



# **Looking In... Portraits of the Canadian Soul**

**An Anthology**

**By**

**Canadian Authors published electronically**

M. D. Benoit, editor

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## Introduction

When we think of Canadian literature, some immediate names come to mind—Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, Lucy Maude Montgomery, Farley Mowat, Alice Munro, Gabrielle Roy, Stephen Leacock... The list seems endless.

Canada has always been known as a hot-spot of literary talent. In fact, the Canadian Government's Ministry of Canadian Heritage reports that in 1996, there were more than 18,000 writers working in Canada. And Canada is known for its high rate of literacy (more than 50% at a competent level, 99% functionally literate). In 1995, Canadians borrowed over 274 million books and other materials from public and academic library branches across the nation.

Today, with the advent of technology and electronic publishing, one could safely estimate the number of writers in Canada at a much higher value. Never before have readers had access to so many talented authors. And now, more than ever, authors have even more chances of having their books read. With the click of a mouse, anyone in the world can enjoy the words of Dee Lloyd, MD Benoit, Kerry Orchard, Bob Thompson—the rising Canadian stars of electronic books.

As the child of an author, I grew up with several routines: quiet time in the afternoon while Mom wrote; the almost daily walk down the street to mail the newest short story submission or book proposal. Just think how different that routine would be if my mother had been pursuing an electronic publisher. Instead of the trek to the mailbox, we'd have been logging into her email accounts.

Electronic publishing, although still in its infancy, has progressed a long way since its initial inception. Ebooks are no longer something "weird" or "strange." They come from small one person publishing operations and multi-national New York-based companies. They can be read on a variety of electronic reading devices and PDAs, or even printed out from your home computer. Ebooks are available wherever you look online, too. From book retailing giant Amazon.com, to small mom-and-pop online bookstores, ebooks have broached the electronic highway, offering readers a new selection of quality reading materials.

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Shannon Mobley, Acquisitions Editor  
Electric eBook Publishing  
<http://www.electricebookpublishing.com>  
[shannon.mobley@electricebookpublishing.com](mailto:shannon.mobley@electricebookpublishing.com)

## **Editor's Note**

When I threw down the glove to our Canadian eAuthors and challenged them to write stories with a Canadian theme or setting, I didn't imagine how wonderful and varied these stories would be.

From personal reminiscences to science fiction and poetry, each author has brought to you their message of what it is to be Canadian. Nature and the weather, of course, take a prominent place, but the sense of place, the importance of community, friendships, beauty, and resolve also come through. Our eAuthors have demonstrated, in their own way and style, their love of Canada and its inhabitants.

I hope you will enjoy these original works by those talented authors.

M. D. Benoit

*In this amazing true story, Eva Kende tells us how her and her mother fled from Hungary and came to Canada. She also shares her feelings about her adoptive country.*

*Eva lives in the Canadian Rockies, in Canmore Alberta. Writing cookbooks, short reminiscences, articles on any subject that elicits enough emotion to drive her to her keyboard, is Eva's retirement activity to keep those "little grey cells active." She is never bored because she usually juggles several projects at a time. She believes that having daily challenges keeps us from growing old and writing from the soul helps keep our thoughts serene. Her story, *Cushion Covers*, appears in the recently published *Chicken Soup for the Travel's Soul*.*

*Her cookbook *Eva's Hungarian Kitchen*, designed primarily for the nostalgic soul, surpassed all her expectations and is now in fifth printing.*

*Eva's *Kitchen Confidence*, a cookbook that aims to encourage young families to return to "from scratch" cooking, is published electronically by DiskUs Publishing.*

You can reach Eva at [ekende@telusplanet.net](mailto:ekende@telusplanet.net), or visit her website at <http://www.telusplanet.net/public/ekende>

*Hungarian Refugees arriving in  
Winnipeg, 1957*



## **The Tale of One Refugee**

By

Eva Kende

In the wake of 9-11-01, there has been a lot of talk about refugees. I thought that perhaps people might like a glimpse into the heart of one, to understand the depth of the refugees' feelings towards their host country.

My mother and I arrived in Canada as refugees 45 years ago. Our sudden journey to the unfamiliar began with a trip to a luggage shop to buy two small bags that would hold our most prized worldly possessions. The Hungarian revolution of 1956 that had started with so much hope was quashed; Budapest was in ruins and bleeding. Mother yearned for the support and comfort of her brother, who had been living in Spain since the end of the Spanish Civil War there. It made her set aside all her fears and phobias about being away from home for more than an hour or two, and she declared that we were going. I was fifteen years old. No father, no siblings, just the two of us to face the great unknown.

She did not make her decision lightly. The great migration started soon after the Russian tanks ended all hope on November 4th, 1956. Now it was mid-December. We had spent the evenings of the past month glued to the radio, listening to Radio Free Europe broadcasting messages from friends and relatives who had safely made it to Austria.

Mother's best friend, Mariska, who was a decisive leader, her husband, Odon and daughter Jutka were leaving, which gave mother the courage to join in this trek to the unknown.

It was decided that the five of us would have to rent a hotel room near the railroad station the night before so as not to be conspicuous in our neighbourhood leaving in the early morning carrying our satchels.

We packed these small bags, over and over again. Mother's heavy stocking repair machine had to go in first. After all she had to make a living somehow, she rationalised. The doll my deceased father had given me for my first birthday, my constant companion and confidante during the war and throughout my childhood, was also a must. Next came the family jewellery, part heirlooms, part items my father had collected "in case" we needed to sell something for essentials. The photo albums were declared essential and I couldn't part with my new burgundy sandals and navy blue suit, the fruit of my first job as a summer student at the Horticultural College, no matter how unpractical they were. Of course, I couldn't leave behind either the new pale blue silk blouse the clever fingers of my beloved great-aunt Nene had so lovingly made from strips of remnants. Two miniature paintings, to sell if the need arose, fitted inside nicely. As we had a little bit more room yet, mother opened the linen cupboard to look for small pieces of embroidery and lace that might be sellable as well. She couldn't bear to part with the beautiful pink embroidered bedding that she had commissioned when she gave birth to me, so we packed it too. We paraded up and down our apartment testing the weight of the satchels and decided that we could handle carrying them for hours.<sup>1</sup>

My mother's cousin gave us a large sum of cash so that we could pay for the "guides" who led people across the border. We packed a string-bag with food and we were ready. We met Mariska and her family in the seedy hotel in the early

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<sup>1</sup> I recently donated one of those bags, the pink bedding, a photo of my doll, and the ship's passenger list to Pier 21, an exhibition hall in Halifax dedicated to immigrants and refugees who were processed into Canada through the Pier 21 immigration facilities.

<http://pier21.ns.ca/index.html>



evening. Our mood swung from sadness to nervous laughter and all ranges of emotion in between. We hardly slept. At about six in the morning of December 19th, 1956, before the city awakened, our rag-tag team walked along the wide, empty avenue to the railway station.

For the first couple of hours, the trip to the industrial town of Gyor, halfway between the border and Budapest, was uneventful. I stared out the window, wondering if I would ever see this land again. But new regulations declared that you had to have a pass — which of course we didn't have — to travel into the border zone, which was a hundred kilometres long, established as an emergency measure by the Hungarian government. So, after Gyor, our troop, now swollen to about fifteen people, some of them total strangers, had to move into the baggage car to keep out of sight. I was lucky. I had a sled to sit on, but the Christmas tree behind me was prickly. At each station, when the border police came to inspect, all fifteen of us had to cram into the single toilet compartment of the car to hide. The largest person sat down on the fixture and the rest of us piled on top of her. This was repeated four or five times until we reached our destination, a small border village, at dusk. We marched to an outlying farmhouse where, crammed into the front room, was another small troop ready for the crossing.

Suddenly, the door flew open and a very young uniformed border guard burst into the room. "You are all under arrest!" he shouted. "We are shipping you back to Budapest immediately". Anyone attempting to escape will be shot." Silence fell. He left the room and we heard some shots ring out in the yard. When he returned, people began to beg the guard to let us go and ply him with watches, money, and jewellery. He was stony-faced, but accepted the items. He assembled us and we started to march to what we thought surely was prison. There was no sign of our paid "guides." The direction we were going seemed to be wrong to me, but I imagined it could have been the deep dark of the night.

Mother was ready to throw away her satchel as she stumbled from fear and exhaustion among the column of fearful humanity. I grabbed her bag and marched like a robot in silence. I didn't know what to think. Hours later it seemed, although I suspect it was less than half an hour, the guard called us to halt. He pointed into the inky darkness ahead of us and said: "There is the border and I am going to turn my back on you." It wasn't until a few meters later when mother tripped on a low wire that I started to believe him. We — by now there must have been about 30 of us — marched in silence for about an hour across muddy, evenly spaced ruts in the fields — it must have been recently ploughed — that sucked the shoes off our feet and wrenched our ankles. There was even a blind woman in the group with a seeing-eye dog. The lovely "sturdy" walking shoes a neighbour had given me for the trip were ruined. The soles separated from the uppers in several places.

I lugged the satchels while looking out for my mother stumbling along. About an hour into this walk across the fields, an apparition seemed to float in the sky. A small town lit in bluish lights, with a prominent church spire—all the street lights in Hungary were yellow—appeared outlined in mid-air. Our relief was palpable. People started to break their self-imposed silence. Odon remarked that we must be close to Budapest by now, because the church spire looked familiar to him. We had been walking for a long time and it felt as if we had turned around and walked all the

way back to Budapest. Everyone laughed at this feeble attempt at humour. The satchels got a little lighter and it seemed that the ruts became a little shallower. As we progressed, it became clear that the apparition was an Austrian village perched on a plateau. It was the prettiest sight! We marched into the town, finding it hard to temper our happiness and relief at having arrived. All the pent-up tensions of our uncertain day and night bubbled out in noisy, uncontrollable chatter. A few windows opened, begging us to be quieter. The good burghers of the small town of Deutschkreutz had had very little sleep for the past month, as groups of Hungarians reached their village each night.

In the centre of the town, we were led to the fire-hall, which was empty save for a thick layer of clean straw topped by a layer of humans of every age, sex, and clad in every kind of garb that one could imagine. About three hundred people curled up in the space normally occupied by several fire-trucks. In the foyer, a huge pot of sweet tea with lemon was boiling away, and several women volunteers were spreading jam on slices of bread as fast as their arms could go. Someone begged me to take some, but all I could get down was some of the hot tea. The knot in my stomach was still too tight for me to eat.

I had to quickly dismiss the thought of bedding down somewhere in a free patch of straw. Our friends were arranging for a taxi to go to Vienna, where they had some friends waiting. They were just US\$11 short of what was needed to secure transportation for all of us. Mother and I had no currency. The forints my mother's cousin had sent us were reserved for guides; besides, forints were useless anyway, since the cabs accepted only western currencies. It was suggested that we stay and our friends would get some money in Vienna and send for us. Mother became upset. Never an independent soul, the thought of being left behind alone with me was more than she could handle. An argument ensued and I couldn't take any more. My facade crumbled and I sat on the spiky wrought iron fence of the church in the Town Square, in the middle of the night, and cried like a three-year-old. My mother stood close by, still arguing with our friends, ignoring my childish outburst. Two young Hungarian men, obviously also new arrivals from across the border, came to ask what the problem was and I told them. They reached into their pockets and handed my mother two dollar bills to cover the shortfall of the taxi fare for all of us. She tried to repay them with some trinket from our bags, but they just waved her off and disappeared into the night.

In Vienna, it became painfully clear that my shoes were wrecked. Slush and snow covering the streets kept my feet continually cold and wet. There were several relief agencies set up to help the refugees. For instance, one organisation gave everyone a green bag emblazoned with Unitarian Service Committee containing essential hygiene products. Another society gave out huge blocks of American processed cheese and powdered milk. We had cheese and reconstituted milk warmed on the radiator for supper for a month. Depots of used clothing were set up all over the city. The refugees gave tips to each other about where to go to get stuff. After several unsuccessful attempts, I finally landed a good pair of emerald-green leather shoes that fit well, although they didn't go with anything I wore. It didn't matter. All the refugees were clad in similarly mismatched garb. At this point, nobody cared, as long as they were warm and safe. All refugees walked the streets for hours admiring the well-stocked shop windows. Mother and I often

bumped into friends and acquaintances. We exchanged news about mutual friends and where each one was heading to in this exodus.

Mother got in touch with her brother in Spain, but he discouraged us from trying to go there. Women couldn't make a living and he was not doing well enough to consider taking responsibility for us. He suggested we try to go to Canada or the USA. He sent us a little money to supplement the freebies. The larger problem was for us to get a visa for one of those countries.

The US quota on refugees was closed. Only sponsored people were considered. We did not have a sponsor. The same situation faced us at the Canadian Embassy, where several refugees milled around in the square in front. Up to early December, the Embassy had handed out, on slips of paper, nameless appointments for processing into Canada, to all who asked. But if people succeeded in getting into the US, or decided to wait for other family members, they didn't need these slips and gave them to others who needed them.

We milled about the square for about half an hour, until we found a man who had an extra slip. After a cursory medical exam, we were told to show up at the railroad station in a few days to be transported to the Canadian refugee camp in Wiener Neustadt where we would be gathered, processed and assigned transportation to Canada.

The Canadian camp at Wiener Neustadt was rumoured to be a former Nazi concentration camp. Some of the kids already in the camp would even take the newcomers to the ruins they claimed were the crematorium—I never tracked down whether this rumour was true. With nothing to do, the camp was always rife with rumours<sup>2</sup>—The camp certainly was not a pleasant place. The barrack-like structure had unheated bathrooms with rows of 20 sinks and toilets. It was so cold that water had frozen in most of the sinks. We were assigned cots in the middle room of a group of three, each containing metal beds with straw mattresses for ten to twelve people. Children, adults, couples, singles, strangers and families were all heaped together. There was a pot-bellied stove in one corner valiantly trying to emit some comfort. Those near the stove roasted while those in the next row froze. The windows leaked so badly we put extra straw mattresses against them to try to keep out the cold. Luckily, we only stayed 3 days. Nevertheless, the food, although basic,

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<sup>2</sup> Because the memories of those days were too painful, it's only recently, more than 40 years after the fact, that I could face them and write about them. Previously, if asked about my experiences, I would answer as briefly as possible, closing the door on the memories as quickly as good manners allowed. I never tracked down what our camp was originally. I was afraid of the answers. Just recently, I found out, thanks to the extensive research conducted by Mr. Maurice Servranckx, that it's highly unlikely that these rumours were true. There were several German factories using prisoners as forced labourers from the concentration camp of Mauthausen, but there were no extermination camps in Wiener Neustadt. Judging by the rows of toilets and sinks, I would guess the brick buildings were formerly used as an army barracks, as a hospital, or possibly a residential school. Badly damaged during the war, the buildings were never repaired before being pressed into emergency service to organise the collection of refugees bound for Canada. Because our stay was short, a matter of 3-4 days, none of the refugees ever resented this inconvenience.

was plentiful, hot, and we enjoyed the luxury of having meat daily. The mess hall, well heated, doubled as a classroom for English lessons between meals. I attended as many classes as offered, in preparation for our new life in Canada.

At dawn on January 24th, we were bussed to the train that was to take us to the port city of Bremenhaven in Germany to sail for Canada.

One picture is engraved in my memory. I was shivering in the early dawn, waiting for the bus, when I saw in the well-lit doorway of the barracks the outline of a figure holding a fencing sword in one hand and a helmet tucked under the other arm. The picture was so incongruous that I stifled a giggle. I later found out that he was a young fencing champion, holding the items he treasured most. The train trip took all day and the next night. As we neared Bremenhaven, mother could hardly contain herself. Her brother, who she hadn't seen for 20 years, had promised to try to meet us at the ship. I was looking forward to seeing my larger-than-life uncle for the first time. As the train pulled into the station, grey with drizzle, there was no one to be seen. Then suddenly a lone figure came into view, mother shrieked, and I knew that it must be my Uncle Robert.

He accompanied us onto the ship, bought me a coke — my very first — in the bar and gave us warm scarves and a big box of dates and figs for snacking on the voyage. The visit was over in a couple of hours, and we sailed for Canada. Almost as soon as we passed the marvellous white cliffs of Dover, the sea turned mean and we spent most of our time being seasick. Whenever possible, we made it to the after-dinner dance which was great fun. There were a number of young German and Yugoslavian immigrants aboard, in addition to our group of Hungarian refugees, meaning plenty of dance partners, even for a fifteen-year-old. The immigrants were dressed in their most elegant duds, while the refugees sported the mismatched hand-me-downs they had collected from the relief agencies.

We arrived in Halifax on the afternoon of February fourth. The day was overcast and drizzly as we crowded the decks to get our first glimpse of Canada. We spent the night on the ship in harbour and in the morning we were led to a great hall for processing and from there onto our train for Winnipeg. Since most of the refugees knew little or nothing about Canada, had they been given a choice, would have wanted to go to Montreal or Toronto, the only two places they had heard about from former immigrants. It would have been hard for those cities to provide such a large number of newcomers with jobs and temporary accommodations. Immigration decided to send each boat or planeload to a different city in Canada to even out the burden.<sup>3</sup>

The train was fabulous. We had never seen anything like it. It sported luxurious plush seats, friendly black porters in crisp uniforms, shiny brass fittings, polished wood everywhere, and boxes of Kellogg's Corn Flakes in every nook and

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<sup>3</sup> I became something of a hero on this trip. My geography teacher was an exceptional lady who poured huge quantities of information into our reluctant heads. As a result, I knew a little about Winnipeg and could cite some of the information learned about industry, transportation and agriculture. I also managed to have a vocabulary of 20 words of English, so I was used as an "interpreter" communicating with the porters.

cranny. We had never seen corn flakes before and never had dry cereal for breakfast. After tasting the freebie, we decided it was the Canadian equivalent to potato chips and snacked on it dry during the whole trip. As we left Halifax, we could see an occasional house here or there, but the sparseness of the population was odd to us mostly city folks. Even odder were the bright pastel colours of the houses. As the wheels clicked away the miles, day and night, with plenty of time to think and talk, a few people had panic attacks now that they were nearing our unfamiliar destination. The enormity of what had happened to us in the last few months, and the scary prospect of having to start a new life in a strange land, having to speak a language few of the refugees knew, struck the weak, while the stronger ones continued to plot and plan to conquer adversity, and soar to great success now that they were truly free. Others relieved their tension with jokes and wisecracks, to the merriment of the group. I often wonder how a psychologist would have evaluated the mood swings of our group.<sup>4</sup>

In Montreal, a few of our sponsored compatriots, as well as a few adventurous ones, decided to stay behind even though they were told that they would not get help in getting settled from the Immigration Department if they didn't continue to our assigned destination, Winnipeg. From Montreal to Winnipeg, crossing the Canadian Shield, we hardly saw any populated areas. The sun shone brightly as frozen lakes followed forests and vice versa.

On February 8th, we arrived in Winnipeg. On the platform, a contingent of middle-aged ladies, wearing silk dresses, straw hats, and fur jackets, waited to welcome us, to minister to us and help ease our way into becoming Canadian. Our ragtag group, emerging from the train, suppressed a collective giggle at their elegance that clashed with our own dilapidated clothes. Nevertheless, the intentions of the ladies soon proved to be very genuine, even if their understanding of our plight was somewhat deficient. The ladies spoke no Hungarian and we spoke no English. We communicated with hands and smiles.

With their kind help and that of countless others, we started our long and often arduous trek into becoming Canadians.

\* \* \*

Being a refugee is like being an adopted child, with all the ambivalent feelings and loyalties. Love for the birth parent — or in this case the homeland — is embedded like the genes of an adopted child, but the loyalty for the adoptive country, born from gratitude, is usually so strong as to always cause conflict within the refugee's heart. For instance, one favourite question among refugee groups is: "Who do you root for during the Olympics?" which usually elicits a lively debate that

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<sup>4</sup> The long trip, and having to face the same problems together, built a special relationship among the people who shared this trek into the unknown. We became a very special "family", in which you could understand feelings. For instance, the young fencer and I were the only two Hungarian refugees, in different faculties, among 7000 students at the University of Manitoba. We relied heavily on that mutual support during our first two years.

clearly shows the confusion of divided loyalties refugees feel for the rest of their lives.

For example: In hockey, I root for Canada. I learned to love this sport here from my stepfather. My loyalty is definitely with the Canadian team when it comes to swimming, because I was an official of the Canadian Amateur Swimming Association when my son was a competitive swimmer and back then I personally knew all the swimmers. However, I will root for the Hungarian competitor if no Canadian is entered in the event, because I remember the impromptu parade in my neighbourhood in 1952 when the champion swimmers were carried home on the crowd's shoulders. The various skiing events cause no problem. Living in the Rocky Mountains, my skiing loyalty definitely belongs to Canada, or more specifically to the Bow Valley athletes. In other events, I choose the individual or team, from my two homelands, that seems to be more accomplished in the particular sport. Luckily, there has not been an instance when a Hungarian athlete was competing head-to-head against a Canadian at any Olympics. I would have been in big trouble then!

There is a subtle and often blurry difference between immigrants and refugees. An immigrant has consciously planned to leave his or her home and settle in a different country. There was time to choose, read up and familiarise oneself with the country, its culture and language. The refugees, on the other hand, were uprooted suddenly and thrust into a strange land, usually following some dramatic, stressful events in their birth-land. Each refugee has a story to tell about his or her path and arrival to Canada. The details may differ, but the message is usually the same.

The majority of refugees are the greatest flag-waving patriots in Canada. We came to this country in the wake of turmoil and danger in our homeland; penniless, destitute, still in mourning and in shock of having lost our home, friends and relatives in the span of a few turbulent weeks. We were confused, scared of our future, and found our dignity in tatters.

We arrived in Canada to find caring people, helping hands and a warm welcome. Through the years, we tried to achieve the success we dreamed of, succeeding at times and failing at others, but we knew that this great country, Canada, gave us the freedom to try again, in anyway we desired.

Here, we could keep our culture and pride of ethnic origin, yet become Canadian and raise our family in guaranteed peace. Show me another country that provides all that and asks nothing in return for its hospitality.

If you see a former refugee stand a little taller or has shiny eyes during the singing of O Canada, don't be surprised. That is our way of saying: "Thank You Canada! We love you!"

*In this charming childhood reminiscence, Rita Y. Toews gives us a glimpse of life in a small town in Northern British Columbia.*

*Rita Y. Toews is a Canadian freelance writer who took up the challenge to write at 50.*

*She has assisted with the writing of three novels. *The Price of Freedom* (winner of a Clara Award) and *Prometheus* will be released by Hard Shell Word Factory in 2002. *Shades of Gray*, *Prometheus* and *The Price of Freedom* are being translated into German for release in 2002.*

*Her short stories and essays have been published in numerous magazines, including: "Western People", "Mysterical-E", "Zygote", the Knights of Columbus magazine "Columbia" and "Green Prints".*

*Rita is currently working on a mystery novel set in her hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba, with Hungarian author, Alex Domokos.*

*You can reach Rita at [r.toews@shaw.ca](mailto:r.toews@shaw.ca). Please visit her website at <http://www.adomokos.homestead.com>*

*Peace River, near Taylor, British Columbia*



## **The Big Shake-Up**

By

Rita Toews

At the announcement, a wave of excitement swept through the classroom. Our real teacher was coming back on Monday! The cheer, born in the mouths of the bold grade sevens, grew and crested as it passed through the row of grade sixes and then to those in the grade five row. It died away in the timid mouths of the "me-too" grade fours. The little ones would do, or say, anything to imitate the older grades.

No one was happier to hear of the imminent return of our much-loved teacher than Edward Reilly was, since it was Edward's mother who had been substituting in our classroom while Mrs. Dubois, our teacher, was away. At

thirteen, I could think of nothing more humiliating than to have my mother teach not only me, but my fellow classmates as well.

In 1960, school was quite naturally the centre of the universe for the children of Taylor, British Columbia, a small community located at mile 35 of the Alaska Highway in the Peace River. Taylor's only industry was the natural gas scrubbing plant and oil refinery that employed most of the several hundred locals, as well as a handful of Americans. Other than a movie theatre that operated on Friday and Saturday nights, there was nothing for us kids in the community to do. With so little to occupy our attention, anything that happened at school affected what happened in our social life after school and on weekends.

Thankfully, we all thought, the last two months' purgatory was finally over, not only for Edward Reilly, but for our entire classroom.

I remember the day it all started. It was in early spring and, when we arrived at school, nothing seemed unusual. The morning bell rang, we sat down at our desks - but Mrs. Dubois didn't appear. Our heads turned to the long row of windows that looked out into Mrs. Dubois' yard, which was right next to the school. When she was late, we could usually see her scurrying across the yard pulling on her coat and admonishing her fat spaniel, Molly, to go home. That day she didn't appear, although Molly was snuffling about the yard, nose burrowed into this clump of weeds and that tuft of grass, searching out new scents that had appeared in the night. I was in grade seven, and at that time of the year the grade sevens' row was positioned right by the windows. So I posted myself in front of them as lookout so I could shout our coded warning word, "Jiggers!", when Mrs. Dubois started across the yard.

The room quickly fell into chaos. My best friend, Linda, positioned herself at the front of the class with the pointer, pretending she was the teacher in charge of a spelling bee. She called out trick words for whomever was listening. Her favourite word was "cereal". If a victim said it was spelled c, e, r, e, a, l, she would laugh and say: "No, it's s, e, r, i, a, l, ". My other friend Cheryl raced to the blackboard and scrawled "Tommy loves Cathy." As though on cue, Tommy howled "I do not!" while Tommy's sister, Ellen, added to his frustration by twirling around and around next to her desk singing—"You do tooo! You do tooo!"

Suddenly, the room fell silent as Mrs. Higgenbottom entered. She was the teacher for the only other room of our small school, which held grades one, two and three. Mrs. Higgenbottom had to have been five foot eleven inches tall and must have weighed two hundred pounds. Even so, she always looked bigger than that, because she wore dresses with big flowers all over them and the dresses floated in the air when she walked. We figured it was a pretty good thing she was so heavy because on breezy days she might have just floated away when the wind caught under all that material. Her voice matched her body: it was big. Boy, when she told you to do something, you did it quick!



That day, though, she didn't yell at us for making so much noise. "Children," she began in a subdued voice, "I have some very sad news for you this morning. Mrs. Dubois has suddenly become ill. So you'll be having a substitute for a few weeks." A groan of anguish rose from the thirty students in the room. The dreaded sub! Which meant we'd get Edward Reilly's mom!

It wasn't that Mrs. Reilly was an awful teacher, it was just that she didn't know anything! Not which lesson we were studying in our textbooks, or whose turn it was to erase the blackboards and clean the brushes after school, and she got so carried away with teaching she didn't always remember when it was time to stop for recess. She just wasn't aware of all the important things.

The dark days with Mrs. Reilly began. They went on for what seemed like forever, and still Mrs. Dubois didn't come back. Edward's mom kept coming back every day, no matter how miserable we made her feel, just so she would give up and stop coming. Edward was the most miserable.

No one ever made clear the reason for our teacher's absence. When we asked if she was sick they told us she wasn't, not really. We asked if someone she knew had died, and after a long silence they told us well, not really either. We asked if we could go and visit her at home, since it was so close; they told us it would be better if we didn't. After several weeks, they said that her husband had taken her on a holiday. That didn't seem fair. She was on holiday while we were left with Mrs. Reilly.

Now, I don't know what Edward and his family talked about over supper but it sure wasn't school because even after several weeks, she still knew nothing about how our school was run.

For instance, she didn't seem to be aware that it was time for us to reposition our desks so we could use the side blackboard. Every spring, when the sun started to shine into the room in a certain way, it would glare off the front blackboard.

That was the signal for the yearly Shake-Up. We all loved the Shake-Up, it was our favourite exercise of the year. Everyone would stand up gripping the sides of the desk, then would walk with it to its new spot in the room. If this was done right, it was like a funny dance. The grade sevens would start it off by walking their entire row to the back of the room and parking it behind the rest of the desks. Then they would simply turn the desks to face the other blackboard. Ha! perfect. In fifteen minutes the entire class was shifted to face the side blackboard, which had no glare on it. Mrs. Reilly's solution was simply to pull the blinds down and turn on the lights.

Another example of Mrs. Reilly's ignorance: our school's grass and the role China played in it. Every spring the janitor, Mr. Konofsky, would bring a big bag of grass seed to school; if we wanted to, we could help him sprinkle it on the yard by the front entrance. Mrs. Dubois would say our grass was so tamped down it was the people in China who were enjoying it instead of us. Anyone caught walking on the newly planted grass seed would get a smack on the hand with the yardstick for their transgression. I swear it's true: I got

it once. Of course, it wasn't my fault because Billy Leaper had pushed me off the sidewalk onto the grass seed. It kind of turned out okay, though, because later he wanted to see how red my hand was and he used that excuse to hold it while he said he was sorry. I must add that Billy was not only the most handsome boy in the school, he was also the only boy in our grade seven class.

Other misadventures befell us while Mrs. Reilly was subbing. We didn't enter the Choral Speech contest, held in Fort St. John. That was always a lot of fun. The previous year, we came in second place and we placed a trophy in our school's trophy case to prove it. The man judging the contest had said he wished there were a trophy for the most enthusiastic group instructor, because Mrs. Dubois would have won it for sure. She stomped her feet and waved her hands around like a windmill so we would emphasize the words at the right spot. I'd liked it when we were supposed to point at the audience and say "...and remember! Once the mighty oak was just a NUT like you!" Everyone in the audience had roared with laughter.

All this to say that we were thrilled to hear Mrs. Dubois was finally coming back. On the Monday morning, the first day of her return, we all sat in our desks so quietly that I could have heard a pin drop. Then, at exactly nine o'clock, the classroom door opened and there she was!

She had the biggest smile on her face and she said: "Children! It's so nice to see you again!"

The room went crazy. Some of us had made cards to welcome her back, others were offering apples and the little kids were giving her hugs. Her eyes teared up and she started to laugh. What a welcome we gave her. Then a man we'd never seen before came in with a big five-gallon pail covered with a lid. He was her husband and he was carrying something they had brought back for us from their holiday "down south" at the coast. Everyone rushed to his or her seat and order fell over the room. "Children, put your heads down on your desk, and no peeking. I've brought back a very special dollar for each of you." Down our heads went, and we heard the lid being taken off the pail, then-

PHEEEW! What a horrible stench! The stench was so overpowering we had to throw open both windows and doors to let out the rotten smell, and Mr. Dubois took the pail outside. Mrs. Higgenbottom's classroom heard our uproar, so they got into an uproar too. Tommy, who got excited over everything, kept saying, "Oh, I think I'm going to be SICK," then he made a gagging noise that got everyone else going. It was pandemonium. It was great.

After everyone settled down again, Mr. Dubois figured out what had gone wrong. He and his wife had collected a pail of sand dollars - those flat, hard-shelled star fishes - from the beach where they had vacationed. Inside the shell of some of the sand dollars had remained bits of the sea creature; these had had over a week to decay. That's what we'd smelled: dead fish. The grade sevens, because we were the oldest, were given the task to go

through the pail, find the rotten sand dollars, and throw them away. After that we rinsed the rest of the shells in water and bleach to get rid of the smell. It was fun, and we were thrilled with our special dollars.

But it was later in the afternoon that the best thing happened. Our wonderful teacher, Mrs. Dubois, suddenly asked: "Children, why on earth are those blinds down? It's time for the Shake-Up!"

*In this reminiscence of youth, R. K. Doiron, aka Robert Thompson, shares with us the meaning of loneliness and, despite all odds, his love of the ocean.*

*A professional writer from the age of 18, Bob started in radio (doing News, Features and Theatre Criticism) in Vancouver, paying his way through to discreet Honours degrees (both First Class) in Literature and History. Since then, his writing has blossomed into an eclectic mix: a number of novels for the U.K. market; plays for performance at the Edinburgh Festival and an assortment of London theatres; one-person monologues for U.K. radio and 'talking head' productions for U.K. television... all of which has combined to give him a critical reputation for his plots, character(s)—and as one of the best dialogue writers anywhere.*

*He has also produced a variety of education texts and resources for secondary schools in 13 different countries.*

*Of late, while his U.K. career continues apace, he has found a home for his 'Canadian' novel at LtdBooks, where he released Year Of The Snake in January of 2001 to 5-Star reviews from ScribesWorld and Simegen. He is slated to "go live" with his new ebook, Means To An End, early in 2002.*

*He currently resides in Comox, on Vancouver Island, with his wife, two mini-dachshunds, an African Grey parrot, and 63 Chickens.*

*You can reach R.K. Doiron at [rthompso@mars.ark.com](mailto:rthompso@mars.ark.com) or visit his website at <http://www.anotherroom.com>.*

*Trial Island Lightstation, B.C.*



## **Personal Fog**

By

R.K. Doiron

Loneliness is a terrible thing. It tears people apart, gives them too much time to brood about the future, about the present and, worst of all, about the past. And the past, at least for me, should always be approached with a sense of dread ...

At this moment, I am lonely. Not alone, but lonely. A new town, a new university, and new people. Left behind is a person who matters most. I see

her on weekends, but during the week I'm lonely—and as it's Wednesday, this is the worst day of the week.

I feel sorry for myself, the way we all do from time to time. So I sit on the patio staring at the swimming pool and listening to the radio—a soccer game that I should be attending, would be attending, if I were at home. A game that she is attending. I try to cheer or sing with the crowd, but I feel foolish. Besides, it makes the loneliness worse.

The wind comes up and ripples the water in the pool. I dislike swimming pools. No—that's not true. Their water frightens me. It's strange, because it's the ocean's water I should be frightened of, but I'm not. It's the ocean I was thinking about as I turned to a fresh sheet of paper on my clipboard and take up my pen...

I was fourteen and working my third summer on the commercial fish boats off the West Coast of Vancouver Island. It was a job I'd been trained for, thoroughly, virtually since birth. And like all fourteen year-old boys, I knew everything there was to know. My grandfather had warned me. He was the skipper; he'd gazed off into the fog—in that huge, slow way of his—and warned me, specifically, to keep both feet on the deck because the sea was choppy. Then he'd lumbered into the wheelhouse, expecting me to obey.

I went over the side instead. I'd balanced myself precariously: one foot on the deck and one knee on the rail, while I bent over to rinse some fish scales off my hands. Next I knew I was overboard.

I yelled and yelled and yelled, but my grandfather was deaf from years of working on diesel engines. The boat evaporated into the fog, simply vanished, and I was alone, struggling to keep above the slapping waves. Too late then. Too late to tell him he was right, as usual. There was only me, with my skin for insulation and my insufficient limbs to keep me afloat.

The fog closed in. At least it felt that way as I was trying to get my bearings. All I could remember was three fathoms, according to the depth sounder, and that was all but useless in my present circumstances. How far from shore, from safety, did it become three fathoms deep, I recall being amazed at my own calm, at the matter-of-fact manner I worked out the distance from the charts I'd studied back on board, during those long quiet evenings. I searched my memory for the shape of the shoreline.

I recall thinking Grandfather would be proud of me, provided he didn't kill me for disobeying him.

And then I swam, striking out toward land. At least I hoped it was toward land. The fog had reduced visibility to a few dozen yards, at most, and three fathoms put me close to 10 miles off shore.

I swam and floated—talking aloud to myself. "I know where land is. Sure I do. Keep swimming. What about sharks? Sharks, don't be so bloody silly. They must be looking by now. Don't panic, above all, don't panic. Run through the 'times tables'. Two times two equal 4; two times three equals

six." Kick and stroke. "Two times four equals eight; two times five equals ten." Kick and stroke. "Keep going, keep going." Kick and stroke....

I can still feel the numb, cold grey. Everything was grey: the sea, the sky—a dull, hazy, icy grey.

My teeth began to chatter uncontrollably and my limbs felt lead-lined. When I stopped swimming, they would sink, rag-like, and drift around helplessly in the current. Only the pain of each new stroke made them part of me again.

"Don't panic. How long can you survive? I read it somewhere. An hour-and-a-half, two hours. How long has it been? It can't be two hours, I'm still alive." Then I would move, and agony racked my shoulders and hips.

I'd stop, start to sink. Then I would choke. I choked, over and over and over again. Salt water tore at my throat when I opened my mouth. "Where the hell are they?" I shouted, growing frantic, searching for the fleet of boats that would surely be looking for me by now, for the Coast Guard, for anyone. But even my loudest screams got lost in the all-pervasive grey, in that peculiar way fog seems to swallow all sound.

I don't remember when land first appeared but suddenly there were, sheer and slippery, leading up to the foot of the lighthouse; and surf, smashing relentlessly against this stony surface. Wave followed wave in rhythmic succession. The roar of colliding sea and land engulfed me, numbing me more than the cold: it seemed, after a time, to emanate from inside my own head.

The memory blurs. Fear is all that comes back. Fog, rocks, and smashing surf all around: and me, drifting past the lighthouse. Terrified. Helpless. Knowing if I got too close I'd be swept up and smashed against the rocks. All they'd find would be my broken body—if they ever found it at all. If solidly build wooden boats couldn't withstand the pounding of the surf in such circumstances... I felt the tide push me past the little point of land and back out to sea. And felt the fear: total crushing fear. I wet myself. I felt the warmth around my legs. My pants, boots and jacket were gone. I must have taken them off before I'd started to swim. That was an ingrained instinct, a part of my training... something I had done without thinking, without even noticing.

"I'm gonna die. I can't get out. I'm gonna die ... and all alone."

I screamed. I screamed again. I screamed a third time, with every ounce of strength I had left, with every fibre of my being.

And a dog barked. I screamed.

The dog barked again. I screamed. It went on for a long time—or so it seemed. Until, suddenly, there he was: a gorgeous Irish Setter, standing like a statue on the bow of a troller. He'd spotted me and was barking frantically, his tail wagging.

Someone in a green plaid work jacket pulled me from the water. I knew the man but I couldn't place his name. "I made it. I made it. It must have been less than two hours." My voice sounded hoarse and eerie to my own ears, as I clutched the plaid-covered arm in both my hands.

But it hadn't been. Later, I learned that it was more like four. That the whole fleet had cut their gear at the mayday call, had been searching frantically for me, had started to trade the discreetly worded radio messages which indicate they feared the worst. That I had no right to be alive; no right to be lonely ever again.

I'd become hysterical ... I must have. All I remember is a big hand, a gigantic hand, coming out of the blur. It hit me. The blow echoed inside my skull.

I came to, after a fashion, and a dog was licking my cheek. No. He was just breathing on me, staying close—attentive. Everything was quiet, except for the dog. The Irish Setter. I love them. I guess I always will.

Work boots thudded down the ladder from the wheelhouse to the galley. A big toothless face appeared. I still couldn't place the name. The face opened and said: "Stay put, don't move. Here, drink this."

The voice was gruff. I'd wasted valuable fishing time and they were angry. "Oh God, I'm dead," I moaned. "Please God, save me—he'll kill me, I know he will."

Next I knew my grandfather was there. So was a man in uniform.

My grandfather argued with the uniform. I heard snatches... the uniform being insistent, about something, followed by my grandfather actually speaking in whole sentences: "No. It'd get in the papers. What'd the old lady think?"

Oh God. He really was mad. Inwardly, with all my strength, I cheered for the uniform. That's how foolish you can be when you're young. I actually prayed for the uniform to save me somehow.

Grandfather picked me up. I was wrapped in a blanket and this huge bull of a man slung me easily over his shoulder. He stomped—or so it seemed to me—all the way back to our boat. Faces appeared in our wake, looked on. Some smiled, at least faintly...The usual ghouls who enjoyed an execution, I thought.

He set me heavily on the stool in the wheelhouse, grabbed me by the back of the neck, and looked at me closely. "Oh God, here it comes." He shook me roughly. Then—he hugged me. For the first time in my life, my grandfather hugged me. Big, staid Yorkshire-bred fishermen don't show affection to anyone, especially to their male descendants. Damn near killed me in the process, mind—but he actually hugged me.

"Ya young pup ya, I thought ya was gone, I thought ya was gone." It was all one big slow word.

He saw me. He clambered up from the hole in the stern, the one from which I'd gone overboard, and clapped me on the shoulder. "Well ya lazy pup ya, I thought ya'd sleep fa'ever". He'd yelled, but only to be heard over the diesel engine.

I tried to apologize. I couldn't. I didn't. I was embarrassed. I tried not to look at him, concentrated on the smooth red paint of the deck instead.

"Ya better pull the gear," he said finally.

He went into the wheelhouse. I pulled the gear, and it hurt. Everything ached and I was weak, but I climbed back into that hole—and I pulled the gear. I cleared every line of seaweed and checked every lure. Anything to stay out of the wheelhouse. The sea, of course, gave no indication of what had transpired. It was better to face it than him.

Later, I tried again to apologize. I just couldn't do it. Worse yet, I knew he wouldn't mention it. For him it was over, except that he never quite looked at me the same way again. There was always something extra in his eyes: perhaps a sign of respect that I'd survived—or, more likely, the knowledge of a shared secret. After all, I'd been raised to survive. And I had.

Years later, I was living in Vancouver. The phone rang one night. It was my father, calling from Nanaimo. "Dad just passed away."

I tried to comfort my father, and then I rang off, had a stiff drink, packed and left for the ferry. In between I tried to cry—but I couldn't. I tried to cry for me, not for my grandfather. I hadn't seen him in two years. I'd grown beyond him, you see—been the first member of our family ever to attend university. Been silly.

Now he's dead and I never did apologize. But no amount of formal—or as he would've said, "fancy"—education reverses the lessons learned in six years on a fishing boat with a tough old Yorkshireman. Crying might be reasonable, under the circumstances, but I simply can't do it. Just as I never told the women-folk in question what happened.

That was the deal. And the least I could do was to keep to the deal.

Now, every time I'm lonely—I think about it. Someday maybe I'll cry about it and it'll all end. Sometimes I think I made it up. That it's just a silly dream. I can almost convince myself. But then, when I'm lonely—it all comes back. The fog, and the rocks, and the smashing surf. And the foghorn, I'd forgotten the foghorn. When it's really bad, I imagine that I'm wetting myself again. I'll jump up and rush to the bathroom. But that particular indignity hasn't happened. Not yet.

The game is over. We won, I think. They say it helps to write. They lied. I feel just as lonely, just as miserable. I'm a little more tired. Maybe I'll be tired enough to sleep.

I'll try.



*In this Fantasy story, Kerry Orchard demonstrates the power of love and the bonds of blood.*

*Kerry was born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, Canada where she still lives with her husband, two children, two cats and a dog. She had an interesting life growing up and working at the racetrack. She has also done much volunteering for animal causes and in schools over the years as well as worked at different part time jobs, giving her many ideas for her characters and worlds. She began writing to beat the isolation of staying home and to cope with a chronic illness. Fantasy is her first love. Poetry affords her an opportunity to express herself. She believes that Fantasy is wonderful because the author controls everything from the laws of the world to the character's behaviour. It is escapism at its best. She is currently at work on her second fantasy, as well as a Canadian-driven murder mystery, another genre she enjoys.*

You can reach Kerry at [kerry@kerryorchard.com](mailto:kerry@kerryorchard.com) or visit her website at <http://www.kerryorchard.com>.

Chinese Gold Dragon



## **A Mother's Love**

By

Kerry Orchard

"My child!" The hollow wail pierced the ears of her watchers. "Where, where have you taken my child?"

"Away; simply away, my lady. You may follow, if you own the courage."

The one who held her reddened, fevered eyes with his did so with intelligence and wisdom both disconcerting and confusing. The fierce grey orbs danced with an emotion she could not place, in a face well worn but dignified. Hair, once jet-black, now streaked with shafts of silver, dangled knotted at his back. Her eyes flicked nervously to the well-polished sword fastened to his thick silver belt. His companion was much the same in appearance, though his hair was yet a rich ebony and abundant. He was, however, no less formidable. Both wore medallions of brilliant turquoise. The face of each was inscribed with a gilded silver emblem of a wondrous garden where flourished an ancient tree with leaves the colour of newly fallen snow.

It is a dream, her mind screamed in warning. Must be, could be, only a dream. With trembling fingers, she reached out and pinched herself sharply. The pain stung and she bit back hot tears. "What do you want?" she asked, subdued, her once lively voice barely audible.

"You," grey hair answered calmly, "only you. We offer...opportunity. A chance to change what is, to now, destined to come. It is an honour which you were chosen for."

Her eyes darted frantically about the room. To her horror, she recognized nothing. The walls were of stone. Like a poorly crafted mask, thick, red curtains obscured the only window, allowing her no opportunity to discover her whereabouts. "Where am I?" a voice she did not recognize as her own whispered through her fear and confusion.

"Where you have taken yourself. Now you must fight for your child. Fight for yourself, your return. Be assured, we will free her to you, for she needs you, but you must fight for the right and the privilege, *if you can*," he answered cryptically.

She sat up suddenly, in a jarring, ungainly motion, long blonde hair falling in waves about a thin but determined face. Her green eyes, now blazing, bore into the two men. "You have stolen my child and now you expect me to battle to get her back! Battle what—whom! Who are you?" Her anger lost ground to fear.

"Would you not, for her?" The question irritated her especially since he had ignored her other queries..

"Of course I would." Her tone betrayed the offence she felt. "Now, who—are—you?"

Grey hair smiled gently, confusing her further. "I am Carn, and this," he waved a thick, well-ringed hand at his companion, "is Taqk. We are both bane and kismet to you."

Dumbfounded by this, she stared down on herself, seeking some fabric of truth, familiarity, some vision of reality, only to find she was dressed in similar fashion to the two before her. Her robe, however, was a shining yellow rather than black, and she bore no sword. She sat upon a well-cushioned daybed covered with a silky material she could not place. Where is

"Yes. It is yours."

She smiled softly. "Jacqueline."

"Jacqueline, it is a lovely name. Chosen for your mother, perhaps?" She nodded as the blood drained from her face. How could they know such a thing? Her mother had fled from her father's home when she was only two; she had not seen her since, and had told no one why she had chosen the name, not even her husband. Her father, cruel and angry, was long dead.

Leading her reluctant body to a large room filled with shining armour, Carn pulled forth an elegant jewel-encrusted sword and ceremoniously handed it to her. She thought even Excalibur could not be so grand. "This is for you, Arian."

"You know my name, too?" She wondered if there was anything they did not know.

"Of course." Carn spoke confidently, with a barely discernible bow of his head.

"Here you are empowered to battle the demons that dwell in this place." Taqk spoke in a gentle voice that stroked her like a mother's hand. "For they are your demons, Arian; know them well. It is what keeps you on this side. You must defeat them to return to your child." She glanced at Taqk, disoriented by the softness of his soothing voice. Were they friend or foe?

Finding her own voice, she shouted, "What! I don't understand. I'm a housewife—mother. I know no demons. I can't help you!" she finished, appalled at them—herself, she wasn't sure which. "Who do you think I am? You must have me mixed up with someone else. I can't help you," she repeated firmly.

"You are not here to help us, only yourself," Carn admonished.

"Follow please," Taqk requested when silence blanketed them like a weight, subduing the echoes of her outburst.

"I want to see my baby first," she demanded stubbornly.

"No, not yet. You will, in time. Then, you must prove yourself." It was Taqk who spoke again and she could hear a sadness that seemed to seep from his soul. Sadness for her.

"But—" Her cry, turned to a whine, was interrupted by Carn.

"No," he repeated without irritation.

Small and slight, Arian knew she was no match for the men who held her prisoner, never mind the demons they spoke of.

Sweat dripped from her forehead to her eyes and she swiped at its stinging bite. She felt afire from head to toe. Her eyes burned and the sword, still clutched in her sweaty hand, felt as though it were weightless. Her legs

trembled with weakness and her fingers itched. "Water," she croaked, suddenly parched.

The two men turned to her with concern. "Of course." To her dismay, out of nowhere, appeared a pail and dipper. She drank greedily, putting its mode of delivery out of her mind.

Arian caressed her sword as they walked and tried to pay closer attention to her surroundings. The corridors, stone and cold, lit solely by candlelight, ran about like writhing snakes, twisting and intertwining in a warren of tunnels. She wondered, hysterically, who lit all the candles every day. She realized with a pang she could never, despite the candles, find her way back alone. Back to where? she wondered, stopping briefly. What would be the point of going back when she did not know where back was? She ran her hand along a damp and chilly passage wall where she could feel the delicate etchings of inscriptions in the stone. She wondered what they said.

They had not gone much further when her captors stopped abruptly in front of her. Peering around them, Arian beheld the thick, ancient oak door at which they stood, noting that the two men appeared to be bowed in silent prayer. She fidgeted and shuffled her feet. Was she also to pray?

Meditations ended, they raised their head and moved slowly through the doorway, subdued, never once looking back at her. She followed, stumbling clumsily behind them into a field filled with massive flowering trees, their leaves the colour of winter's first dusting. Her mind's eye drifted to the emblem at their breast. The same tree.

The meadow was stunningly beautiful in a way only nature can accomplish. The sky hung deep blue and cloudless above them, in a radiant arc, alive with the fire of the sun. The grass, greener than any she had ever seen, was like velvet to walk on. Flowers, like a patchwork quilt, covered the meadow floor, laid out in colourful splendour. Her eyes strayed ahead to the centre of the field where sat an ancient cradle, crafted of scooped, carved wood.

"Jacqueline," Arian moaned.

"Yes, she awaits your return." Carn spoke softly. He detested this part of his job, "But she is guarded."

"I see nothing," Arian snapped, tired of the game and wanting only to see her baby. She rubbed the stinging droplets of sweat from her eyes and wondered jealously why the men were not warm.

"Nevertheless, they are there." Carn turned to face her, sadness laced with hope in his eyes. "Go to her," he ordered quietly.

Head high, sweat dripping from her chin, Arian began to walk on rubber legs. Her eyes on Jacqueline, she did not notice the white mist that snaked around her ankles until it finally enveloped her. Shrouded by the heavy white curtain, she could no longer see. "Jacqueline," she shrieked, "baby! Where are you?"

A faint cry reached her ears, giving her strength. "Mommy's coming," she croaked. Her fevered eyes searched wildly for an opening, some kind of break in the white-out. Nothing, there was nothing. Panic began to set in and she whirled about in frenzy, until her racing eyes happened on a small hole. She dove through without thinking, Jacqueline's tiny face filling her thoughts.

Now there was only blackness, like the soul of depression, filled by the vilest of screams, shouts of terror. "Jacqueline," she moaned when something brushed against her leg. She did not know what it was, did not want to know. Trembling, she stood still and called softly once more, "Jacqueline." A cry. Yes, she was sure she had heard a cry somewhere to her left. She turned and stumbled in the direction of the sound that reached her even over the terror-filled shrieks.

She had fallen. She closed her eyes tight and counted to ten before opening them to find she lay in the field of trees once more. The blazing splendour seemed to renew her strength. She could see Jacqueline now, engulfed by the shadow of the great black dragon who sat beside the cradle. The claws on the right foot dangled precariously into the crib as he rocked it to and fro. Close, too close to the precious bundle within.

"No!" Arian's scream was terrible to hear. She charged toward her child.

The dragon slowly stood, as though no more than stretching, behemoth in size, and lumbered toward her. They stopped about one hundred yards apart: opponents sizing each other up. She shrank back in fear. His claws were as long as her arm. Smoke spiralled from his nostrils like steam from a kettle. Arian made the comparison and nearly giggled insanely. His yellow eyes held her fast, and she knew she could not make that mistake.

"Is this your baby, Madam?" the beast asked grandly, his speech elegant and lovely. It caressed her like a lover's touch, cosseting her into submission.

She shook her head to clear her mind and answered thickly, "Yes." The silky voice would not fool her. She would not allow it.

"Well, well, well. And you are to...win her, from me?" he laughed uproariously. "She is a beauty. I will so enjoy her. Children prolong my life you know," he added as though teacher to pupil.

Arian swallowed her fear and bile. "You will do nothing of the sort. She is mine. I want her back."

"You want to be her mother," he asked silkily, as though it surprised or amused him.

Anger fired her soul. "I am her mother."

"Well then, prove it. Come—fight your way to freedom. Save she, whom you call your child," the dragon chided, flaunting his power. Enormous wings flapped at his back as he began to circle her.

She shook her head once more to clear the cobwebs of his voice and wiped the persistent sweat from her forehead. She heaved the sword up and swung it in a wide arc about her head. The silver glistened like a talisman under the kiss of the sun, sending spinning shafts of shining light about her. She was amazed at its handle, the lightness, and her lack of fear. She would fight anyone, anything, for her child: even death.

The dragon circled, smoke curling and twisting teasingly from his flared nostrils. Arian knew instinctively that she must strike for the belly. Holding her breath, she made her first strike. Flames whipped around her as she charged through the dragon's raging fire. With a whoosh of flame, the air was sucked from her lungs, leaving them dry and burning. Gasping, she backed off.

Jacqueline cried lustily in the background, a reminder to Arian of her prize. She trained her eyes on her target, then jumped left, before coming in right to drive the shaft into the dragon's unprotected belly, but she missed her target and fell plummeting to the earth. He backed off, laughter bubbling from his snout. "Not much sport in this," he howled with mirth, wiping the tears from his glinting eyes. He turned to poke a long claw into the cradle. Jacqueline let out a shriek.

Arian's rage swelled up inside her. It broke free in a startling scream as she dove at him unexpectedly. This time, she did not miss. Like a gentle breeze on a hot summer's day, he was suddenly gone.

After stealing a peek into the cradle, she planted her feet wide apart, grasped her sword and waited. Her heart ached as she ignored the baby's gasping sobs. Her arms were badly burned, aching, and she could smell the rancid odour of charred flesh. Her stomach heaved; her legs tried to buckle but still she stood. She would protect her child.

Birds sang into the glory of her victory but she had only ears for Jacqueline. She could not even take in the tranquil beauty of the place that embraced her, a virtual Eden.

Still she waited, but nothing happened. The birds continued their brilliant song and she felt, after a time, it was a good sign, an omen of safety. They had not been singing when the dragon was in residence. Moving slowly, warily, she crept the last few feet toward the cradle. There she dropped the sword at her feet and dove her hands into the folds of the cradle. She lifted Jacqueline high, allowing the sun to fall on the soft down of her fair head and gazed, for the first time, on her daughter.

\* \* \*

"She's awake!" an exulting voice cried into the blackness of her mind. "The fever's broken!" it shouted jubilantly as its owner fled the room, tears streaming down his face.

Someone leaned over her and gently caressed her forehead, now cool to the touch. "You gave us quite a scare, young lady. It must have been quite a battle to return, hmm?"

She stared, unbelieving, at the gentle, elderly face before her. She knew it, oh yes, she knew that face. Her doctor. Her own, grey-haired doctor. She was, she glanced around quickly to be sure, in the hospital. The starched white sheets rubbed irritatingly against her skin and relief flooded her. The voice of a local newscaster droned in the background. Snow for Calgary tonight, it proclaimed. Alberta would be hit hard by a winter storm.

"My baby?" she croaked, voice parched.

The doctor smiled as a new face appeared beside his. Her husband gently handed into her warm embrace a brand new baby: her baby.

"Jacqueline," she moaned as tears slid down her cheeks onto the sleeping child.

*All that I am,  
And all that I hope to be,  
Is in essence,  
What I have passed on to you.*

*Edward Stack gives us a taste of nostalgia and whimsy in the charming story about hockey days gone by.*

*Eward has been a writer of Fantasy, Science Fiction and Horror for several years. After paying for his undergraduate degree as a soldier, scuba diver, and marine archaeologist he spent eight years teaching high school history at American International Schools in Africa and Latin America. Now he is back in Canada as a faceless bureaucrat here in Ottawa, with two children who are far more wonderful than anything he's ever seen or will ever write. His short fiction has appeared in *Twilight Times*, *STORYTELLER MAGAZINE*, *Bardic Runes*, and *The Ultimate Unknown*, to name a few. Both *STORYTELLER* and *Bardic Runes* featured his stories on their covers. His epic fantasy novel "Ily's Dream" is available as an ebook from Jaqkar, which is where his collection of speculative fiction, "Wizards, Wonder & Worry" and his YA horror/Thriller "Food, Spirits, Lodging" are also published. "Wizards, Wonder & Worry" was a Dream Realm Award 2000 Finalist.*

You can read Edward at [estack@sprint.ca](mailto:estack@sprint.ca) or visit his website at <http://www.speculativefiction.zzn.com>

*Montreal Forum, Farewell Ceremony*



## **A New Game**

by

Edward F. Stack

Howie sat in the dressing room he had spent so much time in, so many happy hours, but things had changed. All the plaques with the players' names had been taken down, along with the row of pictures of the men from the Hall of Fame. No equipment hung in the empty stalls and no-one walked the hallowed halls of the venerable arena. Still, Howie did not really accept that the life of the Montreal Forum was over until the wrecking ball smashed into the side of the old building for the first time.



After that crashing sound Howie floated out through the dressing room wall into the main foyer of the Forum. Staring through the front windows onto St Catherine's Street he saw a crane towering over the building. Something must have gone wrong with the machine, for it ceased its destruction after that first apocalyptic impact.

"I really didn't think they would do it." Beside Howie hovered other ghostly figures. He knew them all, some of them former players like himself, others, fans or people who had worked in the Forum while alive. There was even one kid who had died in a car wreck during a trip to visit the rink. Failing to reach it in life, the boy had made the Forum his home in death.

In death, as in life, the ghosts looked to Howie. Howie Morenz, the greatest player of so many who had skated the ice of hockey's shrine. The building had killed him, complications from that leg shattered during a game gone tragically wrong, breaking the hearts of all Canadiens fans. Yet, it was where he had lived, really lived, been most alive. Was it so strange that it was here he had stayed in death?

"Well, folks," he said. "It looks like it's over."

"Why, Howie, why?" That earnest entreaty was from Saul, dead six years, but before that a season ticket-holder for forty-nine years of a sixty-eight-year life. The Forum existed before he was born and lived after him: In the beginning was the Forum.

"Nothing is forever, Saul. You know that." Saul slowly shook his misty visage as Howie went on, "Remember how the Anglos hated the French when you were a kid? They sat on the opposite side of this building, cheering the Maroons against "les Canadiens"?" Nodding, Saul grinned, as did many of those gathered around, more and more of them as Howie spoke. "When the Maroons folded, all Montreal became Habs fans, Anglos and French cheering "les Glorieux" together. We all said that could not be, but it happened."

The truth of what he said was indisputable, and he continued, "And the players now, from Russia, Finland, and countries that did not even exist when we were playing. Not all "Canadiens" come from good Quebecois stock any more."

Again, no one could argue that he was not speaking the truth. Even so, one voice was raised in opposition to his logic: "But the "le Club de Hockey Canadien" still played here. They must play here. How can the Habs play anywhere but here? This is the Forum, this is the home of "les Glorieux"!"

"Not any more." Howie was tired, but knew he must stay strong for those around him. It had always been his duty, and it would ever be. His ghostly finger pointed to a tall glass-fronted structure just visible from where they all stood. "Now they will play there. They already have."

"But, Howie!" It was the boy who had died trying to see his beloved team play, just once, in the Forum.

"Was I your hero, Danny?"

"You know you were, Howie." The boy's face was bright, guileless. "You still are."

Smiling, Howie looked at the child who stared at him so confidently, so faithfully. "I know, Danny. I was proud, am proud, to have been a Canadien. Like the rest, I played for love, for pride, for the team, for the fans." He paused, unsure if he should continue, but knowing the boy deserved the truth.

"But hockey is a business, Danny. The owners must make money. Players are expensive now. If we are going to win more Stanley Cups, and we will, we must pay top players to come here. The Forum would draw them, but only money will keep them. You still want us to win, don't you Danny?"

The boy, unable to speak, nodded, looking at the floor.

Howie turned to face the ghostly audience that now filled the foyer. "So the Canadiens will have a new home, and will win new championships, new fans, new glory. This building will be gone, but "les Habitants" will go on!"

The crowd cheered, and workmen in front of the building felt a chill on their spines. They looked at each other, but did not speak of what they thought, what they knew. Then the crane operator announced that everything was ready, and the destruction of the Forum could begin in earnest.

Inside, little Danny was still worried. "What about us, Howie? Can we go to the new building?"

Howie watched the workmen prepare to destroy their home. Danny's question was one Howie had asked himself many times of late. "I don't think so, Danny. I heard one of the new players wonder the same thing. He said the team owners took the old dressing room, with all its history, to the new building. They wanted to keep the spirit of the old teams with them. But he wasn't sure the ghosts were transferable."

Shaking his head, a sad smile curling his lips, Howie spoke softly, almost to himself, "I don't think we can leave here."

Seeing the question in the eyes of those around him, he explained, "The spirit is carried in the hearts of living people. It is in the banners that will hang from the ceiling, and in the cheers of the crowds who will fill the new arena. But us? I think we belong here. What would we do there? Where would we live? I don't know that place. I would be a guest in someone else's home. I think we are part of this building, and when it is gone...."

The others heard what he said, then they heard the sound of the wrecker's ball smash into the building again and again. They cried out, fear and sadness tearing their hearts apart as the wreckers tore apart the building. Ghostly tears fell along with the shattered bricks of the building.

As whole sections of the walls began tumbling down, a wind whirled through the foyer. With each crash of the huge iron ball a gust of that wind swept the Forum's ghosts away, singly, then in two's and three's, then en masse. Howie watched them go, his hands reaching helplessly for little Danny as the child was swirled away, on his young face the same mask of terror he must have worn when he died so many years before.

Finally, Howie alone stood tall in the crumbling building, his heart and soul anchored to its rapidly collapsing walls, the foundation his. He had lived here the best part of his life, and all of his death, but it was over. Now what?

By then the walls were almost completely flattened. Howie stood no longer in a building but on a pile of rubble, of memories, of dreams and fears. As he wondered what was to become of him, the wind gusted one last time. It carried him away from the building he loved, the home he loved, into the sky, everything blurring as he spun through the air.

When he could focus again he found himself walking on clouds. In the distance he could see a big building of some kind, and around it swarmed a large number of people. Approaching, he saw that the building was taking the shape of the Forum. As it was being torn down on earth it was being built up here.

"It is where you belong, just as Montreal was."

Howie jumped. He had not heard that voice in many years. Leo Dandurand had been his boss long ago. Now they walked side by side once more.

"Monsieur Leo?"

"You were always bright, weren't you?"

Howie laughed a nervous laugh, "What's going on here, Monsieur?"

"The Forum. It is ours now, forever."

"Forever?"

"Yes." By now they had reached the foyer Howie had been standing in such a little while ago, but here it was intact, spotless, perfect. From deeper inside the building he could hear the old organ leading the crowd in cheers. Shaking his head, he walked towards the ice.

Unthinking, he found himself heading towards the players' bench. There he found so many lost friends, and so many later heroes, all in their uniforms, sweat and blood on their faces like the old days. A few of them noticed him, giving him heartfelt greetings, hugs mixed with punches on the shoulder. Then they all turned their attention back to the game. Montreal was playing Toronto. It was the second period and the score was tied.

"Monsieur Leo?"

"Yeah, Morenz?"

"Where is this?"

"It's heaven. We play all the time, the seats are always full, we always play well, and we never get seriously injured. Even the cuts heal by morning."

"Why are we playing Toronto?"

Leo Dandurand laughed again, sharing a knowing look with the rest of the players, "You are new here, aren't you? Well, Toronto needs somewhere to play until Maple Leaf Gardens is torn down. Until today we had to play Chicago or Boston. Now we have the Forum for ourselves. Isn't it wonderful?"

Howie noticed that Dick Irvin stood behind the players, arguing with Toe Blake. Georges Vezina was at the end of the bench adjusting his pads while Jacques Plante skated towards the Canadiens' goal. Plante's face was bare. There was no need for his mask here. "Do we always win?"

Doug Harvey was listening and snorted, "Of course not. What fun would that be?"

Howie laughed with his old friends and teammates. What bliss, to play all the time instead of just watching as he had for so long now on earth.

Tears in his eyes, Howie watched. It was almost perfect, but he longed to play. As he was thinking this, Coach Blake pointed to him and said, "Let's go, Morenz, you're in!"

Howie looked at the coach, at all his colleagues in their old uniforms, then down at himself. He was in uniform too. As he glanced up he saw little Danny beam and wave from the stands. Swallowing hard, Howie gripped the familiar stick, swung himself over the boards, landed comfortably on that long-ago broken leg, and skated into the center of the Forum's ice.

Into paradise.

*In this science fiction story, Norma McPhee takes us from a well-known corner of the Maritimes to the stars.*

*Norma McPhee bawled her way into the world in Canso, Nova Scotia, on a bright July morning, just before lunch. She grew up on Cape Breton Island, surrounded by books of every type, in a close-knit family known for its collectively weird sense of humour.*

*Norma attended Holy Angels High School, an all-girl institution, where she left a trail of nuns and other teachers wondering what happened. From there it was off to Nova Scotia Teacher's college, where she managed to steal a certificate in Early Childhood Education.*

*Her first novel, Into the Fire, was published in February, 2001 by LTDBooks.*

*Norma works as a nanny to support her writing habit. She lives in Toronto, Ontario with two beautiful, brilliant little girls (if she does say so herself) and their parents.*

*You can reach Norma at [ncmcphee@yahoo.ca](mailto:ncmcphee@yahoo.ca) or visit her website at <http://www.geocities.com/ncmcphee>*

*Peggy's Cove, before the storm*



## **A Mari Usque Ad Astra**

By

Norma McPhee

*Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia*

Wednesday, September 3, 2042

"Just when were you going to tell me?"

Glennis MacKay froze in the doorway, the knob still clutched in her hand. Why did her father's voice sound so strange? Not so much angry as....

"What are you talking about, Dad? I haven't-"

"I'm talking about this." He snatched a pale green envelope off the hall table and shook it at her. "Were you planning to leave without telling me, too?"

Leave?

Glennis stared at the envelope, stunned. So it had come. So much time had passed that she'd thought it never would. That she'd been silly to even think she had a chance.

"Well?" her father prompted.

"I—I kind of forgot about it," she hedged.

"Forgot? How do you forget something like this? This isn't like going off to Calgary or Toronto, where you can just hop a flight home if things don't work out!"

"I know, Dad." Glennis put out her hand for the envelope.

With an irritated growl her father handed it to her but her fingers were trembling so hard she could barely manage to hold the thing, let alone open it. Her father snatched the envelope back in frustration and ripped it open.

*Ms. MacKay:*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have been chosen from a field of over 30,000 qualified applicants for a position in Northern North America's first voluntary offworld settlement.*

*Due to your single status and the constraints of a limited gene pool, a psychologically compatible partner of the opposite sex has been selected for you. Your partner is colonist #328—Kiley, Ian.*

*The hyperspace vessel Venture will be departing for the Nova Acadia colony at 10:15 a.m. on Saturday, October 4, 2042 from Antigravity Pad C at John F. Kennedy Space Center. Colonists will be billeted at the Hilton Cocoa Beach, FLA, USA. Please check in at the hotel no later than 1 October for orientation.*

*If you decide not to accept this post, please notify us as soon as possible so your place aboard the colony ship can be reassigned and another partner assigned to Mr. Kiley.*

Rhiannon Wynn-Carter  
Assistant Director  
United Nations Frontier Ministry

"I got in," Glennis barely got the words out around the lump in her throat. "I actually got in. I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it either," said her father, who had been reading over her shoulder. "Arranged marriages? Where's the colony, Iraq?"

"The profiling computer analyzes our psych profiles and picks someone to complement our personalities. I think it's a much better system than picking somebody based on the width of his shoulders or the shape of his butt. Or the size of his wallet."

"It's barbaric," her dad said. "Psych profiles my ass. They just want to make sure all the women start to make babies right away, instead of taking their time to find Mr. Right."

"Which always works out so well—just like with you and Mom."

His eyes narrowed in displeasure at her sarcasm. "That's hardly my only objection to this nonsense. Have you forgotten about the Chinese ship they lost contact with last year? They never did find out what happened to those people."

No, Glennis had not forgotten. She had been close to pulling her name from the selection program when she heard. Then the call centre in Halifax where she worked invested in some of those new A.I. voice interfaces, and Glennis' job was downsized out of existence.

"It's no different than when our ancestors came over from Scotland," she said. "There were risks then too."

"Right. Risks back home in Scotland, like starvation. You're a hell of a lot more likely to starve on some godforsaken planet light-years from home than you are here."

"Why are you being like this?" Glennis' eyes stung with angry tears she was determined not to let fall. "Why can't you be happy for me? Do you have any idea how difficult it is to get chosen for something like this? Can't you—I don't know—be proud of me or something?"

"I am proud of you," he ground out between clenched teeth. "I was proud of you before that bloody letter showed up. But *another planet*? How can you expect me to be happy about this? I'll never see you again."

Glennis lost her valiant battle with tears. "I know."

\* \* \*

Over the next few weeks, the cool silence between Glennis and her father lifted slowly, with a word here and a word there, but she knew a part of him would never forgive her for leaving. She was his only daughter, the

same child who, at nine, had begged to stay with him when her mother and brothers left for Vancouver and her new stepfather's beachfront condo. It had been just the two of them since then. Dad had had a couple of girlfriends over the years, but Glennis knew he'd never really got over Mom. Lately she had wondered if having her always there, a living reminder of the love he had failed to hold, hadn't been holding him back somehow.

The day before she had to leave for Florida, Glennis and her father strolled up to the lighthouse to mail her final letters to her brothers in Toronto and Calgary, and her mother and stepfather out in Vancouver. Then they walked together in silence along the rocky shore. It was windy, and the waves crashed hard against the rocks. Glennis took off her jacket in defiance of the cool fall air, and felt the salt spray sting her arms' bare skin for the last time.

A shiver ran through her.

Her father glanced at her, his eyes warm with sad understanding. "Cold feet?" he asked.

Glennis gave a dry chuckle. "Yeah. I think my shoes got wet."

\* \* \*

Cocoa Beach, Florida

Thursday, October 2, 2042

"Am I late? How much did I miss?" a burly redhead whispered as he slid into the empty seat beside Glennis. It was the only empty seat left in the hotel's Grand Ballroom, transformed for the occasion into a five-hundred-seat lecture hall. "I slept through my alarm. I hope my new wife is a morning person."

The woman in the seat on Glennis' other side glared at the man, hissing for silence at least twice as loud as he'd spoken.

"Wonder who got *her*," he murmured.

"You haven't missed much. It's just a recap of the mission info from the recruitment package," Glennis whispered back. "You're a single, then?"

The man nodded.

"Me, too. Most of the people I've spoken to are. I don't think many of the couples who applied together made the cut."

"HUSH!" said the other woman, loud enough to be heard back home in Nova Scotia.

"Talk to you after." The man leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Glennis studied him. He was a lot more interesting than some boring speech about things anyone who had even applied to the colony program



should already know. He was big, broad-shouldered. Muscular, but with a softening layer of fat over the muscle. A real teddy bear. She wondered which of the female colonists would have him to snuggle with.

She glanced at his name tag, and her stomach gave a queer, fluttering twist. *Ian Kiley.*

Glennis swallowed. An arranged marriage had been a daunting enough concept when her new husband was a faceless abstraction, but now...

Ian Kiley's mouth fell open, and a hoarse rumble issued from his throat. And another. And another. Glennis suppressed a chuckle as the woman beside her glared.

Glennis poked Ian in the ribs. He grunted, muttered, and started snoring again.

"Probably up half the night drinking like those louts in the room next to mine," the other woman sniffed. "I wonder what poor girl got stuck with *him?*"

"*Me,*" Glennis hissed back, wondering why she felt so indignant on behalf of a stranger, assigned "partner" or not.

The woman gave Glennis a horrified look and then turned her full attention to the lecture.

Glennis closed her eyes and listened to Ian's snores. She might as well start getting used to them now.

\* \* \*

In her dreams, Glennis stood on the rocks at Peggy's Cove and stared out at the water shining golden in the sunset. Overhead, the gulls wheeled and dove, their familiar throaty calls mournful, as though they understood she was leaving them.

After Saturday, she would never hear a gull's call again.

From somewhere behind her a stranger's voice called her name. Calling her away. She tried to ignore it, but the golden glow off the water brightened, spread, filling her field of vision. Blotting out the sky, the gulls, the land...

The strange voice called again, and she turned to face it.

He stood so close behind her that when she looked up, his face filled her vision. Fair skin, freckles, eyes as blue as the ocean itself. A face framed with wild red hair.

Ian Kiley.

He bent his head yet closer, and his lips brushed hers...

Her eyes flickered open.

"I've always wanted to do that," Ian said softly, as he raised his face from hers. "I hope you don't mind. I read your name tag. You're... I mean, we're...."

"I know." For a moment, Glennis thought she was still dreaming. But the cry of the gulls was gone, as was the glow of sun on water. There was nothing left but the sea of silent, empty seats surrounding them.

Warmth flooded to the surface of Glennis' skin. "Did I—did we sleep through the whole presentation?"

Ian chuckled. "At least I know my snoring won't bother you."

Glennis managed a shy answering smile. "I didn't get much sleep last night," she explained.

"I know the feeling. Butterflies?"

"Seagulls."

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

Apparently he did mind, though. "Are you from the Mari... I mean, Atlantica, then?"

Glennis nodded, though she wasn't any more used to using her country's sovereign name than he was. The Atlantic provinces had remained a part of Canada for almost fifteen years after Quebec's separation, bowing to the inevitable just three years ago.

"Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia."

"North Bay, Ontario. I have family in Atlantica, though. Fredericton, and Sydney."

"Do you get down to see them often?" Glennis wanted to kick herself for asking.

Ian grinned mirthlessly. "Not so much any more, I imagine." He stepped back from her and helped her to her feet. "What's next on the agenda? I left my reader in my room."

"They're going to take us over to the Space Center for an advance tour of the ship. After that is the singles reception. You know, where we're supposed to be introduced to our assigned partners."

"I see." Ian winked at her. "I think we can safely skip that one, don't you?"

\* \* \*

The hotel restaurant boasted a lovely view of the beach. Glennis gazed out over the water, ignoring her rapidly cooling brunch. Ian, on the other hand, had wolfed down his own food as if he never expected to eat again.

"Hey, Glennis, listen to this. *"Assigned partners are encouraged to get to know one another before engaging in marital relations,"* Ian read from the Singles Orientation Manual, which his roommate had beamed to his solar-powered ereader when Ian finally got back yesterday, after skipping nearly all of the planned getting-to-know-you activities so he and Glennis could spend the time actually getting to know each other.

Glennis shot him a bemused look. "What a radical idea."

"However," Ian continued, *"the future of a healthy and vital colony depends on each couple producing children as soon as possible. Toward this end, certain material incentives have been set aside for the first twenty couples to register a live birth."* He shot Glennis a sideways glance. "In other words, 'Take your time, folks, but hurry up.'"

He turned back to the reader. *"These incentives include..."*

Glennis turned back to the window, trying to tune out Ian's voice. He might be amused by the not-so-subtle pressure from the colony's organizers to get on with the business of being fruitful and multiplying, but it made her uncomfortable. She liked Ian—his irreverent sense of humour made her smile, and the warm twinkle in his eyes when he looked at her told her he liked her, too. The profiling computer had done a better job of choosing her future husband than she'd really expected it to. Still, the idea of being intimate with a man she had only just met...

She kept hearing her father's voice in her mind. *Iraq*. Right. Whether her marriage had been arranged for her because of religious patriarchy or colonial pragmatism, the effect was the same. She was expected to spend the rest of her life with a man she hadn't known two days ago.

Ian reached out to touch her cheek, gently turning her face back toward him. "I don't care about any blasted incentives," Ian assured her softly. "We can wait as long as you want to."

Glennis swallowed and looked him directly in the eye. "Have you spoken with anyone who didn't skip the ship tour yesterday? Those cabins aren't designed with waiting in mind. They're not much bigger than a king-sized bed, and they're practically *all* bed. Real cozy."

"I can sleep on the floor."

"You wouldn't fit on what little floor there is to sleep on, Big Guy."

"Then you can sleep on the floor. You're little. You can use the blankets for a pallet...."

"*Blanket*. Singular. *Thin* singular blanket. Damn it, Ian, have you spoken to anyone besides me since you got here?"

Ian shrugged. "Not about that stuff. Too personal. I've found out a lot about the colony, though. It's one of several on the planet. We almost had to share a continent with an exile group—those Catholic fundamentalists who tried to blow up Parliament Hill a couple of years ago."

"Nice."

"Yeah. On the one hand, the voluntary resettlement program screens people with an inch of their souls and turns 'em down for the smallest genetic or psychological flaw, and on the other, the international justice system dumps large, organized groups of criminals right next door. But we were lucky. The advance survey found the penal colony a nice big island they missed the first time around."

He glanced at Glennis. "Say, you're not Catholic, are you?"

Glennis' eyes narrowed before she noticed the twinkle in his. "Sure, I'm Catholic. Parents divorced, product of failed birth control. I go to church every other Christmas Eve. You?"

Ian shrugged. "I might be an agnostic, but I'm not sure."

Glennis laughed and shook her head. "Don't you take anything seriously?"

"Yes." Ian reached for her hand. "You think I'd have made it through the screening process otherwise?"

"Maybe. Sometimes I wonder how I did. I'm no one special. I can't even manage to find and hold onto a decent job."

"That's the reality of the Atlantican economy, hon. It's not you. You *are* someone special, or you wouldn't be here."

Glennis shook her head. "I wonder. How many of the people in this program applied because they couldn't make a go of it on Earth? How many CEOs of major corporations do you think there are in this hotel right now? How many moderately successful businesspeople? How many people do you think left a secure job and a big, comfortable house to cram onto that ship with its undersized cabins? Not too many, I'll bet."

"Seventy-eight."

Glennis blinked.

"I hacked the profiling computer."

"Is that how you..."

Glennis regretted the question the second it passed her lips.

Ian shot to his feet. "You think I don't belong here? You think I'm here in this complex, and with you, because I cheated? Is that what you think?"

"Did you?"

"Hell, no! For your information, I happen to be one of those seventy-eight. I ran Bookachow—a highly successful electronics firm and e-publishing house that now belongs to my sister. You may have heard of us. We were the ones who discovered Anna K. Harlan."

Glennis winced. Of all the stupid... "Why would you leave all that behind?" she asked.

"Because what we're doing here is wonderful and exciting and new, and I want to be part of it. Because our ancestors have done a great job of screwing up this planet, and I'd like my kids to inherit one that's fresh and unspoiled. And because the colony's going to need someone doing what I do—providing a form of entertainment that's not too big a draw on available resources. These light-powered, computer-independent e-readers everyone got? A Bookachow product, specifically created for the colony project. They're making my sister a rich woman. And since I own the New Acadian rights to the design and all the currently-available content, I expect to do pretty well in our new home."

"You're going to have to do more than sit around selling ebooks," Glennis warned. "There's going to be a lot of hard, physical work. You read the recruitment materials. No room for slackers."

"So now you think I'm a slacker."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"It sure sounded like you did. Listen, Glennis. If you're getting cold feet, if you don't think you belong out there, that's your problem. I don't have any doubts. I've wanted this from the moment O'Hare and Becket announced they'd found a way to break the warp barrier and conquer the problem of time dilation. Fifteen years I've been waiting for this opportunity. I don't need a wife who can't cut it out there. If you don't think you've got what it takes, get out while you still can, and let them assign me someone who appreciates the opportunity she's getting." He shoved his chair back, almost hitting a couple walking by with their cafeteria trays, and stalked off, leaving Glennis to stare, stricken, at his departing back.

\* \* \*

She didn't see him all the rest of that day, though if she wanted to be honest with herself, she hadn't been looking for him.

How could she have said the things she said? Accusing him of cheating to gain a place in the colony—implying that no one who could make it on Earth would want to go—did she really think that way? Was that really, in the end, the only reason she was going?

Her hotel room ceiling provided no answers, even though she lay on her bed and stared at it for hours. His words had stung more than they should have. He was, after all, a stranger. But he'd be a lot more than that soon, wouldn't he?

There had always been one place where everything seemed clearer, where her restless thoughts grew still and a knowing calmness filled her soul. But the rocky shores of Peggy's Cove were hundreds of miles away now.

Sighing, she rolled off the bed. *Any port in a storm, I suppose.*

\* \* \*

Glennis had lost track of the hours. She sat on the white sand beach, watching the waves roll in and out. Now the sun had sunk below the horizon behind her, and the sky glowed red and purple with the coming of twilight.

Was Ian right about her? Did she have what it took to be part of this colony? Should she back out now, before it was too late?

It was already too late to find another partner for Ian. What would that mean for him?

She breathed deeply, taking in the salt tang of the ocean air. Here in Florida, the wind blowing in off the water did not chill her, and as a far-reaching wave lapped against her feet, soaking her sneakers, the water did not numb her toes. Didn't seem natural for October.

This was what living on another world would be like—only more so. Even things that were the same would never be *exactly* the same. But the new world would have oceans. It would have rivers, lakes, mountains. And it would have people. Not perfect people, because not even the most sophisticated computer in existence could find five hundred of those in the former Dominion of Canada, but normal, flawed people like herself and Ian Kiley. People with doubts and fears and regrets, but with hopes and dreams and ambitions, too.

Did she belong among them?

She had thought a walk along the shore would clear her head, bring everything more clearly into focus as it always had before. But not this time. Not this time.

She turned away from the crashing waves. There were no answers to be found here.

\* \* \*

She found Ian in the hotel restaurant, sitting at the same table they had shared that morning. He was facing the window, but something in the set of his shoulders told her he was looking inward, not out.

Many was the time she'd seen her father sitting like that, staring unseeing out the kitchen window.

He never spoke to her of what he was thinking, all those times.

She just stood there for a moment, watching Ian. Remembering the things she had said to him. The things he had said to her.

She had blundered, insulted him with accusations that were completely unfounded. But he—he had struck a chord. Pinned a big, red ribbon squarely on the very doubts that had been plaguing her ever since she'd first filled out the colony application over a year ago.

Doubts she thought she had worked through and put behind her.

She took a deep, steadying breath and walked toward him.

"Ian?" She hated the tentative note in her voice as she spoke his name.

He looked up at her, and his eyes widened in surprise. "I thought you were gone."

His voice was a weary monotone, giving no indication of how he felt about finding himself mistaken.

"Should I be?" she asked softly.

"You're the only one who can answer that."

"I'd still like to know what you think," Glennis said. "What you really think, now that we've both had a chance to cool off and think about the things we said. I know I was stupidly, ignorantly out of line and will understand if you can't forgive me. Accusing you of tampering with the selection process was inexcusable..."

The ghost of a smile flickered for a moment at the corner of Ian's mouth. "No, it wasn't."

Glennis had never believed a person could be literally struck speechless—until now. The best she could manage was an accusatory glare.

"That's why I lost it," Ian confirmed. "Why I acted like such a royal jerk. Because I'd slipped and mentioned that I'd hacked the screening database, when I was still terrified to tell you the whole story. I could just imagine what you'd think of me, given what you'd already said."

Glennis swallowed, freeing her voice at last. "I can't believe it. You really took someone else's place? And here I was beating myself around the ears for jumping to conclusions..."

"And you're still doing it," Ian gave a dry laugh. "You still don't get it, do you? I didn't take someone else's *place*. I took someone else's *mate*. I've done the computer matchmaking thing, and if it had worked, I wouldn't still be single. So I picked for myself. I picked you."

"Me."

"Yes, you. Out of over two hundred available women. And contrary to the dumb things I said this morning, I think I made the right choice. It's too soon to say I love you, but I like you. A lot. And if something I said, or did, keeps you from getting on that ship tomorrow, I'll never forgive myself."

Glennis' throat stung. "But the things you said..."

"I said," Ian stated softly, "that maybe *you* didn't think you belonged out there. I never said *I* didn't."

It was true, she realized. He'd done nothing more than echo her own doubts.

"The question is," Ian said, "do you *want* to be on that ship tomorrow?"

She hesitated only a moment. "Yes."

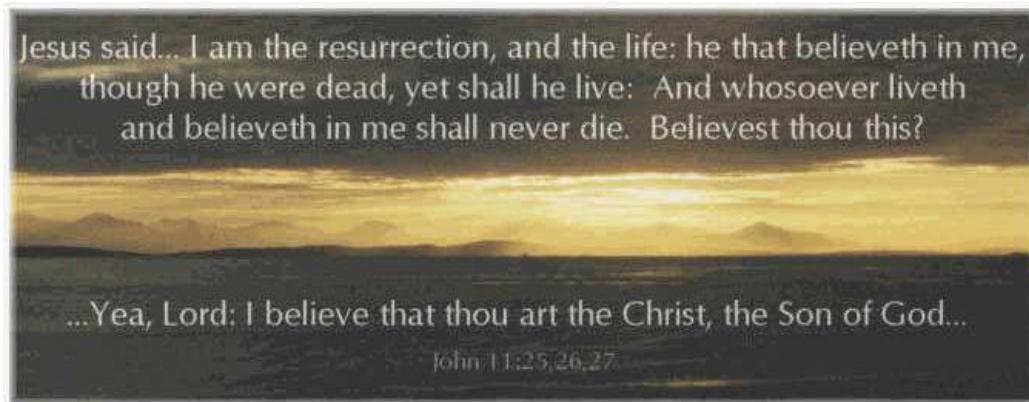
"Good." Ian smiled and reached for her hand. "So, what do you want to do with your last night on Earth?"



*In this story, Rick Sutcliffe mixes a Canadian setting with science fiction and the power of forgiveness in God.*

*Rick is Professor of Mathematics and Computing Science at Trinity Western University. He represents Canada on international computing standards committees and has published a computing science text, written one on ethical and social issues in technology, and has authored over fifty papers, articles, and reviews in trade and technical publications. He is active in Aldergrove Baptist Church, has been a high school teacher, and a magazine and newspaper columnist. He now writes Irish-flavoured Christian science fiction, in which he examines technological and ethical issues in thought-provoking plots set on alternate earths. His first novel, "The Peace" was published electronically in June 2000 and became its publisher's best-seller, receiving high marks by prestigious Analog magazine. A sequel, "The Friends," followed in 2001. He resides in Bradner BC with his wife Joyce and two grown sons. He may be reached through <http://www.arjaybooks.com> or by eMail at [rsutc@arjay.ca](mailto:rsutc@arjay.ca)*

*Georgia Strait, British Columbia*



## **The Lightkeeper**

By

Rick Sutcliffe

*Ambitious parents often cite Day MacAllister as a modern analog of Cormac O'Malachy, whom Brian Boru renamed Meathe in 1014, when he established Ireland's kingdom. However, unlike those of old, modern legends may be questioned, allowing historians to narrate their lives correctly. The author related this account at London's New School in 1994, again during the 1997 Afghan campaign, and has proofread our transcript. We confidently offer it as the authoritative replacement for the extravagant versions of these events still circulating on Greater Hibernia's planetary Metalibrary.—The editors*

*Day and Angus, Sangster Island, Canada 1968-1983*

It's tough growing up knowing your Dad's insane. If he's nuts, how can you believe anything he says? By extension, how can you trust your Heavenly Father?

Delusion, paranoia, inability to distinguish fantasy and reality—the whole ten staves. I looked them up in a psychology text.

'Course, it's worse supposing aliens kidnapped you at birth.

Never mind. Dad and I were the aliens. He stole me. Well, he wasn't my dad, but he was, and he didn't exactly steal me, but....but...

The cut and thrust of it is, I ignored the evidence, not believing a word he said about us, sure he was mad as a hatter—even when he used technology that surely couldn't exist.

Sorry. Like Lady Karina says, "Tell the story in order, or don't waste our time."

My life started out passably well, the earliest years idyllic—fishing, running through enchanted woods, being a nosy, precocious kid, and soaking up knowledge both useful and arcane.

I lived with my folks, Grace and Melvin MacDonald, in a rambling Victorian-era house on a bay of Lasqueti Island in the Georgia Strait. We operated "Mac's" our Pacific Oil marine refuelling depot and general store on Lasqueti's west side. People moored at our dock, gassed up, then popped by the store to buy a Vancouver paper and a can of beans for a quick fishing snack. More mellow customers lingered over coffee and Ma's doughnuts, wasting away an afternoon whilst admiring Vancouver Island stretched out beyond our dock.

Devout believers, my folks allowed Pacific Christian Camps to operate on our property, so my earliest summertime memories are of wonderful music, exciting activities, and fascinating Bible studies. The resident underfoot kid, I got included in everything, mastering archery and shooting with twelve-year-olds at age six, swimming and water skiing a year later.

The camp councillors watched me like a hawk, taking notice when I wasn't underfoot as much as when I was. Good thing, especially the day I clambered down a steep slope into a cove to hunt shells and couldn't get back. With the tide coming in fast, Big Bear's rope down the side was sure a welcome sight. Don't remember his real name, just his camp moniker, and how he bargained not to tell my folks if I'd stick close and help on the archery range.

All summer campers, staff, and a daily stream of boaters dropped by Mac's. But from October to April our only customers were commercial fishboats, police cruisers, and a trickle of island residents. It was a marginal operation, but it was home.

Excepting scattered waterfront cabins, the nearest settlement was the tiny hamlet at False Bay ferry terminal up Lasqueti where I attended grade

school by water taxi. Pa had promised I'd commute across the strait in our cruiser to Parksville and Nanaimo for high school and college.

I motored along, enjoying life, laying ambitious plans for conquering worlds beyond our island. But, day after my sixth birthday, and just before Christmas, Ma and Pa called a family conference.

Pa sat in his rocking chair, not moving, looking nervous, like when Ma's aunt Bertha visited. Ma sat bolt upright on the chesterfield, hands folded in her lap as when she kept me at my lessons. I moved to take the easy chair, but she motioned beside her, put an arm around my shoulders, and settled into a hug.

Then I heard the heavy tread of Angus MacAllister cross the upper hallway and rumble down the stairs. My heart lit up. Perhaps there would be stories.

"Crazy Angus," as I called him then, was the lighthouse tender from Elephant Eye Point on Sangster Island, two miles southeast of Mac's. No one lived there later, when they eventually automated the station, but even today vessels heading up the Strait at night take sightings from Ballenas and Mercy, then watch for Elephant Eye to keep in mid-channel.

Angus MacAllister was enormous, especially to a seven-year-old. Wild hair, shaggy beard, fierce eyes, over six-and-a-half feet tall (a staff exactly), and built like a bull, yet gentle as a lamb when he worked with an injured bird, gave me my shots (he was the local medic) or talked about his long-dead wife Mercy. Angus had his own room at Mac's, and was my favourite visitor.

Pa cleared his throat nervously. "Day, you're growing up, and your ma and I thought you ought to know a few things."

He was solemn and hesitant, quite unlike his normal self. I nodded, my elation dampened. I momentarily wondered if this was another "birds and bees" chat, but such matters never made them bashful before.

Pa switched to story mode. "Once, a man and a woman loved each other very much. They married and were together several years, but God chose not to bless them with children."

I waited, fascinated. This was the beginning of the story of me, one I never tired of. This time it was different.

Angus broke in. "Meanwhile, wee one, there were another lad and lassie living in the auld country wi' their own bairn, newly born and the verra light of their lives." The usual twinkle in his eye went out, and he found himself unable to continue.

Ma took over. "That lady died, leaving him with an infant to care for alone. Moreover, wicked men wanted to kill them. He had to find the baby a safe place."

A roaring began in my ears as I realized what was coming. I've always been a sentence or two ahead. Drove my teachers nuts before I learned to control my tongue. Took several seconds to track Ma's words.

"...And so, God brought you here to us, in the arms of our good friend and cousin Angus, all the way from Scotland."

"You need to know," added Pa, "for we've no truck with deceiving, but you must never forget that though we had no child of our own bodies, you're ours as surely and fully as possible. Maybe more. Most parents never see their children before they have them. We saw you, wanted you, loved you, and..."

"...we still do." Ma hugged tighter.

Part of me believed. But a good chunk was bewildered, the rug pulled out from under life. I walked about stunned for a week, unable to think anything but, "Who are my parents, really?" Ma and Pa could or would tell nothing of the mutual cousin who commissioned Angus to settle me with Canadian relatives, saying only "'Tis for the best, Day. You've a good home here." I fantasized presenting myself on the doorstep of my real family. In my nightmares, they turned me away.

Angus brought me out of my funk with a typically nutty remark. I'd left my electric train unplugged, transformer cord dangling toward the floor, as I drifted listlessly off to my room.

"Ye cannae leave it so."

I turned, puzzled.

"All the wee electrons spilling out make the floor slippery, they being uncertain 'bout where they be and all. Someone might slip and fall."

I blinked, unsure whether to believe him or not, then carefully put the plug on the table. He had a sly look by now, so I guessed he was putting me on.

"Come walk wi' me to my boat. 'Tis time to return to lightkeeping."

I followed, halfheartedly hoping for a story. Near the deserted bay where he moored his boat—he never used our public wharf—Angus commandeered a cedar log, scooping me onto his lap with one huge hand.

"Ach, wee bairn, we've hurt ye bad, tellin' ye of your first folks."

I nodded, fighting tears. Angus was too fierce to think of crying around him. Men and tears don't mix. I knew that.

"Tell me, wee one. Who raised you from a babe, looked after you, gave you a roof over your head, and loved you, if not Melvin and Grace? No one's like them, and you needs tell them so. Will ye do that for me? Yer mopin' breaks our hearts."

I couldn't speak, just nodded. Minutes later, after Angus boarded his speedster and I cast him off, I sought refuge in the boughs of the huge Bigleaf Maple I called my praying tree.

"Dear Jesus, Angus is right. I'm sorry. I've been a thistle in your garden (Ma's expression when I done wrong). Help me do better. But Lord, someday won't you please tell me about my first parents? I just have to know." Then I let loose in the privacy of my woods to bawl my eyes out.

Ma and Pa must'a seen me running full bore across the lawn like I had a lynx on my tail, 'cause they were waiting when I barrelled through the kitchen door, arms akimbo, ready to grab on tight.

"I love you both, and I'm sorry," was all I could say. It was enough. We had a long, giant hug.

A week later, Angus visited again. We sat on our same log, this time with me in more sociable shape—almost happy again, witness that I'd chatted him up all the way from the station, pestering for a story.

"Ach, wee bairn, I wish I could be so free and innocent as ye, but it cannae be, for my enemies'll find me someday and I must be ready. Nor would it do for one the likes of ye to be close by."

"Who are you, really, Angus?" I pressed, imagining him an escaped criminal or an army deserter. I recalled hearing Pa address him as "Colonel."

"Ye'll no tell anyone?" he conspired, and when I shook my solemn head, continued, "Angus MacAllister of Clan Donald, Scotland's traditional high lairds, also great-grandson of Conn III, King of Ireland and all the world from 1912 to 1932, at your service."

There was more, and he said it with believable flair, including a promise to train me in the sword once I was strong enough. Then I remembered the previous week's electricity. An hour in Pa's library sufficed to discover electrons didn't work so, there never was such a king, and Ireland scarcely ruled herself, let alone the whole world. "Adult made-up stories," I concluded. But it helped me recover, and I supposed that was his point.

Angus spent ever more time at our place. He taught me fishing, first aid, fighting with fists and stick, and also a private language he called Orthogaelic. When I could find no reference to it in the UVic library, I assumed it, too, was imaginary.

After I was six, Pa took me in his speedboat twice weekly to Sangster, delivering mail and groceries. I was captivated by Angus, turning over his envelopes to wonder why a lighthouse keeper corresponded with university professors, scientists, politicians, military folk, and the like. But I never had the nerve to ask, and he volunteered nothing.

At age eight, I drove the boat alone—which sounds dangerous, but I had lifejackets, could swim like a fish, went only in the best of weather, and carried a radio Angus supplied. He would greet me expansively, always show

me the lighthouse tower—but never his white stone cottage—and invariably be anxious I return quickly.

\* \* \*

My idyll died when I was nine, along with me, almost. Following summer camp season, we got word the Pacific Christian Society was in financial trouble, their assets seized for debts. Days later, a tall, muscular, lawyer fellow with rat-like eyes boated in to "inspect" the property. Pa coolly advised him Pacific Christian didn't own the land. He and Ma did. The lawyer was mighty upset. The MacDonalds would hear from Campbell and Campbell.

A week later, I woke around midnight, remnants of some odd backyard noise picking at the edge of consciousness. It wasn't repeated, but curiosity conspired with the warm late-summer night to fetch me into my clothes and hie outside for a look. Nothing.

I was turning back toward the house when the world detonated in an enormous ball of gasoline-fed flame. The blast plucked me from my feet and slammed me sideways into the forest. My head exploded in pain, and I lost consciousness.

Voices. Faces. One vaguely familiar, the other not. Discussing me, dismissing me as dead meat. Ill-remembered till years later, they swam before me in a red haze of indefinite duration.

I awoke, too numb to feel mere pain, but possessed of the notion demons had blown up our house, then harassed me. "I'm only nine, God," I raged, "Don't let the devil kill me. Don't let the eagles eat me." Funny the ideas nightmares associate.

This was no dream, however. I tried crying for help, found it impossible, and fainted from the agony my efforts induced.

A second time I awoke. Still-functional brain fragments informed me the stars had scarcely moved. Other neurons took inventory. I hung from a tree, impaled through both cheeks and my mouth by a branch. I moved my tongue slightly, and found gravel where teeth had been. A thin trickle ran down my face, and I tasted salt. "Blood," I thought, trying to wipe the drops from my chin.

I raised my left arm. My shirt sleeve was gone, the skin was loose and wrinkled. I stared several seconds before realizing my arm ended in a charred stump. My left side had been turned toward the house. A piece of burning debris must've severed my wrist, the heat cauterizing the wound.

Hovering just over the brink of madness, I vaguely mourned my missing hand and tried again to pray for help from a God I suddenly feared. No, was angry with. This was no accident. Someone had done this, someone had burned my house and killed my parents. God let it happen, and I was furious with him.

I heard no answer, and was possessed of a consuming desire not merely to live, but to wreck revenge on I knew not whom. I moved my right

hand, with supreme effort fishing from my pocket the green-handled tool Angus had given me for my previous birthday. I activated its sonic saw and cut the branch from the tree, loosing my pounding head.

I dropped half a metre and collapsed on my face into the forest duff and early fall leaves, unconscious again. More time passed in a fog of pain, but eventually anger once more took command of my ruined body. I had enough sense not to try removing the wood jammed through my face. I also knew myself to be in shock, likely concussed, and not far from death.

I felt around on the ground with my one hand and found a small stick I could use to lever myself to my feet. Then, halting, stumbling, crawling, I wound my painful way through the forest. If I could only get to the cove....

\* \* \*

I resurfaced to agony so great nothing could hurt again. I was on my back in a strange room, an out-of-focus face hovering anxiously above. Tubes connected my left arm to a bedside device.

"Ach, wee one, ye're still here," Angus announced. "Dinnae try to get oop."

I inventoried my upper body as covered in bandages, and promptly passed out.

What turned out to be weeks later, when I was partially myself and the wrappings came off, the mirror revealed a horror where my face once was, a mass of fiery scars from my chest up, and a stump terminating my left forearm. I would have screamed at the apparition, but couldn't muster the energy, and fell back to bed, insensible.

Later, Angus said I had found his spare boat, started the motor, driven to Sangster, climbed over the rocks, then collapsed at his door nearly dead. He didn't mention he'd informed the authorities there were no survivors.

"You'll nae tell anyone, but your hand'll come back from the regrow I synthesized with yer DNA." Angus was most broghuey when emotionally on fire.

No such technique existed on that earth in 1978, but my forearm, along with eight new teeth to replace the shattered ones, indeed returned in under two months. After three, the only remaining scars were jagged blurs on both cheeks, where he'd removed the tree branch impaling me. "Some wounds are too difficult to heal perfectly wi' a portable synthesizer," he explained. "Besides, we dinnae want you looking too like yer old self."

Mental wounds take much longer.

For years I remembered little of the awful night my home exploded. But whenever I puzzled over Angus's other-worldly delusions, my slightly crooked, off-colour hand and the remaining cheek scars argued, "Who on earth could have put me back together?" I later learned he had other non-existent gadgets, such as his pocket computer.

Once I recovered, we held a memorial service for my folks, after which he, knowing I couldn't recycle "Pa", said to call him "Dad," rather than "Angus". He produced adoption papers and other identification when needed, but they accentuated the sickening hollow in my heart. Who was I? What was my family? Could I belong? I could get no sensible information out of Angus, so any hope of penetrating the secret of my fostering seemed to have died with the MacDonalds, leaving me utterly without roots. Yearning for family became an obsession.

Despite my need for identity, and until events demanded, neither of us returned to that part of Lasqueti. It was too painful. We boated once a week to Gibson's for mail, but otherwise I became the fellow recluse of Dad Angus.

Now that I shared his secretive home, I discovered he was the archetypal mad scientist, or more correctly, inventor. Our living space was a perpetual clutter of electronic components and assorted prototypes. It's how we made most of our living, the Coast Guard remitting only room, board, and a pittance for light tending. Other government agencies were far better paymasters.

We designed and built security systems, automatic equipment controllers, signal-encrypting radios, and, once that earth invented satisfactory ICs, computerized instruments and sensors. Dad Angus seeded the patents among assorted silent partners, careful to take no public credit. Sold plenty to the military. They kept their mouths shut.

Got good bucks, too. Those days you couldn't buy anything like our gear there. As full partner in MacAllister Enterprises, I became filthy rich in a host of technology stocks of a kind Dad said did well on his earth two centuries earlier during its high-tech revolution.

One of our projects was writing and maintaining software for processing Landsat images. Project management got passed among several outfits, all of whom needed us. The latest contractor, on our recommendation, was Donald and Dutton, the international consulting engineering firm out of Vancouver. They won the contract when I was twelve. Dad Angus made them and Boeing my personal clients.

D&D were plenty surprised first time we visited and they saw "Day MacAllister" was a kid. 'Course, I got respect when they realized I coded rings around their guys.

Nonetheless, I would have swapped every nickel and all the recognition to have family—real blood relatives.

And, if all this meant Dad was nuts, it rubbed off on me. I'd built my first radio long before moving to Sangster, was into prison alarm systems and landslide detectors soon after, then signal detection and, finally, small computers, once that earth got 'round to making the necessary parts.

I'm out of order again. Dad Angus drank too much. He was plastered every weekend, and I cared deeply. I remember at age six sneaking into his



room at MacDonalds' and heaving his cache in the ocean. He bought more and locked it up.

Not long after my recovery, while I was getting used to my new hand and face, a Shantyman name of Murphy dropped by to preach Dad the Gospel—how Jesus could rescue him from alcohol if he would repent and trust Him.

Dad listened politely, but when the Shantyman left, drank himself senseless. Disgusted and alarmed, I went outside, looked up at the sky and prayed, "Jesus, if you fix Dad Angus so's he won't drink, I'll follow you again." See, the explosion left me bitter against the Lord. I'd made a faith commitment at age five, but now thought, "How could God love me, yet allow my family to be destroyed, and Dad Angus to be a drunk?"

Do you suppose kids have credit in the Almighty's bank? A week later was my tenth birthday, just before Christmas. A good weather forecast Saturday morning saw Dad and me piled into his cruiser and motor to Vancouver, where we rented a van and shopped ourselves silly, first for clothes and stuff downtown, later for electronic supplies and tools at suburban specialty stores.

That afternoon the meteorology lads, divining the weather would turn bad, put out a small craft warning. We were out to Langley already, and I saw Dad lick his lips nervously. He'd have to stay sober, or he couldn't drive the van or boat next day. It would be his first dry Saturday since I moved to Sangster.

"One more store, then our hotel," he announced nervously, driving to a tiny shop in Aldergrove for the blank circuit boards he'd ordered.

We no sooner emerged from the van than a stranger—to me—walked up as bold as if expecting us. A kindly-looking fellow of perhaps forty, he had peppery grey hair, and sported a crooked grin. Looked harmless enough, but Dad turned white.

"When will you return to living, Angus?"

"Professor, I..."

"Look Angus, you've wasted enough years. You can't go your own way indefinitely, or you'll pass on without accomplishing what you were created for."

Intriguingly, he included me in the sweep of his hand. What was he to us, and why was Dad scared? I never saw him so any other time. It's obvious now, but hey, you got no control over being written out of life's plot, so why worry?

"You have to stop over tonight to wait out the storm, so why not come to church tomorrow? You remember where it is."

Dad stammered assent, but spent the night tossing and turning. I heard moans, and he called "Mercy" several times, so I knew he was thinking

of his wife. He was a ghost next day. I was too, 'cause I spent the night praying, though a piece quieter.

In the morning, I asked him point-blank, "Dad, why are you running from God?" I ignored the fact I was too.

He sat on the edge of his bed, running his beefy hand through his long sandy hair and beard. He looked exhausted, and sounded worse.

"Mercy and I were partners at Palace Security, and in life itself. Someday, ye'll know what it means."

Back to his other-world fantasy. I must've blinked or grimaced, and opened my yap to make some remark. He scowled, stoppering the words in my mouth.

"She was as good a sword as I, but it don't do a spit o' good if there's no one to protect yer back."

Then he changed the subject. "My old battalion from the Asian dustup back in the 60's was in town. They invited me to their hall in West Tara for old times' sake. I knew Gerald Monde and the Campbells were up to something, but how'd I know it would be that day they picked to depose the Donal? Security was in the way. Time I learned, Mercy was dead."

He looked at me blankly. "My fault. I should've been there, 'stead'a celebratin'. Once I knew, I'd no choice but to run for exile. The rebels would've killed you given the chance, so I brought you along. They'd have found us sure if I stayed on Ortho Earth, so I stole a Security timestream car and came here to Tirdia."

He looked sorrowfully at my uncomprehending face. "I was nae use to Mercy that day, and none to God nor man since. Night Grace and Melvin died, I was drunk as a skunk. Didn't hear the explosion or you might not've had to fetch yourself to Sangster. Will you forgive me, Day?"

I nodded slowly, scarcely understanding a quarter of his words, except that "Tirdia" was what he called this earth, as opposed to the fantasy one we were supposedly from.

Now, Dad I could forgive, but I had bigger problems, 'cause if God kept his side of the foolish bargain I'd offered, I had to keep mine. And there was a pile of anger and hatred standing in the way. "Forgive," Dad said. There was a thought. "No, I couldn't," I decided, recalling my folks murder. Surely God couldn't ask such a thing.

It was beautiful weather when we left the nearby restaurant, but Dad had promised the professor, and like he said, "An officer of Ireland's High King keeps his word, even at dear cost." We went to church.

The pastor preached his heart out. We were all sinners needing God's grace. If we would trust the finished work of Christ on the cross and stop trying to be either good or bad—'cause it wouldn't help either way—we would be forgiven, saved by grace alone, and become God's friends. I remember

his exact words. It's a trick I have. Can't forget when I don't want to, nor permanent if I do. Can be a curse.

"God is the author of all life," the preacher said, "He demands an accounting from those He's created. If we're to serve the Living God as He designed us to, we've got to understand His perfect, unconditional forgiveness, accept it, then emulate it in our relations with others." He paused. I cringed.

"No Lord," I insisted. "I won't. The demons who killed Ma and Pa haven't repented or asked forgiveness."

Before the thought was done, the pastor shot his next bolt. "Constable O'Malley, would you relate what you told me this morning?"

"Sure thing, Pastor Joe." A burly man in full RCMP uniform strode to the front. The pastor stood aside to let him have the pulpit microphone.

"Last night I was on duty at the Langley detachment when the hospital called, asking for an officer to be sent over.

"When I arrived, they had a patient with serious knife wounds waiting for a surgery team. He perked up at the sight of me, whispering, 'I've trusted in Christ for salvation, and made peace with God, but I must confess before I go.'

"I would have put him off. After all, it hardly mattered in his condition. But he insisted, saying he wanted to tell those he'd wronged that he'd repented, gotten the Lord's forgiveness, needed theirs. His life was finished, so he needed my help."

"What did you do?" the pastor asked.

"I said I'd tell his story until someone with the right forgave him."

"And then?"

"He died before they could operate, but he was smiling."

"What was his crime?"

Premonition crept up from my toenails, suffusing my whole body until my hair curled. I knew what he was going to say.

"He murdered a family by blowing up their house. He didn't say why. I assume robbery was the motive. Said he left the body of their youngster hanging in a tree afterwards, and the image has haunted him ever since. If someone could forgive him..."

God's demand on me was clear, and I tried to stand, to speak, but my head swam. God's forgiveness and my hatred battled over me.

The pastor announced a hymn, then interrupted after the first verse, "Maybe you've only now understood the Gospel. Come to the front for prayer, and we'll lead you to faith in Jesus. Or you committed to Christ once, have drifted away, and need to confess your sin, perhaps offer forgiveness, but certainly receive it from God. Return to His family. Come."

He looked straight at us.

An irresistible hand pushed me forward. Seconds later, Dad knelt at the front, the Professor with a hand on his shoulder, me beside, the pastor next, and a bunch of people breathed soft amens behind.

When we were done praying, Dad and I stood, turned and faced the people. You could have heard one of Dad's "wee electrons" fall. He nodded for me to start.

"I'm the one," I began, then had to stop. It was hard letting hatred go. "I scarcely saw the man who burned out Ma and Pa, but I've hated him and blamed God ever since, 'specially for leaving me hanging in the tree. But God had heaven for my folks, and He gave me a new Dad, so...I...I...forgive." I bowed my head.

Into the silence, Dad spoke. "I've been i' th' wrong all these years to blame Lord of Heaven for my own troubles, and fer drowning my sorrows in drink. I also ask for His grace to forgive, and I say, He helpin', I'll nae touch another dram."

You understand, what we did that day was no magic wand to fix everything. We still had battles to fight, enemies to deal with, harsh trials to overcome, but we began to live following that altar call. Moreover, I now had family—God's people.

The professor remained a puzzle till, during one of his many visits to Sangster, he explained, "Angus, I had to get you off the bottle if either of you was to make it out of a novella and into a book."

I never guessed he only had plans for me.

To be part of "The Exile", the upcoming third novel in Rick Sutcliffe's Irish Christian SF series "The Interregnum".

*Quasim Mahmud brings us poetry about love... a love our coldest season often makes us feel even more keenly.*

*Qasim started writing short stories for children in 1975. He was editor of a children monthly "TOT BATOT " ( a character name from a popular children story in Pakistan) between 1978-1989. He also contributed to a student magazine in university. From his travel experience ( Eastern Europe , Asia and North America) he has developed an immortal passion for love and harmony on this small planet called Earth. Qasim has been writing poems since 1978 in many languages. His work has been published in Urdu , Russian, and English languages' magazines. After moving to Canada in 1997 he has contributed to e-poetry sites regularly using the pen name "favrit" and "commonman". Qasim resides in Ottawa with a lovely cat "Sneakers". You can reach Qasim at [qasim@sympatico.ca](mailto:qasim@sympatico.ca) or visit his website at <http://www.poeticword.org>*



## **Winter Poetry**

By

Qasim Mahmud

### **First Snow**

like the first crush  
of a virgin soul  
as if in a musical note  
they are making a song

small white fluffy angels  
all over me around me  
like a shower from heaven

softness of mellow dreams

wind no more in gusty anger  
just breezing thru my heart  
trees holding their hands  
for tiny milky stars

I am here as if saying  
white milky way I feel  
craving to go and dance  
in white lonely street

sombreness that I had before  
is gone first sight of snow  
my heart feels the joy  
peace love glow

\* \* \*

### **Red Tulips**

Gentle breeze bird melodies  
Sun shines and smiles  
a glorious day indeed  
Trees are back with  
nurturing feelings green

Roads those were covered in dust  
last envy lust of snow winter  
they smile again and shine  
with green carpets of walkways

Summer is here on the doorstep

children walking dancing on shore  
lovely dresses fashions passion  
milky bodies with God endurance

Make me wonder is there a heaven  
after experiencing this all  
maybe there is but I won't need  
I saw a kid's smile that is all

Red Tulips shy smiles and dances  
Big old motherly tree shelters my youth  
I sit beneath it to think and write  
an innocent word a letter of love  
not for me not for you but  
just to show how much  
love I got is yours

\* \* \*

### **Lost Season**

Snow told me story melting away  
whispers of last enchanting cold  
you will miss me in coming months  
when all around you be sunshine  
I smiled and looked the other way  
as summer was coming  
streets in love and everywhere  
carnival of love joy

And in came summer  
heat sunshine and rain  
streets flooding in vain  
houses on fire domestic pain

I looked towards the sky  
as if to say it's not  
my summer my season  
please give me my way



### **Snow in Love**

Snow is in passion  
falling in rhythm  
but temperature  
is warm cold

Like flowers growing  
on barren earth  
rain of love in  
ashes of innocence

Just a magic moment  
gave breath of life  
in a stoned heart  
once again

An angel's face  
homely touch  
sweet smile  
innocence

time to dance in rain  
fly like feathers  
sing in music  
without music



Its not a kiss hug  
not even caresses  
just a sensation  
that I am in love  
again



### **People Live Here**

*Dedicated to street people in Toronto*

Card boxes filthy dirty  
we pass by them everyday  
to our work or to love ones  
in rain or sunshine

Streets with rubbish around  
broken stairways alleys  
long line of waiting people  
for drops of water

I avoid those places  
as if my brand new car  
will suffer an anxiety attack  
in those polluted roads

Ignoring all panhandlers  
sometimes out of blue  
it flashes to me  
what if there was

A parallel world somewhere  
roles be switched  
those dirty filthy hungry  
faces be mine

And then only I fear  
and realize whatever  
happens matters  
right or wrong  
don't forget they are  
like us from us  
in those filthy card boxes  
here and there  
people live



### **Snow**

As you lay there on mountains  
I felt their warmth in my heart  
They smiled at me with love  
as if they long for me

I was walking in winter nights  
you came and covered my shivering body  
I was warm again melting pulses  
colour of peace your colour on me

Cedars smile after you hugged them  
dark forest look like wooden heaven  
I danced for ages in Siberian taiga  
just to feel your soft sensuous kisses

Lovely innocent children dancing  
on earth filled with your embrace  
Everyone's wishes only one true wish  
to behold time standing still and still

Far far from everyone and soul  
a small young girl lost in herself  
puts her skates on for first time  
the beginning of her love with you

Miles miles of nothingness  
mother earth covered with you  
and I standing all alone there  
I am happy because I am with you

But now the spell is broken  
time passes through untamed  
I walk ages but barren lands  
mother earth covered with pain  
Frozen winter with colder blood

Oh snow where are you  
I quest for you  
come back to the children  
fill us with warming love

*Kay Shannon wrote and illustrated this charming children's story that ends with a twist.*

*Kay Shannon is an author, illustrator and mother of three rambunctious children. Residing in Powell River, BC, on Canada's West Coast, she fills her time—between wiping running noses and trying to remove permanent stains—by making up stories for her children, drawing and quilting. As the child of an engineer and a writer, Kay believes electronic books are the perfect medium for her to be working in. "The perfect marriage of high and low tech," she says. Kay's illustrations can be seen in the Electric eBook Publishing's forthcoming preschool series of "Early Learning" books Danielle Naibert. You can reach Kay at [acqeditor@shaw.ca](mailto:acqeditor@shaw.ca)*

## **When I Grow Up**

By

Kay Shannon

Caitlin and her daddy walked hand-in-hand to the pond at the far edge of their land in Paradise Valley. They brought sunflower seeds and breadcrumbs for the birds and a snack for themselves.

Daddy spread the big, green-and-red chequered picnic blanket on the grass by the pond, and Caitlin sat down. She watched a big toad jump from one lily pad to the other, its brown skin shiny in the sun. Then it landed in the water with a SPLOOSH!

Caitlin laughed. She loved watching the animals. They did such funny things! Like the way the squirrels stuffed their mouths with so many seeds the cheeks looked like balloons that were going to burst. The squirrels always made her giggle.

Daddy smiled at Caitlin and handed her a juice box from the big red picnic bag.

Caitlin pulled her ball cap lower over her eyes to shade them from the bright summer sun. Mommy had put goopy sunblock all over her face, neck, and arms before they left the house, so she wasn't worried about getting a sunburn. But she needed the shade over her eyes to see the animals better.

She sipped her grape juice through the striped bendy straw. There were lots of birds. Some of them sat in the trees; some floated in the water; some flew high in the sky. They were so many colours, too: black like liquorice, green like the grass in the spring, red like a crunchy apple, even white like snow.

"Daddy," she asked, "what kind of bird is that?" She pointed to a bird with a bright green head at the water's edge.

"It's a duck. A Mallard," he said.

Caitlin giggled. "That's a silly name." She placed her empty juice box on the blanket, and grabbed a bag of breadcrumbs and seeds.

She walked to the water's edge and gently scattered a handful of the food on the ground. At first, only the big Mallard came to eat, but soon hungry birds surrounded her, all grabbing and squabbling over the bits of bread and seeds. Caitlin observed the birds and ducks as they scrambled at her feet.

When the treats were all gone, the birds went back to their trees or into the pond or flew back up into the sky. It made Caitlin kind of sad to watch them leave, like when she reached the bottom of her ice cream bowl and still wanted more.

Caitlin laughed as the green-headed Mallard waddled up to her, QUACKING!

"You're my friend, right Mr. Duck?" She looked at his dark, round eyes, and wondered if ducks could understand people-talk.

The duck turned, and SPLASH, dove into the muddy waters of the pond. Soon he bobbed his shiny head out from the deep and quacked again.

Caitlin slapped her hands together in delight. Even if it was just a duck, it could still be a friend, right? And that quack must have meant that he agreed.

She went back to the picnic blanket where daddy was taking sandwiches out of the picnic bag.

"Daddy," said Caitlin as she sat on the blanket, "when I grow up I want to be a duck!"

Daddy laughed and ruffled her hair.

\* \* \*

Caitlin's mommy was working in the garden. Mommy had told her all the names of the flowers she had planted and Caitlin remembered some. There were purple petunias and red marigolds in the window boxes on the front porch of their house, and morning glory by the trellis in the back yard. They didn't look like much now, but mommy had told Caitlin they would grow if she helped take care of them.

Caitlin liked to garden. She even had her own bucket, shovel and watering can. Mommy called the shovel a "trowel," and promised that next year, when she was five years old, she could plant seeds of her very own. She already knew what she wanted to plant — big, dinner-plate-sized dahlias. Mommy said they didn't come from seeds, but from bulbs, but Caitlin didn't care. She just wanted flowers of her very own.

Mommy moved to the garden, and dug in the moist earth with her trowel. They were going to grow vegetables this year, something they'd never been able to do when they lived in Vancouver.

Caitlin shovelled dirt and collected worms in her bucket. Sometimes she missed her old house and her friends, but at least here, in the country, she had lots of animal friends to play with.

"Cait," mommy called, "look at this."

Caitlin turned to where mommy was hunched over a spot in a grass.

Mommy stood and held her hand out. In it, Caitlin could see something small and blue. "It's an eggshell," mommy said. "From a robin."

Caitlin studied the small speckled half-shell. She hoped the baby bird that came from it was okay. Maybe the egg had fallen from a nest, and broken when it hit the ground. She frowned and returned to her bucket in the garden. Worms felt yucky, but at least she could play with them.

Caitlin was still digging when she noticed something strange happening to the grass beside the garden. It was moving, and there wasn't even a bit of wind!

Slowly, she parted the long grass, and a long snake with a green body and a long brown streak on its back slithered past. It was kind of scary, but exciting, too. She laughed as it disappeared amongst the grass and bushes at the back of the yard.

"Mommy," Caitlin said as they cleaned up their gardening tools, "when I grow up, I want to be a snake!"

Caitlin's mommy smiled.

\* \* \*

At the end of summer, Caitlin's mommy and daddy took her on a trip to Vancouver. They needed to buy some of the things they couldn't get in their small town, and they wanted to visit some of their old friends and neighbours.

Caitlin did not get bored at all on the trip. She saw deer along the side of the highway, and starfish on the beach as they waited for the big ferryboat.

During their last day in the city, they went to the Vancouver Aquarium. Caitlin saw big fish and little fish, long fish and short fish. She even saw a skinny flat fish! But best of all, Caitlin saw the whales. She watched silently as the huge orca swam around its tank. Its skin was so black and smooth, and the white around its eyes and under its belly so white and gleaming she wanted to get into the water and touch it. When it was time to leave, Caitlin said, "When I grow up, I want to be a whale!"

Her parents looked surprised.

"But Caitlin," daddy said as they reached the car, "when we were at the pond, you said you wanted to be a duck."

"And a snake when we were in the garden!" added mommy.

"Now you want to be a whale?" said daddy.

Caitlin was quiet as she buckled her seatbelt. "Well..." she began, "I like the duck's feet, and I really like the snake's skin." She looked out the window for a last goodbye to the aquarium. "But I LOVE the way whales stay underwater for so long!"

Caitlin's daddy laughed. "You can be whatever you want when you grow up, but I don't think you'll turn into an animal."

Caitlin frowned. "But they're my friends, and I don't have any other friends. Not like when we lived here."

Mommy gave her a quick hug. "Don't worry sweetie, you can be whatever you want to be when you grow up."

Daddy smiled at her. "And as soon as school starts, you'll make lots of new friends."

Caitlin thought about that for a moment. They were probably right. She knew she hadn't been living in the country for long enough to get to know any of the kids. All the kids she had met were so busy doing summer things, and going on family vacations that they didn't have time to play with her.

"You're right, I guess," she said to her parents. "But I still want to be like my favourite animals when I grow up..."

Mommy and daddy nodded and hmmed.

\* \* \*

Soon school started and Caitlin knew her parents were right.

It wasn't easy at first, being the new kid at school, but Caitlin tried her very best to be friendly. There were other kids who were more shy than she was, and she easily made friends with them. Before long, she hardly ever thought of her animal friends.

But Caitlin never forgot about all the things she loved about the different animals she'd seen during her first summer in the country.

And she thought about what she was going to be when she grew up for many, many years.

Finally she knew. It wasn't easy, but Caitlin became everything she liked in each of her favourite animals.

Did she grow webbed feet like a duck? No, not really.

Did she have smooth skin like a snake? Well, sort of.

Could she swim underwater for a long time like the whales? Yes, she could!

You know why?

She wore a suit made of neoprene that made her skin smooth and slippery like a snake's. She moved fast in the water like the duck, using

flippers. And she swam underwater like the orca using a mask and oxygen tank.

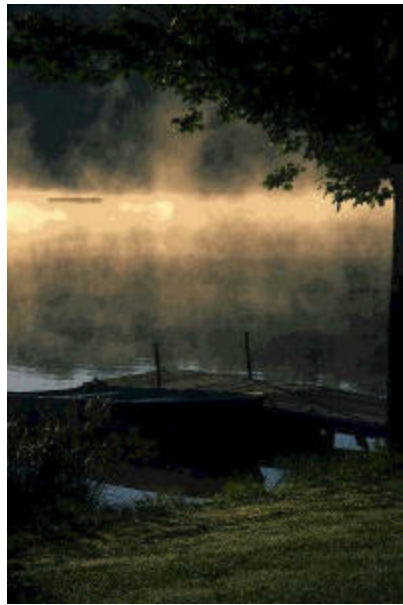
Caitlin became a professional scuba diver!





*In this Mystery story, Dee Lloyd show us how greed and revenge can become bitter enemies.*

*Dee credits her upbringing in a Northern Ontario mining town for her love of dramatic scenery and her conviction that nothing is impossible to a person who is willing to work for it. She is fascinated by electronic publishing and the use of fresh new settings and story lines that this new medium encourages. Married to Terry Sheils, award-winning author of horror and humorous mystery, Dee states, "Writing is as essential as breathing in our house." One of her four published Romantic Suspense novels, TIES THAT BLIND, won the Eppies 2000 Award for Contemporary Romance. GHOST OF A CHANCE is her first Paranormal romance. Dee is a Senior Editor with LTDBooks. You can reach Dee at [dsheils@sympatico.ca](mailto:dsheils@sympatico.ca) or visit her website at <http://www.deelloyd.com>*



## **Mist Devils**

By

Dee Lloyd

Kate breathed a sigh of relief. Sam had finally left. She'd been forced to insist that he had to cross the lake before dark but he had gone.

She sat cross-legged on the end of the wooden dock. Drinking in the silence and the crystal clear air, she watched Sam's aluminum fishing boat disappear around the point of the island. The edges of his wake expanding across the mirror-like surface of the lake caught the reddish light of the sunset. The solitary, twisted pine tree that stood sentinel on the southern rocky point was black against the streaky scarlet sky.

She no longer had her father to share the view but the island was as beautiful as ever. Kate looked over her shoulder at the cottage. Its dark hulk was set into a densely forested area that mostly hid the brilliant western horizon.

She was glad that they'd lit the propane lights before Sam left. The golden glow from the living room windows was welcome in the rapidly descending darkness and chill of a mid-October evening. She rammed her hands into the pockets and shrugged deeper into the wool lining of her leather jacket.

Sam had offered to stay to help her clear out her personal belongings and get the cottage ready for the real estate agent who was coming out on Sunday. After he reluctantly accepted that she wanted to do the packing alone, he tried another tack.

"A bear tried to get into the Wilson's place last week." Sam leaned casually against the doorframe. His keen eyes, though, watched for her reaction. "Ellen said she was sure glad Jack was there with his shotgun."

"He didn't have to shoot it, did he?"

"Well, no." Sam shrugged. "But you never know. Bears are unpredictable."

"Sam, you know we've never had a bear on the island."

He shrugged. "And they haven't caught the guys who broke into the cottages just across the bay, you know. Seems they got into the liquor and broke up a couple of places pretty bad. You'd be a prime target for those yahoos, a beautiful woman all alone over here."

Kate rolled her eyes. "Why would anyone come all the way over to the island? There are dozens of empty cottages on the mainland that are much handier and better stocked than this one."

"Don't be stubborn, Kate. You know you need me here. A single woman needs a strong man around."

That was when she blew up at him. She could have used an extra pair of hands but she wasn't about to give him any kind of encouragement.

Kate had known Sam all her life. Their fathers had been good friends who had started the Ellismarks Electronics business together. As the Marks' family's cottage was just across the way on the west shore, she and Sam had spent most of their summers together growing up. Her scrawny, headstrong buddy had turned into an amazingly charming, good-looking man but she just couldn't think of him romantically.

Unfortunately, he had got it into his stubborn head that she was going to marry him. She couldn't convince him that she did not and was never going to love him. He insisted that love wasn't important. They respected each other and had the business in common. Friendship should be enough for now. Loving him would happen gradually.

Well, that was a problem for another day. Although it had been two years since Dad had drowned, this was her first visit to the island. She'd known how difficult staying here would be. It wasn't just that Dad had died in Loon Lake. She remembered his strong love of the island. She could feel it now.

She took a deep breath and allowed her memories to wash over her. She and Dad would begin their days fishing as the sun came up, then they'd swim or sail. Sometimes they simply stretched out on the dock and sunned or, on cooler days, read by the fire. And laughed. They did a lot of laughing. The sun-splashed weeks up here had been the best of her life.

At Loon Lake, Dad took a break from urging her to give up teaching to take up her rightful place beside him running their growing string of electronics stores. She could never convince him that he didn't need her. He had Sam.

And now, Dad had won. She had taken over his place as Chief Executive Officer and major shareholder of Ellismarks Electronics. Sam, who had inherited his own father's stock a few years before, ran the day-to-day operations, but Kate was at her Dad's desk. She hated to admit it, but she was enjoying the challenge of staying on top of the constantly changing electronics business.

She sighed and started up the dock towards the slope to the cottage.

She took another deep breath, savouring the unpolluted air. The only sound was the crunch of dry leaves and pine needles under her feet. Even the golden poplar leaves were oddly quiet in the still air. Suddenly, the pleasant fresh air seemed colder and the unusual silence almost ominous.

The last thing she needed to do was to spook herself. The familiar song of the wind in the leaves and the whispering of the pine needles would come when the temperature dropped after the sun went down. She glanced up at the cottage. It felt strange to be here alone.

For a fleeting moment, she thought she saw someone sitting in her father's chair by the picture window. The figure glowed palely in the reflected light of the sunset. She blinked and the image was gone.

Surely she wasn't going to start seeing things. It was bad enough that she had absent-mindedly stepped off the curb into the path of a speeding car a few days ago. She rubbed the sore spot on her hip. Fortunately, a perfect stranger had tackled her out of the path of the car..

"Get a grip, Katie, my girl!" That's what Dad would have said to her. She blew out a noisy breath.

How could he be gone when she could feel his vibrant presence in every bit of rock and foliage? It was still hard to believe that a strong swimmer who was as familiar with boats as Jim Ellis would fall out of one and drown. Well, she had to accept the fact.

Supper was a simple one of canned soup and toast grilled under the broiler of the propane stove. When Sam had insisted on lighting the stove and the refrigerator before he left, she hadn't objected. She always hated lighting those hard-to-reach pilot lights. Living without electricity was easy enough once you knew how. It still seemed strange to put a match to the pilot to start the refrigerator, though.

She ate in front of the fireplace. The crackling of the fire was friendly and the heat welcome. Normally, she would put a CD in the battery-powered boom box but, for some reason, tonight she was too uneasy. The music would mask the night noises of the island.

There wasn't much to hear. Something small scurried in the dry leaves at the side of the building. The haunting, slightly maniacal calls of two loons echoed far away in the long bay.

A sharp click propelled her out of her chair. She recognized the sound and could see the branch that was knocking against the living room window. The breeze she had been hoping for had come up suddenly.

She peered out the window. It was sure black out there. Beyond the small area that was dimly lit by the living room lights, there was only darkness. Living in Toronto, a person forgot how black a night without city lights reflecting off the clouds could be.

She couldn't see a single light in the mainland cottages on the south shore. Thanksgiving had been early this year and most of the summer residents had closed their cottages. She knew that Sam was at his place tonight but her cottage didn't face in that direction and you couldn't even see the lake from the back windows for the dense undergrowth.

She shivered and took a well-worn Dorothy Sayers novel off the bookshelf.

She poured herself a mug of hot chocolate from the thermos that Sam had thoughtfully prepared for her. He'd had it waiting when she arrived at his landing where her boat was docked. He really was thoughtful. The island was inaccessible for too much of the year to keep much in the larder.

Kate settled down again in front of the fire. Yes, the decision to sell the cottage was a good one. She wasn't good at being this isolated. Or with being alone. She opened the book.

An hour later, even Dorothy Sayers couldn't hold her attention. Although she couldn't keep her eyes open, she was vaguely nervous and compelled to identify every little sound she heard. That groaning sound was just one branch of the big birch tree at the side of the house rubbing against another.

But that sharp snapping sound was something large stepping on a twig. She waited. Nothing. Nothing larger than a raccoon lived on the island. That was it. It was probably a raccoon.

Those little rustling sounds under the cottage were not loud enough to worry about. This was silly. She slammed the novel shut. It was time for bed.

She felt foolish taking the old five iron that her father had always kept behind the front door into the bedroom with her but she did it anyway. She didn't know what she'd do if there really were an intruder.

"Aim for the kneecap," Dad had said. Oh, sure, and the intruder would stand there while she took aim with her awkward golf swing.

She left on one of the propane lights in the living room and the one in the hallway outside her bedroom. Those lamps were like little heaters. She would be glad of the warmth in the morning. That was the only reason.

"Katie. Katie, girl. Wake up." Her father's urgent whisper drew her to consciousness.

Propane. The smell of raw propane in the room was unmistakable.

"Get up, Katie. Open the window."

She struggled to her feet, coughing and gasping for breath.

She yanked open the window beside her bed, slid aside the screen, and leaned out. As soon as she was able to draw a breath, she grabbed her flashlight from the bedside table, and stumbled into the dark hall. She didn't pause to examine why the lights were out in the hall and the living room but ran to the front door, released the dead bolt, and opened it wide.

Dizzy and nauseated from the fumes, she staggered out to the side of the house where the hundred-pound propane tanks stood, she turned off the valves on both. That was all she could do for now. She tottered over to a birch tree and sagged against it.

Her head felt as if it were being squeezed between the jaws of giant pliers and her stomach was rebelling against the gas. She didn't know how long she stood there retching and leaning dizzily against the birch. But one thing she knew for sure. The lights had not gone out because they had run out of propane. The gas had been pouring steadily out through the unlit mantles. The only way she knew to turn off those lamps was to cut off the flow of gas. It was almost as if someone had turned off the valves at the tanks, then on again.

*Someone had tried to kill her.*

That idea was preposterous. She didn't have any enemies. Some kind of obstruction must have clogged the copper tubing temporarily, just long enough to put out the lights.

She didn't try to explain to herself how her father could have awakened her. That was too bizarre.

The pale, grey light of predawn crept across the sky. Lord, it was cold. At least, the wind had dropped to nothing. She was glad she'd worn heavy

sweats to bed. Kate took a deep breath and held it long enough to venture into the cottage to get her jacket and shoes. She opened more windows and the back door to allow the gas to disperse.

Sitting on a rock by the water, she pulled on her socks and slipped her feet into her sturdy hiking shoes.

All around her, the world was glistening and pearly grey. Swirling columns of mist rose from the satiny surface of the water as far as she could see. Mist devils, her dad had called them. On mornings like this, when the wispy towers swirled as high as six or eight feet in the air, he'd take the canoe and drag a fishing line around the island. He used to get an unearthly charge out of dissipating the mist devils with his canoe.

As her head cleared, Kate considered her course of action. For the first time she regretted deciding not to have a telephone cable laid to the island. As soon as the gas cleared out, she should probably get dressed and go over to Sam's. But what could he do besides get the propane up and running again? She could do that herself.

He would insist that she call the police. What would be the point of that?

There had been no break-in. The doors had still been firmly bolted this morning. If some prankster actually had fiddled with the propane tanks, he was long gone. There'd be no way of proving that he'd ever been there.

The pungent smell of the propane reached her even here down by the water. The gas was heavier than air and must be rolling down the hill towards her in an invisible cloud. She stood up. There was no smell of gas at that level.

Suddenly, she was not alone.

"I thought you'd be sleeping in this morning, Kate," Sam's cheerful voice broke the silence.

She hadn't heard him paddling in. He eased the canoe in behind her pontoon boat and stepped lightly onto the dock.

"I came to take you fishing," he announced over his shoulder as he bent to tie up the canoe.

She'd never been so glad to see anyone. She ran down the dock to greet him.

"Oh, Sammy," she said, her voice breaking a little.

He opened his arms wide and she gratefully accepted his hug. She needed human contact at that moment. However, when he tried to kiss her, she turned her head away.

"Sammy, I had a propane leak. Or something. I woke up with the room full of gas. I was lucky I wasn't killed."

"Are you sure you're all right? Maybe you should see a doctor." His handsome face was filled with concern.

"Yes. I'm fine now." Shaking her head didn't help her headache. "I've a bit of a headache but the fresh air will fix that."

"All right, then," he said. "I'll check the propane and see if I can find the leak."

"I don't really think there is one. I left a couple of lights on and somehow they went out in the night."

"That's odd. You're sure you didn't get up and turn them off? If you cut off the gas flow just enough to turn out the light but didn't turn the knob quite all the way off, that might explain it. I'll check the lamps."

He headed quickly up to the cottage. She caught up with him as he was checking the light by the fireplace.

Kate went directly to the one in the hall that she knew she had left burning. The valve was wide open. It took three complete turns of the handle to close it.

"Nope," she said. "This one was left turned on."

Sam frowned. After a pause, he said, "Let's go out and catch ourselves some breakfast while the cottage airs out. When we get back, we can check all the connections. Don't worry. We'll find the source of the problem."

She must have looked uncertain.

"Go get your fishing rod, Kate. You can't do anything here right now."

Getting out of the cottage sounded good to her.

"Shall we take the pontoon boat?" she asked. "It's more comfortable."

"I like the canoe."

Actually, she would just as soon not have to listen to an outboard when she was fishing. "So do I," she said.

"But don't bring your net," she said, initiating an argument that had begun when they were children. "If we can't land the fish without it, the fish deserves to get away."

To her surprise, Sam quietly lifted the net out of the canoe and placed it on the dock.

A few minutes later, they had attached minnows to their lines and were drifting quietly through the mist devils not far from the island. Sam had moved to kneel in the centre of the canoe to have better access to the bait. Kate was on the bow seat, turned around to face him. Occasionally, one or the other would dip a paddle to move the canoe along.

In the background, the morning mist muted the brilliant reds and yellows of the fall leaves. Kate gazed at the glistening, constantly moving wisps while the events of the night ran through her mind. The warning in her

father's voice had been so clear. She was tempted to tell Sam about it but he would probably laugh at her. The contact with her father had been too precious to be laughed at.

"The water must still be pretty warm for the mist to form like this." Sam broke the silence.

"We've had a lot of warm days," she agreed.

There was another silence broken only by the faint lapping of ripples against the hull of the canoe.

Sam cleared his throat. "Kate. I want you to think carefully before you answer. You know all my arguments about why you should marry me. Are you sure that there is absolutely no chance that you will change your mind?"

His face was pale with tension and he was gripping his paddle so tightly that his knuckles were white. She hadn't realized that it mattered so much to him.

"Oh, Sammy, you have to accept this. I wish I did love you. We're good friends and we work well together but a marriage needs more than friendship to survive. I'm so sorry."

"Believe me, Kate." There was a coldness in Sam's voice that she had never heard before. "I'm sorry too."

In the split-second before Sam's paddle struck her head, Kate realized his intention. She ducked and tried to twist out of the path of the blade. Her quick movement made the canoe rock crazily. Sam kept his balance but the rocking threw off his aim enough that he missed striking her head. The blow struck her shoulder hard enough to knock her right out of the canoe.

She flailed around in the water trying to stay afloat while she dodged Sam's jabs with the paddle. Repeatedly he struck her shoulders and her arms. He landed one solid blow to the back of her head.

She had to get away from the canoe.

Her arms were becoming too heavy to function with the weight of her waterlogged jacket and sweat suit. Kate knew the first thing she had to do was get rid of her heavy shoes. They were like anchors dragging her down. She took a big gulp of air and submerged to tear at the laces. Somehow, she found the strength to loosen them and push the shoes off.

Dazed and in pain, she fought her way back to the surface, only to be pushed under again by the strong thrust of Sam's paddle. She tried to breathe but swallowed water instead. This time as she sank, the chill and the blackness closed in on her. She didn't have the strength to fight her way back to the surface. Her lungs ached and she knew she was losing consciousness.

Suddenly, she felt strong arms lift her to the surface. A powerful thrust propelled her high enough out of the water to allow her to gulp a mouthful of air. On her descent, she grabbed desperately for the gunwale. She caught it



with one hand and held on. Her weight on one side of the canoe flipped it over and tipped Sam into the water.

The invisible arms draped Kate's limp, barely conscious body across the overturned hull. She was conscious of being held gently and firmly while she coughed up what seemed like gallons of water.

As she lay there on top of the canoe, she observed, as if from a safe distance, Sam's attempts to dislodge her from her perch. The moment he reached for her, tendrils of mist would wrap themselves around his arms and drag him away.

She could see the terror in Sam's eyes as he struggled to evade the gauzy strands. Any part of his body that cleared the surface of the water seemed vulnerable to the mist devils.

One tentacle caught his foot and dragged him face down backwards through the water. He wrenched around and broke loose, then disappeared from view. Kate thought at first that he was gone for good but from the mist devils' behaviour she guessed that he was trying to reach the island by swimming underwater. The mist creatures converged over his route.

There was no escaping the mist although its power apparently ended at the surface of the water. Each time Sam's head broke water to breathe, it was pushed back under.

From all over the lake, swirling columns of mist converged over him. Gradually the smooth surface of the water began to swirl along with them, becoming a powerful whirlpool.

"Stop them," she sobbed. "I can't watch this."

"He killed me, Katie girl. And he wasn't going to stop until you were dead, too."

She saw Sam's dark head as he came up for air for the last time. With horror, she watched the whirlpool catch his body and gradually suck it down into the depths of the lake.

The invisible arms tightened around her as she slipped into welcome oblivion.

The sun was hot on her back when she awoke on the dock. Her clothes were dry. There was not a sign of Sam's canoe, or any other craft for that matter, on the lake. It was almost as if her attempted murder and the strange retribution that had been meted out to Sam had been nothing but a horrible nightmare.

Gingerly, she touched the lump on the back of her head. That was real enough. And Sam's fish net lay on the dock.

She smiled grimly. When they found his body, she knew what she would say.

"Yes, poor Sam. Drowned on a perfectly calm morning. Strange. Same thing happened to my Dad."

*In this story set in the Yukon, Marjorie Daniels shows us the challenges of nature the North can put in our way.*

*MARJORIE DANIELS is a former teacher with a passion for story writing. Her historical romance, **THROUGH SERENA'S EYES**, is currently available through DiskUs Publishing. She has written two more historical romances, a contemporary romantic suspense set in Spain and a romantic adventure set in Nigeria. Marjorie is presently working on a sixth book, this time with a Canadian setting. Three of her short stories have won awards in the Canadian Writer's Journal annual fiction competition and she has three dozen articles published. Her article, 'The Moon's The Limit,' won First Place in the Writer's Digest Literary Competition. When she's not writing she enjoys singing, tap dancing, running and dragon boat paddling. Marjorie lives happily with her husband, Danny, on Vancouver Island.*

You can reach Marjorie at [marjedan@shaw.ca](mailto:marjedan@shaw.ca) or visit her web page at <http://members.shaw.ca/marjedan>

Start of the Yukon Quest



## **Cheechako**

By

Marjorie Daniels

Laura raced up the snowy road to investigate the crescendo of barks, yaps and howls. Rounding the corner into the wide main street of Whitehorse, she came upon pandemonium. A mob of leaping, excitable dogs had invaded the snow-packed road. There must be hundreds of them. Maybe even a thousand. Laura couldn't begin to guess.

Some were tethered to long harness lines, hitched to sleds piled high with tarpaulin-wrapped supplies. Men and women, bundled in thick parkas,

coaxed or lifted other dogs from the backs of sturdy trucks. Dozens of canine faces poked out in rows from boxes built into the truck beds.

Most were huskies with a few crossbreeds included. The mixed breeds barked and yelped but the huskies produced an eerie howl instead. Laura thought of wolves. The hair lifted on the back of her neck.

She forgot how cold she felt. Forgot the airline had lost her luggage including her newly-bought wool sweaters and down-filled parka. She had the insane urge to leap up and down with excitement like the dogs. Despite her problems, she'd arrived in time for the start of the Yukon Quest, the toughest dog-team race in the world.

The race could win her recognition as a sports photographer. If her photos were as awesome as she hoped, they would earn top spot in the sports section of the *Arizona Star* back home. And this first visit to Canada, to capture the drama in pictures, was the adventure of a lifetime.

A horn blared behind her. She swivelled to stare into a red face glaring out at her from the driver's window of a truck. The man's face was half hidden by a curly golden beard. His mouth opened, but the barking drowned out whatever he was shouting.

She jumped aside and scowled at him. He zoomed the truck in an arc and parked with front wheels up on the sidewalk. With one leap he was out of the cab. He ran to the back and began to haul a sled down onto the packed snow of the roadway. The handles and running boards were painted a brilliant scarlet. A small but wicked-looking axe in a leather scabbard hung from one handle.

Intent on the sled, the man, whose height and bulk reminded Laura of a football defenseman, took no notice of her. The unwieldy contraption must surely outweigh him, but he hefted it as though its weight was inconsequential. He seemed to be in a great hurry.

Thank goodness she'd kept her camera in her carry-on. Forcing her numbed fingers to work, she snapped several shots of the blond giant while he stored a camp-stove, blankets and bags of dog food on the sturdy sled. She couldn't restrain her curiosity about the axe. "What's that for?" she shouted.

He turned quickly, his puzzled frown plainly saying he was surprised and annoyed at the interruption.

She pointed to the axe. "What's it for?" she shouted again, blinking as the wind whipped her face.

He looked at her, as though seeing her for the first time. "You'll freeze to death," he shouted.

She glanced down at her snow-encrusted loafers. Instinctively she shrugged herself deeper into the collar of her Gore-Tex windbreaker. "I'll be okay," she yelled. Her fingers were almost frozen in place round her Pentax. With a wince of pain she pried them free. Fearing heavy mitts would hinder

her use of the camera, she'd bought a pair of stretchy Isotoner gloves. Useless in this climate.

"You *won't* be okay," the man shouted. "What fit of insanity made you think you could survive out here without mitts or a hat? Or even a decent coat, for God's sake?"

"The airline lost my luggage." As she answered she realized the truth of his words. The arctic wind cut like a knife. Another few minutes and she would be completely unable to handle her camera.

"Get in the truck!" he shouted.

"But—"

"Stop being an idiot and get in the cab where it's warm." He took her by the arm and propelled her towards the passenger door of his vehicle. "Rusty!" he yelled to the teenager who occupied the passenger seat. "Wrap up now and get out there. Start unloading my team. This lady's in trouble here. She needs help."

Laura was about to retort that she wasn't in the least bit of trouble, but realized she couldn't make her stiff legs climb up into the cab, where the heater was pouring out the most wonderful warmth. A strong pair of arms grabbed her from behind and lifted her up onto the seat.

"Mind the door," he said, and slammed it shut. A moment later the door on the driver's side opened and the man climbed in. It was like having a bear sitting beside her. The din outside receded as he closed his door.

"What are you doing out here in those skimpy things?"

"I'm a sports photographer."

"This your first visit to the Yukon?"

Laura nodded. She rubbed fingers that hurt unbearably as the restored circulation cut like red-hot knives.

"From some place in the banana belt?"

"Arizona."

"I have American friends in California and not one of 'em knows beans about Canada." He shook his head. "I guess it's the same in Arizona."

"I knew it would be cold. I told you the airline lost my luggage. They said it might be here tomorrow."

"But the Quest starts today." He burrowed into the cuff of his parka and checked a bulky sports watch. "In about an hour. And the temperature is thirty-below. You'll freeze to death if you stay outside in that thin jacket."

Thirty-below zero was beyond Laura's experience, whether the guy was talking Fahrenheit or Centigrade. *Quite a switch between the Arizona Diamondbacks' spring training camp and a dogsled race in the Yukon.*

She nursed her tortured hands. "I had to photograph the Diamondbacks first," she admitted. "But I thought I'd be in plenty of time."

The guy called Rusty knocked on the window. "Better get going, Jay. The judges started checking all the sleds."

Jay opened the cab door a crack. "I'm on my way," he shouted.

A swirl of frigid air swept in. Laura shivered and he quickly closed the door again. "I'm not kidding. You'll literally freeze to death."

He was right. She cupped her fingers round her mouth and blew into the hollow of her palms, aware of his narrowed blue eyes assessing her. "I've come all this way to get pictures," she said. "How can I miss the start of the race?"

He shrugged and shook his head. His eyes crinkled. She thought she saw a grin forming in the curly golden beard.

"If I had a beard like yours, I wouldn't freeze my face at least," she said.

He chuckled. A deep, pleasant rumble. Burrowing into the glove compartment he dragged out a purple woolly object. "Here, Cheechako. This should stop your ears from dropping off."

"My name is Laura," she said, "What do you mean, Chee-chak-o?"

"That's a newcomer or tenderfoot. No self-respecting Sourdough would go without a tuque in this weather."

After the briefest hesitation Laura pulled the thick knitted hat on her head. "Thanks," she said. "You knit this yourself?"

The chuckle sounded again. Then he frowned. "Can't do a thing about your feet," he said. "Drop by the sporting goods store for snow boots." He reached behind his seat, produced a fleece-lined coat and draped it across her shoulders. It was miles too big for her and the suede was stained and dirty. "Put this on over your jacket. Ought to help some."

"Why are you doing this for me?" she asked.

He raised his eyebrows. "This is the North, lady. We look out for each other."

"Jay!" Rusty opened the door again. This time Laura didn't shiver, thanks to the comforting tent of the old coat. "Your team is all ready and I'm freezing my buns out here."

"Coming," Jay said. He turned to Laura. "You want to stay in here a bit and keep warm?"

"I can't miss all the wonderful chaos out there." Already she had to shout to be heard above the noise.

As she climbed out of the cab, Jay came around to the passenger side. "Here." He thrust a pair of fur mitts into her hands.

"But...you'll need these," she protested.

"I prefer ones with gauntlets. These are spares. I won't need 'em."

Laura retrieved her camera from the seat of the cab. "I don't know how to thank you," she said. But he merely waved and turned to where Rusty waited with his team of huskies, all jumping and straining against the trace lines.

In contrast, the massive white husky, tethered at the very front, sat still. As Jay walked towards him the dog turned his head and gazed up.

"He's Springer, my leader," Jay said to Laura, who'd followed close behind. "He's done this a time or two so he knows what's ahead."

"A thousand miles of snowy trails." Laura had done her research.

"In Canada we call it sixteen hundred kilometres." Jay said as he bent to fondle Springer's ears. "You'd better get down the street if you don't want to miss the start."

"What number are you?" She knew each musher received a number and teams started one by one, since a mass start of some fifty dog teams would be impractical.

"Twenty-nine." Jay waved and started towards his sled. "Get boots!" he yelled over his shoulder.

But there was no time. Over the din, a loudspeaker announced the start of the race. The first team was already in place beneath the large banner flapping in the wind at the end of the street. Willing her feet to respond, Laura pushed her way through crowds of spectators, all muffled in hoods and bulky coats.

She hobbled past the start line and found a good position ahead, ready to capture the first team's departure. What a sight! Twelve huskies in a tandem file. Tongues lolled, shoulders strained and legs pumped madly as they raced towards her. On the step at the back of the laden sled stood the musher, face almost obscured by the fur ruff around the hood of his bright orange parka.

Now was the moment, with the lead dog just a few feet from her lens. Laura tried to press the button, but with the bulky glove on her hand her finger wouldn't connect. "Dammit!" she cried and shook off the glove.

Again she focused.

Too late.

With a whoosh the team swept by her. In a futile effort to salvage something, anything, she snapped the back of the musher as the sled bumped onto the frozen river at the end of the street.

The Yukon River, headed for Lake Laberge. She'd researched all the archives she could lay hands on and had memorized the route. She'd worked so hard. And she'd blown it, right at the start.

*Damn.*

But, she could still get great pictures of some of the other teams. There was Jay with team number twenty-nine, for example.

Her recklessly-bared hand was already white. She must search for the glove she'd discarded. She must get the circulation going at once. Teeth gritted she tried to walk. But her feet wouldn't respond.

Suddenly she found herself face down on the ground, her cry of shock and frustration muffled by the snow sifting into her mouth and nostrils.

"Stand back. Let the doc take a look at her," came a voice in the wind.

"My God. Look at them shoes," another voice said.

Laura was hoisted to a sitting position. A woman with a red wool hat and faced pinched with cold pulled off Laura's shoes and chafed her feet which had turned to white lumps. "We've gotta get you to the hospital," the woman said.

It was five long, painful days before the doctor who treated Laura would let her walk on her frostbitten feet. She didn't know which was worse, the physical pain or the anguish of seeing her big opportunity vanish.

"Lucky you're young and healthy," the doctor said, when her purple, swollen feet returned to more normal appearance. "I guess you weren't prepared for our temperatures."

"The airline lost my bags." Laura said.

She recalled the burst of optimism that had prompted her to buy the warm clothing and plane ticket with her credit card. How stupidly rash.

"I've gone deep into debt for this freelance job. If I don't take pictures back with me..."

The doctor pursed his lips. "Maybe all isn't lost...just yet."

Laura hauled herself up to stand on those two sore feet. "Tell me," she said.

"If you can get to Dawson City by road you could still get ahead of the mushers."

"Dawson. That's about halfway," she said.

He nodded. "The leaders should be there tomorrow. Maybe you can hitch a ride with a truck driver I know."

That night, after a jolting, five-hour drive, Laura reached Dawson City, wearing the warm clothes that had belatedly arrived. Her feet, clad in new boots, itched from the heat in the cab. She pulled Jay's coat over her new parka, hoisted her backpack and hurried towards three muffled figures who waited with lanterns at the riverbank.

"Any racers here, yet?" she called.

"Nope. Leader should be in around first light," one of the group answered.

The voice sounded familiar. "Rusty?" she called.

"Yup?" Lantern in hand, the tall youth came towards her and stared. "The Yank photographer! We heard you'd froze your feet."

"How's Jay doing?"

Rusty grinned. "He was leading the pack by the time they made the first checkpoint near Carmacks. I've never seen the team go so good."

"That's fabulous," she said. "I'm in time for pictures."

Along with the three patient watchers, she peered into the distance, willing Jay to come into view. Rusty jiggled his feet. "Have to keep moving," he said. "Got to keep 'em warm."

Laura tried a little jig but her backpack weighed her down. "I should park this stuff somewhere," she said.

"Jay's truck's over here," Rusty pointed a mittened hand towards a dark shape along the bank. "It ain't going anywhere 'til Jay leaves."

Laura removed her camera bag, stuffed with extra film, from the backpack and stashed the rest of the pack inside the truck.

"If you can't find a place to stay you can always get a cot at my mom's place." Rusty scribbled an address on a scrap of paper. "Jay lives here too, but his place is too far up the hillside."

"Thanks." Northern hospitality again.

"Musher coming!" One of the waiting men yelled.

She squinted to where his arm pointed. In the distance she spied a team of ants joined together by traces of thread. Behind them, the sled was the size Laura's thumb. A furry figure clung and swayed on the step behind.

"Yahoo!" Rusty yelled. "That's Jay."

Even though the moonlight washed out colours on the river's surface, Laura could make out the touches of red on the sled.

Rusty whooped with joy. "Gotta go check to see if Jay's store of dog feed and fresh supplies are ready for him down at the camp site." He trotted with clumsy steps down the bank and onto the riverbed. Determined not to miss a thing, Laura padded down onto the ice behind him,

The racer and dogs grew in size as they got closer and closer. Laura began to take pictures. The dogs raced in eagerly, as though they knew food and rest were to be found here. When Jay brought the team to a halt in a flurry of snow he was scarcely recognizable. His beard, mustache and eyebrows were caked with white frost.

He pulled off a glove and plucked the ice pellets off his eyelashes. Then his frosty brows lifted in surprise when he recognized Laura. "Hey, your



feet must be okay. That's good." Although he gave her a quick grin he appeared weary.

"Can I help you? Feed your dogs or something?" She really wanted to shoot a million pictures, but Jay looked as though he could do with some help.

"No!" Jay and Rusty both spoke at once. "We're not allowed to accept assistance from anyone," Jay said quickly. "See, even Rusty can't help, and he's my handler. He was allowed to bring fresh supplies ahead, but I'm on my own for the rest."

"You don't want to see him disqualified," Rusty chimed in. "But you can take pictures. He'll be making his camp way over there, close to the trees, where I've left his tent and stuff."

Laura followed as Jay steered his dogs to the spot he'd chosen, around the bend in the river, out of sight of the houses of Dawson. He seemed immersed in a world of his own as he made camp. His dogs flopped down, tongues lolling, on the piles of straw Jay spread for them. Jay stroked Springer's head and spoke soothingly to him, then did the same with each of the other dogs.

Within the next hour, as the orange-pink dawn turned to daylight, Laura concentrated on her task, cold, hunger and sore feet forgotten. She captured a story in pictures while, with measured efficiency, a tired Jay built a fire, heated snow in pans and gave the water to his dogs, along with their rations of food. Then he tended to his dogs' feet, took off their orange booties, spread ointment on twelve sets of paws and replaced worn booties with fresh.

Only when he'd finished all that, and seen his dogs curled up asleep on the straw set out for each one, did he heat a can of soup for himself.

"Now for a good sleep." Jay took off his glove, rubbed his eyes and quickly put the glove on again. "Race rules dictate a thirty-six hour layover here, to give mushers and dogs a chance to rest and recover. And to fix any problems with the sleds."

"Does your sled need repair?"

"Nothing much. Can't believe how well it's holding up. But I'll double-check tomorrow while the vet is inspecting my dogs."

Jay yawned. "Jeff King should be coming in," he said. "Go get pictures of him. He's a pro. Been doing this race for years." He shook his head in wonderment. "I never expected to get ahead of Jeff."

He turned to Rusty. "You go rest up. I'm going to crash now. Come back tomorrow night, a couple of hours before I'm due to leave."

Laura hurried back to the arrival area, hidden from view round the bend, where a second team was arriving. By now, brilliant sunlight glinted off the snow. To her surprise she found it was almost midday. Jay had certainly made a great head start.

For the rest of the day she almost forgot about Jay as she shot her rolls of film, capturing scenes of excitement mixed with deep fatigue. Five more teams came in. One musher carried three sick dogs on his sled. Another had two mournful doggy faces peering out from blankets in a big basket. The last two sleds to arrive, as daylight faded from the sky, looked as though they needed major repair.

Laura was suddenly overwhelmed with weariness. She'd missed a whole night's sleep. Climbing up the riverbank, she found her backpack in Jay's cold, unlocked truck and headed towards the lights of the houses. She counted herself lucky to get a plate of buffalo stew and a rollaway cot from Rusty's mom.

Early next morning saw her out on the river again. First, she'd check on Jay. He'd used up twenty-four hours of his layover. Only twelve to go before he took off into the darkness to travel through the night. On the ten-minute tramp to his camp spot she felt a tingle of anticipation to be seeing him again.

She rounded the bend. In the distance his dogs moved restlessly on their patches of straw. The sled was sitting out on the river ice. But where was Jay?

As she drew nearer, the dogs lifted their heads and began to howl. It was unlike the exuberant sound she'd heard before the race began. A knot of sudden anxiety tightened in her chest and she ran towards them.

On the white river surface, between the sled and the shore, Laura spotted a pile of dark clothing. And something red on the snow beside it.

"Oh, no..." she breathed. Jay was face down and unmoving. A spreading pool of blood stained the snow.

"Jay!" A sob burst from her lips.

Casting aside her camera bag she knelt in the snow, rolled him over onto his back and gasped at the raw marks that ripped down one side of his face, right into his beard. With her face close to his she felt a weak breath of air from his blue lips.

His parka hood was off and his woollen hat lay a couple of feet away. Blood poured from the side of his head just above his ear. *She must stop the flow of blood.* She grabbed his hat to use as a pad, but though she pressed against the wound until her arms ached and the woollen hat was soaked, the flow didn't dry up.

She needed more pressure.

Her fingers shook as she unclipped the leather strap from her camera bag. Tugging her own knitted hat from her head she wadded it into a fresh pad and bound it round his head with the strap. The wind whipped against her bare head and she hastily pulled up the hood of her jacket.

Jay started to moan. Thank God. He was regaining consciousness. But great shivers shook his body. *Shock setting in from the blood loss,* she

thought. They were too far from Dawson for anyone to hear cries for help. First, she must stop the bleeding and keep him warm. Then she could go seek assistance.

In a moment she'd stripped off the coat that Jay had given her and tucked it round his shoulders. She ran to the small domed tent, beneath the winter bare branches of trees on the nearby shore, and dragged out the rolled sleeping bag she found.

"You're going to be okay," she told Jay.

His eyes were hidden beneath the wad of wool around his head, but she could see his lips and they were still blue. Alarm spurred her on to stuff his feet into the sleeping bag and tug it up around him to reach his head.

She loosened the strap to check the wound. Thank heaven the blood had stopped flowing, but she bound the wool hat back in place, just to be sure. Kneeling beside him she touched the unhurt side of his face. "Jay," she said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah...can hear y...."

She let out a breath of relief. "I'm going to get help, right away."

"Watch out...," Jay muttered.

Instinctively she glanced around. To her left, the dogs still howled uneasily on their piles of straw where they were individually staked. To her right, trees grew down to the river's edge. Back the way she had come was Dawson city and help. Behind her, great stretches of frozen river rolled onward to Eagle and the next checkpoint, hundreds of miles away.

"Watch out...," he muttered again.

Laura's attention was suddenly caught by a movement beneath the trees. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She jumped to her feet, straining her eyes to see.

Something the size of a terrier dog, covered with blackish fur. Tearing at a ragged pile of dirty white fuzz smeared with dark red. The carcass of a husky dog, being torn to pieces.

"Wolverine." Jay's voice was a little stronger now. "Maybe still there."

"Yes." Laura heard the tremor in her voice as she answered.

"My dog." It looked for a second as though Jay was trying to get up. His arms thrashed.

"Lie still. You can't help him now."

*And I can't leave Jay alone and vulnerable now.*

A knot of fear tightened in her throat, making it hard to breathe. But her photographer's eye couldn't resist. Gruesome as this was, she must try to record it. Eyes glued on the distant animal, she shed her thick mitts,

dragged her camera from its bag, fastened on her telephoto lens and looked into the viewfinder.

Long pointed teeth gnawed at something that no longer had shape. The wolverine's face, ringed by a buff-coloured mask, was set in a snarl. An enormous bushy tail curved over its stout body and legs. Vicious claws tore at bloody, steaming entrails. All Laura could recognize were the legs of the freshly killed husky, pathetic sticks jutting out.

Teeth gritted against her body's need to vomit, she clicked and clicked again, to record this age-old scene of survival. Then, slipping off the telephoto lens, she recorded a close-up shot of Jay, the strong, intrepid musher, fallen prey, not to a feared grizzly or a rampaging moose, but a rapacious, starving carnivore half his size.

What a story.

But would she survive to use it?

*Okay, big brave cheechako. So you're committed to staying here. How can you even protect yourself, let alone Jay?*

The little axe hung at the side of the sled. Laura slipped it out of its leather holder and grasped the handle in one gloved hand.

Now what?

Heart pounding, eyes glued to the wolverine still gorging on the carcass in the distance, she willed herself to be ready for whatever might happen.

Jay had asked Rusty to come back around six o'clock, just a couple of hours before he was supposed to leave. Laura checked her watch. Three-thirty. And daylight waning already. She shivered and drew her hood further down over her head.

A slight snarl made her whip round, her whole body on alert. For one terrible second, she stared at the longest, most horrible set of fangs she'd ever seen. In the fading light the wolverine's eyes glittered like two evil black diamonds as he leapt at her.

With the strength of sheer terror, she crashed the axe blade across those demon eyes. The wolverine backed away, shrieking. Blood streamed down its face. Then it sprang towards her again.

She swung the axe at the growling mouth, at those deadly teeth. The crack of the impact almost broke her arm.

The wolverine collapsed onto the snow at her feet.

But, was it dead? She couldn't take a chance. Once more she swung the axe.

This time it severed the neck. Blood gushed from the wound, much the way Jay's blood had been streaming when she'd found him.

Laura turned aside and retched. Then she had to sit down before her legs failed her altogether.

Suppose there were other wolverines? She would never have the strength to deal with another one.

Forcing her rubbery legs to take her weight she ran to Jay and heaved at the sleeping bag.

"Jay! We can't wait here for help."

"What...?" Jay muttered. He struggled to sit up, then fell back as though in a daze.

"I'm taking you back on the sled."

His eyes flickered open. "How the hell...?"

"I can't lift you," she said. "Can you roll?" She kneeled down and pushed him as though he were a giant log. With every ounce of strength she shoved and prodded him to roll until, somehow, he lay on the sled, eyes closed, as though exhausted.

She was sweating. What came next?

Harness the dogs. The traces were laid out in the snow in front of the sled. But the dogs wouldn't let her get near. Her approach sent them into even more frenzied howls, leaps and snarls.

"Springer," Jay muttered. For the second time he attempted to sit up but seemed unable to break out of his weak, half-conscious state.

"Springer...take...home."

She had a sudden idea. Taking Jay's big coat, which she'd draped over his sleeping bag, she put it on over her parka and walked to where Springer was tethered. He watched her approach uncertainly. She held out one hand, enveloped by the grubby leather cuff.

"Springer...take us home," she said in a firm voice.

The dog sniffed the jacket, pricked up his ears, cocked his head sideways and looked at Laura expectantly.

"Springer...Jay is hurt. Take us home." She reached for the harness around his chest and shoulders. He kept still while she unhooked him from the tether line and then let her lead him to the trace lines. With some fumbling, she clipped his harness to the leader's place, where he stood, head up and tail wagging, as though ready for action.

Now would the rest of the team follow Springer's lead?

Some skittered and resisted but she persisted until they were all hitched.

"Mush!" she shouted.

Springer leaned into the harness, the team followed and the sled jerked forward. Laura leaped onto the step at the back.

But the sled was facing the wrong way. They were headed for the wilderness.

What had she heard the mushers shout? "Haw!" she shrieked.

To her amazement, Springer veered left and the rest of the team followed in an arc that almost took them to the river bank before the sled pulled around to head in the opposite direction.

Laura felt dizzy with relief. "Home, Springer!" she shouted.

The sled swayed and jolted over the bulges and ruts of the frozen river surface. Laura clamped her fingers and clung on. Jay groaned and tried, yet again, to sit up but failed.

"Yahoo!" she shouted. "We're getting there."

As they rounded the bend Laura could see race officials checking in a freshly arrived team. She recognized the bright orange parka of the first musher to leave Whitehorse. He must have had problems on the trail to get this far behind.

Jay's dogs broke into howls and yaps as they caught sight of the other team ahead of them. Alarmed officials ran towards them, waving and shouting.

In a tangle of traces the team skidded and tumbled to a halt.

Laura leaped off the sled and rushed forward to check on Jay. "You okay?" she panted.

"Nice going, Cheechako," he muttered.

"I'm a Sourdough," Laura said. "And next year I plan to catch you at the finish line."

A grin flickered across Jay's face. "Right. And I'll be coming in first."

*In this story, Jillian Dagg shows us that changing our mind about love is sometimes a good thing.*

*Jillian has been creating stories since she was a little girl, and her love of reading romance novels turned into a writing career. She has published print novels with Silhouette, Berkley Jove, Simon & Schuster, Robinson Scarlet, and Avalon. Her electronic books are published with Hard Shell Word Factory, Muse Creations, New Concepts Publishing and LTD Books. Many of her novels have been translated around the world. Jillian is a Charter Member of Romance Writers of America and a long time member of The Writers' Union of Canada.*



## **Love Doesn't Separate**

by

Jillian Dagg

The phone rings. Rachel frowns. It is that ominous after ten o'clock at night ring, when it's past the boundaries when phone calls are expected. Visions of family chaos in Vancouver are with her as she picks up the receiver.

"Mrs. Rachel Morris?"

"Yes." Voice shaking with expectations.

"Your husband is Paul Morris?"

*Sort of*, she thinks, then says, "Yes. He is."

"This is Doctor Hoover. Paul's Doctor. He's been involved in a car accident. Luckily nothing broken. But he has suffered a concussion. We're holding him in hospital for observation. He does seem upset about something."

"Upset?"

"Agitated. Sad."

"Could that be caused by the concussion?"

"Possibly. He's sleeping now, but I'm sure he would appreciate a visit tomorrow."

Rachel takes down the details, hangs up the phone. Paul isn't really her responsibility anymore. He moved out of their house in Burlington and lives in an apartment in Hamilton, not far from the hospital he's in.

She returns to her work on her home computer. It is a report for the office due for an early morning advertising meeting, but the phone call has ripped apart her concentration. Worry niggles at her mind. She sighs and gets up. There is still some coffee in the carafe in the kitchen, so she pours some into a mug.

When Paul lived here they often shared an evening nightcap before bed. Now she takes her nightcap by herself and she rarely retires before midnight. She admits that sleeping alone doesn't appeal to her.

*Paul. Agitated. Sad. Upset.*

They met at a wedding on a day Rachel felt she looked terrific. She wore a blue silk dress, her auburn hair upswept in casual curls. Paul was the best man of the wedding party. He was tall, dark haired and broad shouldered in his black suit. Love was immediate and urgent. The next wedding was their own.

The first six years flew by in a blissful glow. They both worked hard at their jobs. Paul was an engineer. Rachel had a promotion in the advertising agency. They traded their downtown Hamilton city apartment for a house near Lake Ontario in Burlington. Marriage was fun.

In their seventh year Paul was promoted to a managerial position and began to work longer hours. Suddenly he was never home and Rachel felt as if she was running their house alone. She also had a great deal to do for her own job. She began to think that if she didn't have Paul she wouldn't have so much to do. She could concentrate on her job and aim for more promotions. She wouldn't be so stressed. She might even have some time for herself. She had become a housekeeper, their marriage a mere live-in arrangement of strangers who passed in the morning. Neither one of them had the time to squeeze in romance between the daily demands. Love had died.

"Wouldn't it be better," Rachel had told him, "if we weren't married?"

Paul's hands always push anxiously through his thick brown hair when he is upset. "You mean, just live together?"

"No." She remembers turning to the window, staring out at barren trees and a road covered with winter slush. Her life seemed as grey as the weather. "I mean, separate. Not live together."

"Really? So what's brought this on?"

She had continued to stare at the bleak winter day. She truly didn't know the answer to his question. Everything inside was mixed up. She just



knew there was no more glow. Life was drudgery. When she looked at Paul, she didn't feel anything anymore. She was truthful. "I don't know what love is anymore. Is it folding your underwear, sorting your socks and cooking meals you don't come home for?"

"Is that what you think it is?"

"At times I do. Yes. I'm confused."

"Obviously."

She could tell he wasn't pleased with her idea, and over the next few weeks they circled each other like nervous animals. Rachel was loaded with overtime from the office. She was home late all the time so she barely noticed that Paul was vague. Finally he left. He took two bags, two boxes, his laptop and the cat, which had come with him when they had married. He phoned her at work to tell her he had rented an apartment in Hamilton near their old one. Rachel figured their marriage was over. Eventually, she might divorce him. This had happened to friends. She had never expected the same thing to happen to her. But it had. She was separated from her husband.

\* \* \*

Rachel sleeps restlessly that night, worrying about Paul alone in the hospital bed. She arrives at the office late, but just in time for the meeting. She presents her report, but she can't concentrate very well. She looks at the men and women she usually enjoys working with and keeps thinking of Paul. His parents died when they were quite young. His mother of cancer. His father of a heart attack. He lived with an elderly aunt who passed away two years ago. Rachel was his family now, he had told her after Aunt Margaret's funeral.

She drives to the hospital at lunchtime, realizing, as she walks up the corridor to Paul's room, that she should be armed with fruit or something for him. She feels guiltily empty-handed. A nurse hovers by the end of the bed and Rachel hears Paul and the woman share a joke. The nurse turns and smiles at her.

"I've come to visit Mr. Morris," Rachel says. "I'm his, er...wife."

"His first visitor. How nice. He's getting along fine today."

The nurse leaves. Rachel stands at the foot of the bed, purse strap over her shoulder, silly nervousness making her unsteady on the high heels that match her green wool suit. Paul looks pale in the hospital robe. He has nipped his chin shaving. Yet he's handsome, the way he always is. She knows she has made a grave mistake with him. She does still love him.

She notices that he doesn't smile for her. His jaw is taut. She clears her throat. "Are you fine?"

Paul leans wearily against the pillows. "A headache. That's all."

"How bad was the accident?"

"I wrapped the car around a fire hydrant. No one else was involved. I wrote off my car."

"It could have been worse." What if he'd been injured more badly? What if he'd died? She can't bear to think about it. "Why would you do that? You're such a good driver."

"It was my own fault. I was daydreaming."

She wants to ask about what, but Paul sighs deeply and says, "I'm worried sick about Jackson."

Their cat. His cat. "You haven't contacted a neighbour?"

"I don't know any neighbours yet. But he definitely needs feeding."

"I'll go."

Paul leans over to open the top drawer of the cabinet. "The keys are here."

Rachel reaches in and picks up his keys. They feel familiar. Heavy, a good weight. He used to place his keys on the dresser every night.

"Anything else?" she asks. She knows now she is the only one who can help him. She wants to help him.

"My mail box key is there. And..." he rubs his jaw. "Maybe you could pick up my electric shaver. I got mangled by the nurse this morning." He leans back on the pillows. He has very blue eyes usually but right now they seem dull, as if the sky is raining.

"I'll do all that," she tells him. "I'll be back."

"Thanks Rae."

She escapes the hospital. She drives to his apartment. Paul has a few pieces of mail, mostly utility bills. The apartment is sparse. His two boxes haven't been unpacked. There's nothing much in the refrigerator but cat food. And Jackson is meowing furiously and looking fierce. He's sleek black, like satin even though he's ten now. He recognizes Rachel and begins to purr as she feeds him. She decides to take Jackson back to the house.

Instead of going to the office, Rachel goes home with Jackson. Jackson, back in familiar surroundings, chases his tail, chases rainbows at the end of the sunlight. At the supermarket Rachel buys fruit, chocolate chip cookies, Paul's favourite, and a couple of car magazines that Paul likes. She goes back to work and returns to the hospital in evening visiting hours.

Paul smiles when he sees the loot. "Thanks. I'm starting to get bored."

"That's a good sign," she says, sitting on a chair beside him.

"How's Jackson?"

"I took him home to my place. He's happy now."

"Good. I'm getting out at noon tomorrow."

"How will you get home?"

"Cab I suppose. I'll have to look for another car."

"Do you need fresh clothes?"

"Could you?"

"Yes. I'll get everything and come by tomorrow and drive you home."

"Thanks." He shifts in the bed. "I know this is difficult for you, Rae. I know it's taking you away from your work, but I don't have anyone else. I really don't."

She lowers her head and clasps her hands, then she looks at him. "What were you daydreaming about when you crashed?"

"Nothing much."

"You always told me your dreams."

"Not any more I don't."

She shook her head. "You haven't unpacked properly at your place. Aren't you going to stay there?"

"When we sell the house I'll decide."

"Sell the house?"

He looks her right in the eyes. "Aren't we getting a divorce? Isn't that what you want?"

"I suppose." She hasn't got past *separated* yet. She doesn't want separated anymore either. She wants Paul.

"Rachel, you have to make up your mind about me. You can't keep me hanging like this. I need to get on with my life."

She lets out a short breath. "Of course you do. It's just that, before we separated I did so much for you and I got nothing in return."

"And I did nothing, I suppose. I didn't shovel the walk when it snowed. I didn't fix your car when it broke down. I didn't mow the lawn every Sunday during the summer. You do what you did best and I did what I do best. And we did other things together."

Rachel hasn't thought of all that stuff. Ever. Possibly she was too wrapped up in herself. Or maybe she used the sharing of tasks to hide the real issues. Their work had consumed them. Their intimacy diminished. They stopped being together. Together the way a married couple should be together. She definitely needs to be alone to think. She rises from the chair. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She doesn't sleep. She arrives at the office early and does some work she doesn't feel like doing. She can't seem to get involved while Paul needs her. Later she leaves the office and goes to Paul's apartment again. She selects golf slacks, a shirt, sweater, leather jacket. She packs them into one

of the bags she remembers him taking on vacation once. They had flown to Barbados and indulged in two weeks of sun, surf and loving. And yet they haven't been away for five years. Now that they could really afford it, they don't go.

At the hospital, while Paul dresses, Rachel stares out of the window. There are blossoms on the magnolia tree. Transient fragile white blossoms traced with pale pink. They won't be here next week. Love is as fragile as those blossoms and she was going to throw it away. Paul could easily have died in his accident. If he had, she would have died as well. Because he didn't, she might have a second chance.

When she turns around he has on his leather jacket and he's picking up his bag.

"Tell me your daydream?" she asks.

He slips his keys into his pocket with a jangle. "I was daydreaming about getting back with you. I'll always love you. But if you don't love me, then fine, we'll go our separate ways."

Rachel didn't think he loved her anymore. Here's her opportunity. Her spring. She takes a few steps closer to him. "Paul. It's not the same without you."

"I knew it wouldn't be. But you didn't."

Rachel is beside him now. She puts her arms around him. He lets go of the bag and holds her. "We'll have to work out some things," he says. "We have to sit down and talk."

"We should have talked before."

"We were using up our lives with other things. It's not all your fault, Rae. I've been doing a lot of thinking while we've been apart. I didn't plan to have an accident, but thinking about you made me have it and it's brought us back together."

"I love you," she says and plans to say it every day from now on.

"Let's get out of here then."

In her car, Paul asks where she's taking him.

Rachel smiles. For the first time in ages, she feels alive like she did on her wedding day. "To *our* place."

*In Judy Bagshaw's story, love, jealousy and friendship get involved in power plays. Unlike our cherished Canadian sport, however, this game can be played around a cup of coffee and everyone can be a winner.*

*Judy comes to writing after a fulfilling career in education. She has long been filled with the idea of creating romantic stories that feature women and men considered to be outside the conventions of mainstream romantic fiction. Most of her novels and short stories feature plus-sized heroines who reflect life as she herself understands it.*

*Currently available from the author (formerly with Wordbeams) are her two popular contemporary romance novels, **Love by the Pound (YA)**, recently listed on the Ebook Eleven Bestsellers List, and **Teacher's Pet**. She has completed a third novel and is hard at work on the next.*

*You can find excerpts and reviews of her work at her website, <http://writerlady.homestead.com/homepage.html> or contact the author at [writestuff0@yahoo.com](mailto:writestuff0@yahoo.com)*



## **The Puck Stops Here**

By

Judy Bagshaw

"Hey, watch it lady!"

Janelle watched her friend Robin barge through the doors of the Java Hut coffee shop, her headlong rush causing a near collision of two other patrons.

"Oh my God, I really need this." Robin collapsed onto the hard plastic seat across from Janelle and in quick order, shed gloves, tuque, scarf and

army green parka. Without a word, Janelle handed her a steaming mug of Java Hut's best blend and waited to hear details of the latest of Robin's crises.

"What would I do without caffeine?" Robin said. She took a gulp and followed with a deep sigh.

"Probably sleep a lot more," Janelle said, "and fidget a lot less."

"I don't fidget," Robin said and brushed imaginary crumbs off the table. She hitched her bra strap back onto her shoulder, then tore open a pack of sweetener and dumped it in the mug. With furious concentration she stirred her drink.

Janelle smiled. "So why this urgent need to meet for coffee this morning?" She took a sip of her hot chocolate and waited. Long experience had taught her what to expect.

"I broke up with Jamie last night," Robin said. "Now, I know what you're going to say."

"And what's that?" Janelle took another sip.

"That I must be out of my mind to break up with someone as great as Jamie, and that I've made a career out of breaking up with great guys. Maybe I need some counselling to help me get to the bottom of why I sabotage every good relationship I ever have."

"I was going to say all that. My, my."

"Well don't bother! I have my reasons. Good reasons and I don't want to talk about it." Robin waved her spoon for emphasis.

"Okay." Janelle broke a muffin apart and started buttering the halves.

"I mean, how many hockey games did he really expect me to go to? I hate hockey. I hate sitting around a cold rink with frozen toes, watching a bunch of guys bang a stupid puck around with stupid sticks."

"Did Jamie know you thought it was stupid? And aren't you exaggerating a bit?"

"Exaggerating! Look, you weren't there. I swear we spent every waking minute together at a rink."

"Well it is the national obsession. Why didn't you just tell him you didn't like it?"

"He should have known! I mean, really. Did he honestly think I'd spend the rest of my life following him around hockey rinks?"

"I suspect that since you didn't tell him any differently, then yes, maybe he did."

"When he told me he had got us Leafs season's tickets, that was the last straw." She slammed the spoon on the table and grabbed the other

muffin on Janelle's tray. She ripped the top off, turned it upside down and took a bite.

"Was that symbolic?" Janelle said.

"What do you mean?" Robin said through a mouthful of muffin and then paused, the joke registering. "Ha-ha. Jamie's head is still safe on his shoulders. But the thought is tempting."

Janelle laughed. "Honestly Robin, sometimes I think you just expect too much from the men in your life."

"How can you say that?" Indignation was written all over Robin's face. "I'm the sweetest, most agreeable girlfriend. Stop chuckling! I am."

"Okay, if you say so. You want another coffee?"

Janelle stood at the counter waiting for refills, and thought back over the years of her friendship with Robin. They had been best friends from the time they met on the school bus in grade nine, two misfits with potential. Robin, with her carrot-red hair and riot of freckles, had been lively, reckless, fun loving, and a source of continuous fascination for Janelle, who was quieter, more stable.

Janelle had lost count of the number of hearts Robin had broken over those years, but it was quite a few. Most of them had been perfectly nice guys. Janelle would have given her eye teeth to have one-tenth of the opportunities with guys that Robin had had. She'd given up trying to understand Robin's need to avoid commitment. It was a quirk, quite frankly, that irritated the hell out of her.

"So you think I was wrong?" Robin said as she doctored her coffee.

"I didn't say that," Janelle said, "but I have to wonder why you always seem to do this."

"Do what?"

"Well, you meet all these attractive, great guys all the time. You're a regular man magnet. Don't laugh. You always manage to find something wrong and toss them away just when things seem to be getting serious. ."

"You make me sound like some kind of Hard-Hearted Hannah. I'm not you know. I'm a really a sweet, sensitive, easy-going girl. It's the men who are difficult."

Janelle made a sound suspiciously like a snort.

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Well, let's see," Janelle started ticking off on her fingers, "You dropped Barry when he grew a beard and you decided he was selfish because it gave you whisker burns. Stuart's feet were too big in proportion to his body. Larry talked with is mouth full. Damien was too short. Doug was too tall. Raymond was losing his hair—"

"All right, stop already!" Robin put her hands over her reddened cheeks and rested her elbows on the table. "You make me seem so frivolous."

Janelle immediately felt guilty. "I'm sorry. It's just...Oh, forget it." She absently stirred her hot chocolate.

"Just what?" Robin was eyeing her friend intently. It was one of those rare moments when she was aware of someone other than herself, and it made Janelle uncomfortable.

"Never mind," Janelle said and plastered a bright smile on her face. "So, you're single again. Any new prospects in sight?"

"Nah, nah, nah," Robin said, wagging a finger. "You're not changing the subject. You were about to say something before and I'd like to hear it."

Janelle sighed and slumped back into her chair. She had trouble looking at her friend. "I don't want to argue with you," she said softly.

"Why would we argue?"

"Look, I know you. You'll get all defensive and then mad and then we won't speak for a couple of weeks and I'll feel bad and you'll feel bad and..."

"You're stalling," Robin said. "I promise I won't get mad."

Janelle looked at her friend to gauge her words. Then, reassured a little, she plunged ahead.

"For as long as I've known you, you've had this pattern with guys. I don't think that you're even aware of it. You meet someone and immediately fall madly in love, or lust, or whatever it is. We get together for coffee and you tell me how perfect he is, and he's the one, and you've met your soul mate and, even though I feel it's happening too fast, I'm happy for you. I really am. Mind you, I haven't had a serious relationship in God knows how long and I've been out with every loser in the Greater Toronto Area but..."

"That's not true."

"Let me finish. I don't begrudge you your social life. When you have a new man in your life, I don't see you for weeks on end because you are so in love and everything revolves around your boyfriend. Then you introduce me to the guy. He's nice and sweet, lots of fun to be around, and just when I'm sure you've finally found a keeper and I decide to make friends with him, I get the call to meet you for coffee and you announce it's over. Just like that." Janelle snapped her fingers.

Robin was speechless. "I didn't know you felt that way."

"Well, I do."

"I didn't know you were so jealous of me."

Janelle's head snapped up. "Jealous! That's what you got from what I just said?"



"Well, it's true, isn't it? You've been jinxed in the romance department and because I've had an abundance of luck, you're envious and resentful. I'm so sorry you feel like that but I can't help it that I attract—"

"Wait just a damn minute!" Janelle said. "I am NOT envious of you, nor am I resentful except about what you just implied. I've had my share of romantic successes too, you know. In fact, Ralph, the guy I'm seeing right now, is great."

"You said he's obsessed with his truck and that drives you crazy."

"That may be, but he's great just the same. He just has a thing about big tires and ploughing snow." Janelle swirled the dregs of her chocolate around in the mug. "Anyway, this discussion is not about me, it's about you. And it's not about luck, good or bad. What I'm trying to say to you is that you sabotage every relationship when it appears it's going to get serious, and I'm wondering why that is. What are you so afraid of? Why do you do that?"

Robin sat rigidly in her seat, her mouth tight and drawn. "I had no idea you thought of me as some kind of flake—"

"Oh, come on Robin—"

"—and it really hurts because I thought you were my friend and supported me no matter what."

"I do—"

Robin stood and thrust her arms into her parka. "I don't think we have anything more to say to each other, so I'll just be going now." She turned and walked away with purposeful strides, once again narrowly missing another patron.

"Robin," Janelle called, but got no response. "So much for not getting mad."

The next few days brought more snow to the north shore of Lake Ontario and Janelle was kept busy at her job, so that she didn't think too much about her falling out with Robin.

She did do a lot of soul searching however, and was appalled to find that there was some merit to what Robin had accused her of.

For all of their relationship, she'd sat back and watched the glittering butterfly that was Robin entice any and all that came within her sphere. She admired her bravery in jumping in and trying anything at least once. It was fascinating to see the phenomenon and, in looking back, she could see that perhaps there were shards of resentment and envy imbedded in her heart. On her own, she could shine, but when she was in Robin's company Janelle felt that she paled in comparison. It was as if Robin's sheer force of personality pushed hers to the sidelines and made her disappear. More truthfully, she realized she'd let herself be pushed aside. What did that say about her?

Ten days after their argument at the Java Hut, Janelle called Robin and asked her to meet for coffee. She arrived first and waited nervously.

A panicked "Look out!" followed by a crash, alerted Janelle to Robin's arrival. She smiled tentatively as the other girl reached the table.

"I got your coffee for you already," Janelle said.

"Thanks," Robin said, shedding her outerwear and reaching for the cup.

"I'm sorry," they said in unison, and broke into tension-relieving laughter.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking," Janelle began.

"Me too."

"I think you were right."

"No, you were right."

Again the two girls laughed.

"Let's just agree, then, that we were both right," Janelle said. "I realized that I have been resentful of your popularity and I also realize that I've allowed myself to be eclipsed, maybe because I've been afraid to put myself out in front. I was wrong to hold you in front of me so I could be safe and then be judgmental about you being there."

"And I discovered that I'm afraid too," Robin said. "You're right. Commitment scares the hell out of me. And I look at you and how calm and sensible you are about life and I know that I can't be like that."

"You don't have to be," Janelle said, putting her hand over Robin's. "You're great just the way you are."

"You're great too," Robin said, her voice wobbly with emotion.

"Don't you dare start to cry." Janelle's voice was uncommonly high-pitched, betraying her own emotional state.

"I won't," Robin said, and then both women did, covering their discomfort with laughter.

"What a pair we are," Janelle said, wiping her face with a napkin.

"We are that," Robin said. She blew her nose loudly, bringing on another round of laughs. "I talked to Jamie this week."

Janelle was surprised. "You did? How did that go?"

"Weird. I've never had to swallow my words like that before. You know what? He was just wonderful. He was hurt, of course, by the things I'd said, but he wasn't mad. We talked for ages and ages. I don't think I knew just how much I really cared for him."

Janelle smiled at her friend. "I'm so glad. He really is a nice guy."

"Yes, he is. I'm going to his hockey game next Friday."

"What?"

Robin laughed at Janelle's surprise. "Well, I figured, if it's that important to him, I'd better learn to like it."

"Will wonders never cease!" she said, shaking her head. Then she grinned. "Maybe Ralph and I will join you. He's got some new tires on the truck he's dying to try out. Hey, maybe it will snow!"

*In this story, which is a departure from the sf she writes, M. D. Benoit explores what it means to have roots.*

*M. D. discovered science fiction and mystery through her father's bedtime stories, which were always full of gadgets, dark doorways, and disappearing people. She lives in Ottawa with her husband and her cat Slinky (who is really an alien in disguise).*

You can reach M. D. at [mdbenoit\\_2000@yahoo.com](mailto:mdbenoit_2000@yahoo.com), or visit her website at <http://mdbenoit.com>

*Saguenay River, near Chicoutimi*



## **A sense of Place**

By

M. D. Benoit

There is nothing old in her parents' house. No antiques, no cherished piece passed down from generation to generation, no old family pictures on the walls.

Not because of a fire or some other awful disaster. It had been this way all through Billie's childhood. She remembers coming home from school and her mother would have re-arranged the living room furniture, or there would be a new couch, or a new set of glasses in the cupboard. As for her father, he had a love affair with paint. He would try a new colour on the walls every two or three months. One day the walls were red, the next, olive green or stark white. She had grown up with the smell of paint.

Even her own cherished possessions had disappeared. Her mother had thrown out Sally, her favourite doll, admittedly ratty with hair bleached from too much grooming, saying it looked like junk. Her prized counterpane had been replaced with a polyester coverlet, much easier to wash. She'd taken to hiding her treasures from her mother, but they vanished anyway.

They moved, and moved again. Then once more. The houses in which she'd lived until she left home were simply boxes where she could not claim even temporary ownership of her own space.

After she left home, her parents had moved again several times, to end up in Morgan's Grant, one of the newest housing developments in Ottawa. The houses here look all the same, as if they've been cloned.

*Where are my roots, she would ask herself then, my sense of place?*

She asks the question again, standing in the middle of her parents' living room. They are dead, first her father to cancer then her mother soon after from the same disease, and now buried in the double plot they bought. She tries to recapture who they were from the walls and the furniture, but all she feels is numb. There is nothing here that ties her to them, except maybe a few snapshots stuck under magnets on the door of the fridge, of family or friends. It could be anyone's house, anyone's friends: her parents' faces do not appear in the pictures, and neither does hers.

She walks to the bedroom, opens her mother's closet. A hint of perfume wafts from the open doors, but she doesn't recognize the smell. Not surprising. Her mother had no signature scent that could bring Billie the memories she longs for.

Josh has a scent: Old Spice mixed with warm skin. She used to hate that aftershave but now cannot smell it without thinking of him. It amazes her, that jolt of pleasure when he approaches from behind, wraps his arms around her midriff and kisses the back of her neck, envelops her in his own aroma and makes her all tingly.

The jewellery box is full, a jumble of good and cheap pieces. Her mother's engagement ring is there; she never wore it. Nor, now that Billie thinks of it, did she ever wear her wedding ring.

Billie looks at her own ring. It is a plain circle of gold, but it has Josh's name and hers inscribed inside, the last letter of her name and the first of his entwined.

Josh appears in the doorway, hands in pockets. He waits, watchful, silent.

"There's nothing I want here," Billie says through a constricted windpipe. "Nothing means anything. I'd hoped...."

"What do you want to do?"

"I might as well sell everything." She walks to the window, pulls aside the sheer curtains, looks out. There's a long plot of grass in need of mowing extending to the sidewalk. The brand new neighbourhood sleeps in the sultry afternoon.

Josh stands behind her, his hands massaging her neck and shoulders. "We could live here."

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Tries to imagine her and Josh taking over the house, putting their stamp on it. "It is bigger than the one we have now."

"More windows. A bigger yard." She feels his smile. "Lower taxes."

"No turn-of-the-century mouldings, no plaster walls, no busy street."

"I can't say the last one is a plus."

She turns, wraps her arms around his waist. "Is that what you want, Josh? To live in this house?"

He shrugs. "Doesn't matter, really. As long as we're together, I'm home."

He likes to use clichés, and she usually smiles and dismisses them as glib. Now, though, faced with the tangible summary of her parents' lives, what he says strikes her as important. "The only real home I've ever had is the one we're living in now."

"Because it's old." His smile changes, becomes strained. He backs away two steps. She doesn't hold on.

"Yes, and you know that's important to me. To stay put. To surround myself with history."

He shakes his head. "Other people's history. It will never replace yours."

"No, but I can make it part of mine." She strides restlessly from the bedroom to the living room. She stops in the centre, rubs her upper arms against a sudden chill. "Do you know that I have almost no knowledge of my ancestors? My grandfathers died before I was born. I barely knew my grandmothers. Whoever existed before them was sucked into this black hole. If we lived in this house, I'm afraid the little family history I have left would get pulled in, too."

"You have your own memories."

"Memories fade."

"Or get suppressed."

She stares at him, feeling betrayed, willing him to understand.

"Your parents loved you."

"In their fashion, I suppose." She plops down on the couch, looks up at him. "I don't remember much of my childhood. Now you're saying I'm the one who doesn't want the memories."

"It bothers you."

"Shouldn't it?"

He shrugs. "For me, the only memories important enough to keep are the ones we make together."

She savours that, for a moment, but is left dissatisfied. "Where you come from is what makes you who you are today."

"You're an adult, with free will. You can decide who you want to be."

She leans back, brings her knees up, hugs them to her chest. "When I was young, I called myself a Canadian. I was proud of that. It was in the early seventies, at the time when the separatists in Québec were making a lot of noise about secession, talking about the supremacy of the French language. I thought, how silly." Josh sits down beside her but far enough he can't touch her. "I'd never been outside of Ottawa. Then I went on a student

exchange trip, to Chicoutimi. No one there spoke English. I had less than functional French." She laughs slightly. "I spoke so little French, I couldn't even tell them I was deathly afraid of water. They took me on the Saguenay in this boat... it wasn't that small, really, and after a while, the beauty of the river, the warmth of that huge family surrounding me made me forget my fear.

"That's what struck me first, you know, the number of people in that family. They had eight children, and had taken in a niece whose parents had died. The house was always noisy, with brothers and sisters arguing, laughing, running up and down the stairs. Monsieur Tremblay would sit in his rocking chair beside the stove in the kitchen, silently puffing on his pipe and reading his newspaper, while chaos swirled around him. Madame Tremblay had her hands in flour half the time, kneading bread on the long kitchen table. They didn't have a dining room. Everyone gathered in the kitchen to eat and talk. The kitchen seemed to me as large as a tennis court. It had lots of windows and the sun streamed on the bright yellow walls. I always felt soothed in there, but energized at the same time. The phone rang incessantly, neighbours and friends came in to chat or eat some of Madame Tremblay's famous cipaille."

"Something you never knew."

"You can't know how much I envied them all. When you're an only child, and generally discouraged from making noise, that kind of environment is totally alien. The biggest shock was going to church with them. They simply assumed I was Catholic, I guess, or maybe they asked and I didn't understand, just nodded. While the priest turned his back on us to do his thing, a guitar player would start playing, songs that made you want to move, tap your feet. Everybody sang. During the sermon, people started laughing at something the priest said. Can you imagine? Pop songs and laughter in a church. It sounds pretty normal now, but then it sounded so strange.... When we got out of the church, the Tremblays took me on a tour of the town. We walked around some, a small crowd in itself with all the kids, and everywhere we went people greeted us, stopped to chat. Several of them were named Tremblay, too. I understood then that these people were different from me, that, while they were Canadian, their identity didn't come from allegiance to their country. They had a sense of place, roots that dug deeply into the land, the community, the language and the common history they shared. I've been searching for that feeling ever since."

"You haven't found it?"

She shakes her head. "I've travelled from Coast to Coast, lived in cities and small towns, near a lake and in the mountains, in search of a place where I belong." She uncoils, leans toward him. "Would you come with me, if I found it?"

His eyes, laced with tender amusement only a moment ago, become hard then jerk away from her face. Her question hurt him, she knows. Her heart beats faster, and she feels a blush climb up from her neck.

He rises, goes to the kitchen for a glass of water. She follows. "Josh, I...." She's uncertain whether apologizing is the right thing to do.

He gulps the water, sets the glass back on the counter with a snap. "You never heard what I said, did you?" He turns slowly. "Or is it that you don't believe me?"

"Neither."

"Make up your mind, then. I love you, Billie, but I'm damned if I'm going to accept living with a wife who mourns a past she'll never have. I won't be a footnote in your search for something that doesn't exist."

His words sting. "I thought you understood what I'm looking for."

"I do. You're also stuck in a rut of your own making." He shoves his hands in his pockets, takes them out again. "I need some air. I'm going for a walk."

She waits until the front door closes then walks to the window to watch him go. He strides quickly, his steps long, evidence of his frustration. Soon he disappears around a corner.

In the silence, a clock ticks the seconds.

She tries to be angry at his leaving her alone, at his lack of compassion, his failure to understand. She tells herself that, for the first time, she fully revealed herself to him and he scorned her feelings. The anger doesn't come. Instead, the image of Josh turning the corner, disappearing, fills her head. This is all she can see, him leaving. Her throat tightens, her stomach turns over. She takes a shaky breath, telling herself that he'll come back, that her sudden panic at never seeing him again is irrational.

For six years, he's been at her side. His body, the smell and smoothness of it, is as familiar as her own. She's learned his gestures, how to read his moods, what he likes. Yet he constantly manages to surprise her.

With his indifference to the things of the past. With his sudden laughter at a joke only he sees. With his tolerance mixed with bursts of temper. Also with the ease he can express his feelings, with his unrestricted love for her, and yes, with his understanding of who she is.

Has she let the past paralyse her into denying the present? She thinks of all the places where she's lived and realizes with a jolt that, although she chose to come back and live in the town where she grew up, she never made an effort to renew acquaintances with old friends, classmates, neighbours. Was that deliberate, because she is too much changed from the person she was when she left, or is it because she is her parents' child after all?

She goes out the back door, unnerved by the silent house. Sunshine bathes the yard, small but unfenced. In the next lot, a middle-aged woman hangs laundry on a line. She stops and waves when she notices Billie.

"Hi," the woman says. "You must be Billie." Billie nods. "I'm Clara. I'm awfully sorry about your parents."



"Thanks."

"They were extremely proud of you, you know. Your mother spoke of you so often I feel I know you."

Billie is stunned. She always felt she was a disappointment for her parents.

"I saw one of your paintings at the Koyman Galleries in Rideau Centre. Beautiful. I couldn't afford it, of course, but I love your style. Your mother said you had your grandmother's eye for colour."

"She talked to you about her mother?"

"Not that much, really, just a couple of comments, here and there."

I don't even have that, Billie thinks resentfully. Clara continues to chat and Billie barely listens, nods once in a while. She wonders where Josh has gone.

"Well," Clara says, "I better continue with the laundry. Will you be selling the house?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Oh. Nice to meet you, then."

Alone, Billie raises her head to the sun. Her skin soaks up the heat, the inside of her eyelids turn pink, their blood vessels diffusing the light. A dog barks, a chickadee twitters in the cedar hedge at the back. In the distance, traffic hums. An image pops in her head. Josh and her here, in the shaded backyard, eating, drinking crisp, white wine, laughing. She smiles, opens her eyes. The yard is an expanse of grass, blinding in the noon sunshine, almost bleak compared to the scene in her imagination.

Choices. Life is a series of them, she reflects. She lifts then rolls her shoulders, blinks away tears. Her search is over, she decides, certainty settling inside her.

She turns and comes face-to-face with Josh, who stands on the other side of the glass doors. He opens one, steps out. "I'm sorry," he says.

She smiles slightly, nods, turns back to the yard. "You know, what this place needs is a big tree, to give lots of shade. And I say we get rid of the television in the living room and build some bookcases."

She waits. He says nothing for a while, then says, "Are you sure?" When she nods, he engulfs her in his arms. She buries her nose in his shirt, hears the familiar, slow beat of his heart, smells Old Spice and Josh.

"We'll paint the kitchen yellow," she says.

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