

Unbidden Guests

A Seasonal Novel by
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PRÉCIS: A pensive photographer meets some former university mates on the eve of the epic 2011 riot in downtown Vancouver. He is dismayed to discover two of them caught up in daunting pursuits — one peddling club drugs and eighteen carat pornography, the other, a blithe participant in the riot, writing contumelies for a rabid anti-Western website. Both men end up joining an Islamist cell, one as a suicide bomber. A budding dancer/actress and a former girlfriend of the porno-druggie — who's wrestling with her own late dismay! — enlists the help of a retired detective who, along with the photographer, set out to determine the whereabouts and intent of their former 'friends', an undertaking that becomes more tortuous and ominous as they deal with some gangland and Islamist heavies, a corrupt policeman, a posh film maker, and a 'Dark Internet' sociopath.

Sample Pages follow. Download options at end of Sample Pages.

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PART ONE *If you behave badly enough toward someone, you can't stand being around him.* Shirley Hazzard

It was the wording on a small stone cairn in his neighborhood

park that kept alive his ailing sense of reverence and trust. The wording on the cairn face above the Periwinkle was assured and tender, a courtly testament to a life well lived, with purpose and affection. So he surmised, his customary pensiveness put on hold.

In Memory of Elam Smith

Dearest Soul Mate, CupMate

Craftsman and Poet

My Lion and Unicorn

Ever about in our secret park

Amidst the harmony of leaves

Flushing out the nimbler memories!

P

It was the lone memorial garnished with sprigs of flowers in the quiet dappled park. Some weeks fresh, others, usually late in the season, silk or plastic. Watched over by stately Douglass Firs and Red Cedars, their high mighty branches on bright summer days framing gouts of bright green on the grass. Wasps and bees hung out among the beds of azaleas, borage, honeysuckle and salvia in the summer, as did finches, song sparrows, thrushes and robins. Starlings, crows and bluejays

never stayed long, flitting in and out. A meandering stone walkway skirted benches for reposeful folk, and an immense wide magnolia sequined each spring with a milky way of snowy stars. He was familiar with notions like ‘ironic tenderness’ that smart writers might occasionally admit to. Yet when he passed the small stone cairn, the only irony he sensed was his protracted existence as a plaintive witness before unabashed endearment. The bird song itself seemed more vocal when he stopped by the cairn. Amidst ‘the harmony of leaves’ — a Yeats nonesuch.

TWO

Mason Bascule sat in his dim house-keeping room eyeing some ceiling roaches while listening to Enesco’s Romanian Rhapsody in D major, Opus 11 No. 2. A symphonic work he venerated, the small cassette and CD player being an indispensable friend in his ongoing endeavor to photograph life on the East Side of downtown Vancouver, an area reputed to have more hopheads per capita than any other place on the planet. To undertake such a venture you needed music that embraced forbearance, clemency even, vivifying the haunting self-effacement he seemed yoked to these days as he chronicled the lives of the abandoned and forsaken, while living among them as a transient himself. The picture taker with the port-wine birthmark on his left cheek and detectable limp who could yet adroitly see and listen! — the busy roaches, he concluded, not honoring quiet postludes. How sardonic that the sturdy music of the symphonic classics, his

main life solace, even eclipsing his love of photography, should be a near relic in that new-fangled era, music that most youngsters would never hear, let alone consider the studied form and harmony of the notation, its reliable lyrical wonder, nor the inspired ingenuity that went into making up the many instruments that came to form a symphony orchestra. Yes, the Enescu ode seemed to conjure him, a bygone creature smitten by once esteemed euphonic composition, a haven of elegiac nuance and rhapsodic lyricism. Music now often considered dreary, maudlin, mushy. Another topical ‘birth marked’ travesty. Akin to his vision and dated style of photography. As one critic said, ‘You make poverty look poetic for god’s sake.’ The ongoing criticism. Though not from the edgy fugitive now glaring at him — a modern ‘artful dodger’ named Ryan Dyck he had briefly gone to school with only to rediscover among the hopheads, grifters and vagrants in Vancouver’s East End, the very one who had so recently been adrenalized by the promise, the ‘covenant of jihad’, as he called it. Though now that eerie sureness had eluded him as he eyed the CD player in the house-keeping room they shared off East Hasting Street.

“Jees, can’t you take that thing to a pawn shop or something?,” Ryan demanded as he glowered at the CD player, aggravated by the music coming from it, Mason thought. The room itself sported a discolored sink, single hot plate, open cupboard, two old mattresses, scattered duffle bag contents, a small rickety table and two battered stools. A smelly stained

toilet lurked behind a divider. All yesterday hand-me-downs with no antique potential whatever. Mason had not only been photographing the denizens of East Vancouver but stolidly living their life. An *in situ* undertaking.

“It’s not worth much,” Mason replied.

“So what. We’ll be sleeping in the park for crissake.” Ryan meant that keeping the CD player, a moderate cash asset, was extravagant given his current chill penury. In other words, was Mason a mere uncaring observer, a bystander after all?

Actually, such a sale would make little difference. Ryan was just fitfully scrounging for scape goats. He had sloughed off a payment to his coke dealer, the sum of which was astronomical. He could end up in a land fill. As he listened to the ineffable Enescu, Mason wryly wondered if that might not be a net benefit. At one time he might have scoffed, winked at the inevitability of destitution. But Ryan, this otherwise well-favored Ryan, seemed to ordain it — in his terrible need to obliterate all chastening comparison, the stark invidiousness of that polychrome age ever in your face, acutely defining your lack and inadequacy. So the pensive Mason suspected.

“I’m off,” Ryan said, to no one in particular. He had made up his mind. A few last things stuffed into a backpack. His worldly possessions, those he now hastily fetched, little larger than a couple of six packs.

With some impatience Mason exclaimed, “Not that sweater. Mum knit me that!”

“Piss off.”

“Ryan, for god’s sake.”

“Ask for another, angel face.” After a hesitation more given to vigilance than care Ryan vacantly mumbled, “See you.”