January 8, 2015

NeWest Press

#201 8540 - 109 St.

Edmonton, AB

T6G 1E6

Dear NeWest Press,

Please find attached a synopsis, as well as the full manuscript of a novella I have written titled *Admirable Road.*

The novella opens as 84-year-old short story writer Grace Elliot contemplates her life and the people who have lived with her in her big, old house on Admiral Road in Toronto. It has been over a decade since she has written anything and she decides to take up her pen once again and write about these people as a tribute to them.

Five short stories as written by Grace follow, and include the lives of a painter, a ballerina, an artist, an activist, and Grace’s long-time companion, a woman that is revealed to have been her lover.

The theme of the novel is the sacrifices and compromises often necessary in order to devote yourself to your art. As well, Grace as a woman who never married was considered by her family to have lived an uneventful life. After her death her family finds these last autobiographical stories she has written and realize that her life was actually rich in experience and in relationships and how little they really knew her.

Thank you very much for considering my submission.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Vanderleelie

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# SYNOPSIS

# ADMIRABLE ROAD – Stephanie Vanderleelie

**GRACE – TORONTO, 1984**

Written in the first person, the novel opens as 84 year old short story writer Grace Elliot reflects. She has lived in the same house since 1912 and has been renting out rooms mainly to artists for many years. As most of the people she has known have passed on she decides to write their stories.

(Note: The following sections: Susanna, Gwen, Clare, Meredith and Barbara are short stories as written by Grace.)

**SUSANNA – TORONTO, 1919**

Susanna Lund arrives in Toronto from Montreal to study art at the Ontario College of Art. She is accompanied by her distant cousin Daniel Harris who has graduated from the Montreal School of Art and found work in Toronto as an illustrator. They are befriended by Hal White an older established artist who believes that artists should live unconventional lifestyles. Daniel leaves the city to take a job in Victoria and Susanna falls under Hal White’s spell. Her life is irrevocably altered as she shuns her Catholic upbringing to take up with Hal who is also married. She realizes she is only one in a never-ending line of women for Hal and breaks it off. Daniel returns to the city and proposes to her. She refuses him and she eventually returns to Montreal to care for her ailing mother. She has a successful career teaching art and illustrating children’s books. Daniel becomes a very successful landscape painter. They both never marry.

**GWEN – TORONTO, 1924**

Gwen Whitman grew up on the same street where Grace lived until she was 12. She was unusual in that she was a tomboy and tended to play with the boys. Grace played with Gwen’s younger sister Judith who grew up to become a beauty queen and marry into a wealthy Toronto family. Gwen goes to live with her sister when she has trouble finding steady employment after the war ends. She meets Olivia, the sister of her brother-in-law at a family gathering after she returns from New York after running away from her brief marriage. She and Olivia become fast friends. Their relationship changes when Gwen’s brother-in-law tries to sexually assault her. She and Olivia realize that they are attracted to each other. Olivia breaks off the relationship when she decides she has to live a normal life which means being married and having children. Gwen is devastated until she meets Grace. She and Grace end up living together for over thirty years until Gwen dies of bone cancer. No one ever guessed the true nature of their relationship.

**CLARE – CALIFORNIA, 1943**

Clare Donnelly is from a wealthy Toronto family. She has travelled extensively and dabbled in all of the arts. In 1929 she goes off to Paris and becomes involved with the Surrealist art movement. She marries a photographer turned filmmaker who is lured to Hollywood to direct movies there. The story takes place at a Hollywood party as Clare reflects on the direction her life has taken. She is unhappy that she doesn’t seem to have a purpose in life and she is fed up with the decadent lifestyle that they have been living and that her husband doesn’t want to give up. She meets and has a conversation with an idealistic but ambitious young writer who makes her realize it is time to make changes in her life. She ends up leaving the party upset after finding her husband in a compromising position. She is killed as her car misses a curve on the winding ocean side road.

**MEREDITH – TORONTO, 1962**

Meredith Tanner is a retired ballet dancer. She was an only child born to older parents who had thought they were unable to have children. Her parents have since died and she has no other family or friends to speak of. She has never had a relationship with a man. She felt that her only purpose in life was to dance and she dedicated herself to her art. Things change when she meets a young high school drama teacher with aspirations to become a playwright who lives in her boarding house. He talks her into teaching some young kids at the Recreation Centre where he volunteers some of her ballet steps so that they can incorporate them into a performance that they are putting on. He attempts to pursue a relationship with Meredith but she panics because she is afraid of letting anyone get close to her. She abruptly leaves the house and finds refuge at a boarding house which allows only females.

**BARBARA – TORONTO, 1969**

Barbara Luciani is a distant relation to Grace who arrives in Toronto from Leamington to study violin at the Conservatory of Music. She meets her friend’s older brother Steve who is a student and activist who is protesting everything from the Vietnam War, to Gay Liberation, Women’s Liberation, any cause at all. When he graduates he decides to start up a magazine whose purpose is to inform people of injustices going on and how they can make a difference. Barbara becomes involved in helping with the magazine and eventually abandons her music studies feeling that they’re irrelevant. She becomes pregnant with Steve’s child and they get married. Eventually the magazine folds and Steve starts an advertising agency which becomes one of the largest and most successful in Toronto. He and Barbara go full circle as they get caught up in their success and enjoy the conspicuous consumption of the age. Steve actually becomes a card-carrying conservative and is embarrassed of his activist past and worries what his clients would think if they found out. Barbara follows along with Steve but still wonders from time to time how things would have turned out if she would have pursued her music career.

**EPILOGUE – TORONTO, 1986**

Grace has passed away and Barbara and her daughter arrive at the house to begin the task of disposing of her assets. Barbara has been appointed the executor and Grace has indicated that she has a number of unpublished short stories that she wants Barbara to pass on to her editor. In going through the house they also find a large collection of art in the basement, mainly paintings which were given to Grace by her friends and boarders. They also find photographs which indicate that Grace’s existence was not as staid and boring as they had all thought.

ADMIRABLE ROAD

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GRACE ELLIOT

TORONTO, 1984

I was just sitting here watching a little bit of television before turning in for the night, when I came across an interesting documentary on the Public Television station we get here from across the border. It was all about Lee Miller, a photographer who worked as a war correspondent for Vogue magazine, of all places, and she covered all of the important events such as the bombing of London and the liberation of Paris. Interestingly she was also one of the first reporters to enter the Nazi concentration camps once the war had ended and she photographed all of the horrors that they found inside. What made her even more interesting was that she was a remarkably beautiful woman. One of her most famous relationships was with Man Ray, the surrealist artist and photographer. When she left him he was devastated but he did manage to make the most of things, in a creative sense. Using the photographs that he had taken of her, he would cut the pictures up and use them in his art, her eyes being a particular favourite. One of his most famous works, which you’ve probably seen, is the metronome entitled ‘Object of Destruction’ which has a cut out of her bewitching eye clipped to the pendulum.

Anyway, after a very eventful youth she ended up marrying well, taking on the title Lady Penrose, and settling down. Her husband started out as an artist but eventually

became chairman of the Institute of Contemporary Art over in England and was eventually knighted for his service to the Arts. They lived on a farm in Surrey and they had a son together. Lee totally gave up her career as a photographer and became a gourmet cook, of all things. She actually took cooking lessons from the great James Beard and could boast of a collection of over two thousand cookbooks. Every weekend she would prepare elaborate meals for their guests. She seemed determined to put her past behind her and even her own son didn’t know anything about her career as a photographer until after death when he found boxes of her photographs in the attic. Apparently when he questioned his father he was very nonchalant about it all, his only comment being that she had been a ‘pretty good’ photographer at one time. Anyway, the whole story seems awfully sad. My own experience has been that the people whose flame burns brightly when they’re young tend to have a really tough time of it as they age – it’s nothing but downhill for them.

Anyway, I’m going on here about Lee Miller without telling you the reason that her story resonated so strongly with me. It brought back to mind Clare Donnelly, a friend of mine I knew going way back to the Twenties when she was living here in Toronto. Clare wrote to me from Paris - it must have been in the summer of 1930- anyway, she wrote about how she had met Man Ray and Lee Miller. It was at the big social event of that summer, ‘The White Ball’ she called it. It was held on some big, fancy estate just outside of the city. I should still have her letter down in the basement somewhere, anyway, she described to me this fantastic party where they had set out a white dance floor right out in the middle of the gardens and they had a full orchestra hidden behind the hedges and they had set up special effects using lights with words and images projected out onto the dance floor. And everyone was told to dress all in white of course. I remember Clare going on about how beautiful this woman she had met named Lee Miller looked, even though Clare was no slouch herself in the looks department. And when she found out that Lee was a photographer, well of course Clare had to take it up too. Of course it didn’t last very long; I think Clare tried just about everything there was to try at one time or another. Nothing seemed to hold her interest for very long. I always figured it was because she was born into such a wealthy family which meant that she never had the luxury of having to work for a living – and yes I do believe that working is a luxury, as long as it’s fulfilling work that is. And one sure way to avoid boredom is by not having enough money. There’s no time to think about being bored if you’re busy trying to put food on the table and keep a roof over your head. In my estimation the rich have always seemed disadvantaged, but that’s a topic for another conversation all together.

Anyway, I couldn’t help thinking how dumbfounded Clare would be to find out how Lee’s life had turned out. But then again, things didn’t work out all that well for Clare either; at least Lee lived until she was in her seventies.

Thinking about Clare and all the interesting people I’ve known over the years has got me thinking maybe I should get some of their stories down. I’ve always made it a rule not to write about the people that I knew, or at the very least to make sure that it wasn’t too obvious and especially not hurtful, but now that I’m really about the only one left I don’t think I’d be doing anybody any harm at all. In all good conscience I think I could consider it a tribute to the memory of people that I’ve known and those that I’ve loved. And besides I’ve noticed as a general rule that as time goes by it gets more difficult to sort out the actual events from the way you perceived them to be. I do have many boxes of letters, photographs and all sorts of mementoes downstairs in the basement that should be useful for jogging up some long forgotten memories. I think tomorrow I’ll go have a look through some of it and see if inspiration strikes. It’s been quite some time since I’ve done any serious writing. I’m sure my editor is thinking that I’ve put myself out to pasture; she’ll be surprised when she finds out that I’ve still got something to write about after all these years. And once I’ve got all those stories written I’ll have a good excuse to get rid of a lot of that stuff. It’s not going to be of much use to anyone else once I’m gone. Of course I’ll hold onto most of the art that could be valuable, and I’ll keep some of the photographs that might be of interest, but a lot of the letters will have to be destroyed. I really don’t want anyone coming across them after I’m gone. Mind you I still think I’ve got plenty of time left, I’m healthy as an old horse, but still, when you’re eighty four years old you really shouldn’t take anything for granted.

I’ve been living in this same house since 1912, since I was twelve years old – I was born in January of 1900 so the math doesn’t get any simpler for me. And I intend to continue living here until they have to come and carry me out in one of those bags they use for the deceased. And I make out just fine; I can assure you of that. I let out the second floor to a nice young man who’s going to the University to become a doctor; so he should be around for some time yet. Anyway, I let him live here rent free in exchange for taking care of the yard, shovelling snow, taking out the garbage – all the little things that need doing around the house which need some muscle power that I just don’t have anymore. And it’s an ideal arrangement really; we get along just fine and pretty much keep to ourselves. I just slip a little note under his door if there’s something that needs doing and he’s very good about taking care of it lickety split. Anyway, I’ve never had any problems finding boarders; it’s a very pleasant old house and you couldn’t ask for a better location. I remember when we moved into this house how proud my parents were. Back then the Annex was really the very first suburb of Toronto and it was considered a very desirable area to live. The houses were large and attractive and the tree lined streets were spacious, there was just a nice sense of having space which you don’t get when you live in the city, and it wasn’t too far out of the city – you could take public transit and be downtown quick as can be. Of course nowadays it’s pretty much considered to be part of downtown Toronto, the city has grown so much.

My father was a civil servant; he worked for the provincial government, and he had worked his way up to where he was part of management. It looked like the future was going to be bright for us and we were happily going about the business of living our lives and then as things are sometimes wont to do, whether you deserve it or not, everything started going badly quicker than we could bat an eye.

First my father died when I was sixteen, and that was a real shock for all of us. He had a heart attack on his way to work and by the time they got him to the hospital it was too late. It was hard to deal with, having him die so suddenly like that. Here he was one morning leaving the house with his usual cheery good-bye and then we find out that he would never be coming home again. And I shouldn’t say that we didn’t have any other worries at all – my brother Ian was off fighting the war overseas at that time, and sometimes I wonder if it was the stress of knowing that his only son was away at war that helped to precipitate his heart attack. I remember how naïve we were when we talked about Ian. He was such a smart fellow and he had such a bright future in front of him. All we talked about was how he would be coming home a hero before we knew it. We received one lovely letter from him after he had been told of father’s death where he assured us he would be home soon and that he would be proud and honoured to take father’s place at the head of the household and that he would ensure that we were all well taken care of. And that was the last we heard from him until a few months later when we got the news that he had been killed fighting in France.

After that, boy were our hearts heavy. But Mother surprised us all by how strong and determined she became. Money was starting to become an issue but she was hell-bent that there was no way we were going to give up our beautiful house, so she started to surreptitiously rent out one of the bedrooms on the second floor to help make ends meet. And back then, especially in this area, it was looked at askance to take in boarders, but Mother always insisted that they be respectable working men and only the white-collar kind. There were to be no sweaty, hormone heavy, blue-collar types sitting down to dinner with us. Also I suspect Mother was trying to kill two birds with one stone and find suitable husbands for me and my older sister Prudence. And it actually did work out for Pru. She ended up marrying a nice young man who was working at a bank as a clerk, but he was ambitious and hoped to work his way up. He had lived here for almost a year when it became quite obvious that Pru and John had fallen in love and we were not at all surprised when he asked Pru to marry him and of course she accepted. I’m afraid that Pru’s happiness was short-lived though. Poor Pru died in childbirth just over a year after they were married and her baby son died a few days later.

Those were almost unbearably sad times. It seemed like death was relentlessly knocking on our door and refused to go away. Mother especially took Pru’s death very hard. After that she seemed to lose all of her resolve to keep things going and I think she just felt totally defeated by life. It must have seemed to her like life was going to be nothing but a cruel sequence of events with nothing to redeem it. She started leaving everything up to me; I think her will was totally broken and she just withered away, she had no appetite at all, and she staunchly refused to see a doctor, until she quietly died about three years later.

So there I was, just twenty-four years old and in a span of less than ten years my entire family was gone. And there were times when I couldn’t help feeling mighty scared because there was really no one left for me to lean on. The closest relative I had was my mother’s sister who lived near Windsor with her family, but we had not been especially close to them.

So here I was all alone with this great big house to take care of. Back then I was working for the provincial government in a typing pool. It was a pretty good job as far as jobs went because times were a little tough right after the war ended. And the pay wasn’t bad either for a single woman to live on but the truth be told I really didn’t like that job or the thought of doing it for the rest of my working life. Of course in those days a job was a job, it was meant to put bread on the table, and most people, especially women, didn’t have fancy ideas about having a career or finding some kind of fulfillment in a job. But in my case, I guess because I didn’t have any family to come home to, I started to feel that there had to be something better out there for me, something to provide me with the satisfaction and zest that was missing in my life. And I knew that I just wasn’t the type to get married and have children. So I decided to stop feeling sorry for myself, and make a fresh start and make the best of things. I had always been an avid reader and I also loved to write; in fact for many years I had been secretly writing stories in my room at night after Mother had gone to bed. Mother did not approve of artists of any kind; she simply felt that there were more practical things that needed doing and that it was not an honourable way to make a living. And I have to tell you there were times after she died when I felt sure that Mother’s spirit was there watching over me and it was very disconcerting because I’m quite sure that Mother would have been vexed at the way I chose to live my life after she was gone. Anyway I tried to ignore my guilt and I got out the dozens of stories that I had written over the years. I re-read them all and I quite honestly had to admit that they were really pretty darn good and I could see a definite improvement from my earliest works to the later ones. So I went out and I bought myself a nice new typewriter and I started typing up some of my best stories. I would choose the one that I thought was my very best and I mailed it off to one of the women’s magazines that my mother had subscribed to and which always contained at least one short story for diversion I suppose, in between all of the articles on how to keep your house clean, your husband happy and your children healthy.

Now if I’m making it seem very matter of fact, believe me it was anything but that. Mailing off that first story was one of the most harrowing experiences of my life. I was almost overcome with anxiety at the thought of how much my life would change if I were to become a published author. But I knew I had to give it a shot so I gritted my teeth and picked the day that I would go to the post office during my lunch break and mail off my story. I had decided that doing the deed on my lunch hour would be a good way to fuel my resolve because the intensity with which I disliked my job was growing daily, especially since I now had the idea in my head that there were other options open to me. Now when I think about it, it seems quite ridiculous because you know I actually lost my nerve and walked right on past that post office still clutching my story in its envelope. So after work I walked around trying to steel my nerves and rid my mind of images of my mother shaking her finger at me admonishing me that no good would come of this.

Well, needless to say, I did finally manage to mail off my story and I had a few anxious weeks there as I waited for a reply and had to listen to the self-talk in my head telling me that I must be crazy thinking that my stories were good enough to be in print.

And when I did receive that reply, despite the fact that it was a rejection, it was a very nice letter telling me that my story was very good but not right for their publication as they were looking for more domestic oriented stories suitable for mothers with young children but they did advise me to try a more literary type of magazine.

So this time I did some research before I mailed off my story to another magazine. And boy I was determined now, my days of being afraid to go into the post office were over. And my gosh was I thrilled when my story was accepted – the only sad part was that I really didn’t have anyone to share my success with, the other girls in the typing pool already viewed me as a strange bird because I never joined in their coffee break conversations about men or fashions or make-up and instead chose to spend my time productively with a good book. And of course I had no family to speak of, and the boarder who was living at the house at that time was an accountant and I could tell that he wouldn’t be the least bit interested in my literary success.

Anyway, I was paid ten dollars for my story which was pretty good money at the time because I was only making twelve dollars a week. So after that initial taste of success I started polishing up and sending out all of my stories and they were being accepted on a regular basis, so I decided to take the plunge and quit my job to become a full-time writer.

And I’ve made a pretty good living at it. My stories have been published in countless magazines over the years and I have a loyal following of readers who buy my short story collections which my editors have been compiling and publishing every five years or so for decades now. And yet I have to tell you, despite the fact that I’ve been doing it for ages, I don’t think a day goes by that I don’t wake up in the morning with a smile on my face and think my goodness, I’m a writer, and I get paid to do it! And I don’t mean to sound immodest but I do have to boast a bit that my stories have merited some acclaim and I’ve even been nominated for a few awards in my time, although I’ve never won I’m afraid. The last time was almost fifteen years ago and everyone thought that I was a shoo-in to win based more on my entire body of work. Unfortunately there was another older novel writer who was diagnosed with terminal cancer a few weeks before the award was chosen and who had never won before either, so you can guess who the award went to. Not that I’m bitter. Judging whose writing is the best is not an easy task and I don’t think it’s really possible to be fair about it, it’s such a subjective thing. But those awards are good for increasing book sales and it’s about as glamorous as a writing career ever gets. Most of the time it’s just slogging away, all by yourself, isolated for hours at a time, living the lives of people in your head to the point where you almost start thinking of them as if they’re real. And all you can hope is that other people will read your work and get caught up in their lives too. That’s the ultimate compliment to me, when my readers think that my characters are real people or are just like someone they knew or they comment that I must have got into their heads because one of my characters thought exactly the way they did.

Anyway I’ve managed to make a good career out of something that I love to do. I must admit that I have slowed down quite a bit the last ten years or so. It does get difficult to find things to write about that are new and fresh and I find that I have to censor myself more as I’ve found I have a tendency to moralize more the older I get. I see the job of the writer is to gently take the reader by the hand and lead them down the path that you see ahead hoping that they’ll be able to see that way clear once you’ve beaten aside the bushes.

And I must say that writing was the perfect job for someone with my disposition. I’ve never minded solitude and in fact I covet it at times, if I’m around people too much I find myself longing to be by myself and have the pleasure of just luxuriating in my own thoughts. And I especially liked being able to set my own hours and my own little routine and being able to set my own rules – I was never one who liked being bossed or told what to do. And I was always good as far as discipline goes. I was always up bright and early every morning and as I ate my usual breakfast of tea and toast I would plan in my head what I wanted to get done that day. I would head back upstairs to my desk that I had placed in front of a large bay window with a southern exposure so that I could enjoy the morning sun as I wrote. I would write for two or three hours until I felt like I was starting to force the words and they were sounding stale and false. Then I would take a break, have an early lunch and head out for a nice long walk. My rule was that on the first half of the walk I could think about anything that I wanted or just enjoy the scenery but on the way back home I would focus on the story that I was working on and try to advance the plot in my head or work out any dilemmas I was facing in the storyline or with the characters. And sure enough by the time I had returned home I had usually worked out a solution and I knew exactly what I would be writing about that afternoon. I would hurry back upstairs and with my ideas still fresh in my head I would sit down to write for another hour or two. And then I would have the rest of the day to do as I pleased.

It was a nice life, at least it suited me fine, but there were times when I did feel a little bit lonely and I would find myself talking out loud just to make sure that I still knew how to speak. If you’ve ever spent large amounts of time by yourself you’ve probably noticed that when you do speak to someone it feels strange, almost like you’ve arrived from another planet. That’s what happens I suppose when you live in your head. Although it’s really not a bad place to be in my estimation. I feel sorry for people who can’t be alone because they’re afraid of their own thoughts.

Anyway, I suppose I’m making myself sound like a crazy, reclusive old lady. I’ve actually got some family here in the city now and in my time I’ve had many dear friends and one very special relationship. As I mentioned, we had been letting rooms in this house going back to when my father died. And after Mother died there was still one boarder living here, the accountant I mentioned before. Anyway, when he gave his notice that he was moving out I decided that I was going to deviate from the standards my mother had set for boarders. I put up a ‘Room for Rent’ notice at the Ontario College of Art with the idea that by having artists rooming here I would most certainly meet some interesting people. It also appealed to the side of me that wanted to be philanthropic, because I knew what a struggle it could be to make a living as an artist. I planned to charge very reasonable rates which would hopefully in turn allow someone greater freedom to create if they weren’t worrying so much about how to pay the rent.

And I must say that my instincts were dead on. Most of my dearest friends either lived here at one time or were introduced to me by people who were living here. This old house on Admiral Road has seen a lot. Which reminds me again of Clare. She used to refer to us with some degree of sarcasm as living on Admirable Road. She figured we were a little too strait-laced for being artists, but Clare didn’t really know us as well as she thought.

Anyway, it was Susanna Lund who was the first person to knock on my door to enquire about the room for rent. I can still remember that day clearly. It was back in 1926, a really cold day in October. We had just had a really nice warm spell that made you start to think that the summer was going to go on forever and suddenly, just like that, overnight the wind changed direction and came directly out of the north, blowing all the warm air back down south, and leaving us to wake up to find heavy frost in our gardens which only the day before had been lush with the growth of summer. And the wind was just howling telling us loud and clear that the good times were over and winter was on its inevitable way. Susanna looked just so cold and so vulnerable standing there on my front porch. I had her come right on inside and I fixed us a pot of tea. She was so polite and she seemed a little bit shy and nervous and I couldn’t help but take an immediate liking to her. She was very concerned about how much the rent was and she was quite surprised when I asked her how much she felt she could honestly afford to pay and she seemed so relieved when I immediately accepted her offer. At the time I didn’t know anything about what she had been through but I could certainly sense a wistful sadness of spirit about her. It was obvious she had come through a terrible ordeal and she needed to heal.

And the poor girl, her luck never did really improve in the two years that she stayed here. Near the end I ended up taking some of her paintings as payment. She was far too proud to accept an offer of free room and board. And she was a fine artist, so I had no problem with accepting some of her paintings, I was just sorry she had such a hard time selling her art. She ended up going back home to Montreal to take care of her mother who was ailing. At that time she was the only unmarried daughter and it was expected of her.

And it was Susanna who introduced me to Clare. Clare was from a very wealthy family and they lived on a sprawling estate, which was far too large for just one family, out in the country just north of Toronto. Clare was looking for a room to rent for the nights when she didn’t want to drive all that way back home on country roads in the dark. Her father was a Scotsman and could be a little tight fisted with money, although Clare certainly didn’t let that stop her from being the proverbial good time girl. I never did envy her at all though. I don’t think it was good for her, or for anyone for that matter, not to have to strive for anything. A little adversity is good for the spirit is what I’ve always thought. Clare was very sophisticated and very worldly, I’ll grant her that. By the time I had met her when she would have been in her thirties she had travelled extensively and already seen a good part of the world. She also considered herself an artist, but she never seemed to pin it down, I’m sure she must have dabbled in every art form out there. In my estimation she never really excelled at any of it; she just didn’t have the patience or the attention span to perfect her technique and she never stayed with anything very long that’s for sure. When I knew her it was at the latter end of the Twenties when the goings on in the arts community here were pretty exciting. The Group of Seven were newly established and the contemporary art movement was just starting to take off. Clare and I both attended the International Exhibition of Modern Art that was held at the old Art Gallery of Toronto, back in 1927 I believe. They were showcasing all of the new modern artists like Kandinsky and Mondrian and it was quite something for us to see this newfangled way of creating art. It was shortly after we saw that exhibition that Clare decided that the only place to be was in Europe where the Surrealist movement was in full swing. She was determined to get in on that action. She certainly made it sound exciting. But she surprised us all when she married a filmmaker from Berlin and they ended up moving to California. She often asked me to go out and visit her there. I did seriously consider it once one brutally cold January, but nothing came of it. Her letters went from describing all of the exciting artists and events she went to in Europe to all the movie stars she had met at glamorous Hollywood parties. One name in particular stands out for me. I know that she wrote about seeing Rita Hayworth at a party right after the movie *You Were Never Lovelier* with Fred Astaire had come out. It strikes me clearly because just a few weeks ago I saw the movie *Gilda* on the Saturday Night Oldies. And you know they announced not too long ago that Rita Hayworth has Alzheimer’s Disease, and as I was watching the movie I couldn’t help wondering if maybe she was sitting in her room somewhere watching it too but not knowing that it was herself that she was watching and that she had once been a famous movie star and had been married to a Prince. It’s a sad thing to contemplate. It seems to me that all of my memories of Clare come with an afterthought of sadness. I suppose it’s not surprising knowing how tragically things ended up for Clare. Yes, sad is a word that comes to mind often with Clare, but if you had told me that when I first knew her I never would have believed it.

And of course there was my dear Gwen. We grew up together on Manning Avenue in Toronto before my family moved to this house. I didn’t know her too well back then, it was actually her younger sister Judith that I used to pal around with, but when I bumped into Gwen years later when we were adults I knew her right away. She’d hardly changed at all, her flaming orange hair was always a dead giveaway, not many people had that shade of hair in those days – now it’s a different story with all the strange colors the young kids put in their hair. Anyway, we ended up bumping into each other in a hardware store, of all places. I was attempting to fix a leaky faucet at the house by myself to save the cost of calling in a plumber. Well, it turned out that Gwen could fix just about anything, she was so handy and good with her hands, and she was so helpful to me and offered to come over and fix things that very afternoon. We just hit it off really well and she ended up living here with me for over thirty years. And we were close, closer than anyone ever knew. It broke my heart when she got sick; she’d always been such a healthy, vibrant person. Anyway, I won’t get into that right now, it’s just too sad to think about right before going off to bed.

I must also say that I’ve had my share of people living here who I really never got to know at all. It was either because they stayed such a short time or a few simply weren’t interested in being companionable. Meredith Tanner was definitely the latter. She was a dancer with the Toronto Ballet and she lived here for close to five years but boy did that girl guard her privacy. She always seemed to be offended if I tried to make any kind of conversation with her. I got the feeling she felt that everyone was beneath her. And she always acted like she was in such a hurry and was a very busy person but the fact of the matter was that she rarely left her room and as far as I could see she didn’t seem to have any friends or family. Then one day she up and left, she told me one morning that she had to leave the city for a family emergency and by the afternoon she was gone leaving no trace. Many years later I actually saw her in the waiting room at my doctor’s office. She was sitting there ramrod straight with her legs clenched tightly and her toes pointed, her hair held back in the tight bun she always wore. You could see the look of recognition on her face but she tried to mask it and pretend she didn’t know me from Adam. But I called her bluff and went over anyway and said hello. She acted like she was a fugitive from justice and I was a bounty hunter when I asked her how she was doing and if she’d been back in Toronto for long. She was so evasive as if she didn’t want me to know that she was living here but obviously if she had a family doctor it was a pretty safe assumption. Anyway, back about five years ago I saw an obituary in the newspaper announcing that she had passed away after a long battle with cancer. Maybe she knew about the cancer that time at the doctor’s and that’s why she was acting so strange. I don’t know, but somehow I doubt it, that Meredith Tanner was a cold fish. There was no mention in the obituary that she had left behind any grieving family members or that any kind of funeral was being held for her. It did mention that she had left her estate to the ballet school and that a scholarship was being set up in her name. Oh, I think I forgot to mention that she had been a principal ballerina with the Toronto Ballet for a number of years. That’s an important part of her story. And she definitely had talent, her technique was flawless, but where her heart was I couldn’t tell you.

Anyway, I’m going on and on – what I need to do is get these stories down on paper. I’ve seen a lot in my eighty-four years. I feel like I’ve done it all too, although I’ve never travelled anywhere out of this province. I never felt any kind of urge to travel. I suppose it’s because I feel like I’ve experienced so much through other people’s stories it just wasn’t necessary. That’s the good thing about living in your head. And I must say that I feel very satisfied with the life that I’ve lived. I think I made the best of what started out to be a pretty bad situation and I’m very grateful to all the wonderful people who’ve filled in for the family I lost so early in life. Now I want to do one last thing for them and pay tribute to them by telling their stories.

SUSANNA LUND

TORONTO, 1919

Susanna opened her eyes as the sun bathed her in its light. She sat up in bed with a start thinking that she had overslept and was going to be late for class. Relief washed over her as she realized that it was Saturday today and the whole weekend stretched out in front of her. It was the last weekend in September and she and Daniel were going to take a day trip up to Kleinberg to take advantage of the turning of the leaves that were almost at their peak in the picturesque little town north of Toronto. This was the first painting excursion they had taken since arriving in Toronto at the end of August. Daniel, who was a distant cousin of Susanna’s, was four years older than her and had already graduated from the Art School of Montreal. He had been her mentor growing up, and had fostered her own ambition to become a painter. The previous March they had attended the Tom Thomson Tribute at the Montreal Arts Club and they had both been awed by the new style of painting they had seen. It was soon after that they decided that Toronto was the place to be for an aspiring artist in 1919. So Susanna had enrolled at the Ontario College of Art and Daniel had secured employment as an illustrator at a local Lithographic company. Initially Susanna’s family had objected to their plans but had finally relented knowing that Daniel would keep a watchful eye over Susanna.

Susanna put the kettle on for a pot of tea and hurriedly washed up and dressed as she nibbled on a biscuit. Finishing the last of her cup of tea, she quickly rinsed her cup and gathered together her paint box, sketchbook and two small boards that she would use if she decided to do some quick studies instead of sketches. She went downstairs and waited out front on the enclosed porch of the rooming house she lived in on Sullivan Street. It wasn’t the nicest place she had seen but it was conveniently close to her school, a feature that won out in the end.

A few minutes later the car she had been told to look for, a black McLaughlin-Buick, drove up. Daniel, who was in the passenger seat jumped out quickly to help Susanna place her things in the trunk. As she settled herself into the back seat Daniel introduced her to Hal White who was a senior illustrator at the company where Daniel worked. There was also a pretty blonde sharing the back seat with Susanna who was introduced as Hal’s friend Marie.

They settled in for the ride which was under two hours and very scenic and once they had arrived and found a spot which looked promising Hal and Marie went off on their own announcing that they would meet up at 4:00 for the ride back to Toronto.

It was a spectacular fall day and the warmth of the sun enhanced the riotous red and orange of the leaves. Daniel and Susanna set up their easels about fifty feet apart from each other and were both quickly absorbed in their work wanting to take full advantage of the gift of being able to paint nature in its last gasp of glory for the season. They didn’t even take a break for lunch instead eating the sandwiches that they had brought as they worked.

At 3:30 Daniel approached Susanna and suggested that they pack up and head back to where they were supposed to meet Hal and Marie.

Susanna enthused about what a great day it had been.

“I hope Hal and Marie made out as well as we did.”

Daniel grimaced slightly.

“Oh, I’m sure they made out all right, but I wouldn’t put any bets on whether they got much painting done. I don’t believe Marie is an artist and I don’t think she came along to watch Hal paint.”

“Really?” Susanna queried, “I thought I saw a wedding ring on his finger.”

“Yes, Hal is married, but not to Marie. He seems to subscribe to those newfangled theories going around in artistic circles that the artist is above adhering to the moral codes of everyday folks. I have to tell you Susanna, I strongly disagree with him there. He can call me a stick in the mud all he wants, but I truly believe in the sanctity of marriage and when the woman I love agrees to marry me I would never betray her trust. And I’ll tell you too, I’m strong enough not to need to indulge in any pleasures of the flesh. I can happily wait for the woman I love.”

Susanna blushed and hoped that Daniel wasn’t going to continue on with that train of thought. She had recently realized that he was smitten with her, which she felt terrible about because she didn’t think she would ever be able to reciprocate his feelings.

Just then Hal and Marie appeared and Susanna noted that Hal didn’t appear to have any completed studies or sketches with him leading her to surmise that Daniel probably had the right idea about them.

Hal greeted them cheerily and everyone pitched in to pack up the car. Susanna took the opportunity to thank him for driving them up, “It was a perfect day. I feel very inspired and I can’t wait to get to work on a painting from the quick studies I did when I get back home.”

“Well, I do admire your enthusiasm. Oh, but to have the exuberance of youthful optimism. Daniel mentioned that you’re a student at OCA, is that correct?”

Susanna nodded.

Hal continued, “Actually one of the instructors, David Staunton, is a neighbour of mine. Coincidentally he’s asked me to speak at your regular Friday evening lectures. I do believe I’ll take him up on the invitation, especially if the students are as attractive and effervescent as you.”

Before Susanna could respond Marie appeared at his side and possessively took Hal by the arm, “Come on Hal, let’s get going, I have a performance tonight and I have to be at the theatre before 7:30.”

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That Monday morning Susanna was the first student to arrive at her painting class. Her instructor Mr. Stanton was getting things set up. He nodded at Susanna and gave her an apprising second look.

“Miss Lund you look like you’ve gotten some sun this weekend.”

Susanna self-consciously touched her sunburnt nose.

“Yes a few of us went up to Kleinberg this weekend to paint and I forgot my sunhat.”

“I imagine the colors must have been magnificent up there. What medium did you use?”

“Oil on board.”

“Well, bring it in sometime this week and we’ll take a look at it as a class exercise.”

The other students began streaming into the classroom. At the end of class Mr. Stanton made an announcement.

“I’m very pleased that a good friend of mine who is a very talented landscape artist will be coming in to speak to us this Friday. His name is Hal White and I’m sure that at least a few of you have heard of him. Besides being a talented artist Hal also has some interesting ideas about the role of the artist in society that he would like to share with you as well. For those traditionalists among you, you may find his unconventional view of things to be somewhat disturbing, but as part of a well-rounded education in the arts it’s important to be receptive to new ideas and different philosophies.”

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That Friday evening Hal White brought along some of his paintings and began his lecture on the new direction that landscape artists were now taking.

“I’m sure that many of you are aware of the new school of artists who are dedicated to showcasing the beauty of the Canadian landscape. From my own experience I would say that when you paint landscapes you need to keep foremost in your mind the notion that nature is random and not always aesthetically pleasing. When you are confined to a small space, such as a canvas, it is vital that what you are painting has impact; it does not need to be totally true to what you actually see. Always remember that first and foremost your job as an artist is that of an interpreter. You are here to awaken the senses and heighten the awareness of others and if you are able to achieve that you can consider yourself a success.”

Hal began to walk slowly around the room carefully studying each students face.

“Now you look to me like an earnest and dedicated bunch. You have chosen to attend this school so that you can learn the techniques needed to perfect your craft. And that is an admirable undertaking. However, it is just as vital that you also learn how to cultivate your soul. The soul of the artist is his most important tool. By their very nature, artists have a higher level of consciousness than most other people. We see, feel and experience things that others don’t – they are depending on us to illuminate the world for them. I believe that the artist must transcend moral codes, religious doctrine and conventional lifestyles in order to benefit mankind with our heightened awareness and experience. The rules are for others; our sight must not be clouded by the cloaks of respectability. Mediocrity is not for us, it should not be in our art and it should not be in our lives.”

Hal delivered his speech with the intensity of a sermon. Some of the students seemed to be mesmerized while others had looks of studied scepticism. Susanna was totally engrossed and had trained her large brown eyes on him the whole time. She wondered if that was why he had seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time making eye contact with her, making her feel as if his words were directed at her in particular. She felt strangely immodest as though she had been guilty of transmitting the hunger she was feeling for some kind of meaning and fulfillment. All she knew was that she felt very confused and somehow lacking and she desperately wanted to feel the heightened awareness that Hal had talked about with such passion.

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The following Monday evening Daniel stopped by to see Susanna with the news that they had both been invited to spend the upcoming weekend at a cottage on Georgian Bay which was owned by Hugh Leith, who was also an artist and a friend of Hal White. Susanna readily agreed knowing that the scenery would be spectacular for painting.

They drove up early on Saturday morning with Hal White who was once again accompanied by Marie. The setting of the cottage was idyllic; it was right on the lake and was surrounded by trees. It had a very backwoods feel to it and yet the cottage itself was very comfortable and spacious while still retaining a rustic quality. Hugh’s wife Elsie welcomed them warmly and then shooed them off to paint with box lunches that she had packed for them.

“I know that you artists will want to make the most of the beautiful colors and this wonderful Indian summer weather that we’ve been having. Dinner will be at 6:00. So you go off and paint and leave everything else to me. As long as I get to spend a few hours down by the lake with a book, I’m more than happy.”

The group of painters didn’t need any persuasion and set off to spend a pleasant and productive day painting the rugged landscapes surrounding the lake. When they met again for dinner they found a wonderful buffet set out for them with all sorts of homemade casseroles, two kinds of salad, a basket brimming with interesting breads and rolls as well as a selection of cold meats and cheeses. The Leith’s were known for their generosity as hosts; Hugh had been born into a wealthy family and was also a successful artist. He and Elsie were firm believers that it was important to share in their largesse; all that they asked in return was that their guests provide good company and interesting conversation.

The group helped themselves to the buffet and glasses of wine and made their way to the great room where comfortable chairs with small folding tables set in front of them were arranged around a roaring fire. They all ate ravenously aided by all the fresh air and sunshine that they had enjoyed that day. After the meal glasses of port were passed around and trays filled with pastries and chocolates were set out. Elsie announced that she was going to clean up a bit in the kitchen and then head off to her room to do some reading before turning in early.

“I know that you artists will be up at the first light so that you can get in a good days work, and I want to have a nice breakfast waiting for you.”

When they protested she assured them that it was her pleasure, “Since I have no artistic talent myself this is my own small way of helping to support the arts.”

As they sipped their port Marie turned to Susanna and asked her if she was planning to vote in the upcoming provincial election. It was the first time that women would be allowed to vote in Ontario and it had been the subject of much speculation and debate.

Susanna answered affirmatively that she most certainly intended to vote.

Marie replied, “I hope that every woman in this province votes. It’s about time men started taking us seriously.”

Hal fixed his gaze on Marie. Susanna could see the glint of lust in his eyes. Marie was a very attractive, confident woman. She had shiny, strawberry blond hair cut short in a flattering bob that was the latest fashion. She was dressed casually but you could see that her clothes were expensive. She wore no makeup except for a touch of red lipstick that enhanced the fullness of her lips. Her skin was flawless and her eyes were a silvery blue and heavy lidded which made her appear cool and aloof but with an unmistakable air of sensuality. Susanna could see why Hal was entranced with her and yet she couldn’t help wondering how his wife figured into this. Did she actually allow him to go away with another woman for the weekend she mused?

Her thoughts were interrupted as Hal addressed her.

“Speaking of the rights of women, have you read Ann Veronica yet Susanna?”

When Susanna indicated that she hadn’t even heard of it, he continued.

“It’s by H.G. Wells and I would say it is required reading for all young women. There was a lot of attention paid to its assertion that women should have the right to vote but I would say that its main point is that women should have the same freedom as men to chart the course of their lives. I’m hoping that the time has finally come to take bold steps out of the rigidity of Victorian society and into the Twentieth Century.”

Marie pursed her lips and made a sucking noise, “It’s so kind of you Hal to take an interest in Susanna’s intellectual development. Don’t forget to add Havelock Ellis’s The Erotic Rights of Women to her reading list – after all it is to the benefit of wolves like you to coax virginal young ladies into your idea of the right way to live.”

Hal narrowed his eyes and retorted, “The lifestyle I prescribe hasn’t been to your detriment; you certainly haven’t raised any objections that I can recall. I just hate to see people being smothered by conventions when they could be partaking of all of the pleasures that life has to offer.”

Daniel interjected, “Hal, that’s enough of that kind of talk. It’s bad enough that you’re here flaunting your mistress, leaving your poor wife at home to suffer the indignity of it. I don’t think that Susanna needs to be exposed to this kind of thing. You do not have to live like a bohemian in order to be a successful artist and I resent your implication that those of us who have strong morals are beneath you.”

“So, the truth finally comes out Daniel, my fine young friend. Believe me I have nothing but admiration for you and the ideals that you hold so dear. And for your information, not that it’s any of your business mind you, my wife refused my invitation to accompany me here this weekend. She was more than happy to have me out of her hair for a few days and I had her blessing to bring the companion of my choosing.”

“Yes,” Marie added, “Remember that his dear wife Estelle is also an artist and she shares her husband’s ideals. It’s ideal for her that he supports her.” She laughed raucously while the rest of them looked on uncomfortably.

After this clearing of the air and a few minutes of unease they settled into more mundane conversation and soon found themselves ready to turn in for the night. Susanna found it hard to sleep there was so much running through her mind. She felt unsettled, like she was on the cusp of some kind of personal breakthrough and would have to make some difficult decisions as to what path she wanted to take. And the nagging question facing her was whether she was going to continue down the high road or opt for something more exciting but with a destination that was unclear. She had been brought up as a good Catholic girl and she couldn’t help but feel perturbed at the immoral thoughts that were going through her head.

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Susanna spent that winter attending her classes and she would cocoon herself in her room in the evenings. She spent a great deal of time reading and thinking. Daniel would come by to take her ice-skating or to see an art exhibit, but he found her increasingly reticent and introspective. One evening he arrived with the news that he had been offered a teaching position at the Victoria School of Art. They wanted him to start immediately because he would be replacing a teacher who was taking an indefinite leave of absence due to illness. He explained, “It’ll be a really good opportunity to get some teaching experience and I’d also be making a better salary than I am right now. I should be able to return to Toronto with enough money to buy a nice little house, although it might have to be outside the city.”

Susanna blanched as she realized the direction the conversation seemed to be heading and quickly interrupted him.

“That sounds great Dan, I’m sure you’ll be a terrific teacher and living in Victoria should be lovely, I hear it’s beautiful there and the climate is so nice and mild, it will feel so nice after the winter we’ve been experiencing here.”

“If I go will you promise to wait for me Susanna?”

“Well, of course I’ll be still be here Daniel. I have another year of college to finish.”

Daniel had departed by the weekend and Susanna had to admit that it was a relief not to have him coming by all the time, making moon eyes at her as she tried not to notice and pretend that they were just the very best of chums.

And when it seemed like the winter would never end and Susanna was thoroughly tired of the four walls of her room, spring arrived. All of the students at the college had been busy preparing for the annual end of year Artists Masquerade Ball, where they used their creative talents to design spectacular costume and decorate the assembly room where the ball was held. The theme this year was ‘Nature in All of Its Glory’. Susanna had decided to design herself a raven costume because she admired their intelligence and she was also lately feeling a kinship with the mysterious darkness of spirit that they inspired.

Oversized murals of landscapes had been worked on as a group effort by the students and the assembly room looked like a lush and inviting forest in the heart of Northern Ontario.

Susanna arrived at the ball unescorted. Lately she had found herself cherishing her solitude and she didn’t particularly want to form any attachments with anyone, man or woman, at least for the time being.

She was surprised as she walked in and surveyed the room to see Hal White there speaking with Mr. Stanton. He noticed her staring at him and motioned for her to come over.

“Miss Lund, it’s a pleasure to see you again – it’s been too long. And may I say that you look absolutely stunning in that costume. Now tell me, how is Daniel making out in Victoria? We all miss him at the shop; he was such a diligent worker and upstanding young man.”

Susanna felt her color rising as she realized that Hal was making fun of Daniel.

“Actually he’s doing very well, he says the weather there is wonderful and he’s been able to get out and do a lot of painting. He does say that he misses everyone here in Toronto though.”

‘Ah yes, I’m sure that he must be pining for you Susanna. Do you have any plans to join him there or are you patiently awaiting his return with his pockets lined with money so that you two can get married?”

“Daniel and I are just very good friends. We have no plans to marry.”

Hal fixed her with an intense stare, “I see. And how goes your painting? Are you still taken with the new school of painting I was talking about?”

Susanna nodded and Hal continued, “Have you heard about the exhibit that’s being planned at the Art Museum of Toronto in May? It’s a collection of art by the newly formed Group of Seven Canadian Artists. It’s being touted as an absolute must see experience, especially if you’re an artist. A group of us are planning to go together and meet afterwards to discuss our impressions of the show. It would be an excellent learning experience for a receptive young artist such as yourself. I know that if Daniel were here he would have been part of our little group – so why don’t you come in his place and you can tell him all about it?”

Susanna only hesitated for the briefest moment before accepting Hal’s offer.

“Wonderful Susanna, I’ll be in touch with you later with all the details. Now, if you’ll excuse me I have to take my leave. I just stopped by at David’s invitation to marvel at the creativity of you young people. Enjoy your evening Miss Lund, and if you’ll excuse me I must say that you are without a doubt the most breathtaking woman here tonight.”

As he spoke he gently took her hand and placed a lingering kiss on it. He fixed her with that intense stare of his which seemed to delve into her very soul and then abruptly he turned away and strode out of the room.

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It was a Saturday afternoon in the middle of May when Susanna arrived at the Art Museum to take in the exhibition. She had purposely arrived early in order to have some time to compose herself. She had found it difficult to sleep the night before, she felt sure that this was going to be an event with much significance. After purchasing her ticket she sat down inside to wait for the others. While she waited she carefully studied the catalogue. The treatise of the show was that artists ‘are all imbued with the idea that an art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people.’ She felt inspired by the noble sentiment expressed in the quote from the Irish poet George Russell that stated ‘No country can ever hope to rise beyond a mere vulgar mediocrity where there is not unbounded confidence in what its humanity can do’. She was startled from her reverie as Hal White spoke, “Miss Lund, here you are. When I didn’t see you outside I thought that maybe you had decided against coming today and I must admit that I was crushed at the thought. I must tell you, I was so entranced by the vision of you the night of the ball that I’ve found it difficult to get you off of my mind, even in spite of the distractions of the beautiful spring weather we’ve been having.”

Susanna found herself blushing intensely and she felt like a silly schoolgirl as she tried to summon a response to Hal’s words of admiration. She was rescued from the awkwardness of the moment as the rest of the group joined them.

After they had viewed the exhibit Hal suggested that they make their way to a local speakeasy where they could relax with a drink and discuss their various impressions of what they had seen. Susanna had never been to a speakeasy and in fact had not imbibed in any kind of alcohol since their weekend trip to Georgian Bay. The port she had sipped on there had been her first taste of the stuff since her father had allowed her a taste from his wine glass at his cousin’s wedding when Susanna was ten years old. She felt woefully unsophisticated in comparison to the rest of the group. Hal insisted that she join them in a drink, “Miss Lund you must learn to let all your inhibitions loose because they are only going to hold you back from experiencing all that life has to offer. It’s the 1920’s now and the times are changing; as an artist it is your duty not only to keep up with the times but to also play a part in setting the trends for the future.”

After a few sips of her cocktail Susanna felt herself relaxing and she really started to enjoy herself. She didn’t feel confident enough to join in the furious debate that was going on over the artistic merit of what they had seen but she felt very content just to be privy to what was being said. Normally on a Saturday afternoon she would be at home tending to her laundry and cleaning her little apartment; she knew that what she was a part of now was infinitely more significant and exciting. She sat back and gazed at Hal as he lectured the group on the importance of the paintings they had just seen. He was being very attentive to her, making sure that she had his eye and she couldn’t help but revel in his attention. He was so sure of himself and his consequentiality to the rest of the world; by coveting her he made her feel that in turn she must have immense value and that nothing could go ever go wrong as long as she followed his lead. She was glowing from the inside and out and she felt that she could no longer let old-fashioned sensibilities stand in her way.

Later that afternoon as they all stood outside the entrance of the speakeasy saying their good-byes to each other, Hal gently took Susanna by the arm and took her aside, “It’s been such a good day today, it seems a shame to end it now. How about coming by my studio for little while? I’ve been working on a landscape from our Georgian Bay weekend which I’d really like to show you; I’d be interested in what you think of it since you were there as well.”

Susanna shyly nodded and voiced her assent to the proposal.

Hal’s studio was at the back of his property in an oversized shed that had been equipped with a wood burning stove. He lived in Wychwood Park, an artist’s colony just on the outskirts of the city. It was a beautiful natural oasis highlighted by a pond that was part of Taddle Creek. The house was a charming Tudor style surrounded by a large English country style garden that was highlighted by Hollyhocks and other perennials, with climbing roses and clematis growing over a multitude of arbours.

Susanna commented enthusiastically on how lovely the garden was.

“Thank you, but it’s all Estelle’s doing. She’s very passionate about the house and the garden and in fact she does most of her painting right here.”

At the mention of his wife Susanna stiffened.

“Don’t worry Susanna, she’s not here. As a matter of fact she’s in Belleville this weekend attending a bridal shower for her niece. And I can assure you that it is true that Estelle and I both have very liberal ideas about marriage. It suits us just fine that Estelle takes care of the house and the garden and I take care of the bills. We respect each other and we share solidarity in our commitment to our art, but the marriage is in name only, the passion died away many years ago.”

Susanna nodded gravely, “Well, how about showing me your paintings?”

After entering the studio Hal first proceeded to pour them both a glass of brandy from a bottle that he retrieved from one of the cupboards. He had Susanna take a seat on a stool while he brought out his canvases one at a time for display. Each time he would stand close to her and speaking softly he would describe them and the technique he had used. As he spoke he would often graze her shoulder or her hair with the faintest of touches until Susanna found herself aching for his touch to be more substantial. She was finding herself feeling totally seduced by Hal and his obvious talent and this heady feeling was elevated by the effects of the brandy.

He put away the last of the paintings and standing right in front of her he asked, “So Susanna, do I have what it takes?” Before she could say a word he was kissing her and any hesitation she may have ever felt dissolved completely as he led her to a daybed that was set up behind a painted screen.

Their relationship continued into the summer and had evolved to the point where she would mainly see him on the weekends when he would take her to the galleries or the speakeasies, where they were often joined by other friends of Hal’s, who were mainly artists. Afterwards they would go back to her place where she would hastily usher him into her room hoping to avoid being spotted by her landlady. When it had been Daniel visiting her the landlady hadn’t minded but in the case of Hal she seemed to sense things were much different and that Susanna had reason to feel guilty.

Susanna had taken on a job for the summer and she was always meaning to do some painting after work or on the weekends but she found it so difficult to concentrate and would while away many hours daydreaming about Hal. Against her better instincts she would imagine how it would be if Hal were to leave his wife and marry her. And though she was afraid to admit it to herself she was starting to realize that Hal wasn’t quite as enamoured with her as he had been in the beginning. He paid little attention to her art, only giving a cursory glance to any work in progress on her easel. And he seemed to talk exclusively and extensively about his job and his art and seemed impatient and distracted if she wanted to discuss any issues that were important in her own life.

Later that summer Hal invited her to spend the weekend at his house as his wife was going to be away in Belleville attending the wedding of her niece.

“Do you never escort her anywhere?” Susanna asked.

“Not usually. We find it preferable to keep our social lives separate, especially when it comes to her family. They’re not terribly fond of me and the feeling is mutual.”

So Susanna stayed over at Hal’s the entire weekend and enjoyed being able to play at being a married couple. On Sunday morning she awoke early and went out to sit in the front garden with a cup of coffee and enjoy the breaking of the dawn. She was startled when a taxicab drove up to the house and Marie alighted from it with a determined look on her face.

“Well, well, why am I not surprised to find you here Susanna? The lovely Miss Lund – I knew he’d get you in spite of your idealistic boyfriend and your precious virginity.”

Susanna could only stare. She didn’t know how to respond to such a verbal assault that for all of its ferocity still rang true. She had been so happy all that weekend and was starting to believe that maybe there was a chance for her and Hal to have a real relationship if she was just patient and didn’t push it. Now she felt cheap and ashamed of herself for being so gullible and weak willed.

“I suppose Hal’s still sleeping?” Marie asked. “Anyway I just came by to pick up a few things that I left behind at his studio the other night. I’m going on tour with my theatre company and I’m going to need them. Can you let me in so that I can get them?”

Susanna silently escorted Marie to the studio and unlocked the door. Marie proceeded to go behind the painted screen and came out a few seconds later holding what at first appeared to be pieces of lace. Susanna soon realized that it was lingerie.

Marie smiled at her coyly, “I had to make a hasty retreat, Hal’s wife showed up unexpectedly and Hal didn’t want us both to be shot.”

Susanna looked at her quizzically, “I thought his wife didn’t care about that?”

“Sure honey, she doesn’t mind a bit, as long as she doesn’t know about it.” Marie laughed with derision, “I hope you haven’t fallen for him dear. You’re only another one in a very long and never ending line of women. Hal’s not going to give any of it up for you or anyone else.”

After Marie drove off in her taxi Susanna went inside and hurriedly packed up her things. She told Hal that she just remembered that she had something urgent that needed to be taken care of. She did not mention Marie’s visit. She never had the nerve to say anything to Hal about it, she just felt so stupid and used. She ended their relationship by making herself unavailable until he got the message and moved on to easier pickings. Susanna found the whole experience humiliating and she was totally disheartened. She found it hard to get inspired to do anything at all, let alone paint.

When Daniel arrived back in Toronto that fall he found a morose and dispirited Susanna. He asked her to marry him, but she gently refused him. After completing her studies at art school the following spring she tried to find work as an artist. Down on her luck she moved back to Montreal a few years later and lived with her mother. She found work teaching art at the community college and eventually she found steady work as an illustrator of children’s books.

She never did marry and neither did Daniel. Every summer they would see each other at the family cottage in the Laurentians where they would both stay for and month or two and paint. Whenever she was asked why she had never married she would always give the same reply, that it was because her only passion was for painting.

Note to the Editor

(Phyllis, if it’s still you after all these years, I want to thank you and tell you that you have been a great editor and an even greater friend)

If you recognize the name Daniel Harris, you’ve got it right, it is THE Daniel Harris, the one whose paintings now sell for a small fortune. I have not used pseudonyms in these stories. I will leave it to your editorial prowess to change the names and to decide how tricky the legal implications might be and whether standard disclaimers will suffice on this cast of very real characters that I have used. For your information, Susanna died of pneumonia in 1975 at the rest home in Montreal where she had been living for several years. Daniel Harris as you probably know died in 1981 at his home in Ontario. The cause of death was kept pretty quiet but I had heard it was prostate cancer that took him.

GWEN

TORONTO, 1924

Gwen Whitman had been the long awaited daughter born to her parents after three vigorous, bouncing boys. Her mother, who was femininity personified with her beauty, elegance and soft spoken graciousness, a woman who had not the slightest hint of malice about her, was overjoyed. It turned out though that all that Gwen had inherited from her mother was her flaming orange-red hair. It wasn’t until later in life when Gwen was a young woman in her twenties that she finally acquired her mother’s calm disposition, but until that time she was an undisciplined whirlwind of tomboyish activity. Much to her mother’s distress she emulated her brother’s so closely, that she was often mistaken as a boy herself. And she resisted all of her mother’s attempts to turn her into a little lady; she hated to have her hair combed and on the odd occasion when she could not get out of wearing a dress, she was miserable until she was finally able to shed it for her usual dungarees and shirts which she would retrieve from her brother’s closets, to her mother’s unending despair. The world changed forever for Gwen when she was five years old and her little sister Judith was born. Judith from the very start was the quintessential little lady. As a baby she lay primly in her bassinet, seemingly confident of her extraordinary beauty, letting out only the faintest of mewlings should she in the odd event not be lovingly doted on for more than a few minutes. By the tender age of three her choice of clothing involved wearing the frilliest of dresses and she insisted that her mother roll her dampened hair up in rags every night so that in the morning she had a head full of glossy, bouncy curls accessorized with a ribbon carefully chosen to match her outfit. Gwen on the other hand experienced one of the happiest days of her childhood when after months of persuasion her mother finally consented to allowing her to have her hair cut into a boyish cap. This came after her poor mother had finally despaired of the tangles and rat’s tails which had to be combed out of it, not to mention the chewing gum which had to be cut from it on a regular basis. Gwen would keep that same carefree haircut for the rest of her life – it was something that defined her, along with the orange-red hair and the sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her strong, straight nose, giving her a fresh, honest look no matter how old she got.

The Whitman’s lived on Manning Avenue in Toronto where the families were solidly middle class, their roots, manners and morals British to the core. The children swarmed the streets, guileless to anything but partaking of their own fun and frivolity. There was always a hockey or baseball game being organized, or at the very least a rowdy game of tag or hide and seek. Gwen had been blessed with an outstanding athletic prowess and was always one of the first players picked, even if it was only the boys playing. Around the other girls Gwen always stood back with a bemused smile on her face not knowing how to interact with their serious games of skipping, hopscotch and playing house or school all punctuated with paroxysms of giggles. The other girls didn’t mind having her around but they knew instinctively that she was a mysterious outsider who would never be privy to the feminine wiles and machinations necessary to participate in their world.

After finishing high school Gwen shunned the traditional jobs available to women at that time such as teaching or secretarial work. Her preference was to take on a carpentry or construction job. She loved hanging out with her brothers in their basement workshop as they passed on the secrets that they had learned in shop class and she assisted them as they built everything from bookshelves to the massive tree house that dominated the latter half of their backyard. Then the First World War began and women were encouraged to take on the jobs that had been vacated by the men who had gone overseas to fight. Gwen was able to easily find work in the factories doing the kind of strenuous physical work that she enjoyed. The work never seemed to sap her strength as so many of the other women were wont to complain about. After a hearty dinner she would head off for her many sporting activities from rowing to tennis to playing on a woman’s hockey league. She also curled, skated and swam. Every night she sank into an easy sleep, her strong, healthy body repairing and building its musculature, her heart beating strongly circulating the fully oxygenated blood, repairing tissues, building up bones. In the mornings she always woke up fully rested, positive, alert and ready, her skin glowing with health, her eyes bright and unfettered with the gunky debris of those with less hearty immune systems. She hadn’t been sick a day in her life, except for when she had the chicken pox, which had had no effect on her except for her mother’s imposed week long quarantine of her to the house and the backyard, so that she would not be responsible for communicating the disease.

Gwen was happy to keep herself busy and avoid the theatrics that were going on at home with her sister Judith. Judith was fully immersed in ballet and tap dancing and had a schedule of rehearsals, costume fittings and recitals that was attended to with a fortitude bordering on the hysterical. And once she entered her teens, and at Judith’s insistence her mother started entering her into the beauty contest circuit, which hyped up the endless discussions about hair, makeup and the paucity of her wardrobe which never held anything decent, warranting yet another shopping excursion. Things really switched into overdrive when Judith met Timothy Stuart, one of Toronto’s most eligible bachelors. She met him at the church picnic the summer that she turned seventeen. The picnic was held every year at the end of June at Lorne Park, which was a resort area just west of the city. In those days the picnic was the social event of the summer and involved months of planning. The massive amounts of food necessary to feed hundreds of people was loaded onto a boat from the Brock Street dock at the foot of Spadina Avenue for the fourteen mile trip to the dock at Lorne Park. Normally a church picnic would not have been an event that Timothy Stuart would have willingly attended as his usual tendency was to sleep past noon on the weekends. However the young lady that he was courting had asked him to accompany her. Timothy’s father had been intimating that it was time for him to fly straight and settle down. Timothy was the youngest son of Charles Stuart, a self-made man who had made his fortune as the founder of a thriving securities firm. Charles was a philanthropist and a patron of the arts. He lived with his family in a magnificent Queen Anne style house filled with an outstanding art collection, fine European furniture, Turkish rugs and an impressive collection of Ming dynasty porcelain which was displayed in ornately carved mahogany cases with leaded glass doors. He lived well but he also upheld a strict doctrine of giving back in order to maintain a karmic balance with the world. Timothy eschewed his father’s ideals with an unspoken and underhanded zeal that bordered on downright contempt. He was determined to get all that he could out of life which meant taking his family’s money and his own good looks as far as they would take him. He had an arrogant tilt to his chin and a cruel glint in his eye that made most people instinctively wary of him. When the war began he had never considered even for the briefest moment of enlisting, but he would tell anyone who would listen that he had desperately wanted to go but for his inner ear problem which made him prone to dizziness, if not for that he would have gone overseas in an instant. He was twenty seven but had only just completed his university degree, as his many years of study had been interrupted a number of times with extended breaks so that he could travel and ‘relax his mind’. He had just begun working at his father’s securities firm where he daily fulfilled his goal of doing the least amount of work possible while still keeping enough of a profile to ensure that he was noticed and promoted as quickly as possible. He was best at glad-handing the clients which was perfect for him, allowing him to take long drawn out lunches, returning for a brief afternoon appearance at the office before leaving again for yet another meeting, a round of billiards or a golf game with another client or ‘contact’.

He had led an active social life with a succession of beautiful women but now that he accepted the fact that it was time to settle down, at least as far as appearances went, he was on the lookout for the most attractive wife he could find. If a woman was going to be a permanent fixture in his home she might as well be easy on the eyes. And when he laid his eyes on Judith at the picnic he knew that he had to have her as she was easily one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen. She sparkled with a guileless aura that was enchanting. And Judith was easily swayed by Timothy’s charms, truly believing his words of abject adoration and promises of everlasting ardour. They were married the following June in a lavish ceremony and reception with over five hundred guests, followed with a month long honeymoon in Europe, which was just emerging from the auspices of the First World War. Despite the destruction and the rationing the Europeans were dealing with, Timothy and Judith managed to have a wonderful time and returned with the many items of garish, oversized furniture that they purchased there in order to fill the rooms of the grand, showcase house that had been a wedding gift from Charles Stuart. Before the decorating was even completed Judith was already on her way to producing the brood of children she managed to bring forth in rapid succession. By 1923 after just four years of marriage she already had three children and had just been delivered of the news that another was on the way.

While these events were unfolding Gwen was finding herself far from ensconced in her sister’s world of a fairy tale wedding followed by revelling in the joys of motherhood. Since the war had ended she had been having trouble securing work because women were expected to give up their jobs to the men who had returned home. Things became more complicated when her parents decided to retire to Victoria, as her father was ailing. Finding a place to live was a serious issue for Gwen until Judith invited her to come and live with her and her family until conditions improved for her. Judith in all sincerity welcomed Gwen’s company, as well as her companionship to the children who absolutely adored her – she was one of that rare breed of adults who was never too busy or distracted to play with them and could easily be persuaded to spend hours with them outside throwing around a ball or gamely playing along with whatever diversion had been invented for that play session. And despite how things turned out Gwen was always grateful to Judith for her graciousness and generosity in helping her out in a time of need without ever looking down on her or making her feel that she was a burden. Timothy was another matter though. She felt that he looked at her askance as the poor relation who was going to be an indefinite thorn in his side. And she could sense that he had an underlying cruelty about him that could surface without warning and leave a devastating wake. And what bothered her most was that she could see that he felt an increasing disdain towards Judith as she lost her girlish figure to the demands of bearing children and her face started to show the fatigue of caring for such a large and ever growing family. Gwen was just thankful that she rarely saw Timothy. He tended to wake up long after she had left the house for work and his habit was to arrive home late and ask that his dinner be brought to his study so that he could catch up on work.

After Gwen had been living with the Stuart’s for several months, they were all invited to Timothy’s parent’s house for a homecoming dinner for his sister Olivia. She had returned home from New York, abruptly and unexpectedly, after her marriage of less than a year had ended. She had married an associate from her father’s firm who had taken a more lucrative position with a brokerage house in New York City. Gwen had never met Olivia. Olivia hadn’t attended the wedding of Timothy and Judith because she had been living in England at the time where she was studying the Classics. Gwen was surprised at how different Olivia seemed from Timothy. She shared his extraordinary good looks, but her large, soulful brown eyes communicated gentleness instead of Timothy’s furious cynicism. Her soft brown hair was cut in a fashionable bob and she had luminously pale skin, flawless but for one small beauty mark on her left cheek. As she entered the room Gwen could see how vulnerable she felt and Gwen’s immediate instinct was to rush over to her and hug her like you would a small child who was on the verge of bursting into tears.

After dinner the men made their way to the library to partake of cognac and cigars while the ladies headed for the drawing room. Mrs. Stuart took Judith aside to show her the embroidery pattern she was working on so Gwen and Olivia found themselves alone.

“So Gwen, what do you do around here for excitement?”

“Well, at this time of the year I keep pretty busy with curling and skating. I guess the big excitement right now is that the women’s hockey team I play on have made it to the championship game this year – our big game is this Friday night.”

“Oh really, that does sound exciting – would there be any chance that I could go to the game? I really need to get out of this house and take my mind off things. I know my parents are all worried about me too and don’t like to see me moping around the house – I know they’re really shocked at the brevity of my marriage – I’m sure they expected me to stay the course no matter how bad things got, but believe me it was an absolutely impossible situation.”

Gwen nodded silently knowing that it was too soon for revealing too much. People seemed to naturally feel inclined to confide in her, probably because she was such a good listener. Unlike most people she was willing to listen carefully to what people had to say without trying to change the subject back to herself.

That Friday Gwen played hockey with her customary zeal. She could see Olivia in the stands and was surprised at the gusto with which Olivia cheered her on. To the elation of them both Gwen’s team won by a goal scored in the last two minutes of the game. Afterwards they all headed off to a local eatery to celebrate their victory. Some of the girls had flasks of bootleg gin and vodka that they discreetly added to the soft drinks that they ordered.

Olivia sat beside Gwen and was visibly flushed with excitement, “It was so exciting to watch you play! I’ve never seen anyone fly across the ice like that – I have to tell you I used to think hockey was boring but I must say that my eyes have really been opened. I’m just sorry it was your last game of the season. What are you going to do now for excitement?”

“Well, the softball team I play on will begin practicing soon. I also belong to the rowing club and I play tennis and swim; if that interests you I could get you the information on how to sign up.”

“Sure, I’d love to get involved in a few things. I’ve never been much of an athlete but I’ll give it a try. I have to say, it’s been absolutely fascinating watching you – you are so strong and powerful for a woman.”

That summer Olivia and Gwen were inseparable. Olivia was leaning heavily on Gwen for emotional support, something that Gwen was not at all averse to. They both seemed to benefit from their intense friendship.

One unbearably hot Sunday morning in July they attended the christening of Judith’s newest addition to the family, a baby girl named Ellen. Afterwards they attended a family gathering, a sumptuous champagne brunch held at the Stuart Senior’s house. Gwen noted with some alarm that Timothy had eschewed the champagne and was instead consuming large tumblers of straight whiskey. He seemed to be more agitated than usual and was leering at her in a way that made her very uneasy. She had seen very little of him that summer, he was rarely at home and the family usually spent weekends at their cottage in the Muskoka’s, mercifully leaving Gwen with the house to herself.

After nibbling at a few of the delicacies set out on the buffet table, Olivia and Gwen decided to take a stroll in the garden to escape the oppressive feel of the house. Gwen waited in the conservatory while Olivia went off to wash her hands. Suddenly Timothy appeared at her side and grabbed her roughly by the arm, “So how is Judith’s big sister doing? I never seem to see you at home – are you enjoying the free room and board that I’ve been providing you?”

Gwen was shocked; Judith had always made it abundantly clear that she didn’t need to worry about paying for anything, that they had plenty of money and that she was never to consider for a moment that she was a burden to them.

Timothy pulled Gwen against him and continued, “Maybe we should work out some kind of arrangement, especially since your sister never seems to have the time or the energy for me anymore with all those damn kids.”

Gwen struggled to get out of his grasp. Ultimately Timothy was no match for her strength and she managed to extricate herself.

Olivia was standing in the doorway, “My God Timothy you are such a pig.”

Timothy narrowed his eyes, “What’s the matter Olivia? You’re not jealous are you?” He stalked away with an evident fury.

Olivia went over and hugged Gwen. “I’m so sorry Gwen; he’s such a jackass, especially when he drinks. He’s always thought he was God’s gift to women.”

Gwen replied, “It’s all right - I’m fine. But it looks like I’m going to have to move out of his house and I’ll have to do it today. I guess I’ll stay at a hotel until I can find another place.”

“No, you’ll stay here for now. We have plenty of room and my parents are going to be leaving for Europe next week so we’ll have the house to ourselves for almost two months.”

Later that evening Olivia and Gwen sat down with a cup of tea in Gwen’s room, taking a break after finally getting her all settled in. Olivia stared at Gwen for a moment before speaking, “Gwen, there’s something that I have to confess to you – when I first saw you in Timothy’s arms my first thought was oh no, my instincts about you must be totally wrong, and Tim was right, I did feel jealous. I have to tell you how I feel about you Gwen – I care for you in a way that I know I really shouldn’t. I don’t quite know how to say it. I don’t want to scare you off…”

Gwen went over to Olivia and interjected softly, “I love you too Olivia.”

It was a magical and memorable summer for Olivia and Gwen. They found living together easy and they soon adopted a comfortable routine. Olivia would have dinner ready when Gwen got home from work and after dining out in the garden they would spend the rest of the evening going for walks, playing tennis or attending softball games. By the time Olivia’s parents had returned from Europe, Gwen had moved into a boarding house nearby. They continued to see each other every evening and it felt almost as if they were still living together. Until one day Olivia told Gwen that she wouldn’t be able to come by the next night as her parents were insisting that she attend a ‘function’. After that Olivia started to miss her evenings with Gwen more and more often with vague excuses. She seemed increasingly preoccupied and distant, until one night she tearfully told Gwen that she couldn’t see her anymore.

“I’m getting married Gwen. I’m so sorry, I love you but I just can’t go on with our relationship. It’s just too much for me to handle. My parents want me to marry again. He’s really a very nice man and I’m sure he’ll treat me really well. It’s important to me that I have a normal life, I don’t want to have to worry that people will find out about us. And I want to have children too. I’m so sorry to have to hurt you this way Gwen.”

Gwen was completely floored at Olivia’s admission. And it took her a long time to get over her. But she did eventually find love again, and this time it was an enduring love that lasted until her death. It was a secret love as all such kinds had to be at this time in our history. But it was love nevertheless.

Note to the Editor

Dear Gwen who was so strong and healthy all of her life was diagnosed with bone cancer in 1951. After bravely fighting for many years she died in my arms on March 29, 1957.

And yes, the Stuarts are the same iconic family considered a Canadian dynasty and the attack actually happened. I have of course made changes to hide the identity and avoid detection of the family because I am well aware of the litigious ways of the very rich and the very powerful.

Timothy Stuart died of acute blood poisoning in 1955.

What became of Olivia I do not know. She left the city many years ago and was purportedly living in South America with yet another husband.

And as far as I know Judith is still alive, she’s a widower, for the second time and living in Palm Beach, California. She remarried a few years after Timothy died. I know that she shed no tears when Timothy died; she was waiting patiently to be released from the grasp of a tyrannical, heartless, mean-spirited man.

CLARE

CALIFORNIA, 1943

It was yet another beautiful evening in Southern California. The days had been almost relentlessly sunny and warm but that seemingly endless string was about to be broken. Rain was forecast to be moving in during the early morning hours and the advance of clouds was incongruously settling over the haze of the city, bathing the night in moisture. Clare was sorry that she hadn’t chosen a sleeveless dress because despite the ocean breeze, an uncomfortable stickiness was making itself felt in the crevices of her body where only a few hours ago they were freshly soaped and showered. She made her way to the poolside bar focussing her attention on holding her empty glass upright by its delicate crystal stem. Against her better judgement she is about to consume her fourth martini of the evening, but she has promised herself that it will be her last. She plans to sip it slowly and sedately on one of the lounge chairs closest to the beach where she can be soothed by the sound of the surf. Once she is feeling calm and composed she will go in search of her husband. She knows that he has had ample time to be discovered in an embarrassing position, although who of the two of them will have the greatest grounds for affront is yet to be determined. She knows that he has been bewildered and increasingly annoyed at her bourgeois attitude of late; after all when they had first met in Paris in the late Twenties they had both exuberantly participated in the unconventional and non-conformist lifestyle of the Surrealist movement. And she has to admit that she has been a little bit dismayed at herself as well; since they moved to California three years ago she has become uncharacteristically clingy and unsure of herself; so unlike the independent free-spirited woman she was when she met Hans. She wonders if it’s just part of getting old. Or a sign of maturity. She is just plain tired of the non-stop partying, the constant seeking of pleasure and new experiences. All she wants now is to live serenely and with purpose. And if she had it her way she would be sharing her life with Hans, who she loves and admires. But she no longer wants to share him.

She sits down and stares out towards the ocean hoping that she looks preoccupied enough that she will be left alone. She cannot bear the thought of carrying on another inane conversation with someone in the movie business. Unlike the genuine artists that she knew in Europe, these people are obsessed with appearances and with their latest acquisition, whether it be a house, a car or a lover. She has made no secret of the fact that she dislikes it here but Hans has been insistent that this is the only place to be right now to really establish your reputation, not to mention to make a lot of money. His reasoning to Clare is that it is impossible to truly have artistic freedom unless you have money and that once the money is taken care of, and at that time you can concentrate on gaining and securing your artistic integrity. That argument has never held much water for Clare who has rarely noted a positive correlative relationship between wealth and integrity. Her arguments are always overridden when Hans plays his trump card, stating that they can’t possibly return to Europe until the war is over.

Clare herself had been born into a wealthy family. Initially she had been attracted to Hans because despite his lack of money he had a powerful personality and he refused to have anything to do with Clare’s money, insisting that he would pay their way. This had entailed ‘slumming it’ on the part of Clare, but she found it a new and somehow, invigorating experience. Hans had been born and raised in Germany. His family was solidly lower class, but they did have a strong work ethic and a propensity to eat well, and keep themselves and their small, simple house scrupulously clean. Hans was the artistically inclined member of his family, an anomaly in a family of simple labourers, but to their credit they supported his endeavours. He was fascinated by the fairly new art of photography, which was where he got his start, before moving on to making films. By the time Clare met him he was living in Paris, making independent art films. Clare was a striking woman, a tall, willowy blonde with classically sculpted features and arresting grey-blue eyes, which seemed to bore into the deepest depths of your being. In spite of her beauty, her intelligence stood out markedly, making her a daunting woman for any man to approach. Hans had never let her looks, her smarts or her money intimidate him in any way. When he first met her he had asked her to be in one of his films. Clare had refused, stating that she would rather assist him in making the film than be in it. Hans had acquiesced at first, even though his fairly chauvinistic leanings did not support having his woman have a say in his artistic process. Even though Clare did have a good eye and they worked well together, once Clare was his and was hooked on him, he subtly removed her from the production process. And now that they were firmly ensconced here in Hollywood, she had been relegated to head decorator and the ‘wife of’. And to her dismay Han’s personality seemed to shift perceptibly and he had gotten caught up in the hedonistic, superficial lifestyles they favoured out here. She has found herself feeling increasingly isolated. It is beginning to seem like her closest relationship is with their real estate agent – in just over three years they were on their third house, each one grander than the one before.

And now Han’s parents are due to arrive at the end of the week for yet another extended visit. Before they had moved to California she had only met them once, when they took a whirlwind trip to Berlin after their marriage. Hans is so proud of how well he has done that Clare can’t begrudge him wanting to share his good fortune with his parents. He always picks them up at the airport in his latest car and proudly shows them through his new house, showing off his growing art collection and his expensively appointed rooms. Each house has a bigger pool and more extensive gardens, even though neither of them swims.

His mother, wanting to be useful, tends to take over the running of the house and insists on doing the cooking, which to Clare’s chagrin tends to involve sausages and sauerkraut, with the smell perpetually lingering in the house. Clare would never complain, but inwardly she can’t help but thinking that despite Han’s efforts to rise above his working class roots, there is still a crudity about him that becomes more pronounced when his family are around. She used to feel an almost martyr like sense of righteousness when she married Hans. After all she had turned down proposals of marriage from many men of her own class and breeding, but Hans had always been nonplussed about her pedigree, a testament to his own high opinion of himself and his acknowledged, by himself and everyone around him, gift of creative genius. But lately Clare has been feeling a marked disdain towards him. He may be able to enthral an audience of moviegoers but that doesn’t translate to carte blanche when it comes to the treatment of your wife. He seems to take the attitude that it is good for her to be taken down a notch, a reckoning or penance, for the life of pampered affluence she had led until she met him. And Clare had almost felt ashamed of her roots. The dogma of the surrealists was that your past should be shed and never referred to, even going so far as to change your name to obliterate your roots. Now Clare was seriously questioning why it was necessary for her to pretend she was something that she was not. It seemed to her that it was those who had come from nothing, who had no pride in their family history who especially seemed to want to leave their pasts behind them. So just who was fooling who she asked herself.

Her thoughts were interrupted as a young man with very clean-cut good looks pulled up a lounge chair beside her.

“You look a little lonely out here – do you mind if I join you?”

Clare was about to rebuff him but instead decided why not try to enjoy herself a little, since Hans was certainly doing the same wherever he was right now.

“I was just enjoying listening to the sound of the ocean. I hale from Toronto, so it’s something I just can’t take for granted.”

“I know what you mean – I’m from Wisconsin and it still knocks me for a loop whenever I look up and see the palm trees.”

“Oh and what brought you out here from Wisconsin – are you an actor?” Thinking to herself she answered in the affirmative knowing that every person with a modicum of good looks and a minimum of smarts was drawn to this town thinking that they could get into the movies and transform their lives.

“No, actually I’m a writer.”

Clare’s smug air of condescension lost the tiniest bit of its heat with this admission that the man may have brains behind the brawny good looks.

“Do you write for the movies or are you at work on the great American novel?”

“Actually I have had one novel published; it’s called The Wisconsin Way. It didn’t do very well though; my agent figured that its mid-western sensibilities just didn’t have enough appeal for a wide audience. Anyway, I was tired of spending half the year writing in my under heated little house, struggling to make it through another endless winter, so I decided to come out here and try my luck at writing for the screen.”

Clare was thinking, oh boy, here comes another confessional, followed by the sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, probing of her industry status, as far as contacts go. She nodded distractedly, hoping that she was exuding an attitude of polite but obvious indifference.

“Actually, I have to tell you I just signed on with one of the big studios today – you’re the first person outside of my parents that I’ve told that. I phoned them this afternoon and I think they were more concerned than happy; they’d rather that I failed out here and have to move back to Wisconsin. I’ve been bursting to tell someone – I haven’t met too many people out here yet. In fact this is the first party I’ve been to – my agent suggested that I come along with him, have some fun, and maybe make a few contacts. I came just to have the fun, though. Life’s too short to always be thinking about business, plus now that I’ve got a regular job I feel like really letting loose and celebrating!”

Clare found herself warming to his sincerity and youthful exuberance. How long had it been since she had been excited about anything? She seemed to be so blasé lately, her mouth set in a permanent frown of disdain, ready to think the worst of everyone and everything.

“Well, I’d like to extend to you my congratulations; I hope that your writing career here is very successful. And I’m going to buy a copy of your book; I think it would be a pleasure to be introduced to some mid-western sensibility.”

“Well, thank you, but I think you’ll probably have some trouble finding it. It would be my pleasure though to mail you one of my copies, I must have at least forty-five of the fifty copies I asked for left over. And by the way, let me introduce myself.” He gave her his name, which was instantly forgotten.

They shook hands and Clare introduced herself as well.

“Oh, are you any relation to Hans Gruber?”

“As a matter of fact he’s my husband – do you know him?”

“No, but I’ve heard of him. I spent a few months in Paris around 1930. I went over there to write thinking that the atmosphere might be good for me like it was for Fitzgerald and Hemingway. But I found it distracting and really hard to concentrate. It seemed so exciting there compared to the quiet life I was living in Wisconsin. And then I ran out of money so I had to go back home. Hopefully one day I’ll be able to use some of my experience there in my writing.”

“Well, if it’s money you’re after you’ve come to the right place.”

“I guess it’s not just money that I’m after.”

“Oh what else are you after?”

His color heightened as he thought about her question. “Gee no one has ever come right out and asked me straight like that before. I guess once I’m set a little with money I’d like to go back to writing novels again.”

“Well I hope your next one is a bestseller.”

“That’s not exactly what I’m after although it is much nicer to write a book and know that at least a few people have read it; otherwise it seems like what was the point of all those years sweating over every sentence? But I think I’d rather have a critical success than a bestseller, something that over time becomes something of a classic, something that people will be reading a hundred years from now. I guess it comes down to knowing that I could die easier knowing that.”

“So, its immortality you’re after is it? Or I hope it’s not that you have an incurable disease?”

He gave a nervous, half-stifled laugh, “No, I’m healthy as a horse.” He hesitated a second before continuing, “Now that’s a bit of a trick question isn’t it? Especially coming from the wife of Hans Gruber. I know that the films he made over in Europe were all about the absurdity of existence and that you might as well forget about it and enjoy the ride for as long as you’re on this crazy merry-go-round.”

Clare laughed in delight, “You mean you’ve actually seen Merry-Go-Round? And understood it? Wow, I didn’t think the day would ever come that I would meet someone out here who had actually seen Han’s work. They all profess that he’s this great genius from Europe, but I don’t think any of them really get it because if they did they wouldn’t want him making films for the masses.”

He blushed, “Well, I know that I’m not all that sophisticated, but I do try, I mean I really want to be able to write things someday that have artistic merit.”

“I commend you for aspiring to greatness. It’s what all of us should be doing. And I hope this town doesn’t succeed in tainting your ideals.”

Fixing her with a guileless stare he asked, “Are you an artist like your husband? – I hope you don’t think I’m prying, but you seem so intelligent, I just wondered what your story is.”

Clare suppressed a sigh. A sigh that would have been long, drawn out, and full blown one filled with pain and self-pity if she hadn’t stopped it short. “Well, if you want my story, here it is. Once upon a time I considered myself an artist, and believe me I’ve done it all – painting, photography, writing, film making. But since we moved out here to California, I haven’t done a thing. I just can’t seem to get myself inspired to do anything but shop and decorate houses. I feel like I’m totally washed up – although I’ve certainly bought some lovely outfits and my houses are magnificent – nevertheless that is not what I’m hoping to get out of life - I’m hoping that my artistic drought is only temporary and one of these fine mornings I’ll wake up and the creative urge will be with me again. But that day hasn’t come yet. Oh well, maybe tomorrow…”

“I wouldn’t worry about it – sometimes the mind needs time to rest.”

“Oh, I’m not too worried, I’m only in my forties, I’ve still got time to get back on the horse,” she laughed, “or back on the Merry-Go-Round, if you don’t mind me citing a euphemism from my husband’s prolific and always inspired artistic genius.”

Clare continued to laugh with some degree of hysteria until she noticed that the writer was looking at her with some concern. She chastised herself inwardly as she realized how bitter she must sound, “Listen, you mustn’t pay me too much heed, I’m just being wilful and belligerent, as my husband is fond of saying, oh dear, there I go again, cutting up dear Hans…I’ve probably had a wee bit too much to drink, but I will be just fine tomorrow, I can assure you.”

The writer nodded sympathetically, but at the same time was starting to take on the look of a caged animal, desperate to be set free, “Well, it really was a pleasure meeting you, but I guess I should get back to the party…”

Clare smiled wryly and nodded, knowing that their brief interlude was over and they would go their separate ways, never to meet again.

The writer moved closer to Clare in a confiding gesture, “Would you think I was being too forward if I asked you to mention my name to your husband? If this job at the studio doesn’t work out it sure would be nice to have someone I could get in contact with. Maybe he might need a writer for something – I really am big admirer of his.”

Clare gave him her most winning and indulgent smile, “Sure, I’ll tell him all about you. And I’ll make sure he reads your novel when you get around to sending me a copy of it.”

“Gee thanks, that would be great. Well, I’ll see you around I suppose.”

Clare sat there with her eyes closed as feelings of sadness and despair wrung through her. Tears were insinuating themselves, ready to overwhelm her, and she knew she had to get it together quickly. She simply could not face Hans with her eyes and face showing the swollen signs that she had been crying. At least the effects of the martinis she had consumed were wearing off; she could not present herself as a blubbering fool, carefully enunciating so as not to slur her words, struggling to carry herself steadily on her feet.

She found herself thinking about her friends back home in Toronto. She used to tease them and call them a bunch of old fuddy- duddys because they usually refused her bootleg gin or the absinthe she had brought back from Paris and recoiled in horror at her hash pipe. They led such humdrum lives in her estimation, devoted to producing their art, but not wanting to enrich their own experiences. Maybe they had it right after all. Would they be surprised to see her so caught up in her own misery, or would they have figured it for the only possible outcome? And here she was supposed to be carefree Clare; the one who was so sophisticated, so worldly, the only one who knew how to live life to the fullest. Some life – now instead of seeming full, her future seems to yawn, chasm- like, unbearably, with a horrible void that she has no idea how to fill.

Finally Clare managed to shake off some of the deadly inertia and she rose up and made her way inside. She made her decision and steeled her resolve. She was intent on finding some mineral water and paying her respects to the hosts before going off to retrieve Hans.

After downing two large glasses of water she decided to nibble on something from the buffet table in the hopes of settling her stomach. She surveyed the extravagant spread: the serving dishes were gold-plated and heaped with the likes of Beluga caviar, blintz, lobster and all manner of seafood and there were chefs standing at the ready to carve you a slice of roast beef or rack of lamb. The sight of it all made Clare feel even queasier and she quickly turned away.

At that moment she heard a voice from behind her, “My God, Clare is that you?”

She turned to find herself face to flawlessly made up face of Elizabeth Leigh. Or at least that was the name she went by; Clare had heard she had started out as Minnie Podziuk from the Bronx, but had reinvented herself with false airs and misguided pride. She and Elizabeth had both been a part of the Surrealist movement in Paris, but Clare had always considered herself the more genuine artist. In her estimation Elizabeth was a hanger on, a pseudo artiste. At least Clare could say she had produced some art in her day, and she had married an artist, whereas Elizabeth had ended up the mistress of a rich playboy who tried to flatter himself as a self-professed patron of the arts, when it was really all an excuse to be allowed to revel in the glow and the supposed decadence of a group of people who normally would have shunned his poor artistic sensibilities. And now she had the gall to ask Clare what on earth she was doing here.

“Haven’t you heard Elizabeth? Hans and I have been living out here for over three years now – Hans is directing movies for one of the big studios. So what are you doing here Elizabeth? Are you still with Philip?”

“Of course I’m with Philippe. Philippe has decided to get into producing movies, so we’re out here meeting with all sorts of people. It’s been very exciting, we’ve had some tours of the studios and I’ve met so many stars that I can barely remember them all. But I have to tell you, probably the most exciting thing of all is that some people have been telling me that I should be in the movies – they say I have the right look.” She giggled, “I’ve been thinking about giving it a try, but I think Philippe is kind of worried I might become a big star and have all sorts of men ogling me. Well, I’ll see… So do you still keep in touch with any of the old crowd?”

Clare shook her head, noting the look of disappointment on Elizabeth’s face as she realized that the hoped for gossip session was not going to happen, “It’s kind of hard to relate to the old crowd when things here are so different.”

“Yeah I know what you mean. I think this is the place to be. That stuff they’re doing over there is getting really tired. Plus it can’t be very much fun with all that war business going on.”

Clare fixed Elizabeth with her most condescending look. She had never really cared for her; despite all of her airs she was uneducated and common. Elizabeth was impervious to this – what other women thought of her was never a concern of hers, as long as she had a successful man by her side all was right with the world.

“So is Hans here Clare? I’d love to say hello to him.”

“Oh yes, he’s here somewhere, in fact I was just going to track him down – I’ve got a terrible headache and Hans has to be on the set early tomorrow morning. I’ll be sure to tell him that you said hello, and do say hello to Philippe for me.” As she walked away she blew Elizabeth a kiss in her best Hollywood manner.

Clare wandered through the cavernous rooms of the newly renovated and freshly decorated home. It had been garishly decorated in a cross between Mexican and Greek influenced kitsch, as though the decorator hadn’t been able to decide whether to worship the Aztecs or the Greek gods. That was the problem out here, Clare had surmised early on, everyone was competing for the same handful of designers who were all trying to come up with something original and outdo the last house and this was all at the expense of the homeowners who had to live in these aesthetic disasters. Fortunately for them they redecorated every year so they didn’t have to live for too long in these schizoid nightmares.

After wandering through the house Clare eventually found Hans. He was in his favourite position. He was into the streetwalker fantasy, done quickly and up against the wall. Clare usually objected to it because it made her feel cheap, and she knew he had many others willing to oblige. She wondered if this was only his first conquest of the night or if he was on to his second or even third. Han’s had large appetites, he felt that he had been denied a lot of things growing up so poor and he now wanted more than his share of whatever was being offered and if it wasn’t been offered he took it anyway. Clare had taken to placating herself into thinking that maybe it was all just a phase that he had to go through until he eventually realized that he had everything he needed right in front of him.

She discreetly stepped into another room to wait out what she knew would be over in a few minutes. She knew he would head back for more food and drink between rounds and she would be able to grab him and approach him about leaving. To her distress she found that the tears were coming again, she was shaking uncontrollably and she knew she was about to launch into loud sobbing that would be sure to betray her and make her humiliation complete. She was overwhelmed with both rage and sadness. She almost ran out of the house. She felt like she was suffocating and she wouldn’t be able to breathe until she was out of this toxic environment. She saw her hostess as she was heading out the door, “Tell Hans I had to leave. Tell him to grab a cab or find a ride with someone.”

She ran out leaving the poor women with a startled look of incomprehension on her face. She flagged down the equally startled valet, instructing him to bring the car around quickly. It was Han’s latest acquisition, a more powerful sports car than the one before. She had never been too good at handling a stick shift but at this point she couldn’t care less. She had always worried about how fast Hans drove, the roads along the ocean were so winding and she always felt like they were barely holding on to the curve without going over. Tonight she didn’t care, she was glad at how fast this car was able to go. All she wanted was to get home and go to bed. In the morning she would make arrangements to fly back to Toronto and once she was there she could take the time to decide what to do next. The most important thing was to extricate herself from the grips of this place. She closed her eyes for a brief instant as the tears started to well up again. She opened her eyes only a split second later to find that it was a split second too late, and there wasn’t a thing she could do to get it back and change the course of events. She was in the middle of a curve and she knew that even if she turned the wheel, it was too late. She was going far too fast. She braced herself as the car flew, leaving the road, and it seemed like she was soaring through the sky forever, and then, like everything else in life, it was over before she knew it.

NOTE TO THE EDITOR

Clare died in a car accident in 1943, however it was a head on crash and the other driver was killed as well. It was ruled that Clare was inebriated and the Donnelly’s ended up paying a large settlement to the driver’s family. Her family are the Donnelly’s of the distillery fortune. They donated a wing of the art gallery here in Toronto to Clare’s memory. And to my surprise I was willed many of the works of art that Clare had attempted over the years, including a large collection of her photography.

Her husband Hans never remarried. He did take the contents of Clare’s trust fund and used it to finance his movies. He died in 1963 after a prolific but never acclaimed career making movies. He continued to enjoy the excesses of the Hollywood lifestyle and had a reputation for being quite the lecherous old man; in fact the rumour was that he died of a heart attack while in bed with a young starlet.

The writer also existed but he ended his life in 1956 after writing three more inconsequential novels and after descending into alcoholism. The Wisconsin Way did become a bit of a classic after his death, especially in the mid-west where it made its way for a few years onto the high school curriculum.

MEREDITH

TORONTO, 1962

Meredith Tanner was a ballet dancer. It was how she had defined herself since she was four years old, when she had put on her first leotard and taken her first class. It was all that she was and all she had ever wanted to be. To her way of thinking it was the closest a girl could get to being a princess, the main difference being that with dancing she only had to depend on herself. This was after she came to the realization that in fairy tales the princess always needed a man to make her dreams come true and Meredith did not care at all for boys, or men either for that matter, her own father being a grudgingly cautious exception.

Meredith was an only child, born late in life to parents who had been trying for years to have a child. This was back in the day when the riddles of fertility were unknown and it was left to chance and a little bit of luck, depending on your viewpoint. Long after they had given up hope of ever having children, Meredith was conceived, much to their rapturous disbelief and delight. She was treated from that time on as a cherished gift. Every morning they were awestruck to see their little girl and every night after putting her to bed they gave fervent thanks to the Lord above for blessing them with this child. And their gratitude for having the chance to be parents would never dissipate even the slightest.

Meredith’s father was a travelling salesman, selling soap, laundry detergent and other consumer goods in that vein. It wasn’t the kind of job he had dreamed of as a child; in fact he had thought that he would be a fireman or a police officer and he had the burly beefiness to back it up. That beefiness, over the years had aged into a well-marbled cut brought about by long hours on the road and a roadhouse diet. But he made a good enough living and felt he had no cause for regrets – life had turned out quite nicely all the same.

When Meredith was born, back in the Thirties, times had certainly been a lot tougher, but in spite of it all, her parents had been willing to make any sacrifices necessary to ensure that Meredith had not only what she needed, but also whatever she wanted.

Meredith and her mother were left alone together a lot of the time, as her father worked long hours and was often on the road. Meredith had always been mature beyond her years and considered her mother her best friend, and she had always preferred to spend her time in the company of adults rather than other children, whom she had difficulty relating to. She could not wait to finally grow up so that she could officially and permanently enter the comforting world of adults, instead of having to settle for the grudging acceptance she was offered by most other adults but for her parents as she attempted to enter their world. She knew that her mother’s friends often held their tongues and silently wished that she would go away or be asked to do so by her mother, as they did not feel right in allowing a child to be privy to their adult conversations. They silently wondered why it was that she never played with other children. The fact of the matter was that, even as a child herself, she found she disliked children. She disliked their rowdy, undisciplined loudness. She disliked their fixation on play. The Tanners lived in a corner house next door to a family with five rambunctious children. Meredith often glanced out the window, noting to herself with distaste how silly their high-spirited antics were; always chasing balls or each other. To her mind, play was a waste of time; time that could be much better spent practicing at the barre. Her father had built one for her in her bedroom where she would happily spend hours every day. Ballet was her religion and she was as devoted as any nun. Before falling asleep she would pray that she would have a long and successful and injury free career as a principal ballerina; making it as a principal ballerina was a given in her mind; she knew instinctively that it was what she had been born to do but she wanted her career to a be a long one. She did well in school, but only for the sake of pleasing her parents; she knew that the only thing she needed she already had, which was an innate ability to dance.

Meredith’s parents had always looked more like they were her grandparents than her parents, and maybe because they were at such an advanced age when they had a child, they seemed to age at an accelerated rate. Her father had slowed down a lot at work, not able to summon his usual gusto to get out there and sell massive quantities of dish detergent. Instead he was spending more and more time at the racetrack where he thought he had a good betting system worked out. He was hoping to raise the family’s fortunes as the mounting costs of ballet school, Meredith’s expensive wardrobe and the mandatory trip to Europe every year so that Meredith would be exposed to the appropriate level of culture, necessary for one who was firmly ensconced in the world of the arts. All of this, however necessary it might be deemed to be, was taking its toll on the family’s finances. What her father found most worrying was how much money would be left for Meredith to inherit once they were gone. He knew that a dancing career could be notoriously short-lived, and at the end there would be no gold-clad pension to fall back on. He worried that with Meredith’s taste for the good things in life, she could one day find herself in very straitened circumstances. He found himself worrying about that a lot. He never did win big at the track, but he never lost his shirt either. And he had the pleasure of seeing Meredith become a principal dancer with the Toronto Ballet.

Meredith was in her thirties when both her parents passed away within a few years of each other. And they did manage to leave Meredith with a modest, mortgage free house, but little else. In the beginning the house was no problem for Meredith to maintain with her dancer’s salary. However once she began sustaining foot injuries, serious enough to cause her to miss many performances and eventually a whole season, and much as her father had feared, by the age of thirty-eight her career was over. And just as her father had feared, it wasn’t long before she realized that her limited savings were not going to be enough. With the years stretching in front of her, there was no way she could continue to live in her parent’s house. And she was single-minded and adamant that she would never seek any kind of other employment. She was born to be a dancer, it was her only purpose, all that she was good for, and that was that.

So she sold the house and found a pleasant room in a boarding house, secure in the knowledge that the proceeds from the house had been prudently invested, and the money should be able to support her for the rest of her life, if she lived modestly. She continued her rigorous daily routine of barre exercises, and she maintained her stringent eight hundred calorie a day diet. She still looked and moved like a dancer, and at the back of her mind the thought was always there that with discipline and a little luck, she might one day recover enough to make a comeback.

In the meantime she lived her quiet and disciplined life, preferring to keep to herself. She was in the habit of limiting her socializing to other dancers, keeping the level of conversation at a politely professional level. She assiduously avoided the other boarders where she lived, only entering the communal kitchen when it was expected to be safely vacant for as long as she needed to prepare her simple meals. She had been living there a number of years and knew that her landlady tried to take on artists as boarders, but she believed that her passion for her art went deeper than others and that the ballet was superior to any other form of art, requiring a discipline and a tolerance to pain and a willingness for sacrifice that few could aspire to, let alone tolerate.

Lately there had been one boarder in particular who irritated her beyond measure and whom she took special pains to avoid at all costs. He was a deceptively good looking and seemingly friendly young man named Sandy, a nickname he had been given because of his abundant sand-colour hair, which he wore swept sideways over his forehead, magnifying the volume even more. His full name was Alexander Smirnov and his parents had immigrated to Canada from Russia when Sandy was eight years old. He spoke English perfectly, but had retained a fairly pronounced accent, which only added to his charms. He was annoyingly friendly, always greeting her and everyone else with an exuberant cheeriness, even when she was obviously trying to avoid him by making a quick exit back to her room by trying to appear distracted and preoccupied enough not to notice him. She had heard from the landlady, who always insisted in engaging her in a conversation whenever she dropped off her rent cheque, that Sandy was a drama teacher at a nearby high school and that he wrote plays in his spare time and hoped to be able to have a career as a playwright one day.

One morning as she set about efficiently preparing her usual breakfast of tea and dry toast, one eye on the clock, knowing that she only had a few minutes to spirit everything back to her room before the other boarders starting appearing, Sandy walked in, ahead of schedule, for his usual glass of orange juice and bowl of cereal.

“Miss Tanner! Good morning! I’m so glad I caught you, I was hoping to ask a favour of you.”

A favour she thought, the nerve of him. She fixed him with her sternest look of disapproval debating how to reply to such an affront, when he continued, “I’ve been volunteering at the recreation center, working with some of the neighbourhood kids, and we’re putting on a little “Spring Fling” production. I heard that you used to be a ballet dancer and was hoping you wouldn’t mind coming in one evening and showing the kids some of your moves which we could try and incorporate into the dance numbers. It would be a way of subtly introducing them to the fine arts without intimidating them too much. It should only take up a few hours of your time, and I know you’ll find it very worthwhile when you see how good it is for their self-esteem when they’re able to successfully mount their own production.”

Meredith surveyed him with extreme distaste, “I’m sorry Mr. Smirnov but I will have to decline your invitation.”

“May I ask why?”

“I am a dancer, I am not a teacher.”

“Oh, please don’t get the wrong idea, I’m not asking you to take a lot of time and train them in all aspects of the ballet, I was just hoping that you would show them some of your moves, and help to inspire them to incorporate those moves into their dance. And maybe you’d be willing to provide a little extra coaching, and make sure they’ve got the proper form, that sort of thing.”

“First of all they are not called moves, they are referred to as positions and poses, and secondly, it takes many years of intensive study and training to achieve the proper form to perfect the art of ballet.”

“Yes, I do realize that, but sometimes it only takes a few moments to inspire people and make all of the difference in some very vulnerable young people and that’s all that I’m asking from you. I don’t expect you to teach them how to dance Swan Lake. Many of these kids are poor and disadvantaged and I know that seeing you dance would give their spirits a break from the grind of the unending poverty and bleakness that most of them have to deal with every day of their lives. Let them see the possibilities that are out there when you foster a love of the arts. Give them the gift of experiencing the joy that comes from expressing yourself creatively. I can guarantee you Miss Tanner that you will be rewarded in more ways than you can imagine.”

Meredith sniffed in disbelief and picked up her tray, “I very much doubt that Mr. Smirnov, however I will consider your request.” She had said that as a means of exiting from the situation as quickly as possible, but of course she surmised to herself, that dumb brute was probably too dense or conceited to realize it.

Sandy smiled broadly, “Thank you Miss Tanner, I appreciate it. Have a very nice day.”

She made no effort to reciprocate his pleasantry, instead she made a haughty exit, the sound of Sandy whistling a cheery tune, oblivious to her snub, making her seethe with an exacerbated sense of affront and outrage.

A few days later Meredith returned from an appointment with her hairdresser to find that a note had been pushed under her door. It was from Sandy, and he was letting her know that they were having rehearsals the next week on Tuesday and Friday from 6:30 – 8:00 and that the kids were absolutely thrilled at the thought that a real principal ballerina might be showing them some dance steps. The note was adorned with exclamation marks and even had a smile drawn under the large scrawl of his signature, much to Meredith’s disgust. She was appalled at the nerve of his assumption that she might actually be considering his silly invitation and was about to rip up the note into shreds and place it under his door – that should set him straight on what her intentions were and what she thought about the whole thing. But for some reason she found herself hesitating, gripped with an uncharacteristic feeling of angst, that she might be setting in motion something detrimental to her very being and giving fate a rude gesture. So instead of tearing up the note, she instead found herself placing it on the corner of her desk, although she did place it upside down.

The next day she surprised herself again when she saw Sandy and found herself confirming her acceptance, albeit dourly, and she also accepted his offer to drive with him to the rehearsal. When she mulled it over later, she appeased her growing sense of unease, that she was allowing herself to be involved in all of this business, simply because she had been feeling a little bit vulnerable and maybe a little lonely too. The days lately had been dreary and drizzly and she had spent an inordinate amount of time staring out her window, lamenting the fact that if she was still dancing she would have been at the theatre all day preparing for the evening performance, totally oblivious to things like the weather.

She found herself on the appointed Tuesday feeling so nervous and overwrought that she couldn’t manage to finish her dinner. She was dismayed at how excited she felt, like a girl on her first date. If she had thought about it she would have realized, that in actual fact, this was almost like first date for her as this was her first outing with a member of the opposite sex. It was not for a lack of offers that she had never dated; it was just that she had never been interested in the social ritual of the whole thing, her passion was for the dance and she had decided early on that there would be no room for anything else in her life, especially something that could be as time consuming and all-encompassing as romance. And now here she was, a mature woman in her early forties, and she found herself fussing over her hair and whether to apply a touch of makeup. At least she didn’t have to worry about what to wear; it would be her standard warm-up outfit covered up by her long trench coat.

When Sandy knocked gently at her door announcing that if she was ready they should get going, Meredith suddenly felt very shy, a feeling which had always been foreign to her as she had always been confident and arrogantly sure of her superiority over others.

When they arrived at the gymnasium inside the Recreation Centre, Meredith surveyed the space, “There’s no barre here Mr. Smirnov. I can’t possibly show them my routine without first demonstrating the barre exercises.”

Sensing that she was starting to panic, Sandy gently touched her arm, “Don’t worry, this will be fine for our purposes. This is very informal and nobody will mind if you skip the barre routine. It’s the fancier moves that will really impress them anyway, and remember the point is to inspire them, we don’t want to discourage or bore them with the more tedious part of ballet.”

Flashing an angry look she was about to defend her art, which she would never consider tedious or boring when Sandy continued speaking, “And please call me Sandy, all right? And may I call you Meredith? Miss Tanner seems so formal and matronly when I’m sure you’re not much older than I am.”

She was about to sputter an indignant ‘No’ as a way to vent her mounting sense of frustration at being so out of her element, but when she caught the look of gentle compassion on Sandy’s face she found herself softening. She nodded her assent and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“Great, now let’s enjoy ourselves and show these kids the joy of dance.”

She thought for a second and finally allowed herself to relax her strict standards, “All right, let’s do it, but first I’ll need to do a thorough warm-up. Then I’ll show them some pirouettes and I’ll perform some of the positions from the grand allegro which includes grand jetes and tours en l’air, which if you didn’t know are the big jumps and turns in the air – I’ll explain them before I execute them.”

After Meredith had returned from the change room where she had improvised a warm-up using a bench as a barre, she waited while Sandy introduced her in glowing terms. She surveyed the room filled with young people, and had to struggle to supplant the curl of distaste around her mouth with a lopsided smile. To her eyes they looked unkempt and their slumped postures spoke of a complete lack of discipline. She found her attitude softening somewhat as she witnessed how they responded to Sandy and his enthusiasm. As she performed for them they watched her with a rapt attention, the glow of inspiration on their faces. Afterwards they applauded wildly and they respectfully and politely asked questions of her about the ballet. She found a disconcerting tingle of well-being washing over her to the point where she felt a little bit light-headed. She had to concede to herself that Sandy Smirnov had been right; however she soon began to wonder if he had somehow coerced these children to respond this way. She decided that must be the case; it was totally against their natural inclinations to behave so well and so respectfully and she wasn’t going to fall for it; she would honour her commitment and attend the Friday rehearsal and then she planned to wash her hands of this entire business.

After Friday evening’s rehearsal they strolled back to Sandy’s car, enjoying the balmy warmth of the night. Sandy asked if he could take her out for a coffee, as a small way of thanking her for the time and effort she had put in to help the kids.

“Oh no, I couldn’t, I’m not properly dressed to go out anywhere.”

“I’m sure no one will notice, or you could keep your coat on, we could sit outside on the patio, it’s a perfect night for it. Come on, let’s go…”

So they went off to a small, neighbourhood café and they talked about the ballet. Sandy enthused that it must have been a very exciting career.

“Yes, it was all I ever dreamed about doing from the time I was a little girl.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but you seem far too young to be retired – have you never thought about getting into choreography or even teaching? You were great with the kids; I have to tell you I’ve never seen them so transfixed before.”

“I think you’re flattering me Mr. Smirnov. No, I could never teach. My heart and soul was in dancing and I know I could never bear to stand by and watch while others do what I love so much. In fact I haven’t been to the ballet since my retirement. I swore that I wouldn’t go because I know the pain would just be too much.”

Sandy fixed her with a look of concern. “But what are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

“I will live my life, just as everyone does, but without being occupied by eight hours a day with paid work. I have enough money to live on, so why on earth would I want to go to work, just for the sake of keeping busy?”

“It just seems strange to me for someone so young to be retired. Don’t you find you find it gets boring sometimes?”

“No, I keep myself quite busy for your information. I spend at least three hours every day doing my ballet exercises. And I’ve got lots of books to read. I listen to the radio. I go for long walks. Most people would gladly change places with me. Having to go to work seems a distasteful business to me.”

“I have to say I don’t agree with you at all there. I quite enjoy my work, but then again I don’t have the option of not working. Still, it seems to me that there’s a lot that you still have to give, and that you would benefit as well from helping others. I’m sure that you’ve noticed that it’s a very satisfying feeling. What about if you were to teach a class? Maybe some beginning ballet for children so that they learn good posture and how to move with grace? You know I could probably arrange something like that at the Recreation Centre and they could pay you a small fee, or maybe you’d prefer to volunteer?”

“I don’t think so Mr. Smirnov. The experience I had this week was certainly interesting but it’s not something that I would want to repeat.”

Sandy’s face visibly fell, “I’m sorry to hear that, it really looked like you were having a good time with the kids.”

“I’m not saying that I didn’t enjoy it, but it’s really not in my nature to spend any amount of time around children. I simply don’t have the disposition for it.”

“I won’t try to change your mind anymore okay? But if you should have a change of heart please let me know. In any case, you really must attend the Spring Fling performance so that you can see the results of your inspiration – it’s going to be two weeks from tonight.”

Against her better instincts, Meredith found herself two weeks later being escorted by Sandy to the Spring Fling. It was unlike anything she had ever seen before. She was somewhat taken aback by the modern twist they had put on the dance numbers. They had used the new rock and roll music that was all the rage and she frankly found offensive as anyone with culture and good taste would. It was far too loud and tribal for refined tastes, especially hers, but she did allow herself to let the kid’s enthusiasm carry her away somewhat from her natural impulse to disapprove and she did have to admit that it had been enjoyable insofar as being a new and different experience, which made her feel younger than she had in a while.

Afterwards Sandy convinced her, with major cajoling, to join him for a celebratory drink at a nearby lounge. Meredith could count on the fingers of one hand how many times she had indulged in spirits of any kind, but she did allow herself the indulgence of having a Brown Cow with non-fat milk, not cream, at the same time making a mental note to herself that after tonight this nonsense would end. But for now she decided, she would just try to enjoy the moment, after all it was a beautiful evening and she had to admit that Sandy looked extraordinarily handsome. He had dressed in a flattering, well-tailored suit and despite being busy behind the scenes she had been flattered at how attentive he had been to her. To her chagrin she was finding herself feeling more than a little swept off of her feet. And she had found herself, against her will or better judgement, thinking about Sandy quite a bit over the last few weeks. She knew that she was a good ten years older than he was but she was also well aware that she looked better than many women ten years younger than her. Her figure for her age was exceptional in its slimness and musculature and she knew that she would never turn to fat as she aged, as most women were prone to do. She also had lovely skin, which was smooth and unblemished by the dark spots of age due to her assiduous avoidance of the sun for all of her life. All in all it wasn’t totally inconceivable that Sandy might find her attractive. And in her limited experience it seemed to her that he was certainly acting as if he did.

Sandy leaned forward, “Listen Meredith, I hope you don’t think I’m being too forward, but I have to say that I’ve really enjoyed the time that we’ve spent together these last few weeks. You’re a very classy woman and I admire how you stand up for what you believe in. I was hoping you might consider….Well, one of the plays that I’ve written is being put on by an amateur theatre group and I’ll be attending the opening night performance next Thursday, and I was hoping that maybe you would be interested in going with me. And I would like to take you out for dinner first as well. Please say that you will, it would make me very happy.”

Meredith flushed, hating herself for it. Her heart was beating so hard that she was worried that she might pass out. She felt as if someone else was speaking for her as she heard herself nonchalantly reply, “Oh all right, that sounds nice.”

Later as they were leaving she couldn’t help noticing the admiring looks that Sandy generated from the other women in the lounge.

That night Meredith could not sleep at all. She had arrived home feeling an elation that disturbed her and soon became an overwhelming anxiety once she started reviewing in her mind the events of the past few weeks. She had expected to live alone for the rest of her life and had certainly never expected to become involved with any man; she wasn’t even interested in having friendships with women. She had gone from an uncomplicated, accepting and comfortable solitude and now Sandy had come along and she felt like her world was being turned upside down. What if she fell for him and he ended up hurting her? Wouldn’t it have been better not to have the relationship at all than to go through a lot of pain and suffering? And did this young man really intend to pursue a relationship with her or was it something else altogether? What if he had an ulterior motive? She had told him that she had enough money that she didn’t have to work – what if he was scheming to get access to her money? If that happened she could end up destitute and she had no family to fall back on and no other means of support. The alarm bells were going off in her head. She knew there were just too many risks; she could not afford to get involved with this man. She was sick with the realization that she had foolishly gotten herself into a huge mess and she had to get herself out of it quickly before anything bad happened.

The next morning was Saturday. Sandy had told her that he would be attending a weekend writing workshop. As soon as she saw him leave she went out to pick up a newspaper. She spent the day making inquiries and by Monday her plans were set.

On Tuesday morning once Sandy had left for work she arranged for a cab to come to the house and she paid him extra to take away all of her boxes and deliver them to her new address where they were placed in storage. On Wednesday she went to her landlady and told her that she was leaving that day for Vancouver due to a family emergency. She told her that she was leaving her things with a friend in the city because she didn’t know when she would be returning. She said she would leave her deposit and her last month’s rent and she thanked her for her kindnesses over the years that she had roomed there.

By Wednesday afternoon her room had been vacated. She left a note for Sandy under his door telling him the same story as she had told the landlady. She added that she had enjoyed knowing him and she wished him the very best in all of his endeavours.

That night, safe in her new place, after hours spent cleaning and unpacking, she finally sat down with relief in her only piece of furniture, a favourite armchair that she had brought from her parents’ house. She noted with satisfaction that her new room was just as nice as the other one had been, but also had a much nicer view from the window. She was also pleased with herself that she had managed to find a boarding house that only allowed women. There would never again be another close call like the one she had just had. She closed her eyes in relief that she was safe and that her ordeal was over.

Note to the Editor

Meredith Tanner died of breast cancer in 1977. The newspapers carried brief obituaries lauding her career with the Toronto Ballet and noting that she had left her estate to the ballet school.

Sandy Smirnov became a noted playwright. He now lives in New York City where his plays are performed on Broadway. He married a dancer with the Bolshoi Ballet who defected in order to be with him. They had six children together and lived a joyous life.

BARBARA

TORONTO 1969

Barbara Luciani took the morning train from Windsor to Toronto. She actually lived in Leamington which was not far from Windsor. Leamington was a small town that was dominated by the business of tomatoes, whether growing them or processing them for the myriad of products the versatile fruit was used for.

Barbara had been accepted to the prestigious Royal Conservatory of Music and that had been big news in small town Leamington, noteworthy enough to warrant a story and a picture of Barbara with her violin on the front page of the local newspaper. The violin was not the kind of instrument that many people took up in Leamington, in fact as far as Barbara knew, until she took it up, old Mr. Morelli had been the sole violinist in the entire community. Enzo Morelli had immigrated to Canada from Genoa, Italy shortly after the end of the Second World War. He had come over with his son Nino and his daughter-in-law and their only child at that time, two-year-old little Enzo Jr. who would later be called Eric. After arriving in Canada they would have two daughters, completing their family.

Enzo was now in his eighties and people were starting to say that he was ‘losing it’, but he still played the violin beautifully. He had once dreamed of a musical career, and playing in a symphony orchestra, but his musical training had been cut short by the advent of the First World War. And once the war was over he had to put his dream on hold again as he was forced to find employment as a dock worker at the port of Genoa in order to support his family following the death of his father.

Three evenings a week he would play the violin at an upscale restaurant that catered to tourists and the moneyed ranks of the Genovese looking for a romantic evening out. He fell in love with the daughter of the owner, a smart, spirited girl who was nonetheless on the periphery, her parents ran a successful business but that didn’t mean she was above being recruited to help out in the restaurant after school, doing everything from serving to washing dishes. She was musical as well and loved to sing arias from her favourite operas in her lovely soprano voice. Shortly after her seventeenth birthday, once she had finished her schooling, she and Enzo were married; they emigrated to Canada and were soon blessed with three bright, healthy children. Enzo never begrudged not being able to have the musical career he had dreamed about; he philosophized that sometimes things happened as they did for a reason and that he was blessed with a beautiful family life and that was all that really mattered. He did feeling a tinge of sorrow however that none of his three children shared his musicality. And that sorrow deepened a little more when his grandchildren shared the politely indifferent stance of their parents. After his retirement he could happily spend hours playing the violin, his eyes shut in a rapturous contentment, often finding himself surrounded by the fellow members of his imaginary symphony. Until one day he realized that five-year-old Barbara Luciani from next door was shyly standing behind the columns of her front porch watching him play with awed fascination. He called out to her to come over, don’t be shy, come and try out the violin. And Barbara turned out to be a natural and after that it wasn’t long before Barbara was spending hours every day learning the violin, practicing, until her parents bought her an instrument of her own. And after Enzo passed away, she continued with her music lessons, travelling into Windsor every Saturday morning to attend the school of music there.

And now here she was on her way to pursuing a career in music. She often thought about how thrilled Enzo would be to see her now. She had never even been to the symphony but knew that according to Enzo it was the best place on earth that a musician could be, in with the violin section, bows rising and falling in harmony.

In Toronto Barbara was going to be staying with her mother’s cousin who ran a boarding house in the area of the city known as the Annex. It was a pleasant, mature area in the centre of the city, within walking distance of the University and the Conservatory. Barbara had only been to Toronto twice in her life. Once, when she was very young, about six or seven, they had brought her father’s mother to see the sights of Canada’s largest city, after they had finally persuaded her to leave her farm in the Calabrese region of Italy for her first and only visit. The second time had been last spring when she had auditioned for admission to the Conservatory. The city had seemed to go on forever, the people so purposeful, avoiding eye contact as they went about their business that looked as if its import was pressing and invaluable. Where she came from if you saw someone on the street you said hello, whether you knew them or not, or whether you liked or disliked them, in a small town there was no place for snubbing, businesses and people had to support each other.

On both of their visits to Toronto her family had paid a brief courtesy visit to her mother’s cousin who they had always called Auntie. Auntie was a writer, which Barbara had thought, sounded quite exciting. She was surprised to find that Auntie was quite reserved and instead of regaling them with stories she seemed to listen more than she talked and she watched everyone intensely, as though she was taking note. Barbara often wondered if Auntie ever used any of them as characters in her stories. Despite the fact that Auntie always sent them a carefully personalized, signed copy of her latest short story collection, Barbara had never read any of the stories. She much preferred novels, especially the classics, finding it much more satisfying to be able to immerse herself in a tale going back a hundred years or more. And so much of her time was devoted to practicing the violin; she simply lacked the time, although the entire family was immensely proud to have a bona fide published writer in the family.

It did not take Barbara long to settle into her new life as a full-fledged student of music. She loved every aspect of it – how serious and dedicated her fellow students were, all of them mature beyond their years, especially compared to their rural, small town counterparts. Barbara tried not to be too elitist, but she often wondered how people her age could be so complacent, content to follow their parents into the processing plants of Leamington, spending the rest of their working lives producing ketchup and tomato sauce. Music was a religion at the conservatory and the halls were walked as if hallowed, the aura leaning towards the spiritual.

She was soon fast friends with another student of the violin, Angela Simpson, who lived in Toronto and took it upon herself to make sure that Barbara felt at home in the city. She soon found that she had a standing invitation to dinner at the Simpson house, if she was there hanging out with Angela, Angela’s mother would set a place for her at the table with the presumption that she would join them. And Barbara preferred the laidback warmth of the Simpson house, finding the atmosphere at Auntie’s a touch on the oppressive side, being that the other boarders were so much older and on the eccentric side in Barbara’s unjaundiced view. She could also see that Auntie had been used to eating her simple, no fuss meals alone. Barbara was constantly assuring her that she didn’t mind getting her own meals and not to wait for her, but invariably Auntie, with her immaculate British manners, would ask her to join her for dinner if she was home.

The days went by quickly, as they tend to when you’re busy, angst free and in an easy to declare state of happiness, secure in how tangible your existence is. And now Christmas was only a few days away, and with exams out of the way, a flurry of scheming and shopping was exuberantly begun and triumphantly finished, with the optimistic notions of the young that the receiver of each carefully thought out gift will find it perfect and a most elevating experience, as though the receipt of a gift can banish all cares and woes.

Barbara was planning to be on the Saturday morning train back to Windsor where she planned to spend almost two weeks at home with her family. She was looking forward to being able to spend this extended time with her family, but at the same time she knew that she would miss her new life in Toronto, which was working out better than she had ever imagined. On Friday evening she had been formally invited to dinner at the Simpson’s and she and Angela planned to exchange their carefully thought out gifts, the anticipated reaction of the receiver being imagined with relish over and over again.

The event was made more special by dint of the fact that Angela’s much talked about and glowingly personified older brother Steven would be back in the bosom of his family for the Christmas break. Steven was studying law on a full scholarship at a university in New York. As well as excelling at scholastics he was also deeply immersed, or an even more appropriate description might be embedded, in the politics of the moment, which was activism, a fully fraught, no holds barred, save the world from any and all violations of any discernible right, whether it be animal, vegetable or mineral.

And whereas the rest of the Simpson family were extremely mellow and easy-going, the sounds of classical music wafting from the built-in stereo system, a sedate and serene atmosphere hanging about the house, Steven was a stentorious exception. He ignited any room he was in with his almost ferocious spirit, staking his place in the world, assured of his relevance. He had a righteous sense of indignation in regard to any kind of trespass against human rights and freedoms and he could be downright belligerent in swaying others to share his point of view. He was actively involved with the protest movement against the Vietnam War. He was also fighting for Gay Rights, with the Stonewall Riots happening just the previous summer. And the fight for Civil Rights wasn’t over yet either. The battles to fight appeared to be never-ending.

“There is so much injustice out there and just because we’re Canadian, we shouldn’t be so complacent – the same kind of things can happen here. When I graduate I intend to move back here and start up a publication that will focus on the important issues of the day, such as the rights of the people, the right to free speech, to choose your sexual orientation and of course it will be anti-war. Basically I want to press the issue that people need to be able to live their lives without being repressed and without interference, as long as they don’t infringe on other people’s rights. Can you imagine what it must be like to be a young man my age in the United States and have the government put a gun in your hand and send you to a foreign country to kill people that they have deemed to be the enemy? Or to be a gay person and have to hide it so that you’re not discriminated against or even worse, so that you’re not getting beaten up by the police, who are the very people who are supposed to be protecting you? Or to suffer a lifetime of indignity and discrimination based on the colour of your skin? We all have the right to life. And we have the right to live that life in peace. We’re in an era with a tremendous potential for social change and all of us have to take responsibility to ensure that that change happens. It is time for all of us to take action.”

Barbara found it unsettling to listen to him. She had been so ensconced in her safe and secure little world of music, and had paid little attention to what was happening outside in the world. She thought she was content with the thought that her place in the world was to soothe people’s souls with her music. Now here was this person telling her in great detail and in no uncertain terms that she was needed to help put a stop to all of the indignities and suffering that was going on out there.

She left the Simpson house that evening with a queer feeling in the pit of her stomach and an inkling at the back of her mind that life as she knew it and what she had expected of her future had changed forever.

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That May, after classes had ended for the year, Barbara decided that she would stay in the city that summer and find work there. The thought of going back to Leamington and spending the summer toiling in the tomato fields or being stuck in a stifling factory all day with the acrid smell of cooking tomatoes permeating everything did not appeal to her. She had been totally taken in by the excitement of living in a big, vital city and even though she found her job prospects limited by a choice between working in an ice cream parlour or an upscale clothing store for women, she didn’t mind a bit. The job at the clothing store had the potential to earn more money with commissions, but she decided that the ice cream store would be a lot more fun and had the added benefit that she could help herself to free ice cream on her breaks.

One evening she and Angela were sitting on the front porch of the Simpson house discussing their plans for the upcoming weekend, when Steven came out holding a bottle of beer and looking intensely preoccupied. He had graduated and true to his word was making plans to start up his magazine. He had been home for several weeks but he had been so busy that Barbara hadn’t seen him at all in that time.

“Hey Steve, why don’t you sit down, talk to us for a bit – Barbara’s here if you hadn’t noticed.”

Steve gave his lopsided grin, “Oh hi Barb, my mind is totally on the magazine, there are so many details that have to be worked out.”

Angela chimed in, “Have you decided on a name yet?”

“I’m still mulling that one over but I think I’ve narrowed it down to Your Voice or maybe For The People.”

“Not bad – how about Liberation for the Nation or The Right to Choose News?”

“Very cute Angela, but all joking aside, I’ve got tons of work to do before we can launch this thing. If you guys ever want to lend a hand, I’ll take any help I can get, anytime, evenings, weekends, whatever, I can’t really afford to pay you but I will be eternally grateful to you.”

Barbara who always felt shy and insubstantial when Steve was around and rarely said anything suddenly piped up, “Sure, I’d like to help out – I work from noon until 6:00 every day but I could help out for a few hours in the evenings or even in the mornings. It sounds like it would be really exciting to put together a magazine.”

“Actually it’s not as glamorous as it sounds. But once that baby comes off of the presses, it’s probably a comparable feeling to giving birth. But until then it’s a lot of detailed and sometimes tedious work with the editing and the proofreading. And of course there’s all the sales work involved, finding advertisers and sponsors, not to mention securing the financing for your start-up costs. But I’m confident that there’s a market for this magazine, a lot of people no longer want to tune out, they want to know the truth about what’s going on and they want to help to change things and make a difference.”

So the summer was an eventful one for Barbara. She spent her afternoons calmly scooping ice cream cones for the tourists and sweaty, sticky children and after work she headed straight to the Simpson house where Steve had set up a make-shift production office and studio in the rumpus room in their basement. The Ping-Pong table served as a layout table and pinned to the shellacked pine walls were a flurry of production schedules and notes. Steve had his typewriter up in his bedroom where he preferred to do his writing, but he had bought another old second hand typewriter and set it up in the basement. Barbara became quite proficient at using it, and she found her confidence rising as she took on increasingly more complex tasks. The night that Steve told her that she was an invaluable member of the team and that he didn’t know how they could get along without her, she was flying high for days. And Steve eventually began including her in the production meetings where they discussed which topics to cover and articles to include in future issues. In the old days she had cocooned herself in her own little world of music. Even the books she read took place in distant times; causing her at times to think that maybe she had been born in the wrong time and place. But now she felt so embroiled in what was going on, it was if she had awakened from a deep sleep, and she loved how vigorous and relevant she felt.

She was finding herself mesmerized by Steve, his knowledge seemed boundless and he was so confident that people would listen to what he had to say and really believed that he could make a difference. And at first he treated her like she was his kid sister’s gawky but nice friend and Barbara would desperately try not to show any reaction beyond polite acknowledgement when he would talk about a girl that he was seeing or a date he was going on. She felt somehow relieved that he didn’t seem to be serious about any one girl; there seemed to be an unending string of girls who were all anxious to go out with him. Not that he was what you could really describe as good looking. He had tight, curly hair which always looked like it needed a good combing; he had a long, hooked nose and intense, extremely light blue eyes with wild looking eye brows. He wore tinted aviator glasses and at first glance it was easy to dismiss him as a nerd. But as soon as you spoke to him and caught the aura of the tremendous energy and charisma that he exuded it wasn’t long before you were under his spell. He was strong in his convictions and there was a sincerity about him that made people feel that they truly mattered to him. It wasn’t long before Barbara realized with a sinking heart that she was in love with him. She knew that with the beehive of people surrounding him, that her feelings would probably never be reciprocated; she might as well have set her sights on the Prince of Wales. And at first she tried to be very stoical about it, but after a time, now that they were working so closely together, she decided it couldn’t hurt if she made a bit of an attempt at getting him to notice her. She started wearing a trace of makeup and had her hair cut in a more sophisticated style so that she would not look quite so young. She paid more attention to how she dressed which had been decidedly on the sloppy side before and instead began wearing miniskirts and form-fitting sweaters and t-shirts. She carefully read the newspaper every day, ensuring that she knew about current events and she borrowed some of the magazines that Steve always had lying around so that she could intelligently discuss the issues that were important to him.

And yes, her tactics were ultimately successful and Steve did eventually notice her. Barbara had always been an attractive young woman, but she managed to subtly accentuate that attractiveness and intellectually she had groomed herself to be almost an extension of Steve himself, taking on his ideology. Working so closely together on a project that Steve was passionate about and which Barbara soon developed the same passion for, the chemistry between them had no choice but to ignite.

As the launch of the magazine loomed Barbara was spending every spare moment with Steve. Her classes had resumed but her concentration was flagging as she watched the clock anxious to get back to help out Steve. And she found herself questioning her choice of career. It was beginning to feel like she would be sequestering herself; playing violin for the moneyed class, and it was beginning to loom in her eyes as irrelevant and a waste of time. And it wasn’t anything that Steve had said overtly. He didn’t criticize her choice of career but he didn’t encourage it either. Actually if anything he was indifferent, if it was something that she wanted then fine, if not, that was fine too, it was her life and her choice. But ultimately she felt that she would be betraying everything that Steve stood for and that she now wanted to stand for too by making such a potentially frivolous choice of career.

So Barbara decided to drop out, at least for a while, and work with Steve full-time on the magazine. He paid her a small salary, just enough to cover her living expenses, with the promise that when the magazine started to turn a profit she would get a raise. To be truthful, Barbara really didn’t care about the money, she was just so happy to be with Steve, working together, doing something that was so stimulating and important.

About a year later, Barbara found out that she was pregnant, which was not something they had planned, but it was a happy accident. By the time their only child, a daughter they named Justus had been born, Steve and Barbara were married. Barbara continued to work on the magazine on a part-time basis until it finally folded in 1977. By then the times had changed and materialism was replacing activism. Most people seemed to take the position that the battles had been won and they were satisfied with the status quo and indeed their own status had now become the priority.

Steve decided to transfer the experience he had gained through publishing to start an advertising agency. At first Barbara had spent a lot of time helping him with the business but it grew so quickly and soon became one of the biggest and most successful agencies in the city and it seemed sensible to simply hire full time employees to do the work.

Steve had entered advertising with some degree of trepidation, feeling that he might have to compromise his value system. But at the end of the day, he knew that he had a family to support and he had to do what was best for them. He did vow though, both to himself and to Barbara that he would only take on clients with what he deemed ethical products and services to sell. And he also decided that he would take on pro bono work for charity organizations.

After Justus started school Barbara thought about going back to school herself and starting her own career. But whenever she contemplated it, it always ended up being put on the back burner, she was just so busy with all of the volunteer work that she did at Justus’s school and there were so many lessons and activities to drive Justus to, and the time just seemed to slip by so quickly, and they certainly didn’t need a second income…

Barbara still took out her violin every morning after Steve and Justus had left for work and school and she was dedicated about spending a solid half hour or more practicing. She and Steve had been purchasing season’s tickets to the Toronto Symphony the last few years which she loved to attend but at the same time she couldn’t help feeling a wistful wondering about what it would have been like if she was part of the orchestra, playing the violin. She would always feel a lethargy the next morning that hovered on the fringes of depression. But she could always manage to placate herself with peppy self-talk assuring herself that her life had turned out wonderfully, she had a loving husband and a wonderful daughter and why should she want anything more.

And Steve, despite the best of intentions, found that he had to relax some of his strict standards. He found vetting clients for their ethical feasibility was starting to feel hypocritical, after all nobody is perfect, we all have a few ghosts in our closet, and besides so much of the work itself was being delegated to his management team, comprised of people whose main concern was getting their paycheques and a nice quarterly bonus. And he also found that the agency was far too busy to take on any pro bono work so he decided to limit charity work to the firm’s annual golf tournament that raised a substantial amount of money for various worthy organizations every year. He also knew that Barb was good about giving money to all sorts of causes, so they were definitely doing their part.

After many years at the helm of the agency Steve began delegating the day-to-day operating of the firm to a team of trusted employees. He took the company public and named himself Chairman of the Board and only concerned himself with the big picture. He spent his days courting clients at the golf course and with lunch at the city’s most exclusive restaurants. He probably spent as much time with his broker as his clients, insuring that his very healthy investment portfolio remained that way. After all he had to think of Justine’s future. (Justus had asked to have her name changed when she was ten because she felt that it was too much of a flower child name. Barbara had been a little bit hurt, but Steve could wholly sympathize with her on that because there were times when he himself felt a little bit embarrassed at his past as an activist.) He knew that his conservative corporate friends and client’s eyebrows would rise if they knew what he had been like back then. His younger self would have been shocked as well to see that he had become a paean of conservatism. He was even finding that he disliked these strident shouters protesting poverty or whatever it was that the youth today were fighting against, or was it fighting for? To him the issues were a blur. He had done extremely well through his own hard work and determination and knows he and his family were deserving of sharing in the fruits of all that labour. He was more than satisfied with how his life had turned out, and is that not all that matters?

Note to the Editor

Barbara is my own flesh and blood. She is my grandniece, the niece of my mother and I love her and her family dearly. She would be right in thinking that I did not always understand the choices she made, but have always respected that people must choose their own path. I am glad that she has found happiness with her family. Please be sure to get her permission before including this story.

EPILOGUE

TORONTO, 1986

Barbara and Justine arrived at the house on Admiral Road bright and early on a grey, drizzly Saturday morning in November, take-out coffee cups in hand. Grace had quietly passed away in her sleep of natural causes the week before. Thankfully the young man who lived upstairs and helped her out around the house had been alarmed enough not to see her in the kitchen at breakfast that he went into her room to check on her. Barbara couldn’t imagine a worst fate than to be an old woman alone and not have your body discovered until people were alerted by the smell. She knew she was being morose but she had always been squeamish about the thought of death and coupled with the cold, dreary weather and the stress of Auntie’s dying and her own parents poor health, the last few weeks had been difficult. Her spirits had definitely been flagging lately, and now Christmas was just around the corner, and she was going to have to snap out of her funk. She and Steve were going to Las Vegas for New Years and she buoyed her spirits at the thought that in a few short weeks she would feel the sun on her face and could relax her stressed out self by the pool.

The funeral had been small and private and afterwards Grace had been interred in the Elliot family plot. Barbara had been struck by the shockingly short lives of Grace’s immediate family. There had been a rash of deaths in her family from 1916 onward, with the last being Grace’s mother who had died in 1924. After that there was nothing, until now, 62 years later, Grace at the age of 86 was the last of her immediate family to pass away.

Barbara had been surprised at the attention that Grace’s death had garnered. She had been eulogized in the newspapers as one of the masters of the art of short story writing. And the condolences from fans of Grace’s writing had been pouring in. It had been so many years since Grace had had anything published that Barbara had half-expected her death to go unnoticed. She was happy to have been wrong about that, and carefully saved all of the newspaper clippings and the cards. Grace had always been so unassuming about her career as a writer, nonchalantly passing it off as something she’d had a bit of a knack for and was happy to be able to make a living at it.

Grace’s will had designated Barbara as the executor. She had instructed her to dispose of her house and her belongings and use the money to set up a charitable trust for writers. The will also directed that any of her unpublished stories be turned over to her editor to be considered for publication after her death. This was a surprise to Barbara and it was the first thing that she checked for, and sure enough, exactly as per Grace’s instructions she found that the large bottom drawer of her desk contained a number of stories, all neatly typed up and placed in individual file folders. Barbara flipped through them with excitement. She intended to read them all later at home before she handed them over, after all she was the literary executor as well, and she was more than a little intrigued that Grace had wanted to wait until after her death before having these stories published. She wondered if they contained all of Grace’s secrets, after all no one really knew Grace very well, she had always been very private and reserved and everyone seemed to take it for granted that she was just an old spinster who had never travelled and had seemed to live her life through her writing.

As she cursorily looked through the folders she noted that each story was entitled by a first name only. The names were unrecognizable to her until she came to the one titled ‘Gwen’. She took it out of the folder to have a closer look. At that moment Justine came into the room.

“What’s all that Mom?”

“These are the last stories that Auntie wrote.”

“You’re not going to read them right now are you? We’ve got a lot of stuff to sort through – I was just down in the basement and man is there ever a lot of crazy looking stuff down there, it looks like a storage room for a museum or something.”

“All right, I won’t be long, I was just curious because I didn’t think Auntie was doing any writing at all in her last years, so I can’t help wondering why she was keeping these a secret. And then I came across this story called ‘Gwen’ and I couldn’t help wondering if it’s about Gwen Whitman. I never met her, she died before you were born, but my mother used to talk about her. She lived in this house with Auntie for over thirty years. I know that they were very close and that Auntie considered her to be like family. Anyway, poor Gwen ended up dying of some kind of cancer; I think it was bone cancer. I know that she lingered for a lot longer than anyone expected and that she was in a lot of pain the whole time. Auntie insisted on taking care of her and wouldn’t hear of her going into a convalescent home, instead she took over all of her nursing care, even learning how to give her morphine shots. I know that when she died Auntie was devastated. Your grandmother always said Grace was a shadow of her old self afterwards. Before that she had been very lively and vivacious and she had lots of interesting friends and was involved in all sort of different aspects of the arts. Of course your grandmother never really approved, she always felt that artistic types were really little more than bums with lofty assumptions who didn’t want to make a normal, decent living and she was always complaining that they took advantage of Auntie. I guess a lot of them who lived in this house at one time or another paid very little rent or none at all. In fact I’ll bet that a lot of that stuff you saw in the basement were things that they would give Auntie instead of paying rent. She always seemed proud of the fact that she was helping to support the arts in her own little way.”

Justine said, “In that case I’m going to take a closer look at what’s in the basement, maybe it’s not junk after all.”

Barbara began emptying the rest of the contents of the desk and a small filing cabinet into boxes with the intention of taking them home with her to sort through later. She let out a sigh, prompted by her thoughts of the myriad of details that would have to be taken care of as part of the process of closing the file on a person’s life.

After carrying the boxes down to the front hall, she walked around the old house taking a mental inventory of the contents that would have to be disposed of. She was thankful that Grace had lived such a Spartan existence. There was very little in the way of furniture and Grace was never one to collect knickknacks or other mementoes. It was probably because she had no children or close family Barbara mused. She had learned to give her flower arrangements or gift baskets as presents because over the years she had noticed that anything material she gave her in the way of ornaments or clothes she never saw again and suspected that they had been given away.

Barbara decided there wasn’t much else they could do here at this point and made her way down to the basement to retrieve Justine.

Even though Justine had given her fair warning, she was still taken aback by the cornucopia of items being stored down there. The first thing that caught her eye was the stack of paintings lined up against a whole side of one wall. She began to look through them noting that a lot of them seemed amateurish, the standard trite still lifes of vases of flowers that many beginners start out with. There were several signed by an S. Lund that caught her eye and looked as if they might be saleable. It was behind the Lund paintings though that she came across the real find.

“Oh my God, Justine, there are two paintings here by Daniel Harris! He died just a few years ago and his paintings have been selling for a lot of money lately.”

Justine came over to survey them.

Squinting at the bottom corner Barbara continued, “These ones are dated 1925 and 1926, so these must be some of his earliest work. I’ll bet they’re worth quite a bit of money.”

“Wow, it looks like Auntie’s trust fund is going to be loaded. Honestly Mom, don’t you feel a little bit hurt that she didn’t leave anything to us, except for letting us choose anything of hers that we might want to remember her by?”

“Auntie knew that we certainly don’t need any more money. And she did make sure that I knew that she was planning to leave her estate to charity. I do have to say though, I always sort of got the impression that she disapproved of the way we spent money – I guess anyone who’s been through the Great Depression frowns upon what they see as conspicuous consumption.”

“What do you mean she disapproved of us?”

“Oh it’s just that whenever we had her over she seemed to make a point of noticing if we had anything new or I’d redecorated the place. And she would make offhand remarks like, ‘You certainly seem to have a knack for shopping’, that sort of thing. I suppose it was harmless, but there were times I almost felt like challenging her to come out and say what she really thought, but after she left I was always glad that I’d bitten my tongue.”

“I’m sure you’re right that she didn’t mean any harm, old people seem to feel they have to show how much they had to struggle and suffer in the old days and make us feel guilty that we want to live at a higher standard than they did.”

Justine started to sort through a fancy looking box which had turned quite yellow with age. Inside the box were oversized black and white photographs. Turning them over she gasped, “These pictures are stamped Man Ray Photo Studio – Paris – do you think these could actually have been taken by Man Ray?

Barbara went over to take a look, “Well, whoever this woman was she was extremely beautiful.”

Justine continued looking through the pictures, “Wow, look at these ones – these women are all sitting around topless like it’s no big deal. It must have been a wild time back then.”

At the bottom of the box they found a note on heavy embossed stationery. “It says ‘To Grace and all my friends at Admirable Road – having a grand time – kisses to you all’, it’s from a Clare Donnelly – have you ever heard of her?”

“I think one of the stories I found upstairs was called ‘Clare’. You know I really can’t wait to start reading them. How about we wrap things up here? We’ll just pack up her clothes and some of the stuff in the kitchen cupboards so that we can drop them off at the Goodwill. She really doesn’t have a whole lot of stuff; I’ve never known anyone to live so sparingly. When your Nonna died it took us literally days just to go through all the stuff she had in her dining room cabinets.”

“Auntie sure was different from the rest of the family – do you really think she disapproved of us?”

“I know she wasn’t impressed when I told her that I was dropping out of the Conservatory. She said she thought it was not a good idea to rely on a man to make you happy.”

“Well, your life turned out just fine, right?”

“Of course. I really can’t say I have any regrets. Your father and I have had a very nice life, and if I were to have become a professional violinist, it wouldn’t necessarily have made my life any better. Auntie could be a little bit pretentious in her attitude towards others. She lived her life through her art but not all of us are willing to make that kind of sacrifice.”  
 “I don’t know – do you think maybe she was living this wild, bohemian lifestyle while we all thought she was just living this quiet life as a writer.”

“I suppose it’s possible, people are often full of surprises.”

“When you lived in this house there was nothing like that going on was there?”

“Well, I wasn’t around much, I was usually with your Aunt Angela and then your father, but things always seemed pretty quiet around here whenever I was around.”

“Let’s finish up Mom and get out of here – I’m starving.”

“All right, how about if we go somewhere nice for lunch? And we’ll order a nice bottle of wine and we’ll raise a toast to Auntie.”

“Sounds good, this place kind of gives me the creeps anyway.”

The End