems too bizarre to me. Maybe
Jenny’s just planting suggestions in my impressionable brain. I trust her most of the time
now, but there are still moments of suspicion.

Margot’s operation is scheduled now, but Shelagh has convinced her she has
nothing to lose by going to see a chiropractor. Margot even asked her specialist, and she
said she had no problems with chiropractic as long as the practitioner was a licenced
professional. So we took her to She’s chiropractor. It’s been an hour or so. They took
an x-ray first, which makes me feel a little better about the whole thing, but still, I’m
nervous. Shelagh grabs my arm.

“There she is.” Margot’s coming out of the exam room, walking stiffly, as before,
but there’s a big smile on her face.

“I can’t believe it!” She says. “But I feel a little better. I’m still in pain, but it’s a
lot easier to move now.”

“So?” She asks.

“So I’m starting a program of treatment tomorrow. OHIP will cover half, and my
health plan the rest. He’s going to send reports to Dr. Hollis and see if we can’t try to fix
this without surgery.”

“How’s that possible?” I take her arm and start helping her out of the office.

“If he can adjust the part of my spine that is bent out of shape—”

“The subluxation.” Shelagh supplies.

“Yes, the subluxation. If he can adjust that enough to relieve the pressure from the
disc and nerves, I might not need the operation.”

“That’s amazing.” I sure hope the guy isn’t getting her hopes up for nothing.

“He’s amazing. You didn’t tell me he was such a cutie, She.”
"And he's single."

"Why didn't you go out with him then?" I ask.

"We did, but Derek's not my type."

"Since when is anyone not your type, She?"

"We just have different interests!"

"Yeah, well you can explain everything to Ryanne and me over coffee at my place."

"Bavarian chocolate, or vanilla spice?"

Jenny called and cancelled our appointment today. Out of the blue. With no explanation, and I'm beginning to wonder about her. Shelagh has been telling me all these wonderful stories about her, but I don't know her well enough yet to make a judgement. Maybe that's my whole problem with Jenny. I'm depending too much on She's stories and not enough on my own impressions of the woman. I like Jenny. I want to trust her. I'm just into such foreign territory with all this alternative therapy.

In the meantime, I've been doing more thinking about my dreams. I've been thinking like a writer. What if I wrote a story where the protagonist had dreams like mine? What would I be saying? Yes, she feels abandoned, but if she has supportive family and friends, what then? Maybe she's the one that's doing the abandoning. Shutting parts of herself off because being left behind, falling, dying, these things frighten her less than what she's hiding from. Even the new dreams deal with dying, drowning. I'm getting nervous about this whole dream work thing. More nervous than I was before. What could be more frightening than dying?

"She's getting a divorce."

"What?"

"Jenny is getting a divorce. Apparently things have been getting bad with her husband."

"Like abuse?"

"I don't know, Ryanne. Just be careful. It's going to be a rough time for her."
“No shit. How’s Margot?”

“Great! I just brought her back from the chiropractor. Derek’s been able to help her out and Dr. Hollis has cancelled the operation. For now.”

“At least things seem to be going well for her.”

“That’s not the half of it. She’s dating Dr. Derek.”

“No. After what you said about him, I thought she’d never—”

“Apparently he’s decided that his family can go stuff themselves. He’ll go out with whomever he pleases, Jewish or not.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Ain’t it?”

_The panther is in my dream. He comes towards me, panting, as usual. But then he snarls and his paw comes slashing out, his claws slicing across my throat. And out comes the blood. I try to stop the flow with my hands but that’s not enough. The panther disappears and I’m left choking on my own blood. It’s all over my hands now._

_Suddenly, I’m sitting at my desk at work, Mr. Mattheson comes over and drops off a pile of new acquisitions. I try to show him that I’m bleeding, but he doesn’t see and walks away. I start working, getting blood all over the books. The second one in the pile is blank when I open it. I start writing with my finger in the book. Writing in blood._

_My heart starts beating faster, and again I find myself flying, kite-like, being thrown around and around, faster and faster. Then, as before, I fall into the warm red, then into darkness. I’m home._

“I think we’re ready now.” By the way she stands, almost hunched with the effort of rein ing her emotions in, I’d say Jenny is excited and I don’t think I like that. Since her husband left, she’s been a little strange.

“Ready for what?”

“Ready to go back into your trauma and tear it up by the roots.” God, she’s excited. And with the possibility of getting to the root of my tonsillitis thing so close at hand, I should be excited too. Instead, my hands are growing cold and I feel so tired ...
“Well I don’t think I am.”

“Hey, it’ll be okay. The work you’ve done recently tells me you can do this.” She’s uncoiling now, ready to pounce and infect me with her enthusiasm. I back away slightly.

“Thanks, but being able and being ready are two different things.”

“The fact that you think you’re not ready is probably a good sign though. C’mon.” I’ve reconsidered this visit entirely now, and I am inexplicably angered by Jenny’s insistence that we go through with the regression today.

“Well thanks for springing it on me like this. I think I’ll go now.” Jenny steps in, dismay showing clearly on her face.

“Please, you’re misunder—“

“No, I don’t think I am. And please don’t try any more of that reverse psychology crap on me. What, I think I’m not ready, so I am? Well by that philosophy, I don’t have any problems because I think I do!” I start backing up the stairs, Jenny in slow pursuit.

“Hey, thanks, doc! That’s just cleared everything right up for me. I’m cured, but then I was never really sick, was I?”

“Ryanne!” Jenny protests. I cut her off with an accusing finger.

“This session is over. You better sort your shit out, ‘cause I’ve got my own to deal with.”

I turn and stalk out of Jenny’s house. I don’t even check to see if she’s watching.

I think I was a little hard on Jenny, but she shouldn’t have pushed me. I’ve thought about calling her for days now, but I can’t. Shelagh hasn’t even heard from her, and I think that maybe that’s for the best.

I’ve stopped meditating. Stopped going out with Shelagh, and Margot is wrapped up with Dr. Derek. I’m becoming a real hermit and I don’t think that’s good. The idea was to give more time to my writing, but that doesn’t seem to be working. I can’t get very far before I start thinking that everything I’ve written is complete crap.

I can’t shake the feeling that writing is the thing I should be doing now. I think that it may be the writing I’ve abandoned, my hopes for the future. And now that I’ve
given myself the time and space to write, I can't. The irony doesn't escape me. And I think that I need some help with this. I've looked into seeing a psychiatrist. My health plan only covers part of the cost though, and therapy is a lot more expensive than Jenny was.

I'm up the tree again. And this time, Mom and Dad see me when they come out. They laugh at me crying up in the palm tree, stuck halfway, unable to reach the coconuts and unable to climb back down.

"Stop playing around Ryanne, it's time to come down," my father calls.

"I can't!" I wail. "Help me!"

"Maybe we should help her, Steven."

"No, Marjorie, she's old enough to make these decisions on her own," He continues talking to Mom in a voice loud enough so I can hear. "If she won't come down on her own, then we'll just have to leave her."

"No!" I scream. My father pulls my mother into the car.

"This is your last chance, we're leaving."

"Don't leave me! Daddy! Mommy!" He gets into the driver's side and pulls away. My mother watches out the window, she doesn't want to leave me, but she doesn't make Dad stop either.

"Mommy, Mommy, MOMMY!!!!!"

The car is out of sight now, and I suddenly realise, I'm grown up now, clinging to the tree, weeping like an idiot.

"Fuck you then!" I shout after the car. I'll show them.

I climb to the top and grab a coconut. The descent isn't as difficult as I thought. When I get down, I bash the husk off the coconut on a rock. I peel the hair away and crack the coconut open on the same rock. It's full of blood and it splashes all over me.

"No!" I shout, and I throw the bleeding shell to the ground, but the force of my thrust launches me into the air. I catch hold of a bit of coconut hair and the strand stretches and stretches until I'm flying again, zooming about a blood-coloured sky faster
than any amusement park ride. Faster than a jet. So fast I break the coconut hair and soar off into space, thick and red.

So thick, I eventually find myself swimming through it. I see a flash of fin and tail and sleek scaled body. I follow it up, up, through the red ocean. I surface by a rock, upon which sits the mermaid I've been following. She's looking past me at a man on a ship.

"Come," she says and the man leaps into the water, the blood of the earth. I follow them down. They swim together through forests of seaweed, schools of fish, down through a rocky crevice and then up again, into an underwater cave. We all surface again and she gestures to a pile of chests and ropes and nets and rotting sails. I see the remnants of a black flag with a white insignia. Skull and crossbones.

The man, the sea captain drags himself onto the rocky floor of the cave and toward the chests. I move to follow him but the mermaid grabs my arm with her clawed, webbed hands.

"Your way lies there." And she points me to a tunnel in the rock I hadn't seen. I look back into her black fish-eyes. She opens her mouth and snarls a bubbly snarl and I scramble toward the tunnel.

I climb up. And it seems to take forever. I think I'm lost, but there are no other tunnels, no other paths to take. So I go on. Up. At last I see a light. When I emerge, it is into my cave, the secret place I have been in my meditations. I collapse on the rock ledge and let the sun warm me.

The panther is here suddenly, standing over me, and in his mouth, he holds a rope vine from the jungle below. I take it from him, and feel the pull again, the throb of my heartbeat. The vine pulls me over the ledge, down into the jungle. The light fades as I fall, am pulled down, and eventually I am surrounded in comforting darkness. I am safe. I am home.

I tried to call Jenny today, but her phone has been disconnected and there is no forwarding number. Her new one must be unlisted because 411 won't give it out to me
Whispers in the Dark

either... I've got to find her. Things are coming together and I need her help. And maybe, just maybe she needs mine too.

I pull up in front of Jenny's and I can see right away that there are no curtains in the windows. The living room looks bare as well. There's a car in the driveway though, so I get out to investigate. The pin-cherry trees are in full bloom and the yard looks wonderful. The tulips are just dying back now and the daylilies will flower in a week or so, I figure. There are Irises there too, I think, and a bunch of green and yellow puffs of ground cover plants that I can't identify.

The wooden steps groan a little as I climb to the front door.

"Can I help you?" The courteous, well modulated voice surprises me and I almost fall down the steps in surprise.

"Watch yourself!" Says the efficient-looking real estate agent. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you," I manage as my arms flail out to balance me.

"Can I help you?" The woman asks again.

"My name is Ryanne McTeague," I explain, as I walk toward the woman with my hand extended. She looks at it like I have leprosy or something. I check my nails briefly before continuing. "I was one of Jenny's students. Do you know how I could get in touch with her?"

"Ms. Douglas has instructed me not to give out that information."

"Oh." I drop my hand. Something must be wrong, and it couldn't be my little tantrum. I wonder briefly what kind of trouble Jenny is in.

"Well here's a solution to this dilemma." I grab my day planner out of my bag and rip out a page on which I write a brief message and my number. "If you see Ms. Douglas in the near future, you can give her this note, and then it's up to her if she wants to call. Will his do?" The woman relaxes a bit, glad to have the responsibility of this chance meeting off her shoulders.

"Yes, I think that will do," she says and this time she extends her hand in greeting. "I'm sorry I was so rude. My name's Marsha Picket of Century 21 Realty ..."
The telephone rings and I rush to get it, hoping it will be Jenny, tripping over Fen in my haste. She yelps as I grab the receiver.

"Sorry girl," I mutter, then into the mouthpiece, "Hello?"

"Ryanne?" It's her. I'm so relieved I forget to say anything, I just sigh into the phone like some obscene caller.

"Is Ryanne there?" She asks uncertainly and everything spills out.

"Uh yeah. I mean yes. It's me. Sorry, I'm just so glad to hear from you. I hope you're not too pissed off that I walked out on you, because I need your help. Are you okay? I got really worried when the real estate lady gave me the secret service act, you know? I mean, if you don't think I'm prying or anything." I don't think I breathed once in the whole outburst.

"Ryanne!" Jenny admonishes with a chuckle. I can see her comfortably crooked teeth in my mind. "Of course you can come back. Actually, I was just calling to apologise to you. I'm the one who's sorry. I bugged out on everyone so fast I didn't have a chance to call."

"So, how are you?" I ask once I have my breath back.

"Fine. It's nothing, just ..." And she pauses a moment, no doubt deciding whether to confide in me or not. "Well, my ex-husband has been stalking me, and I had to call the police and then move while they locked him up for assault and violating the restraining order."

"My God. What happened?"

"Not much. Compared to usual anyway, but I'd rather not talk about it right now. I just called to tell you that I've moved into a secured apartment and things are getting straightened out. I'm more together now."

"Are you ready to start seeing people again?"

"Clients, you mean? Yes. But I've been seeing 'people' all along."

"Sorry, it's clients I meant. But I think I want to have you over for dinner before we get back into things. I think maybe you need a friend more than a client right now."

"Thank you, Ryanne." There is a brief but awkward silence on the other end of the phone line. "I think I'd like that."
On a whim, I invited Shelagh too. After all, she’s Jenny’s friend too. I’ve got a roast in the oven and potatoes and salad and red wine for dinner. Bought a cheesecake and some Irish cream for dessert. I’ve gone all out. It’s been a long time since I’ve done any entertaining in my apartment. And right now, we’re sharing white wine and antipasto. Mom gave me a jar. Next time, I think I’m going to invite her and Margot over too. It seems like a good idea. The right thing to do.

“Oh God, this feels good!” Jenny says after draining her glass and holding it out for a refill. “Just relaxing. Being catered to. It’s been a while.”

“So what’s up with the disappearing act?”

“Shelagh!” Sometimes that girl is too blunt.

“It’s alright,” Jenny says, sighing. “It’ll do me some good to talk about it, I guess.”

“But you don’t have to,” I tell her. I don’t want to pry. Don’t want to push.

“It’s okay. John’s just always been a little heavy handed. And you know, it’s stupid: I never thought of it as abuse. All those years of school. All those years of counselling, and I never figured it out.” She pauses for more wine.

“Sometimes it’s hard to see.” Like I know anything about it.

“No. It’s easy to see. It’s just easier to deny. Like I’d fall in love with someone who did the same thing my grandfather did to my grandmother.”

“You never told me about that,” Shelagh accused.

“It’s just something I didn’t want to talk about. Grandma moved in with us when I was twelve or so. I was never told why. Not until after she died and we had to start taking care of Grandpa too. He was an alcoholic. Hit her when he was drunk. My mom told me about it as a prelude to the first time I helped her clean him up after one of his binges. My parents were happy together. They were good to me. I never thought I’d fall into an abusive relationship.

“And it’s not like it was a typical abuse situation either, not that that really exists, but I just didn’t see myself as one of those poor women who lived in fear of their husbands. John just lost it sometimes when he got really angry. He’d smack me and then
realise what he’d done. Started apologising and crying and then he would be so nice to me...”

“So when did you figure it out?” I offer her some antipasto but she holds up her glass for more wine. I pour her the last of the bottle.

“He just got angry more and more often. And I started to fight back and he stopped apologising.”

“So how are you doing?” Shelagh asks.

“Better. A lot better now that things are settled. I’m amazed at how quickly we got through the actual divorce. Except for his refusal to leave me alone, John’s been very reasonable. We were able to go through a divorce mediator for most of it. And that’s all I could afford, so that part of it’s been a relief. We just have to wait for a while before the official papers are issued. And now that he’s been arrested, he’ll think twice before trying to see me again.”

“Well that’s good, but how are you doing?”

“I’m dealing with it. I’m seeing a friend of mine, Diana, for some help with it. You know Diana, don’t you, She?”

“Yeah. She works out of the medical centre on Paris, right?”

“Uh-huh. And she’s been really good for me, you know? I’m thinking that I’ve forgotten some of the virtues of western psychology. I’ve been wondering what I want to do now and a Ph.D. doesn’t seem so out of the question as it once did.”

“Why is it that we never figure out what we really want to do with our lives until we’re living post-partner?” I ask. I’m thinking of Jimmy, of how I almost gave in and set everything aside to be a ‘good girlfriend,’ whatever the heck that was.

“That’s not true! I’ve always known I wanted to be in the theatre.” Shelagh protests.

“Yeah, but you’re different, She. I think you’ve always been post-partner.”

“Not any more!”

“What are you saying? You’ve got yourself a man? Why have I heard nothing about this?”
“You’ve been playing the hermit, Ryanne. The world moves on whether you’re paying attention or not.”

“So who is this mystery man?” Jenny asks, relieved not to be talking about her own problems for a while.

“The new director of the Theatre Centre,” Shelagh says with a certain air of self-satisfaction.

“Sam Davies? Isn’t he from Toronto?”

“Yeah, but he’s fallen in love with the north.”

“And with you, I take it.”

“What can I say?”

_I’m a child again, in a hospital bed, and during the night, I die._

_I wake up into a brand new life, this life. But I know something. I am dead and this life is only the dream of my dead self._

“Where are you now, Ryanne?”

“In the Memorial Hospital I think ... Yes, I can see the blue church on the hill across the street through the window.”

“What else do you see?”

“Blue sheets and curtains. Robin’s egg blue. The sheets smell like bleach. And silver bars up around the sides of the hospital bed. My ward-mates have shown me how to climb over them, but I’m a little too small yet to do that, so I’m trapped for now. Don’t want to call the nurse in to lower them. The walls are white and it’s a bright winter morning, so the reflected light off the walls is almost painful. The nurse hasn’t come in to close the curtains yet. I’m in my white and yellow striped flannel pyjamas. An early Christmas present from Nanny.” I’m falling into the regression nicely, and I actually feel that part of me is back in the Memorial Hospital. It’s getting more and more difficult to edit out the child-thoughts I had back then.

“How do you feel?”
“Great! Well, my throat’s a little sore, but it’s not even Christmas yet, and I’ve got all these presents! Mom got me the Barbie I asked for. It’s just like the one Janie has. She’s the girl in the next bed. I never used to like Barbies. And they let me eat ice cream and Jell-O all the time. I should get my tonsils out more often.” It’s amazing how I can be there and here at the same time, conscious mind analysing and unconscious mind experiencing. The memory has taken me in almost completely now. Or have I given myself over to it? I’m not sure. Jenny’s voice intrudes gently into the hospital ward scene.

“Okay now ... we’re going to move forward a bit in time ... You’re home now ... in your own bed ... It’s Christmas Eve and something happens in the middle of the night ... What’s the first thing you remember?”

I’m coughing and the sensation is so real that I actually feel a little panicked. Something’s in my throat. I can’t breathe right. The shallow breaths I can get in between fits of coughing rattle a bit in my chest. I try to call for Mom, but I can’t get around the bubbly rattle. Jenny seems to sense my distress. I think I’m gripping the arms of the chair I’m in.

“It’s okay Ryanne ...” she intones. “You can speak for little Ryanne in the bed ... Tell me what’s happening to her ...” Her words help me to isolate the me that is from the me in the memory. I take a deep, steady breath to convince myself of it, then speak.

“I can’t breathe. I’m choking, gagging, suffocating on my own blood. I can see spatters of it on the pillow beside me, down the front of my pyjamas and on the sheets. It looks black in the darkness, and I’m so scared. Mommy can’t hear me and I can’t call out to her, but the fear pushes me through, and I take a big lung full of blood and let out a choking, bubbling scream: Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, MOMMY, MOMMY, MOMMY!”

“Ryan, calm down.” Jenny’s voice is firmer now, “Listen to my voice. This is only a memory and it can’t hurt you. Remember that you can stop this any time you like ... Just tell me when you’re coming out ... Can you go on?”
“Yes.” I certainly don’t want to have to go through this again. I don’t want any more nightmares either. Pushing the child’s terror away, I steel myself for what is sure to come.

“Now tell me what happens next…”

“Mom hears me and rushes into the room, takes one look at me, and starts to shout at my dad. ‘Steven! Get up! Call the hospital! My God, she’s bleeding!’ And then she tries to comfort me and bundle me up to take back to the hospital, but I’m hysterical.” I’m trying to be objective, but I can still feel the fear, squeezing the life out of me in the past.

“I can’t remember too much clearly after that until we arrive at the hospital. It’s all just a jumble of screaming and crying and my mother’s attempts to comfort me. I’ve closed my eyes against the sight of the blood. I feel dizzy.”

“What happens when you get to the hospital?” Jenny prompts.

“I open my eyes and watch alternating ceiling tiles and fluorescent lights go by. I’m on a gurney being rolled into a treatment room to be prepped for surgery. I’m crying now and struggling, because they want my parents to go away, but I don’t want them to. I hear the male nurse tell my mom, ‘I’m sure we’ll be able to handle Ryanne, Mrs. McTeague, we’re trained for this sort of thing. It’s best if you leave now, or she’ll just be more upset.’

“Someone ushers my parents out of the room. When I see that they are gone, I start screaming to try to call them back and throwing myself about with all the strength a frantic four-year-old can manage. There are four nurses holding me down now, one for each limb, and the male nurse is trying to insert the intravenous catheter into my right arm. I shriek like a demon and wrest my left arm from the nurse holding it screaming, ‘I want my Mommy!’ and spitting blood all over the place. I hit the male nurse’s hand and he ends up getting the catheter stuck in his own forearm. He swears and tells one of the other nurses to go get my mom.”

The words are coming fast and furious now as I struggle to keep up with the event in my memory. It occurs to me that I should have control over this, that I should be able to slow things down, retreat from the panic, but I don’t think I can. I’m hanging on to my
conscious adult’s mind by the thinnest of threads and I fear that at any time it might snap and send me headlong into bloody terror.

“When my mom comes in, I calm down again almost at once. She strokes my hair and I barely even notice that the IV has been inserted. I think I’m very weak now from the blood loss and the struggle. My mom leaves again and I can only muster the strength to call out weakly to her before the anaesthetic takes hold.”

“What’s the next thing you remember, Ryanne?” Jenny’s voice is hushed now and a little strained.

“Waking up alone in the dark and crying.” I don’t want to go on. I can see everything now. I can remember everything. I don’t want to talk about this.

“What else?”

“Nothing. I’m coming out. I’ve got everything I need and I’m exhausted.” It takes me a few minutes to regulate my breathing again, to close all my chakras and count myself out. When I open my eyes, Jenny is there, kneeling before me.

“Are you okay, Ryanne?”

“I don’t know.” I’m shaking.

“What do you remember?”

“Everything. Nothing. I don’t know.”

“Just take a few deep breaths. Calm down. You’re here, in my apartment. You’re safe. Everything is going to be fine.” She’s stroking my hands, my cheek. “It’s okay, dear.”

“I’ve got to go now.” Jenny’s hand gets a little firmer on my arm.

“You’re in no condition to drive, Ryanne. Just take some time. I can get you something to drink if you want. We can go on the balcony for some fresh air. You don’t have to tell me what you saw. Just relax. Do you want some camomile tea?”

“Yeah. Please.” I wish I’d never gone back.

I died that night in the hospital. I remember flying through a tunnel warm and as red as blood, then darker, then black. I remember a light shimmering. And I remember a voice softer than velvet, deeper than time.
“Your path lies there.” It said and I was directed down another tunnel. Back here, back to my own body.

But I woke up alone, and to my young mind, that was the whole point. The last thing I remembered before the anaesthetic took hold was my mom leaving me. Leaving. Me. The fact that she wasn’t there when I woke up in that strange place was just a confirmation that I had been abandoned. I acted out, behaved like a baby. I cried for everything, refused to do anything for myself. They had to put me in diapers because I wouldn’t go to the bathroom on my own or call the nurse to help me.

The fact that Mom and Dad visited every day wasn’t enough. I still cried for my Mommy, Mommy, Mommy for everything I needed.

“Don’t you get it, kid? Your Mom’s not here. She’s not coming!” The night nurse was angry with me. I heard her out in the hall after she finished changing my diaper.

“I don’t need this,” she told the other nurse. “That’s why I got out of the nursery. Kid shits herself every goddamned night ...”

Even my roommate seemed to hate me, praying to the baby Jesus to take me away. I lived in fear of what would happen every moment my parents were gone. The hospital, or some place worse, would be my home forever, mean people and all. Mom didn’t love me anymore. She couldn’t, if she could leave me there with the mean nurse.

What I don’t understand is why the dreams would come back to haunt me now. Unless it’s as simple as me abandoning myself, my dreams, in favour of Jimmy’s white picket fence life. Can it be that simple?

I have to go back and see Jenny again, to sort this out and ‘get closure,’ as the saying goes, but for now, I’ve been taking it easy. Jenny’s been really good about giving me time with this. She hasn’t pushed a bit. We’ve gone out for coffee a couple of times with Shelagh and Margot. Just a bunch of friends. And I know they’re all concerned, but even Shelagh’s giving me a break.

The whole regression thing has to sink in, I guess. But now it’s becoming part of me, like scar tissue slowly being metabolised until all that’s left is a shiny white line to commemorate the wound. I think I can live with that.
Whispers in the Dark

"I have to get your recipe for antipasto, Mrs. McTeague. It's fantastic!"

"Call me Marjorie, please. And I'll be happy to give you the recipe. I'll pass it along through Ryanne."

"Great!" Shelagh is getting right into the party spirit. We got lots of wine this time. She's making the rounds, ensuring that everyone's glass is full.

It's potluck tonight. Mom's antipasto and Margot's spinach dip. Jenny's busy in the kitchen now making a Caesar salad. I've got a chicken and stuffing in the oven and some baby carrots on the stove. Shelagh's going to make a huge cherries jubilee for all of us to share for dessert. I've made up the sofa bed and brought out a camping cot. I have a feeling no one will be able to move after this feast.

"Hey Ryanne," Shelagh says as she fills my glass. "Why don't you tell us a story?"

"Shelagh!" Jenny admonishes from the kitchen.

"It's okay." That girl is entirely too bold. But I have been writing like a fiend in the last few weeks. Ever since I decided to write about the people I saw in my dreams. I suppose it is time to try one out on the gang. Not the singles anymore. I raise my glass to She.

"For you, my dear." Jenny comes in and sits down on the floor beside my mom. I grab my notebook and begin to read.

"It all started when he saw the mermaid ..."
Fool’s Journey

Jessica was in her room reading Guy Gavriel Kay’s *The Summer Tree*. At least, she was trying to read. Her younger brother James was out in the hall. Pacing. One footstep. Two. Three. Four. He paused outside the door. When it was closed, as it was now, he wasn’t allowed in. Jessica counted the beats of her heart until he moved on. Four. It was amazing to her how everything worked out in fours. Or maybe she just made the world fit into fours.

That was the ghost of Dr. Carson talking, still trying to fit her into some kind of rational frame. Dr. Russ was better, more accepting, but Jessica was waiting for the therapy session where he asked her the right question. The question that would allow her to tell him everything. She had to admit, she had no idea what that question might be, but she was still waiting nonetheless. And she was convinced that she would know the question when she heard it, and that when she heard it, the tumblers would click inside her and the door she was waiting to open would swing wide on its rusted hinges. But Dr. Russ had not asked the right question yet.

James was at the door again. In four heartbeats he had moved on again. Jessica hadn’t been home from the Algoma Hospital for more than a few days and already he was preparing to hound her. The irritating thing was that she wanted to tell James what happened to her, just not right now. Sometimes Jessica thought she wanted James to understand more than anyone else, because he hated her. And James’ hatred wasn’t normal sibling rivalry, but a real, black, devouring hatred that Jessica could only respond to in kind. That’s what waited with James outside her door and Jessica wasn’t ready for it yet. It was too soon.

This Saturday, in fact, was the first day Jessica’s mother had gone back to work, leaving her alone with James, and Lyrah, their baby sister. It was both a test and a leap of faith on her mother’s part. There was no money to pay a sitter and Mrs. Schwartz, their elderly neighbour, had been imposed upon enough during Jessica’s absence. Was Jessica well enough to handle the younger children on her own?
"You can call Mrs. Schwartz if there's anything you need help with." Her mother had told her before leaving. "And call me if there are any problems. I've already asked Sue if she'll take my shift at the store if I have to come home. So it's okay, Jessie. You don't have to worry about a thing."

Jessica's mother had no idea what her daughter had to worry about.

James had paused and passed her door a third time, moving down the hall. Jessica knew she had maybe a minute before her brother would open the door, without knocking, and start to ask her stupid questions about her time at the Hospital. Maybe if she ignored him, he would give up and go away.

So she tried to read, was almost desperate to have something other than James to focus her attention on, but she couldn't. She couldn't get through a single sentence without the fours intruding. Each word. Each letter. It was impossible. And it was too late. James had entered, right on cue.

For his part, James was hoping to catch his sister by surprise. If she was off her guard, there was a chance she'd answer the question that had been burning a hole in his brain since she returned from the Algoma Hospital.

"So 'fess up, Jess, what was it like in the psych ward?"

His sister gave him no answer. Kept her eyes glued to the page, pretending to read. But James figured he was nothing if not patient. He stood his ground, matched his sister's silence, determined that he would last longer than she in this battle of wills. He stood there for what seemed like hours. Glanced at Jessica's clock radio and saw that it had only been fifteen minutes. And she was still on the same page. The liar. The big fake.

"C'mon, Dr. Russ says you've got to start talking about it with people outside your therapy group. Said so yourself. Well I'm not in your therapy group. So tell me."

James had the echo of a charlie-horse starting in his ass. He couldn't stand still for much longer.

"I'm not stupid, you know. This stuff's hereditary. Mom told me Aunt Peggy's been on medication for years. What happens if I've got it? What if I'm next? Or Lyrah? We have a right to know."
"Don't worry, James. If you had what I've got, you'd know. I wouldn't need to
tell you a thing."

At last she had broken. At the mention of Lyrah's name too. James knew he had
his sister on the ropes now. Her eyes twitched a bit. He thought she might actually have
stopped 'reading' for a second. It was time to call in the switch-hitter. The charlie-horse
almost made him trip moving back to the door.

"Hey, Lyrah!" He called.

"What?"

"Jess is going to tell us a story." Lyrah loved Jessica's stories. There was only
one thing that could keep her away.

"Can't it wait?" And that one thing was *Star Wars*. James figured Lyrah was
probably eyeball-deep in one of the movies by now. Or playing pretend with her toys.

_Aw Christ!_ He thought, _I live in a family of freaks!_

"Bring Han and Leia with you. This is important."

There was a few minute's pause as Jessica continued to stare stubbornly at her
book. James could imagine the big production as Lyrah gathered her whole plastic
entourage in here with her. The kid related to her dolls better than real people. No
wonder she had no friends.

And then there was Jessica. Occult central. But if James had his way, his sister's
days as 'the special one' would be numbered.

"Luke had to save them from Jabba the Hutt first. But everything's okay now."
Lyrah announced as she entered the room, arms full of toys. "What is it?"

"Jessica's going to tell us a story, Lyr."

"Neat!"

When James turned around again, Jessica was still reading page 132 of _The
Summer Tree_. He moved in for the kill, could see once he was closer that her eyes were
moving, not just left to right anymore, but up and down as well, and right to left,
describing a tiny square on the page. Her left hand was moving too, under the book now
resting on her lap.
It was all just an act anyway, this obsessive-compulsive crap. Just so Jessica could prove how special she was.

_Special my ass_, he thought, _she's just a freak. I'm fourteen, not stupid._ James figured all he'd have to do was trip her up in the middle of one of her famous stories. And now that Lyrah was in the room she'd see how selfish Jessica was being. No more poor Jessica. James had been a fucking saint in comparison. A regular man of the house.

Taking care of things so that his mom and Lyrah wouldn't have to worry while Jessica had been away. So what if Jessica could tell stories? She couldn't manage a thing without that stupid Tarot deck of hers. And the rest of her was pure trouble.

James thought, _if I stare at her long enough, I'll break her. Witch. Liar. Back-stabbing bitch!_

Down, right, up, left: three. Down, right, up, left: four. James was still staring at her. More fours. Down. No. Right. Jessica fought against the fours. Up. Fours wouldn't make him stop. Left. She had to stop the fours, stop the fours, _stop—_

"Fine," Jessica finally said. She wasn't getting anywhere with her book anyway. Felt like she was going to wear through the page with all that optical pacing.

"Jamie said you had a story, Jess." Now James had brought Lyrah into this. The prick. Why couldn't he just leave her alone?

"Yes, Lyr, but it's a very bad story." Jessica didn't want Lyrah to hear what she was going to have to tell James to get him off her back, but now Lyrah wanted a story, and James was partly right. They did have a right to know. Lyrah was a smart little girl. She could understand. Maybe.

Lyrah watched the battle of wills between her older siblings wind down. Jamie was always so angry. And it was funny watching Jessie’s eyes move. Trying to box things in. They weren’t real boxes, though. Jessie couldn’t keep anything inside them. But if she _could_ make them real . . .

"That's okay. I still wanna hear." Lyrah could tell that Jessie was still worried. Scared of something, so she held up one of her dolls. "Here. Luke will help fix—"

"I don't think so, Lyr. Not unless we can travel through time—"

"We can do anything!" That’s what Jessie always said anyway. Had she lied?
"The bad stuff's already happened to me, Lyr, and no matter what we do, I'll always remember."

So Jessie wasn't lying, just remembering. They could do anything, but they'd always remember. Lyrah wondered what bad stuff Jessie was talking about.

"This has to do with the time you were away, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I wanna hear!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah! I wanna hear how you beat the Dark Side, Jess. You're my very own Jedi master!"

You're not the only one with secrets, Jessie, Lyrah thought. As soon as I can show you how strong the force is in me, I'm gonna get you to teach me everything you know! Just you wait.

James was starting to lose patience.

"Can we get on with this?" He asked.

Jessica sighed. There was no escaping it. Eventually James would find a way to goad her into telling her story.

"Fine." She turned her attention back to Lyrah. "Do you remember what I was like just before I went away?" Jessica pulled her legs up, leaned back into her overstuffed blue chair, began the retreat necessary to tell the story. Lyrah dropped onto a cushion on the floor and sat her dolls on her lap like an audience.

"Uh-huh. You were mean. Always telling me to go away, and never telling any stories."

"What else do you remember?" Jessica prompted.

"You slept a lot."

"Yeah. And you missed a lot of school." The malice in James' tone made Jessica wonder if he'd ever forgive her. "And you had me lie to all your friends when they called."

No. He probably never would. Jessica reached into the pouch that was never far from her side, pulled out her Tarot deck, and unwrapped it. One fold at a time. With love.
"Why?" Lyrah asked.

"I don't know." Jessica shrugged her shoulders. "It was just easier to hide."

"You were zapped by a spell," Lyrah said, nodding sagely. "The old Jedi mind trick."

"Not really, Lyr." But Jessica had to pause for a moment. In a way, a spell had been cast on her. Lyrah could be so smart, in her own way.

"So what happened?" The girl asked.

"It's the chemicals in my brain." Lyrah seemed to be relieved at this explanation.

"So what did the chemicals do?" She asked.

"They—well, usually they're at certain levels, balanced, but now they're not."

Lyrah was smiling now.

"Just like I said. The Dark Side got you. The Emperor told the chemicals to attack so you had to go away and learn how to be a Jedi knight to fight back."

"No, Lyr—"

"Yeah, yeah," James interrupted. "Let's get on with the story. I think we can all agree that Lyrah will be able to understand what it's about, even if she sees it …" And here he paused as Lyrah fixed him with a militant glance. "… in a very special way."

"So," he continued once Lyrah had settled herself again. "The asylum."

"Don't call it that!" Jessica had resisted the dark images that went along with that word for a long time. It upset her that James could bring back so many frightening memories with one word.

"What? Okay then, the nut-hatch, the mad-house—" He was openly provoking his sister now.

Jessica leapt out of her chair at James before he could get another word out and pinned him down on the bed, shaking him at intervals to emphasise her words. Lyrah, always happy to watch a good battle, leaned forward on her knees, her eyes wide.


*Jesus,* James thought, *she's got this crazy act down!* *W*onder *h*ow *s*he *k*ept *c*ount *w*hile *s*he *w*as *y*elling *a*t *m*e?

"Okay, okay. Call off the dogs. I'll be good." Jessica crawled off her brother and eased back into her big blue chair. Lyrah sank back on her knees with a sigh and repositioned Han, Luke and Leia on her legs again.

"Story!" She demanded.

"Okay. Give me a moment." Jessica closed her eyes and thought of her best approach to the tale.

"I really don't think that Lyrah should hear this."

"I'm staying, Jessie." Jessica opened her eyes briefly. Lyrah was looking at her intently with a stare that was a lot like their mother's. How could a seven-year-old girl seem so mature? "I know you hurt yourself. And I know it's wrong. Mom explained it."

"Okay." Jessica closed her eyes again. She began to breathe deeply, relaxing into the trance-like state she told her stories from. When she spoke again, Jessica's voice was deeper and more measured. She kept her eyes closed so she could see the story in her mind as she told it. As she spoke her first words, Jessica drew a card, apparently at random, from her Tarot deck. She didn't open her eyes, but held up the card for James and Lyrah to see before she let it fall to the floor. It was *The Fool."

"Something was growing inside Jessica, so slowly that she barely noticed, but every once in a while, she felt wrong in little ways. Then she would feel darkness inside her like a virus, changing her at the genetic level into a copy of itself. Most of the time though, Jessica just felt ill." Referring to herself in the third person allowed Jessica to settle into the story. She shifted slightly into the cushions. She let herself float back, supported by the chair, feeling the blue of the cushions flowing into her body. And in her mind, Jessica remembered herself as she was almost two years ago.

She always stood tall, straight, and alone, surrounded by the air of mystery that she worked so hard to create. She always carried her Rider/Waite Tarot deck in a black silk bag in her purse and wore a pewter pentagram pendant on a long black leather thong.
around her neck. She drew hexes in purple ink on parchment paper with a feather quill, and delivered them by hand, the envelope sealed with a blob of black wax that had been impressed with her initials. She had been a fool, striding unaware toward the edge of the precipice. She drew another card: 'The Moon.'

"Jessica's problems had actually started much earlier, when she learned that she could see things that other people couldn't.

"She always told people she had special powers, that she was a witch, but she'd never really believed it at all. Jessica discovered the truth of this when she started having intense déjà vu."

Jessica opened her eyes when she heard rustling and fussing. Lyrah had risen and grabbed a few sheets of paper off Jessica's desk and a pen. Then she began writing down the words she didn't understand—misspelled, of course. Lyrah knew better than to interrupt the flow of Jessica's story with questions. She would 'listen around' the words for their contextual meaning as Jessica had shown her and write down some words for later clarification. Admittedly, Lyrah had the best vocabulary of anyone in her grade two class. Better even than some of the children in grade three or four. Jessica waited until her little sister finished writing "jennetic" and "dayza voo" at the top of the first sheet of paper before she continued her story, eyes open.

"Jessica kept a journal of all her dreams, and one day, after a particularly vivid déjà vu experience, she looked back along the entries, knowing that she had written a similar dream down several weeks earlier." She got up and, pulling a small key from her jeans pocket, unlocked the bottom drawer of her desk, bringing out a hard-covered notebook with an illustration of the phases of the moon on the cover. Jessica looked through it for a few minutes. "Here." She started reading.

"I'm in a small library, but not the public library. I've never been here before. There's classical music playing, and there are records and CD's and movies on the shelves. The name Joseph Campbell catches my eye. It's on a video called The First Storytellers. I want it, but it's an overnight loan and I can't make it back tomorrow. The librarian's nice to me anyway. He's tall but paunchy, black hair and a fuzzy little salt-
and-pepper beard. He's well dressed. He lets me take the video for a week. 'We've got other copies if someone else wants it,' he says. A woman is waiting on one side to get her books checked out and she says, 'There's a book on storytelling in here, you know. I can't remember where it is, but it's in here.' She looks funny. A tiny nose, and her glasses make her eyes look so big. She's smiling, but she has bad teeth and worse breath. 'Don't worry, dear, I can wait.' I don't realise that she means while I go get it. The librarian types something into the computer. He reads out a call number. Again I don't pick up on it. I've got something else on my mind. This has all happened before.

"She wrote that dream down twenty-eight days before it happened. And it did happen, exactly as she wrote it. No simple déjà vu here. She knew the people too, and the events."

James smirked, but Lyrah's face was relaxed and her mouth had fallen into a soft 'O.' Jessica smiled.

Dr. Carson, her first psychologist had suggested that she had gone back and falsified her journals to reinforce her fantasies. That was before her suicide attempt, and before Dr. Russ. James would no doubt find Dr. Carson's interpretation of his sister's déjà vu very entertaining. And very reasonable.

Lyrah, on the other hand, would have taken one look at Dr. Carson and known him at once as an agent of the Dark Side.

"That's impossible!" James said, laughing unkindly. "How could you have dreamed something that hadn't happened yet?"

"That was the very question I - Jessica asked herself when it first happened. She couldn't believe in something that was only supposed to happen in fairy tales. But she continued to write down her dreams every morning anyway because she couldn't quite not believe it either.

"Then one day, Jessica had a nasty confirmation of her precognitive ability." Jessica paused again in her tale while Lyrah struggled with the spelling of 'precognitive.' James huffed and sat back again. Maybe Jessica was sicker than he thought, but he couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was playing him for a fool.
"To this point, Jessica had no way of distinguishing her dreams of the future from the rest of her dreams. The dreams that later came true had a certain tingly, head-achy feel to them, but some of her other dreams gave her the exact same feeling. Those dreams couldn't be true, though, because they showed her something impossible: her father having an affair." Jessica's eyes lit first on James' face, then on Lyrah's as the knowledge of her statement found its way behind their eyes. After a moment, James' eyes darkened and his brows bent toward one another. Lyrah's eyes, however, saddened. She had no need to add 'affair' to her list of unknown words.

Jessica pulled three more cards from the deck, the 'Knight of Wands,' the 'Queen of Cups,' and the 'Queen of Swords.' Without looking at them—she knew her deck so well that she knew which cards she was drawing—she threw them down on the floor with the others.

"She had dismissed the truth of these dreams out of hand until one day in the Shopping Centre, she happened to see the woman she'd dreamed was her father's girlfriend. Out of curiosity, she'd followed the woman for an hour or more, using the shopping crowds as cover, until she saw the woman leave the mall and walk to a car that looked like her father's as it pulled up to the curb.

"Once inside, the woman leaned close to the driver. Jessica kept walking, closer and closer, until she was sure that she was not mistaken. It was her father. And they weren't just talking; they were kissing one another. On the mouth. Not like friends at all. Once certain, she spun around, and walked as quickly as she could in the opposite direction. When she was out of sight of the car, Jessica ran, and she didn't stop until she got home, into her room, back to her journal and the traitorous dreams inside." Jessica heard a strangled sound from her brother, but hurried on, even as she watched anger flood into his face. He looked like their father did when he was angry. It was a face that frightened her. Made her count, with that involuntary part of her brain that demanded fours for safety, breaths, words, the beats of her heart, the square of shoulders and hips, anything ... But the story now started had to be told.

"She read and re-read the dream of three nights before and its perfect recounting of her approach to the car; she looked back further and read the exact description of her
father's mistress over and over; she flipped through the pages until she found the dream that first mentioned the woman. It was dated three month—"

"This is bull-shit!" James shouted out. "Bull-Shit!" He got up from the bed and Lyrah had to scramble back out of his way as he charged the few feet that separated him from Jessica. He knocked the Tarot deck from her hands and over the side of the chair onto the floor.

"You dreamed Dad's affair?" He demanded. "Bull-fucking-shit! You knew all along, didn't you? He probably told you everything. You were his fucking 'little girl,' weren't yo—"

Jessica felt the impact of his words on her face. Each blast of breath and burst of spit. Her eyes were moving wildly: two ends, each brow, four; two corners, each eye, four; four incisors top; four incisors bottom. With a nearly physical effort, she pulled herself out of the endless sets of fours before she got lost, and interrupted her brother the only way she could think of. She punched James in the stomach to wind him and pushed him back onto the floor.

_I don't need the fours. I don't need the fours. Nothing's going to happen—_

"I told Mom as soon as I knew for sure. That afternoon. And I don't care if you believe me. I hate him. I've hated him for a long time. And I was never his little girl!"

She got up from her chair, ready in case James tried to tackle her again. She spared a glance for Lyrah who was frantically squeezing her hands to her ears in the attempt to block out all of James' 'bad words.'

"And if you swear like that in front of Lyrah again," Jessica stood over her brother for effect. "I'll remind you of your manners."

Jessica's eyes were swimming. She blinked to keep the tears from spilling out. Lyrah tentatively pulled her hands away from her ears and Jessica took a deep, shuddering breath.

"It's okay," she said.

"Aren't you guys gonna fight?" Lyrah, though fearful of 'bad words,' had an appetite for physical violence that was disturbing. An appetite that didn't need to be encouraged. Jessica glanced quickly at her brother.
"No. We're not. Right Jamie?" At first, he didn't respond. "Look, you were the one who started this. You wanted a story. It's started now and if you don't want to hear it, you can leave, but I'm going to finish it whether you're here or not. So.

"We're not going to fight, right?"

"Yeah." James' eyes broadcast his anger, but he eased back onto the bed. For now.

Technically, they weren't supposed to punch each other. Their mother discouraged it with worse punishments like grounding, withdrawal of television privileges, or Nintendo, or the Internet. Their father, when he'd been around, punished like with like, and it was a rare occasion that his belt hadn't come off.

"Bend over," he'd command, and neither James nor Jessica had the courage to stand up to him. But eventually, punishment or no, the two older siblings would come to blows, and since their parents' separation, there was only half as much discipline in the house. To make things easier on their mother, Jessica was trying to break old habits and take on more responsibility than most sixteen-year-olds did. She was trying to keep the peace, but it was hard.

James was mean, particularly when it came to his sister. When their father had been around, he seemed to favour her over James. Because she was older, and a girl, she'd grown much quicker than James and had proved to be more co-ordinated and more athletic too. So their father had been on the sidelines during every game encouraging Jessica to hit a home run in baseball, or to take the shot from centre court in basketball, but he hadn't bothered to catch more than one or two of the plays that James performed in. He'd even missed the one James had written last year: Fire-Eater. So James' sibling rivalry had mushroomed, in the darkness, with lots of manure piled on top.

He was so busy being angry at Jessica that he'd refused to notice that she attended every one of his plays. She saved every program, every ticket, every review she could find. Someday, she'd show James the scrap-book she'd made and he would smile. Someday. It would only embarrass him now.

Jessica bent down to retrieve the remainder of the Tarot deck, but stopped when she saw how they had fallen. James wouldn't want to hear how perfectly they were
Whispers in the Dark

arranged. His mind was too set in the rational world to accept the possibility of serendipity, let alone the fact that his anger had affected the way the cards now lay.

She sat down, feet tucked under her in lotus position, before the cards. Most of them had landed face down, but some hadn't. She picked up the topmost of these—the 'Three of Swords'—and prepared to crawl back into the story.

"Jessica knew she'd made a mistake when she told her mother what she'd seen earlier that day, how long she thought it had been going on. And she was glad that no one else was home that afternoon to hear or see or feel what happened.

"She never knew her mother could be so strong." Jessica watched her brother's face, anger crouching around his eyes and mouth, waiting to lunge out at her and strike.

"Strong enough to see past her own denial to the truth of her daughter's words. Strong enough to love despite betrayal. Strong enough to confront her husband, to make him leave, if necessary, even though she loved him still with all the pieces of her broken heart." Jessica dropped the card she'd been holding into the other, smaller pile, the story pile.

"It had been a bad afternoon, full of tears and screaming and shattering crockery. Spoons had been bent, some completely in half. The paring knife blade had broken off in the cutting board. Jessica's mother had cut her hand doing that, and then, weeping blood and tears, had let her daughter help her dry her eyes, bandage her hand, pick up the pieces of broken utensils, dishes, home. Between the two of them they had figured out a way to begin surviving the man she loved. It had been hours before anyone else had come home." James' face had relaxed a bit, softened by the image of his mother's pain.

"The confrontation that night was amazingly quiet. Not even Jessica heard a sound, although she'd been sitting, waiting, ready to leap up at the first sign of trouble. Her father had simply packed and left, not a word to any of the children. Not one word of explanation or apology." Lyrah was leaning back on a pillow now, Han, Leia, and Luke hugged to her chest.

"That night, Jessica stood by the living room door quietly while her mother explained to her brother and her sister what was happening. She watched as they asked each other questions with no answers and slipped around the corner when her brother's
voice began to rise. Even from her room, Jessica could hear his anger, Lyrah's confusion, and the noises carried her far into the night as she lay on top of her bed willing her stomach to stay still.

"Once the house was quiet, Jessica took one of the decorative dollar-store purple bottles off her shelf. She didn't sleep at all that night, but cried until she couldn't bear to anymore. She collected two little bottles full of tears, then sealed them with corks and wax. She vowed not to cry again, and she stopped writing down her dreams. In fact, she tried to forget them as best she could, because she figured that it was better not to know what the future held."

That was also the night her mind decided to obsess on fours. There were only four of them now. And Jessica had to protect them. From him.

She'd been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder when she was eight. Back then, it had begun with twos. Symmetry was everything: two parents, two eyes, two ears, two nostrils. There were two arms, two legs, two children—after Lyrah was born, Jessica never counted herself with them—and right and wrong. Then, of course, there had been two breasts, two testicles, life and death, self and other. She could map out her life, until the night her father left, in pairs. But then four was the important number. They were all in this together. Everyone but her father. If she'd kept quiet a little longer, maybe he would have left on his own. But she'd never know for sure now.

James was getting restless, chewing his nails. He didn't believe much of what Jessica was saying. This psychic crap was all made up for the story. He wanted her to get to the good stuff. The asylum and her treatment. James imagined straitjackets and rubber rooms and electro-shock therapy. He couldn't wait.

"Can we get on with this?" He asked.

Jessica plucked the upturned 'Nine of Swords' and dropped it onto the story pile.

"Forgetting her dreams wasn't as easy as she thought though. She dreamed and dreamed and dreamed. More now that she didn't want to than ever before. She tried staying up. She tried drinking coffee, but that would only delay the inevitable. She had to fall asleep sometime, and when she did, she would dream.
"So Jessica told her mother that her obsession with numbers was getting worse. It was, but that wasn't the point. At her appointment, she complained to Dr. Carson that she couldn't sleep. Her attempts at enforced sleeplessness made her look the part, so he had no problem prescribing tranquillisers. Then it became easy to sleep dreamlessly, or to dream dreams that had nothing to do with the future. Jessica took a pill every night.

"But somehow, the dreams made their way through, and within a couple of weeks, Jessica was dreaming again. So she took two pills a night, and used up her prescription before it was due to be renewed.

"She made another appointment with Dr. Carson after only three drug-free nights. They'd been terrible nights, and it had been impossible to escape her dreams. The first morning Jessica advised her mother to stay clear of sharp objects. She'd cut herself chopping onions anyway. The second morning, she told her brother to come right home after school. He didn't, and was beaten by a classmate."

At this, James made a rude noise, but he couldn't deny the fact that he'd been beat up a while ago. And the irritating thing was, he hadn't told anyone. Mike had been real careful not to hit James in the face. Being a bully wasn't as satisfying when you got caught and Mike knew how to hurt a guy without leaving many bruises on him. So James let Jessica continue telling her story.

"The third night, Jessica had seen a terrible car accident in her dreams. In the morning, she tried to play sick, but her mother wouldn't buy it. She decided to take another route to school, but a friend met her and insisted they take Regent St. to avoid being late. Jessica felt nauseous. She didn't want to stand by and watch three people die. Moments later, an elderly man driving a Honda Civic swerved into the oncoming traffic. The driver of the car he hit had been a young woman, taking her five-year-old son to kindergarten. Jessica had seen the cars, had tried to wave, to warn the young mother, but the accident had happened anyway.

"Jessica rushed to the accident scene, trying again to change the outcome she had seen in her dream. She only managed to pull the child from the back of the car, the front ends of both cars were too twisted to get the doors open. The boy had no pulse. Jessica's
heart almost stopped beating then too. She was paralysed, but the warm little boy in her arms was going to die, would grow colder with every moment she hesitated.

"It was the pattern that got her moving again. Five compressions, breathe. Five compressions, breathe. It was the pattern she'd learned in phys-ed. at school. CPR to save his life. Jessica faltered when she felt his ribs crack. She vomited when her mouth came away from the boy's with his blood on it.

"When the paramedics got there, they raced the child into the hospital. Only when she saw the ambulance driving away did she realise what was happening. Then she freaked. Right in front of the police. Right in front of the reporter who had just showed up on the scene. That night, the newspaper printed a picture of the hysterical heroine shouting 'I could have stopped it! I could have saved them!'

James remembered that. Jessica had really been weird that night. He'd thought she was just trying for more sympathy. The sensitive one. She'd made a big deal of refusing to talk to the reporters. Said it was her fault the other people had died. So Jessica had been on the scene of a car accident and had saved the kid's life. That still didn't prove she was psychic.

Jessica grabbed another upturned tarot card, the 'Tower.'

"She told Dr. Carson about the accident as an excuse to ask for more tranquillisers. Her plan worked well. She was so distressed over the accident that he'd asked if she needed a refill before she'd got around to it herself. Two hours later, she had a bottle of thirty Ativan in her hand. More drugs to make her sleep. But Jessica never intended to wake up again.

"What was the use of dreaming the future when you couldn't change anything? And if you couldn't hide from the dreams, what was the good of sleeping? Or of trying to drug the dreams? You would only wake up and face a day full of accidents you might have been able to prevent.

"Jessica saw no other option. When she got home, she downed the whole bottle, washing down each pill with a swig of rum. But nothing seemed to be happening. She went to the medicine cabinet, determined to clean out whatever she found. Aspirin turned
out to be the only other drug, however, and there was only half a bottle left, but she took it anyway. Anything to hasten the end. Before she lost her nerve.

"But she lost her nerve, and then found it again, several times before finally falling asleep. Ativan takes a while to work." Both James and Lyrah were listening intently now, the younger one holding her Luke Skywalker doll as if it was all that stood between her and death.

"The Ativan took so long to work that Jessica’s mother was able to find her and rush her to the hospital in time. She was unconscious while the doctor and nurses pumped her stomach and later, she woke up strapped down in a hospital bed on intravenous fluids. Jessica looked about the ward, and saw the bulgy eyes of a toothless old woman, a man shouting for a drink—not water, and another man further down, giggling and straining at his bonds. There were others, calmer, and some asleep, but the frightening and frightened faces around her told Jessica exactly where she was: in hell."

Jessica decided to spare James and Lyrah the details of her treatment, the bleeding ulcers in her stomach from the Aspirin, vitamin K injections, puking blood. They’d almost lost her that first night from the internal bleeding alone. Later, there had been C.A.T. scans and other tests to see if the Ativan had caused any brain or nerve damage, and for a while, Jessica thought there had been. She couldn’t talk properly and her legs twitched from time to time, but once the drugs had been flushed from her system, these side effects disappeared.

"She heard her mother’s voice then, from around the corner, talking to Dr. Carson. She couldn’t make out exactly what they were saying, but it was something about transferring her and about recommended treatment.” That was a lie. Jessica heard exactly what they were talking about. Dr. Carson used the words ‘delusional’ and ‘sociopath’ to describe her. He said he was concerned that her problems would develop into ‘full blown neurosis’ if they went untreated. Further, he thought Jessica would benefit from ‘a more thorough evaluation and possibly an extended program of therapy.’ She understood immediately, even in her weakened state, that Dr. Carson was trying to get her mother to commit her. And Jessica wouldn’t stand for it.
“She was to be transferred to the Algoma Hospital under the care of another psychologist, Dr. Russ.” In fact, when she was in a condition to argue, Jessica had demanded another doctor. At first, her mother sided with Dr. Carson, but Jessica convinced her otherwise.

*Mom, she’d said. Listen to me. I know I have problems. Serious ones. They’re kind of a prerequisite for suicide. But where do you think I got the drugs to do this to myself? Dr. Carson! He thinks the solutions to all my problems come in a bottle. Every time I’ve gone to him with a problem, he’s ended up recommending an increase in my dosage, or a new drug altogether. Why do you think it was so easy for me to get this stuff from him? I know he wants me in the San. And I’ll go. Willingly. But only if I have another doctor. Otherwise, I’ll fight every step of the way.*

*The bottom line is that I won’t get well with Dr. Carson, Mom. Leave me with him, and I will end up dead.*

It hadn’t been easy to get Dr. Carson to give her a referral, but he had. Jessica had no way of knowing if the new psychologist would be any better, but she had wanted help. As she had recovered in the hospital, her dreams had returned. If death hadn’t been the solution, then she’d have to figure something else out.

“Jessie?” Lyrah was standing in front of her sister, reaching out to touch Jessica’s forehead with a sweaty finger. Jessica had said nothing for a few minutes now and she was beginning to worry. Suicide was bad, but Jessica hadn’t died. She’d learned something in the hospital. Something special. And now it was time to find out what it was.

“C’mom, Jess. Snap out of it!” James wasn’t quite sure what to think of his sister anymore, but now she’d come to the good part, the asylum, and he wasn’t going to miss out on any of the juicy details. Jessica looked up, startled.

“Sorry,” she said. “I was just thinking about those first couple of days …” Lyrah knelt in front of the big blue chair. Put her head on Jessica’s knee. Jessica looked to the pile of tarot cards on the floor. Picked the final upturned card and placed it on the story pile. It was Death.
"The worst thing about the psychiatric ward was the nights. During the day, Jessica could almost ignore the sounds that the other patients made. At night, though, when she woke up in the darkness, with the eerie light of the ward seeping through the cracks around her door, every moan and shout crept up Jessica's spine into her head and reminded her that she wasn't very different from the people who made those sounds.

"But each morning, she would go to see Dr. Russ. Jessica knew the first time she saw him that Dr. Russ would listen to her. And he did. She was nervous and tense the first two mornings as she told Dr. Russ about her dreams. And she was waiting for him to ask her leading questions like Dr. Carson did, the questions that meant that he thought she was delusional, but he didn't. He was obviously puzzled when she told him the things she was dreaming now. Things that he could confirm, like that the patient in the next room would have a fit of some kind when she went back to her room.

"On a whim, he'd taken her back himself, and sure enough, there was a commotion and they walked down the hall. It was an allergic reaction to his medication and nothing serious, but it was enough to make Dr. Russ think.

"Jessica's dreams were safer in the hospital though. They didn't involve anyone she knew. And nothing she saw was that serious. Just things she would see in the days to come. Still, she'd asked Dr. Russ if he could help her find a way to stop the dreams. Until the observation period was over, he told her there was nothing he could prescribe, and that after, he wasn't sure if there was a way to stop what was happening to her, because he'd never had a patient like her before. He'd have to do some research, he said.

"Dr. Russ was very good to Jessica. He looked at her C.A.T. scan and recommended a more thorough scan with the M.R.I. He looked at her list of medications, and threw it out.

"He put her on a lower dosage of a single medication, fine tuning the prescription over the weeks to find the optimum dosage. Dr. Russ gave Jessica the tools she would need to eventually wean herself off the drug altogether. With practice, visualisation and mindfulness could bring the OCD under control."

It was a pleasant discovery for Jessica that she could hope one day to live without the drugs that dulled her senses and made her want to sleep all the time. Dr. Russ had told
her to close her eyes and imagine herself going to school, reading, anything she wanted to do. He told her to imagine she was doing so without the drugs and without the intrusion of her OCD.

That had been enough to bring the fours out in force, but Dr. Russ had expected that, so he told her how to isolate her OCD like it was a separate thing. And really, he explained, that’s what it was. Unconsciously, she’d used parts of herself, memories, fears, strengths, and weaknesses, to make the fours and give them power.

So she began talking to her illness. Dialoguing was what Dr. Russ called it. First she would have to identify the fears that made the fours so attractive to her, and then the strengths she had given them so that she could pretend that they protected her. Jessica was still doing that now, and even though she continued to visualise herself healthy every day, the fours always intruded on her imagined health. They would, Dr. Russ warned, until she learned enough about how she created them to take them apart again. Then she could reclaim the parts of herself she used to make her OCD, comfort them, accept them, and welcome them home.

That was hard enough to do. What would Dr. Russ ask of her if she told him about Dad?

James was getting edgy.

“Mindfulness? What the hell is that?”

“It’s a way of being present in the moment, of using my own willpower to keep my OCD in check. It’s hard work and the fours still get away from me, but I’m getting better with practice.”

“That’s stupid.” James wanted a horror story but Jessica wasn’t going to give him one. He couldn’t believe he’d wasted all this time listening to one of his sister’s dumb stories. Even if this one was true, it still sucked.

“Jessie,” Lyrah asked. “How does it work?” She wanted Jessie’s Jedi secrets. The story would be good enough, but still ...

“Well, I can tell when I’m getting stressed out. There’s this … feeling I get. I can tell when the fours are going to start. That’s the silly, scared part of me. So I tell it that I don’t need to do the fours, that nothing bad will happen if I don’t. I tell it to go away.”
“So Dr. Russ has you talking to yourself now. Some shrink!” James fell back on antagonism, hoping at least for a good fight before he gave up entirely.

But Jessica said nothing. She wasn’t giving him anything today.

“You’re crazy.” It was a resignation more than anything else, and James knew it. He got up and left.

Lyrah watched her brother walk out. He was so angry. But he was so tired of being angry, he slouched away, like he was going to fall down when he got to his room.

“So what’s the rest of the story, Jessie?” She asked her sister when James had gone.

“That’s it, Lyr.” Jessica was getting tired. She thought that telling this story would help. Somehow make it easier to bear what she had to bear. Maybe make it easier to tell her real secrets. But that wasn’t going to happen today and she just wanted to sleep. She wanted to get away. Away from James and his anger. Away from Lyrah and her Star Wars. Just Away.

“Jessica was three months in the hospital, and Dr. Russ couldn’t justify keeping her any longer, so he sent her home.”

“That’s it?”

“I’m sorry, Lyr. I’m just tired. The story’s done.”

“But it’s not the end of the story.”

“That’s all there is, Lyr.”

“But Jessie! That can’t be the end!” Lyrah was agitated now, tugging at her sister’s jeans.

“It is, Lyr. For now. See? I’m not a Jedi Master.”

“But you are!” Lyrah stood up and pounded her little fist down on the arm of the chair. “You can see the future!”

“Lyr, I’m not a Jedi and that’s that. I’m your sister, and I love you very much.” Jessica smothered the little girl in a hug before she could say another word. “Go play. I have some stuff to do now. We can talk about this later. Okay?”

“’K.” Lyrah gathered her dolls and left as angry and tired as her brother had. Jessica shut the door behind her.
Whispers in the Dark

She wasn’t ready to tell the rest. Precognition was hard enough to swallow. Jessica was sure that Lyrah would believe her. Lyrah would believe that she could do anything. Literally.

Jessica knelt down on the floor and reached over to clean up her tarot cards. One scoop gathered the fallen cards and she straightened them into a pile, stroking them as she did so. Smoothing out the vibrations of the story they had just been used to tell, wiping away the anger of her brother’s touch. Her hand went out again to bring the rest of the cards to her, but one, the first card she had drawn, remained behind. Again Jessica straightened and stroked her cards. Thinking of all the things she had left out of her story. She didn’t want to think of those omissions as lies, but what else were they?

She stretched out her hand a third time, but did not touch the last card that remained on the floor. Sighing, she focused on the card, imagined it move in her mind, rise up off the floor and float into her waiting hand. Slowly, very slowly, The Fool obliged her. As the card touched her fingers, Jessica let go of the image. And as the small headache that accompanied such feats of telekinesis took hold, Jessica gazed at the card in her hand. She was the fool, walking off the cliff into unknown, yet certain, danger.

Dr. Russ thought he’d seen something unusual in her C.A.T. scan, she was sure. That was why he’d ordered an M.R.I. But it hadn’t shown him what he’d wanted to see. If there had been something wrong though, wouldn’t the other doctors have seen it in the C.A.T.? A tumour, a blood clot, or an aneurysm? Dr. Russ never explained what he’d been looking for. So Jessica decided not to tell him about her other discovery. It only seemed fair.

Jessica spent a lot of her free time alone while she was in the hospital. A 30 minute session with Dr. Russ in the morning, an hour of group therapy in the early afternoon, and catching up with her school work in the evening were the only commitments she had. She didn’t like interacting with the other patients if she could help it. It made group more difficult, because some of the other patients thought she was a snob, but Jessica really wasn’t in the mood to make any friends. Aside from Dr. Russ.

So with her free time, Jessica began to experiment, to see if she had any other psychic abilities. She couldn’t read closed books or know what was on a card she hadn’t
seen before. Her facility with the tarot cards had come from lots of practice and a few elementary card shuffling tricks. She couldn't seem to read minds either. After concentrating for a few minutes though, Jessica moved a pencil without touching it. She just visualised the pencil moving, and focused on it until it did. Strangely, the fours stayed away when she visualised this way. Just to be sure, Jessica repeated the experiment. She did it so many times that she got a migraine. She'd never had one of those before. It made her throw up and kept her in bed for a whole day. After that, Jessica practised moving things only a little bit at a time.

It didn't make a lot of sense to her that she could see the future and move things with her mind. The two abilities didn't seem to go together. But then, having either ability at all defied any logical reality she had ever known.

She didn't know why she kept it a secret though. Telekinesis was a lot easier to prove than precognition. See? I can move that glass. See? I can do it again. But then she'd be a real freak show. Might as well sign up with the carnival after that. Or perform on television for money like a trained seal for fish.

What good was either ability in the real world? They could only make her life more challenging than it already was. They could only make people fear her, hate her. Like James. She didn't want anyone else to hate her like James did. Jessica had tried to tell her mother about the dreams, but it hadn't gone well. Her mother had even made a private appointment with Dr. Russ, but that hadn't seemed to help. She just couldn't believe that her daughter could dream the future. It didn't make sense.

Jessica was just so tired of it all. Carefully, she wrapped her cards in their silk pouch and went to the kitchen to start supper. James was in his room, playing Duke Nukem on the computer and Lyrah was in the living room looking up the words on her list in the old Webster's dictionary. Neither spoke to Jessica as she washed the dishes. Neither helped her peel potatoes or clean the carrots. It was a quiet dinner and a quiet evening. Jessica moved through the house like a ghost, and no one noticed when she went to bed early.

Lyrah couldn't sleep. She didn't like being by herself in the dark. She was thinking about Jessie's story. But it wasn't a story. It was true. Lyrah thought it was funny how
stuff just 'happened' before and everyone tried to tell her about it after. She didn't know about stuff like suicide then. Now she did. And knowing made her scared. But that was okay. Lyrah knew lots of scary things. Things that Mommy didn't know and Jamie didn't know. Things only Jessie told her late at night when neither of them could sleep.

Lyrah missed her sister so much when she was gone. But now she was back. Really back. The story proved it. But Jessie had left things out, hadn't finished her story, and that made Lyrah mad. She couldn't stay mad at Jessie long though. So she crept out of bed, and tiptoed across the hall to Jessie's room. Lyrah knew where to step on the creaky floor so it wouldn't creak. She knew how to open Jessie's door without making a sound. She knew that she was always welcome in bed beside her sister.

"Lyrah?" Jessica didn't even have to open her eyes. She knew it was her little sister. She shifted over, made room for Lyrah, lifted up the edge of the covers. "C'mon in." Lyrah snuggled in close like she used to.

"Aw nuts ..." It sounded so funny when Lyrah whispered it. Aw nuts. It was the closest she'd get to swearing for a while yet. Jessica thought it was something that should be said loudly, not whispered like a secret.

"What is it?" She asked.

"I forgot Asha." Lyrah's teddy bear. No, her Ewok. Lyrah didn't have anything that wasn't Star Wars. "Now I'll have to go back and get her." But she didn't move.

"Yeah," Jessica prompted. "But ..."

"But I'm all comfy now." God, sometimes Lyrah was so sweet. It made Jessica happy that all the innocence hadn't been driven out of her yet. She was still a kid. It was good to know.

"Don't worry about Asha."

"But I can't sleep without—"

"Don't worry." Jessica didn't know why she did this. Loaded so much on Lyrah's little shoulders. Maybe it was the night, the dark. It was a place for secrets. And Jessica knew that Lyrah would accept her secrets. And think that her big sister was great because of it.
"Close your eyes and think about Asha." Jessica whispered. Lyrah was so trusting. Jessica just hoped she didn't end up twisting Lyrah's mind with all her secrets. But maybe it was the deal they had to make each other. It was certainly better than a deal with the devil.

"K, Jessie. Now what?" Lyrah was getting excited. She knew she was going to get some more of Jessie's story now. Maybe find out what Jedi secrets she learned at the hospital.

"Just keep thinking about her—and don't peek, or it won't work."

"What won't work?" She was starting to giggle now. It was a good sign.

"Shhhh. Asha's a very special Ewok. She can hear your thoughts. So if you think loudly enough, she'll pop right over."

"You're being silly."

"Be real quiet, or she won't come." It was hard work. Jessica had never tried to move anything she couldn't see before, but it was just like she was telling Lyrah. She 'thought' about the bear, and it moved. It was just another kind of visualisation, and Jessica was getting a lot of practice at that.

Jessica closed her own eyes, imagined Lyrah's room, her bed, Asha on the pillows. The headache was beginning already, but it would be worth it. Jessica imagined the bear rise from the bed, let it fall over the side. Then she raised it so that it floated only inches off the floor. Slowly, it moved across the hall. Past the jagged place where Lyrah's hamster, R2D2, stopped to eat the drywall on his way to freedom. Across the worn groove in the flooring, that was older than Jessica. Past the night-light. Toward the dark place where Jessica lived.

"You okay, Jess?"

"Yeah." Jessica realised that Lyrah was stroking her arm. And her little hand was so calm, Jessica could feel how badly hers were shaking in comparison, and the headache was getting so bad she could hear the ocean roaring in her ears. She was going to drown in those waters soon. She'd never moved anything this far before. But it was just across the hall, not really far at all. Jessica knew now that she'd overdone it, but at least Asha was there. She opened her eyes to watch the last few feet of the transit, over the metal
strip that marked the end of the hardwood in the hall, the beginning of her room, over the worn carpet, up the side of the bed and over her grandmother’s old blue quilt. Jessica put Asha down gently in front of Lyrah. She felt nauseous. The room was spinning.

"There now," Jessica said, panting. "You can open your eyes."

"Asha," Lyrah murmured and reached out to touch the bear, but then stopped.

"You did that," she said. It was a statement, not a question, and her whisper was weighed down by the new knowledge Jessica had given her.

"Did you look?" Jessica asked in between gasps. "Did you see anything?"

"You told me not to."

"But did you?" Jessica’s eyes were doing fours again, but she didn’t have the strength to stop them. Four corners. It made the spinning even worse. Four walls. Jessica was going to vomit.

"No," Lyrah admitted.

"Then you can’t lie and tell anyone you did." Four angles. Jessica dropped back on her pillow. Four. Lyrah was generating so much heat. Four. She needed to breathe. Four. She needed to stop the spinning. Four. Stop the roaring. Four. Stop the fours. Stop-the-fours-stop-the-fours-stop-the-fours—Stop!

"So you are a Jedi master then." Lyrah rolled over and started running her fingers over Jessica’s forehead and cheeks. Jessica closed her eyes to shut out the dizziness. It didn’t work.

"Hey!" Lyrah said. "You’re hot! Want me to get you some ice?"

"Please."

Lyrah grabbed Asha without a second thought this time. Telekinesis was no longer frightening. The myth she’d chosen to shape her existence had explained everything, made it safe. Just like Jessica’s fours. Jamie was right, her illness did get passed on.

Lyrah was back with a handful of ice cubes. Jessica grabbed them. They started melting as soon as they touched her skin.

"Jess."
"Wha'" Jessica said. Inside she was thinking, *I've done this to her, made her sick.*

"What do you want me to call you?"

"Huh?"

"Ben Kenobi became Obiwan. Luke's dad became Darth Vader. You have to choose a new name."

"What 'bout Yoda? He didn' have 'nother name ..." Jessica wasn't sure if she could make it to the bathroom. She didn't know if she could stand. She didn't think she could bear another name.

"He did! We just don't know it. He's so old nobody knows. He's even forgotten. So what's your Jedi name?"

"Penumbra." It was the first thing that came to Jessica's mind. She let it out by mistake.

"What's it mean?" Jessica could barely hear Lyrah's question.

"Shadow ..."

"What? Jessie! What's wrong?"

She was going to puke. Her legs felt like rubber. She couldn't stand, and so fell toward the door.

"Mom!" Lyrah called. "Mommy! Come quick!" Something was definitely wrong and she was scared. Maybe she'd been wrong all along and her selfish need to prove that Jessica was a Jedi had pushed her older sister too far too soon. Luke Skywalker had almost died pushing himself too far. "Mommy!"

Jessica thought Lyrah was screaming but she couldn't be sure anymore. She tried to crawl up the wall, the pain in her head exploding, blinding her, deafening her. *Oh it hurts, hurts, hurts ...*

"Omigodomigodmigodmigodgogodgogogo—" Jessica wasn't even aware that she was speaking now, moaning into the doorframe a moan that became a howl as the pain broke out of her, became her entire universe.

"Mommy!" Lyrah was frozen, watching Jessica as she dropped to the floor again with a sickening thud. She stopped moaning as she choked and puked.
James got there first. Lifted Jessica out of her own vomit.

"Mom!" He shouted. "Call an ambulance! Jess fell! She's puking all over the place!" He turned his sister on her side and tried to clear the vomit from her mouth enough to see if she was still breathing, but he couldn't be sure. This was so disgusting. *Jesus Jess, did you have to try and kill yourself again?*

"What happened?" He asked Lyrah.

"I don't know Jamie," Lyrah wailed, starting to cry. "I don't know. She got so hot and couldn't talk and started falling and I couldn't do anything—" James looked up from Jessica for a moment.

"It's going to be okay Lyrah. It's going to be okay. Can you do something for me? Can you get the thermometer out of the bathroom? Can you be a big girl and do that?" Lyrah snuffled and nodded, stumbling off to the bathroom and their mother ran up the hall.

"The ambulance is on its way." She knelt beside her daughter. "James, what's happening?"

"I don't know Mom. I don't know."

Jessica could hear them talking, as if they were far away in the darkness. Something had happened, something very wrong, but she couldn't quite remember what. She remembered the salty taste of James' fingers in her mouth, Lyrah crying, the coolness of the thermometer against her skin. James had put it in her armpit. She remembered that he was doing it right, but not why, nor how she knew it. These bits of the world drifted by her, getting fainter and fainter, until she simply floated in the darkness, thinking all the time that something was terribly wrong, but not knowing what.

Her waking was sudden. One moment, she was floating, the next her eyes opened, just a little, it was so bright, and then the dark was gone, forgotten, in the flutter of an eyelid.

There was something in her throat. It hurt. It made it hard for her to breathe.

"Hello, Jessica." It was a woman's voice, but no one she knew. "You've got a tube down your throat. It's to help you breathe. Try not to fight it, dear. Just relax, and the doctor will be here soon."
The nurse, she had to be a nurse, was fussing about her, adjusting something here, checking something there. Jessica felt the blood pressure cuff on her arm and then closed her eyes again. She was so tired.

The next time she opened her eyes, Jessica was alone. It was night and the lights were off. She was able to look around more. The tube was gone, but her throat was still sore, and now she noticed a little burning in her arm. Jessica tried to move it, to see what it was, but she was feeling so heavy, it was all she could do to turn her head.

It was an intravenous drip. She was in the hospital. Again.

What happened? She couldn’t remember. Then it came back to her. So slowly that she noticed it get a little less dark in the room. It must be nearly dawn. Piece by piece, she gathered it all in. Lyrah, Asha… Jessica closed her eyes when she got that far. Far enough for now.

When she opened her eyes for the third time, the ceiling was moving. Light, dark, light, dark. Jessica made a little sound. She’d meant to ask what was happening, but her throat still hurt and she couldn’t talk.

“Jessica” It was Dr. Russ. He sounded relieved. He was smiling. Jessica liked his smile. “Glad you’re awake again. The nurse said you were coming around.”

She realised it wasn’t the ceiling moving. She was. Dr. Russ and a Nurse were taking her somewhere.

“She—?” She managed part of a word this time. Where are you taking me?

“Don’t worry, Jessica. Dr. Keeley and I thought it might be a good idea if you had another C.A.T. scan.”

“I’m fine,” she told him in a squeaky whisper.

“Well, we’re just going to make sure.”

There were a couple of bumps, and they were in the elevator. The nurse checked her pulse, temperature and blood pressure.

“I’m just going to flash a little light in your eyes. I’ll be quick about it.” Dr. Russ checked her right, then her left eye. “Are you in any pain at all?”

Jessica shook her head. Then nodded and touched her throat.
"If that’s the worst of your troubles I think you’re probably fine. Do you know where you are?"

"Hospital," Jessica supplied. "How long?"

"A couple of days."

The elevator stopped, and they wheeled Jessica down the hall into the C.A.T. scan room. They helped her onto the table.

"Are you comfortable?" The nurse asked. Jessica nodded. She went into the control area. Dr. Russ was about to follow, and then returned to her side.

"We can talk about this later if you want, but I’m curious to know if you remember what happened." A little divot between his eyebrows was the only thing that gave away his concern. Jessica nodded again.

"Later," she whispered.

"Okay then. Hey, I hear your father is waiting to see you when—"

"No!" Jessica reached out to grab Dr. Russ’ arm and almost fell off the table.

Images flashed before her eyes. The bright, white hospital room with Dr. Russ standing over her alternated with the image of a dark room, her room, and her father standing over her. Light. Dark. Light. Dark. She’d been a little girl then, about Lyrah’s age, dreading the dark and the terror her father brought into it. Already at six, she knew the futility of crying out, of trying to tell. And when he told her to forget ...

"Calm down Jessica. It’s okay." Dr. Russ helped her back into position and waved the nurse back into the control booth with the technician. "What’s wrong? I know you still have some issues with your father to work out, but he’s concerned about you. Isn’t that a good thing?" Jessica shook her head violently.

"Don’t let him near me," she said, carefully working on each word, to be clear. She could feel the fours tearing at her. She didn’t know if she had the strength to hold them off. "Not now. Not safe."

"What are you talking about?" Jessica glanced in the direction of the control area. To the nurse and the technician, Dr. Russ asked, "Could you give us a minute?"

"Be quick," said the technician. "We’ve got other patients waiting."

Dr. Russ nodded.
“We’ll be out in the hall,” the technician sighed.

When they left, Jessica grabbed Dr. Russ’ hand.

“Can’t touch me,” she croaked. “Not again.”

“Jessica?” She began squeezing his hand. Very tightly. “Why don’t you want your father to touch you?” He too was being very careful with his words now. He was leaning down, whispering. This was not a good time or place to be talking about this, but if they waited for her to be released, for session, for the appropriate time and place, Jessica might lose this chance and whatever it might mean for her recovery. Dr. Russ leaned in further, ignoring the way she was crushing his fingers together.

“What do you mean by ‘not again’?”

Jessica felt the tumblers click into place, one after the other. Her eyes were prickling, but they were too dry for tears. It was the question, or questions, she realised, that she’s been waiting for. She heard the squeak of rusted hinges as the door in her mind opened wide. She could smell the coffee on Dr. Russ’ breath.

“You don’t have to tell me now,” he whispered. Jessica nodded. Yes, she thought. Yes I do.

“He …” she started, her face contorting with the effort. She had to do this quickly, before the fours came, before they stopped her. “He, um, he …”

Jessica couldn’t bear to say it. Not to Dr. Russ. But the door was open now, and if she didn’t get this out, it could slam shut again, maybe forever. She took a deep breath, shifted so she could look Dr. Russ straight in the eyes.

“My father raped me.” It came out as a hoarse whisper, but behind it was the force of every scream she’d never uttered all those years ago. Jessica dissolved into tearless, voiceless, wracking sobs, every ounce of air forced out of her body with each new wave. She’d let go of Dr. Russ’ hand now and was clutching his lab coat, gasping, sobbing, gasping.

“It’s alright,” Dr. Russ whispered into the tangles of her hair. “Let it out. I’m here. It’s alright.”
Jessica was shaking her head against his chest. It wasn’t all right. It never had been. It might never be, but the secret door she’d kept locked for more than ten years was wedged open now by four little words. My father raped me.

She’d never said that to anyone before. Not even Lyrah. The door was open, though, and maybe, Jessica thought, Dr. Russ could help her find something in there to save Lyrah. Something that could save James and their mother too.

Maybe he could even help her find a way to save herself.
whispers in the dark

Fox fur

Anne's first encounter with the vixen caught her in a dream.
Dreaming, she was a young girl again swinging on the big swings in the schoolyard. She liked the flexible seats better than the wooden ones; there was less chance of a wayward splinter. And she could swing so high it was like she was flying. She tried to swing above the high bar and make the set thump. She was laughing, getting ready to jump off, and from the corner of her eye, she could see her parents waving. Her mother was smiling, but when her father opened his mouth—
The first cry woke her, unsure exactly what she'd heard. She pulled the duvet up, though the spring night was unusually warm. She could see her father still, standing at the foot of her bed as though he was tucking her in. His mouth was still open, but he didn't speak. The second cry sounded. Her father shook his head sadly, turned, and faded away.
Anne leapt to the window, dragging the duvet with her, and scanned the darkness for the source of the noise. The night yielded no answers, though, just cry after frightening cry. It sounded like a woman screaming. Anne thought someone was in trouble in the bush; a lost camper from the conservation area perhaps? Injured? Her darkest thoughts said rape. She hadn't lived here then, but it had happened before. When this had been her parents' home, there was a young woman from the University, running screaming through the bush behind the house ...
Anne called the police.
By the time the police arrived, though, the cries had stopped. Anne was in her bathrobe in the driveway trying to explain what she's heard and it happened again.
"That's it!"
The two constables grabbed flashlights and plunged into the trees.
"You stay here, ma'am. We'll find out what's going on."
So she stayed. And waited. And watched her shadow in the lights of the police cruiser. And listened to the sounds of the police radio in the lulls between screams.
Then a shout drew her several steps toward the bush. Moments passed, punctuated by radio communications and sounds of men tromping through the
underbrush, and then the two officers emerged, one plucking twigs and brushing leaves from his uniform.

"You've got foxes ma'am," the other told her.

"Excuse me?"

"Foxes. What you're hearing is the vixen."

"But I didn't think foxes made noises—"

"She's in heat," the first officer said, removing the last of the detritus from his uniform with sharp, frustrated movements.

"Oh. I'm sorry I called you out then." Anne couldn't meet their eyes anymore.

"I-I feel kind of stupid now."

"Not to worry ma'am," said the second constable. "It's better to get these things checked out. You never know."

And she never did know that she'd be in Jordan's car, on her way to dinner and a movie on a brilliant summer evening, when a flash of red-gold fur would bring that cry to mind again.

"What's that flapping on the—ohmigod! Jordan, pull over! It's still alive!"

"What is it?"

"It's a fox." Anne hadn't noticed which car had hit it, but that wasn't important now. The fox was still moving, still suffering. Please, she thought, don't let it be one of the kits... my kits. Anne was out of the car and running toward the fox before Jordan could bring his Dodge to a full stop.

"You're going to get yourself hit!" Anne left his words behind her, waving the traffic around her so she could reach the struggling animal.

"Bring a towel or something," she called.

Anne was standing in the middle of the road now, waving cars by the still flopping fox. It was trying to right itself, claw its way to the side of the road, make its broken legs work again. Anything to get away from the pain. Jordan, dodging the traffic, brought a blanket.

"What are you thinking of?" He asked her. "It's going to die anyway."

"You don't know that!"
Jordan sighed and started waving traffic by as Anne knelt down and dropped the blanket over the little fox, hoping the sudden darkness would quiet its struggles. Jordan was probably thinking that this would spoil their plans for night. He was probably right.

Anne wanted to slap Jordan and his casual dismissal of the poor beast. And every motorist that passed only added to her frustration, whether they shook angry fists, or rolled down their windows to gawk before shrugging and moving on. One man even told her, so kindly, that she couldn’t do anything for it and it would be best if she just get out of the way. That made her all the more angry. Of course the fox was going to die. Of course she should disregard its pain and move it to the side of the road. It would be the sensible thing to do.

Anne wasn’t feeling at all sensible.

A Pathfinder stopped at the side of the road and the driver poked her head out.

“What is it?” She asked, looking at the lump under the towel. “A cat?”

“No. It’s a fox.” Anne gently touched its side through the wool blanket. She felt its breath still moving, but barely, quickly, in-and-out, in-and-out: a death pant counting the small creature’s last moments on earth.

“I’ll call the S.P.C.A.,” said the Pathfinder woman flipping open her cellular phone.

She’d almost walked right past the kits that first time, back in spring.

Anne had been walking to the house from the university, just after sunset, lost in the tatters of her day. She was drifting across campus as she drifted through work, had been drifting through work for quite some time. The English department, where she worked as a research assistant, had been very understanding, but Anne could tell that their collective patience was almost at its limit.

How long were you allowed to mourn? Was there more time allotted for the loss of a parent than for other losses? What about two parents? Was a couple of weeks enough? A couple of months? How did the circumstances of death affect the depth of the loss, and thus the time needed to heal? It seemed to Anne that the rest of the world was dealing with her in terms of questions like these. And even though co-workers and friends still asked her, in that kind way, how she was doing, they never questioned her lie of, “I’m fine, thanks.”
All she knew was that her parents had been killed instantly when their Caravan had wrapped itself around the concrete base of the lamppost by the Lakeshore golf course. And she was suddenly alone, with a bunch of legal responsibilities she was not prepared to deal with and a house full of memories to live in. Things that thrust instant adulthood upon her when she was still living in the illusion that she could be a child forever.

Anne felt the loss of her father’s advice, not always correct, but never less than honest. Or maybe it was her mother’s frankness she needed, unfailingly offered in a loving tone that was neither condescending nor coddling. She’d give her life to hear their voices again, and in a manner of speaking she had, but silence was all she’d received in turn.

And now, after months of just ‘being there,’ of just getting things done because they needed doing, Anne didn’t know how to get beyond the list of things she had to do each day. There was no one to help her, just the list of tasks, made endless by Anne’s ingenuity and the illusory structure it gave her life.

The funeral was long past. The estate was settled. It was time and past time she should get on with her life. At least, that’s what Anne told herself every day.

She was passing by one of the university’s neat lawns and moving toward the treed path that would lead her down to Lakeshore. Another short trek after that and Anne would arrive at the Canterbury Court house. Her parent’s home. Not her home yet, not even after a year of mourning.

She became aware of the moonlight as she moved onto the path. The moon was full and Anne could see the kind face its craters seemed to form.

“You know,” she said quietly, stopping to address it, “survival isn’t enough for me anymore.”

And as she looked down from the sky, she saw a flash of red fur out of the corner of her eye. They were so quiet, she could have missed them entirely: six fox kits playing around a group of spindly pines. Anne could see the support wires the university’s grounds staff had placed on the central pine to keep it from falling over. The kits tumbled over one another and the wires in their play.
It was their silence that amazed her. Though they bit at each other’s tails and
necks and ears, tugged on the plastic-protected ends of the tree’s support wires, and in
every other way seemed to play like puppies, they were completely silent.

They were the most beautiful things Anne had ever seen.

"Where’s your mother?" She whispered. Slowly, she scanned the area, and as if
on cue, the vixen emerged from a gully almost fifty meters away. The hard, black eyes of
the vixen met Anne’s own. I will kill you if you harm my babies.

"I know, Mama, I know." Anne spoke in a voice barely above breathing and
started moving down the path. "You have nothing to fear from me. I’m on my way."

The vixen followed her but stopped at the top of the trail and did something that
was not quite a bark and not quite a snarl before moving back to her kits. Anne located
the moon again through the young leaves on the trees.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Anne told no one of her experience with the family of foxes. It was her gift. But
she began to watch for them, and every red-gold flicker of fur made her heart beat faster.
The foxes weren’t on Anne’s list of things to do.

Now, gently, Anne lifted the blanket from the wounded fox. She saw the tongue
hanging out of its mouth and its eyes, blank with pain. Then she saw the splinter of bone
protruding from the back of its skull. Yes, the fox would die.

The back legs were splayed out unnaturally. Its back had been broken, and more
shards of bone poked through the soft fur.

"It’s okay dear, you’re not alone." Anne began to stroke its fur, not knowing
whether the gesture brought more comfort to the fox, or to her.

The woman in the Pathfinder poked her head out the window again.

"They say they can’t do anything. Just put it on the side of the road and they’ll
pick up the body later."

"It doesn’t make any difference now anyway."

"It’s dead?" Jordan turned around and forgot about the traffic for a moment.

Anne sighed and nodded her head.

"Hold out the blanket and I’ll lift it on."
She’d asked Jordan to take her back to the house and he didn’t argue. In fact, he didn’t say much at all. Anne thought that maybe the fox had made an impression on him too, but it would be a while before he would speak about it.

As soon as he left, Anne opened a bottle of wine, poured herself a glass, and then took both bottle and glass out onto the back deck with her.

The fur had been so soft. She couldn’t remember touching anything like it in her life. She’d never owned a fox fur anything, but Anne figured that even a coat of pelts would never have felt like the fur of this one dead fox. It was a young vixen, she discovered when she rolled it onto the blanket, and definitely one of the clan she had watched grow over the course of the spring and most of the summer. Its teeth were so white.

Anne figured she felt much like the Mama fox did on that night in spring, except that there was no one to kill for this little fox. The driver who had run her over had probably never stopped; probably never thought to stop for a fox kit.

Before this spring, Anne realised, she could have been that driver.

*Foxes are trickster figures in some mythologies, you know.* Out of the darkness, Anne thought she could hear her father’s voice. *They teach through adversity, and the lesson is always the same.*

“Yeah,” Anne said to the darkness, “Life is the biggest joke of all.”

*No dear,* her mother chimed in. *They teach us what means most to us.*

“And what’s that?” Anne poured herself more wine. Talking to her ghosts was a new twist. It deserved another drink.

*Life, dear,* her mother continued. *You want to live.*

“Who teaches me how to do that?”

*You,* her father said.

“Me?”

Yes. *You. Look to the moon, or to the foxes, or to whatever teacher you want, but you’re the only person who knows how to live your life. You’ve looked to us for too long now. We’re dead, honey. It’s time to let go.*
“But I can’t. You weren’t supposed to leave me so soon. I wasn’t ready.” A tear slipped into her mouth. She was only 23.

Goodbye is a simple word, dear.

Anne finished the last of her wine and started walking up Lakeshore to the place she hoped the fox still lay. It was late and she was glad passers-by wouldn’t be able to see her tears so easily.

When she got to the fox, she sat down beside it. Reaching out, she found that the fox’s fur felt different now that it had been dead for a while. It no longer held the magic of the vixen’s warmth, of its life.

Anne’s parents had died on this very road. She hadn’t seen them until they were laid out in their caskets, side by side, as they had always been in life. But they were cold then, and no make-up or funeral finery could hide that from her. They were cold, dead, gone.

Fingers still entwined in the vixen’s fur, Anne recalled what the police had told her about the crash, what they had in turn told the insurance company. She’d wanted to know right away. In fact, she’d insisted they tell her even though the constable in charge of the accident and resulting investigation had tried to tell her that she should wait a while before hearing the details.

“But you don’t understand,” Anne had said, not even bothering to struggle against her tears. “I didn’t see them before the mortician got his pre-paid hands on them. I have to know what happened. Please. I can’t get through this unless I know.”

The constable had relented, but as soon as he began to speak, she realised her mistake. No, she wouldn’t be able to get through this without knowing what had happened to her parents, but she wasn’t ready to know yet. So a strange thing occurred. Part of Anne listened to the constable, looked at the report he handed her, the diagrams, but the rest of her shut down, went blank, hid, because she wasn’t ready to face death just yet.

Now she was.

She looked down the road in the direction her parents had been travelling that night and as the constable’s words repeated themselves in her head.
It looks like they were heading home after a weekend at the camp.

Yes. That was right. Anne had stayed that weekend, working on a project in the peace of the cabin. There was just the sound of the falling rain as company. No distractions. No phone. They’d had to send an O.P.P. officer out to bring her back into town. She could see the Caravan now, its headlights shining in the distance. Her parents were probably talking about how much they didn’t want to go back to their respective jobs on Monday.

It was raining heavily out and the roads were pretty slick. There was only one other vehicle on the road, but it was a fair distance behind your parents’ mini van and the driver couldn’t see clearly what happened.

Anne imagined the reflection of the headlights on the wet pavement. As the Caravan came closer, she even thought she could see her mother smiling, sharing some private joke with Dad.

But the driver of the second vehicle saw your parents swerve. He said he couldn’t be sure whether it was just a loss of control, or if there was something on the road—

Her father was a careful driver. He wouldn’t be distracted with such difficult road conditions to contend with. No. He must have seen something on the road and tried not to hit it. Anne physically jerked as another realisation hit her.

It had to have been a fox on the road that night.

Convulsively, she snatched her hand away from the vixen’s body. It was one of the damn foxes. They had been responsible for the crash. The vision of her parents driving home vanished and Anne felt a sudden rage.

Trickster figures or not, how dare they play with her life this way? How dare they play with her parents’ lives? And did they think she should be grateful for their attempt to make amends? Was the life of a fox worth the lives of her parents?

No, Anne thought, but then she faltered. Who was she to make that judgement? She let her gaze fall to the dead vixen. This is what could have happened last year, if her father hadn’t made the decision to swerve. What if he hadn’t? It was decisions like that who made her father the man he was, the man that she had looked up to and loved
all her life. It was decisions like that that had taught her how to live, made her the person she was today. A loving, caring person.

What if her father had run the fox over that night? He would have stopped to try to save the poor animal. He might have skidded off the road anyway in the attempt. Would have, might have, what if? There was no point in wondering. Her father was dead. Her mother was dead. She was alive. The fox had given one of its children to show her that, a year later. There was no fault, no blame, no justice to be meted out. Just life, and death.

Anne didn’t think she had any tears left to cry, but amazingly, her vision blurred again under the combined weight of them. She let them spill over her lashes, down her cheek, onto the gravel shoulder on which she sat. She watched them for a moment, how they coloured the pebbles, bringing out hues hidden by years of dust and salt. Grief could show you things.

She didn’t notice the clouds come in, only that other drops of water joined hers on the gravel. Anne turned her face to the sky and let the gentle rain wash her tears away.

The glare of a pair of headlights caught her eye. She looked down the road and saw a Dodge Caravan approaching through the rain. When it was close enough, Anne could see her mother in the passenger seat, smiling, as if she were sharing some secret joke with her husband. A phantom fox ran out on the road suddenly, and was stunned by the headlights shining in its eyes. Anne saw her father panic, turning the wheel in an attempt to miss the fox. At the last moment, the animal ran back the way it had come, the bumper of the Caravan missing it by a hair.

Anne watched as the mini van flashed by her, turned to watch as it began to fishtail and then spin as her father struggled and failed to regain control. Her mother was screaming. And then the spin slowed, sending the Caravan into the cement base of the next light post down Lakeshore. Again, Anne heard the words of the constable as he recounted to her the events of that night.

_The other driver had time to slow down and call 911 on his cellular phone. He had some first aid training, but when he got to your parent’s mini van, the entire front end was bent around the post. He couldn’t open the doors, and your parents were_
unconscious, still strapped in their seatbelts. He went back to his car and got his jack from the trunk. He tried to use it to pry open the side sliding door, but when that failed he tried the back hatch.

By the time the ambulance got there, he was inside and had managed to get a pulse on your mother. The E.M.T.’s took over, but there wasn’t much they could do until the fire truck got there with the jaws of life.

They never regained consciousness ma’am. I don’t think they felt any pain.

It was raining heavily now as Anne unfolded her to do list from her back pocket. It, and many others like it, had been her constant companions over the last months. Before she left the house, she’d grabbed a pen and scribbled “say goodbye” at the bottom. She looked up, but there was no moon to be seen tonight. The rain clouds covered the whole sky. In the distance, she could hear a car coming, a real car this time.

As she stood, Anne remembered something her mother used to say, that every goodbye always carries with it the promise of a new hello. She had to say hello to life again, but goodbye came first. Anne nodded to the dead vixen, and then, as she passed, to the imagined site of her parents’ crash.

“Goodbye,” she said, and started for home.
Vita Auctoris

Melanie Marttila was born and raised in Sudbury, Ontario, a city to which she continues to return. She began her baccalaureate at the University of Guelph, but completed it at Laurentian University where she graduated in 1995. Pursuing her master’s degree at the University of Windsor has been an enlightening experience and one that she will carry with her into her future career as a writer. Ms. Marttila will complete the requirements for her degree in the spring of 1999.